



# Aesthetics After Hegel

Vol.1 No.1 (2012)

## Evental Aesthetics

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**Vol. 1, No. 1 (2012)**  
**Aesthetics After Hegel**

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# Aesthetics After Hegel

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# Introduction

Mandy–Suzanne Wong  
and Joanna Demers

“The time of Hegel still lies ahead,” wrote Slavoj Žižek in 2011.<sup>1</sup> Like the twentieth century before it, the young twenty–first century is a din, replete with the strident clanging of stark opposites against each other, and the terrified cries of those crushed in between. Liberalism versus fundamentalism, “terror” versus “freedom,” exploitation versus conservation, singularity against plurality, identity against difference, humanity against nature, deconstruction against metaphysics. What is yet to come, what “lies ahead,” says Žižek, still yet to be realized and comprehensively conceived, is the effective mediation of such oppositions: mediation which, Hegel would say, can result in creative movement beyond the oppositions, that simultaneously preserves and forsakes them.

It is true that on political and ecological, as well as certain scholarly and philosophical planes, antinomy and stubborn antagonism are still the orders of the day. But since Hegel’s time, throughout the twentieth century and even today, aesthetic practices have, in an overwhelming variety of idiosyncratic ways, confronted, enacted, and deconstructed the very notions of opposition and mediation. By thematizing such issues as the relationship between art and non–art, between ending and beginning, individuality and community, mysticism and rationality, irony and sincerity,

communication and meaninglessness, object and process, modern and post-modern art summon opposition and mediation, and call them into question at the conceptual level. Unlike, say, political practices today, contemporary art *practices* opposition and mediation, *utilizes* these concepts in creations that transcend them both, *and asks what it is* to oppose and to mediate. Art and related projects, such as art scholarship and aesthetic inquiries, are able to do this because they are art and not politics. Our point here, though, is that aesthetic practices today do what Hegel did in his philosophy. As he predicted, albeit not at all in the manner he predicted, art has become philosophy.

*Aesthetics After Hegel*, then, refers not just to aesthetic phenomena occurring after Hegel's death, but also to aesthetic phenomena that "take after" Hegel by carrying on his thought in their own ways. Indeed, the very notion – or threat – of "afterness," which casts a shadow over most of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, is itself an evocative problem in art born of an age that brushes up against all kinds of apocalypse. Thus there are multiple senses in which, with Paul de Man, we can realistically say that in our contemporary aesthetic practices, "Whether we know it, or like it, or not, most of us are Hegelians and quite orthodox ones at that."<sup>2</sup> Such distinguished thinkers as Arthur Danto, William Desmond, Joseph Margolis, and Robert Pippin have therefore gone in search of the precise relationships between Hegel's ideas and works of art of which he never could have dreamed, in the hope of deepening and extrapolating from those relationships. We and our contributors continue that quest in this inaugural issue of *Evental Aesthetics*.

To call something "evental" is to say that it promises change. With this issue of *Evental Aesthetics*, we hope to begin to change, in ways however small, how Hegel's relevance to contemporary situations is perceived. Our contributors invite new ways of thinking Hegel's ideas through contemporary art and theories that arise from current perspectives; and of thinking through such art and perspectives via Hegelianism.

## • Articles •

In “(Rescuing) Hegel’s Magical Thinking,” Angela Hume sounds a theme that occupies a few of our contributors: Hegel’s notion of the fluidity of being. For Hegel, all beings are always already both subjects and objects that call for recognition as such. Hume traces the acknowledgement of subject-object concurrence to the creative, affective practice of magic, which relies on similarly fluid and complex ontologies. What she calls “magical thinking” is just such creative recognition of the empowered complexity of beings, a generous recognition that may encourage more ethical relations between persons and their others (drastic ignorance of which has led to innumerable ecosocial crises). She suggests that the groundwork for contemporary magical thinking is already in place: not just in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* but also in Donna Haraway’s work on posthumanism, and in such contemporary aesthetic practices as Brenda Hillman’s experimental ecopoetry.

Mandy-Suzanne Wong applies Hegel’s conception of being-as-fluid to the personal identities enacted in classic blues songs, Gayl Jones’ “blues novel” *Corregidora*, and Paul Taylor’s theory of “post-black aesthetics.” Similarly to Hume, Wong argues that identity is a creative, performative process that involves as much violent dissolution as construction, as what Hegel calls “substance” – his term for one’s surroundings, which include historical and sociocultural circumstances – both shapes and is shaped by one’s individual propensities as a subject. As at once communal and private, impersonal and definitively personal, identity is a fluid experience that cannot be encapsulated by bounded racial, historical, or otherwise sociocultural categories.

The instability of being, a consequence of its fluidity, also plays a role in Shannon Mussett’s thinking. Her essay, “Irony and the Work of Art: Hegelian Legacies in Robert Smithson,” unpacks Hegel’s obscure take on irony by reading it in counterpoint to Smithson’s artistic practice and writings. Mussett reveals a fruitful dialectic between Hegel’s gnostic approach to art – that there exists truth that an artist must reveal – and Smithson’s embrace of the instability and seeming irrationality of nature.

Observing the inherent instability of human subject positions and human knowledge in relation to nonhumans – both of which are manifest

in Hegel's three "phases" (Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic) of art history, Timothy Morton hypothesizes a fourth aesthetic phase. Hegel could never have predicted that rather than "ending" via abdication, surrendering to philosophy, art in the twenty-first century would come to embody the consciousness, integral to our efforts to address current ecosocial crises, that human acts impact the rest of the world. In this new era of ecological awareness, Morton argues, art enters an "Asymmetric Phase" in which, thanks to the vast stores of scientific knowledge humans have amassed, the meaningful, interpretable *content* of art is richer than ever; but at the same time, the *objects* or *materials* of art are recognized as denizens of the nonhuman aspects of the world. And in our augmented ecological awareness, we cannot help but observe (as Hegel never could have realized, given his sociohistorical circumstances) that such nonhuman phenomena have the necessary agency and intricacy to elude human knowledge and control.

## • Collisions •

With *Evental Aesthetics*, we also hope to advance new ways of writing about art and philosophy – new, at least, from the academic perspective. To this end, our first issue introduces a short form of critical essay that we call the *Collision*. A Collision is a striking encounter, enacted in writing, between an author and a specific aesthetic experience. As part of its at once arresting and compelling quality, such an encounter includes the questioning of both artwork and respondent by one another. This questioning plays out in the written Collision, the idea of which is to point towards paths of discussion without entirely following them. Where a longer article would exhaust an argument and its implications, a Collision does not necessarily argue at all. It rather catalyzes argument by indicating points of intersection between philosophical questions and aesthetic experiences, leaving the argument itself to take flight in the minds of readers and later inquiries. We propose this short essay form as an avenue for authors who may not feel ready, or perhaps not feel it necessary, to exhaust a question. Philosophical, critical, and scholarly ideas-in-progress, or the conceived but untheorized intuitions of artists, will find a venue here.

Our inaugural issue includes two Collisions. Both authors encounter artworks – of Dutch painting and contemporary literature – that summon Hegelian notions and questions.

Jason Miller's "The 'Death of Art' and the 'Sunday of Life': Hegel on the Fate of Modern Art" provides a rare, concrete discussion of what Hegel might have meant in proclaiming the end of art. Miller's careful consideration of Hegel's writings on Dutch genre painting argues that Hegel's periodization *affirms*, rather than negates, everyday life, and in doing so opens up aesthetics to the commonplace, the incidental. Miller recasts Hegel as a philosopher of inclusion rather than system, of multiplicity instead of merely teleology.

Joanna Demers, meanwhile, considers Michel Houellebecq's novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, in proposing that apocalyptic stories might bear ethical responsibilities. Comparing the novel's bleak worldview to Hegel's system, Demers argues that when art utterly denies hope, it is left with no recourse but the aestheticization of suffering. And this precisely is the fate of the jaded humans that populate Houellebecq's dystopian future.

But what more might it mean to say that the time of Hegel lies ahead? For Hegel has already run through several cycles of fashionableness; his status in popular and scholarly opinion has ranged from that of an obscure curiosity to that of a Lazarus-hero of newly resurrected metaphysics. For midcentury socialists, Hegel was the *éminence grise*, a prophet in the wilderness who made possible the coming of an even greater hero, Marx. Yet for midcentury Christians, Hegel achieved the impossible feat of bridging the gap between philosophy and dogma. Some today see Hegel as the epitome of sexism, ethnocentrism, or sloppy pseudo-science. Others see him as the champion of the plastic, the contingent, and that which will come. What else could Hegel be, today and tomorrow? What is Hegel's future?

These questions are ironic, considering that Hegel was the philosopher *par excellence* of progress and teleology. Perhaps one of the most seductive subjects in Hegelian aesthetics is his theory of the end of art, a topic to which several of the essays in this issue speak. But we take heart in the fact that the ideas in this issue confound or at least complicate easy interpretations of Hegel's periodization of art, and of course put into question Hegel's thesis that humanity has outgrown its need for art. Art, as many of our authors point out, continues to do philosophical work. This

leads us to wonder whether a fruitful road for inquiry might be interrogating Hegelian speculative trajectories for the possibility that they might go in retrograde. As Morton suggests in his discussion of the Asymmetric Phase, can Hegel's periods of art merge and coexist? Can aesthetics somehow de-evolve, or are they condemned to proceed teleologically? Further, in political and artworld climates that have been over-determined almost to the point of collapse, our authors confront the dangers of determination and challenge its very possibility – and they do this *via Hegel*, philosopher of the Concept and "the cunning of reason." Our question is, then: if some form of "regressive progress" is a possibility for aesthetic practice, and if contingency and fluidity can be aesthetic, even ontological forms, what does this suggest about interpretations of Hegel as the preeminent progressive?

## • Notes •

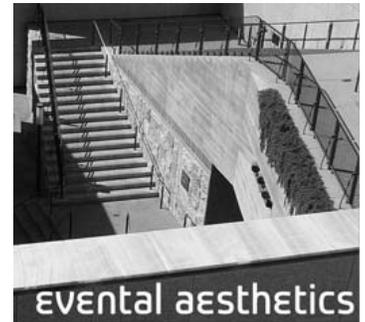
<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Hegel's Century," in *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, ed. Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Paul de Man, "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 763.

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Hume, Angela. "(Rescuing) Hegel's Magical Thinking,"  
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#### ABSTRACT

In this article I ask: how to rescue “magical thinking” (a notion I inherit from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno) in and from Hegel and imagine its possibilities for posthuman society, ethics, and aesthetics? To address this question, I read Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* through Horkheimer and Adorno, who argue that Enlightenment’s program is “the disenchantment of the world”: with the end of magical thinking and the beginning of enlightened thinking came chasm and disparity between subject and object and, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the onset of barbarism. Hegel himself speaks directly to the danger of failed recognition between two consciousnesses, a failure followed by a duel to the death, in which the two figures leave each other indifferently, like things. After reading a distinctly “magical thinking” into the shape of Hegel’s dialectic, I show how contemporary posthumanism and eco-poetics make use of Hegel’s thought in order to reimagine subject-object relations in and as response to ecological crisis. I discuss how Donna Haraway, following in the traditions of Hegel and Adorno, magically thinks her way toward new models for relating more ethically (to borrow Haraway’s own terminology) to human and other-than-human others in the new century. Then, I look at how such models are being adapted in and by aesthetic practice — specifically, in the experimental eco-poetics of contemporary poet Brenda Hillman. In the end, I argue that contemporary posthumanisms and eco-poetics in fact need magical thinking in order to reimagine both the social and the ecological in a time of crisis and resuscitate a devastatingly enlightened world.

#### KEYWORDS

Hegel, Adorno, dialectics, posthumanities, ecocriticism, eco-poetics, experimental poetry

# (Rescuing) Hegel's Magical Thinking

Angela Hume

Rescuing Hegel — and only rescue, not revival, is appropriate for him — means facing up to his philosophy where it is most painful and wresting truth from it where its untruth is obvious.

•Theodor W. Adorno, "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy"

Two years after the end of the Second World War, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno published their landmark essay "The Concept of Enlightenment" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, lambasting Enlightenment thinking and declaring "the wholly enlightened earth [to be] radiant with triumphant calamity."<sup>1</sup> For Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment's program was "the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to...overthrow fantasy with knowledge."<sup>2</sup> They argue that such power structures as the scientific method, technology, and the commodity are products of enlightened thinking, a thinking that — and this point is key for Horkheimer and Adorno — can be traced, in some form or another, all the way back to the early rationalizations inherent in mythical visions.<sup>3</sup> They elaborate: "the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself."<sup>4</sup> In other words: Enlightenment claims it seeks to destroy myth; but in doing so via acts of exposition and repetition, acts that "acknowledge nothing new under the sun," submits ever more deeply to the logic of myth.<sup>5</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno note how early rationalizing myths, "which sought to report, to name, to tell of origins...[and also] to

narrate, record, explain," displaced the earlier spirits and demons, the "incantatory practices of the magician."<sup>6</sup> In Enlightenment, deities were, and are, no longer identical with the elements; "being is split between *logos*...and the mass of things and creatures in the external world."<sup>7</sup> Ultimately: "the world is made subject to man."<sup>8</sup> With the end of magic – which involved relationships between spirits, demons, deities, and the elements – and the beginning of myth came manipulation and mastery of nature; the end of fluidity and multiplicity of identity; and the end of specificity, mimesis, and representation.<sup>9</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno explain:

Magic implies specific representation. What is done to the spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person; the sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god. The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic. But...the uniqueness of the chosen victim which coincides with its representative status, distinguishes it radically, makes it non-exchangeable even in the exchange. [Enlightenment] science puts an end to this. In it there is no specific representation: something which is a sacrificial animal cannot be a god. Representation gives way to universal fungibility. An atom is smashed not as a representative but as a specimen of matter, and the rabbit suffering the torment of the laboratory is seen not as a representative but, mistakenly, as a mere exemplar...The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object...Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object.<sup>10</sup>

With reference to this key passage, I want to stress the following point: in the eyes of Horkheimer and Adorno, humanity's turn away from a magical sensibility and toward a mythical (rational) sensibility cannot be demarcated with a clean line. There was no single moment at which enchantment dissipated and disenchantment set in. Case in point: even "the substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic." Just as mythology always already contained enlightened thinking, magical practices, in some way, always already contained mythical thinking. What I am most interested in here, however, is the key distinction Horkheimer and Adorno do emphatically make between the magical and the mythical/enlightened: with the end of what I am calling "magical thinking" and the beginning of enlightened thinking came chasm and disparity between subject and object – the atom is rendered "specimen," the rabbit is seen as "exemplar" – and, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the onset of barbarism.

Adorno, in a series of essays published in 1963, heralds Hegel as the prophet of precisely this problematic subject-object disparity. And in

the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel himself speaks directly to the danger of failed recognition – failed subject-object realization – between two figures, a failure marked by “trial by death,” or a duel to the death:

[In death] there vanishes from [the] interplay [of two consciousnesses] the essential moment of splitting into extremes with opposite characteristics; and the middle term collapses into a lifeless unity...and the two do not reciprocally give and receive one another back from each other consciously, but leave each other free only indifferently, like things.<sup>11</sup>

In trial by death, when two subject-objects do not mutually recognize one another as subject-objects – that is, as both subject *and* object – they leave each other “indifferently”; they reduce each other to things. Two centuries after Hegel, the posthumanist Donna Haraway echoes Hegel as well as Horkheimer and Adorno when she asserts the importance of subject-object recognition: “the animals in labs...just as we humans *are both subject and object all the time*...It is not killing that gets us into exterminism, but making beings killable.”<sup>12</sup> As we see in Hegel, in Horkheimer and Adorno, and now in Haraway, with the end of magical thinking – a thinking in which subject is always also object and object is always also subject; in which “each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other” (per Hegel)<sup>13</sup> – and the beginning of enlightened thinking – “the distance of subject from object, the presupposition of abstraction” (per Horkheimer and Adorno)<sup>14</sup> – comes thingification, universal fungibility, and exterminism. And these prophecies speak sharply and poignantly to a contemporary Western society so implicated in and by its entrenchment in capitalist economies and acts of violence against cultures and environments.

In this piece I will ask: how to rescue magical thinking (a notion I am inheriting from Horkheimer and Adorno) in and from Hegel (often via Adorno) and imagine its possibilities for posthuman society, ethics, and aesthetics?<sup>15</sup> How are contemporary posthuman theorists and ecocritical artists inheriting Hegel’s “magical” dialectic in their own work in order to recast subject-object relations in a time of ecological crisis? First, through close readings of both Adorno and Hegel, I will show how magical thinking is deeply manifest in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Then I will discuss how Donna Haraway, following in the traditions of Hegel and Adorno, is magically thinking her way toward new models for relating more ethically (to borrow Haraway’s own terminology) to human and other-than-human others in the twenty-first century.<sup>16</sup> Finally, I will look at how such

Hegelian models are being adapted in and by contemporary aesthetic practice – specifically in the experimental eco-poetics of Brenda Hillman. In the end, I will assert that contemporary posthumanisms and eco-poetics in fact need magical thinking in order to reimagine both the social and the ecological in a time of crisis and resuscitate a devastatingly enlightened world.



What marks a magical sensibility as opposed to an enlightened sensibility? For Horkheimer and Adorno in “The Concept of Enlightenment,” the advent of Enlightenment stripped matter of all illusory powers and hidden properties.<sup>17</sup> Prior to Enlightenment, a magical sensibility was open to the possibility of the interior life of any and every thing.<sup>18</sup> With the Enlightenment, the gods were set apart from the substances of the world, whereas for a magical sensibility, any creature could have been a god.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, he who practiced magic was not singular; he changed with the masks he wore, which represented the multiplicity of spirits.<sup>20</sup> So for the magical thinker, no subject or object was unified or closed; no one thing was at risk of being lost in or to all other things. Finally, magic involved specific representation.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, in magic no one thing was exchangeable for any other thing. Interiority, the divinity of the daily, multiplicity, fluidity, irreducibility, and the subject-object status of every single thing – these were attributes of the magical (per Horkheimer and Adorno). And these values, even today, stand in stark contrast to those of Enlightenment: knowledge, calculability, unity, utility, exchangeability, abstraction, and the rending apart of subject and object.<sup>22</sup>

Adorno, in his 1963 series of essays titled *Hegel: Three Studies*, aligns Hegel’s sensibility with precisely the kind of magical sensibility that he and Horkheimer lay out in “The Concept of Enlightenment.” Adorno reads Hegel against the grain, arguing that Hegel’s dialectical thinking actually works to subvert the enlightened thinking of his time. Recall Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim that “magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object.” In his essay “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,”

Adorno writes:

Thought that completely extirpated its mimetic impulse...would end up in madness...The speculative Hegelian concept rescues mimesis through spirit's self-reflection: truth is not *adaequatio* but affinity, and in the decline of idealism reason's mindfulness of its mimetic nature is revealed by Hegel to be its human right.<sup>23</sup>

Here Adorno argues that Hegel's speculative method rescues mimesis – a mimesis, recall, that for Horkheimer and Adorno is markedly different from the abstraction of enlightened thinking – and reveals it to be essentially “human.” In other words, mimesis – which for Hegel is self-reflection in and affinity with the subject-object other – is what saves us from a decline into the dehumanizing cultures of Enlightenment science and exchange, those cultures that distance us from others around us and reduce them to objects. For Adorno, Hegel's magical “mimetic impulse” is fundamental to the subversion of Enlightenment thinking.

Adorno continues to align Hegel's thinking with a kind of magical thinking in his essay “The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy.” In this piece, Adorno argues that, for Hegel, “there is nothing between heaven and earth that is not ‘*vermittelt*’ [mediated], nothing, therefore, that does not contain...a spiritual moment.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike other Enlightenment thinkers, Adorno explains, Hegel believes in the interior spiritual life of all things. Adorno continues: “[Hegel's] impulse to elevate spirit, however deluded, draws its strength from a resistance to dead knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> For Adorno, as “deluded” as Hegel's belief may be, its essential work is its resistance to enlightened science. Adorno goes on to point out that, in Hegel's dialectic, “Once the object has become subject in the absolute, the object is no longer inferior vis-à-vis the subject.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore:

science establishes...concepts and makes its judgments without regard for the fact that the life of the subject matter for which the concept is intended does not exhaust itself in conceptual specification. What furnishes the canon for Hegelian idealism is...the need to grasp...what the matter at hand actually is and what essential and by no means mutually harmonious moments it contains...<sup>27</sup>

In other words: in and through Hegel's dialectic, subject and object – both subject-objects – stand on equal ground. In addition, dialectical thinking acknowledges the mysterious and not-yet-understood “life” of the subject-object – a “life” whose fullness is beyond the reach of conceptual science. Here again, Adorno illuminates how magical thinking is manifest in Hegel: no one subject-object – no one “life” – can be articulated and

therefore abstracted and reduced (as in enlightened thinking); instead, every subject-object remains a mysterious, open, irreducible existence.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, Adorno gestures toward the *critical* capacity of such magical thinking in Hegel when he writes:

When [Hegel's] philosophy is fully elaborated...the difference between subject and object disappears...In that consciousness recalls, through self-reflection...*how it has mutilated things* with its ordering concepts...scientific consciousness comes face to face in Hegel with what a causal-mechanistic science, as a science of the domination of nature, has done to nature.<sup>29</sup>

Adorno adds: "[This] self-reflection...is actually society's dawning critical consciousness of itself."<sup>30</sup> Again he emphasizes that, in and through the dialectic, any subject-object dualism disappears. Additionally, he suggests that when (magical) thinking confronts scientific thinking, consciousness becomes capable of seeing how it has mutilated nature. For Adorno, this type of (magical) thinking is the beginning of a more critical consciousness. On my reading of Adorno reading Hegel, magical thinking is the precursor to any critical or reparative action. Magical thinking is the beginning of "critical theory" itself.

In his essay "Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel," Adorno completes his alignment of Hegel's thinking with magical thinking through a close reading of Hegel's rhetoric, or form. To start, Adorno argues that the Cartesian, rationalist, enlightened "ideal of clarity" in form and content is beside the point in Hegel.<sup>31</sup> More specifically:

Clarity can be demanded of all knowledge only when it has been determined that the objects under investigation are free of all dynamic qualities that would cause them to elude the gaze that tries to capture and hole them unambiguously...rather, [in Hegel] the subject itself also moves, by virtue of its relationship to the object that is inherently in motion...Faced with this, the simple demand for clarity and distinctness becomes obsolete.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, for Adorno the "ideal of clarity" assumes the fixableness of all things. In "clarity," things are frozen, pinned down, and made available to consciousness for scientific observation or exchange. In Hegel, on the other hand, all things are always already in dialectical motion. In this way, Hegel's form resists the clarity so crucial to enlightened scientific thinking, and instead, perhaps, like he who "practiced magic...not single or identical," changes with the "cult masks which [represent] the multiplicity of spirits."<sup>33</sup> For Adorno, subject-objects in Hegel are dynamic and multiple – magical.

I want to highlight two other important points that Adorno makes about Hegel's form in "Skoteinos." First, Adorno argues that Hegel's work requires the reader's imaginative participation: "No one can read any more out of Hegel than he puts in...The content itself contains, as a law of its form, the expectation of productive imagination on the part of the one reading...Understanding has to find a foothold in the gap between experience and concept."<sup>34</sup> What Adorno is gesturing toward here has everything to do with the "afterlife of philosophical works, the unfolding of their substance," which he describes shortly before the passage I just quoted.<sup>35</sup> For Adorno, the meaning of a philosophical work is realized in the space between the philosopher's thought (or form) and the reader's mediation of, or *thinking*, it. In Adorno's own words: "intellectual experience can be expressed only by being reflected in its mediation — that is, actively thought."<sup>36</sup> And so, in Adorno's view, Hegel's radically unfixed, fluid, wide-open text demands precisely this work of mediating, or thinking, the meaning of the work. In other words, Hegel's form itself expects and exacts "productive imagination." In this very Hegelian way, Adorno reads the act of reading Hegel as an entirely reciprocal process and project. Here Adorno again gestures toward traces of mimetic magic in Hegel: "manifold affinities between...things" mark the magical relationship between text and reader — in contrast to the enlightened relationship, which consists of a "single relationship between [a] subject who confers meaning [on a] meaningless object."<sup>37</sup>

*Unclarity, productive imagination...* Adorno then goes on to introduce another concept key to the process of reading Hegel: experimentation. For Adorno,

reading Hegel is an experimental procedure: one allows possible interpretations to come to mind, proposes them, and compares them with the text and with what has already been reliably interpreted...Hegel provokes the experimental method...To read him experimentally is to judge him by his own criterion...When it comes to Hegel, a particularly high degree of such interplay must be demanded.<sup>38</sup>

When reading Hegel, Adorno explains, one must approach the text openly, associatively, and comparatively. In short, the reader must perform a kind of experimental "interplay." Here again Adorno points toward Hegel's magical mimesis — the dynamic, heterogeneous relationship between two subject-objects (in this case, text and reader).

So far, I have read Adorno as reading in Hegel distinctly magical thinking — the kind of thinking that opposes enlightened paradigms, which continue to lead humanity, through calculation and commodification, down

the road to barbarism. For Adorno, magical thinking in Hegel looks like this: it asserts and performs, first and foremost, the subject-object status of every single thing ("the construction of the subject-object [in Hegel]...is in fact presupposed by every dialectical step"); mimetic relating; the irreducible, spiritual, not-yet-understood status of every subject-object; unclarity, which is always an unfixity; productive imagination; and, finally, experimentalism and experimental interplay.<sup>39</sup> Next, I want to introduce yet another key aspect of Hegel's magical thought and form. Then I will show how all of these aspects of Hegel's magical thinking are reimagined by posthuman theory and art for the new century.

Integral to Hegel's magical form – in addition to its radical unclarity, its openness to and dependence on reader imagination and experimentation (per Adorno's reading) – is its unrelenting and incessant *repetition*. In calling Hegel's form repetitive, I am positing a definition very different from the one laid out by Horkheimer and Adorno:

the more the illusion of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects. The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself...Whatever might be different is made the same.<sup>40</sup>

According to this definition, repetition is the mark of enlightened thinking, in all of Enlightenment's disenchantment, regularity, rationality, and closedness. The magical repetition in Hegel to which I am referring, on the other hand, has everything to do with ritual, dynamism, and performance. And now, I will table Adorno and turn to the magical leviathan himself.



One crucial aspect of magical repetition in Hegel is *ritualized repetition*. In Hegel, philosophy is kinetic. He insists that "we must...exert ourselves to know the particulars"; philosophy is a "carrying out," a "process," and a "surrendering."<sup>41</sup> Already in these early characterizations, the nearness of Hegel's dialectical thinking to ritual is apparent. Ritual, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is an "order of performing a...devotional service" or a "series of actions...compulsively performed."<sup>42</sup> It is, by

definition, ordered, devoted, compulsive, and performative. Importantly, some anthropologists argue that in ancient magic, the ordered performance of ritual was valued not for its apparent causation of certain phenomena but for its anticipation and completion of a course of events.<sup>43</sup> Here is Hegel, for whom “the real issue [of the philosophical work] is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about.”<sup>44</sup> The value of magical ritual is one’s participation in the order of its performance; the value of philosophy (for Hegel) is one’s participation in the ritual process through which it comes about.

Bound up with ritual, of course, is repetition. Think, for example, of seasonal or calendrical practices.<sup>45</sup> And recall the very definition of ritual: there is an aspect of compulsion to it. Here, even more importantly, is Hegel. From the first pages of the *Phenomenology* to the very last, Hegel articulates and rearticulates – with ritualistic compulsion – his dialectic, whose substance and product are, at once, always already the whole. In the Preface, Hegel offers one of his first articulations: “And experience is the name we give to just this movement, in which the immediate, the unexperienced...becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation, and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth.”<sup>46</sup> Shortly before this moment, Hegel offers a briefer, yet nonetheless bottomless, articulation: “The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence perfecting itself through its development.”<sup>47</sup> In both passages, “truth” is active: in the first case, it is movement (a becoming, a return), and in the second, a perfecting, or development. In other words, truth for Hegel is ritual experience – experience in and through “the order of its performance.” Essentially for Hegel, truth is the whole; thus, truth is the shape of ritual experience itself, in all of its moments.<sup>48</sup> Notably, these two passages do not say the same thing with different words. In one, the truth of experience is alienation and subsequent return from alienation; in the other, truth is a perfecting *through*. Yet even at this early point in the book, Hegel is practicing ritualized repetition: not repetition of concepts necessarily, but repetition of a formal gesture. In both passages, he works to evoke the essence of the shape of his dialectic – ebb and flow, departure and return, perfecting through – through his form. But not simply through the texture of his sentences in their gathering syntax, their lifts and dips. The text, in its centripetalism, homed in on performances of articulation and re-articulation, differentiation and collapse, effects the amoebic shape of Hegel’s “truth,” which is none other than the shape of ritual experience.

Ritualized repetition of form mimics the pulsive, implosive tendency of the dialectic itself.

A second key aspect of magical repetition in Hegel is *dynamic repetition*. At this point, I want to juxtapose a number of passages from the *Phenomenology*. In the following passages, one can see not only the ritualized repetition of Hegel's form but also its dynamic repetition. In using the phrase "dynamic repetition," I mean to suggest that Hegel's form, in and through its incessant and varied articulations and re-articulations of the dialectic, actively produces and re-produces its meaning. In this way, both form and dialectic (Hegel's form, arguably, is never anything more than dialectic itself) are in motion. Importantly, magic is deeply dynamic. Recall that for Horkheimer and Adorno, in magic "manifold affinities" exist between things.<sup>49</sup> All relationships are varied and multiple. Furthermore, he who practices magic is never singular; he changes with the masks he wears.<sup>50</sup> The very essence of magic is its multiplicity and transitory nature – its dynamism.

