

# THE HEGEL VARIATIONS

On the *Phenomenology of Spirit*



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# Chapter 1

## Closure

Let's begin with the ending: it is above all else urgent not to think of "Absolute Spirit" as a "moment," whether historical or structural or even methodological. Absolute Spirit cannot be considered as a terminus of any kind, without transforming the whole of *Phenomenology of Spirit* into a developmental narrative,<sup>1</sup> one that can be characterized variously as teleological or cyclical, but which in either case is to be vigorously repudiated by modern, or at least by contemporary, thought of whatever persuasion.

Is it, then, to be thought of as the final unveiling of the dialectic (a word Hegel uses very sparingly indeed), or perhaps as the definitive inauguration of something Hegel is much more frequently willing to call the "speculative"? These descriptions have their kernel of truth, insofar as the great movement from *Verstand* or Understanding to *Vernunft* or Reason is grasped as a radical break with common-sense empiricism and with what we may also call reified thinking. In the *Logic*, however, the cancellation and transformation of *Verstand* (and this really may be considered an *Aufhebung*) is followed by not one but two moments, either of which might be called dialectical, albeit for somewhat different reasons. The second part of both *Logics* (the "greater" Logic of 1812–1816 as well as the smaller "Encyclopedia" Logic of 1817) is entitled Essence and deals with "reflection" or what we would call binary oppositions—in other words, very specifically what earns the term "unity of opposites," a dialectical matter indeed. The third or final part, however, that is devoted to the Notion or *Begriff*, is a more metaphysical (or "speculative") affirmation of the ultimate unity of subject and object, of the I and the not-I or nature, a unity that can take either the form of the syllogism or that of Life.<sup>2</sup> What ultimately makes both of these kinds of thinking unsuitable candidates for constituting a whole new historical era or moment is the persistence of *Verstand* within them as the ongoing and inevitable thinking of everyday life and a material world.

It is certain that Hegel is what might anachronistically be called an ideologist of the modern,<sup>3</sup> and that he thinks that a whole new conceptual (and political) practice characterizes his own period (whether one begins that with the French Revolution or Kant, or with Luther and the Reformation). But it is not so clear whether for Hegel the new post-revolutionary and constitutional populations have achieved truly dialectical enlightenment. The

judgment is bound up with that of the status of his philosophy: is it truly universal and exoteric, or rather an esoteric doctrine accessible only to the happy few? I would suggest that the turning point in Hegel's judgment on that status is to be located in his first teaching year in the Nuremberg *Gymnasium*, when he finds to his dismay that the *Phenomenology* is not a satisfactory guide for his students after all, and concludes that philosophy cannot realistically be part of the high school curriculum as he once thought (a disillusionment that significantly coincides with Napoleon's defeat, and a new reactionary hegemony over Europe).<sup>4</sup>

Still, might not the chapter on Absolute Spirit signal a different kind of historical inauguration, that of the appearance of a new kind of human being here and there among the general population—if not the Nietzschean superman, then at least what Kojève calls the Sage, whom he goes so far as to identify with the Platonic philosopher-king?<sup>5</sup> The momentary appearance of Napoleon on the world stage lends historical weight and interest to Kojève's interpretation. Yet it cannot be said that Hegel's conception of the "world-historical individual" reinforces Kojève's anthropomorphism, inasmuch as the very idea of the "ruse of reason or history" devalues the individual "great man" by demonstrating that he is merely a pawn or a tool in the hands of historical development. Kojève's view here is akin to the temptation of personification in literary analysis and traditional allegory, and certainly goes against the grain of the contemporary theory anxious to decenter the subject and to invent collective or structural analyses for what used to be individualizing ones. Indeed, nothing in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* suggests Hegel's complicity in the idea of the Sage with which Kojève here endows him.

But surely Absolute Spirit may be seen as a kind of method, in a chapter which systematically reviews all the moments of the *Phenomenology* and characterizes their findings as truths "for us," and insights we have only been qualified to earn on the strength of reaching this final "speculative" conviction about the ultimate unity of subject and object? Yet the very concept of method flattens out all the properly dialectical differences between the chapters and screens out the stimulating heterogeneity of the *Phenomenology* itself. The dialectic is not enhanced by its association with the truly vulgar and instrumental idea of method, a temptation we would do well to resist but which is certainly reinforced by the omnipresence of *Verstand* or that reified thinking of which "method" is so striking an example.

What may well prove more congenial to a contemporary or a postmodern public is the invocation of Marx's notion of "General Intellect" (which has also been foundational for the Negri/Hardt theory of the multitude).<sup>6</sup> Marx's expression (found in the *Grundrisse*) evokes an historically new kind of general literacy in the mass public, most strikingly evinced in the trickling down of scientific knowledge (and technological know-how) in the population at large, a transformation that might also be described in terms of the displacement of a peasant (or feudal) mentality by a more general urban one

(and in hindsight also comprehensible as a fundamental consequence of literacy and mass culture). At any rate, the hypothesis of such a social transformation in consciousness and mentality (in “Spirit” or *Geist* in Hegel’s sense) is not at all incompatible with Hegel’s narrative here; and it strengthens the renewed appeal of Hegel’s work and the revival of interest in it, in a postmodernity characterized by cynical reason and by what I will later on term plebeianization.

