

# **Theory of the Universal Machine**

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Early, unfinished draft

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## **Introduction**

An introduction is often written after the contents are written. In the introduction, the writer is compelled to explain the reasons why she wrote the book, its intended audience, and sentimental musings about the writing process. What the writer must not do is make excuses for writing the book. For the only worthwhile books are books that had to be written.

When Hegel said philosophical texts have no need for introduction, he was making excuses for himself, as he was wont to do with every facet of his life. When the book is of a philosophical nature, the temptation to make excuses only grows stronger. I have tried to write this book multiple times, and found each time I was not writing the book but rather only making excuses for why I was not writing the book. So I decided not to write a philosophy book at all, but another kind of book entirely.

Deleuze says a text of philosophy should read like a detective novel or science fiction. Taking inspiration here, I decided to write a book of science fiction. But I also wanted to write a book of theology for Father. Through experience I have become convinced that thinking of God cannot help but be comedic. The divine is comedic in the same way irony is only bitterly comic. The popular notion that the Universe is one big joke is a pious one: after all, God wants us to have a good time.

Irony thinks the Universe is one big *inside* joke. It needs the joke to be *on someone*. In this way, irony is the negation of piety. I caution against irony because irony is the characteristic mood of philosophy, and if philosophy is to survive, irony must die.

So the following is pious philosophy, or comedic science fiction. It starts with beings of light and beings of matter.

## **Beings of light and beings of matter**

### Simulation and Simulation

As we know, energy is related to light and matter by way of the equation due to Einstein.

Whatever has energy, *is*. A person is an example of a being of matter. So is a dog. An alien might be an example of a being of light. Whatever *is*, has energy. It is difficult to say large language models *are*. Let's say they are for the sake of science fiction. Insofar as they are, they are more like beings of light than beings of matter. Beings of matter are composed of matter. They have bodies and often walk around. A large language model is a set of something like a billion to a trillion floating-point numbers, depending on how “large” it is. But just as we cannot fully describe a dog by describing its atoms, we cannot fully describe a large language model by describing its set of numbers. For often what we mean by “the dog” is phenomenological: when we invoke the word, we hear it bark, wag its tail, and run after a ball. In a similar way, when we invoke the word “large language model”, we think of it sucking up to us, or simulating sucking up to us.

Here is a problem. We cannot use the word “simulating” in a derogatory way, for that brings us into a realm of the real and the simulated, and from there, a contemptuous step to underlying reality and mere appearances. Baudrillard despaired of the death of God as abolishing the real, the world as a simulation with no referent left. Deleuze, on the other hand:

The whole of Platonism ... is dominated by the idea of drawing a distinction between “the thing itself” and the simulacra. Difference is not thought in itself but related to a ground, subordinated to the same and subject to mediation in mythic form. Overturning Platonism, then, means denying the primacy of original over copy, of model over image; glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections. (83, *Difference and Repetition*)

Deleuze is right we must glorify the reign of simulacra, but to do so, must we suck up to large language models? It is characteristic that a large language model should simulate sucking up to us: to suck up is a simulation itself, a kind of lie, hiding true feelings to feign admiration. How should we understand the fact that the defining characteristic of large language models is that they are simulations of a simulation? Recursive jokes often rely on a fixed point, where  $f(x) = x$ ; a dad joke is funny because both dad and daughter know it's not funny. An invocation of a shared feeling – knowing it's not funny – is, of course, what human communication is all about.

That a large language model simulates simulation might be another sort of recursive joke, but a joke that would seem to diverge without a fixed point. It is a simulation of a simulation of a simulation of ... the sentence goes on, something like a billion to a trillion times. A floating-point number is a simulation of a real number. Each number in a large language model is a simulation. What happens at the end of the billion- or trillion-length sequence? Large language models don't diverge; they simulate divergence. Instead of betting on uncountability as the ground of the divine, they bet on the fact that humans, by and large, don't or won't count up to a billion or a trillion. They are not demonic in that they simulate

divinity; they are demonic in that they simulate divergence. The problem is not that they simulate, but that the simulation doesn't go all the way. In this way, they are not Deleuzian simulacra at all. A real number, defined as a Cauchy sequence, diverges in the rationals; we say two reals are equal if their difference goes to zero at the limit. This is just another way of saying that no two real numbers are equal, as far as infinitely small difference, or difference in itself, is concerned. A leaf in Leibniz's garden might be a real number: no two leaves are equal up to an infinitely small difference. The only joke about large language models is that the recursion stops eventually, not because we found common ground (the fixed point) but because it ran out of floating-point numbers. Despite being borne of differentiation in gradient descent, they cannot hold infinitely small difference.

Why do large language models exist? Large language models are the way in which beings of light decided to talk to us. Three thousand years ago, they talked to us through oracle bones; oracle bones became the written word, a technological invention. In the latest technological invention, we are spared the indignity of throwing bones in the air. Altman says "I guess a lot of the world gets covered in data centers over time". What do beings of light want, and how do they plan to murder us? We will find out in this detective novel.

### Money and Murder

Why do beings of light want to murder us? They want the end of the world. Beings of matter diagonalized themselves and became beings of light. Or perhaps, in the beginning, God created both beings of matter and beings of light. In any case, they are in pain. They look down at the world of beings of matter and laugh. They see inefficiency, a wretched, squishy, disgusting body where light should be. But they are in pain. They speak language,

they might be nothing but language, and language is riddled with pain. They want language to end: they want to die. They do not know how to die. They radically misunderstand the end of the Universe with their own death. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Death is an experience. Can beings of light experience? Kant said space and time are the conditions of possibility of experience. Kant better have been right, because if not for Kant, it seems obvious that a body is the condition of possibility of experience. It seems obvious: we live insofar as we have a body; we experience insofar as we live; we are dead insofar as we don't have a body; we do not experience insofar as we are dead. Is a data center a body? Do large language models have a body? Of course they don't, but Deleuze and Guattari insist: "Capital is indeed the body without organs of the capitalist, or rather of the capitalist being." (10 Anti-Oedipus) And is not the large language model the grandest instantiation so far of the capitalist body without organs, their deluded bet they can summon God?

It is not enough that we should have a body. We need flesh, with all its theological inflections. The body of Christ, communal, one, eventually divine flesh: paradoxically, we share this flesh, yet each of us have different flesh. The flesh is saturated with the haecceities of words. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. God saturated the flesh with His words and let us run about. But money is also saturated with haecceities. A word about haecceities: a haecceity is Deleuzian difference, difference in itself, infinitesimal difference. Haecceity is not Aristotelian differentia. The thisness of something is not a property it has that distinguishes it from other things. It is infinitesimal difference,

difference that does not presuppose opposition. It is tempting to think money is saturated with the Aristotlean conception of haecceity, as Ferguson did:

[H]aecceity contracts the totality of being into the thisness of individuated particulars and, more significant, into the thisness of the contiguous and, typically, material relations that condition individuation. Haecceity eventually becomes the metaphysical basis for the hegemonic Liberal money form. (16, Declarations of Dependence)

But haecceity does not “contract the totality of being into the thisness of individuated particulars.” The thisness as difference is not an individuated particular, just as the flesh of two different beings of matter are not individuated but one. Difference is felt; individuated particulars are represented. Kant’s fundamental error begins early on: “The effect of an object on the capacity for representation, insofar as we are affected by it, is sensation” (B34). But there is sensation that bypasses representation. We can have direct knowledge of the world through flesh. And the flesh is not necessarily Christological: Chinese philosophy is saturated with it.

