

Behind the Curtain:
From Hobbes to Deleuze

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In Abraham Bosse's frontispiece to the original edition of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), which was designed according to the author's own specifications, we find one seemingly gratuitous embellishment: a curtain. To recall this curious detail, the author's proper name -- Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury --- and the book's full title --- *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civile* --- are embroidered upon a large tasselled curtain that is positioned between a series of representations of civil and ecclesiastical power (see Figure 1). It is not, of course, the first such curtain to appear in Hobbes's work. Almost 10 years earlier, Jean Maltheus's frontispiece for *De Cive* (1642) placed between its representations of the state of nature --- "*Libertas*" --- and civil society --- "*Imperium*" --- a similarly imposing drape upon which is inscribed the title of the work and, rather than the author's name, a quotation from the Book of Proverbs 8: 15: "*Per me Reges regnant et legum conditores iusta decernunt* [By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just]" (see Figure 2). If Hobbes scholars have devoted a large body of work to decoding the iconography of Bosse's frontispiece over the centuries, it is thus all the more remarkable that (with one or two significant exceptions) this particular detail has largely been passed over in silence as nothing more than a standard or conventional seventeenth century decoration. In a very literal sense, Hobbes's curtain --- which marks the precise spot *between* the state of nature and society, heaven and earth, God and man --- occupies the centre of his work.

To pull back the iconographical curtain upon Hobbes's frontispiece --- which would seem to both conceal and reveal some kind of inner *sanctum sanctorum* --- I would first like to note that it obviously belongs to a long history of political theological veils, curtains or facades that stretches back to the Book of Exodus. It is significant here that the art historian Horst Bredekamp --- who is one of the few commentators to speak of it at all --- compares the curtain in *Leviathan* to "the pattern of the velum that concealed the tabernacle of the Old Testament as an *arcanum*."¹ As Exodus 26 famously recounts, Yahweh instructs Moses to cover the "Holy of Holies [*Qodesh Ha-qadashim*]" --- the inner sanctuary of the Temple which was only accessible to the High Priest at Yom Kippur to offer the blood of sacrifice --- with a "veil [*parochet*] of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen of cunning work" which "shall divide unto you between the holy place and the most holy" (Exodus 26: 31-33). For the Apostle Paul --- or whoever authors the Letter to the Hebrews --- Jesus's incarnation and death reveal him to be the high priest, the blood sacrifice, the veil [*katapetasma*] and the embodiment of the new covenant between God and Man: "therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh" (Hebrews 10: 19-20). In this context, Hobbes's frontispiece also raises a larger question about the --- Jewish? --- filiation or provenance of his own, allegedly Christian, Commonwealth "Social Covenant": *Leviathan's* veil, of course, remains in place and intact as if Christianity simply never happened.²

If we want to find a more contemporary source for Hobbes's frontispiece than the veil of the tabernacle, then we might also turn to the Baroque idea of the *façade*, which subtly reconfigures this dialectic between interior and exterior space, concealment and revelation. To recall Carl Schmitt's fascinating observation about the Hobbesian curtain in a 1947 entry in his *Glossarium* (1991): "The *Leviathan* itself is a *façade*, the *façade* of dominion (*Herrschaft*) in front of power (*Macht*); those mysterious curtains on the cover of the *Leviathan*." It is "not a 'mere' *façade*; mere illusion or appearance," he continues, "it is also

prestige, glory, honor, representation, omnipotence, but it is yet again only an external omnipotence.” As Schmitt’s remarks reveal, the Baroque façade was not (yet) a façade in the modern pejorative sense of an artificial surface or veneer. Yet, this Baroque façade, which is still recognizably the public face (*facia*) of interiority, stands on the cusp of a historical threshold, where it will give way to the modern liberal theory of the public face as a merely superficial external appearance that conceals a private, unadorned interiority. For Schmitt, liberalism will eventually strip away the grandeur of the Baroque façade to reveal, not a new Holy of Holies, but the profane “truth” of power that lies behind it: “The whole sociology and psychology of unmasking imply a deconstruction of the Baroque façade, and the unveiling of the pure nucleus of power.”³ In a curious reversal of the supersessionary history of the veil of the Temple, Schmitt’s own *Leviathan and the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (1938) will notoriously claim that iconoclastic “liberal Jews” like Spinoza are responsible for tearing down Hobbes’s own Christian veil and exposing the *arcanum* of power it conceals to the liberal light of day.⁴

