

Mladen Dolar*

The Atom and the Void – from Democritus to Lacan

How did the void come about? How did it become an object of philosophical reflection? What instigates one to consider the void as an object at all? Let me propose a first tentative thesis: philosophy started as the exorcism of the void, and its first move was perhaps to expel, drive out and banish the void. If I take, with all possible caveats, Parmenides' poem as the proper beginning of philosophy, then one can see that the first move hinges on a decision, a choice between two paths: "There is the way that it is and it cannot not be: this is the path of Trust, for Truth attends to it. Then there is the way that it is not and that it must not be: this, as I show you, is an altogether misguided route. For you may not know what-is-not – there is no end to it – nor may you tell of it." Let's leave the staging of this spectacular entry into philosophy aside, the fact that this first philosophical statement is put into the mouth of a goddess, with the celestial chariot and all, myth descending upon earth and thus turning into logos, as it were. The crucial fact is that there is an inaugural assertion of being as what cannot not be, and only this can pave the way to truth, but this assertion is made against a backdrop, it is not a description of the evidence of being, it is the defense against a threat, a pervasive and insidious threat of a void that might engulf us, a void that lurks as an unfathomable menace and a peril, or a lure, so we must hasten to hold onto being before the void might get us. Being is posited as an object of choice and decision at the crossroads, against the backdrop of the black pit of the void and non-being. There is an element of haste or, as in Lacan's take on logical time and its anticipated assertion of certainty, of asserting being before the other alternative might get us. One asserts being, one makes the decision and the choice at the point when one is put against the wall, under threat, in a state of emergency, with the void looming large. For this void, if one considers the other alternative, the other path at this crossroads is actually presented as an empty threat, a painted devil, for neither can it be nor can one know it nor can one say anything about it – so why the panic? The other choice, on the face of it, seems so implausible, logically and epistemologically void, that one can't imagine why anyone would be lured, tempted by it or feel

* Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

threatened. The path of the void and of non-being is the path that one cannot possibly adopt and therefore one must not adopt it ('it must not be') – but why the prohibition since one cannot conceivably adopt it at all? Why prohibit something that cannot be anyway? So the assertion of being – the first assertion of being in western philosophy – is the matter of decision and emphatic choice to avoid the void, the precipice, the black hole, to exorcize it. The tacit presupposition of the first statement, its implicit assumption, is that one must act in favour of being to counteract a possible catastrophe, to abjure the void. One is on a battlefield, and being is a weapon one has to use against an unfathomable enemy. If we look at this predicament from the side of logos, which is to be asserted as pertaining to being as its proper mother-tongue, then one can surmise that this mother-tongue is treacherous, since it has the paradoxical capacity to name what is not, and thus to conjure up the specters of non-being, of absence, of nothing, the specters that induce the belief that they might be something when in fact they are nothing, so one has to assert logos and being against the very capacity of logos to induce negativity and non-being, the capacity to produce the void. Thus, in this light, being would be like a defense mechanism against the void, and by presenting being as a matter of choice and decision there is a disavowed primacy of the void as the lure, the temptation and the threat, lurking behind any talk about being, part and parcel with its logos. So how did the void come about? It came about as the discourse of being as the defense mechanism against the void.

Atomism is the first major philosophical stance to introduce the void not as the empty and proscribed alternative but as the path that necessarily pertains to being, and at the same time, by the same stroke, it is traditionally taken as the first appearance of materialism in the history of philosophy, as if materialism and the void belonged together. Atomism emerged as a reaction against the Parmenidian assertion of being, not accepting the choice and the alternative, but taking both paths at the same time, as it were. How is this possible if the two paths are posited as mutually exclusive? There is the conspicuous fact that atomism's claim to materialism doesn't rest on extolling the matter as the ultimate substance along with the claim that the spirit and the soul are equally material as nature, but in fact involves an operation which does far more than that, it introduces the void as the essential component of being.

