

OF STRUCTION¹

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I

Technology² supplants and supplements nature. It comes to supplant or take the place of nature wherever nature does not provide certain ends (such as a house or a bed), and it comes to supplement nature when it adds itself onto nature's ends and means. This twofold value is what Derrida inscribes into the "logic of the supplement," and one could say that this logic itself has no other source or medium than precisely this relationship between technology and nature. The supplement and its twofold concept always fall under the category of technology, artifice, or art, three words which are nearly synonymous in this regard.

Two conditions are necessary for this to be the case: to begin with, nature must present a few characteristic lacks (it is able to offer shelters, but not houses); then, it must be possible for technology to be grafted onto nature (using its materials, its forces). This is indeed the case: on the one hand, the animals of the *homo* species or varieties at least express needs that nature does not satisfy (inhabiting, warming up), and on the other hand, the technologies invented by *homo* take their operating resources (sharp stones, fire) from nature. Fire represents, perhaps, the symbolic meeting point where supplanting and supplementing occurs: it can light up during a thunderstorm, a volcanic eruption, or a spontaneous combustion of gas, and it constitutes the major "invention" of the first human beings despite the fact that it is not combustion that they invent but rather the conservation and "technological" production of combustion. What applies to fire also applies to electricity, semiconductors, optical fibers, and the energy that is released by atomic fission and fusion. Nature always contains and offers the prime matter for technology, whereas technology alters, transforms, and converts natural resources toward its own ends.

This very simple consideration has an important consequence: technology does not come from outside of nature. It has a place within nature, and furthermore, if nature is defined as what achieves its own ends by itself, then technology too must be defined as one of nature's ends, since it is from nature that the animal that is capable of—or in need of—technology is born.

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Technology in turn undergoes its own development: it no longer simply responds to its own shortcomings; it generates its own expectations and tries to respond to the demands that come from itself. This is what happens as soon as the artificial selection of plants and livestock is invented. What follows from this is the construction of an order that is specific to technology, a relatively autonomous order that develops new expectations and demands from out of its own possibilities. It not only consists in the assemblage of materials and forces (what are called “simple machines”: lever, mill, etc.), but also in the elaboration of logics that are structured by a given that is itself produced in view of a new end: good examples include the power of vapor, oil and gas, electricity, and the atom, and later cybernetics and numerical computation (immaterial givens which at once presuppose and bring about new treatments and assemblages of matter, such as with silicon or deuterium).

What profoundly instructs this development is not “the machine,” as it is all too often thought. The machine does not suddenly emerge from out of nowhere. It is machined itself—that is to say, it is conceived, elaborated, and structured by the ends that one proposes oneself. A few anecdotes about inventions that are due to chance (the observation of vapor raising the lid of a boiling pot) cannot obscure the fact that the process of technological invention is a process which is specific to the unfolding of aims and investigations that are oriented by this aim. We attempt to go faster and further, to cross oceans, to produce in greater quantities, to reach the enemy from afar, etc. At one and the same time we attempt to transport more goods, make investments for this, and insure against the risks of it: financial technologies are on an equal footing with nautical technologies within a development that presupposes the existence of independent and competing entrepreneurs—that is, an entire sociopolitical and juridical technology that structures the whole space of our common way of life [*la vie commune*].



Thus “technology” itself is not only limited to the order of “technologies” in the sense that one speaks of them today. Technology is a structuration of ends—it is a thought, a culture, or a civilization, however one wants to word it—of the indefinite construction of complexes of ends that are always more ramified, intertwined, and combined, but above all of ends that are characterized by the constant redevelopment of their own constructions. The transmission of sound, image, and information without a tangible medium creates new assemblages of both apparatuses and modes of life or ways of living. The possibility of acting on certain diseases or else on fertility or life spans through interventions and substances that are invented for these purposes or ends creates new social, sexual, and affective conditions.

At this stage or level, ends and means never stop changing roles with one another. Technology develops a general regime of inventing ends that are themselves thought through the perspective of means (How can sterility be overcome? How can an animated image be transmitted?), and by consequence, that are thought through the perspective of means that are taken as ends (it’s good to live longer, it’s good that money yields more money). This is also why the technologies of the arts—that is to say, technologies as “arts” or the enjoyment of ends in themselves, or forms that have value on their own—can become on the one hand the highest standard of every relationship to ends (everything must be put into image, sound, rhythm, everything must be hypostasized into a monstration: bodies, products, and places) and on the other hand the privileged domain for an interrogation into finality (Why art? What is it for?) that becomes suspicious of identity (What is art? What is it in the service of?).

Construction and deconstruction are closely interconnected with one another. What is constructed according to a logic of ends and means is deconstructed when it comes into contact with the outermost edge where ends reveal themselves to be endless and where means, for their part, reveal themselves to be temporary ends that generate new possibilities for construction. The automobile has given birth to the highway, which has given birth to new modes and norms of transport. It is also making the city have to reinvent both its means of transportation (streetcars, etc.) and over time the very aims or ends of a “city.” Digital cameras and editing processes are deconstructing and reconstructing not only the formal landscape of cinema, but also the signification and the stakes of this art form (along with digital audio processing).

II

What is at stake more generally in this process is sense: whereas we were in the habit of relating sense to an ultimate purpose or final end (whether it be one of history, wisdom, or salvation), today we are discovering that ends are proliferating at the same time as they are constantly transforming themselves into means. In this regard one could say that technology and nihilism go together: whereas until now one used to describe ends (values, ideals, and senses) as being destitute, today ends are multiplying indefinitely at the same time as they are showing themselves more and more to be substitutable and of equal value.

Still it is precisely here that technology conveys its lesson: through technology, nature itself—from which technology is descended—reveals that nature is by itself devoid of an end. We knew this and we said that “the rose is without a why / it flowers simply because it flowers.” But this “without why” continued to foster a more or less muted, more or less latent relationship with a hidden reign in which things were gratuitous, a hidden reign in which we thought we might be able to recognize a pure glory of Being (as long as we no longer needed to locate a divine goodness in it anymore).

Technology teaches us to do away with this glory and hidden reign. This is troubling not only for our meta-physical, theological, and spiritual tendencies, but also for our poetic inclinations. In a sense, this challenges all of our loftiness, sublimities, inclinations, and dispositions that are oriented towards grandeur and thus towards something other than the always mediocre measure of a life that is subjected to a necessity or need that nothing can ever explain. And if it is not explained, this need, this simple need to live, is transformed into a servitude, whereby we feel that we are slaves to technology and to its manifest corollary: capitalism, as the infinite production of values that are producible, exchangeable, and liable to grow exponentially. Value as monetary value in a way represents an inversion of nature: that which grows by itself but whose flourishing is confounded with indefinite growth and yet displays neither flowering nor fruit. “Yield” is not a random term used to speak about the profitability of an investment, including a purely financial investment (in sum, development in itself in its pure form and trade in its pure form without any reference outside of itself).

Capitalism constitutes the exhibiting of a proliferation through value—the proliferating infinity of ends and sense to which technology has introduced us. This exhibiting defines end, sense, and value precisely as the very process of an endless increase (we speak of “growth”). It is from this process that we could, as Marx did, look toward a passage through the limit and a reversal through which growth would reach a stage where its fruits would become available to all without relying on a distortion between the conditions of their production and their actual value (their pleasant taste, their value, their non-tradeable sense). This expectation presupposed something like a nature that would come to reclaim its rights. A *phusis* that, through technology as growth—revealing that all technology is growth—would bring about the flowering and yield of a value or sense that is free from any measure, equivalence, or possibility of subtraction or accumulation.

Yet it is not a *phusis* that is unfolding beneath our eyes. We would claim that it is the contrary of a *phusis*, and we are prepared to call this contrary “technology.” Still as I have mentioned, if technology is the unfolding of nature, one cannot see nature as the contrary of technology—or else we have to know how to consider this in terms of a reversal of nature in and of itself: but would this not renew a dialectic from out of which we would inevitably anticipate a second nature?

It is therefore necessary to think otherwise. If “technology” gives a sense to “nature,” from which technology is constructed and which it destroys at the same time, this implies that speaking of nature is no longer entirely possible, nor by consequence is it possible to speak of “technology.” The opposition of *phusis* and *technē*, the use of which Aristotle established, has undergone several centuries of maturation, which has complicated this opposition by contorting it in a decisive way through the introduction of what Derrida would later call the “supplement” and what Heidegger designated as “the last sending of Being.” In any case, what is at stake is this: “technology,” as that which adds to “nature” and opens ends that it ignores, constructs in reality the very idea of this “nature”—its immanence, autofinality, and law of blossoming. Yet it is also nature which destroys and deconstructs this idea, and with it an entire structure of representations which have organized Western thought.

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It is remarkable that the motif of destruction punctuates the dawn of modernity: first with Baudelaire, for whom “Destruction” concentrates, in his poem by the same name, all the “repugnant” and “demonic” desire which overwhelms him as he overwhelms (in “Meditation”) “the vile multitude,” and then, as it is well known, with Mallarmé, for whom destruction was “[his] Beatrice.”³ One may also recall Rimbaud: “Is it possible to become ecstatic amid destruction, rejuvenate oneself through cruelty!”⁴

(Before the dawn of modernity, the motif of *ruin* already occupied an ambivalent place by exhibiting the melancholic charm of broken-down constructions, that is, monuments to their own ruin).

III

There has thus been something like an enlargement of construction: not so much the edification or erection of buildings, for which the temple, the palace, and the tomb formed the triple paradigm, but rather the montage, assemblage, and composition of forces whereby the “engineering structure” [*ouvrage d’art*] almost gives it its concept (bridge, pier, fort, hall, etc.). The engineering structure requires an engineer more than a builder, a constructor more than a founder (and incidentally one also *constructs* roads, vessels, silos, chariots, and machines). Construction becomes dominant when edification, on the one hand, and making, on the other hand, become industrial and engineered, or in other words, when they bring into play the construction of operational, dynamic, and energy-producing schemata which serve ends that are themselves invented and constructed according to defined aims (production power, speed, durability, reproducibility, etc.).

The constructive paradigm that has been spread through urbanization, means of exploration and transportation, and the mobilization of non-manifest energies (coal, gas, oil, electricity, magnetism, digital computation, etc.)—a paradigm that has rendered ends and means more and more consubstantial—has led to a response of destruction. This does not concern ruining and demolishing so much as it concerns detaching oneself from what could be called “constructivism” (if one reappropriates a term whose invention in the beginning of the 20th Century is nevertheless not insignificant). The Heideggerian *Destruktion* of ontology, which expressly distinguishes itself from demolition (*Zerstörung*), is “destruction” in this sense (Granel and Derrida translate it as “deconstruction”). In a way it gives a philosophical counterpart to the existential and aesthetic Destructions of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Construction as such is brought into play (as well as “instruction,” as what puts knowledge into an order: one could demonstrate it through the recent use of the term “instruction” in school contexts—the expression “*Instruction publique*” [Public Education] dates back to the French Revolution and “*instruction religieuse*” [religious education] is not any older than this).



Onto what does destruction open? Perhaps onto the very movement of modern construction? What is of concern is not to “re-construct” (contrary to the incessantly repeated petition addressed to “deconstructionists”: will you reconstruct already?). Nor is it to return to founding, building, constituting, or instituting gestures, even if it is to open and inaugurate, to allow for a birth of sense. What is at stake beyond construction and deconstruction is *struccion* as such.⁵

Struo signifies “to amass,” “to heap.” It is truly not a question of order or organization that is implied by *con-* and *in-*struction. It is the heap, the non-assembled ensemble. Surely it is contiguity and co-presence, but without a principle of coordination.

By speaking of “nature,” we used to suppose or rather superimpose that there was a coordination that was proper and immanent to the profusion of beings (a spontaneous or rather divine construction). With “technology,” we used to suppose that there was a coordination that was ruled or regulated by ends that were particular to “humankind” (their needs, capacities, and expectations). By acting retroactively, if one may say so, onto “nature” from where it comes out of or emerges (we cannot decide between these two concepts...), “technology” muddles the two possibilities for coordination. It invites the consideration of a struction: the uncoordinated simultaneity of things or beings, the contingency of their belonging together, the dispersion of profusions of

aspects, species, forces, forms, tensions, and intentions (instincts, drives, inclinations, and momentums). In this profusion, no order is valued more than the others: they all—instincts, responses, irritabilities, connectivities, equilibriums, catalyses, metabolisms—seem destined to collide or dissolve into one another or to be confused with one another.

Whereas the paradigm had been architectural, and consequently architectonic in a more metaphysical way, it then became more structural—a composition, surely, an assembling, but without constructive finality—and finally structional, that is to say, relative to an assembling that is labile, disordered, aggregated, or amalgamated rather than conjoined, reunited, paired with, or associated.

In fact, it is the question of a “sociation” in general that is posed alongside struction. Can there be an association, a society—if the *socius* is the one who “goes with” or “accompanies” and if, as a result, she or he brings into play an active or positive value of the “with” or *cum* around which or through which something akin to a sharing plays out? What I am calling here “struction” would be the state of the “with” deprived of the value of sharing, bringing into play only simple contiguity and its contingency. It may be, to take back the terms that Heidegger wants to distinguish in his approach to the “with” (the *mit* in the *Mitdasein* as the ontological constitution of the existent), a “with” that is uniquely categorial and not existential: the pure and simple juxtaposition that does not make sense.

IV

Perhaps struction is the lesson of technology—a construction-deconstruction of the ensemble of beings without any distinction between “nature” and “art”—insofar as it instructs us with this instruction (which indeed we do not comprehend and which appears badly constructed to us). Following this instruction, sense from now on will not let itself be constructed or instructed. What is given to us only consists in the juxtaposition and simultaneity of a copresence in which the *co-* does not bear any other particular value than that of contiguity or juxtaposition within the limits according to which the universe itself is given. At the same time, these limits themselves are only given with the caveat that it is impossible to properly assign them as delimitations of a world in relation to what is beyond or behind it. On the one hand, the universe is said to be expanding as the same time as it is finite; on the other hand, it cannot even be called a “universe” but only a “multiverse.” And yet, in order to think beyond the “universe,” it is no longer necessary of course to understand the multiple worlds as one (or several) other world(s). “They are not somewhere else but modes of relating to what is ‘outside-of-itself.’”⁶

The idea of the universe contains a schema of construction or architecture: a basis, a foundation, and a substruction (a word that is also found in the work of Mallarmé!) that forms the base on which uni-totally is erected and assembled. Uni-totally is posited on the basis of its own supposition and refers essentially to itself; in short, it is in itself (and “Being” is Being “in itself” within the thought that is sustained by this schema). But copresence and coappearance both turn away from the in-itself and construction: “Being” is no longer in itself, but rather contiguity, contact, tension, distortion, crossing, and assemblage. “Being,” of course, shows traits of “construction” understood as mutual disposition and mutual distribution of the multiverses which belong to each other, but not as a (sup)position of a Being or a fundamental real.⁷ The real does not dissolve itself at all in unreality, but rather opens onto the reality of its nonsupposition [*insupposition*]. This is what is signified by the dissolution of the *technē/physis* opposition or what we call “the reign of technology.”

This is what has occurred in our history. We have come to a point in which architectonics and architecture—understood as the determinations of an essential construction or essence as construction—no longer have value. They have worn themselves out by themselves.

Still it has not only been a question of being worn out. It is not only a construction that has been destroyed by time. It is the very principle of construction that has been weakened.

The accumulation, noted above, of motifs of destruction at that time—around 1900, which is traditionally considered as “the” turn of the century *par excellence*, the time in which in fact something was inverted and

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overturned, where an edifice was weakened to the point that one could say, in every possible sense, that the edifying and the edified trembled—this accumulation bears witness to a sort of saturation point and a rupture in the model of “construction.” This signifies that construction bore within itself the seed of deconstruction. What first presented itself as the extension of the assemblage and montage of *tools*—continuations of bodies and simple machines—and later as the expansion of a gesture of mastery or command—the administration and governance of energies (vapor, electricity, chemical reactions) in lieu of the mere use of forces (moving water, winds, gravity)—revealed another nature: one of combination, interaction, and, later, feedback.

In reality, an entire *organicity* or a quasi-organicity has been developed. In sum, the constructive paradigm is overcoming itself; it is overconstructing itself by tending towards an organic autonomy. Overconstruction is turning into struction.

V

Or rather, according to another, slightly different perspective, it is the organic autonomy of our own behavior that has been extended very far beyond not only our bodies but even our minds by asking the latter to export and expose itself under the form of highly self-referential “machines” whose laws and schemas of organization require certain operations from our behavior in return. We learn how to use a computer, on our desk as well as in our car, in the train, on a plane, on a boat, for archeological excavations and for recording data, and in the “creation” of sounds and images. This use does not only imply a new domain of expertise but also a different space-time that incidentally is nonhomogenous and non-unitary or “universal”: we are, at each moment and all at once, in the extension of certain modules that are put into operation everywhere (a digital procedure, a use of signals or icons) and also in the renewal of unprecedented possibilities, which are without a doubt very repetitive (everyone takes the same photos of the same monuments, etc.) but whose very repetition lights up a new reality. We are no longer in the process of discovering a world that has remained in part unknown; we are in a spiraling, growing pile of pieces, parts, zones, fragments, slivers, particles, elements, outlines, seeds, kernels, clusters, points, meters, knots, arborescences, projections, proliferations, and dispersions according to which we are now more than ever taken hold of, interwoven into, absorbed into, and dislodged from a prodigious mass that is unstable, moving, plastic, and metamorphic, a mass which renders the distinction between “subject” and “object” or between “man” and “nature” or “world” less and less possible for us.

In fact, we are perhaps no longer within a world or “in the world” [*au monde*]. What is disappearing or being diluted is the more advanced sense of the *cosmos* or beautiful unity that is composed according to a superior order that directs it and which it also reflects. Our “world”—or our element—is instead composed of bits and pieces which, taken all together, are proliferated from the same source (humankind, the technological animal of nature, the constructive appendage of a great all that shows itself to be rarely constructed but incredibly rich in con-de-in-structive potentialities). Still the bits and pieces or “elements”—which are never elementary enough—of this great “element”—in the sense of a milieu or an ecosystem which is an *ecotechnology*—constantly escape the grasp of every construction. Their assemblage does not refer to a first or final construction but rather to a kind of continuous creation where what is constantly rekindled and renewed is the very possibility of the world—or rather the multiplicity of worlds.

In this sense, struction opens less onto a past or future and more onto a present that is never really accomplished in presence. It opens onto a temporality that definitely cannot correspond to a linear diachrony. Within this temporality there is something synchronic, which is not so much a cut across diachrony as it is a mode of uniting the segments of traditional time, which is the very unity of the present as it is *presenting itself*, as it is arriving, taking place, or coming about. This *coming about* is the time of struction: an event whose significance is not only that of the unexpected or inaugural—not only the significance of rupture or regeneration in the timeline—but also the significance of the passage, of ephemerality intermixed with eternity.

There is something outside of time at the heart of time: surely nothing else than what was perceived in all of our chronic thought in how time flies or gets away from us, or in the present instant’s perpetual flight. Still here “flight” does not signify a disappearance any more than the event signifies an appearance. As with (de)(con)

struction, it is necessary to uncouple (dis)(ap)pearance. “Pearance” or appearance is the appearing—but not as the manifestation of a phenomenon or as the semblance of appearance. As it is suggested by the former use of the word, “appearing” is coming into presence, presenting itself or oneself. That is, coming near to or beside. It is always appearing with.

Within this appearing with a displacement is revealed, a curve in the phenomenological apparatus. It does not so much concern the relationship between an aim and its fulfillment as it does the correlation of appearing between themselves. It is not so much about a subject and a world than it is about references that send the world back into itself and to itself, about the profusion of these referrals and the way that they thus create what could be called a sense, a sense of the world that is nothing other than its appearing with: that there is a world, and all that is in the world, and not nothing.

VI

This kind of brute obviousness might seem to bring us back to a nascent, infantile, and rudimentary state. We would have nothing else to receive, project, or express than the crudest of conditions. We could not account for the world or give any kind of justice to the fact of its existence. Technology would have both withdrawn any kind of final aim or end or supreme good and also rendered reason to be proliferating, exorbitant, and even delirious in its very self-sufficiency—growing like a cancer.

However, to have arrived at the state of struction does not necessarily signify having regressed or degenerated. There may be progress in the passage beyond the processes of construction, instruction, and destruction. Struction is liberation from the obsession that wants to think the real or Being under a schema of construction and that thus exhausts itself in the pointless quest for an architect or mechanic of the world.

Struction offers a dis-order that is neither the contrary nor the destruction or ruin of order: it is situated somewhere else in what we call contingency, fortuity, dispersion, or errancy, which could equally be called surprise, invention, chance, meeting, or passage. It is nothing but the copresence or better yet the appearing-together of all that appears, that is, of all that is.

That which is, in effect, does not appear from out of a Being in itself. Being is itself appearing; it is appearing in an integral way. Nothing comes before or follows the “phenomenon” that is Being itself. Being itself is therefore not at all beings since it is the appearing of a being that “is” only appearing and appearing with. Thus in addition one must say that everything appears-through together: everything refers back to everything and thus everything shows itself through everything. Without end—and more precisely, without beginning or end.



Can we learn the logic—the ontology, the mythology, or the atheology, if one has to find a name for it—of this simple and inextricable appearing with? That is, of this *ecotechnology* that our ecologies and economies have already become, namely states of equilibrium in our milieus and ways of managing our subsistence?

Technology presents us from all sides with dispersion, often irritation, and always the indefinite multiplication of its aims or ends that are neither ends nor means. We prolong life merely to prolong it. We manage services for these prolonged lives. We increase our biochemical and biomechanical know-how, from which we extract new possibilities for further modes of assisting other endangered lives—and we are always further away from knowing how to think about “life,” not only the existence of each and every one but also the life of the ensemble of the living or of all of the living together. We are always further away from thinking nothing less than the impetus of the world through the question of “life,” that is, if “life” itself—what we thus call life—is not contained within the movement of assemblages, combinations, or actions and reactions that we call “matter.” Matter proves itself more and more thanks to exploratory technologies that are increasingly precise, but which are themselves becoming intricately connected to their “objects.”⁸

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Ultimately, all that we have called “matter” and “life” as well as “nature,” “god,” “history,” and “humankind,” have fallen into the same grave. The “death of God” is indeed precisely the death of all of these substances-subjects. As with the former death, the latter deaths are very long and, in our perception(s) and even for our imagination(s), never-ending. And furthermore, they carry within themselves formerly unseen potentialities of a practical, concrete death of the living, a death of human beings and why not of the world? With each step taken by technology, not only ends, means, and deviations become indistinguishable, but harms and benefits also become intermixed, all the more so since we often do not even know what must truly be considered as a harm or a benefit (For example, is the speed [*vitesse*] of transportation or transmission a “good” or a “bad” thing and according to what criteria?).

As soon as we think that we still have a few principles or rules of conduct—and, in fact, we do have some elementary ones such as bare or “vital necessities”—we cannot avoid being led toward the questions of their foundations or ultimate aims or ends. A decent life, yes, but to what end? And to which “decency”? To which level beyond mere survival? To an equality, yes, but to an equality of what if one were to go beyond the bare minimum of law? To consider each human being as an end and not exclusively as a means? Yes, but according to what? How are each an “end”? How and from where do all of the agents and levers that reduce it to the state of means enter (there are so many: economical, political, religious, and ideological ones)?

Yet we cannot presuppose that the entire assemblage and becoming of the world answers to, beneath appearances that are so problematic and even aporetic, an *intelligent design*. This idea is the typical product of a lack of thought concerning technology: it places back before nature the very *technē* that this presumed nature ends up producing.

One could also wonder whether the Western transformation, which was a technological transformation (iron, currency, alphabet, law) at the same time as it was a religious one (the end of human sacrifice, the end of theocratic empires), did not also open up the double possibility of a god that is conceived of as the one who conceives and architect of the world, and also a god who is given in distance and non-presence. The other cosmogonies rarely if ever possess the character of a blueprint and a construction. Instead their gods are present and active in a world in which they are, in a way, “nature” itself.

In any case, it is indeed the image of a god as an architect or clockmaker or as a constructor and technician that has emerged within and imposed itself on our culture, a Platonic demiurge combined with an all-powerfulness which took over or was put in charge of the totality of a world whose beginning and end were clearly outside of itself and in the power and glory of a “Supreme Constructor.” This Constructor precipitated along with its fall a distant, personal, and living divinity of which it was the double. Thus at the same time as it became less and less possible to understand the technological blueprint of the construction of a world (which was the question of theodicy as a justification for the work of the divine), it also became less and less possible to resort to a “salvation” and a “grace” or a “love” that ultimately would supplant and supplement an impossible legitimization.

Neither providence nor promise: one could say that it is the entire situation or situation of togetherness that is developed by technology. It is clear that any representation of an *intelligent design* is bound to fail since the “intelligence” within it only represents itself—in other words, essentially a technological intelligence or an intelligence that is purely focused on technology.⁹ This intelligence can only be presupposed by its own production. Still it is condemned then to presuppose its own limits as well: because if it is a designer that conceived and constructed (both amount to the same thing) matter and life, both of which open onto human intelligence, why does human intelligence understand nothing about why it is there once its intellect itself compels it to renounce the projections of an “end,” a “second nature,” “nature” itself, and a “rational” or “total person”?

At the time when a technology (pottery, architecture, clockmaking, etc.) could have been a model for the intelligent design or intent of a Prime Technician, the model implied an aim toward an end. Today the model itself—“technology” thought as a dimension that is anthropological, cosmological, and ontological (and no longer as an order subordinated to what used to be called the “mechanic arts”)—manifests itself as a proliferation or even a pulverization of “ends” that cannot possibly be imprinted onto the schema of a supposed Designer anymore.

We must dispense with “intelligent design” or intent. This cannot be disputed. One might want to argue to the contrary that a Primordial Intelligence is far more vast than ours and that its intent is precisely to make us search for, fumble around, and stumble around in the limits of the erratic proliferation of its endless goals or finalities—something like what Derrida called “destinerrance.” But even if one admitted this, one would still have to face the question of an intent and design that is put to work in the wandering or errancy that we are. One could say then that the hypothesis of *intelligent design* annuls itself in another way: after having once been a hypothesis that was incapable of understanding itself, it has become a hypothesis which asks in turn for another hypothesis, a hypothesis about the sense of errancy, and even more precisely, about the sense of the errancy of sense.

To this, one must also add the following: we are not only living technicians perplexed by the development of their art or know-how. We are not only overwhelmed and disconcerted that all of the forms and aspects of sense have been brought into play and called into question. We are also ourselves already caught up in this transformation. We have been inserting ourselves into a technosphere, which is our development; what we call “technology” exceeds the entire order of tools, instruments, and machines. It does not concern what is possible through command or mastery (a means to an end), but rather the expansion of the brain (if one wants to call it this) within a network of “intelligence” that extrapolates a mastery that is significant by itself and for itself, a mastery that is an end and a means in itself indefinitely.

Since it is pointless to cast a veil over the errancy in struction—the veil of any preconceived “sense” that is taken from a model of “intelligence” which is supposedly “good”—then it is incumbent on us to reinvent everything beginning with “sense.” Sense does not correspond anymore to a schema of construction or to one of destruction and reconstruction: it must correspond to a “destinerrance” which signifies that even though we are not going towards any term or limit—as a result of providence, tragic destiny, or fabricated history—we are still not devoid of “going.” We are not devoid of advancing, roaming, crossing, and also experiencing [*faire l'expérience*], a word that used to express “going to the very end, to the outermost limit.”

Wisdom cries out from all sides: “This must stop at once! How far will it go?” This is because, in effect, it is limitlessness that is sprouting up on all sides. It is cropping up in genetic manipulations and in financial markets, in networks and poverties and social and technological pathologies. It cannot be a question of establishing limits for what, in itself, ignores the limit. Either this limitlessness will be self-destructive—a construction that goes up but only to fall down right at the end—or we will find a way to recognize “sense” in struction—at the place where there is neither end, nor means, nor assembly, nor disassembly, nor top, nor bottom, nor east, nor west. But merely an all together.

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NOTES

1. TN: This essay appears in a forthcoming book by Jean-Luc Nancy and Aurélien Barrau entitled *What's These Worlds Coming To?*, trans. Travis Holloway and Flor Méchain (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). An earlier version of this text was first published in *Die technologische Bedingung. Beiträge zur Beschreibung der technischen Welt*, ed. Erich Hörl (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011).
2. TN: The polysemantic word *la technique*, which is translated as “technology” in this essay, could also be correctly translated as “technique” or “technics.” While in French *la technique* may suggest, like Aristotle’s *technē*, a kind of skill, know-how, or technique, *la technique* may also imply technology in the sense of Heidegger’s *die Technik*, which has typically been translated into French as *la technique* and into English as “technology” or, more recently, as “technics.” Still, whereas Heidegger generally does not translate *technē* with *die Technik* because he considers modern technology or *die Technik* as being very different from the Greek sense of *technē*, Nancy views modern technology as a one of many “maturation” of *technē* and has even offered *la technique* as a translation for *technē* in Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Technique of the Present: On On Kawara,” in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).
3. Letter from Mallarmé to Eugène Lefébure on May 27, 1867: “...I’ve created my work only by *elimination*, and any truth I acquired resulted uniquely from the loss of an impression which, having sparkled, burnt itself out and allowed me, thanks to the shadows thus created, to advance more deeply in the sensation of the absolute shadows. Destruction was my Beatrice... the sinful and hasty road, a road which is satanic and *facile*, the road of self-destruction which has produced not strength but a sensibility...” Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, ed., trans. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 77-8.
4. In “Tale,” from Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, which can be found in Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations*, trans. John Ashbery (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 35. And one may also think of Dostoevsky: “Man loves to construct and lay down roads, no question about it. But why is he so passionately fond of destruction and chaos? Tell me that!...Isn’t man perhaps so passionately fond of destruction and chaos (and there’s no disputing that he’s sometimes very fond of them, that really is the case) that he himself instinctively fears achieving his goal and completing the building in course of erection?,” Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground and The Double*, trans. Ronald Wilks (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 30.
5. It so happens that *struction* is also a concept in graph theory, which is not relevant here.
6. Aurélien Barrau, “Quelques éléments de physique et de philosophie des multivers,” *Laboratoire de Physique Subatomique et de Cosmologie CNRS-IN2P3*, accessed September 27, 2013, http://lpsc.in2p3.fr/barrau/aurelien/multivers_lpsc.pdf, 122.
7. On this topic see the use of the term “construction” in the work cited in the previous footnote.
8. Thinking about this on a simple level, one knows that a particle accelerator or a space probe is not independent from the “objects” it examines, and this is also conversely the case. But in truth we are only at the beginning: the intricate connection or involvement of the observer in observed reality, such that this reality never ceases to be amplified and made more complex in the so-called hard sciences as well as in the sciences that are called human, signifies in reality a progressive transformation of the status of “science.” Even to speak of this “intricate connection” still suggests that there is an implied agreement with a model of non-involvement and “objectivity.” Here as well, whereas it was once customary to think of technologies as applications of certain scientific results, today technology gives science an unprecedented status and unprecedented content.
9. For the Moderns, intelligence has a tendency to get confused with technology. This is why “artificial intelligence” (a tautology perhaps?) seems so fascinating. On the other hand, when one speaks in French of emotional intelligence as the “intelligence of the heart,” one clearly indicates that one is using a metaphor.

THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE OF SENSE:
THE HISTORY OF SENSE AND TECHNOLOGY AFTER
JEAN-LUC NANCY (BY WAY OF GILBERT SIMONDON)¹
Erich Hörl, translated by Arne De Boever

The 'question of technics' is nothing other than the question of sense pushed to its limits.
Jean-Luc Nancy²

I

Jean-Luc Nancy has philosophically analyzed the twentieth century as the era that brought about a fundamental transformation in the history of sense. In “The Forgetting of Philosophy”, the text from 1986 in which he first put forward his proposal about the history of sense, Nancy focused on the classical formation of sense as the era of fixed, closed sense: sense in the sense of “meaning” [*bedeuteten Sinns*]. For Nancy, however, what is uncovered and exhausted in the twentieth century—a century of distraction, disintegration, and collapse; in short, the century of the end of meaning—is not sense as such, but merely a specific sense of sense. This specific sense of sense appeared to have emerged with the Western, occidental sense of sense, and to co-exist with the occidental as such. Up until the time of Nancy’s writing, this sense of sense was understood as *the* sense of sense: that is to say, as the age-old figuration and interpretation of sense, the *doxa* or dogmatic image that conceives of sense as meaning—“*sense in the sense of signification* (which is the most ordinary meaning of the word ‘sense’ in our language and in philosophy)”,³ as Nancy puts it. Today, “this inevitably delivers us over to *another history* which opens up before us beyond meaning, a history whose sense can never consist in the return of ‘meaning’”.⁴ Instead, it will involve being exposed to the withdrawal of meaning, and to this exposition as sense. For Nancy, that is the rupture in the history of sense that our contemporary condition represents. “The reality of this time”, he writes, “lies entirely in the caesura that everywhere inscribes the open rift of meaning: in world war, extermination, exploitation, hunger, technics, art, literature, philosophy...”⁵

From such a perspective, it is not at all surprising that in the twentieth-century, the “care of sense” [*Sorge um den Sinn*] has become the key item on the philosophico-political agenda. It represents thinking’s concern [*Sorge des Denkens*] not so much with the restitution or closure of meaning, but with the “questioning of the opening

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and openness of sense and of another ‘meaning’ of sense”.⁶ Of course, there have been programmatic attempts in the second half of the century to turn away from meaning and understand it, for example, as a mere effect of the material aspects of communication.⁷ The aim was to ban meaning from the humanities, and go from there to the foundation of new discursive politics as well as extensive archaeologies of the history of media, culture, and science. Today, these projects appear to be merely symptoms of a more foundational transformation in the historicity of sense. In the end, their attempts to be post-meaning cannot escape the history of sense.

From 1986 until today, Nancy’s thought has been driven by a peculiar interest in the history of sense. His entire diagnostic and philosophical work on the “great rupture of sense”⁸ is marked by a noteworthy fascination with “the open” and “the outside”. It unfolds as a questioning and a working through of these notions. This fascination is not arbitrary; it indexes the contemporary moment. It is thus not surprising that Nancy’s recent book on the deconstruction of Christianity would be informed by it as well. Programmatically entitled *Dis-Enclosure*, its horizon is “the essence of Christianity as opening”, Christianity as “the absolute transcendental and the transcendental absolute of opening”.⁹ The book aims to investigate “all the forms of opening” and “exiting from self”. Nancy is very clear about the unprecedented historicity of the powerful archeological question that allows for the entire problem of sense to appear: “Our time is thus one in which it is urgent that the West—or what remains of it—analyze its own becoming, turn back to examine its provenance and its trajectory, and question itself concerning the process of decomposition of sense to which it has given rise”.¹⁰

By the time when this new description of the situation of sense comes about, i.e. by the time Nancy combines the question of sense with the question of the transcendental of the opening and the outside so as to add historical depth and nuance to the question of sense, it has already yielded a wealth of concepts and categories that can all be read as echoes, figurations, or derivations of the central and epochal concepts in the history of sense, namely: the open (*ouvert*) [*Offene*], the opening (of) [*Eröffnung*], opening [*Öffnung*], openness (*ouverture*) [*Offenheit*], and the outside (*dehors, extérieur*). But what to make of the potential historical transcendental of this fascination with opening and exteriorization [*Entäusserungsfaszination*]? Indeed, what to make of the general excitement in the second half of the twentieth century—in particular after Heidegger—for “being outside oneself” and “being outside” that, in Nancy’s thought and conceptual framework, becomes so powerfully prominent? What supports Nancy’s most serious thought, this absolute transcendental of the opening? What drives it? Could there perhaps be something like an origin or evidential ground for this fascination?

In this article, I argue that the fascination with the open and with the outside that erupts in the twentieth century within a history of sense that had always resisted the exterior and the open, is related to the history of machines and objects. *It is because of dramatic changes in the culture of machines and objects that the enthusiasm for the open and the outside has risen to prominence in the history of sense.*¹¹ More precisely, it is the appearance of “open machines” and “open objects”—as discussed by the French mechanologist Gilbert Simondon, to whom I will turn in a moment—, that destroys the exhausted, traditional culture of sense with its related ontological registers and concomitant relations of the production of the economy of meaning. Following the emergence of new technical objects and transformed object relations, it gives rise to a new culture of sense that is post-meaning.