In the Hobbesian curtain, I want to argue that we find one particular fold in what, after Walter Benjamin, we might call a much larger political “*rideaologie*” --- quite literally a “curtainology,” a study or science of the curtain⁵ --- that stretches from Benjamin to Derrida. To anticipate my argument in this essay, I seek to unpick three different readings or writings upon the sovereign curtain --- Deleuze’s fold, Benjamin’s curtainology and Derrida’s veil or prayer shawl --- that all refuse the variously philosophical, theological and political oppositions between interiority and exteriority, appearance and essence, surface and depth and so on by exposing what we might heuristically call an “originary” political ontological curtain, veil or medium which is sutured into the fabric of our encounter with the real itself. If Derrida is undoubtedly correct to suspect that the history of truth from Ancient Greece to modernity is itself a history of the veil --- from unconcealment or *aletheia* (Plato, Nietzsche, Heidegger), through *Aufklärung*, visibility or transparency (Descartes, Hobbes, Kant) up to truth and critique as a process of masking, unmasking, demystification (Marx, Nietzsche) --- I propose that the history of political theological truth-telling --- from Jewish, Christian and Islamic occultation and revelation to liberal iconoclasm and disenchantment is, likewise, a dialectic of (un-)veiling, concealment and unconcealment: all modern political concepts of the state may (with apologies to Schmitt) be secularized *rideaological* concepts. In conclusion, I return to Hobbes’ own curtain in order to argue that it signifies less an absolute divide or threshold between the outside and the inside --- between the state of nature and society --- than, once again, the becoming-inside of this “outside.” What if Hobbes’s Commonwealth is the curtain itself?

Inexplicable

In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1991), Gilles Deleuze draws a diagram of a Baroque house which contains a room “decorated with a drape diversified by folds [*tapisée d'une toile diversifiée par des plis*]” (Figure 3).⁶ To quickly recall its place within his larger philosophical schema, Deleuze’s theory of the fold [*le pli*] becomes the basis of what Alain Badiou rightly calls an “anti-Cartesian” philosophy of modern subjectivity which extends from Gottfried Leibniz to Michel Foucault.⁷ It seeks, in particular, to challenge the notorious series of philosophical dualisms --- mind and body and so on --- upon which the Cartesian theory of the subject is erected. As Deleuze famously argues, everything that is apparently “inside” the Cartesian subject --- the ego *cogito*, thought or consciousness --- is nothing more than its outside involuted or “folded back” upon itself. For Deleuze, what the later Foucault calls the process of “subjectivation [*assujettissement*]” of the subject by regimes of power/knowledge is arguably the defining modern instance of this “becoming-inside” of the outside: “Foucault seems haunted by this theme of an inside which is merely the fold of the outside,” he writes in *Foucault* (1986), “as if the ship were a folding of the sea”.⁸ If Deleuze’s theory of the fold appears to have almost infinite applicability --- from philosophy (Aristotle, Leibniz,

Heidegger, Foucault), through art (Donatello, Tintoretto, Caravaggio, Klee, Hantai, Pollock), architecture (Wölfflin, Rousset, Le Corbusier) to science (Huyghens, Leibniz and the “superfold” of evolutionary biology and new technologies) --- it is because the very activity of thought itself, up and including even the gesture of unfolding (*The Fold*, 35), consists of the production of new folds, pleats or re-doublings: “The Baroque invents the infinite work or process,” he writes, “The problem is not how to finish a fold, but how to continue it, to have it go through the ceiling, how to bring it to infinity” (34). In the mathematical infinity of the Leibnizian universe, we thus confront what we might quite literally call the *inexplicable* (from the Latin *inexplicabilis* “that which cannot be unfolded” --- AB).

To return to our original example, Deleuze’s diagram of the Baroque house is itself, of course, an architectural allegory for a very particular assemblage of post-Cartesian subjectivity: Leibniz’s monad. It depicts a two-storey building, comprising a lower common room with five small windows or apertures --- which represent the “pleats” of matter and the five senses respectively --- and a private, self-enclosed upper room --- which represents the “folds” of the soul. For Deleuze, it is this latter, windowless chamber of the Leibnizian soul that is said to be “decorated with a drape diversified by folds,” concealing its interiority from the outside world. Yet, despite the appearance of an opposition or hierarchy between body and soul, Leibniz’s theory of subjectivity obviously moves beyond any simple Cartesian dualism. In his essay “A New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances and also of the Union that Exists Between the Soul and the Body,” (1695) which Deleuze cites in *The Fold*, Leibniz argues that, while there is no direct causal relation between the soul and the body, there is a divinely pre-established harmony or correspondence: “God first created each soul and other real unity in such a way that everything in it arises from its own depths, with a perfect *spontaneity* as regards itself --- i.e. with no causal input from anything else -- and yet with a perfect *conformity* to things outside it.”⁹

