

Faculty of English

**The Spirit and the Letter of Hegel:
Irony, Recollection, Critique**

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DECLARATION

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

ABSTRACT

The Spirit and the Letter of Hegel: Irony, Recollection, Critique by Robert Lucas Scott

This dissertation defines, analyses, and puts into practice a theory of speculative reading as developed from the work of G. W. F. Hegel, and assesses its importance for literary theory. Hegel's relation to literary theory is seemingly paradoxical. On the one hand, 'theory' often names that which has established itself against figures like Hegel and all that he ostensibly stood for: the imperium of reason, systematicity, 'absolute idealism,' and the end of art. And yet, this opposition notwithstanding, it is frequently claimed that literary theory cannot escape Hegel, and rests upon a number of concepts and ways of thinking that were prefigured by him. *The Spirit and the Letter of Hegel* seeks to complicate this debate, first by claiming that Hegel's influence on literary theory can only be registered in the way in which the latter has made use of certain concepts or arguments as abstracted from their more dynamic presentation in Hegel's writings. It also argues, however, that by reading Hegel 'speculatively'—that is, by being alive to the experience of the content as it progressively (and sometimes regressively) unfolds—Hegel's phenomenology yields a literary theory, and more specifically, a theory and practice of reading. This argument will be conducted across three main chapters and one extended concluding chapter, organised conceptually around four essential yet overlooked modalities of Hegel's dialectic: irony, recollection, 'the spirit and the letter', and critique. Through close engagement with the work of Hegel and a range of his readers (from Theodor Adorno, to Gillian Rose, and Robert Brandom) these chapters explore what Hegelian speculative reading might reveal about the relationships between text and meaning, the role of the critic, and the critical work that literature itself might be capable of. In particular, it seeks to cut through current debates concerning 'the limits of critique' in literary studies. In recent years, the theory and practice of critique has been increasingly cast into doubt as a mode of interpretation, and questioned concerning its political and ethical efficacy. Principally, it has been accused of being overly detached and methodological, tending to diagnose the text's disavowed symptoms at expense of the text itself. I will argue, however, that Hegel provides a model of speculative reading which is critical without succumbing to methodologism or pretensions of mastery and detachment; and one which prioritises the reading experience without succumbing to the implicit subjectivism of the so-called 'postcritical.'

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We learn by experience that we meant something other than we meant to mean.

INTRODUCTION

Hegel and Reading

The relationship between Hegel and literary theory is both severely contested and seemingly paradoxical. On the one hand, ‘theory’ often names that which has established itself against figures like Hegel and all that he ostensibly stood for: the imperium of reason, systematicity, identity at the expense of difference, ‘absolute idealism’, and the end of art. And yet, this opposition notwithstanding, it is also frequently claimed—and often by the same critics—that literary theory cannot escape Hegel. In spite of itself, it is argued, literary theory in practically all of its guises owes a profound debt to his philosophy, and rests upon a number of concepts and ways of thinking that were prefigured by him. The critic Paul de Man states this claim most directly: ‘Whether we know it, or like it, or not, most of us are Hegelians. [...] Few thinkers have so many disciples who never read a word of their master’s writings.’¹

It is the aim of this dissertation, first, to complicate this account. It argues that while Hegel has indeed had a profound influence on literary theory, this influence can only be registered in the way in which the latter has made use of certain concepts or arguments as abstracted from their more dynamic presentation in Hegel’s writings. This ‘use’ of Hegel has been very productive, with pivotal examples from the history of literary criticism ranging from György Lukács’s theory of the novel to Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction (the latter of which is not as anti-Hegelian as is often presumed). Such a procedure of abstraction, however, tends towards reducing ‘Hegel’ to a series of propositions or positions; towards selectively rendering his thought as a methodology; or else towards taking a concept from Hegel (be it ‘history’, ‘recognition’, or ‘difference’) and assuming it as the quasi-transcendental precondition for its critical argument. As such, these attempts necessarily overlook what is perhaps the greatest innovation of Hegel’s philosophy: a presuppositionless phenomenology which is both a theory *and* a presentation of experience. By abstracting from the presentation of the experience to its theory, you lose both. By beginning with a first principle, taken on authority, you do not begin at all. Thought is reduced, in Hegel’s words, to a ‘monotonous formalism’ and to ‘lifeless determinations’, ‘like a skeleton with small bits of

¹ Paul de Man, ‘Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*’, in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. by Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 91-104 (pp. 92-93).

paper stuck all over it' (*PhG* §51).² It is on this point that Hegel's philosophy, particularly in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), itself approaches literature: its content cannot be simply abstracted from the singular experience of reading it. The mode of reading engendered by this *speculative* experience has been overlooked by literary theory; and it is for this reason that literary theory has never been truly Hegelian.

This dissertation will also argue, then, that by reading Hegel 'speculatively'—that is, by being alive to the experience of the content as it progressively (and sometimes regressively) unfolds—Hegel's phenomenology yields a literary theory, and more specifically, a theory and practice of reading. Again, this is not a theory to be produced or taken possession of through the abstraction of certain concepts to be curated, packaged, and delivered over as a commodity to literary studies. Instead, it is a result to be achieved only through the experience of the incessant irony and disruption of the dialectic—that is, of reading Hegel. This is because Hegel's phenomenology is an innovation first in form, not content, whereby the reader is repeatedly led into accepting false certainties which are then comically undermined, forced to confront what was at first unwittingly excluded. While much has already been made of the importance of the reading experience for reading *Hegel*, particularly with reference to his development of the so-called 'speculative proposition', this dissertation argues that the speculative experience of reading Hegel is productive of a mode of reading *tout court*.

This will be conducted across three main chapters and one extended concluding chapter. The main chapters are organised conceptually around three essential yet overlooked modalities of Hegel's dialectic: irony, recollection, and 'the spirit and the letter'. They are chapters which take the form of extended readings of Hegel, while also taking the reading of Hegel as their central thematic question. The concluding chapter, meanwhile, equipped with these experiences of reading Hegel, will turn more explicitly to literary theory by addressing recent and ongoing debates surrounding the 'limits of critique' and the so-called 'postcritical' in literary studies.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). References to this work will be given, as above, in-text by paragraph number with the abbreviation: *PhG*. Where citations of Hegel's works give both English and German sources, unless otherwise specified the German will be referenced by volume and page number from G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, 20 vols., ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), with the abbreviation: *Werke*.

I. The universal irony of the world

On the 27th August 1801, his thirty-first birthday, Hegel defended his doctoral dissertation ‘on the Orbits of the Planets.’ As part of this defence, he submitted twelve theses to debate with his examiners, the first of which was: ‘*Contradictio est regula veri, non contradictio falsi.*’ Contradiction is the rule of truth, non-contradiction is false.³

The argument of the present doctoral dissertation is also guided by a set of interrelated theses, the first of which also concerns the nature of truth. This is an appropriate place to start because it is by grasping Hegel’s conception of truth that one can understand the importance of the experience of reading Hegel to the truth of what is read. These three following theses do not correspond to the three main chapters of the dissertation. Rather, they guide and run through each of them.

Thesis (i): The truth for Hegel is ironic.

This first thesis argues that the truth, for Hegel, is ironic, and can only be grasped and expressed as such. This thesis may seem eccentric, not least because, as we shall see, there is nowhere that Hegel is more incensed and scathing than when critiquing the ironic disposition of his contemporaries. Such a disposition, characterised in Hegel’s view by a vain subjectivity, lazy relativism, and cynical indifference towards reality, consists, he claims, ‘in destroying and dissolving everything that proposes to make itself objective.’⁴ Unsurprisingly, then, the reception of Hegel, from Søren Kierkegaard to Robert Brandom, has usually taken it for granted that he was opposed to irony per se.

This dissertation will argue, however, that this prevalent misconception has damaged our understanding of Hegel’s philosophy and its import for literary theory. Far from representing the philosophical anti-ironist *par excellence*, Hegel is in fact a deeply ironic thinker. Crucially, this irony is radically opposed to that of the Jena romantics whom Hegel so despised, as well as to the postmodern irony which still dominates much critical and cultural

³ See G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Philosophical Dissertation on the Orbits of the Planets (1801), Preceded by the 12 Theses Defended on August 27, 1801’, trans. by Pierre Adler, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 12 (1987), 269-309 (p. 276).

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols., trans. by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), II, 601.

discourse today. Hegelian irony is not an intellectual disposition or a rhetorical figure. It does not pertain merely to an attitude or to language; of saying one thing when you mean another, for example. Rather, it describes the nature of truth itself.

One can have statements of fact which do not change, statements which are qualified once more information is acquired, statements whose meanings vary depending on their contexts, or else statements which turn out to be false. But such statements do not concern truth; this is because ‘truth’, for Hegel, always refers self-reflexively to its own realisation and development. Hegel is less interested, therefore, in asking ‘Is X true or false?’ than he is in asking ‘What is the truth of X?’ As Hegel argues in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is precisely this former tendency to always be asking whether something is true or false that is itself false: ‘this fear of erring is already the error itself’ (*PhG* §74). This claim does not affirm a kind of lukewarm compromise or relativism, for which there is some truth in everything. Instead, the truth of X, in order for X to have any truth at all, must always be moving beyond itself, beyond its own apparent limits, and thus becoming something other than what it once was or how it first appeared: not relativism, but extremism. As Theodor W. Adorno notes: ‘[F]or Hegel mediation is never a middle element between extremes [...] instead, mediation takes place in and the through the extremes, in the extremes themselves. This is the radical aspect of Hegel, which is incompatible with any advocacy of moderation.’⁵ In order for a thing to stay true to itself, it must become something other; as it comes into itself, it at once becomes something different. This is the crux of Hegel’s proposition that ‘essentially “the true” is subject. [...] [I]t is only the dialectical movement, this course of self-engendering, advancing, and then returning into itself’ (*PhG* §65). It is also what he means when he writes, to introduce his dissertation: ‘*Contradictio est regula veri, non contradictio falsi.*’ Without this absolute contradiction there would be no truth, for truth is not a matter of fact, but is the activity of striving to become true.

Why, though, call this ‘irony’? Why not just stick to ‘contradiction’, or else, perhaps, to ‘dialectic’? Aside from one select comment in his lectures on the history of philosophy, in which he describes the dialectic as the ‘universal irony of the world,’⁶ the word ‘*Ironie*’ rarely

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 8.

⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 3 vols., trans. by E. S. Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), I: *Greek Philosophy to Plato*, p. 400.

appears in Hegel's vocabulary unless used with reference to the Jena romanticism which he viewed as anathema to his own philosophical system. This dissertation, however, will recover this notion of the dialectic as the 'universal irony of the world' in order to highlight the *dramatic* nature of the dialectic. The ironic truth of something, for Hegel, can never be known in advance, but must be discovered and experienced. Truth must take us by surprise. To say, then, that the truth, for Hegel, is ironic, and can only be grasped and expressed as such, is not to say that the truth must be grasped and expressed ironically. Hegel is insistent that one must never try to comprehend or communicate the truth with ironic distance, as if what is said is not really meant. On the contrary, the fact of Hegelian irony demands that we pursue the truth of something with absolute naïvety and absolute conviction—if only, through experience, to confront and accept what our first impressions and intentions excluded. We must, in Hegel's words, 'give force to what is'; we must 'set[] aside every reflection, simply to take up *what is there before us*'—not as a capitulation to the status quo but, on the contrary, to realise the truth of what that apparent stability and stasis obscures.⁷ Often the term 'dialectic' is purged of this necessary experiential component, this necessary element of surprise. However, to understand the dialectic from the outside, to have the pretence of knowing in advance what the truth of something is or will turn out to be, without following and experiencing this truth as it unravels, is to merely formalise it as a rigid and inevitable schema. To truly grasp the irony of the dialectic, on the other hand, which is the irony of truth, Hegel asks only that we give ourselves up to it, in all its contingency and surprise, and go to the end. Hegelian irony is then a dramatic irony redoubled, in that we are the ones who, while assuming the position of knowing spectators observing the action, repeatedly find, but always too late, that we are the ones up on stage.

Essential to this understanding of truth is also the notion of recollection. To 'go beyond' something, for Hegel, does not entail a simple departure or abandonment of it in order to make way for the new. Instead, the new always involves an interiorisation and a recollection (the German word '*Erinnerung*' encapsulates both of these meanings) of its past. The truth is also ironic, therefore, insofar as it always stands in critical and contradictory relation to what it was before. Recollection is what is required to both suspend the irony of

⁷ Ibid.; G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. by George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 47.

this contradiction between the past and its present iterations, and to have the resolve, the *Entschluß*, to intervene—that is, to realise the spirit in its progress. It is the task of isolating and taking to the end the truth of something, of conferring necessity and meaning on a contingent happening. Therefore, while the irony and surprise of the dialectic suggest the *passivity* of spirit—its inability to predict, prescribe, or proscribe its own future; ‘recollection’ names the simultaneous work and *activity* of realising the ironic truth of the past in the present.⁸ Every sublation or *Aufhebung* is a labour of both systematic and selective memory which works through its own past in order to realise its specific determination and meaning. To give oneself up to the irony of the dialectic, then, paradoxically involves a constant and strenuous effort. This couple of passivity and activity cannot be divorced.

Thesis (ii): The truth of Hegel is ironic.

The second thesis follows from the first. In a sense, it is the same as the first, but with specific reference to Hegel himself. It therefore helps to illuminate the first as its prime example. If Hegel’s conception of truth demands that it must be constantly going beyond itself—that in order to become more fully what it is, it must, ironically, become something else—then this conception must apply, in turn, to Hegel himself. In order to grasp the truth of Hegel today—or, put differently, to continue to pursue Hegelian speculative thinking—one must push Hegel to his extremes, even if that means going beyond any imagined authorial intentions or meanings. The efficacy of Hegel’s thinking demands that it must be susceptible to its own workings. In other words, the philosophy of Hegel is itself subject to the irony of the dialectic and the irony of truth; or, to continue the theatrical metaphor from before: Hegel is not the theatre director of spirit, orchestrating a drama which he has plotted from the beginning: he is up on stage with us. This raises significant questions, which will be addressed, concerning the ethical and political stakes of authorship and its relationship to authority and autonomy, where Hegel represents perhaps the most extreme case. How can Hegel ‘author’ the path of the dialectic without arrogating the authority to determine it? How

⁸ The importance of recollection for Hegel’s thinking is becoming an important theme in Hegel scholarship. See in particular: Angelica Nuzzo, *Memory, History, Justice in Hegel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Valentina Ricci and Federico Sanguinetti, eds, *Hegel on Recollection: Essays on the Concept of ‘Erinnerung’ in Hegel’s System* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013). It also receives considerable discussion in Robert B. Brandom’s recent *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s ‘Phenomenology’* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), which I critique below.

can one ‘give oneself up to the dialectic’ without dogmatically giving oneself up to ‘Hegel’ as an absolute authority and author?

There can be no such thing as an orthodox Hegelian: to take ‘what Hegel said’ as doctrine, to prioritise getting it absolutely clear in one’s head, as though it were a puzzle to be solved, or a body of work to be pinned down and mastered, means that the truth of Hegel stops. To be a Hegelian, which means to follow Hegel’s thinking on his own terms, we must go beyond them. This is why Hegel’s philosophy marks the end of philosophy only insofar as it affirms the speculative identity of philosophy with its own history and future. The history of philosophy is always complete and ended, but always retroactively altered by each new radical development or interruption.⁹

Crucially, this is not to license interpretative liberties whereby the truth of Hegel can be whatever his reader wants it to be. On the contrary, just as the truth *for* Hegel can only be approached by setting aside every reflection and taking up what is there before us in its stupid immediacy, if only, through experience, to discover what this immediacy obscures, the truth *of* Hegel can only be approached by reading him with what Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda call ‘a kind of mind-numbing literalism.’¹⁰ This is a totally different mode of reading to those that seek to modernise Hegel’s thought by asking of it ‘what is living and what is dead’ (as Benedetto Croce did in his eponymous study);¹¹ by rejecting in advance those elements of his thinking which seem now to be expendable; by trying to extract a spirit of Hegel from the embarrassing baggage that we have to sift through when reading him to the letter—be it God, metaphysics, or (perhaps the greatest offender) absolute knowing. To read in such a way is to read with critical detachment or ironic distance when, again, what reading Hegel demands is critical intimacy, to give oneself up to the drama of the experience of the dialectic. Similarly, however, just as to ask what is salvageable of Hegel can only ever end up with a deflated and

⁹ An interesting parallel can be found in T. S. Eliot’s conception of the literary canon: ‘[W]hat happens when a new work is created is something that happens to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.’ T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent (1917)’, in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), pp. 13-22 (p. 15). Slavoj Žižek also discusses this essay with reference to Hegel in *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2013) p. 209.

¹⁰ Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash—The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), p. 3.

¹¹ Benedetto Croce, *What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel*, trans. by Douglas Ainslie (London: Macmillan, 1915).

truncated version of him, to read Hegel to the letter and the letter alone is to merely construct a partial account of what the historical Hegel intended. It reduces speculative thinking, again, to a series of fixed positions frozen in time to be merely learnt and taken note of: Hegel's corpus—his dead body of work to be picked over.

How, then, to read Hegel with a 'mind-numbing literalism' but without succumbing to the tempting illusion of immediate or literal meaning? This dissertation will argue that it is only by first going through this dead letter and totally immersing oneself in it that the living spirit of Hegelian thinking might be realised. Only the most critically intimate or speculatively naïve reading might animate the truth of the text. The dead letter of Hegel's text, then, is not (as claimed by poststructuralists, from Derrida to Werner Hamacher) the troublesome material remains of the system preventing the final sublation into the heights of absolute knowing, but rather the very condition of such knowing, a knowing which is 'absolute' not because it is finally complete, but because it is fully alive.

While these repeated references to life and death may appear to be merely metaphorical (as they are for Croce), my use of the terms 'life' and 'death' in this dissertation will be in keeping with Hegel's own conception of life.¹² '[C]ontradiction,' Hegel writes in the *Logic*, 'is the root of all movement and life; it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, is possessed of instinct and activity.'¹³ This is because to be alive is to experience the fundamental discrepancy between what I am and what I ought to be, a discrepancy which drives me beyond myself. This 'ought' is not an externally prescribed purpose or imperative. Rather it is the internal purpose of life itself—that is, to be alive. The discrepancy, then, at its most fundamental is that life is mortal: life is indelibly marked by death. As Hegel writes of life in his *Philosophy of Nature*, it is 'the disparity between its [life's] finitude and universality' that is the 'original disease and the inborn germ

¹² 'Life' is becoming one of the most debated topics of Hegel scholarship, especially concerning its depiction in the *Logic*, and its import for critical and social theory. See in particular: J. M. Bernstein, 'To Be Is to Live, to Be Is to Be Recognized', in *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 175-217; Karen Ng, 'Ideology Critique from Hegel and Marx to Critical Theory,' *Constellations*, 22.3 (2015), 393-404; Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free* (London: Profile Books, 2019); Karen Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Jensen Suther, 'Back to Life? The Persistence of Hegel's Idealism (A Response to Karen Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic*)', *boundary 2*, 23 Sept. 2020.

¹³ Hegel, *Logic*, p. 382.

of death.¹⁴ Death is ‘life’s inequality to (it)self,’ as Derrida puts it (apropos Hegel).¹⁵ However, it is precisely this original disparity that is also life’s condition. Certainly, to be dead is to be dead—death in and for itself is the only true tautology, and to be totally tautological is to be dead; but to be alive without the immanence of death to life is to be dead too, for without this fundamental antagonism a thing does not have the drive to move beyond itself. Hence: for Hegel to be alive, he must go beyond himself.

Thesis (iii): A speculative reading of Hegel yields a speculative mode of reading.

This takes us to the third thesis, which argues that this way of reading Hegel, demanded by his presentation of the truth as ironic, yields, in turn, a Hegelian mode of reading. This argument will be made first with reference to Hegel’s idea of ‘the speculative proposition.’ The speculative proposition has traditionally been understood as Hegel’s development of a new kind of writing by which he might better present the ‘plasticity’ and dynamism of the dialectic (*PhG* §64). Indeed, this understanding encapsulates much of what is central to this dissertation. Hegel’s speculative proposition is fundamentally ironic, in that it must be misread before it can be actually read. This is not because it merely seems to mean one thing when in fact it means another, sneakily withholding its true interpretation until later. It is rather because it presents and actuates the impossibility of anything tautologically meaning what it means. By having the copula ‘is’ affirming both identity *and* difference between the subject and predicate of the proposition, and thus by affirming that what the proposition means is always more than it meant to, ‘the dialectical movement, this self-engendering, advancing, and the returning into itself’ is begun (*PhG* §65). It is only by first reading to the letter—by reading simply that ‘is’ means ‘is’—that we are compelled to reread for the spirit—by which what ‘is’ is brought to life.

This dissertation supplements this understanding, however, by arguing that the speculative proposition is always better understood as the speculative *reading* of the proposition, by which *any* proposition might be plasticised, dynamised, and brought to life. What has been neglected is that the speculative proposition is not only the product of a

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 441.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. by John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 116a.

formal or stylistic innovation in philosophical writing, it is also the proposition (which could be any proposition) which has been animated by a dialectically and critically intimate mode of reading. J. M. Bernstein has argued that ‘[p]erhaps what is required now is the writing of new speculative propositions tracing the fate of subject and substance; perhaps philosophy and woman are one, and politics and woman are one.’¹⁶ Aside from the fact that the ‘perhaps’s here undermine the necessary resolve of speculative thinking, this misses that what is really required now is the reading of all propositions as speculative. Again, Hegel’s propositional logic is concerned with asking what the truth of something is, not with asking whether it is true. Therefore, the speculative reading of the proposition, or reading as recollection, provides a model, for Hegel, for reanimating the ironic truth of the history of philosophy within the present. It is for this reason that Hegel could position himself as the ironic truth or ‘end’ of all previous thought. By affirming for the first time a speculative identity between philosophy and the history of philosophy, the truth of the history of philosophy was for the first time recollected.

It will also be argued, finally, that the import of this mode of Hegelian reading is not limited to philosophy, nor even to propositions. In recent decades, literary criticism (and the humanities more generally) has been faced with an apparent crisis. Its prevailing critical paradigm—that is, the paradigm of critique itself—has been cast into doubt as a methodology for interpretation, and questioned concerning its once-assumed political and ethical efficacy. Principally, it has been accused of being overly detached and methodological; and of tending to excavate beneath the text to diagnose its disavowed symptoms at the expense of the text itself.¹⁷ The speculative exposition of Hegel in this dissertation, however, provides a different model of reading: one which is critical but without succumbing to the pretensions of mastery or detachment, characteristic of what is usually understood as ‘critique’; and one which prioritises the singularity of the reading experience but without succumbing to the subjectivism or implicit conservatism of that which has called itself ‘postcritical’. Following the work of Gillian Rose in *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981), I will argue that the

¹⁶ J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 274.

¹⁷ See in particular: Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), 1-21; Heather Love, ‘Close Reading and Thin Description’, *Public Culture*, 25.3 (2013), 401-434.

methodologically detached and diagnostic mode of much critical reading and theory remains stuck in an implicitly Kantian critical paradigm, which favours explanation over truth. It will argue that it is therefore only by learning from Hegel's metacritique of Kant's critique, and from his corresponding development of the idea of speculative experience—the ironic experience that *contradictio est regula veri*—that we might make possible a renewal of critical thinking and reading in the moment of their crisis.

II. What is Living-Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel?

The legacies of Hegel are often described less in terms of his reception or influence, and more in terms of a haunting. While Croce's famous study enquires into this 'undead' Hegel from an assumed position of detached critical hindsight, others allude to the ghost of Hegel far more ominously.

The source of this omen is invariably located in Hegel's propensity to have seemingly anticipated every attempt to exorcise him. Michel Foucault, for example, warns that '[w]e have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of the tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us.'¹⁸ Similarly, Maurice Blanchot argues that '[t]o read him, not to read him—to understand him, to misunderstand him, to reject him—all this falls under the authority of Hegel or doesn't take place at all.'¹⁹ This is because, in the words of Hamacher, 'every new reading of Hegel's writings finds itself confronted by the dilemma of [...] already being grasped by what it seeks to grasp'; of finding that it has 'already been caught up within its circling coils.'²⁰ In each case, the persistence of the dialectic is personified as Hegel himself, presented as a menacing spectral presence. Despite being apparently dead—both literally and, perhaps, in terms of his philosophical viability—there is still the uncanny sense when reading Hegel that he is reading

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, 'The Discourse on Language', in *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 215-237 (p. 235).

¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 46.

²⁰ Werner Hamacher, *pleroma—Reading in Hegel*, trans. by Nicholas Walker and Simon Jarvis (London: Athlone Press, 1998), p. 1.

you back: that every imaginable opposition is a trap which he has laid; that every time we think we are in control or know where we are going, he (or, more properly, the ironic truth of the dialectic) pulls the rug from beneath us. As Slavoj Žižek frequently puts it (paraphrasing Adorno), to ask whether Hegel is dead is the wrong question; perhaps we should instead be asking whether we are dead in the eyes of Hegel.²¹

Even Derrida, who heralds his own concept of *différance* as ‘the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian *relève* [*Aufhebung*, sublation] wherever it operates’²²—as the remains of writing which resist being swallowed by the Hegelian system—also concedes that ‘[w]e will never be finished with the reading or rereading of Hegel,’ and that in essence he, Derrida, ‘does nothing other than attempt to explain [himself] on this point.’²³ This may seem like a contradiction. If the Hegelian *Aufhebung* is destroyed, why can we never escape it? The answer is that there are always two Hegels for Derrida. As he puts it in the opening chapter of *Of Grammatology* (1967): Hegel is ‘the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing’: the thinker of the logos, the absolute, and presence; but ‘also the thinker of irreducible difference.’²⁴ He marks ‘The End of the Book’—the ‘idea of the book’ being that ‘which always refers to a natural totality, [...] the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism’—both as its highest point, and therefore as its self-negation.²⁵ Hegel, for Derrida, is the arch-antagonist of the enterprise of deconstruction, but also its condition.

It is because of this apparent inescapability that some of the most significant proponents of Hegel in recent decades have been those that have exposed the prematurity of any declaration of his ‘death.’ Rose’s *Hegel Contra Sociology*, for instance—which will

²¹ See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 3. Adorno writes that Croce’s ‘loathsome question’ of Hegel ‘makes the impudent claim that because one has the dubious fortune to live later, and because one has a professional interest in the person one is to talk about, one can sovereignly assign the dead person his place, thereby in some sense elevating oneself above him. [...] The converse question is not even raised: what the present means in the face of Hegel; whether perhaps the reason one imagines one has attained since Hegel’s absolute reason has not in fact long since regressed behind the latter and accommodated to what merely exists.’ Adorno, *Hegel*, p. 1.

²² Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 40.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 24-26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

become especially important to this dissertation in its concluding chapter—shows that recurrent issues in twentieth-century social theory (from Durkheim to Weber, Simmel, Adorno, Lukács, Althusser, and Habermas) demonstrate an insufficient engagement with Hegel, and in particular a failure to have come to terms with his critiques of Kant and Fichte. Rose is at pains to insist that this does not constitute an attempt to establish the ‘contemporary relevance’ of, or else an ‘ingenious and ahistorical “return”’ to, her subject; but rather, that she is attempting ‘to retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for social theory, [...] first of all, by recognising and discussing the intellectual barriers which stand in the way of such rereading.’²⁶ Judith Butler’s *Subjects of Desire* (1987), meanwhile, takes a similar approach, with a specific focus on Hegel’s twentieth-century French reception. While this reception ‘may be read as a succession of criticisms against the subject of desire, that Hegelian conceit of a totalising impulse’, Butler demonstrates that Hegel himself was implicated ‘in the construction of this conceit, and that his vision is less “totalising” than presumed.’²⁷ Similarly, Malabou’s *The Future of Hegel* (1996) challenges the reading of Hegel by Heidegger (which had a great influence on this French reception), for its insistence upon the reassuring certainty that ‘Hegel does not have a future’—in the double sense that Hegel does not have an adequate concept of futurity, and that therefore he is a thing of the past. Malabou shows, however, that Hegel’s dialectic is far more open-ended, ‘plastic’, and difficult to elude than that of the straw man who has been constructed (only to be ‘deconstructed’) in his place; that the future of Hegel is not only possible, but inevitable, insofar as his speculative thinking, by definition, is constantly moving beyond itself.²⁸ Žižek describes his defence of Hegel in the same way, again. The ‘reassertion of Hegel’s speculative thought,’ he writes, is not ‘a denial of the post-Hegelian break—but rather a bringing forth of that very dimension which sustains the post-Hegelian break itself.’ He claims that the historical rejection of Hegel (from Schopenhauer to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Deleuze, almost always on the grounds of his ostensibly totalising rationalist holism) has attacked a straw-man, and thus amounts to a spurious and premature proclamation that he has

²⁶ Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 1.

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. xxvi.

²⁸ Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. by Lisabeth During (London: Routledge, 2009).

been overcome: ‘a desperate attempt to *go on thinking as if Hegel had not happened*.’²⁹ Each add credence to Foucault’s worry that at the end of every anti-Hegelianism, Hegel waits.

There is another reason, though, why the signs of Hegel’s legacy seem so ubiquitous and inescapable. While traditionally oppositional accounts of Hegel may be described (as above) as failed attempts to escape him, more recent approaches are better thought of as attempts to accommodate him to contemporary philosophy and theory in spite of his more eccentric ambitions; as concessions that there is some ‘truth’ there despite the alleged failures. As Comay and Ruda have remarked, there is a sense today that ‘everyone has become a Hegelian’:

Having been cured of his metaphysical sickness, Hegel has suddenly become compatible with an unexpected variety of contemporary philosophical projects. From radical theology to Anglo-American pragmatism, from liberal democratic theory to radical anarchism, from speculative realism to psychoanalysis, a plethora of diverging positions have set out to prove that Hegel was actually not so bad.³⁰

While in every case it is Hegel’s alleged totalising holism which is explicitly rejected, it is paradoxically this drive towards encompassing everything that makes Hegel so easy to pick and choose from. Whether one is looking for a proto-Marxist critique of private property, or a conservative defence of monarchism; a discourse of universalism, or of Eurocentric racism; a radical theology, or a radical atheism; an anarchist conception of a voluntaristic and mutually policing society, or a defence of the bourgeois state and its institutions;—as long as we have the liberty to decide what of Hegel is living and what is dead, then he can end up being all things to all people.

Perhaps the most common attempts to save Hegel in recent decades have been those projects which have aimed, implicitly or otherwise, to recruit and mobilise certain concepts from Hegel for the development of theories of democracy, civil society, and public life. In each case, such projects can be described quite uncontroversially as selective readings that (following Croce) divide the living from the dead. Jürgen Habermas, for example, finds value

²⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 194.

³⁰ Comay and Ruda, *The Dash*, p. 2.

in Hegel's conception of intersubjectivity, but criticises his emphasis on the state and other political institutions. For Habermas, the Hegelian *Geist* is the realm of societal norms which are conceptually shaped and developed through discursive practices, a realm which is in turn shaped and developed through intersubjective relations of mutual recognition. This conception of spirit is central for Habermas's own theorisations of democratic public life, particularly in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968). However, in his subsequent work (especially *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985)), while retaining and intensifying this central focus on discursively constituted norms, Habermas more explicitly criticises Hegel's stress on their political and institutional embodiment.³¹ Similarly, Axel Honneth (a student of Habermas) insists upon 'recognition', conceived as the ground of all political struggle and identification, as the most important contribution of Hegel's philosophy for political thought, while regretting Hegel's later demotion of recognition to a mere stage in spirit's development from its original status as spirit's transcendental and existential basis.³² Both of these accommodating and selective approaches to Hegel abstract a concept from his thought for its utility and give it the status of a quasi-transcendental precondition for their arguments. They therefore preclude from the beginning the requisite speculative naïvety and irony of a presuppositionless philosophy, producing instead a kind of Hegel-synecdoche, where a severed part stands in for the truth of the whole.

Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's 'Phenomenology'* (2019), meanwhile, reads Hegel through the lens of analytic philosophy, and pragmatism in particular

³¹ On the importance of Hegel to *Knowledge and Human Interests*, see Garbis Kortian, *Metacritique: The philosophical argument of Jürgen Habermas*, trans. by John Raffan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). On the question of Habermas's relationship to Hegel see especially: Robert B. Pippin, 'Hegel, Modernity, and Habermas', *The Monist*, 74.3 (1991), 329-357; Douglas Moggach, 'Hegel and Habermas', *The European Legacy*, 2.3 (1997), 550-556; Kenneth Baynes, 'Freedom and recognition in Hegel and Habermas', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 28.1 (2002), 1-17; and Robert B. Brandom, 'Towards Reconciling Two Heroes: Habermas and Hegel', *Argumenta*, 1.1 (2015), 29-42. While Baynes and Brandom, as with Kortian, emphasise the confluences between Hegel and Habermas, Moggach and Pippin emphasise the differences, particularly with reference to Habermas's misreadings of Hegel.

³² See especially Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. by Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005). For the best critical accounts of Honneth's reading of Hegel, see Karin de Boer, 'Beyond Recognition? Critical Reflections on Honneth's Reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 21.4 (2013), 534-558; and Robert B. Pippin, 'Reconstructivism: Honneth's Hegelianism', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 40.8 (2014), 725-741. Honneth's Hegelianism and its utilisation by Rita Felski's postcritical literary theory will receive a more thorough analysis in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

—that is, Brandom *rereads* Hegel’s *Phenomenology* through the lens of another, later development in philosophical thought. As we shall see, it consists in what Brandom calls a ‘*de re*’ reading, defined as an ‘attempt to say what *really* follows from the claims made, what is *really* evidence for or against them, and so what the author has *really* committed herself to, regardless of her opinion about the matter.’³³ This may on the face of it seem more like a Hegelian recollection, or *Erinnerung*, which reconstructs the truth of Hegel for today. However, Brandom conducts his reading, like Habermas and Honneth, by elevating a component of Hegel’s thought to the level of a quasi-transcendental, identifying and prioritising a master theme which can be utilised for its import at the expense of the rest. In his own words: ‘The defining subject that serves as both lens and filter for the present account is *conceptual content*’³⁴—what he takes to be Hegel’s nonpsychological account of concepts progressively acquiring determinate content through relations of incompatibility (the coin is pure copper and not pure aluminium) and consequence (and therefore the coin is an electrical conductor). (The example is Brandom’s own.)³⁵

The limitations of this reading are conceded from the first page by Brandom himself:

The narrative I retrospectively discern within Hegel’s is by no means the only one that can correctly and productively be recollected from the intricate and far-ranging story that he tells. Indeed, what is offered here is in many ways a severely selective reading. I am really concerned only with what he has to say insofar as it bears on *one* of the many topics he addresses. I believe it is an axial, organizing topic, and that focusing on it provides a useful perspective on all the rest. But the sharp focus involves real restrictions.³⁶

Through this ‘lens and filter’ (‘selective’ and ‘restrictive’), Brandom’s ‘*de re*’ reading argues that the primary concern of the *Phenomenology* is to discover and describe ‘the transcendental conditions of the possibility of determinately contentful conceptual

³³ Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 102.

³⁴ Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

norms'³⁷—basically, the conditions of possibility for things we can all agree on in spite of our differences. This belies again a precommitment to the political and ethical value of recognition as an instrumentalisable tool for realising a more liberal and democratic society—without grasping the phenomenological development of its ironic truth. For Brandom, this is not a problem. Although he concedes that his reading is ‘severely selective,’ he excuses himself by arguing that there is always a ‘context’ of interpretation—in particular, the prior learning and perspectives of the reader.³⁸ The reader must always when reading be referring back to the facts ‘*as she takes them to be*; that is the best any of us can do.’³⁹ Brandom’s *de re* reading attempts to say, then, ‘what *really* follows from the claims made’ but only by assuming in advance the commitments that he has held before reading. In the case of Brandom, these commitments can be said to include liberal democracy (politically) and ‘semantic pragmatism’ (philosophically). As Stephen Houlgate has forcefully argued, and as I will later develop, by licensing the assumption of such preconditions and prior commitments to the reading of Hegel, Brandom ignores Hegel’s *phenomenology*, the essential experiential modality of speculative thinking. Although Brandom produces what he calls a ‘semantic reading’ of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, such a ‘reading’ (which reads through a particular lens with an assumed set of prior commitments) means that he does not actually read it at all.⁴⁰

Just as Hegel has been recently accommodated by a range of philosophers and sociologists, a similar trajectory can be traced in literary studies. There has, on the one hand, been a marked, welcome increase in explorations of the question of Hegel and the literary. These have often concerned Hegel’s literary references, and how an understanding of such appeals to the literary might illuminate the particular passages in question and Hegel’s philosophy as a whole. The best example is Allen Speight’s *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency* (2001) which reinterprets Hegel’s *Phenomenology* with reference to each of Hegel’s literary allusions (from *Antigone* to *Hamlet* and *Rameau’s Nephew*), demonstrating

³⁷ Ibid., p. 532.

³⁸ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 95.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 101.

⁴⁰ Stephen Houlgate, ‘Phenomenology and *De Re* Interpretation: A Critique of Brandom’s Reading of Hegel’, *Hegel Bulletin*, 29 (2015), 30-47. See also Stephen Houlgate, review of Robert B. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s ‘Phenomenology’* (2019), *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 14 April 2020 <<https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/a-spirit-of-trust-a-reading-of-hegels-phenomenology/>>

that literature, for Hegel, gives the reader unique access to the aporias of ethical agency: its retrospectivity, its theatricality (that is, its sociality), and its need for forgiveness.⁴¹ Such a focus cuts through the reception of the *Phenomenology* as a systematic catalogue of different possible approaches to knowledge and truth, for which any literary reference would function merely as an example or illustration. In other such studies of the status of literature in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, particularly attention has been paid to Hegel's curious decision to end the *Phenomenology* with a quotation (or rather a misquotation) from a poem by Schiller—curious because it comes at precisely the moment when Hegel claims to have surpassed the need for such 'picture-thinking' [*Vorstellung*]. (I will provide my own answer to this conundrum in Chapter 2.)⁴² In the past ten or so years in particular, there has also been a flurry of studies which have explored how a comparative reading of Hegel with particular authors or literary movements might elucidate both of them, whether they read Hegel, or whether Hegel read them, or not—with authors ranging from Edmund Spenser to William Shakespeare, Molière, William Wordsworth, Giacomo Leopardi, Hermann Melville, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Elizabeth Bishop, and J. H. Prynne.⁴³

Of particular interest here, though, are two works which have asserted the Hegelian character of literary theory itself. As stated at the beginning of this dissertation, this may seem like a surprising claim given that 'theory' is often the name given to that which established itself against Hegel. Particularly in the poststructuralist tradition (from Derrida to

⁴¹ Allen Speight, *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴² See especially: Comay, 'Hegel's Last Words', in *The Dash*, pp. 65-86; and Robert B. Pippin, 'The Status of Literature in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: On the Lives of Concepts', in *Philosophy by Other Means: The Arts in Philosophy and Philosophy in the Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), pp. 39-55.

⁴³ See, for instance: Jennifer Ann Bates, *Hegel and Shakespeare on Moral Imagination* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010); Keston Sutherland, 'Sub Songs versus the subject: Critical variations on a distinction between Prynne and Hegel', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, ed. by Joe Luna and Jow Lindsay Walton (Brighton: Hi Zero & Sad Press, 2014), pp. 123-142; Joe Moshenska, 'Why Can't Spenserians Stop Talking About Hegel? A Response to Gordon Teskey', *Spenser Review*, 44 (2014); Wayne Deakin, *Hegel and the English Romantic Tradition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), which discusses Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Shelley; Angelia Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett* (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), which, in addition to those named in the title, also discusses Giacomo Leopardi and Elizabeth Bishop; Eva Ruda, ed., *Beckett and Dialectics: Be it Something or Nothing* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), particularly Rebecca Comay, 'Senile Dialectic', pp. 61-104; and Jensen Suther, 'Spirit Disfigured: The Persistence of Freedom in the Modernist Novel' (unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University, 2019).

Foucault, Deleuze, Hélène Cixous, Paul De Man, Geoffrey Hartmann, J. Hillis Miller, and Homi Bhabha), theory is contra all that Hegel (ostensibly) stood for. And yet—in a move which again implicitly confirms Foucault’s warning that Hegel stands waiting at the end of every professed anti-Hegelianism—M. A. R. Habib, in his book *Hegel and the Foundations of Literary Theory* (2018), makes the historical and conceptual case that literary theory finds its ‘foundation’ in a kind of dialectical thinking inaugurated by Hegel. The concepts and modes of reading which have been the mainstay of a broad range of theoretical approaches were originally articulated by Hegel, whether these theories know it or not. Habib argues that literary theory follows the Hegelian dialectic as far as ‘its second stage, the stage of “difference”’, while ‘refusing to admit progression from this to a third stage, which might effect any kind of metaphysical closure.’ In doing so, it ‘retracts Hegelian content into the status of *form*, of method’, or ‘strategy’.⁴⁴

Andrew Cole’s *The Birth of Theory* (2014) makes a similar argument concerning Hegel and literary theory, albeit with the added qualification that while the birth of theory can be traced back to Hegel (as suggested by the title of his book), the moment of conception can be located in the Middle Ages. Hegel, for Cole, is a fundamentally Medieval thinker, and by reading Hegel within the tradition of Medieval thought and of Medieval history and culture more broadly, we can both better understand him and the subsequent theory for which he is ‘responsible.’⁴⁵ For example, Cole argues that Hegel’s dialectic should be viewed within the medieval lineage of Plotinus and Nicholas of Cusa, rather than solely within the classical lineage of Plato and Aristotle. What is distinct about this kind of dialectic is its stress on the interplay between concept and figure, and the notion that thought itself has a shape and a rhythm. This allows Cole to make the case that even thinkers like Nietzsche and Deleuze, despite their professed anti-Hegelianism, should be read as ‘part of a specialized dialectical tradition’ from Plotinus to Hegel.⁴⁶

There is always something problematic about the drive to identify a ‘foundation’ or origin of something, and the ascribed authority, validity, or ‘responsibility’ implied with such a designation; but it is particularly problematic when it concerns Hegel—a philosopher

⁴⁴ M. A. R. Habib, *Hegel and the Foundations of Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 14.

⁴⁵ Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. xi.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

whose commitment to be without presupposition complicates and undermines every notion of origin, of a pure beginning, or of first principles. A historicist justification of the truth of something, for Hegel, is no justification at all. As we shall later see, Hegel was particularly irritated by what he took to be facile arguments concerning the truth of Christianity and its doctrines which used the historicity of Christ and the early Church as its evidence. ‘[I]t is still primarily immaterial,’ Hegel says, ‘where that doctrine came from. The question is solely whether it is true in and for itself.’⁴⁷ Importantly, though, in the same way that I have just made recourse to evidence of the historical Hegel’s position to justify the claim that such evidence for speculative thinking is not a measure of truth, Habib’s and Cole’s claims are not useless—far from it. Both of their books compellingly argue for a renewed engagement with Hegel from those who have traditionally distanced themselves from him (be they Medievalists or literary theorists), and both expand our understanding of Hegel and theory alike through an engagement with their hidden contexts. However, what these approaches do not and cannot succeed in doing is identifying the *truth* of Hegel ‘in and for himself’, and the ways in which this truth might be realised in literary theory. Instead, they identify how various literary theorists, wittingly or otherwise, have abstracted and made use of some concepts from Hegel’s writing (be they difference, recognition, or history; the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, or the dialectic of concept and figure) as the quasi-transcendental conditions of their theoretical frameworks. I contend, as such, that literary theory has never been Hegelian.

III. How to read Hegel

To emphasise what may already be apparent: both Hegel’s ubiquity in theory, philosophy, and political thought, and the contested nature of his reception, can be accounted for by the question of how to read him—and the extent to which this question is emphasised or else neglected as incidental. The question of ‘how to read’ is not the same as ‘what it means.’ ‘How to read’ does not ask for an interpretation or an explanation or a content. It instead asks

⁴⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One Volume Edition: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson, trans. by R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 83n17. Addition from 1831 lecture.

how a reader should orient themselves, what they should presuppose, what they should prioritise, what they should look out for. One way of putting it is that it asks for a method. This question has proved so uniquely fruitful in the reception of Hegel precisely because it so uniquely essential, and yet unanswerable, with it often being the case that the more an answer is attempted, the more likely it is to be wrong. This impossibility gets to the heart of the speculative character of Hegel's philosophy, by stressing the corresponding notions of presuppositionlessness and of experience: Hegel's reader must be without presuppositions in their reading, including the presupposition of a method, in order to have the speculative experience of the irony of truth. Such a reading of Hegel does not have speculative experience as its presupposition or precondition, because 'speculative' names the experience which is acquired precisely through not having a presupposition or precondition. The question of how to read Hegel is therefore both the most important but also the most superfluous. Important, because it is through the speculative experience of reading Hegel that the ironic truth of his dialectic is set in motion; and superfluous, because there is no method for such a reading other than the commitment to suspend all such methods. The only answer to the question of how to read Hegel is to resolutely commit to refusing all positive answers. In short: the question cannot be merely neglected as superfluous but must be repeatedly emphasised for its superfluity.

The most influential account of the question comes from Adorno's *Three Studies on Hegel* (1963), particularly the third: 'Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel' (which will be more fully addressed in Chapter 1). Crucially for this dissertation, Adorno explicitly positions his readings of Hegel in contrast to the selective 'living or dead' readings licensed by Croce. The truth of Hegel, for Adorno, 'lies in the *skandalon*'—in the stumbling blocks, in the traps and snares—and 'not in its plausibility. Hence rescuing Hegel—and only rescue, not revival, is appropriate for him—means facing up to his philosophy where it is most painful and wresting truth from it where its untruth is obvious.'⁴⁸ The 'spirit of Hegel' cannot be realised by ignoring Hegel 'to the letter'; instead the spirit must be wrested from the letter.

An example of such an Adornian reading can be found in Susan Buck-Morss's *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2005), which argues that the 1791 Haitian Revolution is the overlooked point of reference for Hegel's famous master-slave dialectic. While this may

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Hegel*, p. 83.

sound like a straightforwardly historicist recovery of a forgotten context, the essential contribution of Buck-Morss's reading is her argument that, in a certain sense, Haiti represents the ironic truth of Hegel—the spirit of Hegel wrested from his letter. While, as a child of the French Revolution, Hegel decried the 'slaveries' of dogma and ignorance, he was conspicuously silent regarding the literal slavery which dominated the colonies. The literal crushing of the masters by the slaves is, then, the truth of a dialectic which Hegel himself could not fully articulate or bring to bear. 'There is no doubt,' Buck-Morss writes, 'that Hegel and Haiti belong together.'⁴⁹ It is this asserted speculative identity—the simultaneous distinguishability and inseparability—of these two apparently wildly heterogeneous terms which leads Žižek to conclude, apropos Buck-Morss, that 'Hegel and Haiti' represents 'the most succinct formula of communism': the formula of a theory and historical practice of universal freedom.⁵⁰

To return to Adorno: the particular focus in his third study of Hegel is what he calls Hegel's *skoteinos*—his darkness. To read Hegel, for Adorno, is not to translate the obscurity into clarity, but to dwell in the obscurity and suffer it; the difficult form has a content, performatively instantiating the difficult non-identity and identity between thought and language. To capitulate instead to the Cartesian ideals of clarity and purity of expression spuriously presupposes the abstract identity of thought and language, and thus settles for an approximation. The advice Adorno gives to Hegel's reader is therefore simultaneously comforting and troubling: 'at times one literally does not know and cannot conclusively determine what is being talked about, [...] there is no guarantee that such a judgement is even possible.'⁵¹

While there are many similarities between Adorno's account of the question of how to read Hegel and my own, the crucial difference spawns from Adorno's relationship to Kant. For Adorno, Hegel is ultimately 'untrue in the face of Kantian discontinuities', and can only be read consistently by 'sacrificing consistency' altogether.⁵² In short, Adorno retreats from

⁴⁹ Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), p. 20. This book was developed from the earlier article, Susan Buck-Morss, 'Hegel and Haiti', *Critical Inquiry*, 26.4 (2000), 821-865.

⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 111.

⁵¹ Adorno, *Hegel*, p. 89.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 148.

Hegel to Kant at the last minute, whom he takes to have more resolutely insisted upon the non-identity between thought and things in themselves, where Hegel's privileging of identity spuriously resolves this difference. I will argue, on the other hand, that the Kantian theory of reading implied by Adorno here, which insists upon upholding discontinuity, inconsistency, and revel over repose, is to neglect the resolve and the simplifying work of recollection which are essential modalities of speculative reading. Here we find a curious similarity between Adorno and Derrida. Both Adorno with his 'negative' dialectics, and Derrida with his conception of *différance* at the limit of *Aufhebung*, retreat to an implicit Kantianism which insists upon the irreducibility of non-identity, apparently out of a fear of the totalitarian implications of resolve. I will argue, however, that a speculative reading of the proposition does not finalise meaning once and for all, nor dictate its signification; but nor does it refuse meaning, or laterally, indefinitely defer it. Instead it affirms the reading of the proposition (and of writing more generally) as a site of the ironic realisation of spirit and truth: of contest, commitment, and surprise; of meaning which is always actual, but also always subject to its own revolution.

