Underneath Harlequin's Cloak: Reflections on Aleatory Materialism

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"The essays submitted to you had to take the position of recognizing openly that struggle is at the heart of every philosophy."[1] This quote, from Althusser's "Is It Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy," opens Warren Montag's magisterial study of Althusser's philosophical thought.[2] Montag's study takes on the difficult task of situating Althusser's contributions in the complex, dense, and shifting theoretical conjunctures that he closely studied, inhabited, and took positions in, conjunctures which Althusser himself viewed as a constant battlefield of different philosophies, whose ascendance or decline vis-à-vis one another had important political ramifications that went beyond any theoretical shifts that their concepts, arguments, and specific formulations may inspire.[3] As Montag forcefully shows, Althusser's theoretical practice, always cognizant of its inherently political quality, was largely driven by engaging his "adversaries" on the field of battle: Althusser studied his contemporaries meticulously, often read them against themselves to weaponize their own contradictions in ways that unraveled their unity and force, when he did not try to enlist and mobilize them toward his own purposes. Althusser reflected on the dominant currents of his day, from structuralism to psychoanalysis and phenomenology to deconstruction in this battlefield, but underlying a dizzying range of interventions concerning questions of "structure," the "subject," and "origin/end," as

[1] Althusser, "Is It Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?"
[2] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries.*
[3] Ibid., 4.

Montag's book organizes Althusser's oeuvre, each a vector of Althusser's complex interventions, one cannot help but detect a singular and enduring commitment; namely, to defend a rigorous Marxism against the attacks and incursions that endeavored to refute, dilute, deflect or discredit it from within and without. Althusser fought to counter the liberalization of Marxism in the wake of de-Stalinization under the banner of "humanism" and argued against the attendant jettisoning of radical political objectives such as the "dictatorship of the proletariat" within a communist politics, which he considered to be definitive and crucial for the political horizon of Marxism. With this commitment, and often against the force of fashion, Althusser was willing to forge unlikely alliances to advance in what he saw to be a philosophical "war of position," and did not fear venturing outside of Marxism, into figures prior to Marx, into non- and even anti-Marxist philosophies.[4] In fact, the bulk of Althusser's writings concern thinkers that predate Marx: Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Spinoza, Hegel, and Feuerbach. What is of great interest in his work, therefore, is how he read these thinkers in heterodox ways that made them plausible allies of the Marxist cause, just as he read Gramsci, Lacan, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Deleuze and others writing much closer to him in time.

As Montag's epigraph suggests, however, Althusser did not only struggle with "adversaries" in a conflictual field or forge unexpected alliances, but he also embodied that struggle within; in fact, at the very "heart" of his own philosophy. One of the strongest merits of Montag's work is its ability to put on display how Althusser's thought "interiorized" the contradictions it was unable to "master" or "resolve."[5] Indeed, when one reads Althusser's oeuvre, and in spite of the unity and coherence of his political purpose of defending and revitalizing Marxism that permeates it, it is impossible not to be struck by the many Althussers it contains. This is especially so, considering how the posthumously discovered work, which, in Montag's words, "dwarfed the work published during his lifetime and which included over a dozen full-length manuscripts … and perhaps a hundred essays in various stages of completion," has cast doubt on any linear reading or decidedly unitary reconstruction of his work.[6] Especially striking has been the discovery of "another Althusser, an Althusser in every way opposed to the structuralist thinker he was supposed to be, an *aleatory Althusser* ever haunted by the void, the madman whose madness is his truth, a madman for whom truth is itself a kind of madness, a delusion by which we defend against the abyss that surrounds us."[7]

How might one reconcile the many Althussers, especially after what appears to be the anti-Althusserian Althusser? There are different ways to address this challenge and each with distinct consequences. The most obvious way is to analyze Althusser's work as composed of different phases, each accounting for a different Althusser, but where each

[4] Ibid., 5, 9.
[5] Ibid., 7.
[6] Montag, *Louis Althusser*, 12.
[7] Ibid., 13, my emphasis.

of those phases is internally coherent and coalescing around a distinct but evolving set of concerns. The history of his publications enables a productive periodization of Althusser's work.[8] Accordingly, one can read Althusser's explicit moments of self-critique either by way of retractions and restatements or by the silent abandonment of previous arguments as signaling the transitions amongst these periods. At the same time, there is something that remains elusive, something left ungrasped and even misleading in such a perspective, even as it offers coherence at the expense of the contradictions that inhere in each phase, even in each text, and the presence of formulations and gestures that go against the author's stated goals. Similarly countervailing this approach is the history of Althusser's unpublished manuscripts that challenge and contradict the published writings in different ways. Reading the many Althussers as successive rather than contemporaneous with one another risks an overestimation of Althusser's mastery over his own thought, taking him perhaps a bit too much at his own word.

Another way to read the different Althussers is to deploy a Straussian approach and to explain the tensions and contradictions in Althusser's texts by distinguishing how each text might speak differently to the "initiated" from how it might speak to the "non-philosophers."[9] From such a perspective, Althusser's works can be said to contain different layers of meaning that co-exist, that are brought together intentionally, if also somewhat surreptitiously, as if to escape the censure of the Party, to stay under the radar, to intimate without implicating itself, or simply to extend itself beyond the narrow confines of the academy. If that is the case, and regardless of whether it arises out of strategic considerations, cunning, prudence or a lack of courage, it is possible to read the many Althussers together but as speaking differently, which transforms his texts into an endless hieroglyphic for those who are willing and able to read between the obvious signs. Contrapuntal to this approach, however, would be Spinoza's critique of the esoteric readings of Scripture, and his proposal to read Scripture as "it is, its gaps, lacunae, inconsistencies and outright contradictions of doctrine and narrative, as irreducible."[10] While the observation that Althusser's own method of reading was deeply influenced by Spinoza is not a complete barrier against esoteric readings, it does entail a significant tension vis-à-vis this way of reading Althusser.

Montag offers us a third way of approaching the many Althussers, one that is most suited to Althusser's own project of "symptomatic reading," of treating the text as a "mere surface deprived of any depth," such that its silences, gaps, contradictions and discrepancies cannot be explained away but must be confronted.[11] Reading Althusser symptomatically gifts us with a way of understanding the coexistence of contradictory positions, unstable oppositions, and constant reformulations across Althusser's writings

[8] Such a periodization has been most cogently offered by Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*.
[9] Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-philosophers*.
[10] Montag, *Louis Althusser*, 48.
[11] Ibid., 82.

as neither a shifting set of concerns, nor a politically motivated concealment of his true ideas but as a decisive feature of Althusser's thought. Thus, Montag suggests, the internal conflictuality of Althusser's thought is not simply the presence of an inconsistency, ambiguity, double speak or the failure of rigor, but a "constitutive" quality that is "necessary to its very unfolding."[12] It is to this internal conflictuality as much as to its polemical force and incisive clarity that we owe the generative power of Althusser's thought, Montag argues, insofar as it stands as an open invitation to new interventions that seek to take Althusser's work as a starting point and proceed by way of pressing on the very contradictions that Althusser could not "master" or "resolve."[13] Just as Althusser approached the *décalages* in Rousseau's work as the very "failures" that moved his philosophy forward,[14] so does Montag approach Althusser's pursuit of "a meaning that seems constantly to elude him, even if this meaning is nothing other than the pursuit itself,"[15] as defining not only the uneven and impassioned mechanics of Althusser's thought but also the novel path he perhaps unwittingly opens for others, precisely through its contradictions and failures. Montag's work encourages us to approach Althusser's oeuvre as open, tumultuous, and expansive, often despite its self-presentation as unitary and coherent, distinguished by a display of self-mastery and assertive closures. Even more significant than the polemical reactions that Althusser's work has provoked (and of those there were quite a few), then, Montag reminds us how the coexistence of the multiplicity of Althussers holds in store a generative capacity to call forth a novel theoretical practice which takes inspiration from the irreconcilable contradictions and tensions that this coexistence makes possible. Althusser's work invites novel interventions to take up what it leaves unfinished, unresolved, and perhaps unwritten.

