

Of Syntheses and Surprises: Toward a Critical Integral Theory

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Abstract: The central concern of this article is how the search for formal structures with universal values functions ideologically, addressing Zizek's claim that East-West syntheses may represent the dominant ideology *par excellence* of global capitalism. To this end, the article offers a Foucaultian genealogy of Integral theory, tracing its origins to the cultural and subjective contingencies of the British Empire, primarily in the work of Integral theory's foundational thinker, Aurobindo Ghose. The article poses a primary critique of synthesis and evolution as mythological keys to Ultimate Reality which suggests that Zizek's critique may have some validity, and offers the potential for a "critical integral theory" as an alternative. Situated in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming, and represented in the ideas and practices of a constellation of thinkers inclusive of Gurdjieff, Benjamin, and Trungpa, the article's view of integration supports radical democracy as presented in the writings of Laclau and Mouffe as a model outcome for social and personal transformational practices.

Keywords: ideology, integral, critical, becoming-other, transformational practice, Aurobindo, Deleuze, Guattari, Ziporyn, Tarthang, Trungpa, Benjamin, Gurdjieff, Laclau, Mouffe, Zizek

Introduction

In *On Belief*, Slavoj Zizek (2001) argues that

the onslaught of the New Age 'Asiatic' thought, which, in its different guises, from the 'Western Buddhism' (today's counterpoint to Western Marxism, as opposed to the 'Asiatic' Marxism-Leninism) to different 'Taos,' is establishing itself as the hegemonic¹ ideology of global capitalism (p. 12).

¹ A detailed examination of hegemony as a critical concept is beyond the scope of this paper. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001), in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, offer a genealogy of hegemony, a precise mapping of ideology and hegemony as socioeconomic functions, and a theoretically sound means for the cooperation if not synthesis of various social organs working against the flows and currents of Empire, inclusive of ecologically-oriented, gender or race-based, and labor groups—radical democracy. For these reason, Laclau and Mouffe merit a close examination by Integral theorists. In *Passages About Earth*, William Irwin Thompson (1973) explains there is "a unique contribution to the New Age that America, not India, could make, and that contribution [is] politics, the politics of Washington and Jefferson" (p. 178). While under the present state of American Empire, it is difficult to maintain this kind of optimism—will we be "greeted as liberators" by the New Age? In spirit, Thompson's sentiment is in keeping with Laclau and Mouffe's project in its application to a critical Integral theory.

This critique is clearly intended at least in part for Integral theory—but on what grounds, and why? Specifically, how should Zizek’s critique be read in the context of Integral theory?

As a hypothesis to be tested, in his suggestively titled essay “What is Enlightenment?” Michel Foucault gives a prescription for how to proceed with a test of such as a hypothesis as this. For Foucault, critique is not

to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in design and archeological in method (1984, p. 46).

Taking Zizek’s comments above as a hypothesis, the critical question is historical: how did this *search for formal structures with universal value*—typified by the concept of the “perennial philosophy”² characteristic of the work of many Integral thinkers—come to be the ideology *par excellence* of the dominant social order, if it is such? Foucault makes an observation here that will have elaborate consequences for this paper: critique that shows everyday realities to be contingent and potentially *nonsense* is potentially transgressive (p. 45) in its recontextualization, a surprise that transforms what comes before it in the way the punchline of a joke fulfills or redeems the set-up that comes before it.

This inquiry suggests that Integral theorists should take Zizek’s critique to heart. First, I examine the genealogy of the imperative *to integrate*, demonstrating the implicit ideological investments of Integral theory’s foundational theorist, Aurobindo Ghose.³ Zizek’s critique is

² The concept of a “perennial philosophy” is a foundational assumption of much Integral thought; it informs Wilber’s discussion of spirituality, for example, from *No Boundary* (1979) beyond *The Eye of the Spirit* (2001a). This concept gained some intellectual currency at the pitch of the Enlightenment with the work of Leibnitz, named by Ziporyn as a thinker still capable of maintaining his credibility as such while making ostentatious universalistic truth-claims about his work, and his claims about the man producing such work (that is, himself as one who is up to the task). The “perennial philosophy” as a concept, then, coincides historically with a moment of uncritical self-fashioning. The relatively early vintage also suggests that the logic of integration as “East-West synthesis” may have circulated among intellectuals long before Aurobindo—and not in the sense of forcing all antiquities into a scheme of Biblical teleology (an ideological “return to roots”) as parodied in the paranoid figure of Casaubon. Thus, while it performs a significant function in Theosophy and synthetic Integral theory—functions of popular culture, not philosophy of theory strictly defined—it may also have had some kind of credibility in intellectual culture. Had they the resources, would early holist Edmund Spenser have produced an early Integralism?

³ The influence of Aurobindo’s idea of integration-as-synthesis cannot be overestimated in Integral studies or for cultural production generally, which is one reason why it seems Zizek is not overstating his case, and why his critique deserves a fair hearing. Beyond the direct reception of Aurobindo’s writings by an undifferentiated readership and the specialized reading communities in the academy and the professional world, Aurobindo’s synthetic gesture has lies behind the foundation of educational institutions such as CIIS, by Aurobindo’s disciple Haridas Chaudhuri; and Esalen Institute, co-founded by Michael Murphy, who himself spent a significant period of time at Aurobindo’s ashram and popularized Aurobindo’s ideas, leading to what became known as the human potential movement and helping invigorate the profitable “Self Help” and “New Age” marketing niches in publishing. Integral theory, arguably a reification or clarification of Integral pedagogy, remains Aurobindian from tip to toe inclusive of thinkers as diverse as Wilber and Thompson. Outside the gestalt of Integral studies, D.P.

shown to be a plausible interpretation of Integral theory's ideological pedigree and foundational logic. Second, I propose two criteria that a theory should meet for it to be considered authentically Integral and critical—that is, to be able not only to hold up to an ideological or cultural critique, but to also function *as* an ideological critique and a means of praxis. In short, a critical Integral theory finds ground for the transformations in subjectivity utopian critical theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari map out and prescribe, which are none other than the outcome of transformational practices Integral theory prescribes, while embracing the surprises arising from an ongoing act of compassion—genuine critique.

The Imperative to Integrate

Brook Ziporyn (2004) opens his book *Being and Ambiguity* with a parody of the project he has undertaken, evoking Foucault's dismissal of a *search for formal structures with universal value*:

All other books are included in and superseded by this book, which finally reveals the absolute truth about the universe and its application to all possible facets of human experience. The crucial paradigm shift has been discovered which reduces to irrelevance all the bitter struggles of past and present philosophers and theorists in all fields; this discovery has been made by me and explicated in the work you are now holding [...] integrated [...] so that it is revealed that all were about each other, and resolved into a far richer set of possibilities and vistas of new experience than you had dared hope for (p. xiii).

