

# ‘TARRYING WITH THE NEGATIVE’: BATAILLE AND DERRIDA’S READING OF NEGATION IN HEGEL’S *PHENOMENOLOGY*

RAPHAEL FOSHAY

*St Michael’s Abbey, Farnborough, UK/  
Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, UK*

Derrida’s endorsement, in his early essay ‘From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve’ (1967), of Bataille’s critique of Hegelian dialectic joins many such early self-positionings in Derrida’s work within the Nietzschean–Heideggerian critique of dialectic. It is only quite recently that accumulated critical attention has been turned on the conspicuous continuity of Derrida’s work with this central tenet of the post-idealist critique of metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Recent work on Nietzsche’s understanding of Hegel finds serious deficiencies in his grasp of Hegelian dialectic,<sup>2</sup> and Heidegger, while making frequent lapidary dismissals, is even more than usually elusive in his avoidance of explicit treatment of the role of the dialectical moment in the Hegelian speculative idealist dilation of reality as rational. The present article queries the understanding and workings of dialectic both in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*<sup>3</sup> and in Derrida’s enthusiastic alignment with Bataille’s critique of that text. This latter critique takes issue with Hegel’s portrayal in the *Phenomenology* of negation as it finds phenomenal expression in the dialectic of the Master and the Bondsman. In Bataille’s view, in eliding the material difference between negation and death, Hegel’s treatment of the master–slave dialectic is seen to be exemplary of the fundamental incoherence of speculative idealism, its failure fully to think the material, embodied conditions of any possible speculative self-appropriation. Through initial explication of the understanding in the *Phenomenology* of negation, which is the principle of the master–slave dialectic and of dialectic as such, I attempt in this article to go behind Bataille’s argument to more precisely situate what Derrida acknowledges, for himself, and implicitly for Bataille, to be the key underlying issue in Hegel of sublation, *Aufhebung*, key therefore in the transcendental metaphysics of presence of his speculative idealism. Here, I make a suggestion, following

on the arguments of Adorno, that confusion arises, both in Hegel and the post-metaphysical critique of him, through a misappropriation of dialectic for speculative purposes, rather than in dialectic itself. I argue that, when it comes to ‘tarrying with the negative’, it is more coherent to do what Hegel recommends in the dialectical, than to follow him into the speculative, moment. Adorno was an inveterate and lifelong opponent of the thought of Heidegger, which constitutes his opposition also to certain fundamental premises of Derrida. But in the space apportioned to an article I do not attempt a broad analysis but try merely to contribute to a more specific understanding of what none the less constitutes, along the ridge of the interpretation of dialectic and of negation, a certain watershed in post-metaphysics.

#### I. NEGATION AND REFLECTION

The notion of ‘tarrying with the negative’ arises in Hegel’s ‘Preface’ to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Since the ‘Preface’ provides a rationale for, and a synthesis of, the argument of the *Phenomenology* as a whole, and the *Phenomenology* was itself intended by Hegel as the introduction to his philosophical system, the ‘Preface’, as an introduction to this introduction, is perhaps Hegel’s most concise expression of that system. Further, what Hegel means by ‘tarrying with the negative’, goes to the heart of the ‘Preface’, as Bataille confirms in his citation, in ‘Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice’,<sup>4</sup> of the passage on negation and death leading up to this turn of phrase. ‘There is no doubt from the start of the “capital importance” of this admirable text,’ he says, ‘not only for an understanding of Hegel, but in all regards’ (p. 282). The passage arises directly in relation to Hegel’s positioning of spirit (*Geist*) at the heart of his discourse. Hegel’s thought is definitively dialectical, and this is of course foregrounded in focusing on the role of negation in his thought. Negation, the negative, is *the* dialectical notion *per se*, because, unlike its opposite, the positive, it is quintessentially relational, not to say inherently dependent. To define negation is to flirt with contradiction in so far as one would begin to attribute a positive identity to negation in and of itself. The only inherent, in-itself, or essential characteristic of negation has been precisely its contradictory character as a nothing that in some way exists, that only exists in, as, and through contradiction. Plato, in a brief passage in the *Republic*, was the first to explicitly define reason as the logic of (non-)contradiction,<sup>5</sup> as the adequacy and conformity of thought to its objects, and therefore as the dialectical process of confronting, overcoming, and dissolving contradictions. But it is only in a later dialogue, the *Sophist*, that he addressed the ontological status of negation, asking whether or not the negation of something could have positive content and meaning as a statement. On the surface, then, it is

not surprising that, when we approach that philosopher who more than any other besides Plato is identified with dialectics, attributing to it specifically onto-epistemological status, we should meet with such a notion as 'tarrying with the negative'.<sup>6</sup> The phrase appears in a passage of the 'Preface' in which Hegel introduces *Geist* as the central object and topic of the *Phenomenology*. He is in the *Phenomenology* dealing with spirit phenomenologically, Hegel emphasizes, from the point of view of our relation to it in experience. As the originally intended subtitle insisted, the *Phenomenology* is the 'Science of the Experience of Consciousness'. In the context of our experience, spirit is encountered as our own spirit, as consciousness or mind or subject, or, as Hegel explicates in the passage to which we now turn, firstly as the 'understanding'.

