

Mladen Dolar
**One Divides into
Two**

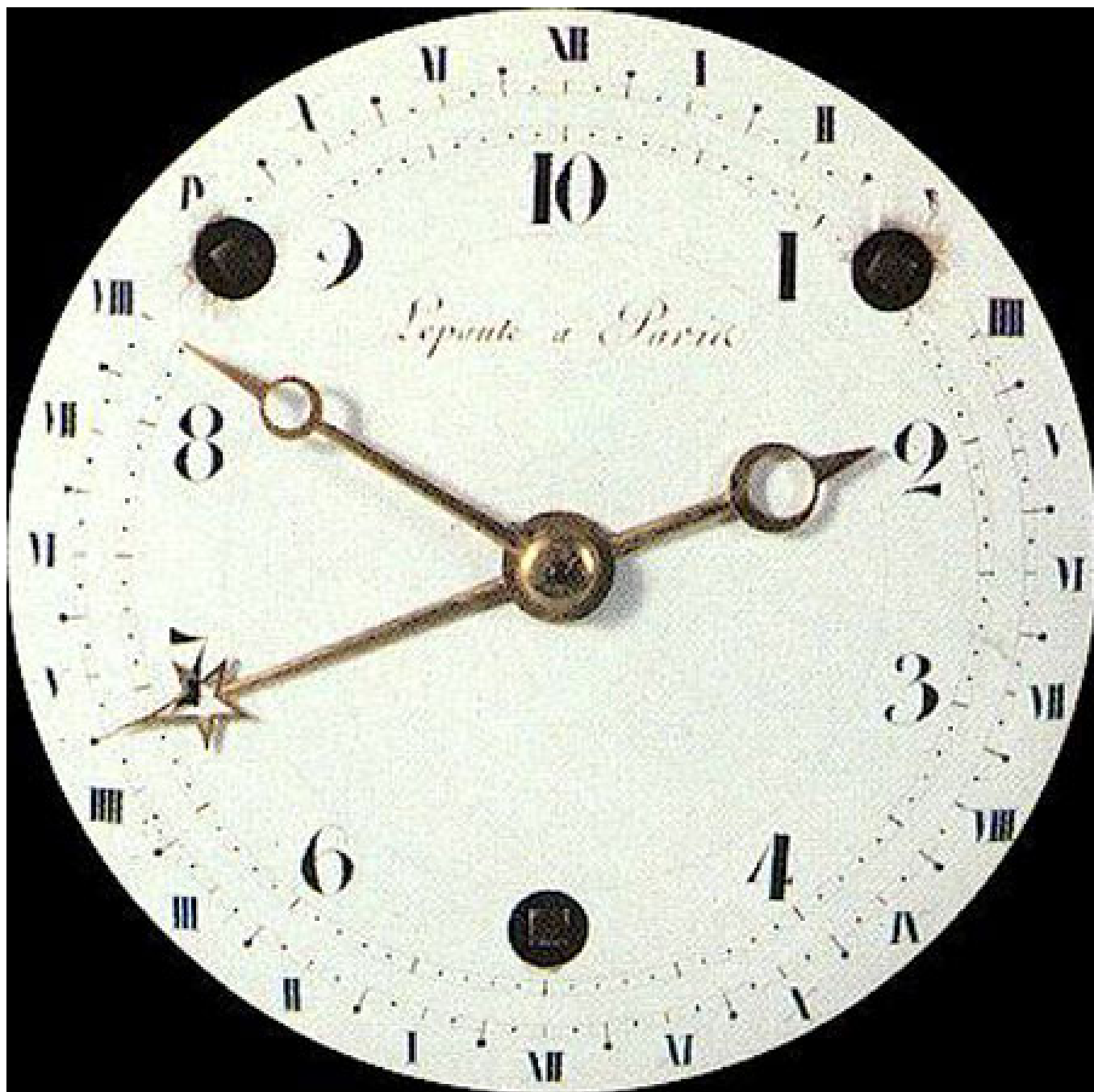
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One divides into two, two doesn't merge into one. This was an old Maoist slogan from the 1960s. Despite its air of universal truth it has become dated, and I fully realize the danger of appearing dated myself by starting in this way. Nowadays, one can recite this slogan in front of a class full of students and none will have ever heard it or have any inkling as to its bearing or its author – it's almost like speaking Chinese. The slogan combines an ontological statement, a mathematical theorem, and a political battle-cry. So why does one split into two in mathematics, ontology, and politics? And why, once we arrive at two, can we never get back to the supposed unity of one?

I will try to speak about something very minimal and basic, something extremely simple and at the same time very enigmatic: namely, how to get from one to two. This movement suggests ways to conceive difference and, more precisely, how to conceive the difference between two kinds of difference. The first kind of difference can be seen as the difference of numerical count. What accounts for counting, for getting from one to two? What pushes the count in its forward thrust? For if we have successfully managed this heroic feat of addition, assuming that one plus one makes two, then there seems to be no stopping this process, we can reproduce this step again and again, and thus count to infinity. To be sure, what seems to be a simple operation, the most elementary of all, the one acquired with the first lesson in mathematics, is itself full of pitfalls and hidden traps, and we only need to mention Frege, set theory, the suture, or Badiou's intricate theory of numbers to remind ourselves of the complexity of the operations involved. But I will not follow this path.¹ I will simply point out that in this way one hasn't really arrived at two, first because the two that has been thereby produced is still hostage to one, is its extrapolation and extension, its replication, one splitting itself and reproducing itself; and second, one hasn't arrived at two but at more than two, the two of many, the whole host of numbers, since the process that one has instigated cannot stop at two, it is endowed with the forward thrust to multiply itself, so that "two" is merely a provisional stopover, a halt from which we must hurry on.

