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# Missed Revolutions, Non-Revolutions, Revolutions to Come: On *Mourning Sickness*

An Encounter with:  
**Rebecca Comay. *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*.  
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REBECCA COMAY in Conversation with JOSHUA NICHOLS

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Rebecca Comay's new book *Mourning Sickness* sets its sights on Hegel's response to the French Revolutionary Terror. In this respect it provides the reader with both a detailed examination of Hegel's interpretation of the Terror and the historical and philosophical context of this interpretation. In and of itself this would be a valuable contribution to the history of philosophy in general and Hegel studies in particular, but Comay's book extends beyond the confines of a historical study. It explores Hegel's struggle with the meaning of the Terror and, as such, it explores the general relationship between event and meaning. By doing so this book forcefully draws Hegel into present-day discussions of politics, violence, trauma, witness, and memory. The following interview took place via email correspondence. The overall aim is twofold: to introduce the main themes of the book and to touch on some of its contemporary implications.

*JOSHUA NICHOLS: This text accomplishes the rare feat of revisiting what is, in many respects, familiar and well-worn philosophical terrain (i.e., Hegel's Phenomenology) and brings the reader to see the text from a new angle, under a different light, almost as if for the first time.*

*Your reading of Hegel's notion of forgiveness as being "as hyperbolic as anything in Derrida, as asymmetrical as anything in Levinas, as disastrous as anything in Blanchot, as paradoxical as anything in Kierkegaard" is just one example of the surprising interpretive possibilities that this text opens (Comay, Mourning Sickness 135). But, before addressing the wider issues and implications, we will begin with the beginning. The entry point is Hegel's reading of the Revolutionary Terror in France. His interpretation of the events across the Rhine have often been read as echoing many of his contemporaries, in that—through witnessing the practical catastrophe in France—Germany is essentially able to skip over the need for such an event by undergoing a kind of spiritual revolution. This interpretation is reflected (and effectively reversed) in Marx's famous criticism that Germans "are the philosophical contemporaries of the modern age without being its historical contemporaries" (Marx, "Introduction to Contribution" 45). And yet, you read Hegel's interpretation as being unique. So, to begin, what is it that sets him apart on this count?*

REBECCA COMAY: At first glance, apparently nothing. It's Hegel, after all, who has done most to formalize the spectatorial fantasy that's floating about Germany around 1800. He does seem at times to identify a kind of cultural immunity to the Revolution: the idea is that Germany can safely watch the show because it's already undergone some kind of pre-emptive cultural transformation on its own turf. Having already experienced its own religious upheaval in the form of the Protestant Reformation, Germany appears to be exempt from the political cataclysms going on next door. Because it's already successfully overcome the religious alienation of the medieval world, Germany is in a position to negotiate the terms of its own political development peacefully, quietly, gradually, without the turmoil and bloodshed that is required in France.

(Unlike many liberal commentators, Hegel does not see the Terror as accidental or circumstantial—something that can be pruned away from the “real” Revolution as a deviation or temporary anomaly.)

This line of reasoning is quite explicit in the *Philosophy of History*, where Hegel considers the apparent contrast between the revolutionary activism of the French and the contemplative inwardness of the Germans. He introduces the “northern principle” as a principle of spiritual autonomy, in the absence of which any practical insurrections are doomed to short-circuit. He attributes the various failures of the Revolution in France to its basic lack of spiritual preparation or foundation. “No revolution without Reformation!” This argument is also implicit in the *Phenomenology*, where the Terror is seen to arise as a direct fall-out of the dialectic of enlightenment (Hegel has the French *Lumières* in mind): he analyses this latter as an incomplete or ineffectual form of secularization, which unfailingly generates all the predictable regressions and atavistic returns of absolutism. It’s no wonder then, that Hegel is usually identified as the chief mouthpiece of the German ideology. This is why Marx, for example, who never stopped agonizing about why the Revolution never seemed to happen in Germany—he gives various explanations for this non-happening both before and after 1848—will reserve his most scathing criticism for Hegel.

On the other hand, and this is the interesting part: it’s also Hegel who offers the most scorching critique of the German ideology. He devotes a considerable part of the *Phenomenology* to a devastating analysis of the German Protestant conceit that freedom could be won in the virtual or “unreal world” of philosophical reflection. He is essentially taking on the entire German idealist project and its spinoffs (from Kant through Fichte and Schiller to Jena Romanticism—in other words, Hegel’s immediate contemporaries). He spares no sarcasm in his

description of the German attempt to translate or transcribe the political radicalism of the French Revolution into the idiom of intellectual radicalism—"Copernican revolution," moral conversion, aesthetic avant-gardism, whatever.

In the final analysis, German freedom, as elaborated to date, is a failure: its worldly promise has aborted. The entire last section of the "Spirit" chapter is essentially a catalogue of bad faith: Hegel is running through all the ingenious alibis by which German philosophy has learned to rationalize or legitimate its own impotence. It consoles itself for its own lack of revolutionary agency by generating elaborate theories of spectatorship, of witness, of sublime enjoyment, etc. Despite or rather because of its distance from the event, Germany prides itself on its ability to enjoy a vicarious enjoyment in the excitement. It claims a special affinity with the project: it's already established itself as an expert in matters of freedom ... This conceit is precisely what Hegel sets out to demolish. But he also tries to analyse it.

Hegel's analysis of the Germany ideology is in this respect far more searching than that of Marx and Engels, for example, in that he tries to account for its logic. Why does Germany consistently miss the moment of revolution, and how does this lapse of experience get registered, embellished, and occluded? How do fantasies of vicarious spectatorship get established and sustained, and what are their repercussions? And more to the point: Hegel demonstrates that far from bypassing the moment of terror, such fantasies only generate secret terrors of their own. In taking on the German ideology, Hegel is of course also taking on himself—his own lingering "Protestantism"—and this is what gives his polemic its peculiar bite.

*JN: Hegel's critique of the logic of spectatorship clearly distinguishes him from Kant and the Romantics, and, as you note, it also reveals a disjunction or perhaps even a blind spot in Marx's*

*critique of Hegel. On this account his idealism is not a ghostly step back from history, but an attempt to think the logic of politics from within the given historical moment (i.e., the famous demand in the Preface to the Philosophy of Right: hic Rhodus, hic salta). This analysis of the logic that produces the Terror also leads to Hegel's own solution for the traumas brought on by the Enlightenment—that is, to forgiveness and Absolute Knowing. Of course, much has been said concerning both what Hegel may mean by this and what its possible practical consequences may be—and here your reading takes a very different and interesting tack—but before we address the wider context and implications, perhaps we can first touch on how you interpret Hegel's solution to the problem posed by the Terror.*

RC: I'm not sure that "solution" is the right word, because Hegel shows this dissonance or spectrality—what you call a "ghostly step back"—to be irreducible. We can characterize this dissonance in terms of a traumatic belatedness, non-synchronicity, or anachronism. The Revolution is experienced in Germany as a vestige or phantom: it never appears in the present. There's a spatial issue: the event is simultaneously close and far. And there's a temporal issue: the event is simultaneously past and future. There are ideological and non-ideological ways of approaching this predicament. The step back can be either a way of rationalizing disengagement (the usual account of the "German ideology" as an embellishment of passivity: the infamous "German *misère*") or, on the contrary, a mode of historical engagement, despite all odds.