With these aspects of magic in mind, consider the following four passages from the *Phenomenology*:

**1 •** The movement of a being that immediately is, consists partly in becoming an other than itself, and thus becoming its own immanent content...In the former movement, *negativity* is the differentiating and positing of *existence*; in this return into self, it is the becoming of the *determinate simplicity*.<sup>51</sup>

**2 •** [I]n it [the unconditioned universal, which results from awareness of the completely developed object], the unity of "being-for-self" and "being-for-another" is posited; in other words, the absolute antithesis is posited as a self-identical essence...In general, to be for itself and to be in relation to an other constitutes the nature and essence of the content, whose truth consists in its being unconditionally universal; and the result is simply and solely universal.<sup>52</sup>

**3 •** [T]he "matters" [constituent moments] posited as independent directly pass over into their unity, and their unity directly unfolds its diversity, and this once again reduces itself to unity. But this movement is what is called *Force*.<sup>53</sup>

**4 •** Spirit is *this movement* of the Self which empties itself of itself and sinks itself into its substance, and also, as Subject, has gone out of that substance into itself, making the substance into an object and a content at the same time as it cancels this difference between objectivity and content.<sup>54</sup>

In these passages, which represent various moments in the unfolding of the phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel articulates his dialectic in different

ways. While the loose shape of the dialectic holds together in and through each passage, the terminology, details, and insights into its nature change. What is the shape of this dialectical movement? In the first passage, it is a “becoming...other than itself, and thus becoming its own” — a departure and subsequent return, a going and coming, and, crucially, a drama implicating both object (the “other than itself”) and subject (“its own”). Hegel’s use of the *gerund* (“becoming”) lends emphasis to the immediacy of movement so key to the shape of the dialectic. Furthermore, Hegel repeatedly employs the verb “to be” to establish, undermine, and establish again equations and connotations: “*negativity is* the differentiating and positing of *existence*”; “it *is* the becoming of the *determinate simplicity*.”<sup>55</sup> The effect of this choice is a simultaneous distillation and collapse of specificity. Notably, the formal device here mimics the very nature of the dialectic itself. Recall Hegel’s assertion that “the whole is nothing other than the essence perfecting itself through its development.” In other words: the whole is at the same time its moments, and its moments are at the same time the whole. In Passage 2, Hegel further articulates dialectical movement: “the unity of ‘being-for-self’ and ‘being-for-another’...the result is simply and solely universal.” Here again, as in the first passage, both subject and object inhabit and constitute the shape of the dialectic; however, the focus in Passage 2 is on the coming together of these two figures, a unification that is in itself a manifestation of the “universal.” Here Hegel also employs the *gerund*, but instead of “becoming,” there is simply “being,” further evoking the nearness of subject to object in the moment of “return,” or in the “universal.” While reproducing the dialectical shape evoked in the first passage, the second passage further realizes the nature of it through a slight shift in focus. In this nuanced shifting lies Hegel’s dynamism, or dynamic repetition. Hegel takes the dialectic to yet another level in the third passage. Once again, there is roughly the same shape, this time articulated as an unfolding and subsequent reducing: “unity directly unfolds its diversity, and this once again reduces itself to unity.” But here, importantly, Hegel names the movement *Force*, further characterizing it. As we can see in this passage, with each act of dynamic repetition, Hegel complicates the dialectic, glimpsing new facets. In the fourth passage, which appears late in the *Phenomenology*, the shape of the dialectic is an emptying, or sinking, and subsequent going into. Notably here, the dialectical movement also called Force has now been further distilled as Spirit. In addition, by this point all distance between object and subject (“content”) has been “canceled.” Perhaps most significantly in this passage, Spirit is equivalent to, or embodiment of, agential self, a self whose substance is movement, Force,

and Spirit; whose nature it is to “make” its substance into subject–object, i.e., to realize itself as both subject *and* object. Much has occurred by this moment in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. Spirit, which began as simple “negation” and “existence” (first passage), is now an agential and complicated “making,” or process, the very process through which subject–objects are produced (fourth passage). While Hegel reproduces, or re–produces, loosely the same shape in each passage, the content of each passage is unstable, in flux. This is Hegel’s dynamic repetition. To return to the magical: in these passages, Hegel captures the “manifold affinities between...things” — between words, between descriptions, between subjects and objects, or between subject–objects. Furthermore, each passage refuses singularity, in a way “changing with [its] masks.” A magical dynamic repetition, indeed.

A third aspect of Hegel’s magical repetition is its performative nature. *Performative repetition* is bound up with both ritual and dynamism. Recall the definition of ritual: a “series of actions...compulsively performed.” And recall how in ancient magic, the ordered performance of magical rituals was valued not so much for its apparent causality as for the steps involved. And recall Hegel: “the real issue is not exhausted by stating its aim, but by carrying it out.” In Hegel, as in magic, the means — the performance — is an end in itself.

What makes Hegel’s form performative and, more specifically, performatively repetitive? Certainly we see elements of performance in Hegel’s dynamism, as I have discussed: in rearticulating the dialectic in different ways, Hegel’s text embodies activity. It is absolutely in flux. To thoroughly address the question, though, one might turn to the section of the *Phenomenology* entitled “Self–Consciousness.” In this section, Hegel’s articulations are more relentlessly rendered than in preceding sections. His dialectic is articulated in almost every paragraph, sometimes more than once within a single paragraph, culminating with such new, more developed forms as the recognition process, the trial by death, and the lord and bondsman (master–slave) dynamic. I will discuss two of these new dialectical formations momentarily, but first I want to consider Judith Butler’s theory of performative repetition, which in my view helps elucidate what I am calling performative repetition in Hegel.

For Butler, the “being” of gender, or of any identity category, is an effect, a process, and an ongoing practice open to intervention and resignification.<sup>56</sup> For Butler, there are no “real” or “natural” identities; rather, identity is a “phantasmatic construction.”<sup>57</sup> Identity is a

performance, and realizing this fact enables us to transform practices of repetition — from practices limited by their mandate to reinstitute “natural” identity categories (e.g., gender binaries) to new practices of repetition that intervene and subvert these problematic “natural” identities.<sup>58</sup> It is this type of performative repetition that, for Butler, facilitates political and social change. Butler explains her position further: “My argument is that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed...It is precisely the discursively variable construction of each in and through the other that has interested me here.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, there is no subject who constructs; there is only the constructing and the constructed, the process and the product. There are only “variable constructions” that occur in and through each other. And in these moments of “variable construction” — moments of deviation and subversion — agencies emerge.<sup>60</sup>

Per Butler, how do we see Hegel practicing performative repetition, perhaps as a means for realizing new forms for and sites of agency? As I have said, for answers one might turn to Hegel’s section “Self-Consciousness.” I want to look in this section at what are some of the most performatively repetitive, or “variably constructive” (to recall Butler’s language), moments in the *Phenomenology*: (1) the moment at which the dialectic, understood as a recognition process, is realized to be bound up with affective materiality, and (2) the moment at which the dialectic is realized as having a capacity for failure, or “trial by death.”

Recognition in Hegel is a manifestation of the dialectic, in which two self-consciousnesses ultimately “*recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another.*”<sup>61</sup> In recognition, each consciousness sees itself in the other and desires to supersede this other in order to become more certain of itself.<sup>62</sup> The act of supersession is “an ambiguous return *into itself*”; however, it is also a “giving back” or “letting go” of the other.<sup>63</sup> Key to this “movement” is reciprocity and, furthermore, the attainment of subject-object status by each consciousness: “Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other.”<sup>64</sup> Each is to the other both subject (“for itself”) and object (“for the other”). At this point, Hegel has articulated the dialectic in its greatest detail and depth thus far. The key moment of performative repetition occurs when Hegel writes: “through the supersession...the other self-consciousness equally gives it back again to itself [the other], for it saw itself in the other.”<sup>65</sup> While following the familiar shape of the dialectic, Hegel here trips upon something quite new: while “return” into self is key to realization of the dialectic, so is “receiving

back” self from the other — both letting go and *being let go* are necessary. In other words: recognition here becomes not only mimetic but also directly relational, affective. For the first time, Hegel’s language gestures toward the materiality of dialectical movement in space (“the other...equally gives it back again”); he has touched on the experience of embodiment in the world, in all of its grasping and releasing, its holding on and letting go. For Hegel, the movement of self-consciousness is always a “double movement”: “both its own action and the action of the other as well.”<sup>66</sup> Here again is a language of affective materiality, in which two self-consciousnesses perform *actions*, implicating one another in the process. Hegel continues, “The first does not have the object before it merely as it exists primarily for desire, but as something that has an independent existence of its own, which, therefore, it cannot utilize for its own purposes, if that object does not of its own accord do what the first does to it.”<sup>67</sup> Two self-consciousnesses, akin here to bodies, must resist the desire and drive to make *use* of each other. How is Hegel able to achieve this breakthrough? In my view, it is the result of his performative repetition. In constructing and reconstructing the dialectic, Hegel remains open to “the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (to return to Butler). For Hegel, creative agency lies in the act, or process, of construction and reconstruction, of performative repetition itself.<sup>68</sup>

It is Hegel’s breakthrough via performative repetition that enables him to realize the implications of the material affect so bound up with the recognition process and eventually articulate what he names the “trial by death.”<sup>69</sup> In the midst of the recognition process, at the moment in which consciousness “goes out” of itself, it must present itself as not attached to common existence, or life.<sup>70</sup> With this new sense of affective materiality, Hegel sees for the first time that recognition has the capacity to go terribly awry: “This presentation [i.e., going out of self] is a twofold action: action on the part of the other, and action on its own part. In so far as it is the action of the *other*, each seeks the death of the other.”<sup>71</sup> When two self-consciousnesses go out of their selves in order to approach each other, each necessarily fights to preserve its own life, and this compulsion to preserve leads to a life-and-death struggle.<sup>72</sup> Hegel, through performative repetition — in writing through the dialectic yet again — has arrived upon new territory: the realm of the volatile and ephemeral material world, in which recognition can fail and beings can die. And it is at this point that Hegel begins to map an ethics. Recall how failed recognition — the failure of each self-consciousness to realize and achieve the status of both subject and object — causes beings to “leave each other...indifferently,

like things.”<sup>73</sup> Without recognition, the world to self-consciousness is comprised of expendable things. And recall Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim, which is also Haraway’s claim, that it is precisely this type of thinking that leads humanity down the road to universal fungibility and exterminism. An essential breakthrough for Hegel, indeed — one that was only possible through magical performative repetition.



I have shown how Hegel’s magical thinking works to subvert the paradigms of Enlightenment science and the commodity, ultimately imparting the need for the subject-object status of every single thing and realizing new formal possibilities for resisting thingification, fungibility, and exterminism. Now I want to show how the kind of magical thinking Hegel performs in his *Phenomenology* is precisely the type of thinking that some posthuman thinkers are exploring today as they begin to imagine new paradigms for relating more ethically in and to the material world. I will highlight aspects of Donna Haraway’s theory to show what magical thinking can look like in the twenty-first century. Then I will look at the experimental ecopoetry of Brenda Hillman, to show how Hegel’s magical thinking is manifest in contemporary aesthetic practice.

In Donna Haraway’s book *When Species Meet* (2008), she poses the questions: “(1) Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog? and (2) How is ‘becoming with’ a practice of becoming worldly?”<sup>74</sup> To answer these questions, Haraway discusses a digital image a friend had captured and sent to her of a redwood stump covered in mosses and lichens, bearing a striking resemblance to a dog (“Jim’s dog”). She argues that in “touching” the dog via digital photography, one touches all of the technological and biological histories that constitute this moment, our moment of contact.<sup>75</sup> Haraway explains: “[In ‘touching’ the dog] we are inside the histories of IT engineering, electronic product assembly-line labor, mining and IT waste disposal, plastics research and manufacturing...The people and the things are in mutually constituting, intra-active touch.”<sup>76</sup> When we acknowledge all of the histories, power relationships, humans, non-humans, and things we “touch” when we make contact with such “other” beings as Jim’s dog — when we recognize the intra-active and intersectional nature of all matter — we begin the practice

of “becoming worldly.” And in becoming worldly, “the clean lines between traditional and modern, organic and technological, human and nonhuman give way.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly: “Jim’s dog is a provocation to curiosity...one of the first obligations...of worldly companion species.”<sup>78</sup> Becoming curious, too, is fundamental to becoming worldly.

For Haraway, becoming worldly is always political. In acknowledging those beings categorized as “other” – “gods, machines, animals...and noncitizens in general” – we undermine the (often anthropocentric) sciences, philosophies, and power structures that institute these “other” categories in the first place.<sup>79</sup> Notably, Haraway draws a sharp distinction between the “High Science” – which, for her, is interested in genius, progress, beauty, power, and money – and the more progressive sciences that she argues have played leading roles in displacing the human in models for understanding the universe.<sup>80</sup> In Haraway’s view, it is precisely the curiosity inherent in practices of becoming worldly that enables us to remake the sciences, or, to use Haraway’s words, “reweave the fibers of the scientist’s being.”<sup>81</sup>

What Haraway calls the “High Science” is essentially the Enlightenment science Horkheimer and Adorno assail in “Critique of Enlightenment,” and to which Adorno situates Hegel in opposition. Recall that, for Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment (science) “[acknowledges] nothing new under the sun.” Haraway imagines an alternative: a science that “[makes] it possible for something unexpected to happen.”<sup>82</sup> She illustrates what this alternative science might look like by telling the story of the scientist Barbara Smuts, who studied baboons in Kenya. When Smuts began her research, she behaved neutrally around the baboons. But the more Smuts ignored them, the more agitated the animals seemed. It wasn’t until Smuts changed her behavior, taking cues from the baboons, that they became comfortable in her presence. Also, the baboons began treating her like a subject with whom they could communicate, as opposed to like an object.<sup>83</sup> Haraway argues that the story of Smuts and the baboons serves as an example of a “natureculture” in which “all the actors become who they are *in the dance of relating* [and] all the dancers are redone through the patterns they enact.”<sup>84</sup> Becoming worldly, for Haraway, is a practice always open to the unexpected, to redoing and being redone. Furthermore, it involves “*respecere*...the act of respect. To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally...To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect is to enter the world of becoming with.”<sup>85</sup> Becoming worldly, which (as

Haraway shows) is always also science – or science, which is always also becoming worldly – involves “touch” (recall Jim’s dog), curiosity, an openness to the unexpected and to redoing and being redone, and respect.

Haraway’s paradigm (or science) of becoming worldly is both deeply Hegelian and deeply magical. I want to suggest that what Haraway offers us is a model for *magically thinking science*. It is not difficult to see the Hegel (and not to mention the Adorno) in Haraway. One has only to juxtapose the two thinkers’ articulations of the “shape” of “life” itself to see the affinity of their thought. For Hegel, “the ‘matters’ [constituent moments] posited as independent directly pass over into their unity, and their unity directly unfolds its diversity, and this once again reduces itself to unity.”<sup>86</sup> Furthermore: “Thus the simple substance of Life is the splitting up of itself into shapes and at the same time the dissolution of these existent differences.”<sup>87</sup> And for Haraway:

the shape and temporality of life on earth are more like a liquid-crystal consortium folding on itself again and again than a well-branched tree. Ordinary identities emerge and are rightly cherished, but they remain always a relational web opening to non-Euclidean pasts, presents, and futures. The ordinary is a multipartner mud-dance issuing from and in entangled species.<sup>88</sup>

For both Hegel and Haraway, in “life,” “shapes” “unfold,” “split up,” or “emerge,” but always return to or remain “a unity,” or “web” (Hegel : dialectic :: Haraway : “multipartner mud-dance”). The diction in both Hegel and Haraway evokes the tactile material world; in it, there is “matter,” “substance,” “shape,” “liquid,” “mud,” and more. In the end, Hegel and Haraway are both interested in relationships and affect in and between material forms – a dialectical science indeed.

Furthermore, Haraway, in the spirit of both Hegel and Adorno, demonstrates how one might begin to magically think science. Recall aspects of the magical: interiority, multiplicity, fluidity, specificity, and the subject-object status of every single thing. Here is Haraway. For her, any (scientific) encounter with any companion species or thing has a depth, multiplicity, fluidity, and specificity uniquely its own. The event of Jim’s dog, for example, is made possible by “mutually constituting, intra-active touch.” Furthermore, for Haraway, knots of companion species and things must be encountered in all of their movement and dynamism – their “emergence,” “folding,” and “webbing.” And of course, “the animals in labs...just as we humans are both subject and object all the time.” Haraway also utilizes (forms of Hegel’s forms of) ritualized, dynamic, and performative repetition. For her, “becoming with” and “becoming worldly”

are always ritual and dynamic practices. The “multipartner mud-dance issuing from and in entangled species” — the shape of life itself — is, at base, ritualized, dynamic repetition. Haraway advocates forms of performative repetition (or, per Butler, “variable constructions”), too. Her advocacy is perhaps most apparent in her assertion that “We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up.”<sup>89</sup> The double meaning of this claim is striking and essential: species and things “make each other,” meaning not only that they materially shape one another — mixing cells, microbes, and molecules in every moment of contact — but that they also “make each other *up*”; at every turn, they *imagine* one another and ways *toward* one another. All touch between companion species is imaginative “touch across difference.”<sup>90</sup>

How to map this “magical” ethics — the ethics of magical thinking — as we have seen it at work in and across the critical theories of Hegel, Adorno, and Haraway? First, in the ethics of magical thinking, subject is always also object and object is always also subject. As I have shown, this subject-object premise works foundationally in the theories of Hegel, Adorno, and Haraway. In addition, magical thinking values and entails interiority, multiplicity, fluidity, and specificity, and as I have discussed these attributes are foregrounded by such posthumanisms as Haraway’s. Adorno, in his writings on Hegel, shows that magical thinking also involves mimesis, an openness to what is not-yet-understood, *unclarity* (i.e., unfixedness), imagination, and experimentation. And as I have illustrated, these values, too, are central to Haraway’s paradigm. Furthermore, magical thinking, per Hegel, exacts ritualized, dynamic, and performative forms of repetition — forms that are always open to the unexpected, to redoing and being redone. And Haraway, following Hegel and Adorno (regardless of whether she realizes it), further complicates magical thinking for the twenty-first century by introducing such new, or newly realized, magical concepts as curiosity, respect, and touch.

Magical thinking sets out to subvert Enlightenment science, the cult of the commodity, and the anthropocentrism that make beings killable and preclude imaginative acts of ethical relating. How do we see magical thinking at work in contemporary aesthetic practice, too? How are experimental artists exploring magical posthumanisms and reimagining subject-object relations? To begin to address these questions, I will turn now to the ecopoetics of Brenda Hillman.



In a pair of short poems from 2011, titled “Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare,” Brenda Hillman mobilizes the lyric as a means of imagining her way toward the other-than-human world and critiquing human environmental degradation.<sup>91</sup> In homage to the Romantic poet John Clare, Hillman performs what she calls “spoken-bird poetry.”<sup>92</sup> While Hillman is being playful, her comment prompts a useful question: what type of thinking might “speaking bird” entail? What kind of thinking renders “spoken-bird poetry” even imaginable? I will show how in these poems, Hillman practices distinctly magical thinking, per Hegel, Adorno, and Haraway, ultimately staging a posthuman environmental ethics. In the first poem, Hillman writes:

**towhee [*Pipilo crissalis*] wakes a human**

pp cp cp cp chp chp  
 pppppppppppp  
 cppppcpp cpp cpp  
 (a woman tosses)  
 Gulf disaster ster sister  
 aster aster as asp  
 ppp cp cp p bp bp BP BP  
 scree sreeeeem we  
 we we didn't  
 neee needed to move so fast<sup>93</sup>

Here Hillman imagines an interspecies exchange, exploring the sound, language, and expression that are the result of this contact – to use Haraway’s words, “mutually constituting...touch.” The poem itself is an act of close listening. In it, very little action occurs: a woman wakes, tosses, and listens to towhee morning vocalizations, perhaps outside of her window. At first, the bird vocalizations are simply ambient. The towhee’s repetitive, shrill “chp” is evocative of a familiar dawn soundscape:

pp cp cp cp chp chp

At the outset, the bird call is pure, spontaneous sound, evolving subtly, almost imperceptibly, with the unfurling of the line that contains it: “cp cp” becomes “chp chp.” In line three, however, the bird’s call breaks into song: “pppppppppppp.”<sup>94</sup> Here the written line vibrates with the towhee’s trill, demanding the reader’s heightened attention. Notably, Hillman allows for the towhee’s song to comprise three consecutive lines of the poem’s ten; she insists that time and space be given to that which is unpredictable and other to human ears. In foregrounding the bird, Hillman acknowledges the mysterious and irreducible life of the animal, both calling, singing subject and audible, readable object. In this way also, Hillman de-centers the human figure – both the woman in the poem and the poem’s reader – a conspicuous refusal of anthropocentrism.

As the bird’s song becomes more insistent and complex in the course of poem, the woman is moved to enter into a collaboration with the bird and her environment – a kind of “mimetic relating,” self-reflection in and affinity with the subject-object other (reminiscent of Adorno on Hegel). Surprisingly to the reader, she hears:

Gulf disaster      ster sister  
                         aster            aster    as        asp

This language refers not only to the human world, but to the other-than-human world as well – not only “Gulf disaster,” but “aster,” a genus of flowering plants. What is the source of this mimetic language and sound? Does it emerge from the breezy caesuras between towhee vocalizations? After all, the wispy “a” and “s” sounds here are very different from the sharp, metallic *chp*’s of previous lines. Is it a culmination of the morning din, bird song and breeze combined? The reader cannot know, and the poem itself facilitates this sense of ambiguity and simultaneity. Then:

ppp cp cp p            bp bp BP BP  
                         scree sreeeeem                    we

By this point, the bird’s song and the woman’s own meditations have come together as collaborative expression. Through this imagined collaboration – in repeating the “pp” and “cp” sounds while also allowing for variation, a kind of dynamic repetition – the poem arrives at “BP,” and then at an exasperated “scree sreeeeem,” one that is conceived of as belonging not to the woman or bird alone, but to both at once: “we.” Here is Hegelian magical thinking at work in contemporary ecolytic. Through openness to and acknowledgement of the not-yet-understood other-than-human other; mimesis and experimentation, a kind of “experimental interplay”; and

dynamic repetition: something entirely unexpected – between human and bird – is imagined. Magical thinking in lyric practice enables Hillman to conceive of new possible forms for relating to the towhee, and also to the fact of contemporary environmental devastation; response to the 2010 BP blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, or “disaster,” has become by the end of the poem a collective gesture, a collective “scree sreeeeeem.” Here also is Haraway’s “becoming worldly” – woman and bird are conceived of as “making each other *up*” as the poem progresses, a manifestation of “touch across difference.”

Importantly, readers are invited to participate in the poem’s experimental relating as well. As readers encounter and mimic the towhee’s “chp chp,” making the sounds with their own tongues, teeth, and lips, they enter into and engage with the poem’s environment in a material, embodied way. Recall Adorno on Hegel: “The content itself contains, as a law of its form, the expectation of productive imagination on the part of the one reading.” Like Hegel’s, Hillman’s text, too, exacts the imaginative participation of readers.

In the second poem of “Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare,” Hillman writes:

**woman in red sweater to hummingbird**

                  ssssssss                  we                  ssssssss weee  
no i’m not not                  sweet not  
sweeeeetie i’m not  
                  something to eeeeeeat<sup>95</sup>

Here, playfully, Hillman imagines a woman communicating with a hummingbird in a hybrid language.

                  ssssssss                  we                  ssssssss weee

Meaning is imagined as occurring somewhere between the woman’s understanding of “red” (a sweater) and the bird’s (something sweet to eat). The woman in the poem responds to the bird’s curiosity with a language she imagines to be nearer to its own embodied experience of the world. The poem, aflutter in all of its lightness, space (caesura), spontaneous indentation, and repetition of airy “s” and “e” sounds, mimics the sudden

presence of a darting, flitting hummingbird. Here a hybrid language provides the woman in the poem with new access to the hummingbird's material presence in their shared world. Amidst so much uncertainty and un-fixity, there is imagined "interplay" between two consciousnesses, reciprocal giving and receiving back from each other. As with the first poem, the reader here, too, is a collaborator; experiencing the rhythms and breaks of the poem becomes for the reader a creative act of relating to the animal other.

Together, these two lyrics instantiate a ritual poetic practice. Recall aspects of ritualized repetition in Hegel: the value of philosophy, or dialectical thought, is "the order of its performance," the shape of the ritual performance itself, in all of its moments. Again, in Hegel's words: "the real issue [of the philosophical work] is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about."<sup>96</sup> In Hillman, we see an emphasis on the process of imagining all of the possible layered, hybrid languages and communicative forms that may exist in the interstices, between subject-objects (in these poems, between woman and bird). Each poem performs for readers this ritual imagining, or "making *up*" of the other, taking time to acknowledge and listen to that which is other than human. Note how in both poems, entire lines are comprised of bird calls and songs – irreducible sound. For Hillman, the act of listening is ritual collaboration with the animal other, and the value of this collaboration is its gradual, unpredictable, and dynamic process.

Hillman's ecopoetics imagines and performs a uniquely magical posthumanism, a demonstration of how contemporary experimental poets might and do draw from a tradition of magical thinking in order to begin mapping an environmental ethics. When we read Hegel through Adorno, and therefore insist on an inheritance of such notions as mimetic relating, experimental interplay, and the subject-object status of every single thing; and when we are attentive to the forms and functions of Hegelian repetition in all of its ritual, dynamism, and performativity, we begin to see how aspects of Hegelian magical thinking have the capacity to inform and enrich posthuman theory and aesthetics for the new century.

That said, and to follow Adorno once again: there can be for posthumanism no revival of Hegel; only rescue. Even an inheritance via Adorno, one critical of Hegel's "deluded" impulse to elevate spirit, must remain circumspect – situated as we are today on a radically degraded earth, only beginning to grasp the damage that our capitalist economies

and cultures of consumption have inflicted upon the planet, and yet seduced as ever by a dominant environmentalist rhetoric that repeatedly, and often uncritically, falls back on such concepts as “connection” and “unity.” As Adorno observed, perhaps most essentially: “The force of the whole...is not a mere fantasy on the part of spirit; it is the force of the real web of illusion in which all individual existence remains trapped.”<sup>97</sup>

Arguably, many contemporary ecological paradigms — notions of a webbed existence in which every being is implicated and subsumed — betray an all-too-orthodox Hegelianism that continues to permeate the Western psyche to its very core. The shape of the dialectic is perhaps as dangerous as it is promising for posthuman thought.

## •Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Concept of Enlightenment,” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114.

<sup>12</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 76, 80, my emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 112.

<sup>14</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, “Concept,” 9.

<sup>15</sup> In his essay “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy,” Adorno writes: “rescuing Hegel — and only rescue, not revival, is appropriate for him — means facing up to his philosophy where it is most painful and wresting truth from it where its untruth is obvious.” Following Adorno, I employ the verb “rescue” here with regard to inheriting Hegel. See Theodor W. Adorno, “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy,” *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1993), 83.

<sup>16</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms,” *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008,) 157-187.

<sup>17</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, “Concept,” 3.

<sup>18</sup> I want to underscore that here I am working specifically with Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of magic as they develop it in “Concept of Enlightenment.” For more on ancient magic and how it relates to religious and rational paradigms, see Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3-6.
- <sup>23</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993), 40-41.
- <sup>24</sup> Adorno, "Experiential Content," 57.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 61-62.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 69.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Here Adorno gestures toward what is perhaps his central thesis in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), and also toward what he perceives to be his essential departure from Hegel. For Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, a concept can never exhaust a subject-object (as Adorno asserts in "Experiential Content" as well). As a result, "the more restlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object." To counter "identitarian" thinking, Adorno imagines the nonidentical in and as the identical — what he at one point suggests to be that which "[lives] in the cavities between what things claim to be and what they are." Notably, Adorno credits Hegel with performing precisely this type of thinking: "The most enduring result of Hegelian logic is that the individual is not flatly for himself. In himself, he is his otherness." For Adorno, Hegel realized that "the nonidentical [is] the thing's own identity against its identifications. The innermost core of the object proves to be simultaneously extraneous to it." But also for Adorno, what Hegel was not able to see was that absolute Spirit — "totality" — in the end denies its own nonidentity. Therefore, Adorno's "negative dialectics" — which takes Hegelian dialectics one step farther — seeks to "convict" totality of the nonidentical within it. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 1973), 147-150, 161.
- <sup>29</sup> Adorno, "Experiential Content," 72, my emphasis.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 75.
- <sup>31</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel," *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993), 98-99.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, "Concept," 6.
- <sup>34</sup> Adorno, "Skoteinos," 139.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 138.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, "Concept," 7.
- <sup>38</sup> Adorno, "Skoteinos," 144-145.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 92.
- <sup>40</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, "Concept," 8.
- <sup>41</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 1-3.
- <sup>42</sup> "Ritual, adj. and n." OED Online, 2011 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1 September 2001.
- <sup>43</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 54.
- <sup>44</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 2.
- <sup>45</sup> Tambiah, *Magic*, 54.
- <sup>46</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 21.
- <sup>47</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 11. Trans. Gerhard Richter, Lecture, "Inheriting Hegel," University of California, Davis, CA (winter 2010).
- <sup>48</sup> For Adorno, on the other hand, "the whole is the untrue" — and here again is Adorno's essential departure from Hegel. For Adorno, Hegel's "whole" is the very image of the "principle of domination," the "superior coercive force," that marks and traps contemporary existence. In other words, perhaps: the domination of science, technology, and capital. "This is the truth in Hegel's untruth," concludes Adorno. See Adorno, "Experiential Content," 87.
- <sup>49</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, "Concept," 6-7.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>51</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 32.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 490.

<sup>55</sup> My double emphasis on “is.”

<sup>56</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 32.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 148-149.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>60</sup> Ironically, Butler situates her argument precisely in opposition to what she calls “the Hegelian model”: “The Hegelian model of self-recognition... presupposes a potential adequation between the 'I' that confronts its world... as an object, and the 'I' that finds itself as an object in that world. But the subject/object dichotomy, which here belongs to the tradition of Western epistemology, conditions the very problematic of identity that it seeks to solve.” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 144.) For Butler, Hegel presupposes an “I” and an “other” who stand in opposition to one another, neglecting to acknowledge that the “I” and the “other” are always already effects of signifying practices and discourse. But what Butler does not acknowledge in Hegel is that the figures “I” and “other” do not preexist the dialectic. Hegel’s dialectic begins and ends with the universal, or whole, and “I” and “other” occur only as moments of this universal. Recall Adorno’s claim that the very project of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is to problematize any subject-object disparity. If “I” and “other” stand in opposition, then recognition has failed and the dialectic breaks down. The culmination of the dialectic is when “I” and “other” exist instead as “I-other” (both “I” and “other”), or as subject-object. What I want to suggest is that we align Butler with Hegel. Recall Hegel: “[Meaning] is not exhausted by stating its aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about.” In Hegel, as in Butler, self, agency, or “Truth” reside in the process and the product, the “result together with the process” of the movement or performance. In short, the shape of Butler’s performative repetition is essentially that of Hegel’s dialectic: the “carrying out” is the site of meaning. Butler, too, is a magical thinker; in Butler’s paradigm, as in the magical act, the means is the end. See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 112.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> One might read Hegel as speaking only figuratively in the passages I have just cited, and not about actual material embodiment. While one cannot know with certainty what Hegel intends here, it is worth noting that Hegel continues to suggest the material nature of dialectical movement throughout the section “Self-Consciousness.” In the paragraphs that follow, Hegel goes on to discuss the “fear” felt by the self-consciousness facing its own death, one that causes it to “[tremble] in every fibre of its being.” Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 117.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 6. According to Haraway, “intra-active” is Karen Barad’s term.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 7, 11.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 21-23.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 23-25.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>86</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 81.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>88</sup> Haraway, *Species*, 31-32.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>91</sup> Brenda Hillman, "Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (spring/summer 2011): 23-24.

<sup>92</sup> Brenda Hillman, "Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare" (Squaw Valley Community of Writers Poetry Reading Benefit, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA, July 15, 2011).

<sup>93</sup> Brenda Hillman, "Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare." *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (spring/summer 2011), 23.

<sup>94</sup> For more information about towhee calls and songs, see "Bird Vocalizations: California Towhee," *California Academy of Sciences*, 22 April 2009, [www.calacademy.org](http://www.calacademy.org).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>96</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Adorno, "Experiential Content," 87.

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# COLLISION

Vol. 1, No. 1 (2012)  
Aesthetics After Hegel

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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Miller, Jason. "The 'Death of Art' and Painting the 'Sunday of Life':  
Hegel on the Fate of Modern Art," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 1 (2012): 39-47.

## ABSTRACT

While recent aesthetic theory has put forth considerable effort to make sense of Hegel's provocative claim that art has come to an end in the modern era, it devotes relatively little attention to the various ways in which art might continue to play an affirmative, even redemptive, role in disclosing the basic normative structures of a particular way of life. Whether we condone or condemn the so-called "end of art" thesis will turn, I argue, on the more basic question of what Hegel takes to be the primary task of modern art. Focusing specifically on Hegel's analysis of Dutch genre painting in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, I argue that Hegel regards modern art, not as a failure to convey the deepest interests of a culture or society, but as a welcome liberation of art in which it comes to reflect the diversity and complexity of human experience.