This calling forth, this open invitation, is not for any kind of philosophizing, however, but specifically for a theoretical practice that considers itself *materialist*. What makes it materialist? Montag tells us that Althusser's thought offers a "new way of inhabiting philosophy," an inhabiting that is itself far from static, that is built on practice, on movement, on a repetition that does not recur to the origin but shifts the starting point further each time.[16] As Montag's work teaches us, this practice is defined by demarcation; it is the "void of a distance taken."[17]

However, because Althusser sometimes sets up the challenge as if he asks us to follow him in the "path" toward a particular destination, it is instructive to think of how he uses the metaphor of paths. When he discusses philosophy as "the falsest of all false paths (*der Holzweg der Holzwege*)," [18] he draws on Heidegger's famous reference:

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[12] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 173.
[13] Ibid., 7, 210.
[14] Althusser, "Rousseau: The Social Contract."
[15] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 210.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Althusser, "Lenin and Philosophy," 62; Matheron, "The Recurrence of the Void in Louis Althusser," 28.
[18] Althusser, "Lenin and Philosophy," 30.

> "Wood" is an old name for forest. In the wood there are paths, mostly overgrown, that come to an abrupt stop where the wood is untrodden. They are called *Holzwege*. Each goes its separate way, though within the same forest. It often appears as if one is identical to another. But it only appears so. Woodcutters and forest keepers know these paths. They know what it means to be on a *Holzweg*.[19]

However, when Althusser seizes on the metaphor of paths [*Holzwege*] in the forest, he gives it a materialist lineage distinct from Heidegger's use of it, by quoting from Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* where Lenin is quoting Dietzgen, "the German proletarian who Marx and Engels said had discovered 'dialectical materialism' 'all by himself', as an auto-didact, because he was a proletarian militant."[20] Althusser writes:

> Ultimately, philosophy has no history, philosophy is that strange theoretical site where nothing really happens, nothing but this *repetition* of nothing. To say that nothing happens in philosophy is to say that philosophy *leads nowhere because it is going nowhere*: the paths it opens really are, as Dietzgen said, long before Heidegger, '*Holzwege,*' paths that lead nowhere.[21]

It is clear that Althusser saw philosophy for what it is and yet chose to walk in its paths. He was and remained until the end a "philosopher," who approached philosophy as his "vocation."[22] At the same time, he was acutely aware of the limitations of philosophy. As Montag once put it succinctly, the risk of philosophy for Althusser was "the risk of following a false path, a path that leads and can lead nowhere."[23] But one could not go anywhere new without taking that risk. To do justice to the many Althussers, then, is to move with Althusser's contradictions in the path he has trodden. The only way to go beyond the places he got stuck (perhaps "where the wood is untrodden") is to pass through them, or at least, to risk the attempt. And thus we can heed Althusser's warning:

> We need to follow a true path; but in order to follow a true path it is necessary to *study* philosophy, which is '*the falsest of all false paths*' (der Holzweg der Holzwege). Which means, to speak plainly, that there can be no true path (*sc.* in the sciences, but above all in politics) without a study, and eventually a *theory of philosophy as a false path*."[24]

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[19] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*. Althusser's library contained a copy of the *Holzwege*. See translator's note in Althusser, "The Underground Current," 206, n56.
[20] Althusser, "Lenin and Philosophy," 30.
[21] Ibid., 55.
[22] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 166.
[23] Montag, *Louis Althusser*, 16.
[24] Althusser, "Lenin and Philosophy," 31.

As in Spinoza's phrase *verum index sui et falsi,* so, for Althusser, materialist practice embodied a truth that is the index of both itself and of what is false. As such, to inhabit in philosophy's ancient and eternal forest, one must have the courage to arrive at a recognition that "nothing happens in philosophy" but that it is nonetheless necessary to follow within it a "true path" – the path of materialism. In this essay, I endeavor to live up to the tall order of the materialist "way of inhabiting philosophy," by following Althusser's contradictions along the path that "comes an abrupt stop where the wood is untrodden"—the stop of aleatory materialism. On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, I offer these reflections on Althusser's later writings in dialogue with Warren Montag, whose luminous scholarship has not only shaped the way many of us read Althusser today, but has also been, for me, a lasting source of intellectual inspiration and generosity.

A Last Testament

One of the sites in which the internal conflict of Althusser's thought is most pronounced is, undoubtedly, the *locus classicus* of the *aleatory Althusser*, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter."[25] As Montag notes in Chapter 9 of *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, this posthumously published text's strange status as a montage, an "a posteriori construction" by its editors, having been excerpted from a longer manuscript, with countless emendations dating from different revisions, its hastily written nature, with "numerous errors of fact and attribution," and the lack of clarity around what it was intended to become, prevents the possibility of any "dissimulation of coherence and consistency" that Althusser might have been able to give it, had it been written at a different time, by a different Althusser.[26] But the fact remains that it was not, and perhaps could not have been, written at a different time, by a different Althusser, for it would have been impossible for the contradictions that prevent the closure and unity of the text to be articulated as the *final* revelation of a truth that emerges with utmost clarity at the end of one's life, as if he is suspended over an abyss into which he is about to fall. Coming at a time when Althusser had already died in his public capacity and was left in solitude to mourn the lives he had taken, "The Underground Current" is, as Montag puts it, perhaps the "philosophical analogue" of his autobiography, *The Future Lasts Forever*, a "last testament or confession, spoken all at once, as if he were making manifest what was heretofore latent in his published oeuvre or, perhaps more accurately, bringing what had been hidden into the open for all to see."[27] After all, Althusser admits to writing this text after "living through that nameless time that does not pass, unaware of what was going on around [him]," in the aftermath of taking the life of his wife, Hélène Legotien,

[25] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 163-207.
[26] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 174.
[27] Ibid., 174-75.

and after three years spent at various clinics. Once he is allowed to leave, he steps out of the enclave and into life, a new and unknown life, unknown because Althusser has only been in the shelter of the academy, the clinic, and the party for most of his adult life, after his time in a prisoner-of-war camp during the Second World War. Althusser writes of this transition as "returning to this world that is entirely new to me, and, since I had never encountered it before, full of surprises."[28]