But the non-synchronicity itself cannot be eliminated. The anachronism is structural: it afflicts all experience. The slippage that defines the German experience of the French Revolution is an extreme case of the slippage that structures consciousness itself, and that produces its peculiar latencies, omissions, unevenness, and blind spots.

Hegel spends most of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* trying to account for this distortion. The dialectic turns out to be a model of vicarious experience: all experience is a missed experience, a belated experience, a non-experience. Consciousness is constitutionally incapable of self-coincidence. Hegel shows how it is both forever overreaching itself (“consciousness suffers violence at its *own* hands,” *Phenomenology* §80) and yet constantly lagging behind its own insights. Even as it keeps on compulsively correcting itself, continually revising everything it knows (and wants, and desires, since this too is a mode of knowing), it stubbornly keeps on erasing or unlearning what it learns. It is condemned to keep forgetting—neurotically repressing, fetishistically disavowing, obsessively undoing, or even psychotically “foreclosing” or abjecting its own truths, which it cannot or will not experience as its own. Its past errors keep returning symptomatically, in the form of atavistic regressions and relapses and even traumatic flashbacks. Hence the inertia, paralysis, or resistance that Hegel stresses: “its anxiety makes it retreat from the truth ...” (*Phenomenology* §80).

This accounts for the slow, circuitous, inefficient, three-steps-forward-two-steps-back narrative tempo of the *Phenomenology* (so similar to the way Marx describes the zigzag rhythm of nineteenth-century revolutions in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*). One reason it takes so long to get through the process—“a slow-moving succession,” Hegel calls it in the last chapter (*Phenomenology* §808)—is because consciousness simply can’t keep up with itself. It’s always tripping against itself because it’s too slow for its own insights. It keeps “forgetting” everything. This forgetfulness will eventually need to be speculatively refashioned or refunctioned.

This is precisely the meaning of mediation, for which we could easily substitute the currently overused word trauma. (We need to give trauma its full psychoanalytic weight as a structural category; we need to strip it of sentimentality or pathos.) Once you acknowledge this,

all the immediacies topple, not least of which is the immediacy of action, the immediacy of a collective, the immediacy of undistorted knowledge or temporal self-coincidence.

So the question is this: if experience has always gone missing to itself, if the missing is structural, are there critical resources to be derived from this structural delay, or are we condemned to nostalgia, defeatism, inertia? Can the category of trauma be rescued from a kind of self-legitimizing or self-embellishing paralysis? We are familiar with a version of this issue in current debates around the concept of “constitutive lack” (i.e., castration): how do we avoid ontologizing or naturalizing our losses by making them structural, essential, or even transcendental? Do we risk conflating or collapsing structural loss and contingent trauma—structure and event—and thereby occlude the determinacy or singularity of historical accident?

Even while he mercilessly takes on the German ideology, as an inauthentic relation to traumatic belatedness, Hegel is not staking his hopes on a moment of untrammelled or undistorted experience. He is not holding out for a recalibration of the clocks and calendar within some kind of unitary or unified present. (This was precisely the fantasy of the French revolutionaries: invent a new clock, create a new calendar, start time again, as if the shadow of the past could be eliminated.) The present is always self-divided, it is always stained by an essential anachronism or out-of-jointedness, as Hamlet and Derrida would say. But this is just another way of saying, as you state, that we are always speaking and acting “from within the given historical moment.” We are always *somewhere*.

The ideological rendition of this scenario, around 1800, is easy enough to lampoon: we Germans have a special intimacy with the event, and this is precisely why we are able to remain immune to it (and vice versa). In spatial terms: proximity is a way of maintaining distance, distance is a way of asserting proprietorship. This is Kant’s argument in the *Conflict of the*

*Faculties*, where the issue is glossed in terms of spectatorship, media culture, and the new public sphere, and we can see the same argument retraced in Jena Romanticism and beyond. In temporal terms: the Revolution is always already past (we've already been through it on our own turf) or it is forever future (we can hold out infinitely for the event in a superior version: the literary absolute, the work-to-come ... ). There's an obsessive production of analogies between the "French" and the "German" renditions of revolution; Heine provides the wittiest rendering, in his *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, where the revolutionary sequence is mapped out in tandem like a kind of bilingual parallel text: Kant is the Robespierre of philosophy, Fichte the Napoleon, while Schelling's regression to dogmatic Spinozism makes him equivalent to Charles X ... (Heine is being only half-facetious here.) So there is an ontological issue too, which can be formalized as a dialectic of singularity and repetition. The more unique the event, the more it splinters into a prismatic array of similarities, analogies, or repetitions—the more unrepeatable, the more it must be repeated, the more untranslatable, the more it lends itself to translation. This obviously has profound aesthetic implications.

I've described this fantasy as the staging of a chronically missed encounter. Like Achilles and the tortoise, Germany is forever catching up to an event which it has already long ago overtaken—the Revolution remains at once intransigently future and irrecoverably past—and this temporal parallax is also a modal one: Germany suspends the actuality of the Revolution by transforming it into pure virtuality or potentiality—absolute, unrealizable possibility, which of course is indistinguishable from impossibility.

*Mourning Sickness* describes how many different ways there are to stage such a non-encounter, so I'll leave the twists and details out, but the point is that the relationship is strictly melancholic: failing to work through or mourn the French Revolution—to inherit the project, to



make it its own—German idealism keeps repeating it, like a stuck record, but also off key. And since the Revolution itself is constituted as an essential melancholia—unmournable death, abstract negativity—the philosophical repetition of the Revolution also cannot fail to reiterate the form of its failure—that is, the Terror. Hegel is zealous in his effort to expose and flush out the way terror keeps reproducing and occulting itself in the German renditions from Kant to Schlegel and beyond. To overcome the German ideology in this sense would be precisely to pass from melancholia to mourning.

So the question is ultimately whether philosophy remains “Thermidorian”—whether it is condemned to keep retracing the long march from the Jacobin Terror to the Terreur Blanche of the Thermidorian counter-revolution (with its own massacres, judicial vendettas, and mob violence) to the bleached out, covert, or sublimated varieties of terror Hegel sees articulated in a philosophical and aesthetic register, with increasing indirectness, from Kant through Fichte to Jena Romanticism. The issue is not only whether philosophy is doomed to spectatorial impotence, but precisely what kind of terrors are perpetrated in and through this impotence. Are we condemned to play out some version, more or less sophisticated, of the beautiful soul?

Do we ever extricate ourselves from such violence? The ambiguity of Absolute Knowing is exquisite. On the one hand it is nothing other than the unflinching and uncompromising disclosure of the untimeliness that afflicts every shape of consciousness, including the act of disclosure itself. (This is tantamount to a confession.) And on the other hand it seems to transform—but also always therefore risks occulting or disavowing—the meaning of its own belatedness, as if lateness itself could become the site of a radical futurity, even a revolutionary new beginning. (This is tantamount to a moment of forgiveness.)