Ziporyn's riff reads like a send-up of claims not infrequently made in Integral theory. Compare it to a representative selection from a prominent Integral theorist: "Out of this bewildering diversity of views, I have attempted a synthesis, an overall perspective [...] To my knowledge, no other book offers this type of overview."⁴ In case the reader had any doubt of his parodic

Chattopodhyaya, arguably the most prominent professional philosopher living in India, has spent much of his career explicating Aurobindo's social thought. Unfortunately, much of his work is not easily accessible to non-specialists outside South Asia. To adapt a meme attributed to Whitehead: if European philosophy amounts to a footnoting of Plato, Integral theory may very well amount to a conversation about Aurobindo. This bit of context foregrounds Aurobindo's achievement: while philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche responded to Asian ideas in European terms, the notion of an "East-West *synthesis*" traces its genealogy to Aurobindo Ghose. Blavatsky, who crystallized this meme and circulated it heartily among the bourgeois of *fin de siècle* Europe in the form of Theosophy, can be credited with (or held responsible for) inventing the cultural phenomenon of "East-West synthesis." This is why a response to Zizek's critique of Integral *theory* (as distinguished from Integral *culture* per se) must begin with Aurobindo, and a cultural analysis should begin with Blavatsky. Approaching Aurobindo's position in the Integral canon from another way, in his Forward to *A Greater Psychology*, Wilber (2001b) credits Aurobindo with synthesizing the Hegelian view of evolution as Spirit-in-action with "ancient wisdom" (p. vi)—a fair judgment—and for this reason, suggests that "[a]ll subsequent attempts at such integrative efforts must [...] at least acknowledge Aurobindo's enduring genius and in many ways still unsurpassed efforts" (p. vii).

⁴ This is from the second (unnumbered) page of the Preface to Ken Wilber's early popularization, *No Boundary* (1979). Wilber's (2000b) popularization *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science, and Spirituality* is clearly *not* intended for a readership sensitive to the

intention, Ziporyn offers the reassurance that “such claims are nowadays immediately taken as irrefutable signs of crankdom, found only in fanatical and naïve street-corner tracts or deliberately obscurantist New Age self-help manuals” (p. xiii)—and, implicitly, the monolithic Big Books that have provided inspiration for Integral theorists, such as Helena Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*,⁵ Aurobindo’s *The Life Divine*, Alfred Korzybski’s *Science and Sanity*,⁶ and, arguably, certain of Wilber’s longer studies.⁷

Ziporyn then makes an unexpected move that transforms what he has written so far: he suggests in the pages immediately following this set-up that *his book may very well present the answer to all questions in a systematic manner*, the seemingly Quixotic “key to all mythologies” satirized in the figure of Casaubon in George Eliot’s 1871 novel *Middlemarch* (the late Victorian vintage of this example as well as its author’s interventions in German idealistic thought are suggestive of the themes that are to follow). By affirming the “punchline” to his own set-up, Ziporyn becomes an authentic Integral thinker,⁸ just as writers such as Aurobindo and Ken Wilber, and institutions such as the California Institute of Integral Studies, are dedicated to the project CIIS president Joseph Subbiondo calls making “meaningful wholes.”⁹ The first definition listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for “integral” cites precisely this holism, while the second designates the method by which wholes are manufactured—synthesizing component parts in order to produce a constitutive unity (note the use of the word “synthesis” in the Integral quotation above). The method of integration-as-synthesis, promoted by Aurobindo and used by many Integral theorists such as Wilber, is a point at which Zizek’s ideological critique strikes home.

If Ziporyn supports holistic thinking and Integral means, why does he parody this tendency toward the synthetic and the systematic in the first place—put another way, why does our current intellectual culture generally tend to be suspicious of Big Syntheses such as those proposed in

“inevitable signs of crankdom” (per Ziporyn) that the title itself evokes. As a cultural phenomenon, however, Wilber’s title clearly owes a generic or formal debt to Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*.

⁵ Volume II of this text is more preoccupied with a mythology of race than anything in Aurobindo’s oeuvre, to anticipate the rhetorical trajectory of this paper. The same could be said for Tolkien’s fantasy worlds, prepared in the decades following, which is suggestive of the cultural tenacity and pervasiveness of racial typography.

⁶ A productive line of inquiry apropos of Korzybski and the project at hand will be to “open up” the “anti-Aristotelianism” of General Semantics by recourse to the directly anti-Aristotelian performance theory of Augusto Boal (1985). Where Korzybski finds the potential for coercion in the dualistic thought patterns he calls Aristotelian (criticized as a straw man argument, but more likely simply a category of convenience), Boal identifies ways in which Aristotle’s model of tragic production is in fact coercive.

⁷ That this parody speaks directly to the frustratingly ambivalent position of Integral theory *vis a vis* the academy which, in my opinion, makes it all the more relevant to the conditions of working in this still-emerging discipline.

⁸ Ziporyn’s method, while Integral, is not synthetic in the way Aurobindo’s is, and therefore has real potential for the development of a critical Integral theory.

⁹ The full text of Subbiondo’s comments regarding the purpose and direction of the Institute from which this quotation is taken is available at <http://www.ciis.edu/catalog/presidentsmessage.html>. Wilber (2001a) defines Integral practice in similar terms in *The Eye of the Spirit*: “one of the aims of an integral approach (and what we call integral studies in general) is to honor and incorporate each of these extraordinary domains—intentional, behavioral, cultural, and social” (p. 11), corresponding to the four quadrants of his own “key to all mythologies,” itself intended to be a meaningful whole.

the Integral Studies gestalt? One answer explored at length in this paper is that Ziporyn is an Integral thinker but not a synthetic one; a second, more immediately relevant answer is suggested in Ziporyn's self-parody, in the figure of the nineteenth-century idealist, or rather ideologist. "For ethical as well as intellectual reasons," Ziporyn writes, "this kind of self-mythologization, still possible, say, for Spinoza and Leibnitz, and also, more complicatedly but nonetheless unmistakably, for Hegel or Schopenhauer, has been thoroughly discredited, and appears ludicrous to us now" (p. xiii). What has ideology to do with the self-fashioning of intellectuals?¹⁰

Everything. *Ideology is that which fashions selves*,¹¹ directly or indirectly, and theorists are not excepted—particularly not when they attempt truth claims on the "perennial philosophy." In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žizek (1993) gives the example of a nation finding its roots—a phenomenon explored below in the example of Matthew Arnold—as a manifestation of ideology in a moment of political crisis, "*the (national) thing returns to itself*" (p. 148). This return to imaginary roots is actually an alienation from present realities that serves a political (ideological) end. According to Žizek, one aspect of an ideological critique is to "designate the elements within an existing social order which—in the guise of 'fiction,' i.e., of the utopian narratives of possible but failed alternative histories—point toward the system's antagonistic character and thus ' estrange' us from the self-evidence of its established identity" (p. 231). An expedient example: the self-evident identity of the United States is a history of legal or de facto slavery, and of aggressive landgrabbing at the expense of the marginalized—the alternative history suggests that the U.S. has always stood for freedom in the abstract, and that all have always been free to participate in a system of private property and free enterprise. In short, *ideology is a return to imaginary roots, a fantasy mistaken for a perennially-valid reality*.