## KEYWORDS

Hegel, end of art, modern art, Dutch painting, everyday

# The "Death of Art" and the "Sunday of Life": Hegel on the Fate of Modern Art

Jason Miller



The caricature of Hegel as an enemy of modern art persists even today. It is rooted in his ambiguous but highly contentious claim that, for us moderns, art "is and remains for us a thing of the past."<sup>1</sup> Art — *in its highest vocation* — offers human consciousness a glimpse of reality in its full disclosure, what he calls "Absolute Knowing."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Hegel appears to revoke this privilege with the further claim that art fulfilled this vocation in classical Greek sculpture. With the subsequent rise of the modern, or "romantic," arts, art cedes its vocation to "higher" forms of self-expression, religion and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> On account of the allegedly downgraded status of modern art, modern aesthetic theory has made Hegel out to be indifferent, or even hostile, to the continued philosophical significance of art.<sup>4</sup> One recent scholar, for example, describes Hegel's *Aesthetics* as "a gigantic war-machine directed against aesthetics in general."<sup>5</sup>

There are several reasons to question the common trope that portrays Hegel as an enemy of modern art. To begin with, it contradicts his obviously deep reverence for the works of Shakespeare, Cervantes,

Goethe, Rembrandt, Van Eyck, and countless other post-classical artworks presumed to be “dead” on his view. *Something* was clearly very much alive in romantic art that warranted Hegel’s rather extensive analysis of it in the *Aesthetics*; it is this *something* that concerns me here. For even if art is in some sense “a thing of the past” for us, it is an altogether different, and I think more philosophically productive, question to ask: What becomes of art once it has fulfilled its highest vocation?

More importantly, the standard view of Hegel overlooks the potentially positive, reconciliatory significance of art’s coming to terms with its own limits.<sup>6</sup> Whatever else an artwork may be, for Hegel, it is inherently *affirmative*, in which case we should expect art to maintain some deeply redeeming character even well after its purported demise. My strategy here, then, is to sidestep the intensely disputed terrain concerning the meaning of Hegel’s so-called “end of art” thesis and to focus instead on the potential *value* of modern art for Hegel. The latter inquiry, I believe, will in turn shed new light on the former. In particular, I argue that Hegel’s rich analysis of Dutch genre painting in the *Aesthetics* breathes new life into the diminished hope for an affirmation and celebration of everyday life in modern aesthetic theory.

## • The End of Art •

However we interpret the “end of art” doctrine in Hegel, it decidedly does *not* mean that art ceases as a practice. It is a basic empirical fact that art persists in the romantic era, and Hegel, a devoted patron of the arts, was keenly aware of this.<sup>7</sup> Art carries on, but unlike the art of antiquity, romantic art doesn’t *mean* to us what classical art did to the Greeks. The highest vocation of art — revealing the inner depths of the human spirit — reached its zenith in Myron and Praxiteles, never to return again. So if art is no longer the appearance of the *ideal* of beauty, we must ask: What significance, if any, does modern art have? What does art *do* for us, after it has ended?

Hegel’s more pessimistic critics take him to be downgrading all art that fails to fulfill the lofty purposes of classical art. But here we must guard against the oversimplified view that Hegel simply rings the death

knell for modern art in the name of an unchecked classicist bias. The point is not that romantic art has lost its significance altogether, but that it has lost its significance as something *divine*. True, “we bow the knee no longer” before the work of art, but this hardly warrants the controversy it has elicited.<sup>8</sup> We simply do not experience the work of art, past or present, as an object of religious veneration. Far more contentious than the claim that art has lost this significance for us, it seems, is the claim that it ever had this sanctified status at all. If ever a god were seen in the *Torso of Apollo*, now we find only a beautiful figure in marble; works of art no longer have that kind of normative pull on us.

This narrative is affirmed by the fact that we do not look to Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings or the poetry of Charles Simic for substantive answers about what we should do, who we should be, and what we should believe. Even the grandest conceits of modern art fall well short of offering a cosmology or comprehensive mythology for modern life. Seen in this light, Hegel’s view of art’s fate simply gives philosophical stilts to the implicit recognition that art plays a very different role in modernity. Indeed, if the “death of art” entails that we need not invest ourselves in the moral authority of Jeff Koons or Matthew Barney, then perhaps we have little reason to grieve the end of art after all.

## • The Liberation of Art •

Moreover, even as Hegel laments the breakdown of normative unity in the modern era, he sees the consequent loss of art’s religious function as *liberating* for the continued pursuit of art:

Art strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes *Humanus* its new holy of holies: i.e., the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates.<sup>9</sup>

Divested of its mythological significance, art is free to explore the rich particularity of human existence — the *Humanus* — in all its complexity. Indeed, Hegel’s insistence on the positive aesthetic value of art’s transition to secular humanism is in my view the real strength of his theory. Rather than staking the continued relevance of art on the romantic prospect of reviving a Golden Age of art, Hegel locates the vitality of modern art in its

celebration of the commonplace. With the breakdown of Greek cosmopolitanism, individual subjectivity emerges and manifests in scenes of everyday life in romantic art: a milkmaid laboring, a peasant wedding, or a mother nursing her sick child. Post-classical art reflects the transition in the subject matter of art, from social agency within the *polis* to the inner life of modern individual subjectivity. Inner subjectivity, or “inwardness [*Innerlichkeit*],” becomes both “the fundamental principle of romantic art” as well as its principal content.<sup>10</sup> The “willing and self-knowing subject” becomes the subject of artistic representation, which means that romantic art is free to run the gamut of human experience as the proper object of artistic representation.<sup>11</sup>

Thus romantic art seizes on and expands art’s fundamental capacity to aesthetically transform the sensible particular. Once nature has been “emptied of gods” and the explicitly religious significance of art begins to wane, the subject matter of art becomes radically diversified.<sup>12</sup> With the inward turn of the modern subject, a broader spectrum of subject matter presents itself for artistic depiction. Aesthetic content becomes “infinitely rich” and can “adapt its shape to ever-altered circumstances and situations in the most multifarious ways.”<sup>13</sup> When art no longer serves a quasi-religious function, it reflects on subjectivity as such and finds “inexhaustible content” in “the whole of mankind and its entire development.”<sup>14</sup>

Because of this transition, the residual religiosity present in romantic art will gradually give way to the secularization of aesthetic content.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this tension between an eroding spirituality and an emerging sense of reflective agency is what Hegel takes to be the most philosophically salient feature of romantic art. “Thus in romantic art,” he explains, “we have two worlds”: a spiritual realm and the realm of the external as such.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, Christianity’s focus on the inner life of the soul outstrips art’s potential to give outward form to a more complex religious narrative.<sup>17</sup> Since art no longer embodies the whole of *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical life, we moderns no longer bow the knee to art. On the other hand, however, this *failure* of art to fulfill our deepest religious needs at the same time ushers in a humanist interest in the everyday that, as Hegel suggests, makes romantic art more *aesthetically* interesting. It is no longer the ideal harmony of form and content that constitutes the beauty of the romantic artwork, but rather its capacity to transform and exalt even the pedestrian details of daily life through artistic representation.

With this, Hegel introduces a new standard by which romantic works of art deserved to be called “great”. If modern works of art are judged in terms of the Ideal of artistic beauty (i.e., the perfect correspondence of form and content), he maintains, they “must undoubtedly fall short.”<sup>18</sup> However, romantic art has a feature that is still of “special importance”, namely,

the artist’s subjective conception and execution of the work of art, the aspect of the individual talent which can remain faithful both to the manifestations of spirit and also to the inherently substantial life of nature, even in the extreme limits of the contingency which that life reaches, and *can make significant even what is in itself without significance*...In view of these aspects we may not deny the name of works of art to the creations of this sphere.<sup>19</sup>

The beauty of modern art lies in making significant the insignificant. In romantic art – which is by far the most developed topic of Hegel’s lectures – it is not the divine, but rather the miscellany of “prosaic life” that constitutes the sensuous appearance of the Idea. This development can be observed most acutely, Hegel thinks, in Dutch genre painting.

Hegel describes the secularization of art in Dutch painting as a “transition from a more peaceful and reverential piety to the portrayal of torments and the ugliness of the world generally.”<sup>20</sup> Importantly, however, it is not a transition from divine beauty to the banal homeliness of the everyday that characterizes Dutch art; rather, it is a matter of singling out the “trivial” and even the “repugnant” and imbuing them with *liveliness* in the form of art. Even such seemingly insignificant detritus, the likes of which are otherwise lost in the course of commonplace affairs, is transformed in the context of art and takes on an appearance worthy of intense admiration.<sup>21</sup> When art sheds its religious occupation, it turns its gaze to the particulars of existence and “exalt[s] these otherwise worthless objects which, despite their insignificant content, it fixes and makes ends in themselves; it directs our attention to what otherwise we would pass by without any notice.”<sup>22</sup> The work of art is no longer ideal, but it can still idealize the quotidian. Thus there remains an “ideal feature” of non-Ideal art that is evident in Dutch painting, namely, its capacity to reconcile us with the mundane world; it is the “Sunday of life which equalizes everything and removes all evil.”<sup>23</sup>

If art is dead, then for Hegel there is liberation in death. Its afterlife is marked by the vitality of Dutch painting. This distinctly modern standard – the *Humanus*, the “new holy of holies,” as Hegel calls it—exalts

the richness and variety of human life.<sup>24</sup> The gradual transition from communal religious life to secular modernity marks the end of art *qua* religion, but in so doing, inaugurates an artistic freedom that “strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment.”<sup>25</sup> While modern art can no longer satisfy our deepest interests, in its capacity to traverse the whole spectrum of human content, Dutch painting holds out the possibility of redemption in modern life through the aesthetic transformation of the everyday. Yet the truth that we find in Dutch painting is at the same time “an ingredient in any work of art”: it provides “the vision of what man is as man, what the human spirit and character is, what man and *this* man is.”<sup>26</sup> This, then, gives way to a new and very important question: Can aesthetic experience be liberating for the *post-romantic* subject?

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup>G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11. For the original German, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*. Bände 13-15 of the *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. by E. Moldenauer and K.M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). A more recent edition by Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007) includes Hotho’s notes from the summer semester of 1823.

<sup>2</sup> See Section III of the *Philosophy of Mind* (292ff). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (424ff) art is presented as an aspect of religion, which Hegel refers to as “Art-Religion.”

<sup>3</sup> This somewhat anachronistic use of the term “romantic” in Hegel designates the whole of post-classical art. This includes, but is not identical to, the familiar aesthetic genre of romanticism.

<sup>4</sup> See Erich Heller, *The Artist’s Journey into the Interior* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 115; and Israel Knox, *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), 103. In the German tradition, see Hermann Glockner “Die Ästhetik in Hegels System,” 438-9; and Rüdiger Bubner, “Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik” in *neue Hefte für Philosophie* 5 (1793), 679.

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Unpresentable,” In *The Subject of Philosophy*. Edited by Thomas Trezise (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 151.

<sup>6</sup> Here my own analysis differs from that of Adorno. While Adorno certainly believes that art has this function of showing us our deepest interests, he patently denies that art should aim to *reconcile* us to the grim reality of modern culture — it shows us what cannot be realized in late capitalist society. My take on the significance of art is slightly more optimistic: I see the critical potential of art (in keeping with Hegel) as ultimately something *affirmative* in the sense that it points *beyond* that which it criticizes, namely, to human freedom.

<sup>7</sup> Apart from Hegel’s rich art-historical knowledge of post-classical European art, he came to experience much of this work first-hand, in various museums and galleries of Germany, France, and Austria, and in the private collections of various wealthy art patrons whose acquaintance he had made as a Professor at the University of Berlin. As a dedicated theater-goer, Hegel also maintained

close personal relationships with several artistic elites in Berlin, including the composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, and the celebrated opera singer Anna Milder-Hauptmann. Cf. Otto Pöggeler, *Hegel in Berlin: Preußische Kulturpolitik und idealistische Ästhetik. Zum 150. Todestag des Philosophen* (Berlin: Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 607.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 518-9. See also Hegel, *Werke*, Vol. 14, 128-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 524.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>15</sup> Despite the normative decentralization of post-classical art, Hegel does not think romantic art abandons its religious significance altogether. Art retains a vestige of its religious heritage in its occasional return to Greek mythological themes, but especially in the predominantly Christian subject matter of Byzantine, Renaissance and Baroque art in Europe. Hegel's point is that art itself is no longer the principal focal point of religious or ethical life. The transition from classic to romantic art is the transition from art *as religion* to *religious art*; that is, from religion in the broad sense (i.e., as comprehensive mythology) to religion in the narrow sense (i.e., as Christianity). Instead of providing a concrete embodiment of cultural normativity, romantic works of art reflect the values of *inner spirituality* — e.g., specific “virtues” (*Ibid.*, 553f), individual character (*Ibid.*, 577f), and inner beauty (*Ibid.*, 583) — independently of the social institutions that once gave shape to ethical life, like the family or the state. Whereas classic Greek sculpture represents the values and deepest interests of antiquity, romantic art turns its attention to the free, self-sufficient subject *reflecting* on the base normative structures of modern life.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 527.

<sup>17</sup> Consider, for example, of the use of gilded script in early Italian Renaissance paintings to visually depict Biblical scenes of the Annunciation: “*Ave Maria, gratia plena dominus tecum...*”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 596.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 883.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent and thorough discussion of Hegel's account of the formal devices employed in painting to convey the emerging consciousness of modern subjectivity — *framing, flatness, and glazing* — see Chapter 2 of Benjamin Rutter's recently published monograph, *Hegel on the Modern Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 887.

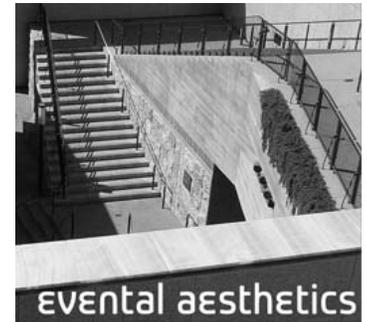
<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 607.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 887. Emphasis original.

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### ABSTRACT

In the *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel warns of the dangers of irony in art because it challenges the sanctity of rationality, truth, and morality. Over a century later, Robert Smithson — most famous for his earthwork, *Spiral Jetty* — openly embraces irony in his art and philosophical writings. In this paper, I employ Smithson as a direct response to Hegel's conception of irony. I contextualize irony within Hegel's critique of the abstract and self-absorbed Fichtean ego as it is found in the ironic artist. Following this, I utilize Smithson's philosophy as a kind of counterpoint — rather than refutation — to many of Hegel's convictions on the nature and function of art in world historical spirit. Despite their seeming incommensurability, Smithson utilizes his own formulation of the dialectic that is deeply indebted to and in dialogue with Hegel's dialectical interpretation of the work of art. Smithson directly challenges the Hegelian primacy of the inherently rational and anthropocentric nature of art's highest themes by creating works that reveal the unstable and transitory nature of existence. Despite the fact that Smithson rejects the Hegelian attitude toward rational progress, he finds that this perspective alleviates the potentially tragic insight into the meaninglessness of existence and provides a way of avoiding a nihilistic attitude toward the crises that confront us in the modern era.

### KEYWORDS

Hegel, Smithson, art, irony, beauty

# Irony and the Work of Art: Hegelian Legacies in Robert Smithson

Shannon Mussett

For in art we have to do, not with any agreeable or useful child's play, but with the liberation of the spirit from the content and forms of finitude, with the presence and reconciliation of the Absolute in what is apparent and visible, with an unfolding of the truth which is not exhausted in natural history but revealed in world-history.

•Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*

It is like going from one happy lie to another happy lie with a cheerful sense about everything.

•Robert Smithson, "Fragments of an Interview with P. A. Norvell"

## • Introduction •

In his scathing attack on the philosophical egoism of Fichte in the *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* Hegel warns of the dangers of irony in art because it presents "the vanity of everything factual, moral, and of intrinsic worth, the nullity of everything objective and absolutely valid."<sup>1</sup> Over a century later, Robert Smithson – most famous for his earthwork, *Spiral Jetty* – openly embraces irony in his works and philosophical writings. Irony, for Smithson, challenges Hegel's emphasis of artistic truth and beauty, opening up fecund sites for the disruption of aesthetic experience made possible by the modern technological landscape. In this paper, I employ Smithson and his works as a direct response to Hegel's conceptions of irony and the ironic artist, as they appear in his criticism of modern irony in the *Aesthetics*. My purpose in drawing this comparison

between Hegel and Smithson on irony is threefold. First, Smithson offers an artistic response to Hegelian aesthetics in general through his explicit adoption of a materialist dialectics in contrast to one rooted in idealism. In so doing, Smithson allows dialectics to continue to do important work both theoretically and artistically in the modern age. Second, the specific point of contact between Hegel and Smithson on irony develops a dialogue between a problematic – even dangerous – conception of irony (as found in Hegel’s critique) and a more fecund and relevant ironic practice (as found in Smithson’s works). By playfully rejecting the position of a Hegelian ironical artist, Smithson illustrates how irony can both engage and critique the contemporary landscape. Finally, given the pessimism and fatalism that infuses many social and academic attitudes toward the future of our shared world, Smithson’s reconfiguration of the ironic attitude away from a Hegelian framework suggests an artistic disclosure that prevents paralysis and encourages innovation.



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*. Photo by Shannon Mussett.

For Hegel, irony functions within the larger framework of beauty's emergence in historical truth, in that irony challenges many of our most deeply held humanistic ideals concerning beauty. Hegel attacks the self-absorbed and aloof posturing of the ironic artist who turns the foundation of spiritual progress into a game of haphazard demolition. I utilize Smithson's philosophy as a kind of developmental counterpoint to – rather than a total refutation of – many of Hegel's convictions on the nature and function of art in world historical spirit, and the danger posed by the ironical attitude toward this development. In many ways, Hegel's condemnation of irony in the *Aesthetics* portends the move that twentieth-century artists such as Smithson take, thus illuminating a deep bond between these otherwise conflicting attitudes toward the nature of truth in art.

Although I briefly explore the distinctions between irony and comedy in the *Aesthetics* (the latter of which Hegel blames for the dissolution of the final stages of romantic art), I focus primarily on the kind of irony that mocks the existence of truth in art. Despite their seeming incommensurability, I find Smithson's utilization of entropy and dialectical thinking to be an important offshoot of Hegelian aesthetics – so much so that Smithson stands as a direct descendent of the Hegelian philosophy of art, even as he is so largely through deconstructing it. Smithson, like Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche before him, exhibits a deep indebtedness to Hegelian formulations of thinking while concurrently rejecting many essential characteristics of spirit, history, and truth operative in the Hegelian worldview.

The initial experience of bringing Hegel and Smithson together on any aspect of aesthetics produces an inevitable sense of discord. Yet, as Gary Shapiro notes,

Hegel produced the most ambitious, one might say the most monumental, of all histories of art, setting the stage for the disciplines of art history and the history of literature. While Smithson is always an avowed enemy of any grand historical conception of art such as Hegel's metanarrative in which humanity comes to understand itself through artistic self-expression, he also displays some affinities with Hegel.<sup>2</sup>

Shapiro rightly finds these diametrically opposed figures sharing ground on the concept of dialectical thinking. If it is possible that Smithson's return to the earth and the material (as opposed to Hegel's distinct yearning toward the spiritual) "shows the limits and perhaps the end" of

Hegel's account, I find it compelling to read Smithson as the inevitable limit and end of Hegel's depiction of the ironic artist.<sup>3</sup> In a sweeping critical gesture, Smithson bucks European art and art history, thereby partially confirming Hegel's fears about the nefarious ironical artist. Yet, Smithson's reversal of the spiritual advance of art produces works that remain every bit as moving, culturally significant, and beautiful as the works of high art thematized by Hegel. And unlike the ironic artist who stands above and apart from her world, Smithson remains deeply embedded – even materially so – in the world in which he lives and creates. It is thus fair to say that both Smithson and Hegel reject the thoroughly ironic position, although Smithson retains a dialectical tension between the comedic and tragic attitudes in art that Hegel would find suspect.

While Hegel lambasts the ironists' mockery of the eternal and true, his criticism functions as a kind of harbinger. Smithson (who would be susceptible to the same kind of criticism that Hegel levels at Schlegel) directly challenges the Hegelian primacy of the inherently rational and anthropocentric nature of art's highest themes. Hegel finds truth in the great themes of art: "the eternal religious and ethical relationships; family, country, state, church, fame, friendship, class, dignity, and, in the romantic world, especially honour and love," whereas Smithson produces works that reveal the unstable and transitory nature of all such themes.<sup>4</sup> Smithson's appropriation of irony is, however, deeply Hegelian even if unselfconsciously so; irony, for Smithson, does in fact lie "in the self-destruction of the noble, great, and excellent" because entropy is a far more dominant force than progress, thus affirming the weight of Hegel's claims.<sup>5</sup> Without a hint of melancholy, Smithson instead turns to the ironic and comedic (two concepts Hegel significantly keeps apart in the *Aesthetics*) as a balm for the incomprehensibility and magnitude of existence. Since there are no real answers to the grand mysteries confronting us, systematic philosophy (and any theory of art based in such a philosophy) is at best a diversion or a game.

Instead of providing truth, any philosophical system engenders its own demolition. As a result,

There is no point in trying to come up with the right answer because it is inevitably wrong. Every philosophy will turn against itself and it will always be refuted. The object or the system will always crush its originator. Eventually he will be overthrown and be replaced by another

series of lies. It is like going from one happy lie to another happy lie with a cheerful sense about everything.<sup>6</sup>

Proposing that philosophy is a string of objections that go nowhere and express nothing about reality is, to say the least, a distinctly un-Hegelian insight. This sentiment is echoed in Smithson's 1969–70 conversations with Dennis Wheeler where he proposes that

Everyone who invents a system and then swears by it, that system will eventually turn on the person and wipe him out. It's that way with everything, in the sense that anything that you make is basically going to turn on you, and you'll find that essentially wrong.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, how can these claims to the *untruth* of artworks and philosophical writings be anything other than ironic when presented by an artist who creates both artworks and philosophical writings? I now turn to study irony in Hegel so as to provide a foundation out of which to approach this very dilemma in Smithson. Smithson both is and is not exemplary of the kind of ironic artist that Hegel derides in the *Aesthetics*. As such, Smithson actually carries Hegel forward in ways unanticipated and yet strangely foretold.

## • Aesthetical Considerations of Hegelian Irony •

The Hegelian dialectic functions in numerous different landscapes: history, natural science, ethics, politics, history, religion, and aesthetics. Largely concerned with the rational account of the emergence and supersession of contradiction in individual and world-historical cognition, the central point to my analysis regards the way in which Hegel's dialectic is ideal — that is to say, even the fully realized concrete subject achieved at the conclusion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is one that is self-conscious and self-aware in a way that mirrors and informs human self-consciousness. As such, Hegel's account remains proudly anthropocentric insofar as we are the vehicles through which spirit achieves its scientific shape. Regardless of which landscape Hegel treats in the path of spiritual development, human rationality is the foundation of its progress. Thus anything that challenges the supremacy of reason is an error or a threat that must be either eradicated or understood, overcome, and preserved in a higher

cognitive form. In art, perhaps the most explicit threat to the appearance of reason in sensible form (certainly in the modern era) comes from irony, which rejects the essential truths of rational spirituality through mockery and disbelief.

Hegel's discussion of irony as developed in the Introduction to the *Lectures on Fine Art* occupies the primary focus of my analysis because this is where he most fully addresses the problematic of *modern* irony.<sup>8</sup> As opposed to a notion of irony that emphasizes an unintentional outcome contrary to what was expected, Hegel's discussion of modern irony takes aim at an attitude bordering on sarcasm. The comedic person, by contrast, "focuses his energies on himself and his private interests and desires. Preoccupation with one's own particularity is comic insofar as it is viewed in contrast to the world and the substantial sphere such particularity tends to overlook."<sup>9</sup> Unlike the comedic character who is funny because she is foolishly self-absorbed, the ironic individual cynically raises herself above the universal truths governing social and historical wellbeing by mocking them.

Following his praise of Schiller, Schelling, and Winckelmann in the Introduction, Hegel sets up his discussion of irony with a more tepid evaluation of Friedrich and August Wilhelm von Schlegel's aesthetic theory. Despite their laudable attempts to exalt past art that had been previously undervalued by the tradition, Hegel finds that they demonstrate a paucity of speculative thought, resulting in an inability to properly judge art along philosophical lines. "Greedy for novelty in the search for the distinctive and extraordinary," the Schlegels pillaged the philosophical idea while retaining a suspiciously critical attitude.<sup>10</sup> Hegel adds that, "since their criticism was not accompanied by a thoroughly philosophical knowledge of their standard, this standard retained a somewhat indefinite and vacillating character, so that they sometimes achieved too much, sometimes too little."<sup>11</sup> As a result of their lack of philosophical underpinnings, the Schlegels are incapable of consistently evaluating greatness and mediocrity, often "ascribing universal worth to what was only relatively valuable."<sup>12</sup> From this lack of a speculative platform the principles of so-called (*sogenannte*) irony that Hegel finds particularly distasteful emerge.

Although he pinpoints the emergence of modern irony from F. von Schlegel's aesthetic theory, Hegel notes that irony has its roots in Fichte's philosophy of the ego. Fichte's ego, as the absolute starting point of all

knowing and experience, remains for Hegel "abstract and formal" and thus dangerously detached from the world.<sup>13</sup> In addition to its utter lack of concrete existence (a clear dilemma when addressing *aesthetic* production and experience) Fichte's ego is thoroughly incapable of giving meaningful parameters to particularity, negating every unique characteristic in its overwhelming systematic unity.<sup>14</sup> The problem, from an aesthetic standpoint, lies in the totalizing nature and activity of the ego and the illusory nature of the object, which is wholly tied to the subject rather than spirit. In essence, if all reality can be summed up by the ego, then the ego has total power over all of reality. Such a position grants the ego awesome powers of creation and destruction, but almost necessitates a move toward solipsism and relativism. If it is the case that the Fichtean ego "can remain lord and master of everything" then "in no sphere of morals, law, things human and divine, profane and sacred, is there anything that would not first have to be laid down by the *ego*, and that therefore could not equally well be destroyed by it."<sup>15</sup> All reality becomes a mere show of the ego's own power to itself. Very quickly, it seems to Hegel, the ego will simply spin off into vanity and vacuity, enjoying its own metaphysical sandcastles.

As he notes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit's* discussion of the "beautiful soul," the vacuity of the Fichtean "I = I" formulation creates a consciousness that "lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world."<sup>16</sup> The threat of actual involvement in the world leads to a total subjective turn, which, although momentarily satisfying in its apparent ability to create its own world, eventually gives way to consciousness's own dissolution. Schlegel's adoption of the Fichtean ego thus results, as Timothy C. Huson acknowledges, in an artificial mastery over the objective world by any artist who adopts it. The "*absolute* authority of the subject (ego) in being able to create and destroy all value also indicates the lack of any fixed value in the subject itself. In confronting a world without meaning, the subject itself is without meaning," resulting in the fact that "[t]he abstract freedom of Schlegel's artist is in fact no freedom at all."<sup>17</sup> With no essential contact with the world and the objective values therein, any meaning given by Schlegel's artist amounts to nothing more than relativistic narcissism.

From the standpoint of the ego, Hegel moves not to a discussion of the work of art, but of the ego of the artist who creates it. Such a move, "invented by Friedrich von Schlegel" and babbled by many others after him,

takes the artist as a kind of self-styled iconoclast who has no real attachments to her art or even the world and its complex web of social and spiritual relationships.<sup>18</sup> Insofar as the artist is *earnest*, she is centered in intrinsically valuable and true content "like truth, ethical life, etc."<sup>19</sup> Insofar as the artist focuses on the eternal truths of family, love, morality, state, religion and other such laudable philosophical and spiritual ideas, she follows the appropriate plan and her works will be both serious and beautiful. However, if the Fichtean ego resides in the artist then earnestness is impossible because "no content of consciousness appears as absolute and independently real but only as a self-made and destructible show."<sup>20</sup> The self-centered, nearly power-mad Fichtean ego is incapable of doing anything more than taking capricious pleasure in its own powers of creation and destruction. Such an

ironical artistic life apprehends itself as a divine creative genius for which anything and everything is only an unsubstantial creature, to which the creator, knowing himself to be disengaged and free from everything, is not bound, because he is just as able to destroy it as to create it.<sup>21</sup>

From here, Hegel's condemnation of the ironical artist only becomes more vitriolic. The artist who takes an ironical attitude reckons himself a "divine genius" who "looks down from his high rank on all other men, for they are pronounced dull and limited, inasmuch as law, morals, etc., still count for them as fixed, essential, and obligatory."<sup>22</sup> Sure, Hegel says, such a person might cohabit with others — friends and mistresses and the like, living and acting in the world with other people — but "his attitude to it all is ironical."<sup>23</sup> One can't help but picture Hegel's caricature as a sardonic maniac, laughing from his mountaintop of self-conceit and vacuous creativity, hurling insults and bad art at the unwitting populace below.<sup>24</sup>

One way to understand just what is at stake in Hegel's visceral hatred of irony can be found in his concluding remarks about K. W. F. Solger, who he claims was trapped by the extreme moment of "infinite absolute negativity" in the dialectic. At this extreme point, the idea has negated itself "as infinite and universal [so] as to become finitude and particularity."<sup>25</sup> True to the dialectical form he champions in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel observes that the dispersion of particularity is a necessary component of the speculative idea, *but only a moment*, which must be sublated into a unity. The natural course of action is the reassertion of universality and eternity in an ever-higher form through

sublation, whereas, in the words of Joseph G. Kronick, "Irony is dialectics run wild" resulting in "a purely negative skepticism."<sup>26</sup> Such lack of restraint is not unlike a bulldozer wreaking havoc on the pillars of progress at the center of teleological dialectics. Or, as Smithson might phrase it, irony opens us up to a view of dialectics not as they function in the story of humanity's progress, but as they function in the nonhuman machinations of entropy.

Presumably then, the artist is superfluous to the consideration of the work of art for Hegel since even the artwork transcends humanistic emphasis. The more elevated the work of art is – the further removed from the temporal flow and the subjectivity of the artist – the more it will successfully present truth in sensible appearance. Although it may seem to be an ironic claim to say that truth is that which removes itself from the flow of the world rather than engages it, this is precisely Hegel's understanding of the true goal of art. He does not deny the materiality of art (as his elevation of Greek sculpture makes clear) but he stresses time and again that what makes art *fine* is the purification of all contingency – the artist, materials, and time – from the material to the greatest extent possible. Any consideration of the specifics of the artist as a *person*, for example, moves away from the end of art and brings us into the orbit of the ironic.