We must at any rate read *Absolute Spirit* as a symptom rather than a prophecy, and thereby rescue the *Phenomenology* from its stereotypical reading as an out-of-date teleology. Indeed, in what follows I will argue that the “ladder of forms” of this work is as open-ended as one likes. How else to explain the persistence today of that opposition between left-Hegelians (such as Kojève) and right-Hegelians (Fukuyama and the triumph of American capitalism) that had already declared itself in the struggle for his system immediately after Hegel’s own death?

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<sup>1</sup> It has been rumored that the formal paradigm for Hegel’s *Bildungsroman* was *La Vie de Marianne* of Marivaux (1731–1745): see Jacques d’Hondt, “Hegel et Marivaux,” in *Europe*, vol. 44, December 1966, 323–337. For d’Hondt, however, the kinship lies less in the sequence of episodes than in Marianne’s achievement of a truly divided self-consciousness.

<sup>2</sup> According to Althusser, Lenin retains the second stage of the Hegelian progression (“the determinations of reflection”) while abandoning the more idealist dimensions of the Notion itself (in the syllogism and Life): see Louis Althusser, “Lenin before Hegel,” in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, 113. I tend to agree with this preference, but would rather substitute ideology for idealism. As for life, Hegel’s version of it, pre-Darwinian as it is, is probably far too metaphysical and epistemological (highest form of the unity of subject and object) to be of much interest for us today. Still we might give Hegel credit for the first timid step in the direction of that vitalism which, a mighty stream from Nietzsche and Tolstoy through D. H. Lawrence to Deleuze, has been so energizing a worldview (which is to say, ideology) in contemporary thought.

<sup>3</sup> I take it that this is the position of Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991; and see also below.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 323.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel*, Paris: Gallimard, 1947. Future references to this work are denoted *ILH*. Significantly, Allan Bloom’s useful English abridgement omits the central political seminar of 1936–1937 (113–157).

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin, 1973, 706; and on the fortunes of this idea for contemporary Italian radicalism, see Paolo Virno, “General Intellect,” in *Historical Materialism*, vol. 15 num. 3, 2007, 3–8.

## Chapter 2

### Organizational Problems

If indeed it still seems necessary to propose another reading of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, one that claims some difference from the seemingly innumerable studies of this work only partially conveyed by the most extensive bibliographies, this not only has to do with the relatively recent rediscovery and revival of interest in this book,<sup>7</sup> about which Hegel himself had mixed feelings later on in his career as he elaborated that “Hegelianism” which, as a philosophical system, would be synonymous with his name down to the 1930s. He himself meant it, as his tenure publication, to be a teaching manual; when in the Nuremberg gymnasium the effort proved a dismal failure (as I have already observed), he not only abandoned his commitment to the teaching of philosophy in the secondary schools, but began to plan new and far more systematic manuals—most notably the three-volume *Enzyklopädie*—which henceforth left the position of the *Phenomenology* in permanent doubt, for himself as well as for his followers: was it an introduction or propaedeutic to philosophy, something whose possibility its own *Vorwort* vigorously denies, or was it actually one constitutive part of that philosophy whose various panels—logic, aesthetics, political philosophy, science—seemed to leave no place for it?

Uncertainties of this kind are welcome in the way in which they expose the text to multiple possibilities of interpretation which cannot be resolved philologically. But what far more insistently calls for rereading and reinterpretation is the presence in this book of a number of themes which have seemed permanently relevant over the last century, despite or perhaps even because of the radical changes in the historical situations in which, as questions, they still insistently reappear: these are most notably the Master/Slave dialectic and the infamous “end of history” (but the Unhappy Consciousness and the “beautiful soul” are also still very much with us, along with a number of other conceptual markers, as I hope to demonstrate below).

Yet what endows these textual moments with renewed interest for us today is their form fully as much as their content: for the very heterogeneity of the book has prevented any one of them from being fully assimilated to some homogeneous dimension of philosophical thought and discourse. They have not been able to be transformed into pure or coherent philosophical positions, into identifiable ideas or concepts, into reified tokens about which we can say

that they represent Hegel's official thoughts or his "positions" on this or that. Nor does this have to do with the much appreciated obscurity of his writing (as opposed to the relative lucidity of the lectures also taken down for us): Hegel's practice of the sentence will certainly detain us here; but it is in terms of his practice of the dialectic which these uncertainties have most often been rehearsed; and we need to be very vigilant about the way in which we evoke this mysterious entity, and in particular wary of its translation back into one of those purely philosophical concepts (the "unity of opposites," for example) that the dialectic itself came into being to forestall or interrupt, to displace or deconstruct, but also to set back in motion. Fortunately, the *Phenomenology* is itself far more vigilant in this respect than the later works, and not the least source of its famous difficulty will be not merely its reluctance to pronounce the word dialectic or to endow it with the density and substantiality of a name or a method, but also the complicated footwork with which it attempts to avoid taking positions at the same time that it expounds them.