It's the interval between confession and forgiveness that fascinates me. There's something of a conversion moment here: time itself seems to turn around. The too-late becomes the occasion for a radical incipience. Benjamin is describing something similar when he speaks, perhaps too weakly, of "hope in the past" ("On the Concept of History" 391). At one point (he's talking about the surrealists) he speaks of "the revolutionary energies of the out-of-date" ("Surrealism" 210). This has nothing to do with nostalgia: it's about extracting the critical resources of obsolescence itself. It's about redeeming the belated possibilities or aborted futures of the past. Delay becomes a modality of the future. This ambiguity explains the title of my book.

*JN: The question of the position of philosophy—or rather the philosopher—(i.e., whether or not it necessarily confines itself to simply repeat various versions of the beautiful soul) is particularly interesting. Many readings of Hegel take issue with him on precisely this point by characterizing mediation and Absolute Knowing as either an endless process of digestion and assimilation (i.e., Adorno's claim that the system is the thinking of a stomach) or of evasion (i.e., Bataille's claim that the system is not a thinking of the limit, but an attempt to escape the limit). Your reading suggests that far from trying to digest or evade history, the philosopher's movement towards Absolute Knowing is an attempt to move from what you characterize as melancholia to mourning. As such, the idea of forgiveness that Hegel develops is not the self-serving gesture of Pontius Pilate (who, like the beautiful soul, attempts to wash his hands and thereby distance himself from the world and responsibility), but an attempt (which is, as you suggest, more akin to Dostoyevsky's Father Zosima than Pilate) to recognize the very*

*impossibility of such an immunity. Can you draw out the connection your reading proposes between forgiveness in the Phenomenology and the move from melancholia to mourning?*

RC: Two things strike me in your formulation. First, it suggests that the choice between “digestion *or* evasion” may ultimately be a false choice. It may be impossible to draw a clean or stable line between the violence of appropriation (recuperation, colonization, absorption) and the violence of voyeurism (escapism, asceticism, coldness). (Feminist film theory made this issue painfully concrete several decades ago, after Laura Mulvey’s pioneering work, and we are still thinking through its implications for postcolonial theory, among other domains. Evasion, too, can be a form of invasion.)

This ambiguity perhaps explains why Hegel is so often reviled on such seemingly opposite grounds. On the one hand, his thinking is constantly ridiculed for its capaciousness, its voracity, its compulsive consumerism (Adorno: “the system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism,” *Negative Dialectics* 23). And it is no less despised, on the other hand, for its Olympian detachment, its Stoicism, its academicism (Marx: “philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it,” “Theses on Feuerbach” 571). These two accusations are strictly immanent critiques, in that it’s Hegel himself who has demonstrated the perils of both positions, and who shows, moreover, why they are two sides of the same coin.

Second, it reminds us to ask again: how exactly does this digestive metaphor work? Psychoanalytically, of course, the opposition between mourning and melancholia is often described as a contrast between two different models of eating; Freud introduces the contrast between introjection and incorporation. So on the one hand, there’s the idea of mourning as a kind of assimilation or metabolization—a “good” eating. We manage to take on, absorb, and

inherit the past: we assume the legacy of the past, we work through, transform, embody the past by turning it into our own flesh and blood (the model of the Eucharist is crucial here). On the other hand, there's the idea of melancholia as a failed or pathological mourning along the lines of an "unsuccessful" eating: the stuff gets stuck in the throat, or can't or won't be digested, and therefore gets trapped inside us like a foreign object, stony, inert, consuming all our energy. What we can't digest ends up eating *us* alive. The opposition is laid out in Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" and developed in really interesting ways by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who show that the issues have fundamental implications for language.

The opposition of course is complicated in Freud, certainly by the time of the *Ego and the Id*, but for these purposes I just want to hold on to the fact that eating itself is no simple matter: to attack Hegel for being so voracious, so "digestive," can mean different things. Is it his digestion or his indigestion that bothers everyone? Is the problem that Hegel's such a successful eater, that he's so absorptive, that everything is metabolized as food for thought? Or is it that he's a dyspeptic, melancholic cannibal—the antiquarian historian of Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation*—forever gorging on what he cannot process or discharge (never satisfied because never nourished, he can't stop eating)? (Slavoj Žižek has a recent piece entitled "Hegel and Shitting," whose title sums up the issue, but Werner Hamacher's early work, *Pleroma*, on Eucharistic themes in Hegel is still indispensable.)

Is Hegel a mourner or a melancholic? There's a tendency these days to valorize melancholia itself for being somehow more "ethical" than mourning—less vulgarly recuperative or appropriative, more faithful to the dead because of its tenacity and plangency—but this is far too easy; it ignores the inextricable link between melancholia and narcissism, and the secret gratifications we garner in our grief. Our fidelity to the dead can always be a fidelity to

ourselves: it's all too often our own wounds we are deliriously enjoying. At some profound level, both mourning and melancholia risk betraying the object: both risk instrumentalizing or recycling grief, turning loss itself into a kind of commodity or fetish; at some level neither is able to just let the object be. By object I mean the other in its singularity—as other, as past, as absent, as dead. This is why Derrida, for example, in his *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, is led to speak of an “impossible mourning”: he is trying to push beyond both these alternatives.

Absolute Knowing is sometimes described, for better or worse, as a kind of mourning—a “successful” eating—both a relinquishment and a kind of metabolization of the past, or what is constantly threatening to become past by dying, or disappearing, or simply losing relevance and turning into a kind of carapace or husk. This description would seem justified by Hegel’s own recourse to a digestive vocabulary in the very last pages of the *Phenomenology* (“Spirit has to penetrate and digest the entire wealth of its substance,” *Phenomenology* §808), and by his characterization of Absolute Knowing as a mode of interiorizing commemoration or *Er-innerung* (whose special “inwardizing” he underlines by introducing startling, almost Heideggerian-style, punctuation-effects).

And the very last words of the *Phenomenology*, lifted and mangled from Schiller, involve the manifestly Eucharistic image of a chalice foaming over, as if God (absolute Spirit) is about to toast himself, or more precisely, imbibe his own creation. He lifts the cup as if he’s about to drink in or reabsorb “this realm of spirits” (the world of creaturely finitude) which he finally recognizes as his own. Or rather, strictly speaking, as himself. It’s a strange and almost uninterpretable image (I’ve written about it elsewhere [see Comay, “Hegel’s Last Words”]). Not least, it seems to reverse the normal Oedipal direction: there’s a hint of father Chronos here—fathers swallowing sons rather than the other way around. But it’s also striking because the

image of foam is itself such a peculiar one. Is this is all that's left at the end of the day, nothing but meaningless, shapeless, evanescent—profoundly unnourishing, unsatisfying, useless—foam?

