

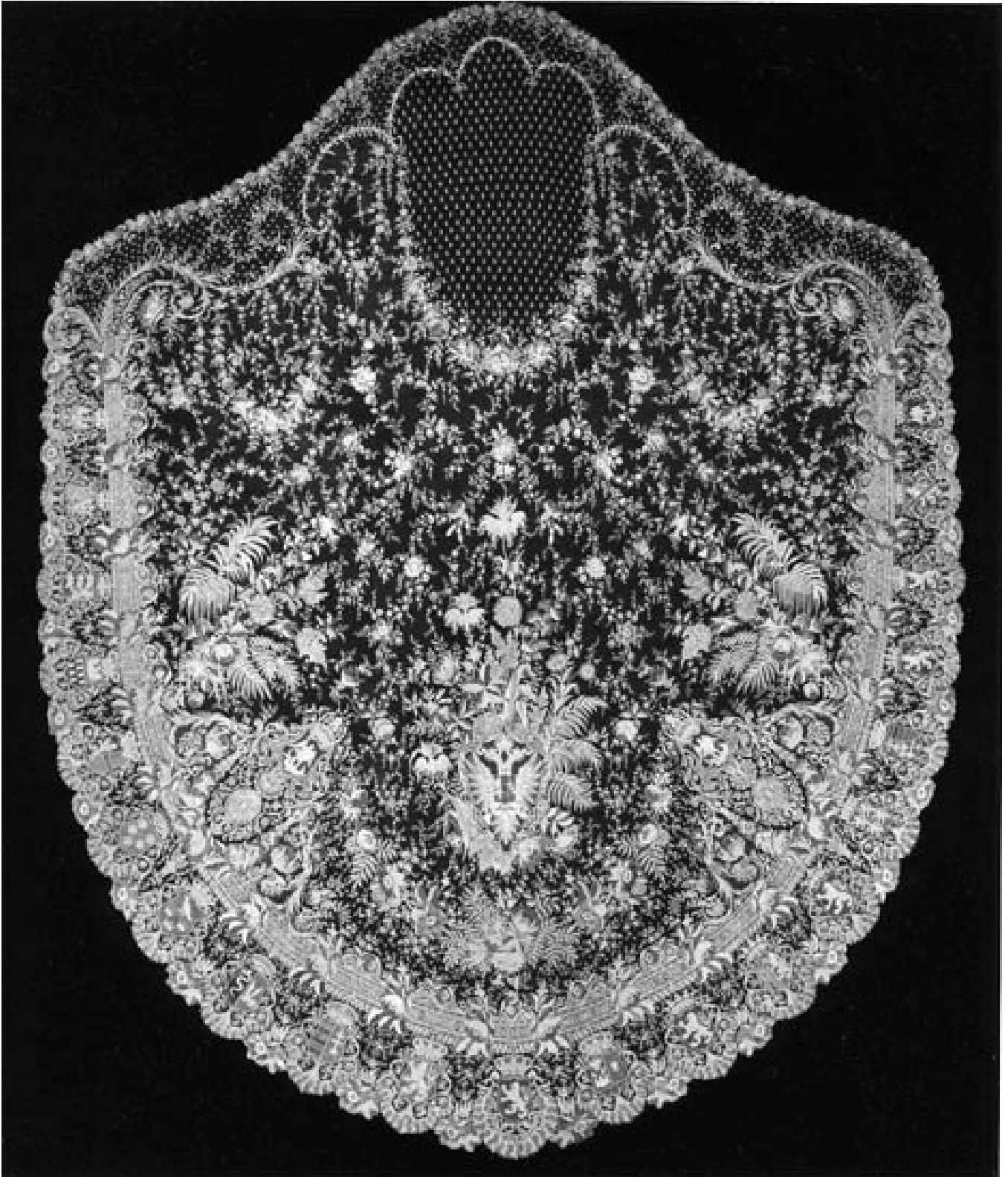
Slavoj Žižek  
**Hegel on  
Marriage**

01/12

e-flux journal #34 — april 2012 Slavoj Žižek  
**Hegel on Marriage**

Far from providing the natural foundation of human lives, sexuality is the very terrain where humans detach themselves from nature: the idea of sexual perversion or of a deadly sexual passion is totally foreign to the animal universe. Here, Hegel fails with regard to his own standards. He only considers how, in the process of culture, the natural substance of sexuality is cultivated, sublated, mediated – we humans no longer just make love for procreation, we get involved in a complex process of seduction and marriage by means of which sexuality becomes an expression of the spiritual bond between a man and a woman, and so forth. However, what Hegel misses is how, once we are within the human condition, sexuality is not only transformed/civilized, but, much more radically, *changed in its very substance*. It is no longer the instinctual drive to reproduce, but a drive that gets thwarted as to its natural goal (reproduction) and thereby explodes into an infinite, properly meta-physical passion. The becoming-cultural of sexuality is thus not the becoming-cultural of nature, but the attempt to domesticate a properly un-natural excess of the meta-physical sexual passion. *This* is the properly dialectical reversal of substance: the moment when the immediate substantial (“natural”) starting point is not only acted upon, trans-formed, mediated/cultivated, but changed in its very substance. We not only work upon and thus transform nature; in a gesture of retroactive reversal, nature itself radically changes its “nature.” (In a homologous way, once we enter the domain of legal civil society, the previous tribal order of honor and revenge is deprived of its nobility and appears as common criminality.) This is why Catholics who insist that only sex for procreation is human while coupling for lust is animal totally miss the point and end up celebrating the animality of humans.