The other side of this question of the two is precisely the side of the other, the Other, its capital letter signifying the "big Other," underscoring the implication of drama. The question of the Other brings forth not merely the numerical two, the second following the first, but the question of something of a different order, something that is not a mere extension of the first, but rather something that would really present two, count for two, the two

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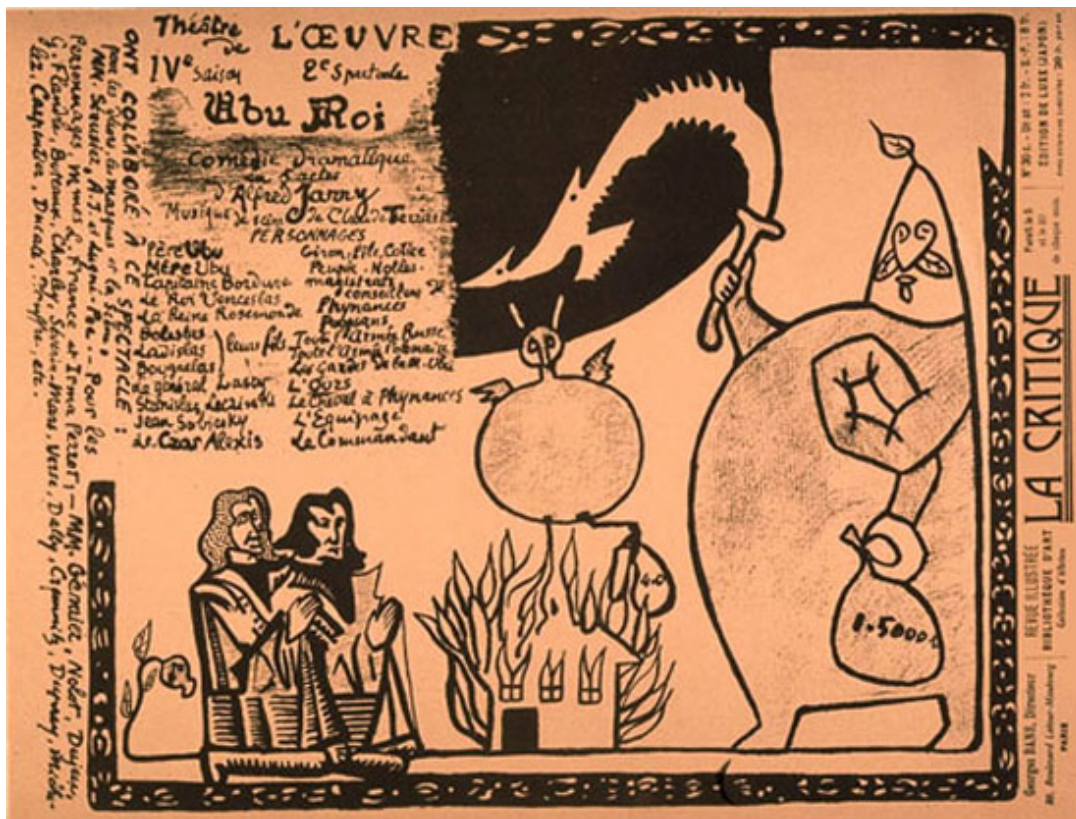
Republican watch from the French Revolution.

heterogeneous to the one and recalcitrant to the progression of ones into infinity. However much we count, however many ones we add to the first one, we cannot count to the two of the Other. The progression of counting extends the initial one into a homogeneous and uniform process, while the Other presents a dimension that would be precisely “other” in relation to this uniformity. In a nutshell, the otherness of the Other, if it can be conceived, is a dimension that cannot be accounted for in terms of One. If the Other exists, then we have some hope of escaping from the circle, or the ban, of One. The dimension of the Other might present a two that would really make a difference, not merely a difference between one and another, that is, ultimately, between the one and itself, the count based on the internal splitting of one, but rather another difference altogether, beyond the delightful oxymoronic phrase “same difference.”