Is forgiveness itself a kind of mourning? This is often taken to be the neuralgic point of the *Phenomenology*—too quick, too bland, too “Christian” ... presto, voilà, the wounds of Spirit heal and leave no scars behind, and the whole book comes crashing to a close. But if you read the final section of the “Spirit” chapter carefully you can see how complicated it is. Not only is the resolution ambiguous, but Hegel has set it up in such a way that the very act of healing appears to be a way of inflicting new scars: erasure produces yet another layer of guilty inscription, all the more persistent for being invisible.

Hegel goes to great pains to lay out the performative aspects of forgiveness as a speech act: its meticulous dramaturgy, its staging, its timing, its audience, its *mise-en-scène*. I've tried to show how the act itself is afflicted by the very delay (the finitude or “evil”) that it is called upon to absolve. Forgiveness fatally misses its cue: it comes too late to achieve what it has been summoned to deliver. Hegel sketches out the scene with breathtaking irony. We see the acting conscience gamely owning up to its own depravity: yes, I am that person. Yes, I am human. (Just like you ... ) Silence ... Hello ... ????

The deadly pause between confession and forgiveness introduces a caesura that almost destroys the communicative situation in which Spirit is inescapably enmeshed. It's this little pause that produces the decisive climax, the tragic peripeteia, of the entire drama. The silence is literally maddening: failing to reciprocate the other's confession, the hard-hearted judge has no choice but to disintegrate, dissolve, swoon, fall apart (there's a hyperbolic, almost operatic dimension here—a bit of “death by the fifth act”). By failing to answer confession with confession, the beautiful soul has permanently ruined the very possibility of a community

founded on mutual transparency or reciprocity. Forgiveness comes too late; it is indelibly stained by this lateness. It is forgiveness that proves to be what is most unforgiveable, and thus in greatest need of forgiveness. (As I've tried to show, Hegel is bringing us directly into the territory of impossible forgiveness, in Derrida's sense, but also into a Levinasian terrain.)

But through this very delay—and here's the rub—the act of forgiveness also retroactively transforms the original confessional scenario: the icy silence of the judge forces confessional discourse to divest itself (or at least to suspect itself) of every last vestige of self-serving narcissism. What kind of shallow opportunist would demand the spiritual payback of a counter-confession? The judge's silence is a deal-breaker. It ruins the idea of a social contract. Asymmetry and opacity—singularity or incommensurability—must be henceforth acknowledged as a permanent feature of human community. This has profound implications for any politics of recognition.

The silence thus produces an inadvertently redemptive result. It punctuates the confessional speech act in such a way that the confessant is for the first time alerted to his own secret opportunism. It's not a question of intention or motive: like every other recognition scene in the book, the original premise of the encounter, for both parties, is retroactively transformed by its unanticipated result. The judge's refusal is itself motivated by everything Hegel is so gleefully parodying—coldness, narcissism, a delusional sense of his own immunity to the evil on which he's feeding. He's not silent out of altruism or out of a desire to elevate or educate the confessant. This is not the Socratic gesture of withholding assent so as to force the interlocutor to take stock of his own assumptions.

There may be something akin to psychoanalytic technique here: the judge is frustrating any expectation of a response based on empathic affirmation of shared humanity—there's a kind

of scansion at work. But the “technique,” such as it is, is entirely unconscious, can only be discerned in hindsight, and is a process over which the individual has little or no control. To pursue this psychoanalytic parallel for just a moment: the confessant’s experience of the judge’s breakdown ruptures every vestigial faith in the *sujet supposé savoir*. It’s like suddenly realizing that your analyst’s silence is not a sign of Olympian omniscience but may stem from something far more human—he’s not paying attention, or he’s bored, or tired, or he doesn’t know what you’re talking about anyway ... It’s humiliating, enraging, disappointing, but in any case profoundly demystifying and ultimately, if you’re lucky, even liberating. Call it “grace,” if you will, but the effect is to purge every last fantasy about the big Other.

There’s a kind of mourning being performed in this last gesture—a renunciation and a loosening of a paralyzing fixity or fixation: we do let go. And this means also letting go of the fetishes or substitutes by which we evade or plug the gap—for example, through nostalgic or utopian fantasies of communitarian fulfillment. But Hegel’s gesture also seems to complicate the Freudian alternatives of mourning and melancholia, if only because it seems to point us away from narcissism. The subject of forgiveness is neither the triumphant survivor (who finds secret consolation in having outlived the object) nor the abject survivor (who finds perverse consolation in being able to keep the object alive, as a kind of undead remainder, if only so that it can continue to wallow about and secretly abuse it while getting credit for its own exquisite sensitivity).

There’s a different logic of survival being explored here, an aftermath existence that wants to move away from both these kinds of self-aggrandizement—which, of course, runs the inevitable risk of indulging in a possibly even more insidious vanity, namely, the conceit of infinitely self-ironizing disenchantment ... opportunism always lurks. Can opportunism itself be



converted into another kind of opportunity—a chance for the opening of subjectivity beyond the bounds of the ego? This would also imply an opening of history beyond the confines of historicism.

Perhaps it's about a permanent passage or porosity between melancholia and mourning—an incessant movement towards mourning that never quite settles. (Of course I don't want to suggest anything like an "infinite task" or regulative idea, which would only reinstate fetishism.) It would be a question of neither metabolizing nor embalming the past as a substantial content: these culinary or consumerist models have to be rejected. Rather, it's about relating to the past in its potentiality or virtuality—its irrepressible futurity. Forgiveness is about reactivating the past possibilities or missed opportunities—the repressed or aborted futures—of the past.

This means remembering the blank spots where something genuinely new or unanticipated could have, and still might, come along. Hegel says somewhere, reviewing the dreary chronicle of history, that "periods of happiness are blank pages" (*Philosophy of History* 26). It's standard to read here the pessimism of the historian, and this isn't wrong, but it overlooks the revolutionary pressure of this blankness. If happiness leaves no traces, if it builds no monuments, this is also because as a missed experience it deposits an opening for future redemption: the blank is not just about the repression of happiness; it can also be a secret index to happiness. Erasing scars is not just about magically forgetting, even though of course it usually is just that; it can also be about remembering or repeating a certain capacity for invention or reinvention. Blankness begets blankness, and this repetition itself is ambiguous. This is why the time of revolution can never be relegated to an isolated moment. As Benjamin writes: "*every* second is the strait gate through which the messiah might enter" ("On the Concept of History" 397, emphasis mine).

Hence the multiple ambiguities of “mourning sickness.” On the one hand the term attests to the permanence of a traumatic, even pathological (it makes us *suffer*) lateness. We are wounded by our temporal displacement; we are outsiders even to our own experience, to which we relate vicariously, enviously, indeed with an unmistakable trace of voyeurism. There’s always a melancholic remainder—an assimilation or identification that’s gone awry. And on the other hand, the lateness itself contains the seeds of a radically inaugural or initiatory opening. There’s a wake-up call in every present. The future gapes open: “Now is a *birth-time* and a period of transition to a new era” (*Phenomenology* §11).

But there’s also a grammatical ambiguity: “mourning” is both a gerund and an adjective. (Never explain a pun!) Sickness afflicts mourning, but it’s also the object of mourning. Our mourning might be sick, but it’s also sickness that we’re mourning (remembering, repeating, relinquishing): we learn to let go of the melancholic fixations that both paralyze and reassure us, even knowing that in the very act of renouncing melancholia we inevitably prolong it.