Another influential account of reading Hegel, or of Hegel and reading, comes from Heidegger. One of the great merits of Heidegger's lectures on the *Phenomenology* lies in their alertness to the *Phenomenology* as a phenomenology—that is, as both a theory and a practice of the experience of consciousness. In these lectures, Heidegger avoids giving a reading of the text; he avoids merely interpreting it, as if it was an external object to be analysed and picked over by the detached critical observer. He instead immanently works through it as an example of how a speculative reading must actualise itself through its own development, without recourse to external presuppositions or expectations. Heidegger also insists upon the importance of rereading. He is firm with his students: 'we can begin to understand the work only if we have already reached its end. In this lecture course I presuppose such a first reading of the entire work. If such a reading has not taken place or does not take place in the next few weeks, there is no sense in sitting here: You cheat not only me but yourselves.'⁵³ He argues, then, that the *Phenomenology* itself must be read as a speculative proposition: misread to the letter and reread for its spirit.

⁵³ Martin Heidegger, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 36. These lectures were delivered at the University of Freiburg in 1930-31 and first published in German in 1980.

Paradoxically, however, it is on this same topic of reading and rereading that Heidegger underestimates Hegel's radicality—particularly concerning Hegel's conception of recollection. The *Phenomenology* must be reread, for Heidegger, principally because 'the end of the work does not escape its beginning, but presents a return to this beginning. [...] [T]he standpoint of one who grasps it and thinks it through is, from the beginning to the end and from the end already in the beginning, one and the same standpoint, namely, that of absolute knowledge[.]'⁵⁴ The *Phenomenology* must be reread in order to be read, for Heidegger, because it is only at the end that we realise the absolute standpoint which governed the movement from the beginning, and that therefore it is only by returning to the beginning and repeating the journey that the content can be properly understood with the clarity that this standpoint delivers. This presents the reading of the *Phenomenology* as a closed circle of reference, with no possible progression beyond itself within itself, and thus without a future. Like Hegel's philosophy, the reading of Hegel, for Heidegger, is always looking backwards. Hegel only 'speaks about having been,' he says, 'but never about the future. This accords with his view of the past as the decisive character of time: It is a fading away, something transitory and always bygone.'⁵⁵ For Heidegger, the *Phenomenology* must be reread because it can only be understood as something that has already happened. As this dissertation will demonstrate, however, although Hegel is a thinker of recollection, this does not commit him, as implied, to *anamnesis*—to the notion that all knowledge is already implicitly known; that the new is always already old since it is plotted from the beginning. Instead, it will be argued that it is precisely through the process of recollection, of rereading, that speculative thinking opens itself up to the future.

It is on this question of Hegel and the future that Malabou bases her riposte to Heidegger's Hegel, a riposte which climaxes, in its final chapter, with another account of Hegel and reading. This is perhaps the best account of Hegel and reading we have, for its argument that it is in the act of reading as recollecting that the novelty and the future of thinking is made possible. For Malabou, the unique resistance to reading posed by the speculative proposition—the disruption of the linear progression from subject to predicate—not only forces the reader to reread it differently from an 'absolute' (for Heidegger, final)

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 82.

standpoint; it also transforms the reader into ‘the author of the enunciation. The reader rewrites what he or she reads.’⁵⁶ This kind of reading (which Malabou, after Hegel, describes as ‘plastic’ (*PhG* §64)) is what really designates the absoluteness of knowledge for Hegel: not its total mastery or finality, but its fully living, self-actualisation. Heidegger therefore has an inadequate conception of Hegelian irony. He understands that the proposition must be reread, as it is only recursively that its ironic truth is realised. However, he underestimates that *this* truth may in turn have an as yet unrealised ironic truth: not only must the proposition be reread, even once it has been reread it must be read again. If the second reading offers a final resting place, then it is just another letter that kills.⁵⁷

This demand for incessant rereading may seem like a guise of what Hegel calls the ‘bad infinite’, in which the movement to overcome finitude always remains the same, an interminable lateral progression of just-one-mores for which the true infinite is always deferred. Malabou’s account of plastic reading, however, can be used to demonstrate how it avoids this pitfall. What defines the true infinite, for Hegel, is the infinite that is not negatively affected by finitude, and therefore one that contains the finite within it. Therefore, if a ‘bad infinite’ reading is one which either rereads the proposition to the letter again and again but always defers its meaning, or else one which rereads for the spirit without going through the letter, thus licensing arbitrary and creative interpretations of ‘infinite’ possibility, then a truly infinite reading is one which experiences the ironic truth of the proposition as a tension—opposed in its unity—between the finite letter and its infinite spirit. This, once again, is the definition of life, for Hegel. To be alive is to be afflicted by finitude, to tarry with it, and yet also to resist it.

This will also be essential for demonstrating how Malabou’s theory of plastic reading does not ‘legitimate arbitrary exegesis’ or ‘interpretative violence’—in spite of its invalidation of ‘any idea of readerly “objectivity” if by “objectivity” we mean the attempt to bring to light, once and for all, what the text “means”.’⁵⁸ Against the common prejudice that ‘the validity of an interpretation relies on the effacement of *all* subjectivity’, Malabou demonstrates how ‘Hegel’s great originality is that he shows exactly how an interpretation

⁵⁶ Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, p. 181.

⁵⁷ See 2 Corinthians 3. 6. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

that aims at nothing more than universality [...] would be in reality particular and arbitrary.’⁵⁹ Such a spuriously ‘universal’ interpretation is analogous, again, to both reading merely ‘to the letter’, and also reading for the spirit of the text without first going through the letter. In each case, it dismisses from the beginning the possibility of speculative thinking, by insisting upon its own objective certainty without the requisite contingency of experience. Equally, however, to defend an element of subjectivity in interpretation does not amount to a defence of *subjectivism*—of making recourse to one’s own preexisting subject position or prior commitments as evidence or justification, as ‘the best any of us could do’ (as Brandom puts it). Hegel’s insistence on the essential place of experience in interpretation does not refer to affect, nor to one’s own personal experiences or perspectives that they bring to the text. In fact, Hegel insists, it is only by relinquishing any personal intrusions that the reader’s subjectivity might be formed through the irony of experience: the ‘refusal both to insert one’s own views into the immanent rhythm of the concept and to interfere arbitrarily with that rhythm by means of wisdom acquired elsewhere, or this abstinence, are all themselves an essential moment of attentiveness to the concept’ (*PhG* §58). Subjectification, then, names merely the total immersion of the reading subject in the substance. The reading subject starts to read as an ‘accident’ (that is, as a subject in all its particularity and arbitrariness), but through the recursive rereading of the speculative proposition they are transformed into the substance of the text: they substitute their own subjectivity for the subject of the proposition. The reader not only follows the movement, they ‘adopt’ it. The resulting experience is an experience which is not limited to the ‘letter’ of the text, but nor one which is spuriously liberated to interpret it arbitrarily. It is instead one which is formed by submitting itself absolutely to the ‘letter’ precisely in order to realise what that initially apparent objectivity obscured: its spirit. ‘Progressively,’ Malabou writes, ‘in the course of reading, the reader’s subjectivity is formed into a substantial accident, a style, a plasticity. [...] Plasticity, informing the self-determining movement of substance and establishing the identity of contingency and necessity, is experienced in the act of reading. This is precisely what Absolute Knowledge knows.’⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 183.

IV. Critique beyond the limits of critique, Marx beyond the limits of Hegel

While Malabou's notion of plastic reading developed in *The Future of Hegel* is applied to the reading of Hegel specifically (and the future of philosophy which, she argues, will be written in a speculative idiom),⁶¹ the concept of reading developed throughout this dissertation will be recovered in its concluding chapter for the critical reading of literary texts. While the critical paradigm of literary theory has been criticised in recent years by writers such as Rita Felski, Heather Love, Sharon Marcus, and Stephen Best for its alleged critical detachment, elitism, chronic suspicion, and for its drive to excavate beneath the text for its disavowed conditions of possibility at the cost of the text itself, it can be demonstrated that their proposed 'postcritical' alternatives all have recourse to a precritical subjectivism. By addressing the question of 'the limits of critique' from a Hegelian perspective, however—and in particular by following Hegel's metacritique of Kant's critique—a different mode of critical reading is possible: one which is immanent to the text, yet open to realising its ironic truth.

This will draw substantially upon Rose's work in *Hegel Contra Sociology* to 'retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for social theory'⁶²—a work which demonstrates how Hegelian speculative experience (the ironic experience of contradiction as the truth) might yield a theory which is critical not in spite of but because of its aversion to the pretensions of critical detachment. In accordance with some postcritics, I will contend that Marxist literary criticism in particular has had a tendency to neglect the experiential content of reading for the text's material and ideological conditions of possibility. In resistance to postcritique, however, I will argue that the retrieval of Hegelian speculative experience for literary theory might provide a critical Marxist model of reading which is both alert to a text's conditions of possibility, but also to the critical potentials of the text itself. In particular, this critical potential will be located in literature's ability to provide a speculative experience not of the text's reducibility to its sociopolitical determination, but of the contradiction between the text and its determination. The critical force of such an experience is that it sustains the

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 167.

⁶² Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 1.

contradiction or the irony of life lived under the ascendancy of real abstraction—that is, of life lived under capital.

This will inevitably raise the question of Marx's relationship to Hegel. Without addressing this as an intellectual-historical question, however, I will approach it as a question of the spirit and the letter—and the different modalities of this question as developed throughout the dissertation: irony, recollection, and resolve. I will contend, as such, that a critical Marxism might represent the ironic truth or recollection of Hegelian speculative thinking under contemporary capitalism. Marxism is essential to Hegelianism. Neither can be thought without the other. While this may seem anachronistic, conceding the obvious point that Hegel preceded Marx, it will be argued that the birth of the spirit of Marxism marks the point at which the spirit of Hegelianism reaches its limit and moves beyond itself: that the condition of the continuation of the spirit of Hegel is the spirit of Marx. This is not because of any inherent failures or weaknesses of Hegelian speculative thinking; it rather represents its tenacity, and its ready adaptability to comprehend its *'own time.'*⁶³

At the beginning of this introduction I wrote that, for Hegel, the truth of spirit, in order for spirit to have any truth at all, must be constantly moving beyond itself. This could suggest a sense of inevitability, of progress without resistance. But what if it does not move beyond itself? What if the place of spirit is usurped? This is the problematic of Marxism, which only turns Hegelian dialectics on its head insofar as it recognises that the self-actualising absolute subject of history and freedom has been substituted for that of capital, with the real life of humanity reduced to a 'dot-like isolation,' to the real abstraction of a living death.⁶⁴ This is the crux of Adorno's dictum (taken from Ferdinand Kürnberger) that what passes for living is not really life: that 'life does not live.'⁶⁵ Life is instead alienated and wasted in the involuntary activity of labour for the creation and accumulation of value—that is, for the reproduction of the absolute subject qua capital. It does not move beyond itself—it

⁶³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. by Allen W. Wood, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 21.

⁶⁴ This coinage, *Punktualität*, is from Marx's *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 485. I owe my knowledge of it to Keston Sutherland's lecture, *Poetry and Subjective Infinity*, online video recording, Vimeo, 7 April 2014, <<https://vimeo.com/91328990>>.

⁶⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 19.

is not the true infinity of dynamic self-actualisation—but is instead gelatinated into a bad infinity of socially necessary labour time.⁶⁶ It is not then the collective spirit which actualises itself, moving beyond itself and its own limits, becoming other to become more fully what it is. It is instead the spirit of capital. This develops an argument that has been made in recent years by Keston Sutherland, who reads Marx's *Capital* (1867) as 'an ironic interpretation of Hegel that spells out the socially true meanings of Hegel's philosophy. [...] Not only is the individual now, in ironic truth, the abstraction to which Hegel was earlier accused [by Marx] of reducing him—nothing more than a disposable predicate, *Menschenmaterial*—but capital, on its side, is the subject actualised by the universal into infinite self-actualisation.'⁶⁷ Lenin describes this self-actualisation of capital, this drive to be exceeding its own limits which is a condition of its own survival, when he argues that imperialism represents the highest stage of capitalism.⁶⁸ This could be rephrased in the terminology of this dissertation by saying that imperialism is the ironic truth of capitalism. — However, as global temperatures hurtle towards and possibly beyond a point of no return, and yet carbon emissions continue to be spewed into the atmosphere for the extraction of yet more profit according to capital's own unrelenting logic and insatiable appetite, we are faced with the irrefutable: that the imperialism which is this highest stage of capitalism will not stop with countries or people, but with life itself.

To retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for a Marxist literary theory, then—which is to sustain, intensify, and tarry with the contradiction between what passes for living and life—is not to neglect the prime Marxist goals of comprehending the world through a ruthless critique of political economy, and of changing it through revolution. On the contrary, following Rose, this dissertation will conclude that 'a presentation of the contradictory relations between Capital and culture is the only way to link the analysis of the economy to comprehension of the conditions for revolutionary practice.'⁶⁹ While '[m]an has lost himself

⁶⁶ For Marx and gelatine, or *Gallerte*, see Keston Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon', in *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms* (London: Seagull Books, 2011), pp. 26-90.

⁶⁷ Sutherland, *Poetry and Subjective Infinity*.

⁶⁸ V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism. A Popular Outline*, trans. by Yuri Sdobnikov, *Lenin: Collected Works*, 45 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972-1978), XXII (1974), 185-304.

⁶⁹ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 235.

in the proletariat', in Marx's words⁷⁰—that is, while the life of humanity is now withdrawn into the deathly real abstraction of its economic function—the speculative experience of this contradiction is, to use Hegel's, the condition of an 'imminent change. This gradual process of dissolution, which has not altered the physiognomy of the whole, is interrupted by the break of day, which in a flash and at a stroke brings to view the structure of the new world' (*PhG* §11).

⁷⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*, trans. by Richard Dixon and Clemens Dutt, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works (MECW)*, 50 vols. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975-2004), iv (1975), 5-211 (p. 37). This is also the epigraph to Sutherland's lecture *Poetry and Subjective Infinity*.

IRONY

or, what is

As noted in the Introduction, the word *Ironie* rarely appears in Hegel's work except when discussing the ironic disposition of his romantic contemporaries in Jena—and rarely is Hegel more incensed, more polemical, and more damning than at these moments. In his lectures on aesthetics he describes romantic irony, variously, as 'morbid', 'wishy-washy', 'annihilating', 'mediocre', 'feeble', 'grotesque', 'false', and 'trash'.¹ He even seems to ascribe Novalis's early death to his irony, to which he assigns literally pathological characteristics.² Irony, for Hegel, is consumptive and self-consuming: an eternally interiorising self-reflection, both self-indulgent and self-destructive. It yearns for the infinite so intensely that it overlooks everything finite—that is, everything else—and can therefore only ever achieve the most arbitrary and particular existence. Even worse, for Hegel, it is destructive of reality itself. It is an anti-philosophy which elevates itself above, or else turns itself against all objective content, the difficulty and messiness of phenomena, and in doing so posits a world without the possibility of truth; it consists in nothing less than 'destroying and dissolving everything';³ it is 'the art of annihilating everything everywhere.'⁴ For Hegel, as Kierkegaard puts it, 'irony is anathema.'⁵

To say this sounds melodramatic, as well as vague, would not be unreasonable. Hegel's reaction to romantic irony in his lectures on aesthetics is quite exceptional in his body of work for its virulence, and notable for its lack of rigour, nuance, and textual justification. As Jeffrey Reid writes in the introduction to his book *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism* (2014):

¹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, I, 67, 68, 160, 161, 161, 223, 243, 244.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, 26 vols., ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978-2000), II (1989), 265.

Let it be said right away that Hegel's interpretation is unfaithful, to the extent that it is strongly critical and even polemical. As such, the Hegelian interpretation is far from demonstrating or presenting a comprehensive knowledge of the theories and works of the Jena Romantics, but rather shows itself to be highly selective regarding them. Hegel hardly ever refers directly to the actual works of the Romantics. When he does highlight a key expression in their writings, in order to make it the pivotal point of his critical enterprise, we notice, looking closely at the texts that Hegel might have been familiar with, that the expression only appears in a marginal fashion and in a context alien to the one evoked in the Hegelian critique.⁶

In de Man's more succinct formulation: 'what he says about it whenever he talks about it is just about always the same, and isn't very much.'⁷ With Schlegel in particular, de Man continues, Hegel 'loses his cool, which doesn't happen very often.'⁸ This, again, echoes Kierkegaard's assessment: 'He takes every opportunity to talk about these ironists and always in the most unsympathetic manner. [...] Explanation is often lacking—but Schlegel is always reprimanded. [...] [B]y his one-sided attack on post-Fichtean irony he has overlooked the truth of irony, and by his identifying all irony with this, he has done irony an injustice.'⁹

While Hegel appreciates some of the important differences between the various guises of romantic irony—between Schlegel and Novalis, for instance—he argues that these differences merely represent different moments of the same thing. While the irony of Schlegel represents a pretence to complete subjective mastery over objectivity, where reality is conceived of as the plaything of the creative genius, and a field of infinite possibility; the irony of Novalis represents a radical scepticism concerning objectivity and reality, and a correspondingly self-indulgent yet self-destructive retreat into the abject loneliness of the pure self. '[F]rightened of being polluted by contact with finitude,' this form of irony winds

⁶ Jeffrey Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 1. This volume is Reid's revision and translation of his earlier *L'anti-romantique: Hegel contre le romantisme ironique* (Laval: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007).

⁷ Paul de Man, 'The Concept of Irony', in *Aesthetic Ideology*, pp. 163-184 (p. 164).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 265.

‘down as it were into a spiritual decline,’ a sickly nihilism which, like Novalis dying of consumption, collapses under the weight of its own ironic self-critique.¹⁰ These apparently distinct positions—of radical hubris, on the one hand, and radical humility, on the other—are in fact the same, Hegel argues, because of this shared ironic relation to objectivity: ‘[T]he *vanity* of all *things* is its *own* vanity, or it *is* itself vain’ (*PhG* §525). In other words, the vanity (that is, the egomaniacal conceit) of the subjective mastery over the objective, must itself become vain (that is, futile, worthless, null); the romantic genius, having ironised everything in existence, has nothing left to ironise but itself. Schlegel and Novalis are thus two sides of the same dialectical coin. This follows, for Hegel, from their fundamental, even crude adherence to the Kantian logic of the understanding, whereby objectivity is bracketed beyond the understanding and comprehension, and therefore, Hegel argues, destroyed, dissolved, annihilated.

One of the questions that will be addressed in the next chapter of this dissertation is whether such a mode of critique—‘unfaithful’, ‘unsympathetic’, and without ‘cool’; with a drive towards reduction, exaggeration, and even caricature—can and should be justified, and what it might suggest about Hegel’s philosophy as a whole. The object of this chapter, in the meantime, is not ultimately to examine Hegel’s opposition to romantic irony, but rather to complicate the resultant, tacit assumption that Hegel is opposed to irony *per se*—the perception that, ‘in his eyes, irony is anathema’, in all cases and always. This is the perception that one might get from readings of Hegel since Hegel (and especially since Kierkegaard). While a relationship between irony and the dialectic has been acknowledged since Plato (and not least by Hegel himself, as we shall see), the vast majority of the discussions dedicated to the topic of Hegel and irony only discuss the question of Hegel and *romantic* irony. From Kierkegaard’s *On the Concept of Irony* (1841), to de Man’s ‘The Concept of Irony’ (1977), Claire Colebrook’s *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* (2002), Reid’s *The Anti-Romantic* (2014), Jeffrey Rush’s *Irony and Idealism* (2016), and Robert Brandom’s *A Spirit of Trust* (2019), significant discussion is dedicated to Hegel’s critique of romantic irony, but no consideration is given to the possibility of a Hegelian irony.

A Hegelian irony has been invoked in passing by some other critics. Judith Butler, for instance, emphasises the ‘permanent irony of the Hegelian subject’—the irony that, in order

¹⁰ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, I, 160.

to know itself, the subject ‘requires mediation’ and ‘knows itself only as the very structure of mediation.’ Hegel, for Butler, shows that the irony of the subject is that it ‘cannot know itself instantaneously or immediately, but requires mediation to understand its own structure.’¹¹ This is another way of saying, as intimated in the Introduction to this dissertation, that in order to truly know itself, the subject must know itself as something other than itself. Butler later describes this irony of the Hegelian subject as ‘the irony of Hegel’s incessantly myopic traveler’ in the *Phenomenology*, who always finds himself ‘mocked by the metaphysical domain which seemed always to exceed his understanding.’¹² The ‘traveler’ of the *Phenomenology*—both reader and subject—is repeatedly afflicted by the ironic discovery that the final destination, absolute knowing, has not yet been reached. Richard Rorty describes a similar irony in Hegel, an irony which he finds to anticipate ‘that tone of belatedness and irony which is characteristic of the literary culture of the modern day.’ Hegel ‘made unforgettably clear,’ Rorty argues, ‘the deep self-certainty’ of ‘each new dialectical synthesis’—while also making ‘unforgettably clear why such certainty lasts but a moment.’¹³ This is also the ‘Hegelian irony’ described by John McGowan as

a hermeneutic which focuses on the illusion of intention, the illusion that the individual by himself can be said to choose what to do and to exercise some control over what is achieved by that doing. It is the totality, the “cunning of reason” or Oedipus’ fate, that rules; Hegelian irony reveals that rule to individuals who continually make the mistake of believing their own independence.¹⁴

Rose, finally, also refers in passing to Hegel’s irony, albeit with a crucial difference to those above. For Rose, as with Butler, Rorty, and McGowan, Hegel’s phenomenology expounds the ‘drama of experience as intrinsically ironic,’ realising ‘the inevitable subjectivity of our positings, and of the ever-painful shifts to further positings of the relation between

¹¹ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, pp. 7-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 148.

¹⁴ John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 177.

“subjectivity” and “objectivity”, which always fail to guarantee a sustainable reality.’ Experience is thus ‘expounded as the changing configurations of the inevitable collision between concepts of self and reality, between concepts of subject and object.’¹⁵ The difference, here, however, is that while irony is conceived by Butler, Rorty, and McGowan as melancholic, relativistic, or tragic, and thus prompts a reversion to a place of ironic detachment, assuming once again an ironic relation to objectivity, a sense that we can never truly know or be sure of something, and that modernity consists only in the ‘bewildering variety of vocabularies from which we can choose, and the instability of each’,¹⁶ Rose’s Hegelian irony only functions insofar as the subject repeatedly and boldly stakes itself anew with complete commitment as the only way to approach such knowledge and certainty, in spite of such inescapable mediation, myopism, uncertainty, and illusion. In Rose’s words: the irony of speculative experience ‘reopens the way to conceive learning, growth and knowledge as fallible and precarious, but risk-able.’¹⁷ Hegel’s irony, therefore, for Rose, does not anticipate the irony of postmodernism, as argued by Butler, Rorty, and McGowan, but instead provides an antidote to it: the justification and the means both for radical commitment and action, and also for the necessary courage and adaptability to move forward when things inevitably and sometimes painfully do not go as expected. McGowan argues that Hegelian irony reveals the rule of the cunning of reason ‘to individuals who continually make the mistake of believing their own independence’, who believe that they can ‘choose what to do’ and ‘exercise some control over what is achieved by that doing’—an admonishment to any would-be radical bent on putting their principles or beliefs into practice. But Rose demonstrates how Hegelian irony in fact reveals that it is only by making such ‘mistakes’ that any progress, be it in knowledge or in action, is possible at all.

In resistance to the prevailing narrative of Hegel as an anti-ironist, this first chapter will build upon Rose’s account of Hegelian irony in particular, in order to provide a more substantial articulation of irony and its central place in Hegel’s work. With reference to his conceptions of method, beginning, and propositional form, it will demonstrate that we have been so overwhelmed by the extremity of Hegel’s attack on romantic irony that we have been

¹⁵ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 6-7.

¹⁶ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 148.

¹⁷ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 13.

blinded to the centrality of irony to his own thought. This irony is neither a stylistic choice, nor a rhetorical strategy, nor an incidental personal disposition. Nor does it have a ‘performative function,’ as de Man theorises: it does not console or promise or excuse.¹⁸ It is rather a necessity borne from what Hegel discovers as the intrinsic irony of truth—of what is in-itself. That is, in discovering the irony of truth, Hegel discovers the irony of irony: that irony is not merely a subjective disposition in relation to the truth, but an essential modality of the truth itself. Without grasping the irony of truth, Hegel’s conception of truth (and by extension the truth of Hegel’s philosophy) is merely described as a process, development, or movement, without being realised or experienced as such.

It will be argued that it is for this reason that the act and experience of reading, for Hegel, is essential to the truth of what is read. Often, the speculative nature of Hegel’s philosophy has been attributed to his speculative mode of exposition, as epitomised by his innovation of the so-called speculative propositional form. As Günter Wohlfart writes at the beginning of his extensive study of *der spekulative Satz*: ‘The problem of the speculative proposition is the problem of the linguistic presentation of the speculative’; and ‘the problem of the presentation of the speculative idea as the philosophical content of the proposition is, in the end, identical to the problem of the speculative method.’¹⁹ Stephen Houlgate writes on a similar note that Hegel ‘employ[s] a special kind of proposition’ capable of ‘articulat[ing] or unfold[ing] what the subject [of the proposition] actually is in truth.’²⁰ While agreeing that the speculative proposition is essential to an understanding of the presentation of the speculative, I will argue that such accounts do not go far enough towards grasping the role of the *reader* in realising the speculative truth of Hegel’s philosophy, and speculative truth as such. The problem of the presentation of the speculative is not one that can be resolved through a formal innovation in writing or exposition alone—that is, in the employment of a special kind of proposition. Hegel’s speculative proposition should therefore also be understood as the speculative reading of the proposition, for the former yields the latter: a

¹⁸ De Man lists these as primary functions of irony in ‘The Concept of Irony’, p. 165.

¹⁹ Günter Wohlfart, *Der spekulative Satz: Bemerkungen zum Begriff der Spekulation bei Hegel* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), p. v. My translation.

²⁰ Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel’s ‘Logic’: From Being to Infinity* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006), p. 94.

mode of reading by which any proposition may be made speculative, which might realise an ironic and developing truth beyond the fetters of its apparently fixed form.

Contrary to Kierkegaard's claims, then, not only does Hegel perceive the 'truth of irony', he thinks that truth itself is ironic. To reformulate Kierkegaard's above critique of Hegel: By focusing on his one-sided attack on post-Fichtean irony, we have overlooked the irony of truth, and by identifying Hegel's critique of romantic irony with a critique of irony as such, we have done both irony and truth an injustice.

I. 'With what must the beginning of science be made?'

In Fred Rush's account of the relationship between irony and Hegel's dialectic, he writes:

The two parts of irony that are implicit and explicit (i.e. withheld meaning and the apparently plain meaning) seem correlative to the two components of forms of consciousness that Hegel takes it to be so (i.e. the in-itself and the for-itself). But there is a significant—one might say definitive—difference. For, in the Hegelian case, the former is converted to the latter on account of intolerance to contradiction, conveying an overall impression of earnestness to the conceptual work. In the romantic case, there is no such conversion, for irony works just to the extent that it is not translated into flat declaration.²¹

And shortly afterwards: 'For Hegel [...] *Geist* or Logic progresses in a necessary and *univocal* way toward a final form of understanding [...]. For Schlegel, by contrast, the individual human being progresses *equivocally* by advancing ironically various self-understandings.'²² These passages concern the apparent methods and *telois* of Hegel's idealist philosophy and Schlegel's romantic anti-philosophy. 'In the Hegelian case,' Rush states, that which is implicit is always made explicit, withheld meaning is made plain, equivocation

²¹ Fred Rush, *Irony & Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 159.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

becomes ‘flat declaration’, and that which is in-itself—that is, that which is implicit, potential, relational, and unreflective—becomes for-itself—that is, explicit, actual, and self-comprehending. In this teleological translation of conceptual tension into conceptual harmony, *Geist* progresses methodically and necessarily in a straight line towards its final goal of absolute knowing where all contradiction is overcome and all reality is conceptually mediated and thus subsumed within the mind. The ‘definitive difference’, Rush claims, is that Schlegel is content with suspending thought ironically within these contradictions and indeterminacies of meaning, and exploring the supposedly infinite lateral progressions that they might bring. Hegel is conceptually ‘earnest’; Schlegel is conceptually promiscuous. For Hegel, contradiction is anathema; for Schlegel, it is possibility. In Schlegel’s own words: it is ‘eternal agility, of the infinitely abundant chaos.’²³ Rush argues that the discrepancy which defines consciousness, on the one hand, and irony, on the other, may ‘seem correlative,’ but while consciousness resolves this disparity, irony suspends it.

There are a number of problems with this distinction that Rush draws. However, I will aim only to correct what is claimed of Hegel, for it is through his definition against Schlegel’s irony that Hegel has been misconstrued. First, anyone who has read Hegel’s written work and claims to have found ‘flat declarations’ is, ironically, not reading hard enough. They can only have retreated from the text to a presupposed overall conception, or spuriously abstracted a positivistic account from the presentation of the work. Adorno writes on reading Hegel: ‘at many points the meaning itself is uncertain’;²⁴ and later: ‘The person who retreats to Hegel’s overall conception when faced with Hegel’s elaboration of his thoughts [...] has already renounced rigorous understanding, has capitulated because Hegel simply cannot be understood rigorously.’²⁵ While Adorno could be making this claim sarcastically—that ‘Hegel simply cannot be understood rigorously [*Hegel strikt gar nicht zu verstehen sei*]²⁶—satirising through free indirect discourse the philistine who is content with getting the overall gist of Hegel’s philosophy because its specificity is just far too complicated for anyone to

²³ Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Ideas’, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. and trans. by Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 123-140 (p. 131).

²⁴ Adorno, *Hegel*, p. 89

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Drei Studien zu Hegel*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 20 vols., ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), v, 247-383 (p. 331).

possibly make sense of, he at the same time means it quite sincerely. This is owing not to some logical ineptitude or argumentative inconsistency on Hegel's part, nor to some necessary intellectual inferiority on the part of his reader. On the contrary, 'Hegel simply cannot be understood rigorously' because of his reproach to the very notion or possibility of a rigorous understanding—at least where 'rigour', '*die Striktheit*', is understood etymologically as 'stiff', 'restrained', or 'tight.' That the 'meaning *itself* is uncertain', that '*der Sinn selbst ist ungewiß*,'²⁷ means, for Adorno, that the obstacle to understanding is not just epistemological, but rather logical, even ontological—that is, the obstacle is inherent *in* the meaning as such, and so to remove the obstacle is to destroy the meaning. When reading Hegel we are sometimes met with words, propositions, even whole passages, where the meaning simply cannot be translated from its difficult presentation into an easier, more digestible idiom. It is there to be suffered as uncertainty as such, a present marker of that which resists 'flat declaration.' Hegel consistently rejects and subverts the prevailing philosophical expectation and presupposition that the true or 'reality' can be grasped in any immediate sense; from a particular, single, positive statement; or from simple, linear argumentation. Obscurity follows obscurity; even in a moment when Hegel seems to capitulate to formal declaration, when a moment of clarity or place of anchorage seems to be offered, our reading on compels us to return to this statement and confront what it withheld, to confound the clarity which came before. (I will return to this point later.)

Rush overlooks this necessity because he has not grasped the even more fundamental point that when consciousness in-itself becomes for-itself, this cannot be described as or through a 'flat declaration', nor any other stable entity. '[T]he former is' *not* simply 'converted to the latter on account of intolerance to contradiction.' This does not mean, however, that the difference between the in-itself and the for-itself is merely suspended. Rather, consciousness in-*and*-for itself, for Hegel, arises out of consciousness being first for-itself: in defining itself against its own content, it recognises its own content as its other, and this minimal yet radical discrepancy which eludes flat declaration or abstract identity, produced by this self-othering, drives it beyond itself. Rush is therefore correct to imply that the idea around which Hegel's phenomenological method revolves is this distinction, but wrong to suggest that the *telos* of this method is this distinction's collapse. This is not what

²⁷ Ibid., p. 326. My emphasis.

absolute knowing is. This point will prove essential to grasp for it is what dictates the specificity and the necessity of the ironic experience of Hegel's speculative philosophy.

This rather abstract account can be clarified with reference to the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, in which Hegel expounds the method of his enquiry into the science of the experience of consciousness. For Hegel, both the truth of method and of beginning only come to be through the ironic experience of their impossibility—of the failure of their actuality to correspond to their concept. '[I]t might be useful,' he writes,

to recall something about *the method of the way it* [the science of the experience of consciousness] *is carried out*. This exposition, represented as the *conduct of science* in relation to knowing *as it appears* [erscheinenden *Wissen*], and represented as the *investigation and testing of the reality of cognition*, seems incapable of taking place without some kind of presupposition which underlies it as a *standard*. For the testing consists in the application of an accepted standard, and in the resulting equality or inequality between the standard and what is tested lays the decision as to whether what is tested is correct or incorrect. (*PhG* §81)²⁸

In this passage we are told what we have come to presuppose of philosophy, even if we have not yet realised it: that we presuppose a presupposition as such—a standard, be it the ground or principle upon which a philosophy is built (such as Descartes' *cogito*, or Fichte's *Ich bin Ich*), or else an adequate method of procedure. Both the Preface and the Introduction begin with similar invocations of the same expectation:

In the preface to a philosophical work, it is customary for the author to give an explanation—namely, an explanation of his purpose in writing the book, his motivations behind it, and the relations it bears to other previous or contemporary treatments of the same topics... (*PhG* §1)

It is a natural supposition [*Vorstellung*] that, in philosophy, before one gets down to dealing with what is at issue, namely, the actual cognition of what, in truth, is, it is

²⁸ Hegel, *Werke*, III: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 75.

first necessary to come to an understanding about cognition, which is regarded as the instrument by which one seizes hold of the absolute or as the means by which one catches sight of it. (*PhG* §73)²⁹

However, in each case, this ‘custom’ or ‘natural supposition’ is not adhered to. We are told what we are ‘seem[ingly] incapable’ without, and then refused this very object through a demonstration of its logical impossibility. Our expectation is dictated then denied:

...— but for a philosophical work, this seems not only superfluous, but in light of the nature of the subject matter, even inappropriate and counterproductive. For whatever it might be suitable to say about philosophy in a preface [...] none of these can count as the way to present philosophical truth. (*PhG* §1)

But here, at the point where science first comes on the scene, neither science itself nor anything else has justified itself as the essence or as the in-itself, and without something like that taking place, it seems that no examination can take place at all. (*PhG* §81)

Where we expect to find an introduction to the instruments and methods required for our inquiry, we are forced to think again. The introductory exercise, traditionally conceived, can only ‘bring us back to where we were before’; ‘the thing—here, the absolute—[would be] again for us exactly what it was prior to this consequently superfluous effort.’

[I]f the testing of cognition which we suppose to be a *medium* made us acquainted with the law of its refraction, it would be just as useless to subtract this refraction from the result, for it is not the refraction of the ray but rather the ray itself through which the truth touches us that is cognition, and if this is subtracted, then all that would be indicated to us would be just pure direction or empty place. (*PhG* §73)

²⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

This last criticism is directed implicitly at Kant and his followers (but could also be attributed to Locke and Descartes, for example), those who approach thought as an ‘instrument’ or ‘medium’, and are therefore bound to the idea that our cognitive faculties stand between us and reality, ‘between cognition and the absolute’, and therefore render the in-itself (conceived here in the Kantian sense) as fundamentally inaccessible. Hegel spells this out most explicitly and most humorously in his *Encyclopedia Logic*: ‘to want to know *before* one knows is as incoherent as the Scholastic’s wise resolution to learn to *swim, before he ventured into the water*.’³⁰

These introductions to method are at once denunciations of the notions of introductions and methods, and therefore suggest a certain irony. But what is the nature of this irony? Donald Phillip Verene writes that the presentation of Hegel’s Introduction ‘follows an ancient principle that he does not state: to say what a thing is, say what it is not and say what it is. In the first eight paragraphs Hegel says what method is not; in the following nine paragraphs Hegel says what method is.’³¹ This is correct in a sense, but Verene does not go far enough. Not only does Hegel say what method is by saying first what it is not and then what it is: he articulates what method is by assuming the logic of ‘method’ in its immediacy in order to draw out its immanent contradictions. It is through this articulation of ‘method’ and the coming to know of its present impossibility or deadlock that method is driven beyond itself and becomes something other—and actual.

We find something similar in the opening of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* where ‘*Being, pure being*—without any further determination’ turns out to be *nothing* precisely because of this very purity.³² It is only through the force of the purity of being—that is, through trying to grasp being in its pure and simple being-ness *without* any irony—that it is revealed, ironically, to be identical with its opposite. The irony then is not in the articulating or the expositing—that is, in the subjective stance or disposition of the author or speaker—but in

³⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. by Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), §10, p. 38.

³¹ Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection: A Study of Images in the ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), p. 14.

³² Hegel, *Logic*, p. 59.

the articulation or exposition itself. This is not an irony of detachment, but rather attachment; not mastery, but naïvety.

This is emblematic of the ironic nature of the dialectic. It does not mean that the introduction to science is simply an introductory statement rejecting introductions. An ironic gesture such as this would be representative of a kind of irony that Hegel hates, following the structure of fetishistic disavowal, an irony which acknowledges its own shortcomings precisely in order not to address them: *je sais bien, mais quand meme...*: ‘I know very well (that introductions are necessarily abstract and rest upon presuppositions outside the science and therefore undermining of science as such), but nevertheless (I must start somewhere).’ Instead, the introduction and method to science only comes to be through the ironic discovery of their own constitutive impossibilities. This first misstep—of accepting the need for an introduction or a ‘first step’ as such—is therefore ironically revealed as the necessary first step, the first lesson learned in the education of our philosophical consciousness. As Rose notes: ‘The need [...] for an introductory abstract statement at the beginning of a phenomenology, is itself justified as one of the determinations of substance. [...] The abstract rejection of abstraction is the only way to induce abstract consciousness to begin to think non-abstractly.’³³ For Rose, then, a formative misstep is therefore not only found in the introductions and prefaces that we have come to expect and which Hegel denies us, but also in the Introduction and the Preface that do indeed introduce and preface the *Phenomenology*. Even these are necessary missteps in the ‘path of despair’ (*PhG* §78)—determinations which are necessary and yet undone by the determinations that follow.

II. Hegel's phenomenological method

So what, then, is this methodless method which arises from the realisation of the contradictory nature of method as such—implicit in this articulation of the failures of introductions and prefaces to introduce and preface? One popular stereotype of Hegel is that he is the most methodical of thinkers, with every thesis being countered by its own antithesis which prompts the resolution of a new synthesis that is faced by a new antithesis, and so on;

³³ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 160.

or else with every positing being negated and then negated again to produce a new position—a rigid protocol to apply to everything.³⁴ But now we know that ‘the testing of the reality of cognition’ can never proceed by the ‘application of an accepted standard’, not even the hallowed ‘dialectic’, how are we to proceed? What method can we assume without presuppositions, and without falling into a mechanism? Certainly not, Hegel writes, ‘the un-method that bases itself on either vague sentiments or on inspiration’, nor ‘the capriciousness of prophetic chatter’, both of which ‘despise not only the science of the necessity of the concept; they despise scientificity altogether’ (*PhG* §49).³⁵ Furthermore, how can such a methodless method be prescribed without itself becoming methodical, or, inversely, without the need for so many apologetic qualifications and caveats that it can never get going in the first place? And finally, why does this methodless method necessitate the ironic exposition of both itself and of the task to which it is directed?

Hegel starts by ‘remind[ing]’ us of ‘the abstract determinations of knowing and truth as they come before consciousness.’ These are not presuppositions as such, but rather descriptions of the passive and immediate experience of consciousness: ‘That is, consciousness *distinguishes* itself from something while at the same time it *relates* itself to it’ (*PhG* §82). We recognise a thing (*every* thing) as something which exists independently of us. But also that, in recognising it, it is represented to us in our mind, and so it relates itself to it. It does not matter yet what the determinations of this thing are, or even if it actually exists; nor does it matter the validity of our relating to it. Hegel is just describing the general passive activity of consciousness, ‘look[ing] on [*reine Zusehen*]’ (*PhG* 85).³⁶ He describes this same procedure in the *Logic* as ‘setting aside every reflection, [...] tak[ing] up *what is there before*

³⁴ For example, W. T. Stace writes that Hegel’s philosophy proceeds in ‘triads of thesis, antithesis, synthesis.’ When he finds that Hegel’s works do not consistently follow this ‘ideal, method’, he claims: ‘These irregularities do not indicate, however, that our description of the dialectic method is wrong. What they do show is that Hegel has not himself been able to carry out his own dialectic method with absolute consistency in all cases. This is of course an imperfection in his system.’ W. T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel: A Systematic Exposition* (New York: Dover, 1955), p. 97. For a critique of this stereotype, with reference to Stace, see Gustav E. Mueller, ‘The Hegel Legend of “Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis”’, in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, ed. by Jon Stewart (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 301-305.

³⁵ Translation slightly altered.

³⁶ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 77.

us.³⁷ We begin only by passively looking onto or taking up something in its simplicity and immediacy. ‘This something,’ Hegel writes,

is something *for consciousness*, and the determinate aspect of this *relating*, or of the *being* of something *for a consciousness*, is *knowing*. However, we distinguish this being-for-another from *being-in-itself*. That which is related to knowing is just as much distinguished from knowing and is posited as *being* also external to this relation. This aspect of this in-itself is called *truth*. (*PhG* §82).

Our relating to an object—‘something’—is what defines our knowledge of it. But the truth of the object—its ‘being-in-itself’—stands outside this relation. This, at first, seems broadly in line with Kant’s critical philosophy for which ontology is bracketed beyond knowledge, whereby (the truth of) the thing in-itself exists outside epistemology, to which all non-dogmatic philosophy is limited—with the important difference that Hegel seems to assume on authority the *de facto* intelligibility of the in-itself.

Some readers of Hegel stop here; they read this as ‘flat declaration’—to use Rush’s phrase. They define Hegel’s phenomenological method as the progressive comparison of what we hold to be true (for us) with the actual truth (in-itself), whereby we methodically adjust our knowledge to fit what we can glean of its objects. Brandom, for example, illustrates the relationship between what a thing is in-itself and what it is for consciousness, and the process by which the two are progressively reconciled, with the example of a straight (in-itself) stick which, when half submerged in water, appears (for consciousness) bent.³⁸ The truth (the stick in-itself) does not change. What changes is our representation of the truth (of the stick) in-itself *for* consciousness—that is, our knowledge of it.

The ‘new, true object’ is the bent-stick representation revealed *as* erroneous, as a *misrepresentation* of what is now *to* the subject the way things really are: a straight stick. This representing is ‘true’ not in the sense of representing how things really are, but in the sense that what is now *to* consciousness is what *it* really is: a mere

³⁷ Hegel, *Logic*, p. 47.

³⁸ Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*. This example is first developed pp. 76-80, and then reprised pp. 89-92.

appearance, a misrepresenting. [...] What alters is the status of the bent-stick representing, what it is to consciousness. It had enjoyed the status of being to consciousness what the stick is in itself. But now its status has changed to being *to* consciousness only what the stick was *for* consciousness: an appearance.³⁹

He puts it more succinctly later on: '[T]he object that was taken to be in itself reveals itself, via incompatibilities, as in fact [...] only what it was for consciousness.'⁴⁰ In presenting the process of knowledge like this, the *Phenomenology* itself is presented as an attempt to grasp the process 'by which concepts evolve. It is the process in and through which more and more of how the world really is, what is actually materially incompatible with what in the objective alethic sense becomes incorporated in material incompatibilities deontically acknowledged by subjects.'⁴¹ It becomes something like a correspondence theory of truth, whereby progress is defined by the development of concepts adequate to their objects; whereby the progress of knowledge is defined as the methodical approach towards the nature of reality independent of our consciousness of it. I say 'something *like* a correspondence theory of truth' because with Brandom (as with Kant) what is in-itself, this nature of reality independent of our perception, is ultimately fundamentally unknowable—or, at least, in the case of Brandom's Hegel, it is fundamentally unknowable whether our knowledge has finally grasped it. For Brandom's Hegel, even our revised knowledge of the apparently bent stick as straight is still just the *appearance* of an in-itself for consciousness, albeit an improved appearance developed through a process of determinate negation and mediation. This is where the pragmatist and normative element of Brandom's reading comes from. Quentin Meillassoux's description of Kant could apply equally here to Brandom's Hegel, for whom

intersubjectivity, the consensus of a community, supplants the *adequation* between the representations of a solitary subject and the thing itself as the veritable criterion of objectivity and of scientific objectivity more particularly. Scientific truth is no longer what conforms to an in-itself supposedly indifferent to the way in which it is

³⁹ Ibid. 91-92.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 362.

⁴¹ Ibid. 101.

given to the subject, but rather what is susceptible of being given as shared by a scientific community.⁴²

Brandom would perhaps argue that this description does not apply to his Hegel. Again, unlike Kant, as Brandom acknowledges, Hegel ‘understands the objective world’—that is, what is in-itself—‘as always already in a conceptual (and so ultimately thinkable, intelligible) shape,’ and so ‘it does not owe to any activity by the thinking subjects to whom it is in principle intelligible.’⁴³ Nevertheless, by Brandom’s own account, there is always the chance that what we take to be objective or in-itself, even the stick that we discovered to be straight, may—and, in the case of more scientifically complex objects (a black hole, or a virus, or an ecosystem, for example), probably will—reveal itself again to be merely for consciousness: that is, our knowledge may again be revealed retrospectively in its incompleteness or even its error, and therefore qualified and improved. Therefore, even if we accept that the in-itself is in a conceptual shape and therefore thinkable in principle, that does not guarantee that it is actually thought. Our knowledge of the in-itself remains residually uncertain, and the ultimate criterion for objectivity, then, remains its normative status for consciousness as acknowledged by the consensus of a community.

The most crucial point concerning Brandom’s account of Hegel’s method for our purposes, however, is that such material empirical objects such as sticks which exist independently of consciousness are not principally the objects of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and so this method described by Brandom cannot adequately describe that of Hegel’s phenomenology. The primary object of the *Phenomenology*—as suggested by its original title, ‘*The Science of the Experience of Consciousness*’—is consciousness itself; and, as Hegel explicitly states, consciousness, when taken as an object for consciousness, is an object unlike all others, and the discovery of its uniqueness dramatically destabilises the hard distinction which was previously drawn between that which is in-itself and that which is for consciousness:

⁴² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 4-5.

⁴³ Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, p. 3.

But the nature of the object which we are investigating goes beyond this division, or to this semblance of division and presupposition. Consciousness in its own self provides its own standard, and the investigation will thereby be a comparison of it with itself, for the difference which has just been made falls within consciousness. [...] [P]recisely because consciousness knows of an object at all, there is already present the difference that something is, to consciousness, the *in-itself*, but another moment is knowing, or the being of the object *for* consciousness. It is upon this difference which is present that the testing depends. (*PhG* §§84-85)

The crucial point is that, when consciousness takes itself as its object, ‘the difference which has been made [between (i) the object in-itself which exists outside any relation to consciousness and (ii) the object as it exists for consciousness] falls within consciousness’ itself. In short: there is not only an opposition between consciousness and its object, but rather the fact of this opposition divides consciousness itself. Hegel goes as far as to say that ‘consciousness itself is their comparison’ (*PhG* §85). When consciousness takes itself as its object, therefore, it realises that what it is in-itself is the speculative unity—that is, the inseparable but distinguishable coupling—of these two moments, in-itself and for-itself. It can never finally grasp what it is in-itself in a positive or static way, for the way in which it appears to itself—that is, its own self-conception, for-itself—is a constitutive part of what this ‘in-itself’ is. This moment of being for-itself inherent in what consciousness in-itself is, is the minimal contradiction which guarantees that what is in-itself is always both itself as its lack; and it is the repeated attempts of consciousness to articulate this contradiction which guarantees that consciousness is dynamic, a process, a movement which is always completing itself through its own development. As soon as it grasps it, what it is has changed. This apparent failure of consciousness to be fully itself is then at once the very condition of its possibility. This is the contradiction upon which all others rest. And it is therefore ‘this difference which is present’, which is always present, upon which the methodless method rests—upon which ‘the testing depends’—methodless because its standard is not external, nor presupposed, but itself, and therefore self-disputing, self-responsive, self-reconstructive: Consciousness takes itself as its object and compares itself with itself, but in doing so what ‘itself’ is progresses. This retrospectively clarifies Hegel’s earlier statement that ‘[t]he

inequality which takes place in consciousness between the I and its substance which is its object is their difference, the *negative* itself. It can be viewed as the *defect* of the two, but it is their very soul or what moves them' (*PhG* §37). The self-inflicted wound of consciousness is its own healing.

One must state clearly, at this early stage, that this does not mean that Hegel's idealism is, as it is again often caricatured, the radical preoccupation of the individual consciousness with its own self at the expense of thinking about reality. Granted, Hegel is not too interested in the *Phenomenology* in the external reality of empirical objects like sticks, or facts, indifferent to consciousness; but he is interested in the historical realisation of consciousness qua freedom, desire, art, politics, culture, civil society, ethics, religion, law, love. This interest concerns, for Hegel, what is true. What distinguishes these objects is that they *do* change in themselves when they change for consciousness because they are products of the truth of consciousness—that which Hegel calls spirit. That is, in the unfolding of the truth of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, consciousness in the individual sense is revealed to be merely a moment in the determination of spirit. Unlike sticks, spirit has no existence in itself unless it exists for-itself—but it does not only exist for-itself: it exists in-itself (as truth) in history. Like consciousness, then, what spirit is in-itself is defined by a contradiction between these two irreducible moments, opposed in its unity. What is in-itself is defined by a split.

