

Chapter 7

Pantheism and the Dangers of Hegelianism in Nineteenth-Century France



Kirill Chepurin

“Absolute communism is the politics of pantheism”

—Louis Dupré (Théophile Thoré)

“Pantheism is not poison, it is indifference to poison”

—Louis-Alexandre Foucher de Careil.

Abstract This study rethinks the critical reception of Hegelianism in nineteenth-century France, arguing that this reception orbits around “pantheism” as the central political-theological threat. It is Hegel’s alleged pantheism that French authors often take to be the root cause of the other dangers that become associated with Hegelianism over the course of the century, ranging from the defence of the status quo to radical socialism to pangermanism. Moreover, the widespread fixation on the term “pantheism” as the enemy of all that is true, and as the term that defines the age, is symptomatic of the perception of the nineteenth century by its contemporaries as a period of crisis and turmoil, in which heretical energies are let loose that threaten to unground all authority and all transcendence. More speculatively, I suggest in the conclusion that it is the same energies that the term “communism” comes to capture, too.

Keywords Pantheism · System · Socialism · Communism · Disorder · Heresy

In this essay, I seek to rethink the critical reception of Hegelianism in nineteenth-century France, arguing that this reception orbits around “pantheism” as the central political-theological threat. It is, I argue, Hegel’s alleged pantheism that French authors often take to be the root cause of the other dangers that become associated with Hegelianism over the course of the century, ranging from the defence of the status quo to radical socialism to pangermanism. Moreover, as we will see, the widespread fixation on the term “pantheism” as the enemy of all that is true, and as

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the term that defines the age, is symptomatic of the perception of the nineteenth century by its contemporaries as a period of crisis and turmoil, in which heretical energies are let loose that threaten to unground all authority and all transcendence. More speculatively, I suggest in the conclusion that it is the same energies that the term “communism” comes to capture, too.

7.1 An Age of Pantheism

In his 1840 *Essai sur le panthéisme dans les sociétés modernes*, Catholic theologian Henri Maret observes what he calls the “double character” of the post-Enlightenment age (1840: v). Religious sentiment and enthusiasm for religion have returned; yet, this has not led to what Maret views as the desirable outcome: the revival of Christian orthodoxy. Instead, the mind of the age finds itself in doubt, confusion, and crisis. “The mind oscillates between truth and error, good and evil”, Maret notes, “[and] its ideas are confused” (1840: v-vi). This crisis extends beyond the merely religious or political: it is “a general disease” that leads to a “weakened reason” and “enervated will” (1840: vi), to “our confused science” and “a prodigious confusion, a veritable chaos” in the entire “intellectual world” (1840: x-xi). It is, so to speak, a general disordering: “the disorder that reigns in thought” but also in the “impotence and division” within society at large (1840: xi, vii). The mind dwells in indifference and indecision: a purely negative state. “We no longer dare to affirm” (1840: v).¹

The whole of society becomes, in Maret’s account, a disjointed association of spectres: a ghost-like existence without vigour, individuality, or community (virtues which are identified by Maret in their true form with Christianity as the positive religion). “Because we carry death in our womb”, his indictment goes, “we want Christianity likewise to die and be extinguished”. This results in an unhealthy divide erected between present and future, in which the obsession with utopian visions of a hoped-for future is the obverse of a hopeless present and the diseased mind that inhabits it—a sign of all-encompassing alienation. “It is”, Maret notes, “in this future that they place light, peace, freedom, happiness”, while “the present stays disenchanting, empty, and cold”, given over to egoism, “practical materialism”, “the slavery of the senses”, and mere “vegetative life” (1840: vi). Since this present cannot in truth lead to a blissful future, such utopian futurity is diagnosed by Maret as but a hallucination, a phantasm of a sickened mind, a spectral reflection of a diseased and incapacitated age:

Just as, under the sway of feverish hallucinations, the patient becomes convinced that he is regaining health, and that he has his entire life in front of him, so, too, enfeebled minds feed on chimeras, soaring towards an unknown future... (Maret 1840: vi)

Disorder is at once pathologized and absolutized by Maret to such an extent that it grows truly cosmic, merging with the chaos preceding creation or, rather, the chaos on which the divine order of creation is imposed, and which constantly threatens to

¹ See also volume 1, §3.4.4.

undo this order. “If celestial bodies ceased to obey the laws of gravitation”, Maret analogizes, “the world would soon revert into chaos”—and this is precisely what has happened in “the moral world” whose “living law” is the transcendent God (1840: vii). It is thus, to continue Maret’s analogy, the world itself, as a lawful and coherent whole, that is undone by chaos and the absence of law. Feverish investment in the future reveals the groundlessness and worldlessness of the present. The removal of the order of transcendence, within whose bounds the ante-worldly chaos is enclosed and suppressed, lets this chaos loose in a kind of de-creation. What Maret seeks is a Christian theodicy of creation; yet what he finds is a reality in which disorders of all kinds run free, and in which no world can be “divinely” reinstated. It is the threat of this disorder that lies at the root of Maret’s anxiety about, and critique of, the post-Enlightenment condition.

Maret’s name for this threat is *pantheism*. Pantheism constitutes “the unity of a century that has none”: a “false unity that rises up against the divine and catholic unity” (Maret 1840: ix). For Maret, it is the spectre of pantheism that is haunting Europe in 1840. At this point, Maret himself starts to hallucinate pantheism everywhere, so that “pantheism” becomes synonymous with the hallucinatory condition of the age. All contemporary theories, he claims, are pantheistic at their core, and it is only from this vantage of an all-pervasive pantheism that “*all* the intellectual, moral, and literary phenomena of the century become comprehensible” (1840: ix; emphasis added). Pantheism reigns equally, if in different forms, in France, Britain, and Germany—and Romantic poetry in particular draws Maret’s ire for its pantheistic nature (1840: xi).² “Pantheism thus explains the age”; it is, Maret adds with a reference to fellow Catholic thinker Louis Bautain, “the true heresy of the nineteenth century” (1840: xii-xiii). To say that God is all and all is God amounts to saying there is no God; and in the resulting emptiness, the finite subject takes God’s place: the human becomes the demiurge. “Wasn’t the human the one who created the past? Isn’t it up to the human to establish the future?”, Maret asks rhetorically, criticizing this demiurgic conception of humanness (1840: vi). Pantheism is the “science and wisdom” of a human being stripped of what is divine, and reduced to passions and egoism (1840: viii). It coincides, one might say, with the perverse “wisdom” of original sin.

As such, however, pantheism is more than *a* heresy. It is the embodiment of the transhistorical spirit of uprising against transcendent truth. As Maret dramatizes it, “Christianity, at its birth, saw pantheism rise up against it... Most of the great heresies of the first centuries were, to a lesser or greater extent, inspired by pantheistic doctrines”—and “even today”, he continues, “this old enemy raises its head; it once again declares war on Christianity” (1840: xii; cf. 174 on the persistence of pantheistic heresy in the Middle Ages). Among philosophers of the present age, Hegel is

²Romantic *philosophy*, too. Maret’s question—“Is [pantheism] not the whole substance of the philosophies that have been taught in Europe for the past 50 years?” (1840: vi)—places the origin of contemporary pantheism in the 1790s, this quintessential Romantic decade. This is also the decade in which post-Kantian German Idealism begins, so that Maret’s question is directed likewise at Fichte, Schelling, and, of course, Hegel.

singled out by Maret as one “of whose pantheism there is no doubt” (1840: 20). Hegel’s system is a system of all-unity and all-identity (1840: 163) that seeks to “embrace the universe” with logical formulas (1840: 170), so that his (as well as Schelling’s) invocation of the divine strips God of all personality and all “quality” (1840: 193).³ (Note the joint critique of “pantheism” and “system”—as we will see, a central motif of nineteenth-century French Hegel reception.) The spirit of pantheism at work in Hegel is, however, for Maret the same as the spirit of the earliest heretical uprising against Christianity, one that bears the name “Gnosticism”. “The logical emanations of Hegel”, he asserts, “bear striking resemblance to the emanations of the Gnostics”. In both Hegelianism and Gnosticism, “the absolute produces and absorbs everything; it is the essence of all things” (1840: 165). For Hegelianism to succeed, Maret maintains, would spell the end of Christianity. However, the latter has God and truth on its side, and just as the Gnostic heresy was overcome by Christianity, so too Hegelianism will be defeated (1840: 429). It is as though whenever Christianity is in crisis, its enemy—the dominant heresy of whatever age—must bear the name “pantheism”.