In his book on technical objects, Simondon has characterized these transformations from a closed world of meaning to an open world of sense—a world that cannot be closed because it is in principle a world of supplementarity and prostheticity—as a transformation of the status of the technical object from minor to major. In such a vision, the technical object no longer features as a meaningless tool, or as an instrument that is a mere means to achieve the ends of an already constituted and meaning-giving subject. It is no longer a separate, minoritized object situated at the abyss of non-sense; no longer the accursed share, or the impossible outside of meaning. This inferior object that was always considered a mere thing in the work of interiority and the theatre of intentionality now appears at the very heart of the culture of sense, opening up a new stage and a new environment of sense. Whereas sense used to come about through a meaning-making act, it now becomes a transcategorical notion, an assemblage emerging from the non-signifying collaborative practices of humans,

objects, and machines.

With the notion of the “open machine”—introduced in his work at the end of the 1950s—Simondon takes a first shot at describing the open coherence of sense in the metatechnical world. “The set of open machines”, he notes, “thinks of the human being as the permanent organizer and living interpreter of machines in their relation to each other”.¹² In a short text that was discovered after his death, and that was probably written around 1970, Simondon appears to intuit the coming of a network-like culture of sense that would operate prior to all meaning. Such a culture emerges from the regime of new objects. In “Technical Mentality”, he writes:

But here’s what’s essential: in order for an object to allow for the development of the technical mentality and to be chosen by it, the object itself needs to be of a reticular structure. If one imagines an object that, instead of being closed, offers parts that are conceived as being as close to indestructible as possible, and others by contrast in which there would be concentrated a very high capacity to adjust to each usage, or wear, or possible breakage in case of shock, of malfunctioning, then one obtains an *open* object that can be completed, improved, maintained in the state of perpetual actuality.¹³

Simondon develops his terminological choice further by saying that the open object “is necessarily a *network reality* [*réalité de réseau*] before being a separate object [*objet séparé*].”¹⁴ In contrast to the “closed object” (*objet fermé*) of industrial production, and entirely in line with what the cybernetic promises of the 1960s and 1970s called a “postindustrial technological object”,¹⁵ it needs to be understood as a “unity of two layers of reality”:

a layer that is as stable and permanent as possible, which adheres to the user and is made to last; and a layer that can be perpetually replaced, changed, renewed, because it is made up of elements that are all similar, impersonal, mass-produced by industry and distributed by all the networks of exchange. It is through participation in this network that the technical object always remains contemporary to its use, always new. ... The object is not only structure but also regime.¹⁶

At the end of his text, Simondon presents “openness”¹⁷ (*l’ouverture*) as the “sign of the perfection of the technical mentality”¹⁸: openness is what determines the technical mentality’s cognitive schemas, its modes of affectivity and its codes of operation. Finally, the “technical reality” itself appears to “[lend] itself remarkably well to being continued, completed, perfected, extended”.¹⁹ In other words: technical reality is in principle a reality of the supplement, of the openness of the prosthesis. Thus, open technical objects as they are described by Simondon (as objects that bear both a logic of supplementarity and of the transcategorical) reveal themselves to be the transcendental of an epochal fascination with openness—a fascination that runs parallel to the massive distribution of technical objects in the culture of sense and in philosophical description. It may very well be that the rise of the logic of the supplement in philosophy from the 1960s until today, as well as the simultaneous return and radicalization of a prosthetic thinking, is merely a reaction to the from now on undeniable primacy of technical supplementarity. What is certain is that the transformation of sense that Nancy describes by means of a philosophical politics of the open and the outside, emerges in this context as a *technological* transformation of sense.²⁰

Jacques Derrida has come very close to uncovering this inscription of the technological caesura in Nancy’s thought. In *On Touching*, he highlights Nancy’s lexicon of *ex-*, which marks the specificity and exactitude of Nancy’s new description of the situation of sense.

We recall that the concept of the “ex-scribed” (a word that Nancy formed or coined) finds itself increasingly inscribed at the heart and inmost core of this writing that thinks: there remains a need to wonder about the body, the force, the compulsive drive that sets this syllable *ex* in motion and keeps it alive. Of course, we shall have to configure this syllable in accordance with a whole thinking of *ex-pulsion*, *ex-pression*, *outward ex-cretion*—this thinking itself conditions the “sense of the world”—and with the thinking of “excess” that “inexorably” pushes outwardly, until it is *throwing* or

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jettisoning (ejecting, dejecting, objecting, abjecting) the ego's subjectivity into exteriority. [...] Here Nancy underscores the trait, or more exactly the traced outline or *tracings*, of their exteriorization of exteriority.²¹

The list could be extended with other outside-oriented concepts that together underline the consistency of Nancy's thought of the outside: "ex-action", "ex-traction", "exemption", "expansion", "extension", "partes extra partes", "ex nihilo". And one shouldn't forget, of course, "existence" and "exposition"—the latter is arguably Nancy's motto, as it refers to a placing or putting outside, a being placed or put outside, an ex-position that designates the key moment of our ontological constitution. On one occasion, Nancy has even referred to "the ex- as proper".

In spite of Derrida's scattered but highly significant suggestions about the important role that the question of technics plays in Nancy's conceptual politics and discourse, he never quite arrives at thinking technics as such as the power of exteriorization and of being outside oneself—even though Nancy's use of the lexicon of the ex- turns out to be the imperative of our time, which is technological. This is all the more surprising given that Derrida himself, following André Leroi-Gourhan (the great anthropologist of artefactual extensions) and in response to the epidemical spreading of the thought of exteriority caused by cyberneticization in the 1950s and 60s, put forth technics as the constitutive outside of Western sense-making. He suggested that since Plato, philosophical discourse—with its enthusiasm for figures of the inside, of the proper [*das Eigene*] and the authentic [*das Eigentliche*], of presence-to-self [*Bei-sich-sein*], being-at-home [*Zu-Hause sein*] and the autochthonous—had constituted itself against technics. Indeed, Derrida's own grammatological proposition drew out the essential technicity and exteriority of sense. And yet, Derrida concludes that there is a drive at work in Nancy's thought: the drive to repeat the first ex-pulsion or ex-odus of birth. It is thus the original exteriorization of birth that (according to Derrida) is repeated in Nancy's work. Birth is what appears through the compulsive repetition of the movement of exteriorization. It shapes the entire consistency of Nancy's thought, through the lexicon and the logic of the ex-.

What Derrida doesn't see is that Nancy's compulsion to build everything on ex-, to use almost exclusively concepts with ex-, and thus to construe an entire ontology of the ex- (an *exontology*, so to speak), belongs to our historical moment *and is due to the technological transformation of sense*. It is this shift that *exteriorizes* in the most radical way, and that by doing so turns exteriorization itself into *the* question of our epoch. In the case of Nancy, we are perhaps not so much dealing with a thinker of expulsion (as Derrida would have it), but with a thinker of exposition. Unless, of course, one understands technical exteriorization as a compulsive, organological thing, as a matter of the drive.

Nancy's thought of the ex- repeats over and over again this moment in the history of sense. This is because in the becoming-technological of our life-form and in the ubiquitous expansion of technological objects, the outside and the opening become prominent, and problematic. Ex-isting is ex-posed as never before. The original exposition of being-outside-oneself and being-outside can no longer be denied. Our entire becoming enters into the light of this major exposition. Indeed, it is itself exposed by this original exposition and by the exposition of technology.

Nancy himself has done more than merely mention technics as a central player in the transformation of the history of sense. For a moment, he even appears to have considered the contemporary situation in light of the technological condition—and to understand and describe the contemporary condition as such.²² In a text from 1991 that a few years later is added as a supplement to his book *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy finds in "ecotechnics" (*écotechnie*) what may be the "last figure without figure"²³ of the history of sense as such. The general "becoming-technology of the world"²⁴ that points towards ecotechnics as its *impossible* and (within the limits of classical concepts) *unthinkable* historical horizon—towards a pure *technè* that would be liberated from all "economy" and "sovereignty"—lets "the question of technics" appear for the first time in all its rigor. This question only begins, Nancy suggests,

at that moment when technics is taken into account as the finish of Being [*finition de l'être*], and not as a means to some other end (science, mastery, happiness, and so on). It only begins when technology is taken into account as an end in itself, *sui generis*. Technology is the “purposiveness without purpose” (= without an extrinsic end) of a genre that perhaps remains to be discovered. It is to such a discovery that we expose our history, as a becoming-technological of Being or its finish.²⁵

Ecotechnics is Nancy's name for the event [*Ereignis*] of the technological transformation of sense—for the shift in the history of sense that is liberated by technics (and liberates technics), and that ends an entire regime of thinking about sense that didn't simply displace technics but founded itself on its denial. This event marks the technological liberation of sense, and its importance remains in itself to be determined: “One day, we will appreciate the newness ... that's been introduced into our history. Nothing less than the entrance of the event of ecotechnics, whose sense we must invent—a sense that corresponds to neither the concept nor to the unmediated”.²⁶ Some ten years later, Nancy will say: “Our world is the world of the ‘technical’, a world whose cosmos, nature, gods, entire system is, in its inner joints, exposed as ‘technical’: the world of the *ecotechnical*”.²⁷ It's in between these two quotes that ecotechnical sense in Nancy's work has been invented.

II

There is something like an insistence of technics in Nancy's text. And it insists strongly. The historico-systematic site where the problem of technics is situated and where questions like the effects of technological becoming arise and can be understood, remains insufficiently explained. The closer determination of this insistence is not only philologically interesting for our understanding of Nancy's work—it also has a much broader, diagnostic importance.

That is how the insistence of technics first appears in *Finite Thinking*, where Nancy attempts to explain the new situation in the history of sense in the context of a thinking of finitude. The first step in the project is to understand existing as a being-without: without essence, without sense, without ground, without aim, without limit, without model, without rule, et cetera. It's precisely this “without”—an emblem of radical finitude that's disturbingly close to ontologies and anthropologies of lack, which I discuss in the next section—that is supposed to be the opening as sense. Fully in line with the historical situation, which is determined by the rise of the technological condition, this originary opening of the “without” marks first of all the ontological site of technics. Technics is thought as the supplement and supplementation of nothing. Thus, it becomes a crucial operation of existence and the only possible correlate to a sense that's in principle finite:

Technics “as such” is nothing other than the “technique” of compensating for the nonimmanence of existence in the given. Its operation is the existing of that which *is* not pure immanence. It begins with the first tool, for it would not be as easy as one imagines to demarcate it clearly and distinctly from all animal, if not indeed vegetable, “techniques”. The “nexus” of technics is existing itself. Insofar as its being *is* not, but is the opening of its finitude, existing is technical through and through. Existence is not itself the technics of anything else, nor is technics “as such” the technics of existence: it is the “essential” technicity of existence insofar as *technics* has no essence and stands in for being.²⁸

Faced with the technological condition and the shift in the history of sense it implies, Nancy goes on to take position against a certain anti-technical affect of philosophical discourse, in particular against the largely technophobic phenomenology of sense, and also against Heidegger. To “dwell” in technics means “to dwell in the finitude of sense”.²⁹ The dominance of technics, or whatever one wants to call Being in technological relations, “disassembles and disorients without fail the never-ending feedback of a single sense”.³⁰ What remains to be understood, if the sense of Being is to be technical from now on, is what is meant, exactly, by technical sense. Indeed, what does technical sense consist of, what is its technicity?

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Nancy's peculiar existentialism is one of technical existence throughout. It appears in this context as both a thought *and* a symptom of technicization. The question of technics, which from here on cuts across Nancy's text, becomes the key problem of an ontology and an aesthetic that understands existence as exposition, and first and foremost as technical exposition. In *The Muses*, for example, Nancy evaluates the new aesthetic sense that presents itself in a world that is resolutely technical. If technics appears there mostly as "being-outside-itself" and as "the exposition to a lack of ground and foundation", as "obsolescence of the origin and the end" and as "withdrawal of the ground", it is also technics that historically paves the way for the appearance of "art-technique".³¹ In the end, technics demands a new treatment of the relations between art and technics that would mark the essential technicity of art, and mark art as technics. When, as we can then conclude, "the arts are first of all *technical*", this is because in the arts the "ex-position of existence" takes place in the most radical way.³² "It might be that art, the arts", Nancy writes, "is nothing other than the second-degree exposition of technique itself, or perhaps the technique *of the ground* itself".³³ Art thus becomes the medium of "exteriority and exposition of a being-in-the-world, exteriority and exposition that are formally grasped, isolated, and presented as such".³⁴ Art "does not deal with the 'world' understood as simple exteriority, milieu, or nature. It deals with being-in-the-world in its very springing-forth".³⁵ Art "exposes" that the world is not a given, and also that the world does not simply appear. Art is nothing other than "the *tekhne* of existence".³⁶

In the context of such an onto-aesthetics of exposition, drawing and design take up a crucial, historico-systematic place. In a short text on cave painting, Nancy thematizes the "opening, the spacing by which man is brought into the world, and by which the world itself is a world" through drawing.³⁷ Before the separation of art and technics, from the architechnical gesture of the groundless design and the original exteriorisation in the form of drawing, "the impossible outside of the world [looms up] ... in its very impossibility".³⁸ Drawing is presented as the archidesign, the archiprojection of world, as its original appearance; it even reveals the originary technicity of appearing. Drawing is the architrace and the archipath of world-building as such. The drawing on the wall, Nancy writes, interrupts "the continuity of being",³⁹ draws traces in being, cuts it up and encodes it. It is the first spatialization of sense, one that always already differentiates every immediacy, the archiexcription. This interruption of the continuum of being that Nancy situates at the beginning of history and as the arrival in history and the world of sense introduces the understanding of technicity of sense that can be found in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and also in the writings of Bernard Stiegler: a technicity that is considered in the context of the technico-medial situation of the present, where the signature of machinism and the technical—now becoming technological in the strong sense of the word—is understood as the encoding of flows of being and as the grammatization of the flow.⁴⁰ Nancy encounters at the very beginning of world-building this generalized machinism and technicity that characterize particularly well contemporary world-building under technological conditions.

The epochal move that becomes visible in Nancy's onto-aesthetic of exposition and that informs its entire politics is clearly described in *Sense of the World* as a technological shift in the history of sense. When in this case the question and the problem of inoperativity (*désœuvrement*) is put forward as the key figure of the technological age, one can see appear in between the lines of the text a double sense of technics—one restricted, and the other general—that regulates the historicity of sense in general. Whereas the restricted sense of technics associated with a world of meaning that's been left behind—the technics of production and of work, and the related dogmatic image of technics as instrument—, the general sense of technics is the one that's referred to by the word "ecotechnics". It opens up the "closures of signification" to "the coming of (necessarily unprecedented) sense".⁴¹ Technics destroys the age-old regime of restricted sense and the concomitant dogmatic image of technics and draws out the sense of technics as such from this order of sense called "meaning". In other words: it's technics and the sense of technics that are unworked first in this technical unworking of sense. The double sense of technics schematizes the question of sense. Its recent appearance—the opening and reopening of sense, its new description—takes place exactly in the passage from the first to the second technics (to recall Benjamin), in other words in the passage from technics to technology. The exteriority and exteriorization of "the necessary exteriority of a being-toward",⁴² as our situation of sense can be described, appears to be first of all the exteriority and exteriorization of technics as such: of a pure, liberated *tekhne*, whose operations

quite simply no longer support the *ancien régime* of meaning, production, and work. If we are indeed living through the completion and ending of a specific formation of sense as well as the opening of another order of sense—more specifically, the rise of sense before all sense, the appearance of the world as such—, then this central senso-cultural and finally ontological transformation fundamentally and directly concerns the power of technological inoperativity. After Nancy, world would from now on always and resolutely be *technical world*. Before and without technics, there wouldn't even be world-building. The appearance of world would always already be technical appearance. World wouldn't simply appear, but essentially have been brought into appearance, with appearance itself being resolutely technical (from Husserl to Jan Patočka, appearance has been understood as an anti-technical phenomenon).

Consider the following passage, which clarifies that the sense of the world under what I call the technological condition—rather than technological conditions—is one of technical inoperativity, in other words a question of inoperative technicity:

The world of technics, that is, the “technicized” world, is not nature delivered up to rape and pillage ... It is the world becoming *world*, that is, neither “nature” nor “universe” nor “earth”. “Nature”, “universe”, and “earth” (and “sky”) are names of given sets of totalities, names of significations that have been surveyed, tamed, and appropriated. *World* is the name of a gathering [TN: *assemblage*] or being-together that arises from an *art*—a *teknè*—and the sense of which is identical with the very exercise of this *art* ... It is thus that a world is always a “creation”: a *teknè* with neither principle nor end nor material other than itself. And in this way, a world is always sense outside of knowledge, outside of the work, outside the habitation of presence, but the *désœuvrement* of sense, sense in *excess* of all sense—one would like to say the *artificial intelligence of sense*, sense seized and sense by *art* and as *art*, that is, *teknè*, that which spaces out and defers *phusis* all the way to the confines of the world.⁴³

The new image of world as “assemblage”, “being-together” and “creation” in the strong sense of the word—*that's* the new conception of sense, under the technological condition of open machines and open objects. That's what Nancy describes. As will be clear, the transformation of sense poses an extremely difficult task to thinking, to the age-old philosophical politics and languages, indeed for the theoretical attitude as such. Once technics has become technology, it has to be thought “in an entirely different way”, “as in-finitization of ‘production’ and the ‘work’ or”, Nancy goes on to say, “as inoperation [*désœuvrement*]”.⁴⁴ The inoperativity as such—which is an at first sight poetological figure that represents one of the central watchwords of our new position in the history of sense and one that so decisively shaped post-Heideggerian thought in Blanchot, Nancy, and Derrida—appears as an effect of technology. Because in the same way that technics “disconcerts and displaces, endlessly, the completion of a ‘work’, in such a way that technicization could, in all rigor, be called ‘un-worked’, or without work [*dés-œuvrée*]”.⁴⁵ The thought of inoperativity is a central figure of sense in the technological era.⁴⁶

It is, finally, in *The Creation of the World* that technics takes up the strongest position in the history of sense. In this book, Nancy now repeats what he has presented throughout his work as the crisis and end of meaning due to a shift in the formation of sense as the beginning of the history of sense. Openness and opening, marked by Simondon as signs of a technical mentality, appear as signatures of a coming-to-world that is from now on technical as such. This is because technics opens up the world of sense as such, and represents the original and originary transformation of sense in the history of humanity: the transformation that first enabled us to enter into sense, that in this way is always already a *techno-logical* transformation of sense, and that marks as well (and before everything else) the condition of philosophy. The “unprecedented opening of sense” that took place with the rejection, the withdrawal, and the subtraction of the gods and with the birth of philosophy goes back, Nancy argues, to the unprecedented power of subtraction, which is one of technics' qualities:

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This force [of subtraction, EH], in all respects, is that of *technology*. Behind what will become, in a very precise sense that we will need to analyze, *techno-logy*, there is a whole range of techniques, like that of iron followed by that of commerce (including both accounting and shipping), writing, and urban planning. With this moment in the history of technologies, there is something like a threshold that is crossed. There is a movement that is contemporary to human beings—technology as human, quite simply *Homo faber*, producer and conceiver of *Homo sapiens*, technician of itself—a movement that from the outset proceeds by subtraction or by emptying out.⁴⁷

The “inaugural *flight* [échappée] of the West” with its four conditions—as Badiou calls them: politics, science, love, and art—, in other words the entrance into Western “ab-sense”⁴⁸, the original “flight of sense” that the metaphysics of meaning has always only impeded, hindered, and hidden, are clearly related here to the “human denaturation” by technics (its essential condition).⁴⁹ This originary technicity of sense is the point of Nancy’s narrative of the history of sense: it was covered up by the metaphysical work on sense as meaning, which introduced the contradiction between sense and technics as the guiding difference of all sense culture. Technics appears in Nancy as the denaturizing event that liberates sense as such. Without technics there wouldn’t even be an entrance in the order of sense, let alone a sense of being. Nancy therefore refers to technics as “architechnics”⁵⁰ (*architechnique*), as the “opening of an empty space where the infinite ‘creation’ of the world is (re)played”.⁵¹ “The event of technics”, he concludes, “would thus have meaning in a sense that would be neither directional nor significant”.⁵² Technics opens up what makes possible existence as pure exposition: without principle, without determination, without ends, it tears up the space in which “existence exposes itself, lacking sense, making this lack its very truth”.⁵³

III

Hans Blumenberg already emphasized that Christianity and technics are intimately connected through the question of creation. They represent the two heavy-weights of the Western history of sense. Against the Platonic rejection of an absolute thought of creation (i.e. a creation without a pre-existing example)—a rejection that can be connected with a remarkable anti-technical attitude and a denial of the technical condition—, Christianity has (according to Blumenberg) begun to radically reconceive the idea of creation. Thereby, it changed the creative human being’s “understanding of being”, something that is unavoidable for the ontological understanding of the “coming technical world”.⁵⁴ In this context, Nancy’s deconstruction of Christianity merely represents the most extreme consequence of his work on the technological shift of sense. It operates precisely in this fold of Western sense, namely the problem of creation. The reformulation of the question of creation from the spirit of exteriorization—as Nancy’s project could be characterized—appears as a major stage of the new thinking of sense. It is located at the level of the technological situation, and indispensable for its understanding. In light of a new understanding of the question of creation, one can see the outlines of a new ontology, an *ontotechnology*, emerge that—after the long dominance of onto-theology—corresponds to the contemporary processes of world- and sense-formation.

Ontotechnological thinking is concentrated on the figure and the problem of inoperativity. From this perspective, creation no longer presents a work, but loses all “operativity”. There is no longer a production that takes place. What happens, instead, is nothing other than an “exposition”, a “bringing outside itself” (*la mise-hors-de-soi*): pure, that is purely technical, exteriorization and exposition. The question of creation thus explicitly becomes the “crossroads” of a “deconstruction of monotheism”—even its “most active resource”.⁵⁵ The stake and horizon of the question of creation—and for an ontotechnological program like the one that can be found in the more recent texts by Nancy, this is of course crucial—is the “*creatio ex nihilo*”, precisely “inasmuch as it is clearly distinguished from any form of production or fabrication”.⁵⁶ *Ex nihilo* means “undoing any premise, including that of nothing. That means: to empty *nothing* (cf. *rem*, the thing) of any quality. That is creation”.⁵⁷ In the transition to another understanding of creation (from a productive, instrumental and work-related creation to an inoperative, kenologic—or, one could also say, kenogrammatic—conception of creation as pure opening and emptying out that Nancy finds in Christianity), one can see once more but more clearly than ever before

how the technical transformation of sense also operates under the title of a deconstruction of Christianity. In the transformation from technics to technology, one loses the restricted, instrumental, tool-like and work-related sense of technics—a sense of technics that has also characterized and formed, one could say, the dogmatic conception of creation. The exodus from the age-old sense of creation as fixated on work and production that is also drawn out and highlighted in the new thinking of creation as Nancy sketches it out is initially implemented by complex human-machine couplings that are unthinkable within the registers of instrumental reason. Through close couplings of humans, machines, and technological objects that shape a new sense of activity, a traditional sense of creation is deconstructed, giving way to a creation without work or creator, in other words: a creative becoming, in which the concept of creation as such is lost. The technological transformation of sense enables us to enter into a world of compositions and assemblages and agencies on the far side of work, production and fabrication. It allows for inoperativity to become the fundamental event of our being, born from the technical operation that can never again be closed or completed. From there, a new ontological situation begins to sketch itself out that Nancy ultimately characterizes as a differed sense of creation: “From creation as the result of an accomplished divine action, one shifts to creation as, in sum, an unceasing activity and actuality of this world in its singularity (singularity of singularities). One sense of the word (creation as a state of affairs of the given world) yields to another (creation as bringing forth [*mise au monde*] a world—an active sense that is nothing else than the first sense of *creatio*).⁵⁸

The ontological “model of causal production according to given ends”⁵⁹ that is found in the traditional conception of creation is left behind. Under the technological condition and following the rise of the “technical mentality” that Simondon discussed, it disappears. The technological becoming of technics itself replaces this in the end mechanical sense of creation, which ultimately masks a restricted sense of the technical. Nancy emphasizes that instead, the “non-model or model-less-ness of being without given”, “its immeasurable real”, appears.⁶⁰ This subtraction of everything given, this groundlessness, this aimlessness and transition into the creative world of transitive being is the central characteristic of the major caesura of sense that is conditioned by technological displacements, and that Nancy describes.

The insight that a wholly new ontological description has become necessary due to technicization—one that exposes the question of creation as one of the great, returning questions of contemporary world- and sense-building—is unquestionably a fundamental concern in Nancy’s work. In this context, it is precisely the question of the *creatio ex nihilo* that brings Nancy’s thought to a highly precarious point of transgression: namely the point where the new thought of a creative becoming breaks with the fascination with lack.

Lack is without a doubt one of the major terms of negativity that has virulently animated the traditional culture of sense—of meaning and representation. It has regulated object relations, in particular relations to technical objects; but it has also presented subjects with a constant lack of sense and being, with a principled understanding of being and one’s relation to the world under the sign of lack, and as governed by the regime of production and work. Lack is probably the most important term of a minoritizing formation of technical objects and technicity as such. For a long time, the West determined the place and stake of the technico-medial question along these lines. However, the transition from technics to technology and the related transformation in the culture of sense that gave way to a world of technical becoming, demands the bracketing of such an ontology of lack—of the kind of ontology that has dominated philosophy since Plato’s *Protagoras*, and that was particularly prominent at the end of the nineteenth century, and going into the twentieth—from Ernst Kapp and Henri Bergson via Sigmund Freud, Arnold Gehlen, Günther Anders, Teilhard de Chardin all the way to Marshall McLuhan, André Leroi-Gourhan, and Gotthard Günther. In all of their works, one finds a negative anthropological and ontological *technodicea* that is again and again presented as the deciphering and explanation of technical being. It casts the human being as a being of lack, and characterizes all artefactuality as prosthetic compensation, a question of a supplementary organology.⁶¹ Today, we are—due to technology and technological objects that inaugurate new object relations—in a world of radicalized technological becoming. It may even be that we have arrived at the outer limit of a history of lack: at the point where lack no longer lacks anything—no lack of essence, aim, determination, ground. Where lack is becoming the lack of nothing, and

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where the great senso-cultural figure and supreme sign of negativity (namely lack) finally comes home to its disappearance and provokes only failed readings. It may be that we have arrived at a point where being and lack are no longer combined, where this evidence that was constitutive for the West loses its force of persuasion, where the fascination with lack begins to lose its logic of abandonment and we can begin to think on the far side of lack? Isn't this the decisive exigency of our new situation in the history of sense, the exigency that represents the consequence of a creationist technology that surpasses lack, in other words: that leaves behind the entire senso-cultural regime of lack including its central notions of essence, aim, determination, ground, that have been lacking for as long as we can remember? Isn't this what is at stake today in our self-descriptions?⁶² And shouldn't we also liberate from this regime our descriptions of media and technology, as appears to happen as well in Nancy's supplementary and prosthetic conception of technics?

Nancy's thought unfolds at the extreme limit of the Western fascination with lack. Key sentences of his thought of exposition such as "To exist means: to lack sense" or "To lack sense is, properly speaking, to lack *nothing*",⁶³ appear to strangely waver in this double, decisive question of lack: in the history of sense, and in ontology. Nancy does not appear to be willing, in any case, to go all the way: this is most clear in his relation to Deleuze, whose attempt to destroy the ontology of lack, and step outside of the history of lack, in other words to think completely outside of lack and be everything but a priest of castration, irritates Nancy. Instead of the "simple plenitude of chaos"⁶⁴ that he associates with Deleuze, Nancy privileges the facilitations [*Bahnungen*] that "lack-of-being-in-itself" carves out.⁶⁵ And a little further on he writes: "I for my part cannot understand how one can escape this hollowing out (death, time, genesis and end)".⁶⁶ Does Nancy's thought of finitude, one can ask, still belong to the ontology of lack, even if it is without a doubt also an attempt to overcome it? Is it perhaps the question of lack that in the final instance ties his thought to Christianity. Through concepts like failing, guilt, and sin, Christianity circulates central notions of lack; could it be that by association, Nancy's reading is in the grip of a fascination with lack? Could it be in the end—and one barely dares to consider it—that the figures of original and necessary supplementarity and prostheticity—these figures of the outside, of the opening of openness, as we find them not only in Nancy but also in Derrida and especially in Bernard Stiegler's thought of the default (*défait*) and that undoubtedly connect these three deconstructions of the techno-medial to another—are perhaps still the figures and inscriptions of an ontology of lack, even if they operate at its outermost limit? Is the thinking of the outside, of the withdrawal and of the open, the theorem of exteriorization that deconstruction radicalized, in a certain sense a final expression or echo of this powerful ontology, one that needs to be destroyed?

This brings us to the breaking point of our philosophico-political history of sense. The quasi-transcendentalism and the thought of immanence that are perhaps nowhere as distinct as in our attitude towards lack, embody two senso-political strategies that today, under the conditions of the technological transformation of sense, compete with one another as explanations of the situation and the determination of a new sense of sense. The question is whether the quasi-transcendental thought of opening, of the opening up and dis-enclosing—this entire fascination with opening that has been unfolding for half a century and is still unfolding today as a thought of exteriority and supplementarity—is not a figure—even if it's a complicated one—of the ontology of lack.

And so we should ask ourselves: doesn't the thought as well as the time of technology demand that we bid this figure goodbye?

POSTSCRIPT 2012

Since the original publication of this article, Nancy has developed new descriptions of the historical condition of sense. There is no doubt that Nancy's thought has focused on human agents and agency. This focus has been characteristic of his thought of being-with and has revealed the limits of his thought of technics and his related reflections on the history of sense: Nancy's privileging of human agency quite simply goes against the explosion of environmental agency of multiple actors and forces that is characteristic of the technological condition. In his text "On Struction", Nancy has let go of this fixation in favor of a cosmopolitical—and cosmotechnological,

even—thought. Finally caught up with the technological condition, or in any case in response to it and after it, Nancy has begun to conceive of the pure technicity of being-with and of the new historical condition of sense as a radically distributed, condition. “What is given to us”, he writes, “only consists in the juxtaposition and simultaneity of a copresence in which the *co-* does not bear any other particular value than that of contiguity or juxtaposition within the limits according to which the universe itself is given.”⁶⁷ It is precisely in this exposition of struction, in the sense of *struo*—“to amass” [*amasser*], “to heap” [*entasser*]⁶⁸—that, according to Nancy, technics has to be considered.⁶⁸ The point is that in the technological age, “a displacement is revealed, a curve in the phenomenological apparatus”, in whose traits one can now more and more recognize mere “coappearance” [*com-parution*] as “sense of the world”.⁶⁹ It is no longer, as before, about an existential and anthropocentric “co” but about a merely categorical one. It is precisely this exposure that marks, according to Nancy, the senso-historical situation of struction, in which technics—having becoming technological in the strong sense of the word—(re)situates us and because of which “it is incumbent on us to reinvent everything beginning with ‘sense’”.⁷⁰

Nancy has developed this very reading of technics further and he has emphasized “the catastrophe of sense”⁷¹ with which we are confronted. As part of this project, he has in an exhaustive diagnostic intervention understood the becoming-catastrophic of sense—sense’s turning, its being-taken-up-in-an-overcoming, its collapsing-onto-itself—as the core of the great senso-historical transformation of the present through technology. Basing himself on general “interconnectedness” [*interconnexion*], he ultimately considers the main characteristic of the contemporary condition to be a general ecology of sense.⁷² As Nancy sees it, there is “a kind of generalized environmentalism, a generalized environmentalism, according to which everything surrounds, enfolds, and unfolds within the measure of the interconnectedness of what has been characterized as a *technological unconscious*—with ‘unconscious’ meaning first and foremost the interconnected weaving together of everything that is”.⁷³

If Nancy had already (and repeatedly) brought the notion of “ecotechnics” into play in order to describe the general becoming-technical of the world and remain in close proximity to the new ecological paradigm, general ecology now appears in his writing as a key destination of our highly technicized culture of sense. With this, Nancy is tapping into a politico-conceptual vein of our epochal movement. Since many years, it is around the concept of ecology that a new semantic for the description of our cyberneticized form of life, and our being in intelligent environments and multiscalar networks, has begun to crystallize. Of course, the notion of ecology itself has been taken up in a shift, a reformulation, and transvaluation even. There is talk of libidinal ecologies, of ecologies of attention, sensation, perception, cognition, subjectivity, belonging, of media ecologies et cetera. We are currently going through a fundamental ecologization of the image of thought and the image of being. The concept of a general ecology, as I am developing it, has a double meaning: on the one hand, it refers to a fundamental change in experience, and a fundamentally new position, that characterizes being and thinking under the conditions of a cyberneticized “state of nature”; on the other, it refers to the new description that this transformation demands, and the new philosophico-conceptual politics that it entails.⁷⁴

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NOTES

1. TN: This text originally appeared as “Die künstliche Intelligenz des Sinns: Sinngeschichte und Technologie im Anschluss an Jean-Luc Nancy”. *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 2 (2010), 129-147. The text is published here in English translation with an adjusted title and a new postscript from 2012. Hörl’s argument revolves around Nancy’s use of the word “sense” (Hörl uses the German “Sinn”), meaning both “meaning” (signification) and “sense”. Whenever “Sinn” or “sense” are clearly used in the sense of “meaning” (signification), I have translated them as such, i.e. as either “meaning” or “signification”. Whenever “Sinn” or “sense” are used in another sense (and often in explicit distinction to “meaning”), I have translated them as “sense”. Hörl’s other focus is on Nancy’s use of the word “technique” (“Technik”, in the German), which I have translated as “technics” to distinguish it from Nancy’s use of “technologie” (“Technologie”, in the German; translated as technology). In many cases, these choices have necessitated significant modifications of already published translations of Nancy’s works—so significant, in fact, that I have my doubts about whether Hörl’s argument could be understood on the basis of a reading of the English translations of Nancy’s work alone—, but I have made every effort to locate all of the already translated passages in the endnotes so the reader can look them up for her/himself and see what other choices Nancy’s translators have made. I would like to thank Erich Hörl for his invaluable assistance with this translation.
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*. Trans. Jeffrey S. Librett. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 40, translation modified.
3. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*. Trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco. Atlantic Highlands: Humanity Books, 1997, 22, translation modified.
4. Nancy, *Gravity*, 44, translation modified.
5. Nancy, *Gravity*, 44, translation modified.
6. Nancy, *Gravity*, 24, translation modified.
7. This last aspect is characteristic of the radical antihermeneutic project of Friedrich Kittler and the first phase of so called “German Media Theory” it inaugurated. See: Berhard Siegert. “Cultural Techniques: The End of Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (2013): 1-18, in particular 1-6.
8. Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*. Ed. Simon Sparks. Trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. 39.
9. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, Michael Smith. Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2008, 145.
10. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 30.
11. In his study of the open, Giorgio Agamben does not consider this historical dimension of this question, which is nevertheless of crucial importance for the functioning of what he calls the “anthropological machine”. Ultimately, there is a clear reconfiguration of the relations between the human and the non-human through machine- and object-historical ruptures, as well as through cybernetics. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.
12. Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques*. Paris: Aubier, 1989, 11. [My translation, ADB]
13. Gilbert Simondon, “Technical Mentality” Trans. Arne De Boever. *Parrhesia* 7: 24, translation modified.
14. Simondon, “Technical”, 23.
15. Simondon, “Technical”, 23-24.
16. Simondon, “Technical”, 24, translation modified.
17. TN: The translation of “Technical Mentality” has “opening”, but I put openness here to be consistent with the terminology used above. At the end of this article, Hörl mentions both “openness” and “opening” as features that Simondon identifies with technical reality, so the difference may not be significant.
18. Simondon, “Technical”, 24.
19. Simondon, “Technical”, 24.
20. I have developed the concept of a “technological transformation of sense” after Husserl in: Erich Hörl. “Du déplacement technologique du sens” *Rue Descartes* 64 (2009): 50-65.
21. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*. Trans. Christine Irizarry. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005.

26-27.

22. I have developed the concept of “the technological condition” in Erich Hörl, ed. *Die technologische Bedingung. Beiträge zur Beschreibung der technischen Welt*. Berlin, Suhrkamp: 2011. 7-53. An English translation is in preparation.

23. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O’Byrne. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, 134.

24. Nancy, *Being*, 117.

25. Nancy, *Being*, 119, translation modified.

26. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Der Preis des Friedens: Krieg, Recht, Souveränität—technè” *Lettre Internationale* 34 (1991), 44. [TN: this quote is not in the English translation of this text, which was published in Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. It can only be found in the second postscript to the German edition of this text.]

27. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*. Trans. Richard Rand. New York: Fordham, 2008, 89.

28. Nancy, *Finite*, 24, translation modified.

29. Nancy, *Finite*, 25, translation modified.

30. Nancy, *Finite*, 26, translation modified.

31. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. 26. Donald A. Landes also comments on Nancy’s new treatment of the relation between art and technics in: “*Le Toucher and Corpus of Tact: Exploring Touch and Technicity with Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy.*” *L’Esprit Créateur* 47 (2007): 80-92.

32. Nancy, *Muses*, 24.

33. Nancy, *Muses*, 26.

34. Nancy, *Muses*, 18.

35. Nancy, *Muses*, 18.

36. Nancy, *Muses*, 38.

37. Nancy, *Muses*, 70.

38. Nancy, *Muses*, 77. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le plaisir au dessin*. Paris: Galilée, 2009.

39. Nancy, *Muses*, 74.

40. For the relation between grammatization and exteriorization, see Bernard Stiegler, *Pour une nouvelle critique de l’économie politique*. Paris: Galilée, 2009, 43-63.

41. Nancy, *Sense*, 102.

42. Nancy, *Sense*, 11.

43. Nancy, *Sense*, 41, translation modified.

44. Nancy, *Sense*, 98.

45. Nancy, *Sense*, 26.

46. I have written extensively about this elsewhere: Erich Hörl. “Das Arbeitslose der Technik. Zur Destruktion der Ergonomie und Ausarbeitung einer neuen technologischen Sinnkultur bei Heidegger und Simondon”. In: Claus Leggewie, Ursula Renner-Henke, Peter Risthaus, eds. *Promethische Kultur. Wo kommen unsere Energien her?* Fink, München, 2013, 111-136.

47. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. Trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, 85.

48. Nancy, *Creation*, 85, translation modified.

49. Nancy, *Creation*, 87.

50. Nancy, *Creation*, 89, translation modified.

51. Nancy, *Creation*, 90.

52. Nancy, *Creation*, 90.

53. Nancy, *Creation*, 90.

54. See also Hans Blumenberg, “‘Nachahmung der Natur’: Zur Vorgeschichte der Idee des schöpferischen Menschen” in Blumenberg, *Wirklichkeiten, in denen wir leben*. Reclam: Stuttgart, 1996, 55-103; 60.

55. Nancy, *Creation*, 70.

56. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 24.

57. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 24-25.

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58. Nancy, *Creation*, 65.
59. Nancy, *Creation*, 68.
60. Nancy, *Creation*, 68.
61. On Plato's ur-narrative of the theory of lack, see Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
62. See Jean-Luc Nancy, "Manque de rien" in *Lacan avec les philosophes*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1991, 201-206. Nancy suggests here that our time needs to be understood first and foremost as a transformation of lack—as a turn in our lack of something, from a lack of essence to a lack of nothing. Nancy suggests that there is a history and historicity of lack that traverses the West. And it is our task to write the history of this fascination with lack, around which Nancy's entire prosthetic understanding of technics revolves.
63. Nancy, *Finite*, 12.
64. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Deleuzian Fold of Thought". Trans. Tom Gibson and Anthony Uhlmann. In: Paul Patton, ed. *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, 112.
65. Nancy, "Deleuzian", 108.
66. Nancy, "Deleuzian", 112.
67. Jean-Luc Nancy, "On Struction", trans. Travis Holloway and Flor Méchain. *Parrhesia* 17 (2013), 5.
68. Nancy, "Struction", 4.
69. Nancy, "Struction", 7.
70. Nancy, "Struction", 9.
71. Jean-Luc Nancy. *L'Équivalence des catastrophes (Après Fukushima)*. Paris: Galilée, 2012, 20. [My translation, ADB]
72. Nancy, *L'Équivalence*, 59. [My translation, ADB]
73. Nancy, *L'Équivalence*, 59. [My translation, ADB]
74. For more on general ecology, see: Erich Hörl. "A Thousand Ecologies: The Process of Cyberneticization and General Ecology". Trans. James Burton, Jeffrey Kirkwood and Maria Vlotides. In: Diedrich Diederichsen, Anselm Franke, eds. *The Whole Earth. California and the Disappearance of the Outside*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013, 121-130; Erich Hörl, "Le nouveau paradigme écologique: Pour une écologie générale des medias et des techniques" Trans. Guillaume Plas. *Multitudes* 51 (2012): 68-79.

JEAN-LUC NANCY: AN EXISTENTIAL COMMUNISM¹

Frédéric Neyrat, translated by Arne De Boever

A philosophy's power—its potential—can be measured by its capacity to satisfy a double demand: to correspond entirely to the tradition by which it is carried; and to resolutely detach itself from it. To interrogate this tradition from the inside; and to challenge it from perspectives that are not strictly philosophical. Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy responds to this double exigency.

To back up this claim, I won't propose a view that explores all aspects of this philosophy, but an observation—better: a perspective that intends to show how this thought intervenes in a singular way in our time. One could, of course, tie this intervention to the school of deconstruction, in which Nancy, with Derrida and a few others (Paul de Man, Avital Ronell), is an eminent figure. And indeed, he often uses the term deconstruction, sometimes even as a general title (as in *Déconstruction du christianisme* [*The Deconstruction of Christianity*]). But what, precisely, is the function of such a concept in his work? Nancy would undoubtedly agree with Derrida to say that deconstruction aims to leave room for the impossible, the heterogeneous, the event, or the “to-come” (Derrida). In this sense, to deconstruct is not to destruct but to show that there is *play*—in all senses of the word—there where one thinks one sees only the immovable, cut off from all alterity and alteration. And one also knows that for Nancy, as for Derrida, deconstruction is not a simple critical method, it engages the very heart of ontology, even at the risk of showing what haunts it.² Deconstruction is, in a certain way, the very movement of things, their permanent auto-deconstruction—thus, for Nancy, Christianity produces its own atheism.

However, I would argue that deconstruction is not the final term of Nancy's thought, which singularizes itself through its separation from a new tradition that, however, it also seeks to form. It's not a question of saying that after deconstruction it would be a question of reconstructing, and for a very simple reason: it's construction itself that generates its own deconstruction! *After* deconstruction can only mean one thing: *otherwise—a gap; the occurrence of a bifurcation*, of a new distribution of the intelligence of the world, of another way of seeing the relations between ontology and politics, from a previously unacknowledged view on our religious

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legacies. I will define this other thought as *existential communism*. Far from being arbitrary, this expression reattaches Nancy's preliminary analyses of Bataille, in which the "communist exigency" leads one to think "community" and "ecstasy" together,³ to his contemporary work on communism as the "truth" of democracy. This expression also enables one to give a positivity to the concept of communism, in spite even of Nancy's expressions—"communism without community"—or those of Bailly in his discussion of Nancy—"non-choral communism".⁴ Non-choral, without community: the communism of Nancy is certainly that—but first and foremost, it concerns *the free and incendiary fact of existence*.

I argue that an unacknowledged existentialism traverses Nancy's thought, a *radicalized existentialism*. By this, I mean the attempt to think ontology starting from the being-on-the-outside of everything that manifests itself: human beings, forms of life, and inert things. Transcendence is not the transcendence of god or of the event as for Badiou; it is the being-in-the-world of all the existents, the transcendence of existing itself. Such a radicalization largely surpasses Heidegger's or Sartre's frames of thought, who have limited their theory of existence to "Dasein" (separated from life) or "man" (distinct from "in-itself"). But existences as such are not atoms, individuals closed onto themselves, they are originarily in relation, they singularize themselves because they are together, with one another—in common. It's this *communism of the matter of being* that interests me, both its roots and its political implications. I want to understand how it is different from other thoughts of communism—the "communist moment" of Rancière, the "communist hypothesis" of Badiou—and from the way in which Nancy seeks, in his most recent works, to tie a politics to it.

Existential communism would be the syntagm that, in Nancy's thought, stands out in our epoch. And it does so in three ways:

1/ Nancy's thought pursues the critique of a modernity: that which has posited the human being as an exception, wrongly immunized against its mode of construction of a world that is more and more uninhabitable. The immanent (de)construction of the world sometimes translates itself in the form of Fukushima. To think the "with", the in-common, is to affirm that our contemporaneity demands a first philosophy capable of fighting against every individualism, everything that seeks to absolutely close existences onto themselves.

2/ On the other hand, Nancy's communism, insofar as it is existential, is the antidote to all relational excesses: generalized interconnection of everything with everything can lead to the worst, to epidemics and systemic financial crises, and one cannot simply bet on the virtues of relations to conjure away the perils of modernity. Existence, for Nancy, is only possible thanks to an outside that, inside of each being, relates it to what escapes every relation, all the while being its condition of possibility. *Where interconnection leads to the agonies of contagion, relation demands separation.*

3/ Finally, the outside, the incommensurable, the ek-: all these concepts show the way in which the existential communism of Nancy also enables one to oppose oneself to a bad solution that is fashionable today to fight against anthropocentrism: the temptation to reduce everything that is subject to the status of object, the flattening out of all the differences in the name of the fight against anthropocentrism. What Nancy's thought brings us is the idea according to which the surpassing of humanism must not come about from below (the equivalence of objects) but from above, or rather through this *transversal commune* that makes each existent be always *more* than itself. To what extent this *surplus* can be grasped by philosophy or contests it from within—as an anti-philosophy or rather an *exo-philosophy*—is a question that I will leave open.

It is therefore not a question of declaring the exhaustion of deconstruction, but of showing the exhaustion of a world that doesn't know how to roll the dice of ontology and politics once more. Existential communism designates without a doubt this very thing, namely that the to-come, absence, heterogeneity, and all those concepts only make sense insofar as they make possible, here and now, *living presences*. If deconstruction, as

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Derrida maintained, is attentive to hauntology, to returning and to specters, Nancy's existential communism privileges *in the last instance* the *pulsing of the world*.

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NOTES

1. TN: This is the translation of the introduction to: Frédéric Neyrat, *Le communisme existentiel de Jean-Luc Nancy*. Paris: Éditions Lignes, 2013. *Parrhesia* would like to thank Frédéric Neyrat for granting us permission to publish this translation.
2. I am of course referring to Derrida's "hauntology": Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres de Marx*. Paris, Galilée: 1, 89, 255.
3. Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*. Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1986, 22-3 and 28.
4. Jean-Christophe Bailly, "Retour sur la comparution," in Danièle Cohen-Levinas and Gisèle Berckman, eds. *Figures du dehors. Autour de Jean-Luc Nancy*. Paris: Éditions Cécile Defaut, 2012, 60.

EXPERIENCE AND THE ANACHRONISTIC PRESENT

Simon Lumsden

One of the central claims of Rebecca Comay's fine examination of the "Spirit" chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is described in the introduction to *Mourning Sickness*.¹ There she describes human beings as "temporal misfits, marooned from our own present" because the "present has never caught up to itself" (Comay, 4). Comay focuses her attention on the French Revolution as the primary example of the structural anachronism that lies at the heart of all historical experience. This description captures beautifully not just historical experience in Hegel's thought but it also captures an important element of experience in the *Phenomenology*. My concern in this paper is to situate this idea of the fundamentally anachronistic quality of historical experience in relation to the discussion of experience that Hegel describes in the introduction to the *Phenomenology*.

The *Phenomenology* is set in motion by a tension between a defined way of understanding the world and what might be described as an alternative intelligible that challenges that form of knowing. The *Phenomenology* begins with some fairly limited shapes of consciousness that are characterised by quite simple claims by a single consciousness to know the world in a specific way. What develops are increasingly complex shapes of spirit, ranging from a single shape of consciousness, whose knowledge is unable to explain some fairly simple objects to shapes of spirit that encompass the very complicated moral, social and political life that we see described in such rich and compelling detail in Comay's analysis of 'Spirit'. The progression moves forward either as a collapse of a shape of knowing or by a shape showing itself to be already more than it takes itself to be or some combination of the two approaches.

Despite the extraordinary obscurity of Hegel's philosophical style, the way in which the *Phenomenology* presents the shapes of life that it examines is implicitly critical of disembodied and ahistorical attempts to capture the character of knowledge and human experience. Hegel begins as it were on the ground, in a world with a subject knowing, judging and experiencing. He begins with a knowing subject embedded in a world. Admittedly at the start it is a pretty simple world. The text unfolds by the subject investigating itself, and through this process it elaborates initially the animating concepts of a shape of consciousness followed by

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more sophisticated shapes of spirit. Each of these shapes breaks down in the process of self-examination and is transformed into the next shape of consciousness.²

The *Phenomenology* proceeds by a process of self-examination. The self-examination at issue is not the enlightenment “resolve [*Vorsatze*] ... that one examine everything for oneself”.³ The progression of the text is not a process of doubting established belief and authority and placing before oneself all the salient ideas of a culture and determining which can legitimately be held to be valid after assessment by the penetrating light of reason. Hegel’s approach is fundamentally historical and phenomenological. The scepticism that animates the text’s protagonist is not the examination of isolated individual truth claims but is a “pathway of doubt”, a “way of despair” in which it loses itself on the path to truth (§78). But this phenomenological analysis is also a philosophical history of spirit.

What is disclosed as the *Phenomenology* progresses is the collapse of various normative orders. The *experience* of this collapse resonates in the subject as a disjuncture between its habits, dispositions and the immediate concepts it uses to make sense of the world and the experience it has that these concepts might no longer be up to the job. This disjuncture between who it takes itself to be and a world with which that self-understanding fails to cohere is the untimeliness that moves the text forward. This temporal disjuncture, or what Hegel calls experience, is the basis of the social pathologies that Hegel describes in that work.⁴

This misalignment is something that only comes to be recognized *retrospectively*, for example, when it results in norms that are unsustainable and that we can see with philosophical hindsight had to be resolved, such as in the irreconcilable commitments of Antigone and Creon. The path that the philosophical or phenomenological observer (the We of the *Phenomenology*) is one that recognizes the necessity for why a specific shape of knowing or form of life comes to understand itself in the specific way that it does. In the context of the *Phenomenology*, the phenomenological observer comprehends the necessity of the collapse of a shape of spirit and why it had to move to a new more adequate shape. The phenomenological observer recognizes the principles that animate specific shapes of consciousness or that animate a shape of spirit as well as failures of justification. That is the philosopher can recognize why the reasons provided by a particular normative mindedness are no longer adequate to a form of life. For the experiencing subject the trauma is precisely located in the anxiety it experiences when its values, norms and commitments are no longer adequate to the world it inhabits. The philosophical observer recognizes as prof Comay puts it that the “present [has] not caught up with itself” (Comay, 4).

Experience in the technical sense that Hegel means it in the *Phenomenology* marks the disjuncture between a world set in motion, that is a self-moving and self-transforming spirit and a specific shape of consciousness or shape of spirit. These shapes intuit the inadequacy of their own self-understanding in relation to that self-transforming spiritual domain. This experienced gap is between, on the one hand, a shape of knowing’s extant concept of itself and the world and on the other hand, an intelligibility that both undermines this self-understanding but moves it forward, which Hegel describes as the “unrealised concept”.⁵

Hegel thinks of each shape of knowing as capable of being pathologised only because its norms values and practices are sedimented in the ‘organic’ structure of subject and spirit. The concepts by which we live our life and know ourselves become stagnant in any form of cultural life. The authority that they have for us will come to be eroded by — to put it in Hegel’s language — world-historical developments. Nevertheless we continue to inhabit them in our daily practices and as defining features of self-understanding but the drama of life and culture moves spirit forward such that we can no longer live those norms and practices with the immediacy that would make them a satisfactory shape of life or as Hegel might put it: where we are at home with ourselves.⁶

In a passage that Comay quotes Hegel says: “world history is not a soil of happiness; in history the periods of happiness are blank pages, for the object of history is, at least, change”.⁷ In these “happy” periods of history the norms, values and practices are inhabited without question, they animate a form of spirit and are identical

with its knowledge of itself. History by contrast is discord and change. The labour of the negative lies in the transformative gap between a determine shape of spirit and knowledge or between a way of life and a force that wants to transform it. Napoleon's conquest of Germany was such a world historical force, bringing the universal aim to the arcane particularity of Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire.

Such experience brings to light our most basic normative commitments; in the moment of downfall we see who we are. Our commitments become visible in the very moment their hold on ourselves and the world lose the coherence of their explanatory hold on what we take the real to be. This is indeed experienced as the loss of self, as a disturbing of who we take ourselves to be, but precisely at that moment we realize what the central concepts are that animate our identity and our culture. The anxiety creates a suspicion that the way we evaluate the world no longer makes sense. But this disjuncture is very difficult to understand in the context of a self-producing spirit. How can we fall out line with a world that we ourselves have produced? That is just what Hegel is trying to capture. When our understanding does not cohere with what spirit has produced spirit strives for an understanding that is adequate to it, the conceptual articulation of this is the role of philosophy.

One way to understand this is that the theoretical and practical problems that emerge in a culture are slowly worked through in the diverse parts of a culture. This is the cultural maturation [*Bildung*] to which Hegel refers in §12 of the preface to the *Phenomenology*. The collective working through of these 'problems' embeds itself in thought in multiple ways. One could think of this as complex processes by which a culture tries to respond to the problems that emerge as its norms, values and beliefs become untimely, a process that threatens established ways of knowing. What I think Hegel is trying to capture with his notion of experience is the dissonance between who we are and what we are becoming. The phenomenological observer grasps this becoming and is retrospectively aware of the conceptual corrections that take place over time. This dissonance between its present claims to know the world and the norms that are emerging to replace them in the culture is only *intuited* in the present by the natural consciousness and the shapes of life. This intuition of its own untimeliness is experienced by a shape of life as through it were burdened with something alien, or as Hegel describes it in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* with a thought that strives to disturb its thoughtlessness.⁸

I have described the historical experience above by which the animating concepts of a culture fall out of alignment with the what world is becoming, producing a kind of normative alienation that moves the *Phenomenology* forward along its self-correcting path. In Comay's discussion of experience in *Mourning Sickness*, at least in the context of the role the French revolution plays in German thought, the dissonance is not between who we are and what we are becoming; the dissonance is instead a marker of an anachronism. The relation of philosophy to the French Revolution "marks the anachronism of the present day" and the "thwarted futures of the past" (Comay, 144-5). The anachronism at issue here that marks the effect of the revolution on Germany is of an irreconcilable discord, of a revolution whose effects on German life are unable to be integrated into the fabric of the culture or its world historical trajectory. The revolution has a determinative relation to German cultural life but in a way that is unable to be incorporated into it. This is the structural marker of the pathologies and anxieties of German cultural life that is produced by the French Revolution. Standardly such discord is the motor of human history; this is the domain of the labour of the negative in which the tensions and contradictions produce the conflicts that is determinative of history.

Mourning Sickness considers the French revolution as a historical trauma that Hegel, despite his best efforts, is unable to absorb into the dialectical trajectory of spirit. Hegel is not able to reconcile Kantian freedom with revolutionary France. Though he does try to reconcile them – unsuccessfully. Rather than simply leaving the revolution hanging in the air as a spectre haunting German politics Comay argues that Hegel cannot help himself, he cannot leave the French Revolution as an exception; it is ultimately "absorbed into the spiritual dialectic of evil and forgiveness" (Comay, 151).

This narrative which presents the revolution as untimely and outside the trajectory of experience described above does perhaps sit at odds with the Hegel of the *Philosophy of History*. In the various expressions of

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those lectures given between 1822 and 1830 Hegel, as Comay rightly points out, places the reformation, and the rise of Lutheran protestantism, and its subsequent philosophical expression in Kant in Germany as the key difference between French and German culture. Rousseau's thought in catholic France without the reformation leads to the reign of terror. Whereas Kant philosophically expresses the rationality of the subject, which is at the dispositional heart of the reformation and in that sense is entirely consistent with Hegel's Owl of Minerva formula, bringing into concept, at the level of will and morality, what the world has implicitly become. Rousseau's thought by contrast becomes a script for political action, a demand to create institutions (objective spirit as Hegel would describe them) in which a free subject could see that freedom externalised.

Lutheran protestantism cultivates the appropriate dispositions for modern life: "without a change in religion, no genuine political change or revolution can be successful".⁹ Luther transforms the sensibility of equality into something spiritual, into a universal principle that is felt, but above all is an element of the consciousness of the subject. This gives a form to freedom that is in the disposition of the subject. The Catholicism of France allowed no such possibility for being at home with oneself with the principles of the modern world. It is an anachronism because the sensibility it cultivated expressed, on the one hand, a private conscience that was animated by superstition, with an authority external to the subject¹⁰ all of which came up against the Rousseauian will.¹¹ Catholic conscience remained isolated from reason – tied to the authority of the church not to the authority of self-consciousness.¹²

Comay captures nicely the model of experience that Hegel appeals to: it is a philosophical-historical experience that attempts to grasp the "nonsynchronicity" of the present but which does not "catch up with itself". This is the model of experience outlined in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* that is described above, in which experience is framed by a dissonance that thought retrospectively attempts to reconcile. However Comay adds a further dimension arguing that the French Revolution is untimely since it is not something which the present catches up with, it remains a permanent anachronism: "The task of philosophy is to explicate this untimeliness" (Comay, 5). The French Revolution remains thereby a trauma that cannot be healed; it is something that philosophy cannot catch-up with and reconcile itself to. It is however arguable if the revolution is untimely in this sense. The revolution is perhaps the defining event of modernity because of its temporal dissonance but this is not the same as being untimely. The Revolution cannot be synchronised with the present, since of course the Revolution is already ahead of itself, its own form of life is not identical to its present, it is not the happy world in which there is no history, indeed it produces many 'concepts' that will only work themselves out over subsequent centuries. In the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that philosophy cannot force a reconciliation in political life but only in thought, since philosophy is not a shape of life or a completed form of spirit but simply the comprehension of what is. Philosophy's temporal dissonance lies simply in its retrospective comprehension of how spirit has produced itself in the way that it has, but spirit will have moved forward rendering the comprehension anachronistic. The Revolution is the political and social expression of temporal dissonance for all the reasons that Comay argues. Philosophy comes on the scene retrospectively charting how we have come to the point we are at, the point of comprehension being the moment of cultural decline. This is the role of philosophy "to make explicit the structural dissonance of experience". The way that Comay sets up the revolution as the marker of historical untimeliness and given that Hegel's notion of experience is structurally framed by such untimeliness then one could understand Hegel's thought as the thought that is adequate to the Revolution. The way Hegel conceives experience is to give a philosophical form to the lived social and political reality of the Revolution (of the temporal dissonance that it articulates) and in this sense his thought is a reconciliation with the revolution, but human history and self-producing spirit is already ahead of itself and this is precisely what Hegel marks with his notion of experience. The present is indeed always anachronistic and this is Hegel's point, but to mark the revolution as permanently untimely, as caesura, as a trauma without being determinable in a linear trajectory of self-determining spirit may be to make Hegel into Derrida.

NOTES

1. Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 4.
2. The *Philosophy of Right* takes a similar approach with Right, where the text adopts a systematic historical-conceptual examination of successive attempts at the realisation of freedom.
3. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, §78.
4. Robert Pippin, "Recognition and Reconciliation: Actualized Agency in Hegel's Jena Phenomenology", *International Yearbook of German Idealism 2*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004, 260.
5. *Phenomenology*, §78
6. Pippin's example is Don Quixote knowing he can no longer be a knight, that the world has moved forward but what it is to be a nobleman in this new world, what the virtues are of such a man is not yet set.
7. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History Vol 1*, trans. P.C Hodgson and R.F. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 172
8. *Phenomenology* §80.
9. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History Vol 1*, 520.
10. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History Vol 1*, 506.
11. *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree. New York: Dover Publications, 1956, 445.
12. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 22. See the discussion of this issue in Dean Moyar's *Hegel's Conscience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 27.

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AND FRENCH REVOLUTIONS: THOUGHTS ON REBECCA
COMAY'S *MOURNING SICKNESS: HEGEL AND THE FRENCH
REVOLUTION*

Paul Redding

In *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, Rebecca Comay brings together the figures of Hegel and Freud. As a student at Tübingen, having watched from a distance the unfolding of the French Revolution, Hegel came up with an account of its central place in the development of the modern world that purported to be based on an idealist logic underlying all things. For the generation that came after Hegel, his attitude to the question of a revolution in his own country exemplified what this idealism entailed. The idealist could think of Germany as having *already had* its "revolution" in "spirit"; it had then no need for one in material, practical reality. Critics like Marx and Engels would explode the pretensions of this attitude as an "ideology" rather than a "scientific" disclosure of reality, one to be diagnosed in Comay's words as "a thinly disguised blend of anxiety, envy, and *Schadenfreude* ... typical of the "German misery." (Comay, 1)

One might expect, then, a parallel to be drawn between the attitude of Freud and the diagnostic stances of Marxist critics of Hegel. Marx and Freud are commonly paired as practitioners of a "hermeneutics of suspicion", with Marx reducing ideologies such as religions or the religion-like metaphysics of Absolute idealism to effects of forces working below the level of consciousness. That is, one might expect Freud to be used in a diagnosis of absolute idealism as a symptom of whatever "trauma" underlies that condition of a peoples that was captured by Marx's idea of the "German misery" that Hegel exemplified. But Comay's book takes an unexpected turn here. The "German misery" is taken as the model of trauma *qua* "modal, temporal and ... historical category" to be explored, and explored with "Hegel, of all people, its most lucid theorist." (Comay, 4) Hegel thus becomes the partner of Freud in the exploration of the human condition, not the object of diagnosis in a Marx-Freud alliance.

But neither does Comay present a psychoanalytic "reading" of Hegel's account of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment more generally in the sense of a reductionist reading of Hegel. Her account is philosophical rather than historical or psychological. Perhaps it could be better said that Comay finds in Hegel's interpretation of the Revolution an approach that strikingly anticipates the theoretical language that Freud later brought to his

psychological histories of individuals. Thus the “mourning” of the title of the book alludes to the “mourning” of Freud’s article “Mourning and Melancholia”, and Hegel’s reading of the revolution is organized around the idea of a type of entrapment within a pathological “melancholic” response to loss that Freud contrasts with an otherwise “healthy” process of mourning. As Comay points out, for Hegel those melancholic aspects of the revolution with its terroristic consequences were tied to the failure of France to have lived through the earlier revolution in religious thought that had been carried through in the German parts of Europe. Modernity, for Hegel, involved the necessary disruption of forms of religion like Medieval Catholicism based on the “immediate” relations found in the pre-modern family. This melancholic holding on to immediate forms of culture that had lost their grounds is a tendency to be found throughout the modern world, interfering with its *necessary* work of “mourning”. Such losses *are* to be mourned, but in its refusal to acknowledge the passing of this culture, the French nation had adopted a melancholic distortion of this.

On Comay’s interpretation, Hegel’s promotion of the French Revolution to the status of exemplary modern event, as well as the problems raised by the idea of a revolution able to be viewed and identified with from a distance, crystallize what she describes as “the untimeliness of historical existence”. In communities subject to the movements of history unevenly distributed over space, subjects can feel as not firmly planted in their present, a condition itself experienced as displacement and loss. It becomes “the task of philosophy ... to explicate this untimeliness”, and this is where Hegel’s philosophy, complete with its notion of “absolute knowing” is relevant. (Comay, 4-5) This is, she acknowledges, “of course not the standard reading. Absolute knowing is usually either discarded as metaphysical flotsam (the “deflationary”, usually liberal, approach) or reviled as an exercise in legitimization.” (Comay 5) While not accepting this dismissal of absolute knowing, neither, of course, does she accept its traditional *affirmative* reading, characteristic of religious “right” Hegelianism. Hegel had spoken, in a way reminiscent of Hölderlin or the early Schelling, of cognition as involving a “wound” brought about by a type of primordial incision separating a self off from a world within which it was initially immersed, allowing that world to become available for it as an object of conscious cognition.¹ Absolute knowing, especially in the hands of the religious right-Hegelians, was meant to signal the healing of this wound by the alienated subject’s becoming reunited with the “ground” of its being, “God”. For Comay, however: “Absolute knowing is just the subject’s identification with the woundedness that it is. Antidote is in this sense indistinguishable from injury, health from illness, and poison from cure”. (Comay, 130)

Comay’s account of Hegel’s metaphysics, his “absolute knowing”, is thus contrasted explicitly with two existing philosophical critiques—the liberal “deflationary” attitude to metaphysics in general, and the left-Hegelian-to-Marxist critique of it as ideology, and implicitly with the traditional right-Hegelian affirmative approach. However, I want to linger on this question of how to locate her reading in the array of existing understandings of Hegel, and in particular with respect to the debate between the so-called post-Kantian or “non-metaphysical” readings of Hegel, and what may be called “revised metaphysical” readings. Up to a few decades ago the standard “scholarly” interpretations of Hegel generally accepted a view of Hegel as putting forward a very substantialist and theocentric metaphysical picture, the sort affirmed by the traditional right-Hegelians. In the closing decades of the last century, however, his account came to be contested from various directions. One alternative emerged in the late 1980s with the writings of Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard. In short, Pippin and Pinkard flatly denied that Hegel represented a return to pre-Kantian metaphysics. Hegel should be read not only as a philosopher who had taken on board Kant’s critique of traditional metaphysics, but also as having applied the spirit of Kant’s critique to residual “metaphysical” dimensions of Kant’s own transcendental idealism. In reaction, the “revised metaphysical” readers such as Robert Stern and Stephen Houlgate have criticised Pippin and Pinkard for their excessive *Kantianization* of Hegel, eliminating the possibility of an Hegelian metaphysics. And so while seeing Hegel as having learned important lessons from Kant, they also see him as reinstating some more modest version of substantive metaphysics, often emphasising its Aristotelian or Spinozistic dimensions.

On my understanding of Comay’s book, her Hegel, I think, has more features in common with Pippin’s and Pinkard’s Hegel than either the traditional or revised metaphysical views.² Moreover, I think her pairing of

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Hegel with Freud sheds important light on how we might think of a “post-Kantian” Hegel. In particular, it gives us a way of understanding better what Hegel accepts of Kant’s “Copernican revolution”, and what he rejects—a question that in many ways parallels the political one of his attitude to the French Revolution. To try to do this I’ll approach these issues in terms of Comay’s diagnosis of the “melancholia” diagnosable in both revolutions. My crude rendering of this will be that Kant is the modern philosopher who most explicitly acknowledges the loss of a desired object—specifically the object of traditional metaphysical desire, a knowable “world in itself”. However, in his case, mourning became entangled in melancholia, and it is in relation to Kant as analyst and that Hegel plays the role of Freud the analyst. The last thing Hegel *qua* Freud *should be doing*, I suggest, is telling Kant (and us) that there is *no reason* to mourn, and that what we have actually lost is of no great loss—a loss that is more than compensated for by a *gain*. This purported gain is absolute knowing in which a *genuine* metaphysical object has been regained—one showing what had been wrong with the conception of the object *initially* sought and what was wrong with how it went about seeking it. Such an attitude would seem to share in the *worst* aspects of the romantic idealizations of lost objects—Novalis’s finding joy in the Sophie who “lives on” in his heart and writings after his fiancée’s actual death. On this reading of idealism, the “real” Sophie *is* the ideal Sophie. This is the attitude of denial, the rejection of the reality principle, and is most obvious in the right-Hegelian readings of Hegel’s metaphysics. On such an account, the metaphysical Hegel is telling us that our beloved epistemic object is *really* alive, living on “in spirit”, which is the *rightful* realm in which all objects live.

This was the reading abhorred by the original left-Hegelians and those who saw in Hegel a willingness to renounce any *concrete* revolution for the Germans because they had already carried it out in “spirit”. The recent “revised metaphysical” readers of Hegel are just as critical of the traditionally understood picture of “idealism” as had been the left Hegelians, but this is because they think the *content* of this metaphysical reading is incorrect. They are in general happy to forego the objects of “*metaphysica specialis*” (God and the soul), and in place attribute to Hegel a “*metaphysica generalis*” that, contra Kant, provides us with genuine knowledge of general categorical features of objective “being”. In this sense they are as anxious as the right-Hegelians to heal the wound of cognition that persists in Kant’s account, and to restore the object that, on Kant’s philosophy, had been lost. To this degree, they too show a melancholic unwillingness to go through the mourning initiated by Kant.

Let’s turn to Freud here and look at a description of melancholia *qua* pathological and regressive analogue of mourning, in which he focuses on the ambivalence of self-esteem that is found in melancholics.

As with paranoia, so also with melancholia ..., it has been possible to obtain a glimpse into the inner structure of the disorder. We have perceived that the self-reproaches with which these sufferers torment themselves so mercilessly actually relate to another person, to the sexual object they have lost or whom they have ceased to value on account of some fault. From this we concluded that the melancholic has indeed withdrawn his libido from the object, but that by a process which we must call ‘narcissistic identification’ he has set up the object within the ego itself, projected it on to the ego. ... The ego itself is then treated as though it were the abandoned object; it suffers all the revengeful and aggressive treatment which is designed for the object. The suicidal impulses of melancholics also become more intelligible on the supposition that the bitterness felt by the diseased mind concerns the ego itself at the same time as, and equally with, the loved and hated objects. In melancholia ... a feature of the emotion life which, after Bleuler, we are accustomed to call *ambivalence* comes markedly to the fore; by this we mean a directing of antithetical feelings (affectionate and hostile) towards the same person.³

On the post-Kantian reading of Hegel, Hegel starts from the reality principle and, with Kant, acknowledges the loss of the desired object—but on this reading Hegel finds Kant in the grip of a melancholic *internalization* of that very object. This results in Kant’s paradoxical combination of under- and over-estimation of our cognitive powers. *Theoretically* Kant is self-castigating. We are essentially total failures from the epistemic point of

view. We know nothing and *can* know nothing of the real world beyond ourselves. There is an unbridgeable gap between an *infinite* cognition to which the world would be presented whole and direct and our own: all we can know are our own miserable representations. But in this *reduced* realm, our knowledge is sovereign—here the mind can in fact achieve perfect knowledge because it is simply knowledge *of itself*. Moreover, this reversal from an under-estimation of our cognitive powers to their *over*-estimation becomes most obvious in *practical* reason. We all have an unimpeachable *certainty* of the “objective” moral law, and so with respect to the practical realm effectively achieve the infallibility of God.

It is not surprising that in his *New Introductory Lectures* Freud follows his account of the abusive super-ego of melancholia with a short discussion of Kant’s account of “conscience”, a juxtaposition that essentially parallels that found in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the confession and forgiveness scenario that concludes Hegel’s account of the “beautiful soul” and that Comay discusses with such illumination the last chapter of *Mourning Sickness*. But rather than follow her down that path, here I want to pursue the idea of an Hegelian diagnosis of this simultaneous under- and over-estimation of our cognitive powers within the domain of *theoretical* philosophy, and do so in what I understand to be the spirit of Comay’s reading. Here is where I take Comay to be opposed to those who want a Hegel who reverses Kant’s metaphysical skepticism and takes us to some modified version of traditional metaphysics. Like Comay, I take Hegel as insisting that there is “no-going-back” to anything like the original metaphysical project. I want to briefly look to the role played by Leibniz in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*.

I have described Kant’s mourning as a refusal that we can have the sort of object loved by traditional metaphysics. This is an object which ultimately manifests itself to us if we, as it were, learn to train the mind’s eye on it and discard the misleading givens of the sensory world which are no more than shadows on the wall of a cave. Sometimes, this process is presented as happening via a process of cognitive self-purification in which immediate givens come to be reflected on and mediated in a web of rationally connected thought. This is traditionally how Hegel’s path to absolute knowledge is presented, with Hegel channelling Diotima from Plato’s *Symposium*. As it is often pointed out, the imagery in these pictures is visual, and this type of immediate quasi-visual apprehension can be seen to characterize even the thinking subject’s grasp of the relation of inference in Aristotle’s account of logic. Thus Aristotle had appealed to this quasi-visual imagery by talking of terms as “contained” or “inhering” others. For example, “Socrates is mortal” is pictured in such a way that the predicate term “mortality” is grasped as contained in the subject term “Socrates” in the way that Socrates’ predisposition to eventually die is *in* him. This containment relation is transitive and its transitivity can be pictured in a visual way by the use of diagrams, for example. Indeed, Aristotle is said to have himself utilized diagrams to get his idea of inference across.