This productive uncertainty about the philosophical status of the *Phenomenology* is matched by equally productive ambiguities or hesitations on other formal or organizational issues. It has for example been noted, practically since the first publication of the book in the triumphant Napoleonic years, that there is a gap and a division, not to speak of an opposition, between the first chapters, on consciousness, and the bulk of the later chapters, which professional philosophers are inclined to describe as sociological (when they do not simply deal with what can be designated as the "history of ideas"). It may be thought that Hegel himself attempted to mask or paper over this shift of registers by introducing a set of superimposed oppositions which certainly complicate this issue. Thus the Consciousness chapters are contrasted with a Self-consciousness section, followed by a section on Reason (*Vernunft*), which on one numeration (as C) completes the triad on consciousness, but on another (simultaneous) one (as AA) appears to oppose itself to Spirit (*der Geist*, BB), itself then followed by CC (Religion) and DD (Absolute Spirit), as though these four categories now formed yet a different kind of series.

It is certain that the large virtually self-sufficient panel on religion complicates the issue in ways I will discuss later on (while Absolute Spirit turns out to be little more than a summary of the book we have just read). At any rate, it is also clear that at least part of the Reason section ("observing reason") falls back into the purely philosophical classification insofar as it is a contribution to that subsection of philosophy called epistemology, while the preceding section on Self-consciousness (which contains the famous master/slave episode) would seem, as political philosophy, to anticipate the sociology/history-of-ideas category (into which its accompanying panel on stoicism, skepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness still more clearly falls).

The first three chapters seem relatively self-contained, and to pursue an identifiable and more technically philosophical argument, which runs from the immediacy of purely physical sensation (the here and now) to the first

discovery of scientific law, as an abstraction behind and beyond that sensory experience. Famously the first chapter uses language to undermine the seeming immediacy of the sense; the second observes the reorganization of the sensory world into the perception of objects which function as containers for their various properties; the third finally pushes on into some ultimate restructuration in which the physical experience of the world becomes inessential in the light of the unseen and imperceptibly abstract scientific laws posited behind it (Hegel characterizes them famously as an “inverted world” lying beyond and behind this one).

Still, there can be little doubt that the overall division marks a shift of registers, and that each group has given rise to a distinctive set of commentaries. The initial philosophical chapters have been seen as Hegel’s solution to the problems with which Kant’s work left the younger German philosophical generation, with its intent to move from mere epistemology à la Kant to full-throated metaphysics or ontology, beginning with Fichte. These problems turn mostly around the opposition between subject and object and their relationship, which Kant had left in a kind of provisional limbo (we can know our knowledge of things but not the “things-in-themselves”). Fichte boldly emerges from this methodological suspension by affirming the very production of the object by the subject, followed in this by Schelling’s daring and comprehensive exploration of what he called the philosophy of Nature.

Will we then still want to say that Hegel then reinstates the subject itself in this discussion? His programmatic formula, Subject or System, would seem to confirm this characterization, at the same time that it opens the door to all those vibrant contemporary arguments about Hegel’s relations with Spinoza and the latter’s alleged superiority to him (immediately reintroducing the issue of temporality and therewith of the dialectic, both presumably absent from Spinoza).<sup>8</sup>

But it is more appropriate to say that Hegel sublates the dilemma of subject and object by projecting a new dimension of thinking, called *speculative*, which presupposes their identity in advance, and which will later on authorize the deployment of that whole immense Hegelian system whose multiple sub-programs scarcely dwindle by comparison with Aristotle himself, in this respect Hegel’s great model and master.

As for the contemporary discussions and commentaries on these technical philosophical debates, I will hazard the impression that the rich tradition of postwar German scholarship, from Dieter Henrich on, has tended to move backwards to reclaim Schelling, and even to produce a fourth philosophical partner in what is no longer a triumvirate, in the person of the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, whose early writings are alleged to have affirmed the unity of subject and object in advance, thereby rendering Hegel’s laborious climb to the speculative unnecessary.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, a growing body of distinguished American philosophy, centered on the work of Robert Pippin, and baptizing this whole complex of technical philosophical problems and solutions “post-Kantian,” has tended to

revindicate the dignity of the old label of idealism, fallen into some disrepute in the post-war period. It is a move which has some plausibility in the midst of the current Bergson revival, even though its arguments about consciousness and the limits consciousness set for philosophy have little enough in common with Deleuzian and virtualist theorizing.<sup>10</sup>

Pippin has taught us to reread Hegel's arguments with the respect due a rigorous philosophizing, even though he achieves this by a modest lowering of the volume of Hegel's dialectical claims, which are surely what have always excited the latter's followers, not many of whom will be altogether content with the unpretentious Rortyan pragmatism of this new avatar.