If *heresy* is one attribute of pantheism, *indifference* is another. According to Maret, by collapsing transcendence, pantheism collapses any higher criterion for distinguishing truth from error. On the one hand, this leads to the oscillation and doubt that permeate the contemporary mind: indifference as the impossibility to affirm or to decide. On the other, this means that, if all things are divine, and thus whatever happens is justified *as* divine, then the present—the way things are—is the way things should be. Whatever form of spirit presently dominates is “highest” and “divine”: such is Maret’s critique of the Hegelian theodicy of history. As Maret puts it, for pantheism, “all forms [that the human spirit takes] are legitimate—all your errors are holy” (1840: xii). Unlike the Christian theodicy of divine order, pantheistic theodicy is a theodicy of indifference *qua* all-legitimation, in which “the past is amnestied” (and original sin, too) simply because it leads to the present in the course of “material progress” (1840: xiii).⁴ Where there is no transcendent truth, there is only “anarchy”; and where the present is automatically legitimated, history is decided by “force” (1840: 256). For Maret, the example of Hegel demonstrates that pantheistic rationalism *sans* transcendence leads to nihilism. “Anarchy”, “despotism”, and a materialism of progress are equally products of pantheism. “Industry, machines”, Maret proclaims, “are for the pantheist the true agents of civilization” (1840: xiii).⁵ Thereby, a line is drawn, as it were, from Hegel to Krupp. Where

³On this point, Maret may be reductively reading both Schelling and Hegel through the lens of Schelling’s identity-philosophical doctrine of “potencies” as purely quantitative, non-essential or formal relationalities.

⁴It is significant in this regard that German Idealism from Kant to Schelling and Hegel justifies the Fall of Adam as necessary for launching the progress of autonomous human rationality and knowledge—a point Maret probably has in mind here, even as he reduces it to a materialistic vision of progress.

⁵Maret’s critique is here inflected by Saint-Simonianism, this (in Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve’s 1831 formulation) “Gnosticism weighted with industrialism” (quoted in de Lubac 1948: 82).

humans are disoriented ghosts that possess no vigour and no truth, and carry death in their womb, it is the machine that reigns. A desolate, hallucinatory landscape of the present is where demonic spectres of original sin take brutal, solid, material shapes, as though to better withstand what is divine and true. Industrial modernity thus appears in Maret as the true hell—one created by the omniscient imposition of indifference that he identifies with pantheism, and with the name “Hegel”.

7.2 Hegelianism’s Dangers: A Nineteenth-Century French Trajectory

In Maret’s striking chain of associations that leads, in his critique of Hegel, from pantheism via Gnosticism to materialism, atheism, nihilism, despotism, industrialism, and rationalism, one can see that the so-called “pantheism debate”, launched by Friedrich Jacobi in the 1780s, did not remain a purely German affair. Especially as the influence of German philosophy continued to increase in the nineteenth century, and as the German-French intellectual exchange grew more volatile vis-à-vis traditional authorities, i.e., both church and state, an indictment of German rationalist philosophy as pantheism and atheism—Jacobian in spirit if not necessarily influenced by Jacobi directly—grew increasingly common among French thinkers and scholars, merging with local debate around Saint-Simonianism and Fourierism, and with the local *querelle du panthéisme* of the 1840s.⁶ Unsurprisingly, the divisive name of Hegel often stood at the centre of these polemics.

For Jacobi in his original argument, the immanence of reason, once it becomes all-encompassing and takes the place of God, forecloses transcendence and leads necessarily to atheism and fatalism—and, in the nineteenth century, Hegel would emerge as a particularly apt target for this kind of critique. As Maret puts it in a highly Jacobian manner, “rationalism has always gravitated toward pantheism” in its desire to rationally “embrace everything, explain everything”, leaving no room for God or for true freedom and unity, and ending up being only “atheism in disguise” (1840: viii-x), with Hegel but the contemporary culmination of this tendency. As Félicité Robert de Lamennais expresses it in his letter from 1830, Hegel is “the Antichrist’s Plato” (quoted in D’Hondt 1972: 165): an impressive characterization demonstrating, if negatively, the extent of Hegel’s influence and philosophical reputation.

In the rest of this chapter, I want to provide an overview of the perceived dangers of Hegelianism in nineteenth-century France as growing out of the philosophical and political-theological question of pantheism. Placed in this broader context, Maret’s critique appears, despite its seeming strangeness, as relatively

⁶For an account of this *querelle*, see Ragghianti (2001). It should be noted that the French debate of the 1840s was already inflected by the question of German Idealism’s influence on French philosophers such as, most centrally, Victor Cousin.

run-of-the-mill, and as shared to various extent by thinkers outside the conservative Catholic circles. In this way, I seek to foreground and speculatively unravel a still-underappreciated dimension in the genealogy of the French Hegel reception.⁷ I call the question of pantheism “political-theological” because, over the course of the nineteenth century, it concerned the relation of immanence and transcendence (a binary that formed precisely in the wake of Kant, Jacobi, and German Idealism⁸) and, as we have seen in Maret, the problem of legitimating or delegitimizing the status quo in a way that cut across the (often unclear) boundary between “religious” and “secular” authority.⁹

In a manner that reflected the highly charged nineteenth-century political and intellectual landscape, and the conflict-laden relation between France and Germany, Hegelianism-*qua*-pantheism also tended to acquire remarkably different associations—from conservatism to socialism to Bismarckism—and often reflected the inner differentiation of Hegelianism into Left and Right. As a result of this inner differentiation, Hegelianism could be easily presented as leading “naturally” to socialism or to the ideology of the Prussian state. However, what is significant for my argument in this essay is that *both* of these Hegelian camps shared, according to their critics, the underlying pantheistic impulse inherent in Hegel’s own thought—and it is this impulse that appeared as a (spiritual and political) threat. And although Hegel’s later French reception will not concern me here, I would suggest that the connotations that Hegel’s name started to carry in France over the course of the pantheism polemics in the nineteenth century played a key part in the formation of the standard French image of Hegel which survived into the twentieth century.

Methodologically, it is crucial to distinguish Hegel’s actual texts, concepts, and arguments from the names “Hegel” and “Hegelianism” as they were used in France in the nineteenth century. In Jacques D’Hondt’s turn of phrase, “Hegel’s thought only entered France as though by contraband” (1972: 164). Hegel’s texts were only very gradually becoming accessible to the French audience, and I will not concern myself here, for instance, with the history of Augusto Vera’s translations of Hegel or their accuracy.¹⁰ Arguably, it is precisely the unfamiliarity, and then distorted or partial familiarity of French authors with Hegel’s writings that was, as it often happens, a prerequisite for the uses of the names “Hegel” and “Hegelianism” in nineteenth-century France. At the centre of such usage, I argue, stood the nexus of *pantheism* and *system*—a nexus that was already political(–theological) and partisan, even in the more academic or scholarly reception.

⁷For an earlier discussion of this dimension, see D’Hondt (1972). See also volume 1, §3.4.4, which further complements and contextualises the analysis of the present essay.

⁸For a brief overview of the formation of the immanence/transcendence binary, see Zachhuber (2017).

⁹Significantly, the binary of “religious” and “secular”, to which we are no less (often uncritically) accustomed as to that of “transcendence” and “immanence”, was still forming in the nineteenth century. Hence, it is not my goal to restage these binaries; rather, what may be glimpsed from the readings I offer is how the question of pantheism cuts across such binary logics.

¹⁰On Vera and his Hegelianism, see Andrea Bellantone’s essay in this volume; on nineteenth-century French Hegel translations including Vera’s, see volume 1, §4.2.

Although I focus here solely on French authors, it is important to keep in mind that these authors were influenced by the German debate, including German critiques of Hegel.¹¹ For my purposes here, what matters the most is not whether the French image of Hegel was original but the very fact that it was French—which could not but put it in a different political and religious context. One can see, for example, how the question of Catholicism comes to the fore in some of these critiques, as well as the question of the French national-philosophical identity, or of how this identity could, perhaps, complement the German philosophical character so that the two might be brought together into a more universal philosophical unity (as may be seen in the Cousin-Schelling connection or in the work of Joseph Willm). This kind of unity, too, could not help but be political—and in fact, the idea of such a unity could itself, for instance in Louis Blanc’s 1843 article on the project of an intellectual alliance between France and Germany, be turned *against* Hegel and German Idealism, with their “atheism” and “pantheism”, from a distinctly Catholic French context (see Blanc 1843).¹²

As the example of Maret demonstrates, by 1843, Blanc’s accusations of “atheism” and “pantheism” against Hegel were already commonplace in the French context. In fact, to reiterate, I would identify pantheism as the conceptual focal point of all Hegelian dangers for nineteenth-century French authors—so that, first, the accusation of pantheism was flexible enough to allow for both Right and Left Hegelianism, both Hegel the conservative and Hegel the radical, depending on the political moment and the political inclinations of the polemicist in question; and so that, second, the more narrowly philosophical dangers of Hegelianism remained inextricably bound up with the political-religious context. As Maret formulated it, pantheism is the “error which sums up and absorbs all the others” (1840: 174); and as we will see, he was not alone in thinking that. In all the critiques, pantheism was a core element, and other ills—be it atheism, nihilism, scepticism, fatalism, conservatism, communism, despotism, or Bismarckism—tended to constitute, to a lesser or greater extent, pantheism’s various offshoots and inflections.