If in a diagram I can see that, say, a circle C is contained in another, B, and that B is contained in further circle, A, then I can simply *see* that C is itself contained in A. Such diagrams are able to model those syllogisms that manifest this type of perspicuous relation, the so-called first figure syllogism “Barbara”, for example: “all As are B; and all Bs are C; therefore As are C”. Aristotle characterized such syllogisms as “perfect”. But not *all* syllogisms (which, by definition, are *valid*) are “perfect” in this way, and so Aristotle attempted to reduce all *non*-perspicuous syllogisms (syllogisms in the second and third “figures”) to those in the first by relying on various “conversion rules” and indirect proofs that are *themselves* not understood in the immediately visualizable ways that accompany the notion of conceptual “inherence”.

In his account of “the Syllogism” in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel in essence sketches the evolution of logic in terms of the dialectical undoing of Aristotle’s way of thinking of inference, tracing the syllogism through its three figures and coming, finally, to the post-Aristotelian “fourth-figure” holding among singular judgments. This last figure poses a serious problem for Aristotle’s conception of the validity of syllogisms, as the constitutive judgments of the fourth figure have *entirely lost* those relations on which the earlier proofs relied—relations of “inherence” as underlying perfect syllogisms, and even those of “subsumption” that had developed in the task of explaining the “reduction” employed in the proofs of imperfect ones.

FREUD, HEGEL AND PHILOSOPHY

Hegel also calls the fourth figure syllogism the “mathematical syllogism” and discusses it in terms of Leibniz’s attempts to reduce logic to a generalized algebra or “calculus”. This aspect of Leibniz’s logic is now thought of as the revolutionary and forward-looking, anticipating, in general ways, approaches that did not develop until the end of the nineteenth century. Although brief, Hegel’s discussion of Leibniz’s mathematical logic and its development by Gottfried Ploucquet, whose logic he learnt at Tübingen, is perspicuous and advanced. Hegel is lacerating in his criticism of the attempted reduction of thought to an algebraic calculus—an extreme product of what he describes as the abstract “understanding”. But there is no sense in which Hegel thinks there can be some return to Aristotle: the ultimate collapse of the Aristotelian syllogism was an inevitable outcome of the very project from its inception, and resulted from a contradiction between the *model* of inference Aristotle took as the norm and the devices he had to employ to give a general account of *all* inferences in terms of that model.

Leibniz’s mathematical syllogism could only work because Leibniz had come up with a new way of thinking of the structure of categorical judgments, bypassing any idea of properties “inhering” in substances and predicates “inhering” in subjects. Within the mathematical syllogism, the very difference between a subject and predicate is annihilated, as two conceptual determinations are deemed abstractly equal, with the copula replaced by an “=” sign. The judgment can be treated algebraically in this way because both the two concepts are taken as predicable of a *third* that “has absolutely no determination whatever as against its extremes”. *Ibid.*, p. 679 (6:371).⁴ This reconfiguration of the categorical judgment can be thought to reflect the loss of the desired epistemic object because *that object* had been thought of as represented by the traditional *subject* of categorical judgment. What the “object” of the judgment is, is now just some indeterminate “*whatever*” that satisfies both predicates and makes the judgment “true”. Moreover, “truth” now becomes reduced to one of *two* values, as in the modern truth-values “T” and “F”—values that, as Leibniz realized, can be replaced by a binary number system (1 and 0) allowing the sentence–equations to be subjected to computation via a calculus.

Hegel is explicit, this fourth figure “mathematical” syllogism brings reason to the point of its death in that it reduces thought to a mechanical computational process that requires no consciousness on the part of any “computer”. Hegel refers to the “ossified” products of this analysis, recalling his treatment of “Phrenology” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which an existing self-conscious being gets reduced to “a bone”.⁵ In relation to the mathematical syllogism, Hegel quotes Ploucquet: “I can teach the whole logic mechanically even to the uneducated, just as children are taught arithmetic, so that, if there is no error of calculation, it would be possible not to be tormented by the fear of erring in reasoning or of being deceived by falsities”.⁶ Ploucquet and Hegel were aware, of course, that arithmetical calculation could be “performed” by machines. Pascal had designed a machine capable of addition and subtraction, and Leibniz himself had designed one capable of carrying out multiplication and division. If logic could be successfully reduced to a calculus, it could be taught “mechanically” because it would, like addition and multiplication, be capable of being “performed” by machines, machines that would, we might say, eliminate the thinking “head” of the human “computer”.⁷ Comay points to Hegel’s attitude towards another well-known machine that in the period of revolutionary terror was used to remove the heads of thinking humans.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel had spoken of the revolutionary use of the guillotine in logical, rather than moral, terms. Where there is no “syllogistic” mediation between “the singular” (an individual) and “the universal” (universal freedom, “*volunte generale*”) what results is the simple “negation of the individual as an *existent* within the universal”. Thus the “sole work and deed” of the universal will was reduced to that of administering “the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water”.⁸ The project of human freedom is, paradoxically, reduced to the destruction of actual individuals whose freedom is purportedly being sought under the heading of freedom for *all*.

The machine required to remove thinking heads in the realm of logic, being considerably more complicated than the invention of Dr. Guillotine, had to await the twentieth century to be built, but the principles involved were clear to Hegel as they had been to Leibniz. For Hegel, the fourth-figure syllogism was the route to a

machine which eliminated the living head, “tormented by the fear of erring in reasoning or of being deceived by falsities”. A successful invention of the type of calculus with which Leibniz and Ploucquet experimented would be the invention of a type of language within which this machine would “think”. To Hegel (and many others) this is as paradoxical as that found in the murder of individuals in the name of universal freedom. As in the reduction of spirit to a bone, we have lost the normative dimensions of knowledge and reason that we are supposedly explaining. But that this is paradoxical is, for Hegel, not the grounds for dismissing it. The paradox of this situation is to be acknowledged and dealt with.

Hegel is often portrayed as simply critical of such developments characteristic of modernity and that are working to undermine the ancient “speculative” conception of reason. Didn’t Hegel relentlessly criticise the reduction of “reason” to “the understanding” in this way? While the answer is “yes”, this is commonly understood in a way that crudely opposes “reason” and “the understanding”. Antinomies are generated by the actions of “the understanding” as had been recognized by Kant. Wanting to save thought from such antinomies, Kant had reacted by restricting the scope of the understanding to “appearances”, and by disallowing questions about the world “in itself”. For Hegel, the antinomy generating features of human thought could not be quarantined in this way, but neither could “reason” be separated from the “determining” activity of the understanding. The understanding was not something that could be avoided or restricted in its operations. Rather *restricting* the operations of the understanding in this *Kantian* way was what robbed its determinations of the propensity to generate contradiction—they dynamic motor of reason. Reason is not to be isolated from the understanding, it must, as it were, give the understanding its head. The paradoxical fourth-figure syllogism was simply the purest expression of the understanding, as was the application of the guillotine in the revolutionary terror; the logical processes of thought reflecting on itself working its way through human culture had been led to these events inevitably, and was not to be sidetracked. Thus logic for Hegel cannot avoid such consequences, but must somehow *acknowledge* them, and think *through* them, and in doing so it must acknowledge the reality its potentially deadly contradictions. In order to live, thought must incorporate the reality of its deadly reduction to the “ossified” forms of thought found as in formal logic, and that of the treatment of citizen’s heads as cabbages.

Critics of the “post-Kantian” interpretation advocate a picture in which Hegel is taking thought *back* to the lost objects of metaphysics. It is true that for Hegel logical thought is reborn after the formal syllogism, resurrected from its death at the hands of the understanding—a resurrection paralleling the one central to the religion with which Hegel identified. But Leibniz’s evisceration of the logical schemata of Aristotelian thought must amount to the abandonment of the *very concept* of the sorts of objects purported to be reasoned with that logic—the classical objects of metaphysics, objects with necessary rather than contingent existence, with essential natures, and so on. Any backtracking would just restart that dialectic that brings this idea of reason to lifeless mechanism. Kant had accepted the loss of these objects, but in urging us to settle for substitutes we could know—“appearances” in the theoretical realm, and the moral law in the practical realm—he, from the Freudian point of view, blocked the work of mourning by inserting the phantasms of melancholia. Whatever the *details* of Hegel’s solution, neither the restitution of pre-Kantian metaphysics, nor the traps of melancholic internalization can point the way. This means that the cognitive life restored must be understood as having non-life—death, mechanism, inertness—as an essential ingredient.

On my reading of Comay, this is the message born by her account of “absolute knowing”. This is a type of knowledge that is built on the assumption that the “wound” of cognition *constitutes* us as the beings we are, there can be no immediate belonging to the world or to our own historical moment, a belonging which is free from the effects of this internal wound within life that makes us human. “Absolute knowing is just the subject’s identification with the woundedness that it is”.⁹

NOTES

1. Hölderlin, Schelling, Hegel
2. It might be the case that Comay includes these readings within the scope of “liberal”, “deflationist” approaches to philosophy. But the misleadingly called “anti-metaphysical” reading of Hegel should not be simply identified with the “deflationist” attitudes of contemporary analytic philosophy.
3. Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. Joan Riviera. New York: Pocket Books, revised edition 1952, 26th lecture, 434–5.
4. The idea that the subject and predicate of a categorical judgment could be understood as *predicates* both predicated of some “*tertium commune*” was a revolutionary move not equalled until the rediscovery of mathematical logic in the 19th century.
5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, § 331.
6. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*. Trans. and Ed. George di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 608. Hegel’s quote is in Latin, di Giovanni’s translation is given in endnote 92 on 624.
7. It is easy to think of arithmetic as a mechanical procedure, with the child being taught to follow a series of instructions. Consider, for examples, two rows of signs (“numerals”) written on a sheet of paper accompanied by the sign “X”. The child learns to look to the left-most sign on the lower line, then to the sign above it. Say that are “3” and “6”, respectively. Consulting a provided table produces a sequence of two further signs, a “1” followed by an “8”. A further rule tells the child to write the second of these signs immediately below the first one looked at, and to “carry” the first. The same procedure is repeated for the next two left-most signs, but the composite sign that results from the table has to be put through a further process to accommodate the sign “carried”, and so on. Through this, the child does not yet have to know what numbers “are” or what purpose this activity is meant to serve. The child can be replaced by a machine.
8. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §590, quoted in Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 73.
9. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 130.

THE USES OF DISENCHANTMENT: REMARKS ON REBECCA COMAY'S *MOURNING SICKNESS: HEGEL AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION*

Robert Sinnerbrink

... the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself.

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*¹

1. OUR SICKNESS UNTO DEATH

In Freud's famous essay "Mourning and Melancholia", unresolved grief over a lost object that can be neither incorporated nor released manifests in a pathological condition known as melancholia.² The latter recalls a more archaic, even mythic register, in which communication between the psyche and the world, between the living and the dead, is more fluid and revelatory than in the disenchanted world of modernity. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine 'depression' – a clinical cum cultural term for one of the defining maladies of our age – used to describe an historical mood or a philosophical *Zeitdiagnose*. Yet some philosophers, not to mention artists, have acknowledged this affinity or connection, from Michael Theunissen's reflections on the melancholy mood of modernity, Julia Kristeva's study of melancholia in the history of art and modern literature, to Lars von Trier's extraordinary recent film, *Melancholia* (2012).³ Despite its history of cultural and aesthetic richness, more recent philosophers, curiously, have shied away from the phenomenon of melancholia, pretending that it no longer exists or that it has little to say to contemporary readers.

The exception proving the rule here is the work of Rebecca Comay.⁴ Comay's *Mourning Sickness* is a brilliant meditation on and analysis of this historical-cultural mood, an oblique and penetrating *Zeitdiagnose* treating the topic of historical mourning via a neo-speculative reading of the latter half of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Indeed, Comay picks up where most commentaries leave off, namely with the unhappy consciousness and the difficult transition to reason and freedom. She investigates, analyses, and speculates on that part of the *Phenomenology* where most Anglo-American commentators fear to tread—the chapters on Reason, Absolute

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Freedom and Terror, culture and self-alienated spirit, forgiveness and reconciliation, absolute knowing and the question of the end(s) of history. The result is a philosophical *Trauerspiel* or Benjaminian mourning play written in grand style, full of aphoristic brilliance, deconstructive insights, psychoanalytical diagnoses, and dialectical poetics. *Mourning Sickness* is a book that demonstrates the importance of treating Hegel as an ‘event’ in the history of thought; a philosopher of the future, a thinker still ‘to come’, a figure who remains vigorous, confronting, and strange, rather than the ‘dead dog’ of interest only to antiquarian curators or academic fossickers.

Comay’s thesis, articulated as a series of variations on key themes, is that Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is a monumental work of historical mourning: for the failure of the French Revolution, its historical and political misfiring; and for the failed birth of modernity and freedom in Germany, the unhappy consciousness of a nation torn between its philosophical progressivism and its historico-political retardation. Indeed, Hegel’s *Phenomenology* remains an instance of the very German ideology it critically analyses, a testament of consolatory revolution at the level of thought rather than praxis. For Comay, it is an elegy for a modernity forever caught in the temporal crossfire between a future that has already passed and a history that never fully arrives. It expresses what she calls a condition of “mourning sickness”; a philosophical malady signalling a failure of philosophical conception, historical gestation, and political birth (as Comay points out, the gendered metaphors of birth are endemic to this *geistige Krankheit*). Comay’s critical diagnoses are articulated in brilliant descriptions of the logic and phenomenology of the French Revolution, the Terror, and their historico-philosophical aftermath: the founding events of a melancholy modernity whose nihilism consists in an Adornian and Benjaminian mourning or *Trauer* of the failed revolutionary promise of modernity.

Hegel is the historical witness and philosophical scribe of this modern melancholia. Hegel’s phenomenological observer, for Comay, is also an ambiguous narrator of the tragedy of modernity, chronicling this historical and political disenchantment even as he authors a philosophical elegy for its lost ideals. At once critical partisan of the Kantian philosophical revolution and sceptical observer of *Geist* and its vicissitudes, Hegel disavows Germany’s historical failure to fully enter post-revolutionary modernity. He appropriates Napoleon, the infamous “world-spirit on horseback”, as a soon-to-be-sublated episode in the fateful historical march of reason towards bourgeois civil society, itself a way station on the way towards ... what? That is the question, both for Hegel and for us, his dissatisfied epigones or restless heirs: w(h)ither reason in history?

To address this question Comay reads Hegel’s *Phenomenology* as a work of mourning for modernity’s disappointed philosophical hopes, a dialectical tragedy in which modernity can contemplate its own fall: its historico-political involution from revolutionary enthusiasm and political rebirth to bourgeois ennui and cultural melancholia. Like a Wagnerian *Götterdämmerung*, or von Trier’s sublime cinematic vision of world-immolation, Comay’s *Mourning Sickness* dramatises, in philosophical and literary terms, the ‘sickness unto death’ of absolute spirit: a malady in which the philosophical observer contemplates and comprehends, but cannot enact or overcome, the failed revolutionary promise that both defines and deforms our age. Like Nietzsche’s ‘perfect nihilist’, Hegel is at once doctor and patient, healer and sufferer. The *Phenomenology*, from this point of view, becomes a case study revealing the cultural-historical symptoms pointing to the unfinished (and perhaps unfinishable) project of modernity. It presents the melancholic experience of a modernist historical subjectivity and a critical self-reflection of modernity’s maladies; a Hegelian critical-dialectical comprehension of our time in thought—an analysis terminable and interminable, if there ever was one.

2. BACK TO THE FUTURE

Among the many things to admire in Comay’s book is its audacity in challenging the prevailing Anglo-American orthodoxy concerning the “future of Hegel”, to use Catherine Malabou’s pregnant phrase.⁵ Here I am not referring to the excellent scholarship on Hegel that has flourished in the Anglophone world in recent decades, but rather to the cultural-intellectual consensus over the significance of Hegel’s thought for contemporary philosophy. We could describe this reception, putting it crudely, as divided between two camps:

those seeking to establish *continuity* between Hegel and contemporary philosophy, and those acknowledging or fostering a *rupture* between Hegel and the tradition. On the one hand, there are those for whom the heritage or legacy of Hegel involves the effort to incorporate his thought, or those elements compatible with contemporary concerns, into the shared philosophical conversation, drawing what is useful, relevant, or *Aktuell* from his work and abandoning the rest to the museum of philosophical bric-a-brac. Thus for philosophers like Charles Taylor, Terry Pinkard, Robert Pippin, and the ‘non-metaphysical’ school of Hegelians, Hegel’s thought matters because it both anticipates and contributes to our contemporary philosophical conversation, whether on the post-metaphysical turn in philosophy, the problem of modernity, the critique of naturalism, the *problématique* of recognition, the sociality of reason, or the meaning of freedom as rational autonomy.⁶

On the other hand, there are the philosophers for whom the legacy of Hegel means above all a rupture or break; a caesura within the philosophical tradition, an event of thought that resists, undoes, or displaces rationalistic attempts at seamless integration. From this point of view, Hegel’s body of work—and in particular the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*—marks a rupture that cannot be sealed or ‘healed by the spear that caused it’. It anticipates and inaugurates a tradition of critical thinking, a ‘Continental’ thinking of rupture, one that maintains a complex and difficult relationship with the philosophical mainstream.⁷ After all, for the early analytic philosophers, Hegel was the exemplary representative of all things metaphysical, irrational, and ‘Continental’—the whipping boy for a range of philosophical, ideological, and political transgressions.⁸ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that this division between continuity theorists and thinkers of rupture reflects, in a complicated and compromised fashion, the troublesome distinction we have inherited between ‘analytic’ and ‘Continental’ philosophy. This ‘philosophical’ distinction—though it is as much historical, cultural, institutional, and ideological—becomes more troubling and perplexing once we consider from an historical perspective. It becomes more complicated, moreover, when we consider how each philosophical perspective ‘reads’ history, whether as its age recollected in thought; or a rational progression, like scientific thought, discarding superseded historical states; or as an event rupturing the prevailing configuration of *Geist* so as to usher in the New.

The standard Hegelian response to such dichotomies is, of course, to claim that both are partially right and partially wrong; both are to be determinately negated in a more comprehensive dialectical unity. Indeed, there are signs today that the oppositional phase of the analytic/Continental dispute has given way to a more self-reflective perspective; a post-analytic/post-Continental sensibility in which the more sectarian and doctrinaire stances of the past have reached a better, if not common, understanding. One is tempted to say that the engagement with Hegel in recent years is exemplary here, with philosophers on both sides of the putative ‘divide’ engaging in conversations that would have been hard to imagine a couple of decades ago. At the same time, talk of an elimination of a putative overcoming of the ‘difference’, in my view, would be premature and misguided. For those readers of Hegel for whom the *Phenomenology* remains a provocation, a challenge, a work ‘of the future’, there is a price to be paid in assimilating Hegelian thought into contemporary academic scholarship: namely the power of Hegel’s texts to arrest, surprise, and force us to think differently—their traumatic power of rupture.

Comay’s Hegel demonstrates this powerfully: a Hegel that cannot be assimilated, in polite fashion, into the *lingua franca* of contemporary philosophical academic discourse, or who contributes a novel voice but no fundamental challenge to parameters of contemporary debate. Hegel was never that, even in his own day, let alone in ours, which is to say in Hegel’s time—a figure that Jacques Derrida once remarked might well define our age.⁹ In this sense, I would situate Comay’s book at the heart of the contemporary battle over the legacy of Hegel, this ‘struggle for recognition’ between philosophers seeking to integrate Hegel into contemporary academic discourse and those desirous of exposing this discourse to the challenge of Hegel’s texts, those for whom Hegel can change the way we think, or indeed the way we write, philosophically. *Mourning Sickness* is one of the most rigorous and ambitious attempts in recent years to do precisely that: to confront contemporary philosophical pieties with the uncanny force of Hegel’s thought, his untimely, even revolutionary potential as a thinker—a philosophical and non-philosophical ‘excess’ that contemporary philosophy seeks to ignore.

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yet which provides clues for grasping the historical melancholia that Comay argues is our true ‘post-modern’ condition.

3. TRAUMA OF HISTORY/HISTORY AS TRAUMA

Comay’s central concern in reading Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is stated succinctly in her “Introduction: French Revolution, German *Misère*”

My interest is philosophical: to explore trauma as a modal, temporal, and above all a historical category, with the “German misery” as its exemplary model and Hegel, of all people, its most lucid theorist.¹⁰

The German encounter with the French Revolution, for Comay, is neither anomalous nor unique. The experience of historical trauma and its philosophical treatment (in both medical and conceptual senses) is not confined to Hegel and the German nation’s post-revolutionary malaise. As Comay explains, the German encounter with the French Revolution—Hegel at once as diagnostician and sufferer of historical melancholia—is “an extreme case of the structural anachronism that afflicts all historical experience” (Comay, 4). Indeed, history itself, for Comay, is traumatic, not only in its deeds but in its non-synchronous rhythms, its paradoxical temporality, its ‘evental’ or event-like status: forever behind us and always yet to come, with the present forever ruptured or divided between disappointed hopes and unattainable ideals. Historical experience, in short, is a “grinding nonsynchronicity” that we try, in vain, to efface, ignore, or correct. The French Revolution, she argues, remains at the centre of Hegel’s philosophy because it expresses a “traumatic dissonance that determines our fundamental sociability” (Comay, 4). It is a paradoxical crystallization of “the untimeliness of historical experience”, Comay remarks, that it is philosophy’s task, not only Hegel’s but ours, to explicate (Comay, 5).

Her point is in doing so, I take it, is to focus our attention on the parallel between Hegel’s confrontation with the revolution and our contemporary historico-political situation, one in which the question of ‘revolution’ might seem at once fantastically distant and strangely proximate: a paradoxical historical self-understanding in which we seem utterly removed from this almost mythical upheaval yet can still detect subtle aftershocks emanating from 1789, like light waves from an imploding star. Indeed, we now exist within an historical situation in which the concepts of ‘absolute freedom’ and ‘terror’ have now taken on a sinister, yet historically resonant ring. Indeed, it would be very interesting to bring another voice into the discussion at this point, namely Susan Buck-Morss’s reflections on “Hegel and Haiti”: her fascinating critical analysis of Hegel’s ‘master/slave’ dialectic as a subtle depiction of the world’s only genuine ‘slave revolt’, which took place in Haiti from 1791 to 1804, just before the publication of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, famously completed as the first shots in the battle of Jena rang out. The Haitian revolution remains an authentic revolt in the name of the freedom of subjectivity, one that is curiously ignored by the post-Hegelian tradition of Continental political philosophy.¹¹

As Comay remarks, this is far from the ‘standard reading’ of Hegel (if there is such a thing). As she notes, typically, one finds Hegel’s “absolute knowing”) discarded either as “metaphysical flotsam (the liberal or ‘deflationary’ approach)”, or else impugned as historical apologetics (the ‘critical’ approach construing the end of the *Phenomenology* as a theodicy of reason, a “final calibration of the clocks” of historico-metaphysical progressivism) (Comay, 5). We might think here, on the one hand, of Hegel’s non-metaphysical readers, who downplay the theologico-political rhetoric and metaphysical flourishes in the final chapters of the *Phenomenology*; and on the other, Hegel’s latter-day ‘critical critics’, like Habermas in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, who take Hegel’s text to be “symptomatic of the German ideology—an attempt to sublimate the event as a ‘glorious mental dawn’ whose light shines most splendidly in the twilight zone of philosophical reflection” (Comay, 5)—a revolution without revolutionaries, so to speak. Both readings, for Comay, disavow or distort what is essential in Hegel’s presentation of absolute knowing: namely, that it both expresses and analyses the logic at work in the ideology of historical progress and its philosophical supplement. Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is both a work in, and a critique of, the German ideology so mercilessly

satirised by Marx, but it is one that also “lays out the traumatic structure” of this ideology, “and pursues its consequences to the end” (Comay, 5). We might call this the *mimetic-deconstructive* aspect of Comay’s reading of Hegel, a performative enactment, as well as critical exposure, of the aporetic experience of historical disenfranchisement—a malaise with which we are doubtless familiar today.

From this point of view, which recalls an earlier generation of French readers of Hegel (like Jean Wahl and Jean Hyppolite), ideology is not to be regarded as alien to, but constitutive of, historical consciousness in its self-alienation or “noncoincidence with itself”—that is, in its “repetitive struggle to define and position itself in a world to which it will not conform” (Comay, 6). Hegelian absolute knowing, on this view, is a hyperbolic philosophical sketch—a silhouette or caricature, as Comay will suggest—of this unhappy historical consciousness. It provides an historical silhouette that makes explicit “the structural dissonance of experience” (Comay, 6)—formalizing the necessity and laying out the structure of this historico-temporal delay, and the various cultural, philosophical, and ideological strategies we have devised to disguise, glamorize or rationalize it.

The challenge posed by the French revolution, according to Hegel, is bequeathed to the generations that have followed it. The Revolution remains a “knot”, as Hegel remarks in the *Philosophy of History*, leaving “a residue for future generations”, as Comay glosses, echoing Benjamin, Adorno, and Derrida. Hegel’s absolute is the philosophical attempt to unravel this Gordian knot, to contemplate this historical riddle, and to do so in a philosophical idiom that includes itself in the very phenomena it is analysing. Comay’s reading of Hegel is acutely sensitive to this self-referential aspect of Hegel’s work, its deconstructive orientation *avant la lettre*. Her aim is thus “to explore the ways in which the seeming exception constitutes the norm: revolutionary negativity is simultaneously a limit to experience and its paradigmatic logic.” (Comay, 6) Revolutionary negativity names a limit to the experience of ‘normal’ modernity, its prose of the everyday, its bourgeois reformism, its smug ‘end of history’ self-satisfaction, its uncanny mixture of pragmatic and destructive politics, empire and ennui. And it expresses its paradigmatic logic; a revolution of the everyday that continues to transform the ground beneath our feet, that temporalises thought, subjectivity, philosophy, economic and political life, technology, thus confirming over Marx’s motto for modernity as the age in which ‘all that is solid melts into air’.

The corollary to this exploration—and this will provide the focus for my questions in what follows—is that Hegel’s *Phenomenology* presents us with the challenge of deciphering this riddle of history, no longer solved but having to be posed anew, repeatedly. Hegel’s singularity as a thinker of modernity is that he both shares and criticises “the fantasies of his epoch” (Comay, 6); he shows “how a fantasy can be simultaneously enjoyed and deconstructed” (Comay, 6), opening up an ambivalent space for critical reflection that both participates and exposes the aporias of modernity. Indeed, the philosophical challenge bequeathed by the Revolution is that of conceptualising history—its nonsynchronous becoming, its irrational rationality—from within a perspective that is itself mobile and mutating. How to think the untimeliness of history in a manner commensurate with our own fractured sense of time? This is the philosophical challenge of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* that is overlooked by Hegel’s more rationalist-optimist interpreters but acknowledged by those who read Hegel as a ‘tragic’ thinker of modernity. The Owl of Minerva may only spread its wings at dusk, which means that it disappears with every new (or false) dawn.

4. ‘FIRST AS TRAGEDY, THEN AS FARCE’

One of the most fascinating aspects of Comay’s book is that one experiences a sense of reading a brilliant interpretation of Hegel’s text that is at the same time a philosophical allegory with profound resonances in the present. If, as Hegel argued, reading texts in the history of philosophy is also a way of philosophically comprehending our present, a critical genealogy enabling us to appropriate our inherited ways of thinking, what philosophical comprehension of the present is afforded by Comay’s analysis of Hegel’s ‘mourning sickness’ and historical melancholia? There are a number of interpretative possibilities that open up: we can read it as a diagnosis of the origins of our contemporary historico-political malaise; an analysis of the discourse of post-

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revolutionary modernity, a discourse that also functions as a philosophical disenfranchisement of politics; a self-deconstructing 'message in a bottle' to be reanimated by critical theorists of the future, archaeologists of the present in an age of sceptical uncertainty. *Mourning Sickness* suggests to me, at different points, all of these possible lines of inquiry, which is why it affords such a rich panorama for the philosophically curious reader, a reader desirous of critical self-reflection as much as cultural criticism and ideology critique.

An important issue arises here, however, that merits further critical reflection. My question is whether we should take the 'mourning sickness' Comay identifies in Hegel's text as *specific* to his philosophical encounter with modernity, or whether we should take it as announcing a more *general* 'structural' problem in our modern experience of time and history. Comay suggests, on the whole, the latter option in *Mourning Sickness*, a reading that makes Hegel's text symptomatic of a more general difficulty afflicting our attempts to comprehend philosophical experience—our inescapable 'untimeliness', our chronic inability to reconcile historical expectation with historical recollection, in a word, our *melancholic* experience of modernity:

we encounter history virtually, vicariously, voyeuristically—forever latecomers and precursors to our own experiences, outsiders to our most intimate affairs ... Simultaneously underachieving and overachieving (we demand at once too much and too little), constantly racing ahead of what we know yet forever lagging behind our own insights, we console ourselves for what we've missed, shrink back from what we've achieved, and strain to harmonize the disparate strands of our historical consciousness by supplying ourselves with imaginary pedigrees, family romances, and phantom solidarities. (Comay, 5)

My question concerns the 'we' in this passage and others in the book. Is it the 'we' of our own historical experience, that of the Hegelian phenomenological observer; or is it the 'we' of the Hegelian historical subject, as depicted more explicitly in the latter parts of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*?

On the other hand, if we take the *Phenomenology* to express a very particular kind of 'mourning sickness', one that afflicts Hegel's ambitious attempt to comprehend and overcome both historical tradition and the ruptures of modernity, then we can read her book as an exacting forensic anatomy of historical melancholia that finds its aetiology in a flawed philosophy of history—rather than in history itself. From this point of view, reading Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an expression of 'mourning sickness' is less a matter of uncovering the aporetic structure of *all* historical experience than it is an exercise in exploring the critical genealogy and phenomenological logic of a certain kind of 'unhappy consciousness'—the alienated Hegelian subject of history, which may or may not map directly onto 'our' historical experience, given the peculiar simultaneity and disparity between pluralist forms of cultural and historical experience today.

I shall return to this issue presently, one of the most fascinating and intriguing in Comay's book. Given our own historical reflexivity in reading Hegel's philosophy, how do we situate Comay's reading of Hegel in relation to our own context and concerns? There is no doubt a way we might reconcile these apparently conflicting tendencies. We could, for example, take Hegel's *Phenomenology* as work of historical mourning for the failed revolutionary moment, and hence as an allegory pointing to tendencies, pathologies, and complicities afflicting our contemporary historico-political situation. For we too are living in the aftermath of some very different, but also related, experiences of 'revolutionary' transformation: for example, the collapse of communism and the rise of a hegemonic neoliberalism. From this point of view, the relationship between Hegelian 'mourning sickness' and our own historico-political situation becomes something like a retrospective allegorisation of the present. Yet in attempting this kind of reading, we risk a kind of philosophical 'presentism': reading our own anxieties and historical mood disorders into Hegel's philosophical analysis of the post-Revolutionary moment of cultural upheaval and historical trauma. How, then, are we to think both the historical and philosophical dimensions of Hegelian 'mourning sickness'?

This question assumes a particular urgency once we consider a fairly recent instance of historical trauma or *Trauerarbeit* at the level of philosophy and politics: the collapse of communism and the exhaustion of the Marxist paradigm. Critical theory and Continental political philosophy are arguably still working through—with varying degrees of success—the trauma of the ‘death’ of Marxism and its melancholic aftermath. Contemporary (political) philosophy, from this point of view, could also be regarded as suffering Hegelian ‘mourning sickness’ in the Hegelian manner: what Bruno Bosteels calls the ‘speculative left’ with its unhappy waiting for the theologically-inflected messianic event, versus the ‘apologetic right’, the reigning cabal of Fukuyamist ‘end of history’ neoliberals/neoconservatives, for whom heaven really has ‘come down to earth’, but without, it seems, the glad tidings of historical reconciliation and universal ‘freedom’ that were predicted. Here Comay’s *Mourning Sickness* might open up a provocative line of thinking in regard to overcoming this traditional Hegelian ‘Left’/‘Right’ dichotomy. Indeed, it offers a more philosophically reflexive and comprehensive way of conceptualising our own historical ‘untimeliness’. In this sense, Comay’s reading of Hegel would be a genuine dialectical *Trauerarbeit*; a work of philosophical therapeutics, helping us ‘work through’ the trauma of loss of utopian vision and political ideals that seem at once untenable and urgent today.

5. HEGEL’S TIME

How would reading *Mourning Sickness* as an allegory of the present work? In posing this question here I would like to stress the ‘timeliness’ of Comay’s reading of Hegel, rather than its ‘untimeliness’. Comay develops a reading of Hegel that is timely, of our time, which is also Hegel’s time, in the sense that Hegel remains the thinker *par excellence* of the aporetic or fractured temporality of modernity. This, to reiterate, is not the Hegel of a relentless rationalist theodicy, of the ineluctable progress of freedom, or of a resignatory reconciliation with the status quo. Rather, it is a Hegel of temporal rupture, of historical trauma, of the ways in which we learn to live the ‘after’; to survive the ‘post’ in post-revolutionary, perhaps even ‘post-historical’ time (as Alexandre Kojève and other unorthodox Hegelians have long argued).¹² Hegel’s time is our time, which is a time ‘out of joint’, as Deleuze remarks, quoting Hamlet apropos Kantian idealism.¹³ Or a time that Marx earlier evoked, with the spectre of revolution in the air; a time that is experienced at once as the perpetual post-festum and the eternal still to-come. Revolution is already past, its time is long gone; revolution has not yet happened, its time is yet to come. This ‘impossible’ temporality of the revolutionary rupture, which resonates with mythic and messianic time, opens up a way of thinking time and history that is dialectical and utopian without being dogmatic or despairing.

If, on the other hand, we take *Mourning Sickness*, as an allegory of a ‘general’ historical condition of ‘untimeliness’ (rather than as situated within, and relevant to, a particular historical constellation), then it becomes unclear in what ways the text sheds light on the present other than to cast it as the burdensome ‘eversame’ of historical repetition (first as tragedy, then as farce). How does this analysis of Hegelian philosophy as a work of mourning that discloses the deeper ‘structural’ impossibility of historical progress illuminate our contemporary historical experience? Does this not risk covering over our own historical perplexity? What becomes of freedom when it is enslaved in the name of terror, or terror emancipated to defend freedom? In the twilight of the idols since the death of Marx, can Hegelian melancholia suggest a way of working through the historical impasse? Perhaps we remain caught, dialectics at a standstill, occupying the position of Hegel’s unhappy historical consciousness, bereft of revolutionary enthusiasm and burdened with resignatory acceptance. ‘Welcome to the desert of the real!’¹⁴ To our de-worlded world order that has all but eliminated the historical horizon and substituted a destructive vision of frictionless exchange, infinite growth, and accelerating global ‘integration’ *cum* totalising domination. How is the Hegelian philosophical critic to find reconciliation in such a new world disorder? Should she?

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One way of addressing these admittedly speculative and perhaps unanswerable questions is to return, once again, to Hegel and the legacy of Hegelian thought. From this philosophically ‘experienced’ perspective, having

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traversed the philosophical odyssey chronicled in Comay's text, Hegelianism itself appears in a new light: as a tragic form of historical self-consciousness reflecting the divided temporal condition of modernity. On the one hand, we are oriented towards the future, directed towards the open horizon of undisclosed possibilities coupled with a desire to affirm our independence of any binding constraints of the past; and on the other, we are historically enmeshed in the dialectic with tradition, inescapably bound to the past, whose possibilities define what is meaningful, yet driven by an anxious yearning for an ambiguous future. From this 'tragic' perspective, Hegel's *Phenomenology* appears as the ambiguous chronicle of an unhappy historical consciousness who finds satisfaction in the philosophical diagnosis and comprehension of the present. Is this the right way to read Hegel (assuming again that there is such a thing), or is this kind of philosophical appropriation symptomatic of the limitations of Hegel's phenomenology of historical experience?

Another intriguing possibility suggests itself here: reading Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a work of irony, as a romantic-dialectical reflection on the aporias of modern historical experience. Hegel's romanticism, from this point of view, remains an intriguing question; an 'undecidable', proto-deconstructive dimension of his critical defence of the Enlightenment tradition. As Comay remarks, Hegel is at his most romantic when mercilessly satirising, mocking, or mimicking romanticism. From this point of view, we could regard the *Phenomenology* as dramatising, indeed as performing, the dialectic of romanticism and Enlightenment in its historically disenchanting movement from rebellion to resignation, from aestheticism to conservatism, from revolution to reconciliation, and back again. Hegelian 'mourning sickness', from this perspective, is a philosophico-historical malady requiring a homeopathic 'therapy', the tonic of philosophical disenchantment as a catalyst for historical convalescence. From the perspective of the unhappy historical subject, Hegel's *Phenomenology* becomes a philosophical therapy, a dangerous *pharmakon*; both poison and cure, contagion and corrective, a disenchanting enlightenment that cannot 'cure' the crisis of our historical illness, yet gives us time to recover, to 'work through' our melancholy modernity.