One can immediately appreciate the high philosophical stakes here. A large part of modern philosophy, if not all of it, has aligned under the banner of the Other, in one way or another, whatever particular names have been used to designate it, and if philosophy has thus espoused the slogan of the Other it has done so in order to establish a dimension that would be

able to break the spell of One, in particular its complicity with totality, with forming a whole. There is a hidden propensity of One to form a whole, to encompass multiplicity and heterogeneity within a single first principle. That program was pronounced at the dawn of philosophy, spelled out by Parmenides in three simple words, the slogan *hen kai pan*, one and all – to conceive the all as one, to encompass the whole in its unity, and to take the one as the simple clue to the whole and whatever multiplicity it may present; to take the whole under the auspices of One. “One and all” served as the blueprint for philosophy, holding in check its whole history; it spelled out philosophy’s mission, its grand overarching chart, its task and its calling, in whatever particulars one conceived it. So if the Other exists, if it can be conceived in terms other than the terms of one, it would permit us to get out of this ban and this circle. Indeed, the task of modern philosophy, if I may take the liberty of using this grossly simplified and massive language, was to think the Other that would not be complicit in collusion with the One of *hen kai pan*, and thus, ultimately, the task to think the two, to conceive the Other that wouldn’t fall into the register of the One. And if I content myself to mention just three great

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Special edition on salmon colored paper inserted in the deluxe programs for the 1896 performance of the play at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, Paris. Lithograph.

names, I will invoke Nietzsche with a single line from the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*: “Am Mittag wars da wurde eins zu zwei” [It was at noon that one turned into two] – the noon as the time of the shortest shadow and the minimal difference, the time of the suspension of time, the division of time – and the title of Alenka Zupančič’s book *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two*. I will invoke Marx and the two of antagonism – Mao’s slogan was designed to spell out its political and ontological impact in a simple adage, transposing it into terms of counting. I will invoke Freud – and now I will take the tricky path of conceiving the two in terms of the Other in psychoanalysis, the Other being a key psychoanalytic term.²

The French *autre*, for the other, stems from the Latin *alter*, which basically means the other one of two and two only (as opposed to *alius* or *secundus*, the second of many). Many languages have retained a distinct word for the second of many as opposed to the second of merely two, not to be followed by a third and so forth. This etymological lead already puts us on the track of the problem of the two, it already gives us an inkling that the two poses a different problem than the second of many and that there is something there that defies counting. This other would be something that contravenes against oneness, while the second merely extrapolates what has already been encapsulated in the one and presents its prolongation.

I said above “If the Other exists...” and this brings me to a very basic asset that lies at the heart of psychoanalysis and the work of Jacques Lacan. There is something like a spectacular antinomy at the foundation of psychoanalytic theory, an antinomy worthy of Kantian antinomies, and Kant has brought the notion of antinomy to a pinnacle – where reason, as a striving for unity, runs into an irremediable two, an opposition that cannot be reduced. This Lacanian antinomy of the two pertains to the nature of the Other. One can pose it as the antinomy of two massively opposing statements: first, *There is the Other*, which is the essential dimension that psychoanalysis has to deal with. Notoriously, Freud spoke of the unconscious as “ein anderer Schauplatz,” the other scene, another stage, a stage inherently other in relation to the one of consciousness, to its count and to what it can account for. It defies the count of consciousness, which is ultimately the homogeneous count providing sense as a unitary prospect. So there is the Other of the unconscious. Lacan, who had, in addition to his extremely difficult style, a talent for simple and striking formulas, proposed the slogan “The unconscious is the discourse of the Other.” There is an Other that speaks through the unconscious

and defies the count of consciousness. And another of his formulas runs: “Desire is the desire of the Other” – there is an Other that agitates our desires and prevents us from assuming them simply our own. These two short statements, in no uncertain terms, place the unconscious and desire under the banner of the Other. There is the unconscious, and there is desire only insofar as each intimately pertains to the Other, they are “of the Other,” and the Other is what stirs their intimacy. There is the Other at the heart of all entities that psychoanalysis has to deal with, and this may be seen as a shorthand to pinpoint their specificity, to assemble them with a single stroke under one heading, the heading of the Other, the Other of a qualitatively different nature in relation to the realm of One. They present the rupture of unity, they defy being counted for one.

Yet this is but the first part of the antinomy, the part positing the Other at the core, the alterity that determines intimacy as extimate, in Lacan’s excellent neologism. The second part of this antinomy, in stark contradiction to the first, states bluntly: *The Other lacks*.³ There is a lack in the Other, the Other is haunted by a lack, or to extend it a bit further: *The Other doesn’t exist*. “There is the Other” vs. “The Other doesn’t exist.”

How can the very dimension on which psychoanalysis is ultimately premised not exist? What is the status of this Other that is emphatically there, permeating the very notion of the unconscious, of desire, and so forth, and that yet at the same time emphatically lacks? Can the two statements be reconciled in their glaring contradiction? Is this a case of a Kantian antinomy, exceeding the limits of knowledge and unitary reasoning? And how can one posit the Other as the very notion surpassing the boundaries and the framework of One while maintaining that it lacks? Is this an exhaustive alternative?

What, if anything, is the Other? What is the Other the name for?⁴ The first answer proposed by Lacan develops in the direction of the Other as the Other of the symbolic order, the Other of language, the Other upholding the very realm of the symbolic, functioning as its guarantee, its necessary supposition, that which enables it to signify. And if this claim is to be placed within the general thrust of structuralism, which was then dominant, the name of the Other, in this view, would be the structure. The Other is the Other of structure, and one can nostalgically recall its Saussurean and Lévi-Straussian underpinnings. What follows from there, in the same general thrust, is the notorious formula *The unconscious is structured like a language* (another way of saying “The unconscious is the discourse of the Other”). But what kind of Other is announcing

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Thea Alba at the Berlin Scala, 1925.

itself such that the unconscious is structured like it? What Other is the unconscious the discourse of? It is clear that Freud's first three books, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, all single out the unconscious as a series of "marginal" phenomena that pertain to language but only as it slips, cracks, short-circuits, breaches, temporary out-of-jointness, not as belonging to its normal, standard, universal use. They pertain to homonymy⁵ – as opposed to synonymy, which tries to preserve the unity of meaning – verbal contaminations, puns, and mix-ups, which all condition what Freud described as the process of the work of the unconscious, ultimately to be put under the two broad headings of condensation and displacement. They are condensed and displaced in relation to the signifying One of language.