Hegel first points to how we tend to become habituated to our experience, how we strive to render our everyday world predictable and familiar. He locates our effort of domesticating the world in our project of representing and describing it, such that experience becomes ordered and predictable through the capacity to identify things and patterns and our interactions with them. A particular effort is then required if we are actually to question and enquire into the rationale of this world. The effort not only to describe but also to understand the world calls for the analysis of our representations and descriptions. This act of analysis is then directed towards our thoughts and involves a dissolving of the relative concreteness of simple representations into their component aspects. The act of analysis distinguishes us from the thing-like inertness of our representations and we experience in this act of understanding the difference between the simplicity of representations of things and states and our own effort to understand why they are what and as they are. Hegel says:

The activity of dissolution [or analysis] is the power and work of the *Understanding*, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power. The circle that remains enclosed and, like substance, holds its moments together, is an immediate relationship, one therefore which has nothing astonishing about it. But that an accident as such, detached from what circumscribes it, what is bound and is actual only in its context to others, should attain an existence of its own and a separate freedom – this is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy of the pure 'I' (*Phenomenology*, pp. 18–19).

What Hegel is describing is clearly a certain shock of defamiliarization, what he calls an accident in the domesticated realm of our organized representation of the world where everything is woven into a set of relations that support day-to-day existence. Our ability to break the surface of that quotidian reality seems to Hegel an astounding power because it enacts and demonstrates a difference in that world, in so far as we demonstrate that we are not simple objects or relations like the objects we perceive and describe in such a world. Rather, we have this

powerful capacity through understanding to dissolve our perceptions and their representations into their elements, and therefore to act on ourselves, to become, he says, 'self-moving' (p. 18). It is the basis and condition of possibility of deliberate action, and it corresponds to Hegel's view of unmediated experience as 'positivity', and of specifically human action therefore as 'negation' of such immediately given conditions. The negative derives its 'tremendous power' from its contribution to, indeed, its constitution of, the act of separation from given experience, from 'nature', and is therefore the dawning of specifically human meaning.

The understanding is negative because it is preceded in the order of the experience of consciousness by the orders of sense and of perception, the realms of 'positivity' that posit the world as an immediate and given set of relations. The understanding, the act of analysis, is negative because it negates that familiar context of practical experience and initiates a tension and a contradiction between the relatively static realm of objects and the kinetic, self-moving domain of the subject that dissolves not only objects but itself into their most elementary elements. Because the understanding analyses not only objects but also itself, it is the first form in which *Geist* is experienced within, and as, consciousness. Hegel continues later in the same passage:

Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject, which by giving determinateness an existence in its own element supersedes abstract immediacy (p. 19).

Spirit negates the given positivity of sensed and perceived existence, and installs a contradiction between and within a self which on the one hand experiences life immediately and on the other grasps itself as thought.

But it is precisely here that Hegel cautions us to stay with negativity, to linger in this experience of contradiction, and not to rush precipitately towards what he calls 'the magical power that converts it into being'. In achieving such a reconciling conversion, we need to be sure we are not merely transferring a naïve positivity to the level of consciousness' own relation to itself. To tarry with the negative, then, is counsel by Hegel to learn what negativity has to teach us, to take it up not as an abstract condition of absence – as such was understood at the former level of assertive positive and positivist reason – but to grasp thought precisely as this defamiliarizing moment in which it separates from itself in self-analysis and negates the previous naïve simplicity of its relation to the world. It must stay with that negation, says Hegel, to see what it looks like from within, and to absorb into its thinking the import of a condition previously thought to be merely negative, a condition in which the positive must be negated and the understanding of the relation of positive to negative grasped from the point of view of that understanding itself, no longer as object but as the power of self-moving subjectivity.

By tarrying with the negative we move definitively beyond the static Cartesian condition of subject/object duality. We grasp in and through negation that the alterity of the object is not external to us, between the world and us, but rather within our own relation to ourselves. Between Descartes's reversion to faith in a transcendent divinity in order to reconcile thinking and extended substance and Hegel's insistence that we stay with and become instructed by that contradiction, we can see configured the transition from what Hegel would call positive or naïve to negative and critically aware modernity. Spirit for Hegel is not a transcendental unity but a self-articulating and dynamic emergence from within consciousness itself, a self-dividing of consciousness in which consciousness knows itself precisely in such a negation of simple unity. It is contradictorily temporal and rational, and is rational only as temporal and self-articulating. This is what Hegel means us to grasp in tarrying with the negative: linger long enough with reason's contradiction of its own naïve understanding of itself as non-contradiction to learn the more demanding work of dialectical reason.