What motivates the Emperor¹² to lie¹³ about his new suit—in fact to insist that this new one is his *traditional* costume, the one he's always worn? The Nietzschean answer is the most plausible, the will-to-power, or will-to-stay-in-power. Wilber might call this phenomenon a "pathological holon." The narrative elements Žizek speaks of, ideological memes, bear with them hierarchies or strata, at minimum the binary offered by most gestalt theories of perception: I see *this* because it is distinguished from *that*. While this and that need each other to exist as such, *this* is privileged as the object and *that* is merely stage dressing. One's ideological investments or will-to-power can be quantified by what-is-seen in this sense. *Theories claiming to answer all questions and enclose all matters ideologically push something or someone aside*—the typical examples being women, workers, the poor, racial minorities, animal life, or any other marginalized stratum.¹⁴

¹⁰ Wilber labels this phenomenon of self-fashioning narcissistic, asserting in the perhaps hubristically titled *A Theory of Everything* that the prevalent "Culture of Narcissism is antithetical to an integral culture" (2000b, p. 4).

¹¹ The view of subjectivity as a product of ideological and hegemonic forces (per Althusser, much of Foucault) dominates this essay, but it does not preclude the idea that subjectivity is actually a precise kind of performance (per Judith Butler). An examination of this issue lies at the heart of a critical Integral theory, but flies outside the trajectory of this paper.

¹² Empire is to be understood here in the sense Hardt and Negri (2001) assign to it in *Empire*, a groundbreaking study that has useful resonances to William Irwin Thompson's concept of noetic polities.

¹³ Žizek's reminder that ideology is not always false—that a statement can be objectively true and ideological at once—bears repeating in this context.

¹⁴ In *A Brief History of Everything*, Wilber (2000a) writes, "When any holon in a natural holarchy"—itself a concept I have reason to be skeptical of—"usurps its position and attempts to dominate the whole,

Is it possible that the synthetic method of Integral theory has done this from the start?¹⁵ A genealogy of integration-as-synthesis suggests that it *is* possible, and that this possibility demands critical attention. Aurobindo's adaptation of integration from nineteenth-century English criticism and the cultural impact of Theosophy is the foundational gesture of Integral theory.¹⁶ This synthetic model of integration seeks unities and abstractions that are synthesized on post-Hegelian grounds and with proto-Hegelian assumptions,¹⁷ which leads to hierarchies that

then you get a pathological or dominator hierarchy—a cancerous cell dominates the body, or a fascist dictator dominates the social system” (p. 25). By contrast, I suggest that all stratified systems are pathological hierarchies by their nature, and that critical Integral theory must aspire to a radical democratic process model, in which the socius (per Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) as a holon is vertically undifferentiated and horizontally specialized, yielding anarchism without anarchy, in a sense. In this way, a position that is anti-hierarchy and pro-holarchy is possible, provided that one is willing to part ways with the distinction between natural and pathological holarchies. Assuming any one given social order is natural or inevitable is, of course, an ideological gesture and is therefore pathological in Wilberian terms. Wilber asserts that “the cure for these pathological holarchies is not getting rid of holarchy per se—which isn't possible anyway—but rather in arresting the arrogant holon and integrating it back into the natural holarchy” (p. 25). The ideological use to which this concept can be put by a “pathological” holarchy, such as the current regime, are legion. The “proper place” Wilber speaks of as the site into which the arrogant holon is to be integrated may very well be Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo, if the “cancer” persists in prescribing its own therapy. The critical question: How does a given holarchy police itself, and police the policing?

¹⁵ Wilber observes that “where we locate Spirit always translates into political agendas” (*The Eye of the Spirit*, 2001a, p. xxii), specifically the agendas of those doing the locating. Where does Integral theory locate Spirit? In “timeless, ever-present awareness, which is said” (by Wilber in this case) “to be nothing less than the actual location of Spirit itself” (p. 253). Is it possible that speculations such as this on nonduality and subjectivity, regardless of their truth value, can function ideologically?

¹⁶ As a historical matter, Aurobindo's early political practice differed sharply from the ideological investments he exhibits in the criticism and religious writing he produced later in life. The man was a revolutionary. For many years, he wrote extensively against Imperial rule, and was imprisoned for his actions. This was hardly a synthetic conciliation of East and West—this was guerilla war, and another subtext for why a critical Integral theory can begin with Aurobindo. Peter Heeh's (2003) *Sri Aurobindo: A Brief Biography* gives a detailed analysis of this early period of Aurobindo's life, as well as a survey of his role in the political life of modern India. Aurobindo can be presented as a terrorist by right-leaning critics, or a freedom-fighter by those on the left; praised as a Blakean prophet-against-Empire or dismissed as a water-boy for Victoria's footmen. The latter view is perhaps a caricature of the critique presented here because it is from that pattern of Aurobindo's gestures that the synthetic-Integral method arose. Whether Aurobindo became more conservative as he aged, or as he deepened his yoga practice, or if his politics began ambivalently and remained so to the end, are still open questions. Heehs suggests that Aurobindo's political interventions were after 1908 in fact the practice of karma yoga, as was his retirement from politics. Regardless, Heehs reports that “Sri Aurobindo's life after 1920 had little outward incident. A narrator of documented events is left with almost none to relate” (p. 130).

¹⁷ “Hegelian” here does not necessarily reflect the work produced by G.F.W. Hegel in Prussia in the nineteenth century, but does designate the dialectical, idealistic, and conservative thinking implied by his name. In practice, Hegel was clearly a more ambitious, ambivalent, and incomplete thinker than the meme “Hegelian” might allow him to be. In short “Hegelian” should be read culturally and not strictly speaking critically here. Similarly, this position does not reject Michael Basseches's view that dialectical thinking may represent “adult intellectual *development*” (2005, p. 48). While I do not accept the dialectic generally as a means of achieving final and conclusive truths, I do recognize the value of dialectical

prove to be ideological in nature in the scheme of human history Aurobindo¹⁸ presents, in which all of animated Nature is evolving in the sense of making *divinely-sanctioned progress*, suggesting that the status quo is also divinely sanctioned, as is any future order—a position any Empire, that of Victoria or of global capitalism, will find congenial.¹⁹

Aurobindo's literary criticism is historical in nature; as Peter Heehs (2003) observes, Aurobindo's *The Future Poetry* is effectively an elaboration of Matthew Arnold's 1880 *Study of Poetry* (p. 122). From Arnold and the generation of critics that followed him, the notion of synthesis as an evolutionary process comes into Aurobindo's thinking, and with it the Victorian ideology of race, of "bloods." The details of this ideology yield much insight into the history of the *how* and *why* of integral theory—the means and ends of Meaningful Wholes. Specifically, integration-as-synthesis can be regarded as a product of *fin de siecle* culture,²⁰ including a specific debt to its race theory and other ideological impulses, and also as a response to said culture.

The Future Poetry is at once a primer on the history of English literature for an Anglophone Indian readership, and a prescription for a spiritualized aesthesis, positing the possibility of a future spiritual and aesthetic renaissance legitimized by an idealistic and ideological reading of this history. The speculations on English poetry included in this volume arose from a matrix of influences Aurobindo could not have avoided in his private tutorship in England or at King's College, Cambridge. Among the most significant of these must have been the literary criticism of Matthew Arnold, England's poet laureate and dominant man-of-letters during much of Aurobindo's formative stay. In Arnold, the reader sees writ large the "return to roots" Zizek identifies as a symptom of ideology at work.

thinking as a means of learning, specifically learning how to read carefully and think clearly (as Basseches suggests).