If we look more closely at Deleuze’s diagram of the Leibnizian monad, we begin to see that the relation between the --- apparently separate --- lower and upper stories of the Baroque house is similarly *inexplicable*. To begin with, body and soul both belong to the same house and are composed of the same stuff or material, namely, folds stretching out to infinity. However, the real Leibnizian fold here is the one *between* these two infinities which both separates and connects the pleats of matter and the folds of the soul: ““The Baroque contribution *par excellence* is a world with only two floors, separated by a fold that echoes itself, arching from the two sides according to a different order” (29). For Leibniz, at least according to Deleuze’s radically empiricist reading, this essential unity of body and soul within the monad --- where each body belongs to a soul and each soul is in conformity with a body --- means that both are imbricated in an ordinary fold: “Is it not in this zone, in this depth or this material fabric between the two levels, that the upper is folded over the lower, such that we can no longer tell where one ends and the other begins, or where the sensible ends and the intelligible begins” (119). In Deleuze’s own diagram of the Baroque house, we can perhaps find a visual representation of this “fold between the folds” in the mysterious “drape diversified by folds” mentioned earlier: what is presented as the apparently exclusive property of the upper level actually starts to unfurl or unfold downwards through the floor and into to the lower level as well, as if were threatening to cover the whole façade of the house.

What, then, lies behind Deleuze’s *toile diversifiée par des plis* in the inner sanctum of the monad? It is revealing, and probably deliberate, that his diagram chooses to depict only the external façade or front elevation of the Baroque house. After the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, Deleuze regards one of the major innovations of the Baroque vis-à-vis the early Renaissance to be the total separation of the exterior and interior of a building so that they no longer have anything to do with each other: “Baroque architecture, he writes, can be defined by this severing of the façade from the inside, of the interior from the exterior, and the autonomy of the interior from the independence of the exterior” (28). Yet, he again adds the

Leibnizian twist that the inside and outside must somehow conform to one another and, once again, the conceptual apparatus that makes possible this correspondence is the fold. To put it in Deleuze's words, the Baroque fold "separates or moves between matter and soul, the façade and the closed room, the outside and the inside," because it is "a virtuality that never stops dividing itself, the line of inflection is actualized in the soul but realized in matter, each one on its own side" (35). If Schmitt's reading of Hobbes's frontispiece recognizes that the Baroque façade is something more than a mere external or superficial appearance that conceals the true, internal essence of the building --- it is "not a 'mere' façade; mere illusion or appearance," he writes, "it is also prestige, glory, honor, representation, omnipotence" (*Glossarium*, 39-40), then Deleuze's own Leibnizian Baroque arguably radicalizes this immanent relation or communication between interiority and exteriority: every external façade conforms with, indeed belongs to, its own interiorization within every closed windowless room. For Deleuze, what we call the intimate or unadorned "inside" --- whether it be the Cartesian subject, the Hobbesian sovereign or the "pure nucleus of power" unmasked by liberalism beneath the Baroque façade of dominion [*Herrschaft*] --- is nothing but the surplus or excess of this infinite outside doubling back upon itself. In this sense, what we call Deleuzian "sovereignty" consists less in the gesture of drawing a curtain --- of policing a border or threshold --- between the inside and the outside than of *making* new folds in the outside itself: the inside *is* the outside, so to speak, turned inside out.

Curtainology

In and amongst his many other uncompleted projects, Walter Benjamin apparently once planned something called a "*rideaologie*": "Today I've obtained significant results in my study of curtains," he writes to Greta Karplus from Ibiza in May, 1933, "for a curtain separated us from the balcony that looked out on the city and the sea."¹⁰ To judge by his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (2006) Benjamin seems to have been fascinated, one is even tempted to say haunted, by *Vorhänge* from a very early age: a child who "stands behind the doorway curtain" in a game of hide-and-seek, as he recalls in the fragment called "Hiding Places", "himself becomes something white that flutters, a ghost".¹¹ It often appears as if the curtain occupies a privileged position in the secret life of objects, ornaments and accoutrements experienced by the young Benjaminian *flanêur*. As he recalls in another vignette called "A Specter," Benjamin also had a childhood dream about a ghost who resided behind the "shoddy violet plush-curtain" in his parents' bedroom and stole silks. For the young Benjamin, what lay behind this curtain was a curious psychosexual *sanctum sanctorum*: "the darkness behind the curtain-door was infathomable," he writes, but illuminated by "the infamous pendant of translucent paradise that opened itself to me with my mother's toilette closet" (*Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, 101). If the Benjaminian curtain is here a psychological threshold between fantasy and the real, it will also come to represent the *political* threshold between the private individual and collective history. In "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin accuses the nineteenth century bourgeois Parisian, living in one of the new apartment buildings erected under Louis-Philippe, of effectively having drawn her curtains on the outside world: "To have lived in these interiors was to have woven a dense fabric about oneself, to have secluded oneself within a spider's web, in whose toils world events hang loosely suspended like many insect bodies sucked dry."¹²

