1

Knot of the World

German Idealism between Annihilation and Construction

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> Blackness is not the pathogen in afro-pessimism, the world is[—]maybe even the whole possibility of and desire for a world.
>
> **—Jared Sexton**

> The world is its own rejection, the world's rejection is the world.
>
> **—Jean-Luc Nancy**

> For we cannot claim to know for sure whether or not our world, although it is contingent, will actually come to an end one day.
>
> **—Quentin Meillassoux**

A specter is haunting contemporary theory—the specter of the world. To think the world radically otherwise; to refuse the very need for a world or to reduce it affirmatively to nothing, a mere illusion or hallucination; to dissolve it in absolute contingency or chaos; to think the reality of that which the world forecloses, subjugates, excludes; to expose the world as totalizing and to find ways of tearing it down or opening it up; to work out an apocalyptic, postapocalyptic, messianic, posthuman ontology, ethics, or politics[1]—along this entire spectrum, the world remains, even in cases where its remains are thought of as, or after, its end. Even when one could not care less about the world itself, one is troubled by the fact of the world. No matter how spectral the world is declared to be, this fact remains a problem, with which all theory feels the need to engage. Even to say that the world is an illusion, that one ought to desire no world, is to admit that the world is there (and is at issue)—that it has the power to foreclose and divide, to make one hallucinate, and, most importantly, the power to

survive, to remain. It is also to imply that the world is necessarily this way. But, why is the world there in the first place? Why this world—of divisions and exclusions, endless striving and endless postponement? Must it even be, this way or at all? Do we have to proceed from the fact that we—the subjects of modernity—are always already in this world?

Among these and similar questions, I would single out one as central: how to think the world without absolutizing or justifying it—to construct a world or the way the world could be, or to reconstruct the way the world is, without falling into the logic of justification—while accounting for the world's being there, as fact or problem? From Quentin Meillassoux's thinking of contingency as at once making the world possible and ungrounding it, to the Laruellean Real as prior to and without world and yet also, in the presence of the world, "giving" and "receiving" the world, to the polemics between Afropessimism and black optimism or queer negativity and queer utopianism, this question is inevitably at stake. The relation between world-making and theodicy (in the sense of world justification) marks this as a political-theological question.[2] In view of contemporary political theology's grappling with the problem of the (Christian-modern) world and its modes of legitimation, this question is central to its present and future.[3]

This is, at the same time, the typical transcendental conjunction, even the transcendental knot: conditions of *possibility* of experience are *necessary* for us to even have experience at all, so that to think the possibility of the world is necessarily to justify the world *as* necessary. This conjunction stems from Immanuel Kant, who formulates it in terms of so-called "transcendental conditions," that is, conditions of possibility of experience—of the world as it appears to us. For Kant, in order for us to even have experience, it must fulfill certain conditions; it must conform to a specific set of categories and follow certain rules. Thus, the reality of the world (of experience) is always negative and divisive: it is a world of objects separated from the subject and from each other; a world in which unity is secondary to separation and can only be thought by way of mediation (synthesis) and relation. There can be, in fact, no experience unless it conforms to these conditions; the world can only appear in this and no other categorial way for it to cohere. If we are to think a world, it can only be *this* world—that is, a world structured in this categorial way—because this is the way experience (our being-in-the-world) works. The transcendental thus converts possibility into necessity: to inquire into the conditions under which the world is possible, is to show that these conditions are necessary for us to even think a world at all. The possibility of *a* world is converted into the necessity of *the* world. To think the (possibility of the) world is to justify it as necessary: the transcendental turn is a theodical operation.[4]

This conjunction of possibility and necessity can take many forms—including contemporary ones. For example, to say with François Laruelle that the world functions by way of dividing the Real is to say that, assuming there *is* a world, this is the way it necessarily works—to determine the world as necessarily this way, to convert a world into the world. This conjunction may also be seen as a tension, within which the above question—of how to think the world without justifying it or exorcizing it—exists.

This tension is already present within German Idealism, spanning the conceptual space between two poles: world annihilation and world construction. In this essay, I will present some of the ways in which German Idealism tried to resolve this tension. The point, however, is not to suggest that German Idealism succeeded in doing so, but to put forward the transcendental knot as a key problem that German Idealism shares with contemporary continental philosophy and political theology. Accordingly, the following sections will approach the transcendental knot from different perspectives to highlight its various aspects and to demonstrate the numerous pitfalls when trying to deal with it—or how the world tends to survive all thinking of its end or rejection. It is crucial to engage with the world, with the way in which it is constructed (and can be deconstructed), and with the real power it possesses rather than announcing the world to be illusory, merely contingent, or easily refusable.

I take the pair of "annihilation" and "construction" from Friedrich Schelling.[5] Already in his early metaphysics, "the world" is a structure of divisive relationality: the original opposition between subject and object, the *I* and the *not-I*, which is then mediated by the *I*. Finding itself *in* the world, the subject is divided from object, faced with external reality as something different, other—something over and against which the *I* seeks to assert itself. Conflict, opposition, and striving are central characteristics of finitude; the finite world is a world of negativity, alienation, division.