It is possible to trace the spread of the above amalgam back at least to the late 1820s and early 1830s. Already then, Hegel was associated in France with pantheism and system, understood politically to imply conservatism and a philosophical justification of the Prussian state or monarchy as such. In the 1830s, a more moderate and progressive reading of Hegel appeared (Willm is an important name here). As Hegelianism in Germany bifurcated into Left and Right and the Left made themselves strongly visible, this doubling was reflected in French reception, too, but it

¹¹The influence went in the opposite direction, too. As D’Hondt (1972: 178) points out, Marx’s 1843 comment on Hegel’s “logical, pantheistic mysticism” from *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* was informed by the French socialist discourse at the time. See Marx (1970: 7). Relatedly, D’Hondt (1972: 186–7) notes a broad Saint-Simonian influence on the pre-1848 German revolutionary mindset. On this influence, see further Breckman (1999: 151–76).

¹²See volume 1, §3.4.2.

was the politically extreme consequences of Hegelianism and the spread of radical Hegelian ideas that scared critics the most.¹³

It should be noted that pre-1848 socialism in France was associated with the names of Henri Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier—so that the term *socialistes* appeared in the 1830s as a label for Saint-Simonians and Fourierians, or those broadly associated with their political-religious radicalism, and became widespread in the 1840s (Strube 2016: 42). This pre-1848 socialism—as one can see in the case of Pierre Leroux, who is often credited as the inventor of the term “socialism”, using this term in his writings starting from 1826 (D’Hondt 1972: 173)—does not fit neatly the Left *versus* Right binary as it is typically construed. In particular, the simultaneous emphasis that one finds in pre-1848 socialism on religion *and* science or community *and* progress is ambivalent vis-à-vis the legacy of the French Revolution, perceived to have led to the triumph of bourgeois individualism and egoism. Pre-1848 socialism confounds the later secularist historiographies of the Left which tend to regard the religious dimension of early socialism as archaic or absurd (cf. Strube 2016: 41–2).

It is on this pre-existing French socialism that the reception of Hegelianism was imposed. As D’Hondt points out, “the resemblances [between Saint-Simonianism and Hegelianism] were obvious in the eyes of the contemporaries”, even if opinions differed as to the extent of their respective pantheism (1972: 179). Adolphe Lèbre suggested in 1838 that France and Germany had developed pantheistic doctrines simultaneously: “In France, after the eighteenth century, came Saint-Simon and Fourier; in Germany, after Kant and Fichte, came Schelling and Hegel. Everywhere pantheism is presently invading thought” (1838: 325).¹⁴ Leroux, on his part, blamed Hegelian pantheism for leading the current generation of French Saint-Simonians, and most centrally Prosper Enfantin, astray (1842b: 332). However, distinctions between various degrees and kinds of pantheism were often too subtle for critics.¹⁵ As Maret summed this up from the perspective of the Catholic camp, “the doctrines of Spinoza, Hegel, Saint-Simonians, and eclectics seem to us fundamentally identical; the differences lie only in form and expression” (1840: 220; cf. Lèbre 1838: 297). It is in this context that Théophile Thoré, writing under the pseudonym Louis

¹³ For example, Edgar Quinet’s important 1838 review of David Friedrich Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* associates the entire latest development of German philosophy (in “Goethe, Schelling, Hegel, Schleiermacher”), culminating in Strauss’s book, with a resurgence of Spinozism and therefore pantheism. See Quinet 1838: 590.

¹⁴ Moses Hess likewise speaks in his 1837 *Die heilige Geschichte der Menschheit* of the simultaneous development of pantheistic doctrines in Germany and France: “[After Babeuf and Fichte] we see in Germany the emergence of Schelling and Hegel and in France of Saint-Simon and Fourier. The principle of the new age—the absolute unity of all life—which manifested itself in Germany as an abstract idealism and in France as an abstract communism begins now to develop from within itself its own concrete content” (2004: 102; note also the pantheism–communism connection).

¹⁵ For more details of Leroux’s critique of Enfantin as influenced by Hegel, and on the French “mediators” of this influence, see D’Hondt (1972: 180–4).

Dupré, and outside the narrow trajectory of German Idealism reception, put forward his 1841 formula: “absolute communism is the politics of pantheism” (1841: 338).¹⁶

In this way, via Hegel, French and German radicalism converged, even while (as Leroux’s case attests) remaining in tension. Hegelian radicalism was likewise perceived as a consequence of pantheism, so that not only Maret but other French critics, too, focused on explicating how pantheism and system led to nihilism, scepticism, atheism, and generally to ruin—or, in a more nuanced way, as in Leroux, how Hegelian pantheism could lead to *either* radicalism or a complacency towards the status quo. Significantly, however, it is pantheism that could lead to both, or at least what Leroux considered to be the false kind of pantheism. By the 1850s, an association between Hegelianism and a vaguely defined revolutionary socialism was firmly in place, leading popular writer Valérie de Gasparin in 1858 to sketch the portrait of “a Hegelian” as someone who, as Eric Puisais summarizes it, is “a dreamer, melancholic, sometimes a bit utopian, certainly a pantheist, an agnostic no doubt, a naive but convinced revolutionary, burning to bring about, arms in hand, an ideal of fraternity and equality” (Puisais 2005: 20). The spectre of pantheism haunts Gasparin’s portrait, too, as her Hegelian protagonist proclaims:

I am God! My thought is a ray of the divine thought, my will is a fragment of the supreme will; the great heart that throbs up above beats in me, in you, in everyone. ... God! God is the world! God vibrates in the plant, in the butterfly, in the fire of the sun, in these raindrops! (de Gasparin 1858: 125)¹⁷

At the same time, after 1848, things became problematic for Hegelianism because of the triumph of a liberal point of view that identified socialism, revolution, and despotism.¹⁸ The pantheism connection persisted, too, as in Alphonse Gratry’s religious critique that continued to exploit the identification of Hegelianism with pantheism and atheism. This led to Hegel’s name becoming outright scandalous in the 1850–60s; in 1851, Étienne Vacherot even had to leave his academic position at the École Normale Supérieure on the suspicion of Hegelianism.¹⁹ Then, around the time of the Franco-Prussian War, the Prussian angle returned in full force—made possible precisely by the pantheism-fatalism-despotism angle—so that the war, on the one hand, and the fall of the Paris Commune, on the other, marked also the fall of French Hegelianism as an “engaged” political-philosophical standpoint. Through its association with everything *pan-* and everything despotic and hostile to freedom, the pantheism connection morphed into the identification of Hegelianism with Bismarckism and pangermanism—and such was the final political-theological mutation of the dangers of Hegelianism in nineteenth-century France. In 1871,

¹⁶I will return to this formula in the concluding section. I owe the identification of “Louis Dupré” as Thore’s pseudonym to Strube (2016: 92).

¹⁷Following this, de Gasparin’s protagonist speaks of a “rejuvenated humanity” and a new “golden age” in a manner that is reminiscent at once of the German Romantic and the French socialist-utopian tradition (1858: 125).

¹⁸For the complex nexus of ideas behind this identification, see Losurdo (2004).

¹⁹See D’Hondt (2007: 22) as well as volume 1, §3.6.

Elme-Marie Caro put forward his famous theory of “two Germanies”, that of “Kant, Goethe and Beethoven” *versus* that of “Friedrich II, Bismarck and Hegel”,²⁰ whereas Émile Beaussire in his “The Anniversary of Hegel” spoke of Bismarck as a practical Hegelian.²¹ Following that, the Hegelianism-pangermanism connection remained influential and persisted well into the twentieth century.²² Over the course of this entire trajectory, Hegel remained the ultimate thinker of the system and the most perfect embodiment of panlogicism-*qua*-pantheism. In the end, all the dimensions of the pantheism-Hegelianism nexus—the religious (pantheism-atheism-fatalism), the political (socialism-despotism-Bismarckism), and the philosophical (panlogicism and system-above-all)—were bequeathed to the twentieth century as a peculiar amalgam that, arguably, continued to underlie the standard French image of Hegel.

7.3 Hegel the Spinozist: Schweighäuser to Lerminier

Interestingly, the first mention of Hegel in a French article—in 1804 (by Johann Gottfried Schweighäuser on the contemporary state of philosophy in Germany)—identifies him as a disciple of Schelling, who is in turn identified as a follower of Spinoza, a thinker whose philosophy “almost approaches atheism”.²³ Schweighäuser does not explicitly voice the pantheism-atheism connection. Rather, he tries to steer his account more towards “Catholic mysticism”, calling Schellingian idealism a strange “sectarian” religious-philosophical movement in which extremes meet, and which worships simultaneously Spinoza, Dante, and the Virgin Mary, all within one philosophical system. And while not using the term “pantheism” or directly accusing German Idealism of atheism, the article positively mentions Jacobi’s critique of idealism (Schweighäuser 1804: 203).

Explicit political judgment may be absent in Schweighäuser’s text, but in the post-Enlightenment context where the religious and the political at once clashed and were entangled, the near-accusation of atheism and sectarian heresy carried political overtones—and one did not have to wait long until the religious critique became explicitly political. In particular, the political forcefully asserted itself during the so-called “Cousin affair” in the 1820s, when Victor Cousin was arrested in Dresden on suspicion of being a political subversive and handed over to Prussia, with Hegel having to intervene on his behalf to have Cousin released from prison.²⁴ This episode resonates in a characteristic way in the later French reception of Hegel.