¹⁸ The thrust of this genealogy seems to contradict Wilber's view that "Aurobindo was ridiculing and condemning those who think" in a racist fashion ("Forward," 2001b, p. ix), but the question of whether Aurobindo definitively was or was not a racist *personally* is in the main irrelevant to my point. The question at hand addresses Aurobindo's ideological alignment, which is concomitant in this instance with a racist agenda, which can readily be seen outside *The Human Cycle*, the text Wilber cites as anti-racist. Is Aurobindian Integralism ideologically productive of repression? This analysis suggests it may be.

¹⁹ This critique is *not* intended to discourage anyone from taking up the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo as a transformative practice, if one pleases to do so—on the contrary. The workings of Shakti as Sri Aurobindo described them are hardly systematic, synthetic, or oppressive, and the task of the Integral yogin is to open up to this force for the sake of all beings without exception, or in Sri Aurobindo's words "not for the sake of the individual but with an eye to the universal evolutionary process" (*Synthesis*, p. 339). To reject synthesis in favor of surprises is one imperative of this paper; it is also the significance of Aurobindo the poet's writing practice. My use of the name Aurobindo in the main text of this paper, sans *Sri*, is intended to underscore the distinction between Aurobindo the critic, poet, and thinker from Sri Aurobindo the guru and spiritual technologist, a distinction not easily maintained given that Aurobindo's poetry is shot through with Sri's spiritual vision, like teasing Milton-the-Puritan and Milton-the-Poet apart.

²⁰ English popular culture was rife with anxiety about heredity, demonstrable change over time, and social order, as evidenced by the social impact of Darwinian theory. Arnold's thinking clearly arose in the same cultural matrix that produced Sir Francis Galton's proto-Eugenics, where one's personal characteristics are determined by one's heredity. The pop-science of the period featured phrenology prominently, by which one's personality traits (even spiritual state) could be "read" from one's physical features, which are also determined by heredity.

In “On the Study of Celtic Literature,” Arnold (1962) interprets Humboldtian historical linguistics—demonstrable change over time—reductively, conflating races with language groups, in order to discuss “the pregnant and striking ideas of the ethnologists about the true natural grouping of the human race” (p. 301). “Natural” in this case already anticipates certain characteristic Integral gestures, specifically the assumption that the findings of one field of inquiry will be relevant to another. As languages and species evolve, so do cultures and races by this logic. For Arnold, Arya (denoting an ancient ethnicity) and Indo-European (an ancient language) are interchangeable terms. Arnold sketches out a taxonomy of English literature’s racial heritage qualitatively, taking arbitrarily assigned abstractions with no quantifiable basis as a means of putatively scientific classification. According to Arnold, the

English spirit, the English genius [can be] characterized [...] by *energy with honesty*. Take away some of the energy which comes to us, as I believe, in part from Celtic and Roman sources; instead of energy, say rather *steadiness*; and you have the Germanic genius: *steadiness with honesty* (1962, p. 341).

By contrast,

[t]he Celtic genius [has] sentiment as its main basis, with love of beauty, charm, and spirituality for its excellence, ineffectualness and self-will for its defect. The Norman genius, talent for affairs as its main basis, with strenuousness and clear rapidity for its excellence, hardness and insolence for its defect (p. 351).²¹

These arise in a composite, according to Arnold, in the English—a lamentable composite. “Our want of sureness of taste, our eccentricity, come in great measure, no doubt, from our not being all of a piece, from our having no fixed, fatal, spiritual center of gravity” (pp. 381-382). And for Arnold, this is not a problem that can ever be addressed through applied inquiry or transformational practice,²² because this is a linguistic and therefore racial defect of the English, per his Humboldtian speculations.

Aurobindo accepts this racist theory of cultural history that, with one significant exception, matches Arnold’s precisely. In both the exception and the rule, Aurobindo is a product of his ideological environment—an interpretation no more surprising than Aurobindo’s demonstrated incorporation of Victorian translations of Plato in his masterpiece, *Savitri*. The critical culture that embraced the “white man’s burden” of Rudyard Kipling produced the systematically Hegelian idealisms of A.C. Bradley’s 1909 *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, in which tragic conflict is taken to be a dialectical movement leading to Universal Justice, in which all things without exception have a place, synthesized in a meaningful totality—a presumptive and belligerent culture, willing to speculate authoritatively on the Nature of Reality, Cosmic Morality, and the self-justification of Empire. It is the critical culture that Bradley promoted which gave Aurobindo the most rigorous intellectual training of his life, leaving him with the skill that would

²¹ One may speculate on the similarity of characteristics assigned to the Irish here, and those projected onto “the mystical East” chronotopically—and Cousins’s (1919) comments on Aurobindo’s functional Irishness.

²² The archetypal lament of Integral theorists—that modern consciousness is fragmented, and a spiritual center of gravity is needed—is of a piece rhetorically with Arnold’s critique of the English ethnic pedigree.

make his career as a nationalist and a guru: his ability to write. Along with the Theosophical memes of occult unity of religions then circulating in Europe, Bradleyan criticism offered Aurobindo a reasonable solution to the assumed problem of disunity and disharmony in the English blood-soul: synthesize it, universalize it—in the proto-Darwinian language of the day, it must evolve and progress. Integral theory is born at this moment as a way to resolve the ideological insecurities of the English Empire.

“This peculiar distribution of national capacities finds its root in certain racial characteristics,” Aurobindo writes in *The Future Poetry* (p. 47). “We have first the dominant Anglo-Saxon strain quickened, lightened, and given force, power, and initiative by the Scandinavian and Celtic elements. This mixture has made the national mind remarkably dynamic and practical” (p. 47). Arnold had attributed this assumed English practicality to the Normal racial type. This is the only significant way in which Aurobindo differs from Arnold—significant in that it allows Aurobindo a properly dialectical movement, and therefore a means of integration. His position on the Teutonic blood he takes as his thesis; his antithesis is the Celtic stock, “the submerged, half-insistent Celtic, gifted with precisely the opposite qualities”—opposite, as befits a proper antithesis—“inherent spirituality, the gift of the word, the rapid and brilliant imagination [...] left to it from an old forgotten culture in its blood which contained an ancient mystical tradition” (p. 48). Of these antitheses, a synthesis arises that directly evokes Arnold’s distress over the presumably motley English race: “vehement but embarrassed power, like an imprisoned spirit let out for a holiday” (p. 48).