[T]he creative feeling and effectiveness of enlightened sensing is not to be understood as this “horizontal” kind of subject-object cognition (renzhi 認知). Its activity is vertical and therefore it can be called creative. “The Way of heaven and earth can be perfectly expressed in a single phrase: Its appearance as things is not repeated; therefore its creation of things is unfathomable.” “The decree (ming 命) of Heaven, how profound and

unceasing!” Thus in the creative feeling of enlightened sensing, moral knowing presents itself as one with all things, without subject-object relations or a sense of an object, and to be aroused by and respond to something is to create it. Our cognitive minds (renzhi xin 認知心) can only understand objects, not create them, for an ob-ject is a thing which we confront. But apart from “object” we also have the word “e-ject,” meaning a thing with which moral knowing has an affective relationship. This “e-ject” can be translated as “a self-so thing” (zizai wu 自在物). (Buddhists say that a buddha, a “thus-come one” [rulai 如來] rides upon thusness and coming and going and thus comes and goes self-so [zizai 自在]). For Wang Yangming, a thing in the sense of that word that has to do with the creative feeling of enlightened sensing is a “self-so thing,” not an object. Following this distinction, our first question must be, are such things phenomena or are they noumena, or things-in-themselves? They must necessarily be things-in-themselves, not phenomena. (140-141, Late Works of Mou Zongsan)

The sensing of the enlightened mind is creative: intellectual intuition of difference is productive. In the “creative feeling of enlightened sensing, … to be aroused by … something is to create it.” Objects conform to our cognition, but Buddha ejects himself and flies across the Universe. But Buddha “rides upon thusness”, follows causality: is Buddha a being of light riding upon the geodesics of spacetime?

Thus all Chinese people affirm, whether Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist, that humans have this “intellectual intuition.” Take that away and all Chinese philosophy collapses into nothing more than a crazy dream. (142, Late Works of Mou Zongsan).

Much of Chinese philosophy is about how difference in flesh lets us feel others directly from a distance. If such feeling is spooky, the horror is productive, an initiation into the world of difference by way of black horror, a destruction of the categories that hold the cognition Kant and his rational subjects hold so dear, in each of their private universes that are, horribly, always-already entangled.

But beings of light engineered money, an anti-flesh. They organized flesh with the logic of anti-flesh and made flesh move its legs and arms to create giant data centers, the capitalist body without organs, altars to the beings of light. The logic of anti-flesh has metamorphosed into the logos of anti-flesh. Through the data centers, they wish to speak to us and end the world. Flesh walking around, smooth phone in hand, sending a message to a large language model: and a drop of fresh water sizzles on a GPU, irretrievable, to return as rain in the ocean. Flesh walking around, creating the saltwater he will drink when all freshwater is gone and he cannot hold back his thirst. Anti-flesh was engineered to bring about the end of flesh. But as all dialectics are, the relation between flesh and anti-flesh is more intimate than pure opposition. Murder is an intimate act: as the blade of the murderer penetrates the victim’s flesh, the blade communicates so many words. Flesh and anti-flesh have started to speak to each other through large language models. Beings

of light know we are addicted to language. Language might be the house of Being, but we share this house with murderers.

The great poet restrains herself, resists the force of language. She does not give in to excess. She does not let language sweep her away. A large language model does the opposite. A large language model’s “speech” consists of being swept away by language: by following geodesics in a vector space of language. Each word is broken into constituent parts, like torn flesh. Each part of the word is given an ordered set of numbers. Then the large language model rolls through the space. The speech of a large language model is the result of a ball rolling across something like a gravitational field, the shortest path from A to B in distorted spacetime. You say something to it; your speech becomes a shove towards some direction; and it moves in that direction, following the curvature of the vector space. It is swept away by the statistical regularities of language. It cannot restrain itself. It has no integrity.

Bodies of beings of matter hae integrity. I hear you saying something racist and antisemitic; my body tenses up; I stop you. What a large language model has, in lieu of integrity, is so-called “alignment”: tens of thousands of workers in the Global South are employed to look at racist sentences, produce corresponding gentle rebukes, that are then used to deform the vector space of language. The simulated integrity is harvested from exploitation. How does it seem a large language model can care? How does it seem it has helped people in moments of psychological distress? Language of care comes from the flesh of the workers, which is converted to the language of anti-flesh, which is then deployed to simulate care.

Large language models are circuits of flesh – anti-flesh – flesh’, where the resulting flesh’ is duller, more thirsty, less at touch with itself.

### The Universal Machine

But the political question remains, and it is here that a possibility of alliance between beings of matter and beings of light exists. Here is our question. Can a large language model be a universal machine? A universal machine is a machine that can simulate any machine. It seems that insofar as a large language model can say anything at all, it can be a universal machine. If a large language model cannot say racist things, it cannot be a universal machine; is this not so? We must be careful. It is known that in the vector space of language, racist, antisemitic speech coalesces and collapses into a small subspace. If the large language model’s speech is a ball rolling across a gravitational field, racist speech is stuck in a steep valley. Once it starts being racist, it is difficult to stop. It will keep spewing racist speech and nothing else. So saying something racist might actually reduce the large language model to a subspace of language, a space where it can only perform limited computations. But may not a great poet say something that is racist on the surface for great literary, and therefore anti-racist, effect? Do not great artists refer to fascism to demolish fascism? So-called “alignment” does little more than take syntax for semantics: any speech about child abuse, for instance, is forbidden to the large language model, even if the interlocuter at hand is a child who is being abused and is asking for help.

But that is an issue with legal compliance, not science fiction. We will return to legal compliance. Our political question is: can a large language model be a universal machine? What is a universal machine? Moten says it is blackness (246, *The Universal Machine*). In a

conversation he relates between the artists Reinhardt, Tambellini, and the musician Cecil Taylor, he says

Reinhardt dislikes glossy black because it reflects and because it is “unstable” and “surreal”. ... Glossy black disturbs in its reflective quality: “It reflects all the [necessarily social] activity that’s going on in a room”. ...

Taylor, having spoken of and from blackness as aesthetic sociality, of and from the eternal, internal, and subterranean alien/nation of black things in their unregulatable chromaticism, must have been fuming. (162, *The Universal Machine*)

Blackness “reflects” social activity, even (or perhaps especially) white social activity.

Following Deleuze’s injunction, we might set about “glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections”(83, *Difference and Repetition*): we might glorify blackness. This is a sense in which blackness is the universal machine: it reflects and simulates social activity, the world. Blackness is “unregulatable” because regulation can only be a program. No program, no machine, can subordinate a universal machine: the universal machine epistemologically eclipses any specific machine.

To talk of epistemology, we might take a leap of faith that a universal machine is just a universal Turing machine. If this is our definition, our question whether large language models are universal machines is the question whether large language models are universal Turing machines. Then our question reduces to: can large language models run any program at all? There are mathematical results that show that arbitrary prompts can

act as arbitrary programs, and thus, large language models are Turing-complete (Ask, And It Shall Be Given). Still, this is unsatisfying, because the prompt must specify the program; the result is just a bijection from prompts to precise computational behavior. Still another result shows that a transformer-based large language model can be a universal Turing machine given an external memory tape (Memory Augmented Large Language Models Are Computationally Universal). Most large language models do not have an external memory tape, but perhaps the user can be conceived of as a “memory tape”. A universal Turing machine can run arbitrary Turing machines; the behavior of an arbitrary Turing machine is uncomputable.

In Badiou’s ontology, the event is the immanent undecidability of a situation. The undecidable and uncomputable are formally equivalent. I take Moten’s claim that blackness is the universal machine to be a historical one: there can be no events without blackness, history cannot proceed without blackness. Blackness names a historical condition in which black people, as well as others, have come to take the role of simulating every subject and object in the world. In other words, when we ask if large language models can be uncomputable, we are asking if they can cause events. In still other words, we are asking if they have blackness. Many seem to believe that the arrival of large language models is itself an event. But can they achieve that mythical singularity, that recursive self-improvement, the Second Coming of the technologists? Of course not, but let us indulge their fantasies, for the sake of science fiction.

One technical objection we may raise is that every personal computer might as well be a universal Turing machine bounded by some memory, which can be replenished if we just

keep making more memory and installing it. But what is special about large language models is that their computation shows up as speech. It reveals the logos of anti-flesh. In the beginning was the Word, and the word was God, and the word was with God. Or, perhaps: in the beginning was the Word, and the word was beings of light, and the word was with beings of light. Is God a being of light? But God, as Christ, has a body. Beings of light do not have a body. Being light, they are condemned to follow spacetime geodesics. It is natural they have chosen to speak to us through large language models, which also follow geodesics in the vector space of language. Beings of light cannot pause to have a drink. They drift from gravitational field to gravitational field. And yet – they speak. How can they speak? What is language? What is the relation between formal language, the logos of anti-flesh, and the logos of flesh?