²⁰ See Caro (1872), collecting his earlier articles in *Revue des deux mondes*.

²¹ See Beaussire (1871: 153): “...the plan that Hegel sketched and Bismarck took upon himself to execute”.

²² One may recall here the names of Edmond Vermeil, Victor Delbos, and Charles Andler.

²³ See also volume 1, §3.1.1.

²⁴ For an account of this episode, see Pinkard (2000: 524–7). Cf. D’Hondt (1972: 166).

Thus, even though it was Cousin's perceived radicalism that got him into trouble in Germany, in an ironic twist, in Eugène Lerminier's 1832 *Lettres philosophiques adressées à un Berlinois*, it is the influence of Hegel, and of Hegelianism more broadly (of such Hegelians as Eduard Gans and Karl Ludwig Michelet), that is retroactively identified as what enabled Cousin's *conservative* politics. His daily conversations with members of the Hegelian school, Lerminier claims, infused Cousin with "an eclectic, optimistic realism that boasted to be capable of explaining everything, of understanding everything, and of accepting everything"—i.e., of justifying the status quo and the way of the world. From this day onwards, "Cousin was no longer an oppositional and revolutionary philosopher", but someone in agreement with the powers that be (Lerminier 1832: 82–3). For our purposes here, it does not matter whether Lerminier is correct, or whether Cousin's conservative turn coincides rather with his turn *away* from Hegel (as D'Hondt and Puisais suggest in contrast). What matters is that Lerminier is able to make the above move because, for him (a young French philosopher of progressive sympathies), Hegel is first and foremost an apologist of the Prussian state, and someone in good enough standing with that state to get Cousin out of prison.

Lerminier was not alone in this opinion. In fact, in French journal articles from this period, Hegel was considered to be utterly, even metaphysically conservative—based, as has often been the case, on the famous *Doppelsatz* from the Preface to the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, which identifies the actual and the rational. For an example, one may turn to a review, signed "B.", of a German-language book on Hegel, which appeared in *Nouvelle revue germanique* in 1829. This review associates Hegel and Schelling with two different varieties of pantheism, and explicitly presents Hegel as the official philosopher of the Prussian state. Another article in the *Nouvelle revue germanique* from the same year likewise connects Hegel's thought to political reaction, "absolute political stability", and "absolute monarchy" ("W." 1829).²⁵ To adduce one more example, Edgar Quinet's 1831 article in *Revue des deux mondes*, entitled "De la Révolution et de la philosophie", associates Schelling with pantheism and, politically, with the Napoleonic Empire based on the "natural" and "Eastern" principle of force, and Hegel with the Holy Alliance (of the monarchist Russia, Austria and Prussia) (see Quinet 1831). While there is, in Quinet's text, no direct identification of Hegel with pantheism, pantheism nevertheless forms the background against which German Idealist (political and metaphysical) conservatism appears in Quinet, and in other French writings from this time. Reading such articles, one gets a distinct picture of Hegel as a conservative pantheist, or as someone whose system identifies what is with what is rational and divine.

In his own 1831 *Philosophie du droit*, Lerminier likewise calls Hegel's doctrine pantheistic and powerfully draws the Hegel-Spinoza connection. In this work, Lerminier devotes a separate chapter to Schelling and Hegel. Significantly, he seeks to provide an overview of Hegel's system precisely *as* a comprehensive system, and

²⁵ "W." here stands for Willm, who edited *Nouvelle revue germanique* starting from 1829 and until at least 1834. On the journal's history, including in the context of Hegel reception, see Rowe (2000). On the attribution of this article to Willm, see Rowe (2000: 244).

as a pantheism of reason. I will quote from Lerminier's text at length, since his formulations are characteristic of the way Hegel was perceived at the time:

What is the consequence of this idealist identity of abstract reason which serves to constitute God, the world, and history? Just as Spinoza introduced divine necessity everywhere, so Hegel introduces reason everywhere; he cloaks all facts in philosophical legitimacy; he elevates history to the sacrality of a pure manifestation of the absolute; and he advances the following axiom: *All that is rational is real, and all that is real is rational.* (Lerminier 1831: 215–6)

It is, Lerminier maintains, the very ambition to rationally or logically re-mediate the entirety of reality—the dialectical method itself—that leads to the iron grip of necessity, and to a justification of the way the world is, which leaves no room for freedom or futurity:

It is time to characterize this dialectic without limits and without shores, which encloses within its vast monotony God, man, the world, societies and history, which departs from abstraction to arrive at abstraction, departs from a dialectical point to return to a dialectical point, departs from *the one* to come back to *the one*, and finds the identity of substance [to consist] in the identity of the abstraction and the formula. Undoubtedly, the thought of the German philosopher is powerful... He displays a rare skilfulness in the mechanism of thinking. But where are the positive discoveries for social philosophy? ... Where is the liberal [*liberal*] spirit which always ought to animate the thinker, the spirit which frees one from the present and leads one towards the future? And how could he have a free spirit [*l'esprit libre*] in the first place, this slave of logic? (Lerminier 1831: 214–5)

Lerminier's invocation of "free spirit" here is ironic, denying to Hegel precisely the *freier Geist* that he proclaimed to be the highest and explicated throughout his system. For Lerminier, dialectics cannot explain or encompass freedom. Dialectics is expansionist, and its expansion is mechanical in character. It cannot break through to newness and futurity, it can only reproduce the same ("the present"), from which Hegel cannot free himself—"swept away as he is in this dialectical turmoil, in these swirling formulas that envelop and imprison him" (Lerminier 1831: 215). As a result, Hegel ends up endorsing a "scholastic pantheism" (1831: 323).

It is crucial to observe the political dimension of Lerminier's critique: the emphasis on liberty as that which Hegel cannot think, and of which his method strips society and history. Moreover, this political dimension immediately turns political-theological, as Lerminier brings together pantheism, pan-systematicity, political illiberalism *qua* justification of the status quo, and the absence of true Christian transcendence in Hegel, who, according to Lerminier, reduces Christianity to a mere schema:

Thus, with such a philosophy, even though one may logically recognize Christianity as an advancement and as the final expression of humanity, I maintain that one fails to understand its spirit, that one does not sense this inexhaustible spirituality which is so free and so innovative, and which is always ready to aid humankind and emancipate it... With such a philosophy, one constantly absolves power, amnesties despotism, tolerates the evils of humanity, [including] human ignorance and human suffering; with such a philosophy, one fails to understand revolutions, even finding metaphysical reasons to condemn them, even going so far as to blame the efforts that a people undertakes within the confines of the law to reform its constitution. (Lerminier 1831: 216)

What Lerminier takes issue with, politically-theologically, is that Hegel's philosophy is a theodicy. It "amnesties" the evil and negativity of history instead of refusing the oppressive present via an opening onto a genuinely novel future: a vision of futurity that Lerminier identifies with Christianity understood in the spirit of emancipation and humaneness. For Lerminier, Hegel's philosophy takes the side of despotism—of the oppressors and not the oppressed—and this hinges on his reading of Hegelian *Aufhebung* as mere repeated affirmation of "the one", a return to and of the same, which makes Lerminier conclude that, metaphysically, Hegel cannot but absolutize the world as it is. "The detours are complicated", Lerminier writes, "but the result is known" (1831: 209). Hegel's logic is an articulation of pantheism (he is "the logician of modern pantheism"; Lerminier 1831: 105), and therefore it can only justify what exists. Things are philosophically legitimated simply by virtue of being the way they are: such is the message of Hegel's philosophy. Hegel emerges from Lerminier's critique as a thinker of repetition and (political-theological) tautology.²⁶

In all of the above, Lerminier builds on the general identification of Hegel's thought with systematicity, pantheism, and conservatism that had already been formed in France by that time—but he is the first to elaborate it in such detail.

7.4 Hegel, the Thinker of Freedom: Willm

In the 1830s, a more "liberal" or "progressive"—although rather moderate and academic—French reading of Hegel appears in Joseph Willm. Willm emphasizes the role of the French Revolution and the motif of universality in Hegel's philosophy of history, which he reads politically as pointing to an intellectual union of French and German thought (a motif which, as mentioned, Louis Blanc in his verdict on atheism and pantheism would later turn against Hegel).

Willm puts forward this idea in the 1835 introduction to his translation of Schelling's judgment on Cousin—an introduction entitled "Essai sur la nationalité des philosophies", in which Willm advances the idea of a more universal philosophy that would reconcile individual national traditions (see Willm 1835). In contrast to Lerminier, Willm turns to Hegel's philosophy of history not as regressive, but as claiming that spirit in its progressive education must overcome national differences. Thus, for Willm too, Hegel's philosophy has clear political significance—and it is against the backdrop of this conviction that, I would suggest, we should read Willm's more scholarly works: his 1836 *Essai sur la philosophie de Hegel* and his 1846–7 *Histoire de la philosophie allemande depuis Kant jusqu'à Hegel*. In the *Essai*, Willm affirms his goal of promoting the advancement of a "universal philosophy" (1836: 4), and so, again, the project of an intellectual alliance between France and Germany. In an academic tone, he reiterates the importance of Hegel to this project, emphasizing the progressive and even revolutionary nature of Hegelian

²⁶ See also volume 1, §3.3.1.

philosophy.²⁷ This reveals the political stakes of this first scholarly monograph on Hegel in French, and of the very scholarly objectivity that Willm professes—an objectivity that, in the context of the time, itself carries a polemical tone, pushing against the all-too-quick identification of Hegelianism with a defence of the status quo.