Eleatic philosophy was based on two basic tenets: 1. that being is one and indivisible, and 2. that being is (it cannot not be) and non-being is not. Atomism adopted a sharply opposite view on both counts: first, that being is divisible by one, not indivisible as one. It posited the atom as the indivisible particle into which everything can be decomposed, thus imposing the simple count on the diverse and infinite facets of being. Atom can be counted as one, with no possibility of a further decomposition, and everything there is can be ultimately reduced to this ‘count-for-one’ into infinity. Second, the moment one posits this ‘one’ as the elementary particle of being, one posits, in the very same breath, the void which separates the atoms and which enables their movement, even more, which is the very principle of their movement. Thereby one posits the non-being at the core of being. The atomistic ‘zero thesis’ is: non-being is, and it is just as real as being. The whole complexity of being can be reduced to just two elements, the one and the void. If there is division in the atoms, then it pertains not to the indivisible particles, but to the void that surrounds them and which allows them to be counted for one at all. Thus we ultimately arrive at a split entity, an entity split into itself and the void. Hence, the Eleatic principle rests on One as the common denominator of all being, the one of totalization, of *hen kai pan*, while the atomistic one is the one of a split, a split one, the one as introducing a split, a crack into being, the one that cannot totalize being under the heading of one, but splits it into infinity and makes it non-totalizable.

Hegel, the supposed arch-idealist, was always enthusiastic about what he saw as the great speculative achievement of ancient atomism, namely that at the bottom we always have not a unity, but a unity split into something and a void, so that we have to include the void as ‘the other half’, ‘the missing half’ of the firm being of atoms. He comes back to it over and over again. The question of materialism is immediately at stake, for if one posits the problem in these terms, then this is obviously vintage idealism to Hegel, since clearly the atoms, the units and the void are ‘ideal principles’. They are not something to be seen or experienced, nobody has ever seen, perceived, experienced an atom, not just in those days but at any time with the best equipment at hand. The atom is clearly an idea, the idea of one and division, the idea of void and non-being. “The principle of one is entirely ideal [*ideell*], it entirely belongs to thought, even if one wants to say that atoms exist. The atom can be taken in a material sense, but it is non-sensual [*unsinnlich*], purely intellectual.” (TWA 18, p. 358) Atoms are invisible not only because of their minuscule size but also because “one cannot

see One [*das Eins kann man nicht sehen*], it is an abstract entity of thought. ... The principle of one is entirely ideal, but not in the sense as if it would be only in thought, in the head, but in the sense that thought is the true essence of things [*der Gedanke das wahre Wesen der Dinge ist*].” (p. 358-9) So atoms are ideal first in the weaker sense, meaning they are in principle not a matter of perception, experience and senses, then in the stronger sense, in the paradigmatic Hegelian sense, meaning that these ideal entities in one’s head do affect being. They are not opposed to sensual being but actually spell out its core. Hence Hegel’s conclusion that this is “idealism in a higher sense, not a subjective one [*Idealismus im höheren Sinne, nicht subjektiver*]” (p. 359), for what is at stake is not a subjective idea in someone’s head (rather, the subject itself is but an effect of this division). This is also in line with one of the Democritus’ fragments (related by Plutarch), namely that atom is an idea, *atomos idea*.

Therefore the Hegelian bottom-line is that being and thought intersect, they are not to be opposed, and the point where they intersect is ultimately the split and the void. As Hegel states later in the *History of philosophy* (when debating Epicurus):

This break [interruption, *Unterbrechung*] is the other side of atoms, the *void*. The movement of thought is such a movement that has in itself the break (thought is in man precisely what atoms and the void are in things, the inner [*das Denken ist im Menschen eben das, was die Atome und das Leere in den Dingen, sein Inneres*]). (TWA 19, str. 311)

This is vintage Hegel. So thought is the break of being, its *Unterbrechung*, its interruption, and what thought and its objects have in common is the break that interrupts objectivity, introducing a void. Thought and world intersect in the void, but this is the very access that thought has to being, the thinking interrupts being itself, it opens up being for us, or the other way around, thought is placed into a rift of being, and the two directions are indistinguishable to Hegel. It is not a question of whether atomism is a good theory, and Hegel will not endorse it in his own account of being, he will deem it insufficient and abstract, and the question is also not whether this is a good historic account of ancient atomism, and a lot of philological research has happened since. The question is that atomism includes a certain insight that Hegel sees as valid and far-reaching, namely that there is a principle of negativity which moves both thought and be-

ing, and that this principle forms the inside of both at their core, *sein Inneres*. To put it in notorious Hegelian terms, the way that substance and subject hang together should be pinned to this principle. We can see that the division between idealism and materialism assumes another proportion: it is not the question of whether matter precedes thought and ideas, matter posited as independent of them, but whether and in what way thought intersects with matter, or whether the division of matter is the very place where thought is inscribed. There is no materialism without espousing this paradox, otherwise matter becomes just another name for traditional substantiality. So the question is not which comes first, but how to think their rift, and hence their articulation.¹ The question of what comes first, matter or idea, already assumes a division that frames the question, but materialism and idealism rather differ in setting this frame.