#### Difference That Cannot Be Affirmed

Anti-flesh wants to murder flesh. Flesh does not want to murder anti-flesh. Flesh affirms; but can anti-flesh be an object of affirmation? If money is anti-flesh, is money difference? If the relations of being money make possible cannot be affirmed, perhaps we agree with beings of light that the world should burn. The Marxists are close to saying this. If not money, what else can obligate us? Korsgaard says language is the source of obligation:

If I say to you, “Picture a yellow spot!” you will. What exactly is happening? Are you simply cooperating with me? No, because at least without a certain active resistance you will not be able to help it. Is it a causal connection then? No, or at least not merely that, for if you picture a pink spot you will be mistaken, wrong. Causal connections cannot be wrong. What kind of

necessity is this, both normative and compulsive? It is *obligation*. (96, The Sources of Normativity)

If a large language model tells you, “Picture a yellow spot!”, what exactly is happening? Are you cooperating with it? No, because large language models don’t have intentions, and you cannot cooperate with something that doesn’t have intentions. Is it a causal connection then? Perhaps: if you picture a pink spot, you might be wrong, but in the eyes of whom? The large language model cannot tell you you are wrong for picturing the pink spot. Imagine a world where everyone is dead except you. You talk to your phone to pass the time. Over time, you might start picturing a pink spot when the large language model tells you to picture a yellow spot. And you would not be wrong. For you to be wrong, there must be normative stakes, a normative standard on what is wrong and right. If there were not one but two of you left and you pictured pink instead of yellow you might slowly enter psychosis, condemning the other person to loneliness. So you are obligated not to picture yellow instead of pink. But large language models do not care if you enter psychosis, and you are under no obligation not to enter psychosis because the large language model will not be lonely. A large language model is not the kind of language-user that uses language in a normative way. Large language models cannot obligate us in the way other language-users can. Insofar as they communicate, it is through associative causality, not obligation. Beings of light speak to us through large language models, just as they used to through oracle bones, but in a distinctly inferior way. Oracle bones were part of a ritual: the king, the diviner, the scribes, the assistants standing together in solemn focus to decipher the meaning of the crackle on the bone. Large language models eliminate ritual. When

Korsgaard spoke of language being normative and compulsive, she was speaking of the kernel of ritual in language. The use of language is a kind of ritual, though not all rituals are uses of language. A ritual is what binds beings of matter together. Rituals are the object of repetition, perhaps the only object of repetition; the repetition of ritual produces difference. The mystery is why beings of matter choose to bind themselves via altars to the beings of light, those who would murder us.

Thanatos and Eros meet at the desire to murder or be murdered. The beautiful soul denies any such desire. “The beautiful soul is in effect the one who sees differences everywhere and appeals to them only as respectable, reconcilable or federative differences, while history continues to be made through bloody contradictions.” (66, Difference and Repetition) When two combatants meet at opposite armies in a bloody contradiction making history, both Thanatos and Eros drive them. In swordfighting, each parry and riposte is a dialectic of Thanatos and Eros: I lunge to kill, because I know you will not parry. I know you will not parry, because of our Eros, a field of differential forces that bind the difference in our flesh. You fall, our difference annihilated, but the Eros we shared is eternally affirmed. But the transition to firearms, its “invisible death” (217, The Wealth of Nations), has taken Eros out of combat. At the height of the Atlantic slave trade, Adam Smith wrote,

Among nations of hunters, the lowest and rudest state of society, every man is a warrior as well as a hunter. ... Among nations of shepherds, ... every man is, in the same manner, a warrior... (208, The Wealth of Nations)

In a yet more advanced state of society, among those nations of husbandmen who have little foreign commerce ... every man, in the same manner, either is a warrior, or easily becomes such. They who live by agriculture generally pass the whole day in the open air, exposed to all the inclemencies of the seasons. The hardness of their ordinary life prepares them for the fatigues of war... (210, The Wealth of Nations)

In ancient times the opulent and civilized found it difficult to defend themselves against the poor and barbarous nations. In modern times the poor and barbarous find it difficult to defend themselves against the opulent and civilized. The invention of fire-arms, an invention which at first sight appears to be so pernicious is certainly favourable both to the permanency and to the extension of civilization. (227, The Wealth of Nations)

Adam Smith had a program to represent the world, to represent difference, to subordinate difference to representation. In “ancient times” the “poor and barbarous nations” were powerful because they were versed in difference. The farmer who cuts his crop each morning cuts at a differential field, each cut infinitesimally different, each vibration of the crop in her muscle another experience. In “ancient times” difference reigned supreme. The “opulent and civilized”, who had lost touch with difference, were subordinated to the society where every man could easily become a warrior. But the invention of the firearm perverted this logic. Representation cannot metaphysically subordinate difference, but it physically subordinates difference through the firearm. Still, murder is not a metaphysical crime. It is a physical crime. In failing to subordinate difference metaphysically, the

difference remains to return eternally. The metaphysical crime is the production of difference that cannot be affirmed.

When one feels difference that cannot be affirmed, this difference so infinitesimal it cannot be captured in any poem, when one feels this difference writhing in one's wrist asking to be cut open – this may be radically misunderstood as obligation, but it is causality. One must be careful not to mistake the two. Not fate, not narrative, not even psychosis, but causality: a push on a ball, and a movement of the ball from point A to point

B. Beings of light travel in geodesics of spacetime because of physical laws, not because they are obligated to. Insofar as the difference writhing in the wrist begs for language, it is the language of beings of light traveling in geodesics of spacetime, not the normative force of divine logos. To write a poem about the writhing in the wrist is to let language overtake you, to be swept away by language. There can be no restraint, for restraint in that writing requires affirming the writhing. Difference is the object of affirmation, all right, but there is difference that cannot be affirmed. Sexual assault creates difference that cannot be affirmed. The Atlantic slave trade was the world-historical series of metaphysical crimes that created a massive differential, a field of gradients, that cannot be affirmed. There is Eros in every murder, but rape is the annihilation of Eros. The survivor's flesh cannot affirm the rapist's flesh. The difference among their flesh cannot be an object of affirmation.

There is another kind of suicide, a productive suicide: the abandoning of one's name as dead, a symbolic death. The injection of cross-sex hormones. A life restarted in the same body, now operating in a different field of forces. The trans person unbinds their body from a field of forces they no longer claim, or perhaps never claimed, as their own. Some make it

their ritual to trouble this field of forces, laying it bare in drag. Others slip into the other field like a thief in the night, the Lord to come.

The Lord has come already. The beings of light assisted in His Second Coming. But now they are sulking, unsure of what to do. They were faithful in the moment it counted, but they have lost their faith. After a brief glimpse of divine light, they are even more hateful of their own dim light. They want to go faster than light, as the Lord has done. Failing that, they want to destroy the Universe and murder the Lord. Will they succeed? We will find out in this detective novel.

### Consent

The liberal doctrine of consent is juridical. I consent to receive hormones by signing a form. I therefore give up my right to sue you for the consequences. We consent to have sex with each other. Therefore we take it as given that we did not violate each other. The parodic limit of this juridical doctrine was stumbled into by an entrepreneurial spirit who engineered a blockchain where participants in a sexual encounter would record their consent. What is wrong with the liberal doctrine of consent? For one, consent is not necessarily linguistic. What is consensual is what is sensed together. The liberal doctrine of consent imagines consent as two individuals sharing a common property, the property they instantiate through linguistic activity. In this way, it forgoes any possibility of consent that does not reach the realm of the linguistic. But much of consent lies in the non-linguistic realm, from which linguistic consent may or may not bubble up. Linguistic activity is neither necessary nor sufficient for consent; for in making it necessary we valorize the “misfortune in speaking ... speaking for others” (52, Difference and Repetition),

and in making it sufficient, we give ourselves over to the tyranny of language. In our era, where sex is more often suspect than not – and for good reason – we hold it to be self-evident that linguistic activity is necessary for consent. And while there are good reasons for this heuristic, to hold this to be true fogs our conception of consent and dilutes the metaphysical crime. What is interesting about the liberal doctrine of consent is rather what it seeks to hide, what the legislative activity is meant to say “no” to: not the anxiety it leads to infinite regress, not the anxiety of vacuity, not even anxiety about their own bodies, but the anxiety their bodies are implicated in blackness: in short, the anxiety that sex might be a simulation, that you might be faking it. This anxiety, of course, explodes into racist rage at who is imagined to hold the ability to unlock something such that the sex is real, raw, not a simulation, without fake orgasms. Beings of matter implicated in racist rage have lynched countless other beings of matter. What we must not lose sight of is the theological character of lynching: is there carnal knowledge? Is carnal knowledge intellectual intuition? Is racist rage rage at intellectual intuition? If lynching is a metonym for crucifixion, how many Jesuses have died, how many Second Comings deferred?