Although Willm was aware of the question of pantheism, he cautiously avoids discussing this question in the 1836 *Essai*.²⁸ However, in the 1846–7 *Histoire*, he allows himself to offer some thoughts on pantheism. Willm may be taken to mount here a *defence* of pantheism as progressive thought of freedom, at least as far as German Idealist pantheism is concerned. First, he partially defends Schelling’s pantheism by distinguishing it from what he calls materialistic-atheistic pantheism—which, in tune with the prevalent French attitude of the time, he condemns. This by itself is a polemical and rhetorical strategy: to condemn the “bad” kind of pantheism so as then to claim that Schelling and Hegel’s pantheism is of a different kind.

Second, after characterizing Hegel’s philosophy of history as concerned with the progress of freedom, Willm proceeds to discuss the relationship between (Hegelian) pantheism and freedom. Willm notes that “it has not been demonstrated that there is a necessary causal relationship between pantheistic idealism and universal freedom” (1847: 448). However, he also firmly—and, I believe, polemically—establishes this relationship in one direction: *from* pantheism to freedom. “Doubtless”, he continues, “a mind [*esprit*] that possesses the consciousness of itself as the absolute must bear any yoke with impatience and recognize the sovereignty of all”. An idealist pantheist cannot but be a defender of universal freedom, even though a defender of freedom does *not* have to be a pantheist. “In order to arrive at freedom”, Willm writes, “to desire it for oneself and for others, it is not necessary to be a pantheist—it is enough to recognize the dignity of the human being in general and to be animated by the love of justice and humanity” (1847: 448–9). It is “under the rule of sensualism”, in the tradition of “Locke and Condillac”, that “the regime of freedom was born”, and not in German Idealism. Furthermore, Willm notes, it is wrong for Hegel to claim that his philosophy alone attains to true universal freedom, given that this freedom was not only practically affirmed already by the French Revolution but, as Willm’s appeal to Locke shows, *precedes* the Revolution theoretically, too. “Madame de Staël”, he emphasizes, “said that it was freedom that was old, and not servitude”—i.e., the Revolution enacted the ideal of freedom that had existed earlier. “Thus”, Willm concludes, “the final period of the universal spirit’s work in the history of humankind does not coincide with that of the philosophical development reaching its perfection in the systems of Schelling and Hegel” (1847: 448).

²⁷ For an overview of Willm’s reading of Hegel in the *Essai*, see Rowe (2000: 247–54). See also volume 1, §3.2.5.

²⁸ At the same time, Willm points out in passing that it is easy to “see how this [i.e., Hegel’s] doctrine could be accused of pantheism, despite the formal protestations of its author” (Willm 1836: 70). Even here, then, Willm’s discussion of Hegel is informed by the polemic around pantheism.

It is clear that for Willm the stakes of Hegelian pantheism are not merely academic, and he places Hegel on the side of freedom even as he denies to Hegel the role of the sole representative of the true idea of freedom, affirming a more pan-European trajectory of modern freedom that is as British and French as it is German. Willm wants, moreover, to move at least somewhat beyond the Eurocentrism of Hegel's philosophy, and of the movement of spirit towards freedom in global history as Hegel depicts it. Willm presents his critiques as a series of rhetorical questions serving to expose the limits of Hegel's abstract historicism:

Why does civilization begin from the Orient and not the Occident? Why does spirit, instead of continuing its development in the Orient, set out on a voyage to Europe, and why does its evolution terminate solely here? ... If history is the necessary development of the universal spirit in time, if reason dominates everything and invariably tends towards a predetermined end, why does not the same progress involve humanity in its entirety, why do so many nations remain outside this movement? Why does Europe alone participate in this heritage while the peoples of the Orient remain stationary? (Willm 1847: 447)

Hegel applies too rigidly “the general principles of his philosophy to the course of history”, and because of this rigidity his account of the trajectory of spirit's global movement does not even make sense on its own terms: he chooses simply “to disregard certain facts”, as well as “all the variety of morals and institutions... and movements both progressive and retrograde that really constitute history” (Willm 1847: 447).

Finally—and on these two points Willm may be taken to agree with Lerminier—Hegel seems all too happy to theodically sacrifice actual human beings to the abstract movement of the absolute spirit. Furthermore, as someone who is not attuned to the real dynamics of history, he seems incapable of thinking futurity in a way that would not be empty:

Will humankind have existed on Earth only for the universal spirit to give to itself, by means of so many generations and sacrifices, the consciousness of itself? And once it has been realized entirely, what will be the outcome of this drama, this immense epic? Once freedom has triumphed everywhere, and the golden age of which poets dreamt in the past has been realized in the future, what will become of humankind? To all these questions, the system of absolute science has no answer. (Willm 1847: 447)

In the end, two things matter the most about Willm's account and make it ambivalent vis-à-vis the “mainstream” trajectory of French Hegel reception. First, Willm undertakes a defence of pantheism with regard to the problem of freedom—a defence that, nevertheless, in the end proves less influential than the dominant political-religious critique of pantheism. Second, one may observe in Willm's account of Hegel the nexus which serves ultimately to reinforce the emerging standard French picture of Hegel: the political-theological nexus of pantheism and system, or abstract rationalism as opposed to actual history and true futurity. On Willm's example, we see confirmed the thesis that French academic reception contributed to this picture, and also carried a political or political-theological character.

7.5 Leroux's Schellingian Critique

Socialist Pierre Leroux was arguably the most prominent champion of the late Schelling on the Left. Unsurprisingly for someone aligned with Schelling, he was also a critic of Hegel. Leroux is an important and complex figure; here, I will turn solely to his two articles in *La revue indépendante* from 1842: on the concept of God and on Schelling's philosophy (1842a, b). Significantly, Leroux stages the essential disagreement between Schelling and Hegel in terms of pantheism and the question of God's relation to the world—a question that he considers to be central to philosophy as, for him, identical with religion. Not Schelling but Hegel, Leroux claims, was pantheistic in the sense that deserves criticism. For Leroux too, there is a “good” and a “bad” pantheism, where Hegel represents the latter. Seeing as Leroux himself diagnoses the fact that the accusation of pantheism has, by 1842, become so widespread that people “speak of it [i.e., pantheism] without knowing what they are saying”,²⁹ it seems necessary to him, as earlier to Willm, to distinguish between different kinds of pantheism in order to redirect this accusation away from the thinker he defends (in this case from Schelling). Leroux traces Hegel's thought from Schelling's, yet claims that Hegel blew some of the central Schellingian intuitions out of proportion, inflating them into an all-encompassing rationalist and pantheistic *system* (1842a: 22–3; one may note here the “bad” pantheism-system connection again).

I will not present in detail Leroux's speculative genealogy of true Christian pantheism, which he traces from Moses via Jesus, St. John, and St. Paul. In contrast to this pantheism, Leroux claims, the pantheisms of Spinoza and Hegel are untrue. In Spinoza, the particular disappears in the universal. In Hegel, the universal becomes fully identical with the particular and disappears in particular beings (Leroux 1842a: 28). Hegel “absurdly makes each individual being into the universal life” (1842a: 44) as part of one “eternal creation” (1842b: 308). Moreover, Hegel goes so far as to “annihilate universal Being” as such, i.e., God, by dispersing it among particular beings—which, however, results in their *loss* of all divinity (1842a: 28). Taken to its logical conclusion, Leroux's critique reads Hegelian pantheism as making a radically anti-religious move. All that is left in Hegel is the “absolute *fatum*”, “a fatalistic ideism” (*idéisme*; 1842a: 28). At this point, we can see the fatalism-nihilism-pantheism-atheism nexus resurface. “Divinity and life” vanish in Hegel; no wonder that his followers, says Leroux, attempt to explain Christianity as merely a product of human spirit. (But now, thank God, Schelling has returned!) “The master's pantheism”, Leroux writes of Hegel, “produced scepticism and indifferentism in his disciples” (1842a: 30). Scepticism is thus, too, added to Leroux's list of Hegelian dangers as growing out of Hegel's ostensible pantheism.

²⁹Cf. Maret (1840: xi), who makes the same point—showing that this was a widespread perception. Cf. additionally Lèbre (1838: 296): “Pantheism is extremely in vogue today; everyone talks about it and judges it; many speak out in favour of it without knowing what it is... great is the confusion around it”.