There are two perspectives on this structure. The first, stemming from Saussure, treats language as a system in which all entities are differential and oppositive, made of differences. No element has an identity or substance of its own; it is defined only through its difference from others, its whole being is exhausted by its difference, and hence they hang together, they are bound together with an iron necessity of tight interdependence. The symbolic is made of differences, and only of differences – and since it has no firm, substantial hold it can equally and with equanimity be applied to language, kinship, food, myth, clothing – the whole of culture. (There is a univocity of difference that can be predicated in the same way of any positive entity – this was structuralism's bottom line.) But the second perspective, the one that Freud opens up with the unconscious, presents the slide of contingency within this well-ordered system. The words contingently and erratically sound alike; not ruled by grammar or semantics, they contaminate each other, they slip, and this is where the unconscious takes the chance of appearing in cracks and loopholes. The first perspective hinges on necessity, ruled by differentiability, which is what makes linguistics possible. The second perspective hinges on contingent similarities and cracks and is the nightmare of linguistics, because its logic is quirky and unpredictable; it pertains to what Lacan called *linguisterie* and *lalangue*. It pertains also to what Alfred Jarry, the immortal Jarry of *Le roi Ubu*, called pataphysics, the science opposed to metaphysics that deals with the exception, the contingent, the non-universal.

So if we have on one hand the Other of the Saussurean structure, or system, then the unconscious represents a bug in the system, the

fact that it can never quite work without a bug. With the unconscious the structure slips. What was supposed to work as the Other, the bearer of rule and necessity, the guarantee of meaning, shows its other face, which is whimsical and ephemeral and makes meaning slide. The Other is the Other with the bug.⁶ And what is more, it is only the bug that ultimately makes the Other other – the Other is the Other not on account of structure, but because of the bug that keeps derailing it. The bug is the anomaly of the Other, its face of inconsistency, that which defies regularity and law. Inside the Other of language, which enables speech, there emerges another Other that derails speech and makes us say something else than we intended, derailing the intention of meaning. Yet the second Other cannot be seized and maintained independently of the first as another Other, the Other within the Other – the Other cannot be duplicated and counted, the bug makes it uncountable.⁷ The alterity of the unconscious is not cut of the stuff of symbolic differences, it opens a difference that is not merely a symbolic difference, but that is, so to speak, "the difference within the difference," another kind of difference within the symbolic one, a difference recalcitrant to integration into the symbolic, and yet only emerging in its bosom, with no separate realm of its own. And the very notion of subjectivity pertains precisely to the impossibility of reducing the second difference to the first one. In other words, the subject that emerges there is premised on a "two," on the relation to a kernel within the symbolic order that cannot be symbolically sublimated. So the bottom line would be: there is an irreducible two, an irreducible gap between the One and the Other, and the unconscious, at its minimal, presents the figure of two that are not merged into one. The problem that remains is that, well, the Other doesn't exist.

Yet the figure of the Other as the Other of language, structure, code, and the symbolic order is but one face of the Other. There is another face, which pertains to the other strand of discovery in psychoanalysis, to sexuality and sexual difference. In Lacan, for example, we can read the following: "The Other, in my parlance, cannot be anything else but the Other sex" [L'Autre, dans mon langage, cela ne peut donc être que l'Autre sexe].⁸ "The Other, if it may be one, must certainly have a relation to what appears as the other sex."⁹ So it appears now that the other face of the Other may well be the face of the woman, and that the Other is inherently and at the same time the Other of sex, of sex as the Other, sex under the auspices of the irreducible two. But, and this is essential, not the two of count.

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If in the first instance the Other seemed a disembodied entity that had to do with signifiers and structures, then in this other aspect it is the Other that most intimately sticks to the body and represents its rift. Not a structural difference, but the rift of our natural bodily being. This implies that the sexual difference, if this be the name of this rift, is not a difference that could be encompassed or covered or accounted for in terms of the signifying difference, the difference of Saussurean differentiability, that is, in terms of One and its split or its replication. It doesn't present the two of counting, based on counting one and then extending this count, it pertains to the "other" difference that cannot be counted and stops at two, that is, at the difference of the one and the Other. But according to the other part of our Lacanian antinomy, the Other lacks, it doesn't exist, it has no ontological consistency on its own, it marks the persistence of a difference that eludes the series of signifying differences and cannot be captured by them. Consequently, it would follow that the Other, as "the Other sex," doesn't exist either, and this is indeed the consequence drawn by Lacan's notorious dictum, which caused so much havoc, that "The Woman doesn't exist." If the Other is the Other sex, the conclusion inevitably follows – but the trouble is that non-existence doesn't make the Other vanish, it doesn't amount to zero. Something is proclaimed not to exist – the Other, the Woman – but that doesn't mean it has disappeared. Of this non-existence something stubbornly persists.