To obtain the "significant results" in his study of curtains mentioned in the letter to Karplus, Benjamin undertook a very particular kind of fieldwork: he spent the day smoking opium with the writer and translator Jean Selz at the latter's home in the old town of Ibiza. It is in this set of notes towards his legendary, albeit once again unfinished, project on drugs that the German thinker re-immerses himself in the "*Vorhängewelt*" --- the curtained world --- of his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*.¹³ As he writes in his "Crock Notes [*Crocknotizen*]" (1933), the opium smoker is a connoisseur, not of the depths, but the *surface* of things: "There is no more valid legitimation of crock [Benjamin's code word for opium --- AB] than the conclusion of having

suddenly penetrated, with its help, that most hidden, generally most inaccessible world of surfaces that is constituted by the ornament.”¹⁴ For Benjamin, as we will see, the smoker of hashish --- who also dwells permanently behind drawn curtains and detests sunlight, fresh air, the great outdoors --- transforms the entirely passive nihilism of the self-enclosed bourgeois subject into an active, indeed diabolical, nihilism: “Such nihilism is the innermost core of bourgeois cosiness,” he writes in the *Arcades Project*, “a mood that in hashish intoxication concentrates to satanic contentment” (*Arcades Project*, I2). If bourgeois domestic interiority seeks to absolutely exclude the “outside” world --- or to domesticate it into merely another interiority very much like itself --- the hashish-smoker, by contrast, seems to turn that interiority inside out like the fingers of a glove: he inhabits an internal subjective space so intense that, as we will see, it paradoxically becomes external or radically alien to him. In Benjamin’s drug experiments, the medium of this becoming-outside of the inside is, once again, the curtain.

If a bourgeois private individual living in her nineteenth century domestic interior weaves “a dense fabric” around herself to keep the city out, Jean Selz, Benjamin’s companion in the opium experiment, recalls that the smoker instead experiences a curious *fabrication* --- a quite literal “becoming-fabric” --- of the city. To return to the scene of Benjamin’s *rideaologie* --- curtain, balcony, city, sea --- we must unpack an inexplicable set of phenomenological reductions in which subject and object, gazer and gazed are increasingly folded into one another. First, the smoker gazing upon the billowing curtain begins to see it as a kind of spatial or visual equivalent to an Aeolian Harp which the invisible, sensual world endows with visible form: “Curtains are interpreters of the language of the wind,” he writes, “They give to its every breath the form and sensuality of feminine forms” (“Crock Notes,” 82). Yet, this subject-object relation is almost immediately folded back on itself as the smoker becomes a decadent avatar of the Kantian transcendental subject whose *a priori* conditions of cognition --- “the curtain” --- inevitably govern or pattern the appearance of sensible perceptions (“the city”). For Benjamin, a patterned or filigreed curtain “will in some measure supply the smoker with patterns, which he lays on the landscape in order to transform it in the oddest ways” (“Crock Notes,” 82). Finally, and more speculatively, however, I would also want to recall Howard Caygill’s hypothesis that this Kantian transcendental synthesis within Benjaminian experience may *itself* be nothing more than the “fold” of a larger natural or cosmic synthesis of city, sky and sea that imposes its own speculative conditions --- its “fabric” --- upon the conditioning subject.¹⁵ In his fascinating memoir of Benjamin’s opium experiments, which is worth citing at length here, Jean Selz captures this uncanny process whereby the smoker begins to encounter an exteriority woven “inside” her very subjectivity:

The view from the open window, through the white muslin curtain, was the repeated focus of [Benjamin’s] musings. The terraced roofs, the curve of the bay, and the line of distant mountains, captured by the curtain or swathed in its folds, undulated along with it when it stirred --- ever so slightly --- in the hot evening air. The city and the curtain soon ceased to be separate things. And if the city had become fabric, that fabric had become the stuff of a garment. It was *our* garment, but was moving ever farther away from us. We then observed that *the opium was divesting us of the country in which we were living*. Benjamin added the humorous remark that we were engaging in “curtainology” [*rideaologie*] (“An Experiment by Walter Benjamin,” 151-2).