Politically, too, the current situation in Germany is seen by Leroux as a direct consequence of Hegelian philosophy, so that Schelling appears, against this background, as a quasi-messianic figure.³⁰ Schelling has finally broken his silence, says Leroux, and claims to possess the truth, and to usher in the true unity of philosophy and religion. “Will Schelling fulfil his promises? Will he stop philosophy from sliding down the slope on which Hegel launched it? What will happen in Germany to this [Hegelian] movement of incredulity, at once scholarly and Voltairean, that is fermenting at universities?” (1842b: 290). Leroux’s attitude to Schelling is more complex than mere acceptance, which has to do, *inter alia*, with his socialist appreciation of the revolutionary side of history, and of the genealogy of protest from Luther to Voltaire. But what is important for us here is that the entire present political-theological condition of Germany is blamed by Leroux on Hegelian pantheism.

Feeling the need to explain the popularity of Hegel on the Left and the Right alike, Leroux notes that, ultimately, the pantheism at the heart of Hegelianism can adapt itself to various political leanings. It is “a vague pantheism, which lends itself to all kinds of presumptions”. “This uncertainty in Hegel’s thought”, he continues, “is revealed today by the state of his school. Ask the Hegelians: Is God independent of creatures? The Right Hegelian says weakly ‘yes’, the Left Hegelian says ‘no’, whereas the one at the centre attempts to say neither ‘yes’ nor ‘no’” (1842b: 309). Still, it seems that the “extreme Hegelian Left”, as Leroux puts it (1842b: 315), are close for him to grasping the essence of Hegel’s philosophy of religion, since statements such as “God is only conscious of himself in the human”, indeed, verge on atheism:

What happened is this. Hegel’s philosophy turned God himself into a product of creation. So how could Hegel’s disciples have avoided the following consequence—namely, that Christianity is a *natural* product of the human mind? Then, from this consequence, should not they proceed to the next consequence, namely, that Christianity is a *historical* product of the human mind? ... In the [Hegelian] system, it is the human who has priority over God. Without the human, God would never have existed... Such is the ultimate formula of Hegelianism. (Leroux 1842b: 320–1)

Those Hegelians who, like Michelet, attempt (more conservatively) to provide an addendum to the above, saying that it does not mean that God is fully reducible to the human, are for Leroux no better. This kind of addendum serves, for him, only to obfuscate things—to cover up the underlying Hegelian vagueness, nihilism, and in the end nothing but vanity or arrogance. In a way that echoes Schelling’s Christian

³⁰It should be noted that the late Schelling himself presents himself as a quasi-messianic figure whose philosophy proclaims a new age, foreclosed by Hegelianism. This is evident, for instance, in his “Preface to Cousin” (Schelling 1861: 201–24), which was translated into French by Willm. Elsewhere, Schelling blames the political state of the German nation, and the “unblissful unproductivity” of this state, on the purely negative (read: Hegelian) preoccupation with thought over being, or with the concept (the *Was*)—including “the *Was* of a constitution”—over the sheer being (the *Daß*) that Schelling identifies with divine being (1856: 589). For a new epoch to become possible, this false order of priority must be inverted—an inversion (*Umkehrung*) taught by Schelling’s own philosophy.

critique of prideful selfhood as the cause of the Fall, arrogance is for Leroux one of the consequences (and dangers) of Hegelianism, which he contrasts with religious piety (*piété*; 1842b: 320).

This arrogance, as self-complacency, is likewise so abstract and vague that it can lead to the (abstract) revolutionary negation of everything as well as to (abstract) complacency with regard to the status quo. On the one hand, “the end result of Hegel’s philosophy”, Leroux satirizes, “is summed up in what we heard one day after dinner from one of the most spiritual writers in Germany, a direct disciple of Hegel: ‘My friends, we are all gods who have dined well’” (1842b: 308).³¹ For Leroux, Cousin’s conservatism is a prime example of this, too—and is also the consequence of Hegelian pantheism-*qua*-fatalism: “Accept everything, explain everything, respect everything. Such was the motto of the fatalism of Berlin and the eclecticism of Paris” (1842b: 321). On the other hand, “Hegel’s royal and aristocratic philosophy” has today, for the most part, “become revolutionary” (1842b: 322–3)—and that happened via theology, or due to the destructive consequences of Hegel’s doctrine of God for theology. “Hegel’s disciples have become theologians”, writes Leroux, referring in this regard to David Friedrich Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* (1835–6). “What is”, he asks, “the conclusion of Strauss’s book? In the final instance, there is nothing philosophical in this book that is not already there in Hegel. The premises of the master, adopted by the disciple, circle back to the master’s conclusions” (1842b: 323). From this perspective, Hegel’s method becomes just as abstractly all-destructive as, in the case of the Hegelian Right, it can be abstractly all-accepting—and in fact, it seems that for Leroux this all-destructiveness, again, gets closer to the true essence of Hegel’s thought. “Hegel’s philosophy”, Leroux asserts, “is like the philosophy of Voltaire: it is a *critique*, and nothing else. It is not a solid construction, it is a destruction” (1842b: 324)—and although Leroux does see the spirit of truth dwelling within the spirit of critique, and affirms Hegel as a thinker worthy of respect (1842a: 28), truth decidedly cannot for Leroux dwell in the “dogmatic” form of the system (1842b: 324). To sum it up, for Leroux as for others, Hegel’s system is a pantheism that is, furthermore, sufficiently flexible to be both conservatively and radically inflected.

7.6 Pantheism as Confusion and as Poison: Ott and de Careil

After Maret, Auguste Ott and Alphonse Gratry were among those who took up the banner of Catholic critique of Hegelian pantheism.³² In a typical manner, Ott’s *Hegel et la philosophie allemande* takes Hegel’s system to be “a systematization of

³¹ The writer in question is Heinrich Heine. Cf. D’Hondt (1972: 175–6).

³² I will not talk about Gratry’s critique at length, but it is worth mentioning briefly. In his presentation of Hegel’s logic as a logic of modern pantheism *par excellence*, Gratry reduces Hegelian dialectic to a sophistry of absolute identity that perverts and forecloses the principle of transcendence. Modern pantheism appears to Gratry as the enemy of truth, and Hegel’s abstract logical

pantheism” (1844: 4), as well as the pinnacle—and dying breath—of Protestant rationalism. “Protestant philosophy”, Ott writes, “is done; Hegel has given it the last word”.³³ Where Ott’s critique, however, becomes more interesting is where, like Maret’s, it touches on the character of the age. The result of Hegel’s complete rationalism has been, in the German intellectual world, “universal confusion”. In this pantheistic vortex, in the absence of transcendent divine guarantee, “ideas have lost their value, words have lost their meaning”, and “all things are being called into question” (Ott 1844: 526). “Everywhere”, Ott writes of contemporary Germany, “there are discussions and controversies, and innumerable pamphlets keep feeding this ardour of dispute that consumes everyone”, and in which, he adds with horror, “one so often forgets even the simplest rules of politeness and decorum” (1844: 527). In France, Ott observes, there is “confusion and intellectual anarchy” too, but here “it is the kind of confusion that precedes new formulas, and that engenders fruitful and durable doctrines”—due, one presumes, to the Catholic spirit. The German Protestant “disorder” is, however, one “born from false and insufficient doctrines” (1844: 528). The German confusion is presented by Ott as a remarkably abstract chaos, as though the German mind could not but dwell in formulas which envelop and suffocate it:

Without having studied [Hegel’s system], it is absolutely impossible to understand a single word of all the philosophical writings that flood Germany, all the books, pamphlets, and newspaper articles that emerge and die every day. As a lay reader, one would seek in vain to orient oneself in this indecipherable algebra, this obscure language, these dark controversies that bring together being, nonbeing, substrate, powers, relation-to-oneself, for-oneself, as-such, before-oneself, outside-oneself, etc. German philosophy has been reduced to these futile categories, these arid abstractions. (Ott 1844: 528)

Ott’s verdict is clear: born from dead and false doctrines, and dwelling in pantheistic abstraction, “German philosophy carries death in its bosom” (1844: 528). As such, French Catholic thought must disentangle itself from German pantheism.³⁴ As Ott puts it, “Catholicism must break absolutely with the philosophy of Protestantism” (1844: 531).

It would seem that, in Ott, “pantheism” stands in for the abyss of confusion engendered by the post-Enlightenment age as, for him, an age of intellectual heresy and crisis³⁵—something that Ott cannot arrange into orthodox categories, and thus reduces to “anarchy”, and to the lack of decorum on the part of those young Hegelian radicals whom he berates as “superficial” and “arrogant” (1844: 537). It is not that Ott is unsympathetic to the ideas of equality and fraternity, but he wants to provide

system as the quintessence of this pantheism. An abstract God, an abstract idea of the infinite, Gratry asserts, “is nothing. It is the God of Hegel, who is an atheist” (1855: 2.180). Gratry thus reasserts the system–pantheism–atheism connection.

³³ See also volume 1, §3.4.4.

³⁴ The split between Hegelians and Schellingians, too, is presented by Ott as a “bitter battle” of two pantheisms (1844: 533).

³⁵ In Lèbre, pantheism is likewise associated with both “confusion” and “a gaping abyss that surrounds all of our paths”, causing “vertigo” in those climbing to the truth (1838: 296, 326).

them with their Catholic foundation (cf. 1844: 539–40) so that the world might cohere again. He senses, in other words, that novel, destructive forces are at play, which refuse and confound old hierarchies, and he labels these forces as demonic and death-bearing—or, not unlike Maret, as the forces of original sin and “incredible pride” (Ott 1844: 537) in a new guise, the same forces that have always been at work in pantheism as the enemy of Christianity.