## II. CRUCIFIXION: THEIST AND IDEALIST

In choosing to introduce his philosophical system by means of a phenomenology, Hegel draws the reader from the immediate experience of the world of sensation and perception to an encounter with the bifurcation of that experience into subject and object, attacking the fiction of an immediate relation to our experience so characteristic of positivist science and common sense alike. Inherent to this development is a transition from propositional, syllogistic logic to an encounter with a dialectical thinking which becomes necessary to the articulation of our contradictory difference with the world of immediacy. Tarrying with the negative is crucial to grasping the point of this contradiction in our emerging relation to experience as on the one hand subjective and self-relating understanding and on the other consciousness over against a world of objects that do not possess this power of self-determination. The emergence of this self-moving consciousness in the form of the understanding is the distinctive moment, Hegel argues, in which *Geist* manifests from within our experience. Spirit emerges first, then, as our own spirit, as our power to act on ourselves, to act not as bodies and wills but as conscious beings who grasp themselves in and as consciousness. Hegel calls this power of self-reflection astonishing, mighty, and indeed absolute because its principles lead the Understanding to Reason and ultimately to a realization of Spirit in its absolute form, a transcendent form of apprehension in which contradictions are not merely resolved but articulated as meaningful, indeed rationally necessary, differentiations of Spirit within and as time.

A fact that seriously disquiets Kojève<sup>7</sup> and Bataille's assertions of the atheism of Hegel's position in the *Phenomenology* is that Hegel strongly maintained the consistency of his exposition of Absolute Spirit with Lutheran orthodoxy. Hegel rearticulated the major doctrines of Christianity in light of this relation of immanent continuity, rather than transcendent opposition, between spirit as finite self-consciousness and spirit as absolute self-differentiating reason. It would seem disingenuous of Hegel to have laid claim to Protestant orthodoxy, in so far as he was explicitly opposed to a reified theism, that he saw exemplified in, for instance, such an apparently dualist traditional doctrine as that of *creatio ex nihilo*. But, *contra* Kojève and Bataille, a non-theist is not simply and necessarily a-theist. The continuity Hegel argued for between absolute spirit and finite consciousness is, in keeping with its idealist affiliations, emanationist and panentheist in tendency rather than creationist. Absolute Spirit manifests itself in finite and embodied form for Hegel, not from out of its own undetermined will, as in theistic creationism, but out of the rational-ontological necessity to divide and differentiate itself in order to know and to rationally apprehend itself. Hegel is positioned in this respect rather squarely in the Neoplatonist emanationist tradition of Plotinus and Proclus rather than in the tradition of Protestant orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup>

However, there is one very distinctive difference between Plotinus's universe and that of Hegel. For Plotinus, the emanation<sup>9</sup> of the One into the sensible forms and finite material of the world is an implicit efflux of its hyperessentiality, of its overfullness of being; the One extends itself into matter and form because it cannot do other than express itself and its fullness. The visible world of material creatures directly mirrors the realm of the Intellect in which there is an immediate union with the First. For example, in the eighth chapter of the Fifth Ennead, 'On the Intellectual Beauty', Plotinus says:

This second Cosmos [the material world] at every point copies the archetype: it has life and being in copy, and has beauty as springing from the diviner world. In its character of image it holds, too, that divine perpetuity without which it would only at times be truly representative and sometimes fail like a construction of art, for every image whose existence lies in the nature of things must stand during the entire existence of the archetype. Hence it is false to put an end to the visible sphere as long as the Intellectual endures, or to found it upon a decision taken by its maker at some given moment. That teaching shirks the penetration of such a making as is here involved: it fails to see that as long as the Supreme is radiant there can be no failing of its sequel but, that existing, all exists. And – since the necessity of conveying our meaning compels such terms – the Supreme has existed for ever and for ever will exist (*Enneads*, V.8.12).<sup>10</sup>

As Plotinus insists, the visible cosmos is a sequel to its invisible archetype and is a direct expression of it. It is not a creation by fiat but a necessary manifestation. None the less, as a copy it is less luminous than the supersensible realm. Unlike the humanly constructed work of art that

sometimes fails to express the artist's idea, the cosmos is an exact replica though an imperfect one because an opaquely material manifestation of the luminous divine forms.