Hegel comes back to this in the *Logic*, in the remark on atomism when introducing his own concept of One:

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

In a way, the entire Hegel is there in a nutshell. By positing the one as the positive entity, one inevitably posits the void, the non-being, as the very element in which the 'one' can prosper. So what is indivisible to Hegel is neither the one nor the void, the indivisible is the division itself. However far we seek for a minimal element, we never arrive at a one as the minimal and the indivisible, but at the division. The void as the Platonic missing half of the element, as one answers this description by being indeed missing. Hegel's atom, his elementary particle, is thus the atom itself in this precise sense: 1. what cannot be divided any further is the division; 2. the negative is the inner condition of the positive;

¹ The Lacanian real – and if there is a Lacanian materialism, then it pertains to the notion of the real – is neither a thought, an idea, nor a being (nor matter for that matter), but something emerging precisely in their rift, something that gets lost in the subsequent self-evident division into being and thought and their opposition.

3. there is no unity but a split unity; 4. being and thought intersect in this split. The atom of Hegel's thought is the atom. Against the Parmenidian exorcism of the void, he takes up the atomistic espousal of the void as the way to address the basic matrix of being. Against the exclusion of the void, there is the inclusion of the void into each particle, the missing half of anything positively existing, of any manifestation of being, and this invisible missing half endows being with *Unruhe*, its unrest, its restlessness, its being ever propelled, the fact that it can only be addressed in its becoming, its production and its incompleteness. From panic, defense, exorcism to inclusion, domestication, using the enemy as the ally – but by enlisting the powers of the unfathomable, has one thereby nevertheless effected an exorcism of another kind? Hasn't one avoided the void by espousing it? The void can be seen as the way to make non-being manageable, to turn it into something countable, the very condition of count. But 'is' there non-being which cannot be quite accounted for by the binary couple of the one and the void?

The story of the introduction of the void may have inaugurated the story of atomism, but the subsequent fate of atomism was largely overshadowed by another story which links the void with the contingency as its 'positive expression', and which curiously led to something one might see as the strategy of counteracting the initial espousal of the void. The notorious story of *clinamen* (the term is used only once by Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 2.292), as it is generally told, goes like this: the atoms, the indivisible particles, are endowed with weight as their principle of movement and they all fall with the same speed. So given their essential and minimal properties their movement can only be that of a parallel fall, like the raindrops ("*imbris uti guttae caderent inane profundum*", "all would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void," 2.222). In this way nothing would ever emerge, "thus nature would never have produced anything" (2.224). So there has to be a declination, a swerve, a deviation from the downward movement which causes the subsequent encounters and collisions between the atoms, and hence the universe 'as we know it'.

16

Again, I must apologize for this very simplified account but will, however, remind you that Lucretius rather paradoxically maintains three things about *clinamen*. This declination first happens in no certain place and at no certain time, as he repeats no less than three times – it has no assignable locus or moment, it is dis-placed and dis-timed, as it were, it presents the out-of-jointness of space

and time. Secondly, it is absolutely minimal, “*nec plus quam minimum*”, “not more than the least possible”, (2.244). The declination is the slightest one one can conceive of, the difference beneath the threshold of any positive or observable difference – a difference different from all usual differences and conditioning them all. Lastly, Lucretius suddenly deviates from his cosmogonic argument (how did the world come about due to *clinamen*) without a warning and immediately plunges into an argument about free will. Cosmology suddenly and without transition shakes hands with anthropology, the causality of nature with the causality of culture, or rather a glitch in the natural causality overlaps with a glitch in the ‘psychic causality’. Just as the atoms depart from their way, so does our will depart from the bonds of necessity, it breaks the decrees of fate, the will is wrested from the fates, which puts our *voluntas* and *voluptas* in one at stake, the will and the pleasure. It is not merely the fate of the universe which is at stake, but the fate of our own will and passion, desire and enjoyment – actually not the fate, but quite the opposite, the very possibility of breaking the fate. *Clinamen* (not the void, as in Hegel) is the point where cosmos and humanity overlap, the out-of-place and out-of-time point they share. So the natural causality and the psychic causality are one and the same for Lucretius, our soul being composed of atoms just as everything else, but one and the same precisely as a deviation, a declination of one and the same. One can venture the term ‘ontological indifference’, or a univocity of movements of the soul and movements of nature.