For Brandom, however, the in-itself is by definition non-contradictory. Contradiction (what he labels as 'material incompatibilities') always falls on the side of cognition—a contradiction which must be overcome:

It is *impossible* for one object simultaneously to exhibit materially incompatible properties (or for two incompatible states of affairs to obtain), while it is only *inappropriate* for a subject simultaneously to endorse materially incompatible commitments. [...] Finding oneself with materially incompatible commitments obliges one to *do* something, to revise those commitments so as to remove the incoherence.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, p. 96.

Brandom, then, has what Hegel disparagingly calls with reference to Kant ‘a tenderness for worldly things.’ He cannot entertain the possibility that the world itself might bear ‘the blemish of contradiction’ which is assumed to ‘fall to thinking alone.’⁴⁵ For Hegel, on the other hand, the gap between consciousness and its object (the gap which defines consciousness) is redoubled in the object qua substance as subject. Continuing from where we left off in paragraph 37, we can see that ‘[h]owever much this negative now initially appears as the inequality between the I and the object, still it is just as much the inequality of the substance with itself. What seems to take place outside of the substance, to be an activity directed against it, is its own doing, and substance shows itself to be essentially subject’ (*PhG* §37).

What spirit is for-itself—that is, perhaps, for us—must change to account for what is spirit in-itself. This is the task of comprehension, of grasping the truth. But in realising what spirit is for-us, it changes spirit in-itself, as what spirit is in-itself is also for us. These two moments of spirit then reciprocally influence one another but they never converge upon an abstract or tautological self-identity. Spirit, in order to remain true to its meaning, changes its meaning. The methodless method of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* rests upon this redoubled gap, where spirit compares itself with itself—that is, between its concept and its realisation or externalisation in history—and it is through this comparison that spirit moves. Every stage of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is characterised by a different attempt to articulate the gap between these two particular moments which will never be resolved, at the levels of individual, moral, and religious experience, and it is precisely the repetitive failures of spirit to articulate this gap that propels its self-movement and self-development. Absolute knowing, therefore, is not the final ‘successful’ attempt, but the ironic realisation of the necessity of this gap as such.

Rush claims that ‘the former [i.e. the in-itself] is converted to the latter [the for-itself] on account of intolerance to contradiction’, but now we can see that the opposite is the case: there is no final conversion, and certainly not on account of an intolerance to contradiction. As Hegel emphatically states in his *Logic*, echoing his much earlier thesis that ‘*Contradictio est regula veri, non contradictio falsi*’:

⁴⁵ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §48, p. 93.

Internal self-movement, self-movement proper, *drive* in general [...] is likewise nothing else than that something is, *in itself*, itself and the lack of itself (*the negative*), in one and the same respect. [...] If [...] a concrete existent were not capable of overreaching its positive determination and grasping the negative one at the same time, holding the two firmly together; if it were not capable of harbouring contradiction with it, it would not then be a living unity as such, not a ground, and in contradiction it would founder and sink to the ground. — *Speculative thought* consists only in this, in holding firm to contradiction and to itself in the contradiction.⁴⁶

Truth is thus characterised by a constitutive, ironic contradiction. It ‘is, *in itself*, itself and the lack of itself (*the negative*)’. If it ceased to harbour this contradiction within it, it would cease to be at all; it would be inanimate and dead, like a stick. Reconciliation is, therefore, not the reconciliation of contradiction, but rather the reconciliation *with* contradiction: it is ‘looking the negative in the face and lingering with it’ (*PhG* §32). Neither Rush nor Brandom ‘hold firm’ to this. To use the terminology of Rose: they seek to spuriously mend the broken middle, rather than render it as such.

III. The ‘is’

The ironic presentation of Hegel’s philosophy is necessitated by the discovery of the ironic nature of truth, where ‘irony’ refers to that which is never fully what it is. If truth is in some sense constitutively incomplete—that is, if what it is in-itself is both itself and the lack of itself—then it cannot be adequately presented positivistically, as ‘flat declaration’, as if what it is is just that. Hegel rejects this use of language with his critique of sensuous certainty, the first stage of the *Phenomenology* which follows the Preface and Introduction. Sensuous certainty is that which ‘expresses what it knows as this: It *is*.’ (*PhG* §60). In other words, what it claims to be certain about is that there is complete identity without difference between what it expresses and its object. However, in being so, it omits all of its object’s determinate

⁴⁶ Hegel, *Logic*, pp. 382-383.

characteristics; all it really affirms is its object's existence: 'its truth only contains the *being* of the item.' Like the speaker of Samuel Beckett's poem 'What is the Word', all it is able to do is point stupidly at the thing ('this this — / this this here — / all this this here —') without concretely grasping any of its determinate qualities.⁴⁷ If Hegel's great discovery, as described above, is that abstract identity, so often taken to be real identity, is in fact illusory, the correlate of this in Hegel's critique of language is that the copula 'is', taken as the marker of identity, is in fact a metaphor which has forgotten that it is one.

In what way, then, can irony as truth or the truth as irony be realised in a philosophical work? If 'is', the most ubiquitous of verbs, backbone of propositional logic, and the primary bearer of affirmation, veracity, and truth in language, is revealed to be and to have always been an obfuscating metaphor, how can we go on using it without the kind of ironic distance that Hegel so despised? It is not as simple as saying one thing when you really mean another. This would suggest that the reader would have to 'see through' the irony to the truth 'beneath'. The point is, on the contrary, that there is nothing to see through at all, and that the truth is ironic as such. But if this is the case and the truth is as it is stated, then how is this ironic at all?

For Hegel, it is precisely the ubiquity and familiarity of this word 'is' that makes it not only emblematic, but the crux of speculation. He writes in his *Encyclopedia Logic*:

[W]hat is [...] familiar is usually what is most unfamiliar. Thus, for instance, *being* is a pure determination of thought. And yet, it never occurs to us to make the 'is' the object of our consideration. We typically believe that the absolute must lie somewhere far yonder. But it is precisely that which is wholly present and which we as thinking beings always carry with us and make use of, even if without explicit consciousness of the fact.⁴⁸

But how, precisely, to 'make the "is" the object of our consideration'? As argued in the previous section, it is only by setting aside every reflection and presupposition and taking up

⁴⁷ Samuel Beckett, 'What Is the Word?', in *Poems: 1930-1989* (London: Calder Publications, 2002), pp. 113-115 (p. 113).

⁴⁸ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §24, p. 61.

what is there before us in its immediacy that the ironic truth of the thing might be realised. It is only by first making and learning from the mistake of thinking abstractly that consciousness might begin to think concretely, speculatively. Therefore, the irony is that, at the level of the proposition, the speculative nature of the ‘is’ is only realised by first using it totally literally—that is, naively, and without ironic distance, where ‘is’ just means ‘is.’

As we saw with Wohlfart, Hegel’s notion of the speculative proposition is often taken to be a formal innovation in philosophical writing capable of presenting the speculative, the ironic truth that what is in-itself is both itself and its lack, which drives itself beyond itself. Indeed, this is the idea of the speculative proposition suggested by Hegel when he writes that: ‘only the kind of philosophical exposition which rigorously excludes the ordinary relations among the parts of a proposition’—subject, copula, and predicate—‘would be able to achieve the goal of plasticity’ (*PhG* §64). But the suggestion that the speculative character of a philosophy is guaranteed only by its philosophical style, by the writer or authorship, does not entirely grasp the importance of Hegel’s speculative proposition. To state the obvious, there is nothing formally distinct about Hegel’s propositional form. Instead, it is the reading consciousness which must repeatedly discover for itself that what *is* is always also what it is not; that ‘is’, too, is in-itself itself and its lack. This denotes the essential experiential content of Hegel’s philosophy. Hegel does not need to develop a totally new propositional logic, therefore, but rather takes this propositional logic to its end so that it might by itself bring to light what it had disavowed. ‘Is’ is thus the most speculative word in Hegel’s corpus, perhaps even more than ‘*Aufhebung*’, as that which signifies the identity of identity and non-identity. (As Hegel writes elsewhere, this speculative identity is not only absolute, but is *the* absolute.)⁴⁹ Crucially, however, this ‘is’ which is as much an ‘is not’ cannot be affirmed as both in advance, but must be repeatedly discovered as such. For it is only through the repeated discovery and experience of this contradiction that the reading of the proposition drives it beyond itself. To use ‘is’ ‘literally’ as speculative thinking demands it, then, is to assert it abstractly, if only to realise what that abstract identity left obscured, and so bring it to concretion. One approaches *what is* without irony, to realise the irony inherent in what is.

⁴⁹ ‘The Absolute itself is the identity of identity and non-identity; being opposed and being one are both together in it.’ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. by H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), p. 156.

Hegel's speculative proposition teaches us how to read in this way, and thus opens up the possibility of reading all propositions speculatively.

Before going into Hegel's exposition of the speculative proposition in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, it may be helpful first to draw on Hegel's description of Socratic irony and its relation to the dialectic in his lectures on the history of philosophy. Hegel says:

The irony of Socrates has this great quality of showing how to make abstract ideas concrete and effect their development, for on that alone depends the bringing of the Notion into consciousness.

In recent times much has been said about the Socratic irony which, like all dialectic, gives force to what is taken immediately, but only in order to allow the dissolution inherent in it to come to pass; and we may call this the universal irony of the world.⁵⁰

While the German reads '*Alle Dialektik läßt das gelten, was gelten soll, als ob es gelte*', the succinct English translation—'all dialectic, gives force to *what is* taken immediately'—is felicitous (even in spite of its omission of Hegel's satirical *détournement* of the Kantian '*als ob* [as if]').⁵¹ The dialectic gives force to 'what is' in terms of what is immediately present or apparent, if only to facilitate its sublation—and this is true of the word 'is' itself. All dialectic gives force to what *is*. Likewise, Hegel's propositional logic gives force to what 'is' is, 'taken immediately'—but only in order to allow the dissolution inherent in 'is' to come to pass—to realise, through reading, the speculative and ironic nature of the 'is' itself; to make its abstract identity concrete and therefore effect the development of the proposition beyond the fetters of its abstract form.

Hegel develops this peculiar propositional logic most extensively in the Preface to his *Phenomenology*. Again, what is particularly unique about this exposition is that it presents the speculative nature of the proposition, and thus speculation itself—what he calls 'the goal of plasticity'—as something which can only be achieved through the experience and the act of reading. The 'rigorous exclusion' of 'the ordinary relations among the parts of a proposition'

⁵⁰ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, I, 400.

⁵¹ Hegel, *Werke*, XVIII: *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I*, p. 460.

is a necessity which must first be discovered and then performed by the reading subject (*PhG* §64). This is why, despite being a ‘distinct’ propositional form, the speculative proposition is formally indistinct from ordinary propositions. It follows the traditional grammatical logic of *S is P*, where the *S* refers to the subject of the proposition, and the predicative *P* refers to its determinations. The novelty of the speculative proposition lies, therefore, not in some extraordinary linguistic or formal device, but in the comic realisation of a notion of identity which retains difference within it, of an ‘is’ which includes an ‘is not’, an ‘is not’ which only becomes apparent upon a compelled rereading after a necessary misreading, and thus leads the assumed stability of the subject-predicate relation awry. This ‘realisation’ is meant in both senses of the word: the reader at once *becomes aware* of the dialectical nature of the ‘is’ and in doing so, *makes it so*. A proposition is only speculative by being read as such.

For this reason, the speculative proposition is better understood as the speculative *reading* of the proposition. Understood this way, ‘the kind of philosophical exposition which rigorously excludes the ordinary relations among the parts of a proposition which would be able to achieve the goal of plasticity’ does not only have to be sought and found in Hegel, but may be realised and actualised through the speculative reading of any proposition. That is, the truth of any proposition may exceed its abstract self-identification. This does not mean that any proposition *must* yield speculative truths, but that in the act of reading there is always the potential for the animation or realisation of an ironic, dynamic, and possibly explosive truth which otherwise eludes the ‘flat declaration’ as suggested by its form. This will become increasingly important in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation where it will be argued that the methodless method of ‘giving force to what is’ provides a model of critical reading in which the truth of a work may be repeatedly and ironically realised anew.

Hegel’s first example of such a speculative proposition is ‘*God is being* [Gott ist das Sein]’ (*PhG* §62, p. 54). This proposition is true. However, its truth lies not in the abstract identity it seems to assert, nor in the exhaustion of the second term in the first, but precisely in that it resists such a ratiocinative and ‘flatly declarative’ reading, which would spuriously resolve, rather than harbour the contradiction that it renders. As Catherine Malabou puts it: ‘the linear *transition* between subject and predicate, although it is immediately suggested by both the philosophical statement and its own form, encounters resistance.’⁵² When Hegel uses

⁵² Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, p. 177.

the word ‘subject’ in the following passage, it is a pun. It denotes both the subject of the proposition and the reading subject. In traditional propositional logic, the subject is fixed, and the predicate proceeds to tell us something about it; the reading subject is fixed too, ‘the knowing I’ that synthesises or collapses the predicates into the subject and declares it to be so (‘It expresses what it knows as this: It *is*.’): ‘At first, it is usually the subject as the *objective* fixed self which is made into the ground. The necessary movement advances from here to the multiplicity of determinations, or the predicates. It is here that the knowing I takes the place of that subject, and it is here that it is both the binding together of the predicates and the subject supporting them’ (*PhG* §60). An analogous example of this is Brandom’s aforementioned *de re* reading where the reader refers back to the facts ‘as she takes them to be,’ ‘as the best any of us can do’: one takes on authority their own subjectivity (or else the subject of the proposition) ‘as the *objective* fixed self which is made into the ground’—the fixed anchor of all subsequent predication.

In reading propositions like ‘God is being’, however, the stability of the subject of the proposition and the subject qua reader is disrupted and undermined. The subject, here, is ‘God’; the predicate is ‘being’. But (and here Hegel ventriloquises the internal monologue of the reading subject)—but “‘being” is not supposed to be a predicate. It is supposed to be the essence’: that is, it is supposed to be a subject; a ground. The reading subject then assumes ‘being’ as a subject and reads backwards, ‘but, as a result, “God” seems to cease to be what it was through its place in the proposition, namely, to be a fixed subject.’ We read a proposition expecting a linear transition from subject to predicate or predicates but, in having this expectation undermined, by finding a subject in the place of the predicate, we are ‘thrown back to the thought of the subject’, and find it changed. The predicate ‘being’ is expressed as subject, ‘as the *essence* which exhausts the nature of the subject [God]’, but in doing so ‘it finds the subject [God] also to be immediately present in the predicate [being].’ ‘Thinking, instead of getting any further with the transition from subject to predicate, feels instead inhibited’ (*PhG* §62): it (the thinking subject and the subject of the proposition) oscillates from subject to predicate and back again, it becomes stuck in the proposition it had expected to merely take note of and pass by. ‘This conflict between the form of a proposition per se and the unity of the concept [...] destroys that form’ (*PhG* §61). And thus speculative propositional form comes to be through the ironic discovery of the impossibility of

propositional form as such (just as the notion of ‘method’ and its introduction came to be through the ironic discoveries of these presuppositions’ self-defeating internal logics). In this form, subject and predicate are not affirmed as identical with nor exhaustive of each other, but are left circling around the copula between them—‘is’—which is revealed to affirm an ‘identity of subject and predicate [which] does not abolish their difference’ (*PhG* §61): an identity of identity and non-identity. The tension created by this identity and non-identity is not merely suspended, however. It is instead this tension that drives the meaning of the proposition beyond the abstract self-identification as suggested by its form; that drives it beyond simply and tautologically ‘meaning what it means.’ ‘God’, before assumed to be the fixed subject *par excellence*, is revealed instead as being, in-itself, itself and the lack of itself, and thus dynamic, ‘self-engendering, advancing’ (*PhG* §65). As Rose puts it: ‘the subject of the proposition is no longer fixed and abstract with external, contingent accidents, but, initially, an empty name, uncertain and problematic, gradually acquiring meaning as the result of a series of contradictory experiences.’⁵³ This, for Hegel, does not undermine the subject (even if the subject is God), but rather makes the subject *true*.

On encountering such propositions, our ‘knowing how to read’ is checked and undermined; the usual way of interpreting and understanding proves insufficient: ‘Common opinion [...] learns from experience that it means something other than what it took itself to have meant, and this correction of its opinion compels knowing to come back to the proposition and now to grasp it in some other way’ (*PhG* §63). In order to be read properly, therefore, speculative propositions—and even the word ‘is’ itself—must first be misread, for it is only in the *Gegenstoß* (translated by Pinkard as both ‘counter-punch’ and ‘counter-stroke’) (*PhG* §§60, 61),⁵⁴ in being ‘thrown back’ (*PhG* §62), upon encountering resistance and retreating, that what is returned to (the true, not as abstract identity, but as a concrete speculative identity of identity and non-identity) comes to be. The speculative identity only

⁵³ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 52.

⁵⁴ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 58-59. Cf. Žižek recovers the latent concept of ‘*absoluter Gegenstoß*’, translated as ‘absolute recoil’, from Hegel’s logic of reflection to describe the emergence of a thing out of its own loss or failure. ‘When positedness is self-sublated, an essence is no longer directly determined by an external Other, by its complex set of relations to its otherness, to the environment into which it emerged. Rather, it determines itself, it is “within itself the absolute recoil upon itself”—the gap, or discord, that introduces dynamism into it is absolutely immanent.’ Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 4.

arises through the failure of its abstract identity; the possibility of reading arises only from misreading. It is only through this reversal that the ironic truth comes to be realised.

Hegel acknowledges how irritating this is:

For the most part, this unfamiliar impediment forms the basis for the complaints about the unintelligibility of philosophical literature even when the individual has otherwise met the conditions of cultural formation for understanding such philosophical writing. In what is said about this, we see the reason behind the specific reproach which is so often levelled against such writings, namely, that so much has to be read over and over again before it can be understood. (*PhG* §63)

But for Hegel this irritation borne from the necessity ‘to be read over and over again’ is a necessity which must be endured. It is a condition of true knowledge. The truth of philosophy, and thus the true itself, can only be accessed indirectly, through the ironic experience of first having missed the mark. The assumed fixity of the subject as a stable notion in-itself must be repetitively undermined in order to realise the subject in its dynamism. This is why, in a letter to his friend, the poet Karl Ludwig von Knebel, Hegel contrasts the argumentative or propositional style of his journalism with that of his philosophy, saying of the latter that the ‘subject matter does not permit that clarity of exposition which discloses the object in a finished state and clear light at first approach, and which is possible in the case of a concrete subject matter.’⁵⁵ The object of reportage may be disclosed ‘at first approach’ because its subject matter is constituted by facts—time, place, circumstance, statistics—which do not change what they are in-themselves when they change for us, where all besides the facts are opinion and rhetoric. On the other hand, the object of philosophy to be grasped and expressed, that is the true, cannot be disclosed on first approach, for what it is in-itself must be revealed, retrospectively and ironically, in its incompleteness, in order for it to drive beyond itself.

⁵⁵ Hegel to von Knebel, 30 August 1807. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Letters*, trans. by Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 145.

IV. From the speculative reading of the proposition to the speculative reading of the 'Phenomenology'

One possible objection to all this is that not every proposition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* appears to function in this way. Not every couple of subject and predicate circle wildly around an 'is', with the reader repetitively thrown between the two, realising what is read in its motile configuration by encountering resistance from what is first misread as a flat declaration. This is evident from the fact that some of the best exegetes of this passage—for example, Malabou and Hamacher—while making much of its importance for a reading of Hegel in general, do not give any examples of speculative propositions from the body of the *Phenomenology* beyond Hegel's own examples from the Preface of 'God is being' and 'the actual is the universal.' Rose locates a few more examples of such propositions in Hegel's lectures and the *Philosophy of Right* whose copulae have been misread as affirmations of an abstract identity between the related terms: 'In general religion and the foundation of the state is [*sic*] one and the same thing; they are identical in and for themselves'; and 'What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational'; and 'To comprehend *what is*, this is the task of philosophy, because *what is*, is reason.'⁵⁶ These deceptively declarative statements have indeed caused much confusion due to their being understood as a defence of, for example, a quietist justification of the status quo, due to their being read as if the ordinary relations between subject and predicate persist, as if they were ordinary propositions. Even Adorno, for example, claims that the thesis that the actual is rational is 'indistinguishable from apologetics.'⁵⁷ However, such deceptive statements from Hegel are relatively few and far between.

Perhaps Hegel's most radical speculative proposition—most radical in terms of the resistance it presents to linear, ratiocinative reading; in terms of the intensity of its self-contradiction—is the infamous so-called 'infinite judgement' from the section on phrenology in the *Phenomenology*: the proposition that the '*being of spirit is a bone*' (*PhG* §343). This speculative proposition is important for Lacanian readers of Hegel such as Mladen Dolar and

⁵⁶ Quoted in Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, pp. 51, 86-87. Rose's own translations.

⁵⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. by Harry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 7.

Žižek for illustrating Lacan's theory of the simultaneous incommensurability and inseparability of the subject (\$) and its unobtainable object of desire (*a*) which sets in motion the process of signification.⁵⁸ In Hegelian terms, the bone represents the material remainder of spirit which both resists and guarantees the economy of sublation. Importantly, the way that Žižek describes the proposition that 'spirit is a bone' and its relation to this simultaneous failure and possibility of subjectivity epitomises the experience of speculative reading as elaborated by Hegel above, and the status of this experience as a condition for realising the speculative truth of a proposition:

[T]he proposition 'the Spirit is a bone' provokes in us a sentiment of radical, unbearable contradiction; it offers an image of grotesque discord, of an extremely negative relationship.

However, [...] it is precisely thus that we produce its speculative truth, because *this negativity, this unbearable discord, coincides with subjectivity itself*, it is the only way to make present and 'palpable' the utmost—that is, self-referential—negativity which characterizes the spiritual subjectivity. We *succeed* in transmitting the dimension of subjectivity *by means of the failure itself*, through the radical insufficiency, through the absolute maladjustment of the predicate in relation to the subject. This is why 'the Spirit is a bone' is a perfect example of what Hegel calls the 'speculative proposition', a proposition whose terms are incompatible, without common measure. As Hegel points out in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, to grasp the true meaning of such a proposition we must go back and read it over again, because this true meaning arises from the very failure of the first, 'immediate' reading.⁵⁹

But speculative propositions such as 'spirit is a bone', and such as Hegel describes them in the Preface, are exceptional—at least in terms of this radical sense of an 'unbearable contradiction.' This is not, however, because Hegel sets up the speculative proposition as an

⁵⁸ See Mladen Dolar, 'The Phrenology of Spirit', in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 64-83; and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 234-237.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

expository ideal, which he then fails to realise, but because he sets up the speculative reading of the proposition as an analogue and a microcosm of speculative reading as such.

‘The *proposition*,’ as Hegel writes, ‘ought to express *what* the true is’ (*PhG* §65). In this sense, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* should be read as one long speculative proposition, as an attempt to express what the true is as a whole (or as *the* whole). The importance of the reading experience of the speculative proposition, then, is that it represents the reading experience of the *Phenomenology* in microcosm. As Hamacher remarks, it is the ‘paradigm of the whole speculative movement’ in which ‘the grammatical logic of subsumption characteristic of “representational thinking” [*vorstellendes Denken*]’—in this case, the formally logical predication of a fixed subject—‘is replaced by the circular logic of dialectical thinking.’⁶⁰ It also graphically and syntactically represents the *Phenomenology*’s central concern—that of identity—through its own central term: the ‘is’. Finally, Hegel’s exposition of the speculative proposition is important because it reveals that speculative thinking is, first of all, an experience and act of reading.

Far from every stage of the *Phenomenology* neatly transitioning into the next, overcoming the logical and conceptual tensions of the previous one, each presents itself as a new hurdle; every synthesis or rational achievement which is approached appears, upon arrival, as yet further conceptual tension and contradiction. It is, then, ironic in the sense of a dramatic irony to which the reader is not privy until it is too late, as the means by which they might be confronted with the disparity present in the true as such. This is why Butler is right to claim that ‘[a]s readers of [the *Phenomenology*], we undergo the drama of accepting false certainties and then being rudely and, indeed, comically confronted by that which they unwittingly exclude.’⁶¹ Hegel’s reader is never passively witnessing the comedy of the text unfold, or enjoying the dramatic irony from the outside. Instead, they are wholly implicated as a character within it, afflicted by incessant confusions and false conclusions, producing the reading’s content and form by being compelled to read differently, speculatively. This is what characterises an immanent as opposed to a transcendental exposition and reading of the dialectic, which is the difference between experiencing and therefore realising the truth of the

⁶⁰ Hamacher, *pleroma*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Judith Butler, ‘Commentary on Joseph Flay’s “Hegel, Derrida, and Bataille’s Laughter”’, in *Hegel and His Critics: Philosophy in the Aftermath of Hegel*, ed. by William Desmond (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 174-178 (p. 175).

dialectic in all its irony, plasticity, and surprise, and merely formalising it as a schema or method. ‘Indeed,’ as Butler goes on, ‘the narrative journey of Hegel’s emerging subject in the *Phenomenology* is marked by a repeated and insistently premature proclamation that the absolute has been achieved.’⁶² What Butler does not fully acknowledge, however, is that absolute knowing *is* achieved at the end of the *Phenomenology*, but this absolute knowing is itself ironic: it is not, as the reader might have expected, a fullness and immediacy of knowledge and experience, or a complete conceptual mediation of reality, but rather the moment of return, the ironic reversal, where we are ‘thrown back to the thought of the subject’, and are compelled to reread what we had first misread: where we reread the gap between us and the in-itself as a gap *in* the in-itself; where we reread the apparent disparity between us and the truth of absolute knowing, as a disparity inherent in the truth of absolute knowing itself.

This complicates the idea, advanced by Josiah Royce and later developed by the likes of Jean Hyppolite and M. H. Abrams, of the *Phenomenology* as a *Bildungsroman*—as documenting a teleological process of (self-)realisation and demystification towards maturity and reconciliation with normative society.⁶³ It may seem that this reading is not without some textual justification. Hegel’s chosen metaphor for the *Phenomenology* is, after all, a ‘ladder’ (*PhG* §26). He also describes the dialectic as ‘unrelenting’ in the *Phenomenology* (§80); as ‘the universal, irresistible power which nothing, however secure and firm it may feel itself to be, can withstand’ in the *Encyclopaedia*; and, in the *Logic*, as ‘free of restrictions, and as the absolutely infinite force to which no object that may present itself as something external, removed from reason and independent of it, could offer resistance’.⁶⁴ However, perhaps these grandiose claims, upon rereading, might reveal their own ironic truth. As Comay notes: ‘What he describes [as a ladder] is actually more like a game of snakes and ladders, where the snakes vastly outnumber the ladders, where at any moment you

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ See Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), p. 147; Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’*, trans. by Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 11-12; M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), pp. 225-237.

⁶⁴ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §81, p. 130; *Logic*, p. 737.

might find yourself sliding back to the beginning.’⁶⁵ Rush claims that Hegel’s dialectic ‘involves sequential progressive change from one world view to another, measured in terms of coherency that overcomes conceptual tension.’⁶⁶ But this is asserted without textual justification beyond an insufficiently literal reading of Hegel’s own claims—that is, Rush’s reading does not ‘give force’ to literal-mindedness in order to bring about its own transgression, but instead retreats from the letter to a hypostasised and lifeless ‘flat declaration.’ Where is this ‘coherency that overcomes conceptual tension’ actually to be found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*? While it does indeed progress, this progress is always, at once, obstruction. It documents a process of ‘coming to know and knowing about that coming to know’⁶⁷—as Isobel Armstrong puts it—but essential to this process are the disruptive revelations of the *wrongness* of knowledge, and the repetitive, incessant undoings of what we had come to know (and known about that coming to know), which are at once constitutive elements of what that very knowledge is.

This does not affirm the *Phenomenology* as an unequivocal work of destruction, nor absolute knowing as a standpoint of absolute loss. Instead, read properly (that is, in surrender to the dialectic), the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is traumatic in a precisely psychoanalytic sense: at once it documents and engenders the progressive challenging and undermining of the coordinates of ‘common sense’ and established knowledge on and in their own terms. On the other hand, it is this very reading experience, that immanently negates itself, which engenders the (negated negation of) the receptivity to the contingencies of reality that allows thinking to be adaptable, critical, progressive, and without presupposition—that is, speculative.

Another way of putting it is that the *Phenomenology* is a work of mourning, not melancholia. This conception of mourning should be distinguished, however, from the postmodern conception of Derrida, for example. Derrida ironically reformulates Descartes: ‘I mourn, therefore I am.’ For Derrida, mourning is an endless, ‘impossible’ process, and it is

⁶⁵ Rebecca Comay, ‘Resistance and Repetition: Hegel and Freud,’ in *Hegel and Resistance: History, Politics and Dialectics*, ed. by Bart Zantvoort and Rebecca Comay (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 35-57 (p. 50).

⁶⁶ Rush, *Irony & Idealism*, p. 165.

⁶⁷ Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2000), p. 62.

only this mourning that drives us on.⁶⁸ The speculative work of mourning, on the other hand, is one that takes the risk of completing itself. This does not mean that the gap inherent in absolute knowing is finally overcome, but rather that knowing, in spite of this gap, continues to take the risk of staking itself, of making more propositions with naïve commitment—not with the delusional hubris of the fundamentalist or zealot who cannot be falsified, but with the revolutionary courage of the historical actor who knows that the ironic truth of their position can only be realised by repeatedly putting it into action and going to the end, learning from their mistakes, and risking action once again. ‘Experience will only accrue if the angel discovers the violence in its initial idea,’ as Rose puts it.⁶⁹ ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’⁷⁰ This, of course, is a painful process. It is for this reason that even in completing the work of mourning one is not freed from the path of despair.

Consequently, although I have suggested that Hegel’s description of the *Phenomenology* as a ‘ladder’ should be read ironically, this does not merely mean that it should be read as if the total opposite is true. Like Hegel’s speculative proposition, on first reading this metaphor seems to affirm a simple or abstract identity between its object and the chosen image; but as we read on, (to repeat) we ‘learn[] from experience that it means something other than what it took itself to have meant, and this correction of its opinion compels knowing to come back to the proposition and now to grasp it in some other way’ (*PhG* §63)—that is, we are forced to understand it as affirming both identity *and* non-identity, ladders *and* snakes. The speculative truth, the vital dialectical twist or ironic reversal of this is that, for Hegel, it is only by being rudely confronted with these obstructions and obstacles to reading, when we were promised a path to knowledge without resistance, that the only path to knowledge becomes possible. In other words, it is only by encountering snakes when we expected a ladder that a ladder appears.

If this conception of the true that I have been rehearsing here seems untenable for its irreconcilability with more acceptable conceptions of the true, that is, in a sense, because this untenability and unacceptability are integrally constitutive elements of such a conception.

⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 321.

⁶⁹ Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 10.

⁷⁰ Luke 9. 62.

Truth for Hegel is necessarily dialectical and thus necessarily self-disputing. It stands for a direct confrontation with contradiction in the very substance of reality and thought. Our first reaction to the revelation of this nature of truth is therefore one of self-defence. As Sutherland describes it: established knowledge ‘acts up, squirms, revels in phlegmatics, grabs for what it already owns or contains, eulogises over abstractions, asserts the unarguableness and even the divinity of its institutions; above all, it “recount[s] conventional ideas as if they were established and familiar truths.”’⁷¹ But at once, the intense unacceptability of this unresolved encounter presents the only possibility for the generation of further thought from thought, of staking ourselves once again. The inherently contradictory nature of truth stands as both its interminable obstacle and its interminable possibility; and the strenuous effort with and against this contradictory truth (of contradictory truth) is what gives definition to speculative thought.

The reason that Hegel so detests the romantic irony of his contemporaries in Jena—Schlegel, Novalis, and Schleiermacher—therefore, is not because of its inimical difference to his system and method, but its uncanny closeness. Romantic irony amounts to an inadequate reflection of his own ironic dialectic. Both are characterised by self-consciousness, the deployment of contradiction as a positive resource, and a self-reflexive awareness of the limitations of one’s own ideas, actions, and language. But while romantic irony is aloof with respect to the world, and announces a self-reflexive awareness of its own limits and inadequacies in order to expiate and cynically distance itself from these limits and inadequacies and the damage they might do—a self-reflection which is at once indifferent to the world and yet paranoid of its judgement—the ironic as dialectic at once acknowledges and operates within these inadequacies and limits, repeatedly staking itself and embracing the risk of activity, as the only way to move forward. It is deployed not to spuriously escape such limits, but to configure them as such, on and in their own terms (despite the risk, the inevitability, even the necessity, of being misread), for the true for Hegel is found not despite brokenness, but in brokenness itself. The dialectic ‘only wins its truth by finding its feet in absolute disruption’ (*PhG* §32).

⁷¹ Keston Sutherland, ‘Wrong Poetry,’ in *Stupefaction*, pp. 91-158 (p. 91); with quotation from *PhG* §57.

V. Commitment issues

The Adornian question, then, of ‘how to read Hegel’, is revealed as the most fundamental question. It is also revealed as the most unnecessary. There is no schema or trick or hermeneutic method that is required to discern the thought of the *Phenomenology*. Rather, all that the *Phenomenology* asks of its reader is a kind of active passivity, or a willed abnegation of one’s own will.⁷² This is not because ‘Hegel’ is an authority with whom we should not quibble, who knows better. Hegel is also, like us, merely ‘looking on’ at the movement of spirit, ignorant of where it will go. (He was, after all, ‘in the habit of calling this piece [...] his voyage of discovery’.⁷³) Of course, Adorno is conscious of this irony. It is rehearsed in miniature by the title of his third study on Hegel: ‘*Skoteinos*, or How to Read Hegel’. ‘*Skoteinos* [σκοτεινός]’, Greek for dark, mysterious, shady, and untrustworthy, seems to point to Hegel’s obscurity—that is, the difficulty of reading him. As such, this seems to be set up as a problem. Adorno’s choice to render this quality of Hegel’s writing in Greek, a language reserved for the learned and initiated, seems to performatively and indeed ironically embody this obstacle to understanding. The subtitle, on the other hand, ‘How to Read Hegel’, seems to point descriptively to the following study as a solution; its clarity and straightforwardness, and the simplicity of its vocabulary, seem to leave no room for confusion: this is a guide, a ‘Hegel for dummies’, which will provide you with the know-how necessary to get to grips with this famously difficult philosopher. The ironic reversal is that the content of the essay, directed, as is typical of Adorno, against these Cartesian ideals of clarity, certainty, and method, argues that a programmatic statement of ‘how to read’ is itself the obstacle to reading, and that σκοτεινός must be confronted as a necessity. *Skoteinos* itself is the criterion for how to read Hegel. To repurpose Hegel’s own words: the reader learns from experience that the title means something other than what it took itself to have meant, and this correction compels knowing to come back to it and grasp it in some other way (*PhG* §63).

⁷² This is comparable to what Lisa Robertson (after Hannah Arendt, and with reference to Pauline Réage’s *Histoire d’O*) calls ‘nilling’. For Robertson, in the act of reading there must be a willed surrender of agency which verges on the masochistic. See Lisa Robertson, ‘Lastingness: Réage, Lucretia, Arendt’, in *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias* (Toronto: Bookthug, 2012), pp. 19-40 (p. 28).

⁷³ Hegel’s student Karl Ludwig Michelet, qtd. in Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 203.

We have determined that Hegel's philosophy does not explain or argue or posit abstract propositions, 'flat declarations'. But if this is the case, where does its content lie? If it still *thinks*, what is the precise nature of this cognition? The answer is suggested in this phrase 'learns from experience' and by what Adorno calls the 'experiential content of Hegel's philosophy.' This experiential content does not denote affect or feeling, nor 'prosody as cognition';⁷⁴ its motivation, as Adorno notes, is neither biographical nor psychological nor physiological;⁷⁵ nor is it intended to render the contours of phenomenological experience in its fundamental determinations (as attempted by subsequent works in phenomenology, such as those by Heidegger, Henry, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty). Instead, what Hegel calls experience is concerned merely with the animation of the contradiction present in the true: 'This *dialectical* movement which consciousness practices in its own self (as well as in its knowing and in its object), *insofar as, for consciousness, the new, true object arises* out of this movement, is properly what is called *experience*' (*PhG* §86). Experience is then nothing but the passive witness and the active recollection of the conceptual movement of the true, surrender to its incessant ironic twists and turns; it is the holding fast to the contradiction of the in-itself with itself, which is its very soul and movement, and the following of this movement to its apogee. This is the form and content of speculative thought, which finds its origin in reading.

This is why, as soon as one tries to bring a particular mode of interpretation to bear upon this experience, interpretation itself becomes impossible, because we bring a presupposition. One must, again, challenge Brandom on this point, who prescribes two 'equally valid'⁷⁶ interpretative modes for reading: *de dicto* and *de re*.⁷⁷ The former, *de dicto*, aims to discern how Hegel himself would have answered particular questions regarding his text, given his particular historical commitments:

⁷⁴ Simon Jarvis, 'Prosody as cognition', *Critical Quarterly*, 40.4 (1998), 3-15

⁷⁵ Adorno, *Hegel*, p. 53.

⁷⁶ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 106.

⁷⁷ These terms are defined in full in *ibid.*, pp. 94-107. Brandom proposes *de dicto* and *de re* as possible modes of interpretation for reading any philosopher; Hegel is mentioned as an example throughout without acknowledging the vitally unique status given to reading in his philosophy.

One engaged in this sort of interpretation is trying to specify the contents of commitments in a way that would be recognised and acknowledged *as* specifications of those contents *by* the one whose commitments they are. [...] One seeks to know so thoroughly what an author actually said, how his thought developed over his lifetime, what the rhetorical strategy of each work is and how it was understood by its author as fitting into the oeuvre, what his extraphilosophical concerns, attitudes, and experiences were that one can answer questions on his behalf in something like his own voice.⁷⁸

It asks, in short: what did Hegel mean to mean?

The latter, *de re*, aims to discern what ‘*actually* follows’ from Hegel’s claims, regardless of his intended meanings, where the reader provides the context for interpretation. The reader ‘assesses the inferential significance of the ascribed claim from the inferential context provided by her own commitments.’⁷⁹ In other words, such specifications ‘attempt to say what *really* follows from the claims made, what is *really* evidence for or against them, and so what the author has *really* committed herself to, regardless of her opinion about the matter.’⁸⁰ Brandom’s own pragmatist semantic interpretation of the *Phenomenology* in *A Spirit of Trust* represents such a reading: it depends upon claims that Brandom himself holds to be true in advance.

Both of those ‘readings’ of Hegel prevent a reading of Hegel altogether, for they approach the question of ‘how to read’ as a traditionally hermeneutic one, and, in doing so, sacrifice the essential notion of experience, as described above, as philosophically contentful. In fact, one of Brandom’s own apparent ‘commitments’ upon which his *de re* reading depends is that experience is beneath philosophical consideration: “‘Experience’ is not one of my words,’ he states proudly. ‘I do not find it necessary to use it in the many pages of *Making it Explicit* [...] and the same policy prevails in this book [*Articulating Reasons*].’⁸¹ While in *A Spirit of Trust*, Brandom presents Hegel’s concept of experience as essential, defined as the

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 98-99.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 101.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

⁸¹ Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 205n7.

‘process that determines conceptual contents,’ he abstracts this notion of experience *in the Phenomenology* from the experience *of* phenomenological thinking. He thus sacrifices experience in spite of professing its central importance. Brandom acknowledges that he undertakes his particular reading of Hegel based upon his own personal commitments, and does so ‘without claiming that Hegel would have acknowledged them.’⁸² There seems little point, therefore, in complaining that ‘Hegel wouldn’t agree’—this would be a *de dicto* rebuttal, anyway. What I do want to argue, however, is that by reading in these ways, one is not and cannot read Hegel speculatively and therefore cannot grasp its truth. If there is a speculative *de re* reading of Hegel—that is, a reading of Hegel which grasps what actually follows from the words on the page according to the immanent movement of the dialectic—it is possible only by pursuing and radicalising the claims of consciousness within the singular experience of consciousness itself, in spite of consciousness’s presupposed ‘commitments.’

Firstly, prior ‘commitments’ are just presuppositions, and presuppositions are anathema. As Houlgate argues against Brandom: ‘the only commitment of his own the phenomenologist may bring to bear on the study of consciousness is the commitment to *set aside* any determinate commitments of his own and to work out what experience is made necessary by the commitments of consciousness alone.’⁸³ To read *de dicto* can only perform a kind of historicism. The attempt to reconstruct the singular perspective of a historical individual, ‘Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’, by attempting to discern the wealth and nuance of his historically contextual commitments, is, as Brandom himself states, intellectual historiography.⁸⁴ What Brandom does not concede is that such a reading, while interesting and valuable in its own right, prevents a reading of the ironic *truth* of what is read (of which speculative experience is not only essential but the essence). This is why there cannot be such a thing as an orthodox Hegelian. To read with an aspiration to grasp ‘Hegel’s’ ‘meaning’ is to be un-Hegelian. But to read *de re* is to read with ironic distance, to try and discern the work’s ‘relevance’ or ‘insight’, or else to reconstruct the text as a series of ‘claims’ and ‘commitments’ to be judged for their present veracity and utility.

⁸² Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 103.

⁸³ Stephen Houlgate, ‘Phenomenology and *De Re* Interpretation’, p. 31.

⁸⁴ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 102.

The enfranchisement and empowerment of the reader suggested by Brandom's description of *de re* interpretation—whereby the reader provides their own context—is opposed, therefore, to my own insistence on the importance of the reader in the realisation of the speculative, ironic truth of the proposition. Hegel's irony functions, ironically, only insofar as there is no ironic distance to our reading, only insofar as we assume absolute naïvety. It is only when we read with naïvety, 'suspending judgement and leaving understanding and explanation to another day' (in the words of Comay and Ruda), that we discover the deviation of what is in-itself from itself, which animates this contradiction, and is thus its self-movement. To experience this self-movement is to think speculatively. Comay and Ruda describe this naïvety by way of analogy to psychoanalysis:

Hegel demands of his readers a properly psychoanalytic attitude. The absolute method is the equivalent to the "fundamental rule" of analysis—the annoying obligation to speak "freely"—to communicate whatever comes to or "falls into" the mind, *Einfälle*, without selection, omission, or concern for connection, sequence, propriety, or relevance. Like a passenger on a train (that's Freud's own somewhat Proustian analogy), you're to report the changing mental scenery as it passes by, merely "looking on [*reine Zusehen*]", suspending judgment and leaving understanding and explanation to another day (or person). Our task is simply to "take up *what is there before us* [*aufzunehmen, was vorhanden ist*]."85

This should be emphatically distinguished from other kinds of possible passivities of thinking. One can imagine, for example, a New Age guide on 'how to read Hegel'. In recognising, like Hegel, the necessity of passivity, the necessity for a suspension of presuppositions, and the absence of a positive self as a substantial psychical agent, it prescribes that, before each engagement with the text, the reader must undergo a ritual of mind clearing of these illusions and obstacles. Does the 'psychoanalytic attitude' required to 'read Hegel'—'looking on', 'speaking freely', 'suspending judgement'—not sound analogous to a practice of meditation—'letting oneself go', etc.? The essential difference is that while a meditative passivity establishes a distance between itself and the source of

⁸⁵ Comay and Ruda, *The Dash*, p. 5, quoting *PhG* §87 and *Logic*, p. 47.

negativity, so that what changes is not this source but rather the way in which we relate to it, an elevation above it for the purposes of calm and contentment (and thus another guise of romantic irony), Hegelian passivity surrenders to this negativity and the disruption that it entails: it continues down the path of despair. The former dismisses the negative as a transitory illusion in the infinite play of phenomena. It is ‘a life that is fearing death and austere saving itself from ruin.’ The latter, on the other hand, ‘looks the negative in the face and lingers with it.’ ‘It bears death calmly, and in death, sustains itself’ (*PhG* §32).

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate that one cannot grasp Hegel’s notion of the true without appreciating its irony. Not that we should, like the romantics, assume an ironic relation to the true, but that by pursuing the true without presuppositions and with absolute commitment, we realise that the true itself is ironic. It is only through this repetitive experience of the irony of truth that speculative thinking becomes possible, abstraction is made concrete, and the truth of the proposition moves beyond itself.

I have also argued that the presentation of this speculative thinking is not just limited to the way in which it is written down—that is, in the innovation of a special kind of propositional form—but that speculative thinking is also made present through the act and experience of reading. By generalising the idea of the speculative proposition to one of the speculative *reading* of the proposition, we may begin to intimate the outline of a theory of speculative reading as such, by which what is read is speculative not by merit of the way in which it is composed, but rather through the way in which it is read. The meaning or ironic truth of a text might be realised by a critically intimate mode of reading which, on rereading, *recollects* it anew. It is this theme of recollection which will be the focus of the following chapter, which is the active counterpart to the passivity of the reader’s ‘looking on.’

RECOLLECTION

or, the gallery of images

But none of the feelings which the joys or misfortunes of a real person arouse in us can be awakened except through a mental picture of those joys or misfortunes; and the ingenuity of the first novelist lay in his understanding that, as the image was the one essential element in the complicated structure of our emotions, so that simplification of it which consisted in the suppression, pure and simple, of real people would be a decided improvement.¹

— Marcel Proust

In the final paragraphs of the final chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel looks back on and describes the preceding narrative of spirit's 'coming-to-be.' On the one hand, he writes, this coming-to-be can be considered as 'nature'—as a 'free contingent event.' 'Nature' refers here to what spirit 'is' in its stupid, conceptless, and unthought immediacy. Spirit's development is thus conceived as something which just happens, beyond spirit's control. Spirit is completely passive in the face of the ironic twists, turns, and dramatic reversals of the dialectic. Thought of in in this way, spirit's 'immediate coming-to-be'—the *Bildung* narrative of the *Phenomenology* presented over the preceding pages—is 'nothing but this eternal relinquishing [*Entäußerung*] of its *stable existence*', a displaced agency of meandering contingency, a bad infinity of merely living on, for which spirit can only sit back and observe (*PhG* §807).² 'Coming-to-be', in this sense, spirit's nature, is then something that happens to spirit, and not something that spirit does or itself participates in.

'However', Hegel continues, 'the other aspect of spirit's coming-to-be, *history*, is that *knowing self-mediating* coming-to-be.' Conceived in this way, spirit's coming-to-be is

¹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols., trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. by D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1992), I: *Swann's Way*, p. 116.

² Hegel, *Werke*, III, 590. This is why, for Hegel, the philosophy of nature involves the passivity of an external observer: it 'has, as it were, simply to watch how nature itself sublates its externality.' G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. by W. Wallace and A. V. Miller, rev. by Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 14.

reclaimed, not as a random series of events beyond its control that merely happened and continue to happen to it, but as its own history—a history upon which it can confer meaning and significance. As Timothy Bahti succinctly puts it: ‘The relation between *Geschehen* and *Geschichte*’—between the ‘free contingent event’ of nature and history—‘is one between *Geschehen* and *das was geschehen ist*’—between the immediacy and indeterminacy of a happening and the subsequent mediated and determinate knowledge of what happened. *Geschichte* is then ‘necessarily *nach Geschehen*’—necessarily an after-happening. ‘[I]t is retrospective, and thus reflective, *nach-denkend*’—an after-thought—the consolidation and comprehension of what happened, after the fact.³ It is an *inwardisation* and a *recollection*. Hegel’s word ‘*Erinnerung*’—which he hyphenates on a couple of occasions (‘*Er-Innerung*’) to emphasise this notion of the inner [*das Innere*]⁴—encapsulates both of these meanings.

This act of spirit’s recollection of its own history—the moment when it looks back on its own coming-to-be and reclaims it as its own—is at once, then, the condition of its entrance *into* history. It is for this reason, Hegel continues, that although spirit’s coming-to-be is ‘relinquished into time [...] this relinquishing is likewise the relinquishing of *itself*’ into time (*PhG* §808).⁵ In other words, this relinquishing, this *Entäußerung*, is not merely the excretion of the inessential waste which follows the subject’s digestion of its substance (the gastroenterological metaphors are Hegel’s own), but this externalisation is spirit’s excretion *of itself* from the purity of logic into the messiness of phenomena.

As Terry Pinkard notes, ‘*Entäußerung*’ has explicitly religious and in particular Christological connotations. It is ‘the term that Luther used for his translation of *Kenosis*, the act of God “humbling” himself (as the King James translators had it) or of “emptying” himself (as some more modern translators have rendered it), so that, for Christians, God became flesh’:⁶ Christ is God relinquished into time, which is at once the relinquishing of himself, as the precondition for the life of his (holy) spirit in the community of believers. God ‘forsakes [his own] existence and gives [his] shape over to recollection [*seine Gestalt der*

³ Timothy Bahti, *Allegories of History: Literary Historiography after Hegel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 81.

⁴ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 548, 591.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 590.

⁶ Terry Pinkard, ‘Translator’s Note’, in *PhG*, pp. xxxvii-xlv (p. xlii).