In his new home in a "working class neighborhood," Althusser reflects on the manuscript: "I have condensed in it what I believe it is in my power to say in this autumn in which, the other day, the yellowed leaves were falling slowly on to the tombs of Père-Lachaise, near the Wall and elsewhere."[29] As G.M. Goshgarian puts it, his home is near (but not quite in) Père-Lachaise, a cemetery in Paris's Twentieth Arrondissement. What is unique about it is that "in May 1871, it saw a fierce battle that sealed the defeat of the Paris Commune at the hands of the liberal regime headed by Louis Adolphe Thiers. After the fighting, the Communards who had survived it were shot down in cold blood; the *Mur des Fédérés*, in the south-eastern corner of the cemetery, memorializes the massacre. The apartment in which Althusser lived in the 1980s stands not far from this wall."[30]

It may not be a coincidence, then, that to present his thoughts as if they were the revelation of the hidden truth of his life and life's work, Althusser would write from the end and return to the beginning, as it were; in the double sense: politically, to the Commune, and philosophically, to antiquity. Both the Commune and ancient philosophy present primal, originary scenes that inaugurate new worlds; they are what Walter Benjamin would call the *Ur-forms*. In the one case, the communards initiate the institutional form that embodies radical political imaginary of communism, which Marx hailed as the "glorious harbinger of a new society."[31] In the other, we have the eternal rain of atoms in the void initiating, with an unpredictable encounter, the birth of the world and many other worlds to come. Knowing that this is one of Althusser's last writings, it is particularly moving to think of "The Underground Current" as a last testament, as Montag suggests, one that is uttered "all at once," as if it is a race against the impending end of Althusser's life, but also as close as one can be to something that has stood the test of time – to the tombs in the cemetery, but especially to the *Mur des Fédérés*, the mural for the "martyrs" of the Commune "enshrined in the great heart of the working class,"[32] as Marx saluted the fallen Communards; to philosophical antiquity, but especially that ancient form of materialism that becomes a philosophical model, a "seat,"[33] for many other articulations that will follow. Each commands immortality; each speaks beyond their time, and in so doing they blend and merge with one another. Does the image of

[28] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 165.
[29] Ibid., 166.
[30] Ibid., 203, n5, translator's note.
[31] Marx, *The Civil War in France*, 99.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Bourdin, "The Uncertain Materialism of Louis Althusser," 276-77.

"yellowed leaves … falling slowly on to the tombs" in Althusser's Parisian autumn not reenact and merge with the ethereal image of the rain of atoms in the void?

It is in this quality as the "last testament" that Montag encourages us to read "The Underground Current," which allows us to appreciate the emotional valence of the text, distinguished from any other authored by Althusser. What, then, we might ask with Montag, does the philosophical "last testament" of Althusser make manifest? What path does it trod upon? What contradictions does it contain? Althusser calls it the "philosophy of the encounter," and presents it, in a way that sits quite uneasily with his erstwhile pronunciations against a foreknown end, as a *destination*: "It is better that [the reader] know where he is going if he is to follow me, and it is therefore better that he know where I am going – where I would like to go, and, perhaps, am going."[34] This materialism is not just a path among paths but the final path, a finality that was meant to be discovered all along but remained "almost entirely unknown," a kind of hidden *telos*. How strange, then, that Althusser is in the *Holzweg* that will lead to the true materialism, the very "*key* to what we have read of Marx and, as it were, understood of what is thrust upon us" – a world in crisis.[35]

If the text reads like a "last testament," this is because it is overburdened with the revelation of a destination that is also a destiny, something that a different Althusser had forever criticized because it meant that the path was already drawn, that the Origin already contained inside it the End. And yet, the last Althusser announces this materialism as the destination he would like to reach, and would like the reader to follow him on his path while he goes there, though he is not fully certain he may reach it after all, not knowing whether it would be death that prevented him from reaching it or the impossibility of arrival. There is a sense in the text that this destination was also what Althusser meant to reach all along, that in fact, it was not only him, but through him, that a whole current of materialism that traversed the history of philosophy, a current that was "almost completely unknown," but also one that was "repressed" and purposefully misread by the philosophical tradition, which awaited Althusser to excavate and "free [it] from this repression."[36] Althusser asks his readers to be courageous and to have fortitude, because just as the "Underground Current" is the last word of Althusser's oeuvre, it is also a new beginning.

This is the text not of a dying man, but a man already dead and yet still writing, a man who sees his release from the clinic as a "return" to a "world that is entirely *new* to [him],"[37] a man who complains in his autobiography of how the judgment of insanity that declared him unfit to stand trial for murder buried him "under a tombstone of silence,"[38] and yet a man who lives near a cemetery and takes walks around the tombstones, a man

[34] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 166.
[35] Ibid., my emphasis.
[36] Ibid., 168.
[37] Ibid., 163, my emphasis.
[38] Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever*, 22.

both in silent mourning – for his wife, his life, the lives of the Communards, the life of socialism – and somehow still with something to say, for the working class, for the "class position" in philosophy he spent his entire adult life writing for, having finally taken up residence in a working class neighborhood. As such, perhaps the main, inevitable contradiction that traverses the text as a whole is one that is between life and death, between the end and the beginning. One sees this contradiction in its many incarnations and permutations, and in a deeply personal register that suspends the text between the life and death of Althusser, the man, and the life and death of Althusser, the philosopher. The invisible conditions of the text's composition permeate it with its insistence on the void, and the two concepts that emerge from the void, perhaps pointing to its negation, however temporary: the encounter and the swerve. As the text is straddled between truly living versus remaining alive, truly dying versus being declared dead, authoring the death of a loved one versus the inability to author one's own philosophical death, the protracted death of the communist party versus the long and continued life of the principles to whose articulation by Marx Althusser dedicated a lifetime of work, the contradiction between life's plenitude and the many kinds of death Althusser is countenancing animates the text's centripetal force that constantly draws us into the void at its center, while it also continuously reaches for the "lines of flight" that open up new paths to refuse this force. Epicurus, Democritus, Lucretius, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, and "*even* Heidegger"[39] make their appearance, as well as Nietzsche, Deleuze, Derrida, and Wittgenstein. Althusser thus assembles a motley crew, and in this strange line-up, some figures are undoubtedly stranger than others.

More theoretically still, a similar contradiction remerges in Althusser's contemplation of the eternity of philosophy and the finitude of the philosopher, the recognition of which burdens the text acutely. Writing with an understanding of the transience of his work that will disappear, or perhaps has already disappeared, into the permanence of the philosophical *Kampfplatz,* as a final contribution to the materialism he so deeply embraced, Althusser asks in advance for liberties from his audience for what is to come. He blames his "long reflections" on his vocation "(one is not a 'philosopher' from the age of twenty-eight for nothing)."[40] Now, as Althusser proceeds some thirty years later, the vicissitudes of the "materialism of the encounter" intwines with the fortunes and misfortunes of Althusser himself. So Althusser can set out to trace the winding path toward this materialism, which is not only the destination but also the path itself, as a kind of destiny that he was meant to enact: the fortunes of materialism in Western philosophy, which, with Heidegger, Althusser calls as having "presided over *our destiny* since the Greeks," lamenting and celebrating in equal measure both how Western philosophy has churned the most subversive current into an "idealism of freedom," distorting its true character with its logocentric reading that has prioritized "necessity and

[39] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 168, my emphasis.
[40] Ibid., 166.