This story has met with ample and adamant resistance and harsh criticism, stretching from Cicero to Hegel, and sometimes to our days. The most adamant was Cicero, who set the tone for centuries and millennia:

... this is entirely a childish fiction ... on the one hand is this declination arbitrarily dreamed up ([Epicurus] says that the atom declines without a cause; for a physicist there is nothing more shameful [*nihil turpius*] than to say that something happens without a cause), and on the other hand he excepted the atoms without a cause from the natural movement of all bodies...” (*De finibus bonorum et malorum*, 1, 19) “Do they draw lots among them which one would decline and which not? And why do they decline by a minimal interval and not by a bigger one? ... This is wishful thinking, not an argument.” (*De fato*, 46)²

² For these sources and for the general background I have drawn on Ernst A. Schmidt, *Clinamen*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter 2007, pp. 53-60.

There is a lot more along these lines, and a lot more by a host of other authors, such as Plutarch, Plotinus, Augustine etc., up to Kant (“Epicurus was even so shameless that he required the atoms to decline from their straight movement without any cause so that they would be able to encounter each other”)³ and finally Hegel, who should have known better. Hegel, otherwise an enthusiastic admirer, nevertheless treated the notion of *clinamen* in the same vein with contempt. He says in the *History of philosophy* that for Epicurus the atoms deviate from the straight movement “in a curbed line [*in einer krummen Linie*] which somewhat departs from the straight direction, so that they collide with each other, thus forming a merely superficial unity [*eine oberflächliche Einheit*], not stemming from their essence.” (TWA 19, p. 313) In the *Encyclopedia* he states roughly the same: for the atomists the atoms “are to be brought together by chance [*Zufall*, coincidence], i. e. the thoughtless [*das Gedankenlose*]. ... something completely external [*etwas ganz Äusserliches*].” (TWA 8, p. 206, # 98 Zusatz) So *clinamen* stands for the thoughtless and the external, the absence of thought and of inherent conceptual deduction.

Here we come to the crux of the matter. What belongs to the essence of the atom? Is *clinamen* a merely superficial external addition that doesn’t affect the essence? A swerving for no sufficient reason? Is it an essential or an external fate of atoms?

In opposition to this view, let me bring in Deleuze, not exactly a Hegelian, anything but, but who gives to this a very Hegelian twist, more Hegelian than Hegel himself. Thus in the appendix on Lucretius in the *Logic of sense*:

Clinamen or declination has nothing to do with the slanting movement which would come to modify by accident a vertical fall. It is present since always: it is not a secondary movement nor a secondary determination of movement which would occur at a certain moment at a particular place. *Clinamen* is the originary determination of the direction of movement of an atom.⁴

18

To follow this line of thought against the grain of the dismissive tradition, *clinamen* is always already there, it is the disparity ingrained in the definition of

³ *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*, 1755, TWA 1, p. 234.

⁴ *Logique du sens*, Paris: Minuit 1969, p. 311. Similarly and briefly also in *Différence et répétition*.

the atom from the outset, its ‘internal’ disparity with itself. The atom is its own declination, the paradoxical unity not merely of the one and the void, but at the very same time the unity of the entity with its own straying away from itself, as it were. It is not a secondary fate which would befall the atom in itself and its supposed straight path – once there is declination from the path, one supposes the straight direction that must have preceded, but which doesn’t exist in itself. The straying away retroactively produces the ‘in itself’, Hegelianly speaking. The temporal narrative which places things in a sequence – first the parallel fall, then the *clinamen* – is a necessary retroactive illusion. Declination inhabits the atoms from the outset, and it inhabits them permanently, at all times. Their out-of-placeness and out-of-timeness are part and parcel of their place and time. Atoms cannot be thought apart from their inherent swerviness, *clinamen* is their soul, if they had one. It is one with their oneness, hence their oneness is already a departure from one, a swerved one. But wasn’t Hegel best placed to appreciate this? Is *clinamen* his blind spot, where he should have seen the necessary ‘becoming accidental of essence’, the way that the essence can only be itself by fully espousing contingency, or is it an inherent departure from his account of one and the void, something that he must have structurally missed?