Further, Aurobindo’s dialectical working-out of Spirit through forms, in this case the forms of races, is of a piece with the neo-Hegelianism of Bradley’s positions on tragedy, by which characters on stage are figures in the movements of an inevitable, all-consuming, and absolute Universal Justice from which there is no escape. These idealized gestures need not concern themselves with ethnographic reality. As abstractions in a working ideological system, they are formulated to wind around a much more significant and politically viable Ultimate Reality, the most radical “return to roots” possible—and they remain functionally static throughout much of the corpus of Aurobindo’s voluminous writings. For example, Aurobindo identifies the spiritual inertia inherent in the Celtic “strain” with the modern Irish. In “Lines on Ireland” (1908), the poet laments the weakness of Irish polity but asserts, “her weak estate/Could not conceal the goddess in her gait” (pp. 7-8)—which functions as “a power within/Directed, like effective spirit unseen/Behind the mask forms, a source/And fund of tranquil and collected force” (pp. 40-42). And in Canto Four of the heroic poem “Urvasie,” the poet attributes the “Vedic litanies” to the ancient “Aryan race,” a gesture Arnold would have approved.²³

Aurobindo’s inspiration for writing *The Future Poetry* gives some insight into how this return-to-roots functioned *vis a vis* Aurobindo’s self-fashioning as a poet and critic. J.H. Cousins’s 1918 study *New Ways in English Poetry*, published in India, is a short and idiosyncratic guide to contemporary poetry in English for an Indian readership. In a sense, the Theosophist Cousins sought to celebrate the potential for a kind of “East-West” spiritual synthesis through poetic inspiration in this text. Aurobindo, deeply impressed by it, writes, “the book on every page attracts and satisfies by its living force of style, its almost perfect measure, its delicacy of touch, its fineness and depth of observation and insight, its just sympathy and

²³ This should not be taken as a sign that Aurobindo sympathized with the rhetoric or practice of the Third Reich, but it is fair to state the obvious, that the double meaning of Arya as “noble” and as a designation for a particular racial group has historically been of great use to the Fascist cause, and that the meme had been in circulation in Europe for a hundred years before 1933.

appreciation” (p. 1). Aurobindo typically reserves this vintage of hyperbole for poets such as John Milton and Percy Bysshe Shelley—poets he believed to be divinely inspired.

Cousins (1919) opens his book with a consideration of time and his own moment, opining that the first World War “has produced no poetry,” at least none of the sort that bears “any epoch-making prophetic impulse” (p. 2). Even so, “it is not quite true that the war marks, if it does not create, a passing over from one phase of poetical activity to another”—that is, Cousins sees “a new spirit and method animating the poets of England” (p. 3). Cousins is not concerned with, or apparently aware of, the disillusionment with ideology and idealism prevalent in poets who experienced the war, such as Siegfried Sassoon—although he does find opportunity to praise Rupert Brooke, now notorious for treating his very brief war experience with naive sentimentality and rote nationalism. Cousins is not without hope, however; he sees the makings of an Aquarian age of revelatory abstraction in the first attempts of certain poets of the war era: “The minor poet reproduces his or her time; the major poet reveals through himself and his time the true spiritual nature and destiny of the universe. And this is just what these poets have not yet ventured to do” (p. 9). Cousins is working from the same assumptions Aurobindo learned from critics such as Bradley—opening functional common ground between Bradleyan idealism and Theosophical millenarianism—but with sentiments favoring Romantic zeal; for Cousins, the poet is a prophet, an unacknowledged legislator—“The protean creative energy is forever advancing the borders of ‘reality.’ The great poets anticipate the advance” (p. 15). Cousins seeks to anticipate this anticipation, a task presumably the work of a very great poet, declaring that “the new ways in English literature are breaking through the obstructions of ignorance, and all that hangs thereon, into the broad highway of literary evolution” (p. 15). Cousins takes prophecy as his purpose—he seeks to explain to the groundlings how the Spirit of the Language *moves*. This is pedagogy. Cousins hopes to give

some temporary indication, however inadequate, of the direction of English literature at the present time and in the immediate past. This necessity has arisen out of a special movement to make education in India both national and rational [—Bradley’s imperatives—] by putting it in contact with the vital spirit of literature, instead of starving it on half a dozen stale fragments of the literature of the past that have no interest for Indian youth, and that make the cultivation of good modern English speech impossible (1919, p. xii).

Cousins summarizes the imperatives of popular Theosophy here: the “West” is prepared with technical means, and precise and modern language, while the “East” offers *timeless* or perennial spiritual inspiration.

Cousins’s brief chapter on Aurobindo provides some clues into which poet he feels could be up to the task of revealing the ways of God in this new age of poetry he envisions:

The poetry of Aurobindo Ghose is a meeting-place of Asiatic universalism and European classicalism. It is inspired by the philosophy of the Vedas; but it is shaped and atmosphered like Greece, or the Greece that is dimly incarnate in English poetry (p. 27).

Here is integralism in its form as “East-West” synthesis—Esalen Institute in embryo. Further, according to Cousins, Aurobindo’s “eyes perpetually go behind the thing visible to the thing essential, so that symbol and significance are always in a state of interfusion” (p. 28). This is the

dialectical working of “perennial philosophy” and inspired language synthesized into one gesture—a synthetic integralism that is a *cosmic* “return to roots.” Finally, Cousins relies on the same racial typing Arnold and Aurobindo do, while making it quite personal:

For a companion to Mr. Ghose’s double-sightedness, the simultaneous glimpsing of norm and form, we have to pass beyond the confines of Europe, and listen to the spiritual songs of AE. The Irish poet has not the patience and expansiveness of his Aryan brother, but in heart and vision they are kindred (p. 29).

Cousins identifies Aurobindo Ghose, essentially, as a Celt, in that he bears “the idealistic strain that is one of the most characteristic features of the Irish race” (p. 32)—an assumption that is not illogical, given the preoccupations of both men on “Irishness.” Cousins identifies Aurobindo as a first-order teacher and prophet of the modern world on the basis of this theory of racial typing, *a poet capable of revealing, justifying, the reality of the universe to all beings*. On these grounds, Cousins gives Aurobindo credibility in the “East” and “West,” synthesized into one *spiritual center of gravity*, to recall Arnold’s lament. Aurobindo accepts the views of Cousins that offer him this position of authority. According to Aurobindo, Cousins raises the “possibility” of

the discovery of a closer approximation to what we might call the *mantra* in poetry, that rhythmic speech which, as the Veda puts it, rises at once from the heart of the seer and from the distant home of the Truth (p. 8).

Aurobindo would spend the rest of his writing career fashioning himself as that seer, and producing some first-rate verse in the process.²⁴

The birth of Integral from the spirit of synthesis, to summarize, can be understood in three stages. In the first synthesis, Aurobindo resolves the fragmentation Arnold found in the English soul by means of Bradleyan idealism. The imperative: integrate yourself by recourse to what is highest (read: most abstract) in yourself. Blavatsky had accomplished and popularized the second synthesis: that of the unitary spiritual vision of the “East” and the fragmentary materialism of the “West,” including good modern English. The “perennial philosophy” promoted in Theosophy becomes a useful conceptual tool in the third synthesis, which Aurobindo accomplishes in accepting Cousins’s criticism (effectively synthesizing the first two syntheses): the Integration of self as an evolution bearing an analogous relationship to that of the cosmos, both as expressions of some supreme being (proto-holism beyond that of Plato’s *Timaeus* or *The Faerie Queene* of Edmund Spenser). This is a cosmic subjectivity, and a global “return to roots,” to what absolutely underlies the subjectivity of every person and to the putatively universal, always-has-been significance of all religions. *This is the most radical*²⁵ *ideology imaginable*—no surprise it has popular appeal under Empire.