The limitation of Hegel’s notion of sexuality is clearly discernible in his theory of marriage (from his *Philosophy of Right*), which nonetheless deserves a close reading: beneath the surface of the standard bourgeois notion of marriage lurk many unsettling implications. <sup>1</sup> While a subject enters marriage voluntarily, surrendering his/her autonomy by immersing him/herself into its immediate/substantial unity of family that functions with regard to its outside as one person, the function of family is the exact opposite of such a substantial unity: to educate those born in it to abandon (their parental) family and pursue their path alone. The first lesson of marriage is that that the ultimate goal of every substantial ethical unity is to dissolve itself by way of giving rise to individuals who will assert their full autonomy against the substantial unity that gave birth to them.



The Habsburg imperial wedding veil, 1881.

This surrender of autonomous individuality is the reason Hegel opposes those (Kant, among others) who insist on the contractual nature of marriage: "Though marriage begins in contract, it is precisely a contract to transcend the standpoint of contract, the standpoint from which persons are regarded in their individuality as self-subsistent units. The identification of personalities, whereby the family becomes one person and its members become its accidents (though substance is in essence the relation of accidents to itself), is the ethical mind." It is clear in what sense, for Hegel, marriage is "a contract to transcend the standpoint of contract": contract is a deal between two or more autonomous individuals, each of whom retains their abstract freedom (as is the case in exchange of commodities), while marriage is a weird contract by means of which the two concerned parties oblige themselves precisely to abandon/surrender their abstract freedom and autonomy and to subordinate it to a higher organic ethical unity. <sup>2</sup>

Hegel's theory of marriage is formulated against two opponents. His rejection of the contract theory of marriage is linked to his critique of the Romantic notion of marriage, which conceives as its core the passionate love attachment of the couple, so that the form of marriage is at its best merely the external registration of this attachment and at its worst an obstacle to true love. We can see how these two notions supplement each other: if the true core of marriage is the passionate inner love, then, of course, marriage itself is nothing but an external contract. For Hegel, on the contrary, the external ceremony is precisely not merely external. In it resides the very ethical core of marriage:

It is in the actual conclusion of a marriage, i.e. in the wedding, that the essence of the tie is expressed and established beyond dispute as something ethical, raised above the contingency of feeling and private inclination. If this ceremony is taken as an external formality, a mere so-called "civil requirement," it is thereby stripped of all significance except perhaps that of serving the purpose of edification and attesting the civil relation of the parties ... As such it appears as something not merely indifferent to the true nature of marriage, but actually alien to it. The heart is constrained by the law to attach a value to the formal ceremony and the latter is looked upon merely as a condition which must precede the complete mutual surrender of the parties to one another. As such it appears to bring disunion into their

loving disposition and, like an alien intruder, to thwart the inwardness of their union. Such a doctrine pretentiously claims to afford the highest conception of the freedom, inwardness, and perfection of love; but in fact it is a travesty of the ethical aspect of love, the higher aspect which restrains purely sensual impulse and puts it in the background ... In particular, the view just criticized casts aside marriage's specifically ethical character, which consists in this, that the consciousness of the parties is crystallized out of its physical and subjective mode and lifted to the thought of what is substantive; instead of continually reserving to itself the contingency and caprice of bodily desire, it removes the marriage bond from the province of this caprice, surrenders to the substantive.

Along these lines, Hegel rejects the Romantic view of Schlegel and his friends that "the wedding ceremony is superfluous and a formality which might be discarded. Their reason is that love is, so they say, the substance of marriage and that the celebration therefore detracts from its worth. Surrender to sensual impulse is here represented as necessary to prove the freedom and inwardness of love – an argument not unknown to seducers." What the Romantic view misses is thus that marriage is "ethico-legal (*rechtlich sittliche*) love, and this eliminates from marriage the transient, fickle, and purely subjective aspects of love." The paradox here is that, in marriage, "the natural sexual union – a union purely inward or implicit and for that very reason existent as purely external – is changed into a union on the level of mind, into self-conscious love." The spiritualization of the natural link is thus not simply its internalization; it rather occurs in the guise of its opposite, of the externalization in a symbolic ceremony:

The solemn declaration by the parties of their consent to enter the ethical bond of marriage, and its corresponding recognition and confirmation by their family and community, constitutes the formal completion and actuality of marriage. The knot is tied and made ethical only after this ceremony, whereby through the use of signs, i.e. of language (the most mental embodiment of mind), the substantial thing in the marriage is brought completely into being.

What Hegel does here is bring forward the "performative" function of the marriage ceremony. Even if this ceremony appears to the