teleology,"[41] and how it has nonetheless managed to survive as an "underground current." How strange it is to see Althusser align himself with Heidegger to talk about "Western philosophy" since the Greeks as shaping "our destiny," leaving us with a deep ambiguity regarding who that collectivity references. It is as if Althusser wants to redeem his own complicity in the logocentrism that has permeated materialism, perhaps despite himself, placing him both as a willing executor of the idealism of the philosophical tradition that permeated materialism and as its simultaneous victim. Althusser's task now is one of deconstruction as much as it is of uncovering: to uncover the "underground current" is simultaneously to deconstruct the "priority of Meaning over all reality,"[42] of "Reason (*Logos*, *Ratio*, *Vernunft*), and therefore of Origin and End – the Origin being nothing more, here, than the anticipation of the End in Reason or primordial order (that is, the anticipation of Order, whether it be rational, moral, religious or aesthetic) – in the interests of a philosophy which, rejecting the Whole and every Order, rejects the Whole and order *in favour of* dispersion (Derrida would say, in his terminology, 'dissemination') and *disorder*."[43] The "materialism of the encounter" stands as a radical opposition to, as well as the product of, the artificial sense of Order, signaling how it is always already deeply permeated by a reality marked by a lack of meaning, of necessity, of telos. Althusser's final act of inversion feels akin to a revelation of how Althusser's own delirium was nested within the semblance of order that marked his life's work.

"The Underground Current" carries both sides of this antagonism, as it is suspended between life and death, between finitude and eternity, between transience and permanence, between order and dispersion, between Origin/End and the "process without a subject," and it condenses them into an evocative philosophical image: the rain of atoms in the void. These ethereal particles, infinite and infinitesimal at once, hold in abeyance the "swerve" that promises both the birth of a new world and its coming to an end, both the accomplishment of the fact and its non-accomplishment, both a piling up [*accrochage*] of atoms in an encounter that holds and a radical instability that permeates everything that exists, suggesting the possibility of an immanent disbanding [*décrochage*], a scattering and dissolution of what exists into the eternal void.

Atoms in the Void

Reading the "Underground Current," one is confronted with the difficulty of deciphering the scene of the rain of atoms in the void, which Althusser borrows from Epicurus and to which he recurs when discussing different thinkers. Is it the statement of an ontological condition, much like the one often attributed to the "state of nature"

[41] Ibid., 168.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 188.

in Hobbes, which functions in the theory as a foundation that will justify the validity of the otherwise highly debatable propositions to come? Is it a contingent historical starting point for a materialist tendency in philosophy to which later thinkers subscribing to that tendency were obliged to allude to without, however, having a substantial commitment to atomistic materialism? Alternatively, is it simply a metaphor for a political logic – the logic of the conjuncture, the logic of contingency – that Althusser had long expressed in a myriad of different formulations and restatements about the necessity to think beyond a teleological narrative? Indeed, part of the enigma and perhaps paradoxical appeal of this text among Althusser's readers can be attributed to the undecidability of this primal scene. This enigma is exacerbated by the heterogeneity of the thinkers in the lineage Althusser constructs, as if each warrants being placed in the tradition Althusser is constructing precisely because they are later examples of the same, or as Montag puts it, "as if the history of 'aleatory materialism' were nothing more than a series of variations on a single theme."[44] This is not entirely correct, Montag suggests, not only because the problems to which this materialism is applied becomes increasingly complex, both historically and politically, but also because, despite the fact that Althusser announces his work as proceeding along a path, the path itself is not exactly a straight line.

Montag rightly puzzles over how Althusser's construction of a "cumulative, remarkably continuous linear time," indicating the unfolding of the history of (Western) philosophy following the Epicurean scene in the text's "movement toward an end," is disrupted in its chronology by the introduction of Heidegger as contemporaneous to Epicurus, as well as by the inversion of Spinoza and Hobbes in the movement from Machiavelli to Marx.[45] These two disruptions, especially with Spinoza, become symptomatic in Montag's hands that direct us to the "unrecognized conflict at the heart of the text"; namely, that it contains "two incompatible notions of the void."[46] One is an ontological conception of the void, which Althusser attributes to Spinoza, expressed as *le néant*, or *le vide*, indicating an originary nothingness that is the *object* of philosophy whereas the other conception makes the void a philosophical performative, a verb, a practice of "intervention."[47] In this latter conception, the void references the activity of making room for the emergence of new theoretical arguments.[48]

An object of philosophy, however much one might conceptualize the void as a non-object, on the one hand, and a philosophy that lacks any object, that can only be conceived as a practice of making demarcations, on the other, these two conceptions of the void mark Althusser's essay in an irreconcilable tension. If, following Montag, we can

[44] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 177.
[45] Ibid., 175.
[46] Ibid., 178.
[47] Ibid., 178-79.
[48] These are not the only occurrences of the void in Althusser's work. As Matheron persuasively argues, there is a proliferation of the "void" across Althusser's works such that "the insistence on the void in his oeuvre [can be read] as the recurring index of theoretical difficulties." See Matheron, "The Recurrence of the Void in Althusser," 24.

agree that Althusser's internal conflictuality is also the generative quality of his thought, which calls forth a theoretical practice that is inspired or instigated by its latent contradictions, it may be apt to characterize "The Underground Current" not only as a "last testament" or "confession," but also as an implicit "philosophical will," a statement of the problems Althusser is leaving behind, of the insights he has been able to arrive at as well as the contradictions he has not been able to settle, for those affiliating themselves with his legacy to take up. We must pursue these two voids, then, to decipher what they signify, i.e., as a sign of what the late Althusser's thought has been unable either to "master" or to "resolve" and thus bequeaths as part of his philosophical estate.

A Tale of Two Materialisms

As Montag reads Althusser's text as one that is at war with itself, he reconstructs how, of the two conceptions of the void, the ontological one dominates the text. Indeed, this conception becomes "the defining characteristic, the specific difference of that 'profound tradition' that led from Epicurus to Marx."[49] Expressed as *le néant*, or *le vide*, indicating an originary nothingness the first modality of the void is a means of challenging the dominant conceptions of Origin and End, which are but the same thing. Thinking this void as the *object* of philosophy, the primal scene of ancient atomism provides us with a theorey of the radical contingency of the world: atoms falling in the void stage random collisions caused by inexplicable swerves that lead some atoms to deviate from their otherwise vertical fall, and through these encounters the piling up of things and the emergence of the world. Atomism thus offers the insight that always in the shadow of the world as it exists are the worlds that have not been accomplished, because encounters that could have led to their accomplishment did not happen or failed to take hold, worlds that have been foreclosed or lie in waiting for other encounters to undo the existing world and bring those alternatives forth. This is a philosophy *of* the void that runs from Epicurus to Marx, which Althusser reads in each instance as emphasizing the emptiness, nothingness or disorder that preceded the world, whether this is the political chaos of Machiavelli's fifteenth century Italy, Rousseau's primeval forest, Spinoza's God, Hobbes's state of nature, or Marx's so-called "primitive" accumulation. This embrace of contingency re-emerges in Althusser's interest in his contemporaries, in Derrida's psychoanalytic reading of Epicurus, informed by Heidegger's "thrownness," and Wittgenstein's radical nominalism that builds the world out of the "case."