Erinnerung übergibt]’ in Hegel’s words (*PhG* §808).⁷ This explains the apparent paradox of Christ on the cross crying out to the God who is, in a sense, himself: ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani? ... My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’⁸ It is only by ‘forsaking’ himself and giving himself up to recollection that the spirit (of God, of Christ) is brought to life—hence the inwardising-recollection of the *Gestalt* of Christ at the Eucharist: ‘Take, eat ... do this in remembrance of Me.’⁹

This is why, as Hegel goes on, ‘[t]he *aim*, absolute knowing, or spirit knowing itself as spirit, has its path in the recollection [*Erinnerung*] of spirits as they are in themselves and are as they achieve the organization of their realm’ (*PhG* §808).¹⁰ As we shall see, this has been interpreted as emblematic of Hegel’s voraciousness—his desire to consume everything within the economy of his system, ‘the belly turned mind’, as Adorno puts it, in keeping with Hegel’s own digestive imagery.¹¹ As we shall also see, this moment of recollection has also been interpreted as ‘opposed’ to the moment of relinquishment, or kenosis. This chapter, however, will interpret them in their speculative identity. The recollection of spirit *is* its kenosis, and its kenosis *is* its recollection. The ‘recollection and Golgotha of absolute spirit [*die Erinnerung und die Schädelstätte des absoluten Geistes*]’¹² which end the *Phenomenology* refers on the one hand, to Calvary, the site of Christ’s crucifixion, and therefore the transition from externality, materiality, and corporality to spirituality and ideality; but on the other hand, it refers to the *Schädelstätte*, in Luther’s German, ‘the place of the skull’ which reaffirms the so-called ‘infinite judgement’ that ‘*the being of spirit is a bone*’ (*PhG* §343).¹³ It refers as much, therefore, to kenosis and relinquishing—of spirit

⁷ Ibid., p. 590.

⁸ Matthew 27. 46.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 11.24. These words also appear with some variation in Matthew 26. 26; Mark 14. 22; Luke 22. 19.

¹⁰ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 591.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 23.

¹² Hegel, *Werke*, III, 591.

¹³ See Matthew 27. 33; Mark/Markus 15. 22; Luke/Lukas 23. 33; John/Johannes 19. 17. *Die Bibel: Lutherübersetzung* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018). The term for Golgotha in the original Biblical Greek, Γολγοθα, is a simplified pronunciation of the Aramaic *golgota*, which corresponds to the Hebrew *gulgōlet* (גִּלְגֹּלֶת), meaning ‘skull.’ ‘Calvary’ is the anglicised form of the Latin ‘*calvāria*’, also meaning ‘skull.’ ‘golgotha, n.’, in *OED Online*, <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/79828?redirectedFrom=golgotha#eid>>

externalising itself once again—as it does to recollection and inwardisation, affirming both as essential moments in the movement of the dialectic.¹⁴ As Hegel writes in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*: ‘The force of spirit is only as great as its expression [*Äußerung*], and its depth goes only as deep as it trusts itself to disperse itself to and to lose itself in its explication of itself’ (*PhG* §10).¹⁵ The depth of spirit’s inwardising-recollection depends entirely on its simultaneous resolve to externalise and re-present what it finds there.

This chapter, then (and, from another angle, the following chapter too), concerns the transition between these two moments or ‘aspects’ of spirit’s ‘coming-to-be’: from nature to history, from free contingency to conferred necessity, from passivity to activity—from irony to recollection-and-relinquishment. If ‘ironic’ describes, first, spirit’s passive experience of its unfurling nature, in all its contingency, contradiction, and surprise; this chapter will argue that it is what Hegel calls ‘recollection’ which names the retrospective activity of conferring significance and meaning onto this experience—an activity of representing the past as a means of relinquishing or moving beyond it. These are also the two sides of speculative reading. Coming-to-be qua nature and coming-to-be qua history are analogous to the necessary misreading of the proposition and the subsequent rereading of the proposition which makes it speculative. This is the transition between reading passively, ‘looking on’, to reading actively; from being a detached critical observer, taking note, to being a thinker and co-creator of what is read, suddenly forced to be engaged and critically intimate—one who recollects the spirit of what is read from its letter.

It will also, finally, be demonstrated that central to this activity of recollection is the activity of representation [*Vorstellung*] as epitomised by the image [*das Bild*]. The image, for Hegel, is both that which spirit recollects and spirit’s concrete expression: its kenosis. To grasp this is to grasp the role of representation in relation to the thought of the concept, which is not finally abandoned with absolute knowing, but recollected in the activity of recollection itself. For Hegel, a recollection is always, to some extent, artificial: a simplification, an exaggeration, a caricature, an ‘exemplum’. If one side of spirit’s coming-to-be is its nature,

¹⁴ A similar point has been made by Bahti: ‘we re-mark as well that the *Schädelstätte*, Golgotha, is “both” sublation or allegory—trading the body for the spirit, while promising thereby resurrection of the body—and the literal place of the skull, the material left-over, left over.’ *Allegories of History*, p. 90.

¹⁵ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 18.

‘the other aspect’—that is, its recollected history—is what Hegel elsewhere calls its ‘inorganic nature’ (*PhG* §28): a kind of unnatural or perhaps denatured nature, a nature made strange. It is this recollective process of representation which is also this representational process of recollection—critical, simplifying, and even vulgarising—which stakes and realises the irony of the true, from which further ironic truths can develop.

I. The ‘Phenomenology’ as a gallery of images

In the same paragraph quoted from above, Hegel writes: ‘This coming-to-be exhibits a languid movement and succession of spirits, a gallery of images [*eine Galerie von Bildern*]’ (*PhG* §808).¹⁶ What does it mean for Hegel to describe this aspect of the *Phenomenology* (coming-to-be via self-mediation—responsive, relational, reconstructive; recollective—which drives and is spirit’s history) as ‘exhibit[ing]’ a ‘gallery of images’? For the reader that has made it to this final paragraph, ‘a gallery of images’ will seem like an appropriate metaphor. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a text uniquely replete with images...

Along the ‘path of despair’ (§78) the reader encountered a variety of strange characters and scenes. Early on in their journey they passed a party of drunks, calling themselves ‘the true.’ Each celebrant was their own individual, but all were united by their intoxication. In their bacchanalian revel, each passed out, unconscious, into the quiet repose of the whole (§47). The reader then came across a skeleton, each part helpfully labelled, but lacking the requisite flesh, blood, and breath to be alive, and therefore known (§51). A little

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 590. Translation altered, changing ‘picture’ to ‘image.’ Where Pinkard, following J. B. Baillie, has translated ‘*Bild*’ as ‘picture’, I will follow A. V. Miller and Michael Inwood to give ‘image.’ This is in order to correlate with translations of other German philosophical texts (from Kant to Fichte, Schelling, and others from Hegel, and to Benjamin and Adorno) in which *Bild* is usually translated as ‘image’, thus preserving a certain genealogy; and also to preserve the etymological links between *Bild* (image) and *Einbildungskraft* (imagination). These etymological links extend in the German: *bilden* is to form, which is to develop, hence *Bildung*, culture, formation. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 2 vols., trans. by J. B. Baillie (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1910), II, 821; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

later they were met with an image of ‘a *topsy-turvy* world [verkehrte Welt]’ (§§157-160),¹⁷ where sweet was sour, black was white, north was south, and crimes were moral goods; a world which challenged the authority of ‘the tranquil kingdom of laws [das ruhige Reich der Gesetze]’ (§§149, 157)¹⁸ which is our home. The world was posited by an evil genius, mad with the inflated sense of her own understanding. If, she asked, there is a distinction between appearance and reality, between the sensible and supersensible worlds, what if the two are total opposites? The only thing that is certain is the distinction itself (§§157-158). Soon they encountered a master and a servant in a struggle of life and death, each staking their lives to prove their worth to themselves—and to each other (§187). In this fight, the whole being of the servant was seized with dread. Everything solid and stable for him shook to its foundations. Death became his new master (§194). To conquer his fear, he worked. He formed with his own hands a *thing*, fashioning his own nothingness into a positive being, realising himself in an external object, and thus as his own individual with his own mind (§195-196). He was, therefore, victorious. However, his newfound freedom brought him no joy. He was soon found seeking comfort in various forms of sophistry—in scientism (§§198-201), in nihilistic resignation (§§202-205), and then in the opinions and authority of experts. He sought it in spirituality, transcendence—in the ‘shapeless roar of the pealing of bells’ or ‘all-suffusing vapor’ (§217); and then merely in the animal routines of eating and shitting (§225)—but to no avail. In the end the man with the unhappy consciousness went to a priest. He surrendered everything—his decisions, his freedom, his ‘blame’ [*Schuld*] (§§226-228)¹⁹—and, while his actions and his being remained to him a sham, his enjoyment a sorrow, he found some solace in the intimation of a union with God, albeit through the intercession of a mediator (§230). Further along the path of despair, observing reason, the reader came across a physiognomist (to be punched in the face), and then a phrenologist (whose skull needed to be smashed) (§339). They were then presented with a phallus (too

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 128-129. This is the felicitous translation suggested by Verene, which is translated by Baillie (I, 152-156), Miller, Pinkard, and Inwood as ‘inverted world’: ‘The English term “topsy-turvy” is an apt word for this image. The first element of the English world is related to the word “top” and the second to “to turn over.” Topsy-turvy is the top where the bottom should be; the object is reversed.’ Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection*, p. 44.

¹⁸ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 120, 127. This is Miller and Inwood’s translation, translated by Pinkard as ‘motionless realm of laws’, and Baillie as both ‘quiescent’ and ‘changeless kingdom of laws’ (I, 143, 151).

¹⁹ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 175.

busy pissing [*pissen*] to fuck) (§346).²⁰ They met a vain, facetious ‘wit [*Geist*]’ (a sardonic pun on Hegel’s master term) (§520),²¹ with a taste for the surreal, who wouldn’t stop talking. A one-man variety show, his zaniness was that of an eclectic musician, Rameau’s nephew, singing now in Italian, now in French, first bass, then falsetto, ‘alternately raging and then being placated, imperious and then derisive’ (§521). He disdained, disoriented, and derisively laughed at all he saw, eventually even himself (§524). Then, on finding universal freedom to be terror, the work and deed of which is a meaningless death, a final erasure of a self which was already nothing, an ‘unfulfilled empty dot [*unerfüllte Punkt*]’,²² they saw an image of a severed head of cabbage and a mouthful of water, swallowed (§590). Next, they came across a beautiful soul: an aesthete and a romantic; so sensitive, so conscientious, so moral. Terrified of the dangerous world and its corrupting influence, terrified of being polluted by contact with the mundane and the profane, he fled, first from actuality, and then from himself, in a desperate attempt to preserve the purity of his heart. He yearned for *something*, but he knew not what. Nothing pleased him. He collapsed under the weight of his own innocence. It paralysed and consumed him. The last image of this pitiful figure showed him as nothing but a shapeless vapour, dissolved into thin air, vanished (§658). Then, they met a self-appointed critic and judge, detached and ruthless in his condemnations of the confessions of the wicked (§665). The confessor confessed: ‘*I am he.*’ But this confession was not reciprocated by the judge, conceited in his assumed position of guiltless authority, confident in his superiority over those he discredited. This hard-hearted judge clutched to his pride, refusing to give himself up to mutuality and reciprocity, to the recognition of his own implication in the spiritual substance of what is, for fear of the guilt that it might entail (§§666-667). But in doing so he revealed himself to be just another beautiful soul, frightened of being polluted by the messiness of collective existence. And, like all such beautiful souls, his ‘innocence’ consumed him; he shut himself away, renouncing any and all connection with an other, and thus denied himself any existence at all. As a judge of all except himself, he became a nobody, ‘disordered to the point of madness,’ and wasted away in a fit of consumption (§668). They then met a prophet, a poet. He reflected to the people the final truth of who they

²⁰ Ibid., p. 262.

²¹ Ibid., p. 386.

²² Ibid., p. 436.

were—we are. A product of the world and yet its unacknowledged legislator, and endowed by the muse, Mnemosyne, with the gift of memory [*Erinnerung*], he recalled the essence of the past for the spiritual enrichment of the present. A mere vessel, an organ of truth, he lost himself in his universal song (§729).²³ But the unhappy consciousness soon returned, to announce that God was dead (§752). Trust in the eternal laws then faded away. The statues became mere stones, corpses from which their living souls had flown, just as hymns through repetition became empty words. The tables of the gods were stripped of their food and drink; games and festivals ceased to bring joy and unity; the works of the muse, Mnemosyne, were rendered impotent. — However, a young girl took these relics of the past and gathered them up. She represented them as pieces of beautiful fruit, broken off from a tree, and gifted them to the reader. (The fruit does not exist. Nor does the tree that bore it. Nor the earth upon which the tree grew. They are, in a sense, ‘inorganic’.) The reader took the fruit, and wiped a drop of rain (or was it a speck of dust?) from its skin. In the gleam of the girl’s ‘self-conscious eye’ [*in den Strahl des selbstbewußten Auges*], the reader saw the trees, the air, the light—all of the conditions which nourished this fruit, and allowed it to grow—as an *inwardised-recollection* [*Er-Innerung*] (§753).²⁴

Even if the conceptual intricacies and even the precise order of these stages of spirit encountered and sublated in its coming-to-be are forgotten in the haze of retrospection, the shapes themselves are preserved, recollected in these and other images. ‘Shape’, ‘*Gestalt*’: the word itself implies an external form or outline, a *Grundriß*, fashioned not found; an aesthetic shorthand or index for the ‘wealth of its substance’ (§808)

II. The fate of representation

In some ways this mode of literary-philosophical presentation may seem in keeping with the range of romantic, early post-Kantian thinkers who promoted the aesthetic as the means and end of absolute knowledge. From Fichte, to Schelling, Schiller, the Schlegels, Novalis, and the early Hegel himself, the promise of a unified system of philosophy would be fulfilled

²³ Ibid., p. 531.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 548.

through a radicalisation of Kant's aesthetic theory: his theorisation of the simultaneous distinction and inseparability between concept and intuition, *a priori* knowledge and aesthetic intelligibility. These philosophers held that, with his 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, Kant had demonstrated the possibility of a sensuously embodied absolute meaning, principally in art, beyond the constraints of concepts and conceptually mediated intelligibility; a kind of ultimate meaning which could render spirit sensuously, reflectively, and therefore totally intelligible to itself, thus disclosing the true nature of reality. This was a possibility which, as Robert Pippin notes, 'was of such significance that for the early Schelling [...] and the Schlegel brothers, this artistic attestation and comprehension of such unity was *more* significant than any philosophical articulation.'²⁵ In the words of Schelling himself, in his 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*: 'Philosophy attains, indeed, to the highest, but it brings to this summit, so to say, the fraction of a man. Art brings *the whole man*, as he is, to that point, namely to a knowledge of the highest, and this is what underlies the eternal difference and the marvel of art.'²⁶

This position is similar to that of the earlier 1796/7 so-called 'Oldest System Programme of German Idealism' (the existing manuscript of which is in Hegel's handwriting, but is thought to be written earlier—possibly by Hegel, but more likely by Schelling, Hölderlin, or an unknown fourth author). This text heralds 'the Idea which unites all, the Idea of *beauty*, the word taken in the higher platonic sense. I am now convinced that the highest act of reason, which embraces all Ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are brothers *only in beauty* — The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power | as the poet [*Dichter*].'²⁷ Following on from (or perhaps extending and exaggerating) Kant's third critique, the author holds that beauty is that which will unite truth and goodness. Practical reason and theoretical reason may be resolved into a purposive whole by the judgement made in the indeterminacy of aesthetic reflection. The aesthetic, for the early Hegel, Schelling, et al. thus represented the promise or placeholder for the realisation of freedom.

²⁵ Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 16.

²⁶ F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. by Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 233.

²⁷ 'Oldest System Programme of German Idealism (1796)', trans. by Andrew Bowie in *Aesthetics and subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche* by Andrew Bowie, 2nd edn. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 334-335 (p. 334).

This is the position held in Hegel's essays on *Faith and Knowledge* and *Natural Law*, written in 1802-1803, immediately prior to his work on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This time, however—and significantly, for our purposes—he makes reference to ‘the image’ in general, rather than to aesthetics or fine art in particular:

For just as each part or aspect of philosophy is capable of being an independent science, so each such science is thus immediately an independent and perfect image [*ein selbständiges und vollendetes Bild*], and in the form of an image [*der Gestalt eines Bild*], can be accepted and expounded by an intuition which purely and happily keeps itself free from contamination by fixed concepts.²⁸

In stark contrast with the later Hegel we have come to know, here it is the concept, or at least the spuriously fixed concept, which contaminates the purity of the image, and not vice versa. The image is also presented here as the vehicle and means of mediation by which a thing can be known in its totality—what he later calls ‘the totality of the widespread image.’²⁹ As Malabou notes, this conception of the image is developed less from a radicalisation of Kant's third critique as presenting a unification of truth and goodness in the beautiful, and more from a reinterpretation of Kant's first critique as managed by an economy of visibility.³⁰ These early essays (*Faith and Knowledge* in particular) reconceive the Kantian notion of the *a priori* synthesis—that is, the originary relation between subject and object, and the identity between concepts in their difference—as the pure image which reconciles thought and being, logic and ontology. Following Fichte in reading for the spirit of Kant against his letter (a reading which will be elaborated in more detail in the following chapter), Hegel rereads the

²⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, trans. by T. M. Knox (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), pp. 55-56; ‘Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts, seine Stelle in der praktischen Philosophie und sein Verhältnis zu den positiven Rechtswissenschaften’, in *Werke*, II: *Janaer Schriften*, pp. 454-532, (p. 435). Translation altered, changing ‘picture’ for ‘image’ [*Bild*].

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁰ See Catherine Malabou, “‘Idealism’: a new name for metaphysics; Hegel and Heidegger on *a priori synthesis*”, in *German Idealism Today*, ed. by Markus Gabriel and Anders Moe Rasmussen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 189-202.

epistemological claims made in the first *Critique* as an ‘ontological theory in disguise.’³¹ The *a priori* synthesis, for Hegel, is of ontological and not only epistemological import, to the extent that it forces us to understand reality as an undifferentiated whole that only becomes separated into subject and object once it imposes a conceptual schema upon itself. And it is an image (as opposed to a concept, for example) as it comes from the transcendental *imagination*: that which ‘provides us with pure determinations of time and space, that is, pure “images” given before any empirical phenomena.’³² Pure images thus ‘form a spatial and temporal scene for the synthesis that goes beyond the analytic closure of the concept without transgressing experience.’³³ In this sense, for Hegel, the *a priori* synthesis qua image is ‘nothing but the speculative form of God.’³⁴

To what extent does this or any other idea of the image remain of ‘absolute’ importance for the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* and beyond? Returning to the beginning of this final chapter on absolute knowing, with the reader having passed through the carnivalesque range of characters and images recollected above, Hegel himself arrives to inform the reader, us, that we have reached the exit. The journey is over and now, no longer needing figurative representations or examples to learn from, he tells us, we are ready for what lies beyond: the pure thought of the concept—that is, philosophy as such: ‘The *content* of the representational thinking [*des Vorstellens*] is absolute spirit, and the sole remaining issue is that of sublating this mere form’ (*PhG* §788).³⁵ This echoes a number of points throughout the *Phenomenology* (which we will return to), but which is, again, epitomised in microcosm by Hegel’s speculative proposition. As developed in the previous chapter, the assumption of formal logic in the reading of a proposition, for the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*, spuriously asserts both a fixed subject—be it grammatical or the subject qua ‘self’—and an abstract identity, in which ‘the name as a name, [...] denotes the pure subject, the empty, conceptless “one.”’ It is, therefore, a form of re-presentation, and as such, Hegel

³¹ Rolf-Peter Hortsman, ‘The Reception of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in German Idealism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s ‘Critique of Pure Reason’*, ed. by Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 329-345, (pp. 341).

³² Malabou, ‘Idealism’, p. 193.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

³⁵ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 575.

continues, it also falls for the trap of the ‘sensuously intuited or represented self’ (*PhG* §66). In contrast, the speculative proposition—or, rather, the speculative *reading* of a proposition—as Hegel develops it, avoids or sublates the errors of this ratiocinative form by demonstrating that sensuous immediacy is always already mediated, that the subject is unfixed and dynamic, and that true identity is always an identity of identity and non-identity.

This account suggests neither, as before, a conception of the beautiful image as the means of unification between truth and goodness, or theoretical and practical reason; nor a conception of the pure image as the originary *a priori* synthesis, as the means of identification between the subject and its predicates in their difference. Instead the image and all other such picture-thoughts are here deemed apparently expendable; true in their content, but false in their form. It may at first appear that Hegel’s earlier notion of the originary ‘pure image’ does not succumb to this later critique of representation. Does the ‘purity’ of the *a priori* synthetic image not mean that it is free of the contingencies of the inessential and the sensuous? On the contrary, the pure image does not elude the economy of representation, but in a sense epitomises it as an abstract representation of a representation. The pure image is a representation abstracted from all particular and sensuous content while remaining wedded to the logic of the senses: it is a sensuousness without sense. It is still, therefore, a decidedly aesthetic absolute.

When one looks over Hegel’s work following the *Phenomenology*, this apparent shift—from valorising representation to dismissing it—seems decisive. Indeed, one might go as far to call it an epistemological break. From the Jena *Phenomenology of Spirit* onwards, throughout his Heidelberg *Encyclopedia Outlines* and his Berlin lectures, to the final edition of the *Science of Logic*, he argues that, while *Vorstellung*—translated variously as ‘picture-thinking’, ‘representation’, or, in more colloquial usage, ‘idea’³⁶—may share the same content as philosophy, this content is obscured by its contingent, arbitrary, and sensuous form. *Vorstellung* is *illustrative* of thought, and is therefore not pure thought itself. As such, so the story goes, it is inadequate for *Wissen* proper. As Hegel seems to suggest above, one of the most important preparations to undertake before engaging in real philosophy (that is, one assumes, the thought of the *Science of Logic*) is *Vorstellung*’s overcoming. While before the

³⁶ Pinkard and Inwood opt for ‘representation’ and occasionally ‘representational thought/thinking’, while Miller also uses ‘picture-thinking.’ Baillie usually translates to ‘idea’ or ‘presentation.’

aesthetic was held to be that which would mend all broken middles, here it is presented as a dangerous obfuscation.

The clearest formulation of this kind of argument comes at the beginning of the 1817 *Encyclopedia Logic*:

Given that the determinacies of feeling, intuition, desire, volition, etc., insofar as we are *conscious* of them, are usually called *representations*, it can be said quite generally that philosophy replaces representations with *thoughts* and *categories*, but more specifically with *concepts*. Representations may generally be regarded as *metaphors* of thoughts and concepts. By merely having representations, however, we are not yet familiar with the meaning they have for thinking, i.e. we are not familiar with *their* thoughts and concepts.³⁷

The two main kinds of *Vorstellung* must, however, be distinguished. One is the more prosaic thought of *Verstand*, or the understanding: the kind of common-sense thinking with which we relate to the empirical world in an individual and immediate (and therefore spurious) sense; the thinking of ordinary, everyday, moment to moment consciousness, whose purview is facts (verified or refuted by reference to external objects, such as sticks—thinking back to Brandom’s example)—and therefore not truth. This *Verstand-Vorstellung* constitutes one of Hegel’s prime targets throughout and especially in the first part of the *Phenomenology*. In contrast, *Vorstellung* raised to its highest level, as it appears at the end of the *Phenomenology*, the sublation of which is ‘the sole remaining issue’, the last step necessary for absolute knowing, refers more specifically to the kind of thinking in which we represent thoughts and concepts as normative fictions (for instance, in art, law, ethics, and especially, for Hegel, religion). It is the kind of thinking apparently reserved for when we have not yet reached the lofty heights of absolute knowing, and are as such unable to think with ‘pure thoughts’, but are nevertheless in some kind of communion with the true: ‘*thinking* has not been inactive at all in what is religious, right, and ethical,’ he writes, ‘its [i.e. thought’s] activity and its

³⁷ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §3, p. 31.

products are *present* and *contained* therein.³⁸ To repeat from above: the content of *Vorstellung* is absolute spirit but the form must be sublated.

This position is also found in both the *Science of Logic* and in the *Encyclopedia Philosophy of Mind*:

Nature and spirit are in general different modes of exhibiting *its* [the absolute idea's] *existence*, art and religion its different modes of apprehending itself and giving itself appropriate existence. Philosophy has the same content and the same purpose as art and religion, but it is the highest mode of apprehending the absolute idea, because its mode, that of the concept, is the highest.³⁹

This knowledge [science, philosophy] is thus the thinking cognised *concept* of art and religion, in which the diversity in the content is cognised as necessary, and this necessity is cognised as free. [...] The whole question turns entirely on the difference of the forms of speculative thinking from the forms of representation and the reflective intellect.⁴⁰

‘If *Verstand* brings with it the errors of empiricism,’ as Fredric Jameson puts it, ‘picture-thinking on the other hand is already an experience of truth, albeit a distorted and preconceptual one. Reason must transcend and transform the errors of *Verstand*, but it must hermeneutically recover the truths of *Vorstellung*, even though the latter have also been formed into images in accordance with the logic of the senses and of externality.’⁴¹ Thoughts are re-presented in *Vorstellung*, in order for their truthful content to be more easily, initially approached; and then reason, when capable, must extract this truth content from its inessential form in order for it to be truly known. This is one possible explanation, according to Hegel, for why the speculative philosophy of the *Logic* is at times so difficult to grasp—it assumes not only some preexisting knowledge, but the absolute knowledge of its reader, and

³⁸ Ibid., §2, p. 29.

³⁹ Hegel, *Logic*, p. 735.

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §§572-573, p. 267.

⁴¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 119.

it therefore lacks the convenient yet ultimately obfuscating presence of representation. As the above passage from the *Encyclopedia Logic* continues:

One aspect of what is called *the unintelligibility* of philosophy relates to this. In part, the difficulty consists in a certain inability, which is really merely a *lack of training*, to think abstractly, i.e. to hold on to pure thoughts and to move among them. In our ordinary consciousness, thoughts are clothed in and combined with familiar sensuous and spiritual material, and when we think things over, reflect, or reason about them, we intermingle our feelings, intuitions, and representations with thoughts [...]. — The other aspect of the unintelligibility of philosophy is due to the impatience of wanting to have before oneself in the form of a representation what exists in our consciousness in the form of a thought and a concept.⁴²

Hegel, again, appears to offer something of a preemptory apologia for the obscurity and difficult nature of his writing.

This more particular relationship between representation and images, on the one hand, and religion, art, and literature, on the other, are perhaps most straightforwardly stated in his lectures on the philosophy of religion:

In the first place, sensible forms or configurations belong to representation. We can distinguish them by the fact that we we call them *images* [*Bilder*]. Those sensible forms for which the principal content or the principal mode of representation is taken from immediate intuition can in general be termed images. We are directly conscious that they are only images but that they have a significance distinct from that which the image as such primitively expresses—that the image is something symbolic or allegorical and that we have before us something twofold, first the immediate and then what is meant by it, its inner meaning. The latter is to be distinguished from the former, which is the external aspect. Thus there are many forms in religion about which we know that they are only metaphors. For example, if we say that God has begotten a son, we know quite well that this is only an image; representation provides

⁴² Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §3, p. 1.

us with “son” and “begetter” from a familiar relationship, which, as we well know, is not meant in its immediacy, but is supposed to signify a different relationship, which is something like this one. This sensible relationship has right within itself something corresponding for the most part to what is properly meant with regard to God.

So there are many representations that derive from immediate sensible intuition as well as from inner intuition. Thus we soon know that talk of God’s wrath is not to be taken in the literal sense, that it is merely an analogy, a simile, an image. The same holds for emotions of repentance, vengeance, and the like on God’s part. Prometheus, who instructs human beings, and of Pandora’s box—these, too, are images having a nonliteral meaning. Thus we hear of a tree of the knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] of good and evil. When the story arrives at the eating of the fruit, it begins to become dubious whether this tree should be taken as something historical, as a properly historical tree, and the eating as historical, too; for all talk of a tree of knowledge is so contrary [to ordinary experience] that it very soon leads to the insight that this is not a matter of any sensible fruit, and that the tree is not to be taken literally.⁴³

Each of these instances, from across a broad stretch of Hegel’s *oeuvre*, where he discusses the relationship between thought and its representation (be it felt, intuited, figurative, metaphorical, analogical, etc.), seem to suggest, in turn, an unequivocal and fairly conventional position regarding the relationship between the apparent dichotomy of philosophy and literature. While literary representation (whether in the literary arts *per se*, or more specifically in the transcribing or writing of thought) may possess a certain truth-content, its form is nonetheless inessential, fictional, and constructed; constrained to the spurious logic of externality and the senses: the aesthetic. Hence: ‘Philosophy does nothing but transform our representations into concepts.’⁴⁴

⁴³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 145-147.

⁴⁴ Ibid. pp. 144-145. Variations of this phrase can be found throughout Hegel’s work post-*PhG*. For example, in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, §20, p. 52: ‘it can generally be said that philosophy does nothing but transform representations into thoughts — and, indeed, beyond that, the mere thought into the concept.’

III. Er-Innerung

To return to the *Phenomenology*, then: at last, we might think upon reaching its end, we are about to achieve what we were promised from the outset—that is, thinking which is liberated from its childish dependency upon illustrations, metaphors, and representations in order to think the truth: The ancient quarrel between philosophy and literature is about to be resolved, with philosophy victorious and literature redundant.

However, what we actually get with the chapter on absolute knowing is something far more complicated and, if read closely, greatly destabilises the above account of the role of picture-thinking in relation to the thought of the concept. Despite expectations, what we are presented with is not pure thought or a final synthesis, devoid and purified of the contingencies of figurative language and imagery, but yet more images. (Is not ‘the gallery of images’ itself an image?) The chapter on absolute knowing presents nothing immediately new, no final or revelatory insight, but a summary or catalogue (a form which Hegel had apparently denounced in the Preface with the images of the annotated skeleton and the ‘rows of sealed and labelled boxes in a grocer’s stall’ (§51)) of that which came before, followed by a final, rhetorical flourish, replete with images, and even some poetry:

The *aim*, absolute knowing, or spirit knowing itself as spirit, has its path in the recollection of spirits [*die Erinnerung der Geister*] as they are in themselves and are as they achieve the organisation of their realm. Their preservation according to their free-standing existence appearing in the form of contingency is history, but according to their conceptually grasped organization, it is the *science of phenomenal knowing*. Both together are conceptually grasped history [*begriffne Geschichte*]; they form the recollection and the Golgotha of absolute spirit [*bilden die Erinnerung und die Schädelstätte des absoluten Geistes*], the actuality, the truth, the certainty of its throne, without which it would be lifeless and alone; only —

Out of the chalice of this realm of spirits

Foams forth to him his infinity.

[*aus dem Kelche dieses Geisterreiches*

schäumt ihm seine Unendlichkeit.] (§808)⁴⁵

Why is this? Why more images? How can we account for both Hegel's claim to have sublated *Vorstellung* and his simultaneous usage of it? As Comay puts it, does the ending of the *Phenomenology* 'contradict or confirm his own infamous pronouncement of the supersession of the "poetry of *Vorstellung*" by the "prose of *Denken*"? Is this the triumphant absorption of the aesthetic or a testimony to its persistence: display of a trophy or confession of defeat?'⁴⁶

It has become commonplace to criticise or else make excuses for this final chapter—for its brevity, its obscurity, its reckless pace, and its apparent inconsistencies such as these. Jameson, on the one hand, calls it 'a most sketchy and disappointing anticlimactic conclusion for so intricate a work.'⁴⁷ It is perhaps emblematic of what Derrida identifies as Hegel's propensity to 'rush[] toward the economy of a reconciliation that causes the wrong itself to be simply forgotten or annihilated.'⁴⁸ A succession of *dei ex machina* are brought onstage before the final curtain call to tie up any loose ends. Hyppolite, on the other hand, while acknowledging some flaws, is more sympathetic, and makes excuses for the simultaneous obscurity and briskness of Hegel's conclusion, mentioning 'the difficulty of the subject matter, Hegel's varied intentions, [and] probably also a hasty composition which is sufficiently explained by the circumstances of the book's publication'⁴⁹—these circumstances, as Pinkard describes them, ranging from bankruptcy, to an accidental

⁴⁵ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 591. The lines of poetry are a misquotation (deliberate or otherwise) of the final couplet of Schiller's 1782 poem 'Die Freundschaft': 'Aus dem Kelch des ganzen Seelenreiches / Schäumt ihm—die Unendlichkeit'; 'From out of the chalice of the whole realm of the soul / Foams for Him—infinity.' Translation from Verene, *Hegel's Recollection*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Comay, 'Hegel's Last Words', *The Dash*, p. 70; quoting from Hegel's *Aesthetics*, I, 89; *Werke*, XIII: *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, p. 123. The full sentence reads: '[A]t this highest stage [i.e. poetry], art now transcends itself, in that it forsakes the element of a reconciled embodiment of the spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination [*Poesie der Vorstellung*] to the prose of thought [*Prosa des Denkens*].'

⁴⁷ Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, p. 116.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible', in *Questioning God*, ed. by John Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 21-51 (p. 46).

⁴⁹ Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, p. 573.

pregnancy, to war.⁵⁰ By his own admission, Hegel hastily wrote the book's final pages on the eve of the battle of Jena. In the same letter to Niethammer that contains Hegel's famous soaring description of seeing Napoleon 'riding out of the city on reconnaissance' ('[i]t is indeed a wonderful sensation,' he writes, 'to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it'), Hegel also complains of his desperate money problems, and also his struggle to get the manuscript of the *Phenomenology* finished and safely delivered on time: 'How dearly I wish you had arranged for cash payment to be made for merely part of the sum, and that you had not made the final deadline so strict! [...] God will, I hope, deliver my scribblings to you within the deadline. As soon as you learn how some money can be sent to me, please dispatch it most urgently. Before long I will have absolute need of it.'⁵¹ Caught up in the excitement of the historical moment, overwhelmed by personal hardship, and maybe seduced by the soaring rhetoric of his own prose, perhaps he simply forgot about 'the sole remaining issue' with which he had introduced the chapter: 'that of sublating this mere form [i.e. *Vorstellung*]' . Perhaps that final sublation slipped his mind. Or perhaps, a more generous reader might suggest, absolute knowing is not to be found in the *Phenomenology* at all. Perhaps the *Phenomenology* is all-*Vorstellung* and it is only in the *Logic* where we can find 'pure thought', the prose of *Denken*. As Speight has noted: 'The *PhG* is, with good reason, often thought to mark within Hegel's life a sort of Prospero's farewell to the employment of literary and imaginative arts'⁵²; a final indulgence in picture-thinking before renouncing it forever—*rough magic abjured, and charms all o'erthrown*.⁵³

A similar contradiction is apparent in an earlier section, with Hegel's foremost critique of *Vorstellung* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which ends with the aforementioned

⁵⁰ 'On February 5, 1807, two weeks after Hegel, now virtually penniless, had finished a new Preface for the book [the *Phenomenology of Spirit*], the housekeeper and landlady of the house where Hegel was living, Christiana Charlotte Johanna Burkhardt, gave birth to his illegitimate son, Ludwig. With no money, no real paying job, and a child by a woman who was married to some one who had recently abandoned her, Hegel's situation was now desperate.' Pinkard, *Hegel Biography*, pp. 229-230.

⁵¹ Hegel to Niethammer, 13 October 1806, *The Letters*, pp. 114-115.

⁵² Speight, *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency*, p. 133.

⁵³ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd edn., ed. by W. J. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 1-23 (v. i. 50-51; Epilogue. 1).

image of the penis (too busy pissing...): The more thinking occupies itself with representations, Hegel writes,

the more tawdry is the appearance of this content, which is either solely for consciousness, or is solely expressed naively by consciousness. — The *depth* from which spirit pushes out from its inwardness but which it only manages to drive to the level of *representational consciousness* and then abandons it there — and the *ignorance* [*Unwissenheit*] of this consciousness about what it says — are the same kind of connection of higher and lower which, in the case of the living being, nature itself naively express in the combination of the organ of its highest fulfilment, the organ of generation, with the organ of pissing [*Organs des Pissens*]. — The infinite judgement as infinite would be the completion of self-comprehending life, whereas the consciousness of the infinite judgement which remains within representational thought conducts itself like pissing. (*PhG* §346)⁵⁴

The truth which is grasped solely at the level of representation, Hegel argues, is like an ‘organ of generation’—a penis—which can only piss. Typically, ‘*Organs des Pissens*’ is translated as ‘organ of urination.’⁵⁵ As Verene has noted, however, this translation erases Hegel’s wordplay: while representational consciousness masquerades as knowledge, as *Wissen*—as seminal and generative—what it amounts to is mere *Pissen* by comparison.⁵⁶ The stark contradiction of this passage, however, is that just at the moment where Hegel appears to bitterly denounce thought which remains stuck at the level of representation, as a perverse coincidence of the high and the low, corrupting and cheapening the absolute spirit which is its content, he is at the same time re-presenting this juxtaposition with the graphic image of a phallus. As Mladen Dolar has noted, ‘this parting shot is really the limit to flabbergast the interpreters. Most of them cautiously decided to pass over it in silence.’⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Translation altered. Hegel, *Werke*, III, 262.

⁵⁵ This is true of Baillie (I, 337), Miller, and Pinkard. The one exception is Inwood, who opts for ‘pissing.’

⁵⁶ Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection*, p. 87.

⁵⁷ Dolar, ‘Phrenology of Spirit’, p. 70.

Verene is the only critic to offer a substantial study of Hegel's use of images in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and of what this might mean for our understanding Hegel's philosophy more generally. On discussing the ending of the *Phenomenology*, Verene begins by rehearsing the commonly held view, as above, that 'the much-awaited, final and direct explanation of absolute knowing, [...] seems rather slight and abstract—an anticlimax.'⁵⁸ He goes on to argue, however, that the ending of the *Phenomenology* in fact evinces the absorption of the aesthetic and the poetic into the thought of the speculative by way of a dialectical reversal. This concluding passage, he writes, is Hegel's 'final irony'—his last trick. Once again, the dialectic has led us to accept one thing, one final certainty—'that religion is not absolute knowing because it delivers the content of absolute spirit in the form of picture-thinking'—and once again he then rudely, comically undermines that position: he 'uses this very form to conclude absolute knowing and the *Phenomenology* itself.'⁵⁹ The ironic experience of discovering one's own misreading, thus necessitating a rereading, as represented in microcosm by the speculative proposition (as developed in the previous chapter), extends to the *Phenomenology*'s final moment. In Verene's words:

The *Phenomenology* ends with an image—Calvary, the throne, the cup foaming forth. [...] Calvary is an image of an end that is also a beginning. It is an image of suffering and triumph through suffering. It is a master image of opposites—finitude and infinitude and the circle of beginning and end.

By concluding the *Phenomenology* in this way Hegel reminds us that the image is still with us. The *Begriff* still has a connection with the *Bild*.⁶⁰

This connection between the *Begriff* and the *Bild*, as Verene argues throughout his study, and as I intimated at the opening of this chapter, is one of recollection [*Erinnerung*]. In short: thinking gains its access to the concept by recollecting (both internalising and recalling) the past as an image. The image is the form in which the developed concept is 'stored', and, once recalled, from which further concepts are developed. It is not the concept, but the concept's

⁵⁸ Verene, *Hegel's Recollection*, p. 104.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

support: Philosophy or logic does not think in images but must be constantly referring back to or recollecting its internalised past *as* an image in order to subsist and develop. Absolute knowing, therefore, consists not in superseding *Vorstellung* once and for all, but in realising, or recollecting, its essential function in the act of recollection itself.

From the outset, Verene modestly provides a caveat for his argument: ‘The contrast I make between *Bild* and *Begriff* is not Hegel’s. Hegel does not employ *Bild* in the *Phenomenology* as a special term.’⁶¹ For Verene, the introduction of the image-concept dialectic is something of a creative misreading, or perhaps a *de re* reading in the Brandorian sense where Verene provides the context of the interpretation. But perhaps Verene does not take his own argument seriously enough. While Hegel’s references to *das Bild* in the *Phenomenology* are relatively scant, it can be demonstrated that they are made with both precise intention and conceptual specificity. What Verene has intuited in the *Phenomenology*—the recollective function of the image for the thought of the concept—is in fact vindicated by Hegel’s later systematic articulation of ‘representation’ in the third volume of his *Encyclopaedia Outline*, a section which is subdivided into ‘recollection’ [*Erinnerung*], ‘imagination’ [*Einbildungskraft*], and ‘memory’ [*Gedächtnis*]. This section has become particularly famous because of the importance given by Derrida and de Man to the latter subsection.⁶² For Hegel, memory is the faculty of the mind which produces signs—that is, signifiers which re-present yet exist in arbitrary relation to a semantic content. For Derrida and de Man, Hegel shows how this productive, mechanical memory is speculatively identical to thinking itself. Consequently, for Derrida in particular, this subsection proves central for his understanding of Hegel as ‘the first thinker of writing.’⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid., p. xii.

⁶² See Jacques Derrida, ‘The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 69-108; and de Man, ‘Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*’. Derrida ‘commemorates’ the latter of these in his lecture ‘The Art of *Mémoires*’, trans. by Jonathan Culler, in *Mémoires for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 45-88. For a critique of de Man’s reading, see Raymond Geuss, ‘A Response to Paul de Man’, *Critical Inquiry*, 10.2 (1983), 375-382. In the wake of Derrida and de Man, the section of the *Encyclopedia* on *Gedächtnis* has also received discussion in John Sallis, ‘Ending(s): Imagination, Presentation, Spirit’, in *Spacings: Of Reason and Imagination in Texts of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 132-158; and David Farrell Krell, ‘Of Pits and Pyramids’, in *Of Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing: On the Verge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 204-239. See also, more recently, Jennifer Ann Bates, *Hegel’s Theory of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), particularly Chapter 5 ‘The Communicative Imagination’, pp. 81-102.

⁶³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 26.

What has received less attention, however, at least from literary theorists, is the significance of Hegel's discussion in this section of the relationships between representation, recollection, and imagination. 'Representation [*Vorstellung*],' Hegel writes, 'is the recollected [*erinnerte*] intuition and, as such, is the mean between intelligence's immediate finding-itself-determined and intelligence in its freedom, thinking'⁶⁴—where 'intuition' stands for the immediate, sensory cognition of an object which exists externally to intelligence. 'The path of intelligence in representations,' he continues, 'is to make the immediacy inward.'⁶⁵ That which is immediate, in order to be mediated—that is, to be thought—must first be interiorised and become thinking's own. This is what Hegel calls 'recollection [*Erinnerung*]: the process by which a content 'is not only intuited as it just *is*, but at the same time *recollected*, posited as *mine*. Determined in this way, the content is what we call an *image* [*Bild*].'⁶⁶ As such, what was before an intuited immediacy, irreducibly particular, and a mere moment of sensory experience, becomes 'immortal' and universal: 'I lift the content out of the *particularity* of space and time, the particularity to which the content, in its immediacy, is bound'; and, in doing so, I can now 'represent [it] to myself wherever I am, even what is remotest from me in external space and external time.'⁶⁷ While 'what is represented gains this immortality only at the cost of the *clarity* and the *freshness* of the immediate individuality, the all round determinacy, of what is intuited'—that is, although 'the intuition is obscured and blurred, when it becomes an image'—it is in turn only by sacrificing the immediacy, freshness, clarity, and complexity of the intuition that it becomes available to thought.⁶⁸ To reformulate the epigraph to this chapter from Proust: For Hegel, thinking cannot be awakened except through an image, and the simplicity of this recollected image, which consists in the suppression, pure and simple, of the real, is a 'decided improvement.' While that which is 'recollected within intelligence' is 'no longer existing'—is not preserved externally in the world by merit of being recollected—the image' of it is '*preserved unconsciously*.'⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §451, p. 184; *Werke*, x: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse; Dritter Teil: Die Philosophie des Geistes*, p. 257.

⁶⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §451, p. 185.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*; *Werke*, x, 258.

⁶⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §452, p. 186.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, §453, p. 187.

Intelligence is thus conceived by Hegel as a ‘nocturnal pit in which is stored a world of infinitely many images and representations’—a ‘gallery of images,’ we might say. This ‘nocturnal pit’ of images, Hegel writes, is ‘the universal requirement to conceive the concept as concrete.’⁷⁰

As if to give a performative illustration of this, Hegel then gives a remark which recollects a famous image from his past work. He writes: we conceive the recollected image containing in possibility the thought of the concept ‘as we conceive e.g. the seed as *affirmatively* containing, in *virtual* possibility, all the *determinacies* that come into *existence* only in the development of the tree.’⁷¹ This recalls the moment from the Preface to the *Phenomenology* when Hegel illustrates the idea of the true as a process with the image of a tree: ‘When we wish to see an oak with its massive trunk and spreading branches and foliage, we are not content to be shown an acorn instead. So too, Science, the crown of a world of Spirit, is not complete in its beginnings’ (*PhG* §12). To further develop this metaphor, we might then think of recollected-internalised images as seeds that we carry around with us, ready to plant and cultivate. While philosophy should not be ‘content’ with such images, or mistake such picture-thoughts for concepts, they are nonetheless essential for the growth of such concepts. In turn, just as seeds are not destroyed or abandoned by the growth of the tree, but preserved therein, producing yet more seeds for the development of yet more trees, so these images are recollected and internalised by the development of the concept, which produces in turn more images for the production of more concepts. As Hegel continues: ‘the seed comes out of the existing determinacies and *returns* to its simplicity, to the existence of being-in-itself again, only in something else, in the seed of the fruit.’ Intelligence is thus conceived as ‘the free *existence* of the *being-in-itself* that recollects itself into itself in its development,’ and ‘this *in-itself* is the first form of universality that presents itself in representation.’⁷² The recollected image founds the universal.

It is surprising that Verene only mentions in passing this systematic articulation of representation, recollection, and the image in his study, dismissing Hegel’s presentation of recollection here as merely ‘a particular moment of intelligence in his account of the

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

psychology of the theoretical mind.’⁷³ With its discussion of feeling, attention, and intention, this account is perhaps closer to what would become known in the twentieth-century as phenomenology, than it is to the phenomenology of Hegel’s science of the experience of consciousness. In this section, Hegel is trying to describe the ways in which consciousness and thinking might be developed from the intuitive experience of phenomena from a first-person point of view. However, by generalising these terms as elaborated in the *Encyclopaedia* to the development of absolute knowing—that is, by applying the meanings of these terms ‘representation’, ‘recollection’, and ‘image’ as they are found in the *Encyclopaedia* to where they appear in the *Phenomenology*, we find that, *pace* Verene, Hegel *does* employ *Bild* and *Erinnerung* in the *Phenomenology* as special terms.

Erinnerung exists as a latent concept throughout the body of the *Phenomenology*, but is named just four times, in passing, before the final chapter (§§13, 303, 753, 766). It appears just as many times in the final paragraph alone (§808), its significance developing on each occasion. Hegel announces it to be the organising principle of the entire preceding narrative.

First: immediately after invoking the ‘gallery of images’ exhibited by spirit’s history, Hegel writes: ‘While its consummation consists in spirit’s completely *knowing* what *it is*, in spirit *knowing* its substance, this knowing is its *taking-the-inward-turn* [*Insichgehen*] in which spirit forsakes its existence and gives its shape over to recollection. In taking-the-inward-turn, spirit is absorbed into the night of its self-consciousness...’⁷⁴ This moment represents the recognition of spirit’s coming-to-be in terms of its ‘nature’—its *immediate* coming-to-be—as described at the beginning of this chapter. Recollection is introduced here as the initial response of spirit when it stops to look back along the path travelled. In knowing ‘its substance’ to be nothing more than this, and absolute spirit as nothing but the sum of these past mistakes, with agency lost and self forsaken, it gives itself up to introspection and interiority. This inadequate form of recollection—‘*Insichgehen*’, literally a ‘going-into-oneself’—is thus melancholic, the activity of a beautiful soul. The ‘night of its self-consciousness’ in which spirit then finds itself should be considered strictly analogous to the ‘nocturnal pit’ from the *Encyclopaedia*, ‘in which is stored a world of infinitely many images and representations.’

⁷³ Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection*, p. 2.

⁷⁴ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 590.

‘[B]ut,’ as Hegel continues, ‘its vanished existence is preserved in that night, and this sublated existence—the existence which was prior but is now newborn from knowing—is the new existence, a new world, and a new shape of spirit. [...] [T]hat *inwardising re-collection* [Er-Innerung] has preserved that experience; it is what is inner, and it is in fact the higher form of substance.’⁷⁵ Here, recollection is not, as above, the helpless backwards glance; the realisation that history happened behind our back and that there’s nothing that we can do to change it. It is instead the realisation that the recollection of this past, the preserved experience, is something to be learnt from. Melancholia turns to mourning. The seed which is recollected in the tree is not finally destroyed, but preserved, and productive of further seeds, and further trees. The preserved past experience produces a ‘new existence, a new world, a new shape of spirit.’ This echoes an earlier mention of recollection from the Preface: ‘while the initial appearance of a new world is just the whole enshrouded in its *simplicity*, or its universal ground, still, on the other hand, the wealth of its bygone existence is in recollection still current for consciousness’ (*PhG* §13). On first reading, this may seem to profess simply that every novelty preserves within itself the moments of its own history. However, read alongside the account of recollection in the *Encyclopaedia Outline*, we can see that, in a speculative sense, ‘the initial appearance of a new world’, ‘the whole enshrouded in its *simplicity*’, is this very recollection: the recollected image is at once the seed to be planted from which further thought is developed. The recollection of spirit’s past as an image is both a condition and the very existence of its future.

The third and fourth iterations of *Erinnerung* in this paragraph, already quoted, affirm then that it is this power, the power of recollection, which is the path to absolute knowing. Recollection is not just the interiorisation of and learning from the past, but the act of representing it before us, with and against which thinking can define and refine itself. To repeat:

The *aim*, absolute knowing, or spirit knowing itself as spirit, has its path in the recollection of spirits as they are in themselves *and* are as they achieve the organization of their realm. Their preservation according to their free-standing existence appearing in the form of contingency is history, but according to their

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 591.

conceptually grasped organisation, it is the *science of phenomenal knowing*. Both together are conceptually grasped history; they form the recollection and the Golgotha of absolute spirit [*bilden die Erinnerung und die Schädelstätte des absoluten Geistes*], the actuality, the truth...