As always already in the world, the *I* strives to break free of the world—be that through gathering the world into one totality that the *I* would perfectly possess (the dream of perfect sovereignty) or by purifying itself of any *not-I* (the dream of perfect dispossession, of having no need for the world). The former is the activity of synthesis: the *I* brings what is multiple into a unity. The latter is morality, configured as the striving to become absolutely nothing, without any need or lack. It may be seen, however, that the end goal of both strivings is, essentially, the same. "The ultimate end goal of the finite *I* and the *not-I*, i.e., the end goal of the *world*," Schelling writes, "is its *annihilation* as a world." What the *I* strives toward is absolute freedom from the negativity of the world—from conflict, division, and

striving itself. This absolute freedom Schelling calls "absolute bliss." As negative and divisive, the world is fundamentally unblissful; the *I*'s existence in such a world is, accordingly, a constant longing *for* bliss. The world does nothing but defer, postpone, or mediate salvation and fulfillment. It is, after all, through this postponement that the world itself survives. From within the world, bliss cannot but appear as transcendent: as either a paradisal past or a future salvific telos—never now.

Imagine, however, that one would not have to strive for bliss; that the subject, instead of wanting something, could get fulfillment immediately—or not want anything at all. In this state of bliss, the subject would immediately cease to be just that: a subject. If there is nothing to strive for, nothing to negate or overcome, no positions to occupy, possessions to accumulate, or goals to achieve, what would subjectivity consist in? It would amount to simply *being what one is*. This is precisely absolute freedom: to simply *be*—without any self-assertion or lack, any further determination, any reason why. The *I* would become, as Schelling calls it, "absolute"—and thus cease to be an *I*, a transcendental subject or a subject of striving. As the mere *am* or *is*, this state may be termed "absolute being"; as being *what it is*, this being could only be an "absolute identity"—without any negativity or relation to otherness. As immanent only to itself, absolute freedom cannot become other, cannot transition to negation or any outside. "The absolute," Schelling insists, "can never be mediated."[6] It is "utterly immanent" and "has no need to go outside itself" (*VI*, 167). It is an absolute now, without before or after, possibility or actuality: immanently atemporal and amodal.

This kind of radical immanence can only function in and as the absence of a world. It possesses the "absolute power": the power to "completely annihilate" the world (*VI*, 122, 104). There are two aspects to this affirmative reduction to *Nichts*. Firstly, no common measure applies to absolute being (122), so that, from the perspective of the world, the absolute "can be neither object nor not-object, i.e., cannot be anything at all" (101)—can only be a nothingness, "nothing at all (= 0)" (119). Conversely, since the absolute has no place or need for otherness, it is the world that is *nothing at all,* annihilated immediately by the power of the absolute as the absolutely nothing. This annihilation functions by transporting the philosopher to the zero point that must be thought of as preceding—not following upon—the world. In other words, even though the *I* always already finds itself in the world, this is not where speculative thought must begin—this is not where Schelling locates the Real. The world is a factually inevitable yet secondary, imposed, negative reality. The zero point of

nothingness or bliss is prior to the imposition of the world, annihilating its very possibility.

That is, in fact, why the *I* strives toward bliss in the first place: because it knows or intuits the world to be forcefully imposed, foreclosing the Real as that which is without negativity or striving—and so seeks to return to it. The temporality of the *I*'s striving in the world turns out to be one whereby the past is redoubled as the future, the past bliss as future bliss: a utopian loop. As long as the world is there, past and future remain separate, with the world existing precisely in and as this gap. To collapse them—to enact bliss right now—would necessitate a total collapse of the world. Why, then, must the world even be? "The main business of all philosophy consists," as a result, "in resolving the problem of the being-there (*Dasein*) of the world."[7] It is with this problem that contemporary theory continues to struggle.

It seems that this problem cannot, however, be resolved other than *from within* the world. In this, we approach the crux of the issue. At the standpoint of the absolutely Real, there is no world. As soon as the world is there, however, we find ourselves always already in the world. Even if we say with Schelling that, in fact, the absolutely Real is the "essence" of the *I* or the soul, so that in a more essential sense we are always already nowhere or nothing, prior to the imposition of the world—a fact that the world forecloses—and that the world is therefore an unreal, even illusory thing, this does nothing to make the world go away or cease its violent imposition. At best, it tears us between two "always already": one blissful, another imposed, with which we still have to engage.