To illustrate the direct functions of this ideology by example: the nineteenth-century racial theory that Aurobindo uses to speculate on the future development of English literature—and,

²⁴ The conventional Byronic Orientalism of Aurobindo’s early fragment, “Khaled of the Sea: An Arabic Romance,” suggests that at one point in his life, Aurobindo either uncritically accepted the assumptions about “the mystical East” he absorbed in England, or was at least willing to reproduce them.

²⁵ Radical, of course, is to be taken exclusively in its etymological sense here.

through Cousins, his place in it—is, as one might predict, integrated into his yogic program as well, and in starker terms. In *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Aurobindo (1971) explains that one

may come to the conclusion that mental life, far from being a recent appearance in man, is the swift repetition in him of a previous achievement from which the Energy in the race had undergone one of her deplorable recoils (p. 9).

The spirit behind the culture, like Bradley's Universal Justice, is really *the Absolute Spirit*; this is Cousins's thesis and Aurobindo's. Because the significance of cultural production is synthesized with cosmic significance, the stakes extend beyond the racial heritage of *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost* toward a global ideological crisis (recalling Zizek), appropriate to the conditions of the British Empire:

For if the actuality of intellectual achievement is unevenly distributed, the capacity is spread everywhere. It has been seen that in individual cases even the racial type considered by us the lowest, the negro fresh from the perennial barbarism of Central Africa, is capable, without admixture of blood [...], of the intellectual culture, if not yet of the intellectual accomplishments of the dominant European (pp. 9-10).

For Aurobindo, *the subaltern may be able to read*—a prospect aided, perhaps, by two authoritative primers on what to read, and how, one each by Cousins and Ghose—but *the subaltern may not write*. Not yet.

This is the kind of bald racism that justifies Empires—abstractions, eternal, and ideals that are mistaken for in-the-moment realities—“mistaken” for a reason. Aurobindo's sole criticism of Cousins's primer echoes the lament of the colonial agent or the outsourced management team: “a finger-post by the way is not enough for the Indian reader, you will have to carry him some miles on the road if you would have him follow it” (*Future Poetry*, p. 2). In fairness, Aurobindo discusses in the next paragraph of the *Synthesis* the possibility for “the advance of backward races” as a general function of spiritual evolution, which again arises as a species of Victorian optimism about technological Progress, inclusive of “the multiplication of labour-saving appliances” (p. 10)—a view that comes under scrutiny in the criteria for a critical Integral theory below. A global, totalizing ideology developed under the global, totalizing conditions of British colonial rule, today, circulates as the meme *par excellence* of total subjective and objective reality in the popular writings of today's Integral theorists, among others.

The broad strokes of this tentative genealogy of *integral*, an *integration* and their concomitant ideological function, while not yet conclusive, are firm enough to suggest that some new directions should be explored in order to understand in an Integral way how subjectivity functions (or is made to function), without simply replicating the hegemonic ideology of Empire. I submit one such direction: the potential for a critical Integral theory.

Toward a Critical Integral Theory

If Integral theory's reliance on synthesis as an evolutionary, cosmic force is to be reconsidered, even revised out of a critical Integral theory²⁶—what is available to do the work demanded of that vacated concept? The *OED* gives a subdefinition for “Integral” as *immaterial* (the first use of the word in this sense is recorded in 1651). When explicated, *immaterial* yields two criteria for a theory to be considered both critical and Integral. In place of synthesis, a (critical) Integral theory should aim for a precise kind of praxis, *becoming*, which arises from productive relationships and multiplicities—what Ziporyn calls *transformative recontextualizations*, which amount to surprises.²⁷ And in place of evolution and concomitant stratification, a critical (Integral) theory calls for revolution—itself nothing short of a miracle, as Zizek observes. The following pages are intended to sketch out how these criteria work in enough detail to open up further, forthcoming inquiry.

The first criterion is the most literal reading of the word “immaterial”—*not strictly or only material*, which also means not precisely “immaterial,” since an *idea* of the immaterial is itself a matter, thought-stuff. By no means should Integral theory limit itself exclusively to material questions, bracketing away the transhistorical as inappropriate for inquiry; and by no means should a retreat into the archetypal alternative to strict materialism, the “specifically European disease” of Transcendence (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 18) into an idea of a Divine, Absolute, Universal Being replace it. Rather, I propose an inquiry into the *intermezzo* between the meat world of perception, of form (*Schein*) and spiritual reality (*Sein*)—a third space Nietzsche connoted with the neologism *untergehen*, which can be suggestively rendered as *to go under* or *to undergo*.²⁸ *This is a theory of becoming rather than Being, of time and space rather than Structure*. Given the prevailing world order, the business of an immaterial theory is the active, ongoing work of unplugging subjectivity from the complex of late capitalism's desiring-machines.

As the purpose of this criterion is to ensure the Integrality of a given theory, an explication of it will begin with Aurobindo. While he did not reject the more-than-Miltonic role Cousins assigned to him as a potential world-teacher, Aurobindo used his writing of *Savitri* primarily as a

²⁶ Specifically, neither the key-to-all-mythologies, God-is-on-our-side implications of “the perennial philosophy” as articulated in Aurobindian or post-Aurobindian theory, nor the valence of paranoia (or at minimum neurosis) implicit in the synthetic model of integration according to which *every detail* (all quadrants, all lines) must be accounted for, gridded, and hung on the proper peg of the spectrum of consciousness or its functional equivalent, will ever survive a vigorous ideological analysis.

²⁷ Ziporyn's punchline can be profitably juxtaposed against the “absurd laughter” Thompson identifies with “mysticism” in *Evil and World Order*. “Laughter then involves detachment, and detachment is a fundamental form of freedom” (p. 56). Thompson's assertions on tragedy, by contrast—“Individuation is the tragic error”—are best elaborated by Boal's (1985) rendering of Aristotelian tragic theory as a mechanism of subjectification, an ideological device.

²⁸ This amounts to a break with forms of Integral pedagogy that assume a hierarchic or “pyramidal” movement upward that proceeds in predictable stages that has a significant historical precedent in Nietzsche's break with Wagner: “The same human type that raved about Hegel, today raves about Wagner; in his school they even *write* Hegelian.—Above all, German youths understood him. The two words ‘infinite’ and ‘meaning’ were really sufficient: they induced a state of incomparable well-being in young men” (p. 634). Nietzsche's polemic points to the role critique must play in any pedagogy, especially an Integral one.

means of transformation, of becoming, for himself.²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari³⁰ give a precise mapping of this process, according to which a multiplicity or collective “brings a becoming-molecular that undermines the great molar powers of family, career, and conjugality” (p. 233)—the social forms held in place by the strange songs of ideology, such as the fictional “traditional” family or fictional “traditional” marriage, to give two live contemporary examples of instances of ideology as Žižek defines them. To generalize, becoming is transformative in nature, therefore potentially destructive, and potentially liberating.³¹ The challenge Deleuze and Guattari describe is to become something other than a belligerent bullet-brained fantasy-enforcing *machine*. Deleuze and Guattari give a series of negations that help explicate what becoming is not. First, it is not a “correspondence of relations,” nor a “resemblance, an imitation, or at the limit, an identification” (p. 237). “To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination” (p. 238). In other words, this is a horizontal rather than a vertical, transcendental process, although its significance lies in its vertical (destratifying) potential. “Becoming produces nothing other than itself [...] a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself” (p. 238). Thinking of animal mimicry: the animal one becomes is not a real animal, but the process of becoming-animal has a reality to it. In Aurobindo’s case, the question is not whether he did or did not in *reality* become the prophet of the divine Mother, but rather the point is that he experienced (recontextualized) himself as such, became it, by the mediation of his writing practice. In this sense, critical Integral theorists should become prophets against Empire.