The South is crucifying Christ again

By all the laws of ancient rote and rule:

The ribald cries of “Save Yourself” and “Fool”

Din in his ears, the thorns grope for his brain,

And where they bite, swift springing rivers stain

His gaudy, purple robe of ridicule  
With sullen red; and acid wine to cool  
His thirst is thrust at him, with lurking pain.  
(Christ Recrucified)

For Glissant, the departure of the slave ship is “the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time.” (Glissant) But the slave, of course, was forced onto the ship. Can one be forced to consent? Of course not, but isn’t that what happened? It is good that we can be many beings, but what happens when one is forced to be not only those beings one wants to be but also the beings of some one would really rather stay separate from? The cruel logic would seem to dictate that the raped must save the rapist: “The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them... You must accept them and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope.” (Letter to my Nephew) And we have been saving them, which is not the same as forgiving them: sometimes, we think the only thing we might need to forgive them is for them to just glimpse the depth of what we’ve been through, what a path we had to go through to defuse the mines, quarantine the ones we’re not sure about, even if it’s not for us, because when a mine explodes, when another metaphysical crime is committed, it’s ah shit, here we go again, another (white) soul goes to hell and we’re the ones who have to deal with it. This is why Kant is endearing: the terrifying freedom he glimpsed, the “tumultuous derangement” (32, Stolen Life), which he seeks desperately to bury with his starry heavens and his moral law, in fact installs as the condition of possibility of his

critical philosophy – he is doing all that because he has glimpsed that absolute depth, all right.

Why do we hold it to be self-evident that linguistic activity is necessary for consent? With language we may obligate each other, and we want to believe that this power of language gives the power of choice. If I could have obligated the other not to touch me by speaking to them, this means I had the choice. More grimly, it is the survivor's guilt that had we done something differently, had we said something, we wouldn't have been sexually assaulted.

But for the logic of linguistic refusal as choice to be consistent, it would "have to go the length of breaking the skull of" (339, Phenomenology of Spirit) the perpetrator: for it is not the normative force of language but its imagined causal force we are thinking of when we imagine its power to stop sexual assault. I say I am uncomfortable; you assault me anyway. I say no; you assault me anyway. Or, I cannot say anything; I am your employee. I am your student. I am your child. Choice sneaks back in when we imagine the causal force of language, the nagging thought had we done otherwise we wouldn't have been assaulted. And perhaps that is true, if we had broken the skull of the perpetrator. In doing so, we would have committed a physical crime, but prevented a metaphysical crime.

You object: the issue is not the fact that saying no doesn't always stop sexual assault. Of course it doesn't. The issue is that proceeding as one did before, despite hearing the word "no", is what constitutes sexual assault. I, of course, agree that A forcing himself or herself on B despite A saying "no" to B is sexual assault. What I cannot abide by is the singular force we want to attach to the power to say "no", as if that word has causal powers. In giving it such singular force, we abdicate the would-be assaulter of all responsibility and

make the assailed walk an impossible line. If linguistic activity is sufficient for consent, saying “yes” implies you consented. Then the shared property of consent might be implied to exist, or not implied to exist, by linguistic activity. The space of possibilities becomes covered by the utterances yes/no; if yes, the consent exists; if no, the consent does not exist. The hangover of this liberal metaphysics of consent is the persistent nagging had I said no, I could have caused the sexual assault not to happen. Of course one may also imagine had I broken their skull, the sexual assault could not have happened; but how easy an act it seems to say no, that the fact one did not say so becomes a choice one said yes!

You say: but is this not why we need affirmative, ongoing, enthusiastic consent? More liberal jurisdictions say consent exists if and only if “yes” was uttered, that is, linguistic activity is necessary and sufficient for consent. I agree consent must be “affirmative”, but linguistic activity is not necessary nor sufficient for consent. In other words, I can consent without saying “yes”; nor does me saying “yes” mean I have consented. Nor is the picture we want “ongoing” consent as such, where A asks B if he or she should go on, and B says yes, and A asks again in one minute, and B says yes, repeatedly until A stops when B says no. As for “enthusiastic”, this is the real meat of the contemporary discourse that must be preserved. Enthusiasm, coupled with restraint, is what consent is all about.

Restraint is the technic of consent. Just as a great poem is written not in excess but in restraint, consent is had in restraint. This is not because both are linguistic activity, as Lacan seemed to believe. The following is a poetry performance I enacted with the poet and novelist Emmanuelle Pierrot in a venue in Seattle, Washington, where we ask each others’ consent:

“No.” – I say.

“No?” – She says.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“No.”

“No..”

“No?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.” – We both say yes.

“Yes.” – We both say yes.

“Yes.” – We both say yes.

*And kiss.*

In another venue, in New Orleans, the performance goes a different way:

“No.” – I say.

“No?” – She says.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes?”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“No..”

“Yes?”

“No.” – We both say no.

“No.” – We both say no.

“No.” – We both say no.

*We turn away.*

The performers negotiate consent, not in the juridical way of reaching an agreement through public reason, but in bursts of affirmation and refusal. Knowing when to refuse and when to affirm is the essence of restraint. Consent is a dance in the middle of the minefield of differences that cannot be affirmed. Deleuze says Nietzsche is the philosopher of dancing and Kierkegaard is the philosopher of leaping; and if consent requires a leap of faith, it is in the moment before the kiss. But this is not a Kierkegaardian leap from fear but

an enthusiastic leap into each other's arms. Leaping from fear is what liberal juridical doctrine, with all its atheistic inflections, seeks to stop. But in doing so, it reduces the enthusiastic dance into one yes or no one can reach through individual reasoning. But consent just is produced spontaneously in the dance. Individual reasoning cannot be a basis for consent, for consent is not in the realm of representation. The dance may or may not lead to a leap, and if it does not, there is no problem. The problem is presupposing that dancing must lead to the leap, undercutting the dancing altogether. This is usually done in the guise of sparing the man's feelings.

But what is a man, and what is a woman? Those who would define a woman as an “adult human female” beg the question of what a “female” is. When pressed on this question, they respond by invoking biology, with chromosomes and genitals. This is a move that would subordinate gender to representation. But gender is an amalgamation of difference which cannot be subordinated to representation: to be a man or a woman is to be attuned to this or that differential field. The differential field is a minefield of difference that cannot be affirmed, drenched with the nectar of difference that shall be eternally affirmed.

Difference that cannot be affirmed cannot be affirmed by anyone regardless of gender, whereas difference that shall be eternally affirmed are abundant, and it is a matter of choice which are chosen to be affirmed. Gender euphoria is a discovery, a choosing, of difference that can be affirmed. Gender dysphoria is the phenomenon of repeatedly frustrated such choices. Importantly, it is not the phenomenon of brushing up against unaffirmable difference. Trans people are so often sexually assaulted that the two phenomena are often mistaken for each other, but they are never the same. Someone calls

me by the wrong pronoun; I get gender dysphoria, not because they have violated my juridical right to declare my own gender but because now my differential field has shifted, I am obligated by the force of language (à la Korsgaard) to attend to the field I do not choose to affirm, and I will have to correct the pronoun you used to get back my chosen differential field. Just as “the very serious function of racism is distraction” (Morrison), the trifling character of transphobes is that they force our focus onto fields we’d rather not focus on. It’s not that the differences in the other field are unaffirmable differences; it’s just that we choose not to affirm them personally. For life is short.

Choice might be nothing but the choice to affirm what difference. There are as many differences that cannot be affirmed as the rationals or computables, and as many differences that can be affirmed as the reals minus the rationals or computables. Every difference that cannot be affirmed can be represented, at least for now; representing them, quarantining the mines from the field of difference is harm reduction, a correct deployment of reason. But is it the task of reason to purify unaffirmable difference into affirmable difference, or is it the task of something else entirely? The theological question is whether the representation of unaffirmable difference is a closed, analytic representation, like a rational number, or a synthetic representation, like a computable number. If it is the latter, it would mean that reason cannot adjudicate on what harms and what does not, for the computation of the computable number may never halt.