It is, in effect, through this metaopposition that the world is constructed. This tear between the two "always already" itself is (the fact of) the world, existing as the gap within the Real. I am taking the term *construction* from Schelling's later philosophy, where it means exhibiting the world speculatively in—or with a view to—the absolute. To put it simply: if absolute identity and freedom are the absolutely Real, then how to think the world? Since there is no world at the standpoint of the absolute, to think the world is to think it as *negation* of the absolute—a negation of absolute freedom and bliss. In order to construct the world, then, we need not merely absolute being or nothingness, but twoness and division. The world functions by way of dividing and then mediating (bringing into relation or unity). Accordingly, in order to be a "system of the world" without absolutizing the world,[8] the system must be a system of oneness and twoness: it must at once annihilate or suspend the world and exhibit or construct it. The twoness is

introduced by the fact of the world, a fact that cannot be thought if we remain at the standpoint of the absolute. Once it is introduced, however, the world can only be thought by way of negation and doubling. In other words, if the absolutely Real is without world, and if speculative thinking seeks to think according to the Real and not according to the world—seeks not to make the world into the first—then the only way to think the world is to think it *as* negative and imposed (vis-à-vis the Real). To think the possibility of the world turns out to think it as necessarily the (negative) way it is. The world cannot, it seems, be thought otherwise than in the very terms that serve to create it: the transcendental knot again.

To construct the world is thus, in the early Schelling, to reconstruct the way it is. But it is also to construct the end of the world. To think absolute being or nothingness as the Real, and to think the world as imposed negatively upon the Real, is to think that which immediately annihilates the world. The world can only be thought as its rejection or end. However, *from within* the world (where we are as subjects), this annihilation cannot but be thought of as its future (and not immediate) end. The issue is, in other words, how to think the annihilation of the world from within the world—given the fact that the world is there and does not simply and immediately go away.

If the absolutely Real is what annihilates the world, then to do so becomes imperative. In the absolute itself, no imperative could arise; however, from the point of view of the world, the soul's striving for the absolute translates into the demand of putting an end to the world. "In order to resolve the antagonism between I and *not-I*," Schelling says, "nothing else remains except complete *destruction* of the finite sphere (practical reason)." It is only if "we pierce through these [finite] spheres"—as demanded by the moral law—"that we find ourselves in the sphere of absolute being" (*VI*, 145). As a result, the question *Why is there a world at all*? "cannot be resolved except the way Alexander the Great resolved the Gordian knot, i.e., through the canceling-out of the question itself."[9] It is in the cutting of the knot of the world so as to break through to absolute identity and freedom, that the only resolution of the problem of the world consists. The moral imperative "enters, not in order to untie the knot, but to cut it into pieces by means of absolute demands" (*VI*, 100). To *Why must the world be?*, the only absolute answer is, *The world must not be*.

Since, however, the world *is* there, this absolute demand can only be remediated (from within the world) in terms of a future. The problem is that the canceling-out of the world, its affirmative reduction to nothingness, must be enacted from within the world. In order for the soul to strive toward the end of the world, this end must be configured as possible—

become representable as a goal. That which is supposed to annihilate the world becomes thereby a position in the world, a telos or *Endzweck* toward which the world must be directed. The absolute demand of immediate annihilation is impossible and so gets postponed into a possible future that is, constitutively, never now as long as the world remains. All that the striving toward this future can realistically amount to, then, is a progress of morality, an approximation of the absolute demand: an "incremental approximation to the end goal" (*VI*, 124). The world is supposed to be, in the end, annihilated, but this annihilation is always not-yet. In this way, the world remediates bliss as telos. As soon as nothingness becomes possibility and telos, it gets caught up in the same logic of futurity thanks to which the world exists in the first place: the gap in which past is redoubled as future. Via possibility and the not-yet, the world endlessly defers its annihilation.

By thinking the end of the world as the end goal—by thinking bliss as producible from within the world—the world is thus reproduced. Not only can the world only be thought as its rejection or end; the end of the world is the world. To construct the world with a view to its end thus runs the risk of justifying the world as the only way it can and must be.

I do not intend to suggest that this issue is absolutely unresolvable; to suggest so would also mean to absolutize the world. In his later thinking, Schelling may be seen as attempting to approach this issue differently—to think the fact of the world without reproducing the way the world is. In his so-called identity philosophy, Schelling insists that the world is something that we have imposed upon ourselves and need simply to reject; that we need to begin not with striving but with the refusal of striving; that we need to remain where we already are, to remain in the now, which is what the world forecloses. There are not two "always already," but only one. Essentially, we are never in the world. All finitude, temporality, relation, are already "annihilated in God."[10]

The identity philosophy proclaims the finite world, this world of reflection and the relation between subject and object premised on their separation, to be an illusion (*Schein*) that only appears if we adopt the point of view of reflection in the first place—a product of our "finite" way of looking at things, which must "disappear" if we are to think what is Real.[11] What is needed is to refuse to see the world that way: to *re-vision* the world as bliss, thereby *annihilating* it as world. There is but one being, an immanence common to all things; to see being otherwise—as divided—is to introduce division into it, to create the reality of which we then futilely strive to break free. To intuit this immanence-in-common is to see all things

as simply being what they are—to see the pure "=" at the heart of everything, in which all distinctions between particular and universal, lower and higher, human and nonhuman disappear. Finite things may come into being and perish; but the "=" persists. In this, all divisions that make up the world are dissolved.[12] To construct the true reality is to exhibit it indifferently, that is to say, without difference, relation, or striving.[13]

On the one hand, this is a more fruitful move: to unground the very transcendental conjunction—to see the world in which we modern subjects exist as one whose necessity is tied to the conditions of possibility that produce this world as necessary—in this case, a certain way of looking at the world (of producing it *by* envisioning it as a world of alienation and division) that, one could argue, becomes dominant with modernity.[14] One could then investigate this conjunction historically, genealogically, or speculatively in order to destabilize it and to think a world not in terms of the transcendental knot. The transcendental is thereby made contingent or ungrounded. To expose this contingency is also to insist that the being that all things have in common, prior to the world thus produced, is where one already is, so that one must inhabit this common being and immanently refuse the world as unreal.