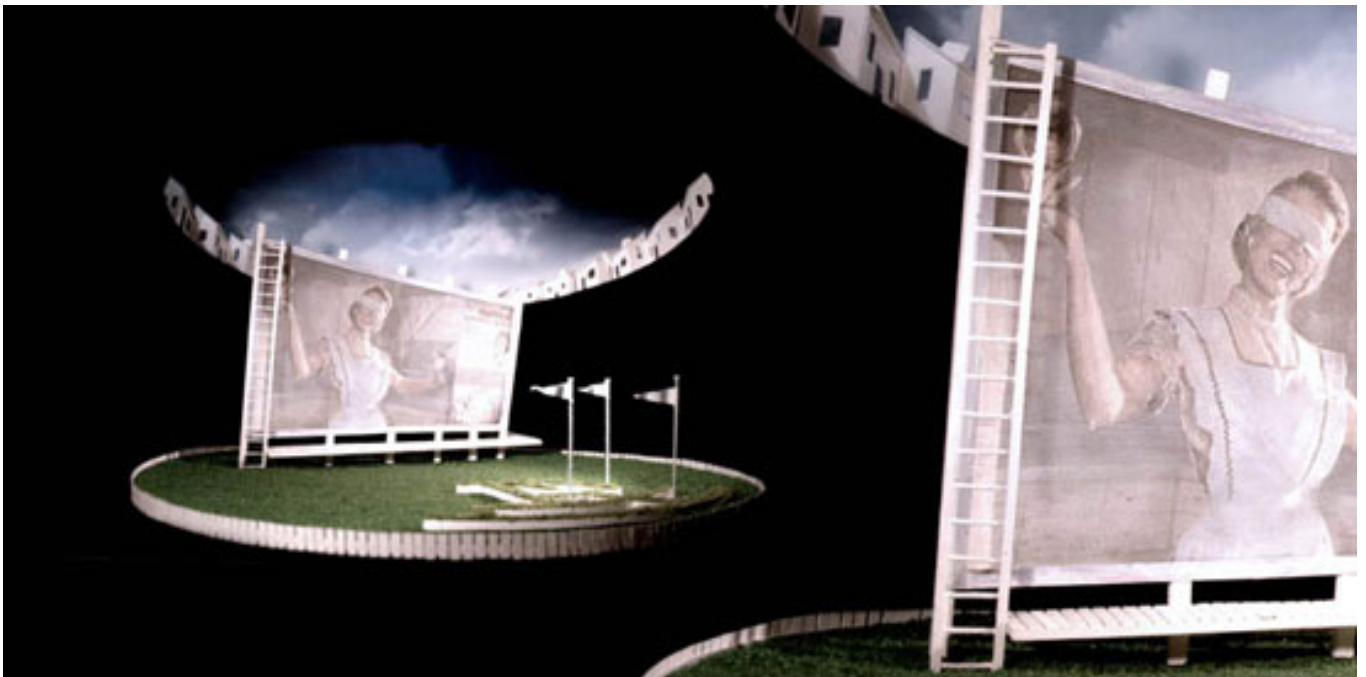
love partners as a mere bureaucratic formalism, it enacts the inscription of the sexual link into the big Other, the inscription which radically changes the subjective position of the concerned parties. This explains the well-known fact that married people are more attached to their spouses than it may appear (to themselves also). A man may have secret affairs, may be dreaming about leaving his wife, but anxiety prevents him from doing this when a chance presents itself – in short, we are ready to cheat on our spouses on condition that the big Other doesn't know it (register it). The last quoted sentence is very precise here: "The knot is tied and made ethical only after this ceremony, whereby through the use of signs, i.e. of language (the most mental embodiment of mind), the substantial thing in the marriage is brought completely into being." The passage from a natural link to spiritual self-consciousness has nothing to do with "inner awareness" and all with the external "bureaucratic" registration, a ritual whose true scope can be unknown to its participants, who may think they are just performing an external formality.

The key feature of marriage is not sexual attachment, but "the free consent of the persons ... to make themselves one person, to renounce their natural and individual personality to this unity of one with the other. From this point of view, their union is a self-restriction, but in fact it is their liberation, because in it they attain their substantive self-consciousness." In short,

04/12

true freedom is liberation from pathological attachments to particular objects determined by caprice and contingency. But Hegel goes all the way to the end here, i.e., to the dialectical reversal of necessity into contingency. To overcome contingency does not mean to arrange marriage based on careful examination of the future partner's mental and physical qualities (like in Plato); it is rather that, in marriage, the partner *is* contingent, and this contingency should be assumed as necessary. So when Hegel deals with the two extremes of prearranged marriages and marriages out of attraction and love, he ethically prefers the first one. At one extreme,

the marriage is arranged by the contrivance of benevolent parents; the appointed end of the parties is a union of mutual love, their inclination to marry arises from the fact that each grows acquainted with the other from the first as a destined partner. At the other extreme, it is the inclination of the parties which comes first, appearing in them as *these* two infinitely particularized individuals. The more ethical way to matrimony may be taken to be the former extreme or any way at all whereby the decision to marry comes first and the inclination to do so follows, so that in the actual wedding both decision and inclination coalesce.



Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Conceptual Opera Set and Costume Design Project for Così fan tutte*, by W. A. Mozart, 2008.

The beginning of the last sentence is worth rereading: “The more ethical way to matrimony may be taken to be the former extreme or any way at all whereby the decision to marry comes first and the inclination to do so follows” – in other words, the pre-arranged marriage is more ethical not because the benevolent elder relatives see further than the young and are in a better position than the young, blinded by their passions, to judge if the young couple has the qualities needed to make their shared life happy; what makes it more ethical is that, in this case, the contingency of the partner is directly and openly assumed. I am simply informed that it is expected from me to freely choose as a life-long partner an unknown person imposed on me by others. This freedom to choose what is necessary is more spiritual because the physical love and emotional tie come as secondary. They follow the abyssal decision to marry. Two consequences follow from this paradox: not only is the surrender of abstract freedom in marriage a double surrender (I not only surrender my abstract freedom by accepting to immerse myself in the family unity; this surrender of abstract freedom itself is only formally free, since the partner to whom I surrender my abstract freedom is de facto chosen by others); furthermore, the surrender of my abstract freedom is not the only surrender implied by the act of marriage – let us read carefully the following passage:

The distinction between marriage and concubinage is that the latter is chiefly a matter of satisfying natural desire, while this satisfaction is made secondary in the former ... The ethical aspect of marriage consists in the parties’ consciousness of this unity as their substantive aim, and so in their love, trust, and common sharing of their entire existence as individuals. When the parties are in this frame of mind and their union is actual, their physical passion sinks to the level of a physical moment, destined to vanish in its very satisfaction. On the other hand, the spiritual bond of union secures its rights as the substance of marriage and thus rises, inherently indissoluble, to a plane above the contingency of passion and the transience of particular caprice.