Human beings for Plotinus are poised on the frontier between the Intellectual and Sensible worlds. They partake of both and can turn their attention in either direction. Born into the body, they are naturally oriented toward adaptation to the physical realm. But if they are to enjoy more than an external and sensuous existence they must undergo a conversion, an awakening to their invisible origins. Plotinus explains:

This conversion brings gain: at the first stage, that of separation, a man is aware of self; but retreating inwards, he becomes possessor of all; he puts sense away behind him in dread of the separated life and becomes one in the Divine; if he plans to see in separation, he sets himself outside (*Enneads*, V.8.11).

The world of the senses and of the body is a separation from our divine origins, and must be recognized as such so that we may return to the unity of the Intellect and ultimately of the One. For Plotinus, this conversion is not presented in agonistic or dramatic terms, but as a purely visionary and noetic difference: 'All that one sees as a spectacle is still external; one must bring the vision within and see no longer in that mode of separation but as we know ourselves; ... it is but finding the strength to see divinity within' (*Enneads*, V.8.10).

This relatively benign character of awakening to Spirit in Plotinus is the site of a specifically Christian departure on Hegel's part from the pagan Neoplatonic visionary landscape. Their emanationism expresses the respective continuities of the finite and infinite dimensions of their worldviews, but for Plotinus the encounter with separation, with the alienation of self and other, sense and intellect, is to be met by a retreat inwards, a 'putting away' of the separated life, since for him our turn away from material towards spiritual reality is a return to our ontologically prior and inherently transcendent identity as intelligible and intelligent beings. From Hegel's specifically phenomenological perspective, however, our self-realization as spirit is not of a pre-existent condition from which we have lapsed or been exiled. Rather, the content of such a self-apprehension is the recognition that one is oneself merely negative, a nothing, and that one's reality is not the finite historical self, but the universal movement of spirit of which that finite self is merely an evanescent moment. Thus, the explicitly dramatic and agonistic implications of this encounter with the negative for Hegel. To return to sections of our earlier passage not yet discussed, we find him asserting that the negation implicit in the recognition of the freedom of Understanding is nothing other than death. He says:

Death, if that is what we want to call this [negative content of thought], is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength.

Lacking strength, Beauty hates the Understanding for asking of her what it cannot do. But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive . . . , on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it (*Phenomenology*, p. 19).

Although both Plotinus and Hegel speak of this conversion as requiring strength and resolve, Hegel does not describe a simple turning away and retreat but, in keeping with the immanence of a phenomenological realization, a need to pass into and through separation. As Bataille rightly observes, Hegel's rationalist science of spirit is an emanationism that has absorbed significant aspects of Christianity on its way to its thoroughly modern, and I would argue modernist, emphasis on the immanent expression of spirit in experience. For Hegel the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are a representative instantiation of the cosmic process of spirit's emanation and manifestation in sensible particularity, exposing the forces of nescience, violence and alienation that are implicit in finite material existence. Spirit's return to itself occurs for Hegel not as a mere awakening or reawakening but as an experience of finitude, a dramatic encounter with, and vulnerability to, separation and death. As with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, awakening is not, as in Plotinus, a simple return to an Intellect and a unity merely forgotten and never inherently ceasing, but an abjection, a damnation, a rending of oneself from oneself, as the unavoidable condition of a resolving sublation of finite personal identity in the universal movement of *Geist*.

### III. TRANSCENDENCE, SOVEREIGNTY, OR DIALECTICS?

Hegel's system stands as a, if not the, pivotal narrative of post-Christian modernity. It subsumes into speculative unity both sacred theological and secular historicist narratives of the human condition. The more significant theorists of postmodernity almost to a person agree in acknowledging Hegel's pre-eminence in modern cultural theory and his determining influence on their thought. Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault and Lyotard, among others, make hyperbolic statements to this effect. To quote Lyotard, for one:

The 'metanarratives' I was concerned with in *The Postmodern Condition* are those that have marked modernity: the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom, the progressive or catastrophic emancipation of labour (source of alienated value in capitalism), the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of capitalist technoscience, and even – if we include Christianity itself in modernity (in opposition to the classicism of antiquity) – the salvation of creatures through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative of martyred love. Hegel's philosophy

totalizes all of these narratives and, in this sense, is itself a distillation of speculative modernity (in Barnett, p. 3).

The one who has placed Hegel most explicitly at the centre of his thinking has perhaps been Jacques Derrida. In *Of Grammatology*, Hegel is named as the quintessential thinker of the metaphysical tradition:

[Hegel] undoubtedly *summed up* the entire philosophy of the logos. He determined ontology as absolute logic; he assembled all the delimitations of philosophy as presence; he assigned to presence the eschatology of parousia, of the self-proximity of infinite subjectivity (in Barnett, p. 26).

In an early interview in *Positions*, Derrida says of that most definitive of deconstructive strategic constructs, *différance*: 'If there were a definition of *différance*, it would be precisely the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian *releve* wherever it operates. What is at stake here is enormous.'<sup>11</sup> And, with a certain characteristic hyperbole, Derrida expands: 'We will never be finished with the reading or rereading of Hegel, and, in a certain way, I do nothing other than attempt to explain myself on this point' (in Barnett, p. 1).