On the other hand, declaring this world to be an illusion, or perhaps something the absolute contingency of which needs to be exposed in order to think the Real or the event (for instance, to think with Meillassoux the coming of God as an eventuality that is absolutely contingent[15]), remains a problem insofar as it leaves the world free to haunt us. Insisting with Schelling on a being-in-common that the world divides, or with Meillassoux on the absolute of hyper-contingency that would allow us to think the event that "we might hope to see" one day,[16] still does not answer the question of *what to do* about the fact of the world—and the fact that it is the way it is—a fact that, as it were, recedes into the background of any destabilization of the world as mere illusion or as absolutely contingent. The world is made into a ghost, and the more one tries to exorcize it or to inhabit that which has (or wants to have) nothing to do with it, or the more one leaves its conditions of possibility to a throw of the die, the longer the world continues its haunting: a spectral dilemma, though not quite in Meillassoux's own sense—perhaps even a spectral knot.

Simply letting things be in order to immanently think absolute bliss runs the risk of simply leaving the world be, too. Similarly, to say that it is all up to an absolute, unmasterable contingency, may amount to justifying the world as merely (contingently) the way it is—to also simply letting it be. Contingency can do the work of legitimation as well: perhaps it is simply bad luck that the world is the way it is? Perhaps all we can do is hope

for the lucky throw? Finally, to make the world into a ghost by proclaiming it to be illusory runs the risk of implying it can be simply refused—of trivializing the world's violence, thereby also justifying the world. This is not to say there is no way to evade these pitfalls. However, upon this way, one has to tread a very thin line, behind which the world continues to loom and which cannot, it seems, be traversed without engaging with the world in some way. No matter how illusory or contingent the world is announced to be, one has to think of ways of dealing with it—with the fact of the world's forceful imposition—if one does not want unwittingly to absolutize the world.

What to do about (or in) the world, too, remains a question with which Schelling continues to grapple. Elsewhere I have argued that the logic of highest agency (including moral agency) in Schelling's so-called middle period amounts to acting out of absolute indifference—to simply enacting what is right or beautiful without caring about what the world proclaims to be possible.[17] To act in such a way is to act *in* the world *without relation* to the world—an operativity that, for Schelling, completely disregards and, as it were, indifferently cuts through all worldly production and mediation. Moral virtue in particular is here no longer a matter of moral striving or progress, but a direct, immediate expression of the (soul's or God's) atemporal essence. "Let the [indifferent, blissful] soul act in you, or act through and through as a holy man"[18]—that is, one who acts, as Schelling points out in the *Freedom* essay, immediately out of the divine, out of "the highest resoluteness for what is right, without any choice."[19] In this state, the soul is immanent only to itself, so that morality, as the immediate expression of this immanence, operates without any deliberation and without relation to any context. It is atemporal in the sense of being without relation to the world's temporality or regime of reproduction, instead directly enacting what is right. It does not negotiate or construe dialectical relationships with the world; it intervenes into it. Morality is indifferent to the world as it is while being operative in it. In this, one may be said to act in the world without legitimating it.

This, too, is a way of annihilating the world. The basic idea here may be seen as responding to the problem we saw in the early Schelling. Any agency that is supposed to break through this world of actualization and the not-yet must not itself be inscribed into or function as part of the process of actualization. Any activity that seeks to abolish the position of the world must not itself be represented as a position within the world. Accordingly, to ask whether such an agency is possible is to fall back into the logic of possibility and striving. Such an agency, then, fundamentally cannot be

self-reflective or inquire into its own conditions of possibility (bypassing thereby the transcendental knot); it cannot relate to any particular configurations of the world; it cannot act toward any position or any telos. The way it (mindlessly) cuts through the world may best be likened to a forest fire or perhaps a flood. No wonder that Schelling compares it at once to divine love (*Liebe*) and divine wrath (*Zorn*)—a divine violence that needs, furthermore, to be powerful enough to disregard worldly possibility, even to obliterate it so it does not block its path.