Recollection is thus both ‘preservation’ and ‘organisation’, both the interiorisation and re-presentation of the shapes of spirit as a gallery of images. The *Phenomenology*’s final conjunction of *die Erinnerung und die Schädelstätte* is not an opposition, but an apposition—a speculative identity.

What does it mean to claim this? It means that speculative thinking does not abandon picture-thinking once and for all, but finds the function of picture-thinking in relation to the thought of the concept in the activity of recollection. This complicates the commonplace account of the relationship between the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*; an account which, it must be said, is propagated by Hegel himself: that the *Phenomenology* is the ‘ladder’ to the *Logic* (*PhG* §26), a ladder which, once climbed, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, must be thrown away;⁷⁶ that it is a necessary presupposition or introduction to science—necessary if only because, by cataloguing and demonstrating all the failed paths to the absolute, it ends by announcing its own superfluity. In truth, neither the sublation of *Vorstellung* into *Denken* nor the succession of the *Phenomenology* by the *Logic* signal the superfluity of picture-thinking nor the total victory and exclusivity of ‘pure’ thought: the former are constantly recollected by the latter by the means of the former, and the latter are forced to repeatedly confront the fact that the former are still implicated. This is a similar point to one made by Comay and Ruda: ‘In moving from the *Phenomenology* to the *Logic* Hegel does not simply violate the Kantian prohibition: we do not simply step away from appearance to reality, from the phenomena to things in themselves. We rather learn that our propensity to illusion does not derive simply from the deficiencies of natural consciousness but is inscribed in the act of thinking—and therefore in being—as such.’⁷⁷ What consists in absolute knowing is not finally going beyond illusion (beyond despair, error, *Vorstellung*, or the *Phenomenology*), but

⁷⁶ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 89.

⁷⁷ Comay and Ruda, *The Dash*, p. 51.

in recollecting the necessity of illusion in and as the activity of recollection itself. What these moments suggest is that thinking must choose representation where it wanted purity (appearance where it wanted reality, snakes where it wanted a ladder, pissing when it wanted sex) since by starting with the latter it remains stuck at the starting block, and only gets the former; while it is only by going through the former that the latter opens up.

Some examples:

i. *History*

Erinnerung (of, and in the form of *Bildern*) is thus the basis of *Bildung*; it conditions and drives the progress at every stage, even with absolute knowing. This triptych of *Bildung*, *Erinnerung*, and *Bild* can be demonstrated with regard to historical consciousness and experience with reference to the passage in the Preface where Hegel describes the recollection of the past, which he identifies with the ‘the history of the cultural formation of the world [*Bildung der Welt*]’ as being ‘sketched in silhouette [*im Schattenrisse*]’ (*PhG* §28).⁷⁸ Recollected past events are ‘shapes which spirit has already laid aside’, he writes, ‘fragments of knowing,’ which have also, at once, become ‘acquired possession[s]’: they are viewed in an oblique and simplified form, their concrete reality and particularity lost, rendered as an image, a sketched silhouette against which, and with which we define ourselves. Despite being ‘laid aside’, passed over, sublated, they nevertheless ‘constitute the substance of the individual, or, his inorganic nature’—that is, his history.

Comay beautifully exposit this passage:

History can be encountered only as spectral, monochromatic, shrouded in shadow—a series of frozen snapshots, fleetingly apprehended (were it not for this acceleration, we would perpetually have to repeat the past in real time), belatedly absorbed. The past presents itself as at once an ephemeral trace to be deciphered and a stony burden that must be metabolised as food for thought (the only safely edible fruit is the

⁷⁸ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 32.

inedible or inorganic one)—both shadow and stone. History makes its appearance in the border zone between light and darkness—a shape made visible as a blind spot or absence of illumination. The silhouette is also an image of dismemberment: we engage with history only obliquely and in abbreviation—a series of disembodied facies, viewed in profile, inaccessible to direct frontal encounter. [...] Silhouettes are both mnemonics and provocations: they are what we ultimately remember of the past, an assortment of textbook summaries, episodic flashback, and coarse reductions; and their lack of subtlety is also what challenges us to revisit this past.⁷⁹

This can be elaborated, again, with reference to Hegel's discussion of the passage from intuition to thought via recollective-representations and images in the *Encyclopaedia Outline*, in which he gives a candid judgement of the requisite skills of a good historian. We might expect that a historian should occupy themselves primarily with the wealth of historical nuance and detail. Not so, argues Hegel. The true skill lies in the historian's recollection of the past from their *intuition* of its detail (in the strictly technical senses of these words developed above). 'A talented historian,' Hegel writes, 'has before him in vivid intuition the *whole* of the conditions and events he is to describe; by contrast, one who possesses no talent for the portrayal of history confines himself to individual details and overlooks the substantial.'⁸⁰ As we shall see in the following chapter, this is the difference between the speculative thinker who rescues the spirit from the letter, and the 'letter-bound man' who obsesses over trivialities and pedantries at the expense of the whole.

ii. *The 'Phenomenology'*

This requirement is not just limited to history, Hegel argues. On the contrary, it is 'rightly insisted that in all branches of knowledge, and *especially in philosophy* too, one should speak from intuition of the subject-matter.'⁸¹ The importance of recollection and images should also

⁷⁹ Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 86-87, 95.

⁸⁰ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §449, p. 183.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

be insisted on, therefore, for the experience of reading the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. One can say with some confidence, albeit anecdotally, that what is initially, discursively recollected of the *Phenomenology* in either casual or classroom discussion is not the minutiae of its particular arguments or positions, but its gallery of images: the master and the slave, the unhappy consciousness, the beautiful soul, the night in which all cows are black, the chopped head of cabbage and the mouthful of water, the heard-hearted judge, Golgotha, the foaming chalice.

Many of these images function as specific, albeit veiled historical or literary allusions. The famous ‘night in which, as one says, all cows are black’ satirises the featureless, indifferent identity of the absolute in Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* (*PhG* §16). Others are multi-referential, contested, or else, in the words of Drew Milne, ‘sufficiently general and particular that [they] can generate confident but very different allusions in the eyes of [their] beholders.’⁸² The master and the slave, for example, refer to French colonisers and Haitian revolutionaries, feudal lords and serfs, God and man, man and wife;⁸³ the beautiful soul, meanwhile, refers to Shaftesbury, Wieland, Jacobi, Goethe, Novalis, Schlegel, and Jesus.⁸⁴ However, while the philological identification of these allusions and their historical contextualisation may indeed be enlightening, what is of primary importance is not the empirical or historical referent of these images, but the fact of their being images, for it as images that they are recollected.

⁸² Drew Milne, ‘The Beautiful Soul: From Hegel to Beckett’, *Diacritics*, 32.1 (2002), 63-82 (p. 70).

⁸³ See, respectively, Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*; Cole, *The Birth of Theory*; Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’*, ed. by Allan Bloom, trans. by James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980). On ‘man and wife’: Derrida suggests that Hegel derived the master-slave dialectic from his reading of Rousseau’s account of the ‘the battle between men and women’ in *Emile*, where Rousseau writes: ‘If he takes a wife from a lower class, natural and civil law are in accordance and all goes well. When he marries a woman of higher rank it is just the opposite case; the man must choose between diminished rights or imperfect gratitude; he must be ungrateful or despised. Then the wife, laying claim to authority, makes herself a tyrant over her lawful head; and the master, who has become a slave, is the most ridiculous and miserable of creatures. Such are the unhappy favorites whom the sovereigns of Asia honor and torment with their alliance; people tell us that if they desire to sleep with their wife they must enter by the foot of the bed.’ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 176; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile; or, Education*, trans. by Barbara Foxley (London: J. M. Dent, 1911), p. 370.

⁸⁴ I owe this list of possible referents to Milne, ‘The Beautiful Soul’, p. 70. However, Milne also writes, and I agree, that ‘[a] balance needs to be struck [...] between reconstructing the historical intelligibility of Hegel’s terms and assessing the truth of his argument’ (p. 69); ‘More is required than an oscillation between conceptual paraphrases and philological reconstructions of sundry contextual “backgrounds”’ (p. 75).

This point has been elucidated recently by Žižek, who argues that in order ‘[t]o properly grasp the dialectical relationship between a concept and its examples, a third term has to be introduced, that of *exemplum*.’⁸⁵ While Shaftesbury, Novalis, or Schlegel may be examples of those who are subject to Hegel’s critique of the purity-obsessed moralist; or else while French colonisers and Haitian revolutionaries, or feudal lords and serfs, may work as empirical case studies (or may even have been inspirations) for Hegel’s account of the development of self-consciousness through an asymmetrical struggle for recognition; because of the complex wealth of historical detail that permeate each of these examples, they never properly fit the purity and simplicity of the conceptual thought. This is why an *exemplum* is needed, defined by Žižek as a ‘fictional singularity which directly gives body to the concept in its purity’⁸⁶—or, as I have shown, what Hegel calls an image. Žižek elaborates this with reference to Hannah Arendt’s thesis of the ‘banality of evil’ illustrated by the *exemplum* of Adolph Eichmann.⁸⁷ Although the reality—that is, the *example*—of Eichmann does not fit Arendt’s thesis (as Žižek notes, ‘far from a non-thinking bureaucrat just following orders, he was a fanatical anti-Semite fully aware of what he was doing’), this does not undermine it.⁸⁸ The truth of a concept is developed from the recollected image, however fictional it may be, and not the empirical external facts.

iii. *Words*

This importance of representation and recollection in the reading of the *Phenomenology* may even be seen at the level of the word: The negative, reflection, withdrawal, emptying out, recoiling, grasping [*begreifen*], advancing and returning, re-collecting, even spirit itself, are also initially recollected in their representational, figurative form. After all, as Hegel

⁸⁵ Slavoj Žižek, ‘A Short Note on Hegel and the Exemplum of Christ’, *Crisis & Critique*, 8.2 (2021), 432-441 (p. 433).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006).

⁸⁸ Žižek, ‘Hegel and the Exemplum’, p. 433. Žižek develops his argument, and this point in particular, from Pierre Bayard, *Comment parler des faits qui ne se sont pas produits?* (Paris: Minuit, 2020).

explicitly states: ‘Every spiritual content and all relationships generally [...] are representations; spirit itself is a representation.’⁸⁹ These concepts are all, at least initially, with their written representation, metaphorical images. As Hegel says in his lectures on aesthetics: ‘In the first place, every language already contains a mass of metaphors. [...] *Fassen, begreifen*, and many words, to speak generally, which relate to knowing, have in respect of their literal meaning a purely sensuous content.’⁹⁰ Even *Aufhebung*, before being grasped conceptually, is first represented in the mind in metaphorically spatial, material terms: to lift up, to rise to the next level, to transcend; to preserve, to suspend; to destroy.

Of course, this is not to say that the gallery of images is all that remains of the *Phenomenology*, with the wealth of its conceptual substance replaced by cartoonish outlines. The master-slave, the beautiful soul, the negative, ‘*begreifen*’, spirit, etc. are neither reducible to nor exhausted as images; their images are not the horizon of their being thought. It must be emphasised that Hegel’s fundamental concerns remain with *der Begriff*, and not *das Bild*. What it does mean, however, is that these *Grundriße* are the initial forms of that which is thought, from and against which the conceptual detail can be elaborated, without which the concept would cease to exist; and that this passage from *das Bild* to *der Begriff* is not one of simple, linear, progressive abstraction, but one of constant recollection. Hegel’s philosophy is, therefore, no ‘white mythology’, as Derrida describes metaphysics—that which ‘has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in palimpsest’: metaphor, figuration, employed but disavowed.⁹¹ On the contrary, Hegel is fully cognisant of the imaginary origin, or rather the origin in the image, of the concept, not erased, but recollected.

If, then, ‘the image’ for the young, romantic Hegel was the beautiful link between truth and goodness; and if the image for the Hegel of the essays on *Faith and Knowledge* and on

⁸⁹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 149.

⁹⁰ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, I, 404.

⁹¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 207-271 (p. 213).

Natural Law was the Kantian synthetic *a priori* judgement representing the identity of identity and difference; then the image of the *Phenomenology* is the recollected and represented history of spirit as a simplified *shape*, with and against which the present spirit can define itself, in order to move beyond itself. It is therefore in the activity of recollection that representation or picture-thinking finds its function in relation to the thought of the concept.

IV. Grau in Grau; Erinnerung und Entäußerung

One of Hegel's most memorable images of all, from the Preface to his *Philosophy of Right*, encapsulates this very process, this essential activity of recollection, for thought, via representation: 'When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.'⁹² As T. M. Knox notes, this metaphor of philosophy's 'grey in grey' is an ironic reference to Goethe's *Faust*, in which Mephistopheles rejects the dull abstractions of philosophy in favour of the colourful immediacy and freshness of life: 'Grey, dear friend, is all theory, / And green life's golden tree.'⁹³ Philosophy, in contrast to (what Mephistopheles conceives of as) 'life', 'always comes too late.'⁹⁴ It cannot, therefore, instruct or advise; it can only recollect, and can only understand after the fact. In recollecting, however, it drives spirit forward. That philosophy paints, not only in grey, but 'grey in grey' emphasises that re-collecting is a form of repetition. Philosophy can offer no pure novelty, no greenery in and of itself; it can only recollect or repeat, literally re-call, that which already is, or rather was. 'Grey in grey warns against philosophy's pride of *Sollen* [ought],' Rose writes, 'against any proscription or prescription, any imposition of ideals, imaginary communities or "progressive narrations"'. Instead, the "idealizations" of philosophy would acknowledge and recognise actuality and not

⁹² Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 23.

⁹³ Qtd. in T. M. Knox, 'Explanatory Notes', in *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* by G. W. F. Hegel, trans. by T. M. Knox, ed. and rev. by Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 324-363 (p. 328n16).

⁹⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 23.

force or fantasise it.’⁹⁵ Philosophy should not, and indeed cannot, provide political activists and militants with an answer to Lenin’s famous question: What is to be done? What ‘is’, recognised as the identity of identity and non-identity is what is absolute—not what ‘ought’ to be. It is only after what was coming-to-be has come to be that philosophy can think it; only then can the owl of Minerva begin its flight.

This may seem awfully conservative; an apologia for the status quo and a capitulation to what exists. Indeed, this is the grounds upon which some Marxist and then poststructuralist thinkers have criticised Hegel. Ernst Bloch, for instance, criticises this notion of recollection as repetition or recapitulation, designating it as that which ensures the closed ‘magic circle’ of Hegel’s system, and hence that which precludes its thinking of novelty. Bloch draws a connection between *Erinnerung* and Plato’s concept of *anamnesis*, developed in his *Meno* and *Phaedo* dialogues: the idea that the acquisition and development of knowledge is not one of learning something new, but of remembering—the difference being that while for Plato all knowledge is innate and resides in the soul, and to learn is to recollect this knowledge that one has always already had, for Hegel, the *Erinnerung* which drives the *Bildung* of spirit is always a recollection of spirit’s historical experience.⁹⁶ Bloch writes:

[T]he Hegelian process of the result, therefore, is within the the circle of anamnesis as within a magic circle. Everything here is full of New: however, in every final moment, especially at the end of the circle in general, the newest (in Hegel’s gigantic breaking philosophy, and in spite of it) must have always already been the oldest, with its prearranged, preordained, complete beginning. This prevents even the system of development from remaining a system open to development: it is subdued to the First,

⁹⁵ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. xi.

⁹⁶ As Socrates says to Meno: ‘since the soul both is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen both what is here and what is in Hades, and in fact all things, there is nothing it has not learned.’ Therefore, ‘there is no reason why someone who has recollected only one thing—which is what people call “learning”—should not discover everything else, as long as one is brave and does not give up on the search. For seeking and learning turn out to be wholly recollection.’ Plato, ‘Meno’, in *‘Meno’ and ‘Phaedo’*, ed. by David Sedley and Alex Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-41 (p. 15).

although the latter is not developed and not consumed, after which it starts. The *restituto in integrum* brings back the *expeditio in novum* with the rope of *epistrophé*.⁹⁷

For Bloch, ‘everything’ in Hegel ‘is full of New’, but because everything new is necessarily recollected from the past, it has always already ‘grown old.’ The *Bildung* is plotted from the first, so has no *Bildung* of its own. *Erinnerung* as *epistrophé*—repetition and return—thus ensures the restitution of a hypostasised law of the same. Bloch returns to this criticism in the first volume of *The Principle of Hope* (1954), in which, with reference to the same passage from the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, he complains that ‘[t]he closed-circuit thinker Hegel, the antiquarium of what is unalterably already existing, [...] prevailed over the dialectical process-thinker Hegel with his crypto-practice.’⁹⁸ It is not coincidental that Bloch’s critique here appears within the context of a discussion of Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (1845): Hegel’s recollection only interprets the world, when the point, however, is to change it.⁹⁹ Bloch’s critique also parallels Heidegger’s complaint, referenced in the Introduction to this dissertation, that, as a thinker of the past, Hegel has no adequate concept of futurity. As Hegel ‘speaks about having been but never about the future’, he limits his philosophy to a kind of perpetual irrelevance and anachronism.¹⁰⁰

Derrida and Hamacher have similar worries. For Derrida, Hegel’s *Erinnerung* is a symptom of his ‘irrepressible philosophical desire to summarise-interiorise-dialecticise-master-*relever* the metaphorical division between the origin and itself.’¹⁰¹ For Hamacher, it is ‘the cultic re-collection’ by which Hegel the megalomaniac asserts his ‘mastery,’¹⁰² and lays claim to the ‘absolute interiorisation’¹⁰³ of the past; *parousia* and *pleroma*. For both, it is the

⁹⁷ Ernst Bloch, *Subjekt-Objekt: Erläuterungen zu Hegel* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1962), p. 503; qtd. and trans. in Ricci and Sanguinetti, Introduction, *Hegel on Recollection*, pp. ix-xxiv (p. xiii).

⁹⁸ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols., trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), I, 270.

⁹⁹ Cf. ‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.’ Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach [Original version]’, in *MECW*, v (1976), 3-5 (p. 5).

¹⁰⁰ Heidegger, *Hegel’s Phenomenology*, p. 82.

¹⁰¹ Derrida, ‘White Mythology’, p. 269. *Relever* is Derrida’s translation of *aufheben*, sublate; *relève*, *Aufhebung*, sublation.

¹⁰² Hamacher, *pleroma*, p. 15.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 227.

movement of idealisation by which all disparity is swallowed into harmony, all difference into homogenous identity, and all beginnings into their ends—resisted only by the irreducible exteriority and alterity of the letter. Despite his admiration for Hegel as ‘the first thinker of writing’ and ‘the thinker of irreducible difference’, Derrida views the moment of recollection as the eschatological moment of spurious and violent totalisation, where the trace of difference (and therefore of writing) is erased. It is, once again, the moment where Hegel ‘rushes toward the economy of a reconciliation.’ This is why, Derrida writes, ‘all that Hegel thought within this horizon, *all, that is, except eschatology*, may be reread as a meditation on writing.’¹⁰⁴

However, and contra Derrida and Hamacher, this *Erinnerung* for Hegel is not simply a final inwardisation. It is not an act of voracious consumption without remainder. Nor is it a moment of eschatological or apocalyptic fulfilment. Derrida writes in passing, in a footnote, that *Erinnerung* and *Entäußerung* [recollection and relinquishment], and *Inwendig* and *Auswendig* [inside and outside], are oppositions.¹⁰⁵ Despite the parenthetical nature of this comment, it reveals the key to his error, or at least his prejudice. For Hegel, *Entäußerung* is not opposed to *Erinnerung*, and *Auswendig* not opposed to *Inwendig*. Instead, each is the ironic truth of the other. Each pairing does not form a dichotomy, but a dialectic. Just as consumption is followed by excretion, inwardising-recollection is followed by a relinquishing or kenosis; each depends on the other. This is why each of Hegel’s major works finish not with a final interiorisation of all remaining objects, with the absolute subject licking the plate clean, but with a dramatic ‘emptying out’—with the idea, or spirit, relinquished [*entäußerte*] into time: The *Phenomenology* ends with ‘spirit relinquished into time’—its ‘kenosis’ and self-externalisation (*PhG* §808); the *Logic* ends with the idea ‘*freely discharg[ing]* itself’; and the *Encyclopedia Logic* ends with ‘the absolute *freedom* of the idea’ which consists in

¹⁰⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 26. My emphasis.

¹⁰⁵ ‘All these developments are governed by the opposition *Auswendig/Inwendig* and by that of *Entäußerung* and *Erinnerung*.’ Derrida, ‘The Pit and the Pyramid’, p. 95n23. Michael Inwood, too, in the glossary to his translation of the *Phenomenology*, writes that ‘*Erinnerung* is the converse of *Entäußerung*.’ Inwood, ‘Glossary of Some Key Terms’, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Inwood, pp. 323-330 (p. 327).

nothing but a decision: it ‘*resolves* [entschließt] *to release* freely *from itself* the moment of its particularity.’¹⁰⁶

The specificity of the German word *Entäußerung* is instructive here. While the stem *Äußerung* refers to an expression or utterance, the *Ent-* prefix signifies and enacts both a return and an immanent negation. An *Entäußerung* is thus an utterance which, in spite of being a first utterance, is at once a repetition of that utterance, and a repetition which undoes itself. And this is why an *Entäußerung* is not opposed to an *Erinnerung* but represents its speculative or ironic truth. When spirit recollects and internalises itself it at once re-presents and externalises itself in a new shape, and in doing so it ‘*resolves to release* freely *from itself* the moment of its particularity’—to repeat from the *Encyclopedia Outline*—as the condition of its continuation. *Entäußerung* names the moment when an *Erinnerung* stakes itself and goes to the end to discover its ironic truth—or, to use Hegel’s imagery from earlier, it is the moment when spirit plants the seed that it has (re-)collected in order to grow a tree. Again, it is not coincidental that this is the word that Luther used to translate Christ’s *kenosis*. As the expression of the concept in its particularity, which is both its undoing and yet the condition of its life, *Entäußerung* finds its ultimate exemplum in God’s relinquishing of himself through his incarnation and death as the condition of the life of his (the holy) spirit.

Derrida and Hamacher are therefore correct, but in a wrong way: particularity and externality *are* that which prevent the system from enacting some final messianic or eschatological mending of all broken middles, but they are also that which render the system open to the future, free, dynamic, moving, alive, ‘without which it would be lifeless and alone...’ (*PhG* §808). Spirit’s self-relinquishing is the moment of revolutionary resolve [*Entschluß*] where it externalises itself, stakes itself, and goes to the end to discover again its own ironic truth. This is also correlative to the moment of speculative reading when, after discovering the non-identity inhering in the identity asserted, the reader resolves not to suspend this difference but to follow it to its end, to re-realise and re-assert the truth of the

¹⁰⁶ Hegel, *Logic*, p. 753. *Encyclopedia Logic*, §244, p. 303; *Werke*, VIII: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse; Erster Teil: Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, p. 393. This implicitly scatological imagery has prompted Slavoj Žižek, in an essay entitled ‘Hegel and Shitting: The Idea’s Constipation’, to quip: ‘What critics of Hegel’s voracity need is, perhaps, a dosage of a good laxative.’ *Hegel’s Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek and Creston Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 221-235 (p. 231).

proposition beyond the fetters of the abstract self-identification implied by its propositional form—to realise the spirit of the letter.

This is why, Rose writes (and perhaps with Bloch's kind of Marxian critiques of Hegel in mind, according to which recollecting the world precludes the possibility of changing it), that Hegel's philosophy which paints grey in grey does 'not [render philosophy] *ex post facto* justification, even less *a priori* rejuvenation, but reconfiguration, oppositional yet vital — *something understood*.'¹⁰⁷ Rose does not explicate by what medium this reconfiguration occurs. I have argued in this chapter that it is: re-presentation. Hegel writes that '*die Philosophie ihr Grau in Grau malt*'.¹⁰⁸ The verb '*malen*' here (meaning 'to paint', but also 'to draw', or 'to picture') is yet another artistic image (after the 'sketched silhouette' and the 'gallery of images') which emphasises the artificiality or 'inorganic nature' of Hegel's *Erinnerung*—its status as an image. It is the 'painting' of what is recollected which is the medium of philosophy's 'oppositional reconfiguration' with and against which thinking defines and refines itself. The owl's flight signals, then, not only the comprehension of the past but its retroactive representation, which at once sets the conditions for the opening up of the future. As Hegel stresses, spirit does not recollect the shape of life which has grown old in order to renew it: 'it cannot be rejuvenated [...] by the grey in grey of philosophy.' On the contrary, it is only by representing its own past to itself that spirit can risk completing the work of mourning for itself.

V. Suspicion or trust?

Perhaps a surprising comparison that can be made here is with the art of caricature. 'In caricature,' Hegel says in his lectures on aesthetics, 'the specific character is exaggerated and is, as it were, a superfluity of the characteristic.' At first, just as a metaphor or allegory initially appears as a distraction of style on the way to thought, the exaggerated nature of the caricature seems excrescent to the truth of its subject. '[B]ut,' as he goes on, 'the superfluity is no longer what is strictly required for the characteristic, but a troublesome repetition

¹⁰⁷ Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. xi.

¹⁰⁸ Hegel, *Werke*, VII: *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, p. 28. My emphasis.

whereby the “characteristic” itself may be made unnatural.’¹⁰⁹ The effect of caricature is that it recollects its subject both hyperbolically and superfluously, but in doing so it retroactively renders the truth itself as hyperbolic: ‘unnatural’. From this, perhaps we can begin to account for Hegel’s polemical criticisms of Schlegel and Novalis, which, as noted in the previous chapter, are often noted for their lack of both nuance and textual justification. Past *shapes* of spirit, and hence the recollection of past philosophies, for Hegel, are just that: not faithful reconstructions but caricatures; broad shapes and provocative outlines. In painting its grey in grey, philosophy’s recollection ‘troublesomely repeats’ what appears to be ‘natural’, but it is only in doing so that it can perform its ‘oppositional yet vital’ ‘reconfiguration’ of actuality, and in doing so move beyond it.

As Comay expounds upon Hegel’s phenomenological method: ‘Hegel illuminates the pathological within the normal. Exaggeration reveals uncomfortable features of experience that would otherwise be invisible.’¹¹⁰ Perhaps this is one reason why Adorno aphorises in *Minima Moralia* that ‘[i]n psycho-analysis nothing is true except the exaggerations.’¹¹¹ What are the dreams, delusions, and neuroses of the analysand if not the recollected-internalised [*er-innerten*], exaggerated images of their repressed past life, ‘preserved unconsciously’ in ‘the nocturnal pit’ of the unconscious mind, to be then brought to speech and externalised [*entäußert*], in order to get over them? Again, an *Ent-Äußerung* is an ‘utterance’ which moves beyond itself only by returning itself, just as the process of analysis, for Freud, is a process of *Durcharbeiten* via *Erinnern* and *Wiederholen*—of ‘working-through’ by recollecting and repeating.¹¹²

In one sense, this resonates with Malabou’s insight that Hegel is a philosopher of simplification. In spite of what is perhaps the most common prejudice about his writing—that it is unrelentingly and perhaps unnecessarily difficult—Malabou claims that everything in Hegel’s thought tends towards radical simplification and abbreviation. Dialectical

¹⁰⁹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, I, 18-19.

¹¹⁰ Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, p. 96

¹¹¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 49.

¹¹² See Sigmund Freud, ‘Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II (1914)’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), XII (1958), 145-156.

simplification, Malabou argues, is the means by which spirit both accounts for its own history and moves beyond it; that is (although Malabou does not use this terminology) it is the means by which spirit repeatedly recollects and relinquishes itself. Every sublation or *Aufhebung* can thus ‘be interpreted as a labour of speculative mourning’¹¹³—as a work of both systematic and selective memory which works through its own past and gives it specific determination and meaning; which reduces the multiplicity and complexity of a past stage of spirit to a singular, distinctive characteristic: what Hegel calls its shape, *Gestalt*. It is for this reason, according to Malabou, that *der Grundriß*—that is, the précis, abridgement, plan, sketch, or outline—is paradoxically ‘the best and most appropriate format for a work of philosophy.’¹¹⁴ This is why ‘Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia*’ is actually an *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*—an *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*—an important point which is often overlooked due to the conventional shorthand (i.e. ‘Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia*’). As Hegel himself writes in the Preface to the first edition, the philosophical genre of ‘an outline’ offers ‘a new reworking of philosophy according to a method that will someday be recognized [...] as the only true method, identical with the content.’¹¹⁵ Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia Outline* is an abridgement or summary of an encyclopaedia for which there is no ur-text.

Where my account differs from Malabou, however, is that she argues that the work of simplification for Hegel is always one of abstraction, whereby a thing is stripped of its sensuous form and reduced to its purely logical content: ‘Simplification takes the *sensuous configuration* of existence and reduces it. It shapes the figure (*Gestalt*) into an abbreviated form-determination (*Formbestimmung*), which is made of logical essentiality.’¹¹⁶ In the *Phenomenology*, however, as demonstrated, one finds a different version of simplification whereby that which is thought through or passed over, sublated, is then recollected, internalised, and re-presented as a series of picture-thoughts—a ‘gallery of images’—a new shape from which further thoughts can develop. This is why, in the *Phenomenology*, the shapes of spirit are not merely abstracted into a purely logical schema, but presented as a

¹¹³ Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, p. 146.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, p. 151.

series of caricatured *dramatis personae*: the master and the slave, the unhappy consciousness, the beautiful soul, the hard-hearted judge, and so on.

My account of recollection differs more starkly, however, from Brandom's. For Brandom, Hegel's '*Erinnerung* rationally reconstructs the experiential past into an expressive genealogy of a Whiggish history.'¹¹⁷ For such a history, '[e]ach step is necessary, not in the prospective sense that things could not have happened otherwise [...] but in the retrospective'—and, perhaps, rather banal—'sense that if they had *not* happened, some aspect of what the story claims was all along implicit would not have become explicit.'¹¹⁸ He argues that 'retrospective reconstrual and retroactive recontexting'—that is, recollection—'is reason's march through history.'¹¹⁹ Developing from Brandom's own terminology, this could be described as a *de re* historiography. Rather than understanding the past on its own terms, *de dicto*, Hegelian recollection reconstructs the past both in light of the present—conceived apparently *a priori* as the highest rational achievement yet—and as the present's condition of possibility. Crucially, then, recollection for Brandom's Hegel is always reparative; it is always a labour of forgiveness. In his own words: 'When recognition takes the magnanimous form of recollection, it is forgiveness, the attitude that institutes normativity as fully self-conscious of *trust*.'¹²⁰ The errors of history—defined by Brandom as our failed individual and institutional attempts to develop determinately conceptual norms and semantic relations—are redeemed and forgiven by an act of recollection which locates in each of them a moment of rational truth which helped us on the way to where we are now. The rational kernel is 'recollected' from the irrational husk. This is the 'spirit of trust' of Brandom's title: Hegel, for Brandom, entrusts 'the next generation to do for its time what he has done for his: to take on the forgiving recollective labor of explication that makes a rational history.'¹²¹ This, Brandom argues, is the labour of the *Phenomenology*: to make 'the case that nothing is for nothing, that all things happen for the best.'¹²²

¹¹⁷ Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, p. 438.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 628.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 631.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 632.

If Hegel's *Phenomenology* did make this case, it would not take a reader of Adorno to realise its total inadequacy when tasked with accounting for the horrors of the twentieth century (from the Holocaust to the failures of state socialism), or the still unfolding horrors of the twenty-first—not to mention the horrors of slavery, torture, misogyny, and colonialism which persist throughout human history.¹²³ It is not surprising, then, that Brandom does not make substantial reference to one historical event in the 800 pages of his book. Perhaps anticipating such a riposte, however, he concedes euphemistically that there may be 'strains' in any 'recollective undertaking': elements 'that *cannot* be smoothly, successfully, or convincingly given a satisfactory norm-responsive explanation. Indeed. But,' he continues, 'we must now ask: Whose fault is it that the doing, or some aspect of it, is unforgiveable—the doer or the forgiver? Is the failure that of the bad agent or of the bad recollector? Is whose fault it is a matter of how things anyway just are? Or is it at least partly reflective of the recollector's failure to come up with a more norm-responsive narrative?'¹²⁴ We should therefore, Brandom argues, 'acknowledge at least equal responsibility on the part of the unsuccessful forgiver.'¹²⁵ To use an extreme or particularly 'strenuous' example, does this mean that, for Brandom, the only reason we cannot forgive Hitler is because we are yet to develop a 'satisfactory norm-responsive explanation' for his positive role in world history? and that we are at least equally responsible for the horrors committed in his name for our inability to reconcile them with a Whiggish history of unending progress?

Forgiving recollection as Brandom conceives of it is not 'the meaning of working through the past' (to use Adorno's phrase),¹²⁶ but (to use Brandom's own words against him) mere 'semantics with an edifying intent.'¹²⁷ (He must have forgotten Hegel's caution in the Preface: '[P]hilosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying' (*PhG* §9).) The source of

¹²³ In his review of *A Spirit of Trust*, Žižek compares Brandom's reparative attitude to that of the American Republican Senator Tom Cotton who caused an uproar when he 'forgivingly recollected' America's historical use of slavery as a 'necessary evil' for the establishment of the union which would then go on to 'abolish' it. Slavoj Žižek, 'Hegel: The Spirit of Distrust', in *Reading Hegel*, by Slavoj Žižek, Frank Ruda, and Agon Hamza (Cambridge: Polity, 2022), pp. 13-100 (p. 35).

¹²⁴ Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, p. 747.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ See Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past', in *Critical Models*, pp. 89-104.

¹²⁷ Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, p. 753.

Brandom's error is that, like Derrida (albeit with a favourable emphasis), he views the moment of *Erinnerung* as the eschatological 'rush[] toward the economy of a reconciliation that causes the wrong itself to be simply forgotten or annihilated'; and as opposed to the moment of *Entäußerung* which posits that which is recollected in a new shape, not so it can be accommodated or stomached, but precisely in order for it to begin to be moved beyond. What is at stake is, for an example, the question of whether we forgivingly-recollect and commemorate Edward Colston as a generous philanthropist and benefactor, whose engagement with the slave trade was an unfortunate excess; or else whether we recollect him as a monstrous personification of capital, responsible for the theft, abuse, and extinction of thousands of black lives. There is no room here for nuance. By overlooking the representative and relinquishing *telos* of recollection, then, Brandom also overlooks that recollection is both radically uncertain, and radically committed. It *may* be redemptive and forgiving, realising the unintended truth or spirit of the past in the present through an act of fidelity (as Hegel realised the spirit of Luther, as I will argue in the following chapter); but it may also be radically damning, critical, and unfaithful (as we saw with Hegel's acerbic reaction to the Jena romantics). Recollection, then, is always the name for reinterpretation, for rereading—for a rereading which is a site of commitment and heated contestation, and thus of continually renewed meaning.

If there is a 'spirit of trust' at all in Hegel it refers to the trust required to follow the internal movement of the dialectic to its apogee, to realise its ironic truth, to discover what happens when we resolve to bring abstraction to concretion, and immediacy to mediation. It is not, though, the vulgar 'Leibnizian optimism' that trusts that 'all things happen for the best.'¹²⁸ On the contrary, the dialectic demands our trust in spite of the fact that, if we can anticipate anything at all—with whatever we posit, or take to be the case, or do—we are bound to learn through an ever painful experience that we meant something other than we meant to mean, an experience which compels us to go back and repeat (*PhG* §63). The spirit will exceed the letter. Recollection is, then, the critical moment where we return to spirit's coming-to-be and represent it as a gallery of images—each image singular, exemplary, reductive, hyperbolic; possibly forgiving, possibly passionately hateful—from which we can risk thought and action, and relinquish ourselves once again.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 632.

THE SPIRIT AND THE LETTER

or, a series of letters concerning the spirit and the letter within Hegel's philosophy

It should already be clear that Hegel has an obstinate commitment to the spirit over the letter. Even apart from spirit or *Geist* in the technically Hegelian sense of the word, he always has an eye for the overall spirit or ethos of something against the specificity of its particular details. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, speculative thinking's activity of recollection, for Hegel, is reductive to the point of caricature, and often presents little if any interest in nuance or fidelity to any supposed original meaning or intention. It does not confine itself to specifics, but has before it the vivid intuition of the whole.¹ Historical phenomena and past stages of spirit are rendered not in their wealth of empirical minutiae, but 'sketched in silhouette' (*PhG* §28): Hegel's historiographical shapes of spirit do not represent past epochs merely 'as they were'—that is, 'to the letter'—but in broad and provocative outline. This does not suggest a wilful interpretative laziness or violence, but instead epitomises Hegel's phenomenological 'methodless method', which consists merely in following the path of any position to its disavowed extremes; in illuminating 'the pathological in the normal';² in distinguishing the ironic truth or 'spirit' of something from the false integrity of its 'letter'. It represents a firmly held conviction in the triviality, pedantry, and tyranny of literalisation. Hegel is thus a firm adherent to St Paul's dictum: 'the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life [*der Buchstabe tötet, aber der Geist macht lebendig*].'³

John Smith refers to this idea of 'the spirit and the letter' with reference to Hegel's philosophy throughout his book on the influence of classical rhetoric on Hegel's notion of philosophical representation, but only as a pun—exploiting the fact that the idiom 'the spirit and the letter' includes a key word from Hegel's philosophical vocabulary (that is, of course,

¹ This repeats Hegel's account of the standards of a good historian from his *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 183, referenced in the previous chapter.

² Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, p. 96.

³ 2 Corinthians/2 Korinther 3. 6.

‘spirit’).⁴ Smith does not, then, refer to the ubiquity of the phrase ‘the spirit and the letter’ in the discourse of nineteenth-century German philosophy (especially in the works of Fichte), as well as in Biblical hermeneutics; nor to its origins in Pauline Christianity; nor to Hegel’s explicit invocations of this phrase throughout his lectures and correspondence.

To take perhaps the most obvious example of such an invocation, in the introduction to his 1827 lectures on the philosophy of religion, Hegel attacks all interpretations of the Bible which begin from their own presuppositions. Such ‘argumentative thinking,’ he argues, ‘makes some assumption or other, and proceeds according to the relationships of the understanding [employed in the kind] of reflection that we have developed within us through our education, without any criticism of these relationships.’⁵ Incidentally, this argument could be used as yet another example of the insufficiency of Brandom’s *de re* hermeneutics for reading Hegel—a hermeneutics which proceeds ‘from the facts *as she* [the reader] *takes them to be*’, from ‘the inferential context provided by her own commitments’, as ‘the best any of us could do.’⁶ Hegel continues: the problem with such a hermeneutics is that it ‘involves assumptions, which themselves can be called in question.’ As such it operates ‘according to caprice and chance’ and not according to necessity—that is, it does not operate according to the necessity of the immanent movement of the dialectic.⁷ Such a capricious and subjective hermeneutics nonetheless frequently makes spurious claims to necessity when it comes to the Bible, on the merit that that which it interprets is supposedly infallible. In Hegel’s words, ‘the argumentative theology of the Christian church pretends nevertheless to possess a firm footing, asserting, “For us the firm footing is the Bible, it is the words of the Bible.”’ It is here that Hegel invokes St Paul’s maxim from 2 Corinthians 3. 6:

But against this one can quote the essential sense of the text, “the letter kills [*der Buchstabe tötet*],” etc. One does not take the words [of the Bible] as they stand, because what is understood by the biblical “words” is not words or letters as such but the spirit with which they are grasped. For we know historically that quite opposite

⁴ See John H. Smith, *The Spirit and Its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel’s Philosophy of ‘Bildung’* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁵ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 93.

⁶ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 101.

⁷ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 93.

dogmas have been derived from these words, that the most contrasting viewpoints have been elicited from the letter of the text because the spirit did not grasp it. In these instances appeal was to the letter, but the genuine ground is the spirit.⁸

The present chapter will elaborate this dialectic between the spirit and the letter as it is developed throughout Hegel's work. It is a dialectic which he frequently and anxiously returns to, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more obliquely. In what follows I offer first a chronological account of the dialectic's development across Hegel's work, drawing from both major works and letters [*Briefe*], from the period of his early theological writings to that of the *Science of Logic*, as well as from Kant and Fichte. I will then argue that Hegel inherited and developed his mature conception of the spirit and the letter from the theology and Biblical hermeneutics of Martin Luther, an inheritance and development which, in turn, is emblematic of this relationship between the spirit and its letter—that is, Hegel realised the spirit of Luther. This brings together the arguments developed in the previous chapters concerning the inherent irony of the dialectic and the recollective function of representation for speculative thinking, to further determine a definition of speculative reading and hermeneutics for literary theory.

I. Letters Against Letter-Bound Thinking

In an early letter to Schelling from the 16 April 1795, Hegel draws a connection between Biblical literalism and political despotism: 'Religion and politics have joined hands in the *same* underhanded game. The former has taught what despotism willed: contempt for the human race, its incapacity for any good whatsoever, its incapacity to be something on its own.' In this letter, Hegel argues that the German church has betrayed its Lutheran roots with a dogmatic insistence upon the letter of the Bible against its higher spiritual meaning, and the authority of the church against the autonomy of the believers. This religious prescriptivism, whereby the faithful are instructed on the meaning of scripture, rather than being granted with

⁸ Ibid, pp. 93-94. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, 3 vols., ed. by Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1993), I, 77.

the freedom to interpret it for themselves, has resulted in turn in a supposedly secularised culture of political submissiveness and critical apathy. However, Hegel continues: ‘With the spread of ideas as to how everything *ought* to be’—the emphasis is his—‘the indolence that marks people set in their ways, who always take everything the way it is, will disappear. [*Mit Verbreitung der Ideen, wie Alles sein soll, wird die Indolenz der gesetzten Leute, ewig alles zu nehmen, wie es ist, verschwinden*].’⁹ The word ‘*ought*’ here is playfully ironic. ‘[T]he spread of ideas as to how everything *ought* to be,’ for the young Hegel, consists in the spread of ideas that are freely and independently thought, without the imposition or mediation of an external authority—without the tyranny of any ‘ought’ at all. The category of ‘how everything ought to be’ has no presupposed content, but consists only in that which is self-determined, -actualised, and -legitimated. It is that which has developed within itself according to necessity, its content being its own legitimation. Of course, while the *letter* of the Kantian ‘ought’ (to which this is undoubtedly a reference) does not entail such imposition or authority but, on the contrary, the theoretical and practical freedom of the rational agent—who is commanded only that one ought to be better simply because one can be¹⁰—Hegel, as we shall later see, is concerned with exorcising Kantianism’s disavowed imperious *spirit*.

This argument regarding the letter and spirit of Christianity and their analogues in law and freedom finds a more developed articulation in Hegel’s early theological essays. Indeed, the titles of his most famous writings from this period correspond to the two sides of this dialectical coin: ‘The Positivity of the Christian Religion’ refers to the historical realisation of Christianity grounded in the external authority of rules imposed by clergy (i.e. a Christianity of the letter); while ‘The Spirit of Christianity’ refers to the religion’s higher truth, grounded in love, and realised only by the free spirit of the community of believers. In the first of these essays, he identifies ‘the fundamental error at the bottom of a church’s entire system’: ‘that it ignores the rights pertaining to every faculty of the human mind, in particular to the chief of them, reason. Once the church’s system ignores reason, it can be nothing save a system which

⁹ Hegel, *Letters*, p. 35. Translation slightly altered. G. W. F. Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, 4 vols., ed. by Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1969), I, 24.

¹⁰ In Kant’s own words: ‘For if the moral law commands that we *ought* to be better human beings now, it inescapably follows that we must be *capable* of being better human beings.’ *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. by Allen Wood and Georgie di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 70. ‘[T]he action must be possible under natural conditions if the ought is directed to it.’ *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 540.

despises man.’¹¹ In building a church grounded upon external authority—that is, in the letter of the law, as opposed to the free spirit of human reason—it undermines (‘contemns’ and ‘despises’) the being of humanity itself; and this finds its political corollary in humanity’s actual subjugation.

Hegel derives this term ‘positive’ from the jargon of jurisprudence. While positive *law* describes the set of manmade laws in any given legal or political community (as opposed to natural law, which constitutes the inherent laws of God, reason, or nature, which underly any historically or locally particular legal construction), positive *religion* refers disparagingly to any doctrinal religion whose normative power depends merely on the fact of its being established. In both cases, ‘positivity’ is that which relies on the dictates of authority and normativity, and not those of reason.

In both of these early theological writings, Hegel rehearses various tropes of Lutheran antisemitism by blaming this positive legalism on the insidious persistence of Christianity’s Jewish pre-history—‘the Jews’ being a people ‘overwhelmed by statutory commands which pedantically prescribed a rule for every casual action of daily life’, whereby ‘the holiest things, namely, the service of God and virtue, was ordered and compressed in dead formulas’, with life reduced to ‘a monkish preoccupation with petty, mechanical, spiritless, and trivial usages.’ While ‘the letter which kills’ is not explicitly mentioned here, Hegel finds everything in common between it and Judaism: its legalism, its pedantry, its prescription, its defilement of the sacred, its sacralising of the material. Both have a tendency towards the formulaic, the mechanistic, the trivial, and the dead.¹²

In turn, from religion and politics to philosophy, Hegel finds an analogue of Judaism’s letter-legalism in Kant. Hegel argues that the commandment to “‘Love God above everything and thy neighbour as thyself” was quite wrongly regarded by Kant as a “command requiring respect for a law which commands love.””¹³ In positing love as a duty commanded by law, a

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. by T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 143.

¹² However, even here, it must be mentioned that Hegel insists that this is a vulgarisation of Judaism, a Judaism betrayed by being followed ‘to the letter’, distinct from the true ‘Jewish spirit, which already was deeply mortified and embittered by the subjection of the state to a foreign power.’ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 213, with quotation from Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*. The edition that Knox quotes from is Immanuel Kant, *‘Critique of Practical Reason’ and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, trans. by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1923), pp. 175-176.

law requiring imposition and implying opposition, love loses any semblance of being love at all. In Kant's hands, love to the letter and of the letter becomes an unattainable ideal commanded by an unknowable superego that sadistically enjoys the subject's unremitting failure to meet its demands. While Kant appears to elevate ethics above any prescribed dogma, leaving the interpretation of the one categorical imperative to the autonomy of human reason, the unwitting truth of the Kantian 'ought' constitutes in fact the coldest, most abstract, and unknowable terrorism; a manifestation of the law at its most severe, extirpated of all sensuousness, particularity, and desire.

Adorno and Horkheimer would follow this logic to its end to find the ironic truth of Kant in Sade.¹⁴ Such readings epitomise Hegel's reading for the spirit against the letter. Once again, we can see that reading for the spirit against the letter does not necessarily suggest an interpretative violence or manipulation, but rather a resistance against the arrogated authority of the letter itself. As Comay writes: 'Hegel's critique of Kant is merciless and unremitting. [...] The accuracy of this reading is not the issue here: it's clumsy and can be mean-spirited, and is meant to appear so.'¹⁵

* * *

In another letter to Schelling, written a few months later on the 30th of August, Hegel is even more explicit in his favour for the spirit over the letter, directly invoking this Pauline distinction:

What I might write concerning your dissertation [*De Marcione*] would serve to bear witness to my joy over the free spirit of higher criticism which holds sway in it, a spirit uncorrupted—as I could only expect from you—by the venerability of names. It

¹⁴ As did Lacan, but with a difference. As Žižek identifies, while Adorno and Horkheimer identify the sadistic truth of Kant, Lacan offers a Kantian Sade. See Slavoj Žižek, 'Kant and Sade: The Ideal Couple', *Lacanian Ink*, 13 (1998), 12-25. For a more detailed comparison, see Rebecca Comay, "'Adorno avec Sade...'", *differences*, 17.1 (2006), 6-19. See also Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 63-93; and Jacques Lacan, 'Kant with Sade', in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 2006), pp. 645-668.

¹⁵ Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, p. 95.

is a spirit which keeps the whole in view, and which does not sacralise words. And I would also compliment your perspicacity and learnedness. I have at once found confirmation in it of a suspicion I have harboured for a long time, namely, that it would perhaps have done more credit to us and mankind if some heresy, no matter which, damned by councils and creeds, had risen to become the public system of belief, instead of the orthodox system maintaining the upper hand.¹⁶

In this passage, ‘names’ are singled out as epitomising the violence of ‘the letter’: irreducibly particular, synoptic, and arbitrary; given, but also alterable; they spuriously fix and determine their referent, and obstruct and corrupt any development and any vision of the bigger picture: of the spirit.¹⁷ Orthodoxy and heresy, for Hegel, therefore, must swap places: that which is orthodox is in fact the most profound heresy, while that which is heretical to orthodoxy, to the accepted opinion of ‘councils and creeds’, should be raised to ‘the public system of belief.’ Hegel’s point is not that we need a new orthodoxy to replace the old one, but rather that the only true orthodoxy (literally, ‘sound doctrine’) is the one that resists stasis absolutely, distinguishes its spirit from its letter, and moves beyond itself. That which *remains* true to orthodoxy, cannot be true at all. This is the case with Hegel’s philosophy, everywhere: in order to be what it is, spirit, the concept itself, must change.

It is not at all incidental, therefore, that the dissertation of Schelling’s which Hegel praises so much, his 1795 *De Marcione Paullinarum epistolarum emendatore*, is a study of Marcion of Sinope’s emendations of St Paul’s epistles—emendations which attempt to render the spirit of the epistles against their letter, and, even more crucially, epistles in which this spirit-letter distinction was first made.¹⁸ This preoccupation with religious emendation

¹⁶ Hegel, *Letters*, p. 43. Translation slightly altered for clarity.