Hegel notes that insofar as it has been transformed into art, irony focuses on the personal life of the artist as well as his work of art. Such attention to the personal details of the artist's life is most clear in the poetical arts but could, I believe, be extended to any kind of art that emerges from the kind of self-centeredness of absolute subjectivity and skepticism Hegel fears. In its attacks on all that is noble and fine, ironic art

will have to display only the principle of absolute subjectivity, by showing forth what has worth and dignity for mankind as null in its self-destruction. This then implies that not only is there to be no seriousness about law, morals, and truth, but that there is nothing in what is lofty and best, since, in its appearance in individuals, characters, and actions, it contradicts and destroys itself and so is ironical about itself.<sup>27</sup>

For Hegel, modern irony in art necessitates that artistic presentation illustrate the nihilistic movement of the self-centered ego that produces it. The characters and actions presented in ironic art will themselves be a bunch of dilettantes – iconoclasts in their own minds – who engage in "joking merely for the sake of joking," but who are in reality morally and

socially dangerous forces.<sup>28</sup> Why then, does Hegel keep separate the workings of irony from comedy, when both can be understood as forms of social criticism loaded with menace? A few words on the place of comedy in Hegel's system are needed in order to develop the distinction between comedy and irony; both unleash disruptive forces into art, but the ironic poses a far greater threat than comedy because it attacks the very nature of truth itself.

Although one wouldn't want to overlay the significant culmination of hundreds of pages of lectures on aesthetic theory in an analysis of *comedy* (it does, after all, have to end somewhere) neither should it be underplayed. Hegel relates that with the brief analysis of various forms of ancient and modern comedy "we have reached the real end of our philosophical inquiry" which has spanned the distance from symbolic art to romantic art.<sup>29</sup> Comedy, with its emphasis on the subjective and accidental aspects of existence, in fact leads "to the dissolution of art altogether," because it chips away at the essence of art which "aims at the identity, produced by the spirit, in which eternal things, God, and absolute truth are revealed in real appearance and shape to our contemplation, to our hearts and minds."<sup>30</sup> Also a force of dissolution and critique, comedy loosens the unity realized in spirit's quest to manifest itself in matter through art.

Comedy is best seen in character portrayal for Hegel. True, he writes, there are useless, frivolous and bad people, but that doesn't mean the ideals of usefulness, earnestness, and goodness are somehow problematic. The ideals to which humans *should* aspire are above reproach, even if we can have a good laugh at characters who fail to achieve them or are too ignorant or self-absorbed to even try. But it is an all-too-easy slide from poking fun at character flaws to calling into question the value of the goodness of the good person as irony might do.<sup>31</sup> As Hegel notes, "Irony loves this irony of loss of character" precisely because it is so easy to see the worst kinds of people as indicative of the absence of a rational standard according to which we can judge and even laugh at them.<sup>32</sup> This is why Hegel warns that irony is a "false theory" that "has seduced poets into bringing into characters a variety which does not come together into a unity, so that every character destroys itself as character."<sup>33</sup> The danger of irony, especially in the artistic portrayal of human passion, is that it runs a very serious risk of showing the deepest core of the motivation of human action as "unsubstantial and null" and thus inessential.<sup>34</sup>

Hegel clearly distinguishes between irony and comedy. Admittedly, irony “borders nearly on the principle of the comic,” but whereas the comic shows the destruction of “a false and contradictory phenomenon, a whim, e.g., an oddity, a particular caprice” etc., Hegel claims that it is “a totally different thing if what is in fact moral and true, any inherently substantial content, displays itself in an individual, and by his agency, as null.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps aware that his nearly hyperbolic harangue against irony may be interpreted as comedic, Hegel claims that despite their kinship, the ironic is different from the comedic in one crucial way – whereas the ironic attacks the truth itself, the comedic attacks the negativity (in the sense of nullity) that serves as the heart of irony. In other words, comedy laughs at irony. The comedic character is laughable because of her self-centeredness and lack of connection or respect for the absolute; the ironic individual simply mocks the absolute. Comedy reveals the destruction of what is relatively unimportant – what is already false: a character flaw, a whim, a quirk, something silly that was taken as something serious. As soon as the good, the moral, the beautiful, and the just are portrayed as null, we have ventured into the ironic. These truths are taken as sacrosanct and as such remain off the table for comedy. Comedy may attack the inherently untrue in subjective folly but not the inherently true itself. Comedy defends truth but irony “as this art of annihilating everything everywhere...acquires...the aspect of inner inartistic lack of restraint.”<sup>36</sup> Irony, it seems, simply destroys while comedy ultimately supports the noblest achievements of humankind.

Significantly, Smithson does not maintain this strict division between irony and comedy. This is easy for him, insofar as he rejects the very premise that there exists a kind of truth revealed to and by human beings alone. With such a dismissal, the question of whether or not one is attacking a subjective folly or an objective truth becomes irrelevant. All such human concerns are cause for laughter whenever they aspire to elevate the human over the cosmic.

## •Smithson's Ironic Sense of Humor •

Whereas Hegelian dialectics operate under the auspices of undoing contradiction through sublation into a higher shape of consciousness, Smithson's dialectics take a non-teleological and materialistic bent. Like Hegel, he emphasizes contradiction – bringing it into a stark sensible presentation in his works – but unlike Hegel he does not attempt to synthetically resolve it. By rejecting the prominence of the human, Smithson's dialectical method allows for the presentation of irrational forces in artistic arrangements.

His material dialectics are evidenced in all of his sculptures but are most evident in his nonsites and earthworks. His adherence to brute matter – dirt, rocks, sand, glass, mud, glue, etc. – underscores the entropic rather than the progressive. By highlighting the forces of dissolution, decay, and the temporal flow, Smithson's works attack the very heart of spiritual progress beloved by Hegel and could only be seen as ironic from the latter's perspective. For example, embracing a "dialectics of site and nonsite" which ruptures rather than preserves unity, Smithson explains how the iconic *Spiral Jetty* enacts contradiction rather than corrects it. He observes in the essay, "The Spiral Jetty," that the site in the Great Salt Lake

reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone...A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement...From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence...No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none.<sup>37</sup>

In choosing his materials and sites, Smithson often makes similar kinds of paradoxical pairings – immobile cyclones, dormant earthquakes, fluttering stillnesses – in an effort to rupture systematic thinking. There exists no category that can sufficiently maintain contradictions such as these and thus an irresolvable dialectic must take place in the matter itself. Since the ideal is no longer the operative genesis and telos for Smithson, "Ambiguities are admitted rather than rejected, contradictions are increased rather than decreased – the *alogos* undermines the *logos*."<sup>38</sup> In fact, should the Jetty (which is, after all, called a *jetty*) somehow present

itself as a kind of Hegelian presentation of the beautiful, he would have considered it a failure. For Hegel, beauty in art must be purged of any signs of contingency, decay, and death; whereas Smithson underscores precisely these entropic signs. All of the things that beauty in art must accomplish for Hegel – the purging of contingency, decay, and death – must be present in the work of art for Smithson. It is hard, given this small taste of Smithson's views on the dialectics of matter in art, not to see him as Hegel would: an ironic artist scoffing at the truth of rational humanity through an overt turn toward the irrational machinations of brute matter and the forces of entropy.

Smithson's position regarding art and artistic endeavor does evoke the general sense described by Hegel's critique of modern artistic irony. Yet, Smithson disarms the most potent aspects of Hegel's critique by not only accepting the power of irony to challenge truth, but by actually producing enormously influential and profound works of art from within an ironic attitude. As discussed above, Hegel finds modern irony so dangerous because it mocks the eternal and true, giving us the ironical artist as a hero – a hero who is little more than a self-absorbed and socially detached agent. Disregarding the centrality of the human being actually allows Smithson to elide any concern with who *he* is as an artist; whether or not he is an "ironic artist" in the Hegelian sense is largely beside the point when focusing on geologic rather than existential time, and inorganic rather than human bodies. Even if he can be *personally* classified as ironic (and most certainly would be by Hegel) his art enacts the work of irony on its own. A key component of his impressively diverse and robust body of work lies in his extensive writings and interviews where he deals explicitly with the issues of irony, comedy, and humor in the work of art.

In a 1967 interview with Allan Kaprow on the question, "What is a Museum?", Smithson challenges the value of the museum space for art as well as the value of the valuation of art. Revealing his Marxist bent (as well as his Nietzschean morality) he explains that "The categories of 'good art' and 'bad art' belong to a commodity value system."<sup>39</sup> Instead of these *moralistic* categories, he believes we need to shift our attention to an *aesthetic* form of valuation. Upon hearing this, Kaprow takes up the Hegelian mantle and asks,

How can your position then be anything but ironic, forcing upon you at least a skepticism. How can you become anything except a kind of sly

philosopher — a man with a smile of amusement on your face, whose every act is italicized?<sup>40</sup>

Notwithstanding Kaprow's brilliant encapsulation of his interlocutor as an ironic artist, Smithson doesn't miss a beat. Rather than deny or accept this characterization, he instead takes the argument to the inability of the American temperament, inherited from a kind of European seriousness, to find art funny and even hilarious:

The varieties of humor are pretty foreign to the American temperament. It seems that the American temperament doesn't associate art with humor. Humor is not considered serious. Many structural works really are almost hilarious. You know, the dumber, more stupid ones are really verging on a kind of concrete humor.<sup>41</sup>

Humor remains a somewhat fringe concern for both aesthetics and philosophy, thus the idea that most humor isn't thought of as a serious production, worthy of intellectual investment in its own right, is fitting. Smithson's notion of a kind of material or "concrete humor" strikes a note of discord in most of us with our heavily European sensibilities for precisely this reason. However, for Smithson, "High seriousness and high humor are the same thing."<sup>42</sup> In a dialectical inversion, Smithson points to the inherent hilarity of high art — something of which Hegel wasn't unaware but about which he felt a high degree of suspicion.

In his 1966 essay, "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson analyzes a number of his contemporaries (Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, Sol Le Witt and members of the "Park Place Group") to elaborate on the concept of "entropy" at the heart of their art. As I have hinted above, the entropic is perhaps the most significant and distinctly anti-Hegelian force operating in Smithson's own work. Rather than building up to a teleological grand slam, Smithson finds technological, humanistic, and artistic accomplishments to be far more vulnerable to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The law of entropy charts how "energy is more easily lost than obtained" positing "that in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness,"<sup>43</sup> rather than a completely differentiated yet thoroughly unified substantial subject.<sup>44</sup> Focusing on waste, loss, and devastation suggests "that history and 'progress' are limited by entropy, the ineluctable undertow of all human and natural processes."<sup>45</sup>

How does one make art in the face of the kind of future evoked by T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*? For one, historical teleology must go since what awaits us is not a progressive realization of spirit's self-awareness, but decay, decrepitude, and death. But such an abysmal insight can foster some pretty depressing artworks if not tempered with a profound, almost Olympian ability to laugh. Smithson explains three years later:

As long as art is thought of as creation, it will be the same old story. Here we go again, creating objects, creating systems, building a better tomorrow. I posit that there is no tomorrow, nothing but a gap, a yawning gap. That seems sort of tragic, but what immediately relieves it is irony, which gives you a sense of humor. It is that cosmic sense of humor that makes it all tolerable.<sup>46</sup>

Confronted with the yawning gap of non-being, one has a choice between the wisdom of Silenus or the wisdom of Aristophanes. Perhaps, however, there is a third option taken by Smithson himself: maintaining the tragic and comic insights in a kind of dialectical tension wherein one does not necessarily give way to the other but both are maintained in the work of art itself.

Elaborating on the notion of entropy in "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson notes that architect and futurist Buckminster Fuller was told by some that the concept of a fourth dimension (time) was "ha-ha". In a similar vein, Smithson observes that the topsy-turvy world into which Alice plunged was created by the mathematical mind of Lewis Carroll, resulting in a highly ordered manifestation of humorous non-sense. Perhaps, Smithson suggests, we can treat laughter in a similar serio-comedic fashion: "Laughter is in a sense a kind of entropic 'verbalization.' How could artists translate this verbal entropy, that is 'ha-ha,' into 'solid-models'?"<sup>47</sup> The suggestion alone makes us pause, but a detailed analysis of "the different types of Generalized Laughter, according to the six main crystal systems" (what he calls "Solid-state hilarity") follows, which includes the "chuckle" as a triangle or pyramid (Tetragonal), the "titter" as prismatic (Orthorhombic), and the "guffaw" as asymmetric (Triclinic) among many other laughter/crystal structures.<sup>48</sup> Only Smithson can ride the line between high seriousness and high humor with such aplomb; one is simply unsure whether to take this suggestion seriously or to laugh at it. Smithson himself wryly concludes, "From here on in, we must not think of Laughter as a laughing matter, but rather as the 'matter-of-laughs'."<sup>49</sup> The analysis of laughter along the concept of the crystalline (a favorite thematic in Smithson's artworks and philosophical writings

insofar as it presents us with an inorganic and ancient perspective on time and life) illustrates a dialectical tension that is utterly irresolvable. Although it would be difficult not to hear Hegel mumbling under his breath that Smithson here invokes a kind of irony “which likes to pass itself off as the highest originality” but which “treats nothing seriously,” Smithson’s humorous presentation still maintains a critical component of earnestness in its playfulness.<sup>50</sup> Instead of merely offering us the temporal decomposition of high art into irony and comedy as we find in Hegel, Smithson presents us with works that refuse to transition into their contraries, opting instead to engage us in the experience of aesthetic contradiction itself.<sup>51</sup>

In line with the achievement of aesthetic contradiction, Jack Flam’s Introduction to the *Collected Writings* illustrates the enigma of Smithson’s projects. Smithson embraces an ironic position regarding art as a sacred, almost divine manifestation of truth and beauty, and yet one would be hard pressed not to find these elements in many of his sculptures and earthworks. As Flam notes, “One of the most striking aspects of Smithson’s work as a whole is the way in which he uses a strongly anti-romantic, anti-sublime stance to create, paradoxically, what seems to be a romantic evocation of the sublime.”<sup>52</sup> In his denial of the European romantic aesthetic (a high point of art for Hegel) we don’t find the presentation of ugliness and triviality but rather profundity and in many cases, beauty. This is due to the fact that Smithson expands, rather than restricts, the sphere of aesthetics by detaching it from the essentially human.

Smithson rejects the primacy of the subject as both the principal meaning and orientation of the artwork. Under the influence of Anton Ehrenzweig’s “dedifferentiation” (as well as Freud’s understanding of the “oceanic”), Smithson believes that the artist – or at least an artist who evokes the entropic in his work – lives at the lower levels of consciousness, which subvert and elide rationality’s strict requirements for limits and boundaries. In this dedifferentiated milieu, subjectivity melts away as the creative process melds with the forces of the universal ebb and flow. Margaret Iversen notes, “For Smithson, the artist’s job was to endure, temporarily, the suspension of boundaries between what Ehrenzweig called the self and the non-self, and then return to tell the tale.”<sup>53</sup> The rational critic of art (or in the case of Hegel, the philosopher of rational aesthetics) however, “cannot risk this abandonment into ‘oceanic’ undifferentiation, he can only deal with the limits that come after

this plunge into such a world of non-containment."<sup>54</sup> In other words, the artist resides in the tension between "oceanic fragmentation" and "strong determinants" while the art critic finds meaning and comfort only in the resulting determinations.<sup>55</sup> In the process of dedifferentiation, Smithson claims that the dialectic gets "unusual" due to a sense of overlapping meanings – a concept, strangely, that he finds to be a strength in Freud, Marx, Hegel, and Pascal.<sup>56</sup> To be pulled too far in either the direction of total subjective annihilation or that of total determinacy results in nonsense on the one hand, and the subsumption of art into hyper-rationality on the other, both of which are forms of madness.

Within this tension, the anthropomorphic and the rational dissolve, leaving us with a stark reality that simply persists in a kind of Heraclitean flux of change. It is no accident that Smithson's focus on dedifferentiation and de-architecturing leads him to assert that "The actual *disruption* of the earth's crust is at times very compelling, and seems to confirm Heraclitus's *Fragment 124*, 'The most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion'."<sup>57</sup> Such confusion presents the artist with the unique opportunity, not to *correct* contingency, but to *arrange* it new ways: "A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an esthetic process that has scarcely been touched."<sup>58</sup> Rather than improving on the material world – taking it out of contingency by removing blemishes and signs of decay – Smithson finds that bringing these forces to the foreground is precisely the task of the artist. To Hegel's claim that "the aim of art is precisely to strip off the matter of everyday life and its mode of appearance, and by spiritual activity from within bring out only what is absolutely rational and give to it its true external configuration," Smithson would counter that artists must refuse the temptation to correct the impurities of their media.<sup>59</sup> "By refusing 'technological miracles' the artist begins to know the corroded moments, the carboniferous states of thought, the shrinkage of mental mud, in the geologic chaos – in the strata of esthetic consciousness."<sup>60</sup> Avoiding the desire to purify the materials with which he works, the artist avoids the illusion that the artwork is somehow outside of time, while also allowing for new kinds of art to emerge.

Smithson's sense of irony and play scoffs at the seriousness of art criticism and museum culture that he strives to undermine with his nonsites, mirror displacements, and earthworks. The aesthetics developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe paved the way for the

dominance of the museum and the rise of art history and criticism along clearly demarcated lines. Rather than clarifying the advance of world spirit as Hegel might have it, Smithson eschews the drive for purity of form as it arrogates to establish genres in art. In an unpublished piece (c. 1966) he finds that "Purity is a desperate nostalgia, that exfoliates like a hideous need. Purity also suggests a need for the absolute with all its perpetual traps."<sup>61</sup> As a result of the demands for purity,

Esthetics have devolved into rare types of stupidity. Each kind of stupidity may be broken down into categories such as bovine formalism, tired painting, eccentric concentrics or numb structures. All these categories and many others all petrify into a vast banality called the art world which is no world.<sup>62</sup>

By mocking the categories of art held so dear to Hegel's own analysis, Smithson shows his utter disdain and disregard for the determinations that dominate aesthetic theory. Yet it would be disingenuous not to find a kind of gravity in his art and writings that belies the notion of Smithson as *merely* ironic. He not only makes fun of truth — something that Hegel accuses the ironic artist of doing — he entirely disavows the notion of rational truth as such, opting instead for a kind of proliferation of truths which result from the fragmentation of entropic systems. Returning to his interview with Kaprow (who refuses to back down on his interpretation of Smithson as an ironic artist) we find a confirmation of Smithson's inherently Nietzschean position. When Kaprow pushes the notion that as soon as one engages in museum or gallery showings one is ensnared by the cultural valuation of art, he tells Smithson that any antagonistic orientation to cultural validation is essentially "ironic." Smithson reframes the problem by evaluating irony in terms of deconstruction (using Ehrenzweig's term, "dedifferentiation"):

I would say that it [Smithson's position] has a contradictory view of things. It's basically a pointless position. But I think to try to make some kind of point right away stops any kind of possibility. I think the more points the better, you know, just an endless amount of points of view.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, refusing to make a point engenders multiple points of view because for Smithson, the undetermined is more fecund than the determined.

Smithson's multiperspectivalism does not, however, exclude attention to important and even dire issues confronting the artist in his or

her time. Sometimes he embodies a serious and wholly *unironic* attitude, thus revealing himself as still tethered to the world in a way that Hegel's flippant ironist is not. In a 1970 symposium on the artist's relationship to the political, Smithson contributed a piece to *Artforum* entitled "Art and the Political Whirlpool or the Politics of Disgust", in which he evokes a more solemn tone than usual. Every attempt to remain free from the fray of politics is impossible; eventually the artist will be "devoured" by the political because "The rat of politics always gnaws at the cheese of art."<sup>64</sup> Being sucked into the whirlpool (an image and theme that runs throughout Smithson's work) of one's time often causes pain, horror, disgust, and fear. The artist cannot simply reclaim all the forces of entropy (pollution, war, violence, dehumanization) within the political realm. There is no way to "laugh" off the decaying pig head from the *Lord of the Flies*. Sometimes social and political structures make life a hell on earth. Smithson fears a state where

the Earth thickens with blood and waste, as the population increases, the stress factor could bring "the system" to total frenzy. Imagine a future where eroticism and love are under so much pressure and savagery that they veer towards cannibalism. When politics is controlled by the military, with its billions of dollars, the result is a debased demonology, a social aberration that operates with the help of Beelzebub (the pig devil) between the regions of Mammon and Moloch.<sup>65</sup>

Clearly Smithson's concern for the plight of the planet and the dangers of social and political decay prevent our judging him as the worst kind of Hegelian ironical artist. There is nothing in these lines indicating an artist who remains above the fray, cocooned in his own abstract ego. The specter of this decline into a planetary hell brought about largely through political machinations causes Smithson to claim in an earlier piece that "The Establishment is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."<sup>66</sup>

The artist's *inability* to simply step outside of the temporal stream through the production of a sensible manifestation of the divine prevents the kind of aloof attitude Hegel decries in the ironical artist. This is because the artist, for Smithson, is agonizingly aware of the fluctuations of temporality. In fact, Smithson claims that artist has been estranged from time for too long.

Critics, by focusing on the "art object," deprive the artist of any existence in the world of both mind and matter. The mental process of the artist which takes place in time is disowned, so that a commodity value can be maintained by a system independent of the artist. Art, in this sense, is

considered “timeless” or a product of “no time at all”; this becomes a convenient way to exploit the artist out of his rightful claim to his temporal processes.<sup>67</sup>

The critics who focus on the timelessness of the artwork essentially discount the artist; saving the work of art from time in order to mummify it only serves to exploit the artist and to present the lie of ideality.<sup>68</sup> To the Hegelian assertion that the ideal of art must be rescued from its temporal setting and purified of external contaminants, expressing “inactive, eternal repose,”<sup>69</sup> Smithson would counter, “Every object, if it is art, is charged with the rush of time even though it is static.”<sup>70</sup> Smithson’s emphasis on understanding and respecting the artist’s time brings the existential subjectivity of the artist to the foreground – a kind of anthropocentric bent rejected by almost all of Smithson’s works. Despite this ironic turn, Smithson earnestly disparages the exploitation of the artist resulting not only from capitalistic forces but also from the spiritual elevation of art into the beyond; we cannot set up the work of art as a kind of timeless manifestation of truth without totally devaluing the persons involved in its creation. And with this move toward the serious, we come full circle – even the ironic attitude turns into its opposite when confronted with the realities of politics, environmental devastation, and capitalist exploitation. The ironic does not have to totally reject the sanctity of certain components of being human in the world. In fact, the ironic may provide us with a kind of humanity that anchors us more firmly in our world precisely because it refuses to elevate the lie of rational humanity above all other viewpoints.

## • Conclusion •

In this paper I have shown how Hegel’s formulation of irony in modern art takes a robust trajectory through the works of Smithson. Hegel condemns the ironist for rejecting the essential truths that fuel the engine of the dialectic. The essence of spirit emerges in the sphere of art by fusing the timelessness of the absolute with the flawed materials of the natural world. The work of art thus stands as a paradoxical revelation of the eternal in the flux of nature. To take an ironic position toward this teleology is to attack the very foundation of Western spiritual progression.

Smithson's project affirms the domination of entropy and the insignificance of human progress thus directly and surreptitiously embodying the exact dangers of irony in modern art foretold by Hegel. Nevertheless, Smithson maintains an element of earnestness where he acknowledges the deep connections the artist has to the world and the significance of the artist's time. In this affirmation of social and material ties, he avoids the detachment of the artist in the ascension of the work of art to spiritual truth.

Hegel's *Aesthetics* produces a kind of sadness about the passage of art away from the living truth of a people, while Smithson celebrates the way in which art metamorphoses into a whole new cultural force removed from the confines of purity, truth and spirit. Rather than viewing art as sacred because it is produced by free and rational human beings, Smithson places artworks in the distinctly un-Hegelian insight that there is no progress, no real creation, and nothing better to come — only a cheerful string of lies refuting lies. Although art remains an important endeavor, it no longer provides us with the sensuous presentation of the divine. Rather, art helps to alleviate the potentially tragic insight into the meaninglessness of existence, all the while presenting us with something profoundly and unexpectedly beautiful. In large part, this relief comes from a cosmic sense of humor that laughs at our entropic predicament.

The disruptive and deconstructive power of irony and humor unsettle codified conceptions of what makes art good or worthwhile. This potential for mayhem causes unease in Hegel, leading to his criticism of the modern ironic attitude in particular. However, Hegel's analysis also heralds forms of ironic art that, although they are perhaps not his ideal of beauty, open us to new and unexpected sensuous presentations. Ironically, rather than producing an aloof artist, this move anchors artists such as Smithson in the material of the Earth. Smithson's position regarding truth in art would certainly have been seen by Hegel as ironic, which is both an accurate judgment and yet somewhat unmerited. Smithson's investment in dismantling the anthropomorphic center, focus, and goal of art frees him from the strict limitations that Hegelian aesthetics require. And yet, he also provides a kind of affirmation of Hegel's analysis insofar as he positions art as a unique site for preserving the tension between diametrically opposed forces.

Smithson's disavowal of the subject (or even the organic, for that matter) removes him from the Hegelian charges of subjective perversion

and derangement insofar as the work of art shows us that human beings are merely a part (and a small one at that) of a far greater system of entropic decay.<sup>71</sup> The greatest perversions and derangements result from the inevitable machinations of entropy itself, not from facetious practical jokes played by artists. Perhaps the larger question that Smithson forces us to ask is: what does this decentralization of the human and increased sensitivity to the entropic offer us in the modern age? I believe we are only now beginning to be able to address this question and so offer only a preliminary attempt at an answer. One point in particular seems to be most relevant, and that is that an ironic position in the Smithsonian sense allows us to see ourselves as part of much larger processes of change and transformation. Once we no longer find ourselves as the masters of nature (a problem that lies at the heart of Hegelian philosophy) then we can stop fighting against nature and discover ways in which we *are* nature. Ironic art can show us how to embrace that which is not actually foreign to us but is who and what we are. From the other side, we can stop the guilt-ridden, handwringing pessimism resulting from our contributions to global decline. Smithson's art confirms that we are in fact responsible for natural degradation, destruction, and the production of massive amounts of waste. Yet, these byproducts are also the inevitable results of entropy as such. Once we move past the hope for an Edenic return to a pristine past, we can actually begin to find ways to reincorporate that which horrifies us into new, possibly better, forms. Smithson's art reveals this kind of reclamation to be a real possibility.<sup>72</sup>

In the end, both Hegel and Smithson reject the wholly ironical in art — this is why Smithson refuses to accept or reject Kaprow's characterization of his work as ironic. To simply challenge the values esteemed by Hegel is to affirm them. Smithson's stated and practiced goal rides the fine line between upholding and destroying, in an irresolvable dialectical tension. Through irony and humor, he evokes earnestness and beauty without ever taking himself (or having us take the work) too seriously. As soon as we begin to promote his artwork to the eternally true, we are forced to laugh at ourselves for falling into the traps of the past. Conversely, as soon as we begin to disregard his whole project as absurd, we realize we are irrevocably drawn to its power and grace. The lasting impact of his art indicates his success in preserving the dialectical tension between tragic and comedic insights into our cosmic quandary as ephemeral manifestations in a great entropic system. In this accomplishment, he displays an intimate and not altogether antagonistic connection to the very European ideologies he rejects. Smithson's

question mark to the heart of Hegelian aesthetics actually shows the power of Hegel's framing of truth in beauty for the human imagination. For Smithson's own dialectical opposition to Hegel preserves his philosophy even as it rejects it. The connection between them illuminates not only Hegel's legacy in modern art — much of which he would be loathe to admit is even art — but also the enduring relevance and infinite possibilities in artistic creation still left to us. In an age where irony usually takes the form of a cynicism bordering on despair, and the end of art and the dread of Armageddon are woven into the social fabric, we are well served by such reminders.

## •Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T.M. Knox. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Shapiro, Gary. *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 220.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Smithson, Robert. "Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell." In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Ed, Jack Flam. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 195.

<sup>7</sup> Smithson, "Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson." Edited and annotated by Eva Schmidt in *Collected Writings*, 210.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that Hegel does not provide an important discussion of irony as it appears in Attic comedy in the *Aesthetics* and elsewhere in different forms (particularly *The Phenomenology of Spirit's* description of the Unhappy Consciousness and the placement of modern irony in the final discussion of *Moralität* in the *Philosophy of Right*) but only that this analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. For more on the role of comedy and irony in ancient Greek theater (particularly its relationship to the mask) see George, Theodore D. "Specifications: Heidegger, Hegel, and the Comedy of the End of Art." *Epoche*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (Fall 2003): 27-41. Bernard Freydberg also highlights the significance of ancient comedy for Hegel (particularly Aristophanes) in his own lament on the loss of the comedic art in modern times and his hope for a rebirth in the future, something I find happening, in part, in the works of Robert Smithson. Freydberd, Bernard. "Harkening to Thalia: Toward the Rebirth of Comedy in Continental Philosophy." *Research in Phenomenology* 39 (2009): 401-415. See also William Desmond's light-hearted attempt to read Hegel's sense of humor and its relationship to Aristophanes' comedy. (Desmond, William. "Can Philosophy Laugh at Itself? On Hegel and Aristophanes." *The Owl of Minerva* 20 (Spring 2009): 131-149.) Hegel may very well be more humorous than we have made him in the canon, but his criticism of modern irony is almost entirely without mirth.

<sup>9</sup> Roche, Mark W. "Hegel's Theory of Comedy in the Context of Hegelian and Modern Reflections on Comedy." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol. 56, No. 221 (2002), 413.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> In this sense, Hegel maintains his position on Fichte as found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* wherein he attacks the Fichtean Absolute for its erasure of difference in the assertion of unity. Maintaining a theory that upholds the sameness of the Absolute, even when pitted against all other cognition, is “to palm off its Absolute as the night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black.” Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 64-5. Emphasis original.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 400.

<sup>17</sup> Huson, Timothy C. “Hegel and the Concept of ‘Tragic Irony.’” *Southwest Philosophy Review: Journal of the Southwestern Philosophical Society* Vol. 14 No. 1 (1997): 125. Emphasis original.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 66. This ironic detachment causes Hegel to claim later that the Schlegels, “with their premeditated irony could not master the mind and spirit of their nation and time.” Ibid., 1175.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Even if other people apprehend the ironical artist’s works as serious presentations, their judgment only shows their ignorance. Taking on the voice of the egotistical and somewhat cruel ironical artist, Hegel calls these duped souls “deceived, poor limited creatures, without the faculty and ability to apprehend and reach the loftiness of my standpoint.” Ibid., 65.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hegel often employs metaphors of distance and loftiness when describing the ironical artist. Untethered by the demands of the Ideal, such an artist floats above the rest of us like a disembodied and flippant Cartesian ego. Yet, Hegel’s venomous attacks on Schlegel are perhaps belied by his own use of irony in his general philosophical methodology. The idea of Hegel’s questionable treatment of Schlegel on the issue of irony as a strategy is taken up in Grau, Alexander. “Glauben, Wissen: Ironie: Hegels postanalytische Überwindung der Erkenntnistheorie.” *Glauben und Wissen, Zweiter Teil (Hegel-Jahrbuch 2004)*. Edited by Andreas Arndt. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004, 197-202.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 68. Hegel returns to the notion of irony in Solger in a footnote in the *Philosophy of Right*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, 101-2.

<sup>26</sup> Kronick, Joseph G. “The Limits of Contradiction: Irony and History in Hegel and Henry Adams.” *Clio* Vol. 15 No. 4 (1986): 401.