In this reading, Epicurus's primal scene is not a historical starting point but essential to the tradition. At its core, aleatory materialism is an atomistic philosophy.[50] "In Democritus, and especially Epicurus," Althusser writes, were the theses of aleatory

[49] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 179.
[50] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 188, and Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism," 256.

materialism articulated in their "first form, the simplest and purest."[51] In Epicurus, we find a discourse on the beginning of the world, even as Althusser analyzes this scene as the absence of an origin, an originary cause, a first mover, prefiguration or reason. But this is a paradoxical philosophy because it denies what one might expect to find in a foundational discourse. Instead of a grounding, he tells us, we have the void. Althusser formulates this, in allusion to Deleuze and Derrida, as the "primacy of absence over presence."[52] In slightly different formulations, Althusser writes: "before the formation of the world, there was nothing,"[53] and "before there was a world, there existed absolutely nothing that was *formed*."[54] He thus offers the first materialist thesis: nothing precedes the world. This thesis is materialist because it refuses God. Instead of a new grounding, however, we have no grounds, or a grounding on nothingness. The Epicurean void, with the nothingness it holds, is crucial for Althusser to present aleatory materialism as an anti-foundationalist philosophy. However, starting from the void has the danger of implying that what is to transpire and come into being is the result of a miracle, the consequence of creation *ex nihilo*. Paradoxically, the void as the symbol of Althusser's anti-foundationalism, has the danger of reproducing a new foundation in itself, one that offers itself as the "non-origin" of an origin story.

Althusser finds Epicurus's account to refuse the story of creation *ex nihilo* because it embraces the thesis of the *eternity of the world* ("a materialist thesis *par excellence*"): atoms falling parallel in the void, which because even though there is nothing prior to the beginning of the world, the void is full of elements. As Althusser is keen to emphasize, assuming the absence of matter would take us into idealism. However, these elements are only "abstract" prior to a swerve and an encounter, they are "lacking in all consistency and existence."[55] Althusser writes: "Before the accomplishment of the fact, before the world, there is only *the non-accomplishment of the fact*, the non-world that is merely the *unreal* existence of the atoms."[56] Hence, the image of the void, full of atoms in a phantom state, serves both to assert that nothing lies at the origin, thereby offering a refusal of origin/foundation for materialist thought and to symbolize an openness to futurity since it is replete with the potential of (a) new beginning(s) whose elements are ever present and ready to combine into novel forms and configurations.[57]

The second point that Althusser distills from the Epicurean scene is that it posits the beginning with the swerve of the atoms, their deviation from the straight line and encounter with each other, leading to an aggregation that produces singular entities in form and appearance. This is the second materialist thesis, namely, that "swerve, not

[51] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 190.
[52] Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism," 262.
[53] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 168.
[54] Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism," 260.
[55] Ibid., 261.
[56] Althusser, ""The Underground Current," 170.
[57] Ibid., 175.

Reason or Cause, is the origin of the world."[58] Quoting Lucretius, Althusser writes: "an infinitesimal swerve, 'as small as possible'; 'no one knows where, or when, or how' it occurs, or what causes an atom to 'swerve' from its vertical fall in the void."[59] Emphasizing the minute quality of the movement, such that it is almost undetectable, Althusser exacerbates the immensity of its effects. "Breaking the parallelism in an almost negligible way at one point, [to] induce an encounter with the atom next to it, and from encounter to encounter, a pile-up and the birth of a world – that is to say, of the agglomeration of atoms induced, in a chain reaction, by the initial swerve and encounter."[60] With the piling of lasting encounters, "a world is born."[61] For Althusser, Epicurus' conceptual move implies that only an ever so slight change is sufficient to imagine and remake the world otherwise. This invests the swerve with great force; it makes the swerve primary and the "origin" derivative, as it locates the origin as the result of a swerve. Both theses are essentially irreligious: the second thesis supports the first in its rejection of an originary cause and, thus, of God in philosophy.

The third thesis is that the encounter, i.e., the meeting of an atom with another, a collision, "induces the gigantic pile-up and collision-interlocking [*accrochage*] of an infinite number of atoms, from which a world is born."[62] Some encounters are brief and nonlasting, others endure and become the basis of reality. This brings us to the third, and most central thesis of this materialism; namely, that the world is the result of an encounter. The encounter, which has a specific structure due to the way elements come together and interlock, produces *form*, the form of order and the form of beings. In another iteration, Althusser calls the encounter the "event [*événement*]" that turns into "advent [*avènement*]," endowing the ensuing pile-up or "agglomeration" with a particular form.[63] Vittorio Morfino has called this materialist thesis the "primacy of the encounter over the form."[64] What this thesis means is that there is no guarantee of the necessity of the world, nor is there any reason to justify what exists as necessary, especially with reference to divine will. A world may not have happened if the encounters had not taken hold. Or, this world might not have happened had another encounter occurred and taken hold. And in the world that exists, it is the structure that emerges from the encounter provides the form and works to assign elements to their place, establishing relations of necessity.[65] Contingency, therefore, is not an exception from necessity; rather, necessity is a "becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies."[66]

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[58] Ibid., 190, and Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism," 260.
[59] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 169.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism," 260.
[62] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 191.
[63] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 191.
[64] Morfino, "'The World by Chance': On Lucretius and Spinoza," 117-31.
[65] Althusser, "The Underground Current,"192.
[66] Ibid., 194.

The Epicurean scene is subversive, then, first because it is a "truly non-religious" philosophy, without room for God.[67] And second, the absence of an origin and telos creates the space to think the arbitrariness of the world (as opposed to any rationality of the real) and history as an open field of possibilities, since even the most enduring forms are radically unstable. Third, being against the eternity of the Forms, it implies a radical nominalism of singularity; thinking about cases, situations, forms, and conjunctures.[68] However, even as Althusser analyzes the primal scene of the atoms in the void as the refusal of the divine, of original meaning, and embraces the negation of teleology, he reads the radical contingency of the world off of how nature really "is." For example, in one recapitulation of Epicurus's philosophy, Althusser describes it as follows: "Epicurus tells us that, before the formation of the world, an infinity of atoms were falling parallel to each other in the void. *They still are*."[69] In a similar way, sometimes Althusser tends to suggest that the materialist quality of the this thought lies in its atomistic basis. For example, he writes that this tradition "sought its materialist anchorage *in a philosophy of the encounter* (and therefore in a more or less atomistic philosophy, the atom, in its 'fall,' being the simplest figure of individuality."[70] It is possible to conclude that the atomistic conception of matter becomes indispensable for all of the political and philosophical implications to follow. The contingency of matter (as its inherent chanciness) is an a priori in order to think the contingency in politics in a materialist way.

Taking this line of thought to its logical conclusions means recognizing that Althusser attempted to invent a new materialist ontology *for* Marxism, one that would be able to account for precisely that which dialectical materialism could not see or think. This move would give the unexpected political "event," standing in for revolution that is impossible to predict and seems to happen out of nowhere, a basis in the workings of nature, thought all the way down to its smallest constituent components: atoms and their movement. A theoretical parallelism between nature and society, where the possibility of breaking the parallel fall by an unpredictable swerve becomes the possibility of interrupting the reproduction of capitalism. Hence, this reading provides the conditions of possibility of re-forging the link between materialist philosophy and a radical politics based not on a philosophy of history but, rather, an ontology that theorizes the unpredictable horizon of eventual irruptions. In short, the corollary of the ontological conception of the void is an ontological materialism.