¹⁷ As he would go on to write in his *Logic*, p. 91: ‘the individual name is something meaningless, in the sense that it does not express a universal, and for the same reason appears as something merely posited and arbitrary; just as proper names, too, can be arbitrarily assumed, given or also altered.’ While Hegel’s account of names is not just limited to proper names, this position can account in part for the near total absence of proper names in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

¹⁸ Indeed, the tension between faith and law which Marcion found throughout Paul’s epistles led him not only to emend scripture, but to abolish parts of it. For its dependency on law, Marcion regarded the Old Testament as the work of the devil. He also rejected all Gospels except Luke’s, purging it of all references to the Hebrew Bible. See John Barton, *A History of the Bible: The Book and Its Faiths* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), p. 182.

persists throughout Schelling's work. For example, as he would go on to say in a later lecture on the study of theology:

The earliest books on the history and doctrines of Christianity are merely a particular—and, moreover, imperfect—manifestation of it; its idea is not to be sought in these books whose value is to be measured by the extent to which they express this idea and are in consonance with it. Already for St. Paul, the proselytiser of the Gentiles, Christianity had become something different from what it was for its founder. We must not stop at any arbitrarily chosen point of time; we must have the whole of history and the world that has produced Christianity before our eyes.

One of the operations of the modern pseudo-enlightenment—which, with respect to Christianity, might rather be called a dis-enlightenment—is the attempt to 'restore' it, as the saying goes, to its 'original' meaning, to its early simplicity, in which form it is sometimes referred to as 'primitive' Christianity. One might have thought that Christian teachers would have been grateful to later ages for having extracted so much speculative matter from the meagre contents of the earliest religious books and for having drawn it up in a system. To be sure, it may be easier to talk about the scholastic chaos of the old dogmatism, to write popular treatises and to indulge in hairsplitting and playing with etymologies than to grasp the universal import of Christianity and its teachings.¹⁹

From its very inception, an essential component of Christianity is that it must move beyond itself; from Christ to Paul to Marcion (to Augustine to Luther to Hegel), the spirit of Christianity is always in a process of realisation, necessarily becoming something other than itself in order to be truly what it is. The dogmatic fixity of the letter, of origins, of orthodoxy, of law, 'kills'; the spirit, meanwhile, is always developing and moving forward, generating further truth from truth: it is the very life it gives.

¹⁹ F. W. J. Schelling, 'Lectures on the Method of Academic Study (1803)', trans. by E. S. Morgan, in *The Schelling Reader*, ed. by Benjamin Berger and Daniel Whistler (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 361-370 (p. 368).

Meanwhile—to return to the letter above—as Hegel immediately goes on to despair at Fichte’s enjoyment of his own celebrity, he despairs even more at the pedantry and sophistry of his ‘letter-bound’ readers:

Fichte grieves me. Beer glasses and swordplay of ancient student custom [*Landsväterdegen*] have withstood the power of his spirit. Perhaps he would have accomplished more had he left them to their coarseness and aimed merely at drawing to himself a small, quiet, select group. Yet his and Schiller’s treatment at the hands of would-be philosophers [*seinwollenden Philosophen*] is still shameful. My God, what letter-bound men [*Buchstabenmenschen*], what slaves, still number among them!²⁰

Fichte has been seduced by the archaic rituals and customs of university life, in spite of ‘the power of his spirit.’ But even worse, his spirit has been further depleted by so-called *Buchstabenmenschen*, those who have confined and bound themselves to the letter; supercilious pedants who nit-pick at the particular details and phraseology of Fichte’s works and those he draws upon (namely Kant’s *Critiques*), who do so at the expense of grasping their overall truth, their spirit.

This particular invocation of the spirit-letter distinction is not only used with reference to Fichte, but is itself Fichtean. From his 1794 lectures ‘Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy’ onwards, the spirit and the letter became one of the governing dichotomies of Fichte’s work. The following year he also wrote the ironically titled ‘Series of Letters concerning the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy’ (which he published in 1800). In particular, Fichte characterised his own philosophy, including his major 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, as a radicalisation of Kant’s, pushing the *Critiques* to extremes not legible when reading to the letter, but which nevertheless remain true to the Kantian spirit. In his own words: ‘He does Kant little *honour* who has not noticed in the whole contour and execution of his writing that he would impart to us not his *letter* but rather his *spirit*; and still less does he *thank* him.’²¹ For instance, while

²⁰ Hegel, *Letters*, p. 43; *Briefe*, I, 33.

²¹ J. G. Fichte, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, ed. by Allen Wood, trans. by Garrett Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 23.

Kant argues that knowledge is epistemically limited to phenomenal objects of consciousness, and can make no claims about things in-themselves, Fichte claims that Kant unwittingly overcomes these limits when he posits a causal relation between things in-themselves and their appearances. Similarly, while Kant argues that God and freedom can be established via practical reason, as a necessary condition of moral agency, Fichte, consistent with this spirit, claims that the same can be said of reality itself. Positioning himself as the philosopher most true to the Kantian spirit, Fichte reserves his most polemical ire for those Kantian dogmatists who defend the *Critiques* to the Kantian letter. Again, the most heretical Kantian is the most orthodox; the most orthodox Kantian, the most heretical. If the facts of consciousness and the faculties can ever be known to the letter, Fichte writes with bitter sarcasm, perhaps they ‘will finally be revealed by the anatomist’s knife and pickled in alcohol, enabling our descendants to mail each other pieces of well-preserved understanding or half a dozen categories?’²² Declining the dissected and pickled Kant on offer, Fichte was concerned with what could keep Kantianism actually alive and moving.²³

Jacobi is the missing figure here, between Kant and Fichte, for first recognising the ironic truth and unintended consequences of the Kantian philosophy—that is, its spirit against its letter. ‘The transcendental idealist must have the courage, therefore, to assert the strongest idealism that was ever professed, and not be afraid of the objection of speculative egoism, for it is impossible for him to pretend to stay within his system if he tries to repel from himself even just this last objection.’²⁴ For Jacobi, Kant’s transcendental idealism taken to its end necessitates a pure egoism: a total forgoing of the knowledge of any other minds or of external reality, which amounts to a denial of any thing in-itself. We can never know anything except our own minds. The key difference between Jacobi and Fichte is that Jacobi did not

²² J. G. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 329.

²³ For more, see Claude Piché, ‘The Letter is Particularly Lethal in the *Wissenschaftslehre*’, and Kien-how Goh, ‘The Ideality of Idealism: Fichte’s Battle against Dogmatic Kantianism’, both in *Fichte and Transcendental Philosophy*, ed. by Tom Rockmore and Daniel Breazeale (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 85-102, 128-142; and Matthew C. Altman, ‘The Letter and the Spirit: Kant’s Metaphysics and Fichte’s Epistemology’, in *The Palgrave Fichte Handbook*, ed. by Steven Hoeltzel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 421-442.

²⁴ Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, ‘David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism: A Dialogue—Preface and also Introduction to the Author’s Collected Philosophical Works’, in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel ‘Allwill’*, trans. by George di Giovanni (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), pp. 253-338 (p. 338).

endorse this position, but merely presented it as an epitome of the nonsensical places that unchecked speculation can take us, and, more precisely, the nonsensical core of Kant's critical philosophy. He distinguished the spirit from the letter, only to reject the both of them. For Jacobi, transcendental idealism represented the most '*absolute and unqualified ignorance*'.²⁵ Fichte, meanwhile, a true revolutionary, fully assumed what he took to be the consequences of the Kantian event, not (as Jacobi argued) the radical solipsism of the empirical 'I', but instead the self-positing of the absolute ego in the rational community.²⁶

Indeed, Kant himself passionately resented this revisionism, publishing a polemical open letter to ex-friends such as Fichte and fellow Kantian heretic Jakob Sigismund Beck—a letter in which he insists that the *Critique of Pure Reason* says exactly what it means to, that he should know best because he wrote it, and that to look for a 'spirit' of the work opposed to its 'letter' is not only unnecessary, but betrayal:

Since, finally, the reviewer [of Johann Gottlieb Buhle's *Entwurf der Transcendental-Philosophie*] maintains that the *Critique* is not to be taken *literally* with respect to what it teaches about sensibility and that, instead, anyone who wants to understand the *Critique* must first master the requisite (Beckian or Fichtean) *standpoint*, because the *Kantian* letter, just like the Aristotelian one, will kill the spirit, I therefore hereby declare that the *Critique* is to be understood according to the letter and is to be considered merely from the standpoint of common understanding, insofar as it has been sufficiently cultivated to such abstract investigations.

There is an Italian proverb: 'May God protect us only from our friends, we'll keep watch over our enemies ourselves.' There are indeed well-meaning friends who are well disposed toward us but get everything reversed (clumsy) in the choice of the means that favour our ends; but there are also deceptive, cunning so-called friends who aim for our ruin and yet use the language of well-wishing (*aliud lingua promptum, aliud pectore inclusum genere* [who say one thing and have in their hearts

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek has argued something similar: 'Fichte's reaction to Jacobi's criticism of Kant is paradigmatic of how a true philosopher proceeds, fearlessly running against the grain of the predominant common sense.' *Less Than Nothing*, p. 179. For another account of the relationship between Fichte and Jacobi see also, Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, ed. by David S. Pacini (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 111-112.

another]). Before these so-called friends and their carefully laid traps one cannot be too well guarded.²⁷

It is interesting to note that Kant's theorisation of authorship and authority here is markedly different to the modesty he displays in the Preface to the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he professes that 'it is appropriate for an author only to present the grounds, but not to judge about their effect on his judges.'²⁸ In this letter, by contrast, Kant seems eager to police his own reception.

To read such a letter as evidence of Fichte's error, however, is to miss the point. For Fichte, such bitter objections from Kant are not merely of little importance; in fact, and on the contrary, they represent the greatest triumph: the test of the truth of the Kantian spirit is that Kant himself should reject it. With his desperate 'I therefore hereby declare...' Kant positions himself as an exasperated parent lecturing a disobedient child, resorting to the infamous 'Because I say so!'—a declaration of unquestionable authority which already bears the mark of its own impotence. In doing so, Kant not only defends, but embodies the letter and, or of, the law. The mask of Kantianism slips, and laid bare is the disavowed tyranny of its categorical imperative, whose source of authority remains a mystery, unaddressed and unaddressable, a tautology of infinite regress: 'I therefore hereby declare because I declare because I declare...'. But also laid bare is the letter's impotence in the face of its spirit, a spirit untethered from its point of origin. Kant's defence of his letter against his spirit only serves to embolden the spirit's resolve. His own copernican revolution is thus no exception to the rule that, like Saturn, the revolution devours its children.

Fichte argues, therefore, that a freedom and spontaneity of interpretative, creative spirit is a prerequisite for the post-Kantian philosopher; they must demonstrate an aesthetic, even an artistic sensibility—a sensibility which is posited as spirit itself:

[T]he philosopher has to possess an aesthetic sense, i.e. "spirit", (for without this he will not succeed in raising himself to the transcendental viewpoint). This does not

²⁷ Qtd. in Peter Fenves, *Late Kant: Towards Another Law of the Earth* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 114-115.

²⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 102.

mean that the philosopher must necessarily be a poet or a fine writer or an accomplished orator, but he must be animated by the same spirit that, when cultivated, serves to develop one aesthetically. Without this spirit one will never make any headway in philosophy, but will trouble oneself with the letters of the same without penetrating its inner (spirit).²⁹

By discerning the distinction between the spirit and the letter within philosophy, Fichte thought, all prejudices and misunderstandings about the nature and function of philosophy may be overcome.³⁰ Crucially, he recognised that the spirit-letter distinction would have to be made with respect to his own philosophy—all future readers of Fichte would have to distinguish the spirit from his own letter, to render its universality from its particular form:

Previously [he writes of his *Wissenschaftslehre*] I feared that, for better or for worse, I would have to bequeath my system to some future age which might be able to understand it, and that I would be forced to hand it down in the dead letters of that particular form in which it first present itself to me. But now I can embrace the solid hope of gaining agreement and advice even from my own contemporaries—the hope of seeing my system assume a universal form through the shared labour of many persons and the hope of bequeathing it as something living within the spirit and the manner of thinking of my age.³¹

This steadfastness against the temptations of the letter, whose inertia threatens to anaesthetise thought, is the quality that Hegel most celebrates in Fichte, as he writes in his Preface to the essay on the *Difference Between Schelling's and Fichte's Systems of Philosophy*:

The Kantian philosophy needed to have its spirit distinguished from its letter, and to have its purely speculative principle lifted out of the remainder that belonged to, or could be used for, the arguments of reflection. In the principle of the deduction of the

²⁹ J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 474.

³⁰ Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, pp. 192-193.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

categories Kant's philosophy is authentic idealism; and it is this principle that Fichte extracted in a purer, stricter form and called the spirit of Kantian philosophy.³²

For Hegel, Fichte's discernment of the core truths of Kant's philosophy from its letter—conceived as its textual presentation, the apparent authorial intentions, and its status as a fixed or positive doctrine—was the kick start needed to move German philosophy after Kant beyond itself. Indeed, as we saw in the previous chapter, Hegel himself undertook a similar enterprise of distinguishing the Kantian spirit from its letter in his essay on *Faith and Knowledge*, by explicating what Kant could not admit: that the *a priori* synthesis is the pure image which expresses the identity and difference of the absolute, of ontology and theology. Therefore, while critics have noted Hegel's 'self-serving interpretation' of Fichte³³ (and while there are important differences between Hegel's and Fichte's conceptions of the spirit-letter distinction and its import for philosophy, which I demonstrate below), it has been overlooked that Hegel has developed this method of interpretation, in part, from Fichte himself.

* * *

As an aside (although in keeping with the chronological account), it is interesting to note that in the later 1807 *Phenomenology*, Catholicism, as much as Judaism, occupies the place of the letter and literalism against the free spirit of revealed religion. This may seem counterintuitive given Catholicism's affirmation of mystery as a doctrine of faith, its use of symbolism and ritual, its basis in a developing and deepening sacred tradition, and its corresponding rejection of the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (the sole infallible authority of the Bible for faith and practice). It would be easy to present Protestantism, on the contrary, with its belief in the absolute material sufficiency and perspicuity of scripture, as a more obviously letter-bound form of Christianity. (I will return to this latter point in more detail with my discussion of Hegel's Lutheranism, below.) However, in his account of the unhappy consciousness, Hegel finds medieval Catholicism to be the most stupidly literal form of Christianity precisely because of this mystery, rituality, and tradition.

³² Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's*, p. 79.

³³ See for example Altman, 'The Letter and the Spirit', p. 421.

The unhappy consciousness, of which Catholicism is an instance, is the subject who is painfully and unhappily aware of the gulf that separates it as a finite individual from ‘the unchangeable’ (i.e. God)—the unchangeable that, in its being-for-unhappy-consciousness ‘is only the *alien* essence passing sentence on it’ (*PhG* §210). In contrast with spirit’s preceding *dramatis persona* as the ataraxic sceptic, the happy relativist who finds a certain freedom in appearances, in ‘the multifarious shapes of life’ (*PhG* §202), the unhappy consciousness cannot bear this uncertainty, and therefore commits to a blind devotion to this alien being. It seeks communion with this God, through prayers, rituals, and music, whilst at the same time professing its impossibility.

[I]t only, so to speak, launches itself *in the direction* of thinking, and on that path it becomes *devotion* [*an das Denken hin und ist Andacht*]. As such, its thinking remains that of the shapeless roar of the pealing of bells, or that of a warm, all-suffusing vapor, or that of a musical thinking which does not amount to concepts, which themselves would be the sole, immanent, objective mode of thinking. (*PhG* §217)³⁴

As Stefania Achella has noted, Hegel’s wordplay in the German serves to underscore the links between prayer, commemoration, devotion, and the failure to think. ‘The unhappy consciousness, as pure consciousness, tries to move towards thought, “*an das Denken hin*,” without however succeeding because, in its attitude of devotion (*Andacht*), it appeals to commemoration (*Andenken*).’³⁵ Consciousness believes (or acts *as if* it believes) it can reconnect with the lost, alien object of its worship by exciting the senses—but this, Hegel writes, is ‘only the struggle over an endeavour that must end in defeat’ (*PhG* §217).

Paradoxically, this air of mystery and obscurity already betrays, for Hegel, a blind, desperate literalism. The Catholic’s chasing after relics of the dead, canonisation of the dead, and rote recitation of musical yet meaningless (at least to the reciter) syllables in Latin (the language of the dead), together demonstrate an ‘infinite *longing*’ for the immediate sense-certainty promised but always denied by the literal (*PhG* §217). In the words of Comay: ‘The

³⁴ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 168.

³⁵ Stefania Achella, ‘Memory and Fate: Recollection in Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion’, in *Hegel on Recollection*, pp. 179-198 (p. 187).

obsession with relics demonstrates the literalism of all melancholy; the thirst for tangible sensuous immediacy confirms the intractable remoteness of the object of desire.³⁶ While Hegel does not associate Catholicism, in this instance, with the legalism that he ascribes to Judaism, it represents what Rose might call an ‘aberrated mourning’ for such a legalism,³⁷ fetishistically replacing the terminally lost object with whatever relics of ‘morbid remembrance’ it can get its hands on.³⁸ It is a suspended, melancholic, and therefore insufficient *Erinnerung*. Thus, although a literalism without a letter, medieval Catholicism is not, for Hegel, any less literal-minded. On the contrary, through its desperate attempts to hide from itself the empty tomb by cluttering it with more and more *things*, it only succeeds in drawing attention to the structural emptiness that afflicts all letter-bound thinking. It yearns for ‘an object of immediate sense-certainty’ and ‘for that reason, it thus turns out only to be the kind of thing that has vanished. For consciousness, what can thus be for it at the present time can only be the *grave* of its life’ (*PhG* §217).³⁹

* * *

In a later letter to Niethammer, on the 23rd of October 1812, contemporaneous with the publication of the first part of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel repeats his position contra the letter, with more specific reference to textual criticism.

[P]hilology is becoming so erudite and is tending to mere word-learning. The Church Fathers, Luther, and the preachers of old quoted, interpreted, and manipulated the biblical texts with a freedom which, as regards historical scholarship, was for the most part devoid of scruples so long as they could thus read all the more instruction and edification into the texts. After the aesthetic quackery of *pleasingly to the point of*

³⁶ Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, p. 113.

³⁷ See for instance, Gillian Rose, ‘The comedy of Hegel and the *Trauerspiel* of modern philosophy’, in *Mourning Becomes the Law*, pp. 63-76, (pp. 64, 70-71). Rose develops this concept from Freud via Laurence A. Rickels, *Aberrations of Mourning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

³⁸ Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, p. 113.

³⁹ Hegel also critiques Catholicism and the Crusades in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (London: H. G. Bohn, 1857), p. 405-415.

charm [*pulcre, quam venuste*] of which we still hear significant echoes, the scholarship of text criticism and metrics is now the order of the day. I do not know if much of it has already gained ground with the personnel under your supervision. Yet the tendency no doubt awaits them, too, and in either case philosophy will go out rather empty handed.⁴⁰

Like Socrates, Hegel is wary about how the fixing and rote mechanical learning of words instils a dulling of thought.⁴¹ In the movement from frivolous and fanciful ‘aesthetic quackery’ to dry and solemn ‘text criticism’, one mistake has been replaced by another. Despite its earnest intentions for determining and cataloguing the original meanings of texts and words, philology limits and constrains itself by obsessing over such trivial details. Just as this treatment perverted the spirit of Fichte’s philosophy, so Hegel thinks it will pervert philosophy as a whole: ‘philosophy will go out rather empty handed.’ He repeats himself in another letter on the same point a few years later still, to Ludwig Döderlein: ‘Philology has presently entangled itself in such an erudite cobweb-spinning and labor of barren industry—so fixing itself into [a concern with] means, externalities, and their unravelling—that its true content withdraws ever further from the unlucky souls who become ensnared by it.’⁴² Reading to the letter is both boring and tyrannical. Erudition, usually thought of as a requisite feature of good scholarship, is revealed to be, at best, tedious academicism, and at worst, obstinate dogmatism. Reading for the spirit, on the other hand, is how true meaning and liberation can be derived. It is concerned instead with the ‘true content’ of a work, even if the positing of such a truth demands going beyond ‘the original’, and beyond every succeeding

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Letters*, p. 283.

⁴¹ See especially Plato, *Phaedrus*, ed. by Harvey Yunis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴² Hegel to Döderlein, 29 April 1817, *Letters*, p. 365.

interpretation. Indeed, Hegel explicitly admires the ‘freedom’ with which Luther ‘quoted, interpreted, and manipulated’ scripture.⁴³ I will return to this.

II. God is coal

To make reference to one final letter [*Briefe*]: we can say that i) the spirit and ii) the letter correspond to the i) speculative, and ii) the transcendental dialectic and the abstract, as schematically laid out in another letter to Niethammer on the topic of how to introduce school boys to philosophy.⁴⁴ (This rather formal communication was delivered together with the aforementioned, more personal letter, which makes reference to the interpretative practices of the ‘Church Fathers, and Luther’.) This letter is significant because it highlights the transition from Hegel’s early account of the spirit and the letter, by which the spirit is dialectical and self-actualising, but does not sit in any dialectical relation to its letter, to a dialectical consideration of this distinction itself, in which the spirit only arises from the contradictions within the letter, and in which the distinction between the spirit and the letter is one that is internal to the letter itself.

In teaching philosophy, one must start with abstractions, writes Hegel: ‘that which holds determinations fast and comes to know them in their fixed distinction.’⁴⁵ This is an education of instruction via rote mechanical learning, of taxonomies, of reading from the textbook or off the blackboard. It represents the acquisition of knowledge at its most basic

⁴³ It must be noted, however, and as I will elaborate below, this latter descriptor in particular —‘manipulated’—is not one Luther would have liked, believing his biblical translations, tracts, and sermons to be indelibly true to the spirit of God’s word, however deviant they may be from any historical-philological ‘letter’. For instance, when Luther receives complaints for translating Paul’s epistle to the Romans 3. 28 to say that ‘a person is justified without the works of law, but by faith alone’ (this word ‘alone [*sola*]’ does not appear in the original), he replies: ‘since your papist wishes to make such a fuss about the word ‘sola’ (‘alone’), go straight back to him and say, “Dr Martin Luther wishes to keep it as it is, and says that a papist and a donkey are one and the same.” *Sic volo, sic iubeo, sit pro ratione voluntas* [I desire it, I command it, may my will be reason enough]’. One can imagine Hegel responding with similarly disgruntled hubris at pedants bemoaning his misquotation of Schiller at the end of the *Phenomenology*, for instance. Martin Luther, *An Open Letter on Translating*, trans. by Howard Jones (Oxford: Taylor Institution Library, 2017), p. 11. (As Jones, ed. notes, the Latin is a quotation from the Roman satirist Juvenal, *Satire* VI, line 223.)

⁴⁴ For a different discussion of this letter, used to elucidate the differences between Hegel and Adorno, see Gillian Rose, ‘From Speculative to Dialectical Thinking — Hegel and Adorno’, in *Judaism and Modernity*, pp. 53-64.

⁴⁵ Hegel, *Letters*, p. 280.

and least philosophical: mere formulae, factoids, and quotations to be memorised and recited. This corresponds to the letter at its most stupid. It is the letter of the letter: a fixed designation of an apparently fixed referent, to be taken note of without further thought.

This finds its philosophical corollary in pre-Kantian dogmatism, and its political corollary in the esoteric enforcement of dictatorial prescription and bureaucratic control. Kant, in the Preface to the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, describes metaphysic's dogmatic slumber in terms of the political, but only metaphorically: 'In the beginning, under the administration of the **dogmatists**, her [metaphysic's] rule was **despotic**.'⁴⁶ Hegel, however, as we have seen throughout this chapter, perceived a literal correlation between the philosophical, religious, and political dogmatisms which 'join hands in the same underhanded game.'

'The dialectical,' Hegel continues, 'is the movement and confusion of such fixed determinateness; it is negative reason.'⁴⁷ This second stage represents an intermediate education, where questioning and critical thinking are encouraged, where the apparently fixed and established knowledge which was learnt prior is problematised. One must unlearn what has been learned by grasping the contingent and inherent limits of what has been internalised as a reified schema. As such: 'The stage is more difficult than the abstract; and is at once the stage in which the young, eager for material content and sustenance, are least interested.' Even the enthusiastic student, hungry for more knowledge, is resistant to having their existing knowledge made wrong.

This stage represents dialectical thinking in the strictly Kantian, transcendental sense. 'The Kantian antinomies [...] contain deep fundamentals of the antinomical [content] of reason,' Hegel writes.⁴⁸ At this point, we may appear to be moving beyond the triviality and tyranny of the letter of the law. Indeed, the transcendental dialectic proceeds from the abstract precisely in order to guard against such metaphysical dogmatism. Even the very word 'antimony' is derived from the Greek '*anti-nomos*': 'against the law'. For Hegel, however, in their stasis, these anti-laws which reveal and mark the contradictions within the laws themselves, only serve to establish a new law of the law's contradiction—that is, they

⁴⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 99.

⁴⁷ Hegel, *Letters*, p. 281.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 281.

enshrine the law's limits in and as the law itself. As such, Hegel argues, although '[t]he Kantian antinomies [...] contain deep fundamentals of the antinomical [content] of reason', these fundamentals 'lie concealed and are recognised in the antinomies so to speak unthinkingly and insufficiently in their truth. [...] [T]he antinomies really constitute all too poor a dialectic. Nothing beyond tortuous antitheses.' As Adorno and Horkheimer would go on to observe, Kant's critical philosophy, in accordance with its own principles, repeatedly condemns itself as dogmatic.⁴⁹ This is almost spelled out, albeit fondly, by Kant himself. The transcendental dialectic, he writes,

limits all our speculative claims merely to the field of possible experience, not by stale mockery at attempts that have so often failed, or by pious sighing over the limits of our reason, but by means of a complete determination of reason's boundaries according to secure principles, which with the greatest reliability fastens its *nihil ulterius* on those Pillars of Hercules that nature has erected, so that the voyage of our reason may proceed only as far as the continuous coastline of experience reaches, a coastline that we cannot leave without venturing out into a shoreless ocean, which, among always deceptive prospects, forces us in the end to abandon as hopeless all our troublesome and tedious efforts.⁵⁰

Once again: confined, rigid, unanswering, and unanswerable. The antinomical and prohibitive letter is inscribed: *nihil ulterius*, go no further, keep off the grass, and don't ask questions!

This stage finds its political corollary in bourgeois resignation. In the words of Lukács, transcendental critique is, with its legislation of unsurpassable limits, 'always, if not always consciously, an apologia for the existing order of things or at least the proof of their immutability' as 'eternal laws of nature.'⁵¹ Adorno, too, argues that it is Kant's antinomies of reason, keeping us in check, which make his philosophy 'a theodicy of bourgeois life'—one which expresses 'that refusal to make any significant statement on the crucial questions, and

⁴⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 66.

⁵⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 493.

⁵¹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 48.

instead to set up house in the finite world and explore it in every direction, as Goethe phrased it.⁵² In the words of Alain Badiou, finally:

Everything in him [Kant] exasperates me, above all his legalism—always asking *Quid juris?* or ‘Haven’t you crossed the limit?’ [...]. The critical machinery he set up has enduringly poisoned philosophy, while giving great succour to the Academy, which loves nothing more than to rap the knuckles of the overambitious—something for which the injunction ‘You do not have the right!’ is a constant boon. Kant is the inventor of the disastrous theme of our ‘finitude’. The solemn and sanctimonious declaration that we can have no knowledge of this or that always foreshadows some obscure devotion to the Master of the unknowable, the God of the religions or his placeholders: Being, Meaning, Life... They render impracticable all of Plato’s shining promises—this was the task of the obsessive from Königsberg, our first *professor*.⁵³

Each of these eviscerating critiques of Kant owes a debt to Hegel. To repeat: for Hegel, the fundamentals of the antinomical content of reason ‘are recognised in the antinomies so to speak unthinkingly and insufficiently in their truth’—and this is because Kant presupposes in advance that the antinomies of reason constitute threats to the very employment of reason, and so must be avoided. In order to avoid such threats, Kant assumes, reason must know and respect its limits and stick within them. This is emblematic, for Hegel, of Kant’s ‘tenderness for worldly things.’ For Kant, ‘[i]t is not supposed to be the worldly essence that bears the blemish of contradiction, but it is supposed to fall to thinking reason *alone*.’⁵⁴ In short, Kant refuses to entertain the possibility that antinomies are not just on the side of cognition or reason, but in ‘everything real. [...] In Kantian idealism, insofar as it concerns what belongs to reason, the deficiency is blamed on the thoughts, such that they are held to be insufficient.’⁵⁵ The antinomies of reason are thus recognised in Kant’s antinomies

⁵² Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant’s ‘Critique of Pure Reason’*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 6.

⁵³ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 535.

⁵⁴ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §48, p. 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92, §47.

insufficiently for the antinomies are recognised as antinomies as such—that is, to the letter, or else as that which fixes the letter in its place. This apparently paradoxical thought, antinomical in its own right, demonstrates the need for one final step.

‘The third form is the truly speculative form, i.e., knowledge of what is opposed in its very oneness, more precisely the knowledge that the opposites are in truth one. Only this speculative stage is truly philosophical. It is naturally the most difficult; it is the truth.’⁵⁶ The move between the (transcendental) dialectic and the speculative is nothing more than a parallax shift of perspective.⁵⁷ The antinomical content of reason, rather than being conceived of as mere limit, is instead conceived as productive of reason as such. For Hegel, ‘the antinomy occurs not only in the four specific objects taken from cosmology [as identified by Kant] but instead in *all* objects of all genera, in *all* representations, concepts, and ideas’⁵⁸—and this absolute antinomical content of reason does not limit reason, confining it to the picket-fenced coastline of experience, but drives it beyond itself into uncharted territories. To slightly alter Rose’s formulation: with Kant’s move from dogmatic metaphysics to transcendental idealism, hubris becomes humility; with Hegel’s move from the transcendental to the absolute, humility becomes motile configuration.⁵⁹ What Kant conceives of as the external limit of reason, marked by the thing in-itself, the thing beyond reason which cannot be grasped, is transposed by Hegel into the defining character of reason itself: an antinomy which is no longer a contradiction between two irreconcilable positively existing objects which are external to one another (be they reason and the in-itself, truth and error, the absolute and cognition, and so on), but a minimal contradiction which divides the one object from itself—that which is ‘opposed in its very oneness.’ In short, while the transcendental dialectic recognises and guards against the errors that truth is irrevocably prone to (but, as such, lays them down in law), the speculative dialectic begins by asking a different question: Should we not be concerned that the fear of error is already the error itself? (*PhG* §74).

⁵⁶ Hegel, *Letters.*, pp. 281-282.

⁵⁷ This use of the word ‘parallax’ is with reference to Žižek’s development of the term as a concept. See especially Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

⁵⁸ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §48, p. 94.

⁵⁹ ‘Philosophy’s “grey in grey” [...] would turn hubris not into humility but into motile configuration.’ Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. xi.

Hegel continues to complicate matters by explicating that the speculative ‘is itself present in twofold form’: ‘I. in its common form, where it is brought closer to representation, imagination, and the heart, as for example when one speaks of the universal self-moving life of nature molding itself in endless forms. [...] Law, self-consciousness, the practical in general already contain in and for themselves the principles or beginnings of the speculative.’ The speculative in this first ‘common form’ represents the content of the absolute at the level of picture-thinking [*Vorstellung*]: that which is a self-generating and self-moving unity, propelled by its own immanent contradictions, but without being elevated to or thought at the level of the concept. Hegel lists ‘[L]aw, self-consciousness, [and] the practical in general’, extending to art, religion, history, and culture. In each of these, the speculative is at work but not yet fully thought; merely brought ‘before representation.’

Hegel continues: ‘And of spirit and the spiritual there is, moreover, in truth not even a single nonspeculative word that can be said; for spirit is unity with itself in otherness. As a rule when one uses the words “soul”, “spirit”, or “God” one is speaking all the same only of stones and coals.’⁶⁰ — ‘[N]ot even a single nonspeculative word that can be said.’ As such, Hegel implies not a hard distinction between the letter and the spirit, but rather a speculative identity and non-identity between them: ‘spirit is unity with itself in otherness’—or, in this case, ‘spirit is unity with itself in the letter’. The proposition which follows is even more surprising, and may appear to contradict the first. One might expect Hegel to illustrate this by saying that even the lowliest words can communicate the most profound spiritual truths. But Hegel proposes, to the contrary, that when one uses what appear to be the most lofty and spiritual words—“soul”, “spirit”, or “God”—‘one is speaking all the same only of stones and coals.’ A crucial misunderstanding needs to be avoided here. Hegel does not mean that when one speaks of ‘God’ one is speaking equally of ‘coal’ due to some irreducible tendency of words to vulgarise their objects. After all, language itself is speculative: it is adequate to grasp and express the true. As Hegel writes in the *Logic*, on the speculative nature of language: ‘It can delight thought to come across such words, and to discover in naïve form, already in the lexicon as one word of opposite meanings, that union of opposites which is the

⁶⁰ Hegel, *Letters.*, p. 282.

result of speculation but to the understanding is nonsensical. Philosophy, therefore, stands in no need of special terminology.⁶¹

This is how we can reconcile these two apparently paratactic statements: that i) not even a single nonspeculative word can be said, and ii) when one speaks of God one is speaking of coal (or else, when one speaks of the soul one is speaking of a stone). For Hegel, God *is* coal (the soul *is* a stone). What can this mean? It is a proposition which can only be grasped by first going through the insufficiencies of abstraction and the transcendental dialectic. At the level of abstract thinking, the word ‘God’ seems perfectly suitable for its referent: a simple identity is assumed between the world and the words used to describe it. At the level of (transcendentally) dialectical thinking, meanwhile, this suitability is problematised: The word ‘God’ is just an arbitrary signifier, a dead letter which spuriously fixes its referent, totally insufficient for representing the divine majesty of the creator. And yet words are all we have. God-in-himself thus remains an unknowable mystery beyond phenomena, while the word ‘God’ is damned to be a ‘tortuous antithesis’—an idolatrous representation of God as external dead matter. One might expect here that the speculative stage will be introduced to finally overcome this difference and to reconcile this antithesis. But in an ironic twist, the speculative does not magically bring to life what is dead, but instead finds life in this death itself—that is, the antinomy is not reconciled, but viewed in its productive capacity. At the level of speculative thinking, then, the word ‘God’ represents divinity as inert, dead matter, but in doing so reveals that (speculatively) this is precisely what God is: unity with himself in otherness. This is manifested at its most extreme, for Hegel, with the incarnation of Christ: the eternal divine realised in history, locally, as a mortal human who eats, shits, cries, doubts, hurts, and dies. The speculative proposition that ‘God is coal’ or that ‘the soul is a stone’ echoes, therefore, the so-called ‘*infinite judgement*’ found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that ‘*spirit is a bone*’—‘the proposition which lies in the concept of reason’ as such, the judgement ‘that the self is a thing—the judgement which sublates itself’ (§§343-344). In each case, the radical proposition delivers an ironic punchline: the infinity of spirit is only to be found by first going through the apparently spiritless, external materiality of the letter. While Hegel insists upon the irreducible antinomies of the letter, wedded as it is to abstract and insufficiently dialectical thinking, he at the same time

⁶¹ Hegel, *Logic*, p. 12.

demonstrates that it is only by perceiving these antinomies in their positive and productive light that spiritual truth is realised. The word ‘God’ is always-already speculative, but it is only by perceiving it as such that we are moved from the thought of representation to the thought of the concept.

This defines the second form of the speculative:

2. What is philosophical in the form of the concept is exclusively what has been grasped conceptually, the speculative proceeding out of the dialectic. This can be only scantily present in the gymnasium. It will generally be apprehended only by a few, and to some extent one cannot even really know whether it is apprehended by them. To learn to think speculatively, which is specified in the directive as the chief purpose of preparatory philosophical instruction, is thus surely to be seen as the necessary goal. Preparation for it is first abstract thinking and then dialectical thinking, and beyond that consists in attaining representations of speculative content. Because gymnasium instruction is essentially preparatory, it can consist chiefly in working into such dimensions of philosophising.

The speculative proceeds out of the dialectic; the spirit proceeds out of the letter. It is this which differentiates Hegel’s inheritance of Paul’s spirit-letter distinction from Fichte’s. While Fichte conceives of the two as simply and definitely opposed, Hegel conceives of the two as speculatively opposed in their unity, with spirit only finding itself in the otherness of its letter. This corresponds to Hegel’s speculative identification of the truth as both subject and substance—opposite, but one. For Fichte, the spirit is always creative *ex nihilo*, and always stands over and against the vulgar empiricism of the letter. It is ‘what is otherwise called *productive imagination*.’ Unlike ‘*reproductive imagination*’ which ‘repeats something which was already present within empirical consciousness’, the productive imagination of spirit ‘does not repeat anything’; it is ‘completely creative—and it creates something from nothing.’⁶² As such, Fichte presents spirit as totally antinomian; totally opposed to any letter, law, or fixed schema. As he writes in a letter to Schiller: ‘spirit obtains its rules from within

⁶² Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, p. 193.

itself. It needs no law'; and this extends to philosophy, which 'is not at all a matter of the letter; it is pure spirit.'⁶³

Fichte's romantic conception of spirit—colourful, immediate, and novel—is ultimately anathema to Hegel's—that which paints grey in grey. For Hegel, the spirit creates nothing from nothing, it only recollects that which came before, and is as such only in its unity with its opposite—that is, the letter. However, this bright hue of Fichte's spirit betrays an artificiality. While it claims to surpass the antinomies of Kant's transcendental dialectic, it only succeeds in burying them. Fichte raises the question of the letter only to dismiss it all too quickly in favour of a spirit whose authority remains a mystery, a mere 'aesthetic sense' which dictates on a whim. For Hegel, on the other hand, there is no hard distinction to be drawn between the letter and the spirit; and while, following Paul, he maintains that the letter kills while the spirit gives life, he does so with the added, ironic qualification, that it is only by being killed by the former that the spirit can bring us, and itself, to life.

III. Kreuzestheologie und Kreuzeshermeneutik

The earlier comments from Hegel, catalogued above, may have appeared to represent to the extreme a caricature of the radical idealist, disregarding empirical reality, proclaiming it to be irrelevant in the face of philosophical truth. It is a position which may seem especially pernicious and irresponsible in our own so-called 'post-truth' era. However, in light of this later letter on the passage from the abstract, to the dialectical, to the speculative, we can see that this is not what Hegel's spirit-letter distinction amounts to. It is only through an initial naïve and self-defeating commitment to the letter—a 'mind-numbing literalism' to repeat from Comay and Ruda—that the ironic spiritual truth opens up.

Hegel's above references to biblical hermeneutics, Luther, and St Paul, are not incidental. In fact, I will contend that it is only by recovering this dialectic between the spirit and its letter as derived, not only from Fichte, but also from Hegel's engagement with Lutheran theology (and, in particular, from Luther's seminal interpretations of Paul's

⁶³ Ibid., p. 392. 27th June 1795, pp. 392-396. Fichte writes a scathing letter to Schiller upon the latter's rejection of his 'Letters Concerning the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy' for *Die Horen* (Schiller's new journal).

epistles), that we can adequately understand them. While the young Hegel does at times assume a somewhat vulgar Lutheranism, dogmatically rejecting the letter (of the law) in favour of the spirit (of love and freedom), the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* and after, through a more nuanced engagement with (and ultimate sublation of) Luther, develops a more complex and dialectical understanding of this distinction.

The question of the relation between the spirit and the letter is, for Hegel, a broad one. It pertains to truth and reality, to civil society and the state, to speculation and reflection, to reason and metaphysics, to life and death, to subject and substance, to the community of believers and the crucified Christ. It pertains to ethics and law; to the juridical opposition between free subjects and subjected beings. However, in what follows, I will be occupied primarily with the dialectic of spirit and letter as a question of reading and writing, as a question of how the ‘meaning’ of a work, discovered by reading, relates to its textual presentation—that is, I will read ‘the letter’, ‘literally’. Importantly, this is not to exclude the other valences of the spirit-letter dialectic listed above (truth and reality, ethics and law, etc.). The Pauline antithesis which posits that the letter kills while the spirit gives life was never only a question of hermeneutics. However, it will be demonstrated that an elaboration of this hermeneutics will in turn provide a heuristic through which these other dialectics might become legible; not least because it is only by understanding how the spirit of Hegel’s philosophy self-consciously relates to its textual presentation that we can know how to begin to read it at all.

Hegel’s dialectic of the spirit and its letter does not amount to a simple hierarchisation of the former over the latter, nor the opting for one at the total expense of the other. More particularly, he does not merely posit the spiritual truth of a text as determined by the whim of its reader. Instead, he demonstrates that it is only by tarrying with the impossible demand of the letter of the word, which strips its reader of all arrogance and self-righteousness, not only as debasement, but as a condition of grasping the true, that the spirit might be realised.

* * *

As already intimated, the missing figure in this passage from Kant and Fichte to Hegel is one from three hundred years prior: Martin Luther. It is with Luther too, that the question of the

spirit and the letter as a question both of law and of writing and hermeneutics comes into focus, by which we can read ‘the letter’ as both ‘the letter of the law’ and ‘the letter’ as such.

Throughout this thesis, I have suggested a radically atheistic conception of Hegel’s Christianity. The content of both the Biblical narrative (including the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ) and the Christian doctrine (including the Trinity, the immortality of the soul, sin, and redemption) are for Hegel symbolic. The revealed religion of Christianity is speculative and true in its conceptual content, but it assumes the fictional form of *Vorstellung*. Throughout his lectures, Hegel dismisses religiosity which remains preoccupied with the narrative and doctrinal elements of Christianity as unthinkingly dogmatic. He notes, however, that ‘[i]n recent theology very few of the dogmas of the earlier system of ecclesiastical confessions have survived or at least retained the importance previously attributed to them [...] faith in the Trinity for example, or the miracles in the Old and New Testaments, etc.’⁶⁴ While previously, philosophy has been burdened with the job of challenging such superstitions, theology’s declining interest in such positive doctrines means ‘philosophy can operate without restraint in regard to them.’⁶⁵ Crucially, of course, this does not mean that Christianity for Hegel can be dismissed wholesale, nor that it is just one of many possible religious illustrations of the absolute. Instead, while the positive doctrine of Christianity is dismissed as incidental, Christianity is still cast as the uniquely necessary mythical structure proximate to and even generative of Hegel’s own conception of the dialectic.

Hegel is concerned not with whether Christian doctrine is historically or empirically factual—for example, whether the miracles in the Bible actually happened, whether the Trinity is a foundational doctrine or a later addition, or even whether the historical figure of Christ was actually God incarnate who died for our sins. He is concerned instead with whether it is spiritually true. For example, regarding the Trinity, while Hegel concedes that it ‘may have entered Christian doctrine from the Alexandrian school, or from the Neoplatonists’—i.e. that it may not be an element of Christianity’s ‘original’ meaning—he emphasises that ‘it is still primarily immaterial where that doctrine came from. The question is solely whether it is true in and for itself.’⁶⁶ What can this mean? Surely it is fundamental to

⁶⁴ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 82-83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

the ‘truth’ of Christianity that Christ’s incarnation and death ‘actually happened’. Not so for Hegel: spiritual truth appeals not to the facts of the past in isolation, but takes history or spirit as a whole, and considers the continuing presence of the past and its legacies. To ask whether Christ’s incarnation and sacrifice are true, then, is to ask about their self-subsistent actuality today. In this sense, then, they are absolutely true, representing not an exception or deviation in history, but epitomising history’s essential logic, ‘the recollection and the Golgotha of absolute spirit, the actuality, the truth, the certainty of its throne’ (*PhG* §808), spirit’s kenotic self-sacrifice which is the condition of its continuation. “‘To sacrifice’ means to sublimate the natural,’ Hegel says. “‘Christ has died for all’”. This is not a single act but the eternal divine history.’⁶⁷ Christ’s incarnation and sacrifice should not be quibbled over as a matter of mere factual verification, as a singular historical event, for this overlooks its status as the realisation of the historical truth that the absolute is not an immutable being (i.e., God, or else, perhaps, a fixed letter), but always a being coming-to-be (spirit).

Despite his atheism, or even perhaps because of it, Hegel cannot be understood without reference to his Christianity. Graham Ward—albeit from an orthodox Christian perspective—gives this argument an explicitly teleological and biographical spin, arguing with reference to Hegel’s early theological essays that he ‘could only become a professional philosopher when he had found the place from which he could speak philosophically, and that place has much to do with developing a philosophical theology on the basis of a Logos Christology.’⁶⁸ In short, Hegel’s logic finds its basis, both biographically and structurally, in strictly theological reflections upon the incarnation, mediation, and reconciliation as found in the Christ narrative. As John Milbank identifies, it has tended to be Schleiermacher who is identified as the turning point in the development of modern theology—but only insofar as it was Schleiermacher who first defined theology as having a discrete domain and method, distinct from those of modern philosophy (just as he undialectically defined the letter against

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 469-470.

⁶⁸ Graham Ward, ‘How Hegel became a philosopher: Logos and the economy of logic’, *Critical Research on Religion*, 1.3 (2013), 270-292 (p. 271).

the spirit).⁶⁹ For Hegel, on the other hand, the two can never be so neatly divorced: ‘Philosophy is only explicating *itself* when it explicates religion, and when it explicates itself it is explicating religion. For the *thinking* spirit is what penetrates this object, the truth; it is thinking that enjoys the truth and purifies the subjective consciousness. Thus religion and philosophy coincide in one.’⁷⁰

It is at this point, however, that a qualification needs to be added: Hegel’s Christianity and Hegel’s Christ are explicitly Lutheran in character. Hegel trained to become a Lutheran pastor before turning to philosophy, but would continue to proudly refer to himself as a Lutheran. Indeed, far from being a departure, Hegel’s philosophical activities only served to bolster his Lutheran theology. For instance, after making incendiary remarks about the Catholic Eucharist in a lecture, remarks which caused him to be reported by a group of priests to the Ministry of Religious and Educational Affairs, Hegel defended himself without deference, only by stating simply that ‘I have [...] explained and expressed Luther’s teaching as true, and as recognised by philosophy as true.’⁷¹ Similarly, in a letter to the theologian August Tholuck (this time criticising his colleague’s ‘facile’ account of the early Church’s development of the doctrine of the Trinity as a spurious imposition of certain Platonic and Aristotelean ideas upon indeterminate passages of scripture), and with yet another proclamation of the spirit over the banality of the letter, Hegel writes:

Does not the sublime Christian knowledge of God as Triune merit respect of a wholly different order than comes from ascribing it merely to such an externally historical course? In your entire publication I have not been able to feel or find any trace of a native understanding of this doctrine. *I am a Lutheran, and through philosophy have been at once completely confirmed in Lutheranism.* I do not allow myself to be put off such a basic doctrine by externally historical modes of explanation. There is a higher

⁶⁹ John Milbank, ‘The theological critique of philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi’, in *Radical Orthodoxy: A new theology*, ed. by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 21-37, (p. 23). For Schleiermacher on the ‘dead letter’ of empiricism and worldly knowledge against the living spirit of religion, see, for example, Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. by Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 9.

⁷⁰ *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 78-79.

⁷¹ Hegel to von Altenstein, 3 April 1826, *Letters*, p. 531.

spirit in it than merely that of such human tradition. I detest seeing such things explained in the same manner as perhaps the descent and dissemination of silk, culture, cherries, smallpox, and the like.⁷²

To repeat from above, it is ‘primarily immaterial where that doctrine came from. The question is solely whether it is true in and for itself.’ The history of Christianity, for Hegel—and indeed history itself—is not some reconstruction of past events as a narrative of empirical facts, likened here to the spiritless abstractions of political economy or epidemiology, but is instead a living, motile configuration, whereby the present’s particular recollection of its past is what constitutes the present as such. ‘I am a Lutheran, and through philosophy have been completely confirmed in Lutheranism’: Hegel makes this proclamation first as a sign of his unwavering Lutheranism in the face of trivialising and pedantic opposition, but also as a suggestion that he finds the resources and justification for such criticism in Lutheranism itself. Hegel’s Lutheranism, therefore, while staunch, is not one to the letter; it does not express any fidelity to Lutheranism as a fixed doctrine, bound to the historically particular facts of the German Reformation and Luther’s life. ‘There is a higher spirit in it than that of such human tradition...’ It is instead a Lutheranism of the spirit, one which is concerned with the truth of Luther’s revolution in Hegel’s own time.