Sickness is not magically overcome as we shift from mourning to morning. (This is by virtue of all the paradoxes of autoimmunity: we reproduce the illness in our manic efforts to forestall or evade it.) And the phrase also alerts us to a contagious, social quality of thinking: mourning is never a private act, it is inescapably linguistic or symbolic, or performative, and this means collective. Remember that Hegel consistently characterizes language, like rationality itself, as a kind of inescapable “infection”: it spreads and smears over everyone and everything, even when you try to close your ears or mouth. Maybe foam spreads this way too ...

*JN: The motif of digestion in Hegel is intriguing as it suggests a kind of infinite last supper in which all of the speeches must be made while still eating in order maintain its pace (on this point*

*one is reminded of Kierkegaard's claim that the capaciousness of Hegel's system leaves him sounding like he is trying to talk with his mouth full, or Nancy's image of the Aufheben as a neutral voice that is attempting to speak in water). And yet, why is it never quite finished? Or, perhaps more directly, what of the leftovers? That is, Derrida's "remains" or—mutis mutandis—Nancy's "relief."*

*On one account it is Hegel who is attempting to sweep these aside and, like a good stage magician, draw our attention back to the show (i.e., Adorno's claim that the system is attempting to jump over its own shadow or Bataille's claim that it is an attempt to avoid the excess by annulling it). But, it may also be—and this is what I am seeing as your position—that the system is not an onto-theodicy (or, borrowing your terms, a kind of melancholic project), but rather, a mapping out of the course of the subject that is drawn to the promise of one. And, as such, Absolute Knowing is not the magical word that simply washes away the leftovers—like Christ's "let the dead bury the dead, and follow me" in Matthew—but, the very impossibility of this (an impossibility that, as you say, "ruins history at both its edges," Mourning Sickness 148).*

*Perhaps it is the puzzling image of the foam that can draw the discussion towards the political question in Hegel. The foam seems to function as a sign of the prodigal excess of being, which is at once a reference to the promise of the Eucharist (one that brings to mind the image of the overflowing cup in Psalms) and ultimately pointless (a proliferation of husks housing the same core). If we take this foam as a sign of the proliferation of objective spirit (i.e., the "truth" wrested from Proteus at the end of the Philosophy of Nature) then does Absolute Knowledge paint itself into the corner of spectatorship along with the beautiful soul? Is politics simply written off as a repetition of the well-worn and tired path to war (i.e., a pointless foaming up of Spirit)? Confined to remaining a slaughter-bench while the philosopher shifts his attentions to*

*the “higher” pursuits of art, religion and philosophy (i.e., Absolute Spirit)? Or, is there a shift in Absolute Knowing, a kind of responsibility—an obligation to remain at the table and attend to the Bacchanalian revelry of existence—to stem the effects of what you call melancholia by keeping the political open?*

RC: Talking with your mouth full—also rushing through the meal because you’ve arrived too late, or picking at your meal because you’re not really hungry anymore and the food’s gotten cold in the meantime ... and anyway, what the final chapter on “Absolute Knowing” gives us is really more like a menu than a meal. It reads like a catalogue or summary of the work we’ve just read—abbreviated, elliptical, a kind of mnemonic shorthand or digest (because we’re always on the verge of forgetting it); or, equally, a kind of preview or incentive to start rereading (like a table of contents, the cursory reading of which Hegel ridicules in the Preface). What is the final chapter providing—an appetizer? Dessert? The menu? The itemized bill?

“*Attending to Bacchanalian revelry*” ... I guess you do mean it this way. It doesn’t sound like much fun. But you’re absolutely right: Absolute Knowing, as Hegel describes it in the Preface, isn’t so much about the drunkenness itself—dismemberment, tumult—as it is about the sober recollection of this drunkenness in the twilight of philosophical retrospection (*Phenomenology* §47). And it’s impossible to read about drinking and dismemberment in this context without thinking about the guillotine: Hegel famously describes the sensation of the blade on the victim’s neck as the feeling of a “sip of water” (*Phenomenology* §590).

And don’t forget there’s a wine shortage: in the Preface, Hegel describes Enlightenment modernity as a desert of abstraction in which we’re all so parched for content that anything will do: “the Spirit shows itself so impoverished that, like a wanderer in the desert craving for a mere

mouthful of water, it seems to crave for its refreshment only the bare feeling of the divine in general. By the little which now satisfies Spirit, we can now measure the extent of its loss” (*Phenomenology* §8). Is there going to be a miracle, like at Cana, where Jesus turns water into wine? Or has everything been diluted? What’s in that foaming chalice? The whole outcome of the dialectic of enlightenment rests on the answer to this question.

I can see that it’s going to be a long, circuitous route back to politics, and Hegel himself offers precious few markers, so bear with me ...

Can we make the transition from spectatorship to action? Spectatorship remains—it cannot fail to remain—an abiding danger for every form of subjectivity, because there’s something nauseatingly recursive or self-reproducing about it. How can you watch out for it? How can you be wary enough, vigilant enough, about the crippling effects of your own voyeurism? Given that subjectivity is structurally split or divided (“the distinction falls within it,” *Phenomenology* §84), and that we’re therefore not only always watching the world, but self-regarding while we do so, the idea of immediate agency is in any case delusional—and moreover fraught with all the nostalgia and romanticism that accompanies any ethics of witness.

In the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel speaks of the need to “mistrust the mistrust” (*Phenomenology* §74). He’s referring to the kind of lazy skepticism that fails to put its own suspicions under scrutiny and thus inevitably ends up recycling the most tiresome forms of dogmatism—a standard performative contradiction that has plagued the history of Skepticism from Pyrrho onward. He’s talking epistemology, of course, but by the end of the book we can see that the problems of epistemology have become soaked with a palpable affective, practical, social, and historical urgency, even an institutional one, as the section on “Absolute Freedom and Terror” makes grippingly clear: we’ve just seen suspicion stage-managed and streamlined as a

boring administrative procedure. The end of this section shows the “executioner executed,” as in the famous Thermidorean print showing a field of empty guillotines: once Robespierre has executed the last executioner, i.e., himself, all that’s left is the apparatus running on empty in a display of pure geometrical abstraction.

The philosophical significance of the Thermidorian counterterrorist reaction, for Hegel, is that it puts suspicion under suspicion—terror comes to terrify itself—a move that conceptually opens up the transition to “morality” with its emphasis on the self-reflexivity of the self-willing will. And, as the chapter on Kantian morality makes painfully clear, terror only multiplies with every attempt to invigilate, contain, or oversee it. Even in the “unreal world” of German philosophy (*Phenomenology* §595), there’s a reign of terror being anxiously re-enacted: vigilance reproducing itself as a kind of vigilante justice.