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What is our contemporary mourning sickness? How do we situate our melancholic historical and political horizon? One version of it could be described as a melancholic response to the trauma of Marxism's collapse and the unstable ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism. We no longer mourn the revolutionary past, yet we remain stuck within a melancholic malaise, unable to re-imagine and reactivate our inherited historical possibilities. The messianic-ethical turn in politics might be worth considering in this light: an unhappy consciousness of a revolutionary legacy that seems remote, coupled with the messianic promise that it might one day be reborn. This historical melancholia, one might suggest, stems from an unresolved grief over the loss of the myth of progress, which we can no longer fully believe, but also cannot bear to let go. It is this humanist myth of historical progress that Comay's Hegel, in the end, both diagnoses and deconstructs. Can we rethink history no longer as a triumphalist tale of teleological progress while maintaining a philosophically lucid hope for the future? That is our melancholy perplexity.

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NOTES

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 19.
2. Sigmund Freud (1917), 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*. Trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1957, 243-258.
3. See Michael Theunissen, *Vorentwürfe von Moderne: antike Melancholie und die Acedie des Mittelalters*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1996. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. In von Trier's *Melancholia*, the *Weltschmerz* of an age contemplating its own end is mediated via the melancholy consciousness of artist/advertiser Justine [Kirsten Dunst], and transfigured through cinematic images of extraordinary power and beauty—a medium torn between the will to art and artifice and the demand for entertainment and profit.
4. See Rebecca Comay. 'The Sickness of Tradition: Between Melancholia and Fetishism', in Andrew Benjamin, ed., *Walter Benjamin and History*. London: Continuum, 2006, 88-101.
5. Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
6. See Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Dialectic: The Explanation of Possibility*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988; Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, Robert Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008; Paul Redding, *Hegel's Hermeneutics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996; Allen Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
7. See Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism*. London: Routledge 2003. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
8. See Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 2nd Edition. Malden/Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999, Paul Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, and Tom Rockmore, *Hegel, Idealism, and Analytic Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
9. Jacques Derrida, 'The Age of Hegel' in *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy I*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 117-157.
10. Comay, Mourning Sickness, 4. This and all parenthetical references are taken from Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.
11. See Susan Buck Morss, "Hegel and Haiti" *Critical Inquiry* 26(4) (Summer2000): 821-886, and Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. University of Pittsburgh, 2009.
12. See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Trans. J. Nicholas. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969 [1947].
13. Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.
14. See Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Matters*. London: Verso Books, 2002.

HEGEL: NON-METAPHYSICAL, POST-METAPHYSICAL, POST-TRAUMATIC (RESPONSE TO LUMSDEN, REDDING, SINNERBRINK)

Rebecca Comay

These are enormously thought-provoking and generous responses: my thanks to Simon Lumsden, Paul Redding, and Robert Sinnerbrink for such engaged and challenging readings.¹ I can't begin to do justice to the full range of topics raised in these rich and original essays—each leads in a startlingly different direction-- but I'm going to try to connect a few of the dots in order to bring them into conversation. So rather than parceling out my responses to each piece separately, I'm going to try to weave them together as much as possible.

All three writers point to an unnerving contemporaneity in Hegel's project that may exceed his own self-understanding and complicate the question *for us* of "what is living and what is dead" in Hegel's philosophy today. There are several contemporaneities jostling for attention here. They're not easily or obviously compatible but they all work to replace the tiresome image of the bad Hegel—panlogical, logocentric, logorrheic—with a refurbished model more congenial to present concerns: historically inflected, socially responsive, existentially embodied, awake to contingency, intransigently if anxiously secular—radically, if complicatedly, modern in every way.

Paul Redding wonders whether my own approach in *Mourning Sickness* might have unexpected affinities with an influential revisionist strain in recent Anglo-American Hegel reception—the post-Kantian, post-Wittgensteinian trajectory from Pippin to Pittsburgh. Simon Lumsden wonders whether my reading might push (and potentially distort) Hegel in a deconstructive direction. Robert Sinnerbrink, who points to something potentially inassimilable (or perhaps a little weird) about the whole setup wonders about the specific historicity of my problematic. If *Mourning Sickness* is not just an historical study on Hegel, on the German idealist reception of the French Revolution, or on the German political impasse ca. 1800—more precisely: if the very concept of *revolution* is not by now pathetically outdated—what exactly is its contemporary traction?

The issue of anachronism looms large. Can we read Hegel today without adopting a kind of "presentism" that would assimilate the past to the immediate exigencies of the existent? The philological issues are less

important than the ideological ones: by converting a historical text into familiar currency we risk both effacing the explosive demands of the past and stripping the present of its urgency. This is a boring generic point but it has a specific punch here. Anachronism itself is the defining structure of all experience. Consciousness is defined by an essential non-synchronicity. There's a structural delay that distorts all experience and marks its essentially traumatic condition. (I'll return towards the end of this essay to this paradox of "structural" trauma, as well as my decision to use the vocabulary of trauma in the first place: the issue lies at the heart of Sinnerbrink's reflections and pertains to some of the most difficult ethical and political challenges regarding Hegel's actuality today.) Hegel sets out the basic structure of this untimeliness in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* and spends the rest of the book drawing out its epistemological, social, and political implications. The stakes become sharp as the Spirit chapter reaches its climax: the anachronism that defines the "German" experience of the "French" Revolution is an extreme case of the slippage that structures consciousness as such, and that produces its peculiar latencies, omissions, syncopations, and blind spots. The belated encounter with the Revolution brings Spirit face to face with its own untimeliness. By the end of the Spirit chapter, the issue of temporality—specifically: of *bad timing*—will loom into view. Anachronism as such becomes the explicit object of scrutiny. In the final forgiveness scene, Spirit's own lateness reaches crisis proportions: delay itself will be the ultimate "evil" that Spirit must eventually—after a breathtaking and unforgiveable moment of hesitation—forgive.²

Missed revolutions, delayed forgiveness, belated recognitions, expired deadlines: all these lapsed opportunities had exerted an urgent pressure on German philosophy and politics circa 1800. The experience of the missed revolution had confronted philosophy with its own belatedness and marked its essentially traumatic condition. The topic of lateness (not to mention revolution) has a slightly tired ring today, no doubt in part due to the ubiquity of trauma studies. Has bad timing lost its currency as a political and historical concern? Is anachronism exhausted as a critical principle; does it need it to get updated; or do we inevitably end up getting snarled in annoying performative contradictions the moment we start to do so? This is not just a silly formal issue.



Paul Redding invites us to relate the broadly *psychoanalytic* concerns of *Mourning Sickness*—Hegel as a thinker of historical loss and trauma—with the contemporary pragmatist attempt to rehabilitate Hegel as an "anti-" or "non-metaphysical" thinker. This latter rehabilitation usually centers on Hegel's post-Kantian credentials: his attempt to extend, radicalize, and refashion the critical project so as to stake out the elusive transition from "substance" to "subject."³ What is the status of Hegel's surpassing of Kant? Normally this question is posed in broadly epistemological terms, where the passage from transcendental to absolute idealism involves the flushing out of the last vestiges of pre-critical positivity—what the young Hegel describes as those "revolting lumps" of unelaborated objectivity⁴—still clinging to Kant's own critical apparatus. Hegel's achievement would be the elimination of the Ding an sich (along with its many subtle avatars) together with the difficult expansion of the solitary Kantian subject into the precarious intersubjective arena—the "becoming-we of the I," and of course vice-versa. There are a few other adjustments that will also have to be made along the way—namely, the various dualisms cluttering the Kantian landscape (a priori/a posteriori, concept/intuition, spontaneity/receptivity) and other bits of scholastic detritus⁵-- but these issues are all connected, at least in Hegel's mind, and ultimately stand or fall together.

To what extent does Hegel push forward the Kantian agenda, to what extent does he retreat from it, to what extent do the very terms of his advance intrinsically constitute a regression—a resurrection of some kind of rationalist substance monism in a pre-critical mould? This last suspicion usually comes to linger on all those closing flourishes—the last pages of the *Phenomenology*, the end of the *Logic*, the whole conceit of the *Encyclopaedia*—where Hegel seems to veer into grandstanding mode. It's in response to such grandiosity that many recent commentators have opted for a more sober, more "deflated" reading, often at the expense of Hegel's systematic claims, and usually with an eye to rescuing Hegel's modernity from the tidal wave of tradition that keeps threatening to engulf him—that is, to redeem him as a thinker of normativity, autonomy, or

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freedom (in some sense of the word: just what this means is of course the bone of contention). There's a lot of flotsam in that ocean: decomposing shreds of rationalist ontology, scraps of empiricist positivity, architectural debris from broken down architectonic or geometrical systems. Some of this stuff is biodegradable, some recyclable, some is salvageable if only for ornamental purposes. These "lumps" have the ambiguity of all leftovers: it's sometimes unclear whether they're there simply because they're there, because no-one bothered to get rid of them, because there's no place to put them, and because they've become invisible through habit and overexposure; whether they're harmless pebbles decorating the sandcastle; whether they've been embedded as *spolia* or trophies in the triumphal archway of the new system; or whether they're cemented into the foundation such that the whole edifice would crumble if they were removed. This is why disposing of them can be so tricky.

The demands of post-Kantianism drive my book as well but I've inflected the problem in a slightly counterintuitive direction. If we're to vindicate Hegel's most challenging modernity—his irreversible departure from substantialist metaphysics of every stripe—we must take seriously those aspects of his thought usually associated with his most embarrassingly retrograde onto-theological commitments. Only by pursuing the project to the end, by venturing to the outer extremities of the system, can we purge it of its most reactionary attachments. Not only must we engage with Hegel's philosophy of history (almost unreadable today for its ridiculous teleological-theological trappings). We must also engage with the claims of Absolute Knowing itself. In other words, Hegel's philosophical—and I would even venture to say his *political*—radicalism is to be located precisely at those junctures where his thought might seem to regress most. Absolute knowing is modern, even revolutionary, in its premise. It marks the decisive departure from every form of absolutism. It also reveals what is most painful about every decision (and for that matter about every departure): it needs to be continually repeated.



Redding suggests that the reading offered in *Mourning Sickness* might supply Anglo-American "non-metaphysical" Hegelians with two unlikely allies: Marx and Freud. Lumsden suggests that my emphasis on an incorrigible untimeliness might push Hegel beyond himself, and certainly beyond his own self-understanding—perhaps in a Derridean direction. Curiously, although Lumsden does not pursue this thought, such a push into deconstructive waters might also manage to steer Hegel into another kind of "non-metaphysical" territory—non-metaphysical in the Heideggerian "overcoming-of-metaphysics" sense—although the landscape would obviously here look quite different. I'm not sure whether all these commitments are ultimately compatible—something might have to give—but the conjuncture is intriguing, not least because it invites us to revisit the terms of the discussion.

It's hard to take the exact measure of Hegel's metaphysical commitments. There are many ingredients to weigh out, the proportions can be tricky, and it's often hard to agree on the terms. Of course much depends on what we mean by "non-metaphysical." "Metaphysics" is a charged word for both the traditions on the table here, although their diagnoses and their remedies (this is not quite the right word) diverge. The difference might come down to whether one takes the problem to be a purely internal *conceptual* problem; or whether it is to be understood as a strictly *historical* one, pertaining to the epochal predicament of the Western philosophical tradition. In other words, must the question of the "non-metaphysical" be translated into the question of the "post-metaphysical"—that is, must it be framed in a quasi-Heideggerian language of completion, exhaustion, and overcoming (the "end of philosophy," the "overcoming of metaphysics," the "end of man," and so on)? Or does the negation retain its analytic force independently of the specific pressures and opportunities of historical accumulation, genealogy, and context?

Non-metaphysical Hegelians of all stripes do perhaps agree on one thing: the point is to relinquish the last vestiges of positivism, where positivity attaches not only to the irrefragable immediacy of sense-data, to the manifold of intuition, or to the objects of traditional metaphysics (laws, causes, essences) but extends to all

extant (and even non-extant) things. The purge would eventually need to extend to the trappings of subjectivity itself just where it threatens to hypertrophy and congeal. Hegel congratulated Kant for having “liberated” us from the snares of rational psychology. Kant had proved that the subject is not a lump-like thing (*Seelending*, *res cogitans*) but rather a site of pure motility, activity, functionality, or what Hegel will call, untranslatably, “actuality,” *Actuosität* (Robert Pippin has captured the force of this neologism).⁶ The task of post-Kantian philosophy would be to protect Kant from regressing from his own insights. The task of post-Hegelian philosophy would be likewise to protect Hegel from regressing from his own. In Hegel’s case this would mean abandoning every personification of Geist as a corporate collective subject—the caricatures popularized by Charles Taylor, but already rehearsed in Heidegger in different terms. (For Heidegger, Hegel represented the culmination of the metaphysics of subjectivity and thus marked the closure of the history of *Seinsvergessenheit* inaugurated by Plato). Derrida himself, at least the early Derrida, was still writing in Heidegger’s orbit when he identified Hegel as the epitome of onto-teleo-theology—in short: the metaphysics of presence—and as such the emblematic figure with whom deconstruction must above all break. Famously: “*Différance* must sign the point at which one breaks with the system of the *Aufhebung* and with speculative dialectics.”⁷ So it would be ironic if Hegel himself turned out to be harnessed to deconstructive ends.

Redding notes Leibniz’s incisive but risky contribution to this iconoclastic project.⁸ With the reduction of the Aristotelian syllogistic apparatus to a formal combinatorial, thought itself is reduced to an empty calculating apparatus: it undergoes a mortification or “ossification” (Hegel’s words) that Redding intriguingly compares to the decapitation of cabbage heads on the scaffold.⁹ Curiously, this deadly moment of mechanization has the same function as rote memorization in the creation of mental habits or as repetition in religious ritual (as for the unhappy consciousness with its idiotic recitation of the rosary).¹⁰ In each instance the mortification of consciousness proves to be the key to its redemption: the mind’s surrender to mindless automatism becomes the occasion for thinking’s renewal. Extremes meet: faith and enlightenment prove equals in the art of mindlessness, and the path to rationality is strewn with the corpse of thinking itself. Redding points out that Hegel’s explicit distaste for this mechanization does not tempt him to reinstate pre-modern modes of rationality: the “cut”—exemplified here by the stringency of Leibniz’s algebraic notation¹¹—is irreversible, the renewal of thinking is premised on its own evacuation, and indeed the logic does sound a little Christian. Eighteenth-century mechanistic philosophies were quick to emphasize this. La Mettrie pointed to the uplifting promise behind his own deflationary message. The chastening reduction of man to machine had the salutary effect of reminding him of the superior order of providence—a kind of philosophical *vanitas*.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, all this machine-talk also points to the tenacity of the death drive; the grinding repetition points not to some kind of nostalgia for the comforts of inanimate existence, or to the void of Nirvana, but rather a return to the beginning where everything can start again



Of course any serious consideration of the question of Hegel’s metaphysical predilections would at some point have to deal with the gritty historical-reconstructive issues: the various inheritances, influences, affinities, and blind-spots that mark Hegel unmistakably as an inhabitant of the nineteenth century. But before going any further, it’s worth noting—both Redding and Sinnerbrink are absolutely right to point this out—that the current battle lines between “metaphysical” and “non-metaphysical” readings don’t exactly map onto the “Right Hegelian”/“Left Hegelian” polarities of old.

And that’s too bad. That earlier struggle had all too often, of course, been woefully misconstrued. Many have argued that (early) Marx himself may have been partly to blame for this: in his eagerness to extricate the rational kernel of the dialectic from its moribund religious trappings he ended up reinstating some kind of species essentialism along humanist lines. That trajectory would culminate in a messianically inflated notion of the proletariat tethered to a creaky model of progressive universal history—the “homogeneous empty time” reviled by Benjamin among others. It’s also the case that the left-Hegelian attempts to relieve the Hegelian

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dialectic of its ideological baggage had itself made use of a concept of ideology (as illusion, error, in short, as a narrowly *theoretical* problem) that was fraught with its own “metaphysical” assumptions. So the “young Hegelian” effort to purge Hegel of his lingering metaphysical attachments may well have misfired—indeed for reasons that Hegel himself had already spelled out in his analysis of the dialectic of enlightenment in the *Phenomenology*. This is unfortunate, if only because it has made it far too easy for us to dismiss or ignore the political stakes of that early struggle. We lose sight of these stakes when we define “metaphysics” too narrowly and thus restrict the critical scope of the post-Kantian effort.



Redding captures the psychoanalytic resonances of Kant’s own critical-transcendental project: Kant’s unfinished struggle against metaphysics can be regarded as an aborted work of mourning. “Metaphysics,” psychoanalytically speaking, represents a hypostatization or embalming of the lost object: an incapacity or refusal to relinquish the traditional ontological-theological securities—an “inability to mourn,” to use customary parlance. Kant, in this light, is not only a melancholic, ragefully clinging to what he renounces, but, technically, a pervert, clinging to incompatible epistemological commitments: he simultaneously acknowledges and disavows “castration” by constantly skating around the negativity his thought ineluctably concedes.¹² Substance is flushed out through the front door and systematically smuggled back through the rear by way of a panoply of fetish objects—things-in-themselves, postulatory principles, and the sundry *dei ex machina* (God, for example) that populate both the theoretical and the practical philosophy.¹³ (As everyone has observed, there’s something cartoonish in Hegel’s presentation of Kant and company, but we needn’t get too distracted by this: there’s method in the madness, and as with any caricature the effect of the distortion is to isolate and underline what’s ultimately at stake—the “splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass...”¹⁴)

Strikingly—although the argument does not require lexical evidence—Hegel himself resorts to a proto-Freudian vocabulary of splitting and disavowal when describing the slippery logic of *Verstellung* in the “morality” section of the Spirit chapter. Kant keeps relinquishing and reinstating, keeps plugging the hole he opens up: he keeps acknowledging and recoiling from his own most radical discoveries.¹⁵ This also partly accounts for the mood swings that Redding describes succinctly—the oscillation between grandiosity and self-abnegation that will also set the tone for the post-Kantian romantic aftermath. I should stress that by “mood,” neither Redding nor I have in mind anything pathological, in the Kantian sense (and obviously it’s not about Kant the person)—nothing psychological, anthropological, naturalistic or otherwise empirical. (This may be counter-intuitive, given the emotional and affective vocabulary that pervades *Mourning Sickness*, starting with its very title.) It’s rather a question of a structural dissonance that plays out along strictly *modal* (in the logical sense) lines: a sense of inflated possibility conjoined with a grinding sense of impossibility that announces the subject’s submission to the most abstract and coercive power of necessity. Hegel traces this bipolarity back to the founding contradictions of Protestantism, with its simultaneous aggrandizement and humiliation of the subject. Marooned between an exorbitant sense of responsibility and its own crushing sense of inadequacy, the modern subject oscillates between the “poetry of grief” and the “prose of satisfaction”¹⁶—between the delirium of infinite impossibility and the concession to the drab exigencies of the actually existing world.

Hegel’s project can be construed as a radically counter-fetishistic venture in both the Marxist and the Freudian senses. The dialectic not only exposes the fabrication at work in every social product—it reveals every *given* to be a *result*—but also explores the logic of disavowal that sustains the consumption of these products long past their expiration date. In other words, Hegel does not only ask the somewhat anodyne historicist-pragmatist question: why do our normative commitments keep changing, why are we obliged and entitled to keep revisiting our most basic entitlements and obligations, why is conceptual and institutional self-revision both conceptually and (eventually) institutionally mandated? He also asks a far more painful question: why, despite their manifest rotteness, despite their blatant contradictoriness and ineffectiveness, do outdated normative commitments *persist, and even keep returning* long after their illegitimacy has been universally acknowledged? It’s not just that normative authority is precarious, that it is socially and historically constituted, and thus inevitably

loses traction. We don't need Hegel to tell us that. The more difficult point is that it's also weirdly resilient. It somehow survives its own demise. Even when divested of legitimacy and credibility norms continue to bind. They impose a kind of normativity even in the absence of all authority—"force without significance," to speak Gershom Scholem's language (terms recently popularized by Agamben).¹⁷ In this respect they have the excessive, uncanny vitality of the undead. This is why it can sometimes take such extreme measures to evict them.

Far more puzzling than the rational drive to progress in Hegel is its frequent and conspicuous failure. What accounts for the fixations, adhesions, regressions, the endless detours and deviations that seem to block, delay, or reverse the path of progress, and that show enlightenment itself to be so curiously ineffective? We're all used to talking about contradiction as the motor of the dialectic, and this is fair enough as far as it goes, but Hegel is preoccupied with the far more perplexing—and equally dialectical—question: why does the motor keep stalling? Why do we keep getting so stuck? Moreover, how do we keep coming up with such ingenious ways to endure and even enjoy this stuckness? The painful experience of contradiction (inferential inconsistency, propositional incompatibility, institutional incoherence, or however you care to describe this dissonance) not only propels us ever onward and upward, to use Hegel's unfortunate image of the ladder. It also generates an array of strategies for enduring, embellishing, and reproducing this very contradiction. Skepticism, to take one of Hegel's most flamboyant examples, sustains itself by cultivating contradiction as a form of entertainment. Hegel describes it as a game played by children "who by contradicting *themselves* buy for themselves the pleasure of continually contradicting *one another*" (§205).¹⁸ Far from being intolerant to contradiction, the human "spirit"—individual, collective, institutional—has a dizzying capacity to sustain its antinomies and even to derive secondary gratification from these. This is why consciousness-raising or enlightenment (in the vulgar sense) is such a poor model for what we might still want to call ideology critique. Hegel explains precisely why this is so in the "Faith and Insight" section of the *Phenomenology*.

If psychoanalysis manages to dampen enlightenment's confidence, this is not because it posits some kind of exogenous or ahistorical "real" exceeding or impeding the symbolic-imaginary circuit—a clot of substantial opacity that would remain unassailable to argument because it knows not the rules, can't keep score, can't or won't talk, remains recalcitrant to logic and good manners (in other words, because "there is no 'no' in the dreamwork," or, which basically amounts to the same thing, because "there is no time in the unconscious"). And it's not because of some kind of pessimism about human nature, as a bad reading of the death drive would have it. That would obviously be to regress to some kind of naturalistic metaphysics of a singularly banal sort. (Freud's own nod to a "piece of unconquerable nature" might provoke such a reading, but it is intended precisely as just that—a provocation.¹⁹) But once you admit the unconscious into the "space of reasons," and I think Hegel's model of consciousness forces us to do so, the whole picture dramatically changes. While confirming the radical historicity of experience, psychoanalysis reveals temporal disturbances that threaten to derail the progressive or "linear trajectory of self-determining spirit" (to use Lumsden's words). It points to antagonisms that can't be resolved by reason alone, at least in its discursive syllogistic form. It points to a permanent dissonance that thwarts every possibility of reconciliation.

This grates with any pragmatist or historicist rendering of Hegel. It also grates with Lumsden's reading. And it no doubt grates with Hegel's own self-understanding. It is, however, implicit in the picture of consciousness that Hegel sketches out in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* and that he fleshes out so vividly in each of the following chapters. Hegel's final move is to demonstrate that the logic of distortion brooks no exception. The anachronism is constitutive and incorrigible. This is the final lesson of the Spirit chapter. Even the act of forgiveness that eventually confesses to its own untimeliness perpetuates this untimeliness. Absolute Knowing is the unflinching disclosure of the untimeliness afflicting every shape of consciousness including this act of disclosure itself. Like Kafka's Messiah, who arrives only on the "day after" the Day of Judgment, absolution comes only when it is no longer necessary, or no longer possible, or both.

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Movement—the famous *dialektische Bewegung*—is for this reason neither a homogenous nor a unidirectional linear process: it proceeds along multiple tracks, each set to a different tempo and veering in a different direction, including sideways, backwards, and all too often nowhere. This makes the idea of progress complicated and Hegel's own image of a ladder problematic. In the introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel shows that consciousness *needs* to keep moving forward. Lumsden lays this out perfectly: consciousness is constitutionally self-transforming. Its internal division, and constant self-adjudication, compel it to keep revising its most fundamental commitments; it is forever running ahead of itself. And yet this very self-division is what condemns it to keep backsliding. It can't keep up with its own insights. Perpetually overreaching itself ("consciousness suffers violence at its *own* hands" §80), it is chronically lagging behind itself. It is at once too early and too late for its own experience. The motor is thus simultaneously the brake. Consciousness is destined to keep forgetting—neurotically repressing, perversely disavowing, obsessively undoing, even psychotically foreclosing—its most hard won truths, which it systematically fails to recognize as its own, or even as truths, and which therefore keep disappearing like writing on water. Even as its achievements keep crumbling, its past errors keep returning, as regressions, neurotic symptoms, traumatic flashbacks, hallucinatory reminders, or as fetishistic attachments—ideas we all know perfectly well to be ridiculous, but that we nonetheless continue to (at least act as if we) believe in. "*Je sais bien mais quand-même....*" This accounts for the stuttering, repetitive rhythm of the dialectic, the continual stalling and restarting of the engine and the constant return to the beginning as the process gathers (but also keeps losing) steam. This pleating or bunching of consciousness is at once the product and the condition of its dialectical unfolding or "development" (*Entfaltung*).

Hegel only partly explains this backsliding in terms of resistance. Truth is painful; it can be registered only as a loss of certainty, of security, of self-identity—in short as a narcissistic blow. "Its anxiety makes [consciousness] *retreat* from the truth..." (§80). But his analysis points to something even more intractable than resistance: enjoyment. Consciousness not only flees its own antimonies, it also has a strange way of tolerating and even in investing in them; it can show a peculiar indifference to contradiction that allows it to parry its losses such that they fail even to register as such. We maintain our untruths in a strange museum-like limbo where they continue to circulate as relics with their own ineluctable power of attraction. It's in this sense that Hegel introduces the image of a "gallery of images" in the last paragraph of the *Phenomenology* (§808). Benjamin's account of the allegorical apparatus of the Baroque is illuminating here. He shows how obsolete artifacts have a strange way of surviving their own expiration date: their tenacity outlives their conceptual vitality. Benjamin also points to the affective and rhetorical energies unleashed by this uncanny longevity.²⁰ This isn't always as lugubrious as it sounds. Hegel famously speaks of Bacchanalian revelry (§47).

All this accounts for the tortuous pace of the *Phenomenology*, its continual leapfrogging and zigzagging from achievement to regression, from insight to blindness, and the incessant resurgence, in the midst of the most sophisticated achievements, of outlived and stagnant forms of life. Perhaps the language of normative "grip" (to use current "non-metaphysical" parlance) is inadequate to capture the prehensile vicissitudes of the *Begriff*: it overestimates the traction of conceptual insight—the ability of ideas to *stick* for more than about five minutes—and underestimates the blind tenacity of moribund ideas. (Needless to say, there are immediate institutional and political implications.) Truths often lose their grip not only because they've been refuted and superseded, but also because despite their self-evidence they somehow don't quite manage to take hold. Ideas have a strange way of disappearing even before they've had a chance to grow old. Things that should endure keep disappearing, while the broken-off fragments of abandoned practices keep stubbornly gliding back in view. This makes for a startlingly inefficient narrative tempo. Spirit's circuitous trajectory in the *Phenomenology* anticipates the zigzag rhythm of nineteenth-century revolutions Marx describes in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, with their constant interruptions, repetitions, reversals, and spasmodic precipitations. Hegel describes the process as "a slow-moving succession" (§808). This sluggishness can precipitate drastic catch-up measures—revolution, for example.

Any "non-metaphysical" interpretation of Hegel should be able to give some account of this inefficiency. It's not only the bogeyman of traditional providential eschatology that needs to be exorcised, but also the

more subtle teleology implicit in every gradualist account of conceptual improvement. There's a political and institutional counterpart to such gradualism: reformism.



I've talked a lot about anachronism as the structural condition of experience: it's constitutive and systematic. Lumsden challenges my claim that this would of itself present a permanent obstacle to reconciliation. He suggests an attractive alternative possibility: reconciliation might rather consist precisely in the acknowledgment of this anachronism—a concession to lateness that would discharge the traumatic force of this delay in such a way that Spirit might eventually be able to catch up to itself. Everything of course depends on what we mean by reconciliation, one of those portentous, hard-to-understand Hegelese words, but the stakes are high. It's the afterlife of the Revolution that's ultimately at stake. This is why the last pages of the Spirit chapter are so crucial.

We can read the entire Morality chapter as Hegel's confrontation with the German ideology. We watch Spirit squirming as it assumes one posture after another in an increasingly desperate attempt to secure a manageable distance from the revolutionary event. By seeking comfort in spectatorship it embellishes rather than confronting the trauma of its own belatedness. It converts temporal displacement into a generalized spectatorial immunity—from nature, from others, from action, from the world. Every moral shape that Hegel analyzes—from the asceticism of Kantian morality to the purism of post-Kantian Romanticism—is implicated in a voyeuristic pursuit that must be read against the general backdrop of the persistent spectatorial fantasies sustaining the German response to the French Revolutionary Terror around 1800.²¹ (These fantasies must be understood in the context of the new media in this period. An unprecedented surge in print culture enabled the systematic construction of a reading public that could define itself in essentially vicarious and voyeuristic terms. Reading about the Revolution becomes a way of absorbing its intensity from a distance: the very act of witness becomes a transformative event. Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties* is the best-known example of this ethics of witness: the real drama turns out to be the sublime enthusiasm of the viewing public.) The achievement of the "Morality" chapter is to demonstrate how every spectatorial fantasy that tries to parry the Terror through an act of moral self-affirmation only generates new terrors of its own. The voyeuristic experiment inaugurated by the Kantian "moral world *view*" launches a series of disasters that will culminate in the suicidal vehemence of the ever-watchful and self-regarding beautiful soul.

In puncturing these fantasies, Hegel is at no point staking his hopes on a moment of untrammelled experience. Nowhere does he suggest a recalibration of clocks and calendars, either within the unitary present of philosophy or within the purity of spontaneous, unmediated action—and not even within the repleteness of a magically unified theoretical-practical conjuncture. That would be a reversion to the false immediacy of sense-certainty. This had been the fantasy of the French revolutionaries, at least for a while: invent a new clock, design a new calendar, rename the streets, start time again, as if the shadow of the past could be eliminated, as if the Revolution itself were not already lagging behind its own initiative, as if it were not already leaping ahead of itself, already caught up in the circuitry of theatricality, representation, repetition—as if the Revolution itself were not marked by the permanent shadow of its own delay. Another word for all this: mediation. Another word: traumatic *Nachträglichkeit*.

Why an over-cooked word like trauma? I'm not using this word for its gravitas. We need to restore to trauma its psychoanalytic weight as an explanatory category; we need to strip it of sentimentality and pathos. Trauma doesn't mean non-dialectic or anti-dialectic; it's not the eruption of some kind of uncontainable excess that would interrupt or elude the dialectic (as the Terror is sometimes thought to do). It rather describes precisely how the dialectical movement is suffered in the order of experience: by way of latency, retroactivity, non-synchronicity. It captures the predicament of a consciousness played between a past it cannot master or render present (and which therefore insists all the more intransigently) and a future it cannot anticipate (and which therefore impinges with the force of a disaster). It describes the way temporal dissonance gets registered,

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elaborated, and elided. It shows why Hegel's theory of consciousness is ultimately also a theory of the unconscious, and why his model of experience is a model of non-experience.

That the anachronism is permanent (I know there's a paradox lurking there somewhere) only intensifies the pressure to engage it.



Sinnerbrink presses a different question about structural anachronism—a question that pertains not only to the systematic reach of trauma as a constitutive condition but also to the specific epochality of the Revolution as its most exemplary manifestation. Is the trauma explored here a specifically modern one, inherently unrepeatable; is it a structural necessity, interminably repeated; what exactly is the relationship between event and structure, and for that matter between history and philosophy? Is the problem of a *lapsed or missed revolution* already an outdated problem, lacking any real critical or political traction today? Did the explosive pressure of expired deadlines start to fizzle out sometime after Waterloo—around 1830, say, or by the mid-1840s, when Marx remarked on the sepulchral predicament of his own nation: Germany is in the paradoxical situation of having to undergo restoration without having gone through its own proper revolution: it has the unique privilege of tasting freedom only once—on the day of freedom's funeral.²² In 1843 Marx could still retrieve a propulsive power from this belatedness: Germany's political retardation was tantamount to its revolutionary precocity, the very impediment to agency would become its enabling condition, and the clocks would suddenly recalibrate as lag became lead. A century later, even Adorno was still trying to reactivate this trope when he drew a flicker of opportunity from the decisive missed opportunity of revolutionary praxis: "philosophy lives on because the moment for realizing it was missed."²³ Benjamin for his part (although he was often talking about things like unfashionable clothing or old furniture) spoke of the "revolutionary power of the out-of-date."²⁴

There's another question implicit in this last question. If the German *misère* is a purely historical pathology attributable to the contingent peculiarities of history (the infamous German *Sonderweg*: its prolonged lingering in feudalism, its delayed economic development, its delayed unification as a nation-state, and so on) it loses traction as a philosophical topic. If it is rather emblematic of a constitutive or generalized temporal slippage, it risks dissolving into an ocean of abstraction. The same dilemma holds for the Terror, as for every other historical event that's managed to leave its imprint in Hegel's philosophical exposition, and it may ultimately boil down to the basic question of the legitimacy of a philosophy of history in the first place. But in its specific formulation the question relates to an anxiety ubiquitous in contemporary trauma studies: can we give trauma its full weight as a structural category without thereby reducing the singularity—the concrete, contingent violence—of actual, specific, on-the-ground, suffering? Such a reduction would compound violence by comparison, generalization, or trivialization. A related question comes up regularly in the context of comparative atrocity studies, where questions of uniqueness, singularity, and exemplarity are always pressing: the uniqueness of the Holocaust is of course the prime example (there's perhaps a paradox in that last formulation). And a similar concern is often expressed in current discussions about "constitutive lack" (i.e. castration): do we ontologize or naturalize and thus trivialize our losses when we determine loss itself to be structural, essential, or even transcendental? Do we risk conflating structural lack and contingent loss—structure and event—and thereby occlude and embellish everything that is most singular, determinate, and ultimately avoidable, about the specific historical situation? The predicament goes back to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. What is the relationship between "accident trauma"—the shell-shocked soldier returning from the trenches—and what we can call "castration trauma" (more generally, "difference trauma"), that is, the layering, repetitive phantasm—the deferral and displacement that marks the traumatic condition of experience as such?

Sinnerbrink's question harbours yet another implicit question. If experience has always already gone missing to itself, if the lapse is structural, if we're always too late for the revolution, does this condemn us to spectatorial paralysis and evasion? Does the predicament turn us into specimens of the unhappy consciousness, mesmerized by the receding promise of fulfillment, or the beautiful soul, captivated by the spectacle of its own impasse—

that is, into an isolated, voyeuristic spectator marooned from every social context in which action could be thinkable or even recognizable as such? Benjamin had a name for such fascination: “leftwing melancholy.” Or can we derive critical resources from this delay, such that anachronism could be regarded not only the certificate of alienation but equally the hallmark of our most intractable sociability? Trauma is precisely what binds us: the dissonance or disconnection is the very connection. That we are never up to date with our own experiences is precisely because our experiences are never our own: we are afflicted by the unprocessed experiences of others, and our time is the discordant interlacing of different and discontinuous heritages, unevenly remembered and incompletely rendered.

But there’s a final challenge waiting behind all these questions: the relevance of this whole discussion is less obvious and more urgent than it might seem. To say that the crisis of German philosophy circa 1800 is *also* our crisis, that the virtual-vicarious-vicious circle continues, is not to equate the two. For one thing, there’s the unprecedented impact of repetition itself—1789, 1830, 1848, 1870, 1930, 1989... Marx’s mordant comment about Germany circa 1840—it’s somehow managed to experience counterrevolution without even having undergone its own proper revolution—has a peculiar plangency in the prolonged Waterloo that defines the present day.