But this rescue operation, which makes Hegel respectable and allows him reentry into the fraternity of professional philosophers, has a consequence which elementary dialectics might have predicted in advance, namely—and as a result of the reaffirmation of the rigor of the philosophical chapters—the slippage of the non-philosophical (or “sociological”) chapters into the impressionistic flabbiness of a generalizing “culture critique.” The Americans have tried to forestall this unfortunate development by lending Hegel contemporary relevance as a philosopher of modernity; and insofar as the epithet directs our attention to the more immediate cultural problems of Napoleonic and post-revolutionary society the effort is meritorious. But it cannot long block the downward rush; and when “modernity” comes to be endowed with all the familiar Nietzschean and existential characteristics—death of god, end of values, alienation, etc.—Hegel's originality as a thinker evaporates (along with his relevance to the postmodern age, for which none of these “problems” are any longer an issue).

This is why the most useful and productive commentaries on the second (or sociological) batch of *Phenomenology* chapters are rather those elaborated from a political and indeed a Marxist perspective, in which even the status of what gets called culture or cultural is profoundly modified. The fountainhead of such commentary is of course the classic lecture series of Alexandre Kojève in the 1930s, still stimulating, but about which I think some new kinds of questions can now be raised.

For the moment I will merely lay down a rough and general framework for grasping the organizational fault line responsible for the emergence of these various philosophical and political traditions. It seems to me that things fall into place if we follow Hegel himself in his peremptory definition of Spirit or *Geist* as “the ethical life of a nation [das sittliche Leben eines Volkes] insofar as it is the immediate truth—the individual that is a world.”<sup>11</sup>

In this fundamental identification of *Geist* with collectivity I have followed the movement of Adorno's thinking in his first Hegel essay, which reaches its climax at the utterly unexpected eruption of the Marx of the 1844 manuscripts. Yet this high point is also, characteristically, the moment at which we begin our downward path towards everything ideological in Hegelian idealism. What is remarkable is that at the very moment at which Adorno names the content of *Geist* or Spirit as *Gesellschaft* or society, he

abruptly withdraws the identification, or at least its terminological articulation:

The interpretation of spirit as society, accordingly, appears to be ... incompatible with the sense of Hegel's philosophy if only because it does not satisfy the precept of immanent criticism and attempts to grasp the truth content of Hegelian philosophy in terms of something external to it, something that his philosophy, within its own framework, would have derived as conditioned or posited. Explicit critique of Hegel, of course, could show that he was not successful in that deduction. The linguistic expression "existence," which is necessarily conceptual, is confused with what it designates, which is nonconceptual, something that cannot be melted down into identity.

Die Deutung von Geist als Gesellschaft erscheint demnach als unvereinbar mit dem Sinn der Hegelschen Philosophie allein schon darum, weil sie sich gegen die Maxime immanenter Kritik verfehlt, den Wahrheitsgehalt der Hegelschen Philosophie an einem ihr Äußerlichen zu ergreifen suche, das diese in ihrem eigenen Gefüge als Bedingtes oder Gesetztes abgeleitet habe. Die explizite Hegelkritik freilich könnte dartun, daß jene Deduktion ihm nicht gelang. Der sprachliche Ausdruck Existenz, notwendig ein Begriffliches, wird verwechselt mit dem, was er designiert, dem Nichtbegrifflichen, in Identität nicht Einzuschmelzenden.<sup>12</sup>

Yes, Spirit is the collective, but we must not call it that, owing to the reification of language, owing to the positivities of the philosophical terms or names themselves, which restore precisely that empirical common-sense ideology it was the very vocation of the dialectic to destroy in the first place. To name the social is to make it over into a thing or an empirical entity, just as to celebrate its objectivity in the face of idealistic subjectivism is to reestablish the old subject-object opposition which was to have been done away with. A similar, profoundly Adornian move can be observed in his next step (in which I also follow him).

As always in Hegel, however, the term "immediate" is a warning signal: indeed, the whole of Hegel's philosophical production is an elaborate refutation of all possible concepts of immediacy. He therefore continues:

It [Spirit] must advance to the consciousness of what it is immediately, must leave behind it the beauty of ethical life [das schöne sittliche Leben], and by passing through a series of shapes [Gestalten] attain to a knowledge of itself. These shapes, however, are distinguished from the previous ones by the fact that they are real Spirits, actualities in the strict meaning of the word [this whole phrase is Miller's paraphrase of *eigentliche Wirklichkeiten*], and instead of being shapes merely of consciousness, are shapes of a world. (326; 265)

We can disambiguate Hegel's discussions by holding firm to the principle that the words Spirit or *Geist*, wherever they appear, have nothing to do with spirituality nor even with consciousness itself as such (whose philosophical problems have already been sharply differentiated by Hegel himself in his

organizational scheme). I would even go so far as to say that Spirit means nothing cultural, in the looser sense in which that word is generally used (but I will come back to that sense later on; the problem is a central one for my reading). We must, in other words, hold firmly to the conviction that in Hegel the word “Spirit” always designates the collective, a second word I use as a more neutral one than society, which immediately raises substantive and historical problems. When we do so I believe we will find that many false problems fall away: thus the peculiar emplacement of observing Reason outside the Spirit chapters, and in seeming opposition to them, can be explained by the hypothesis that for Hegel scientific research—here the paradigm of Reason—is an individual pursuit, and not (or not yet) a marker of the quality of this or that historical moment in the development of society.