There is an enigma at the very discovery of psychoanalysis, which developed in two separate ways. In his first three books, Freud presents the unconscious as the new object of the new science, something that Lacan summed up, half a century later, in the notorious formula *The unconscious is structured like a language*, that is, like a derailment of language, its constant slippage. Then in 1905, Freud published the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, a surprising work with respect to the earlier books. Its focus is not on language and its vicissitudes – there is an astounding absence of linguistic considerations – but rather on the body and its vicissitudes, deviations from its natural habitus, needs, and maturation. This is not a physiological body of firm substance and natural causality, but a body haunted by a cut, and this cut into physiological causality conditions and produces the drives, the new entities. Sexuality, such as Freud describes it, is placed in this cut in the body, causing the bodily needs to deviate from their natural goal and tend toward other aims. To put it in terms of counting, bodies can be counted, but the cut makes for uncountable entities, what Freud appropriately called partial

objects, that is, objects "less than one," not to be counted as one, objects partial by their very nature, not by virtue of a curtailment of a unity. But this partial nature is precisely what makes for the two, the two heterogeneous to the numerical one. If the first way concerns "the mind" and its derailments, the second concerns "the body" and its derailments. How do the two fit together? Well, they are connected precisely by the Other. From here one could propose Lacan's major thesis on "What, if anything, is the Other?" "Of what is the Other the name?" It is the Other of the symbolic, but naming the locus where the symbolic slips – the Other is the Other of the bug, not of order – and this is the place where the unconscious sneaks in and where the subject of desire takes its slippery hold. And the Other is the Other of sex, the body, enjoyment, surplus enjoyment, the drives, partial objects, the heterogeneous excess that is the bug of sexuality and can never be assigned its place. Those are the two directions of the initial discovery of psychoanalysis, and the notion of the Other brings them together under the same roof. It names together, under one heading, in the same framework, in language and the body, that which presents alterity, that which emerges precisely at the interface of bodies and languages, at the interface of these countable entities, at their infringement. One could say that there is a univocity of the Other that can be predicated of both in the same way.

In many languages, sex is etymologically *the cut*. But is it the cut in half (as in Plato's legendary theory)? Is it the cut into two? How many sexes are there? If sex is section, rather than vivisection, does it cut into two only? There is a widespread strand of criticism that aims at binary oppositions as the locus of enforced sexuality, its regimentation, its imposed mold, its compulsory stricture, or "the compulsory heterosexuality." By the imposition of the binary code of two sexes we are subjected to the basic social constraint of placing ourselves on one side or the other, thus discarding the multiplicity of sexual positions. But the problem is perhaps rather the opposite: sexual difference poses the problem of the two precisely because it cannot be reduced to the binary opposition nor accounted for in terms of the numerical two. It is irreducible to the signifying difference which defines the elements of the structure. It cannot be adequately described in terms of opposing features or as a relation of given entities existing prior to difference. It presents the figure of the two precisely by being irreducible neither to the one of count replicating or splitting itself, nor to the two that would form a complementary whole. The two that we are after is not the binary two of equal or different ones, extensions of the same

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order, but the two of the one and the Other. The sexual difference establishes the two precisely because it can neither be numerically counted two nor squeezed into a binary opposition. And if there is an astounding variety of sexual positions, it's because of the impossibility of coming to terms with this count, its irreducible two-ness.

To be sure, language constantly attempts to capture the sexual difference by means of the signifier, and perhaps this defines a very basic linguistic gesture. The most general classification of nouns, in most languages, follows precisely the sexual pattern in order to establish the roughest of divides, that into masculine and feminine gender. This opposition, supposedly taken from nature, is used as the most elementary guideline to sort out the vocabulary. But the spectacular metonymic proliferation in all directions testifies to the impossibility of the task – when anything can be grammatically sexed, nothing can be, and the very instrument of such classification is ruined by its own success. In Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* there is a famous line where Oskar Werner, as a German, tells Jeanne Moreau (the French woman *par excellence*): "What a strange language is French where *l'amour* is masculine and *la guerre*

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is feminine." In German, with *die Liebe* and *der Krieg*, it's the opposite, supposedly how it should be if we are to follow "a natural pattern." In Germany, love is the domain of women and war is the domain of men, while in France, reputed for perversion, it seems to be the other way around. "Make love not war" would have a completely different meaning and impact in Germany than in France. So taking the sexual difference as the pattern of grammatical gender makes for infinite possibilities of extension in any direction, while the guiding principle becomes completely useless. Everything can be accounted for and squeezed into the gender mold except for the sexual difference itself, which served as the model. The difference on which everything may be modeled persists as a real which cannot itself be seized as a difference.