Against this ontological conception of the void, Montag asserts, there is another conception that is at fundamental odds with it – one for which the void is not an object of contemplation "external" to philosophy but one that invokes the void as a way to make

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[67] Althusser, "Correspondence about 'Philosophy and Marxism,'" 218.
[68] Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism," 265. This element is developed further in Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, and Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza," 8. Also see Montag, "Althusser's Nominalism," 64-73.
[69] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 168, my emphasis.
[70] Ibid., 188.

room for different theoretical arguments. Montag explains: "the void that philosophy makes would not be a constatation of the real, as if it were external to that which it represents, but rather one of its effects, a means by which it frees itself of origins and ends in order to become the infinite diversity it is, the indissociable simultaneity of thought and action that Althusser once tried to capture in the phrase 'theoretical practice.'"[71] Accordingly, the void would not be the *a priori* of this radical materialism, but the result of, or better yet, the process that is set into motion by, an encounter that produces the conditions of a void – full of possibilities and yet devoid of what may come -- out of which a new beginning can emerge. This is not a *philosophy of the void*, but a *philosophy that voids*. Althusser's interest in the void, in this reading, is more a function of his interest in the encounter and what it may be able to effect. It reflects the search for a *tabula rasa*, the conditions of a new beginning, in philosophy and politics alike. Here, Althusser's discussions of thinkers such as Machiavelli and Marx (and to a lesser extent Hobbes and Rousseau) in the "Underground Current" have a different tenor than his discussions of Epicurus, Spinoza, and Heidegger, for example, and the movement of atoms become much more metaphorical references for the interventions of political agents and the transformation of social relations. This is a political reading of the void in which the *encounter* takes the center stage and the interest is on its capacity to make room for a new beginning (whether it is the irruption onto the political scene of a new prince, the formation of a new state, or the emergence of a new mode of production, or their failures to take hold). It bears traces of Althusser's theorization of necessity and contingency in two essays from the mid-1960s, "Contradiction and Overdetermination,"[72] especially in its Appendix, as well as "On the Materialist Dialectic,"[73] even though in a markedly different vocabulary which swaps the analysis of "contradictions" in favor of the much more inexplicable moments of the swerve and the effects of the swerve.

According to this reading, and here I want to push Montag's invocation of the alternative conception of the void a bit further, the Epicurean scene is much more of a metaphor that was instrumental in challenging the dominant philosophy and political establishment of its time in order to articulate an opposing perspective. Here, the void is better understood as a non-concept -- instead of being a fully elaborated concept, it is an evocation, a stand-in for what cannot be thought, though what is still necessary for the thought of the totality to function. It is helpful to consider Althusser's remarks from another unpublished manuscript predating the "Underground Current" by only a few years, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, to see how he positions the "void" as a supplement that does not in fact exist but is invented to think totality: "the void in Democritus and Epicurus as the condition of possibility for the encounter of atoms, hence for the

[71] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 188.
[72] Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination."
[73] Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic."

constitution of the 'whole' of the world (this void is posited as existing, but the thought of it is negative: we can say that it is not thought)."[74]

If the void is primarily a heuristic, Epicurus emerges as a materialist not because he theorized matter in a way that acknowledged its inherently atomistic basis or the random character of the movement of atoms, but because he used it to open up a materialist position in the *Kampfplatz* of ancient philosophy to think the whole by doing so – on terms already defined by the dominant philosophies at the time (Plato and Aristotle). Epicurus created a "void" within philosophy to insert a new "theoretical practice." Epicurus stood for a materialism because the void was the limit of what could not be thought while being necessary for the conditions of thinking otherwise. The non-concept of the void enabled Epicurus to oppose the theory of Being. Even though his philosophy was articulated on an ontological register, its materialism was less in its atomism but, rather, in how it countered the search for Origin or Meaning that came to mark the dominant philosophy of his time. Let us note that Althusser, the other pole of this opposition is marked by Plato's philosophy, which transposed problems of religion to another terrain in order to "ward off the threat of science so as to restore order: religion's order."[75] Since then, philosophy has largely been dominated by idealism, which has enlisted rational discourses in the service of power and claimed for itself knowledge of truth. "Idealism talks about Truth, but, behind Truth, it is power that appears on the horizon, and with power, Order."[76] Against the Platonic Order, then, the Epicurean refusal of the Origin of the world in favor of a theory of its autogenesis, its refusal of meaning, its emphasis on contingency are *heretical gestures* that help "*eliminate meaningless questions*: not just the question of the Origin of the World, but also everything connected with it – the question of God, of his omnipotence, of his incomprehensibility, of time and eternity, and so on."[77] As such, they enact the philosophical voiding to make room for materialism.

The unevenness in the "Underground Current" which Montag identifies as an irreducible antagonism between two conceptions of the void, which Althusser presents "as if they were complementary," as if the ontological assertion of the void is the "foundation of the philosophy that makes a void,"[78] I will venture to suggest permeates the whole text, as well as much of the reception of the text, in the form of two distinct materialist tendencies – at times intermingled with one another or converging, albeit asymptotically, and at times disjunct and/or patently opposed. These two tendencies are united in an uneasy combination under the shifting titles of "aleatory materialism" and the "materialism of the encounter," along with references to the materialism of the "rain,"

[74] Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, 69.
[75] Ibid., 42.
[76] Ibid., 43.
[77] Ibid., 30.
[78] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 186.

the swerve, the take [*prise*],"[79] which are presented as more or less synonymous. At stake are, I contend, on the one hand, an *atomistic materialism*, understood as an *ontology* for Marxism, derived from the ancient philosophy of Epicurus and its core materialist theses, and, on the other hand, a *counter-hegemonic, contrarian materialism*, that is defined less in reference to a set of core theses about the nature of matter than as a *position* taken within the conflictual field of philosophy in opposition to the dominant position, which, in however muted and mediated form, often functions as the position that strengthens the ruling classes. Accordingly, this contrarian materialism has little to do with atomism as such but much to do with the role of atomism in the *Kampfplatz* of antiquity.

Harlequin's Cloak

One of the difficulties that the "Underground Current" presents is that these two materialisms are intertwined, even fused, in the figure of Epicurus where the ontological content of the materialist theses are inseparable from the heretical, contrarian form that they take vis-à-vis the dominant philosophy of the time. There is another such figure, contemporary with Althusser, who represents a similar problem: Gilles Deleuze. When Althusser discusses the philosophers who could "give up thinking the origin as Reason or End in order to think it as nothingness,"[80] he references a "triumvirate": Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Derrida. Montag is right to elevate Deleuze to centrality in this triumvirate as a symptomatic moment of the internal battle of the text.[81] If the two conceptions of the void seem to be at war in Althusser's reading of Deleuze, this is because Deleuze is the hinge between the two conceptions of materialism that Althusser braids together and often conflates.