So what do we surrender in marriage? <sup>3</sup> Insofar as, in marriage, the pathological attraction and lust are sublated into a symbolic link and thus subordinated to spirit, the consequence is a kind of *de-sublimation* of the partner: the implicit presupposition (or, rather, injunction) of the standard ideology of marriage is that, precisely,

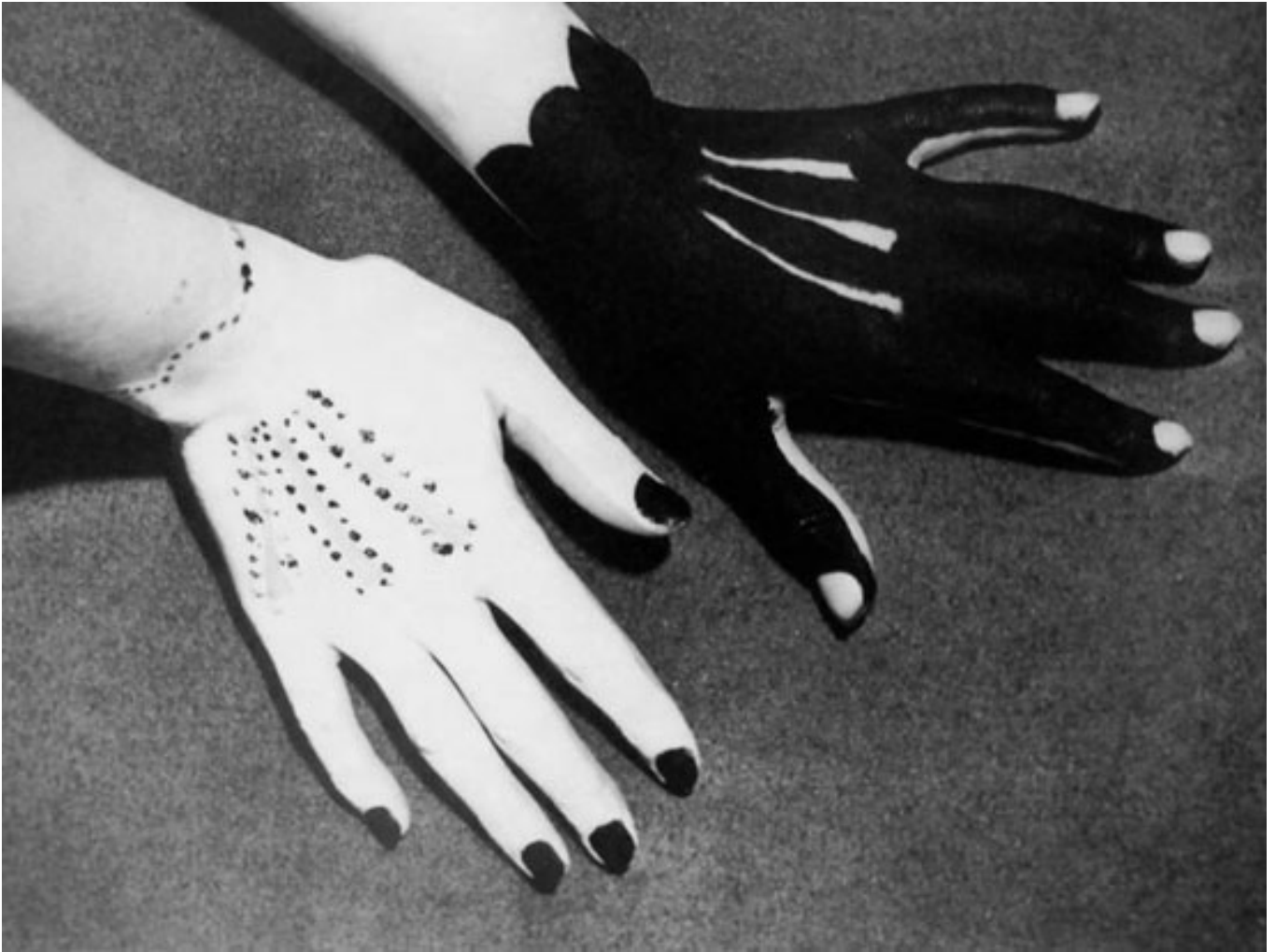
there should be no love in it. The true Pascalean formula of marriage is therefore not: “You don’t love your partner? Then marry him or her, go through the ritual of shared life, and love will emerge by itself!” On the contrary, it is: “Are you too much in love with somebody? Then get married, ritualize your love relationship in order to cure yourself of the excessive passionate attachment, to replace it with the boring daily custom – and if you cannot resist the passion’s temptation, there are extramarital affairs ...” In other words, what is sacrificed in marriage is the object. The lesson of marriage is that of Mozart’s *Così*: object replaceable.

### *Così fan tutte*

What makes *Così* the most perplexing, even traumatic, of Mozart’s operas is the very ridiculousness of its content. It is almost impossible to “suspend our disbelief” and accept the premise that the two women do not recognize in the couple of Albanian officers their own lovers. No wonder, then, that throughout nineteenth century, the opera was performed in a changed version in order to render the story plausible. There were three main versions of these changes which fit perfectly the main modes of the Freudian negation of a certain traumatic content: (1) the staging implied that the two women knew all the time the true identity of the “Albanian officers,” they just pretended not to know it in order to teach their lovers a lesson; (2) the couples reunited at the end are not the same as at the beginning, they change their places diagonally, so that, through the confusion of identities, the true, natural love links established; (3) most radically, only the music was used, with a wholly new libretto telling a totally different story.