At a material level of course everything has changed: the geo-political situation, the institutional-ideological apparatus, the cultural-technological conditions of spectatorship itself. Apart from anything else, recent transformations of the media have transformed the public sphere—on the one, expanding the opportunities for vicarious consumption, both reinforcing and disguising the split between spectator and actor (along with all the other divisions of intellectual and manual labour); on the other hand, enabling new modes of collective agency, and leading us to wonder whether the classic Marxist formulation of this split might need modification. The recent cycling of revolutionary upheaval and counterrevolutionary repression, with their strange synchronicities, unpredictabilities, and planetary ubiquities, have demonstrated that the border between reportage and participation can be porous, that the line between consuming and producing, between reading about and making the news may be uncertain, and that the global *translatio* moves more quickly and in more directions (including depressingly backwards) than ever before imaginable. The communication technologies that facilitate the spread of global capitalism also contribute to its interruption, while at a political level these very interruptions manage simultaneously to sustain it. Hegel could not have anticipated many things about capitalism, including the way it not only contains crisis but manages to sustain itself precisely by way of this containment. Capitalism needs to generate crisis if only in order to expand its own scope. In this respect it exhibits the voraciousness that is so often attributed to the dialectic.

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NOTES

1. I also want to thank Andrew Benjamin, who invited me to Australia and organized the Melbourne workshop on *Mourning Sickness*, and Joanne Faulkner, who organized the Sydney workshop and put together this special section of *Parrhesia*. I finally want to thank the audiences at both events for their lively contribution; traces of those discussions also find their way into what follows.
2. I elaborate on this in the final chapter of *Mourning Sickness*.
3. More precisely, we must think the logical force of the fragile comparative, the *ebensosehr*, that will place substance and subject on equal footing: “everything hangs on apprehending and expressing the truth not merely as substance but [also] equally as subject [nicht als Substanz, sondern ebensosehr als Subjekt aufzufassen und auszudrücken].” Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §17. Henceforth all references to the *Phenomenology* will be given by paragraph number in the body of the essay, using Miller’s published translation (silently emended at times).
4. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, translated by Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), 77.
5. As many have observed, this decluttering project already starts, and fails, according to Hegel, with Kant himself.
6. Hegel uses this neologism in various places, for example to describe the activity of God in the *Philosophy of Religion*, in the *Science of Logic* when explicating the modal logic of necessity, and in his 1822-25 lectures on the philosophy of spirit (all cited by Pippin in *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy*, 52n).
7. Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 44.
8. This strand in Leibniz stands in notable tension with the metaphysical features that Redding brings out so lucidly in relation to German idealism in his *Continental Idealism: Leibniz to Nietzsche* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
9. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press),
10. See, respectively, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, vol 3, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace and A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p§462-464 and *Phenomenology* §§228f on the unhappy consciousness.
11. Leibnizian notation thus functions as a kind of logical guillotine, as Redding notes: what is severed is the living bond between grammatical subject and predicate—a fissure that would also break every vital link between the *reading* “subject” and the proposition that is being read. With the effacement of the copula, the sentence loses its speculative power: language falls apart into an aggregate of disjointed parts of speech, while reading deteriorates into a mechanical ritual without real relation to the cognizing subject.
12. On the logic of disavowal, see Freud, “On Fetishism.” I discuss the structural proximity of melancholia and fetishism in “The Sickness of Tradition,” in Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen, eds., *Walter Benjamin on History*, Walter Benjamin Studies (2005). I explore the logic of fetishism in Kant’s moral philosophy in the fourth chapter of *Mourning Sickness*.
13. There is a corresponding fetishistic logic in Kant’s political philosophy, expressed in his simultaneous celebration and repudiation of the French Revolution, and in his practical philosophy and philosophy of religion, expressed by his simultaneous acknowledgement and repudiation of diabolical evil as a moral category. In the second chapter of *Mourning Sickness* I show how these two antinomies are connected.
14. I discuss (and defend) the violence of Hegel’s hermeneutic strategies in the fourth chapter of *Mourning Sickness*, and more extensively in “The Actuality of Anachronism, or, Absolute-Freedom-and-Terror today (response to Balfour and McCumber)” forthcoming in Emilia Angelova, ed., *Hegel, Freedom, History*. The famous “splinter in the eye” quote is from Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso Books, 2006), 50.
15. See the fourth chapter of *Mourning Sickness*.
16. See Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1971), 61.
17. See Scholem’s letter to Benjamin of Sept 20, 1934, on the force of law in Kafka. *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 142. Agamben has repeatedly taken up this theme, for example in *Homo Sacer*.
18. Scepticism is, to be sure, an ephemeral interlude: it quickly refutes itself by virtue of its own performative contradiction. But that it keeps conspicuously returning suggests that it retains an inextinguishable allure: it comes back as “the eternal irony of the community,” as the disruptive voice of “self-alienating Spirit,” as romantic irony, as comedy, etc.
19. Freud, “Civilization and its Discontents,” in *Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), vol. 21, 88.
20. See Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2003), 198.
21. This is of course a huge generalization, but the pattern goes something like this. First step: temporal displacement is converted into a mode of virtualization and neutralization. The Revolution is ejected from the present as a contemporary concern. *For us* the Revolution is always already past: we’ve already been through a bigger and better upheaval on our own turf, to wit the Reformation. Or, the Revolution is forever future: we can hold out until doomsday for an even more splendid revolution to come—the infinite task, the literary absolute.... Second step: immunization. Thus inoculated against *political* upheaval we can safely watch the Revolution while deriving moral gratification from our own act of witness. I rehearse the

various intricacies of this maneuver in the first two chapters of *Mourning Sickness*, with a particular emphasis on Kant's *Conflict of Faculties* and *Metaphysics of Morals*.

22. Marx, Introduction to "Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*" (1843)

23. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983), 3.

24. Walter Benjamin. "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 210.

THE NADIR OF *OOO*: FROM GRAHAM HARMAN'S *TOOL-BEING* TO TIMOTHY MORTON'S *REALIST MAGIC: OBJECTS, ONTOLOGY, CAUSALITY* (OPEN HUMANITIES PRESS, 2013)

Nathan Brown

Graham Harman's *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002) was an interesting book. Its reading of Heidegger's tool-analysis, I thought, was original and productive, its scholarship was thorough, its writing vigorous and engaging. The first two chapters of the book struck me as important and promising: here, perhaps, was a return to the things themselves that might open significant new pathways in contemporary philosophy. "The central theme of this book," Harman wrote, is the way in which "entities tear away from the shapeless totality...the stance in which *specific* beings take up a relation to their own being." "My approach," he continued, "is based neither on a credulous realism nor on some devious taste for substance abstracted from all relation. It relies only a single, undeniable fact: *the fact that there are discernible individual entities at all.*"¹ 'Wrong side of the ontological difference,' one of my friends quipped at the time. But I felt this was a philosophical effort worthy of attention.

Harman pursued his theme by generalizing Heidegger's tool-analysis, such that the reversal of readiness-to-hand into presence-at-hand was not only a phenomenon proper to the intentionality of *Dasein*, but was proper to any relation among any objects whatever. Relations among objects, Harman argued, are such that they always involve a selective constitution which differentially specifies individual entities as individual. A boulder need not be experienced as "a boulder" by an intentional consciousness in order to function in the world as a discrete and distinct object; it still manifests specific qualities and powers as something distinct in its relation to a tree during an avalanche, or in relation to an animal attempting to pass by it on a narrow path. It is through such selective relations that objects, Harman argued, are torn out of immersion within the contexture of the world: drawn into distinction, constituted as individual entities.

The final chapter of Harman's book, however, took a disappointing turn—one that has proved insurmountable for his work since then, not to mention that of his followers now flying the flag of "object-oriented ontology." Here, *Tool-Being* turned toward an argument that the distinction of specific objects depends upon their withdrawal from relations altogether. Objects are "vacuum-sealed" (TB 283) Harman claimed. They are absolutely distinct

only insofar as they are “devoid of all relation” (TB 225). Harman’s argument, if such it may be so called, was that no particular relation can ever exhaust “the reality” of an object, or “sound out every last fugitive echo of its being” (TB 223). Here is a specimen of his reasoning on this point:

No description of the bridge by a human being, and no touching of the bridge by the sea or hill that it adjoins, can adequately mimic the work of this bridge in its being. No perception of the bridge-thing, however direct a perception it may be, can accomplish the very actuality that the bridge brings about. The bridge is irreplaceable in an *absolute* sense. To repeat, the tool-being of an object is the reality of that object quite apart from any of its specific causal relations, and unexchangeable for any grand total of such relations. Even if we were to catalog exhaustively the exact status of every object in the cosmos vis-à-vis this bridge, it would still be possible to conceive of other entities that might occupy a different stance or relation to it, if only they had entered the fray of the world. In this way, bridge-being is sheer reality, devoid of all relation. Tool-being withdraws not just behind any perception, but behind any form of causal activity as well. (TB 225)

Harman judges that since the “reality” of an object isn’t exhausted by causal relations, it must exist in “vacuum-sealed isolation” (TB 287). Couldn’t the bridge be constituted by the current context of its relations with other entities *and* be differentially constituted by relations with new entities and contexts? The closest Harman comes to engaging this modest suggestion is his oft-repeated argument that if the objects of the world were constituted by their relations there could never be any change at all, because objects would hold nothing “in reserve” that might alter those relations.² He is fond of noting that Aristotle once said something similar. Such an argument supposes an initial stasis from which “every object in the cosmos” would be unable to break free; it doesn’t allow for the possibility that the constitution of objects and relations is *never* absolutely stable, so that change need not derive (and how could it?) from their non-relational, “vacuum sealed” interiors.

Sadly, the concluding pages of *Tool-Being* descend from here into an impenetrable fog. Harman acknowledges that in order for his ontology to be consistent objects must be non-relational—yet it must also be possible for the kidnapped Duke of Braunschweig, a pair of diamonds, a late landscape by Poussin, a genuine arrowhead from North America, a lock of hair from the late Elisabeth of Bohemia, and a specific rare Korean manuscript by an anonymous Zen master to count as an object, a substance (TB 284-287). If the “weirdness” of such scenarios is not sufficiently titillating to defer skepticism, the only compensation Harman offers for the collapse of his ontology into absurdity, irrelevance, and infinite regress is that other philosophical positions wouldn’t be able to rectify the incoherence of his own argumentation:

In a certain sense, the tool-being of a thing exists in vacuum-sealed isolation, exceeding any of the relations that might touch it. But now it also seems true that some sort of relationality is needed to create at least *some* tool-beings. Until the Duke of Braunschweig is abducted, the pair of diamonds remains nothing but a ‘being of reason.’ However, neither of the other philosophical positions that I have criticized is any better equipped to clarify the situation. (TB 287)

This was the unfortunate conclusion of an initially promising book, and the stupor in which *Tool-Being* ends has not been rectified by Harman’s subsequent writings. The most striking thing about the book’s conclusion is that it leaves us with no meaningful criterion for the constitution of objects at all. And by the time we are halfway through Harman’s next book, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, we realize that his account of causality will be predicated upon concepts drawn from analyses of metaphor and humor³—a substantial drawback for an ontology pretending to displace the centrality of human consciousness within the history of philosophy. Should any of this seem unpersuasive, we are submitted to the rhetorical *coup de force* of constantly reiterated allusions to parrots and glaciers and quarks, etc., etc. Since all kinds of objects are often mentioned, this must really be a philosophy of objects. Distraction is what passes for epistemology.

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More than ten years after the publication of *Tool-Being*, what has become of this program? Despite the precipitously diminishing returns of Harman's work, despite clear-headed assessments of its pop-philosophical opportunism by former allies,⁴ and despite the thoroughgoing lucidity with which its conceptual incoherence has been diagnosed,⁵ "object-oriented ontology" has succeeded in establishing itself as an apparently viable academic trend. (Philosophical circumspection is not a great strength of American humanities departments). *New Literary History* has devoted a special issue to "object-oriented literary criticism,"⁶ and two of the movement's "founders"—Ian Bogost and Timothy Morton—have recently been plenary speakers at the annual conference of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts.⁷ Perhaps, then, we might turn to Morton's new book, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (2013), to assess the present state of "OOO" and the fruits of its influence within the American academy.

Morton tells us that "*Realist Magic* is an exploration of causality from the point of view of object-oriented ontology."⁸ Indeed, the book carefully toes the party line of "OOO," citing Harman with a frequency bordering upon obsequiousness and lauding his "seductive prose" in the acknowledgments (RM 9). The book risks not even a single quibble with Harman's positions. Within the framework of those positions, Morton argues that "causation is wholly an aesthetic phenomenon" (RM 19). Aesthetic events, he insists,

are not limited to interactions between humans or between humans and painted canvases or between humans and sentences in dramas. They happen when a saw bites into a fresh piece of plywood. They happen when a worm oozes out of some wet soil. They happen when a massive object emits gravity waves. (RM 19-20)

"*The aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension*," he tells us. "It still astonishes me to write this, and I wonder whether having read this book you will cease to be astonished or not" (RM 20). This is indeed an interesting claim; so let's see what sort of arguments Morton makes on its behalf, quoting sufficient material for us to get a sense of their substance and style.

But first of all, Morton might interject, it isn't really a matter of "arguments." The book is more like a series of riffs. And it's true, *Realist Magic* doubles down on a rhetorical strategy frequently adopted by Harman: the deployment of a style so effusive, so strenuously goofy and flippant, that anyone who engages the work closely enough to criticize it will (hopefully) appear stuffy and obtuse: such pedantic critics will seem to have missed out on all the anxiously projected fun. "One object plays another one," Morton writes. "This empty orange juice bottle is playing the table in this airport, waggling back and forth as the table sways due to a wonky leg" (RM 71). Should you find the cutesy anthropomorphism of such passages banal and conceptually vacuous, you're just taking yourself too seriously.

Yet *Realist Magic* asks to be taken very seriously indeed. Claiming that object-oriented ontology is "congruent with the last century of physics," Morton is quick to point out that the results of the latter should nevertheless be considered secondary to the primacy of his own philosophical position:

This congruency is a good sign that an object-oriented theory of causality is on the right track. But it is not strictly necessary: if anything the necessity goes the other way around. In other words, quantum theory and relativity are valid physical theories to the extent that they are object-oriented. (RM 31)

Within the parameters of Morton's rhetoric, those who hold that the validity of physical science does not, actually, depend upon its alignment with a recently articulated theory of vacuum-sealed objects withdrawn from all physical relations are guilty of "scientism" (RM 164). He insists that:

It's about time humanists started telling scientists how to think again, as science seems to be defaulting to some quite old stereotypes. Which brings us again to OOO, the only non-reductionist, non-atomic ontology on the market. (RM 165)

There is a more modest sense in which I agree with some aspects of what Morton has in mind here. It is true, I think, that science requires for its foundation certain logical structures and conceptual categories which can either be implicitly presupposed or explicitly articulated. In this sense, by framing of a coherent conceptual scheme within which scientific procedures and results may be interpreted, philosophy can make a crucial contribution to scientific coherence. And while philosophy must be informed concerning the results of the physical sciences, it cannot be entirely subordinate to them—precisely because it is at least a co-condition for understanding those results.

But the tone of the snake oil salesman in Morton’s prose (“the only non-reductionist, non-atomic ontology on the market”) is not incidental: like every form of quackery, Morton’s version of “OOO” denigrates the same evidence of science and mathematics that it relies upon elsewhere—in some unrecognizably mutilated form. And this double maneuver requires for its operation a very credulous reader indeed. At one moment, Morton parodies the rhetoric of what he calls “post-postmodern thinking” in the following terms: “‘Hey, look at me! I’m totally entangled with not-me!’ ‘I *am* the walrus! And I’ve got the quantum theory to prove it.’ Do you though? A counter-argument might demonstrate that quantum theory is profoundly object-oriented”(RM 165). This is indeed an objectionable rhetoric, but it’s one that Morton himself deploys, constantly referring to hackneyed pop-scientific clichés about entanglement and action at a distance in order to suggest the alignment of “OOO” and quantum mechanics:

It seems as if the ideal causal event would be a totally invisible and inaudible one. Yet we know from phenomena such as entanglement and superposition that such events, strangely and ironically, refute clunking⁹ in other ways, for instance by producing so-called action at a distance. (RM 95)

Or elsewhere:

Quantum entanglement is truly random. What does this mean? It means for instance that in certain highly repeatable conditions the likelihood of a photon being polarized in a certain direction is totally uncertain before a “measurement” takes place....”Totally uncertain” means that no matter how much information you have, you won’t be able to predict the state of the photon. This is patently not the case with dice and billiard balls. *Totally uncertain means uncertain in itself, rather than when we measure.* One explanation for this total uncertainty is that a photon is in two or three different orientations simultaneously. This violates...*the Law of Noncontradiction.* (RM 25)

The problem with such passages is that the interpretation of phenomena like entanglement, superposition, and action at a distance—particularly their ontological interpretation—is itself a matter of debate both in quantum physics and in philosophy of science. But there is no real engagement with these debates in Morton’s book. Consider, for example, the position on such questions developed in Michael Epperson’s and Elias Zafiris’s recent book, *Foundations of Relational Realism: A Topological Approach to Quantum Mechanics and the Philosophy of Nature* (2013). Grounding their approach in consistent histories interpretations of quantum mechanics,¹⁰ Epperson and Zafiris forward a clear, plausible, and technically informed argument that Boolean logic, the principle of noncontradiction, and the principle of the excluded middle are in fact requisite for any meaningful interpretation of quantum mechanics, epistemological or ontological (31). “Even in quantum mechanics,” they write,

calculated superpositions of potential outcome states necessarily presuppose discrete, observable, actual initial and final system states and their logical relation, and it is only via the later that predictive calculations are confirmed retrodictively. The electron, in other words, is always *observed as actualized*, in either one state or another, in satisfaction of PNC [Principle of Noncontradiction], and never observed as potentialized—i.e., as a superposition of potential states in violation of PNC. In this way, superpositions are properly understood as relations of successive actual states, initial and final, via an appropriate measurement interaction. (RM 37)

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Whether or not one informed party or another agrees with this approach to understanding quantum mechanics within the framework of classical logic, it derives from a well-established interpretation of quantum mechanics (the consistent histories interpretation) of which Morton seems to have no cognizance, or which he chooses to ignore. It is not at all a fact, but a matter of present debate, whether the phenomena described by quantum mechanics are properly understood to violate the principle of noncontradiction.

Judging by his citations, most of the tidbits of post-classical physics Morton references are drawn from David Bohm's books, *Quantum Theory* (1951) and *The Special Theory of Relativity* (1965). At one point he praises Bohm for challenging "the reigning Standard Model proposed by Neils Bohr" (RM 103),¹¹ and elsewhere he argues that Bohr's interpretation of quantum mechanics is responsible for "a longstanding taboo on ontological probing beneath the closed hood of quanta, which is why the 'ontological interpretation' of David Bohm and Basil Hiley has been vilified" (RM 170). Yet several sentences later he finds "Bohm's version" guilty of undermining objects, insofar as it relies "on there being real entities that may enclose infinitesimal layers of smaller entities all the way down" (RM 170-172). Since this is a cardinal sin for "OOO," it would seem a serious charge against Bohm. And earlier Morton includes Bohm in his mockery of various materialist ontologies: "if you really want to be a far-out materialist, you should go for monism, like Parmenides, Spinoza, or David Bohm" (RM 164). So which interpretation of quantum mechanics will Morton have us believe is consistent with "OOO"? Morton's constant recourse to Bohm makes it clear that he leans heavily upon the latter's books for his grasp of relativity theory and quantum mechanics.¹² Why does Morton rely so heavily upon Bohm if the latter's understanding of the relation between quantum mechanics and objects inconsistent with his own? The upshot of Morton's pretension to tell scientists "how to think" is apparently the freedom to say just what he wants about science, picking and choosing the interpretive framing of his remarks without much attention to their consistency with his own ideas or their position within debates that already exist. Surely he can do as he pleases, but why should scientists listen to Morton tell them how to think when his thinking about the relation of his work to their own is disoriented and predicated upon superficial scholarship?

If the results of *Realist Magic*'s dabbling in quantum mechanics are negligible, let's consider an example of how it treats the relation between philosophy and relativity theory. While attacking Whitehead's process philosophy, Morton offers a supposed "refutation" of what he denigrates as "lava lamp materialism." He claims that Whitehead's account of process requires a static temporal frame in which processes take place (RM 166). Rather than reconstructing Whitehead's theory of process in order to argue for this reading, pointing out exactly where and how Whitehead relies upon a static temporal frame, or grappling with the chapter on "Time" in Whitehead's *The Concept of Nature* (1920),¹³ Morton instead indulges in an absurd thought experiment concerning the transformation of a "blob" into an apple. He claims that process philosophy depends upon yet cannot think the temporal frame in which such becoming occurs, and then he warns that:

Relativity will not help here, if you feel like defending lava lamp materialism. Relativity simply means that the frame is also blobby (Gaussian) rather than rigid (Galilean). It's still a frame, still ontologically outside the entity. Imagine wrapping the graph around an orange. Congratulations. You now have exactly the same problem, wrapped around an orange. (RM 167)

It is hard to judge whether Morton really expects his readers to accept this as a valid characterization of the relation of Gaussian curvature to Cartesian space, or of the relation between time and geometry in relativity theory—or whether he simply expects us not to care. It's hard to believe that Morton thinks his analogy makes sense or bears meaningfully upon the topic at hand (the role of time in Whitehead's process philosophy or in relativity theory). Evidently we are meant to chuckle, but the passage well exemplifies the pure nonsense to which *Realist Magic* frequently resorts, papering over an incapacity for legible philosophical writing with an overbearing jocularity, tinged with a sort of careless aggressivity. Such passages substitute for persuasive arguments of the kind the author of *Realist Magic* is apparently incapable of making. And this strategy of substitution is particularly necessary when Morton is faced with a figure like Whitehead: a thinker trained in mathematics and physics, whose philosophy was deeply engaged with the development of relativity theory

and quantum mechanics as it unfolded. There is, of course, a voluminous body of scholarship on the relation of Whitehead's thought to twentieth century science; but this is precisely the sort of scholarship a book like *Realist Magic* is too cheeky to engage with.¹⁴

The poverty of Morton's engagement with physics also extends to his forays into mathematics and logic. Attempting a more-set-theoretical-than-thou swipe at Alain Badiou, whom he faults for supposedly "preferring" the Zermelo-Fraenkel axiomatization of set theory to Cantor's earlier work (RM 114), Morton demonstrates his own superior grasp of this material on the following page:

The set of real numbers contains the set of rational numbers but is infinitely larger, since it contains numbers such as Pi and the square root of 2. There appears to be no smooth continuum between such sets. So the set of real numbers contains a set that is not entirely a set of itself—the set of rational numbers sits awkwardly inside the set of real numbers, and it is this paradox that infuriated logicians such as Russell. Their "solution" is to rule this kind of set not to be a set—which is precisely to miss the point. (RM 115)¹⁵

Yes, the set of real numbers is infinitely larger than the set of rational numbers, which it contains. But what does the remainder of this passage mean? "The set of real numbers contains a set that is not entirely a set of itself," Morton states. When he says that the "set of rational numbers sits awkwardly inside the set of real numbers," presumably he has in mind logical problems attendant upon fitting discrete parts (the rationals) into continuous wholes (the real number line). But even supposing we can make sense of these elliptical and sloppy formulations, what do they have to do with Russell's paradox? Russell demonstrates the logical inconsistency of a set of *all* sets. His paradox results from a logical problem attendant upon predicating totalities. But no such predication is at issue in the relation of the rational numbers to the reals.

The obscurity here is clarified by a passage earlier in the book, in which Morton demonstrates that he does not understand Russell's paradox at all—despite continually faulting Russell's interpretation of his own finding. "Objects withdraw," Morton writes, "yet they appear: $p \wedge \neg p$ (p and *not-p*). And objects contain beings that are not themselves, thus exemplifying Russell's paradoxical (and for him, illegal) set of things that are not members of themselves" (RM 31). But the proposition that "objects contain beings that are not themselves" does *not* exemplify Russell's paradox, since the latter, again, bears only upon *totalities* that could neither include nor exclude themselves among their predicates (the set of *all* sets that are not members of themselves). If we attempted to construct the set of *all* objects, without including that total set *as* an object (which would then require another total set to include it) we could not do so. That is the import of Russell's paradox, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the claim that "objects contain beings that are not themselves." It is not Russell's understanding of his paradox, but rather Morton's erroneous application of it, that precisely misses the point.

Again, such errors might be more easily forgiven were they not made by an author proposing alignment with his favored ontology as the primary criterion for scientific validity. As it is, however, they eviscerate the credibility of *Realist Magic* and testify to the hubris of Morton's attitude toward science. But lest we think that the weaknesses of *Realist Magic* are restricted to its engagement with physics and mathematics, let's consider one final passage in which Morton offers a critique of Marx. The context is a larger critique of theories of emergence. Earlier, Morton lauds Einstein for supposedly theorizing space and time as "emergent properties of objects" (RM 30). But later on, as it suits him, he says that theories of emergence depend upon "a kind of causal miracle"—and here Marx is called upon as an (improbable) example. Let me quote the whole passage so the reader can be sure nothing that might make sense of it has been omitted:

Consider the Marxist theory of industrial capitalism. From this standpoint, it turns out that the real problem with Marxism is that Marx is an idealist, or perhaps a correlationist. How can one justify such a fanciful notion? As a matter of fact, there are plenty of ways to do this. For instance, we could look at Marx's antiquated anthropocentrism, which his beloved Darwin had blown sky high by the

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time he put pen to paper. But my argument here is more technical, and pertains to the issue at hand. Consider chapter 15 of *Capital* 1. There Marx outlines his theory of machines. The basic argument is that when you have enough machines that make other machines, you get a qualitative leap into full-on industrial capitalism. Marx never specifies how many machines this takes. You know it when you see it. If it looks like industrial capitalism, and quacks like industrial capitalism, then... So what this boils down to is a theory of emergence. Capitalism proper emerges from its commercial phrase when there are enough machines going ker-plunk or whatever. (RM 143-144)

This is what counts, for Morton, as a “more technical” argument. Remember—we are not reading the work of an overconfident undergraduate here, trying to find his way amid the complications of critical theory and thus protesting too much while understanding too little. We’re reading a book by the Rita Shea Guffey Chair in English at Rice University, whose previous two books were published by Harvard University Press. So what is going on here?

I’ve titled this review essay “The Nadir of *OOO*” because I think that the absurdities of *Realist Magic* are due at least in part to those it inherits from the incoherent ontology it wants to popularize and extend. In order to stake its claim to originality and supremacy, “*OOO*” has to fulminate against what it sees as a threatening field materialists, purveyors of “scientism,” process philosophers, Deleuzians, and systems theorists. It has to establish itself as “the only non-reductionist, non-atomic ontology on the market.” So Marx, as well, will have to be laid low. Since it would be prove difficult to mount a plausible or relevant critique of historical materialism from a perspective committed to a universe of objects withdrawn from relation, the object-oriented ontologist can only flail wildly at his target, hoping to construct arguments so preposterous that they can’t possibly be accused of trying to be serious. “Going ker-plunk or whatever”: the style affects an insouciance its desperation belies, and it amounts to self-parody.

What is the point, then, of talking about the book, even to criticize it? On a blog discussing *Realist Magic*, a reader says he wants to “dive deep enough into the object-oriented aspects of Morton’s thought to get some grasp of what he is trying to do.” The reader quotes a long passage concerning the essence of a cinderblock, which ends as follows:

You could explode a thousand nuclear bombs and you would not reveal the secret essence of the cinder block. You could plot the position and momentum of every single particle in the block (assuming you could get around Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle) and you wouldn’t discover the withdrawn essence of the block. Ten of the world’s greatest playwrights and film directors (let’s say Sophocles, Shakespeare, Garcia Lorca, Samuel Beckett, Akira Kurosawa and David Lynch just for starters) could write horrifying, profound tragedies and comedies and action movies about the block and still no one would be closer to knowing the essence of the block.¹⁶

“Something tells me,” the reader writes, “if I can understand the passage above I might just be able to pick up what Tim is putting down.” But take care, dear reader: in order to pick up what Morton is putting down, you would need to understand less, not more. The difficulty of getting “some sort of grasp on what he’s trying to do” is inherent to the book, not any deficit of your own comprehension. Yet many readers, perhaps trying to find an initial foothold in philosophy and theory, will find themselves in a position from which this might not be apparent. And the problem with obscurantism is that its strategy is to reinforce incomprehension, rather than alleviating it. To the extent that this strategy can itself be clarified, its effect—the cultivation of ignorance and error—is mitigated. That is why it may be worth noting some reasons why no one should hope to understand anything by reading *Realist Magic*.

“*OOO*” seems to be relatively popular at the moment. But obscurantism usually gleans the sort of popularity that does not last. Despite the present popularity of “*OOO*” the conceptual weakness, the scholarly irresponsibility, and the rhetorical desperation of *Realist Magic* offer ample evidence that it is not aging well. Academic theory

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will shortly try out a new flavor of the month—and the sooner the better, I suppose. It could not be more tasteless.

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NOTES

1. Cited hereafter in text as TB.
2. Levi Bryant reiterates this argument: “Were objects constituted by their exo-relations or relations to other objects, the (sic.) being would be frozen and nothing would be capable of movement or change. It is only where relations are external to objects that such change can be thought.” Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011, 68.
3. Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago: Open Court, 2005, 101-144.
4. Ray Brassier, associated with Harman through their participation in a symposium titled “Speculative Realism” in 2008, does not mince words in a 2013 interview (the context here is Harman’s continuing use of “speculative realism” as an umbrella category under which to position his own object-oriented ontology): “The ‘speculative realist movement’ exists only in the imaginations of a group of bloggers promoting an agenda for which I have no sympathy whatsoever: actor-network theory spiced with pan-psychist metaphysics and morsels of process philosophy. I don’t believe the internet is an appropriate medium for serious philosophical debate; nor do I believe it is acceptable to try to concoct a philosophical movement online by using blogs to exploit the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students. I agree with Deleuze’s remark that ultimately the most basic task of philosophy is to impede stupidity, so I see little philosophical merit in a ‘movement’ whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity.” “I am a nihilist because I still believe in truth.” Interview with Marcin Rychter, *Kronos 2* (2013): http://www.kronos.org.pl/index.php?23151_896
5. See Peter Wolfendale, “The Noumenon’s New Clothes,” *Speculations III* (2012): 290-366.
6. *New Literary History* 43.2 (Spring 2012).
7. Bogost in 2009, Morton in 2013.
8. Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013. Cited hereafter in text as RM.
9. “Clunking” is Morton’s shorthand for what he calls “billiard ball causality.”
10. See, in particular, Roland Omnès, *The Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
11. Morton’s terminology seems to confuse the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics developed by Bohr and Heisenberg, sometimes referred to as the “standard” interpretation, with the Standard Model of particle physics, developed in the 1960s.
12. He cites Bohm nine times in the four chapters of his book, compared to only five citations from other sources on post-classical physics.
13. Time is not, for Whitehead, a uniform static frame in which processes take place; the attribution of such a position to him is flatly incorrect. In the chapter on “Time” in *The Concept of Nature*, he writes: “We have first to make up our minds whether time is to be found in nature or nature is to be found in time. The difficulty of the latter alternative—namely of making time prior to nature—is that time then becomes a metaphysical enigma. What sort of entities are its instants or periods? The dissociation of time from events discloses to our immediate inspection that the attempt to set up time as an independent terminus for knowledge is like the effort to find substance in a shadow. There is time because there are happenings, and apart from happenings there is nothing” (66). It is integral to Whitehead’s philosophy that time is constituted by particular durations, and “a duration is discriminated as a complex of partial events, and the natural entities which are components of this complex are thereby said to be ‘simultaneous with this duration.’” Whitehead specifically corrects the sort of misunderstanding promulgated by Morton: “The word ‘duration’ is perhaps unfortunate in so far as it suggests a mere abstract stretch of time. This is not what I mean. A duration is a concrete slab of nature.” (53). Morton suggests that “if you really want to do an Einstein, time has to emanate from the object itself” (167). Whitehead’s philosophy meets just this criterion: time is not a static frame in which processes occur; as the passage above states: time is composed of durations, durations are complexes of partial events, and natural entities are the components of these complexes. Moreover, Whitehead holds that there is more than one time series in nature (70-73) while specifically criticizing modern materialism for viewing nature as an aggregate of

material that exists at successive extensionless instants of time (71).

14. See, for example, *Physics and Whitehead*, Eds. Timothy E. Eastman and Hark Keeton. Albany, SUNY Press, 2003. See also Michael Epperson, *Quantum Mechanics and the Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004. For a critique of the alignment of Whitehead's philosophy with quantum mechanics proposed by Epperson, see Abner Shimony, "Quantum Mechanics and the Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy*, 41.3 (Summer 2005): 714-723. See also Whitehead's *The Principle of Relativity with Applications to Physical Science*, recently reissued by HardPress Publishing (2013).

15. Was Russell really "infuriated" by the paradoxes of set theory that he formulated? He seems to have had a rather sober correspondence with Frege concerning his findings.

16. "Realist Magic" on *Archive Fire*, February 2, 2013: <http://www.archivefire.net/2013/02/realist-magic.html>

THE DEMON OF ANALOGY: SIMON O’SULLIVAN, *ON THE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY: FIVE DIAGRAMS OF THE FINITE-INFINITE RELATION* (PALGRAVE, 2012)

Justin Clemens

This book proposes itself as a kind of non-commodity commodity, the record of an effort to think one’s way out of capitalist neoliberalism—with its allegedly ‘alienated, atomized and homogenized individual[s]’ (4)—and, moreover, ‘in aid of my desire to *reconnect* with life’ (4; my emphasis). O’Sullivan, in the name of reconnecting with this immanent life, wants to counter the ‘gap between phenomena and noumena, subject and object—again, [the] gap between the finite and infinite’ (5). That none of these terms can map onto any of the others without analogizing is indicative of what I see here as the book’s fundamental if inadvertent project of suturing gaps to infinitist continuism. Indeed, the title of the first chapter places Spinoza, Nietzsche and Bergson together under precisely this heading ‘From Joy to the Gap.’ As such a title insinuates, we find that this fearful gap is rather a portal to otherness, a torsion of indeterminacy, that, far from introducing an irreparable discontinuity in our thought and being, genially announces the promise of our finite opening onto the infinite. My problem (actually, one of my problems) is that such claims are effected primarily by what Stéphane Mallarmé nominated ‘the demon of analogy.’ Listen to this:

the content of this Bergsonian cone might also be understood in Lacanian terms as the Real insofar as it ‘contains’ everything not part of the sensori-motor schema (habit) which here can be understood—in its most expanded sense—as the realm of the symbolic (language, as it is typically employed, consisting of a certain adaptation, however complex this might be, to the concerns of the plane of matter). In Badiou’s terms...we might understand the ‘content’ of the cone as ‘inconsistent multiplicity’ in that it ‘contains’ everything not counted in the situation/world as it is... (49)

Although I can’t fathom all of this, an analogy-drive seems clearly at work. Why try to ‘understand’ the ‘content’ of the ‘cone’ in Lacanian terms at all? And why add the Badiouan terms immediately thereafter? Is O’Sullivan saying that the cone is to habit what the real is to the symbolic is what inconsistent multiplicity is to a situation? Or are the—ahem—‘content’ and ‘structure’ of these concepts more deeply intricated still? If so, what are the consequences for the differences? Yet the analogies are further pursued, to the point of (my) frustration: I

simply cannot see how ‘Badiou’s militant’ can be reinscribed in the Bergsonian terms of the actualization of a past event in the present (56), without missing everything specifically Badiouian about Badiou.

This is therefore not so much a machination of encounters of difference as O’Sullivan claims, as an accreting of connections through analogies effected by certain master-words. Let me concentrate on a single example, focusing upon one of the thinkers I’m most familiar with. Chapter 2 stages a confrontation between Foucault and Lacan under the heading of ‘The Care of the Self versus the Ethics of Desire.’ First, maybe surprisingly, some simple praise. It’s a nice confrontation to set up and take seriously, and usefully and didactically phrased as such: ‘If it is Lacan more than any other post-Freudian who sharpens and accelerates the challenge implied by psychoanalysis for ethics, then it is Foucault who takes up the further critical project of excavating an alternative tradition of ethics’ (60). But O’Sullivan can’t help himself: despite admitting that there are ‘major differences,’ he’s already readying us for the ‘important resonances.’ These include: the oral nature of Lacan and Foucault’s seminars; both are concerned with contemporary ethics; they are centrally concerned with the self’s relation to the outside; they both offer ethical programs.

Yet it’s really not certain to me that Lacan in fact does offer an ethical program. Despite the extraordinary enthusiasm that has seized ‘continental philosophers’ since the ‘ethical turn’ of the early 1990s, sweeping along any number of cultural Lacanians in its wake—of whom Slavoj Žižek would of course be the foremost representative—it’s not clear that ‘ethics’ is a word appropriate to psychoanalysis at all. Although people routinely invoke ‘don’t give way on your desire’ as the maxim of a specifically psychoanalytic ethics, a brief check of what Lacan actually says complicates this presumption.