Deleuze is no doubt important for Althusser, first as one of his contemporaries whose critique of structuralism helped Althusser clarify his own relation to it, and as Montag puts in Chapter 5, to "finally separate himself from the metaphysical notion of structure" that permeated his work prior to 1967-68. Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* offered a non-teleological account of capitalism's emergence, whose echoes can be discerned in Althusser's late writings on alternative ways of thinking about the "mode of production" in Marx.[82] However, Deleuze was especially important in the context of Epicurus, whom Deleuze had interpreted in a powerful essay that dated from the early 1960s.[83]

Briefly stated, Deleuze's reading of Epicurus through Lucretius counteracts the Platonic Being through Becoming. Instead of the principle of identity, it presents differences and resemblances. Instead of the "is," it gives the conjunction of singularities

[79] Althusser, The Underground Current," 167.
[80] Ibid., 188.
[81] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 186.
[82] Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 225ff.
[83] Deleuze, "Lucrèce et le naturalisme," which was then incorporated in the appendix of *The Logic of Sense*.

(the "and"). It thus accounts for the diversity in nature that cannot be totalized into a single whole. Deleuze writes:

> Nature is not collective, but rather distributive, to the extent that the laws of Nature (*foedera naturae*, as opposed to the so-called *foedera fati*) distribute parts which cannot be totalized. Nature is not attributive, but rather conjunctive: it expresses itself through 'and,' and not through 'is.' This and that—alternations and entwinings, resemblances and differences, attractions and distractions, nuance and abruptness. Nature is Harlequin's cloak, made entirely of solid patches and empty spaces; she is made of plenitude and void, beings and nonbeings, with each one of the two posing itself as unlimited while limiting the other. Being an addition of indivisibles, sometimes similar and sometimes different, Nature is indeed a sum, but not a whole.[84]

Likening nature to "Harlequin's cloak," Deleuze posits the Lucretian gesture to be against all those philosophies that espouse "Being, the One and the Whole," which he condemns as the "theological forms of a false philosophy."[85] The atomic basis of Epicurean philosophy is not unimportant for Deleuze insofar as atoms are infinite but untotalizable. By inscribing the clinamen, which is the source of atomic collisions, to the movement of atoms itself, as the difference in the direction of the velocity of each atom (rather than treating it as a contingent deviation from the vertical fall), Deleuze offers an alternative ontology that embraces the atomic conatus as a "differential of matter," which confirms "the irreducible plurality of causes or of causal series, and the impossibility of bringing causes together into a whole."[86]

With Deleuze, then, we are drawn into a battle that takes place on the basis of the nature of the atom and its movement. While Deleuze's reading refuses Platonic Being, thereby undoing the unity of the void, it substitutes in its place an equally questionable metaphysics based on Becoming as the patchwork of plenitude and emptiness. Thus, the truth or falsity of the propositions that he advances can only be assumed to rise or fall with the veracity of his metaphysics of naturalism, whose affirmation of multiplicity supports the possibility of demystifying fears and illusions. As a "fellow Spinozist," for Althusser, Deleuze's interpretation of the void was an inspiration and a challenge.[87] Deleuze's inscription of the swerve as a kind of "conatus" of the atom works to emphasize the continuous production of singularities and becoming against the static and totalizing Platonic Being. In Deleuze's hands, the reference to the void is not an originary nothingness, even less a revelation of what dominant philosophies were hiding, but an alternative ontology that celebrates singularity and becoming. In Montag's acute

[84] Deleuze, "Lucretius and the Simulacrum," 267.
[85] Ibid., 267.
[86] Ibid., 270.
[87] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 187.

formulation, Deleuze presents "a philosophy of the encounter without the void,"[88] perhaps taking Althusser's ontological materialism to its logical conclusions.

At the same time, Deleuze's analysis of the significance of Epicurus/Lucretius is tied to his critique of Platonism, a task he continues following Nietzsche's own goal and injunction to "reverse Platonism" as the "task of the philosophy of the future."[89] Thus, we find ourselves in an ancient *Kampfplatz*, in which two tendencies confront each other: Becoming against Being, multiplicity against unity, sum against the whole, patches of plenitude and void against the void as nothingness. In viewing the Lucretian position as a contrarian alternative to Plato, Deleuze and Althusser can therefore be seen as converging. From this perspective, it is Deleuze's attribution to the line of Epicurus-Lucretius a significant role for the "counter-canon in Western philosophy" that he sought to construct as positioned against Platonism that is in the same spirit as the second conception of the void that Montag points out, as much as it is due to the alternative conception of a naturalist materialism that he advances.[90] Lucretius constitutes a continuous point of reference for Deleuze, one that he later situates "at the head of a refashioned canon of empiricists."[91] Deleuze wrote: "I see a secret link between Lucretius, Hume, Spinoza, and Nietzsche, constituted by their critique of negativity, their cultivation of joy, the hatred of interiority, the externality of forces and relations, the denunciation of power … and so on."[92] Thus, the Lucretian reading of the void, in Deleuze's hands, works as a counter-hegemonic, contrarian position that inserts itself in the philosophical void it creates. In this regard, Deleuze's effort to construct this minoritarian tradition as an alternative canon of philosophers based on their distinctive conceptual contributions that challenged the "major" canon may also be seen as a rival for Althusser, who may be read as offering a delayed attempt in the "Underground Current" to do the same. As such, the "Underground Current" brings to fruition (however imperfectly) a goal that Althusser may have inadvertently pursued in his philosophical excursions into a whole range of philosophical figures, ranging from Montesquieu to Machiavelli, Lenin to Rousseau, and Lucretius to Marx, as part of the philosophical battles he was waging, without ever acknowledging that these excursions were also aimed to construct an alternative materialist canon, a counter-canon, as it were, all along.

However, underneath Althusser's convergence with the Deleuzean reading, which positions atomism against the Platonic position, it is possible to detect a fundamental and perhaps irreconcilable difference, which ultimately lies in their respective relation to a Marxist project.[93] Put succinctly, the question is whether it is necessary for the counter-

[88] Ibid., 187.
[89] Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum," *The Logic of Sense*, 253.
[90] Holmes, "Deleuze, Lucretius, and the Simulacrum of Naturalism," 316.
[91] Ibid., 319.
[92] Deleuze, *Negotiations,* 6.
[93] Much ink has been spilled regarding Deleuze's relationship to Marxism, which I cannot take up in detail here. For an array of positions, see Lecercle, "Deleuze, Guattari and Marxism"; Stolze, "A Marxist

hegemonic, contrarian position to be a *materialist* one (rather than simply a subversive or transgressive one) in the *Kampfplatz,* i.e., that it also correspond to a position that represents the muted voice of the oppressed. At least for the Althusser of "Lenin and Philosophy," the definition of materialism as "class struggle in the field of theory," one cannot simply be considered materialist by occupying a contrarian position to dominant ideology, if that position does not in some capacity represent the oppressed class. Now, Althusser is never too direct about what such representation may mean, and one searches in vain in the "Underground Current" for a rigorous criterion. However, that a commitment to atomism, insofar as atomism is an oppositional current, should automatically reflect or stand in for this position is an argument that neither Althusser nor Deleuze makes at length. In Deleuze, such a consideration, appears to be much more muted, if not altogether absent, and not coincidentally, he sees the axis of confrontation not between idealism and materialism but between idealism and naturalism (or later, empiricism). For Althusser, on the other hand, the opposition of atomism to Platonic idealism is deeply animated by materialism's heretical stance vis-à-vis the essentially religious questions that philosophy asks, its connection with nascent science, and its opposition to idealism's role as the guardian of power. At the same time, Althusser avoids any direct discussion of the connection to Epicurean atomism to the forms of class struggle that essentially take place outside of philosophy, except to salute the heresy: "Democritus' and Epicurus' work, we would note in passing, did not fall victim to the flames by accident, these incendiaries of every philosophical tradition having paid for their sins in kind – the flames, produced by friction, which one sees bursting from the tips of the tallest trees, because they are tall (Lucretius), or from philosophies (the great philosophies)."[94]