Deleuze puts the essential point economically and well, but he had an illustrious predecessor in this. The very young Karl Marx defended his doctoral thesis in 1841 in Jena (the same Jena where Hegel wrote the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and where he watched Napoleon ride a white horse) on the subject, of all things, of *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, where it appears that he first pinned the fate of his own enterprise precisely on *clinamen*. Although the main line of his argument is questionable, he nevertheless decidedly opposed the bulk of the tradition of harsh criticism of Epicurus on *clinamen*, maintaining precisely that *clinamen* is inherent and not external. So let me quote some Marx which is virtually never quoted:

Cicero further bemoans ... that the declination of the atom happens *without a cause*; and nothing more shameful, says Cicero, could befall a physicist. But, first, a physical cause such as Cicero wants would throw the declination of the atom back into the deterministic series from which it should precisely be lifted. *And further, the atom is not yet accomplished before being determined by declination.* [Dann aber ist das Atom noch gar nicht vollendet, ehe es in der Bestimmung der Deklination gesetzt ist.] To question the cause of this determination therefore

means to question the cause which makes the atom into a principle – a question which is meaningless for someone for whom the atom is the cause of everything, therefore itself without a cause. (MEW Ergbd. 1, p. 282)

What is the cause of the cause? Does cause have a cause? What is required of a cause to be a principle? Can a cause limp? Marx's argument is basically that once we posit the atom as the principle there is no other cause which would affect it apart from the causality already inscribed in it, and declination belongs to its inner causality, not to its subsequent fate. It is equally uniform and univocal as weight, but precisely as the inner disparity of uniformity and univocity. The seeming straying away from causality brings the cause to the fore. It is the cause *de ce qui cloche* (Lacan), the limping cause, always co-present in any cause.

The materialism of *clinamen* runs counter some basic assets of the Aristotelian ontology, which one spontaneously and tacitly assumes. Atom is neither *hyle* nor *morphe*, neither matter nor form, it is precisely a principle evading such a division and all the intricate complications of Aristotelian hylomorphism. It is both matter and form 'in one', it doesn't require form as a separate principle to inform it, it is informed and propelled by itself, endowed in itself with its own impulse and impetus, equally in its straight and its swerving movement. This is where it is even more opposed to the notion of matter deriving from the Cartesian division in which matter is largely seen as inert and passive, ruled by mechanical laws. Atoms effectively blur the line between the animate and the inanimate as well as the line between matter and idea as well as the line between the physical and the psychic as well as the line between necessity and chance. The simple and the difficult thing to grasp in this atomism is its going against the grain of seemingly self-evident Aristotelian dualities, the way to circumvent them, to think the 'two in one', as it were, but in a one which can no longer be 'the One' nor one at all. Any one is the internal swerving of oneness which dismantles its oneness.

20

Undoubtedly, there is a problem there. Deleuze's and Marx's reading, insightful and lucid as it is in its speculative turn (now largely followed by the bulk of contemporary criticism), can easily turn *clinamen* into a non-concept, it can quickly become the ubiquitous key. At the worst, it is ideally suited to feature as the hero of the postmodern era, its fashionable catchword and password, conflating the developments in physics, Prigogine's 'dissipative structures', fractals, chaos

and quanta, with the devices of (post)modern poetics, where Jarry and Joyce, both keen admirers of Lucretius, have paved the way.⁵ And there is but a small step to include Derrida's *différance-détournement* and Deleuze's *lignes de fuite*, Meillassoux's 'necessity of contingency' etc. in the general mix. One can easily imagine how *clinamen* can amply prosper in this way, a universal *passe-partout* in its seeming singularity, and reticence is in place if one has no stomach for such a prospect. But this flamboyant use doesn't disqualify the concept itself, which has produced intriguing offspring: most notably Althusser's idea of aleatory materialism, or the 'materialism of the encounter', is entirely premised on *clinamen*, but I cannot discuss it further in this scope.