<sup>27</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 67. Should the ironical ego remain in empty and totally inward subjectivity, then the world will persist as a denuded shell of itself and all activity remain in vain. However, given the nature of the Hegelian dialectic to unravel its concentrated extremism by producing its seeming opposite, this empty ego may once again grow dissatisfied with itself and seek something substantial. Although truthfully, Hegel has little hope that the Fichtean ego at the heart of modern irony can accomplish anything more than a yearning for concretization from which it lacks the ability to escape. Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1236.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. The strangeness of ending the *Lectures on Aesthetics* on comedy (and comedy in theater in particular) leads Richard Collins to assert that we are meant to read the lectures as a kind of comedic performance. A somewhat strange claim in itself, Collins is at least correct that “As a performance of the working of Spirit in philosophy, the *Aesthetics* is a piece of virtuosity which performs not only the dissolution of art but the dissolution of its own performance on the way to the Absolute.”

Collins, Richard. “The Comic Dissolution of Art: The Last Act of Hegel’s ‘Aesthetics.’” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 33 No. 1, (March 1981): 67.

<sup>31</sup> The treatment of character is where Hegel mistrusts modern comedy and blames it for the dissolution of art as spiritually relevant. Part of the problem with modern comedy lies in the fact that, unlike its ancient predecessors (particularly the comedies of Aristophanes) modern comedies (such as Molière’s works) cause the audience to laugh at the characters alone; the characters do not laugh at themselves. Thus, there is a cruelty at the heart of modern comedy that is lacking in moral edification.

<sup>32</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 243.

- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 244.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 67.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 160.
- <sup>37</sup> Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty." In *Collected Writings*, 146.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Smithson, "What is a Museum?" In *Collected Writings*, 50.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments." In *Collected Writings*, 11.
- <sup>44</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 489.
- <sup>45</sup> Shapiro, 36.
- <sup>46</sup> Smithson, "Fragments of an Interview with P. A. Norvell," 195.
- <sup>47</sup> Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," 21.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid. Felicity Colman argues that we can find "much of this type humorous posturing in Smithson's film of the Spiral Jetty" as well. Colman, Felicity. "Affective Entropy: Art as Differential Form." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (April 2006): 174. She is right in a certain way as, for example, the *Spiral Jetty* essay informs us that the kind of laughter evoked by the paleontological/geological perspective on time is not one of pure hilarity but a kind of "cosmic" sense of humor that keeps us anchored in the entropic without succumbing to it. In the last few lines of this essay Smithson writes, "The ghostly cameraman slides over the glassed-in compounds. These fragments of a timeless geology laugh without mirth at the time-filled hopes of ecology." The dinosaurs being filmed snicker humorlessly at the cameraman filming them as they signal the distant past and inevitable future — a past and future in which the species filming them did not and will not exist. Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," 152.
- <sup>50</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 296.
- <sup>51</sup> Smithson does the same kind of thing when he analyzes Ad Reinhardt's *A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala*. In his analysis of this strange and comical work of art, Smithson urges us to "take this 'Joke' seriously," which Smithson himself does, all the while suspending us on the border between laughter and earnestness. Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art." In *Collected Writings*, 87.
- <sup>52</sup> Flam, Jack. "Introduction," In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, xxiii.
- <sup>53</sup> Iverson, Margaret. *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007, 79.
- <sup>54</sup> Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," In *Collected Writings*, 102. Such inability to enter into irrationality shows the limitations of art criticism which, for Smithson, appreciates but fails to enter into the artistic process. He wryly observes, "Art critics are generally poets who have betrayed their art, and instead have tried to turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse, and, occasionally, when their 'truth' breaks down, they resort to a poetic quote." Ibid., 107.
- <sup>55</sup> For a detailed discussion of how Ehrenzweig's psychoanalytic theory plays in Smithson's works, see Shapiro 88-9 and Graziani, Ron. "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situation: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s." *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 20 No. 3 (Spring 1994): 419-451.
- <sup>56</sup> Smithson, "Four Conversations between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson," 207.
- <sup>57</sup> Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects." In *Collected Writings*, 102.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 100.
- <sup>59</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 289.
- <sup>60</sup> Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," 107.
- <sup>61</sup> Smithson, "An Esthetics of Disappointment." In *Collected Writings*, 334-5.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., 335.
- <sup>63</sup> Smithson, "What is a Museum?" 51. Perhaps exasperated by the fact that Smithson will not simply affirm himself as an ironic artist, Kaprow concludes the interview by stating "this article itself is ironic in that it functions within a cultural context, within the context of a fine-arts publication, for instance, and makes its points only within that context." Ibid.
- <sup>64</sup> Smithson, "Art and the Political Whirlpool or the Politics of Disgust." In *Collected Writings*, 134.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>66</sup> Smithson, "The Establishment." In *Collected Writings*, 99.

<sup>67</sup> Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," 111-2.

<sup>68</sup> Smithson makes a similar point in an interview with Anthony Robbin where he argues that "People who defend the labels of painting and sculpture say what they do is timeless, created outside of time; therefore the object transcends the artist himself. But I think that the artist is important too." Smithson, "Smithson's Non-Site Sights: Interview with Anthony Robbin." In *Collected Writings*, 175.

<sup>69</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 176-7.

<sup>70</sup> Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," 112.

<sup>71</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 576.

<sup>72</sup> To illustrate this point, one of his most ambitious proposals for a land reclamation project envisioned placing an enormous revolving disk at the bottom of the mile-deep Bingham Copper Mine (now Kennecott Copper). Such a project, suggested, rejected, and minimally preserved in his writings and sketches, would force the viewer to confront the devastating void caused by the world's largest open-pit mine, while drawing attention to (rather than away from) how human technology functions in the larger workings of entropy.

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# COLLISION

Vol. 1, No. 1 (2012)  
Aesthetics After Hegel

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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Demers, Joanna. "The Ethics of Apocalypse," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 1 (2012): 77-84.

## ABSTRACT

Apocalyptic scenarios in science fiction often represent the end as a horrible possibility – something we, the audience, should think would be absolutely terrible. But what about artworks that depict apocalypse as something desirable? Is such a desire ethical? I want to pursue these questions as they apply to Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), in which ecological and biological misdeeds lead to the extinction of human civilization and the emergence of asexual, anti-social "neo-humans." I argue that Houellebecq's vision of the future, with its starkly beautiful descriptions of an overheated, polluted, and geologically ravaged Earth, aestheticizes annihilation, making collapse seem not only inevitable, but attractive. My essay then makes the case for a metaphor likening Houellebecq's apocalyptic scenarios to G.W.F. Hegel's "system," his overarching philosophical model that accounts for everything from individual consciousness to governments, art, and natural phenomena. This metaphor is borne out by the fact that Hegel's system contains a few apocalypses of its own, namely the famous "end of art" and "end of history." Critics of Hegel's system (e.g., Gianni Vattimo) accuse it of squashing freedom, of demanding that everything eventually be sublated into a static unity that tolerates nothing outside itself. Proponents of Hegel's system (e.g., Catherine Malabou), however, regard it as an organic mechanism that allows for change, contingency, and difference. I argue that Houellebecq's apocalypse can be understood as a system analogous to Hegel's, and interrogate the ethics of such a system. Is the choice to represent environmental catastrophe as both beautiful and preordained (qualities that Hegel attributes to his system) one that ultimately denies the importance of the individual, of difference? Or, can there be room for freedom and chance in narratives of unavoidable doom?

**KEYWORDS:** Hegel, Houellebecq, apocalypse, infinity

# The Ethics of Apocalypse

Joanna Demers



**F**ictional narratives often put forward the illusion of hope. This is an illusion, of course, for naturally fictional characters are not real, do not possess agency, and thus cannot control their existence. But what are the ethical ramifications of a narrative that offers no hope? I speak here of an apocalyptic story in which disastrous outcomes are known well in advance, and in which characters believe that they lack freedom of will. My paper explores the nature of the aesthetic pleasure we experience when contemplating artworks that deny the possibility of freedom. Would it be fair to read such a story as a totalizing system in which human agency is rendered irrelevant? Would it be perverse for readers to enjoy such a story? Is there an ethics to apocalyptic narrative?

I ask these questions as they pertain specifically to Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Possibility of an Island*,<sup>1</sup> which alternates between the accounts of two characters: Daniel, a present-day superstar comedian, and Daniel25, his clone who lives several millennia in the future. The relationship between these two accounts, which trade off chapter-by-chapter, is initially unclear. Daniel seems all too familiar with his jaded

descriptions of contemporary mores, whereas Daniel25's writing is dispassionate, referencing a leader called the "Supreme Sister" and obscure cataclysmic events. As the novel unfolds, these two accounts begin to form a composite picture of global collapse. For despite Daniel's rancor, his ruinous affair with a twenty-something nymphomaniac, and his cynical film scripts replete with pornography and ultra-violence, he comes to believe that he will be resurrected as a clone in a utopia where aging, disease, and death will have disappeared, and where humans will be free to indulge in perpetual love and sensuality. This is his "possibility of an island", an era he imagines in which a younger, perfected version of himself will love an equally young and perfect woman. This may strike us as a fantasy, as normally such an idea would strike Daniel. But caught up as he is with the Elohimite cult, which claims to have mastered genetic cloning, Daniel comes to view this possibility as certainty.

So in the present, Daniel's nihilism mixes with the hope that no matter how deplorable the human race is now, it will one day evolve to enjoy a happier, more peaceful existence. But this is not to be. Daniel25 describes a nuclear war (occurring not long after Daniel's suicide) that culminated in atomic bomb detonations at both of the Earth's poles, unleashing an ecological catastrophe called the "Great Drying Out". All cities have been destroyed, with a small fraction of the human population surviving in primitive brutality. An even smaller number has survived as clones of the original Elohimite members, and these are scattered across the globe, each one occupying its own mechanized, hermetically sealed compound. Daniel25's account incrementally reveals that little of what Daniel envisioned about the future has come to pass. The clones – "neo-humans" as they call themselves – live in isolation from one another and communicate only through computers. Neo-humans have lost all desire for food and sex, and experience no emotions beyond curiosity and disgust at the spectacle of human civilization. Neo-humans put to rest any fantasies that the Elohimite cult might have entertained for a better, more loving world.

Houellebecq extends little genuine hope to Daniel, or at least no hope besides that necessary to end his meaningless present life in order to prepare for an impossible future one. But Houellebecq affords absolutely no hope to Daniel25, who speaks of neo-human existence as machine-like and determined, and who knows ahead of time that his final act of leaving his compound for the outside world will change nothing. In other words, the world in POAI is closed off from possibility and contingency. |

therefore view this novel as a system, a philosophical paradigm that relates separate phenomena to some intelligible whole. The world set into motion by POAI – its system – is closed because Daniel is powerless to avoid both personal and global catastrophe, and Daniel25 portrays that catastrophe in retrospect as unavoidable and well-deserved.

Among the POAI system's starkest claims is that parents experience no love or satisfaction from raising children. Human offspring are nothing more than emotional and financial burdens from infancy through adulthood, and parents:

would have to take care of children, above all, like mortal enemies, in their own house...they would remain slaves until the end of their parenthood; the time of happiness was indeed over for them.<sup>2</sup>

The irrelevance of children becomes formalized when the Elohimite cult announces its first successful human clone, for now the biological imperative to procreate vanishes. Children are literally no longer necessary, and the Elohimites begin a campaign to convince their followers to stop having them.

By Daniel25's time, the absence of children means that neo-humans persist by means of an infinite progression of copies of the same few people. Daniel25 considers his predecessors (Daniel through Daniel24) as doomed to thinking the same thoughts, and regards the outside world as similarly constrained. Daniel25 makes one decision that might suggest agency: to leave his compound and search for a rumored colony of neo-humans on Lanzarote, an island in the Canaries. This might appear to prove that Daniel25 sees some value after all in (neo-)humanity. Yet Daniel25 later repudiates that decision, and his final observations of the outside

amply legitimated the final verdict the Supreme Sister had reached concerning humanity, and justified her decision to do nothing to thwart the process of extermination in which it had engaged for two millennia.<sup>3</sup>

But while Daniel25 depicts humans as worthless, he describes post-cataclysmic Lanzarote – his “possibility of an island” made into reality – as statically beautiful:

air and water temperatures were equal, and must have been around 37°C, for I felt neither hot nor cold; the light was bright but not blinding. Between the tide pools, the sand was piled into holes that resembled little graves. I lay down in one of them; the sand was warm and silky. Then I realized that I was going to live here, and my days would be many.<sup>4</sup>

Daniel25 may not admit it, but his description makes clear that the infinite succession of his remaining days are not without pleasure. And we as readers, in turn, may contemplate the endless stretch of days before him with a certain fascination.

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Apocalyptic stories are usually open systems because they offer hope for the future, or at least delay hopeless revelations until the end of the story. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), for instance, begins with Sarah Connor convinced of the inevitability of nuclear war. But Sarah's son John reasserts hope: there is "no fate but what we make." Even a dark tale like *Planet of the Apes* (1968) saves its hopelessness for the ultimate scene. We don't know that Taylor has been on Earth all along – an Earth where humans have blasted themselves back to the stone age, and where apes rule – until he discovers the Statue of Liberty rusted and all but submerged in sand. Only then do we know the truth, and then the credits roll. But in POAI, there are no final surprises, and readers know that the end for Daniel (i.e., suicide) and Daniel25 (i.e., solitary reflection) will change nothing in the world at large. Indeed, Houellebecq depicts apocalypse as both inevitable and seductive. Daniel25's descriptions of the world outside reveal that nature has reclaimed formerly human territory with a vengeance; forests stretch over what once were car-parks or industrial areas. The Atlantic Ocean has evaporated, leaving vast plains of white sand, new rock formations, and a balmy climate. Armageddon here is definitive, but also beguiling.

What are the ethical implications of artworks that contain such absolutist systems? In POAI, there are no characters who would challenge the prevailing theory that humanity is doomed, no actions that would shake this theory, no moments of randomness that might complicate the fatalist narrative. We can enlist a critique of POAI's system from another, more

famous philosophical system, Hegel's, which shares with POAI the fact that it too enlists endings as integral moments of dialectical progression.<sup>5</sup> Hegel makes endings – of art, of history – central to the system, though he would argue that endings and beginnings feed into one another in an eternal circle.<sup>6</sup> He also accounts for everything, from being and ontology to nature, human psychology, history, and religion, with the system, to the extent that critics like Vattimo have accused Hegel of creating a totalizing theory that tolerates nothing outside itself.<sup>7</sup> Yet there is clearly a difference between the closed system in POAI and the open system of Hegel's dialectical logic, and this difference amounts to their respective senses of the nature of infinity. Hegel writes that the good or "true" infinity in dialectical thought resides within the finitude of the present moment: "It *is* and *is there*, present before us."<sup>8</sup> There is, in other words, no infinite existence divorced from the finite particularizations of daily life; true infinity embraces contradiction, contingency, and possibility. POAI's infinity, however, denies all hope of change for humanity, conveniently passing it off as the privilege of the mysterious Future Ones who will someday descend to Earth. In POAI's bad infinity, the same few players perpetuate humanity's miserable existence without adding anything substantially new. Free will and hope are inaccessible because change itself is identified in advance as impossible.

What POAI offers is a critique of our current tendency to aestheticize suffering. In watching unstoppable destruction, we aren't led to sympathy or hope for Houellebecq's characters, because they themselves lack hope. In Virilio's words, this experience is "pitiless", for it inculcates within the spectator numbness toward suffering.<sup>9</sup> What is left can be described as a mechanical curiosity for the particulars of destruction. What would the world look like after a nuclear war and environmental collapse? What would the Atlantic basin look like once drained of most of its water? If these questions seem too particular to Houellebecq's novel, we could easily expand this discussion to include artworks that treat the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., that occurred on September 11, 2001. Commercial films like *United 93* (2006) or *World Trade Center* (2006) are gripping because they explore the details of an event in which individual agency was utterly obliterated – what it might have felt like to be trapped aboard one of the hijacked planes, or under a mass of rubble that had once been the Twin Towers. Even an understated treatment like William Basinski's formidable electronic music work, *Disintegration Loops* (2002), is built on the simple formula of automatic decay: we listen to a loop of musical material over

and over, until the tape on which it was recorded several years ago literally falls apart and takes its sounds with it. In all these examples, the absence of hope and freedom leaves only an intellectual interest in decay and death.

I close with a few thoughts that hopefully will provoke an ongoing discussion on the ethics of apocalyptic artwork. We might reflect on the dividends of a work like POAI that, on the surface, might seem to be an abjectly depressing novel. Its greatest achievement may in fact be its graphic illustration of what happens to audiences faced with artworks that withhold hope and freedom. For while we might regard lowbrow forms of entertainment like porn, torture porn, or snuff film as existing on a plane entirely removed from that of a novel like POAI, Houellebecq's book articulates in conceptual terms what porn and violent films demonstrate on a very basic level. In both cases, the absence of hope or freedom leads to an aesthetic experience in which nothing fatal is hidden or withheld, and in which human agents are reduced to the status of automatons. It's easy to fall prey to Daniel's descriptions of the outside world, suggesting that a post-human world would be a more beautiful and peaceful place. In so doing, we end up believing, with Daniel, in a possibility that in reality affords no possibilities at all.

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *La possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005). Henceforth referred to as POAI. Translations from the French are mine.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>5</sup> GWF Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, §17.

<sup>7</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 19: Self-consciousness in Hegel's system is "totally closed to the possibility of truly encountering something other than Spirit itself."

<sup>8</sup> GWF Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. AV Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), 148.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Virilio, "A Pitiless Art," in *Art and Fear*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Continuum, 2003), 25-66.

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Wong, Mandy-Suzanne. "Hegel's Being-Fluid in *Corregidora*, Blues, and (Post-)Black Aesthetics," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 1 (2012): 85-120.

#### ABSTRACT

In Hegel's system, all identities are unstable. Beings and concepts continually become their others in order to remain themselves. This notion of being-fluid powers Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora*, in which the protagonist's personal identity comes from the identities of others with whom she interacts – including her ancestors, who suffered the cruelties of slavery. Blues music, by which Jones' novel is inspired, also embodies and performs the presence of enslaved ancestors, and of the African-American community as such, in present-day African-American individuals. This article therefore offers Hegelian readings, based on his theory of identity as fluid, of *Corregidora*, the blues, and the African-American identity performed in these artworks. Through these readings, I propose, following Hegel, that all identities be denied fixed definitions, in favor of fluid ones that allow for change and the sublation of otherness – even Hegel's identity. With Paul Taylor, whose theory of post-black aesthetics relies on the fluidity of racial classifications, I argue for Hegel's relevance to African-American aesthetics, despite his just classification as a white racist.

#### KEYWORDS

Hegel, Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*, blues, post-black aesthetics, fluidity

# Hegel's Being-Fluid in *Corregidora*, Blues, and (Post-)Black Aesthetics

Mandy-Suzanne Wong

When someone writes, "there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found" in "the Negro," it is understandable that in certain contexts, such as African-American aesthetics, his bigotry might overshadow his other remarks, germane though they may be.<sup>1</sup> Anachronisms aside, it hardly seems possible that the proponent of this nonsense could contribute to reflections on blues song or a "blues novel" – both of which are said to address the very "essence of the black experience" – even if he is G.W.F. Hegel.<sup>2</sup> Yet Hegelian readings of Gayl Jones' 1975 novel *Corregidora*, as of blues aesthetics, from which this novel takes its form and content, are not just plausible but illuminating. Hegel's philosophy can take us right to the heart of what's at stake in these important African-American artforms. Likewise, in their expressions of black identity, *Corregidora* and the songs that inspired it enact what might be Hegel's most perspicacious idea: the instability of identity. Self and other, singularity and plurality, subject and substance, creator and created continually become one another whilst remaining themselves in the fluid becoming that is being.

Few interpreters of "black" music and literature openly acknowledge their Hegelian connections. With rare exceptions, as we'll see, those who do mark Hegel's echoes tend to do so with omissions of his

name or descriptions of his ideas as racist obstructions. Hegelian analyses of blues music and literature nevertheless corroborate what audiences, authors, and scholars of these artforms claim to hear in them. Granted, the Hegel we read today isn't just the man who penned the asinine remark above. It's the latest Hegel who seems, at times, to be of almost common mind with blues aesthetics, particularly as he's read by Frederic Jameson (2010), Catherine Malabou (2005), and Jean-Luc Nancy (2002). Not that any of these thinkers mention blues. Rather, it is my contention that Hegel, his postmodern readers, early blueswomen and an important "blues novelist" sometimes perform one another unwittingly.

To recognize identity as fluid and contingent is to build a solid platform whence we might perceive that seemingly oppositional phenomena, "black" culture and "white" philosophy, always-already shade into each other. Not in the sense of assimilation: this is not a case of "white" norms, such as certain artworld politics, forcing black artists to conform. Nor is it a matter of proving that African-Americans are brainwashed by "white" culture to the extent that, having lost sight of their uniqueness, they *can* only make art in conformity with "white" norms. No: I will demonstrate that for Hegel, the becoming-otherness of self-sufficient individuals *is* the engendering of their self-sufficiency.

Further, I suggest that Hegelian readings of African-American artworks are exercises in post-black aesthetics, as outlined by Paul Taylor. Propelled by Hegel's concept of fluidity, post-black aesthetics discourage the confinement of "black" art and "black" people – by extension "white" thought, "white" people, and even racist thought – to any fixed categories. These include stereotypical conceptions that preclude those who are not black (or "not black enough"), from responding intelligently and empathetically to Afro-American art. The bottom line: we can use Hegel's ideas to propel our thinking beyond scholarly, aesthetic, and philosophical segregation – in spite of Hegel himself.

## • Fluidity •

Otherness, plurality, contingency, and fluidity *constitute* self-sufficient singularity, identity, and individual being. This principle goes by many names in Hegel's *Logic* and *Phenomenology*, among them: fluidity, Spirit,

absolute knowing, substance–subject, negativity, dialectic, sublation, determinate being, self–consciousness, “the /that is *We* and the *We* that is /.”<sup>3</sup> Everything in Hegel’s system aspires to this multiplicitous condition. Its countless names are buzzwords signaling the presence of his shadow in later thinkers’ ideas.

The gist of the principle: each individual is unified with and delineated from its other; each individual is formed by and gives form to its other. This applies to individual things, concepts, and subjects, such as human subjects. The *other* of a given individual can be another person, a separate thing, an alternate concept, or “substance.” For Hegel, *substance* is everything there is: the “totality” of universalities, possibilities, and particulars that comprises the concrete world.<sup>4</sup> These particulars include sociocultural and historical circumstances, as well as the persons and things that form situations. Being an individual means becoming all these things while sustaining oneself. It means relating to oneself by relating to others. In Hegel’s *Logic*, “A determinate, a finite, being is one that is in relation to an other; it is a content standing in a necessary relation to another content, to the whole world...[I]t is only through such relation that it essentially is what it is.”<sup>5</sup>

In fact, existence is a continual movement of becoming–other: as I join in relationships with others, I become those relationships. And that relating alters me, changes me into the other of what I had been. Being is “a union which can only be stated as an *unrest of incompatibles*, as a *movement*” that “involves the spontaneous vanishing,” or change, of that which is.<sup>6</sup> Thus, being is dialectical.

[W]e call dialectic the higher movement...in which seemingly utterly separate terms pass over into each other spontaneously...a movement in which the presupposition *sublates* itself. It is the dialectical immanent nature of being and nothing to manifest their unity, that is, becoming, as their truth.<sup>7</sup>

Something is sublated when it “enter[s] into unity with its opposite,” at which point it “cease[s]” and is “preserve[d].”<sup>8</sup> A being becomes its other in order to remain itself. For example, a person is sublated by her sociocultural surroundings. They define her by eradicating her individuality – by placing her as “just another” member of a group (e.g. black blues singers active in the ‘20s) – which eradication *assures* her individuality by distinguishing her from other people of different sociocultural circumstances (e.g. Bessie Smith from Tracy Chapman or Belle Mann). At the same time, an individual sublates her sociocultural

circumstances by absorbing them into her identity: she thereby cancels their universality ("blues singer" applies to Smith in a singular way valid for her alone), changes and preserves it (without individuals like Smith, the category "blues singer" would not mean what it does). Even in thinking about myself, building my self-conscious identity, I formulate my uniqueness in terms of cultural norms established by others. I sublimate these norms in my uniqueness even as they sublimate my uniqueness. Sublimation is resistance and surrender, making and being made. A "person" is thus "a culturally formed rationality which has *made* itself into what it is."<sup>9</sup>

Sublimation is embodied, lived. We pass into others, and they into us, physically and sensibly, not just conceptually. For instance, in *Corregidora*, the physical appearance and deportment of the narrator, Ursa, cause her to be pushed and pulled in and out of unity with socially constructed concepts: "black," "passing," "Spanish," "American."<sup>10</sup> This pushing and pulling isn't just in Ursa's mind. Other people see her slip between racial categories. They treat her accordingly, ask demeaning questions such as "What are you?"<sup>11</sup> Thus, gliding to and from conceptions is physically palpable, as people's reactions to Ursa's multiplicity affect the sights and sounds that comprise her interactions with the sensible world: "Then when I was just walking down the street minding my own business, these two [black] women in a car. 'You red-headed heifer,'" they said.<sup>12</sup> Ursa physically instantiates racial and nationalistic concepts just as they *become* her. She and the concepts, along with their associations and consequences, absorb and affect each other, forming and being formed by each other's visibly and audibly fluid identities.

Throughout the *Phenomenology*, Hegel uses the term *fluidity* in several contexts related to subjective self-certainty and fixed definitions, all of which are illusive. By practicing and promoting fluidity of thought, Hegel challenges himself and his readers to break free of fixed categories in general – in philosophy, personal identity, and ordinary naming.

Nowadays the task before us...consists in actualizing and spiritually animating the universal by means of the sublimation of fixed and determinate thoughts...Thoughts become fluid when pure thinking, this inner *immediacy*, takes cognizance of itself as a moment, that is, when pure self-certainty abstracts from itself – it does not consist in merely omitting itself, or setting itself off to one side. Rather, it consists in giving up the *fixity* of its self-positing as well as the fixity of the purely concrete, which is the I itself in contrast to the distinctions of its content – as the fixity of distinctions which, posited as existing within the element of pure thought, share that unconditionedness of the I.<sup>13</sup>

Even "I" connotes an illusive "fixity" that should be "given up." Hegel emphasizes that to say "I am I" is meaningless and empty; such an "I" can only refer to something that has no being at all.<sup>14</sup> For I am nothing without my distinctions, which as socially constructed concepts exist separately from myself: I am "a blues singer," I am "black." Similarly, distinctions cannot exist without something to bear them: there is no concept called "blues singer" without extant or imagined blues singers.

This is not to say there is nothing we can reasonably call "I," that I can't differentiate myself from other beings or concepts. I am a singular, self-sufficient subject *even as* I am the substance of the world, *even as* I am the concepts that comprise my distinctions, fluid interactions between otherness and independence. "The I is the content of the relation and the relating itself. The I is itself in its both confronting an other and at the same time reaching out over and beyond this other, which, for the I, is likewise merely itself."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, others are themselves even as they are the life I live.<sup>16</sup> This too is fluidity: "This very fluidity, as self-sufficiency in-parity-with-itself, is [my and my others'] *durable existence*."<sup>17</sup> My independence from others is my fluidity with and through them.<sup>18</sup>

Altogether, substances and subjects, their unities and differences are all fluidity. The fluid process of living is simultaneously that which lives.

Within the universal fluid medium, life in its *motionless* elaboration of itself into various shapes becomes the movement of those shapes, that is, life becomes life as a *process*. The simple universal fluidity is the *in-itself*, and the distinction among the shapes is the *other*. However, by virtue of this distinction this fluidity itself becomes *the other*, since it now exists *for the distinction* which exists in and for itself and which is thus the infinite movement by which that peaceful medium is consumed. As such, it is life as *living things*.<sup>19</sup>

This life is not peaceful multiculturalism or idyllic ecological harmony. It is a violent life. In fluid being-as-becoming, although one's self-sufficiency is preserved by interactions with others, aspects of oneself are nonetheless mutated and consumed. Fluidity is "pure negativity" and "unrest," "doubling" as "self-restoring parity."<sup>20</sup> Perpetual instability and change, constant consuming and being-consumed – arduous, painful. Otherness constantly disrupts my independence, uproots my sense of myself. I am ruptured from without as I drive myself into others. Breaking them again and again as I am broken. Hegel cautions: do not overlook "the suffering, the patience, and the labor of the negative."<sup>21</sup>

Spirit only wins its truth when it finds its feet within its absolute disruption. Spirit is not this power which, as the positive, avoids looking at the negative, as is the case when we say of something that it is nothing or that it is false, and then, being done with it, go off on our own way on to something else. No, spirit is this power only when it looks the negative in the face and lingers with it. This lingering is the magical power that converts it into being.<sup>22</sup>

Lingering with the negative is the subject itself, which is substance and their mediation.<sup>23</sup> Fluidity is the process of being-as-becoming invaded and independent. The traumatic invasion of Ursa's subjectivity by other subjectivities, especially her ancestors' and husbands', exquisitely exemplifies and elucidates this process, as I'll describe below.

Recent readings of Hegel emphasize being-fluid as the effort and performance of living undertaken by all beings: the work of being-oneself as the pain of being-broken. I am "the infinite work of negativity," says Nancy.<sup>24</sup> This work, "restlessness," is what and how I am, think, and do. Simply by being, I am an irruption and explosion, recurrently "opening the present, opening space and time, opening the world and the 'I,' and throwing existence into its restless exigency."<sup>25</sup> This exigency is the need to "manifest" before others, an impulse in every being to give itself to others in singularity and relation.<sup>26</sup> Manifestation is the effortful self-presentation of individuals to others, inevitable in a populated world.

The "gift" of manifestation must be physically sensible. "[S]ensibility...make[s] the other come about for the subject, and makes the subject for itself in what becomes *its* other."<sup>27</sup> For Nancy, sensation is itself the "incessant movement and activity" of being-fluid, "being torn away from subsistence...away from fixed determination."<sup>28</sup> Malabou affirms: sensation is a relation that throws a subject into crisis. Sensing an other, one must struggle to remain oneself.<sup>29</sup> Thus sensation is an effort and a giving-away, likewise a mediation and shared ground between sensor and sensed. Being present, speaking and writing are sensible acts of manifestation-before-others.

But, Nancy suggests, art is a more "fulfilled" manifesting, a richer gift.<sup>30</sup> Through art we may present deeper aspects of our being-fluid that elude language – through blues-singing, for instance, as I will discuss. As evidenced by Hegel's flock of terms, no single linguistic category can capture the unstable, motley fluidity of being, the "common vertigo" that all things suffer.<sup>31</sup> But the creative acts and material changes characteristic of art are effective communicative enactments of going-out-from-oneself as remaining-oneself, as Jameson and Malabou attest.