Where is such absolute power to be found? To ask this question is to raise the crucial issue. The world, after all, does block one's path. Even if we take the world, most radically, to be an illusion, its power—the violence it does, the hallucinations it produces, the fear it causes, the divisions it enacts—does not become any less real. Seeing as the world's divisions have real power, it becomes a question of enacting a power that would rival and even overpower the world—a power that would be capable of blowing up, setting on fire, flooding the wall or the colonial settlement that is the world. To locate this power in that which is transcendent to the world (a coming God perhaps), would be to reintroduce indefinite futurity into the picture. Another Schellingian answer would refer to this power as "nature"—this being of vast indifference and immense power, on which the modern world (of the Anthropocene) is imposed. It is unclear, however, whether waiting for a coming retribution from nature is any different from waiting for the arrival of a God. To wait is, again, to let the world be—which means that, in order not merely to wait, one needs to find ways of not simply leaving the world in place. That, in turn, implies thinking the world and the reality of its power (a thinking absent in the divine violence itself), even inhabiting it, if only to know where to ignite or how to produce or identify the cracks in the wall that should help make it give in to the coming flood. This issue is central not only for political theology but for contemporary thought as a whole. In Laruellean terms, the problem is that the Real and the world are *both* real, albeit in different ways, so that the reality of the world's power, if it is to be confronted, cannot simply be discounted as illusory. Unless it is confronted, however, the world continues to persist.

The move of beginning with what is absolutely nothing from the point of view of the world appears likewise in Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. The dogmatists—those who take the world to be the ultimate reality—"think of *things as the first*, and make knowledge depend on those, be formed through those." Knowledge and being for them coincide, so that, in dogmatic philosophy, the world fundamentally remains in place. The

dogmatists, as a result, can only have "doctrines of things: ontology, cosmology, etc."—mere "images of things." The task is, however, to investigate the conditions of possibility of the world as it appears, or to trace how the world is constructed: a "construction *a priori*," which cannot begin with anywhere (any place or position) in the world. This kind of knowledge can, accordingly, only begin with a nonplace that must be thought of as preceding and totally *dis*-placing the world: the task is to think "knowledge as something independent—and for that matter, first, the question of whether things can still have any being outside knowledge if left in their place." The dogmatists cannot think such a nowhere, and so "cannot have any *Wissenschaftslehre*." To them, "it would be the doctrine of nothing."[20]

As proceeding immanently from the nonplace of total displacement, "knowledge structures itself through itself as an organized and articulated full *system*. . . . *One* part of that system is its concept of itself in its above-mentioned original organization. This is, precisely, the *W.L*. [*Wissenschaftslehre*]."[21] The point from which the *Wissenschaftslehre* begins, as part of the system of knowledge, is the point of the original completion of the system of knowledge as such. That the system is complete—a totality that is, however, not the totality of everything in the world—and that the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is the atopic point where this totality coincides with itself, is crucial. It is, for Fichte, the atopic totality indexed by the system that ungrounds the world as always *not-yet* and instead grounds knowledge.[22]

"God" is what Fichte calls this atopic standpoint, similar to Schelling's absolute being. This being, too, is without negation or transition to otherness. As such, it cannot act, or produce any world.[23] Accordingly, the central issue is that of glimpsing the *ought* (*Soll*) behind the world. To what end must the world be? What is its meaning, its justification? To think the world *without* such an *ought* would be to think it as the mere capacity to effect an infinite series of things or positions, in space and time—as a potentiality without end or purpose, as meaningless, a nothing. But to reduce the world to nothing (*Vernichtung*) is—in a familiar inversion—to suspend this endless series of schematization (the drive to instantiate further things, without end), in order to expose the absolute being that it forecloses, a being that is itself a no-thing in the world. To inquire into the *ought* is to suspend the world as perpetually not-yet, so as to find oneself precisely at the original atopic standpoint with which we saw the system begin.[24]

To think the world from the standpoint of the *ought*, is to demand that the reason behind the world—the *ought* itself—become visible. The *ought* is thereby redoubled: as beginning and as end (as "the ought of the

visibility of the ought," the telos of the world). "To construct the *true* world of sense" is, accordingly, to think the utopian point where the world coincides fully with the visibility of its *ought*. The gap between the two "oughts" fully filled, we find ourselves back at the original atopic standpoint.[25] Why, then, must we leave it in the first place? Because, again, the world is there and its meaning needs to be glimpsed. The existence of the world is the condition of possibility of the *ought* (it is because the world is there that the realization of the *ought* is thought to be possible[26])—but, also, it is only "on the condition that [individuals] find themselves on the path of glimpsing the ought" that the world and its *ought* may be seen to coincide: that the world may be regarded as justified.[27] To construct the world is to reconstruct it on the condition of its *ought*, and thus as not yet the (true) world—with a view to its end; and to think the end of the world, the point where its *ought* is fully visible, is to justify the world. Thereby, the world is constructed as the condition of possibility of its own (future) end. The ante-original, atopic beginning of the system is remediated into an eschatological telos to which the world is bound—and which is itself bound to the world.

The transcendental knot could not be tied any tighter. It is, perhaps, time to cut it again.