But overcoming Kantian spectatorship does not in itself bring you back to politics in any recognizable sense of the word, or at least Hegel doesn’t tell you how this return would be accomplished, certainly not in the *Phenomenology*. One of the most discomfiting things about reading the *Phenomenology*, of course, is that after we leave the episode of the Terror, we seem to have migrated away permanently from any situation which even remotely resembles politics. The exodus to the “unreal world” in which Kantian philosophy hashes out its own dilemmas is conspicuously *not* followed by a return to identifiable institutions, material power structures, etc.

Forgiveness seems to force a return to the world of finite, embodied subjects—it reveals both the possibility and the necessity of a robust form of worldly, practical engagement that recognizes the claims of others in their imperfection and contingency—but there’s necessarily a kind of formalism in the gesture. What is it that the “reconciling *yes*” is actually affirming (*Phenomenology* §671)? Yes, we are irreversibly damaged, yes, this marks our essential point of

connection, yes, our connection lies precisely in our disconnection, yes, we must repeatedly reaffirm this affirmation. The performativity of the “yes” has to be continually restaged and re-established as a performative lest it congeal into a kind of dogmatism or empty formula ...

But what does this actually mean for politics? This is not about a politics of amnesty or truth-and-reconciliation—first, because the act of confession itself has been so transformed by the act of forgiveness that it’s been divested of its normal confessional trappings; but mainly because the work of secularization has been so radicalized that the forgiving subject has been stripped of sovereignty. There are a lot of things ruled out or negated by the final affirmation—communitarian transparency, the substantiality of a people, abstract individualism or liberalism, etc. (it would take a book to prove this, but I think it’s there)—but there’s nothing either prescriptive or descriptive in Hegel’s argument. Part of it is of course that he’s writing in a complete vacuum: Prussia in 1806 really is an “unreal world.” But there are philosophical reasons for his reticence.

And when politics does come back, in the later lectures at Berlin, it’s not always in quite the way we might hope for. If you turn to the *Philosophy of History*, for example, Hegel seems on the one hand to be delivering a conventional enough eighteenth century aesthetics of history, a tableau of war, in which the world is reduced to a Baroque landscape of empty husks and ruins seemingly stripped of all spiritual significance except for the allegorical gaze that surveys the scene—the famous slaughter-bench of history ... But if you look harder, you can see that Hegel is merciless in his critique of every aestheticism that tries to extract a drop of curmudgeonly satisfaction from the spectacle of disaster. He more or less imports the figure of the beautiful soul from the *Phenomenology*, who makes a cameo appearance in these later lectures as the romantic purveyor of ruins—all spectatorial melancholia and rancour. By this point the beautiful

soul has lost its veneer of beauty: he's become a whining, impotent, ugly Thersites. One could go somewhere with this (Hegel doesn't).

Even if it's stupid to accuse Hegel of being a lackey of the Restoration (a suspicion that was starting to simmer even in his own lifetime), one is of course hard-pressed to find the kind of radical social vision that one might be looking for in a writer who has so profoundly situated himself in the aftermath of the French Revolution. There are little footholds. I've tried to excavate a few in the book. Even in the *Philosophy of Right*, not Hegel's most radical publication, and certainly his most awkward one in terms of the censors, there are some startling moments. One place to look is in his discussion of poverty and "the rabble" (even more pronounced in some of the unpublished lectures); there's really an edge (see Ruda). There's almost a hint of sympathy for the *sans culottes*. Hegel's own explicit remarks on the French Revolution seem generally to be more political in their focus than economic or social (something that Marx of course would rectify), but in these passages you can see that he really was alive to the "social question"—Arendt's phrase—that had been opened up during the period of the Terror (and closed down almost immediately during Thermidor). In the early Jena text on "Natural Right" there's this eerie, almost gothic passage that describes the creaking machinery of civil society as a kind of undead monster that keeps on generating unrest and needs constant repression to keep smoothly functioning.

There are other places too; sometimes the most embarrassingly normalizing pages turn out to be the most subversive: this might include the most notorious passage of all, the one about the owl of Minerva. Marx famously tried to replace the backward looking owl with the "Gallic cock" whose call would stir the revolutionaries into action. I find Hegel's image much more unsettling than is usually acknowledged. The Caspar David Friedrich drawing from 1835/36,



“Landscape with Grave, Coffin, and Owl” (reproduced on the cover of my book), which shows the owl frozen, arrested at the point of flight, perched on the coffin, the grave still gaping open, is really just so perfect. I wish Hegel had seen it (it was painted a few years after his death). It’s not just about some pretty sepia-tinted melancholia. It was one of Friedrich’s last works, drawn when he was recovering from a stroke, and facing not only his own imminent death, massive personal depression, professional frustration, artistic impediments, a cascade of personal losses, but also the repression of the revolutionary possibilities of the 1814 Wars of Liberation in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna, the failure of the 1830 rebellion in Dresden (inspired by the events in Paris that same year), and so on. The corpse of politics is in the coffin, but not yet buried; in fact, as long as the owl stays perched there, the burial can’t happen. And as long as it’s there, we are stuck there too: we can’t move away. The bird has us, the spectators, captured in its gaze.

Despite all the things we love to hate about Hegel (starting with his own dismissal of the 1830 Revolution, for example), there is an almost unbearable potency to the image. It could be Hegel’s version of the “Angelus Novus” (remember the Klee painting described in Benjamin’s ninth thesis on history: the angel staring backward, transfixed, even as the storm pushes forward)—truly an image of the dialectic at a standstill.

All this has burning relevance for us today. At a time when the whole discourse of the political seems so often to be sublimated or trivialized—either spectacularized, reduced to entertainment, or downgraded to a numbing managerial or administrative procedure—it’s important to try to remember and imagine what resources there might be for discussing the issue. Hegel forces us to realize that we cannot take for granted what we even mean by politics. If his whole analysis of the German ideology from Kant to Schlegel is really about the aestheticization of politics, he also makes us stop in our tracks before we assume that we know what it would

mean to reverse the process. Is there a magic wand that allows us to move from the aestheticization of politics to the politicization of art? Do we even know what we mean by art? We're (yet again) quickly moving into Benjamin's territory (see the famous ending of the "Work of Art" essay).

*JN: Hegel's political sympathies are notoriously hard to pin down. Interpreters from both ends of the political spectrum have staked claims to the system or at least to some version of it. (On this account the variations remind me of the labyrinth city in Borges' short story "The Immortal"; each variation is produced by simply shutting off one door or another and claiming mastery over one part of a system that is, despite all efforts toward mastery, infinite.) These versions can be so wildly different that it seems that Hegel's system has somehow managed to say both everything and nothing. And yet, this does not mean that he is not saying anything or that he does not have anything to offer on the question of politics.*

*On this point I am reminded, again, of Nancy's characterization of Hegel's text as a constant process of unsettling, a kind of restlessness of negativity that resists all possibility of closure. In this sense it is not the question of a particular form of politics (Hegel's text will constantly see any particular position as one that is formed and enacted in relation to others), but of the essence of politics itself (i.e., the political). Now whether the political is a kind of penal administration in which the system is set out to collect, catalogue, and contain a collection of moments (i.e., your reference to Nietzsche's antiquarian historian from the Untimely Meditations) or that it is not about the containment and control or singularity, but of attending to the Bacchanalian revelry (your characterization captured my meaning precisely) is a question that is open to interpretation.*