For Jameson, works are effortful acts of all kinds: ethical, utilitarian, creative, or otherwise. A “work as a message or a communication” is an effort in which fluid being-as-becoming “achieve[s] a very special kind of recognition from other people.”<sup>32</sup> Recognition of its work-as-gift affirms the fluid self’s existence to itself. In a work, an individual addresses other individuals and the world at large by means of shared constructions like cultural norms. As such, works, including artworks, are acts by individuals made of and for all individuals. Works instantiate or perform the presence of “the collective within individuality,” a form of the otherness within singularity.<sup>33</sup> Jameson underscores the collectivity, to whom I present and whom I draw on in presenting, as presupposed. Nonetheless I form this collectivity by being part of it, even as it is the substance of which I am formed. My recognition of and by the collective is thus my reconciliation with a part of myself.<sup>34</sup> When the working, creating, singing “I” unifies with those who listen and respond, the “I” confirms its own existence to itself.<sup>35</sup>

The importance of making and doing to the achievement of self-conscious fluid identity suggests to Jameson a “handicraft ideology” at the root of Hegel’s identity-theory. By “working,” “interven[ing] in [the] world,”<sup>36</sup> one comes to a sense of the other as oneself, a “feeling of the alien existence [as] self-feeling.”<sup>37</sup> For Hegel, this feeling is “happiness.”<sup>38</sup>

Malabou’s synonym of choice, Hegel’s term “plasticity,” further accentuates the materiality of being-fluid and its relationship with creativity.<sup>39</sup> Cued by plastic artworks, plastic as polymer, plastic explosives, plasticity in the brain and other phenomena, Malabou reads plasticity as a “capacity to receive form and a capacity to produce form.”<sup>40</sup> Plastic beings “lend themselves to being formed while *resisting* deformation” – as in marble underneath a chisel, a standard blues form made new by an improviser, a man molding himself out of cultural universals.<sup>41</sup> Being-plastic is “synthetic,” “explosive,” “violent”; it is between presence and absence, passivity and action.<sup>42</sup> Thus, “Plasticity’s native land is the field of art.”<sup>43</sup>

To summarize: contemporary readings of Hegel describe being-fluid as a self-made effort, formed by and out of otherness, that according to its own impulse must be performed for others in a way they can experience with their physical senses. Artistic creation is one such performance. Musical performance, even improvised performance of the

kind that characterizes blues and jazz, is an effortful act of presentation in which one draws, sometimes unwittingly, on sociocultural norms in a communicative gesture. This presenting is interactive and formative: in improvising blues, I draw on otherness in presenting myself to others, affecting them; and their responses affect me and my presentation.

To take a simple example, while improvising over blues changes, I throw in a quotation from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The effect on my audience is appreciable: those who recognize the tune applaud my integration of the stately "Promenade," and its reminiscences of Russian folk tunes, with the rhythmic and formal strictures of American blues. In response to the applause, I plan to repeat the quotation later in my solo. With their response to my performance, my audience assumes an active role in shaping that same performance. My improvisation also constitutes otherness in the form of musical conventions, for example the twelve-bar blues form, which originated with someone other than me in some other time and place. These conventions are learned, remembered, passed down; they are attributes of the musical cultures in which blues participates. Thus my performance is partly molded by forces other than my own, and I in turn affect these forces by performing them.

To put this another way: in personal extemporizations, improvising musicians perform (play, play with, and play on) memories – their own, others', and cultural memories. Nina Sun Eidsheim and I recently investigated the diverse ways in which conscious and subconscious memories determine what goes on in improvised musical performance.<sup>44</sup> We found that, as much as any performance, Jones' novel *Corregidora* enacts memory's effects on blues singing. But a multifaceted relation with the past comprises just one aspect of the unending performance that is Hegelian fluidity. As I revisit *Corregidora*, I'll consider not just how interactions with the past form what Ursa lives and sings, but also how her relations with present listeners, with Jones' readers, and with the construct known as "African-American cultural identity" make the fluid identity that she makes into song.

## • Corregidora •

Blues singer Ursa Corregidora is thrown down a flight of stairs by her first husband, Mutt. As a consequence of her injuries, she must undergo a hysterectomy. To twenty-five-year-old Ursa, this operation renders her a complete failure and makes her existence pointless; because several generations of Corregidora women have inculcated her with the idea that her only purpose is to create the next generation, who will bear unwritten tales of the family's dark history into the future. Ursa recounts her ordeal in the novel that bears her name.

*Corregidora* is the debut novel of the Kentucky-born, African-American author Gayl Jones. Since its publication in 1975, this novel has engendered mixed (but inevitably strong) feelings in its readers, exciting as much controversy as admiration. While some reviewers undertake heated polemics against the book's violent and sexually explicit content, other scholars employ psychology in attempts to make sense of Jones' disturbing plot and unusual narrative voice.<sup>45</sup> Still others try to rationalize the strangeness of Jones' story and its structure, which will be evident in my discussion below, by relating them to musical structures – specifically, to the blues.<sup>46</sup> But as Casey Clabough notes, “philosophical” readings of the book are scarce.<sup>47</sup> I'd like to attempt such a reading based on Hegel's being-fluid, which may shed light on *Corregidora's* themes, complex voices, and the “philosophical purposes” behind Jones' vivid portrayals of sexual violence.

I read *Corregidora* as a performance of a substance-subject performing her fluid identity: a violent becoming rife with joining and breaking. Ursa lives and sings her own traumatic past; the memories and voices of other persons; plus the cultural memories and constructions that are still considered vital to African-American identity. Ursa's identity is as much others' as her own, as much a collective and somewhat abstract movement as a personal becoming that struggles to achieve both self-subsistent singularity and communal acceptance.

The otherness in Ursa consists largely of her ancestors' memories and voices. In compulsive retellings, her grandmother and great-grandmother recount tales of their enslavement under “Old man Corregidora...Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger.”<sup>48</sup> Like her

mother before her, and even as a very young child, Ursa's made to listen close, repeatedly. She learns that Corregidora hired out her Great Gram as a prostitute, and fathered her grandmother and mother. History is forced to overlook this man's perversity: all written documents attesting to the existence of slavery are destroyed as soon as the institution is abolished.<sup>49</sup> So to create living testimony to Great Gram's and all slaves' suffering, each Corregidora descendant burns into the next the duty to "make generations" and keep the truth alive through them. As a force their witnessing outlasts every individual and all attempts to snuff it out.<sup>50</sup>

The retellings are vivid, angry, desperate, and so frequent that Great Gram's tales are like etchings on Ursa's memory and body.<sup>51</sup> Throughout their lives, she and her mother feel physically compelled to produce children but, largely because Great Gram's horrible story is all they know of men, they are unable to foster healthy relationships. Moreover, in a compulsion to repeat her ancestors' ordeal, Ursa consistently chooses abusive male partners. As shared trauma, *otherness* determines her self-image, the reason for her existence, the function she envisions for her body, and the way she perceives and interacts with other people. In the manner Hegel described, Ursa's determinate being *is* this fraught relationship with others.

Jones' narrative style accentuates individuals' fluidity not only in their slippage in and out of categories, but also as the absence of clear boundaries between characters. Ursa's first-person narration is actually polyphonic: her imagination speaks to her in others' voices; her interior monologues are always interrupted by other people's thoughts, usually her ancestors' or her ex-husbands'. For example, while considering how she should feel about Mutt, now that he's grown violent, Ursa finds her thoughts broken into: first by fears of long-dead Great Gram; then, mid-sentence, echoes of her mother.

Is it more his fault than mine? Naw, when you start thinking that way. Naw, that nigger's to blame. What's bothering me? Great Gram, because I can't make generations. I remember everything you told me, Great Gram and Gram too and.

*Good night, Ursa baby. Good night, Irene. Honey, I remember when you was a warm seed inside me, but I tried not to bruise you. Don't bruise any of your seeds. I won't, Mama.*<sup>52</sup>

Here Ursa is addressor and addressee; her voice is hers and her mother's, sliding in and out of others, in and out of self-sufficiency.

Jones' male characters are similarly unstable. Ursa imagines a conversation in which Mutt addresses her just as Corregidora addressed Great Gram, his "little gold piece." Mutt's voice becomes Corregidora's, then that of Ursa's second husband, Tadpole.<sup>53</sup> Because she *is*, in part, her ancestors, the man who abused them is among her abusers, who likewise share his identity. By the end of the novel, "It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora..."<sup>54</sup>

For Donia Allen, the persistent interruption of Ursa's thoughts by others' voices evidences a "lack of emotional space [that] reflects the extent to which boundaries between characters are confused" – or fluid.<sup>55</sup> The same applies to boundaries between Ursa as an individual and the mid-twentieth-century African-American community to which she belongs. She lives, Nancy would say, in "common vertigo."<sup>56</sup>

Several scholars, including Clabough, read Ursa's (private and inherited) memories of abuse as "intersections of personal and cultural traumas."<sup>57</sup> Slavery in all forms is considered "traumatic experience" for the African-American community, says Jennifer Griffiths, implying that the trauma and its residues "exist within the cultural and familial framework" common to African-Americans.<sup>58</sup> "Ursa's narrative stands as a collective memoir to the suffering endured by [all] black women in slavery as well as an articulation of black women's ability to endure," adds Jennifer Cognard-Black.<sup>59</sup> For Joyce Pettis, therefore, to read *Corregidora* is to investigate its reflections of "black culture."<sup>60</sup>

The point is: for many readers, Ursa's fluid identity embodies African-American cultural identity in general, which is equally a fluid becoming of past into present, self into other. All cultural identities are similarly fluid: all communities are defined by their histories and their relationships to other communities. But African-American identity includes the collective memory of slavery in the Americas. Ursa therefore exemplifies the unique fluidity of American blackness as well as the concept of fluidity, which qualifies all communal identities. Thus, with his notion of being-fluid, Hegel identifies the condition that enables living African-Americans to define themselves according to collective memories.<sup>61</sup>

It's a struggle for Ursa to maintain a sense of individuality. Crowded by others, she rarely has room to think about herself. "I would

rather have sung [Mama's] memory if I had to sing any. What about my own? Don't ask me that now."<sup>62</sup> One's alienation of oneself, during relations, enables individuality. But alienation–relation – rifting oneself, guzzling others – is painful. Hegel says "individuality" is "consumed...in preserving itself at the expense of the universal...However, the sublation of individual durable existence is, conversely, equally its own engendering."<sup>63</sup> For Nancy, "being–affected [as] a determinate relation to the other" is the essence of pain that is nonetheless crucial to individuality.<sup>64</sup> "Pain is precisely the element of the singularity of separation [of a self from itself]...It occurs as the alteration of its subsistence, and thus as its self awakened in its alterity...To undergo pain is therefore to feel oneself singular."<sup>65</sup>

Foregrounding the necessity of relation–as–pain, of lingering with the negative, could be the "philosophical purpose" behind Jones' frank portrayals of sexual violence. These joinings are brutal, humiliating, sometimes incomplete.<sup>66</sup> In my view, these scenes enact the damaging and being–damaged that compose everyday being: the exigent but cruel penetration of the self by otherness. In fact, Jones underscores the essentiality of breaking and being–broken by demonstrating how violent relations may control an ordinary life. Punctuated by these vicious encounters, *Corregidora* is not a linear trajectory but a presentation and performance, setting–forth and enactment, of a being–fluid that "looks the negative in the face."<sup>67</sup>

I say "presentation" rather than "trajectory" because despite all her suffering, despite attempts to revise her relationships with men, her mother, and her ancestors' legacy, Ursa seems to have changed little by the end. This isn't a widespread view. Most scholars conclude that by singing the blues, Ursa works through her traumas and looks forward.<sup>68</sup> However, such readings don't devote enough attention to the fact that Ursa takes Mutt back. She does so out of renewed desire and, as I read it, out of vengeance. She recalls her hatred for him even as she accepts his invitation.<sup>69</sup> And as they renew their sexual relationship, Gram's voice breaks into her thoughts, reminding her that Great Gram had done something – never said what – that humiliated and enraged Corregidora so that he wanted to kill her. Ursa calculates what that might have been; she returns to Mutt *in order* to do this thing to him.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile he asks her not to let her ancestors' experiences color their relationship; she begs him not to bloody the relationship with abuse.<sup>71</sup> Neither promises a thing, because they *haven't* overcome their disrespect for one another. Mutt

knowingly retains abusive tendencies, and Ursa keeps letting Corregidora dictate her actions.<sup>72</sup>

The point of the continual process of self-othering and returning-to-self that comprises being-fluid isn't to "resolve" by "moving on" from otherness or selfness. Rather sublation, unifying opposites, involves both ceasing and preservation, change and remaining-the-same. As I see it, the point of Jones' novel is not to execute a narrative trajectory that relies on the positing and resolution of conflict, but to present an extreme (yet far from uncommon) manifestation of being-process as sublation: concurrent resistance and surrender to conflict. Ursa performs this process, living it; and Jones performs it by presenting Ursa's life-experience.<sup>73</sup>

For Jones, being-fluid is a kind of blues performance. She calls *Corregidora* her "blues novel."<sup>74</sup> Ursa's singing is communicative work, a "talent" and a "craft" through which she's compelled to manifest her being-fluid before others.<sup>75</sup> "They squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return...in the whole way I drew out a song. In the way my breath moved, in my whole voice."<sup>76</sup> After her hysterectomy, singing the blues becomes Ursa's only means of fulfilling her filial duty. By singing her ancestors' story so that others may acknowledge it, she affirms her mothers' truth and their presence within her. Singing her own compositions in a striking voice shaped by her own suffering, Ursa also manifests her singularity. In Jameson's terms, blues is the "work" through which Ursa performs the "collectivity within [her] individuality."<sup>77</sup> In Malabou's, Ursa is plasticity: formed by her ancestors' past and her own troubles, she gives form to bluesy creations.

As Hegel recognized, fluidity's inherent instability enables it to evade fixation even in language. For Ursa, blues can go where language can't: "to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there."<sup>78</sup> Her past, the traumatic otherness in her, is audible in her songs and the timbre of her voice. After Mutt's attack, a listener reports:

Your voice sounds a little strained, that's all. But if I hadn't heard you before, I wouldn't notice anything. I'd still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something...Like Ma [Rainey], for instance, after all the alcohol and men, the strain made it better, because you could tell what she'd been through. You could hear what she'd been through.<sup>79</sup>

In fact, says Ursa, "I sang because it was something I had to do, but [Mutt] would never understand that."<sup>80</sup> He attacks her because he resents her career as a blues singer, which enables her financial independence and self-expression before others. In Hegelian terms, he tries to prevent her from achieving a self-sufficient identity mediated by relationships with others and affirmed by others' recognition, in order to cement her dependence on him.<sup>81</sup> He aims to silence her, nullify her work, cancel her manifestation, and thus make her meaningless, effectively annul her existence.

But Ursa sings the blues even in her dreams. Imagining her ancestors, she sings them in the three-line (AAB) form of standard twelve-bar-blues lyrics. She daydreams "Old man Corregidora" in a pair of blues verses.

*While mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed  
While mama be sleeping, the old man he crawl into bed  
When mama have wake up, he shaking his nasty ole head  
Don't come here to my house, don't come here to my house I said  
Don't come here to my house, don't come here to my house I said  
Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead...*<sup>82</sup>

In a subtler example:

*But you got to make generations, you go on making them anyway. And when the ground and the sky open up to ask them that question that's going to be ask. They think it ain't going to be ask, but it's going to be ask. They have the evidence and give the verdict too. They think they hid everything. But they have the evidence and give the verdict too.*<sup>83</sup>

We could hear "And when the ground..." as the opening of a three-line blues with the last line repeated (concerning evidence and verdicts). Alternately, we may hear a repeated "question" followed by a repeated "verdict." The latter is still blues: call-and-response is the archetype of blues forms. In twelve-bar blues, the first two lines sound a call to which the last responds; and each line itself comprises two clauses in a call-response structure.

As Jones said in an interview, most blues lyrics are about "blues relationships...out of a tradition of 'love and trouble,'" which represent Afro-American cultural memories of slavery and racism.<sup>84</sup> I'll say more about this below. Here I want to emphasize that since all Ursa lives and sings are "blues relationships," her life *and its novelized presentation* are blues performances.

Jones even formats important dialogues as twelve-bar blues.<sup>85</sup>

"If that nigger love me he wouldn't've throwed me down the steps," I called.  
"What?" She came to the door.  
"I said if that nigger loved me he wouldn't've throwed me down the steps."  
"I know niggers love you do worse than that," she said.<sup>86</sup>

A poignant example forms the final strains of the novel: a blues by Ursa and Mutt, in which Mutt, saying nothing in the final line, fails to provide a verbal response to Ursa's call.

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you."  
"Then you don't want me."  
"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you."  
"Then you don't want me."  
He shook me till I fell against him crying. "I don't want a kind of man  
that'll hurt me neither," I said.  
He held me tight.<sup>87</sup>

Jones calls this "ritualized dialogue." "[I]n ritualized dialogue, sometimes you create a rhythm that people wouldn't ordinarily use...[Y]ou change the rhythm of the talk and response and you change the rhythm between the talk and response...both things take the dialogue out of the naturalistic realm – change its quality."<sup>88</sup> In the examples above, speech takes on the quality of blues song. As musical performance, Jones' novel turns its readers into listeners.

In Hegel's thought, effortful and sensible self-giving, and the receiving audience's recognition, are partly formative of being-fluid. Similarly, says Clabough, "Jones believes the input of the hearer, even if the listener is also the speaker, serves as a kind of reaffirming agent for the rendered narrative, making it more genuine and beneficial for the speaker."<sup>89</sup> Cognard-Black describes a working reader-listener who destabilizes her identity through that of the other. "[L]istening is work, a productive strain. Listening is that tender and precarious act of attempting true empathy, of putting oneself in the proverbial shoes of another character or person...and in *Corregidora*, listening on the part of a reader is a process of acknowledging that Ursa and her foremothers can reveal something cutting and vital..."<sup>90</sup>

Jones' blues brand themselves on our memories too. She performs consequences of being: relationships are vital even as they tear us to

pieces. She sings in multicolored polyphony; screams and brutal taunting mix in with her songs. All this is otherness that I, a reader–listener, absorb into myself – *Corregidora*, with its ghosts, is part of the substance that forms my fluid subjectivity. Ursa and Jones forcefully disrupt my self-sufficiency as I struggle to bear their violence and understand their split, jagged narrative. At the same time, their fluidity is affirmed and altered by my recognition of their struggles. In Hegel’s words, “Each is, in its own eyes and in that of the other, an essence immediately existing for itself which at the same time exists for itself in that way only by way of this mediation. They *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing each other*.”<sup>91</sup> Listening to Jones’ blue fluidity, I recognize my own. Thus in her way (a performative, interactive way – a blues way), Jones brings her reader–listener to “absolute knowledge”: painful awareness of the disruptive, integral existence of otherness in myself.

## • Blues •

Early reviewers of *Corregidora* named its author a blueswoman.<sup>92</sup> The shoe fits. *Corregidora* shares classic blues structures and themes: the twelve–bar form, “love and trouble,” enslavement and freedom, sex and abuse, neverending dissatisfaction and the compulsion to repeat (tonally speaking, the twelve–bar blues could circle indefinitely). Jones affirms: “the main focus of *Corregidora*...is on the blues relationships or relationships involving brutality...[since p]erhaps brutality enables one to recognize what tenderness is.”<sup>93</sup> So if *Corregidora* is a blues performance: given that this novel may embody Hegel’s notion of being–fluid, can we say that blues music embodies this notion too?

In my view: yes. The meat of *Corregidora* and Hegel’s system, being–fluid, is also a motivating impulse of the blues. In blues, a self-sufficient individual, molded and riddled by otherness and collectivity, is compelled to present herself to other complex individuals. Robert Switzer says it well. “Where the blues is truly radical is in its continual breaking down of barriers...[T]he blues song has indefinite boundaries as to origin and conclusion, is a confluence of forces and events rather than a discrete entity.”<sup>94</sup> Jones’ fascination with the blues has similarly “to do with meanings and things having a lot of different meanings at once...Blues acknowledges all different kinds of feelings at once. How do we know, for

instance, 'Sometimes he is a bad dark man' isn't really a repetition of 'Sometimes he is a good dark man'? That's what really interests me. Ambiguity."<sup>95</sup> The pertinence to the blues of Hegelian being-fluid is evident, although it is not named, in hearings of classic blues by other venerable authors and in the identity-forming, community-shaping roles deemed acceptable for blues by African-Americans.

The individual as collective, the past in the present, is the fluid identity that's typically sung in blues – in African-American improvised music generally, says George Lewis, or in what he calls "Afrological" improvisation, which is guided by the principles that underlie black identity. In Lewis' view, "the African-American improviser, coming from a legacy of slavery and oppression, cannot countenance the erasure of history. The destruction of family and lineage, the rewriting of history and memory in the image of whiteness, is one of the facts with which all people of color must live."<sup>96</sup> As in Ursa's blues, the past is alive and sung in African-American music of the present: the identity of the contemporary African-American improviser is that of his ancestral others. Lewis implies that individual memories of slavery solidified into a communal memory, a formative aspect of present-day African-American cultural identity "with which all people of color must live."

Additionally, the African-American improviser sings a "personality" comprised of *present* others. "[T]he development of the improviser in improvised music is regarded as encompassing not only the formation of individual musical personality but the harmonization of one's musical personality with social environments, both actual and possible."<sup>97</sup> Thus, for Amiri Baraka, "the Blues Aesthetic is not only historical and carrying all the qualities that characterize the African-American people, but social in the same way. It must be how and what black life is and how it reflects on itself."<sup>98</sup>

Hegel said it like this, *vis-à-vis* personality in general: "the history of the cultural maturation of the world...constitutes the substance of the individual, that is, his organic nature. – In this respect, the cultural maturation of the individual regarded from his own point of view consists in his acquiring all of this which is available, in his living off that inorganic nature and in his taking possession of it for himself."<sup>99</sup> In Hegelian terms, the blues is work, executed by and through individuals, that gives and presents African-American cultural fluidity to others.

At the same time, says Lewis, "One important aspect of Afrological improvisation is the notion of the importance of personal narrative, of 'telling your own story.'"<sup>100</sup> Blues is often described as a formative encapsulation of African-American cultural identity that also emphasizes individuality. As Baraka put it:

Even though its birth and growth seems [*sic*] connected finally to the general movement of the mass of black Americans into the central culture of the country, blues still went back for its impetus and emotional meaning to the individual, to his completely personal life and death. Because of this, blues could remain for a long time a very fresh and singular form of expression.<sup>101</sup>

Yet, this individual *is* "the African-American as such" or "the Negro as such," Baraka implies: each black man or woman is the entire African-American race and culture. Thus:

the intensely personal nature of blues-singing is also the result of what can be called the Negro's "American experience"...[T]he insistence of blues verse on the life of the individual and his individual trials and successes on the earth is a manifestation of the whole Western concept of man's life, and it is a development that could only be found in an American black man's music.<sup>102</sup>

"In this view," writes Karen Ford, "even the focus on the individual (supposedly an apolitical emphasis) suggested by the ubiquitous blues

### Slave to the Blues

by Thomas Dorsey,  
recorded by Ma Rainey, 1925

Ain't robbed no bank, ain't done no hangin' crime  
Ain't robbed no bank, ain't done no hangin' crime  
Just been a slave to the blues, dreamin' 'bout that man of mine

Blues, please tell me do I have to die a slave?  
Blues, please tell me do I have to die a slave?  
Do you hear me pleadin', you going to take me to my grave

I could break these chains and let my worried heart go free  
If I could break these chains and let my worried heart go free  
But it's too late now, the blues have made a slave of me

You'll see me raving, you'll hear me cryin', 'Oh, Lord, this lonely  
heart of mine!'  
Whole time I'm grieving, from my hat to my shoes  
I'm a good hearted woman, just am a slave to the blues.

theme of lost love and estrangement, signifies the larger problem of the dispossession of blacks in America."<sup>103</sup>

As *Corregidora* demonstrates, abusive sexual relationships sometimes have roots in social problems, like slavery and racism. Angela Davis points to several songs by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith in which "representations of pain suffered by women in their sexual relationships often also

seem to be metaphorical allusions to pain caused by the material hindrances of sexism and racism.<sup>104</sup> For instance, in "Slave to the Blues," Rainey equates the content expressed in blues – blues relationships, love and trouble, the burden of otherness in selfness – with slavery.<sup>105</sup> In its "blurring of the sexual and the social," the private and the shared, blues enacts what Hegel calls the "consumption" of individuality by collectivity, that equally "engenders" individuals.<sup>106</sup>

Consequently in the blues, as in Jones' blues novel, sexuality is no longer a private affair.<sup>107</sup> Consider Rainey's

"Sweet Rough Man"<sup>108</sup> and Smith's "Spider Man Blues"<sup>109</sup>: explicit portrayals of horrifying sexual violence. The idea is that listeners might hear reflections of themselves in Ma's and Bessie's words, and recognize their part in the collective that shares the "larger problems" signified by sexual trauma.<sup>110</sup> According to Davis, Bessie Smith's "popularity was a result of the black community's ability to identify her greatness as an artist and to discover themselves and their lives – women and men alike – in her work."<sup>111</sup> As such, "Smith was an articulator and shaper of African-American identity and consciousness."<sup>112</sup> Articulation or communication, bringing-forth, says Hegel, is such exigent work because the recognition of others is formative and affirmative of one's collective-individual identity. Blues is indeed urgency, an "impulse" to manifest personal and cultural "blues feelings" so that listeners may acknowledge and sublimate them – rendering them shared burdens, easier to bear.<sup>113</sup> Ralph Ellison:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.<sup>114</sup>

### Sweet Rough Man

by J. Sammy Randall and Ma Rainey, 1928

I woke up this mornin', my head was sore as a boil  
I woke up this mornin', my head was sore as a boil  
My man beat me last night with five feet of copper coil

He keeps my lips split, my eyes as black as jet  
He keeps my lips split, my eyes as black as jet  
But the way he love me makes me soon forget

Every night for five years, I've got a beatin' from my man  
Every night for five years, I've got a beatin' from my man  
People says I'm crazy, I'll explain and you'll understand

My man, my man, Lord, everybody knows he's mean  
My man, my man, Lord, everybody knows he's mean  
But when he starts to lovin', I wring and twist and scream

Lord, it ain't no maybe 'bout my man bein' rough  
Lord, it ain't no maybe 'bout my man bein' rough  
But when it comes to lovin', he sure can strut his stuff.

## Spider Man Blues

by Bessie Smith and Harold Gray, 1928

Early in the mornin' when it's dark and dreary outdoors  
Early in the mornin' when it's dark and dreary outdoors  
Spider man makes a web and hides while you sleeps and  
snores

Never try to sleep, mean eyes watch me day and night  
Never try to sleep, mean eyes watchin' day and night  
Catch every fly as fast as she can light

That black man of mine sure has his spider ways  
That black man of mine sure has his spider ways  
Been crawlin' after me all of my natural days

I'm like a poor fly, spider man, please let me go  
I'm like a poor fly, spider man, please let me go  
You've got me locked up in your house and I can't break down  
your door

Somebody please kill me and throw me in the sea  
Somebody please kill me and throw me in the sea  
This spider man of mine is going to be the death of poor me.

Note Ellison's accord with Hegel, via Jameson and Nancy: work, communication, creation, sensible manifestation as exigent drives toward affirming recognition. Ellison also echoes Hegel's and Jones' insistence on lingering with the negative.

Some blues scholars even rely on quasi-Hegelian language, though his name never comes up. One example is the "self-alienating double consciousness" that Andrew Scheiber hears in the relationship between jazz and blues.

Given my observations above, Scheiber's concept could apply to blues alone. The double consciousness:

pull[s] in opposite directions, mapping contradictory ideological imperatives onto the black subject — one emphasizing personal, dynamic self-stylization and self-invention and the other defining selfhood primarily in terms of shared historical, cultural, and emotional affinities...one having to do with innovative freedom and the other with the interpersonal and collective affinities that bind the community to its past and to one another.<sup>115</sup>

In another example, Bruce Baugh points out that although hearing oneself in Ma and Bessie "opens up the possibility of understanding the world differently, it nonetheless constitutes a negation of one's self, and so produces not exhilaration but anxiety."<sup>116</sup> The blues is thus a "dual negation of self and world"; as Switzer puts it, a "recovery of the experience of the negative."<sup>117</sup> Hegel's resonance is patent in this driving force of blues: the painful fluidity of identity that craves the recognition of others.

The philosophical potential of blues was for many years undermined by black and white intellectuals, as in Ellison's refusal to hear "the consolation of philosophy" in such music. Davis explains that:

black intellectuals associated with the [Harlem] Renaissance largely underestimated the value of African-American blues and jazz...On the one hand, it [blues] was the one art form within black culture that had retained the vigor of the culture's historical realities. It furnished evidence of race identity and race consciousness. On the other hand, it was the target, like the culture as a whole, of racist characterizations such as "savage," "primitive," and "undeveloped."<sup>118</sup>

Only Langston Hughes, and later writers like Jones, Toni Morrison, and August Wilson, credited blues with the expression of philosophical ideas. Wilson, whose fictionalized Ma in his 1982 play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is "drive[n] to arrive at truths through voice and music," believes that blues is indeed an "entire philosophical system."<sup>119</sup> Hegel would be hard pressed to disagree.

## • Hegel and (Post-)Blackness •

Baraka and Cognard-Black intimate an awareness that Hegel's ideas could contribute significantly to comprehensive analyses of blues, *Corregidora*, and the fluid African-American identity sung in both. At the same time, these scholars and others seem to attempt to deny his relevance.

In an article on black aesthetics, Baraka describes blues as an enactment of "the One is Two dialectic."<sup>120</sup> When "[w]e blues or jazz up...One is Two. One Breaks into Two."<sup>121</sup> Each individual is its other: singular identity breaks into plurality, and blues performs this fluidity. Baraka attributes the One-is-Two to Marx, summoning Nietzsche and Lenin in addition.<sup>122</sup> "One is two, as Lenin said, explaining the dialectic in *The Philosophical Notebooks*. Everything is itself and something else at the same time, i.e., what it is becoming."<sup>123</sup> It is well known that Marx was a direct respondent to Hegel, and that significant portions of Lenin's *Notebooks* are extended commentaries on Hegel's *Logic* and other works. It's more than likely that the dialectic Baraka attributes to Lenin is actually Lenin's reading of Hegel's ideas, specifically being-fluid, rather than Lenin's own thought. Nonetheless, Baraka prefers to cite Hegel's

philosophical descendants instead of the progenitor of the dialectic that forms the crux and rhythm of Baraka's argument. Hegel's absence is conspicuous because of the extent to which Baraka seems to go out of his way to align himself with the German-Idealist tradition by naming Marx, Nietzsche, and Lenin.

In a comparable move, Cognard-Black concedes Hegel's relevance to *Corregidora* only as a representative of the white oppression Ursa has to overcome. Mutt and Ursa, *Corregidora* and Ursa's ancestors, are for Cognard-Black reflections of the "master and slave" figures in Hegel's *Phenomenology*.<sup>124</sup> She formulates a surmise in accordance with Hegel's own: that "masters" are only independent because slaves depend on them.<sup>125</sup> I read the master-slave example as an idiosyncratic enactment of being-fluid: I achieve my self-sufficiency via my relationship to others who are equally self-sufficient and dependent. Thus the master-slave dialectic exemplifies *Corregidora's* driving force, being-fluid. Yet Cognard-Black reads the dialectic *as a whole* – and here Hegel is named and quoted – as something Ursa must elude. She must "sidestep the master-slave dialectic...[because] the crucial method of protecting herself against silencing whiteness (including its agent, Mutt Thomas) is for Ursa to establish an antidiscourse to the white imaginative landscape; and necessarily, Ursa must conceive of herself as opposite to the forces that suppress, repudiate, and erase her selfhood."<sup>126</sup>

However, I have demonstrated: first, that the "forces that suppress" Ursa's selfhood also constitute it; second, that this continual, paradoxical becoming *is* the Hegelian dialectic, which finds expression in the master-slave figures; third, that Hegel's concept of being-fluid aptly characterizes African-American cultural identity. Nonetheless Cognard-Black assumes that Hegel's philosophy represents "the white imaginative landscape" and nothing more. In writings like Baraka's and Cognard-Black's, why is Hegel's philosophy – though it qualifies a key aspect of African-American identity and formative impulses in important African-American music and literature – guarded against, misattributed, and derogatorily relegated to the realm of "whiteness"?