Edward Said drew attention to a letter Mozart wrote to his wife Constanze on September 30, 1790, i.e., when he was composing *Così*. After expressing his pleasure at the prospect of meeting her again soon, he goes on: “If the people were to be able to see into my heart, I would have to be almost ashamed of myself.” At this point, as Said perspicuously perceives, one would expect the confession of some dirty private secret (sexual fantasies of what he will do to his wife when they will finally meet, and so forth); however, the letter continues: “everything is cold to me – cold like ice.” <sup>4</sup> It is here that Mozart enters the uncanny domain of “Kant avec Sade,” the domain in which sexuality loses its passionate, intense character and turns into its opposite, a “mechanical” exercise in pleasure executed by cold distance, like the Kantian ethical subject doing his duty without any pathological commitment. Isn’t this the underlying vision of *Così* – a universe in

06/12



Man Ray, *Hands Painted by Pablo Picasso*, 1935.

which subjects are determined not by their passionate engagements but by a blind mechanism that regulates their passions? What compels us to bring *Così* close to the domain of “Kant avec Sade” is its very insistence on the universal dimension already indicated by its title: “they are *all* doing like this,” determined by the same blind mechanism. In short, Alfonso the philosopher, who organizes and manipulates the game of changed identities in *Così*, is a version of the figure of the Sadean pedagogue educating his young disciples in the art of debauchery. It is thus oversimplified and inadequate to conceive this coldness as that of “instrumental reason.”

The traumatic core of *Così* resides in its radical “mechanical materialism” in the sense of Pascalean advice to nonbelievers: “Act as if you believe, kneel down, follow the ritual, and belief will come by itself!” *Così* applies the same logic to love. Far from being an external expression of the inner feeling of love, love rituals and gestures generate love – so act as if you are in love, follow the procedures, and love will emerge by itself. Moralists who condemn *Così* for its alleged frivolity thus totally miss the point. *Così* is an “ethical” opera in the strict Kierkegaardian sense of the “ethical stage”; the ethical stage is defined by the sacrifice of the immediate consumption of life, of our yielding to the fleeting moment, in the name of some higher universal norm. If Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* embodies the Aesthetic (as was developed by Kierkegaard himself in his detailed analysis of the opera in *Either/Or*), the lesson of *Così* is ethical – why? The point of *Così* is that the love that unites the two couples at the beginning of the opera is no less “artificial,” mechanically brought about, than the second falling in love of the sisters with the exchanged partners dressed up as Albanian officers that results from the manipulations of the philosopher Alfonso. In both cases, we are dealing with a mechanism that the subjects follow in a blind, puppet-like way. Therein consists the Hegelian “negation of negation”: first, we perceive the “artificial” love, the product of Alfonso’s manipulations, as opposed to the initial “authentic” love; then, all of a sudden, we become aware that there is actually no difference between the two – the original love is no less “artificial” than the second. So, since one love counts as much as the other, the couples can return to their initial marital arrangement.

Consequently, in Lacanian terms, marriage subtracts from the object (partner) “what is in him/her more than him/herself,” the *objet a*, the object-cause of desire. It reduces the partner to an ordinary object. The lesson of marriage which follows Romantic love is: “So you are passionately in love with that person? Get married and you will see how he/she is in

everyday life, with his/her vulgar tics, small gestures of meanness, dirty underwear, snoring, and so forth.” One should be clear here: it is marriage whose function it is to vulgarize sex, to take all the true passion from it and change it into a boring duty. One should even correct Hegel: sex is in itself not natural, it is the function of marriage to reduce it to a subordinated pathological/natural moment. And Hegel should be corrected here insofar as he confuses idealization and sublimation. What if marriage is the key test of true love in which sublimation survives idealization? In blind passion, the partner is not sublimated; he/she is rather simply idealized. The shared married life definitely de-idealizes the partner, but does not necessarily de-sublimate him/her.

To make this crucial point clear, let us compare Christianity to Judaism. Christianity inverts the Jewish sublimation of God into a radical desublimation (in the common sense of the term): not desublimation in the sense of the simple reduction of God to man, but desublimation in the sense of the descendance of the sublime Beyond to the everyday level. Christ is a “ready-made God,” as Boris Groys put it. He is fully human, inherently indistinguishable from other humans in exactly the same way that Judy is indistinguishable from Madeleine in *Vertigo*, or the “true” Erhardt is indistinguishable from his impersonator in *To Be Or Not to Be* – it is only the imperceptible “something,” a pure appearance which cannot ever be grounded in a substantial property, that makes him divine. *This* is why Christianity is the religion of love and of comedy: as examples from Lubitsch and Chaplin demonstrate, there is always something comic in this unfathomable difference that undermines the established identity (Judy is Madeleine, Hynkel is the Jewish barber). And love is to be opposed here to desire. Desire is always caught in the logic of “this is not that,” it thrives in the gap that forever separates the *obtained* satisfaction from the *sought-for* satisfaction, while love as authentic sublimation *fully accepts* that “this is that” – that the woman with all her weaknesses and common features *is* the Thing I unconditionally love; that Christ, this miserable man, *is* the living God. Again, to avoid a fatal misunderstanding: the point is not that we should “renounce transcendence” and fully accept the limited human person as our love object, since “this is all there is.” Transcendence is not abolished, but rendered *accessible* – it shines through in this very clumsy and miserable being that I love. <sup>5</sup>

