

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

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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on the German political impasse ca. 1800—more precisely: if the very concept of *revolution* is not by now pathetically outdated—what exactly is its contemporary traction?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 antinomies, 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 Hannsen, 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.