An alternative approach would be to think the world *without* an "ought"—the empty potentiality we glimpsed in Fichte.[28] In this approach, the transcendental conjunction is destabilized via the focus on the world-making capacity without a normative horizon or any necessary process of actualization. This would amount neither to absolutizing the world nor to declaring it an illusion, but to proceeding from the fact that the world is made or imagined. This is the early Romantic, poetic focus. Here, the transcendental knot is both acknowledged and ungrounded by thinking the conditions of possibility of the world without thinking this world (or any other world) as necessary or seeking to justify it.

"Is not," asks Friedrich Schlegel, "this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos?"[29] The world is endlessly constructed ("unending"), serving to foreclose the incomprehensible—the chaos—not only as the Real but also, so to speak, as the material from which the world is being constructed. This idea is Kantian in origin: the in-itself as providing the material of sensation which the subject arranges into the world with the help of the categories. In Kant, however, the standpoint of the in-itself (which Schlegel calls "chaos") is cognitively inaccessible to the subject—and, as mentioned earlier, the categories themselves are necessary for the world to appear to the subject in

the first place. The categories are thereby fixed and justified as necessary. They are also binaries or dichotomies (which are then mediated), in keeping with the character of the world as imposing itself on the Real by dividing and mediating it. Schlegel, too, acknowledges that the world, and the way we reflect about the world, functions this way. We tend to employ binary terms to construct the world or make it comprehensible—not just the ones found in Kant's table of categories, but also high and low, serious and jocular, beautiful and ugly, natural and artificial, and many others.

This is where, for Schlegel, *irony* comes in, which takes any pair of such terms and subverts or collapses them—so that, faced with irony, the subject cannot know whether the ironist (the ironic text or ironic speech) is being serious or jocular, where the higher might become the lower and the lower the higher, where the familiar might be revealed as strange, the natural as artfully constituted, and the ugly as beautiful, if in a different, unusual way. Thereby irony interrupts the flow of the world's construction in which we are habitually engaged, ungrounding the world's imposition and transporting the ironist to a standpoint at which *all* binaries are immediately collapsed. The operation of irony amounts to "a total interruption and canceling-out" of any process of construction (*KFSA*, 11:88). This serves not only to expose binary categories as themselves constructed and the world as produced—so that the alleged necessity of the way the world is gets fully suspended—but also to expose the Real on which these binaries are imposed and which can only be thought of as collapsing any binary, and thus as incomprehensible: the Real *of* incomprehensibility or chaos.

"Irony," says Schlegel, "is the clear consciousness . . . of the infinitely full chaos" (*KFSA*, 2:263). The irony of this expression, suspending the clear-chaotic opposition, is itself programmatic. There is, Schlegel observes, a certain symmetry to the chaos inherent in irony, with its move of "logical disorganization" (2:403)—a symmetry that cannot be the standard symmetrical demarcation between *A* and non-*A*. Rather, *symmetry* here names the structure of indistinction between any binary terms, or the total ("infinitely full") collapse of dichotomies. In nature-philosophical terms, Schlegel speaks of this full suspension as "the point of indifference [*Indifferenzpunkt*] where everything is saturated" (18:391), where everything is, to the point of indistinction, dissolved into one.

The first operation of irony stops, as it were, the cycle of reproduction of binaries, completely suspending the world with all its binaries, so as to begin with the chaos that must be regarded as prior to any world. At the atopic standpoint from which irony proceeds, all binaries are collapsed—so that, for example, *all* is jest and *all* is seriousness at once (*KFSA*, 2:160). The *all* suggests here not an alternation between the terms but an affirmation of a

point of suspension in which the two (and any other opposing terms) coincide at any given moment. This is an operation of immediate annihilation, too—the world's decreation to the zero point that collapses all divisions. In a fragment from his philosophical notebooks, Schlegel connects neutralization, annihilation (nothingness), and chaos in the following way: "The chaos relates to the nothing in the same way that the world relates to the chaos. Chaos [is] the only real concept of the nothing. Nothing itself [is] the purely analytic concept. . . . The neutral, too, is confusion and chaos. . . . Nothing (*Nichts*) is more original than the chaos" (18:78).[30] Elsewhere Schlegel says, "Only that confusion is a chaos which can give rise to a new world" (2:263), and thus to speak of chaos is to speak of the world suspended or decreated. Similarly, to speak of nothingness, this purely ideal or "analytic" absence of anything, is to speak of chaos as a state in which all oppositions are refused in the all-encompassing *Indifferenzpunkt*.

There is, in this chaos, no trajectory or topos, no movement of mediation or distribution of possibility and actuality. It is the void of negativity grasped as "real," as an immanent materiality of nothingness—as pure material in which all distinctions are collapsed and with which the work of construction (of a world) begins. Chaos is nothingness considered as productive and generative. The ensuing construction reconfigures immanently this world-material—and in this, it is for Schlegel at once critical ("critique is the universal chaos"; *KFSA*, 18:366) and artistic: "the contact between the artist and the material is only thinkable as creation from nothing" (18:133). No wonder, then, that chaos is intrinsic for Schlegel both to the novel ("in its form, the novel is a well-formed artificial chaos"; 16:207) and to Romantic poetry (18:337). It is from this atopic standpoint of material nothingness that any binary—and any distribution of binaries, that is, a world—may be said to be constructed.