### From the New Heloise to the Communist Couple

This is what Rousseau offers in his great novel

07/12

e-flux journal #34 — april 2012 Slavoj Žižek  
Hegel on Marriage

*Julie, or the New Heloise.* This novel about authentic life (in the Swiss province, well outside the corruption of Parisian high society) is clearly theatrical, self-reflected (even literally: stuffed with theoretical reflections on music, the corruption of big cities, the art of reading, and so forth). Since (unfortunately, a sign of our barbarism) Rousseau's extraordinary novel no longer has the status of a well-known classic, here is a brief outline of the story. Set principally by Lake Geneva, the novel centers on a young tutor, Saint-Preux, and Julie, his female pupil, who fall in love. But he is a commoner, and Julie's noble father will not hear of their union. Forced to keep their passion a guilty secret, the couple succumb to it and become lovers. Julie hopes to force her father to consent by becoming pregnant, but she has a miscarriage. At this point Lord Eduard Bomston, an immensely rich English peer and a friend of Julie's father, appears. He takes a great liking to Saint-Preux, but the latter suspects him of having designs on Julie. In a jealous rage he challenges Lord Eduard to a duel. This disaster is finally averted and Lord Eduard's generosity is proven by his efforts to persuade Baron d'Etange to permit the marriage. But Eduard also fails: Julie's father requires Julie to renounce Saint-Preux and accept the husband of

08/12

his choice, his own companion, the older Wolmar.

At this point of despair, another person intervenes to resolve the deadlock: Claire, Julie's level-headed cousin who is eventually in everyone's confidence and who acts as a sort of one-woman chorus throughout, observing, predicting and lamenting. To save Julie's reputation, Claire sends the tutor away; his friend Lord Eduard takes him to Paris. While they are gone Julie's mother discovers the correspondence and is very upset, and soon after she falls ill and dies. Even though the two events are unrelated Julie feels guilty and thinks that she is to blame for her mother's death. In this state of mind she consents to renounce her lover and to marry Wolmar. During the wedding she undergoes a profound inner change, a conversion to virtue. She now feels ready to accept her duties as a wife and mother. In her pursuit of virtue she is at every step helped by her extraordinary husband, a man as wise as he is good. Although she cannot bring herself to tell him of her relationship with Saint-Preux, he knows and forgives everything. In return, Julie embraces her new state, breaking entirely with her lover who eventually flees Europe.

But the story continues, or, rather, it starts again: ten years later, Saint-Preux returns and is



Illustration of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*.



welcomed by Wolmar and his wife. Julie now has two children and her life is wholly devoted to them and to running a model estate at Clarens with Wolmar. The rest of the book describes these efforts, Julie's virtue, Wolmar's wisdom, the beauty of their English garden and the prosperity of their estate. (Is this ten years gap not like the gap that separates the first and the second part of the Freudian dream of Irma's injection? In both cases, the same reversal occurs from tragedy to comedy: we inexplicably change the terrain, the utter despair of the abandoned lovers is replaced by the ridiculous happiness of the well-organized collective life at Clarens.) Julie's only sorrow appears to be that Wolmar is an atheist. He never speaks of it and always attends church for the sake of appearances, but he is a convinced unbeliever. This disturbs Julie, although Wolmar never tries to alter her faith. The more beneficent Wolmar is, the more he does to cure Saint-Preux of his old infatuation, the more religious and miserable his wife becomes – why? As it was clear to Rousseau, the excess of religious commitment is a displaced return of the repressed sexual passion: the true factor of desexualization is not religious spirituality but the atheist Enlightenment which dissolves passion in its cold utilitarian understanding, reducing it to a pathological excess to be properly cured. No wonder that, in these conditions, sexual passion can only return in a religious guise, as the "irrational" awareness of misery and sin.

In the end, as it seems certain that Saint-Preux will marry Claire and settle down at Clarens to become the tutor of the Wolmar children, she tells him of her profound malaise and boredom. The novel ends with an unexpected accident that nonetheless reveals a deeper deadlock: having plunged into the lake to save her younger son from drowning, Julie catches cold, falls ill, and dies an exemplary death. She was never really "cured" of her love for Saint-Preux, and thus the only way out of this predicament is her death. She is thus very happy to die, because she is now perfectly aware that all her virtue has not helped her to forget Saint-Preux: she loves him as much as ever. As she dies she gives an account of her tolerant and loving religious beliefs, but her greatest hope is to be reunited in heaven with Saint-Preux.

While the novel's title draws a parallel with the medieval story of Heloise and Abelard – a young girl and her tutor who also succumbed to passion – one should focus on the difference between the two stories. Rousseau depicts the era of the Enlightenment, where the renunciation that follows sexual transgression is no longer castration for the man and nunnery for the woman, as in the medieval story. Rather, the new

Heloise virtuously takes up her duties as wife, mother, and, together with Wolmar, the beneficent parent to everyone on their model estate, while, instead of the cruel castration, the tutor is invited by the understanding husband into this ideal family in order to be cured of his pathological infatuation. The message couldn't be clearer: marriage is the contemporary form of sexual renunciation. In a first approach, the inner movement of *Julie* effectively appears as "a kind of two-stage negation" in which "the passionate rejection of false and conventional desires" is "followed by the virtuous or rational rejection of the unconventional passions themselves": *Julie* is "the story of two lovers ... whose passionate love first rejects the falsity of existing conventions but who then – through their membership in a community formed by Julie's husband, Wolmar – undergo a second development in which they virtuously abstain from those passions themselves."<sup>6</sup>