In another context, Althusser suggests that idealism assimilates the "social practices of men, who continue to toil and to dwell in darkness," with the violence of the concept, whereas materialism embodies the "irruption of practice" within philosophy.[95] The content of the subversiveness of materialism in this articulation arises from its connection to the outside of philosophy by way of social practices, including class struggle, which "shakes philosophy to its foundations."[96] Since Althusser does not delve deeper into this link, and leaves us suspended between deconstruction and an alternative vision of the link between philosophy and social practices, it is difficult to press the difference with Deleuze much further.[97] Thus the Deleuzean inflection in Althusser's interpretation appears more as a symptom of Althusser's internal struggle or a substitute for an answer he could not develop than a counterpoint, working against which could

Encounter"; Garo, "Deleuze, Marx, and Revolution"; Sotiris, "The Many Encounters of Delueze and Marxism," among others.

[94] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 190.

[95] Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism," 275-6.

[96] Ibid., 275.

[97] Tosel, "The hazards of aleatory materialism," 21-23.

have propelled Althusser out of his impasse. Thus, as in the Deleuzian case, the two senses of materialism -- materialism as an alternative ontology that corresponds to the inverted version of idealism's ontological claims, and as a theoretical practice that intervenes against the dominant philosophy by making a philosophical void – are folded together, the discourse on the void becomes a precondition of the enactment of a philosophical void. However, it is dubious whether folding the two together offers a compelling answer for Althusser's search for a different materialism that breaks free of idealist residues. It is perhaps this residual idealism in aleatory materialism, if not in content, then, definitely in *form* (of an alternative ontology), that despite all the gestures of disavowal that are scattered in Althusser's text against idealism and idealist materialisms alike, that informs the enigmatic and inconclusive nature of the text.

"Amicus Plato, magis amica Veritas!"

These are the last words that the editors of Althusser's posthumous works have chosen to bring the "Portrait of the Materialist Philosopher," the last piece in the collection of the *Philosophy of the Encounter* to an end.[98] It is a remarkable tribute to end Althusser's oeuvre with a salutation of truth. As a philosopher's last word, it imbues meaning to Althusser's lifelong search for a "true materialism," his belief in materialism as the true path in philosophy, which is "the falsest of all false paths (*der Holzweg der Holzwege*),"[99] and of communism as the truth of materialist politics.

At the same time, the salutation of truth at the end of Althusser's oeuvre meets Althusser's reckoning with the truth of his own life, which he chooses to depict as the life of a materialist philosopher, who is a self-made man, who "started out from nothing," but who, instead of reveling in his success, continued to wander because that is the only way to understand the "true philosophy."[100] This philosopher is an "aleatory materialist," we are told, one who "always catches a moving train, the way they do in American Westerns."[101] He goes different places, continues to learn by studying the people around him and by mastering the great thinkers until he "attains the level of classical wisdom," part of which is to understand that "everything is repeated and exists only through differential repetition."[102] Only then can he bring some idealists "round to his views," and only then, "with great bitterness." One can hear the echoes of Althusser's construction of philosophy as an eternal *Kampfplatz* in this description, where materialism and idealism repeatedly clash forever, each time in a slightly different way. He is there, too, in his transience, making a few dents against idealism, and advancing the cause of materialism, despite the "great bitterness" he effects.

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98 Althusser, "Portrait of the Materialist Philosopher," 291.
99 Althusser, "Lenin and Philosophy," 30.
100 Althusser, "Portrait of the Materialist Philosopher," 291.
101 Ibid., 290.
102 Ibid., 291.

Reading from the end of this deeply personal and cryptic text, would it not be accurate to say that Althusser's interest in Epicurus, his return to this ancient philosopher, is not merely to advance the cause of a true materialism? Is it not possible to detect in Althusser's interest in the founder of the "Garden," the advocate of the pursuit of *ataraxia*, a deeper, more personal quest, a last attempt to make meaning of his life and perhaps to reach the tranquility of his troubled soul, an effort to gain wisdom before death as the ancients endeavored to do? Is this precisely not the final turning around of the individual who turns around, as Althusser once said, in a "simple 180-degree physical conversion,"[103] in the gesture to become a subject?

Turning around from the end to the beginning is, as Althusser put it, "not a *going-back-towards*, but as a horizon receding endlessly ahead of the walker who, seeking his path on the plain, never finds anything but another plain stretching out before him (very different from the Cartesian walker who has only to walk straight ahead in a forest in order to get out of it, because the world is made up, alternatively, of virgin forests and forests that have been cleared to create open fields: without *Holzwege*)."[104] Althusser knows that it is impossible to return to the beginning, as the origin is always beyond reach, and must be rejected for the end it predetermines, but neither should one take a straight path to the end, across the forest. I think it will readily be conceded that Althusser's path was far from a straight line. Not unlike Harlequin's Cloak, the horizon ahead is a patchwork of "virgin forests and forests that have been cleared to create open fields." If the path backward is elusive, the path straight ahead is illusory -- its lack of *Holzwege* suggests a false clearing, a clearing already carried out by others. So what should a materialist philosopher do? How to think for oneself and to forge a theoretical practice that is at once one's own and yet belongs to something bigger, more permanent and great, not to those in power but to those "who continue to toil and to dwell in darkness," to the working classes, to the oppressed who find themselves in struggle; in short, not to the "Friends of the Forms," according to Plato, but to the "Friends of the Earth"?[105] Althusser refuses to go back or to go forward; after all, materialism, too, is anything but a straight path. Instead, he chooses to wander, "to think the openness of the world towards the event, the as-yet-unimaginable, and also all living practice, politics included."[106] To think the plenitude of life in the face of death, to offer a glimpse of *amor fati*, the wisdom of embracing one's life – not in the rendition of Wittgenstein as in the world as "everything that is the case," but, rather, in a different form, as "the world is everything that befalls us."[107]

Althusser's last words, the "Althusser after Althusser," as Montag puts it, leaves us with a final void, as the anguish of a void inhabited and the passion of a void still to be

[103] Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 191.
[104] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 190-191.
[105] Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism," 264.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Althusser, "The Underground Current," 190.

made, in the "emptiness of a distance taken,"[108] a distance that keeps reminding of itself not through a promised arrival at a final destination but by its silent, protracted, invisible work on Althusser's readers whom his writings continue to grip and transform. As Althusser fades away in the forest of philosophy, he leaves us with the task of picking up the battle, where true materialism is both a road not taken and yet a path well-trodden by the best of the best, where nothing new ever happens and where eternity is always the receding horizon of the truth of the old to come in ever changing guises.

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[108] Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries,* 192, 211.

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