This decreation is configured by Schlegel, furthermore, as a revolutionary operation: "The chaos that, in the modern world, has previously been unconscious and passive, must return actively; *eternal revolution*" (*KFSA*, 18:254). Revolution is decreation followed by creation; or, even, creation by way of decreation. The same principle—"creation from nothing"—can be discerned for Schlegel in the three main contemporary events: the French Revolution, Fichtean idealism, and "the new [Romantic] poetry" (18:315). This nexus is crucial. What needs to be thought is simultaneous deconstruction of the world (to chaos or nothing) and its construction—one that is "artistic" or "poetic" in the sense of experimenting immanently with the pure material and constructing a world out of it: the transcendental conjunction as decoupled from the justification of the world under construction as necessary or the best possible. It is this decoupling that the terms

poetry or *art* index—and not the valorization of the subjective and the arbitrary (as the supposed "subjectivism" of early Romanticism is sometimes understood). The ironist undermines any world she constructs by keeping open the capacity to confuse, to collapse any binary. The Kantian-Fichtean transcendental conjunction is important for Schlegel because it allows to see the world as constructed—without necessarily thinking it as necessary. The knot has to be cut only if one ties it in the first place; but why must one do so?

To think the poetic with Schlegel is to think construction without justification, and potentiality or capacity without necessity, including the necessity of actualization—but also without *end*. Romantic poetry is "progressive" (as Schlegel terms it) not in the sense of a not-yet, but as the absence of end or telos. Nor does it mean "incomplete" in any standard sense: instead, poetic construction begins immanently with a complete suspension of the world. The point is not to exorcize the world, thereby demonizing it or making it haunt us, but to think it (or, with Schelling's holy man, act in it) *without investment* in the way it is or could be. Thus, even if we accept that it is necessary to construct a world in some way, this does not have to mean justifying this world as necessary or implying that its construction must proceed in this and not some other way, toward this end or toward some end at all, or that it needs to be objective or serious.

That is, of course, an important part of Hegel's criticism of Schlegel: that irony "takes nothing seriously"[31]—that it does not take the objective movement of world history seriously. I do not have the space here to consider Hegel—or, for that matter, Marx—in any detail. But the way the transcendental knot is tied to world justification remains central to them both. In Hegel, world history famously is theodicy, and the transcendental structure—the way spirit produces its own conditions of possibility as necessary for its actualization and forward movement—is central to this history. To destabilize this conjunction the way Schlegel does is to endanger the teleology of spirit.[32] The issue, in Marx, of changing the conditions (of possibility) that are necessary to effect this change in the first place points to a similar knot. In the words of Lisa Robertson:

> Here is Marx's big dilemma, the reason he goes to Lucretius:
> practice arises from conditions
> yet these are the conditions we must change.[33]

This is, in different terms, precisely the issue which this essay has attempted to outline. In order to resolve it, Marx, Robertson suggests, turns to a thinking that is poetic in form. In the post-Kantian context, poetry indexes a

"chaotic imagination that generates the promises of new worlds."[34] Romanticism wants to think the possibility of new worlds—but is that really the way to resolve the transcendental knot, this tension between annihilating and justifying the world? The (possibility of the) appearance of the new is, after all, at the heart of this tension that is political-theological in character.

This tension seems to remain as long as the world remains—because it indexes the fact of the world. In this essay, I have partially sketched the theoretical spectrum that emerges from attempts to engage with this tension and some of the pitfalls along the way. I have argued that, before German Idealism proceeds to construct the world, it annihilates it in order to reveal the Real that the world forecloses, so as to begin with this Real and not with the world. Instead of proceeding from the world as the ultimate reality, Idealism proceeds from a zero point absolutely free from any need for or any necessary transition to a world. This starting operation transports the speculative thinker to an atopic standpoint at which the world is turned to or exposed as *Nichts*, and which must be thought of as *preceding* the world. To annihilate the world, the way I have used this term, is to expose the world as secondary and imposed—to reduce it affirmatively to nothing—so as to proceed immanently from this nothingness (alternatively termed chaos, God, or bliss) as that which the world would foreclose.

To conceive immanently of a standpoint at which there is no world, revealing the world as imposed, is, however, not enough. For what to do about the fact that the world *is* there—the fact that we are subjects in and subject to the necessity of the world? For, no matter the force of world destitution and affirmation of nothingness, it is the construction (the thinking of the world) that ultimately determines whether, how, and to what extent the world survives and is justified. This construction may, as in Schlegel, take the form of ironic or poetic deconstruction, of taking apart the binaries that make up the world in order to freely rearrange them—but it is crucial that some sort of construction occur, some sort of inquiry into the exact conditions and function of the taking place or imposition of the world. If the construction is simply forgone, the world is either absolutized or turned into a ghost (or both). It might turn out, in this case, that the world is reproduced by way of its rejection, that the specter of the world persists paradoxically by way of its exorcism. Accordingly, the manner in which, and the end to which, the construction takes place is key. It does not suffice to declare the world to be nothing; it is important to destabilize the very conditions of possibility of the world and not to, wittingly or unwittingly, absolutize them. Even if the world is taken to be made or

imagined, it is essential to trace how this imagination works—and the power it has over us. Deconstruction alone is insufficient; construction must take place. Such is a central insight that German Idealism bequeaths to contemporary political theology and contemporary theory.