The positive definitions Deleuze and Guattari offer for becoming are equally evocative: “Becoming concerns alliance” rather than filiation (p. 238)—like symbiosis between heterogeneous species, or the relationship between a teacher and collection of students. “Becoming is involutionary, involution is creative” (p. 238), where involution is understood to be something other than evolution. “Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree” (p. 239). These *koans* can be solved by looking at how becoming works, through the example of becoming-writer. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “becoming-animal always involves a pack [...], a multiplicity” (p. 239)—in short, a culture. Aurobindo was without doubt among the more cultured Anglophone writers of a generation that included James Joyce and T.S. Eliot³²—he *contained* a multiplicity—but more significantly, he had built a culture around himself, through correspondence and the ashram that grew around him in Pondicherry that made becoming possible for all connected with it. Becoming-animal, one of the more conspicuous

²⁹ Some regard reading the poem as a transformational practice as well.

³⁰ When fully elaborated, Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of becoming has many advantages to a critical Integral project beyond those touched upon here. The dynamic they describe between the “sorcerer” and the multiplicity offers a precise tool for explicating guru-disciple and guru-group phenomena, and is also relevant to critical Integral pedagogy and the concerns of Integral leadership models such as Jonathan Reams’ (2005) regarding “the level of development necessary to perceive and act from an integral place” (p. 128). Further, the Deleuze-Guattarian insistence that their work is a project, itself a process, is in itself a model for how a critical Integral theory (to use the counterintuitive language I have adopted here) can remain productively irrelevant, and can be a step toward a vertically destratified social holon, the *socius*—radical democracy.

³¹ Erik Thornquist (2006, personal communication) has suggested that the Chaos Theory promises to offer some valuable critical tools for elaborating this theory of becoming in an Integral context.

³² The reception history of Aurobindo’s poems in the Commonwealth and in the United States should be a productive point of study for postcolonialists. How is it that this most English of writers, more English perhaps than the English, still has an ambivalent position in the canon of literature in English?

versions of becoming Deleuze and Guattari present, has little to do with literal animals in this context, except by analogy; in one sense, it is a cipher for becoming-writer. Deleuze and Guattari's examples are strictly literary, inclusive of Kleist (Penthesilea's becoming-dog), Melville (Ahab's becoming-whale), Kafka (Gregor's becoming-insect). In Aurobindo's case, the transformation is not simply narrated in a text, but by his own account a lived experience verifiable by a knowledgeable reading of his writings, which makes his case qualitatively unique. For this reason, he is the picture of the writer-sorcerer in Deleuze-Guattarian diction: "[I]f the writer is a sorcerer, it is because writing is a becoming" (p. 240).

Becoming defined in this way gives space for the transformational practices valued by Integral theorists without the counterproductive ideological baggage integration-as-synthesis carries, and is therefore a valuable tool for a critical Integral theory. As Dorothea Olkowski (1999) observes, efforts to construct objective narrative models of reality—unified field theories—are doomed to failure as a condition of language, and this may very well be a blessing as well as a challenge. It means learning is possible, if not inevitable, and that the miserable contingencies much of the world endures under neoliberalism and patriarchy are not necessarily inevitable, ideal, or here to stay. It also means that the status quo is constantly inventing new "roots" to return to, making new material to manage the situation at hand. The moment-by-moment work of a critical Integral theory is to keep the edge of critique ahead of the limit of the machinery of Empire's manufacture of saccharine consolation and team spirit.

Becoming is a way to refrain from participating in the subjectivity-games of the status quo, and to pursue a critical agenda, the consideration that beats through the heart of the second criterion, which is a colloquial reading of the word "immaterial"—as *irrelevant*, specifically irrelevant to the imperatives of the regime at hand, and non-profitable or even *unprofitable* as a business venture.³³ This returns us to Žižek's critique of Integral praxis as the hegemonic ideology *par excellence* of neo-liberalism, according to which "the 'Western Buddhist' meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way, for us, to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity" (2001, p. 13). John Morrow (1975) anticipated this critique while working for Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1974, at the inaugural summer session of Naropa Institute: "Macbeth with mindfulness? Buddhist propaganda under the disguise of far-out space awareness techniques, so we can go back to our old reactionary selves, and really enjoy them this time with the new costumes?" (p. 41). Morrow concludes that

³³ Returning to the "writerly" examples of becoming, in *Moby-Dick* Ahab's hunt for the Whale is a miserable business model—much of his produce is squandered, the slaughter consumed by the sharks that swarm the *Pequod*,—but his project is to "pierce the veil," not to bring intact whale blubber back to Nantucket by the strength of his rhetorical appeal to becoming. Gregor had been supporting his family in "The Metamorphosis" single-handedly until he becomes a dung beetle, leaving the others to fend for themselves and, in fact, metamorphose. Antony squanders a political life, a share in Empire, in order to pursue his masochistic practice with Cleopatra—to borrow a Shakespearean example favored by a true poet of becoming, Helene Cixous. Parenthetically, *The Newly Born Woman*, co-authored by Cixous and Catherine Clement (1986), is an extended meditation on the business of becoming as it relates to issues of gender and language, and features a poetic analysis of Kleist and Kafka as well—authors favored in Deleuze and Guattari's theses on becoming. The explicitly literary nature of these examples is intended to illustrate my point that working toward a critical Integral theory must be taken as an intrinsically valuable project, as a creative endeavor and an act of kindness, rather than a neologism-coining gimmick for selling books and tchotchkes, or filling seminars. There can be no Critical Integral Theory™; this is not a proprietary scheme. Neil Young's 1974 recording "For the Turnstiles" renders this critique in more soulful and more biting terms.

while this outcome, precisely the one Zizek identifies as reactionary and performative, is precisely *not* what happened at Naropa. Trungpa devised means of keeping his *immaterially* Integral project critical: “There is a particular philosophy of Naropa which is not so much trying to bring” traditions or practices “together, like a spoon of sugar in your lemonade so that it becomes more drinkable, but the point is more like a firework [...], there is a meeting point which takes place in a spark!” (p. 18). In short, Trungpa wants to blow the fuses of his students’ mental machinery, not to help them appear sane at their office jobs. While it was Integral, this curriculum was not a *synthesis* of Hindu, Buddhist, and psychological skillful means as they were presented at Naropa; nothing was produced, no superstructure, only an immanence, a surprise. Zizek is thinking of Western Buddhist meditation practice as a very relevant and profitable kind of sugar in the sour lemonade of cubicle life; Trungpa, a foundational figure in the history of Western Buddhism, rejects this kind of supplement as another form of spiritual materialism.