Ultimately there are two possibilities: one either situates *clinamen* in the place of a constitutive exception, something that must have always already happened in order for the universe to emerge, occurring out-of-space and out-of-time with no place nor moment within space and time once they are constituted. Or else it can be an omnipresent 'quasi-universal' principle, which immanently derails any given one at all places and all times. It seems that Badiou, in his perspicacious treatment of *clinamen* in his *Theory of the subject*, roughly opts for the first solution:

It is absolutely necessary that *clinamen* be abolished in its own turn. [...] Any particular explanation of any particular thing must not require *clinamen*, although the existence of a thing in general is unthinkable without it. [...] The atom affected by deviation engenders the Whole without any rest or trace of this affection. Better still: the effect is the retroactive effacement of the cause [...] the deviation, being neither the atom nor the void nor the action of the void nor the system of atoms, is unintelligible.⁶

Deleuze, on the other hand, opts for the second solution, and one could read his notion of the virtual as the inherent and immanent *clinamen*, swerviness, inhabiting every moment and entity. – Having in mind Lacan's formulas of sexualisation one could well pose the question: is Badiou a man? Is Deleuze a woman?

⁵ The first sentence of *Fineggans Wake* famously begins: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay ..." There is the swerve right at the opening and some commentators have seen Lucretius there, and *clinamen* as the most appropriate kick-off of the novel which was to encompass the universe.

⁶ *Théorie du sujet*, Paris: Seuil 1982, p. 79-80.

In the first case we take it as an exception that never ‘takes place’, although it underlies every taking place as an out-of-worldly ‘immanent transcendence’. In the second case we quasi-universalize the exception and make it immanent to any taking place and thus turn it to a universal swerviness of any universal, the out-of-oneness of any One (with the danger of providing a convenient and non-binding *passe-partout*). How to think together the One and the Other? Is there a third option?

So is the Hegelian speculative insight, with the far-reaching consequences that Hegel was to draw, the bottom-line of the story of atomism as materialism? The one, the void, the split, the negativity, the subject inscribed in the split? Or are we to espouse the *clinamen* story, which displaces the Hegelian story and circumvents the stark opposition and the split? – Let me, in conclusion, go back to Democritus and briefly look at an option that neither Hegel nor Marx considered, an obscure spot which was pinpointed as crucial by Lacan and where he saw something like the ‘atom of thought and being’, as opposed to the Hegelian atom. In a famous spot in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, he says the following:

When Democritus tried to designate it [the origin], presenting himself as already the adversary of a pure function of negativity in order to introduce thought into it, he says, *It is not the meden* [non-being] *that is essential*, and adds [...] *it is not a meden, but a den*, which, in Greek is a coined word. He did not say *hen* [one] let alone *on* [being]. What, then, did he say? He said, answering the question I asked today, that of idealism, *Nothing, perhaps?* – not *perhaps nothing*, but *not nothing*. (P. 63-4)⁷

So what, if anything, is *den*?

22

In the famous fragment 156 (in the canonical Diels-Kranz edition), Democritus enigmatically introduced precisely something that wouldn’t fall on either side of the divide between the one and the void. He coined a term, *den*, which caused a lot of headache to the classical philologists because it is an improper word formation in Greek (“a coined word,” says Lacan). The word stems from the negation of *hen*, one. *Hen* can be negated in Greek in two ways, either as *ouden* (ob-

⁷ *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, transl. Alan Sheridan, London: Penguin 1979.

jective negation) or as *meden* (subjective negation), and they would both mean ‘nothing’ (although with a different shading), more accurately ‘not one’, or ‘not even one’. *Den*, this malapropism, means like ‘less than one, but still not nothing’, or pushing it a bit, ‘less than nothing’. It presents a hard nut for translators. Diels translated this curious word by *das Ichts* (*Das Nichts existiert ebenso sehr als das Ichts*).⁸ The English translation by W. I. Matson proposed ‘hing’, as opposed to the thing: ‘Hing is no more real than nothing’ or ‘Hing exists no more than nothing’.⁹ A more accurate rendition would have been ‘othing’, as a subtraction from nothing. Barbara Cassin, the formidable French scholar, proposed the French translation *ien* – not *rien*, nothing, but *ien*, precisely ‘not nothing’, as Lacan says (or alternatively *iun*, not one).