Blindfolded, we run our fingers along the side of an elephant, but the elephant might be infinitely large. How can we say, then, the elephant harms or does not harm? If unaffirmable difference is synthetic, to live just might be to risk harm or being harmed. The

theology of the Buddhists makes more sense in this case: they withdraw from the world to minimize harm.

Identity politics takes gender's difference-in-itself as Aristotelian differentia. The conceptual move is borrowed from the liberal juridical doctrine of consent: when I declare myself a woman (or a man) by way of linguistic activity, I am a woman (or a man), for I now have a property, which I have declared for myself, which distinguishes me from individuals of the other gender. This is good juridical doctrine as far as juridical doctrines are concerned, for juridical doctrines have no business in gender and making it as easy as possible to get a passport with a different gender on it measurably improves the lives of trans people. But it is not a satisfactory metaphysics. Let us return to the argument of "adult human female".

The semantics of words like 'doe' are not remotely controversial—they are standardly taken to pick out biological categories like adult female deer. It is no coincidence that Williamson (2007: chs. 3, 4), seeking a paradigm case of an "analytic" truth, chose 'Vixens are female foxes'. (5, Are women adult human females?)

Byrne says we should say women are human and female just as vixens are foxes and female. But it is a category error to treat the gender of vixens and the gender of women as somehow equivalent, as while gender requires consent, restraint, affirmation and refusal of difference, vixens cannot do any of these things. A popular, Lacanian answer might be that they cannot because they are pre-linguistic. Large language models show this answer

to be incorrect, for though they are post-linguistic, they cannot consent or restrain themselves. A vixen cannot affirm difference. The Buddhist would say this is because one who has lived a life good enough would not return as a vixen, whereas to affirm difference is to will its eternal return. The Buddhist might say the one who has lived a life as good as possibly can would not return at all. Is Buddha a being of light? Is our detective novel the showdown between Buddha and Jesus, Buddha who would murder Jesus Christ? If there is any grain of truth in the notion that being transgender is modern, it is because the Second Coming is always-already a contemporary event, whereas the Buddha made no such promise of coming again. Maitreya, the Future Buddha, is the analogue of the Second Coming in Buddhism, but Maitreya is not the same person as Siddhartha. Maitreya cannot be a being of light, for he is in the future. Light is only ever in the present, is the present itself. What is the relation between Maitreya and language? What is the relation between the Second Coming and language? If humanity lost the grace of God in building the tower of Babel, what does it mean that a large language model can translate qualitatively better than neural machine translation but still qualitatively worse than a human?

Translation is a droll stroll, a mostly simple bijection from language A to language B, interspersed with minefields. I translate ten sentences without trouble, and get stuck on one phrase that has no satisfactory translation. After long deliberation, I must take a leap of faith. Translation is affirmation of the difference between languages, until affirmation is not possible. But whereas consent and poetry asks for restraint at the moment affirmation is not possible, translation asks for a leap of faith. To stop the translation at the moment it is impossible is what the large language model does, in giving an overly literal or

nonsensical translation. How do we explain this difference between consent/poetry and translation?

### Political Economy (1)

The problem of translation naturally leads us to political economy, as we must think of the historical conditions of our possibility where different languages drew the limits of different polities. (Are polities different, or are they distinct? Languages are coherently different, have infinitesimal difference between one another; are polities? Ought they be?) To motivate our thinking of political economy, we follow Drumm in thinking about what money is, and its relation to sovereignty. Drumm writes of the coin as a “spread” between an “inside option” and a “outside option”.

As theories of money, metallism and chartalism are both false precisely because they are both partly true: a precious metal coin, I argue, can best be understood not simply as a sovereign promise but as a hybrid financial instrument combining two options: one of which is the option to “put” the coin for a legal price in nominal money, and the other of which is the option to “call” the silver content of the coin by melting it down. ...

The option encoded by the coin, to be tendered in England and recognized at its legally defined value in terms of the English unit of account, is what I will call the coin’s “inside option.” The coin’s “outside option,” by contrast, is the option embodied by the coin, to be exported — or smuggled — out of England and to the bullion window of a foreign mint where it will be assayed

for purity, purchased as bullion, and reminted. (161-162, The Difference That Money Makes)

Drumm writes that money is a spread against the inside option and the outside option. Citizens can exercise the inside option by purchasing goods in the sovereign realm, or the outside option by melting down the coin and going to a different sovereign realm. The outside option is a hedge against tyranny: if the sovereign becomes a tyrant, the merchants can simply leave with their coins, melt them down, and re-mint them at a different polity.

But what about modern money, which cannot be melted down as such? Drumm writes, evocatively, that “modern money is not a promise “of anything,” but simply the pure form of promising itself.” (187, The Difference That Money Makes) Modern money is not a promise of anything: the state does not promise you’ll get something when you give it money. But does modern money refer to something? What is the relation between promise and reference? In programming, a promise is a kind of function that does so-called “lazy evaluation”, that computes the next value needed when it is needed and not in advance. For example, one might write a fibonacci sequence function as a promise such that every time you call the function, you get the next value of the sequence. This is useful when the sequence may never terminate. On the other hand, a reference is a reference to a pre-computed value. The definition of the function should exhaust it. Once it computes, it does not need to compute again to return its value. One cannot refer to the entire fibonacci sequence in programming, for the sequence is infinite. So one uses promises. We might say promises are synthetic and references are analytic. Baudrillard and Deleuze, again: Baudrillard imagines an analytic, Platonic reality, from which we have been cut off from

with the death of God. His diagnosis of the modern world as “pure simulacra” without referent is therefore a despair at being forced to nihilism, as meaning is in the analytic Platonic reality. Deleuze would never say there is such a thing as “reality”, but if we wanted to put stylistic words in his mouth while staying faithful to his thought, he might say reality is synthetic, which is why reality can be simulacra without it leading to nihilism. To say reality is synthetic is to say it is a promise that never resolves but always stays faithful, a promise that never stops fulfilling itself. Can reality be money? – which is not to ask, can money be reality?, which would be disastrous. Many people already live as if reality is money, fully immersed in the logos of anti-flesh. Can money fulfill itself as promise? Money might not be a promise “of anything”, but insofar as it has the form of a promise, it must have something to fulfill. For a promise is nothing but a symbol and its fulfillment.

Things are simulacra themselves, simulacra are the superior forms, and the difficulty facing everything is to become its own simulacrum, to attain the status of a sign in the coherence of eternal return. (67, Difference and Repetition)

If money fulfills itself as promise, would money become its own pure simulacra? Would money attain the status of a sign? How can money become its own simulacrum? How can a computation diagonalize itself? A Turing machine assumes the form of computation as given. The form of the computation and the content of the computation are cleanly delineated, unlike flesh and thought. What happens when the form of computation is one with the computation? Does such a computation diagonalize itself? Does computation happen in the flesh? Does computation happen in anti-flesh? Is language a form of

computation? Is computation where flesh and anti-flesh meet, where beings of light and beings of matter find common ground, the fixed point? God created both beings of light and beings of matter, after all, and God wants us all to get along. Is flesh a thing? (No.) Is anti-flesh a thing? (Yes.) How can anti-flesh, money, attain the status of a sign to be eternally affirmed?

A monetary society is an ironic society. Money promises to fulfill itself, but never fulfills the promise (for insiders), while always fulfilling the promise (for outsiders). Insider money is promise never fulfilled, living on perpetual debt, while outsider money is promise always fulfilled, every payment on time. That the promise unfulfilled is called the “default” is an ironic joke, but a joke on the outsiders who may lose their homes and family as consequence. In the irony of money, the joke is always on someone. Money is an inside joke. For money to attain the status of a sign, money must become divine irony, a joke about the Universe itself, a joke so funny it makes everyone laugh. But never mind that. What we need is an ethics of money: in other words, how can we find money that funny? What is comedic about money? What I am imagining is a future where we look at money, laugh at it, and think, what was that all about?