One can briefly hint at the question of the phallus in this context. In the traditional view and as the pragmatic "rule of thumb," the phallus has served as the simple discriminatory factor supposed to distinguish two sexes. Either one has it or one doesn't, which should suffice. This is where a simple anatomical contingency meets the basic trait of the signifying logic, the difference between *marque* and *manque*, the mark and its absence. The presence or absence



Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life, (Natura morta)*, 1956. Oil on canvas.

of a privileged anatomical marker follows the same logic that fuels the differential structure, it coincides with its elementary matrix. The “phallic signifier” can thus serve as a model of the signifying difference, based on the presence or absence of differential traits. The privilege of the phallus could therefore be seen to follow from the overlapping of two spheres, the signifier and the body, which coincide at this privileged site. The phallic difference would thus present the very model of the first difference, the oppositive and binary difference, the Saussurean difference, from which it would seem that in this relation to the sexed body it obtains its hidden reference point, standing at the core of the production of signification (hence the title of one of Lacan’s notorious *écrits*, “The Signification of the Phallus”).¹⁰ But here is one of the basic tenets of psychoanalysis: the sexual difference cannot be accounted for in terms of phallic difference. It eludes this phallic logic. It stands in difference to this logic as such, as another difference irreducible to presence or absence of differential traits, irreducible to the phallus as signifier. This is why the sexual difference cannot be written – it is what doesn’t cease not to be written.¹¹

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Yin Yang Infinity by OneiromancerNJV.

If there is a real of sexual difference, a real that makes its two irreducible to the two of count or the expansion of One, then it can be most simply and economically epitomized by Lacan’s dictum “There is no sexual relation” [Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel]. There is a two, but there is no relation. There is no relation between the One

and the Other, they don’t complement each other. The supposition that there is a complementarity of two principles, that there is a relation, this supposition has largely underpinned traditional ontological assumptions. Perhaps the best known figure of the relation between the two is the Taoist yin-yang symbol. It is an image that has massively served as support for an entire cosmology, ontology, social theory, astronomy. It gives figure precisely to the two (and only two) poles of masculine and feminine, and the image is formed in such a way that they complement and complete each other, in perfect symmetry. There is a circle, and the circle itself is divided by two half-circle lines. The masculine and the feminine principle, their conflictual complementarity, are taken as the clue that informs every entity, indeed the entire universe. What does this image convey? There is a strong thesis presented in it that one could spell out like this: there is a relation. There is a sexual relation. Every relation is sexual. The relation exists emphatically, conspicuously, in a demonstrative manner, in the complementarity of the masculine and the feminine, in their perfect balance, the perfect match, and can serve as a paradigm for everything else. Everything can be interpreted in light of this image. The thesis implies and manifests even more: there is sense, this is the visual embodiment of sense that can endow everything else with sense. Sense basically consists in relation – if there is relation, there is sense, and only relation “makes sense.” The paradigm that regulates sense also regulates the sexual relation.¹² It has the power to bestow sense, which emerges from the complementarity of the two. So this sign states: one divides into two, and the two merge into one. The exact opposite of the other notorious Chinese dictum, the one we started with: one divides into two, but two doesn’t merge into one. For Lacan, Aristotelian ontology is like our Western version of yin-yang, it makes analogous assumptions about *hyle* and *morphe*, matter and form, the feminine and the masculine, the passive and the active. And this goes for the bulk of traditional dichotomies: matter and form, body and spirit, nature and culture, intuition and intellect, active and passive – all of them are secretly sexualized, premised on an assumption about the relation. There is a theme to ponder: ontology and sexuality. To what extent were ontological assumptions always underpinned by sexual assumptions, assumptions about the sexual relation, its existence as a guiding principle, the hidden assumption about the relation?¹³

So the thesis that there is no sexual relation contains a strong ontological implication: there is an irreducible two but no relation, not even,

especially not, the relation of count; there is also not complementarity. There is the Other (of the unconscious, of sex), but it cannot be counted for one, and it cannot complement its other (consciousness, “opposite sex”) in a division of labor. It lacks, it doesn’t exist, but nevertheless, and this is the whole problem, its non-existence doesn’t run out into a simple nothing. But what remains of this non-existence? Can one name it?

In the first pages of his last big book, *Logics of Worlds*, Alain Badiou proposes the term “democratic materialism” to name the prevailing spontaneous set of assumptions that form the contemporary doxa. This democratic materialism can be summarized, according to Badiou, in one “ontological” statement: “There are only bodies and languages” [Il n’y que des corps et des langages].¹⁴ There is the firm being of bodies, their proliferation, their striving for pleasures and enjoyment, the increase, growth, and expansion of life; and there is the multiplicity of languages, the democracy of their plurality and proliferation, multiculturalism, minoritarian practices, all of them entitled to recognition. Democratic materialism is the spontaneous idealism of our times – nobody believes any longer in the salvation of the immortal soul, we firmly believe in bodies and languages. Badiou’s addition to this axiom is simple: “There are only bodies and languages, but apart from that there are truths” [... sinon qu’il y a des verities].¹⁵ There are truths that are of another order than bodies and languages, they engage subjectivity and raise a claim to universality, but they don’t exist on some separate location somewhere else – for our particular purpose we could say that they emerge precisely with that excess at the interface of bodies and languages, something that psychoanalysis brings together under the names of the unconscious and sexuality, at the intersection that prevents the neutral coexistence of bodies and languages, in a subtraction from the regime of bodies and languages, epitomized by the Other. Bodies and signs can be counted, but the Other makes for a two that is uncountable. The axiom of democratic materialism has a corollary: there are only bodies and languages, but there is no Other. The promotion of their expansion and proliferation precludes the Other. And this is where our adage that the Other lacks takes precisely the opposite direction: it doesn’t mean that, since it lacks, we are only stuck with bodies and languages, happily or unhappily stuck, it means that the very existence of bodies and languages has to be put into question. It is the two of the Other that undermines their multiplicity and proliferation. The two that is neither one nor multiple, and provides a precarious hold for truth.