By the peculiar amalgamation of the last letter of negation with the negated positivity it obliges us to understand that the atom not only is not an affirmation or a position, being or one, but furthermore that it is not their negation either, that it doesn’t have the consistency of ‘no-thing’ or ‘rien’: the atom is literally less than nothing, one has to call it ‘ien’ [...] *Den* is the name of the atom insofar one cannot conflate it with the being of ontology nor take it as an elementary body of physics.¹⁰

So what is this entity, *den*? Not something, not nothing, not being, not one, not positively existing, not absent, not countable – is this not precisely the object that we are after? What is *den* the name of – object *a*? This is the point that Lacan singled out in our quote, although he couldn’t quite escape negation: “*Nothing, perhaps?* – not *perhaps nothing*, but *not nothing*.” It is not a negation, but rather like a decapitation of nothing, cutting off its head, turning no-thing into *Ichts*, *hing*, *othing*, *ien*. Or to use the Badiouean term: not negation, but subtraction. It is not a subtraction from being, introducing a void, nor is it a left-over of the negation of being which didn’t quite succeed, but rather – and this is the mind-boggling speculative turn – a subtraction from non-being, as negativity effacing itself. There is a failure of double negation, a glitch in the Hegelian negation of negation. Something emerges in this imposition and failure of negativity, but

23

⁸ Hermann Diels & Walther Kranz (eds.), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker II*, Berlin: Wiedemannsche Buchhandlung, 1935, fr. 156, p. 174. – I can add that in my own language the Slovene translator Anton Sovre followed this line by coining the neologism ‘ič’, as opposed to ‘nič’, nothing. *Predsokratiki*, Ljubljana: Slovenska matica 2002, p. 200.

⁹ W. I. Matson, “Democritus, Fragment 156”, *The Classical Quarterly*, 13, 1963, pp. 26-29.

¹⁰ Alain Badiou & Barbara Cassin, *Il n’y pas de rapport sexuel*, Paris: Fayard 2010, p. 81.

not quite something, it has no positivity and no identity, yet such is the being of the atom.

Heinz Wismann, one of the greatest specialists in Democritus, doesn't shy away from this consequence:

Actually, the 'real' evoked by the rudimentary term (*den*) forged by Democritus owes its existence only to the removal of negation (*me*) which is inherent both to the conceptual and to the lexical reality of 'nothing' (*meden*). Being, one could say, is just a privative state of non-being [*l'être ... n'est qu'un état privatif du non-être*]; its positivity is a lure. It is a kind of subtraction operated on nothing [*soustraction opérée à partir de rien*, subtraction executed on the basis of nothing], atom can be thought as the avatar of the void [*avatar du vide*].¹¹

This serves as the title of Wismann's book, *Les avatars du vide*, and here we have it, the basic move that I am trying to follow: from the inaugural exorcism of the void which is the flip side of Parmenides' initial gesture to the atoms as the avatars of the void, not simply as positive beings that entail the void as the consequence, but as being themselves nothing but the avatars of the void, the very verge of being and non-being.

If atom is *den*, then for Democritus it can have no weight, so there can be no parallel fall nor the problem of *clinamen*. It was only Epicurus who actually ascribed weight to atoms, being thus unwittingly prey to the Aristotelian ontology, unable to conceive of atom as not being a body. Atoms are not bodies, but mere trajectories producing bodies. There seems to be like an enactment in advance of the dilemma presented by modern nuclear physics: either the body or the wave, you can't have both, there is a parallax. If Democritus, unaware of any of this, opted for the waves (*rhysmos* was for him the basic property of atoms), then the Aristotelian ontology, including Epicurus, opted for the bodies.¹² Ontology and physics followed suit. – No wonder that Plato, so Diogenes Laertius tells

24

¹¹ Heinz Wismann, *Les avatars du vide*, Paris: Hermann 2010, p. 65.