In the second of the above quotations, Derrida says that *différance* is positioned precisely as and at 'the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian *releve*'. *Releve*, i.e., *Aufhebung*, is of course the key speculative principle of Hegel's thought and bears directly on the role of negation in his system. *Aufheben*, to sublimate, means at once to 'raise up', 'to abolish' and 'to preserve'; it is positioned as the third moment of speculative union or rather integration of difference. The movement of thought for Hegel begins in abstraction, proceeds to negation, and hence to a sublation in which what has been dialectically opposed is viewed as interdependent and therefore united precisely in its difference; that is, the negative difference is seen as the very condition of possibility and articulation of a higher perspective from which opposing elements are revealed as one another's necessity. Thus, the higher or speculative integration of dialectical opposites is a sublation in that it 'raises up' these opposites, 'abolishes' their antagonism, and also 'preserves' their difference in a differentiated identity ... what Hegel referred to in the *Science of Logic* as 'the identity of identity and difference'.

When Derrida asserts that *différance* is 'the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the *releve*', of this moment of integrated raising up, he rightly urges that the stakes are enormous. The notion of *différance* and the practice of deconstruction intend to interrupt and destroy the speculative dimension and therefore the very reconciling and resurrecting movement out of negation, the movement out of the dismemberment and death that Hegel sees as so powerfully implicit in dialectical negation. With the 'destruction' of the *Aufhebung*, Derrida is invoking of course a Nietzschean critique of metaphysics slightly different from but, as he

himself urges, consistent with, Heideggerian *destruktion* and Bataillean sovereignty.

Derrida says of *différance* that it sustains ‘relations of profound affinity with Hegelian discourse ..., is also, up to a certain point, unable to break with that discourse ...; but it can operate a kind of infinitesimal and radical displacement of it, whose space I attempt to delineate elsewhere’ (in Barnett, p. 14). One of the texts referred to here is his essay on Bataille’s reading of Hegel, ‘From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve’.<sup>12</sup> The key text to Derrida’s discussion is Bataille’s ‘Hegel, Death and Sacrifice’, in which Bataille concentrates on the selfsame passage from the ‘Preface’ to the *Phenomenology* we have just examined, reading it largely in light of the dialectic of master and slave treated in the main text of the *Phenomenology*.<sup>13</sup> As Derrida affirms of this unusually brief and accessible passage in the *Phenomenology*, ‘the rigorous and subtle corridors through which the dialectic of master and slave passes ... cannot be summarized without being mis-treated’ (‘From Restricted to General Economy’, p. 254).

Without, then, trying to summarize, it can be noted that the master/slave dialectic is the historical stage of development which mirrors in the social sphere the drama of the interior experience of self-apprehending consciousness described in the passage on the understanding as negation. The master/slave relation is the historical circumstance in which understanding emerges first as a relation of self to other consciousnesses before it can be interiorized as subjectivity. The bid for recognition is necessarily, under these conditions of externality, Hegel says, an abstract and one-sided struggle, in which only one can emerge with the capacity to command the recognition of the other. Because it is necessarily a one-sided recognition at this stage, Hegel asserts, the struggle must stake the lives of the contestants; or, put more concisely, victory in such a one-sided pursuit of recognition necessarily goes to the one who is willing to risk death, the one who prefers victory, and the mastery it confers, to life as the other’s slave. But there is of course, as Bataille and with him Derrida points out, a cunning dimension to this gambit. Both combatants must survive the battle if it is to be successful. As Derrida glosses Hegel:

To rush headlong into death pure and simple is thus to risk the absolute loss of meaning, in the extent to which meaning necessarily traverses the truth of the master and of self-consciousness. One risks losing the effect and profit of meaning which were the very *stakes* one hoped to *win*. Hegel called this mute and unproductive death *abstract negation*, in opposition to ‘the negation characteristic of consciousness, which cancels in such a way that it perceives and maintains what is sublated and therefore survives its being sublated’ (‘From Restricted to General Economy’, p. 255).

What Derrida points to here, following Bataille’s argument, is that the sublation of death can only take place if death is not actual physical

death, but only its survived possibility. Only then can it become representation and meaning. This point bears on the internal contradictions of the master/slave dialectic itself, but much more so on the drama of interior self-consciousness to which it is preparatory.