Hegel explicitly equates this truth—that is, the spirit of Lutheranism—with his own philosophical system. Indeed, in his ‘Address on the Tercentenary of the Submission of the Augsburg Confession’—the Augsburg Confession being the document written by Luther and others which was presented to the Holy Roman Emperor on 25 of June 1530 to formally declare their dissenting articles of faith—Hegel declares his own work as inaugurating the ‘second reformation.’ While asserting that ‘the things which our Luther set in motion were truly new’, he also claims that Luther was ‘deaf’ to the spiritual truth of, and what would truly follow from, his own novelty: ‘he left to others the immortal glory of defeating that tyranny which had usurped control of religion; [...] he was unable to perceive that God had *risen up*, and that it was *his* [i.e. Luther’s] *trumpet* which now proclaimed the wondrous

⁷² Hegel to Thulock, 3 July 1826, *ibid.*, p. 520. My emphasis.

sound of Christian freedom.’⁷³ The Christ event for Hegel refers, therefore, not only to the historical happenings in first-century Judea and its Biblical representations, but also to the Protestant (Lutheran) Reformation, and even his own philosophical system; and the transitions between each of these may be described as transformative attempts of the spirit of Christianity to distinguish itself from its letter. Again, this spirit is not some concealed ultimate meaning, distinct from and shining through its letter. It is instead nothing but this repetitive process of freeing itself from such fixed determinations and returning to itself—with the further qualification that what is returned to is produced only by this very process of return. To use some words from the *Logic*: the spirit of Christianity ‘comes to be only by being left behind [...]. For the presupposition of the turning back into itself—that from which essence arises, essence being only as this coming back—is only in the turning back itself.’⁷⁴

The history of interpretations of Paul’s spirit-letter distinction—that ‘the letter [*gramma*] kills, but the Spirit [*pneuma*] gives life’—presents a history of biblical interpretation itself. From Paul, to Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine of Hippo, Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, Luther, and Schleiermacher, each appeals to this antithesis to justify their methods of reading scripture.⁷⁵ Origen (and other Alexandrian followers), for instance, interpreted ‘the letter’ as the literal, surface meaning of scripture; ‘the spirit’ as the deeper, true meaning; and the relation between the two as one of allegory. Logical contradictions apparent on a literal reading of the text only betray the necessity for a different mode of reading by which these

⁷³ G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Address on the Tercentenary of the Submission of the Augsburg Confession (25 June 1830)’, in *Political Writings*, ed. by Laurence Dickey and H. B. Nisbet, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 186-196 (p. 189).

⁷⁴ Hegel, *Logic*, p. 348.

⁷⁵ I include Paul himself in this list for, as Regina Schwartz has stated, the ‘story of biblical interpretation begins in the Bible, where the prophets rework the exodus narratives, the New Testament interprets the “Old” (the construction of these categories was itself a major interpretative event), and Paul offers allusive remarks about the letter and the spirit that are to influence subsequent patristic principles of exegesis.’ Regina M. Schwartz, ‘Introduction: On Biblical Criticism’, in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. by Regina M. Schwartz (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 1-15 (p. 4). For a book length study of Paul’s *gramma-pneuma* distinction, both in its original context and its aftermaths in these and other thinkers, see Paul S. Fiddes and Günter Bader, eds, *The Spirit and the Letter: A Tradition and a Reversal* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). See also Keith D. Stanglin, *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

contradictions might be resolved. Apparent inaccuracies and discontinuities could be overcome by demonstrating how their allegorical meanings were consistent with the whole. This contrasts with the Antioch school of interpretation, which held that the truth of scripture was literal, not allegorical, and could be discerned through philological and historical investigation. Therefore, they interpreted the letter-spirit distinction not in terms of hermeneutics, of literal and spiritual meanings, but in terms of the law, along the lines of the Old and New Testaments. Augustine can be seen to represent a synthesis of the two, assuming Origen's allegorisation as a given, but emphasising the Antioch school's antinomianism:

For the Scripture phrase, 'the Letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life,' is not only to be understood to mean that any figurative expression, whose natural meaning is absurd, is not to be taken literally, but that we should feed our souls by spiritual understanding, considering the inner meaning which it represents; [...] [they] are not only to be understood that way, but also, and indeed chiefly, as it is spoken most plainly in another place, 'I should not have known evil desire unless the law had said thou shalt not covet.' [...] [T]he letter of the law, which teaches that we must not sin, kills, if the life-giving Spirit is not present.⁷⁶

In contrast to the life-giving spirit of the New Testament, both the legalism and the supposed literal meaning of the Old Testament was, for Augustine (and many other medieval exegetes), mere 'letter.' Both its historical particularity and its sadistic prohibitions (prohibitions which inaugurate their own transgression), mean it can only ever constitute an obstacle to salvation—unless, that is, it is understood spiritually in the light of the New.

Luther's letter-spirit distinction, meanwhile, maps onto his theology of law and gospel. Although inspired by Augustine, this theology does not present a simple opposition between the Old and New Testaments. Instead, 'law' refers to all demands made by God upon humanity (from the Ten Commandments to the Sermon on the Mount), while 'gospel' refers to the Good News that God freely justifies humanity '*allein durch den Glauben* [by faith

⁷⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, trans. by W. J. Sparrow Simpson (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1925), pp. 39-42.

alone]⁷⁷—despite their inevitable failure to keep to such demands. This doctrine of *sola fide* is the central tenet of the Lutheran Reformation. No amount of good works will save someone from damnation, only accepting God’s grace through faith.

A common misconception is that Luther thus proclaimed the law irrelevant, abolished by Christ’s sacrifice. Indeed, this is the position of many Lutherans, such as when the early Hegel in ‘The Spirit of Christianity’ describes Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 as the ‘extinction of duty and law in love.’⁷⁸ With Jesus, he writes, the law is made ‘superfluous.’⁷⁹ This misconception is epitomised most colourfully by Nietzsche’s psychological readings of Luther and Paul as analogous figures, both of whose interminable despair at their repeated sinning is spuriously overcome by a dismissal of the law itself: ‘The law was the cross to which he felt himself nailed: how he hated it! how he had to drag it along! how he sought about for a means of *destroying* it—and no longer to fulfil it!’ But then, ‘a liberating idea’: ‘henceforth history revolves around him! For from now on he is the teacher of the *destruction of the law!*’⁸⁰ According to Nietzsche, Pauline-Lutheran atonement consists in the abolition of guilt via the annihilation of that which causes guilt, namely, the law. This antinomianism is also the theme of Badiou’s reading of Paul, in which faith and works, grace and law, spirit and flesh, life and death, and universality and particularity, are sorted undialectically into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ camps. ‘The law,’ he writes, ‘is what gives life to desire. But in doing so, it constrains the subject so that he wants to follow only the path of death.’⁸¹ The problem with sin for Badiou’s Paul, then, is not that it breaks the law, but that it does not break *with* the law.

⁷⁷ Roemer 3. 28. My emphasis.

⁷⁸ Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, p. 223.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸¹ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 79. For a further discussion of the question of Paul and law in Badiou’s thought (compared and contrasted to Slavoj Žižek’s), see Adam Kotsko, ‘Politics and perversion: Situating Žižek’s Paul’, in *Žižek and Law*, ed. by Laurent de Sutter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 31-41, (pp. 31-33).

This, however, is not Luther's position. That the letter kills does not mean, for Luther, that it should be rejected in favour of an edifying spirit which guarantees salvation regardless of one's obedience to God's commands. On the contrary:

These then are the two works of God, praised many times in Scripture: he kills and gives life, he wounds and heals, he destroys and helps, he condemns and saves, he humbles and elevates, he disgraces and honours [...]. He does these works through these two offices, the first through the letter, the second through the Spirit. The letter does not allow anyone to stand before his wrath. The Spirit does not allow anyone to perish before his grace.⁸²

Only when one has been killed by the letter, spiritually crushed by the revelation of one's impotence in the face of it, can the grace of the spirit bring one to life. What has received less attention is how the distinctions between the letter and the spirit and law and gospel are, for Luther, always a matter of hermeneutics.⁸³ This is because the letter, for Luther, is never something imposed by an external ecclesiastical authority, but rather something which is read and spiritualised by the believer. The letters [*Buchstaben*] of the Bible represent the external manifestation of God's Word, the absolute authority, which bring life and grace only by being read.

Luther's most extensive treatment of 2 Corinthians 3. 6, in which the above quotation appears, is in a 1521 treatise against the German theologian Hieronymus Emser, brilliantly and sarcastically entitled *Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig—Including some Thoughts Regarding His Companion, the Fool Murner*. While Emser follows Origen and the tradition of medieval exegesis of understanding the relationship between the spirit and the letter as one of allegory, where the allegorical meaning reveals the spiritual truth of scripture against its more literal sense, Luther radically broke with this mode of interpretation. Throughout his ministry, he railed

⁸² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 79 vols. (St Louis, MO: Concordia; and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-), XXXIX: *Church and Ministry* I (1970), ed. by Eric W. Gritsch, p. 188.

⁸³ One exception is Randall C. Gleason, "Letter" and "Spirit" in Luther's Hermeneutics', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 157 (2000), 468-485. I owe my knowledge of Luther's treatment of 2 Corinthians 3. 6 to this article.

against the allegorisation of the Bible as a means for twisting the text to fit the interpreter's presuppositions or motives: 'Allegories are empty speculations, and as it were the scum of Holy Scripture'; 'Allegory is a sort of beautiful harlot, who proves herself specially seductive to idle men'; 'Allegories are awkward, absurd, invented, obsolete, loose rags.'⁸⁴

The interpretation of the spirit and the letter as pertaining to allegory, then, shows 'clearly that Origen, Jerome, Dionysus, and some others have erred and failed'; and Emser, drawing on this tradition, thus 'builds upon sand.'⁸⁵ For Luther, by contrast, the spirit and the letter, as a question of both law and hermeneutics, pertains to the authority of scripture, not allegorisation. While Emser's hermeneutics (and the entire post-Origen tradition of allegorisation) places scripture at the interpretative discretion of the reader, Luther presents the 'letter' as that which exercises its authority over the believer by stripping them of their arrogance, revealing their impotence, and thus by pointing them to their need for Christ. Only once that has happened can the spirit do what the mere letters of the text cannot, namely, to give the believer grace and the spiritual enablement to live righteously, and read speculatively. '[I]t is impossible,' he writes, 'for someone who does not first hear the law and let himself be killed by the letter, to hear the gospel and let the grace of the Spirit bring him to life. Grace is only given to those who long for it. Life is a help only to those who are dead, grace only to sin, the Spirit only to the letter. No one can have the one without the other.'⁸⁶ The impossible demand of the letter does indeed kill, but this death is the necessary condition for true life.

We can now clearly perceive Hegel's Lutheranism in this famous passage from the Preface to the *Phenomenology*: 'the life of spirit is not a life that is fearing death and austere saving itself from ruin; rather, it bears death calmly, and in death, it sustains itself. Spirit only wins its truth by finding its feet in absolute disruption' (*PhG* §32). Similarly, this finds its hermeneutical corollary in Hegel's development of the speculative reading of the proposition, theorised in the first chapter of this thesis, in which the linear transition between subject and predicate, though suggested by the statement and its propositional form, encounters resistance. Hegel's reader is repeatedly confronted with the impossibility of

⁸⁴ Qtd. in Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1886), pp. 342-353.

⁸⁵ *Luther's Works*, XXXIX, 175; a reference to Matthew 7. 26.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

following him to the letter, but it is only by doing so, and by being forced to reread it differently, that the speculative (i.e. spiritual) meaning is realised. In terms of the 1812 letter above, it is only by first tarrying with the impossible claim that ‘God is a coal’ that its radical truth can be realised. Alan M. Olson writes of Hegel’s Christology: ‘While the Incarnation is the concrete, representational symbol of the overcoming, it is Spirit that makes it actual and Spirit alone that makes it intelligible in the spiritual community.’⁸⁷ Similarly, while the letter is the concrete representation of Hegel’s philosophy, its corpus, it is its recollection via reading that makes it intelligible, actual, and *alive*—that makes it spirit. Mere philological or textual criticism, reading to the letter and only the letter, leaves the dead letter dead. In the words of Luther: ‘It remains letter, and does not yield more than that.’⁸⁸ This does not mean, however, that one should ignore the letter for some presupposed overall conception, the general ‘spirit’—rather one should go through the hardness, the impossible demand of the letter, as it is here that the real spirit opens up.

This spirit which arises from the impossible demand of the letter represents a strange kind of freedom—not the typical Aristotelian conception of freedom as choice or capacity, but on the contrary, a conception of freedom as necessity, as fate. As it pertains to reading, the impossible demand of the letter does not give us the freedom to interpret the text arbitrarily, but instead presents us with the freedom of speculative reading, which consists only in absolute submission to the irony of the dialectic. As Frank Ruda puts it, apropos Luther: ‘The one who is truly free does not identify freedom with a given capacity, but instead experiences the despair that there is nothing we *can* do.’⁸⁹ This is the ‘despair’—the *path* of despair—which is also the freedom which comes from following the dialectic to its apogee, to realise its devastating ironic truth which cannot *but* be accepted. What this devastating ironic truth is, for us, here, now, will be spelled out at this dissertation’s conclusion.

⁸⁷ Alan M. Olson, *Hegel and the Spirit: Philosophy as Pneumatology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 127.

⁸⁸ *Luther’s Works*, XXXIX, 182.

⁸⁹ Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for Contemporary Fatalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), p. 15. This is the crux of Luther’s debate with Erasmus of Rotterdam on the question of free choice. For Luther, the experience of freedom is analogous to Paul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus. As Ruda puts it in *ibid.*, ‘I experience faith only when I encounter God, and I am thus forced to renew myself.’ See also E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, eds, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1996).

Karl Barth describes Luther's desire to communicate the true meaning of scripture by contrasting the literalist 'historical reconstruction of the text' with Luther's 'genuine understanding and interpretation', the 'creative energy which Luther exercised with intuitive certainty in his exegesis.' Luther's scriptural exegeses and acts of translation have immanent fidelity to scripture precisely because they go through and then beyond them. They break down 'the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first' so that when Paul spoke 'the man of the sixteenth century hears.' Luther translates the Bible, and in doing so re-collects it. 'The conversation between the original record and the reader'—and, perhaps, 'the letter' and 'the spirit'—'moves around the subject matter, until a distinction between today and yesterday becomes impossible.'⁹⁰ This is the brilliance that Hegel praises too. 'Luther made the Bible speak German,' he writes in a letter, '—the greatest gift that can be made to a people. For a people remains barbarian and does not view what is excellent within the range of its acquaintance as its own true property so long as it does not come to know it in its own language.'⁹¹ As long as a religion remains in a foreign language of antiquity, presented as rules and regulations by an external, hierarchical, ecclesiastical authority, or else wedded to some 'original' meaning, it remains alien; it remains positive religion or else mere historical curiosity. In both cases: mere letter. Thus Luther: in translating the Bible, we 'mustn't consult the Latin text about how to speak German, as these donkeys do, but we must consult the mother at home, children in the street, and the ordinary man in the marketplace, watch them mouth their words, and translate accordingly.'⁹² Hegel remarks in another lecture: 'The Bible has [the] form of positivity, yet according to one of its own sayings, "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."' It is a question, then, Hegel continues, 'as to which spirit we bring in, which spirit gives life to the positive.' Not merely the spirit of the individual reader, in which case spiritual truth is either dictated as positive doctrine by the author, or reduced *à la* Fichte to human autonomy or genius. Instead, we must bring in the spirit as such: the motile and living truth of history which manifests itself in the consummation of its development.

⁹⁰ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 6-7. See also Gleason, "'Letter' and 'Spirit'", 485.

⁹¹ Hegel to Voss, *Letters*, p. 107.

⁹² Luther, *Open Letter on Translating*, p. 17.

This brilliance of Luther is also one Hegel aspires to. ‘I may say of my endeavour,’ he continues in the above letter, ‘that I wish to try to teach philosophy to speak German.’⁹³ Again, ‘German’ should not be read here as an expression of nationalism, but rather, like Luther, as a desire to make philosophy speak in its own particular historical moment, or spirit. To echo Hegel’s concluding words in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, this marks ‘the absolute freedom of the idea’: the point at which it ‘resolves [entschließt] to release freely from itself the moment of its particularity.’⁹⁴ In this way, Hegel’s entire philosophical system can be conceived as a recollection, a rereading, even a translation of the history and totality of philosophy itself for his own time. Hegel proclaims in the *Philosophy of Right*: ‘[P]hilosophy, [...] is its own time comprehended in thoughts.’⁹⁵ In light of what has been argued in this chapter, we can make a similarly formulated proposition: Philosophy is its own history comprehended for its own time. In order to have immanent fidelity to Hegel’s intention, we are required to make philosophy speak our own language, for our own time. We must tarry with the letter of Hegel’s philosophy in order to realise its living spirit today.

⁹³ Hegel to Voss, *Letters*, p. 107.

⁹⁴ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §244, p. 303; *Werke*, VIII, 393

⁹⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 21.

APRÈS LA LETTRE

Hegel in a postcritical era

To recognise the rose in the cross of the present
is to preserve subjective freedom in the realm of the substantial.¹

I. 'Hegel Contra Sociology'

After three chapters of reading Hegel, it is now time to read *with* Hegel; it is time to paint grey on grey, and recollect a shape of life that has grown old. 'This essay is an attempt to retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for social theory.'² So begins *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981) by Gillian Rose. Despite being one of the most important and original contributions to the tradition of critical theory since the heyday of the Frankfurt School, its significance has not yet been fully realised. This neglect can largely be attributed to the density of the presentation of its argument. It is hard to disagree with Peter Osborne: *Hegel Contra Sociology* is 'unashamedly, and sadly, an extremely difficult book.'³ And yet, in spite of this difficulty, it is one of the aims of this final concluding chapter to demonstrate that *Hegel Contra Sociology* both anticipates and provides essential insight into ongoing debates about the limits of critique in literary studies. By recovering and developing Rose's argument, it makes the case that it is only by turning to Hegel's critique of Kant's conception of critique—and in particular Kant's institution of the hard distinctions between subject and object, and between preconditions and conditioned—that we might move beyond the antinomies of literary theory and its critical mode. It also argues that this might, in turn, open up the possibility for a recollection of critical thinking and reading in the moment of their crisis. — This grey on grey brings together the work undertaken in the previous chapters to more

¹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 22. The full quotation reads: 'To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to delight in the present—this rational insight is the *reconciliation* with actuality which philosophy grants to those who have received the inner call *to comprehend*, to preserve their subjective freedom in the realm of the substantial, and at the same time to stand with their subjective freedom not in a particular and contingent situation, but in what has being in and for itself.'

² Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 1.

³ Peter Osborne, 'Hegelian Phenomenology and the Critique of Reason and Society', *Radical Philosophy*, 32 (1982), 8-15.

directly address a way in which the spirit of Hegel might be realised in literary theory today—in which the ironic truth of Hegel might be recollected.

Rose's argument in *Hegel Contra Sociology* is that social theory, from Durkheim to Weber, through Simmel, Adorno, Lukács, Althusser, and Habermas, unwittingly rests upon an identifiably neo-Kantian framework, and has thus failed to take account of Hegel's critique and surpassing of Kant's transcendental idealism. In particular, she argues that it is only by realising the sociopolitical significance of Hegel's idea of 'speculative experience' that we might be up to the task of comprehending, criticising, and therefore transforming the social and political relations that determine us; that we might develop a critical theory (or a 'critical Marxism'⁴ as Rose calls it) that is worthy of its name.

Sociology aims to reveal the conditions of possibility of any given social phenomena with the assumption that the latter lack the inclination or self-reflective capacity to account for such preconditions. Such an activity of sociological reason is called (with an adaptation of a term used by Kant) 'quasi-transcendental'—*quasi-transcendental* because, while it considers its object in light of what it presupposes (like Kant's transcendental idealism), this presupposition—that is, society—is posited as external to the mind. In Rose's words: while the quasi-transcendental 'is an *a priori*, that is, not empirical, for it is the basis of the possibility of experience', as a 'sociological' *a priori*, it 'is, *ex hypothesi*, external to the mind, and hence appears to acquire the status of a natural object or cause.'⁵ While many of these sociologies 'reject Kantian critical philosophy in fundamental respects', and while some are even 'motivated by the desire to break out of the constrictions of the neo-Kantian paradigm,'⁶ Rose demonstrates how nevertheless they unwittingly remain within it.

In particular, Rose picks out the work of the philosopher Rudolf Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), arguing that in spite of being 'now unknown,'⁷ his reformulation of some of Kant's ideas provided the intellectual basis for the subsequent development of social theory. Lotze's innovation lies in 'his strict separation of the logical question of validity from the epistemological question of cognition'—of the question of logical truth from the question of

⁴ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 235.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6. This is perhaps an overstatement. See note 10 below.

experience, representation, and appearance—which he supplements with the third question of human significance and meaning, or what he calls ‘value.’⁸ In his own words: ‘All our analysis of the course of the world ends in leading our thought back to a consciousness of necessarily valid truths, our perceptions to the intuition of immediately given facts of reality, [and] our conscience to the recognition of an absolute standard of all determinations of value.’⁹ Rose argues that this distinction between values and validity in particular, recasting the Kantian dichotomy between cognition and its object, influenced the subsequent development of post-Kantian philosophy: ‘On the basis of Lotze’s thought, critical, transcendental philosophy became transformed into the neo-Kantian paradigm of *Geltung* and *Werte*, validity and values.’¹⁰ This is the case, Rose argues, even for apparently diametrically opposed ‘schools’ of neo-Kantianism:

The Marburg School gave the question of validity priority over the question of values; the Heidelberg School gave the question of values priority over the question of validity. But in both cases the transformation of Kant’s critical method into a logic of validity (*Geltungslogik*), a general method, excluded any enquiry into empirical reality. Objectification became the correlate of pure logic.¹¹

In turn, this influenced the subsequent development of social theory: ‘The development of the idea of a scientific sociology was inseparable from the transformation of transcendental logic

⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

⁹ Qtd. with an altered translation in *ibid.*, p. 9, from Rudolf Hermann Lotze, *Microcosmos: An Essay Concerning Man and His Relation to the World*, 2 vols., trans. by Elizabeth Hamilton and E. E. Constance Jones (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1894), II, 575.

¹⁰ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 9. As David Sullivan notes, Heidegger was the first philosopher to identify the extent of Lotze’s influence on neo-Kantianism (and also Husserlian phenomenology). With his introduction of the terminology of validity and values (Heidegger argues), Lotze established the prejudice that philosophy should aspire to be a pure and general logic, ‘an ideal network of propositions’, distinct from ‘the empirical reality of things.’ Martin Heidegger, *Logic: The Quest of Truth*, trans. by Thomas Sheehan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 50. See David Sullivan, ‘Hermann Lotze’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/hermann-lotze/>>. Lotze’s influence on neo-Kantianism is also discussed in Thomas E. Willey, *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), pp. 40-57; and Frederick C. Beiser, *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism: 1796-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 192-196.

¹¹ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 10.

into *Geltungslogik*, the paradigm of validity and values.’¹² Again, this is in spite of the differences between rival social theories. On the one hand, ‘Durkheim,’ to take one paradigmatic example, ‘granted the question of validity priority over the question of values, and made validity into the sociological foundation of values.’¹³ He argued that the categories of the understanding are constituted and conditioned by ‘society’—a quasi-transcendental, sociological *a priori*. ‘Weber,’ on the other, ‘granted the question of values priority over the question of validity and made values into the sociological foundation of validity’—that is, contra Durkheim, Weber argued that it is values which confer and ground validity.¹⁴ Within the realm of sociological reason, to prioritise validity is to examine how society conditions us—it is to examine the objective (i.e. societal) determination of our experience and knowledge; while to prioritise value is to examine how we might in turn condition or mediate our society—it is to explore the subjective mediation of that objectivity. And yet, in spite of these apparently diametrically opposed approaches, each remain within the neo-Kantian paradigm insofar as each posit this dichotomous relationship between validity and values, and between preconditions and conditioned.

In this sense, Rose argues—and following Hegel’s critique of Kant—neither can grasp the precise relationship between these spheres: the ‘status of the relation between the sociological precondition and the conditioned becomes [...] ambiguous in all sociological quasitranscendental arguments.’¹⁵ Objective determinations may be gestured towards, and subjective mediations may be investigated, but they cannot be grasped in their unity—that is, objective determinations cannot be grasped in terms of the subjective mediations through which they are experienced, represented, misrecognised, reproduced, and transformed. While such a sociology may be capable of ‘provid[ing] an exposition of the abstract experience we are already living as immediate experience’¹⁶—of explicating the reified logic of social relations *as reified*—it is unable to account for the ways in which these social relations are experienced. As ‘pure’ theory, it is rendered radically politically impotent: ‘In the name of a

¹² Ibid., p. 14.

¹³ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gillian Rose, ‘Does Marx Have a Method?’ (unpublished lecture recording, University of Sussex, 1987).

neutral method which seeks solely to justify knowledge, transcendental philosophy justifies infinite ignorance not finite knowledge.’¹⁷

For example, most Marxist sociologies, according to Rose, fail to adequately critique capitalism because they fail to grasp it phenomenologically in terms of the subjectivity that capitalism both determines and is mediated by. For such sociologies, ‘[s]ubjects are merely “bearers” of economic functions, such as, “capitalist” and “worker”, and the remainder of human personality is *directly* reduced to this defining function.’¹⁸ In the name of a critique of capitalism, of ascertaining and describing its logic and limits, human subjectivity and its possibilities are reduced to these abstract categories. By assuming an abstract rather than a speculative identity between objective determinations and subjective mediations—‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ in Marxian jargon—and by positing that consciousness and its activities (such as religion and art) can only serve to legitimise prevailing social relations, these Marxisms render any effective critique impossible.

It is important to emphasise that neither Hegel nor Rose are under any illusions that the critic can simply step out of such quasi-transcendental frames. Nor are they recommending a wholesale rejection of the theory and practice of critique. What Hegel does think, though, is that despite their apparent inescapability, the relation between ourselves and such determining constraints might be comprehended through a radically immanent, phenomenological, and therefore speculative mode of critique, in which objective social determinations and their subjective mediations (or validities and values) are taken, not as a dichotomy, but as one. This is the key, Rose argues, to Hegel’s speculative proposition: ‘In general religion and the foundation of the state is [*sic*] one and the same thing; they are identical in and for themselves.’¹⁹ Objective determinations (such as the state) and their subjective mediations (such as religion) must be explicated and comprehended in their identity—but only in order to recursively experience and discover the non-identity which that initial abstract identity obscures. Objective determinations and their subjective mediations *are* identical, but speculatively: opposed in their unity.

¹⁷ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, pp. 47-48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

¹⁹ Qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 51. Rose’s translation.

This different kind of [speculative] identity cannot be pre-judged, that is, it cannot be justified in a transcendental sense, and it cannot be stated in a proposition of the kind to be eschewed. This different kind of identity must be understood as a result to be achieved.

From this perspective the ‘subject’ is not fixed, nor the predicates accidental: they acquire their meaning in a series of relations to each other. Only when the lack of identity between subject and predicate has been experienced, can their identity be grasped.²⁰

This is emblematic of the intrinsic irony of speculative experience as developed in the first chapter of this thesis. The speculative identity and lack of identity between subject and predicate, between state and religion, between objective determinations and their subjective mediations, can only be recognised by first being misrecognised. We must ‘learn by experience that we meant something other than we meant to mean; and this correction of our meaning compels our knowing to go back to the proposition, and understand it in some other way’ (*PhG* §63). To experience this different kind of identity is to transgress the limit between the implicitly Kantian dichotomy of our knowledge, action, and experience, and their conditions of possibility. Put differently: it is to keep alive the possibility of what our social and political determination deems impossible. It is only through this ironic, speculative experience of how substance is *misrepresented* as subject—that is, without reducing them to an abstract identity—that what Marx calls the ‘coarsely sensuous objectivity’ of life might be kept alive amongst the dominion of capital’s universal powers of abstraction.²¹ This is what it means, to use another Hegelian phrase, to recognise the rose in the cross of the present: to preserve subjective freedom in the realm of the substantial.²²

As Fredric Jameson reminds us, therefore, Hegel’s phenomenology is an innovation first in form, not content.²³ Rather than presupposing any hard distinction between the subject

²⁰ Ibid., p. 52.

²¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 138.

²² Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 22.

²³ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 306.

engaged in critique and the social reality which it seeks to criticise, Hegelian phenomenology is a form of metacritical activity which immanently presents preconditions and their subjective mediations through a process of naïve and unassuming self-reflection, in which the critique of phenomena and the discovery of their quasi-transcendental determinations are inseparable. Such a phenomenology, as the name might suggest, is explicitly experiential. Due to the immanence of its presentation, the reading consciousness of a phenomenology progressively discovers that it is always already implicated in, determined by, and misapprehensive of what it seeks to grasp. Not only does the reader find themselves to be reading a kind of *Bildungsroman* (although, as suggested in the first chapter, this designation cannot be made so comfortably), they also find that they are its protagonist. However, by ‘demonstrat[ing] the domination of abstraction,’ it therefore ‘urges *us* to transform ethical life by recognising the law of its determination.’²⁴ That is, Hegel’s critique does not merely critique knowledge by exposing its conditions of possibility, it makes possible an experience of the total ascendancy of that which we are determined by, an experience without which it cannot be overthrown. Perhaps, then, *Hegel Contra Sociology* is ‘unashamedly, and sadly, an extremely difficult book,’ not only in the generic sense that its argument is complex and its style abstruse, but in the more radical sense that it provides us with the means by which we might experience the inimicality of social and political reality to life.

It is this speculative experience that Rose seeks to retrieve for social theory and Marxism in *Hegel Contra Sociology*, her overlooked masterwork.

II. *Hegel Contra Literary Theory*

Following Rose, this chapter is an attempt—or at least the *Grundriß* of an attempt—to retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for literary theory. As stated in the Introduction of this dissertation, the ‘foundation’ or ‘birth’ of what can be sweepingly referred to as ‘theory’ has often and increasingly been presented in terms of Hegel and a host of conceptual

²⁴ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 199. Rose argues that this is the trace of a necessary yet disavowed imperative or *Sollen* of Hegel’s thought. As ‘philosophy is the concept of real recognition’ yet ‘arises in a society where real recognition has not been achieved,’ philosophy necessarily ‘reinforces the primacy of the concept, and falls into the terms of a dichotomy which it seeks to transform. It thus contains an abstract imperative, a moment of *Sollen*.’ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

abstractions that he is said to have prefigured for it. In the words of M. A. R. Habib: ‘It was Hegel who first offered a comprehensive critique of the notions of identity and essence; it was Hegel who showed that both subjectivity and objectivity are constructions; that we achieve humanity only through mutual recognition; and it was Hegel who pioneered the insights that the linguistic sign is “arbitrary,” and that “reason” is historical and social in its very nature.’²⁵ In spite of its variety, in spite of its various ‘schools’ as conventionally and pedagogically identified—from Marxism, to feminism, structuralism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, posthumanism, queer theory, new historicism, and so on—and even when explicitly distanced from him, ‘theory’ is said to rest upon: Hegel. In what follows, however, I will argue that what is often referred to as ‘theory’ rests, like sociology, upon an implicitly Kantian, and therefore pre-Hegelian, paradigm. The very idea of theoretical or critical reading *of* a text—that is, in the application of the former (theory) as a method, an arsenal of concepts, or a reified system of tropes to the latter (text), in order to get behind it to find its ‘true’ meaning (or else the impossibility of such a thing)—presupposes a Kantian, transcendental structure, because it assumes the text as a given and then seeks to reveal and examine its conditions of possibility. Yet, as Rose’s *Hegel Contra Sociology* has shown, ‘Hegel’s thought anticipates and criticises the whole neo-Kantian endeavour, its methodologism and its moralism, and consists of a wholly different mode of [...] analysis.’²⁶

As already intimated, apparently similar interventions have been made in recent years by practitioners of so-called ‘postcritique’, with their professed wariness towards all ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.²⁷ Indeed, the posited truth of all ‘false consciousness’, which a hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to disclose, might be understood as a quasi-transcendental: class struggle, will to power, and sexual repression are for Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (respectively) the objective determinations which underly all hitherto existing social and subjective phenomena; they constitute the condition and horizon of all that can be thought and acted. Likewise, just as Hegelian speculative experience allows us to comprehend the relation between underlying objective determinations and subjective experience (or validity and values) without prioritising either in advance, postcritique aims to address the analogous

²⁵ Habib, *Hegel and the Foundations of Literary Theory*, p. ix.

²⁶ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 2.

²⁷ See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 32-36.

dichotomy of the two dominant readerly modes: that of the critic intent on burrowing beneath the text to examine its disavowed preconditions, and that of the lay reader immersed unthinkingly in the experience of reading. In the words of Rita Felski, postcritique's most famous practitioner, 'postcritical reading' is that which 'slices across the dichotomy of skeptical detachment versus naïve attachment'; between 'the furrowed brow of the scholar deciphering an intractable subtext and the blissful mien of the subway rider devouring a bestseller.'²⁸ However, while right to criticise the detached methodologism and moralism of much contemporary critique, I will argue that such postcritics offer a false solution to its aporias and antinomies. Neglecting to realise the import of Hegelian speculative experience, they too often regress to an uncritical and an insufficiently naïve mode of reading.

The unique character of a truly Hegelian literary theory would be a critical theory of literature which is at once a speculative experience of it, and one which might facilitate the speculative experience that literature itself can provide. Literary theory which remains stuck in a Kantian, diagnostic mode, on the other hand, neglects to realise the critical work that literature might be capable of. This criticality does not necessarily stem from the politics of a work, nor from some metacritical reflection upon its own conditions of possibility. Instead, the critical work of literature may be found in its ability to affirm the possibility of a subjective freedom of life against the finite limits of its social and political determination: to 'preserve subjective freedom in the realm of the substantial.' Such a literary hermeneutics cannot be reduced to one of suspicion, but nor is it any less critical for it.

In this reading I will follow Rose's own (in a sense) postcritical assertion that to read Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as *merely* masters of suspicion is to neglect to read them holistically. As she says in an interview: 'They're seen as radical debunkers, but that's only the first, sceptical stage. [...] [U]nderlying that is a positive vision which they want to re-insinuate, and they do it cleverly, *through* scepticism.'²⁹ Negative critique or scepticism, for Rose as for Hegel, must always give way to its positive moment. After realising the wrongness of its knowledge and action, consciousness must take the risk of staking itself

²⁸ Rita Felski, 'Postcritical', in *Further Reading*, ed. by Matthew Rubery and Leah Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 135-143 (p. 135).

²⁹ Gillian Rose, 'Interview with Gillian Rose', transcribed and ed. by Vincent Lloyd, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25 (2008), 201-218 (p. 208). My emphasis. The interviewer is Andy O'Mahony. It was first broadcast on RTE Radio on 4 November 1995.

once again. This is what Hegel calls the ‘self-consummating skepticism’ of the dialectic and of the path of despair (*PhG* §78).

Kant’s dictum still stands: ‘The **critical** path alone is still open.’³⁰ And yet, critique as we know it appears to have ‘grown old’. What is required, then, is not the abandonment of critical thought, but its recollection—a recollection which is not a ‘rejuvenation’, a restitution or resuscitation, but which nonetheless opens up the possibility of the new, of a different kind of critique. As Robyn Marasco notes, to understand Hegel as a critical thinker needs some qualification. Indeed, Hegel did not describe his own work as critique.³¹ Like Marx after him who, with Engels, produced a vociferous ‘*Kritik der kritischen Kritik*’,³² Hegel disdained critical philosophies in the Kantian sense—those concerned merely with legitimating and justifying knowledge by consigning it to its proper place within preordained limits. It is the argument of this chapter, however, that in spite of this distancing from the idiom of critique, Hegel’s own critique of critical critique marks not an abandonment of critique or a profession of critique’s superfluity, but instead yields a transformed critical path: ‘the path of despair.’ It argues, then, that a critical literary theory after Hegel and Marx would not just expose the preconditions of a particular text or act of reading, but might make the inhumanity of these preconditions explicit, and even our complicity in creating and sustaining them: a speculative experience of such objective determinations which would intensify the necessity of destroying them.

III. Theory after ‘Kritik’?

Literary theory is just as diverse, if not more so, than the social theory that Rose reassesses in *Hegel Contra Sociology*. Any attempt to talk about it as a whole risks neglecting the particularities of its historical manifestations and the vast differences between its major traditions. Can a common denominator be identified notwithstanding such differences? Rose shows that all dominant strands of sociology, in spite of their divergences, ‘rest upon an

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 704.

³¹ Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 25-26.

³² See Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*.

identical framework: “the neo-Kantian paradigm.”³³ Likewise, is it possible to show that literary theory derives from or rests upon a single paradigm?

To identify ‘critique’ as such a paradigm may seem insufficient, in part because the word lacks agreed or stable definition. As Willi Goetschel notes, although critique ‘assumes the central function of legitimizing theoretical practice [...] there appears to be no agreement on what critique might mean.’ This is not to suggest, though, that the definition is particularly contested either, as ‘the question of what it means is treated in a surprisingly casual way, given the fundamental role it plays in the context of theoretical self-explanation and legitimation.’³⁴ Another reason for why ‘critique’ might seem a vague answer to the question of a literary theoretical paradigm is that the word, at least within literary studies, is often taken to be synonymous with the very activity or practice of literary theory. What would literary theory do if not critique—however the word may be understood?

It is this latter point that has been picked up on by followers of a so-called post-critical turn who argue that literary theory has uncritically presupposed critique as the horizon of its activity at the expense of other modes of interpretation. These proposed ‘other modes’ vary between surface,³⁵ distant,³⁶ and machine reading;³⁷ thin description;³⁸ reading with the grain;³⁹ reading as an act of acknowledgement;⁴⁰ actor-network theory (ANT);⁴¹ and object-

³³ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 1.

³⁴ Willi Goetschel, *Constituting Critique: Kant’s Writing as Critical Praxis*, trans. by Eric Schwab (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 1.

³⁵ See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), 1-21.

³⁶ See Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), 54-68; and Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).

³⁷ See N. Katherine Hayles, ‘How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine’, *ADE Bulletin*, 150 (2010), 62-79.

³⁸ See Love, ‘Close Reading and Thin Description’.

³⁹ See Timothy Bewes, ‘Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism’, *differences*, 21.3 (2010), 1-33.

⁴⁰ See Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁴¹ See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). ANT is also central to Rita Felski’s articulation of postcritique. See, for instance, Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp. 151-185.

oriented,⁴² implicative,⁴³ and computational⁴⁴ criticisms—to name just a few. In spite of their differences, what unites these new approaches in literary criticism is a wariness towards (if not a mere abandonment of) critical reading and theory. The ‘post-’ in ‘postcritique’, therefore, signals both a temporal designation and an evaluative—one could even say a critical—stance.

The name ‘Rita Felski’ has become almost synonymous with this trend. This is not necessarily because her literary analysis is emblematic of the postcritical. Her applications of ANT and the work of the contemporary Frankfurt School to the analysis of literary texts greatly set her apart from the literary studies of Franco Moretti or Timothy Bewes, for example. It is rather because her work *The Limits of Critique* (2015) represents the most comprehensive and polemical articulation of what is apparently wrong with the critical paradigm in literary studies. Its publication and the resulting controversy thus functioned to draw together these different approaches to literary studies under the banner of single critical term.

In this work, Felski notes that it is often taken for granted that the job of the literary theorist is ‘to draw out what a text fails—or wilfully refuses—to see.’⁴⁵ But why? she asks. ‘What sustains [the critic’s] assurance that a text is withholding something of vital importance, that their task is to ferret out what lies concealed in its recesses and margins?’⁴⁶ Felski presents the origins of this style of critical thinking in terms of Paul Ricoeur’s characterisation of Marx’s, Nietzsche’s, and Freud’s interpretations of Western culture as assuming a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion.’⁴⁷ It is to this hermeneutics that Felski limits her

⁴² Graham Harman, ‘The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism’, *New Literary History*, 43.2 (2012), 183-203.

⁴³ Andrew H. Miller, ‘Implicative Criticism, or The Display of Thinking’, *New Literary History*, 44.3 (2013), 345-360.

⁴⁴ See in particular the work of Andrew Piper, such as *Enumerations: Data and Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

⁴⁵ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ See Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, pp. 32-36. With this characterisation of critique, Felski also draws on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her account of ‘paranoid’ reading. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You’, in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-152.

definition of critique. What unites these ‘masters of suspicion,’ she writes, ‘is their conviction that radicalism is not just a matter of action or argument but also one of interpretation,’ and that the ‘task of the social critic is now to expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see.’⁴⁸ Felski is at pains to insist that she does not reject critical-suspicious reading *tout court*. Indeed, the title of her work, ‘*The Limits of Critique*’, is ironic insofar as ‘critique’ since Kant has been understood as the identification and setting of limits. Instead, she takes issue with the way in which critique has become the uncritically presupposed paradigm in the humanities, and particularly literary studies—with ‘the relentless grip, in recent years, of what we could call an antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma’⁴⁹—and the ways in which such a hypercritical mode can distract from the more modest job of literary interpretation: ‘trying to figure out what something means and why it matters.’⁵⁰

Putting its contents to one side for the moment, there is at least an Hegelian tenor to the mode of postcritique’s intervention. ‘My aim,’ Felski writes, ‘is not just to describe but to *re-describe* this style of thinking.’⁵¹ This is a Hegelian gesture insofar as philosophy for Hegel (as we saw in the second chapter of this dissertation) is always retrospective; it always comes after the fact, once ‘a shape of life has grown old’—or ‘run out of steam’ in the words of Bruno Latour.⁵² That which falls under its gaze can only be recollected in its death throes. Only then does the owl of Minerva spread its wings—as Hegel’s famous image has it.⁵³

As mentioned, the postcritical redescription of critique often begins with the suspicious hermeneutics of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, as theorised by Paul Ricoeur. This link can also be found to be made in works by theorists such as Latour, Stephen Best and

⁴⁸ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵¹ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 2.

⁵² Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 225-248.

⁵³ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 23.

Sharon Marcus, and Heather Love.⁵⁴ Without contesting the specifics of this account, it is interesting to note how infrequently and vaguely postcritics recollect or redescribe the critical paradigm of literary theory with reference to Kant, especially given its implicitly Kantian character, and given that it was with Kant that critique was transformed into a theoretical method; or else, that theoretical method was transformed into critique. In the words of Willi Goetschel, it was only with Kant that critique ‘assumed an epistemological function and thereby achieved theoretical dignity.’⁵⁵

Drew Milne, in his anticipatory essay on ‘Criticism and/or Critique’ highlights the Kantian heritage of critical theory and, by extension, of the critical reading of literary texts: ‘the modern coming together of criticism, critical reading and critique can be traced back to Kant, who made the term “critique” and its practice central to modern thought.’ Indeed, as Milne notes, it was Kant who heralded ‘our age’ as ‘the age of criticism’ and who insisted that ‘to criticism everything must submit.’⁵⁶ ‘The age of critique’ is not now what it once was, with the dialectic of enlightenment which played out through the twentieth century revealing the inherent illusions, blindness, and tyranny of any claim to a totally disenchanting reason. However, what has persisted from Kantian critique to the critique of today is its self-reflexive form, which seeks to identify both the conditions of possibility of both the subject and the object of knowledge. In the words of Milne, Kant’s revolution consists in a method for the delimitation of ‘the epistemological conditions by which the subject of knowledge, the knower, knows, the object, or the known. The critique of reason’s conditions of possibility marks out Kant’s conception of critique as a new philosophical reflexivity: the self-critique of

⁵⁴ As already noted, this link was first made by Sedgwick, along with her introduction of the idea of ‘paranoia’ into literary critical discourse. However, as Bruce Robbins argues, despite her influence on the trend, her work is not so easily described as postcritical. Robbins argues that ‘Felski misreads Sedgwick, who is well worth taking back from Felski.’ Similarly, Merve Emre has indicted postcritique for its ‘flagrant’ misreading of Sedgwick. Sedgwick is not simply against paranoid or suspicious readings. Instead, for Sedgwick the crucial question is what can a reader do *after* the paranoid reading has disclosed that which has been disavowed: ‘paranoid performativity may have something more to offer than impotence.’ See Bruce Robbins, ‘Not So Well Attached’, *PMLA*, 132 (2017), 371-376 (p. 373); and Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 222.

⁵⁵ Goetschel, *Constituting Critique*, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Drew Milne, ‘Introduction: Criticism and/or Critique’, in *Modern Critical Thought: An Anthology of Theorists Writing on Theorists*, ed. by Drew Milne (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 1-22 (p. 5); with reference to Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 100-101.

enlightenment.⁵⁷ Almost all varieties of critical theory involve this methodological presupposition of Kantian critique. The key distinction is that while Kant's critique involves the identification of universal transcendental conditions, critical theory involves the identification of *quasi*-transcendental conditions. This is the same reason why, according to Rose, all sociologies inherit the antinomies of Kantian critique. The main difference is that the Kantian question of *a priori* conditions has become the post-Kantian question of *a priori* sociological conditions.

This shift also constitutes what might be called critique's 'suspicious' turn. To take just one paradigmatic example, also drawn upon by Milne, Foucault argues that the function of critique after Kant is not only to legitimate theoretical practice, but to 'transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible crossing-over [*franchissement*]'—a possible transgression. As such, he continues, 'criticism is no longer going 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.'⁵⁸ That is, while Kantian critique seeks to justify and legitimate knowledge claims by deducing their *a priori* conditions, critique after Kant seeks to 'interrogate, unmask, expose, subvert, unravel, demystify, destabilise, take issue, and take umbrage' (to cite Felski's inventory)⁵⁹—to investigate the disavowed contingency of our object so as to present and actuate the possibility of its transgression.

One might rejoin here that Kant's critical philosophy was defined by a suspicion towards the metaphysical assumptions that had been the dogma of previous philosophies, and that only then could it begin to justify true knowledge. More broadly, is suspicion not always a condition of ultimate justification? Every process of justification in the tribunal of reason must begin with the implicit acceptance that that which is on trial may *not* be justified. This is certainly the case. However, Kant's critique is ultimately a project of justification, and not

⁵⁷ Milne, 'Criticism and/or Critique'.

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', trans. by Catherine Porter, amended by Robert Hurley, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, 3 vols., ed. by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 2000), I: *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, pp. 303-319 (p. 315). See Milne, 'Criticism and/or Critique', p. 7.

⁵⁹ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 5.

suspicion, because it does not seek to interrogate the conditions (and therefore limits) of possibility so that they might be transgressed, but to insist upon their universal validity. In contrast with Hegel, to be a condition of possibility, for Kant, means to be unchangeable by time, thought, or action; an absolutely secure possession. As Deleuze puts it, in his account of Kant's critique:

Kant merely pushed a very old conception of critique to the limit, a conception which saw critique as a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to knowledge and truth, but not on knowledge and truth themselves; a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to morality, but not on morality itself. Thus total critique turns into the politics of compromise: even before the battle the spheres of influence have already been shared out.⁶⁰

It may be tempting to suggest that this move from justification to suspicion is analogous to the historical-philosophical move from Kant to Hegel. In a broad sense, this analogy works, and indicates the long shadow of Hegel's influence in critical and literary theory. As Sally Sedgwick has noted in her book on *Hegel's Critique of Kant*, the two major respects in which Hegel's conception of critique differs from Kant's are: i) that 'critique as Hegel employs it does not result in the ultimate justification of the common, familiar assumptions with which our inquiries begin' but 'instead undercuts them'; and ii) that 'critique for Hegel deflates our claims to know ourselves at the start of our inquiry.'⁶¹ Put differently: '[T]he assumptions we took to accurately capture the universal and necessary conditions of our science, turn out to be contingent. Critique, as Hegel exercises it, exposes the need to move beyond them.'⁶² By this account, while Kantian critique seeks to justify knowledge, Hegelian critique seeks to undermine it; while Kantian critique seeks to identify the universal transcendental horizon of knowledge, Hegelian critique seeks to reveal that what we took to be universal and necessary are in fact particular and contingent; while Kantian critique seeks to delimit a firm foundation

⁶⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 83-84.

⁶¹ Sally Sedgwick, *Hegel's Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 155.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 156.

from which to begin, Hegelian critique shows that we are always ‘beginning in the middle.’⁶³ Hegel’s critique of critique, therefore, at once explicates and actuates the ironic truth of critique as its own opposite. With Hegel, the humble setting of limits gives way to the radical transgression of those limits, while the justification of knowledge gives way to its complication. To take a more specific example, it may be tempting to interpret Hegel’s speculative identification of philosophy with the history of philosophy—the idea that ‘philosophy [...] *is its own time comprehended in thoughts*’⁶⁴—as a movement beyond Kant’s transcendental subject via a historicisation of the transcendental subject, an insistence upon the historical contingency of the transcendental itself. This would in turn imply the historical contingency of all knowledge, including Kant’s apparently universal transcendental deduction of the categories.

While all of this represents an accurate account of the differences between Kantian and Hegelian critique, and would indeed signal a move from justification to suspicion, it is nonetheless only a partial account. What is left neglected is the idea of Hegelian speculative experience and the phenomenological form that Hegelian critique takes. In this sense, modern critique after Kant, despite its insistence of the contingency and particularity of the transcendental, still remains in an implicitly Kantian mode. To return to Foucault, for example, although he insists that his mode of critique is ‘not transcendental—in the sense that it will not [à la Kant] seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge [*connaissance*] or of all possible moral action’⁶⁵—it is at least *quasi*-transcendental insofar as it seeks to account for the constitution of particular knowledges, discourses, and activities with reference to their historical conditions of possibility. Although it does not posit or accept ‘formal structures with universal value,’ it posits formal structures with particular value in advance of their discovery, or the experience of them. In turn, the experiences of the reader or critic are posited in advance as mere effects of the structure. As such, the critique implicit in Foucault’s discourse analysis is neo-Kantian insofar as its exposition of the relation between objective determinations and their subjective mediations remains transcendental, as it offers

⁶³ This is Rose’s phrase: ‘This unsettled and unsettling approach, which is not a “position” because it will not *posit* anything, and refuses any beginning or end, would yet induce repetition forwards—a beginning in the middle.’ Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 155.