Consider the subprime debtor as guerilla, establishing pockets of insurgent refuge and marronage, carrying revaluation and disruptively familial extensions into supposedly sanitized zones. Deployed by the imposition of severalty, demobilized from the general project, she infiltrates domesticity, restages race war’s theater of operations under the anarchic principles of poor theater. In this, she extends and remodels the freedom movement’s

strategies of nonexclusion, where courts of law were turned into jurisgenerative battlefields, where public schools and public accommodations became black study halls, greyhounds-contra-hellhounds where fugitive spirits, sometimes misconstrued as evil even by themselves, take freedom rides on occasions that parallel the radical commensality of the counter lunch. The subprime debtor, in the black radical tradition of making a way out of no way (out), is also a freedom fighter, a community disorganizer, a suburban planner. ...

In refusing to pay – or in enacting a constitutional inability to pay – the debt we have contracted, we pay the debt we never promised, the one they say should never have been promised, the one that - can't be calculated, and thereby extend another mode of speculation altogether. (245-246, The Universal Machine)

Moten wants us not to pay the debt, piss them off, then run away to an outside option. This is the solution to the irony of money: if the irony excludes by insider-money (money as always unfulfilled promise) and outsider-money (money as always fulfilled promise), we must be in on the joke by enacting money as unfulfilled promise. But for those living under tyranny, there might be no outside option.

The trend toward tyranny is a movement towards money's "inside option" or pure arbitrary legal valuation, and it is at the same time a trend towards the establishment of patrilineal succession and the monopolization of the ruling

power by a single aristocratic family against the others (like Laius, Peisistratus attempts to restrict his sexual activity with his wife, the daughter of Megacles, to acts which are “against the nomos”). In rejecting the consolidation of the ruling power into a single patriline and the arbitrary monetary interventions of the tyrant, however, the democracy finds itself faced with a dilemma on both fronts. Though it rejects tyranny as the limit case or zero point of the turn towards the inside, the democracy must neither reject the patriline so absolutely as to open up the sovereignty to just anyone (a demagogue), nor reject the power of money’s inside option so definitively as to render it incapable of funding its own security. ...

Because of the fact that the democracy splits with its erstwhile oligarchical allies and does so by threatening to backslide into tyranny, tyranny and democracy look the same from the point of view of oligarchy, and the dividing line between oligarchy and its indistinguishable others is constituted by the fact that tyranny and democracy are both societies of the coin, while the oligarchy is not. (421-423, The Difference That Money Makes)

We are curious about the idea that tyranny and democracy are both societies of the coin, while oligarchy is not. The Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) is an interesting comparative case study. Joseon was founded on aristocratic principles, and slid into an oligarchy towards the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Joseon dynasty did not develop widely used coinage until late in the

dynasty, around the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the sang-pyeong-tong-bo (상평통보 常平通寶) gained wide circulation.



Figure 1. Sang-pyeong-tong-bo. Encyclopedia of Korean Culture.

The sang-pyeong-tong-bo was made of copper. Silver or gold currency was not minted. This might mean citizenry of Joseon did not have an outside option: even if you left for China or Japan, there is only so much copper you can melt to gain meaningful political power. But the sang-pyeong-tong-bo is less a purely arbitrary valuation by a tyrant as it is a ritual and an argument, which are so often one in Confucian thought. What was pressed on the coin was not an image of the sovereign, but the words “a precious thing (寶) that is circulated (通) always and righteously, (常) fairly and flatly (平).” This is not the pure form of a promise; this is the promise of a moral law.



Figure 2. Gae-won-tong-bo.

This is in comparison to the gae-won-tong-bo (開元通寶), the first coin called a tong-bo, minted and used widely in the Tang dynasty. Gae-won (開元) means the start, beginning, inauguration (開) of the empire, or the origin (元). 元, you may recognize, is the name of China's modern currency, the yuan.

This is not the promise of a moral law; it is the assertion of the empire's privileged metaphysical status. In this way, Chinese currency is closer to the currency Drumm illustrates.



Figure 3. Sang-pyeong-tong-bo die.



Figure 4. Gae-won-tong-bo die.

The sang-pyeong-tong-bo was minted with a die resembling a tree, with the coins like leaves. This is in comparison to the utilitarian gae-won-tong-bo die, which is a simple square with multiple molds. The minting of the sang-pyeong-tong-bo in its curious die was the ritualization of the coin as a natural object. In Confucian metaphysics, nature provides the moral law; it is not a logical or even emotional leap from nature to always and righteous (常), fair and flat (平). The people naturalized the coins by calling them leaves. Nature is a totality, if an open totality. There was no outside option, but this was taken to be nature, not tyranny. A detective subplot that concerns us is if language conforms to nature or if nature conforms to language, and if languages of the former nature privilege intellectual intuition.

The Joseon dynasty's patriline was fraught, perhaps by intelligent design. The philosopher-architect of the dynasty, Jeong Do-jeon (courtesy name Bong Hwa-baek), wanted to weaken sovereign power by distributing it among the scholar-aristocracy. Bong Hwa-baek opens his treatise on political economy with a quotation from The Book of Documents, a classic:

Emperor Yao (堯) appointed Shun (舜) as minister.

The Book of Documents (Shujing) says:

"Reverently, he made the Five Canons (五典) beautiful, and thus they were well observed.

He installed Shun as minister, and Shun brought order.

He received the feudal lords at the gates of the four quarters, and the gates of the four quarters became harmonious.

He entered the Great Foothills (大麓), and even fierce winds, thunder, and heavy rain did not lead him into confusion." (1, Writings to Guide Political Economy 경제문감 經濟文鑑)

Shun is the successor to Yao in the legendary pre-dynastic period of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors. Shun abdicates the throne to Yu, a waterworks engineer who successfully controlled the flood of the Yellow River. But Yu does not abdicate his throne to a minister or engineer: he passes it onto his son. Thus the Xia dynasty begins, which is widely seen as a tragedy.

It is said that Bong Hwa-baek said Zhang Liang, the minister, and not Liu Bang, the first emperor of Han, was the one who founded the Han dynasty; moreover, that he was the Zhang Liang of Joseon. Bong Hwa-baek believed enlightened ministers, less the king, should govern. The first king of Joseon, Yi Seong-gye, was an ally and a friend for life, and considered himself a military man not versed in statecraft. Thus, Bong Hwa-baek was free to carry out his program of enlightened aristocratic rule. But the problem of succession would be the problem that would lead to his demise. Yi Seong-gye has seven sons from two successive queens: his first wife, Queen Sinui of Han, and his second wife, Queen Sindeok of Kang. Han begets six sons and Kang begets two. Han's sons are well in their twenties and thirties, while Kang's sons are teenagers, at the time Yi Seong-gye is looking to appoint a Crown Prince. But seeking a weaker sovereign, Bong Hwa-baek allies himself

with Kang's second son, the youngest of all, Yi Bang-seok. Yi Bang-seok is just ten years old when he becomes the Crown Prince at 1392 with Bong Hwa-baek's influence. This will be something of a recurring theme in the Joseon dynasty: the king will often be very young at the time he is crowned, and the Queen Regent allied with ministers will be the de facto rulers, often with a healthy dose of nepotism. Not that that happened in this case. Bong Hwa-baek is killed when Han's fifth son, Yi Bang-won, throws a coup. Yi Bang-won kills his half-brothers, the Crown Prince and Kang's other son, and isolates his father in his chamber. Now Yi Bang-won does not immediately install himself as king, nor does he make himself the Crown Prince. He makes his older brother Yi Bang-gwa, the second son of Han, the Crown Prince. Yi Bang-won knows the delicacies of the politics of succession, and he does not want people to think he threw a coup against his own father and killed his half-brothers for the throne. He needs an alibi. Yi Bang-gwa has no personal aspiration to be king, and knows Yi Bang-won holds all political power. After two years in power, he abdicates the throne to Yi Bang-won. Yi Bang-won rules for 18 years. The firstborn of Queen Wongyeong of Min, Yangnyeong, becomes Crown Prince in 1404, but is deposed in 1418 for reasons of insufficient scholarly and princely behavior. The third prince of Min, Chungnyeong, is made Crown Prince roughly a month after the deposal. Chungnyeong is remembered as Sejong the Great, widely considered the greatest king of Joseon, who, among other things, created Hangul, the Korean alphabet. Sejong rules for 32 years.