What --- if anything --- might lie behind Benjamin’s stoned curtainology? To answer this question, I want to recall a famous passage from his essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929) in which Benjamin soberly speaks of a “*profane illumination*, a materialist, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else, can give an introductory lesson”: what shines through the curtain of *rideaologie*, in other words, is always politics.¹⁶ It is worth remembering here that Benjamin’s drug trips were rarely solitary experiences, but rather communal, collaborative projects carried out together with like-minded comrades like Jean Selz and Ernst Bloch. As he recounts to Greta Karplus,

his pharmacological experiment was also a political --- indeed a communist --- experiment in which master and servant, abstract and material labour and even nature and history were woven together upon a single horizontal curtain: “The role of assistant, which requires great care, was divided between us [Benjamin and Selz --- AB], in such a way that each of us was at the same time servant and beneficiary of the service,” he writes, “and the conversation was interwoven with the acts of assistance in the same way that the threads which colour the sky in a Gobelin tapestry are interwoven with the battle represented in the foreground” (*Gesammelte Briefe* 4, 116-20). Yet, it is not just the “human solidarity” enjoyed by the participants that proves the political valence of intoxication; this special variety of “really-existing” communism is to be found in the relational phenomenology of *being* intoxicated. For Benjamin, what is ultimately at stake in the persona of the Ibizan opium smoker, gazing down on the city through the curtained window, is a kind of immanent political critique of the bourgeois Parisian property-owner who seeks to --- quite literally --- curtain themselves off from the city in their extravagantly decorated domestic interior. By weaving the fabric of the city around themselves in the same way as the bourgeois property owner --- even to the point of turning that fabric into a “garment” they can wear almost like a believer’s prayer shawl or *tallith* --- the smoker comes to the contrary conclusion that this garment can never quite become their own “property”: “It was *our* garment, but was moving ever farther away from us,” Selz cryptically observes, “*the opium was divesting us of the country in which we were living.*” If the bourgeois subject’s curtain seeks to create a dividing line between interiority and exteriority --- constituting both subject and object, proximity and distance --- the smoker’s garment is, on the contrary, constitutive of the exposure of interiority to an absolute exteriority extending beyond city, state or world *ad infinitum*: what is or should be most proper, intimate and internal to subjectivity becomes irretrievably improper, distant, alien. In a kind of dialectic negative of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie’s domestic interior in which there is no longer any outside, Benjamin’s opium smoker’s den reveals to us that, *mutatis mutandis*, there is no inside --- that the outside is already inside “us”, that it is us.

Le rideau

In *Glas* (1974), Jacques Derrida confesses that he always finds his father’s proper name --- and therefore his own --- hiding behind one particular word: “*Derrière*: every time the word comes first, if written therefore after a period and with a capital letter, something inside me used to start to recognize there my father’s name, in golden letters on his tomb, even before he was there,” he writes, “*A fortiori* when I read *Derrière le rideau* [Behind the curtain]”.¹⁷ To return to the vast body of work signed by the proper name “Derrida,” we find a sustained and remarkable reflection upon the question of what, if anything, lies *derrière* our philosophical and theological curtains: *Glas* itself re-reads Hegel’s Christian supersessionary account of the lifting of the veil of the Temple in Exodus; “The Double Session” (1970) traces the figure of the hymen, threshold and curtain in the poetics of Mallarmé; “To Speculate --- on Freud” (1980) re-analyzes Freud’s famous interpretation of his grandson’s *fort/da* game via the figure of the child’s curtained bed or crib; and “A Silkworm of One’s Own” (1996) explores the possibility of what it calls a different history of truth --- quite apart from the exhausted Greek and Christian concept of truth as *aletheia* from Plato to Heidegger --- in the Jewish prayer shawl or *tallith*. If we can draw any shared theme from these diverse series of texts, events and signatures, it is perhaps a certain reflection on a shared “Jewish” inheritance or law --- descending from father to son --- which, contrary to Christian iconoclasm, insists upon the *irreducibility* of the curtain: “You poor thing,” one of the voices in “A Silkworm” chides the other, “finishing with the veil will always have been the very movement of the veil; an unveiling, unveiling oneself, re-affirming the veil in unveiling.”¹⁸ In seeking to remove it once and for all, we paradoxically remain *derrière le rideau*.