The problem is how to read the return of the passion at the novel's end, when Julie confesses her inability to compromise her desire and opts for (a thinly covered) suicide as the only way out. Is this disturbing supplement a sign of the failure of the Hegelian "negation of negation" that forms the novel's basic frame, or is it its inherent fulfillment? In other words, is the gap between the "official" Hegelian reading of *Julie* (the "sublation" of passionate love in the new virtuous community which cures us of love) and the implicit lesson of the story itself (the failure of this "sublation," the deadly return of love) to be read as a critique of Hegel, as an indication of the limit of *Aufhebung*, as the persistence of the real of the "undead" obscene passion whose singularity eludes the grasp of the notional universalization? One is tempted to agree with such a reading: Is what characterizes the post-Hegelian break not precisely the rise of repetition which cannot be "sublated," of a drive which persists beyond (or, rather, beneath) all movement of idealization? And do the memorable phrases in Julie's final letter to her lover before her death (Sixth Part, Letter VIII) not point precisely in this direction? It is not so much that satisfaction (well-being, happiness) are out of reach for her – they are actual, and this very fact, "ce *dégoût du bien-être*," is what she finds unbearably suffocating: "Je suis trop heureuse: le bonheur m'ennuie."<sup>7</sup> When a contemporary Swiss reviewer of *Julie* wrote that "after reading this book, one has to die of pleasure ... or, better: one has to live in order to read it again and again" – is this overlapping of death and the repetitive excess of life not the most succinct description of the Freudian death drive, a dimension which eludes the Hegelian dialectical mediation?<sup>8</sup>

What, however, if we turn the perspective

09/12

e-flux journal #34 — april 2012 Slavoj Žižek  
Hegel on Marriage

around? It is only after we pass through the painful “sublation” destined to cure us of love passion that this passion emerges “as such,” in its pure form, shorn of the naïve-heroic mask of opposing traditional oppressive-paternal morality that characterizes its first appearance. In Hegelese, if the first negation (passion against social oppression) is “abstract negation,” the second negation is “concrete,” actual negation. Only here – when the Order is no longer oppressive, but has become the order of happiness and well-being – can it be properly negated. The “negation of negation” is thus necessarily followed by an additional “turn of the screw”: the absolute/undead passion is what the “negation of negation” produces, what it brings from its In-itself to its For-itself. Julie’s final outburst of passion is thus uncannily similar to Sygne’s “no” from Claudel’s *L’Otagé*: the remainder that follows the double movement of *Versagung*, the excess generated by the self-negated sacrifice. After you sacrifice everything (social content) for passion, you have to renounce passion itself – and yet, *eppur si muove*, the passion persists.

There is another point to add here. The way *not* to read the ending of *Julie* is to see in it the assertion of the “ontological” gap between desire and the constraints of (social) reality, as the necessary failure of an impossible utopia, along the lines of “desire can never be fully satisfied, and it is best that it should not be.” We should risk here a somewhat naïve historicist-Marxist solution to the final deadlock of *Julie*: What if the Clarens cure/sublation fails not because of some ontological incompatibility between love and virtuous social order, but because the social order of Clarens is a proto-totalitarian hierarchical-pedagogic nightmare, the realization of the fantasy proper to the despotic pre-revolutionary Enlightenment? Clarens is carefully constructed and tightly ordered, self-complete and unchanging, an Enlightenment utopia in a new intimate version: for complete happiness, all must be committed to the collective good. The institutional manipulation of the workers (who happily endorse their exploitation, with no need for overt repression), as well as the weird “cure” for Saint-Preux’s amorous illness, seem to come straight from the Foucauldian universe of biopolitical control and regulation – the oppression of the prohibitive power is replaced by the benevolent administration. This new mode of the exercise of power is personified by Wolmar; although he is imposed on Julie by her own father, Wolmar is not a figure of paternal authority, but decidedly a post-patriarchal authority, a benevolent regulator/coordinator who rules with total transparency, deprived of any mystique of Power,

and expects the same openness from his subjects. It is crucial to learn that he is privately an atheist who just externally partakes in religious rites: he needs no higher transcendence to sustain his power. In Lacanese, the passage from Julie’s father to Wolmar is the passage from the Master’s discourse to the University discourse: deprived of the authority of the Master-Signifier, Wolmar is knowledge embodied – he knows it all, all the intimate secrets of those around him, and the only subjective stance that can sustain such an excess of knowledge is serene forgiveness. He knows all about Julie’s affair and aborted pregnancy, and there is no envy or jealousy in his reaction to it. He accepts it all. The obverse of this unconditional munificence is, of course, a control and domination much stronger than the usual oppressive exercise of power: the latter is an external pressure, thereby allowing the subject to resist it from within, while Wolmar’s power is a power that caringly accepts this very inner core of resistance, not accusing or blaming the subject for it, but merely proposing to cure the subject of it by way of reeducation, with the subject’s full cooperation.

This is why the community of Clarens, presided over by Wolmar and the reborn Julie, is not the truly self-transparent community it pretends to be. Its “transparency” is false, an illusion obfuscating utter manipulation. The “general will” that appears to emerge in Clarens deprives subjects of the very core of their subjectivity – and Julie’s “irrational” resistance is the proof of this, a desperate attempt to reassert the infinite right of her subjectivity. This is why it is too easy to see Claire as superior to Julie (as some feminist interpreters are tempted to do), i.e., to oppose Julie, still caught in the split between duty and passion that characterizes the traditional feminine identity, to Claire, a free and independent woman who was able to rise above traditional sex roles, cherishing liberty and friendship. Claire is here presented like a wise character from a Jane Austen novel, as opposed to Julie whose unquenchable passion forecasts the Brontë universe. Claire may well rise above the traditional feminine role, but precisely as such, she is the ultimate guarantee of the order and its stability, a behind-the-scenes fixer who wisely intervenes and manipulates the excessive outbursts so that social harmony is maintained. Claire fits perfectly into the existing order, in contrast to the unrest and negativity embodied in Julie.