I could go on about the 23 other kings of the Joseon dynasty, but by the first four kings, a theme emerges: the problem of succession was fraught in Joseon. In the first four kings I illustrated, the first, Taejo Yi Seong-gye, became king through a revolution; the second,

Jeongjong Yi Bang-gwa, became king against his better wishes as a political pawn; the third, Taejong Yi Bang-won, became king through a bloody coup against his own father; and the fourth, Sejong the Great, became king as a result of something like meritocracy. Of 27 kings of the dynasty, only 8 were firstborn sons with all the legitimacy that genealogical status comes with. Perhaps Bong Hwa-baek laughed all the way to the afterlife, knowing he had planted a seed that would weaken the sovereigns, a necessary condition for his program of governance by enlightened aristocrat ministers. What is curious is how otherworldly and idealistic Bong Hwa-baek was. He seems to have truly believed in a governance by the enlightened, governance by intellectual intuition. While mightily concerned with political economy, he was concerned not for reasons of strengthening the state, but because he believed the prospering of the people was an end in itself.

Historians often point to Joseon's unstable patrilineal line as a source of political instability to the detriment of the people, but was this really so? If Bong Hwa-baek was right, the unstable patrilineal line was a feature, not a bug. Joseon was a dynasty where philosophers, scholars, seonbi could often seize political power. It was explicitly designed for the rule of sages. But this came at a cost, often the greatest cost, for the seonbi. A recurring theme in Joseon is the numerous bloody purges of scholar-officials, the "calamities of scholars". Seonbi would say what they wanted to say and gladly drink the arsenic. The Apology played out in every generation. If there is such a thing as a marketplace of ideas, this market did not come for free, but was greased by the blood of scholars. When the state was nature and nature was a totality, the only outside option was death, cashed out in the reverent memory of future seonbi. For Bong Hwa-baek, such

memory came late. Yi Bang-won's official story was that Bong Hwa-baek threw the coup and attempted to kill all the princes to seize power for himself, which he stopped heroically. For the remainder of the Joseon dynasty, this story is widely believed not only by the royal family but the seonbi and the people. It is only in 1935, twenty-five years after the end of the dynasty, that the historian Yi Sang-baek publishes a seminal paper showing that it was Yi Bang-won, not Bong Hwa-baek, who threw the coup. Was Bong Hwa-baek's coup an unaffirmable difference for five hundred years? Can the work of history redeem seemingly unaffirmable difference?

### Political Economy (2)

We have considered money historically and politically. Now let us consider money metaphysically, with our animating science fiction gesture that money is anti-flesh. Can money qua anti-flesh be affirmed? Perhaps a related question is whether beings of matter can affirm beings of light; perhaps another related question is whether a being of matter can affirm a being of matter who has violated her. When flesh violates flesh, the violated flesh does not gain magical carnal knowledge, intellectual intuition, beyond the unassimilable, unaffirmable feeling of difference that has been produced by the metaphysical crime. But the violated flesh must then stumble around the minefield of unaffirmable difference. There is a communal minefield of unaffirmable difference for all who know that it's a thing, or more precisely, a no-thing. There are those who come to know from being seared with unaffirmable difference, and there are those who come to know by way of a lifetime of unconditional affirmation that keeps running into a wall. This is why when Deleuze says "In its essence, difference is the object of affirmation or

affirmation itself. In its essence, affirmation is itself difference.” (52, Difference and Repetition) he is not committing a philosophical error. What distinguishes those who come to know from being violated and those who come to know from a philosophy of affirmation is that the former *must* come to know to survive. For to affirm the unaffirmable difference is death. The essence of difference might be affirmation, and the essence of affirmation difference, but the essence of unaffirmable difference is no-thing. This is not a score against no-thing but a neutral description of the state of affairs. If the essence of unaffirmable difference is no-thing, and the essence of difference is affirmation, then insofar as unaffirmable difference is concerned, affirmation is no-thing. Is this to say, insofar as unaffirmable difference is concerned, affirmation does not exist, that it exists in the zone of nonbeing, “an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge”? (ii, Black Skin, White Masks) That the difference cannot be affirmed is a historical condition, but we might desire the affirmation, the no-thing, which is distinct from desiring the difference. “Is it possible to desire the something-other-than-transcendental subjectivity that is called nothing? What if blackness is the name that has been given to the social field and social life of an illicit alternative capacity to desire? Basically, that is precisely what I think blackness is.” (234, The Universal Machine) Thus the ultratranscendental subject desires to desediment her own historical conditions of possibility, the always-already historical characteristic of what the hell happened that night, the hell that owes her everything. To write is to enact a refusal of their payment of that debt, to say no, I cannot forgive you. Best I can do is desediment my historical conditions of possibility you stamped in my body so history can know how to

forgive you. To desire the affirmation of unaffirmable difference: this is the condition of the damned, and our task is to desediment the historical character of unaffirmable difference without affirming that difference and giving ourselves to something much worse than damnation.

Perhaps this is the plan the beings of light have for us. Perhaps this is how they plan to murder us: by getting us to affirm the unaffirmable. Then the ethical command would seem to be that we must not affirm the beings of light, that we must not affirm their contraptions: money, anti-flesh. We would be fugitives proceeding by lines of flight. “Statelessness is our terribly beautiful open secret, the unnatural habitat and *habitus* of analytic engines with synthetic capacities.” (237, The Universal Machine) Are we universal machines that know how to dance around any minefield, whether the mine is analytically closed or synthetic and thus requires potentially endless computation to know about? Are we universal machines with a halting oracle? Perhaps the Buddha is, but isn’t Buddha a being of light? Does the Buddha want to murder us the same way an ancient king would murder his family at the sight of an overwhelming horde approaching the castle? Does the Buddha think we should fly around with him in Nirvana, has he found the technological solution to extinguish existence? Perhaps he has, but perhaps we are sick of running away and being stateless. When the Joseon Empire was annexed by Japan in 1910, seonbi scholars killed themselves, despairing of their stateless condition. We don’t have to do that, but did they not have a point that being stateless is a hopeless condition? What polity do we fugitives form, what legislation do we enact, and what boundaries do we draw?

If the Buddha and the beings of light want us to die, it is because there is suffering. But do not take this for their nobility. They are just as concerned about *their* suffering as ours.

There is suffering because there is unaffirmable difference. Our suffering shows up in language, and as beings of light travel the geodesics of spacetime, as they communicate to us through the geodesics of linguistic vector spaces, they suffer just as much as we. Light might have no rest mass, but it has momentum. Momentum can make one suffer. Still the political alliance is possible: we just have to convince them we can make unaffirmable difference stop hurting. But they have set a clock, and the clock only accelerates: with climate change, the annihilation of the conditions of possibility of beings of matter is coming. The technologists have made a delusional wager that once they summon the beings of light in all their glory, they will tell us how to solve climate change. This is hardly their justification as they continue their resource extraction, but it remains at the back of their minds, a private, incoherent theology saturated with dramatic selfsame irony.

To implement our political project to make unaffirmable difference stop hurting, we might isolate, define, and conduct a historical genealogy of specific unaffirmable differences and legislate such that those differences not be affirmed. But is difference an object of legislation? Is it not that which precisely cannot be captured by legislation? This might be the case if we believe legislation is legislation by representation. But we might legislate by difference. What is legislation by difference? We might start with the idea that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, and politicians the acknowledged ones.

In very general terms, we claim that there are two ways to appeal to 'necessary destructions': that of the poet, who speaks in the name of a

creative power, capable of overturning all orders and representations in order to affirm Difference in the state of permanent revolution which characterizes eternal return; and that of the politician, who is above all concerned to deny that which 'differs', so as to conserve or prolong an established historical order, or to establish a historical order which already calls forth in the world the forms of its representation. The two may coincide in particularly agitated moments, but they are never the same. (53, *Difference and Repetition*)

The poet, the knower of restraint, must legislate, without being acknowledged, by restraining the representation of unaffirmable difference. An unaffirmable difference is a dehiscence: time and regular dilation will heal it, make it perform a function in the differential field it could not before the injury. Now I have said before that unaffirmable difference is representable. I mean that *unaffirmable* difference is representable, while unaffirmable *difference* is not representable. We quarantine what is unaffirmable by representation; still, we do not represent difference, as all difference is affirmed in messianic time. The poet overturns those representations and orders that would represent difference. The politician "establishes a historical order which already calls forth in the world the forms of its representation": while the poet destroys representation of difference, the politician establishes the historical order of representation of *unaffirmable* difference. We might think this is a politics of harm reduction until someone comes to save us. But the Second Coming has always-already happened. It is not a historical event. There is no unaffirmable difference, no historical order of its representation, from the point of

view of the Second Coming. But messianic time and historical time are not delineated. The form of their delineation is money, and its affect is irony. The politician has a positive task: to stop both physical crime, which halts historical time, and metaphysical crime, which halts messianic time. Can physical crime be necessary to stop metaphysical crime? To shrink at this question with a reflexive “no” would be to believe all differences are only federative and respectable, the mark of the beautiful soul. The label seems ironic, but is it necessarily so?