To pull back the speculative curtain upon Judaism --- which he notoriously sees as nothing more than an unhappy, alienated religion of the law --- Hegel’s early “Spirit of Christianity and

its Fate" (1798) recalls the Roman General Pompey the Great's discovery of what actually lay inside the Holy of Holies at the Temple: "After Pompey had approached the heart of the temple, the center [*Mittelpunkt*] of adoration," Hegel writes, "he might well have been astonished on entering the arcanum to find himself deceived so far as some of his expectations were concerned, and, for the rest, in an empty room [*in einem leeren Raum*]." ¹⁹ For Hegel, as ventriloquized by Derrida, this empty space in the Temple comes to signify the absolute and unbridgeable divide or curtain between God and Man --- the infinite and the finite, the transcendental and the sensible --- that plagues Judaism itself:

The Jewish hearth forms an empty house. Certainly, sensible to the absence of all sensible form, the Jews have tried to produce an object that gave in some way rise, place, and figure to the infinite. But this place and this figure have a singular structure: the structure encloses its void within itself, shelters only its own proper interiorized desert, opens onto nothing, confines nothing, contains as its treasure only nothingness: a hole, an empty spacing, a death. A death or a dead person, because according to Hegel space is death and because this space is also an absolute emptiness. Nothing behind [*derrière*] the curtains (*Glas*, 47).

If Hegel notoriously claims that it will only be with the birth of the incarnate God of Christianity (whose tearing of the veil of the Temple is clearly anticipated by Pompey's own act of desecration) that a new religion will be able to fill this empty space between God and Man, *Glas* dedicates itself to demonstrating the impossibility of this triumphal Christian supersessionary philosophy of religion: "Judaism" becomes one of Derrida's strategic answers (alongside woman, the bastard child and, of course, the homosexual Jean Genet himself) to the question of what structurally "remains" outside of, and unsublated by, Hegelian *Savoir absolu* (*Glas*, 1a). In seeking to reveal that Judaism has no "inner truth" to reveal, Hegel remains committed to the theory of truth as revelation --- and so the curtain remains paradoxically in place.

If the absence of anything behind the veil of the Temple is apparently final proof of Judaism's fatal commitment to a purely abstract or formal law handed down by an unknowable lawgiver, and the reason why it will require sublation by Christianity, it is intriguing to find Hegel repeating the same metaphor of the "empty room behind the curtain" a few years later in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806) to demonstrate the --- equally necessary --- supersession of post-Kantian transcendental philosophy by his own speculative philosophy. It is the Protestant Kant who perversely plays the role of the "Jew" to Hegel's own "Christian" in the *Phenomenology* because, upon the latter's reading, Kantian transcendental philosophy ends up repeating Judaism's enslavement to the absolute law of an unknowable "non-world." As Derrida himself observes (though he only refers in passing to the passage I cite below from the *Phenomenology* in a footnote to "The Double Session"), Kantianism is "structurally a Judaism" in Hegel's system because it still promulgates a "formal and abstract morality (*Moralität*)" (*Glas*, 33-4a). Yet, by this logic, what Derrida calls the unsublatable Jewish "remnant" [*reste*] in Hegel's own philosophy might take the form of a certain residual, indeed Kantian, dualism. To Kant's defining claim that the noumenon remains unknowable to consciousness, Hegel famously replies in "Force and The Understanding" in the *Phenomenology* that, behind the curtain of phenomena, consciousness still only ever experiences itself:

This curtain [*Vorhänge*] [of appearance] hanging before the inner world is therefore drawn away...It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we go behind it ourselves, as much in order that we may see, as there may be something behind there that can be seen.²⁰

By arguing that the allegedly transcendental divide between the phenomenal and the noumenal is in fact already immanent to the speculative movement of consciousness itself, Hegel effectively presents himself as a nineteenth century version of that proto-Christian iconoclast Pompey the Great, tearing down the “Jewish” veil of the Kantian Temple. For Hegel as well, what lies behind the curtain of transcendental philosophy is not the invisible object of the thing-in-itself but rather an empty room waiting to be filled by whatever speculative consciousness itself will put there. In revealing that “nothing” lies behind the curtain of the Temple but the space of consciousness itself, however, Hegel’s Christian iconoclasm arguably still remains within the revelatory structure of Judaism: what is “revealed” may no longer be the unrepresentable non-world of an irretrievably transcendental God, of course, but it still remains the non-world behind that non-world, the absolute nothingness concealed by that nothing.