There is something both tragic and comic in the master/slave struggle ... tragic in that there is a life at stake, comic in that if it is really and truly waged to the limit, so that either or both contestants are killed, then the desire for recognition is revealed as absurd in its one-sidedness. As we saw in the passage on the understanding as negation, Hegel is much more taken with the agonistic than the ironic proportions of this encounter, so much so that the drama when interiorized becomes filled with the pathos of psychic crucifixion. Bataille, and Derrida after him, on the other hand emphasize the hilarity and bathos of the scene. To the notion of Hegelian survival through sublation, Derrida responds thus: 'Burst of laughter from Bataille. Through a ruse of life, that is, of reason, life has thus stayed alive' ('From Restricted to General Economy', p. 255). Derrida with Bataille sees the canny reserve inherent in the master/slave struggle, the reserve that necessitates the survival of both, as a cunning fiction of a life-and-death struggle, a spectacle of risk that cannot succeed in the absence of the awareness that it is rather the representation, the threat, of death's possibility than its unequivocal engagement. The absence of a purely literal seriousness to the contest of master/slave applies also for Derrida/Bataille to the drama of self-conscious understanding. Derrida says:

The independence of self-consciousness becomes laughable at the moment when it liberates itself by enslaving itself, when it starts to work, that is, when it enters into dialectics. Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death ('From Restricted to General Economy', pp. 255–6).

Derrida claims for Bataille's sovereign laughter that it 'is totally other', that 'Bataille puts it out of dialectics' (p. 256). Further, and necessarily, says Derrida: 'The notion of the *Aufhebung* is ... laughable in that it signifies the *busying* of discourse losing its breath as it reappropriates all negativity for itself' (p. 257). Derrida argues that in the case of the latter, of sublation, Bataille's identification of the comic implications of the death struggle of master and slave reveals the sublation of that struggle, its raising up and preserving in the master/slave relation, to be only partially serious, to be I would argue equally and undecidably tragic and comic because not yet able to acknowledge the element of artifice and of play in its reserve, its avoidance of the abstract negativity of physical death. But, and this is my principal argument here, surely it is one thing to interrupt or to undermine the speculative sublation of this flirtation with the possibility of death and quite another to frustrate or elude its dialectical structure.

It seems to me that Derrida is claiming for Bataille altogether too much here. The dialectical and the speculative moments of this drama of negational self-consciousness are quite autonomous for Hegel. He is very clear about that, since it is precisely what he intends by the counsel to tarry with the negative. If Hegel then construes the import of the negative in the light of tragic self-immolation rather than of comic play, Derrida/Bataille have every right to ask why or how one would choose between them. The pretence that the life-and-death struggle is altogether real and serious is indeed a ruse; it forgets its status as a threat, a representation, present and possible only to be avoided. One of the difficulties of Derrida's analysis is that he alternately and, sometimes by implication, jointly discusses both the master/slave dialectic and the dialectic of the understanding interior to consciousness. But the merit of Derrida and Bataille's analyses, with respect to the latter dialectic, is that they point to the inherent relativity of the emergence through negativity of a dialectical self-awareness, of self-awareness as necessarily dialectical. There is no inherent reason why that negatively generated self-awareness has to be viewed tragically, or rather melodramatically, since surely the point is that it is negative only relative to the positivity of naïvely positive immediacy. It is, as Hegel takes pains to distinguish, a determinate and not an abstract negation. Derrida/Bataille should rather accuse Hegel of failing to be dialectical enough, of failing fully to pursue, at this very point of the emergence of dialectic, the more concrete implications of embodied understanding. The agonistic dynamics of negation are not the only alternative. It would be arguably more consistent, if one were truly to tarry with the negative, to remain even more persistently than Hegel with the dialectical interplay of positive and negative, of tragic and comic, seriousness and absurdity in the self-differentiation of the mind from its material immediacy. However, Bataille and Derrida's insistence on an 'unreserved' and sovereign laughter here is equally one-sided and equally fails to find in the moment of dialectical negation the fully dialectical possibilities.<sup>14</sup> So, while we may accept Derrida's claim to have frustrated, with Bataille, the restricted economy of Hegelian speculative sublation, not so with respect to dialectic. If there is a problem with the Hegelian presentation of the distinctively dialectical moment of the experience of consciousness, that problem is no more adequately addressed by a sovereign, Nietzschean affirmation than a tragic negation. In itself dialectic can be neither, but is rather necessarily and interdependently both – and, of course, just as equally, neither.<sup>15</sup>

In Hegel's system, there are three stages of thinking: the abstract, the dialectical, and the speculative. Abstraction is mere static, antinomian differentiation; it 'holds determinations fast and comes to know them in their fixed distinction'. Dialectic, on the other hand, reveals the reciprocal determination of oppositions. The speculative grasps differences

more truly, says Hegel, as being 'opposed in their very oneness, more precisely [as] the knowledge that the opposites are in truth one'. Hegel says:

The dialectical is the movement and confusion of such fixed determinations [of abstraction]; it is negative reason. The speculative is positive reason, the spiritual and it alone is really philosophical.<sup>16</sup>

The dialectic is negative because it links oppositions in their undecidable identity and difference, in endless oscillation that for Hegel is positively resolved in speculative *Aufhebung*, a pure intellectual vision of a higher identity and ontological resolution of the play of identity and difference.