Following this, I suggest that practices functioning as a palliatives to make neo-liberalism taste better, be it a warm feeling of wholeness, a teleology, a totalization, or even in some contexts a therapy—may be of benefit to some in some contexts, but may not have a place in a critical Integral theory. To see how a critical theory might be productively irrelevant to the contingencies of Empire’s imperatives, one can use Zizek’s prescription for a “Leninist” intervention, a trauma-of-benefit. Consider two examples from Buddhist hagiography: Tilopa cured Naropa by throwing things at his head, and Marpa transformed Milarepa by making a slave of him.

This functions in the same way as Gurdjieff’s (1999) stated purpose in the front matter of his novel, *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson*: “To destroy, mercilessly, without any compromise whatsoever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world.” *By centuries*—time is not necessarily offering an aquarian unfolding of spiritual development in the souls of men; in fact, Gurdjieff’s view of history more closely corresponds to Walter Benjamin’s than that of Aurobindo. Consider Benjamin’s famous image of the “angel of history:”

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise [...] This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (1968, pp. 257-258).

Rather than imagining in what would be regarded as bad faith that history represents material progress, Gurdjieff recommends cutting away the mental and emotive accumulations of time’s industry as they have stratified and territorialized one’s subjectivity, and discarding them. He gives 1,238 pages of very difficult and very amusing prose read three times in a particular way³⁴ as a means of lightening the work of the angel of history, to speak metaphorically. The use of

³⁴ Perhaps the most significant aspect of the three readings Gurdjieff recommends to readers of *Beelzebub’s Tales* is the motivation to undertake the practice of reading each time through: the wish to be of benefit to others first. This attitude and concrete methods for attaining it, are available in Chagdud Tulku’s practical guide, *Change of Heart* (2003). Critical intervention or revolution must be undertaken with this kind motivation.

masochistic language—breaking, cutting, dying—in this context is deliberate. Deleuze and Guattari use masochism specifically as an example of a risky home remedy that achieves an end cognate to Gurdjieff’s merciless destruction “without any compromise” of the manufactured subjectivity of the reader. They call this end the Body without Organs (BwO).³⁵ One can make a BwO of oneself intentionally, but the practices Deleuze and Guattari observe—masochism, addiction, anorexia—lead them to caution, “you can botch it” (p. 149). Multiple means for accomplishing the BwO safely and sanely exist within the gestalt of Integral Studies; the Giant Body Exercises that Tarthang Tulku (1977) presents in *Time, Space, and Knowledge* (TSK) is a particularly delightful example, given the resonance in language and methodology. One experiences oneself first as a stratified body, then sees the strata as the nature of space, which reveals their boundaries to be in a sense arbitrary, until finally one experiences oneself as a deterritorialized *body* of space, a BwO. *Surprise*—things are not what they seem, nor does the order of things need to remain as it is.

Conclusion

While the surprise of critical intervention is a break and a local disintegration, it is neither a discontinuity nor a global disintegration. I promote Ziporyn’s technique of transformative recontextualization as an *immaterial* alternative to evolution as presented in synthetic Integral theories—a practice that pursues “second-tier” thinking to its logical conclusion.³⁶ The doctrine of the *Lotus Sutra*, according to Ziporyn, “is not some specific teaching about what the real is”—as is Wilber’s attempt in *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality*³⁷ to map all knowables objectively, an ambitious and Aurobindian project—“but just the act of opening up and revealing, of bringing teachings together so they are revealed to be versions of one another, one may say of *teaching per se*, that is, the ultimate teaching” (p. 91). As in Trungpa’s curriculum at Naropa, the teachings Ziporyn speaks of are assembled in such a way, newly contextualized, as to yield a particular affective result. “Provisional is to ultimate as setup is to punchline. Enlightenment is here equal to humorousness, delusion to seriousness” (p. 97). This is another way of describing the net result of the critical inquiry Foucault (1984) calls for: “an *undoing* of this chronic previous habitual focus or mental grip, or seeing its groundlessness, arbitrariness, in other words, that another set of equally obvious facts, if attended to, change the significance, meaning, *identity* of the token in question” (p. 99).

³⁵ A productive line of future inquiry will compare the functions of the BwO relative to transformational practice and concepts such as holons and holarchy as Integral theorists such as Wilber have developed from Arthur Koestler’s initial mapping of them.

³⁶ One may speculate at this point that an upcoming generation of integral thinkers may need to read Aurobindo, for example, in a manner analogous to approaches to Spinoza taken by theorists such as Deleuze, Antonio Negri, and Etienne Balibar—which is to say a recontextualization of the immanent or “immaterial” impulses that saturate the best of Wilber’s thought into the interface between subjectivity and the machinery of late capitalism. This is not to suggest that Deleuze, Negri, or Balibar have necessarily revealed the final word on Spinoza, but to illustrate Ziporyn’s point that “just the same content, when ‘opened up’ [...], suddenly reads differently without having changed in the least” (2004, p. 93).

³⁷ A comparative study of Wilber’s use of the Buddhist doctrine of relative and absolute truths and Ziporyn’s—beyond the scope of this paper—will open up in detail the distinction I am mapping out here in abstract.

To draw this multiplicity of threads together: the BwO is the “punchline” moment to the tedious, territorialized stream of subjective time *that made the punchline possible*. In a sense, this critical intervention is the *Aha!* of the boy as he recognizes that the Emperor, the Empire, really is naked; for this reason it is wholly *irrelevant* to the aims and imperatives of Empire. Significantly, Benjamin’s (1968) view of history³⁸ can be understood as an *immaterially* Integral one, where the despair of the angel witnessing the accumulation of infected detritus we experience prosaically as a lifetime of trips to Wal-Mart is potentially liberated *at any moment* by “a Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (p. 263). Notice that Benjamin is able to think in terms inherited from Marxism and Lurianic Kabbalah without reducing either to a synthetic whole, or one to the other. This kind of recontextualization is an *immaterial* Integral relationship that is, in a sense, laughed into being as one *undergoes* the surprise. And with it, Deleuze and Guattari’s insistence that becoming is *not* an evolution is no longer a potentially anti-Integral gesture, meaning that it is possible for a theory to be both functionally Integral and irrelevant in a critical sense.

To conclude, synthetic Integral theory may very well be what Žižek suggests it is—part of a complex of ideologies that amount to a justification and a means of maintaining and regulating the pathologies of Empire. It need not be this way, however. This theory can emphasize becoming and immanent critique, a microintegrality, rejecting the teleologies of synthesis and evolution and the assumption that anyone’s theory can speak to a “perennial philosophy.” This may be the best way to understand how transformations in subjectivity can make substantive changes in the socioeconomic machines that themselves make subjects, and how a sane social order can support that practice of transformation. In shorthand: do not posit a coming New Age, an Ultimate Reality, or a “key to all mythologies.” Do find the means of making a new age happen, make it happen, and keep it happening.

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³⁸ It will be worthwhile to consider this reading of Benjamin’s view of redeemed time in the light of Tarthang Tulku’s vision of Great Time in the TSK series.

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