What does Derrida himself find --- or not find --- *derrière le rideau*? To turn briefly to his late essay “A Silkworm of One’s Own (Points of View Stitched on the Other Veil)” --- a dialogue or polylogue between at least two (Jewish and Christian, female and male?) anonymous voices -- we find one more attempt to locate within Judaism what he calls a different “*verdict* [a *verdictum* or saying of the truth, but also a *ver-dit* or saying of the silkworm --- AB]” that breaks with the long history of truth as (un-)veiling from Plato to Heidegger: “This event belongs to a quite different space, it comes following a different order, that order under which comes what I am calling the *verdict*,” he writes, “It is neither a torn cloth, nor a lifted curtain nor a split veil” (“A Silkworm of One’s Own,” 322).²¹ It particularly seeks to recuperate Judaism as the religion of the law --- exemplified by the empty room of the Temple --- from the Christian supersessionary caricature to which it is subjected in Hegel’s “Spirit of Christianity.” As Derrida observes, “absolute knowledge [*savoir absolu*] will never accept this unique separation, that in the veiled place of the Wholly Other, nothing should present itself, that there be Nothing there that is, nothing that is present” (317). However, “A Silkworm of One’s Own” finds a text or textile that allegedly breaks with this exhausted philosophical and theological dialectic of veiling and unveiling, occultation and revelation, in the seemingly modest form of Derrida’s own Jewish prayer shawl or *tallith*. For Derrida, the *tallith* --- which is neither a veil nor an article of clothing, a property nor a possession, an object of sight nor of knowledge, natural nor artificial but a singular and tactile “second skin” or even a silkworm-style secretion of the body --- breaks with the history of the veil precisely because it stands for the absolute past of a Law that precedes all truth, obscurity or revelation but which, nonetheless, we must obey: “It veils or hides nothing, it shows or announces no Thing, it promises the intuition of nothing. Before seeing or knowing [*le voir ou le savoir*], before fore-seeing or fore-knowing, it is worn in memory of the law” (326). If Derrida’s essay is careful to never suggest that the *tallith* stands totally “outside” the history of the veil --- he concedes at one point that we still “see *through*” it albeit “differently than (*through*) a veil or behind a veil to be lifted” (338) --- the question remains of who or what exactly we do see through the prayer shawl ---and one (curiously Hegelian) answer is not God, truth or revelation, but ourselves, whoever “we” may be: ““One says ‘*my* shawl’ only by obeying [YHWH’s] order. And by beginning to wonder: who am I who have already said ‘here I am’? What is the self?” (327). Perhaps this is why “A Silkworm of One’s Own” (like so many of Derrida’s so-called writing on “religion”) takes the form of a singular or intimate spiritual confession or “autobiography” --- even a set of “spiritual exercises” --- in which the singular events and experiences that go to make up the “I” are revealed to be already exposed, in their very autonomy, to an unknowable heteronomy that precedes and exceeds them. In positioning ourselves rather than God *derrière le rideau*, Derrida’s prayer shawl once again turns the logic of the veil inside out: what the *tallith* both conceals and reveals is not the alterity of the wholly other but the outside *within* ipseity, propriety, the self.

Behind the curtain

In Book 35 of his *Naturalis Historiae* (77-9), “An Account of Paintings and Colours,” Pliny the Elder tells the story of a competition between the renowned Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius to determine which was the greater artist. To quickly recall Pliny’s tale from Chapter 36, “Artists Who Painted with the Pencil,” Zeuxis paints a picture of a bunch of grapes so life-like that they even deceive a flock of birds, who immediately fly down and start pecking at the painting. Yet, Pliny relates, Parrhasius’s own picture happens to be concealed behind a curtain, which Zeuxis --- delighted by the positive verdict passed on the verisimilitude of his work by the birds --- demands be drawn back, so that his rival’s effort can be judged. In seeking vainly to get behind the curtain and view the picture, though, Zeuxis realises that Parrhasius has deceived him, and so he has lost the competition: the curtain, of course, *was* the painting.²²

To be sure, Pliny’s story of the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius has been re-told many times but perhaps the most revealing contemporary interpretation is Jacques Lacan’s claim in the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1978) that it stages the “triumph of the gaze over the eye”.²³ “If one wishes to deceive a man” it is not a question of simply painting an image of a bunch of grapes that, to the naked eye, are indistinguishable from the real thing --- but rather of satisfying the desire of the gaze to see that which lies *beyond* the image: “what one presents to him is the painting of a veil, that is to say, something that incites him to ask what is behind it” (*Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 112). In other words, what fools the eye and seduces the gaze is not the verisimilitude of the painted curtain but the desire --- which is here cast in psychoanalytic terms but is nonetheless threaded through the history of political theology --- that there must be *something* behind the curtain.