Properly speaking, then, it is not the dialectical but the speculative movement of thought that enacts sublation. From the strictly dialectical point of view, there is no *inherent* reason to proceed to speculative sublation. Such a progress is proper to onto-epistemological not to dialectical assumptions, to metaphysical assumptions that Hegel from the beginning of his philosophical work held to be unassailable, namely, that unity must in the end prevail and therefore must be able to encompass all difference without at the same time erasing it in monist night in which all cows are black. But such assumptions may arguably be separated from the purely negative determinations of the dialectical moment itself. Such considerations play a significant role in, for instance, Adorno's critique of Hegel, and of his defence and promotion of a 'negative dialectics'. Adorno, loyal as he is to Hegel's elucidation of the necessarily dialectical nature of reason, is sharply opposed to the speculative project of an absolute idealism, which he considers a false and indeed contradictory foreclosure of the realm of objects, of materiality, of the historical, the temporal, the productive – all of which Adorno subsumes under the category of the 'nonidentical'.

Adorno's critique of Hegel clearly corresponds with that of Derrida and Bataille with respect to the idealist character of Hegelian sublation. Adorno makes a similar point as do Derrida and Bataille, that Hegel forecloses on the material dimension of the dialectic by eliding the difference between, for instance, real, physical death and its representation as an idea, a concept in the course of the effort of consciousness to differentiate itself and to recognize itself, either externally in the master/slave struggle or internally in its own relation to itself. But Adorno would be critical of their attempt to burst out of the dialectic in such a supposed absolute immediacy as Bataillean sovereign laughter. For Adorno, the problem is not with dialectic but with its supposed sublation in an absolute identity of consciousness with itself, even in Hegel's integration of difference in an 'identity of identity and difference'. For Adorno, dialectic needs to be grasped critically, that is, truly dialectically. Certainly, it differentiates and reflexively transforms itself at the level of the differentiation between consciousness and its objects,

and more properly of the reflection on that difference of consciousness. Even if, as Hegel brilliantly observes, such a self-differentiation also transforms (the significance of) any object of perception, it will not be consistent in acknowledging its own self-appropriation at the level of the understanding if it then forgets the very alterity (even as restructured in reflection) over against which that understanding constitutes a negation, that is, by reifying the ideational status of that negation.

Adorno emphasizes that self-conscious reason must neither take literally its own ideation, absolutizing itself in Hegelian sublation, nor retreat from the very recognition made possible by the moment of negation itself. For neither can it flee dialectics towards a literal or quantitative empirical immediacy, nor, as in Derrida's and Bataille's case, elude, elide or overwhelm it in undecidably ecstatic, and therefore inherently naturalistic and unstable, sovereignty. Adorno insists that the only way forward from dialectics is through its rigorously dialectical practice:

The only way out of the dialectical context of immanence is by that context itself. Dialectics is critical reflection upon that context. It reflects its own notion ... Such dialectics is negative. Its idea names the difference from Hegel. In Hegel there was coincidence of identity and positivity; the inclusion of all nonidentical and objective things in a subjectivity expanded and exalted into an absolute spirit was to effect the reconciliation.<sup>17</sup>

The point for Adorno is precisely not to effect the reconciliation of subject and object only at the level of subject, but to respect their incommensurability. This incommensurability is not essential but dialectical and historical. It reflects the conditions of the historical present, directing, without (as in a historical materialism) determining, the future. This incommensurability accords respect to the natural world, to history, to embodiment, as being the very conditions of thought, conditions that thought, as thought, cannot merely sublimate. Such an incommensurability is of course not itself an object but an open, precisely dialectical, unfolding of already dialectical relations. As Adorno puts it:

Thought need not be content with its own legality; without abandoning it, we can think against our thought, and if it were possible to define dialectics, this would be a definition worth suggesting. The thinker's equipment need not remain ingrown in his thinking; it goes far enough to let him recognize the very totality of its logical claim as a delusion (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 141).

If, as Derrida asserts, what is at stake in the interruption and destruction of sublation is 'enormous', then the present argument that dialectic is not in itself vulnerable to such a deconstruction has serious implications in itself, and for the reading both of his and of Bataille's work. By referring to the properly or strictly dialectical, or the dialectical in itself, one does not assert some essence or identity of dialectic. One is within dialectics and has, of course, a dialectical relation to dialectics.

Neither affirmation nor denial, both affirmation and denial – a spontaneous, undecidable codetermination and play of identity and difference characterizes the constitutively negative moment of dialectic.