Indeed, Reason is here explicitly identified with empiricism (144; 184), and a host of figures of forgetting (“after losing the grave of its truth, after the abolition of its actuality is itself abolished” [140; 179]) underscore its own necessary forgetfulness of its own evolution out of the Unhappy Consciousness (“it has this path behind it and has forgotten it” [141; 180]). What has been forgotten is essentially the Other, and the structure of self-consciousness which the shock of the other produces/reveals; so that its discovery of the Categories (which confirm the unity of consciousness and the not-I), its “certainty of being all reality” (142; 181), is left strangely abstract and one-dimensional, and cannot yet accede to genuine individuality insofar as it remains unconsciously locked into the mind of the individual scientist or observer, the individual practitioner of this abstract Reason. The moment of Reason here is therefore not yet the discovery of Spirit, but rather that of the emergence of *Vernunft* or Understanding (142, 144; 182, 184)—an essentially spatial and non-reflexive mode of consciousness.

With the self-consciousness chapters, and up to the emergence of Spirit as such, we traverse a seemingly heterogeneous mixture of subjects, which include chapters on the history of philosophy and the emergence of natural science, as well as brief but probing excursions into passion (hedonism, romanticism, and eighteenth-century virtue), along with the emergence of modern or secular individuality. In their various ways, all these topics lay the groundwork for the more recognizably historical chapters of the section entitled “Spirit,” which I have translated here as the social collectivity. A first pair of chapters (“Self-consciousness”) lay in place a kind of existential progression, which includes the famous section on the struggle between Master and Slave, and the various existential-metaphysical options on offer in the desolation of the Roman Empire: stoicism, skepticism, and Christianity (the Unhappy Consciousness). The next or transitional group of chapters, entitled “Reason” (and posing the significant question of its possible distinction from self-consciousness on the one side and Spirit on the other), take up the topics of science (classificatory, psychological and as it were neuro-materialistic), libido, and work.

These are then the epistemological, psychoanalytic and Marxian

preconditions not only for individualism and modernity, but above all for the full-blown emergence of History in the chapters organized around Spirit. For reasons to be discussed later on, I read the chapters on Spirit as the *Phenomenology's* conclusion (its climax in the opposition between the revolution and Kantian morality), with the immense chapter on religion and the relatively perfunctory one on Absolute Spirit as textual supplements of one kind or another.

The same description may incidentally be applied to religion, whose recurrence in Self-consciousness (“the Unhappy Consciousness”), in Spirit (“belief and pure ‘insight’ ”), and finally in a whole immense subsection (CC) entirely devoted to it, may otherwise be confusing. These returns, something like the progressive intersections of a single vector with the loops of a spiral, might better be grasped on the order of the musical theme and variations, as we will see later on. In any case, it is clear that the first-mentioned of these discussions of religion isolates the experience of an individual consciousness, the second one that of a significant social movement at a certain moment of history, and the third a whole social structure as such.

The Spirit chapters now unroll into what is a recognizable linear historical sequence, omitting, as I have already pointed out, the darkest Middle Ages (presumably on the ground that Christianity has already been dealt with). So we move directly from the polis and its vicissitudes (Antigone)—the ethical order—to the early modern and the emergence of the absolute monarchies from feudalism: this is now significantly entitled Culture, and prepares the way for the discussion of what we now call the public sphere in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, with its dialectical struggle against religion or Christianity which has now sunk to the status of a “belief.” There then follows the French Revolution and the Terror, to which I see the following chapter on Kantian morality in synchrony as a pendant, and which will for us be read, not as Kojève’s end of history, so much as the suspended step of a present as much ours as Hegel’s.

It would then be tempting to oppose the collective sense of Spirit to some individual perspective in the earlier chapters: but this is to presuppose that there could be any coherent individual perspective outside the collective existence in which individuals always find themselves. What could possibly be individual, in some existential sense, about the dialectic of sense-perception? That dialectic, to be sure, does involve some common-sense empiricist ideologies, which it undertakes to deconstruct; but one can hardly maintain that the operations of the individual senses and their objects absorb the totality of the individual existence (or at least one cannot do so until a certain modernism in art). The first three philosophical chapters are then truly technical, in the sense that they isolate specialized problems touching on this or that isolated feature of individual existence, and not, as is later the case with Spirit or with religion, the whole of it: but this is why these chapters, “moments” though they are (in that specific sense in which the German neuter noun “Moment” means an aspect, rather than, as with the masculine

noun, a temporal phenomenon), designate levels of life which are always with us and whose very errors or commonplace stereotypes persist through all the “shapes” of history. Sense-perception is always with us, and in an historically far more significant way, so is the dialectic of the Master and the Slave: nothing excludes the latter’s ongoing presence from the seemingly later chapters on the polis, absolutism, or revolutionary democracy. The same can no doubt be said for “observing Reason,” the practice of a scientific investigation of nature and of both outside and inner worlds, as well as for the passions, the various ethics, and the religious anxieties. (Another weakness of the “post-Kantian” school may be conjectured here, in the way in which the more passional or ethical materials of the Reason chapter are relegated to “sociology” and thus implicitly dismissed as unworthy of technical philosophizing.)