In my view, the answer has nothing to do with the theory of being-fluid, but with the man who conceived it, with who he was and what he thought outside this theory. He takes pains to underscore cannibalism and tyranny in his descriptions of Africa. "The Negroes indulge, therefore, that perfect contempt for humanity, which in its bearing on Justice and Morality is the fundamental characteristic of the race."<sup>127</sup> Thus "The peculiarly

African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all *our* ideas – the category of Universality.”<sup>128</sup> With the boorish claim that “our” (read: his) ideas cannot apply to black people, Hegel shoots himself in the foot: he undermines any potential for universality that may reside in his own theories. Perhaps this is why Baraka omits his name, and Cognard-Black cannot see past his “silencing whiteness.”<sup>129</sup>

Can we think beyond Hegel’s bigotry rather than consigning him to oblivion or obsolescence, “savagery” or “primitiveness” (or misreading him, as some do, in order to exaggerate his racism)?<sup>130</sup> As Susan Buck-Morss pleads in “Hegel and Haiti”: can we not “rescue” Hegel’s philosophy “from the uses to which white domination has put it?”<sup>131</sup> Can we read the valuable contributions that Hegel’s thought on being-fluid can make to philosophical considerations of African-American music, literature, and identity, in a manner that allows the *idea itself* to achieve its greatest potential – even though some of that potential results from the very fact that the idea was coined by a *particular* racist white man who also happened to be a great philosopher?

Let me put this another way. Does the fact that I inherited the brownness of my skin from my Bermudian grandfather, who inherited his mahogany coloring from his enslaved African grandparents, make me more qualified than *Hegel* to speak *philosophically* about anything, blues and black identity included? Musicologist Guthrie Ramsey would answer in the affirmative. To him, the “cultural experience” of blackness automatically grants an author the “authority” to address blues and other “black music” intellectually.<sup>132</sup> I cannot hold with this view. In my opinion, the very fact that we can glean insight on African-American art and identity from such as Hegel, says something about the status of race-thinking in scholarship and philosophy in general.

Recent sociological and philosophical work turns the influence of race-thinking on scholarly, political, and philosophical discourses into a question rather than a given.<sup>133</sup> To take a Hegelian perspective on this question: I don’t believe Hegel would countenance the wholesale elimination of racial concerns from philosophical considerations of identity or aesthetics. Whether it’s inherited from our ancestors or constructed by those around us, race and race-thinking constitute aspects of *substance*, the totality of otherness that forms each individual subject. Substance is

inescapable, as is being-fluid. But through them both, individuality and self-sufficiency persist – which means each individual can decide, for himself or herself, how to approach races, race-thinking, and racism.

In my opinion, Hegel's idea of being-fluid is his authority, and mine, and that of any intellectual approach to African-American identity and art. Hegel's identity is as fluid as anyone's, particularly now that he's not here to conduct himself in ways that risk suggesting otherwise. He's not *only* the ignorant penman of the racist remarks in *The Philosophy of History*, even though he is that author as much as he is the *Phenomenology's*. The latter Hegel, who is yet the former, just may have hit upon certain universalities in spite of himself. Baraka and Cognard-Black sense this, I think, despite themselves – otherwise they would not have surrendered to the allure of certain ideas.

Paul Taylor does so without shame, in his indispensable theory of "post-black aesthetics." Post-black aesthetics is "an approach to expressive culture that reflects [artists'] experiences of a world in which racial boundaries are blurry...blackness ceases to be a foundation and becomes a question."<sup>134</sup> "For post-black thinkers, nationalist ideas about cultural self-determination and about a unique African personality have been supplanted by individualist and often apolitical aspirations, and by appeals to intra-racial diversity and interracial commonalities."<sup>135</sup> Consequently, "post-black aesthetics treats blackness not as its source but as its subject," recognizing that "[d]istinct human populations, such as they are, shade into each other."<sup>136</sup>

The defining characteristic of post-blackness is thus *fluidity*.

[T]he traditional meanings of blackness, the meanings that took their most recent form in the soul-era [1960s and '70s] politics of respectability and black power, are too confining. New meanings have emerged: new forms of black identity that are multiple, fluid, and profoundly contingent, along with newly sophisticated understandings of race and identity...We might say that to be post-black is to experience the contingency and fluidity of black identity, to have to wrestle with the question of how to orient one's self to the various options for black self-consciousness, and to do all of this while relating one's self to the similarly fluid meanings and practices of the wider society.<sup>137</sup>

This fluidity is Hegel's fluidity: post-black identity remains itself "while relating" and "orienting" itself to equally fluid otherness. For Taylor, it is just such fluidity that enables the "post" in his understanding of blackness.

Post-blackness is not un-black or nullified blackness, but sublated blackness: in post-black aesthetics, "traditional" black identity undergoes cessation *and* preservation. "Posterizing," naming a phenomenon as *post-something*, "enjoin[s] those who would engage in it *to embrace and to reject the past*, while also embracing but remaining wary of the present."<sup>138</sup> Taylor finds the roots of the posterizing enterprise in Hegel's philosophy, in his notions of the "end of art" and "end of history."<sup>139</sup> These ideas are grounded in the more general notion that categories such as "art" do not have fixed definitions. In Hegel's *Aesthetics*, "art points beyond itself": what art means, its function relative to philosophy and its ability to represent truth, changes ("ends" or is negated) even as the constituents of art, such as music and poetry, remain what they are.<sup>140</sup> For Taylor, "race takes the place of art on Hegel's scheme...it is free to do or be anything, or nothing, without historical consequence."<sup>141</sup> At the same time, in post-black aesthetics, "race is in the position of Geist [Spirit]" as self-conscious contingency.<sup>142</sup>

The point is, the concept of post-blackness does not entail overlooking race, race-thinking, and racism in aesthetics or any other discourse. It's not a matter of casting aside the painfully charged history that yet informs African-American identity. It's rather a perspective that relinquishes *any* presupposed fixity, in the interest of ensuring that African-Americans – and Caucasian philosophers – may live and be more than that history, in addition to it. Classic blues like Ma Rainey's, and blues-based fiction such as *Corregidora*, achieve just such self-aware fluidity. Hegel helps us recognize their accomplishment. And Taylor not only legitimates Hegelian readings of African-American art as exercises in (post-)black aesthetics; but also, by recognizing the philosophical potential of the relationship between black identity and Hegel's conception of being-fluid, affirms the fluidity of Hegel's identity.

## • Notes •

I'd like to extend special thanks to Nina Sun Eidsheim for setting my sights on the path that led at last to this essay, also to Joanna Demers and the anonymous *Evental Aesthetics* reviewers for their invaluable feedback.

<sup>1</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (London: Dover, 2004), 110-11.

<sup>2</sup> James Cone quoted in Andrew Joseph Scheiber, "Jazz and the Future Blues: Toni Morrison's Urban Folk Zone," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 2 (2006): 473.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), §177. Emphasis original. In my view, "absolute knowing" is the weakest term. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel aims to develop his reader's "culturally immature standpoint" to the truthful perspective of "absolute knowing," by demonstrating how various kinds of relationship between subjects and substance sublate other relationships and the parties involved (§28). Thus, "absolute knowing" is not only a fact that the subject learns about herself – the fact that she could not exist independently of her world – but also the unstable state of being-as-becoming via sublation of and by others. "Absolute knowing" is self-conscious fluidity of identity; it is the interactive act of being that each individual perpetually performs. I find the term somewhat misleading, in part because the word "knowing" risks obscuring the embodied, experiential nature of being-fluid. Hegel himself seems wary of the term: it appears only five times in the body of the *Phenomenology*.

<sup>4</sup> "Substance is the absolute, the actuality that is in and for itself in itself as the simple identity of possibility and actuality, absolute essence containing all actuality and possibility within itself..." Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1969), 578.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91. Emphasis original.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 105. Emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §21. Emphasis original.

<sup>10</sup> Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 70, 71.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 73. In another example, Sal, a black woman who is normally cool towards Ursa because of the relatively pale color of Ursa's skin, suddenly becomes friendly. Ursa realizes that this is because she, Ursa, has just married a very dark-skinned man. In the time it takes to sign a marriage contract, Ursa transmutes in Sal's eyes from "passing white/Latina" to "black," thus from an object of resentment to one of approval. Jones, *Corregidora*, 69-70.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §33. Emphasis original.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, §167.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, §166.

<sup>16</sup> "For its part, the object [otherness], for which self-consciousness [the I] is the negative, has likewise for us, that is, in itself, returned into itself, just as consciousness, for its part, has done the same. By way of this reflective turn into itself, the object has become *life*." *Ibid.*, §168.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, §169.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, in Hegel's view, when a mind or thinking subject fails to take part in being-fluid, denies that it is other minds and the surrounding world as much as it is itself, and instead rigidly insists on its separation from the world and other beings, this mind is diseased. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894), §404-08.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §171. Emphasis original.

<sup>20</sup> "[W]hat is at rest, is self-moving, that is, it is subject. Its abstract power to move is *being-for-itself*, that is, pure negativity...The purpose [of being] which has been worked out, that is, existing actuality, is movement and unfolded coming-to-be. However, this very unrest is the self, and for that reason, it is the same as the former immediacy and simplicity of the beginning because it is the result which has returned into itself. – What has returned into itself is precisely the self, and the self is self-relating parity and simplicity." *Ibid.*, §22. See also §18. Emphasis original.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, §19. The "suffering" that attends fluidity is also apparent in the *Philosophy of Nature*. Here an organism's life consists of the nourishing destruction and consumption of external entities, and the destruction and consumption of the organism itself by disease – all of which Hegel names "fluidity." See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), §353-65. Also ———, "The Philosophy of Nature," in *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline and Critical Writings*, ed. Ernst Behler (London: Continuum, 1990), §286-95.

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §32.

- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Steven Miller and Jason Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5. Emphasis original.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 33.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 47.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 50.
- <sup>29</sup> Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (London: Routledge, 2005), 32-34.
- <sup>30</sup> Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, 53-4. Religion and philosophy are yet "higher" means of truth-presenting than art, according to Hegel's *Aesthetics*.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 18. Jameson calls this Hegel's "form-problem": the challenge Hegel faces in attempting to present the fluid subject-as-other "without allowing the terms of any of [the constituent] oppositions to harden over into a specific philosophical thesis." Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations* (London: Verso, 2010), 84.
- <sup>32</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 66.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 67.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 44, 85.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 91.
- <sup>36</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §356, 222.
- <sup>37</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 72-73. Quoting Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132. See also Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §222.
- <sup>38</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §356, Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 64.
- <sup>39</sup> The term "plasticity" (*plastische*) seems to appear just once in the *Phenomenology* (§64 in Pinkard's translation), but features more extensively in Hegel's *Aesthetics* and *Philosophy of History*. See for instance his discussion of sculpture in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 119-20.
- <sup>40</sup> Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, 9.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 8. Emphasis original. See also 10, 72-3, 181.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 9, 18.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 8. See also 68-9, 71-3.
- <sup>44</sup> Nina Eidsheim and Mandy-Suzanne Wong, "Corporeal Archaeology: Embodied Memory in *Corregidora* and Contemporary Music," in *Sounding the Body: Improvisation, Representation, and Subjectivity*, ed. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, forthcoming).
- <sup>45</sup> See for instance: Casey Howard Clabough, *Gayl Jones: The Language of Voice and Freedom in Her Writings* (Jefferson, NC: McFarlan, 2008), Jennifer Cognard-Black, "'I Said Nothing': The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *NWSA Journal* 13, no. 1 (2001), Jennifer Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Healing in African American Women's Writing and Performance* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).
- <sup>46</sup> Donia Elizabeth Allen, "The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *Callaloo* 25, no. 1 (2002).
- <sup>47</sup> Casey Howard Clabough, "Toward an All-Inclusive Structure: The Early Fiction of Gayl Jones," *Callaloo* 29, no. 2 (2006): 649.
- <sup>48</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 8-9.
- <sup>49</sup> As Ursa puts it, "they burned all the slavery papers so it would be like they never had it." Ibid., 9.
- <sup>50</sup> "...I'm leaving evidence," says Great Gram. "And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them...The important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And that what makes the evidence. And that's what makes the verdict." Ibid., 14, 22.
- <sup>51</sup> More on bodily memory's role in *Corregidora* in Eidsheim and Wong, "Corporeal Archaeology: Embodied Memory in *Corregidora* and Contemporary Music." Also Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Healing in African American Women's Writing and Performance*. And Camille

Passalacqua, "Witnessing to Heal the Self in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 35, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>52</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 41. Italics and indentation original.

<sup>53</sup> "Your pussy's a little gold piece [Corregidora's phrasing], ain't it Urs [Mutt's nickname for Ursa]? My little gold piece." "Yes." "Ursa, I'm worried about you, you so dark under your eyes [Tadpole's recent complaint]." *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>55</sup> Allen, "The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," 269.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, 18.

<sup>57</sup> Clabough, "Toward an All-Inclusive Structure: The Early Fiction of Gayl Jones," 646.

<sup>58</sup> Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Healing in African American Women's Writing and Performance*, 70.

<sup>59</sup> Cognard-Black, "'I Said Nothing': The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," 41.

<sup>60</sup> Joyce Pettis, "'She Sung Back in Return': Literary (Re)Vision and Transformation in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *College English* 52, no. 7 (1990): 789.

<sup>61</sup> An interesting aside: because Ursa lives in multiple "times" – her present, her past, and others' pasts and presents – time does not "pass" in a smooth, linear manner in Jones' novel. Years of Ursa's life fall into the voids between chapters; and as Camille Passalacqua points out, Jones' consistent use of "flashbacks," as in the quotation above, "results in the collapse of time and reality...The persistent instability of time and narrative voice reflect the disorder and disorientation of Ursa's consciousness as she attempts to find a secure identity." For Malabou, the plasticity of concepts in general entails the plasticity of time in Hegel's thought: time itself has a plastic identity, with multiple and conflicting definitions. Time is not a container in which things exist but is itself the becoming of things as their fluid identities. The nonlinearity of time in Jones' narration is the "disorder" of Ursa's identity. "My veins are centuries meeting...Stained with another's past as well as our own. Their past in my blood. I'm a blood." Passalacqua, "Witnessing to Heal the Self in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*," 143, Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, 14-17, Jones, *Corregidora*, 45-46.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 103.

<sup>63</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §171. Emphasis original.

<sup>64</sup> Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, 41.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Take Ursa's relations with Mutt, with Tadpole; Gram's and Great Gram's relations with *Corregidora*; Ursa's parents' relations with each other. All are fierce and demeaning. See for example Jones, *Corregidora*, 83-84, 74-75.

<sup>67</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §32.

<sup>68</sup> The analyses previously cited by Allen, Clabough, Griffiths, and Passalacqua are examples of such optimistic readings, as are commentaries by Sirène Harb, Claudia Tate, and Missy Dehn Kubitschek. As Clabough puts it, "the blues tradition is the repetitious healing formula Ursa employs to reconcile her identity...[T]he blues functions as an innovative linguistic salve for the personal and cultural violence of the past." Clabough, "Toward an All-Inclusive Structure: The Early Fiction of Gayl Jones," 651-53. Stephanie Li credits Ursa's investigation of her mother's past as the source of her own healing. Sirène Harb, "Memory, History and Self-Reconstruction in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 3 (2008), Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), Claudia C. Tate, "Corregidora: Ursa's Blues Medley," *Black American Literature Forum* 13, no. 4 (1979), Stephanie Li, "Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *Callaloo* 29, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>69</sup> "I wanted to say I can't come back, but I couldn't say anything. I just looked at him. I didn't know yet what I would do. I knew what I still felt. I knew that I still hated him." Jones, *Corregidora*, 183.

<sup>70</sup> This humiliation is the oral sex act, which appears as a slave's means of undermining his or her master in *Corregidora* and in other novels of slavery, such as Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*. See *Ibid.*, 184, Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: W. Morrow, 1986).

<sup>71</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 184.

<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg corroborates my point of view with her more unusual reading. According to Goldberg, "by structuring her novel in a pattern of traumatic repetition, Jones offers neither the satisfactory closure of a linear narrative (of either progress or decline), nor the

redemptive healing of a circular narrative." Even at the end of the novel, "Ursa exhibits the behavior of a person *still in pain*..." Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, "Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*," *Callaloo* 26, no. 2 (2003): 446-47. Emphasis original.

<sup>73</sup> As Nancy puts it, "experience" is "not only the passage from a 'one' to an 'other,' but the one, in this passage, finds its truth in the other, and thus touches upon and unsettles its own ground." Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, 14. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "Consciousness knows and comprehends nothing but what is in its experience, for what is in experience is just spiritual substance, to be precise, as the *object* of its own self. However, spirit becomes the object, for it is this movement of becoming an *other to itself*, which is to say, of becoming an *object to its own self* and of sublating this otherness. And experience is exactly the name of this movement within which the immediate, the non-experienced, i.e., the abstract (whether the abstract is that of sensuous being of 'a simple' which has only been thought about) alienates itself and then comes round to itself from out of this alienation." Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §36. Emphasis original.

<sup>74</sup> Gayl Jones and Michael S. Harper, "Gayl Jones: An Interview," *The Massachusetts Review* 18, no. 4 (1977): 700.

<sup>75</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>77</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 67.

<sup>78</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 66.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> See Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §189-96.

<sup>82</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 67. Italics and indentation original.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. Italics and (lack of) indentation original.

<sup>84</sup> Jones and Harper, "Gayl Jones: An Interview," 700.

<sup>85</sup> Allen addresses the relationship between blues and Jones' "ritualized dialogue" in greater depth. Allen, "The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*."

<sup>86</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 36-37.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 185. Cognard-Black provides a fascinating discussion of silences and failures to respond in *Corregidora*. Particularly telling is the extent to which Ursa fails to respond to her husbands, as often as they do to her. See Cognard-Black, "'I Said Nothing': The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," 50-55.

<sup>88</sup> Jones and Harper, "Gayl Jones: An Interview," 699.

<sup>89</sup> Clabough, "Toward an All-Inclusive Structure: The Early Fiction of Gayl Jones," 653.

<sup>90</sup> Cognard-Black, "'I Said Nothing': The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," 57.

<sup>91</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §184. Emphasis original.

<sup>92</sup> For instance, Raymond Sokolov, "A Woman Who Sings Blues: *Corregidora*," *New York Times Book Review* (25 May 1975), Ivan Webster, "Really the Blues," *Time* 105 (16 June 1975), Tate, "*Corregidora*: Ursa's Blues Medley." Interestingly, Andrew Scheiber makes the quasi-Hegelian implication that for Jones and other African-American writers coming of age during the 1970s, the very gesture of summoning blues, which was at the height of its popularity in the 1920s, is like a flashback that unites the past and present and engages the fluidity of time. Scheiber writes that "blues had been effectively superseded as a point of musical cultural reference by other, more urban and contemporary black musical forms [e.g. free jazz] – making its literary resuscitation by writers like Jones, [Alice] Walker, and [Toni] Morrison a significant contrarian gesture in an intellectual atmosphere that, in Madhu Dubey's apt phrasing, is characterized by an 'opposition of the oppressive past and the free future.'" Scheiber, "Jazz and the Future Blues: Toni Morrison's Urban Folk Zone." Scheiber quotes Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 95.

<sup>93</sup> Gayl Jones and Claudia C. Tate, "An Interview with Gayl Jones," *Black American Literature Forum* 13, no. 4 (1979): 147.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Switzer, "Signifying the Blues," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 21 (2001): 41-48.

<sup>95</sup> Jones and Harper, "Gayl Jones: An Interview," 700.

- <sup>96</sup> George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996): 233.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*: 234-35.
- <sup>98</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, "The Blues Aesthetic and the Black Aesthetic: Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture," *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (1991): 105.
- <sup>99</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §28.
- <sup>100</sup> Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," 241.
- <sup>101</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1963), 67.
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.
- <sup>103</sup> Karen J. Ford, "These Old Writing Paper Blues: The Blues Stanza and Literary Poetry," *College Literature* 24, no. 3 (1997): 95.
- <sup>104</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 81.
- <sup>105</sup> Transcribed by Angela Davis, in *Blues Legacies* 243.
- <sup>106</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, 81, Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §171., quoted in full above.
- <sup>107</sup> "Sexuality is not privatized in the blues. Rather, it is represented as shared experience that is socially produced." Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, 91-92.
- <sup>108</sup> Transcribed by Angela Davis, in *Blues Legacies* 247.
- <sup>109</sup> Transcribed by Angela Davis, in *Blues Legacies* 339.
- <sup>110</sup> R.A. Lawson says it nicely. "The blues was a collective form of commiserating; bluesmen sang of their sad existence, and from 'this [the] listener took heart for he shared his predicaments and his fortunes and was reassured' that 'they were common to them both.'" R. A. Lawson, "The First Century of Blues: One Hundred Years of Hearing and Interpreting the Music and the Musicians," *Southern Cultures* 13, no. 3 (2007): 54. Lawson draws from Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 269-73. And Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1963), 107-08.
- <sup>111</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, 142.
- <sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>113</sup> "Blues feelings" is Ursa's turn of phrase. Jones, *Corregidora*, 50.
- <sup>114</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1953), 78.
- <sup>115</sup> Scheiber, "Jazz and the Future Blues: Toni Morrison's Urban Folk Zone," 482-83.
- <sup>116</sup> Baugh, Bruce. "Left-Wing Elitism: Adorno on Popular Culture," quoted in Switzer, "Signifying the Blues," 39.
- <sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.
- <sup>118</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, 149-50.
- <sup>119</sup> August Wilson, quoted in Doris Davis, "'Mouths on Fire': August Wilson's Blueswomen," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 35, no. 4 (2010): 166.
- <sup>120</sup> Baraka, "The Blues Aesthetic and the Black Aesthetic: Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture," 104.
- <sup>121</sup> The passage in full: "Roll over, Beethoven, we cry, and relate it to us over and under any way. We blues or jazz up, syncopate any and every. We are incumaters [sic] and syncopaters. One is Two. One Breaks into Two." *Ibid.*: 106.
- <sup>122</sup> "Two is One, says [sic] [Thelonious] Monk and [Karl] Marx." *Ibid.*: 104. For Baraka on Nietzsche, see 107.
- <sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*: 106.
- <sup>124</sup> Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §189-96.
- <sup>125</sup> Cognard-Black, "'I Said Nothing': The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," 51.
- <sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*: 52. See 50-51 for Cognard-Black's readings of Hegel.
- <sup>127</sup> Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 113.
- <sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 110. Emphasis original.
- <sup>129</sup> Indeed, Babacar Camara observes that "Many African scholars [not just African-Americans] reject G.W.F. Hegel because of his theses on Africa." Babacar Camara, "The Falsity of Hegel's Theses on Africa," *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 82. Susan Buck-Morss makes a laudable but

halfhearted attempt to rescue Hegel by proposing that the master-slave dialectic, in which slaves emerge victorious, might have been inspired by the successful revolution of Haitian slaves that took place during Hegel's time, and which he probably read about. She points out that his *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right* call for the abolition of slavery, suggesting that Hegel praised the victorious black Haitians in his thought and conversation. But he made no attempt to acknowledge them in the *Philosophy of History* which, Buck-Morss suggests, might not have received the care that went into his other work – although this is no excuse for racism. Buck-Morss concedes that "Hegel was perhaps always a cultural racist if not a biological one." Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 864. See also ———, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

<sup>130</sup> Here I am thinking of Ronald Jackson, who misreads Hegelian fluidity. Jackson takes this to mean that what something is, is measured according to and made valid by what it is not – ergo a black person is, is decided upon and judged legitimate (or not) by white people. Hence in order to survive, according to the terms of Hegelian dialectics as Jackson reads them, black people must assimilate to whiteness. "[I]f the Hegelian dialectic is practiced and reified by Blacks," Jackson says, "then only one destiny can result: 'Whiteness.'" This interpretation deliberately exacerbates Hegel's impression as a racist. However, as my analysis has shown: driven by sublation (which is at once cessation and preservation), Hegelian fluidity entails not the assimilation of oneself to the other, but *becoming-other whilst remaining oneself*. What results is not assimilation but a plural identity – a notion quite the opposite of racism. Ronald L. Jackson, "Black 'Manhood' as Xenophobe: An Ontological Exploration of the Hegelian Dialectic," *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 6 (1997): 742. I have borrowed Angela Davis' terms, cited above: "savage" and "primitive," drawn from early black intellectuals' dismissals of blues.

<sup>131</sup> Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," 865.

<sup>132</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, "Who Hears Here? Black Music, Critical Bias, and the Musicological Skin Trade," *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2001): 18. Ramsey acknowledges the "cultural chauvinism" that sometimes surrounds scholarship on black music: a certain "territorialism, mysticism, or, if I might use a vernacularism here, 'it's a black thing, you wouldn't understand' sloganism" (6). Yet he claims that an analysis of music by a black artist must convey "'professional' or 'confessional' blackness" (32). Confessional blackness is synonymous with "cultural experience" or "childhood experience" which, if one has the right kind, bestow upon one the "authority" to speak about black music (18, 35). Professional blackness "consists of complex theoretical explanations of identity and culture" of unspecified nature that scholars may acquire through "specialized training" (32-33). According to Ramsey, even an eminent (white) musicologist like Gary Tomlinson should justify his analytical insights on African-American jazz-rock fusion artists, by tying them to his biographical experiences (25).

<sup>133</sup> See for instance Joshua Glasgow, "A Third Way in the Race Debate," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (2006), Joshua Glasgow and Julie Schulman, "Is Race-Thinking Biological or Social, and Does It Matter for Racism? An Exploratory Study," *The Journal of Social Philosophy* 41, no. 3 (2010), Kwame Anthony Appiah and Amy Guttmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). See also Paul Taylor's work, cited below.

<sup>134</sup> Paul C. Taylor, "Black Aesthetics," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 1 (2010): 10.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*: 10, 3.

<sup>137</sup> ———, "Post-Black, Old Black," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 626-27.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*: 629. Emphasis added.

<sup>139</sup> The "end of art" and "end of history" appear in the *Aesthetics* and *Phenomenology*, respectively. *Ibid.*: 636-40.

<sup>140</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 103.

<sup>141</sup> Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," 638.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

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#### ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that we have entered a new era of aesthetics. This new era is possible to predict using Hegel's lectures on aesthetics. But for reasons that I outline, Hegel himself would not have predicted it. The Hegelian thinking of art has an unconscious that is only now coming to light. This coming to light signals the collapse of the Romantic period — the "long march of the isms," the most encompassing of which is consumerism, since the late eighteenth century, accompanied by the advent of modernity, the upsurge of industrial capitalism, and the subsequent geological shift we now call the *Anthropocene*: the fact that we have now entered a geological period in which humans have a direct affect on the substrata of their earthly reality. The Anthropocene has a very definite beginning indeed: 1945, when a thin layer of radioactive materials was deposited in Earth's crust. The new period we enter, I claim, is an ecological one. In this period, a new phase of art, unpredicted, and indeed I shall argue, unpredictable, by Hegel, comes about. This phase of art I call the *Asymmetric Phase*.

#### KEYWORDS

Hegel, Asymmetric Phase, hyperobjects, nonhuman, ecology

# Art in the Age of Asymmetry: Hegel, Objects, Aesthetics

Timothy Morton

In this essay I argue that we have entered a new era of aesthetics, shaped by the current ecological emergency. This new era is possible to predict using Hegel's lectures on aesthetics. But for reasons that I outline, Hegel himself would not have predicted it.

Hegel's philosophical approach is intuitively very satisfying for literature scholars like me. From early on, literature students are taught that texts have narrators, and that these narrators are different from the author. For instance, a text might not have a single author, or even a human one. You could discover the text written in gigantic letters on the surface of Mars or floating in the tealeaves at the bottom of the pot. No matter: all texts, even texts like these, have narrators.

Now the thing about narrators is that they do two things, roughly: they establish a *point of view* (or points of view), and they establish a *subject position* (or positions). The point of view is fairly straightforward: it's the answer to the question, "What or who is the narrator?" Is the narrator omniscient, omnipresent? Does it have a gender, a race, a class? Is the narrator a character in the story? Characters? And so on.

Slightly more difficult to grasp is the notion of subject position, but this is where it really gets interesting being a literature (or any kind of art) student. If one was forced to boil down what we do as humanities scholars into a single task, it would be identifying subject positions and working on them, which is what Hegelian philosophy is all about. The subject position of a text or artwork answers the question, "Who are you, the reader?" What attitude towards itself does the text expect you to take? Think of a perspective painting. The vanishing points in the painting dictate where to place your gaze in order to make a two-dimensional surface appear three-dimensional. Your gaze is encoded into the picture surface. In the same way, perhaps, a flower's subject position is that of a bee, if it's painted with ultraviolet landing stripes. It tells the bee where to put her proboscis.

In a Lacanian, Althusserian nutshell, this is the news that literary theory delivers. People come in to the theory class with the expectation that they will hear that one can make anything mean anything. Theory teachers will always get a certain essay on deconstruction that totally misinterprets it along these lines. That is in fact what we could refer to as the *pre-theory* attitude. What you should leave the theory class with is the knowledge that not only is the interpretation of texts subject to all kinds of nonsubjective constraints, but also a place for you has been pre-established by the text itself. It's like those maps with the little red arrow that says, "You are here."

Now Hegel's great insight is that ideas come bundled with attitudes — in other words, ideas code for subject positions. An idea's thinkability as such depends upon a certain attitude on the part of the thinker. So when a Hegelian wants to debate you, she doesn't argue the toss about the truth content of your claims. She makes a beeline for the subject position that your ideas code for, and talks to that. Say "welfare" and you evoke a whole host of attitudes; call it "social security" and it becomes very different. The Hegelian doesn't argue the toss about the value of supporting poor people. The Hegelian goes directly for the jugular of the attitude that the "welfare" concept promulgates.

Homing in on the subject position is disarming. The subject position tends to be the unconscious of the idea, the idea's personality, as it were, and we have a clue from psychoanalysis that one's personality, how one appears to the other, is unconscious. So what happens when you home in on the subject position is that you deprive it of its effectiveness. You collapse the idea and the attitude it codes for into a bundle.

Now this bundle is yet another idea. And guess what. Since ideas code for attitudes, this one is no exception. So the Hegelian must figure out that one. And so on. This is the essence of dialectics. It means that philosophy is the history of philosophy, not the superficial occurrence of ideas “in” time, but a temporality and a temporalizing that is internal, intrinsic, to thinking as such. For instance, it has no reverse gear. Thinking is futural, since ideas don't know yet what they code for.

Ideas, for Hegel, have a structural instability, an intrinsic difference from themselves, reflected in the rift between an idea and the attitude it codes for. Ideas are also archaeological evidence of the existence of at least one thing that is not an idea: people who have those ideas. Ideas don't float in a void, but are lived, phenomenologically — which is why of course Hegel calls his history of attitudes that ideas encode *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Now there are ideas humans have about art. And these ideas code for attitudes. And these idea–attitude bundles are structurally unstable and teeter forwards, opening up the future. So Hegel's history of aesthetics is the history of how human ideas about what art is code for attitudes, setting up unstable constructs that collapse into new ideas and fresh attitudes. Hegel's history of art has three phases: Symbolic, Classical and Romantic. Now we can track this history, argues Hegel, according to how humans have developed attitudes towards the objects of art: the painting, the canvas, the cave wall, the pen, the subject matter, all of it. Ideas concerning these objects code for attitudes, the spiritual inside of art, as it were. In a nutshell, Hegel's history of aesthetics is the story of the eventual release of this spirit from the very materials that it used to understand itself, and the subsequent surpassing of art by philosophy, when spirit becomes too heavy for objects to embody it.