¹² Democritus ascribed three properties to the atom: *rhysmos* – rhythm, wave; *diathigè* – touching upon, contact; *tropè* – return, twist. Aristotle translated them into his own terms as *schema*, *taxis*, *thesis*, which then in Latin rendition became *forma*, *ordo*, *positio*. One should note how all Democritus' descriptions are those of a movement, whereas Aristotle's refer to a state.

us, wanted to burn all Democritus' writings (but there were too many), and no wonder that when Democritus came to Athens nobody recognized him.

Den is like an ontological scandal. Lacan comes back to it in *L'Étourdit*:

Democritus has made us the gift of *atomos*, of the radical real, with the elision of 'no', *me*, but in its modality whose demand requires consideration. In this way *den* was the clandestine passenger whose shell now forms our fate. In this he was no more materialist than anyone who has some sense [*n'importe qui de sensé*], for instance me or Marx. (*Autres écrits*, Paris: Seuil 2001, p. 494).

Den condenses our question in a minimal way. What is particularly striking with it is its inner connection with the Hegelian story, which I take to be the best account of the philosophical impact of atomism, under the bias of one/void, being/non-being. *Den* emerges literally in the same place, in the very division, in the midst of the split that Hegel took to be the spectacular clue. *Den* is co-extensive and at the same time incommensurable with 'one', the one that the atoms introduced as the count of being, and with the void as the flip side of the split one. One could say that it is the missing half of Hegel's atom, the one that was already split into the present and the missing half, with the co-belonging of being and non-being, of one and the void as the dialectical matrix – but *den* is the missing half of this split unity itself, exactly by not being quite missing nor being quite there, by not being in any dialectical relation to the foundational split of the atom. It is the pure surplus of the split, a (non)entity escaping the division yet not 'being' somewhere else, dwelling in the division itself. Not an originary presence or absence, not a foundational principle, a mere *hing* (or *othing*) derivative of the split (into one/void, being/non-being) and irreducible to it.

25

Den can be thought only after the one, as a subtractive operation and not as a provenance, truncated or not. It cannot be submitted to dialectics precisely by not being a negation of negation, taken up and sublated, but a subtraction on the basis of negation [...] It is not an entry but an exit, a way out which makes the origin stumble and deviates the history of philosophy [...]. (Cassin, p. 83-4)

This is the crux of the matter (figuratively and literally): *den* comes not quite after 'one', but in the same package with one, yet without making either two or zero. It is the other of one by being neither the nothing of its negation nor

the multiplicity of its proliferation. It is recalcitrant to count, yet dependent on 'one', the cut of the signifier at its minimal.

The question of *clinamen* is indicative at this point. We have seen that Hegel spoke depreciatively of *clinamen*, siding with its numerous detractors, while praising the profound insight of the split into the one and the void as constitutive of the atom, a clue to substance, subject, negativity, being, nothing, dialectics. On the other hand, Deleuze made a great case of *clinamen*, ultimately precisely as a way of avoiding the one and the void: it is a move that enables circumventing the cut, negativity, lack etc. lurking in the atom, along with all the traps of the Hegelian dialectics, and this circumvention paves the way for the positivity of becoming. There seems to be like a parallax view when looking at the atom: either one sees the split, one/void etc. as Hegel did, or else one sees *clinamen*, the inner swerviness, torsion, declination, the immanent becoming not premised on the cut of negativity, relying on swerviness as the becoming without a void – where *clinamen* is taken as the exorcism of the void. It is as if seeing one part precluded seeing the other, one cannot make a compromise or a synthesis of the two.

Taking the cue from the happy Democritean invention of *den* maybe allows us to sidestep this parallax choice: it is only on the basis of 'one' and the cut that *den* can emerge, as a subtraction of negativity, not its exorcizing. This avoids positing *clinamen* as either a 'foundational exception' (Badiou) or a universalized virtuality (Deleuze). Thus one maintains both parts, 'one' and *den*, in their very incommensurability, as the very cleft of being, the place where both being and thought (e)merge. It produces a new object yet lying low since the dawn of philosophy as its clandestine passenger, an object with no identity and founding no ontology. This is perhaps the spot where psychoanalysis is to be understood as the heir to the Hegelian dialectic, not its abandonment, yet at the same time envisaging something that emerges within it and cannot be quite accounted for in its terms.