On this view, then, it is not (it is no longer) a good idea to think of the *Phenomenology* as a kind of *Bildungsroman*, a form which, in a true Enlightenment spirit, tells the story of the progression of an immature subject to a state of maturity, very much in Kant’s original sense: a “formation” or “education” brought about by the combined effects of inner dispositions and external experiences. The idea of maturation—autonomy, responsibility, self-government and the like—is certainly one of the most influential ways in which Hegel and his contemporaries conceptualized the bourgeois revolution (for which the notion of modernity is in any case a misnomer and an anachronism), living it as a fundamental historical break and as the central event of History at least since the Reformation; and it is clear from a juxtaposition of his revolutionary chapter (“Absolute Freedom and Terror”) with the following one on morality that he saw Kant’s ethics as a crucial contribution to the new post-revolutionary world, both as a sign of profound change and as an attempt to theorize and to resolve the new problems to which it gave rise. But it’s not clear to me that this particular historical plateau is endowed with a vision of some new centered and fulfilled subjectivity (and to read *Absolute Spirit* in that way is to turn Hegel back into the caricature he has been for so many years).

Even less satisfactory is any attempt to make such a view of the subject (albeit immature and still in tutelage) retroactive to the initial chapters of the book which as we have seen at best pose aspects of the problem of consciousness, but not of any unified subjectivity. It would be tempting, then, to think of those early chapters in terms of split subjectivities, multiple subject-positions, part objects, semi-autonomous drives and the like; but that is surely even more anachronistic and without any persuasive evidence. If what is wanted is some line of narrative continuity—and the desire and its accompanying anxiety say as much about the reader as about the author’s project—then at best the chapters are shadowed by sequences from the history of philosophy as Hegel saw it. In that case they project but local sequences scarcely bound by the rules of chronology, and which are in any case mostly assimilated to the illusions of common sense and the ideologies of

everyday life. Thus the opening chapter on “sense certainty” posits a world in which the things we see and touch around us constitute reality as such and are self-evidently the worthiest of our trust.

Meanwhile, a more comprehensive kind of illusion slowly develops throughout these first chapters and which we must call, as though it were a specific faculty of the mind, *Verstand* or understanding: this is what we might now today call common sense: reified thinking, the thinking of the external, of space and objects generally, a thinking ultimately abstracted and codified in mathematics. The two *Logics* undertake the most thoroughgoing demystification of this “faculty,” which we tend to apply indiscriminately and illicitly to all kinds of other phenomena, such as thoughts and concepts, feelings, history, relations with other people, and so forth. I call this a faculty (a view inherited from Kant) because although it will come to be corrected by different kinds of thinking, it is obvious that it must remain the conceptual lingua franca of our everyday life in what it takes to be a material world. In typically dialectical fashion, it is an error, but an error that it would be disastrous to do away with, and that can only be sublated or *aufgehoben*: that is, it will continue to exist on the level appropriate to it, but now coordinated with some very different conceptual dynamics.

Before taking on any of this substantively we need to ponder a methodological issue and to forestall one of the most notorious and inveterate stereotypes of Hegel discussion, namely the thesis-antithesis-synthesis formula. It is certain that there are plenty of triads in Hegel, beginning with the Trinity (or ending with it?). It is also certain that he himself is complicitous in the propagation of this formula, and at least partly responsible for its vulgarization. It is certainly a useful teaching device as well as a convenient expository framework: and is thereby called upon to play its role in that transformation of Hegel’s thought into a systematic philosophy—into Hegelianism, if you will—on which we will have occasion to insist over and over again in the present essay. For even if the tripartite rhythm happens to do justice to this or that local Hegelian insight, it still reifies that insight in advance and translates its language into purely systemic terms. (Indeed, for contemporary philosophy it is precisely this sequence which is identifiable as being teleological, so that today—or perhaps from Freud on—we tend to reverse this order and to affirm that it is the antithesis which produces the thesis in the first place, in order to generate the ideological illusion of the synthesis as such. It may be observed that the new version of causality performs the same operation on the old one.) Meanwhile, the tripartite formula is calculated to mislead and confuse the reader who seeks to process this material in a series of three steps: something for example utterly impossible to complete in the structurally far more complex play of oppositions in the chapter on the secular culture of absolutism; and alarmingly rebuked by Hegel himself in that famous passage at the end of the greater *Logic* in which he allows that “three” might be “four” after all.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the tripartite temptation does not appear out of nowhere, nor does it