Notes

1. The human is, after all, one of the names of the world—as "our world" (per the Meillassoux epigraph).

2. On the question of world-making as a central political-theological question, see Daniel Colucciello Barber, "World-Making and Grammatical Impasse," *Qui Parle* 25, nos. 1–2 (2016): 179–206.

3. See also my and Alex Dubilet's introduction. On the world in question as the Christian-modern world, see also our introduction, as well as Joseph Albernaz and Kirill Chepurin, "The Sovereignty of the World: Towards a Political Theology of Modernity (after Blumenberg)," in *Interrogating Modernity: Debates with Hans Blumenberg*, ed. Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel Whistler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 83–107.

4. As first suggested, in a different context, by Odo Marquard. See, for example, Marquard, *Transzendentaler Idealismus, Romantische Naturphilosophie, Psychoanalyse* (Cologne: Verlag für Philosophie Jürgen Dinter, 1987), 77–83. I take issue with Marquard's understanding of modern theodicy, however, and German idealist theodicy in particular. He seems to take the term *theodicy* at face value, putting too much emphasis on God and not enough on the world—whereas, starting already from Leibniz (who coined the term), at stake in theodicy was the justification of *the world* as the best possible world, and of the negativity of the world as in some way necessary, ineliminable, and ultimately good. Thus, when Hegel says famously that world history is theodicy, the main function of that claim is not so much a defense of the figure of God but a justification of the course of world history as the best possible and even necessary or "divine"—so that no better world is possible, and no forms, categories, or grammar of spirit other than the ones produced historically by spirit itself. This, too, is a version of the transcendental knot.

5. This and the following section are a condensed version of the reading of the early Schelling offered in my "To Break All Finite Spheres: Bliss, the Absolute I, and the End of the World in Schelling's 1795 Metaphysics," *Kabiri: The Official Journal of the North American Schelling Society* 2 (2020): 40–67.

6. Friedrich Schelling, "Vom Ich als Princip der Philosophie," in *Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980), 1.2:109. Hereafter cited in text as *VI* and page number in parentheses.

7. Friedrich Schelling, "Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kriticismus," in *Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1982), 1.3:82.

8. Friedrich Schelling, *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*, in *Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2017), 2.8:68.

9. Schelling, "Philosophische Briefe," 79.

10. Friedrich Schelling, *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2018), 30.

11. Friedrich Schelling, "System der gesammten Philosophie" ["Würzburg System"], in *Sämmtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1860), 1.6:140.

12. Schelling, *Aphorismen*, 49.

13. I owe the idea of Schelling's identity-philosophical construction as exhibiting the world indifferently to Daniel Whistler's work.

14. As suggested by Schelling himself in *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie*, 61.

15. Quentin Meillassoux, "Spectral Dilemma," *Collapse* 4 (2008): 261–275.

16. Meillassoux, 267.

17. See Kirill Chepurin, "Indifference and the World: Schelling's Pantheism of Bliss," *Sophia* 58 (2019): 613–630.

18. Schelling, *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*, 166.

19. Friedrich Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, in *Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2018), 1.17:159.

20. All excerpts from Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die späten wissenschaftlichen Vorlesungen* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2003), 2:3–5.

21. Fichte, *Vorlesungen*, 2:15.

22. For a related argument on the standpoint of the system in Fichte as the impossible utopic non-place prior to the world's construction, see Kirill Chepurin, "Suspending the World: Romantic Irony and Idealist System," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 53, no. 2 (2020): 111–133.

23. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die späten wissenschaftlichen Vorlesungen* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000), 1:181.

24. Fichte, *Vorlesungen*, 1:189.

25. Fichte, 1:191–192.

26. Fichte, 1:189.

27. Fichte, 1:192.

28. This section draws from the more detailed interpretation of Schlegelian irony in my "Suspending the World: Romantic Irony and Idealist System."

29. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler et al. (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1958), 2:370. Hereafter cited in text as *KFSA* followed by volume and page number.

30. "Neutrality" is important here insofar as the neutral indexes precisely a neutralization of the binary logic.

31. G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke in 20 Bänden* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1971), 18:460.

32. For an important unorthodox reading of the movement of spirit in Hegel—not via his philosophy of history but via the transition from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to the *Science of Logic*—that may be more aligned with the non-Hegelian and even Romantic trajectory charted in this essay, see

Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash—The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

33. Lisa Robertson, *3 Summers* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2016), 47.

34. To borrow an expression from Frédéric Neyrat, "On the Political Unconscious of the Anthropocene," Society and Space, March 20, 2014, https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/on-the-political-unconscious-of-the-anthropocene/.