Bataille, no more than Hegel, was able to find in dialectic and negation a source of sustenance. Regarding its 'play' and the comedic exchange of master and slave, he had, in 'Unknowing and Rebellion', some rueful thoughts. He pointed out that if the drama of master and slave was a comedy, it was no joke. If not a cunning Hegelian melodrama preparatory to onto-epistemological apotheosis, then what? For his part, the implications were characteristically disquieting:

It thus appears that we extricate ourselves from the philosophy of play, that we reach the point at which knowledge gives way, and that un-knowing then appears the greater game – the indefinable, that which thought cannot conceive. This is a thought which exists only timidly within me, one which I do not feel apt to sustain. I do think this way, it is true, but in the manner of a coward, like someone who is inwardly raving mad with terror.<sup>18</sup>

No sovereign, Zarathustrian laughter. Between Hegel and Bataille, it would seem, choose your drama.<sup>19</sup>

#### Notes

1 See Stuart Barnett, 'Introduction: Hegel Before Derrida' in Stuart Barnett (ed.), *Hegel After Derrida* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 1–37.

2 See Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

3 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

4 Georges Bataille, 'Hegel, Death and Sacrifice' in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (eds.), *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 279–95.

5 Alan Bloom, in a footnote to his translation of the *Republic* (New York: Basic, 1968), says of a passage in Book IV (436b): 'This is the earliest known explicit statement of the principle of contradiction – the premise of philosophy and the foundation of rational discourse' (p. 457, n. 25).

6 For a lucid and engaging discussion of Hegel's participation in and extension of Platonism, see J. N. Findlay, 'Hegelianism and Platonism' in Joseph O'Malley, K. W. Algozin, and Frederick G. Weiss (eds.), *Hegel and the History of Philosophy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 62–76.

7 On Bataille's dependence on Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, see below, note 13.

8 In his *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), Michael Inwood comments on how closely Hegel read Plotinus and especially Proclus (p. 297). In *Hegel and Greek Thought* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1968), J. Glenn Gray comments on the obvious relation between Hegel and Neoplatonism: 'Some students of Hegel have long been inclined to find an important key to his philosophy in his interpretation of Neoplatonism. Had not Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus and other leaders of this school appreciated the unity of the Platonic and Aristotelian thought and had they not brought it into the closest relationship with Christianity, as Hegel himself was to do at a later time? Hegel's answer to this seems to be that they only pointed the way to an end which they themselves could not reach. For though they succeeded in accomplishing what Plato and Aristotle could not do, in forsaking the method of reasoning from particular and sensuous images, and conceiving the unity of self-consciousness and being purely as Thought, they never made the necessary logical synthesis of the objective and subjective' (p. 88).

9 There is of course a question as to whether Plotinus's system is actually, and not merely metaphorically, 'emanationist', or rather a peculiarly Greek-philosophical (rather than Christian) form of 'creationism'. On this, see Lloyd P. Gerson, 'Plotinus's Metaphysics: Emanation or Creation?', *Review of Metaphysics* 46 (1993), pp. 559–74. The debate addresses issues ontologically

prior to my concern with the difference between dualist and non-dualist models of such 'efficient causation' of the world, regardless of how that is to be precisely understood.

10 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen McKenna (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

11 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 40–1.

12 In Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 251–77.

13 Bataille is forthright about the unanimity of his reading of Hegel with that of his teacher, Alexandre Kojève, who made of the dialectic of master and slave the keynote of his overall reading of Hegel. See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, translated by J. H. Nichols, edited by A. Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

14 Nietzsche was himself realistic about the limitations of sovereign affirmation and expenditure. Speaking in 'Truth and Falsity in the Ultramoral Sense' in terms of the intuitive as opposed to the (mendacious) rational man, he observes of the former: 'Of course where he *does* suffer, he suffers more; and he even suffers more frequently since he cannot learn from experience, but again and again falls into the same ditch into which he has fallen before. In suffering he is just as irrational as in happiness; he cries aloud and finds no consolation. How different matters are in the same misfortune with the Stoic, taught by experience and ruling himself by ideas!' Hazard Adams (ed.), *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Revised edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p. 639.

15 Elsewhere than in the essay on Bataille, but in the same early period of his work, namely in 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences', Derrida is more judicious with respect to the horns of dialectic: 'There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology – in other words throughout his entire history – has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring presence, the origin and the end of play. ... For my part, although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing* ... because we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différance* of this irreducible difference.' In *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 292–3.

16 *Hegel: The Letters*, translated by Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 280.

17 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973), pp. 141–2.

18 Georges Bataille, 'Unknowing and Rebellion' in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (eds.), *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 329.

19 The writer wishes to acknowledge support, during the writing of this article, of fellowships from Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, UK, and from the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, Canada.