*I think that one of the most compelling and important contributions that Mourning Sickness makes is that it concentrates on a crucial (and often overlooked) “foothold” in Hegel’s text. Here Hegel’s facility for “mistrusting the mistrust” (Phenomenology §74) clearly pays dividends. The Terror and the Revolution are placed into relation on a conceptual level and this enables him to produce a kind of schematic diagram of political violence. The key is that it undoes itself (and perhaps, to shift the discussion even further, this is a general statement on the autoimmune nature of political violence itself. On this point one could possibly reinterpret Hegel’s more difficult statements on war—i.e., that war fails to achieve the ends that it sets itself and ends up exposing the very impossibility of closure—in a very useful and persuasive manner). Much like the commandant in Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” Robespierre ends up entering the apparatus in a testament to its “truth” (i.e., not a demonstration of law, but of the terror of pure geometrical abstraction).*

*This is—at least on my own reading—what is at stake in attending to the Bacchanalian revelry of existence. As such, far from being either revolutionary or reactive, Hegel—and this is in some way unsurprising given the *modus operandi* of the dialectic—is attending to that which both precedes and exceeds the given moment (and this is not some particular essence or substance, but rather the restlessness produced by the impossibility of either filling the gap). As you say, this undoes history at both ends. It is a vigilance against the promise of a politics that situates its “truth” beyond the now (i.e., Hegel’s demand in the Preface to the Philosophy of Right: *hic Rhodus, hic salta*). Perhaps this is connected to what Derrida refers to as an impossible mourning, in that it is neither the melancholic indigestion that casts its gaze to the horizon and the promise of advent and utopia, nor is it the kind of mourning that simply digests the other without remainder (like a sip of water). In this case the risk that Hegel takes—or rather*

*the risk that must always be taken—is part of the very practice of attending to existence, that is, a vigilance that refuses the intoxication of the Bacchanalian revelry. Not to simply hold out in some ascetic gesture that would maintain some internal claim to personal purity and separation.*

*Rather, to what you call mourning sickness. A way of attending to the past, that is, a constant, restless, reactivation of the disjointedness of the past that keeps open the possibility of freedom (not as autonomy, but, borrowing Nancy's language, the freedom of existence or of the experience of being-with). In which case it seems that Hegel offers us much more than a set of prescriptive institutional solutions (i.e., democracy requires x, y, z ... ), but a way of opening up the very radical core of democracy as the restlessness of the negative. Additionally it seems to offer a way of reading political violence that—much like Benjamin—does not dismiss it as either an atavistic remainder or a brutal necessity that simply must be accepted. It seems that—especially in Hegel's reading of the Terror—there is a way of tracing the arc that the coupling of the political and violence generates. Perhaps we could characterize this as a way of reading through the aesthetics that are deployed to make this relationship appear necessary or a way of reading it to its ultimate limits?*

RC: Yes. All this. And just a couple of final points.

The first has to do with the risk of formalism. It's one thing to say: no program, no prescription, no policy, no "recipes for the cookshops of the future" (Marx, "Postface" 9). This is how Marx put it when he was trying to distance himself from the utopian socialists—I can see this question of food will continue to consume us!—the point being that as soon as we start drawing up blueprints for the future we inevitably end up reproducing the wretched conditions of the present. Any attempt to dictate or even imagine the "realm of freedom" from within the

confines of the “realm of necessity” ends up slavishly recycling and reinforcing the latter’s limitations (see Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3). This is why Marx and Engels famously insist, in the *German Ideology*, that communism is not a “*state of affairs* to be established,” not an “*ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself,” but rather “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things” (57). The point is to explore and explode the “premises *now* in existence”—where this “now” is not a solitary present and therefore not self-present: it is opaque to itself because historically saturated; it is overwhelmed by the undischarged burden of the past.

I take this to be actually very similar to what Hegel is saying in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* when he defines philosophy as “its own age comprehended in thoughts” (21). It’s not about prescriptions or prophecies—this would only reinstate an ideology of the “ought”—but about grasping or taking hold of (“comprehending” is perhaps too sanguine) the present in all its negativity. Our “own” age is not our own to possess as such; we are forced to take ownership and assume authorship over a legacy from which we are by definition excluded: this is the essential paradox of every inheritance (a variant of the more generic paradox of the gift). Philosophy confronts the present as a minefield of counterfactual possibilities inherited from the past; hence its essentially crepuscular situation. There’s nothing either cynical or compliant about this.

However: having said all this, there’s still a risk. No blueprints, no recipes, sure. But how do we prevent this absence of directive from congealing into a formalism, even a decisionism that derives legitimacy from the fact (actually an appearance) of sheer novelty? The risk is abstract negativity. But the risk cannot be circumvented. The danger is not the standard one—for example that Hegel’s own political allegiances are reactionary (they surely are, in many places, but this isn’t interesting), or that he’s consigned philosophy to languish in the twilight zone of

reminiscence, gazing like Nietzsche's "angry spectator" at a past into which it cannot intervene (this isn't true). The risk is possibly even more profound.

People often speak of turning from "politics" to "the political"—from *la politique* to *le politique* (to recall the distinction emphasized in French Heideggerian circles in the 1980s, but also by Claude Lefort in a distinctly non-Heideggerian register). It's not simply a matter of shifting our focus from the boring nitty-gritty of horse-trading and vote-counting—business as usual (a very short-term perspective)—to entertain the more thrilling question (also the more historically capacious one) about how we even raise the question of legitimacy and power, or about how we can begin to think about the meaning of community, equality, identification, representation, etc., in the absence of any pre-given established guarantor of meaning or legitimacy—a big Other—who will dictate the terms of the discussion.

One reason why politics seems to go missing after the "Absolute Freedom" chapter in the *Phenomenology* is because the Revolution itself has evacuated all the terms of reference. This is what Hegel is talking about at the end of this chapter when he describes the weary repetitiousness of political discourse in the wake of Thermidor, how the old atavisms keep getting recycled, the staleness and boredom that has set in by the Directory; Hegel is more or less writing a history of the present. We have to *forget* that language. The "sip of water" (the guillotine) isn't just a *refreshment*, he says, it's not just about taking a holiday so we can go on about our daily business re-energized, as if the fear of death has just given us a new lease on life (*Phenomenology* §594). That would not only trivialize the traumatic impact of the event but also efface its utopian radicality. The sip of water is more like the water of Lethe: there's a baptismal quality to the event. Like the Flood (another common image for the French Revolution at the

time), the Revolution has washed away everything. Everything inherited and familiar has been swept aside.

So if we are tempted to describe the shift from *la politique* to *le politique* as a kind of Heideggerian “step back” or phenomenological epoché—a turn from “politics” to “the essence of politics,” or even to the transcendental (quasi- or otherwise) conditions of politics or “politicality” as such—it’s crucial that we don’t misconstrue this suspension as an asceticism—a move to contemplation or ordinary idealism. This is where Hegel’s ellipsis is so revealing. The silence that follows the “Absolute Freedom” section isn’t filled by the chatter of philosophy: the whole point of the section on morality is to show how philosophy itself—German philosophy (and this means *a fortiori* all philosophy)—is singularly unequipped to fill the void of the interregnum. All the avatars that are paraded out in this final section prove to be as useless as the travesties of transitional justice conjured up during Thermidor: what fascinates Hegel is the way that philosophy itself becomes another medium through which terror can keep on being repackaged and piously doled out.

