

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

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*... 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*<sup>1</sup>

### 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.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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).<sup>12</sup> Hegel’s time is our time, which is a time ‘out of joint’, as Deleuze remarks, quoting Hamlet apropos Kantian idealism.<sup>13</sup> 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!’<sup>14</sup> 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.
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