In the third division of the final seminar of *Ethics*, Lacan begins: ‘It is an experimental form that I advance the following propositions here. Let’s formulate them as paradoxes.’¹ Please note immediately two features: 1) the *experimental* nature of the propositions, i.e., they are not apodictic announcements, they are not indices of proven theorems, etc.; 2) they are formulated *paradoxically*, i.e., they cannot be imperatives, maxims for action, or anything else resembling traditional moral precepts or counsels. In fact, this means they are neither epistemic nor ethical announcements, at least not according to received acceptations. In the context, the anti-Kantianism couldn’t be more pronounced.

The key proposition immediately follows: ‘I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty of is having given ground relative to one’s desire.’² The curliness of the syntax should be enough to alert readers not to think of this as simply the organisation of a specifically psychoanalytic ethics per se, but as a delimitation of the status of ethics from a psychoanalytic perspective. The tragic hero of whom Lacan has been speaking with reference to the scintillating figure of Antigone, and Lacan immediately goes onto note that the relation between the good and the heroic, law and desire, power and resistance is internal to each subject. There is no question of simply finding a way to unleash desire, as if that were a good in itself, a technical or technological matter, or an epistemological issue.

In fact, if one returns to the opening of the final seminar, we find that Lacan has set things up very clearly, perhaps a little too clearly for anybody to bother reading it properly:

an ethics essentially consists in a judgement of our action, with the proviso that it is only significant if the action implied by it also contains within it, or is supposed to contain, a judgement, even if it is only implicit. The presence of judgment on both sides is essential to the structure.

If there is an ethics of psychoanalysis—the question is an open one—it is to the extent that analysis in some way or other, no matter how minimally, offers something that is presented as a measure of our action...³

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Lacan's is therefore not an 'ethical' injunction; it is a delimitation of the field of ethics per se. It gives no program, nor directives, nor advice, merely a 'prosaic' (Lacan's word) analysis. The 'ethics of psychoanalysis' is not really a seminar *about* the ethics of psychoanalysis at all, but a seminar about how to conceive of, demarcate, the domain of ethics from the point of view of psychoanalysis. At best, psychoanalysis opens the question of its own ethics as a conditional on the basis of—not 'the infinite' as such—but the problem of *measure*. In a word, not simply the finite nor the infinite is at stake, but the *void*. This 'structure' is irreducible to the Foucauldian 'program' of 'care for the self,' despite O'Sullivan's attempts. And to insist on the void, as Lacan does, is in any case to immediately come a cropper with the idealists. At this point, every Deleuzian on the planet is liable to start quacking 'lack! lack!'

Leaving aside the problem that the void, the Thing and *jouissance* are not really equivalent to each other nor, indeed, to 'lack,' such lack-quacking is liable—as is the case here—to find a Spinozan alibi for its abolition. You may find Lacan's definition of ethics otiose insofar as it essentially links ethics to the problem of judgement of an action, but then you're departing from the Lacanian frame in contesting this definition. If you do so, then it's incumbent on you to demonstrate—rather than just assert—how another style of ethics is available at all, conceptually or no. For it's also to some extent missing the point to think that ethics can take place without *some* reference to judgement, even or especially if it's the case that ethics is meant to take place against, without or despite judgement itself.

Spinoza and Synthesis are the twin angels of O'Sullivan's search for diagrammatic reconciliation for an ethics-without-judgement. Yet the direct bibliographical references to Lacan here are significantly minimal: the two Seminars VII and XX, two essays from the *Ecrits*, and the plumped-up translation of *Television*. If you're going to use Spinoza with or against Lacan, however, you should probably also look at Seminar XI, where the problem of Spinoza is foregrounded explicitly by Lacan.⁴ But even if one sticks to Seminar VII, the real *différend* shouldn't be missed: in Spinoza, the positivity of ethics is linked directly to the infinite totality of God-Nature via the increase of power, which precisely provides the measure by which activity is to be 'judged' (to speak like Lacan); in Lacan, this position, delightful as it is, can only really be made sense of if we recognise that Spinoza conceived of nature as a system of signifiers.

I have comparable difficulties with O'Sullivan's other chapters: 3 on Guattari (with short addenda on Negri, Virno and Berardi), 4 on Deleuze against Badiou, 5 on Deleuze & Guattari, as well as a Conclusion, in which the little diagrams of the finite-infinite relation that O'Sullivan has sketched throughout the book all come to be lined up in a little row. The Conclusion also briefly invokes the work of Iain Hamilton Grant, Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Reza Negarastani, before itself concluding: 'what seems to have been at stake...is an attempt at thinking the production of subjectivity as speculative, but also as a pragmatic and creative practice.' (221) This is probably right as a self-description, but it's just the sort of thing I find it difficult to come at. If it's probably heartening to see somebody struggling to bring together incommensurable singularities in a big family reconciliation, it's also infuriating insofar as disavowed analogy comes to trump difference again and again.

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NOTES

1. J. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. with notes D. Porter. London: Routledge, 1992, 319. For an excellent close introduction to this seminar, see M. de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Seminar VII*, trans. S. Jottkandt. Albany: SUNY, 2009, esp. 261-268.
2. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 319.
3. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 311.
4. Or, indeed, at the major commentary available in English, e.g., A. Kiarina Kordela, *Surplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (Albany: SUNY, 2007).

TO DESIRE, NEVERTHELESS, THE ALTERNATIVE: JOSHUA KATES, *FIELDING DERRIDA. PHILOSOPHY, LITERARY CRITICISM, HISTORY, AND THE WORK OF DECONSTRUCTION* (FORDHAM, 2008)

Hannu Poutiainen

*The eternal fraternity of theological optimism and of pessimism: nothing is more reassuring, but nothing is more despairing, more destructive of our books than the Leibnizian Book. On what could books in general live, what would they be if they were not alone, so alone, infinite, isolated worlds?*¹

A tribute nowadays commonly paid to Jacques Derrida is the insistence that his work, whatever its failings might be, will continue to have some lasting value as a contribution to some positive x : “phenomenology,” “philosophy,” “thought,” “ethics,” “the future,” and so on. Such insistence is inherently fraught with the danger of an injustice: for a tribute, in referring the value of one thing to that of another, may also have the object of tribute *laid under tribute* to something greater than itself. A tribute paid to y is always made with a view to an x ; x then becomes the arbiter of the value of y . To suppose that Derrida contributes something to some x is to believe that Derrida has had something to give to this x . Derrida, under this assumption, would have offered a thesis allowing a better appreciation of this x , a thesis that might become a *given* in any further handling of the x . His work would have given this given *to* this x to interiorise and appropriate. It would thus have given *itself* as giving *us* this x in a novel fashion. Derrida’s contribution, the given pertaining to x given to x by him, would therefore have depended on the x itself for its pertinence with respect to the x ; it would have received from the ideal normativity of the x its proper status. Derrida, then, would have been but the dialectical conduit of a gift given by the x to itself: another milestone in the infinite progress of the self-approximation of the a priori x . Philosophy itself—to the extent that the x in question lays claim to a putative identity, dialectical or otherwise—finds itself helplessly attracted by the *telos* of such a plenitude.

There is, beyond any doubt, a great deal of truth in this. Indeed, if one were to pick at random any of Derrida’s works, it would be easy to show the massive extent of its influence upon the way some given x gives itself to be thought. Derrida’s works, to the extent that they are thematisable, and this extent is always considerable, *do* contribute: adding power and clarity to the way we read—whatever it is that we read: philosophy, literature, art, law, architecture—they ceaselessly renew the injunction to read with a vigilant eye. They are, in the very best

sense of the term, pedagogical works.

But they are always much more than simply pedagogical. “I am tempted to say,” Derrida confides to Maurizio Ferraris in *A Taste for the Secret*,

that my own experience of writing leads me to think that one does not always write with a desire to be understood—that there is a paradoxical desire not to be understood. ... If something is given to be read that is totally intelligible, that can be totally saturated by sense, it is not given to the other to be read. Giving to the other to be read is also a *leaving to be desired*, or a leaving the other room for an intervention by which she will be able to sign in my text. And it is here that the desire not to be understood means, simply, hospitableness to the reading of the other, not the rejection of the other.²

How, then, if Derrida “does not always write with a desire to be understood”, should one respond to Joshua Kates’s *Fielding Derrida*, an ambitious work whose aim is precisely to render Derrida comprehensible *as* a contribution to a broader horizon of philosophical and cultural problematics? How to respond to what appears there as more than residual reference to the value of an *x*, an identity to which Derrida’s *project*, in *relying upon* that which makes up the identity of this *x*, would finally *redound* in the manner of something properly *tributary*?

A “project” that is “tributary” to that to which it “contributes”; that “redounds” in fundamental “dependence” to that on which it manifestly “relies”; this is the language of debt, of presuppositions taken up and borrowed from elsewhere, of interpretations accepted as settled truths; a language, then, that assumes itself capable of accounting rigorously for such an economy. The work to which I refer is explicitly cast in such terms. In using these terms, I have, therefore, already cited the work: not so much to cast doubt on the intentions animating the work as to emphasise the conceptual network—*itself essentially limited and perhaps of limited pertinence*—on which these intentions themselves depend.

What are these intentions? It is no frivolous claim that Kates stakes out: “Unearthing buried positions and presuppositions, framing field-specific assertions and truth-claims, and then correcting and nuancing these assertions in turn, such exegesis necessarily overflows the boundaries of Derrida’s own texts, even as it reaches into the depths of the mechanics and texture of his writings.”³ Such, then, are the book’s objectives. Reaching “into the depths” of “Derrida’s own texts” while “necessarily overflowing” their “boundaries,” intent on “framing” assertions and then “correcting and nuancing” them, seeking to “unearth” the “buried positions and presuppositions” of Derrida’s work: the protocols of a “scanner,” as Derrida says in his 1990 preface to his 1954 dissertation, that works with “imperturbable impudence.”⁴

This essay is a response to this axiomatic. What it reviews is not Kates’s book as a whole—which covers a lot of ground in Derrida studies, impressively ranging from Derrida’s reading of Marx to a comparison between Derrida and Merleau-Ponty—but rather a broad argument that runs through the work. Without a doubt the following pages will fail to match Kates’s work in terms of nuance and exactitude, an original and inventive work that, for me, remains an absolutely invaluable and indispensable reference. Yet for all the admiration I have for this work, my response will, I fear, tend towards the critical; for even if it is only at one point, at one singular and highly charged moment, that Kates has, as I read him, been inclined to take a wrong turn, it is this very turn that will, as I argue, prove fatal to some of Kates’s more original proposals.

◇

If one should ask, then, whether Derrida has had a contribution to make to phenomenology, as Kates agrees he has, and to which aspect of phenomenology this contribution would return, it would be necessary to inquire as to the issue to which Derrida’s work is tributary and which thereby has to be settled before Derrida may risk the more adventurous propositions for which he is duly famous. This requirement, as it somewhat unsurprisingly

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turns out, concerns a certain conception of *language*; more surprising is the actual conception that Kates claims to bring to light. In Chapter 3 of *Fielding Derrida*, “A Transcendental Sense of Death? Derrida and the Philosophy of Language,” Kates writes (and I emphasise certain motifs upon which he time and again relies):

Derrida, at the most decisive junctures in 1962, it turns out, *wholly relied* on Husserl’s views of meaning and the sign, even as he had begun to explore certain fault-lines in Husserl’s project. Derrida’s construal of the sign, meaning, language, and writing were themselves *strictly Husserlian*, anchored in this notion of the linguistic sign as *Leib*, as flesh or spiritual corporeality. Were different starting points in the philosophy of language valid—should Husserl’s interpretation of the linguistic sign as a living flesh come into doubt—*none* of Derrida’s own findings *would remain*: neither those concerning a transcendental (and thus potentially quasi-transcendental) writing, nor a purportedly “transcendental sense of death,” nor even that of a pure equivocity and the perhaps problematic teleology that remedies this.⁵

1962, 1967. These dates structure Kates’s entire argument. I will try to respect the regulative value that Kates bestows upon them. For according to Kates, Derrida would have been, at least at the time of his 1962 *Introduction to Edmund Husserl’s The Origin of Geometry*, “strictly Husserlian” in “wholly relying” on Husserl’s “starting points in the philosophy of language.” Fully “anchored” in these notions, Derrida stands and falls with them; without them, “none of Derrida’s own findings”—not only in 1962, as it will appear, but in 1967 and beyond—“would remain.” Therefore, given this total and all-or-nothing dependency, whatever doubt is cast upon Husserl’s “interpretation of the linguistic sign as a living flesh” will by extension be cast upon Derrida’s own findings: for if there should be “different starting points” that would yield “valid” theories of language, these starting points would problematise not only Husserl’s philosophy of language but also Derrida’s—thereby compromising a great part of what Kates consistently terms the latter’s “project.”

Throughout *Fielding Derrida*, in full continuity with his previous efforts, Kates refers to these “different starting points” as “alternatives” to the approach for which Husserl and Derrida both opt. “Sometimes disagreeing with Derrida,” Kates describes his intentions in his 2005 book *Essential History: Jacques Derrida and the Development of Deconstruction*,

my aim is to make clear that the interpretive decisions that Derrida has made are by no means always self-evident, that these take shape within a wider range of alternatives—with the aim, again, of ultimately revitalizing Derrida’s thought and the sort of philosophical or theoretical discussion in which it participates more generally.⁶

It is necessary, then, according to Kates, to question the idea that Derrida at some point wrests himself free of Husserl’s hold as per his conception of language: the idea, that is, that Derrida, in what even Kates does not deny is a radical break from Husserlian orthodoxy, has also achieved the sort of independence from phenomenological expressivism that might permit him to apply these principles without letting them dictate the ultimate remit of his work. This questioning takes two distinct forms. On the one hand, Kates seems at times to argue as if his reading of Derrida were of a phenomenological sort. This happens whenever he says that Derrida’s “interpretive decisions”, being “by no means self-evident”, rely on a presupposed sense that is already a constituted given. On the other hand, Kates seems to hold that phenomenology itself, and Derrida’s work by extension, contains a residuum of unchallenged presuppositions that we should submit to a critique that need not itself be phenomenological.

The most interesting discussion in the book is one where the two aspects are interlinked. The object of the critique—Derrida’s analysis of the indexical “I” in *La Voix et le phénomène*—is in its own right a highly charged moment. The history of its reception exhibits a massive expenditure of energy. It is no great surprise, then, that Kates should read more into the passage than it actually warrants. In the following argument, focusing on precisely this moment of tension, I will rely on what I consider an exemplary selection of themes and theses

that center around Kates's repeated invocation of the *alternative*.⁷

What, in truth, does it mean to be an *alternative* to something? What sort of relation is it? In what circumstances and in what regard may some *y* be posed as an alternative to an *x*? This is the question on which I shall insist. If Kates does not reflect upon this issue, if at decisive junctures of his argument he seems to take the existence of viable alternatives for granted, it is utterly inescapable, as I shall show, that the question of the alternative remains an *operative* concept of his discourse. Operative; as such, inadequately thematised; hence open, all at once, to several alternative construals.



The Derrida that *FD* claims to discover remains essentially dependent on what might be called a Husserlian semanticism: the postulation of what Kates calls an autonomous realm of meaning radically independent of the world. The first part of this argument is familiar. Readers of Derrida will recall how Husserl—as summarised by Derrida in 1967—relates meaning (*Bedeutung*) to sense (*Sinn*): the expressive stratum—the linguistic expression of ideal meaning (*Bedeutung*)—refers for its content to the pre-expressive stratum of experienced meaning (sense, or *Sinn*), while the non-expressive stratum, comprising all indicative signs (*Anzeichen*), whether linguistic or natural, is the repository of such inadequately given meanings as can be rendered meaningful and thereby expressible only through the active intervention of an experiencing ego.⁸ This amounts to a construal of the linguistic sign that Derrida, on Kates's reading, never repudiates: as the intended and living flesh of a meaning that remains radically independent of its worldly embodiments, as a spiritual corporeality whose ties with transcendental *Sinne* are absolute, the sign as *Leib* stands “at the basis of all signs, of all linguistic signification, of every ‘linguistic or graphic body,’ spoken or written.”⁹ Kates argues, then, and this is the less familiar part of the argument, that this absolute bond ensures on the level of language that *expression of meaning* is logically and juridically prior to *reference to particulars*. Linguistic meaning, achieving its own ideal objectivity through the transcendental contribution of writing, constitutes the possibility of expression, while expressions, drawing both their right and their content from a meaning that is prior to them, immediately revert to a meaning that relates to itself through the spiritual corporeality of the sign.

This, in brief, is the chief and unforeseen novelty of *FD*: the view advanced there is that Derrida will never cease to follow Husserl in affirming the rights of *meaning* over those of *reference*. “There really are only two working alternatives in philosophy of language,” Kates writes:

the way of reference or the way of meaning. At this critical juncture, as in future ones, where Derrida must choose, he indeed chooses meaning. None of his subsequent philosophy, or post-philosophy, none of his subsequent deconstructions of these *topoi*, prove possible without his reliance on Husserl's own semantic presuppositions, as becomes evident here.¹⁰

Throughout *FD*, Kates will continue to valorise the “way of reference” as opposed to the “way of meaning.” A little later, in Chapter 4, Kates continues:

There [in “Signature Event Context”] Derrida makes clear that Husserl's positions in respect to language and discourse embody a precursor position to his own, insofar as Husserl rigorously thinks the independence of meaning from reference. An initial, radically semantic orientation that takes the work of language as wholly separate from reference ... is, in fact, the ground shared by Husserl, Saussure, and Derrida. ... Thus for Derrida, for Saussure, as well as for Husserl, meaning exists securely in its own right, apart from reference; it is correlated with language as a clearly delimited and autonomous domain.¹¹

Derrida, then, even as his future work will “plumb” the issues of “indexicality and even referentiality” via such themes as “repetition, iterability, and spacing”¹², will continue to posit the existence of an autonomous realm of

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meanings. This is an entirely novel reading of Derrida; astounding, even, given that one cannot really find any anticipation of this in *Derrida*. Here, for instance, are two exemplary passages, passages that elucidate what might be taken, *pace* Kates, to represent Derrida's "actual positions" as concerns these linguistic issues. The first is from *Limited Inc*, the second from *Dissemination*.

What I call "text" implies all the structures called "real," "economic," "historical," socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that "there is nothing outside the text." That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naive enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this "real" except in an interpretive experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring. That's all.¹³

To put the old names to work, or even just to leave them in circulation, will always, of course, involve some risk: the risk of settling down or of regressing into the system that has been, or is in the process of being, deconstructed. To deny this risk would be to confirm it: it would be to see the signifier—in this case the name—as a merely circumstantial, conventional occurrence of the concept or as a concession without any specific effect. It would be an affirmation of the autonomy of meaning, of the ideal purity of an abstract, theoretical history of the concept.¹⁴

In citing these passages, I am of course inviting an obvious objection: 1962 and 1967, not 1988 and 1972, are the decisive dates here. It will be necessary, therefore, if I wish to remain true to my professed intention, to abstain from such appeals to textual evidence and to attend more closely to the actual logic of Kates's interpretation, even if I will be obliged here to narrow its breadth into an unjustifiably constricted form.

On what grounds may Kates impute to Derrida the affirmation of an "autonomous realm of meaning" even when some of Derrida's texts would seem to foreclose such an imputation? These grounds mark a great distance from what Kates considers a commonplace reading of two key Derridean notions: writing and death, such as they are treated, in the *Introduction*, in a purely transcendental sense. On this mainstream view, represented in *FD* by Peter Fenves and Leonard Lawlor, the threat posed to truth and meaning is one of radical unintelligibility: entrusted to an inscription that is essentially perishable, truth, as it participates in this perishability, risks voiding itself and becoming impossible to retrieve. Kates counters this view by noting Derrida's strict stipulations concerning the relation of a "pure writing" to a "pure consciousness": thoroughly anempirical, essentially divorced from all mundanity, writing, in truth, can only threaten meaning *as and through* meaning.

For Derrida, writing makes possible an infinite traditionality, a potentially infinite passing on of meanings, a virtually infinite transcendental community, correlative to the kind of objectivity belonging to essences and to scientific truth. Such a possibility of infinite transmissibility, however, can also *infinitely* distance a science, its meanings, and achievements, from its origins, from its founding acts and experiences. It can imply a now-infinite removal from its roots, *seemingly* making possible the loss or disappearance of truth in a radical sense. Writing, a condition of essential truth, on Derrida's reading, also makes possible the potential disappearance of this truth, since it opens the door to a now potentially infinite sedimentation.¹⁵

Once a meaning has become available for inscription, once it is incorporable in the body of a sign, sedimentations of further incorporable meanings, tending in number to infinity, will immediately begin to accrue to it: meanings, by their sheer profusion, will come to occlude a reactivation of their origins in such a way as has hitherto appeared, to these standard commentators, as a radical and worldly death of meaning. An impressive, persuasive, and strong reading; yet nowhere near to being conclusive.

Problems begin to amass at the very moment that Kates turns to Derrida's 1967 construal of death and language in the famous "I am dead" argument. Kates once again reiterates his belief that Derrida, if he is to achieve as radical a break with Husserl as is commonly ascribed to him, "must embrace at a very fundamental level"—and "in a way that proves decisive for the relation of his work to analytic philosophy"¹⁶—a Husserlian semanticism. "All speech, all discourse, Derrida is believed to have shown, entails the structural possibility of the speaker's absence (i.e. his or her death), an absence itself most apparent in writing"¹⁷: it is, once again, from a commonplace that Kates wants to distance himself.

It is characteristic of this commonplace, Kates argues, that it correlates the potential objectlessness (*Gegenstandslosigkeit*) of language with the radical disappearance of truth. "It can be shown," writes Geoffrey Bennington (a "prominent commentator," whose summary, marked with "admirable brevity," Kates quotes at length), that

like any other term, 'I' must be able to function in the absence of its object, and, like any other statement, (this is the measure of its necessary ideality), 'I am' must be understandable in my absence and after my death. ... The meaning, even of a statement like 'I am,' is perfectly indifferent to the fact that I be living or dead, human or robot.¹⁸

Kates doubts neither the accuracy nor the brevity of this description. Indeed it is all too obvious that he thinks it unnecessary, for his reservations are elsewhere:

[T]he claim that "I" really *is* a term "like any other," and that it does express or carry meaning, is highly controversial. Terms like "I"—but also "today," "now," "here," as well as the demonstratives "this" or "that," which are dubbed "occasional expressions by Husserl, others calling them "token reflexives" or "indexicals"—are expressions whose function is *not at all* to mean, it has been argued, but solely to refer, to refer directly. They are constituents of what are sometimes called singular propositions—statements that contain a reference to a particular, without any mediation by a concept or a sense.¹⁹

It is this claim, however, rather than Bennington's, that is truly controversial. And brazen, too: for Bennington had already published, in 1994, an extensive essay on the question of indexicals in Derrida. The central claim there is that the challenge posed by "Derridean iterability" to "Husserlian expressivism" occurs precisely by way of irreducibly *singular* or *particular* statements in highly determined contexts. "By arguing on the basis of an essential iterability of the deictic 'I,'" Bennington writes, "Derrida is less assimilating an indexical item to a lexical item, than infiltrating lexical items in general with indexicals—which is in fact the general drift of his demonstration that Husserl cannot purify expression of indication."²⁰ A conclusion diametrically opposed to what Kates claims to be the case:

Bennington's and Derrida's argument, then, presupposes quite a lot. Their conclusion, specifically, assumes that the "role" of the indexical, as this is sometimes called (the possibility of its application as predelineated in language: in the case of the "I," roughly, to refer to the speaker or the agent of expression; in the case of "now," to fix a moment of time), is to be identified with an actual meaning. For this argument to go forward, the role and the meaning of "I" must indeed be one and the same.²¹

One might be tempted, here, to quote an extensive footnote from Derrida's 1993 text "Passions", one that is so blatantly at variance with Kates's description that one would soon be forgiven for succumbing to this temptation. "For example," one would begin to quote Derrida, still within the paragraph one was in the process of writing when the citation first suggested itself, jumping thereafter into an indented paragraph devoted to the quotation proper:

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suppose that I say “I,” that I write in the first person or that I write a text, as they say “autobiographically.” No one will be able seriously to contradict me if I claim (or hint by ellipsis, without thematizing it) that I am not writing an “autobiographical” text but a text on autobiography of which this very text is an example. No one will seriously be able to contradict me if I say (or hint, etc.) that I am not writing about myself but on “I,” on any I at all, or on the I in general, by giving an example: I am only an example, or I am exemplary, I am speaking of something (“I”) to give an example of something (an “I”) or of someone who speaks of something. And I give an example of an example. What I have just said about speaking on some subject does not require utterance, i.e., a discursive statement and its written transcription. It is already valid for every trace in general, whether it is preverbal, for example, for a mute deictic, the gesture or play of an animal. Because if there is a dissociation between myself and “I,” between the reference to me and the reference to (an) “I” through the example of my “I,” this dissociation, which could only resemble a difference between “use” and “mention,” is still a pragmatic difference and not properly linguistic or discursive.²²

A pragmatic difference, not properly linguistic but at work in language, and, moreover, in such a way as to permit an “I” to stand in for another “I.” Now, having given in to this temptation, one would not be far from noting how baldly Kates’s description contradicts this passage, and from adding, so as to accentuate that contradiction, that Kates pushes his argument even further by claiming that Derrida “comes to affirm, *perhaps* erroneously, that the indicative, or pragmatic dimension specific to language (not to mention pragmatism as such) is wholly tributary to the privilege of presence, specifically presence to a subject.”²³ A strange statement, this, and made all the stranger by the solicitude signaled by the “perhaps”, a solicitude one cannot quite have faith in, given that the purported affirmation is treated as obviously erroneous: “The work of *indexicals*, one might say,” unless one affirmed what Kates takes Derrida to affirm, “is simply the work of the *indicative*, the work of *indication* through language (all the terms being cognate).”²⁴

But such a digression will not do: 1993, after all, is a far cry from 1962 and 1967. One would then have to retrace one’s steps and proceed with the explication of Kates’s argument. Before going further, however, it will be necessary to note some ways in which Kates’s argument is simply flawed.

1) It is not possible to remove indexicals “from anything that might be genuinely called a meaning.”²⁵ Indexicals, after all, remain indexical *expressions*. A minimal symbolic investment—or, as J.N. Mohanty puts it in the case of the “I”, a semi-meaning²⁶—is necessary for an indexical to be what it is. David Kaplan, to whose work Kates refers this part of his argument, never denies this. Quite the contrary: D.W. Smith and Ronald McIntyre have noted that “Husserl’s account of demonstratives and Kaplan’s coincide up to a point: both hold that demonstratives refer directly; both recognize two levels of meaning for demonstratives, one that varies with the occasion of utterance and one that does not.”²⁷ No grave difference between Kaplan and Husserl, then.

2) Kates blurs distinctions that do not permit blurring. To say with Bennington that an “I” must remain “able to function” in the absence of “its object”, and that this functioning, in order to be recognised, necessarily requires a modicum of ideality, is not to say that the indexical “must carry a meaning.” Such teleology is profoundly foreign to Derrida and Bennington.

3) The view that Bennington and Derrida identify indexicals with actual meanings is an absurdity. For a situation to assume *some* meaning, for it to be able to yield *some* meaningful experience for *some* subject, is not quite the same as *to have* a meaning. And to have *a* meaning is not necessarily to have *just one* meaning. Indeed, the *capacity* of an utterance to *assume some* meaning in *some* possible context—to function, for instance, as indicative or expressive—is the very opposite of the *incapacity* to ever function otherwise than according to a meaning that it already *has*. This, it should be noted, is what the extensionalism of Gottlob Frege, to which Kates traces all the “other initiatives” he proposes as viable alternatives to deconstruction²⁸, will incontrovertibly lead to: as the renowned logician Jaakko Hintikka has noted, following Jean van Heijenoort, if concepts are to be fixed by their extensions alone (by the range of *really existing* things that make a statement true), and if every

statement is formulated according to an absolute and universally applicable logic like Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, it follows that there is *only one* possible interpretation for every statement and *only one* possible world with respect to which those interpretations can be made.²⁹ The result, of course, is that "one cannot on this view vary the representative relations between our expressions on the one hand and the reality on the other."³⁰ One cannot, that is, perform eidetic variations, which, as Derrida notes, are a hallmark of deconstructive plurivocity: "If all language, as was suggested elsewhere, is in itself a sort of spontaneous eidetic and transcendental reduction, and therefore also 'natural' and more or less naive, the multiplicity of reductions may be carried out by the more or less discordant concert of several voices."³¹ On this view, linguistic meaning, as thought by Husserl and Derrida, would not in fact constitute "an autonomous realm"; the "autonomy" which Kates treats with such great suspicion is in fact nothing less than the essential availability of language for reinterpretation in terms of alternative scenarios (as opposed to being fixed in terms of one single world or structure of meaning). Indeed, John D. Caputo already said as much in 1985; his words bear quoting at length. "Signifiers", Caputo says as per Derrida's notion of the sign,

are magical performatives which produce a staggering array of amazing results: science, art, outright fictions, graffiti, metaphysical systems, ethical exhortations, mythologies, scriptures, insults, commands, baptisms, poems, political constitutions, public prohibitions, curricula, colloquia, soliloquies, logical systems, normal and abnormal discourses of all sorts, and on and on. We can liken this productivity to the power of the 'imagination' in German idealism. For here, we have to do with *Ein-bildungs-kraft*: with an inexhaustible power to engender form, to produce formed effects. This is not to say that the power of differance is a subjective faculty. The energy in question is not the energy of a subject but the power of the differential system to generate new effects indefinitely.

Indeed Husserl himself had a glimpse into this abyssal power of productivity, albeit one which was couched in the language of transcendental subjectivity and transcendental freedom. He describes this for us in §§ 47–49 of *Ideas I* in terms of "the annihilation of the world," in a discussion aimed at showing the "constitution" of the world. The world around us is radically contingent, he says. The actual world is but a special case of a multitude of different, possible worlds. Things take shape for us as the correlate of a factual sequence of experiences, and we can imagine that these sequences would be different, would change.³²

On the possible-words view a statement is worth nothing in itself. Its value as true or false, decided only with respect to some particular world, is not an intrinsic one. Yet Kates, as I shall show in the next section, cannot postulate, precisely because of the way he privileges reference (extension) over meaning (intension), any such independence.

4) Ideality, therefore, does not require that any privilege be accorded to some single actual meaning. On the contrary: it may be said, as Martin Kusch has argued, that "Husserl seems to commit himself to a thesis ... according to which actuality is expressed by an indexical like 'I' or 'here'. That is to say, the predicate 'actual' does not pick out one and the same single world for all subjects, but it picks out for each subject (or group of subjects) 'its' (or 'their') world."³³ On Kusch's view, then, the relation that Husserl finds to obtain between indexicals and actual meanings—indication being the form in which a subject's actual experience gives itself to be expressed: *I am in this world*—is the very inverse of what Kates imputes.

A more general inference can be drawn from this last point. "Indication," Derrida writes in *Speech and Phenomena*,

thus enters into speech whenever a reference to the subject's situation is not reducible, wherever this subject's situation is designated by a personal pronoun, a demonstrative pronoun, or a 'subjective' adverb such as *here, there, above, below, now, yesterday, tomorrow, before, after*, etc. ...

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We quickly see that the root of all these expressions is to be found in the zero-point of the subjective origin, the *I*, the *here*, the *now*. The meaning (*Bedeutung*) of these expressions is carried off into indication whenever it animates real intended speech for someone else. But Husserl seems to think that this *Bedeutung*, as a relationship with the object (*I, here, now*), is “realized” for the one who is speaking.³⁴

One might have supposed it obvious here that the reference to the *other* interrupts the presence-to-self that Husserl seeks so forcefully to uphold. Kates, however, plumbs these depths as follows:

At the present phase of Derrida’s analysis, however, what becomes apparent is that Derrida’s stance is undergoing a subtle alteration, doubtless in part under the pressure of Husserl’s own treatments. Though Derrida in this later moment in *Speech and Phenomena* continues to valorize indication in the most general sense, to privilege indication as an “originary” possibility at the very border between linguistic and nonlinguistic signs, as a function *within discourse itself* he starts to link indication to the work of presence, specifically a supervening presence of, and to, the subject. Discussing these occasional expressions, which, as so defined, contain an indicative moment, he states: “the root of all these expressions, one sees it very quickly, is the zero-point of the subjective origin, the *I*, the *here*.”

Derrida now sees this indicative dimension of the linguistic sign in use as redounding to the presence of the subject and thus to the metaphysics of presence—in particular, in the case of the use of “*I*”—and clearly, on these same grounds, Derrida would also steer clear of the alternative “analytic” treatment of the “*I*” set out above.³⁵

Derrida’s premises should sanction our saying exactly the contrary. This “subtle alteration” is far too subtle to actually exist.³⁶ Or is it merely by chance that Kates surrounds it with a “however” and a “though” that have no motivation in Derrida’s own phrasing? That this conclusion is developed further in a passage where a “nevertheless” and a “doubtless” will come to reduce Derrida’s future thought to an affirmation that indication is tributary to presence?³⁷ That this interpretation is suggested in *processual* terms (“is undergoing”, “continues to valorize”, “starts to link”) that would not suggest themselves without the postulation of some goal (that Kates now sees and would have us see that “Derrida now sees”)? Or, finally, that his discussion contains a veritable “Sarl” moment where he criticises Derrida by means of a distinction already to be found in the latter’s text? “After all,” Kates writes against Derrida’s and Bennington’s conclusions, “a proper name, or even a possible gloss on the meaning of ‘*I*,’ such as the phrase ‘the person now speaking,’ can by no means stand in for ‘*I*.’”³⁸ Yet Derrida has already acknowledged this: “An essentially occasional expression is recognizable in that it cannot in principle be replaced *in speech* by a permanent objective conceptual representation without distorting the meaning (*Bedeutung*) of the statement.”³⁹ That Kates thinks he can discount this acknowledgement on the basis of Derrida’s analysis of Husserlian teleology—according to which an infinite objectivity will be able to substitute for the *content* of every occasional utterance an *objective* expression⁴⁰—is highly telling. For what Husserl deems objective in this sense is not what can be uttered in communicative speech but what can be intuited in a total objectivity, an objectivity rooted in an “*absolute temporal position*”⁴¹ that is able to form a synthesis between disparate moments and the elements of speech available within those moments. Husserl writes:

Every normal statement is produced in the mode of actuality; the anomalous therefore stands within quotation marks or requires reference to the circumstances of the statement, from which the modification of sense becomes clear. *This modification is not an alteration of sense of the kind which takes place within the consciousness of actuality—for there we have sense only in the mode of the ‘actual’—but a modification which confers the character of fiction on the sense itself.*⁴²

Thus the objectivity of which Husserl and Derrida speak, and which the latter subjects to the most profound questioning, constitutes not a “gloss on the meaning of ‘*I*’”—which would amount to an alteration of sense

“within the consciousness of actuality”—but a broader analysis of the “absolute temporal position” that has permitted the “I” to be stated and identified in a particular way.⁴³

For Kusch, then, as well as for Derrida, though it permits a mediation between occasional expressions and individuated meanings, such actuality is always positional. Positional—hence contextual—hence indicative—and always necessarily unfulfilled. Kates, however, is strangely inattentive to the decisive role that the notion of context plays both in general and in Derrida. (A close reading of *EH* and *FD* would reveal that Kates understands “context”—everywhere operational yet nowhere defined—in what ought to be called a historicist-hermeneutic vein.) “One of the most important influences on meaning,” says Ronnie Cann, author of *Formal Semantics*, “is that of the context of utterance. The context plays a vital role in determining how a particular utterance is to be interpreted on any occasion. In particular, it is needed to restore ellipses, resolve ambiguity, provide referents for deictic elements and resolve anaphoric dependencies.”⁴⁴ Let me summarise the role of context in Derrida. 1) *A context*, whether “internal” or “external” to the sign, is “the set of presences that organize the moment of [a sign’s] inscription.”⁴⁵ 2) *All contexts* are “pragmatically determined.”⁴⁶ 3) *Context*, as a general term, designates “the real-history-of-the-world”: nothing *exists* outside context⁴⁷. 4) *No context* can be fully saturated and fixed by an intentional consciousness⁴⁸. 5) This pertains, due to the general structure of citationality, to *all possible contexts*: a context need not be actual in order to determine at least one potential use of a sign⁴⁹. 6) This, in its turn, necessitates a detour via ideality, given that Derrida affirms Husserl’s analysis of possibility as “irreal.”⁵⁰ 7) Derrida, therefore, in rigorously reaffirming the importance of context, should in fact be seen as repairing a fault in Husserl’s own understanding of context. “Husserl’s basic theory of intentionality,” D.W. Smith and Ronald McIntyre write, “fails to take account of such contextual influences on intention. Accordingly, it must be modified or extended to what we might call a ‘pragmatic’ theory of intentionality, in analogy with a pragmatic as opposed to a purely semantic analysis of linguistic reference.”⁵¹ A kind of *pragmatology*, then.⁵²

Now, relating this summary to what we have just read from Derrida, and relating Derrida’s text to Kusch’s interpretation of Husserl, it should be possible to propose, against Kates, a double defense of Derrida’s notion of linguistic meaning: that 1) *a reference to the subject’s situation is always and everywhere irreducible* and that 2) *a subject is always situated in one possible world that must be ideally related to other possible worlds*. This cannot but have a profound effect on how Husserl’s and Derrida’s “semantic presuppositions” are to be interpreted.