correspond to nothing at all. Indeed, it might be considered a relatively awkward codification of what is certainly a far more consistent and coherent Hegelian view of human time, which governs the growth of the individual (*Bildung*) fully as much as the development of history itself. This is the great rhythm of internalization and externalization in which Hegel both coincides with Marx and differentiates himself sharply from Marxism. For the various words Hegel uses about this process—*Entäußerung*, *Entfremdung*—all of them corresponding to the literal meaning of the word alienation—open that conceptual space in which Marx himself, adopting this systole and diastole of the production process, seeks to distinguish *alienation* from objectification or externalization in a way which will ground a properly Marxian view of history. Nonetheless we will see that Hegel's notion of work or activity, which is the source of the rhythm whereby we objectify ourselves and then reinteriorize the objective results at some higher level, is profoundly dialectical and is scarcely cancelled by the Marxian correction. It is all the more useful a concept for us today, as we shall see, in that it posits a rhythm of expansion more helpful in conceptualizing contemporary spatiality than it would have been in an earlier period. Finally, it is the source of some of Hegel's most significant and insistent linguistic figures, in particular the language of a "going back into" the self or consciousness, a trope far more important for the understanding of the Hegelian text than the standard tripartite language, whose final term, "synthesis," presupposes a resolution in this movement which is not at all consistent with Hegel's thinking; positing a kind of success or progress in externalization and internalization which scarcely does justice to Hegel's deeper appreciation of failure and contradiction and turns the historical movement of the dialectic into a banal and uplifting saga of inevitable progress.<sup>14</sup>

The tripartite scheme itself has a different origin, however, and it is to be located in one of the most inveterate figures of the Hegelian text, namely that which seeks to assimilate thinking and its temporalities to that amphibious thing, the proposition (*Satz* or sentence) in logic—a sentence which is also a judgment, and whose strongest and most unique form is reached in the syllogism.<sup>15</sup> The extraordinary productivity of this fascination of Hegel with logic reaches its fruition in the greater *Logic* of 1812–1816, in which, in a stunning and wholly unexpected resurrection, the whole dead weight of the scholastic elaboration of Aristotle's logical compendia is miraculously translated and transmuted into substantive dialectical categories. In the *Phenomenology* we only sense the first stirrings of this mighty project, and it is best to take them as figures rather than as ideas in their own right. Thus we will say that the syllogism is here little more than one crystallization among others of the specialized temporal cadences Hegel is here concerned to collect: the logical figures are one convenient way of transcribing and scoring such moments, with the advantage that this particular figure is also auto-referential, and that its own specific content—subject, predicate, affirmation, negation—can also serve as an interpretant of what we find here transpiring.

(It is not until the third and final, “speculative,” panel of the *Logic* that the syllogism bursts forth as the very embodiment of Life itself.) But here, at this lower level, it is best to think of the logical episodes as yet more picture-thinking (Miller’s welcome translation of *Vorstellung*).

The view of logic with which we then emerge is one in which attention and its thinking veers around under its own weight: the logical subject, of which a predicate is affirmed, now, insofar as it is at one with that particular predicate, loses its priority; the predicate, now becoming the substance itself, has shifted to the center of things, the former subject now reduced to little more than the predicate of that former predicate. It will be remembered that the young Marx took this whole process as the very paradigm of Hegel’s profound idealism, which turns abstractions into things at the same time that it turns real things into abstractions.<sup>16</sup> What casts a somewhat different light on this suspicious procedure is its restlessness (one of Hegel’s favorite words), which allows none of these developments to settle down in a stable place or being. Indeed, as Adorno has argued, when in doubt, Hegel (straining to restore content to the subjectivisms of Fichte and Schelling) always inclines in the direction of the “preponderance of the object.” Thus, in characteristic micro-narrative, he conveys something of the frustration of the former “subject” of the proposition, which

still finds in the Predicate what it thought it had finished with and got away from, and from which it hoped to return into itself; and, instead of being able to function as the determining agent in the movement of predication, arguing back and forth whether to attach this or that Predicate, it is still really occupied with the self of the content, having to remain associated with it, instead of being for itself. (58–59/37–38)

And now, unexpectedly, not only is “the general nature of the judgment or proposition ... destroyed by the speculative proposition,” but the whole figure is effaced by a new, musical one: “this conflict between the general form of a proposition and the unity of the Notion which destroys it is similar to conflict that occurs in rhythm between metre and accent” (59/38). This illustration will be enough to warn us against identifying Hegel’s thinking with any of the figures he uses to describe it.

Some of them, to be sure, if properly marked as figures in advance, can be helpful in isolating this or that significant feature: the tripartite formula, for example, can suggest the all-important unity of opposites by way of its first two terms, and provided we abandon the obsessive search for syntheses. Meanwhile, the form of the syllogism can also be useful if we focus attention, not on its results or conclusions, but rather on that “middle term” shared by both subject and predicate—a kind of Hölderlinian primordial unity, from which, as we shall see, both terms emerge and to which they strain to return at the end of the logical process. Even these examples, however, suggest yet a further lesson, namely the need to stress an open-ended Hegel rather than the conventionally closed system which is projected by so many idle worries

about Absolute Spirit, about totality, or about Hegel's allegedly teleological philosophy of history.