(Here I employ the terms *spirit* and *spiritual* rather than *subject* and *subjective*. First because Hegel uses them. Secondly, because those terms are interestingly provocative right now. And thirdly because subject is itself a kind of cheapening or reification of what we are aiming for here, which is more like an analysis of the withdrawn essence of things versus their manifestation for others, or for the other.)

Now I am not a certain type of Hegelian, in the sense that I am not a teleological thinker. I do not believe that the history of what Hegel calls spirit has an end, even a predictable end point — indeed, it's possible that Hegel himself was nowhere near as teleological and rigid as some have

made him out to be.<sup>1</sup> And I am not endorsing Hegel's viewpoint concerning the defects of the Symbolic, Classical and Romantic phases. Indeed, I intend on doing something like a "Hegel" with Hegel himself, since what is of interest here is the fact that Hegel, as a Romantic philosopher, is a very contemporary philosopher, insofar as we are still inside the Romantic period – or were, until very recently, and this is the main topic of this essay.

How can we tell we still have one foot in the Romantic period? The fact is borne out by the persistence of Hegelianism itself. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, can write an essay called "Is It Still Possible to Be a Hegelian Today?"<sup>2</sup> The Hegelian thinking of art, in other words, has an unconscious that is only now coming to light. This coming to light signals the collapse of the Romantic period – the long march of the isms, the most encompassing of which is consumerism, since the late eighteenth century, accompanied by the advent of modernity, the upsurge of industrial capitalism, and the subsequent geological shift we now call the *Anthropocene*: the fact that we have now entered a geological period in which humans have a direct effect on the substrata of their earthly reality. 1790 was a significant moment in the Anthropocene at which a layer of carbon materials from industry began to show up in the top layers of Earth's crust, from deep lakes to the Arctic. The Anthropocene has a very decisive moment indeed in 1945, when a thin layer of radioactive materials was deposited in Earth's crust. The new period we enter at this point, known in geology as the *Great Acceleration*, is an ecological one. I call it *the time of hyperobjects*, for reasons I shall make clear. In this period, a new phase of art, unpredicted, and indeed I shall argue, unpredictable, by Hegel, comes about. This phase of art I call *the Asymmetric Phase*, again for reasons I shall establish. To argue that there is a fourth phase, logically possible within Hegel yet not predicted by him explicitly, is not to be teleological. This fourth phase just is another moment, not a terminus.

Now I am not a Hegelian as far as ontology goes either. I am, rather, an object-oriented ontologist carefully trained in deconstruction, and before that Marxism. For one, then, I'm a realist, not an idealist. In this I am a little more Kantian than Hegelian: there are places in the universe that thinking can't touch. I just don't accept that when I think this untouchability, I am touching it – this would be the Hegelian response to Kantianism.<sup>3</sup> But unlike Kant and his correlationist legacy, I see this not as a reason to confine thinking to a little island of human meaningfulness, but rather to embark on a speculative journey amidst an irreducible plenum of

discrete, unique, sparkling objects, whether they be snow crystals, Arsenal or a single photon.

The fact that philosophy is now thinking ways out of the Kant–Hegel dyad is very significant as we enter the time of hyperobjects. I don't think it's an accident. I believe that this is the moment at which nonhumans, sentient and otherwise, make decisive contact with humans, even those humans who have been living under the spells of modernity, capitalism, correlationism and technology. What we are witnessing today, in aesthetic terms, is the deconstruction of the Hegelian thinking of aesthetics, a deconstruction or as Heidegger would say a destructuring according to the implicit qualities of reality itself, the plenum of unique objects that now impinges on us, the plenum whose thinking some of us call ecological awareness or *the ecological thought*.<sup>4</sup>

Let us proceed, then, through Hegel's history of art, knowing that it too codes for its own attitudes, not the least of which is the Romantic, end-of-history motif, in which we're all dressed up with nowhere to go, beautiful souls in the empty supermarket of anxiety.<sup>5</sup>

Hegel traces a history of phases of art based on the dialectical evolution of attitudes towards things – things such as subject matter, material media, conventions and so forth. But since Hegel argues that history is internal to thinking, we can imagine the three phases Hegel outlines as recapitulated in any process of coming to terms with human creativity. In other words, the Symbolic phase need not be so-called Oriental art pure and simple; the Classical Phase need not be confined to ancient Greece; the Romantic phase need not be confined to a Christian era and so on.<sup>6</sup> Despite the attempt to produce a grand Romantic narrative (and Romanticism is indeed story-shaped for Hegel), Hegel can't contain a creepy, threatening awareness of nonhuman beings. Even in Hegel, in other words, the objects that seem only to provide blank slates for the unfolding of the human drama begin to vibrate and move with their own uncanny power.

There is a very simple reason for this: *there are nonhuman beings*, and these beings also have agency. It's perfectly straightforward for us to say this now in a moment of ecological awareness. What is significant is not that Hegel was “wrong”; rather, Hegel was so terminally unable to think this thought. This is not to suggest absurdly that Hegel had no idea that there were things such as broom handles and parrots: his own prose is

full of nonhuman beings, and for him sound itself has a kind of agency. Rather, the point is that for Hegel, such entities are little more than bit players in the drama of the (human) subject.

Let us proceed then with a brief walk through Hegel's phases of art.

## 1 • The Symbolic Phase<sup>7</sup>

In this phase, objects outstrip spirit. Art's substance (statues, instruments, paint) outstrips its content. This is an age of *fetishism* (from the standpoint of the imperialist bearer of Enlightenment) or *animism*, or as Hegel puts it, "primitive artistic pantheism."<sup>8</sup> The plenitude of art materials and objects overwhelms its spiritual content, which appears far removed from genuine embodiment (says Hegel). Thus the thousands of images themselves seem "inadequate."<sup>9</sup> This phase collapses — why? Because as humans get to handle objects and investigate them, they come to know more about them and about themselves.

The Symbolic Phase is represented by "Oriental" art, with its tumult of baffling (for Hegel) forms. The Idea "seethe[s] and ferment[s]" in the art forms of the Symbolic phase, producing for instance the manifold forms of Buddhas and Hindu gods.<sup>10</sup> Such art is irreflective, gesturing towards thinking but failing to achieve it.<sup>11</sup> Hegel is without doubt the Eurocentric imperialist par excellence here. What remains of interest in this configuration, however, is precisely this very imperialism. Hegel is simply unable to see the spiritual content of non-European art: how it's not just a dumbshow waiting for real content to be beamed into it from elsewhere.

We should hold and reflect on this attitude of Hegel's for a moment. The world of things — and of all the phases Hegel outlines, Oriental art seems nearest to this world of nonhuman things — has no intrinsic meaning. This is somewhat different from an argument that only humans have agency: as a brief reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* reminds us, there are all kinds of nonhuman forces and agents in the world. What is significant, rather, is that nature is self-externality: it does not know itself.<sup>12</sup> It's only later, when humans figure out that ideas are different from things, and much later when I, Hegel, come to tell this story,

that nonhuman things gain meaning. Isn't there a little bit of awareness of the inverse in this attitude? Namely that *there are nonhuman beings*, that may or may not match up with our projection onto them. Surely there is something compelling about this thought as we humans enter an ecological age. In thinking the Symbolic Phase, it appears both as if meaning is dependent on human presence, and as if human presence is irrelevant to meaning.<sup>13</sup> Hegel's attitude towards the Symbolic Phase has an inner instability that becomes more significant as we proceed towards thinking this ecological era in perversely Hegelian terms.

## 2 • The Classical Phase

In this phase, there is a Goldilocks sweet spot in which objects and spirit seem perfectly matched in a beautiful symmetry.<sup>14</sup> Hegel finds it embodied of course in the art of Greece. Now this phase collapses – why? Because eventually humans just start to know too much. Although Classical form perfectly expresses inner content, such that there is no gap between form and content, this is a fleeting illusion, since temporality is intrinsic to knowing – time just is, as Kant had argued, the succession of thoughts one after the other. Eventually the spell is broken.

In this Phase, human creativity seems to dance with an unfettered joy, molding everything to its will in such a way that things seem to reflect it perfectly: “the human form divine” as William Blake put it.<sup>15</sup> But this creativity has vertiginous, inner aspects such that to a later age, classical art can't help looking a little bit like a repetition compulsion, the mechanical attempt to ward off basic anxiety of this inner space. Soothing mechanisms confront us in the neoclassical music of Bach or Pachelbel for instance, music evocative of, and to some extent a recapitulation of, the Classical phase proper. Don't these kinds of music suggest the fantasy of an infinite deferral of something threatening? Isn't there something a little bit true in the cliché that Bach shows no emotion? And if the anxiety could indeed be infinitely deferred, wouldn't this suggest an inner power that was infinite? Thus we would be on a Möbius strip: attempting to thwart the oncoming awareness of inner infinity, we arrive at forms that begin to convey it despite ourselves. Thus the Classical Phase collapses into the Romantic phase.

Moreover, doesn't the joy of imposing form on an infinitely plastic world of things strike us as a profound violence? Hegel seems a little seduced by this violence, the sadistic brio of a fugue or a sonata, or to use something closer to his examples, sculpture with its noble calm appears to have wrenched stone from its strife and placed it in a heavenly hall of tranquil mirrors where it reflects back perfectly Blake's human form divine. The sunny Classical marriage of form and content at the altar of human meaning, might now be seen, in a more ecological age, as resembling a shotgun wedding in which one party, the nonhuman, uncomplainingly submits to the will of the other.

### 3 • The Romantic Phase

In this phase, spirit outstrips objects; art's content outstrips its substance. Infinite inner space is opened up.<sup>16</sup> No external object becomes adequate to convey this inner space, so art must now be about the successful failure to embody the inner world. Philosophy drives ahead, while art can only fail better (irony).

Now in turn the Romantic phase, just like the phases before it, collapses – but why? For Hegel the Romantic phase evaporates into the end of art. But I shall argue here that art does not evaporate, even according to a certain Hegelian logic. This is not predicted in Hegel, nor, I claim, is it predictable according to a certain strict Hegelianism. The collapse of the Romantic phase is not an evaporation into nothing, but rather the collapse occurs because objects themselves begin to speak. The materials that are used to convey the failure to embody the inner start to swirl, drip and go through their motions with less and less deliberate intervention by the artist. There is something like a straight line in this sense between the blank verse experiments of Wordsworth and the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock.

Hegel's fantasy is that this is the period when philosophy takes over from art, since art can no longer handle the *chōrismos* (Greek, "rift") between objects and spirit. Art must tell the story of its inability to tell the story of the spirit. Irony becomes the dominant flavor of art, based on a vertiginous awareness of the gap between spirit and art's materials. In the Romantic Phase, the beyond disappears and reappears within people. God

dies and comes down to Earth incarnated in Jesus. A truly Christian art is now possible, better than Gothic cathedrals and Handel's *Messiah*, in its presentation of the proximity of real, other people: "It is an ancient mariner," as Coleridge writes, beginning his masterpiece with the uncanny proximity of a stranger.<sup>17</sup>

For Hegel, it's irony and vertiginous strangers from here on out, human strangers.<sup>18</sup> He forgot to add: slowly but surely it creeps up on humans that this strangeness is nothing special, or at least, nothing uniquely human. He also forgot to add: to think the death of the beyond is to think the essence of things *right here, as substances*, in a weird return to Aristotle. This is the irony of irony as such. The abyss of the subject rolls out the red carpet for the arrival of a monstrous new kind of substance.

There is a kind of master–slave dialectic at work here, or what Heidegger would call the strife between *World* and *Earth*.<sup>19</sup> The more you have of landscapes that convey the subjectivity of the implied viewer, the more you have of hills, trees and water. The more you express your tortured soul, the more globs of paint you need. The march of the isms – Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism... – is also the story of the emergence of nonhuman entities into the very space that appears to be free of them. The very failure of nonhuman entities to express human depth is what allows those entities to emerge, an emergence we examine today under the heading of emerging critical environments.

Consciousness as such, that great discovery of the Romantic period, is not exempt from this liberation narrative. Think of Monet's *Water Lilies* series. Of course what Monet is painting is not the lilies as such but the rippling, floating space between the lilies – the space that in fact is a substance, water. Einsteinian spacetime is also the discovery that space is not just an empty box. Husserlian intentional consciousness, a much misunderstood and maligned idea, is much the same thing: when I am thinking something, there I am, thinking it. Consciousness itself is no longer a void in which ideas just collide like billiard balls. It's a substance: you can't touch it, you can't see it. But then, can you really touch the essence of a billiard ball? Whatever you do will be your anthropomorphic translation of the ball. Just as the billiard cue cue-pomorphizes the ball. Just as the green baize baize-pomorphizes the ball. Writing about music really is like dancing about architecture. Consciousness becomes the

prototype of objects in their infinite, Tardis-like strangeness, which we shall now explore.

## 4 • The Asymmetric Phase

In the Deleuzian manner, in which we push philosophy from behind to vomit forth some unspeakable secrets, we can imagine a fourth moment, which I call a time of *asymmetry*.<sup>20</sup> Now let's begin to think the current phase of aesthetics, a phase that has been developing since the start of the Great Acceleration, out of a structural instability internal to the Romantic Phase. In this phase, art's content outstrips its substance in one way: we know way more every day about reality (science). But in another way, the substance of art outstrips the content (revenge of the objects). An *asymmetrical* confrontation between the human and the nonhuman.

When we compare the Asymmetric Phase with Hegel's three phases of art, we discover some remarkable parallels and recapitulations. The Asymmetric Phase is like the Symbolic Phase, insofar as the world of objects seems to have enormous power and clarity. We know that we carry traces of mercury and radiation in our bodies. We know that gravity waves from the Big Bang are propagating through our bodies. But the Asymmetric Phase is profoundly unlike the Symbolic Phase in that knowledge, science, what we know rides out to meet the objects in all their infinite variety – from quanta to hypothetical bruise marks of other universes at the edge of our own; from entangled carbon fullerenes to global warming; from humanoids and hominids and hominins to slime molds that can navigate their way around a maze. The Asymmetric Phase is like the Symbolic Phase in that objects such as Pollock's paint drips now free themselves from the human realm. But unlike it since humans have more knowledge.

The Asymmetric Phase is like the Classical Phase, insofar as there seems to be an equal match of potency between spirit and objects. Yet the Asymmetric Phase differs wildly from the Classical Phase in that this is not a Goldilocks balance in any sense. What confronts our inner infinity is an equal and opposite outer infinity, or even more disturbingly, an infinite variety of infinities, a transfinite set that is larger than a simple pair; possibly large beyond magnitude, incalculable. For something to be

beyond magnitude would be for it to be truly infinite in the Kantian sense, in which the analytical sublime evokes pure space as a quantum, that is, as a unit incapable of further subdivision.<sup>21</sup> The unconditional freedom of the human being meets the unconditional freedom of a decaying leaf blown into some gutter.

The Asymmetric Phase is like the Romantic Phase in that there is still irony. But it differs from it since objects are no longer simply sounding boards for human subjectivity. The Asymmetric Phase is like the Romantic Phase, insofar as spirit is vast and top-heavy: we lack, as Percy Shelley puts it, "the creative faculty to imagine that which we know."<sup>22</sup> And what a world we know. Yet the Asymmetric Phase differs profoundly from the Romantic Phase, because it is not spirit that is doing the leading in this dance: it's the objects, not the human attitude to them. By which I mean that the human attitude is now infected from within by the objectness of objects. Why?

There are two absolutely unique features of the fourth age. In this phase, the *strange stranger* appears.<sup>23</sup> We return to a kind of animism (the first age), but *sous rature*: ~~animism~~. In the Asymmetric Phase, the *future future* opens: a future without us. A future in which an object like radioactive waste lasts longer than the time stretching all the way back to places such as the Chauvet Cave with its Paleolithic paintings. A future in which evolution develops intelligent albino alligators who make their own Romantic movies about cave paintings.<sup>24</sup>

What we now see is that nonhumans are also filled with infinite inner space. Some of us are ready to grant this inner infinity to certain kinds of sentient being. Some are willing to grant it to all sentient beings. Some are willing to grant it to all lifeforms (this was my position in *The Ecological Thought*). And some still further out are willing to grant it to all nonhumans whatsoever, no questions asked. These are the object-oriented ontologists, in whose number I now find myself. I see no inherent reason why what I called the strange stranger in *The Ecological Thought* should not apply to any entity whatsoever: fireplaces, the Oort Cloud at the edge of the Solar System, flamingos and slices of pork rotting in a garbage can. Since lifeforms are made of nonlife, and since what counts as a lifeform is very much a performative act down to the DNA level, I see no big reason not to extend the concept of the strange stranger to cover all entities.

So what we confront in the Asymmetric Phase are infinities everywhere. The universe is suddenly full of Tardises, all bigger on the inside than they are on the outside. Humans are one of these Tardises, but so are salt crystals, tsunamis and twelve-inch vinyl techno records. Now there are varying degrees of resistance to granting entities of all kinds the same basic ontological configuration that humans have. Some people still act like the subjectivity-equivalent of the custodians of the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, granting inner space parsimoniously to certain higher primates or whatever. Others, including myself, have completely given up.

It is as if nonhumans have finally infiltrated human social, psychic and philosophical space, with varying degrees of success. The vanguard of this infiltration was done by what I call *hyperobjects*. Hyperobjects are entities that are massively distributed in time and space, relative to human scales.<sup>25</sup> They are immersive, phenomenologically viscous entities: we exist inside them and as the flowers of their massively branching trees. We find ourselves psychologically, socially, aesthetically, politically glued to them wherever we go.

One hyperobject I've been studying a great deal is global warming. Say you decide that the solution to global warming is to go to Mars. Then you go to Mars still under the spell of global warming, and guess what. When you get there, you have to create the atmosphere for yourself, let alone regulate it. You have the same problem magnified even more. This is the theme of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy.<sup>26</sup>

Hyperobjects come in and out of phase with human time and spatial scales, because they occupy a much higher dimensional space. Look at the Lorenz Attractor, the first strange attractor ever discovered. It was discovered in the attempt to model the phases of weather. The Lorenz Attractor lives in a high dimensional space, in which every point is a weather event in four-dimensional spacetime. Consider evolution, a hyperobject of which we are a direct product. The possibility space of evolution is just outrageously vast. A map of vectors in this space would be on an order of dimensional magnitude almost unthinkably vast for humans. Yet we can't unthink the thought of evolution.

Hyperobjects are the discoveries of modernity: economic forces, the unconscious, evolution, the biosphere, global warming. First we detect them on our instruments. Then we realize we are inside them. Then they crash into social, psychic and aesthetic space. This is what ecological awareness actually is, and what eco-hippie previews miss. Far from

placing human consciousness and power at the center of the universe, as Kant's perhaps misnamed Copernican revolution did, hyperobjects are more like the real Copernican revolution in that they force us to coexist with a vast plenum of nonhumans, a plenum first sensed as the vacuum of space in Pascal's famous line about the silence and stillness of intersidereal spaces filling him with dread. The more we know, the more objects, and the more the objectness of objects, rise up to meet what and how we know. So now we encounter this vastness not as empty space but as a plenum. Emmanuel Levinas's line about cosmic space is appropriate here: how when I look at the stars, I realize that I am sought out by inhabitants of the intersidereal spaces.<sup>27</sup> There is no space, there is no abstract other. Only consider what happened to space itself halfway between us and the time of Kant (1900). There is spacetime, an emergent property of large objects, filled with quanta of all kinds, pressing on us like the leering figures of a James Ensor painting.

In this object-oriented universe, there is no background that is not itself an object, like Stephen Dedalus's postal address in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Stephen Dedalus  
Class of Elements  
Clongowes Wood College  
Sallins  
County Kildare  
Ireland  
Europe  
The World  
The Universe<sup>28</sup>

Thus there is no *world*, no *horizon*: the background is only a sensual impression of some real object. It is truly *the end of the world*. This is what it means to inhabit the time of hyperobjects.

Art in the Asymmetric Phase seems to have three properties:

- (1) Demonic force
- (2) Hypocrisy
- (3) Collaboration between humans and nonhumans.

We shall sift through these one by one.

## (1) Art as demonic force

Art in the Asymmetric Phase becomes what Socrates calls it in *Ion*: a tuning, an attunement, the channeling of a demonic force.<sup>29</sup>

Plato imagines artistic inspiration as an electromagnetic field (*Ion*). It is time we took this granddaddy of aesthetic vehicles out for another spin. Post-1800 physics presents us with a universe of waves: electromagnetic, gravitational and quantum. Then there are wavelike phenomena such as Lorenz attractors (high dimensional objects such as hyperobjects must be wavelike). Tuning in this respect is attuning the art object (voice, breath, instrument) to these physical waves, quite literally.

These waves are somewhat or entirely nonlocally distributed. Below the size of an electron, for instance ( $10^{-17}$  cm), there is a vast ocean of space, right down to the Planck length ( $10^{-33}$  cm) and possibly lower (strings). It is plausible that spacetime is an emergent property of objects larger than  $10^{-17}$  cm.<sup>30</sup> This means that objects below this scale are “everywhere.” That is, if we think that quantum theory is telling us something about reality rather than simply acting as a correlationist tool. But in a more mundane sense, Faraday and Maxwell imagined electromagnetic fields permeating the universe. The same can be said for gravitational fields. They never really zero out. We can see the Cosmic Microwave Background from the “beginning” of the universe on our TV sets when we see TV snow, and so on. This is somewhat nonlocal.

Art becomes tuning to the depth of these fields. Genius is no longer something you are, as in the Romantic period, but something you “have,” like in previous periods. You “have” genius because art is an attunement to a demonic force coming from the nonhuman and permeating it: as we all know we have all been strafed by radiation, and so on. Consider a real example. A sound artist can put contact mikes on the window of his apartment in New York. They can record sounds for five days and nights. Then he speeds up the recording, three hundred and sixty times. Traffic begins to sound like the tinkling of tiny insects. A slow, periodic hum begins to become audible. When I hear a recording of this, *Air Pressure Fluctuations* by Felix Hess, I am hearing the standing wave caused by pressure changes in the air over the Atlantic Ocean. I am hearing the sound of the air over the Atlantic. A gigantic entity has been channeled into a sound recording audible to humans.<sup>31</sup>

Heidegger argues that every entity is really channeling, in this *Ion*-like way. I never hear the wind in itself, only the wind in the chimney, the wind in the trees, or in this case, the air mass contracting and expanding as the Atlantic heats and cools.<sup>32</sup> Isn't this very close to what Percy Shelley argues in *A Defense of Poetry*? Shelley thinks about an Aeolian harp. The Aeolian harp was a wind harp that was very popular in eighteenth-century households, like Bose speakers and iPods are now. It gives me a bit of a kick to imagine Jane Austen characters listening to the Sonic-Youth-like sounds that emanate from these harps as they tune to the wind that blows over them, as they lie on the windowsill on a summer afternoon. Coleridge wrote a poem called *The Eolian Harp* in which he imagines all organic nature to be a series of such harps, and Shelley does something similar, allowing for the possibility that every sentient being is like one of these harps. We tune to the environment, then we tune to our tuning — that is called thinking, so Shelley has produced a physicalist model of thinking, probably based on materialist theories of mind influenced by the recent discovery of the human nervous system.

But Heidegger's argument goes one step further, implying that every entity in the universe is an Aeolian Harp. Every entity is modulating every other entity. Mercury in the thermometer tells me about my body temperature. Photons hitting my optic nerve tell me about the mercury. Transducers in my ears tell me about pressure waves, translating them into electrochemical signals that I hear as sound. The dinosaur-shaped hole in the fossilized mud tells me about the dinosaur that was walking over the mud. The computer model tells me about global warming.

This Aeolian channeling is an art built out of causal effects between objects, which are on my view entirely aesthetic. A footprint, a software model, a sound, the pulsation of the air: all these are aesthetic phenomena. They are interobjective, that is, they inhabit some etheric shared space between objects, a space that can only in and of itself consist of more objects. Art that talks about these shared effects has two modes: Shelleyan (or Wordsworthian), which is to talk about relations, and Keatsian, which is to give some impossible glimpse of the real object that subtends those relations. Because relations are Shelley poems: vast, sprawling, nonlocal, dizzying, spiraling, constructivist. But objects are Keats poems: unspeakable, unique, black hole-like.

## (2) Hypocrisy

This has two components: (a) weakness and (b) irony.

(a) Weakness. Objects ( $1+n$  of them) exist ontologically prior to your art, and art's form and content are now asymmetrical. We know so much about real entities (modern science). Yet precisely because of this they loom uncannily towards us, getting stranger by the minute. All our representations are inadequate – we've kept this from the Romantic Phase. Since we are *inside at least one* of these objects (for instance global warming), and since "inside the hyperobject we are always in the wrong," art becomes an art of lameness and weakness. Nietzschean impulses are vanquished by sliding underneath them like a scared little vole or a slime mold. This in particular ends the Nietzscheanism of contemporary Marxian "critique."

(b) Irony. Rather than a vertiginous antirealist abyss, irony presents us with intimacy with  $1+n$  objects that already exist. Irony is the canary in the coalmine of the hyperobject, a symptom that existed even during the Romantic Phase. "The vicissitudes of this life are like drowning in a glass pond."<sup>33</sup> Irony is the experience of total sincerity, of being enveloped by a hyperobject, of being Jonah in the whale realizing that he is part of the whale's digestive system. Irony is coexistence without center or edge. Ecological art that tries to delete irony is trying to unthink what was learned during the Romantic Phase. This is impossible, and the attempt is dangerously regressive. What ecological thinking needs to know is that irony is not an optional extra: it's intrinsic to the strangeness of nonhumans.

## (3) Art as collaboration between humans and nonhumans

(1) and (2) and their scientific underpinning (we know about global warming, gravity waves, and so on) give rise to a necessary knowledge about smaller scale, medium sized objects such as paintings and poems. Relativity affects pencils and professors flying at altitude above Earth. When you write a poem you are making a deal with some paper, some ink,

wordprocessing software, trees, editors and air (and more). Moreover, given (2) one is compelled to wonder whether one's poem about global warming is really a hyperobject's way of distributing itself into human ears and libraries. And given (1), even the poem that isn't about global warming takes place on the inside of a hyperobject — and so it's a function of that object in some sense.

Now since there are real objects, and since causality itself is an Aeolian harp-like transduction of energies, a translation of one object in terms of another — since causality just is the aesthetic dimension, in other words — then some translations are better than others. How are they better? Somehow they tune to the object in a more powerful, more convincing, more revealing way.

What would perfect tuning look like? It would look like death. When an object perfectly tunes another one, it becomes that object, or vice versa. “It was so beautiful I almost died.” Kantian beauty is already an attunement between two beings, a subject and an object, in which the subject discovers something surprising: it is capable of having an experience outside of its ego shell. Beauty is what happens when an object and its tuning fit so snugly that they fuse together, in a kind of loving extinction. Beautiful death. It happens because an object and its sensual qualities are riven from each other. There is an irreducible *chōrismos* between an object and that object's appearance—for another object. Objects are self-contradictory and fragile. They are mortal: they contain a secret *hamartia* (Greek, “wound”) that makes them vulnerable to at least one magic bullet. Art in the Asymmetric Phase will increasingly tries to come as close to that magic bullet as possible. So art in the Asymmetric Phase is somewhat threatening, reminding us of death, beautiful death. Like a sound that was so beautiful you couldn't stop listening to it, but so loud and in tune with your body that it began to take you apart on a cellular level. Art becomes an object that almost kills you.

Iain Thompson writes, “Heidegger's defining hope for art...is that works of art could manifest and thereby help usher in a new understanding of the being of entities, a literally 'post-modern' understanding of what it means for an entity to be.”<sup>34</sup> It seems as if nonhumans have begun to grant Heidegger his wish. The Asymmetric Phase retroactively reconfigures the Phases that came before it. In particular, it now seems clear that the Romantic Phase was not simply a moment at which spirit became too big for its boots. It was also the Phase in which environments

emerged within the humanities and the arts. And what are these environments? Nothing other than nonhuman entities in all their mysterious, vibrant wonder and horror, filling us with guilt and shame, joy, compassion and sadness, decentering our place in the universe.

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> For a useful counterpoint, see Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Verso, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Is It Still Possible to Be a Hegelian Today?” in Levi Bryant, Graham Harman and Nick Srnicek, eds., *The Speculative Turn* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 202–223.

<sup>3</sup> See Steven Shaviro, “Kant and Hegel, Yet Again,” <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=991>, accessed October 7, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> The term beautiful soul is Hegel's own: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller, analysis and foreword by J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 383–409.

<sup>6</sup> *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T.M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), 1.100–101, 1.299–300. Hegel's remarks on the malleability of symbolism are exemplary in this regard (1.362–375, 1.393–395); his remarks on the persistence of symbolism in Catholicism (and that religion's parallels with Buddhism, “Lamaism”) are also illuminating here (1.324).

<sup>7</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, tr. Bernard Bosanquet, intro and commentary Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 82–84; *Aesthetics*, 1.300, 1.303–322.

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 83.

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 83; *Aesthetics*, 1.408.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics* 1.319, 1.322–325, 1.347–354, 1.378, 1.421–422.

<sup>12</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), tr. A.V. Miller, foreword J.N. Findlay, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.9, 2.13–14, 2.17–19, 2.24, 2.28.

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Joanna Demers for pointing this out to me.

<sup>14</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1.301, 1.427–442.

<sup>15</sup> Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 84–85. William Blake, “The Divine Image,” line 11, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1965; revised 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 85–86; *Aesthetics*, 1.301–302, 1.516–529.

<sup>17</sup> Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 90, 92–93; *Aesthetics*, 1.505, 1.519–522, 1.530–539. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimona Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1.243–244, 1.438, 2.994.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 15–87.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Massumi, “Translator's Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy,” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ix–xvi (ix).

<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar, intro. Patricia W. Kitcher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 216, 234, 242, 254, 298, 459, 463.

<sup>22</sup> Percy Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry", in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2002), 530.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 14–15, 17–19, 38–50.

<sup>24</sup> This is an oblique reference to the strange coda of Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (IFC Films, Sundance Films, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Timothy Morton. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (unpublished book manuscript). Several talks about hyperobjects are archived at <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/p/talks-archive.html>, accessed October 7, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (New York and London: Bantam, 1993), *Green Mars* (New York and London: Bantam, 1994), *Blue Mars* (New York and London: Bantam, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 116.

<sup>28</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Huebsch, 1922), 11–12.

<sup>29</sup> Plato, *Ion*, tr. Benjamin Jowett (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1871), available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/ion.html>, accessed October 7, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Petr Horava, "Quantum Gravity at a Lifshitz Point," arXiv:0901.3775v2 [hep-th], available at <http://arxiv.org/abs/0901.3775>, accessed October 7, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Felix Hess, *Air Pressure Fluctuations* (Berlin: Edition RZ, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, "Origin" 26.

<sup>33</sup> Chögyam Trungpa, "Instead of Americanism Speak the English Language Properly," *The Elocution Home Study Course* (Boulder: Vajradhatu, 1983).

<sup>34</sup> Iain Thomson, "Heidegger's Aesthetics," in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>, accessed October 7, 2011. See also Iain Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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