It’s only in that final moment of silence that precedes forgiveness—that cold, cutting, (and yes, in every way terrifying) silence—that the stakes become clear: we must testify to the fact that everything has been annihilated. This is ultimately what the “reconciling yes” is affirming: what we must acknowledge is the evacuation of all received content. It’s a peculiarly non-conciliatory mode of reconciliation.

The job of philosophy is to sustain that vacancy. This is the most modern version of the skeptical epoché: it’s the suspension that keeps open the space of democracy as a rigorously “empty place” (in Lefort’s sense)—evacuated of an authority that has not yet reproduced itself, and in its fidelity to its losses is open to possibilities still unforeseen. It marks the opening to

democracy as essentially traumatic. In this sense philosophy can be defined as a relentless counterfetishistic practice: its mandate is to demystify or disenchant all the surrogates or substitutes—all the bogus forms of sovereignty that fail to mark themselves as such. It's hard work, if only because, as the dialectic of enlightenment shows (and Hegel here perfectly anticipates Nietzsche and Adorno), even disenchantment itself keeps performing its own insidious magic. Even the void can become a kind of filling.

This clarifies the risk I was referring to: how do we prevent the discourse of the void (the empty place of democracy) from congealing into a kind of negative theology? This is an issue that torments Adorno, for example, when he invokes the second Commandment in *Negative Dialectics*: the *Bilderverbot* has to be secularized, it has to be pried away from religious orthodoxy, it needs to be given its real materialist urgency and immediacy (207). Only through theology do we overcome religiosity. Hence Adorno's advice to Benjamin in their correspondence around the *Passagenwerk*: we need more theology! (Benjamin, *Correspondence* Letter of Aug. 2, 1935).

Adorno is here radicalizing Marx's and Engel's insistence, in the *German Ideology*, on the need to fortify materialism with a dose of critical idealism: left to its own devices, materialism degrades into positivism, that is, contemplative inertia: only through idealism do we overcome idealism. If you want to be a good materialist, you need to harness the resources of theology. Marx's "no recipes for the cookshops of the future" thus becomes, in Adorno (who never missed an opportunity for gravitas), "no graven images of utopia." How do we avoid turning political philosophy into a negative theology which would reinstate absolutism in an even more untouchable, because inscrutable, guise?



Political language needs to be reinvented. This means, on the one hand, that we cannot leave unexamined or unproblematized our guiding assumptions about what constitutes political existence: how does power get constituted and distributed, what does it mean to construct a common space of representation, what are the material and symbolic resources we need to claim and activate and invent? It also means, on the other hand, that we can't assume that we are ever safely distant from the political: even the most seemingly neutral or apolitical zones are afflicted by issues of legitimacy, power, domination, inheritance. This also opens up new opportunities and new imperatives for activism. Remember: once upon a time gender inequality was not considered a genuinely *political* matter ... This in turn, of course, brings in a panoply of new dangers: if everything is political, how can "the political" retain its specificity as a critical or normative category? This was Henri Lefebvre's concern.

This is the most profound meaning of secularization: the fundamental terms of politics have to be renegotiated. There's no more God (or king or leader) to tell us what to do or think or be. We have to settle the terms of our freedom starting from the radical caesura of the revolutionary event. Politics is *in retreat*, to recall Jean-Luc Nancy's and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's formulation: *the political* is "retired" or withdrawn from view (the Heideggerian *Entzug*) in that it can no longer be incarnated in any specific ontic instance or example. But to think this negativity or withdrawal also commits us to *retracing*—mournfully remembering, working through, and relinquishing—all the past iterations of political life. In Heideggerian terms: the *Zug* is also a *Riss*—a "trait" or incision—and the "re-trait" a withdrawal that is equally a reinscription or, more properly, a re-exscription.

But we don't have to speak Heideggerian to bring this point home. What if Hegel's silence in the last part of the *Phenomenology*, rather than indicating a contemplative or Stoic

indifference to politics, were a registration of the specifically determined *historical* retreat of politics itself in a post-revolutionary epoch? It's the Revolution that has brought into view the necessary evacuation of all political and symbolic capital. It reveals the need to step back to a prior, or more fundamental, level of analysis: the *Phenomenology* is thus an experiment in a kind of phenomenological reduction—one imposed by history itself.

This implies neither a flattening or limitation of politics, nor an appeal to a mysterious essence of politics, and it would surely ruin the Husserlian search for meaning and certainty; for one thing, Hegel's analysis of consciousness reveals a subject that is structurally fading into unconsciousness. This reduction would take us to the limits of phenomenology in that it would point beyond the space of all appearances: the *Phenomenology of Spirit* takes a distance from every recognizable manifestation of political life. This distance carves open a space where the very question of politics can be re-elaborated. It is this slightly counterintuitive imperative that explains the curious rigour of Hegel's project.

This is another way of saying (second point) that the question of politics cannot be pried away from the question of political theology. The whole debate on the meaning of secularization—the argument, say, between Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt—really boils down to whether we are forever trapped within the terms of political theology (whether that hyphen is “permanent,” as Claude Lefort puts it), whether we are condemned to keep on replacing one king, one form of sovereignty, with another, or whether we can envisage a break with political theology—and if so, how are we to relate to the remnants of absolutism that saturate our life like so much undead matter (see Lefort, “On the Permanence of the Theologico-Political?”). (See Eric Santner's recent book, *The Royal Remains*, for a brilliant discussion of this issue; Julia Reinhardt Lupton also has a wonderful discussion in her new book on Shakespeare.

Agamben is of course a key resource, from *Homo Sacer* onwards.) The issue of mourning and melancholia persists: it defines the troubled temporality of modernity.

The third and last point therefore has to do with the status of revolution itself. There's only one thing I'd take issue with in your formulation above. I think we have to stop short of saying too quickly, "oh, Hegel's politics are neither reactionary nor revolutionary, he's as hard on the Jacobins as he is on the absolute monarchy, he trains us to be suspicious of all concrete modes of politics ... " I know you didn't say this, exactly, but there's always this risk of formalism that I think we need to be really attentive to. Not all forms of politics and policy-making (*la politique*) are equivalent. If the French Revolution remains the burning center of Hegel's thinking, this isn't just because it demonstrates the need to step back from the received terms of political discourse to investigate the conditions of the possibility of politics as such—the phenomenological reduction from politics to the political. It also demonstrates the need to proceed in the opposite direction as well: we have to retrace the steps back to politics itself—in the crudest, most vulgar sense of the word.

And not just to any politics: the concrete social and practical imperatives bequeathed by the Revolution are irreversible. There are urgent substantive issues. Hegel's manifest failure to take that last step shows precisely where we have to keep working.

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