The claims that pantheism is a kind of poison, or a death of the mind, and that it characterizes the age, likewise appear in Louis-Alexandre Foucher de Careil’s *Hegel et Schopenhauer*—a work from 1862 which shows that, during this time, Hegelianism and pantheism continue to be heated topics. De Careil’s work speaks in a striking manner of the “ruins” that Hegel, this “intellectual Gargantua”, left behind—dark ruins through which pantheism spreads like poison (1862: 53). “Kant”, de Careil writes, offering a diagnosis that goes beyond the history of philosophy, “truly inaugurated the new world crisis that is still ongoing” (1862: ix). German philosophy has left ruin in its wake, and the trajectory from Kant to Hegel to Schopenhauer proves this tendency. It is as though, after Kant, we have been dealing with a process of continuing explosion. As part of this process, in Germany “critique degenerate[d] into criticism, philosophy of art into Romanticism”—which de Careil blames for dealing in illusion—“and pure science into the abstract idealism that has been the greatest pitfall of modern speculative thought” (1862: xii). Hegel’s pantheism stands at the centre of this process; and de Careil thereby reiterates the abstraction-pantheism-nihilism nexus. “Hegel’s error, which he has in common with all pantheists”, de Careil asserts, “is to overthrow the very process of reason, to mistake pathological signs for the healthy state, to deny evil, to mistake death for life and *vice versa*” (1862: xxxvii). In the viscous reality that pantheism creates by collapsing what is solid and what is phantasmatic, illusions and vapours are indistinguishable from truth, and “dark phantoms of the mind” claim “omni-science” (1862: xiv-xv).

With German Idealism, thus, “the ultimate illusion arrives” (de Careil 1862: xv), totalizing due to the all-encompassing rationalism of Hegel’s system—an illusion from which, one surmises, the world must cleanse itself if the present crisis is to come to an end.³⁶ This illusion, which makes it impossible to tell truth and falsehood apart, “leads inevitably to scepticism” (1862: xv): it is as though de Careil were intent on compiling a list of all the dangerous “-isms” that Hegel’s philosophy was thought to engender. While calling pantheism and atheism two conjoined types of poison, de Careil further clarifies—in a passage that may be viewed at once as a culmination and singular transformation of the *omnipresence* of pantheism in the French intellectual debate of the time—that pantheism is even worse than poison, since it prevents one from being able to distinguish poison from cure:

³⁶ See also de Careil (1862: xvi) on Hegel’s thought as creating “la grande illusion totale”.

Pantheism is not poison, it is indifference to poison: it develops an unhealthy tolerance for error and truth, and the kind of absolute indifference which ends up killing the soul by enervating it. (de Careil 1862: xxxiv)³⁷

If de Careil's somewhat Gothic presentation of pantheism seems itself at once medical and fantastic, then this is due to the fact that "pantheism"—a vaguely constructed "-ism" mistaken for a real explanatory principle—appears, in the intellectual debate of the time, as one of the central concepts carrying in itself the swirling energies of the period that de Careil identifies both as "a scientific century" (1862: xv) and a century of the ongoing crisis of reality and truth. When surveying the vehement nineteenth-century French polemic around idealism-*qua*-pantheism, one cannot shake off the impression that the concept of pantheism itself becomes a kind of poisonous or phantom presence, lurking in the minds of post-Enlightenment thinkers of various leanings as a more-or-less obscure embodiment of threat—a very real threat *of* a world in crisis, which exhausts ("enervates") the scientific and the religious mind alike in their longing for clear-cut categories. "Pantheism", as we have seen, spectrally doubles and evades categorial capture, indexing the confusion and disorder at the heart of an allegedly secular or secularizing age—a confusion that cannot itself be categorized as either "religious" or "secular". It may be that the actual explanatory power of "pantheism" as a term during this period lies not in the way it supposedly applies (or fails to apply) to Schelling or Hegel, but precisely in the way it discloses the above confusion: the turbulence and turmoil or, to use Schellingian terms, the *Umtrieb* and *Verwirrung* of the ongoing crisis. This is, in fact, precisely what is revealed by another characteristic equation which grows common by the mid-century, and with which I would like to conclude: the equation between "pantheism" and "communism", as two equally disorderly and heretical terms. While going beyond the context of Hegel reception narrowly understood, this equation is essential for comprehending the intellectual movement of the age.

7.7 Pantheism, or Communism: A Coda

"Pantheism" is not the only concept carrying the explosive forces or energies of the early-nineteenth-century crisis. In Thore's dictum, "absolute communism is the politics of pantheism" (Dupré 1841: 338), "pantheism" further doubles as "communism", which is developed as that political concept which captures the same forces and same confusion. The copula ("is") in Thore's formula indexes an identity that must be thought of as preceding the division into what is religious ("pantheism") and what is political ("communism"),³⁸ pointing to post-Enlightenment and

³⁷Cf. Leroux above on pantheism as leading to "scepticism and indifferentism".

³⁸As Thore explains, he thinks of the religious and the political by way of a broadly Spinozistic parallelism of "an endless generation" within which one cannot distinguish between the two even retroactively ("when the fruit falls ripe from the tree, it is not always clear from which branch it

post-Revolutionary confusion as a state of absolute identity: as the crisis of hierarchy, distinction, and felt community that, in communism as he depicts it, leads for Thoreau most radically to their full *absence*. By “absolute communism”, Thoreau understands the kind of radical socialism that abolishes even residual hierarchy, instead “preach[ing] absolute and mathematical equality” and proclaiming “abolition of property and inheritance, abolition of family and marriage, abolition of fatherland”—a *total* abolition that is unrelenting in its indifferent abstraction (Dupré 1841: 340).³⁹ Thoreau admits that “there are very different sects among the communists” (Dupré 1841: 341), yet it is this distilled logic of communism that fascinates him the most.

For Thoreau, speaking at once as a republican journalist and Romantic art critic, pantheism and communism alike go too much in the direction of oneness, painting reality grey on grey: the “canvas of pantheism and communism” presents a total confusion of colours (“omnicolour”) that equals lifeless absence of colour, a monochrome (“one-colour”) picture in which no real individuality or, for that matter, real community can be distinguished (Dupré 1841: 338). Taken too far, abstract equality and oneness are indistinguishable from total indifference and confusion, *all* (“pan”) from *nothing*. (“Nothingness in politics can only correspond to nothingness in religion”; Dupré 1841: 341.) For Thoreau, communism, like any confusion and crisis, while necessary, can only be a transitional state that destroys the old regime *so that* something vibrant and new could arise from the indifferent canvas of reality:

When the old form of a religion is to be destroyed for the sake of eternal and progressive religion, we return to the confused oneness, which is the negation of the old distinctions in God, i.e., of dogma. Then, having passed through this pantheism, philosophy discerns new distinctions within this oneness, and we see new dogma emerge on the immutable foundation of religious feeling. ... Similarly, communism claims to destroy the old form of political society... It comes to deny old social distinctions, old privileges of individuality by confusing all individualities with each other. Human persons fade away, like divine persons in pantheism. (Dupré 1841: 338)

This is, however, but a “temporary confusion”, which Thoreau compares to winter as necessary in the change of seasons, and as the period in which “the desolate nature loses its colour [and] a grey veil spreads over the landscape and fills the air”—yet which is followed by spring, when “fresh green grass emerges from the ground, ... life is reborn everywhere, and the abundant light lovingly caresses all the renewed forms” (Dupré 1841: 338–9).

We are used to thinking of revolution as a singular event within a progressive temporality; however, it can also be thought of as a (historical and cosmic) movement of restoration, return, or renewal: of Justice, Love, Community.⁴⁰ For Thoreau,

originated”; Dupré 1841: 340). In this way, Thoreau’s notion of identity resists the secularist construction of the religious/secular binary.

³⁹Babeuf and Sylvain Maréchal are named by Thoreau as the originators of this tendency (Dupré 1841: 341).