If we return to the artwork with which we began this essay, Hobbes scholars have proposed a number of different answers to the question of what might lie behind the mysterious embroidered curtain on the frontispiece to *Leviathan* --- from a political theological Holy of Holies (Bredenkamp) to a profane, liberal Wizard of Oz frantically pulling the levers of power (Schmitt) --- but I want to conclude by proposing that the English philosopher’s *magnum opus* might itself be seen as a Parrhasiusian work of political *trompe-l’oeil*.²⁴ To put it in Lacanian terms, what is “beyond” the image is already contained within the image --- indeed *is* the image. In a Baroque political equivalent to paintings like Adriaean van der Spelt and Frans van Mieris’ *Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain* (1658) (Figure 4) --- a homage to Parrhasius which was painted only 8 years after the publication of *Leviathan* --- Hobbes’ curtain is *itself* the work of art and, more precisely still, that work of modern art called the political state.

What would it mean, though, if everything we deem to be “outside” the Hobbesian Commonwealth in space and time is paradoxically folded *inside* its warp and woof? To end with just one example of what such an *inexplicable* Commonwealth might look like, I would recall Giorgio Agamben’s intriguing proposition in *Homo Sacer* (1995) that the Hobbesian state of nature is not “a prejuridical condition that is indifferent to the law of the city, but rather the exception and the threshold that constitutes and dwells within it.”²⁵ For Agamben, the Hobbesian Commonwealth represents less the exclusion or expulsion of the state of nature, in other words, than what he calls the state of nature’s “incorporation [*inglobamento*, literally the absorption or inclusion --- AB]” into, and as, the political state in the form of the state of exception (*Homo Sacer*, 35). In Agamben’s logic of inclusive exclusion, Hobbes’ curtain between the state of nature and society would thus signify less a portal or threshold between the outside and the inside than this becoming-inside or *inglobamento* of the outside itself: the curtain *is* the Commonwealth.

¹ Horst Bredekamp, “Thomas Hobbes’s Visual Strategies,” in the *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes’s Leviathan* ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29-60, 32.

² See Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 95-118 for a discussion of Hobbes and the political theology of sacrifice.

³ Carl Schmitt, entry for November 12, 1947, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1957-51* ed. Eberhard Freiherr von Medem (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 39-40. I am indebted to Antonio Cerella for drawing this reference to my attention.

⁴ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol* trans. by George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵ Jean Seltz, “An Experiment by Walter Benjamin” in Walter Benjamin, *Oh Hashish* ed. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 147-55, 151-2. In a 1933 opium experiment with Selz, as we will see below, Benjamin allegedly claimed that “we were engaging in ‘curtainology [rideaologie].”

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* trans. by Tom Conley (London and New York: Athlone, 1993).

⁷ Alain Badiou, “Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque,” in Constantin V. Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski, eds. *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 51-69, 52.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. by Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 96-7.

⁹ Gottfried Leibniz, “A New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances and also of the Union that Exists Between the Soul and the Body,” trans. by Jonathan Bennett <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/leibniz1695c.pdf>, 1-8, 6.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 vols., ed. by Christophe GÖdde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1995-2000), 4: 216-20.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 99.

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), I2, 6.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *Oh Hashish* ed. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006). In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin spoke of completing a “truly exceptional” study of hashish (“Translator’s Foreword”, *On Hashish*, xiii) but apparently all that survives are the essays, protocols and other fragments collected in this posthumous volume.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Crock Notes” in *Oh Hashish* ed. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 81-5, 81.

¹⁵ See Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1995) for a classic account of Benjamin’s highly experimental synthesis of Kantian and Hegelian, transcendental and speculative, theories of experience.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” in *Reflections* ed. and intr. by Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace 1978), 177-92, 179.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Glas* trans. by John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 68b.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, “A Silkworm of One’s Own (Points of View Stitched on the Other Veil)” in *Acts of Religion* ed. by Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 309-55, 314

¹⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, “The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate” in *Early Theological Writings* trans. by T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 182-301, 192.

²⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 103.

²¹ See Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004) for an extended discussion of Derrida's philosophy of religion.

²² Pliny (1952), *Natural History Books XXXIII–XXXV*, trans. H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1952), XXXVI, 65, 308–10. See Kathryn Murphy, "Drawing the Curtain." In *Apollo* 15 August 2015 <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/drawing-the-curtain/> for a discussion of representations of the curtain in art from Pliny to the present to which I am indebted.

²³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1978), 103.

²⁴ See also Quentin Skinner, "Hobbes on Representation," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 13 (2): 155-84 for a reading of Hobbes on representation in the light of Pliny.

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 105-6.