⁶⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, p. 315.

no experience of their formation and deformation (that is, their *Bildung*), nor of their relation.⁶⁶

Only Bruno Latour, among the postcritics, in his polemics against critique and self-reflexivity in the social sciences (which greatly influenced the current postcritical trend in literary studies⁶⁷) makes reference to Kant's *Critiques* as the original, critical sin. For example, in his essay 'The Politics of Explanation: an Alternative' (1988), Latour criticises the tendency of sociologists to offer social explanations for the natural sciences. Such social explanations of knowledge, he argues, are patently self-contradictory: 'they make it impossible for their own explanations to be seriously believed by anyone. Their arguments in feeding back on themselves nullify their own claims.'⁶⁸ If the sociologist aims to compromise the claims of the natural scientist by demonstrating that the latter is influenced by social factors, why can they not see that they too must fall victim to their own argument—that they too are influenced by social factors? With polemical flourish Latour claims that this can only lead sociologists into an infinite feedback loop of self-reference, leaving them 'entangled in a sort of aporia similar to the famous "all Cretans are liars", an aporia 'from which they cannot escape except by indefinite navelgazing, dangerous solipsism, insanity and probably death.'⁶⁹ It is in this essay that Latour attributes this reflexivity to a 'hidden Kantianism': 'They all think that objects, things-in-themselves, are somehow out of reach'—and this enables the sociologist 'only to expose reflexive claims, never to talk *about* something.' Latour's rhetoric builds throughout this passage to explode with a mid-paragraph rallying cry: 'Down with Kant! Down with the Critique! Let us go back to the world, still unknown and despised.'⁷⁰ This point is reiterated in his later essay, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?' (2004), in which he criticises the 'mistake' of the humanities and social sciences 'to believe that there

⁶⁶ For more detailed accounts of Foucault's disavowed neo-Kantianism, see Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 171-207; and Craig Brandist, 'Neo-Kantianism in cultural theory: Bakhtin, Derrida and Foucault', *Radical Philosophy*, 102 (2000), 6-16. Both explicate Foucault's neo-Kantianism with explicit reference to the Marburg and Heidelberg Schools of sociology.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 150.

⁶⁸ Bruno Latour, 'The Politics of Explanation: an Alternative', in *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by Steve Woolgar (London: Sage, 1988), pp. 155-177 (p. 155).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

was no efficient way to criticise matters of fact except by moving *away* from them and directing one's attention *towards* the conditions that made them possible.' Again, this critical paradigm is attributed to scholars 'remaining too faithful to the unfortunate solution inherited from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.'⁷¹

At first, Latour's argument may seem parallel to that of Rose's in *Hegel Contra Sociology*. Both criticise sociology's methodological attempts to expose the conditions of possibility of any social practice or theory; both argue that attempts to contextualise knowledge in this way preclude the possibility of any real knowledge at all; both criticise the methodological detachment of sociological critique; and both attribute these problems to an often unwitting inheritance of the philosophy of Kant. The crucial difference, however, once again, is Hegel: while Rose enjoins us to move beyond these antinomies of sociological reason by learning from Hegel's critique and surpassing of Kant, Latour enjoins us to regress from Kant to a precritical realism. While Rose calls for a radicalisation of critique through a retrieval of Hegelian speculative experience, Latour calls for critique's abandonment. He writes: 'If you sneer at this claim ["Down with Kant! Down with the Critique!"] and say "this is going back to realism", yes it is.'⁷² In short, for Latour, Kant's critique is only invoked as a misstep, or a dead end, from which we need to retrace our steps.

IV. Retour à Frankfurt?

I have criticised the so-called post-critical turn for its regression from an implicitly Kantian critique in literary theory to a precritical realism or subjectivism. Correspondingly, I have argued that in order to move beyond the antinomies of literary theory and its critical mode we must turn to Hegel's critique of critique, which in turn opens up the possibility for critique's renewal. However, here I want to discuss the most recent and ongoing work of Felski, whose postcritical engagement with the contemporary Frankfurt School, approaches a kind of experiential and phenomenological literary theory comparable to that which I am proposing—and, for that reason, needs to be all the more carefully distinguished from it. This seems

⁷¹ Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?', pp. 231-232.

⁷² Latour, 'The Politics of Explanation', p. 173.

especially necessary given the frequent strawmanning of Felski as resistant to theory and critique *tout court*—strawmanning that, it must be said, probably arose in response to her own strawmanning of critique in her unfortunately generalising and polemical *The Limits of Critique*. While Felski does not engage with Hegel directly, in this more recent work she does so vicariously through her engagement with, in particular, the contemporary Frankfurt School sociologist Axel Honneth, whose work is motivated by a desire to move sociology beyond its Kantian paradigm and to insist upon the subjective mediation and experience of social relations—work which, most importantly, takes Hegel as its point of departure. However, again, with reference to Rose’s *Hegel Contra Sociology*, I will demonstrate that Honneth (and by extension Felski), by neglecting the specificity of *speculative* experience and the particular phenomenological form of Hegel’s critique, remain within this paradigm.

As already stated, Felski does not engage anywhere with Hegel directly, only once making an oblique reference in her book *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020) to Hegel as just another emblem of methodological critical detachment: ‘Whether one turns to Hegel or Foucault, it is only by distancing oneself from what exists that one can gain any kind of critical purchase on it.’⁷³ This throwaway comment is especially ironic, given that, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, Hegel’s development of a phenomenological critique was founded on the sole presupposition that it is only by ‘setting aside every reflection’ and ‘simply [...] tak[ing] up *what is there before us*’⁷⁴—as he puts it in the *Logic*—without any further presuppositions, that thinking might begin; and motivated by a resistance to any such critical detachment, any supposition of a distinction between the instrument and object of critique. In the same sentence, therefore, Felski indicts Hegel for critical detachment while unwittingly echoing his rejection of it. She immediately goes on to complain that, ‘[a]t a philosophical level, [...] detachment has been hailed as a precondition for any form of knowledge’⁷⁵—without acknowledging that, for Hegel, the assumption of this Kantian critical detachment as a precondition for knowledge in fact precludes the possibility of any knowledge at all.

⁷³ Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 9.

⁷⁴ Hegel, *Logic*, p. 47.

⁷⁵ Felski, *Hooked*, p. 10.

Nevertheless, and in spite of its avowedly postcritical stance, Felski's recent theoretical work draws from the post-Habermas era of Frankfurt School critical theory, some of which explicitly takes up Hegel and his critique of Kant. For instance, in two recent articles ('Good Vibrations' (2020), and 'Recognizing Class' (2021)), and in her forthcoming monograph and the 2021 Clark Lectures upon which it is based (*Remix: On Literature and Theory*), Felski seeks to address the neglect in literary scholarship of the contemporary Frankfurt School—figures such as Honneth, Nikolas Kompridis, Hartmut Rosa, Rahel Jaeggi, and Robin Celikates.⁷⁶ 'While the Frankfurt School crops up frequently in literary studies,' she writes, 'it does so as an intellectual formation preserved in amber: Weimar Germany and its aftermath. The figures cited are Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, sometimes Georg Lukács or Ernst Bloch'⁷⁷—while the work of the later figures goes unnoticed. This neglect is attributed, in part, to the later Frankfurt School's own neglect of aesthetic questions: 'Speaking from, and to, the fields of social and political theory, they rarely cite literature and never literary critics. [...] The highly attuned aesthetic sensibilities of Adorno or Benjamin have long since vanished; heavily "sociologised" in its form as well as its content, German critical theory no longer registers on the radar of literary scholars.'⁷⁸ As Amanda Anderson remarks, Habermas in particular has become associated in literature departments with 'plodding style, an embarrassing optimism of intellect, and dangerous complicity with the Enlightenment'⁷⁹—and those sociologists in his wake are therefore tarnished by association. Another reason why literary studies has not engaged with such thinkers is that their critical theory demonstrates little interest in many of the key concerns that occupy literature departments today—race, gender, sexuality, and the environment.⁸⁰ And yet, Felski argues, this work deserves the attention of literary scholars for its distinctive preoccupation with what she calls 'experiential concepts'—phenomenological concepts which 'stake a claim that's anchored in fine-grained attention to ethical, affective, and aesthetic life.' Listing

⁷⁶ Three out of four of these lectures are available to watch on the Trinity College, University of Cambridge website, <<https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/about/public-lectures/clark/>>.

⁷⁷ Rita Felski, 'Recognizing Class', *New Literary History*, 52.1 (2021), 95-117 (p. 97).

⁷⁸ Rita Felski, 'Good Vibrations', *American Literary History*, 32.2 (2020), 405-415 (p. 406).

⁷⁹ Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 141. Qtd. in Felski, 'Recognizing Class', p. 97.

⁸⁰ Felski, 'Recognizing Class', p. 101.

‘acknowledgement’, ‘affinity’, ‘recognition’, and ‘disclosure’, she suggests that, opposed to ‘abstract’ concepts, these experiential concepts prompt the reader to engage with and test them with reference to their own experience.⁸¹

Finally, this ‘return to the Frankfurt School’, as Felski dubs this most recent phase of her work, is done to ‘acknowledge intellectual debts’⁸²—that is, perhaps, to demonstrate that her postcritical work has a rigorous academic basis, and is not, as some have argued, a celebration of the individual reader response at the expense of scholarly expertise.⁸³ She claims that this acknowledgement serves to bolster her own arguments concerning the limits of critique in literary studies, with the affinities between her position and theirs demonstrating that ‘[s]uch arguments are not just the provenance of unrepentant aesthetes and retrograde lovers of literature as hostile critics like to claim, they actually make up a major strand also in social and political thought.’⁸⁴ In other words, it seems that with this most recent work, Felski is keen to push against the claims of her detractors that post-critical literary scholarship must by definition collapse into uncritical subjectivism or aestheticism.

In her article on ‘Recognizing Class’ (which was also presented as her second Clark Lecture, ‘On Recognition’), Felski seeks to bring Axel Honneth into a ‘common constellation’⁸⁵ with the auto-theoretical memoir, *Retour à Reims* (2009) [*Returning to Reims* (2013)], by the sociologist and queer theorist, Didier Eribon. In *Returning to Reims*, Eribon reflects on his upbringing in working class France, and his increasing distance from and embarrassment about these origins as he grew up—motivated largely by his homosexuality. In particular—and this is the focus of Felski’s article—he grapples with the lived experience

⁸¹ Rita Felski, *Clark Lectures 2021: Rita Felski* [‘1. Remix: On Literature and Theory’], online video recording, Youtube, 23 February 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o56TpkAbhKE>>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ For example, Robbins describes Felski’s project as moving literary scholarship ‘closer to fandom, a profession that is closer to the industry’s dollars-and-cents metric and its rhetoric of helpful and largely positive advice to the would-be consumer.’ Robbins, ‘Not So Well Attached’, p. 372. Likewise, Robert T. Tally Jr. argues that postcritique ‘compromises the very position of the literary critic or professor entirely, championing an approach to literature that removes both expertise and even knowledge from the process, and encourages readers to trust their own affective reaction to whatever “brand” of literature seems most commercially attractive to them at any given moment.’ Robert T. Tally Jr., ‘Reading Adorno by the Pool; or, Critical Theory in a Postcritical Era’, *symptome*, 27 (2019), 281-289 (p. 287).

⁸⁴ Felski, ‘Remix’.

⁸⁵ Felski, ‘Recognizing Class’, p. 96.

of social class. His memoir is driven by a conviction that this lived experience (this subjective mediation of objective determination, to use Rose's terminology) must be confronted in order to begin to grasp why, for example, his family who always voted for the Communist party would end up supporting the National Front; or why the act of reciting a poem in English to his mother might provoke hostile resentment; or why he is still burdened by a sense of shame towards his working class roots. Despite the apparent particularity of these experiences, they function as indexes to broader discussions of trenchant and ongoing issues with contemporary sociological research and leftist politics, and the entrenched chasms between academic thought and the working class. Above all, for our purposes, Felski lauds *Returning to Reims* for both arguing for and realising a kind of sociology which resists the reduction or collapse of the complexities of lived experience into a reified schema, logic of categories, or social explanation.

Although Eribon makes no mention of the Frankfurt School—he even proclaims that ‘I detested Germany, and the German language. I found them repulsive’⁸⁶—Felski locates in *Returning to Reims* certain affinities with the German sociologist Axel Honneth. What is distinctive about Honneth, and what he has in common with Eribon, is an insistence that class relations cannot be dealt with as a ‘purely’ economic or sociological issue. Focusing not only on social or political determinations, Honneth directs his gaze to the ways in which these determinations are subjectively experienced and mediated. A guiding question of his research is therefore: ‘[h]ow is it that the *experience* of disrespect is anchored in the *affective* life of human subjects in such a way that it can provide the motivational impetus for social resistance and conflict, indeed, for a struggle for recognition?’⁸⁷ In other words: class and class determinations, for Honneth, only have meaning and existence in relation to moral and affective intuitions such as pride, belonging, resentment, or shame; all of these subjective mediations take the form of a ‘struggle for recognition’; and only by taking this struggle into account can we understand the possibility of social resistance. Felski finds this in stark contrast to the concepts of recognition as found in ‘[t]he two most frequently cited parables of literary theory—Jacques Lacan’s account of the mirror stage and Louis Althusser’s anecdote of being hailed on the street by a police officer.’ While with these theories, she

⁸⁶ Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, trans. by Michael Lucey (London: Allen Lane, 2018), p. 170.

⁸⁷ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 132. My emphases.

argues, ‘recognition was downgraded to misrecognition or political subjection,’ she finds in Honneth’s theory of recognition an antidote against both the ‘rational, autonomous individual of liberalism’ and this critical ‘flattening of persons into effects of linguistic or ideological structures.’⁸⁸

Crucially, as this phrase ‘struggle for recognition’ implies, Honneth’s sociology is motivated by a Hegelian critique of sociology’s hitherto existing Kantian paradigm. Indeed, in the chapter ‘From Kant to Hegel’ in his book on the history of the concept of recognition, Honneth argues that ‘[a] deficit in the history of sociology is that it has failed to take proper account of Hegel’s formative role for the emergence of this discipline in the nineteenth century.’⁸⁹ And, at the conclusion of the book, he summarises his argument: that while ‘the Kantian-influenced tradition of German Idealism offers such a fundamental insight into the nature of social recognition [...] only Hegel managed to free it from the transcendental realm and insert it into a social reality of a “spirit” that has become objective in the shape of institutional forms, moral habits and the living humans who deal with both.’⁹⁰ While Felski only makes a passing reference to the Hegelian tenor of Honneth’s terminology (i.e. the ‘struggle for recognition’),⁹¹ her subsequent reading of *Returning to Reims* is coloured by Honneth’s Hegelianism—his resistance to transcendental explanations of social phenomena and to the assumption of an abstract identity between objective determinations and their subjective mediations; and his corresponding insistence on the sociopolitical importance of the lived, affective experience of social categories.

Honneth develops his theory of recognition not, as one might expect, from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*—which includes the famous parable of the ‘life-and-death struggle’ for recognition between the master and the slave (*PhG* §187)—but instead from his earlier

⁸⁸ Felski, ‘Recognizing Class’, p. 99. Cf. Jacques Lacan, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’, in *Écrits*, pp. 75-81; Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 232-272.

⁸⁹ Axel Honneth, *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of Ideas*, trans. by Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 128n45.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

⁹¹ Felski, ‘Recognizing Class’, p. 101.

System of Ethical Life.⁹² It is in this text, Honneth argues, that the young Hegel began to develop a social philosophy of mutual recognition in which the ‘claim’ of individuals ‘to the intersubjective recognition of their identity [...] is built into social life from the very beginning as a moral tension, transcends the level of social progress institutionalised thus far, and so gradually leads—via the negative path of recurring stages of conflict—to a state of communicatively lived freedom.’⁹³ In other words, it is the work in which Hegel began to develop a theory of society as grounded on the individual’s demand for recognition of their identity from others. It is this demand for recognition, for both Honneth and his young Hegel, which is the motor of social and political progress. Starting as a “moral tension,” the struggle for recognition transcends to progressively higher levels in which the recognition of difference is institutionalised, and particular identities, needs, and commitments are mutually respected, mediated, and policed. In the *Phenomenology*, by contrast, this ‘conceptual model of a “struggle for recognition” had lost its central position within Hegel’s theory,’⁹⁴ reduced to a particular stage of the development. It is this particularity that Honneth disputes in other theories of recognition. As Felski notes, while the defining role of recognition in social and political life has become a common theme of social theory in recent decades,⁹⁵ what makes Honneth distinctive is his insistence that the struggle for recognition is a fundamental, even existential feature of human nature: ‘Rather than being a recent trend that is tied to multiculturalism and recent social movements—as [Nancy] Fraser assumes—the desire for recognition is a basic human need, even as it takes on historically variant forms.’⁹⁶ Honneth’s work *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (1992) can be understood as an attempt to revitalise this earlier project from Hegel’s *System of Ethical Life*,

⁹² G. W. F. Hegel, ‘*System of Ethical Life*’ and ‘*First Philosophy of Spirit*’, trans. by H. S. Harris and T. M. Knox (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979). The *System of Ethical Life*, usually dated 1802, went unpublished until 1913.

⁹³ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Felski makes reference to Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25-73; Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking Recognition’, *New Left Review*, 3 (2000), 107-120; and Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. by Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke (London: Verso, 2003).

⁹⁶ Felski, ‘Recognizing Class’, p. 98

in which (at least according to Honneth's reading) recognition is not a particular historical sociopolitical phenomenon, but rather a fundamental, existential human need.

Although, as already stated, this theory is motivated by a desire to move beyond the Kantian antinomies of sociological reason via Hegel, it can be demonstrated that it nevertheless remains within this Kantian paradigm. It is a Kantian reading of Hegel because it takes a concept from Hegel—that is, recognition—and employs it as the precondition of its quasi-transcendental metacritical argument. To repeat Honneth's claim: 'the intersubjective recognition of their identity [...] is built into social life *from the very beginning*.' As such, it neglects that which moved Hegel beyond transcendental philosophy—that is, the phenomenological form of his critique, and his idea of speculative experience, both of which depend upon the refusal of all methodological presuppositions, for which nothing can be 'built in from the very beginning.' This is the same criticism that Rose makes of Habermas and Althusser with reference to Marx. Habermas and Althusser, she argues, in spite of their differences, remain with a Kantian paradigm because they take a concept from Marx and elevate it to the status of a precondition, thus neglecting the phenomenological exposition of the preconditioned and conditioned in their speculative identity: 'Thus Jürgen Habermas has "taken" three kinds of action from Marx, and made them into the preconditions of three knowledge-constitutive interests'; similarly: 'Althusser has used Marxist concepts as the precondition of his metacritical argument, "structures", "apparatuses", "ideology".'⁹⁷ Honneth claims that his critique 'departs from the Kantian tradition in that it is concerned not solely with the moral autonomy of human beings but also with the conditions for their self-realization in general'⁹⁸—that is, their struggles for recognition. However, this is precisely the reason that his metacritique remains *within* the Kantian tradition: because it takes social life as a given and then seeks to examine its conditions of possibility in the idea of a struggle for recognition.

Furthermore, although Honneth cites Rose's *Hegel Contra Sociology* in an endnote as having a 'very strong interpretation of the concept of "mutual recognition"' which he also

⁹⁷ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 44.

⁹⁸ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 172.

claims to be ‘comparable’ to his own,⁹⁹ their readings are in fact profoundly at odds.¹⁰⁰ In particular, Rose’s argument concerning the *System of Ethical Life* is that this early text represents Hegel’s ‘first “phenomenology”’¹⁰¹—that is, his first experiment with an immanent, phenomenological, and speculative form of critique, in which objective determinations and their subjective mediations are explicated in both their identity and non-identity. Contrary to Honneth’s claim, far from positing recognition as the precondition of social life, Rose argues that Hegel’s phenomenological critique in the *System of Ethical Life* reveals that recognition under bourgeois property relations is necessarily a misrecognition. Recognition occurs only ‘as an imperfect unification or as a *relation* between the two,’ as Hegel puts it; and therefore absolute ethical life—‘the absolute oneness of [...] individuals’—remains barred.¹⁰² Just as the *Phenomenology* progressively recollects the necessary series of failed attempts to achieve the absolute, the *System of Ethical Life* presents a series of necessary but failed attempts to achieve ethical life or real recognition—from work, to family, commodity exchange, legal contracts, robbery, and war. But it is ultimately discovered that each of these, endemic to bourgeois property relations, presuppose a misrecognition.

This argument is made most clearly in the *System of Ethical Life* in the early section on ‘work’. As Rose puts it:

The simplest mediation is one in which the relation or lack of identity predominates [...] in work. Work was accomplished by using a tool, and the product of labour belonged to the individual as his possession. By working, using a tool, or possessing the product, the individual sees himself, but in a formal way. He does not see the activity of others in his own activity, nor does he see other aspects of his own activity.

By making the world, the tool, the product, his own, by appropriating them (*an-eignen*), the individual recognises himself in a formal and partial sense.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 186n40.

¹⁰⁰ For an account of Rose’s theory of recognition with broader comparison to other prominent alternatives, see Kate Schick, ‘Re-recognizing Recognition: Gillian Rose’s “Radical Hegel” and Vulnerable Recognition’, *Telos*, 173 (2015), 87-105.

¹⁰¹ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 64.

¹⁰² Hegel, *System of Ethical Life*, pp. 101-102.

Appropriation, making someone or something into one's own ('an' means 'into', 'eignen' means 'own'), is the simplest but formal way of re-cognising oneself. It does not see what is excluded, the relation or non-identity. Hence this recognition is a new form of mis-recognition and remains so as long as it occurs within bourgeois property relations.¹⁰³

It is in alienated work that, in Hegel's words, the 'unity' of the collective—'the activity of others in [the worker's] own activity'—'hovers over the single individual, [but] he does not emerge from it or abstract himself from it; it is in him but it is concealed in him; and it appears in this contradiction, namely, that this inner light does not absolutely coincide or unite with the universal light hovering over him as something according to which he is driven on, as impulse or striving.'¹⁰⁴ The critical implication which is made here—not by methodologically jumping the gun to examine the sociological preconditions, but instead by phenomenologically expositing the immanent misrecognition of recognition itself—is that the possibility of real recognition will only be realised by a different system of property and work relations. The totality and unity of absolute ethical life 'hovers' over the worker but he does not and cannot recognise it except through the formalised and therefore compromised medium of a property or work relation. As Rose explicates it, Hegel's phenomenological exposition reveals how the real recognition of absolute ethical life cannot be achieved under bourgeois property relations for 'they make people into competing, isolated, "moral", individuals who can only relate externally to one another, and are thus subjected to a real lack of identity. Bourgeois private property presupposes real inequality, for the law which guarantees abstract, formal property rights presupposes concrete inequality (lack of

¹⁰³ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 77.

¹⁰⁴ Hegel, *System of Ethical Life*, p. 102.

identity).¹⁰⁵ With this, she presents Hegel as anticipating Marx's theory of the fetish-character of the commodity, in which 'the definite social relation between men [...] assumes here, for them, the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things.'¹⁰⁶ Under bourgeois property relations—that is, under capitalism—recognition between humans can only take the form of relations between things, in commodities, in alienated labour. Since recognition can only occur through this compromised medium of commodity exchange, real recognition remains an impossibility.

Honneth, however, is blind to this conclusion because he assumes recognition in advance of his critique as its quasi-transcendental precondition. In other words, Honneth is blind to the capital relation and commodity fetish which guarantee both that recognition is impossible, and that misrecognition is misrecognised as recognition; and this is because he assumes and idealises recognition as a fundamental and inalienable feature of human sociability. As Felski puts it, albeit admiringly:

In contrast to Adorno—and his present-day avatars—Honneth steers clear of capitalism-as-body-snatcher scenarios; to portray one's fellow human beings as voided of agency and unwittingly controlled by social forces is to enact the very dehumanisation one claims to diagnose. Rather, he shares with French sociologist Luc Boltanski the conviction that critical consciousness is ordinary, part of daily life rather than estranged from it. It is only via attention to everyday struggles over recognition

¹⁰⁵ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 60. It is important to note that while Hegel is arguing that only 'relative' (i.e. not absolute) ethical life and misrecognition are possible under bourgeois property relations, he is not advocating for communism—that is, for the abolition of private property and class society. The final section of the *System of Ethical Life* imagines a different property relation designed merely to counterbalance bourgeois property relations with a system of mutual dependence between different social groups. This system is still based on the stratification of society into agricultural, acquisitive, and administrative classes. Rose's reading defends Hegel nonetheless, arguing: 'By acknowledging the contradictions of bourgeois enterprise and private property, Hegel hoped to surmount and contain them. He developed a notion of absolute ethical life which does not deny and suppress, nor reproduce, real relations, lack of identity' (p. 75).

¹⁰⁶ Marx, *Capital*, p. 165. Translation slightly altered. Fowkes renders '*phantasmagorische*' as 'fantastic'. This is a mistranslation. As Rose notes: 'The epithet "phantasmagoric" stresses the personifications as well as the strangeness of the form in which the relations between men appear. "Phantasmagoria" means a crowd or succession of dim or doubtfully real persons. The word was coined in England in 1802 and was taken over later into German.' Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 40.

—even if submerged or ambivalent—that scholars can adequately reckon with conditions of injustice.¹⁰⁷

Following Honneth, Felski thus instrumentalises recognition as an originary ideal that, if recovered, would address the various failings of misrecognition and promote a more liberal, understanding world, in which differences and grievances are adequately acknowledged and negotiated. But, by neglecting the misrecognition that resides behind every recognition within class society, legible only via a speculative critique, Felski neglects too that, as Rose puts it, it is totally ‘possible to mean well, to be caring and kind, love one’s neighbour as oneself, yet to be complicit in the corruption and violence of social institutions.’¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the actual ‘condition[] of injustice’ which precludes the possibility of such recognition is dismissed as a boogie-man, the talk of doomsayers and conspiracy (critical?) theorists. If there *seems* to be a truth, then, to Honneth’s dismissal of his Frankfurt forebears—that ‘[t]here is an atmosphere of the outdated and antiquated, of the irretrievably lost, which surrounds the grand historical and philosophical ideas of Critical Theory, ideas for which there no longer seems to be any kind of resonance within the experience of the accelerating present’¹⁰⁹—this can only appear to be the case by focusing on ‘lived experience’ at the expense of objective determinations: an exclusive focus which is as mistaken and as quasi-transcendental as the inverse.

Felski’s employment of Honneth’s concept of ‘recognition’ in her reading therefore also results in a profound misrecognition of Erbion’s incendiary depiction of class society. By focusing exclusively on the lived experience of class as presented in *Returning to Reims*, Felski concludes by indicting Marxism for its ideal of a classless society: ‘To what extent can one wholeheartedly will the extinction of one’s own way of life, an existence that may be experienced as constrained and riven by deprivation, but also a source of felt belonging—of memory, identity, and personal history?’¹¹⁰ For Felski, this line of questioning constitutes a fine-grained attention to the complexities of class—its ups and its downs. But this sentimentalism is radically conservative. Marx’s point is not that working class identity

¹⁰⁷ Felski, ‘Recognizing Class’, p. 101.

¹⁰⁸ Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁹ Axel Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, trans. by James D. Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 19.

¹¹⁰ Felski, ‘Recognizing Class’, p. 99.

should be abolished, but that the very fact of this class-belonging precludes the possibility of real self-identification. For Marx, any imagined self-identification with one's class category under capitalism can only ever misrecognise one's real existence. To be 'distort[ed]' into 'a fragment of a man' and 'degrade[d] [...] to the level of an appendage of a machine'¹¹¹ is not a 'way of life'. The solution to the exploitation of the working class, therefore, is not in the provision and celebration of a genuine working class self-identity, but in the demonstration that the reality of this exploitation precludes the possibility of any such thing. This is what Marx means when he writes that 'in the fully-formed proletariat, the abstraction of all humanity [...] is practically complete. [...] [M]an has lost himself in the proletariat.'¹¹² It is on this point that Felski and Marx can, perhaps, agree: The category of the proletariat is a violent abstraction which reduces human subjectivity to its economic determinations, which steals humanity from itself. But while Felski wrongly identifies this as a feature of Marxist criticism, for Marx it is a feature of social and political reality itself. It is what he calls a *real* abstraction. Put differently, it is not that Marxist criticism reduces subjectivity to its economic determinations, but that this is what capital itself does. The task of Marxist critique, then, is not only to disclose these determinations which flatten and erase human subjectivity but to keep alive and insist upon the life that they squander. This can only be done by providing what Rose, after Hegel, calls a speculative experience: an experience of the contradiction between our economic determination and our subjective freedom; the contradiction between capital and life. Without this speculative experience, humanity remains 'lost [...] in the proletariat,' and real life remains lost in life under capital.

Felski is also, therefore, misrepresentative of Eribon's own critique. Eribon does, indeed, criticise his own youthful Marxism as 'little more than a way of idealising the working class, of transforming it into a mythical entity compared to which the actual life of my parents seemed utterly reprehensible', and as 'a vector for a kind of social disidentification.'¹¹³ However, this is a specific self-criticism of a purely academic and therefore impoverished Marxism. Marxism does not 'idealise the working class.' In Marx's words, 'socialist writers' do not 'regard the proletarians as *gods*.' On the contrary, Marxism

¹¹¹ Marx, *Capital*, p. 799.

¹¹² Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, pp. 36-37.

¹¹³ Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, pp. 82, 84.

ascribes the proletariat with a 'world-historic role' by demonstrating that their alienation can only be overcome by 'abolishing the conditions of its life,' an abolition which cannot take place 'without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life.'¹¹⁴ It is in fact Felski who idealises the working class, for her insistence that their sense of 'belonging' is reason enough to deny their emancipation. In the words of Walter Benjamin, the name we should give such 'attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which they strive to eliminate' is 'fascism': 'Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.'¹¹⁵ Nowhere, by contrast, does Eribon suggest that class society should be preserved due to the attachments some might have to their imagined class identity. On the contrary, Eribon's account of the misrecognitions of and between class identities radically magnifies the horror of class relations and their inimicality to real recognition, and hence the necessity of the destruction of the social order upon which they are based. 'In fact,' he writes, 'there is little or nothing they can do when faced with the irresistible forces of the social order, forces that operate both in secret and in the light of day, and that impose themselves everywhere and on everyone.'¹¹⁶ It is the speculative experience of this determination and its hostility to life which is productive of the injunction to overthrow it. By retrieving this idea of speculative experience, by presenting the contradictory relation between capital and life, literary theory might realise a kind of critique which is neither detached, nor methodological, but which might keep alive the possibility of real life against the domination of real abstraction.

¹¹⁴ Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*.

¹¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 217-252 (p. 241).

¹¹⁶ Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, p. 115.

V. Jameson's Hegelianism?

If Kantian critical literary theory is empty, postcritical literary theory is blind. The former, critically detached and suspicious, seeks to excavate the text to examine its disavowed conditions of possibility, at the expense of the text itself. The latter, though, presents social reality and meaning as reducible to their immediate, affective and subjective experience; or, in the case of distant or computational reading, empirical, harvestable data. To return to Rose, both reproduce the neo-Kantian dichotomy of validity and value—the only substantial difference being which side is privileged.¹¹⁷

It is only by retrieving Hegelian speculative experience for literary theory that this impasse might be broken. That is, it is only by practising a literary criticism whereby the reader or critic comes to discover—through the irony, shock, and surprise of the dialectic—the contradictory relations between their sociopolitical determination and their subjective experience that the truth of the text might be realised, and that the critique of such determinations might be linked to their revolution.

Fredric Jameson's 1971 *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* was the first work to explicitly call for such a literary criticism. Not only did it for the first time provide Anglophone literary critics with an introduction to the work of Frankfurt School critical theory and Hegelian Marxism more generally—from Adorno, to Benjamin, Marcuse, Bloch, Lukács, and Sartre—it brought these different approaches together in order to intimate a future possible dialectical and phenomenological literary criticism.

Marxism and Form's final chapter, entitled 'Towards Dialectical Criticism', begins by summarising the 'organizational dilemma' faced by any dialectical criticism: the dialectic's drive towards holism and totality.

¹¹⁷ Here, I reformulate Rose's indictment of the two major, apparently opposing strands of sociology, both of which are reducible to a post-Kantian paradigm. She writes: 'Structural sociology is "empty", action theory is "blind". The former imposes abstract postulates on social reality and confirms by simplifying the contradictions of dominant law. The latter confirms social reality as a mass of random meanings in its immediate mode of representation.' *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 228-229. This, in turn, parodies Kant's famous formulation from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 193-194 that '[t]houghts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.'

The peculiar difficulty of dialectical writing lies in its holistic, “totalizing” character: as though you could not say any one thing until you had first said everything; as though with each new idea you were bound to recapitulate the entire system. So it is that the attempt to do justice to the most random observation of Hegel ends up drawing the whole tangled, dripping mass of the Hegelian sequence of forms out into the light with it. So it is also that at some point or other books or essays on Marx dutifully end up as rehearsals of historical materialism as a whole. There is no content, for dialectical thought, but total content.¹¹⁸

However, Jameson then goes on to offer by way of solution the innovation of Hegelian phenomenology:

It is for this reason that phenomenology (like the other great contemporary philosophical systems not a discovery of new *content*, but an innovation in *form*) seems to have an answer to what would otherwise, for us, be an organizational dilemma. For phenomenology is precisely the attempt to tell not what a thought is, so much as what it feels like. It aims not at making statements about content (that being momentarily placed between parentheses), but at describing the mental operations which correspond to that content in all their temporal specificity. Its mode of proof, for the reader, consists not in logical argumentation, but rather in the shock, or the failure, of recognition.¹¹⁹

What is key, here, and what so often goes neglected in Hegel scholarship, is the emphasis on Hegelian phenomenology as a primarily *formal* innovation—and a formal innovation that works to provide a certain *experience*. Jameson then goes on to describe the shock of this experience, and its inextricability from, even its identity with, the dialectic:

There is a breathlessness about this shift from the normal object-oriented activity of the mind to such dialectical self-consciousness—something of the sickening shudder

¹¹⁸ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, p. 306.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

we feel in an elevator's fall or in the sudden dip in an airliner. That recalls us to our body much as this recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers. The shock indeed is basic, and constitutive of the dialectic as such: without this transformational moment, without this initial conscious transcendence of an older, more naïve position, there can be no question of any genuinely dialectical coming to consciousness.¹²⁰

What I have emphasised in this final chapter, is that this speculative experience provided by the formal innovation of Hegel's phenomenology also offers a solution to the tendency of criticism and critique to transcendental reduction—in addition to offering a solution to what Jameson identifies as the organisational dilemma represented by the holism of the dialectic. To understand the dialectic from the outside is to formalise it as a schema, to understand it only from a transcendental standpoint. To truly grasp the dialectic requires the critic to experience it, even live it. By emphasising the shocking, even 'sickening' experience of a truly dialectical criticism, through which we are brought to self-consciousness not via logical argumentation but via the sudden, ironic reversal of what we had once held to be true, criticism might be moved beyond its detached, diagnostic mode.

It is a shame, then, that Jameson's subsequent work abandoned this project of a phenomenological dialectical criticism, and reverted to a more Kantian mode, in a decidedly transcendental register. In *The Political Unconscious*, for instance, the 1981 work for which he is perhaps best known (and which, despite this departure, is a breathtakingly intricate work of criticism), Jameson describes his own methodology of critique as: 'the diagnostic revelation of terms or nodal points implicit in the ideological system which have, however, remained unrealised in the surface of the texts, which has failed to become manifest in the logic of the narrative, and which we can therefore read as what the text represses.'¹²¹ What should now be evident here is that, despite positioning himself as a Hegelian Marxist—he speaks, for instance, of the 'unavoidably Hegelian tone [...] of *The Political Unconscious*'¹²²—Jameson remains within a neo-Kantian paradigm. This is because, in this

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 308.

¹²¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 33.

¹²² Ibid., p. xii.

work, the critic assumes a position of methodological detachment, takes the text as a given, and then seeks to diagnose and examine its repressed conditions of possibility.

While this will perhaps require a more substantial engagement elsewhere, let it suffice for now to quote from the book's famous beginning: 'Always historize! The slogan—the one absolute and we may even say "transhistorical" imperative of all dialectical thought—will unsurprisingly turn out to be the moral of *The Political Unconscious* as well.'¹²³ The problem with this is that dialectical thought, at least according to Hegel, presupposes no 'absolute', and certainly no 'imperative' or 'moral'. By neglecting what he had once emphasised in *Marxism and Form*—the shock which is essential to and constitutive of the dialectic as such (provided by what we have called a speculative experience)—Jameson reproduces the erroneous picture of Hegel as a kind of 'Kant+history', whose innovation for critique is a mere historicisation of the Kantian transcendental. Jameson thus produces a Kantian reading of Hegel, for he takes a concept from Hegel (history) and employs it as the precondition of his quasi-transcendental critique.

Unsurprisingly, Jameson's methodologically diagnostic and critically detached approach to literary theory means that he is often picked upon by practitioners of postcritique as an exemplar for all that is wrong with literary studies' critical paradigm. In particular, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, in the editorial introduction to their 2009 issue of *Representations* on 'surface reading', direct most of their polemical ire for 'symptomatic reading' at Jameson's *Political Unconscious*. In it, they present Jamesonian criticism as an authoritarian and elitist practice for which both the writer and reader of literary texts are ideologically brainwashed, requiring the 'heroic' literary critic to 'free the hidden truth hidden in the depths of the text.' Not only does it 'usurp[] the place of the author', they argue, but even the place of God: the Jamesonian critic believes that they alone 'can transcend the blinkered point of view of mankind.'¹²⁴ However, just as we saw that Latour's rejection of Kantian critique leads him to endorse an uncritical naïve realism, Best and Marcus argue that the job of the critic is not to diagnose symptoms, but to far more modestly articulate 'what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor in hiding.'¹²⁵ As I have

¹²³ Ibid., p. ix.

¹²⁴ Best and Marcus, 'Surface Reading', p. 15.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

already argued, such a criticism does not move beyond the antinomies of critique, but is a regression from or disavowal of them.

In a more recent and revealing article from 2016, entitled ‘Marxist Criticism and Hegel’, Jameson concedes that the ‘weak link’ of much contemporary criticism is this awkward move between text and context—or, as we might understand them, text and conditions of possibility—that postcritique has emphasised. ‘Indeed,’ he writes

as far as Marxist literary criticism is concerned, I think it can be generally agreed that its most embarrassing move tends to be this (unavoidable) shifting of gears in which we pass from literary analysis to Marxian interpretation and find ourselves obliged to evoke the social and political meaning of the text in terms of the classes, historical contradictions, political and economic background, the conjectures and forces and ideologies, capitalist alienation, commodification, and ideological occultation and repression, all of which lurk behind the aesthetic curtain and are suddenly unveiled in all their impoverished extraliterary nakedness like the wizard of Oz.¹²⁶

This is precisely the allegedly ‘unavoidable’ shift between text and context which is criticised by postcritics such as Best and Marcus (and Latour, Felski, Love, et al.). However, their proposed solution is to do away with the shift altogether. In the words of Latour, taken up by Felski: ‘Context stinks!’¹²⁷ The text is all that matters. Jameson then goes on to invoke his own method of critique in ‘a much older work’ (that is, *The Political Unconscious*), only to self-deprecatingly admit that the methodology on offer there ‘is a solution that does not solve, or even paper over, the crucial moment of transition, the embarrassing link of the move from text to context.’¹²⁸

Now, the rest of the article turns to another possible solution, developed from the logic of essence in Hegel’s *Logic*. This particular method for literary criticism proposes that, by ‘following a number of logical preconditions for the work back in time, we lay in place what had already to be—socially, historically, formally, existentially, or psychologically—

¹²⁶ Fredric Jameson, ‘Marxist Criticism and Hegel’, *PMLA*, 131 (2016), 430-438 (p. 432).

¹²⁷ See Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp. 151-185

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

before reconstructing the actual production of the thing in itself, its emergence into Existence and its appearance, its reception and meaning for Actuality.¹²⁹ However, despite having abstracted this methodological procedure from a passage in Hegel, this could not be a more exemplary statement of Kantian criticism: once again, this is a methodology which instructs us to take the work, then reconstruct it by identifying its conditions of possibility. Jameson proposes to overcome the awkward moment of transition between text and context by taking the text as a given only to then methodically build from the ground up (from its logical to its social, historical, formal, etc. preconditions—or contexts) to explain its existence, reception, and meaning.

The difference between this proposed criticism, and the criticism intimated in *Marxism and Form*—whose ‘mode of proof [...] consists not in logical argumentation, but rather in the shock, or the failure, of recognition’—could not be more marked. Andrew Cole states at the end of his book on *The Birth of Theory* that ‘with Jameson, Hegelianism outdoes itself by completing itself. It finds its telos. It ends.’¹³⁰ But by inheriting the Kantian dichotomies of validity and value, and by neglecting the import of Hegelian phenomenology and speculative experience, it can be demonstrated that, with Jameson, Hegelianism is not realised at all.

VI. Towards dialectical criticism, again

What, then, would a return to Jameson’s initial aborted project of a phenomenological and dialectical literary criticism look like? Put differently, what would a renewal of critique based on a retrieval of Hegelian speculative experience do for literary theory?

One example is implied in Rebecca Comay’s *Mourning Sickness*—which has been a constant point of reference for this thesis. In her account of Hegel’s phenomenology, which is alive to its form as well as its content, Comay demonstrates how Hegel constantly collapses the boundary between spectator and spectacle, the reader and what is read, the object and subject of critique, and the edifying comfort that these neat distinctions bring. The reader of

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 437.

¹³⁰ Cole, *The Birth of Theory*, p. 149.

the *Phenomenology* constantly finds that they are the one on stage, already observed by what they seek to observe. The critical force of this ironic experience is that it makes our sociopolitical determination, and even our complicity with it, known and felt. Comay strikingly describes this rude awakening, analogous to ‘the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator’s fall’ invoked by Jameson, with recourse to both theatrical and suicidal metaphors: ‘Having cleared the stage of all actors, dialogue, and costumes, I have put myself in the position of the last executioner in the famous Thermidorian print who, having executed everyone else, must finish off the job by staging his own execution. Stage manager, actor, and spectator all in one, I must learn to do the police in different voices.’¹³¹ There is implicit here, at once, a conception of critique, a theory of reading, and even an ethics. Again and again, the reader of the *Phenomenology* who assumed the position of spectator, finds that they are the one performing the action. We purport to keep our hands clean and conscience clear by drawing distinctions between reader and what is read—by undertaking detached critical and ethical reflections—but the true ethical revolution of the *Phenomenology* is the way in which it collapses these distinctions, and reveals the complicity and culpability of such a gaze.

A similar theory and ethics of reading and critique is also implicit in the critical work of Keston Sutherland—which, in turn, argues that such a theory is implicit in the work of Karl Marx. In his essay ‘Marx in Jargon’, Sutherland argues that the ‘concept’ or ‘theory’ of ‘commodity fetishism’ has been severely misunderstood. Firstly, ‘*der Fetischcharakter der Ware*’ is ‘the fetish-character of commodities.’ To understand it as ‘the *fetishism* of commodities’, as the official mistranslation would have it, is to suggest that the fetishism is merely a mode of apprehension, or else an epistemological problem, rather than an irreducible and insurmountable feature of the character of commodities themselves.¹³² This has led to the second misunderstanding, whereby the fetish-character has been understood as a concept or theory, or else a conceptual or theoretical problem; a problem of signification or understanding, rather than a problem with social reality itself.¹³³

¹³¹ Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, p. 89.

¹³² Sutherland, ‘Marx in Jargon’, pp. 33-34.

¹³³ Incidentally, and as Sutherland also notes, this misunderstanding of *der Fetischcharakter* is implied by Jameson when he writes that ‘if commodity fetishism can in one way be usefully described as “the effacement of the traces of production from the object”, then aesthetic dereification will naturally enough be identified as the will to conceal those traces.’ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 188. Qtd. in Sutherland, ‘Marx in Jargon’, p. 84n37.

What, then, is the fetish-character if not a concept or a theory? By philologically reconstructing Marx's writing, Sutherland demonstrates that it is in fact the subject of a satirical drama at the expense of his bourgeois reader. *Der Fetisch* as articulated by Marx is a term derived and *détourned* from the work of the eighteenth-century, aristocratic French ethnographer, Charles de Brosses. Throughout his 1760 essay on *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches*, de Brosses performatively dramatises a sense of 'astonishment' on behalf of all enlightened modern European readers at the primitive phenomenon of fetish worship—of the worship of inanimate objects and animals by so-called 'savages.' He writes: 'one cannot prevent oneself from being *astonished* by the fact that nations and ages [*siècles*] so remote from each other should agree on the same idea.'¹³⁴ This 'astonishment' does not, as Giorgio Agamben has *theorised* it, evince de Brosses' 'forgetfulness of the original status of objects'¹³⁵; but is rather, as Sutherland shows, evidence of a 'form of polite, literary socializing among equals, a way of dramatizing and giving confessional literary colour to his recognition of the kindred intelligence of his reader.'¹³⁶ This practice of literary astonishment is '*irresistible* in the sense that it fulfils a moral imperative and serves as evidence of civilized sensibility.'¹³⁷ De Brosses' drama is thus a satire at the expense of a 'barbaric' figure, aimed at establishing 'sympathetic mutuality' between members of the same class, 'on the grounds of their common difference from the stupid and the unenlightened.'¹³⁸ What is particularly essential, here, is that '[f]etishism in *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches* is not a "concept"; it is, rather, the subject of a drama'—a drama which 'depends on a specific historical *dramatis personae* sharing specific relations.'¹³⁹ By translating 'fetishism' into a concept of a theory, this irreducibly literary character is overlooked.

¹³⁴ Charles de Brosses, *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches, ou Parallèle de l'ancienne Religion de l'Égypte avec la Religion actuelle de Nigritie* (Westmead: Gregg International, 1972), p. 237. Qtd. in and trans. by Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon', p. 58.

¹³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. by Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 35. Qtd. in Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon', p. 57.

¹³⁶ Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon', p. 58.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Despite not mentioning Hegel here, Sutherland's account of Marx's subsequent *détournement* of de Brosses' literary astonishment and *fétichisme* exemplifies the ironic, even satiric force of the dialectic, of all speculative experience. In Marx's *Capital*, the barbarian figure is not ultimately (as it was for de Brosses) a mere subject of ridicule; a means for polite, albeit racist, literary socialising among smug, self-important equals. Instead, the barbarian figure is the bourgeois reader—that is, perhaps, us.

The figure who is incapable of disenchanting or conquering the fetish-character of the commodity is first invoked as either 'an infant, or a barbarian or a cannibal.' Thus, '[t]he stage is set, in this prologue to theoretical disillumination, for a literary conversation that will illuminate sympathetic mutuality between Marx and his readers.'¹⁴⁰ And yet, once promised, this sense of security, certainty, community, and superiority—of all the comfort and confidence that comes with critical detachment—we are rudely and radically denied it. We are denied the sympathetic mutuality of the community of readers who can judge this barbarian figure: for this barbarian figure, we are shocked and disgusted to find, is us. As Sutherland puts it, echoing Marx's own horrific metaphor: despite our initial false assurance, we soon discover that 'we are instead the person, like the infant vampire who licks clean the cauldron of *Gallerte*, sucking the blood off his milk teeth, who is real by negative virtue of not yet being impossible.'¹⁴¹ This is because the fetish-character of the commodity is not something that will be disenchanting and therefore vanquished through a process of analysis or logical argumentation, as it is so often implied. It is instead the assurance of the fact 'that you are eating your brothers and sisters and that no act of deconstruction [...] will get humanity out of your mouth.'¹⁴² This 'stupefaction', to use Sutherland's word, or this 'shock [...] of recognition', as the early Jameson calls it, constitutive of speculative experience as such, is the same one as theorised by Rose which, by 'demonstrat[ing] the domination of abstraction [...] urges *us* to transform ethical life by recognising the law of its determination.' In the act of reading, she writes elsewhere, '[i]nstead of emerging with sentimental tears which leave us emotionally and politically intact, we emerge with the dry eyes of a deep grief, which belongs to the recognition of our ineluctable grounding in the norms of the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁴² Sutherland, *Stupefaction*, p. 13.

emotional and political culture represented.¹⁴³ By recognising the law of our determination—that is, that we are necessarily implicated in a system of universal suffering—we, the reader, are faced with a dead end for which there is no theoretical solution. It is the revelation of this determination that produces the only truly Marxist ethical injunction, which is revolution.¹⁴⁴

This is the truth of the Hegelian irony theorised in the first chapter of this dissertation, a dramatic irony to which we are not privy until it is too late. As Comay and Sutherland (and also Marx) show, a speculative experience is one in which we are led into a sense of security and certainty, only to be rudely, even violently confronted with what that comfort disavows. It is also emblematic of the refusal of any methodological distinction between the subject and object of critique, and also of any neat dichotomy of objective determinations and their subjective mediations. The subject of the speculative satire is both the critic's pretensions to detachment, but also the disavowed barbarism of the bourgeois reader. In fact, they are the same thing.

Here is a kind of criticism which recalls ourselves to ourselves with violence. In reading speculatively, we recollect not only the ironic truth of the text, but the ironic coexistence of real life with real abstraction. Crucially, however, this criticism is not conducted by the critic alone, but the reader in cooperation with the text. While a Marxist criticism in the Kantian mode may point behind the text to its objective determination, it is only through the speculative experience of the unbearable disjunction between the fetters of this determination and our subjective freedom as represented in and by the text (our expression, feeling, passion, hatred, and love) that we have any hope of saving the life that this determination squanders: of recognising the rose in the cross of the present, of preserving subjective freedom in the realm of the substantial. To retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for literary theory might therefore reveal and sustain the irony of life lived under the dominion of its opposite.

¹⁴³ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 54.

¹⁴⁴ As already noted: Rose argues that this represents the trace of a necessary yet disavowed imperative or *Sollen* of Hegel's thought.

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