⁴⁰Cf. de Lubac (1948: 169) on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s iterative understanding of revolution, across history, as renewed “access to Justice”. The revolution that the late Schelling proclaims, too, as the overarching movement of *Umwendung* or *Umkehrung*, is a cosmic revolution as the restoration of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*). I hope to discuss this in more detail in my future work on Schelling.

pantheism and communism form but a stage in the overarching revolutionary cycle of rejuvenation (“history has seasons like nature” [Dupré 1841: 339]), and the political-religious movement of revolution is modelled for him upon the revolution of the Earth as a celestial body. Thoré identifies the French Revolution with the stage of destruction and “immense ruination” as necessarily leading to “an even grander construction”, to new religion and new dogma (1841: 348). Furthermore, this ruination for him continues, since the old regime still persists, transformed, in the widespread egoism and fragmentation (1841: 342), which preclude the true religious and communal sentiment.⁴¹ Such is the way in which crisis and confusion are, for him and others, entangled with the incomplete post-Revolutionary now. Not unlike de Careil in 1862, Thoré speaks in 1841 of phantoms haunting this ongoing confusion and crisis. Communism comes politically to exorcize the “vain ghosts” of the past (1841: 337), and this remains the nature of its true task. It must “wipe clean” the canvas so that “the painting [can] be started over” (1841: 339). However, this means that, for Thoré, communism is not the end goal; and to persist in communism is to persist “in negation, in doubt or darkness” (1841: 348), without moving on to the constructive stage, and thus to perpetuate the confusion that communism at once indexes and further engenders.⁴²

In Thoré’s text, the confusion of pantheism, distilled politically in communism, becomes truly all-pervasive. Pantheism not only doubles as communism, it triples and further multiplies as Thoré goes on to identify it with “philosophical and social materialism” (Dupré 1841: 348)—implying, one surmises, an embrace of the confusion of mere matter, of the disorder and chaos preceding (new) creation, a reduction to the material substrate without distinction or order. Materialism is, in turn, associated with “liberalism”, so that liberals, too, emerge as covert pantheists, as well as with “atheism”. Thoré writes:

⁴¹ Cf. Strube (2016: 93): “Various socialist theories prior to 1848 are distinguished, first and foremost, by the striving for the regeneration of a post-Revolutionary society with its perceived fragmentation”. This is not, however, to be mistaken for the desire to return to the pre-modern period. Thus, Thoré explicitly calls upon communism to destroy the last vestiges of the feudal Catholic order, adding: “The principle of the Middle Ages has not yet been destroyed, it will fully disappear only in the face of a new religion. [...] So, let communism do its thing, and do not fear for the future. [...] After the [communist] ruins, there will be new construction”, and this construction will “no longer [be] the Catholic and feudal affirmation” (Dupré 1841: 343, 348).

⁴² Interestingly, Thoré in 1841 identifies communism *qua* pantheism with the same spirit of all-destroying critique, exemplified by Voltaire (see Dupré 1841: 342), with which Leroux identifies Hegelianism in 1842. In keeping with his cyclical vision of history (“history”, he writes, “is like a stringless rosary” [1841: 339]), Thoré sees pantheism and communism periodically reborn together since at least early Christianity—joining Maret, but speaking not of “heresy” but of *the recurrence of crisis*. “It would be easy to show historically”, he notes, “that communism and pantheism are always reborn together, time after time”. This happens during periods of “separation” when something new is struggling to be born, and when a reduction to “elements” occurs, a chaotic elemental turbulence giving rise to new, “unforeseen” combinations (1841: 339–40). Cf. Dupré 1841: 344: “Here are fishermen, like at Christ’s time, abandoning their nets to become fishers of men, and to announce the good news: the news of the emancipation of workers”.

Liberals are another variety of materialists. They deny all authority, all rules, just as atheists deny God. They go at random, letting things happen without any notion of political right or duty, just as atheists no longer have any notion of good and evil. They separate church and state, that is, thought and action. They claim that the law should be atheistic, that is, indifferent to justice and to truth. (Dupré 1841: 348)

In this way, like later in de Careil, pantheism comes in Thoré to constitute an *indifference to all poison or evil*, and thus the highest poison itself. It seeps everywhere and warps everything, so that everything that is bad, perverted, or disorderly turns out to be pantheism, explicitly or in disguise. As Thoré puts it in a formulation that may be read as paranoid: communism, and thus pantheism, “is everywhere” (Dupré 1841: 340). The same sentiment, not coincidentally, is given voice by Maret in the spirit of Catholic paranoia and desire for an apocalyptic battle: “Today pantheism is everywhere, but everywhere it hides; it does not want to confess; it conceals itself. We must therefore first tear down the mask with which it covers itself, and expose the face of this monster in all its hideousness”—so as to “combat this evil” (1840: xiv-xv).⁴³ Pantheism thus emerges as an absolute spirit turned absolute poison, whose vapours make one hallucinate it everywhere—a toxic *all or pan*, indeed. It is in the context of this omnipresent confusion indexed by “pantheism” that the (like-wise rather confused) French reception of Hegelianism-*qua*-pantheism should be placed. All of the nebulous, poorly outlined “-isms” that branch off from the cardinal sin of “pantheism” are themselves but phantoms that roam this confusion, and that haunt the mind as the collective embodiment of an ill-comprehended yet real threat.

This epochal threat is that, I would suggest, to which Karl Marx also seeks to give shape, or whose shape he seeks to discern. Marx wants to concretize the utopian socialist notion of humanity or the vague idea of the emancipated worker, which underlies Thoré’s understanding of communism, into the (theoretically elaborated and practically organized) material figure of the proletariat. He seeks thereby, as if to ward off Thoré’s critique of communism as incapable of distinction, to *differentiate* and *mobilize* the spectral energies of the ongoing post-Revolutionary vortex.⁴⁴ To mobilize, however, is not the same as to exorcize; it is not to clear reality

⁴³ Proudhon’s confession that, when reading Abbé Pluquet’s *Dictionnaire des hérésies, des erreurs et des schismes*, he found himself to “profess all the heresies” recorded there, illustrates well the heretical pantheistic spirit that both Thoré and Maret perceive in communism and socialism. This included for Proudhon those heresies through which pantheism or Gnosticism persisted starting from early Christianity throughout the Middle Ages (a fact likewise mentioned in Maret’s *Essai*): the “Millenarian Gnostics”, the “Circumcellions”, the “Donatists”, the “Albigensians”, and “the Beguins and the Turlupins”. See de Lubac (1948: 107).

⁴⁴ For Thoré, importantly, this is precisely the task that follows *upon* “communism” *qua* total negation: “Their work is to re-differentiate anew, with greater precision, this political pantheism” (Dupré 1841: 340–1). In this sense, Marx can be read as aligned with Thoré. As the latter puts it, “the vast majority of communists do not know what their community should be”, and especially the “social economy” of the social-order-to-be is yet to be elaborated (1841: 344–5)—so that Marx may be taken to discover the solution to this problem in the figure of the proletariat, seeking to provide the broad yet vague appeal of communism to the worker that Thoré mentions (1841: 344) with concrete socio-economic foundations. “It is communism”, Thoré proclaims, “however absurd its theories may be at this moment, that will nevertheless have brought about a new economic society” (1841: 345).

of all ghosts, but to discern a form of life, or non-life, at once material and ghostly, on the verge of absolute exhaustion, that is capable of “emerg[ing] from the ground” not unlike in Thoreau’s depiction of spring. The proletarian subject as it takes shape in Marx’s writings from the 1840s—as one who is sapped of one’s life-force and turned into a shadow of one’s own true nature, and who constitutes but a dispossessed, alienated, dislocated fragment of an old communal life that continues to haunt the present—is this form of spectral non-life. If, in the general nineteenth-century atmosphere of confusion, it is phantoms that gain omniscience (as de Careil puts it), and if Marx himself depicts bourgeois modernity as an age of all-confusion, dissolution, and spectrality,⁴⁵ then communism, as seeking to be *the spectre* haunting Europe, must self-reflectively unite into itself all the dark spectral energies that are exploited and obscured by the bourgeois world of day—the same energies that, to Catholic thinkers, appear as demonic. It is as though the nineteenth century is a century of spectres, solidifying, to the extent that spectres can amass and attain to solidity, in the Marxian spectre of communism that programmatically takes it upon itself to haunt and to confuse—the spectre of all those *pushed below*, into the dark, turned into ghosts inhabiting the hell of mines and factories, dwelling precisely (to recall an above-quoted expression from Thoreau) “in negation, in doubt or darkness” (Dupré 1841: 348).

To conclude, what is particularly heretical about pantheism and communism is that both of them refuse the hierarchy of what is above and what is below, and are aligned, as Thoreau’s accusation goes, with what is “coarse, bestial, nonhuman” (Dupré 1841: 341), and thus with all those made less than human and put endlessly to work.⁴⁶ At its most heretical, communism-*qua*-pantheism persists in and with chaos and disorder, mobilizing them into the force of upheaval rising from below, from the material substrate (*subiectum*) impossibly turned the subject of history, and erupting against the imposition of a divine order from above (be it in the form of God or Capital). This upheaval is what is perceived by Thoreau as the levelling of all reality, the razing of the entire world-construction, and the refusal to proceed to the work of new creation—work that leads to new dogmas which, in turn, become new mottos under which to put to work. Perhaps, indeed, the goal of communism-*qua*-pantheism is not to perpetuate but to abolish this “natural” cycle: a goal towards which the Marxian embrace of the maximization of free time asymptotically tends. The impossibility of this goal does not make it any less of a real threat to the hierarchies and categories through which the world is reproduced—and it is ultimately the same threat, *the threat of the abolition of transcendence*, that underlies the vexed association of Hegelianism with pantheism in nineteenth-century France.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See on this, most famously, Berman (1988).

⁴⁶ The proletariat, Marx writes, equals “the complete loss of humanity [*der völlige Verlust des Menschen*]”, and as such embodies “the dissolution of the existing order of things” (1970: 141–2).

⁴⁷ I would like to thank Kyra Sutton, Daniel Whistler, and Ayşe Yuva for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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