Indeed, the doctrine of the middle term suggests a very different Hegel who may serve as a corrective to the traditional ones: this is the Maoist Hegel proposed by Alain Badiou, in which the metaphysical spirit is expansive rather than centripetal or cyclical. Here the central dialectical movement is identified as the One dividing into Two, and it is clearly quite distinct in spirit from those figures that emphasize (for example) the return of consciousness into itself (350–351, 425).<sup>17</sup> We will also return to this new pattern of infinite scissiparity (which is to be found explicitly articulated in Hegel's political thought) later on.

For the moment, it is enough to conclude these initial remarks with the conviction that we must try in what follows to separate the events of Hegel's text from the terms and figures in which they are presented. But this is easier said than done, for it involves the contradictory presupposition that the fundamental problem can be stated in non-representational terms, as though what we were calling "representation" were some mere decorative adjunct to what can also be presented neutrally or objectively. At that point, then, every effort to convey some original thought of Hegel before its expression in what he found to be a satisfactory formulation is itself in turn drawn back into the representational dilemma in a never-ending asymptotic spiral.

But the dilemma can perhaps better be conveyed in another figure, on which we have already touched. This is the musical phenomenon of the theme and variations, and it is surely no accident that the master of this musical figure is Hegel's exact contemporary. Indeed, it may even turn out that the compromises on which Beethoven himself (and the first Vienna school in general) founded their "classicism," also have some analogy with Hegel's own problems and solutions. Here is what Adorno has to say about Beethoven's practice of theme and variations and indeed its centrality in this whole moment of musical history:

Development recalls the procedure of variation. In music before Beethoven—with very few exceptions—the procedure of variation was considered to be among the more superficial technical procedures, a mere masking of thematic material which otherwise retained its essential identity. Now, in association with development, variation serves the establishment of universal, concretely unschematic relationships. The procedure of variation becomes dynamically charged with newly gained dynamic qualities. In variation, as developed up to this point, the identity of the thematic material remains firmly established—Schoenberg calls this material the model. It is all "the same thing." But the meaning of this identity reveals itself as non-identity. The thematic material is of such a nature that to attempt to secure it is tantamount to varying it. It really does not in any way exist "in itself" but only in view of the possibility of the entirety. Fidelity to the demands of the theme signifies a constantly intervening alteration in all its given moments. By virtue of such non-identity of identity music achieves a completely new relationship to the time within which a given work takes place. Music is no longer indifferent to time, since it no longer functions on the level of repetition in time, but rather on

that of alteration. However, music does not simply surrender to time, because in its constant alteration it retains its thematic identity. The concept of the classic in music is defined by this paradoxical relationship to time.<sup>18</sup>

Adorno's discussion is not by chance embedded in his essay on Schoenberg, where it marks that possibility of a transgression of limits already foreshadowed in the limit itself. For as Adorno implies, the very notion of the theme is a fragile and precarious one, which will in Schoenberg's hands (and under what Adorno considers to be the objective logic of the musical material itself) give way. For the well-nigh infinite virtuosity of the variational process itself (we often indeed begin with a variation, and only later on discover the theme as such, in its official or "original" form) at length leads to a kind of musical "critique of origins," that is to say, to the nagging doubt as to whether there ever was such a thing as the initial theme in the first place. Yet if the theme itself also comes to be considered a variation, it then turns out, in truly postmodern fashion, to have been a variation without an original, much as present-day simulacra are described as copies without originals. We therefore here arrive at a decisive moment dialectically, in which difference, by gradually extending its dominion over everything, ultimately comes to liquidate identity as such, in a well-nigh suicidal meltdown in which it must itself also disappear (inasmuch as difference is necessarily predicated on identity in the first place).

The classical form of theme and variations is then secretly inhabited by this contradiction, this fateful inner tendency, which it can only provisionally and temporarily forestall by some initial act of faith in the stability and identity of the theme as such. It is a dilemma we may now retranslate into conceptual terms, where the term reification seems the most appropriate way to convey a linguistic parallel. The compromise belief in the stability and substantiality of what is in music called the theme is here in philosophy echoed in the mirage of the invention and defense of a correct language, that is to say, a set of stable names for the philosophical problems and their putative solutions. The systems of the traditional philosophers are then in effect constituted by systems of names, by a specific nomenclature, associated above all with the name of the philosopher (Lacan taught us that names and -isms were the very hallmark and symptom of so-called university discourse<sup>19</sup>). The stability of the names, and the prospect of widespread adoption and adherence to them, is a well-nigh religious mirage of universality whose destructiveness has come to be only too well-known, without there seeming to be any other alternative than the reformation-style pluralism of multiculturalist "interpretive communities."

The problem with names is that, deeply embedded in history, after a certain time and at different rates of speed they begin to show their age. Some systems are canonized and as it were mummified, others begin to rot and stink of an intolerable past, still others give off the musty smell of archives and long-shuttered houses. There then gradually arises a new kind of