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I can, in conclusion, propose a very simple name for it, a name stemming from the pre-Socratic times of the dawn of philosophy. And the question of One and its division into two is indeed a pre-Socratic question to start with. The first appearance of materialism in the history of philosophy was linked with the atomists, and most notably with the figure of Democritus. What is atomism, if not precisely a radical attempt to submit bodies, the whole matter, indeed the cosmos, to count? Matter can be counted, and the atoms are the indivisible particles that enable counting. The atom would thus be the pure minimal element of matter that cannot be reduced any further, and this is what enables them to be counted for one. If there is division in them, and division there is, then it pertains not to the indivisible hard particles, but to the void that surrounds them and allows them to be counted for one at all. So we arrive at a split entity, an entity split into itself and the void. Hegel was always enthusiastic about what he saw as the speculative insight of ancient atomism, namely, that at base we always have not a unity, but a unity split into something and a void, so that we have to include the void as “the other half,” “the missing half” of firm being.¹⁶ That which is most palpably material, reduced to its minimal, seems to behave like a signifying structure, based on the minimal division presence/absence – one didn’t have to wait for Saussure. This would spell out the secret of counting at the dawn of philosophy. Yet this is not all. In the famous fragment 156 (in the Diels-Kranz edition), Democritus inadvertently or intentionally introduced something else, something that wouldn’t fall into the division between one and the void. He coined a word that gave the classical philologists a headache because it is an improper word formation in Greek. The word is *den*. *Den* is like the negation of *hen* (*hen* of *hen kai pan*), of one, but not the usual negation, which would be *ouden* or *meden* (not one, not even one) – it’s a negation that doesn’t quite negate. What, if anything, is *den*? What is *den* the name of? I will give translations of this fragment in three languages so you can appreciate the paradox. First in German, by Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz: “Das Ichts existiert ebenso sehr als das Nichts.”¹⁷ Barbara Cassin, a formidable French scholar, proposed the French translation *ien* – not *rien*, nothing, but *ien*, “not nothing.”¹⁸ (Or, alternatively, *iun*, not one.) W. I. Matson proposes the English translation “hing,” as opposed to the thing: “Hing is no more real than nothing” or “Hing exists no more than nothing.”¹⁹ Hing – less than a thing, but not nothing. So what is this entity, *den*? Not something, not nothing, not being, not one, not positively existing, not absent, not countable –

and thus providing the minimal figure of the two.
Lacan singles it out:

When Democritus tried to designate it ... he says, *It is not the meden* [non-being] *that is essential ... but a den*, which, in Greek, is a coined word. He did not say *hen* [one], let alone *on* [being]. What, then, did he say? He said, answering the question I asked today, that of idealism, *Nothing, perhaps?* – not *perhaps nothing*, but *not nothing*.”²⁰

This is perhaps the closest that philosophy, at its dawn, would ever come to what Lacan, at the other end, would name *objet a*, the object *a*, which he saw as his crucial contribution to psychoanalysis, his key theoretical invention.

There is a history of materialism to be written that would take *den* as its guideline – not simply matter or the atom, for atoms ultimately run into the first kind of difference, that of count. Let me remind you that the young Karl Marx wrote his doctoral dissertation in philosophy in 1841 on the subject of “The difference between the philosophy of nature of Democritus and Epicurus,” where he took this up. Again, Lacan singled it out: “[Democritus] was no more materialist than anyone who has some sense, for instance me or Marx.”²¹ And let me quickly give another reference from a completely different quarter, Samuel Beckett. When Beckett was pressed about the philosophical implications of his work, he wrote in a letter from 1967, “If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work, my point of departure would be the ‘Naught is more real...’”²² So Beckett himself proposed Democritus’s fragment 156 as a clue (one of two) to his entire work. He used it verbatim at various points in his work, and in his later work he invented a fine name for it: the unnullable least.

So where does this leave us with regard to our initial problem, the way in which the one divides into two? Which two does one divide into? My answer would be that it is not the two of count, which is the replication of one, the division of one producing more ones, nor is it the two of complementary halves that one would try to combine and fit into a whole. Ultimately, the two, the two of the Other, the Other that doesn’t exist but nevertheless insists, the two would be the division into one and *den* – not something, not nothing, not one, not being. Enough to stake our hopes on? The object of our perseverance.

x

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1
Jacques-Alain Miller, "La suture," *Cahiers pour l'analyse* 1 (1966): 37–49; Alain Badiou, *Le nombre et les nombres* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

2
One could cite as a further token another programmatic statement, the René Char quotation that Foucault emphatically placed on the back cover of his last two books on the history of sexuality: "The history of men is a long succession of synonyms of a same word [vocabulary]. To contradict this is a duty [Y contredire est un devoir]." To contradict the synonymy of One – but with what?