But does the fact that Clarens is a pre-revolutionary organic community not allow for the possibility of another form of collectivity, something like an emancipatory-revolutionary

collective that embodies much more authentically the “general will”? The question is: How does such a collective affect intense erotic passion? From what we know about love among the Bolshevik revolutionaries, something unique took place there, a new form of love couple emerged: a couple living in a permanent state of emergency, totally dedicated to the revolutionary Cause, ready to sacrifice all personal sexual fulfillment to it, even ready to abandon and betray each other if the Revolution demanded it, but simultaneously totally dedicated to each other, enjoying rare moments together with extreme intensity. The lovers’ passion was tolerated, even silently respected, but ignored in the public discourse as something of no concern to others. (There are traces of this even in what we know of Lenin’s affair with Inessa Armand.) In all three previous forms depicted in *Julie*, we have a violent attempt of *Gleichschaltung*, of enforcing the unity between intimate passion and social life (Julie’s father wants her to suppress her passion; in her affair with her tutor, the two want to obliterate social reality; Wolmar again wants to cure the lovers of their disease of passion and integrate them fully into the new social space), while here, the radical *disjunction* between sexual passion and social-revolutionary activity is fully recognized. The two dimensions are accepted as totally heterogeneous, each irreducible to the other, there is no harmony between the two – but it is this very recognition of the gap that makes their relationship non-antagonistic.

It is easy to see the parallel between the rabble and sex here. Hegel doesn’t recognize in the rabble (more than in state bureaucracy) the “universal class”; he doesn’t recognize in sexual passion the excess that is neither culture nor nature. Although the logic is different in each case (apropos the rabble, Hegel overlooks the universal dimension of the excessive/discordant element; apropos sex, he overlooks the excess as such, the undermining of the opposition nature/culture), the two failures are linked, since excess is the site of universality, the way universality as such inscribes itself into the order of its particular content.

Does this mean that, once we enter the Freudo-Kierkegaardian world of pure repetition, we can forget about Hegel? Claude Levi-Strauss wrote that the prohibition of incest is not a question without answer, but rather the opposite: an answer without a question, the solution of an unknown problem. The same goes for the pure repetition. It is an answer to the *Hegelian* problem, its hidden core, which is why it can only be properly located within the Hegelian problematic. Once we enter the post-Hegelian world, the concept of repetition is

“renormalized” and loses its subversive edge. The situation is similar to the relationship between the finale of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (don Giovanni’s death) and the post-Mozartean Romantic passion: the scene of don Giovanni’s death generates a terrifying excess which disturbs the coordinates of Mozart’s universe; however, although this excess points forward towards Romanticism, it loses its subversive edge and is “renormalized” once we are in Romanticism.

But does this, paradoxically, not unexpectedly bring us back to the topic of *Aufhebung*, this time applied to the very relationship between Hegel and his post-Hegelian “repetition”? Deleuze once characterized his own thought as an essay to think as if Hegel didn’t exist, and he constantly made the point that Hegel is the philosopher who should be simply ignored, not worked through. What he missed is how his own thought of pure repetition only works as a weird sublation of Hegel. In this exemplary last revenge of Hegel, the great Hegelian motif of the path towards truth as part of the truth, of how, in order to arrive at the right choice, one has to begin with the wrong choice, reasserts itself. The point is not so much that one should *not* ignore Hegel, but that we can only arrive at the position at which one can afford to ignore Hegel after a long and arduous working-through-Hegel.

x

11/12

e-flux journal #34 — april 2012 Slavoj Žižek  
Hegel on Marriage

Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic working in the traditions of Hegelianism, Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. He has made contributions to political theory, film theory and theoretical psychoanalysis. Žižek is a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and a professor at the European Graduate School. He has been a visiting professor at, among others, the University of Chicago, Columbia University, London Consortium, Princeton University, New York University, The New School, the University of Minnesota, the University of California, Irvine and the University of Michigan. He is currently the International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at Birkbeck, University of London and president of the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis, Ljubljana.

12/12

e-flux journal #34 — april 2012 Slavoj Žižek  
Hegel on Marriage

1

All Hegel quotes that follow are from *Philosophy of Right*. See <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/prfamily.htm>.

2

In a strange argumentative turn, Hegel deduces the prohibition of incest from the very fact that “marriage results from the free surrender by both sexes of their personality – a personality in every possible way unique in each of the parties”: “Consequently, it ought not to be entered by two people identical in stock who are already acquainted and perfectly known to one another; for individuals in the same circle of relationship have no special personality of their own in contrast with that of others in the same circle. On the contrary, the parties should be drawn from separate families and their personalities should be different in origin.”

3

I rely here on Jure Simoniti, “Vrtnica bi pod drugim imenom disala drugace,” *Problemi* 1-2/2010 (in Slovene).

4

Edward W. Said, “Così fan tutte,” *Lettre internationale* 39 (Winter 1997): 69–70.

5

I borrow this formula of love as the “accessible transcendence” from Alenka Zupančič, to whom this whole passage is deeply indebted.

6

Allen Speight, *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 91–92.

7

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2002), 757.

8

Quoted in Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes from the French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books 1999), 286.