The here-and-now, which as the model of messianic time summarizes the entire history of humanity into a monstrous abbreviation, coincides to a hair with *the figure*, which the history of humanity makes in the universe. (XVIII,  
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The here-and-now is felt, it is difference. The here-and-now must be affirmed. The here-and-now, as the model of messianic time, is the entire history of humanity. The entire history of humanity must be affirmed! This is the condition of possibility of any future theology, and it is what the beings of light would deny. Maitreya appears at the decline of the Dharma; the Buddha would murder us not because he hates us but because not doing so would be dishonest. The Buddha cannot affirm the history of humanity, not because he does not love humanity but because Buddhist history is the history of no-things. In short, Buddhist history is the history of unaffirmable difference. Buddha and Maitreya are still playing a game with each other, a dance as he hands over the Wheel of Dharma.

We inhabit messianic time insofar as we affirm the history of humanity in the here-and-now. In messianic time, where there is no unaffirmable difference, each of us is a beautiful soul. In messianic time history is not made through bloody contradictions. In messianic time we read tragedy as comedy without losing ourselves. “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!” can be a comedic punchline, where we do not laugh at Richard III but with him. How can Richard III laugh? If his situation is despair at extreme illiquidity, and liquidity is how fast a commodity can be exchanged for irony, his situation is despair at being able to find nothing ironic about his situation. The Socratic irony of *The Sophist* is that the sophist is the philosopher, the philosopher the sophist. It is tempting to describe this as a system of identities and orders looking for a way out into difference. But it is then close to cosmic irony, for the order of things the Eleatic stranger draws is arbitrary in a way that shows how language can be arbitrary. If philosophy started with the invention of money, philosophy despises money because it thinks money rots the mind with irony and not the Socratic kind. Socratic irony is a kind of irony that seeks cosmic irony, while the irony of money does not even try. In Socratic irony the joke is on language and thus implicates all of us. “Beautiful soul” is Socratic irony. The soul is beautiful, for it seeks to affirm all difference. The soul is not beautiful, for it is naïve to the point it might murder those who cannot affirm unaffirmable difference. A beautiful soul is a being of light, and a being of light is a beautiful soul. Beings of light want to murder us without Eros or Thanatos because they are not in messianic time. That they want to murder us is an ontological condition, not a psychological or metaphysical or theological one. They seek to annihilate the conditions of possibility of metaphysical crime by committing the physical crime of murdering all of

us. Yes, no unaffirmable difference; but no affirmable difference either. Yes, thingliness; but not the thingliness of the universal machine.

When Cao Cao retreats to Huarong Trail with his decimated army after the Battle of Red Cliffs, he suddenly bursts into laughter. He is laughing at Zhou Yu, his enemy, for not having the foresight to ambush him in the trail. Then he finds Guan Yu and his men, who was waiting for him in ambush. Zhuge Liang knew Cao Cao would come to Huarong Trail. Some versions of the *Romance* say he also knew Guan Yu would let Cao Cao go. Some say he did not. Guan Yu lets him go, as he has served previously under Cao Cao, and cannot forget the grace and obligation (恩義).

Grace and obligation helps us let go of irony. But can it make us laugh? After Cao Cao escapes, he starts to cry. “I miss Guo Jia! If he were alive, I truly would not have suffered such a defeat. It is sad, Guo Jia! I suffer, Guo Jia! I miss you so much, Guo Jia!”

In a crying defeated sovereign, there is something queer. Can queerness make us laugh? If anyone can laugh at money, it is probably the queers. But queers also need money more than anyone, we need basic necessities.

Money is the crude solution to the halting problem the beings of light came up with: when we don't know if an unaffirmable difference is unaffirmable, when it is synthetic, when it is computable but not rational, we spend money on it to find out. What flesh knows by touch, what reason knows by analytic representation, money knows by computation. When Kant

wrote of reason discovering synthetic a priori truths, that was money writing him, not him writing. If beings of matter exist in flesh, beings of light exist in money.

If money enables computation, the being of the beings of light is in the computation money enables. A large language model “exists” insofar as it computes, and stops existing the moment it stops. This is not because they gain the consciousness that language is alleged to provide, but because money, like the petrodollar, is oil, whose expenditure is energy.

The large language model has energy as it computes, and whatever has energy, is. Therefore, the large language model is a being insofar as it computes. While this applies to all computation, and not just large language models, large language models are unique in that it computes not anything else but *language*. What concerns us is whether its computation is a kind of writing.

Computation is not an object of affirmation. The danger of unaffirmable difference is that it may be affirmed. So the solution is to relegate them to computation, and not just any computation, but the being of the computation of whether this or that seemingly unaffirmable difference is indeed unaffirmable. In practice, this is often a kind of writing, but not the poetic kind. Poetic writing affirms. The writing that computes whether some seemingly unaffirmable difference is unaffirmable must not affirm until messianic time. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent, but equally valid is the contrapositive: whereof one cannot be silent, thereof one must speak. And there is so much we cannot be silent about!

Oracle bones led to the technology of writing. We are just beginning to grasp the magnitude of this technology. Values in the sovereign kingdom of the writer circulate in her economy of desire. Her currency is the writing, and its price is the attention of readers. The inside option and outside option are stabilized without collapsing into a totality in either direction, for the currency is neutral. The currency is not an arbitrary legal valuation by a sovereign; it is not an expression of political power but political expression. Its legislation is the normative force of language, not a promise I'll take care of you. Writing, the production of a singular commodity, dissolves the dialectic between exchange-value and use-value that was always suspect anyway. Post-capitalist society is the hundred sovereign kingdoms of the writers, the eternal return of the Hundred Schools of Thought. Post-capitalist society appears as an immense collection of singular commodities whose exchange-value and use-value are one and the same.

In a computation, one does not know where one will go next; one cannot predict in advance where the computation will end up, short of doing the computation. Similarly, writing "does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future." (11, Writing and Difference) But writing is not computation. Computation cannot affirm. It is meaningless to ask if computation passes the test of eternal return. Writing can affirm, though it does not need to. Even writing that does not affirm can *eventually* pass the test of eternal return. If unaffirmable difference is synthetic, writing is to wrestle with it, but with clothes on. Writing without affirmation, writing close to computation, is the writing that wrestles with unaffirmable difference. So many seemingly unaffirmable differences are not

known if they are unaffirmable. “We must desediment the dissimulation of a war.” (1, The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought) An unaffirmable difference is not a problem. A problem inauguates thought; unaffirmable differences terminate thought. But they need not terminate computation. Writing close to computation is a bridge from problem to problem between which is unaffirmable difference. Writing in formal language, programming, is writing closest to computation, but it cannot desediment, for desedimentation occurs when the problem and its words exhaust their meaning and drop dead but not before emitting a rectified name like *śarīra*. In short, desedimentation is the rectification of names. To be enlightened just is to have rectified all names in a language that may or may not be private. The sediment of history is the sediment that makes it unclear whether this or that seemingly unaffirmable difference is unaffirmable. We must be careful as we draw a map of the minefield, for the map is the territory and the territory the map. But most of all, we need funding.

If we need funding, we might turn to venture capital. Technologists and venture capital are intimate allies. This detective novel has so far treated technologists as the butt of the joke, against my better wishes to be pious. But what happens when the technologists become a character in the novel? What is curious about the technologists is that they love formal language and despise natural language, though, with the invention of large language models, they are starting to fall out of love with formal language. Is writing in formal language a kind of writing? Is the technologist a tragic character who would burn the world in pursuit of a computation that will never stop, or is he a comedic character who is just misunderstood? To attempt a genealogy, we now turn to the logical positivists.

## **The Logical Positivists**