To reiterate: Kates believes he has shown Derrida to rely on a Husserlian assumption concerning *semantics*. This assumption, Kates argues, comes down to Husserl’s analysis of the linguistic sign as a spiritual corporeality: all linguistic items are ideal objectivities, independent of spatiotemporal variation, which can only aim at ideal contents if enlivened by an intentional animation. This assumption, Kates says, has “undergirded” Derrida’s analysis “all along.”⁵³ Therefore, “whatever talk of a transcendental sense of death signifies, it cannot be equivalent,” even *after* 1962, “to a complete loss or death of sense on the transcendental plane.”⁵⁴ It follows by the same token that “meaning exists securely in its own right, apart from reference; it is correlated with language as a clearly delimited and autonomous domain.”⁵⁵

In this penultimate section I will focus my attention on one single question. This question communicates with the issue of the *alternative* that Kates so eagerly invokes but neglects to thematise. The question is this: does the description above really amount to a thesis concerning *semantics* as such and in its totality? More specifically: can this description of the linguistic sign serve as an adequate definition of semantics, that is to say, of all the possible *functional relations* in which language stands to its objects? Here, for comparison, is the initial definition of semantics that Ronnie Cann gives at the beginning of his *Formal Semantics*:

(1) **A semantic theory must:**

1. Capture for any language the nature of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences and explain

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the nature of the relation between them;

2. Be able to predict the ambiguities in the expression of a language;

3. Characterise and explain the systematic meaning relations between the words, the phrases and the sentences of a language.

...

(2) A semantic theory must provide an account of the relation between linguistic expressions and the things that they can be used to talk about.⁵⁶

Husserl, of course, grounds semantics in what he calls a “pure logical grammar” and thereby grants to it a regional pertinence. Derrida refers to this pre-semantic pure logical grammar in a decisive passage in “Signature Event Context”: “the issue is indeed one of a purely *logical* grammar, that is the universal conditions of possibility for a morphology of significations in the relation of knowledge to a possible object, and not of a pure grammar in *general*, from a psychological or linguistic point of view.”⁵⁷ Yet Kates, in commenting on “SEC”, is content to note Derrida’s approval of the “architectonic distinction ... between a pure logical grammar, focused on meaning alone, and a higher-order logic taking in validity, the object, and truth”⁵⁸ by means of which Husserl “rigorously thinks the independence of meaning from reference.”⁵⁹ This obfuscates the matter. The purpose of a pure logical grammar is *to account for all possible relations to all possible objects before those relations are interpreted or reinterpreted with regard to any single domain of meanings or existents*. From this it follows that the semantic theory most appropriate to Husserlian phenomenology, and to which it may comport its formidable powers of analysis, is that of possible worlds semantics: a semantics, that is, where meanings are defined as *functions from expressions to extensions in possible worlds* and therefore as *merely a more complex sort of reference*.⁶⁰ A problematic conclusion: it appears that Kates invokes the question of semantics and appeals to it without ever addressing the matter. Here, for instance, is a salient and exemplary passage, a wonderful piece of exegetical precision that nevertheless cannot but stray wide of the issue:

[F]or Derrida ... the linguistic sign as such is an *ideal individual*, ultimately belonging to culture and history, only able to be accessed through repeated intentions and acts of intention. These, in turn, necessarily bring with them higher-order acts of meaning and intending—both toward the objects at which they aim (*Gegenständen, Objekte*) as well as the logically articulated conceptualizations (*Bedeutungen*) through which these objects are presented. The sign thus stands in a total complex comprised of: (1) merely spatiotemporal bodies (*Körper*); (2) living spiritual corporealities or flesh (*Leib*); and (3) acts of meaning (*bedeuten*) and meanings (*Bedeutungen*)—specifically logical conceptualizations; and this is indeed how Derrida conceived the (linguistic) sign, both spoken and written, in 1962.⁶¹

This description only satisfies Cann’s stipulation (2): “A semantic theory must provide an account of the relation between linguistic expressions and the things that they can be used to talk about.”⁶² A semantic theory must do more than spell out a number of formal rules on the basis of which a statement may be considered valid and disambiguated. It also has to describe and justify the pure possibility of semantics as such. It is in describing this possibility that Kates succeeds with admirable clarity, rigour, and novelty. What he painstakingly shows is that Derrida agrees with Husserl as to the *possibility of semantics*; what he does not see—but what can now begin to be thought thanks to his efforts—is that Derrida cannot but agree with Husserl as to the *semantics of possibility*. It is in terms of such a semantics that D.W. Smith, Roland McIntyre, Jaakko Hintikka, and Martin Kusch, among others, interpret Husserl. On this view, it may be said that Husserl’s *Bedeutungen* consist in functions that assign propositions to objects in possible worlds. They connect statements to *alternative situations* in which the statements hold true. “On the possible-worlds version of Husserl’s theory, then,” Smith and McIntyre write in *Husserl and Intentionality*, “an act is not directed toward an object simpliciter but only in, or relative to, a possible world. And so an act’s intentionality consists in a pattern of directedness that reaches into various different possible worlds under the noematic guidance of the act’s Sinn.”⁶³ Unlike Frege, then, Husserl is not required by his theory to treat every object of reference as an existing entity. It may happen, as it does in the case of indefinite beliefs, that such objects, being potentially “dispersed” or “indeterminate”,

vary from one world to the next: existent here, inexistent there, possessing such-and-such traits in one world another set of traits in another. But even then the linguistic *Leib* intending these disparate objects may well remain the same.⁶⁴



1962, 1967. These dates function for Kates as an ordered pair of regulative metonymies. They mark, in a highly condensed fashion, a series of continuities and discontinuities whose proper interweaving he has attempted to unravel. “1962” stands for a certain complex situation in which Derrida stood as “a young philosopher, relatively unknown, with almost no prior publications”⁶⁵; “1967,” on the other hand, condenses a massive output of papers and essays written between 1959 and 1967. In 1962, Derrida’s work is *tout court* a contribution to Husserlian thought; in 1967, while in many respects liberating itself from Husserl’s influence, it remains in some essential respects tributary to the latter. A synecdoche of this relation may be found in the phenomenon of the *book*. In 1962, Kates says, the “tantalizing formulation of an original spatiotemporality allied to a ‘pure tradition and history’ immediately leads Derrida to offer his ‘phenomenology of the written thing’ in the form of ‘the book’”⁶⁶, while in 1967, most obviously of course in *Of Grammatology*, it is “the role of the book” that “most notably” indicates “the distance between Derrida’s treatment of writing here [in 1962] and in 1967.”⁶⁷

But this synecdoche is not simply a synecdoche. Its effects depend on the configuration of the metonymic dates. And it is precisely by means of the *book* that “1962” and “1967” can be so reconfigured as to make necessary a passage through “1963.” The year, that is, that saw the publication of “Force and Signification”, which later became the opening essay of *Writing and Difference*. Here, by way of conclusion, I shall offer a few remarks concerning an important passage therein that cannot but have an impact *both* on the issue of Derrida’s “semantic preconceptions” *and* on the general relation between “1962” and “1967.”

This passage concerns the relation between “the Book” and “books.” Derrida makes it clear that this relation is not one where the more general term encompasses the plural as instances of itself. “Books”, to borrow Kates’s terms, are not finite “possibilities of meaning”⁶⁸ that would redound to the “proliferating infinitude”⁶⁹ of some “ongoing infinite historicity of meaning”⁷⁰ that would amount to a total Book. If they were, Derrida writes, “to write would still be ... to attempt to forget difference: to forget writing in the presence of the so-called living and pure speech.”⁷¹ Hence the truth of the book must be the very inverse: “The pure book, the book itself, by virtue of what is most irreplaceable within it, must be the ‘book about nothing’ that Flaubert dreamed of—a gray, negative dream, the origin of the total Book that haunted other imaginations.”⁷² To translate this into semantic terms: the *pure book*, opposed to the *total Book* and maintaining a generative relation with singular and separate *books*, just as the virtual system of language is irreducible to a speech whose truth is already decided, denotes nothing but the perpetual possibility of any book to be *reinterpreted in terms of some other book*. (Or, as Derrida will later write: “One text reads another. ... Each ‘text’ is a machine with multiple reading heads for other texts.”⁷³) The Leibnizian terms in which Derrida casts his discussion are of the utmost importance here: Leibniz, as is well known, is generally credited with the invention of the idiom of “possible worlds”, and it is precisely to Leibniz’s notion of the *best possible* world—which, as best, is the one world that God has willed into existence—that Derrida likens the absolute and infinite Book.

To write is not only to know that through writing, through the extremities of style, the best will not necessarily transpire, as Leibniz thought it did in divine creation, nor will the transition to what transpires be always *willful*, nor will that which is noted down always infinitely *express* the universe, resembling and reassembling it. It is also to be incapable of making meaning absolutely precede writing: it is thus to lower meaning while simultaneously elevating inscription. The eternal fraternity of theological optimism and of pessimism: nothing is more reassuring, but nothing is more despairing, more destructive of our books than the Leibnizian Book. On what could books in general live, what would they be if they were not alone, so alone, infinite, isolated worlds? To write is to know that what has not yet been produced within literality has no other dwelling place, does not await

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us as prescription in some *topos ouranios*, or some divine understanding. Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning. This is what Husserl teaches us to think in *The Origin of Geometry*.⁷⁴

Every book is a possible world, every world a possible book, related to one another in an “autonomous sur-compossibility of significations”⁷⁵ that interrupts beforehand the dictation of an infinite and unified history whose development is regulated by an Idea in the Kantian sense. Formulated in 1963, reiterated endlessly through Derrida’s oeuvre in forms as diverse as “Nietzsche’s umbrella”⁷⁶, the “preface”⁷⁷, and the “more or less discordant concert of several voices”⁷⁸, this relation, as a synecdoche of the relation between “1962” and “1967”, explodes that conjunction from within.

Deconstruction as monadology: this is where *Fielding Derrida*, read in a certain way, arrives. Every inscription is a monad of meaning, related to the infinite but divorced from it by dint of its finitude, never completely dead, never completely born, always arising from and redounding upon another monad. *Fielding Derrida*, then, at a stroke, is one of the *most* and one of the *least* deconstructive response to deconstruction. “When one inherits,” Derrida says, “one sorts, one sifts, one reclaims, one reactivates. I also believe, although I’m not able to demonstrate it here, that every assignation of an inheritance harbors a contradiction and a secret.”⁷⁹ It is such a desire to inherit *otherwise*, to inherit some *alternative*, that Derrida’s work instills; deconstruction, perhaps, has always been the thought of the alternative—not simply as the relation that thought holds with “the alternative”, with things that are alternatives to one another, or with the concept of the alternative—but thought itself as that which arises from the alternative. The alternative is always that which is desired on the basis of that which leaves something to be desired. Kates, however, in his desire to respond to those aspects in Derrida that have left him something to desire, has responded to this desire with an interpretation that leaves him with no alternative; his interpretation, then, although its *impulse* is a deconstructive one, exposes itself to deconstruction to the precise extent that it is no longer deconstructive. For it is the alternative, binding its origin to itself in giving the origin to be thought in as many modes as there are notions of the possible, that first of all *contributes to* desire. In more senses than one.

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NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. New York and London: Routledge, 2004, 11. Hereafter WD.
2. Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis, Ed. Giacomo Donis & David Webb. New York: Polity, 2001, 30–32. Hereafter TS.
3. Joshua Kates, *Fielding Derrida. Philosophy, Literary Criticism, History, and the Work of Deconstruction*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. Hereafter FD.
4. Jacques Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, trans. Marian Hobson. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003, xiv.
5. Kates, FD, 62.
6. Joshua Kates, *Essential History: Jacques Derrida and the Development of Deconstruction*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005, xviii. Hereafter EH.
7. Kates, FD, 62–64, 71, 73, 255n6, and the whole of Chapter 4.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 160–161. Hereafter MP.
9. Kates, FD, 56.
10. Kates, FD, 70.
11. Kates, FD, 89.
12. Kates, FD, 69.
13. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, Ed. Gerald Graff. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988, 148. Hereafter LI.
14. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson. London & New York: Continuum, 2004, 5.
15. Kates, FD, 142.
16. Kates, FD, 63.
17. Kates, FD, 63.
18. Kates, FD, 64. Kates is referring to Geoffrey Bennington, “Derridabase,” in Bennington & Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1993, p. 110. Hereafter DB.
19. Kates, FD, 65.
20. Geoffrey Bennington, *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction*. London, New York: Verso, 1994, 293. Eftichis Pirovolakis argues similarly in his *Reading Derrida and Ricœur: Improbable Encounters between Deconstruction and Hermeneutics*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010, 120–127.
21. Kates, FD, 66.
22. Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. David Wood. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993, 143n14.
23. Kates, FD, 69, my emphasis.
24. Kates, FD, 68.
25. Kates, FD, 68.
26. J.N. Mohanty, *Edmund Husserl's Theory of Meaning*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976, 77–79.
27. D.W. Smith & Ronald McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality. A Study of Mind, Meaning, and Language*. Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: D. Reidel, 1982, 225n31. Hereafter HI.
28. See Chapter 4 of Kates, FD.
29. See, for instance, Jaakko Hintikka, *Selected Papers Volume 2: Lingua Universalis vs. Calculus Ratiocinator*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997, 162–164. Hereafter LUCR. A lengthier reading should demonstrate that Kates holds precisely this position (Kates, FD, 85 contains a symptomatic passage). Another reading of Derrida diametrically opposed to this view is to be found in Patrick O'Connor's intriguing book *Derrida: Profanations*. London & New York: Continuum, 2010.
30. Hintikka, LUCR, 164.
31. Jacques Derrida, “Et Cetera...” Trans. Geoffrey Bennington, in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, Ed. Nicholas Royle. London & New York: Routledge, 2000, 296. Hereafter Etc. For Derrida's suggestion, see Jacques Derrida, *Introduction to Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, trans. John P. Leavey. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989, 66–69. Derrida, as I read him, argues here for the double reinterpretability of all language: once language is transcendently reduced, its relation to expressible essences is rendered accessible, after which the eidetic reduction will permit the relation between singular expressions and singular essences to be freely and unboundedly varied (so as to yield, among other things, different interpretations correlated with different possible worlds).
32. John D. Caputo, ‘The Economy of Signs in Husserl and Derrida: From Uselessness to Full Employment’, in *Deconstruction and Philosophy. The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 107. The volume consists of papers presented at a 1985 conference on Derrida's work.
33. Martin Kusch, *Language as Calculus vs. Language as Universal Medium. A Study in Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer*. Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer, 1989, 96–97, Hereafter LC.

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34. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 94. Hereafter SP.
35. Kates, FD, 67–68.
36. It would be odd if Derrida, in writing SP, had somehow collapsed “under the pressure of Husserl’s own treatments,” given that, as he notes in TS, the book itself originated as a presentation: “I wrote it in a few weeks in the summer for a conference in the United States, and then I showed it to Hyppolite who said to me ‘it could be made into a book’—that’s how it happened, but it was anything but a project for a book” (Derrida, TS, 30). Kates speculates on the exact time when SP was written (see Kates, FD, 225n16); Derrida’s remark suggests that the book was formed on the basis of pre-existent material and does not therefore figure as a foray into something that was altogether novel to him.
37. “Doubtless, Derrida ... will continue to plumb all the more provocatively that indexicality and even referentiality in the form of repetition, iterability, and spacing Nevertheless, Derrida ... comes to affirm ... that the indicative, or pragmatic dimension of language ... is wholly tributary to the privilege of presence” (Kates, FD, 69).
38. Kates, FD, 65. A questionable claim, for it is possible to refer to oneself by one’s proper name: think of Julius Caesar in Shakespeare’s play.
39. Derrida, SP, 94 (my emphasis). Derrida says “in speech”, dans le discours: see *La Voix et le phénomène*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967, 105. Strangely, Kates elides this passage in both of his books.
40. Derrida, SP, 100–101.
41. Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgement. Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, trans. James B. Churchill and James Ameriks. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 173. Hereafter EJ.
42. Husserl, EJ, 300 (my emphasis). See also Kusch, LC, 98–99.
43. On the issue of infinite objectivity and its interruption, see Bennington, DB, 116–118. Another essential reference with regard to the speaking “I”—which Kates omits—would be Derrida’s 1965 essay “La parole soufflée” (Derrida, WD, 212–245).
44. Ronnie Cann, *Formal Semantics. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 22. Hereafter FS.
45. Derrida, MP, 317.
46. Derrida, LI, 148.
47. Derrida, LI, 136, 152.
48. Derrida, LI, 8, 14–15, 58–59.
49. Derrida, LI, 62–63.
50. Derrida, SP, 53n3.
51. Smith & McIntyre, HI 219.
52. “[A]n analysis ... at the intersection of a pragmatics and a grammarology,” in Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 1*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008, 373. This suffices by itself to dispute Kates’s claim that for Derrida “the indicative or pragmatic dimension of language is tributary to the privilege of presence and the subject” (Kates, FD, 70).
53. Kates, FD, 56.
54. Kates, FD, 56.
55. Kates, FD, 89.
56. Cann, FS, 1.
57. Derrida, MP, 320.
58. Kates, FD, 70.
59. Kates, FD, 89.
60. As Jaakko Hintikka says in his essay “Semantics for Propositional Attitudes”: “The theory of reference is ... the theory of meaning for certain simple types of language. ... Instead of the theory of reference and the theory of meaning we perhaps ought to speak in some cases of the theory of simple and of multiple reference, respectively” (Hintikka 1979, 145). The essay appears in *Modality and Reference*, ed. Leonard Linsky. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, 145–167.
61. Kates, FD, 57.
62. Cann, FS, 1.
63. Smith & McIntyre, HI, 311.
64. Smith & McIntyre, HI, 338, 349.
65. Kates, FD, 57; see also Kates, EH, 53–54.
66. Kates, EH, 254n32.
67. Kates, EH, 67.
68. Kates, FD, 60.
69. Kates, FD, 60.
70. Kates, FD, 60.
71. Derrida, WD, 14.

72. Derrida, WD, 8–9.
73. Jacques Derrida, 'Living On/Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, trans. James Hulbert, Ed. Geoffrey Hartman. London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, 107.
74. Derrida, WD, 10–11.
75. Derrida, WD, 10, translation modified.
76. Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
77. Jacques Derrida, 'Outwork', in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson. London & New York: Continuum, 2004.
78. Derrida, Etc, 296.
79. Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television. Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek. New York: Polity, 2002, 25.

CHRISTINA HOWELLS AND GERALD MOORE (EDS.),
STIEGLER AND TECHNICS (EUP, 2013)

Dominic Smith

As with Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and other contemporary candidates for that hoary chimera of a title, 'greatest living French philosopher', there are aspects of Bernard Stiegler's work that can appear entirely predictable. He is phenomenally prolific (thirty books in the past twenty years and counting). He is lyrical and wide-ranging in the themes he submits to philosophical interrogation. His work bears witness to a heady desire to theorise and, at points, is utterly frustrating in terms of the concepts it deploys (this is not to judge him by the standards of a G.E. Moore, merely to point out that terms like 'epochal redoubling' or 'epiphylogenesis' can seem unnecessarily baroque once their content has been articulated). He is well read in Freud, Lacan, and the generation of French philosophers immediately preceding his own (in particular, Derrida and Deleuze). He is well versed in the history of philosophy in general, and not averse to creatively misreading it. His work is steeped in the sense of a broader literary, artistic and poetic culture and aesthetic, and he is not averse to using examples from these domains to make big philosophical claims.

So much for expectations. What is refreshing about this collection is that it does not pander to them. Rather, the lasting impression one takes away from it is that, among all the heavyweights of contemporary French philosophy, Stiegler might, by virtue of his core focus on technology, be uniquely placed to break out of the ghetto of our assumptions surrounding terms like 'continental philosophy', 'French Theory', and 'the greatest living French philosopher'.

There is a condition on this: that we find the time, the inspiration, and the attention to engage Stiegler's work in new and productive ways. Frustratingly, and not without irony, Stiegler himself has been particularly bad at building the case for why we should do so in recent years. At his best (in the *Technics and Time* (1994-2001), the *De la misère symbolique* series (2004), and in the short work *Réenchâter le monde* (2006), for example), Stiegler is an unsurpassed gadfly of contemporary technological and mediatised society, capable of bringing acute poetic intelligence to an assessment of its limits and prospects. More recently, however, he seems to have fallen into some of the same paradoxes of overproduction that affect the work of Žižek - the more he produces,

the less he seems to say; the more he repeats his core theses, the more one suspects a certain loss of focus (last year's *Etats de choc* (2012) was particularly egregious in this respect, seeming hastily put together and deeply reactionary at points).

The first great service this collection provides, then, is that it charts exactly the right balance between reading Stiegler selectively and reading him attentively. Howells and Moore provide an inspiring overview of Stiegler's life and work in the introduction, and merely observing the contents page gives the reader a sense of the focus to come: contributions are ordered into five key categories ('Anthropology', 'Aesthetics', 'Psychoanalysis', 'Politics', and 'Pharmacology'); of these, the first four are traditional but wide ranging and interdisciplinary, allowing us to see how Stiegler contributes exciting ideas to established fields; the fifth category, in contrast, is a kind of 'creative trajectory', giving us a sense of how one of Stiegler's key themes might lead to the establishment of a new field. This is exactly the kind of framework reading Stiegler requires - by overcoming some of the more aberrant and inconsistent aspects of how he presents his ideas, it gives them a new critical context in which to shine.

Gerald Moore's '*Adapt and Smile or Die! Stiegler Among the Darwinians*' opens the 'Anthropology' section. The tone is deeply polemical: situating Stiegler's work as a new form of 'humanism' premised on the 'adoption' of technical supplements, Moore attacks the contemporary capitalist ideology of 'adaptation', which he sees as a front for resignation to bad socio-economic circumstances, and which he traces in examples ranging from contemporary management culture to poststructuralist philosophy. Such themes have been explored in the work of others, but Moore's focus on Stiegler is instructive.¹ What's more, his writing is exciting and driven by an anarchic sensibility which, true to the excursus with which he begins the essay, may owe more to the work of Michel Houellebecq than that of Stiegler. In particular, his critique of poststructuralism is thought provoking, if a little open (perhaps necessarily so) to the riposte of not engaging subtly enough with canonical thinkers like Deleuze and Foucault. Next up is Christopher Johnson's 'The Prehistory of Technology: On the Contribution of Leroi-Gourhan', which reads as an extremely well-focused 'history of ideas' piece. It will appeal to students of the history of French anthropology, and its account of how Derrida acted as a middle term between the work of Leroi-Gourhan and Stiegler is illuminating for thinking through potential interdisciplinary connections. Michael Lewis' 'Of a Mythical Philosophical Anthropology' is the next essay. It offers a close reading of the first volume of *Technics and Time* that situates Stiegler between the 'transcendental anthropology' of Rousseau and the 'empirical anthropology' of Leroi-Gourhan. I particularly appreciated the unabashed close reading at the core of this piece, and its insistence on the necessary role of myth-making in Stiegler's work. Since the first volume of *Technics and Time*, this quality has become a more subterranean aspect of Stiegler's approach, with the consequence that some of his poetic moments begin to look like bare assertions; it was therefore refreshing to see it resurrected in this context. Ian James' 'Technics and Cerebrality' is the last essay in the 'Anthropology' section. James is perhaps best known for his work on Jean-Luc Nancy, and he brings the subtle and incisive style developed in this context to his reflections on Stiegler. As the focus of his essay is brain plasticity, it stages the appropriate encounter with Malabou's recent work, but also manages to do a great deal more: like Lewis' essay, it benefits from a close reading strategy (in this case, of Stiegler's *De la misère symbolique* series and Malabou's *Que faire de notre cerveau?*), and it provides an excellent account of Heidegger's philosophy of technology, as well as Stiegler's deviations from it.

The third volume of *Technics and Time* (*Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*) forms a key focus for the 'Aesthetics' section. Serge Trottein's 'Technics, or the Fading Away of Aesthetics' sets the tone by offering a clear exposition of Stiegler's account of cinematic technologies in relation to Kantian aesthetics and Husserl's reflections on internal time consciousness. Trottein's overall argument is, I think, accurate: that Stiegler slides towards a form of technological determinism occluding the domain of the aesthetic. If there is one criticism to be made of Trottein's essay, however, it is stylistic: Trottein had me utterly hooked by his literary approach at the beginning, but I was left feeling a little bereft of the thread of the argument by the middle; thankfully, this was resolved by the close of the essay. Next up is Patrick Crogan's 'Experience of the Industrial Temporal Object'. The key strength of this essay is that it demonstrates a different strategy for reading Stiegler selectively:

by structuring the engagement around a key concept (in this case, the 'industrial temporal object'). Guided by this thread, the essay contextualises Stiegler with reference to the history of cinema and cinema theory; granted, its treatment could be faulted for being broad brush at points, but, given length constraints (all essays in the collection are around 15 pages long), such tactics are necessary, and the focus on a key concept means that Crogan's piece is a long way from feeling superficial. The final essay of this section is Martin Crowley's 'The Artist and the Amateur, from Misery to Invention'. It is also one of the best in the collection. In terms of form, it is distinguished by its exemplary clarity, focus and pace. In terms of content, Crowley shaves off some of the rougher edges of Stiegler's writing in *De la misère symbolique* to fashion a cogent argument for "a new politics of aesthetic experience" (120), centred on the figure of the 'amateur'. What sets this essay apart from the other 'Aesthetic' offerings is its highly focused critical sensibility: for example, Crowley asks whether the move from TV "broadcasting" to Internet "narrowcasting" calls into question Stiegler's theory of "hypersynchronisation", according to which consciousness is in danger of being standardised by the mass consumption of broadcast events; this is an important question which is only hinted at in the contributions of Trottein and Crogan.

Christina Howells' '*Le Defaut d'origine: The Prosthetic Constitution of Love and Desire*' opens the 'Psychoanalysis' section. This essay demonstrates yet another important strategy for reading Stiegler selectively: by focusing his work onto key themes (in this instance, love and desire). Beyond this, two aspects of this piece are particularly impressive: the way it characterises Stiegler within a broader account of Twentieth century French philosophy (its focus on Sartrean existentialism and Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular), and the implicit case it builds for tolerance of 'creative misreading' as tendency within this tradition. Having criticised Stiegler on Lacanian *jouissance*, for example, Howells maintains that the "possible pedantry" (148) of her criticism should not block the more creative consequences of Stiegler's alleged mistreatment. What is at work here is nothing so explicit as a Davidsonian 'principle of charity'; rather, we have an implied ethics and practice of reading, developed through close attention to the potentials of the text in question. The next essay is Tania Espinoza's 'The Technical Object of Psychoanalysis'. Beginning from Christopher Bollas' definition of the unconscious as the "unthought known", Espinoza states:

Two claims about the relationship between Bernard Stiegler's philosophy and psychoanalysis can be made. First, that technics is the unconscious of psychoanalysis. Second, that psychoanalytic technique, insofar as it looks at the underside of discourse, is central to the philosophy of technics. (151).

These are acute and well formulated claims, worthy of a book length study unto their own. In her essay, Espinoza goes on to develop them in some detail by thinking through connections between Stiegler's work and that of Donald Winnicott, among others. As might reasonably be expected, however, we are not left with a definitive sense that her claims have been addressed; rather, we are left with a sense of an emerging author who has identified key themes for future research, and who has offered an exciting foretaste of them. Oliver Davis' essay 'Desublimation in Education for Democracy' is the last in the 'Psychoanalysis' section. Surveying the titles before I read the collection, this was the essay that appealed the least; now, I am of the opinion that it is the best in the collection. As per Crowley's earlier contribution, it is characterised by a clear argument and a trenchant sense of critique. The argument is that Stiegler, in persistently deploying a rhetoric of "sublimation" (the investment of desire), ignores the extent to which "desublimation" (the uncoupling of desire) is an important aspect of any libidinal economy. The critique is that, unconsciously, Stiegler is himself an "adept of the desublimatory" gesture (176). What Davis means to highlight by this is the sense in which Stiegler's rhetoric often tends towards bare assertion and an "apocalyptic tone" (176) which, he contends, is designed to uncouple readers from libidinal investments (whether philosophical, technological, or political) that are incongruent with Stiegler's own worldview. Davis' approach could be criticised for being too traditionally 'deconstructionist' at points, and he does veer dangerously towards an *ad hominem* attack at the end of his essay. Such is the strength of his argument and the clarity of his focus, however, that the reader is apt to overlook these issues.

The penultimate 'Politics' section begins with another strong contribution in the shape of Miguel de Beistegui's 'The New Critique of Political Economy'. This sets out to examine Stiegler's contribution to a resurgence of political themes in continental philosophy, with special reference to *Pour une nouvelle critique de l'économie politique* (2009). Although the shortest essay in the collection, at 11 pages, de Beistegui's piece charts an excellent balance between being descriptive of Stiegler's approach, and being critical of it. Given de Beistegui's background as a Deleuze scholar, the concluding argument is somewhat predictable (that Stiegler's restriction of his analysis of desire to libido ignores '...vaster, more impersonal and *pre*-individual' forms of desire (p 191)), but this does not detract from what is a high quality reading and contextualisation overall. The next piece is Sophie Fuggle's 'Stiegler and Foucault: The Politics of Care and Self-Writing'. Stiegler's engagement with Foucault's concept of '*hypomnemata*' is arguably one of the most interesting aspects of his recent work, and Fuggle is to be congratulated for delivering an essay that develops this theme in order to chart wider resonances between two thinkers so important for contemporary political thought. My impression is that her essay tails off a little towards the end, but the quality of her exposition is consistently clear, particularly in terms of her elaboration of key concepts and stages in both Stiegler and Foucault's philosophical developments. The next piece is enticingly called 'Technology and Politics: A Response to Bernard Stiegler', by Richard Beardsworth. What really grabs attention about this essay is its willingness to reach into the idiom of contemporary philosophy of technology (in repeatedly prosecuting the charge that Stiegler's approach is 'technologically determinist', for example). This form of explicit engagement with philosophy of technology is notably lacking in many of the other pieces, so it is a very good thing that Beardsworth's essay is strong enough as a stand-alone to go some way towards remedying it for the collection as a whole. Somewhat frustratingly, his essay has been shortened (through the use of ellipses dots), but this at least has the virtue of keeping it congruent in size with the other contributions in the collection. The last essay in the 'Politics' section is Ben Roberts' 'Memories of Inauthenticity: Stiegler and the Lost Spirit of Capitalism'. This is the only essay in the collection to be focused on Stiegler's *Mécréance et discredit* series (2004-2006), and develops a convincing argument that Stiegler's "...transformation of work by Derrida, Simondon and others has allowed a rearticulation of some of the concerns of the Frankfurt school" (225). The focus on Simondon is particularly instructive here, as Roberts develops a critical exegesis of Stiegler's reading of Boltanski and Chiapello's *Le Nouvel Esprit de capitalisme* (2005). The productive series of contrasts he builds throughout the essay leads to a convincing conclusion that Boltanski and Chiapello's outlook finds a useful critical supplement in Stiegler's "more nuanced account of the relationship between technics and culture" (238).

The last section of the book comprises two essays on Stiegler's concept of 'Pharmacology'. Following Derrida, Stieglerian 'pharmacology' entails the study of technologies as '*pharmaka*' (that is, as both 'poisons' and 'cures'). At certain points in reading Stiegler, the content of 'pharmacology' can seem to amount to little more than the instrumentalist truism that technological artefacts can be used for both 'good' and 'bad' purposes. Read together, however, the concluding two essays of this volume give the sense that 'pharmacology' might offer an exciting new trajectory for contemporary thought - one that builds on and surpasses Derridean deconstructionism. The first essay is 'Pharmacology and Critique after Deconstruction' by Daniel Ross. It is an extremely well structured and direct piece, which offers a high level encounter with the approaches of Derrida and Husserl. Given Stiegler's Derridean background, and his appropriation of Derridean concepts such as *différance* and 'grammatisation', it is especially important that this encounter features in the collection, and Ross makes a good job of it (the focus on the issues of 'will' and 'decision' in the conclusion is particularly interesting). The second essay is by Stephen Barker, and carries the somewhat unwieldy title of 'Techno-pharmaco-genealogy'. Like Roberts' essay, it offers an engagement with Simondon, but goes much further, developing a rich focus on the concepts of '(trans)individuation', 'transduction' and 'collective individuation'. I must admit that I find Barker's prose dense at points, but he makes many acute observations. In particular, his concluding suggestion that, "...as *pharmaka*, technologies themselves are ...profoundly neutral - which is to say, indifferent to the ways in which they individuate their users" (271) is thought provoking, with its suggestion that Stiegler returns us full circle, as it were, to a kind of (utterly altered) 'instrumental and anthropological definition' of technology, as described by Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology*.

What can be made of this collection as a whole? First and foremost, it was long past time for a text like this to appear in English, and exciting intimations of future publications on Stiegler are contained within it (Moore's forthcoming *Bernard Stiegler: Philosophy in the Age of Technology*, for example). Second, the tone and pitch are exactly right: the editors have drawn together a selection of high quality essays from both established and emerging voices; none of these is slavishly enthralled to Stiegler; each highlights aspects of his work that are exciting and of value, and all are of roughly equal (and eminently manageable) length. What emerges, in short, is the sense of a rich critical introduction, one that signposts the right names, concepts and directions for taking scholarship of Stiegler's work further. To be sure, the majority of the contributors are, like Stiegler himself, steeped in the terminology and attitudes of contemporary continental philosophy. Beyond this, however, the potential tangential impacts of both his work and this book are huge, for four fields in particular: art and media, literary studies, performance studies, and the coalescing field of contemporary 'philosophy of technology'. Let me conclude with a reflection on the place of Stiegler's work in relation to contemporary philosophy of technology. This is an excitingly inchoate field at present, incorporating aspects of everything from analytic philosophy, to the Dutch 'empirical' approach centred on the University of Twente, to social constructivism². Of all the approaches contributing to the field, however, two are especially inspired by continental philosophy: Don Ihde's 'post-phenomenology' and Andrew Feenberg's 'critical theory of technology'.³ Compared with Stiegler, both of these approaches are apt to seem tame in the extreme. Indeed, the harsh critic would perceive a struggle on the part of Ihde to move beyond late-Husserl/early-Heidegger, and a struggle on the part of Feenberg to move beyond Marcusean critical theory. Stiegler's reflections are much less safe than this, and, at least potentially, a good deal more interesting for contemporary philosophy of technology as a result. Many within this field are currently primed to write him off (as a 'technological determinist', or as a thinker in the vein of 'classical' philosophers of technology like Ellul, Jonas and Heidegger, for example); through the intervention of collections like *Stiegler and Technics*, however, we might just learn to read his work with the degree of selective attentiveness appropriate to it. Should this occur, Stiegler may emerge as a poetic and aporetic philosopher of technology *par excellence*, at the threshold of a 'continental turn' in philosophical reflections on technology.

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NOTES

1. In Catherine Malabou's recent work, for example. See Catherine Malabou, *Que faire de notre cerveau?* Paris: Bayard, 2004, and *Les Nouveaux Blessés: de Freud à la neurologie: penser les traumatismes contemporains*. Paris: Bayard, 2007.
2. For analytic interventions, see Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action and Cognitive Extension*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, and Luciano Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. For the Dutch approach, see Philip Brey, "Philosophy of Technology after the Empirical Turn", *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 14:1 (2010, 36-48) and Petere Paul Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011. For social constructivist approaches, see, for example, Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, and Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986.
3. See, for example, Don Ihde, *Multistabilities: Experimental Phenomenology*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2012, and Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.