3
One can find it, for example, in this minimal and straight form in one of Lacan's last public statements: "L'Autre manque. Ça me fait drôle à moi aussi. Je tiens le coup pourtant, ce qui vous épate, mais je ne le fais pas pour cela" [The Other lacks. I don't feel happy about it myself. Yet, I endure, which fascinates you, but I am not doing it for that reason].

4
But asking "What?" already precludes another way of asking, namely, "Who is the other?" For the question of the other, and this is just a digression, is first dramatically posed in relation to another person, this *alter ego* next to me, the same as me and for that very reason all the more the Other. This is where the whole drama of what Lacan famously called the mirror stage comes in, the mirror stage "as formative of the function of the ego," as the title of his first paper runs. In this drama, the *alter ego* is constitutive of the ego, precisely insofar as it is the agent of alterity, opacity, the foreignness of the Other, under the auspices of "the same," and it is only by this other and through it that one can assume the self of the ego as "my own," The foreignness of the other intersects with the own-ness of the self; the other is on the one hand homogenized, so that I can recognize myself in it, but only at the price of alienating myself in this image of the other – the other is the same as me, my double, and precisely because of that my competitor, my opponent, an intimate enemy who threatens my life and integrity. And one can, in another quick aside, point to the fact that Levinas took his cue from this same constellation, from the question of "Who is the other?" from the alterity of the other, epitomized strikingly and immediately by his or her face, in a way that cannot be circumvented and that circumscribes the very notion of the self – so his whole enterprise hinges massively on the question of the two and how to conceive it, and on the ethics that follows, taking the Other as its guideline. This is his

particular way of taking up the question of the two. But I will not pursue this further.

5
If the Char quotation used by Foucault placed the history of men under the banner of a long succession of synonyms, then in this first simple view one could maintain that what contradicts synonymy can be seen as the realm of homonymy. Against the unity of meaning that can be expressed by different means while remaining the same, there is the disruption of erratic similarity of sounds that don't heed meaning – a dispersion of meaning along the lines of contingent similarities. The unconscious, at its minimal, contradicts synonymy by homonymy. Could one say: The one of synonymy vs. the two of homonymy?

6
The bug means 1. *cimex lectularius*, a nasty little creature, a small insect; 2. a defect, a deficiency, a malfunction; 3. a fixed idea, a folly (for example, one can be bitten by a "love-bug" or a "money-bug," following the dictionary); 4. an imaginary object of terror; 5. a recording or eavesdropping device of tiny size; 6. bugger? The six meanings present a very good introduction into the theory of the object *a*. There are also "bug-eyed monsters."

7
This is the point of another Lacanian dictum: *There is no Other of the Other*. Lacan first maintained that the Name of the Father was the Other of the Other, the guarantee of the symbolic, and only gradually came to demote it, to pluralize – Names of the Father – and eventually to turn it into the symptom of the symbolic rather than its guarantee. See the work of Lorenzo Chiesa.

8
Jacques Lacan, *Encore* (Paris: Seuil 1975), 40.

9
Ibid., 65.

10
Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 575–584.

11
Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, 87. Opposed to this, the phallus is something that ceased not to be written with the advent of psychoanalysis. "Phallus ... – the analytic experience ceases its not being written. This *to cease not being written* implies the point of what I have called contingency. ... Phallus which was in ancient times reserved for Mystery, has through psychoanalysis ceased not to be written precisely as a contingency. Not any more" (86–7). What was veiled as a Mystery turned out to be the banal overlapping of the signifier

and the bodily contingency. Cf. Zupančič, *The Odd One In* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 205.

12
Lacan comments on yin-yang in *The Four Fundamental Concepts* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1977), 151. "... primitive science is a sort of sexual technique."

13
Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, 76. "Let's look at how these notions of active and passive have dominated everything that has been conceived of the relation between form and matter, this fundamental relation on which Plato's and then Aristotle's every step is based. It is visible, palpable, that these statements take their support only in a fantasy, by the means of which they have tried to complete/complement that which cannot be said, namely the sexual relationship."

14
Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 9.

15
Ibid., 12.

16
"The atomistic principle, with these first thinkers, didn't remain in exteriority, but apart from its abstraction contained a speculative determination, that the void was recognized as the source of movement. This implies a completely different relation between atoms and the void than the mere one-beside-the-other [*Nebeneinander*] and mutual indifference of the two. ... The view that the cause of movement lies in the void contains that deeper thought that the cause of becoming pertains to the negative." G. W. F. Hegel, *Logic*, TWA 5, 185–6.

17
Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker II, ed. Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz (Berlin: Wiedmannsche Buchhandlung, 1935), 174.

18
Alain Badiou and Barbara Cassin, *Il n'y pas de rapport sexuel* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), 60–94.

19
W. I. Matson, "Democritus, Fragment 156," *The Classical Quarterly* 13 (1963): 26–29.

20
Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 63–4.

21
Jacques Lacan, "L'Étourdit," in *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 494.

22
Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta* (New York: Gove Press, 1984), 113. He used it already in his early novel *Murphy* (1938) ("... naught than which, in the guffaw of old

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