

AUFHEBUNG AND NEGATIVITY: A HEGELIANISM WITHOUT TRANSCENDENCE

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ABSTRACT: This article defends Hegelian dialectics against the critique of Derrida and Bataille. This defense revolves around the fate of abstract negation in dialectical sublation. Focusing on the Lordship-Bondage section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is proposed that in the sublated figure of the slave there remains an absolute detachment irreducible to any capitalistic, ‘restricted’ economy of preservation. The consequence of such a reading of sublation is that no move outside or beyond dialectics, no transcendent escape from the *Aufhebung*, is called upon in order to account for notions of alterity, detachment, or transformation.

KEYWORDS: Ontology, Hegel, Negativity, Sublation, *Aufhebung*, Žižek, Malabou, Derrida, Bataille, Transcendence, dialectics

I. DERRIDA’S CRITIQUE OF HEGEL’S MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC

Rejecting those crude and simplistic dismissals of Hegel that often attach themselves to the name ‘anti-Hegelianism’, Jacques Derrida, in his essay ‘From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve’, decides instead to tarry with the gravitas of Hegelian dialectics, resolving to ‘spen[d] the night with reason’¹ in order to ultimately displace it. For this, he turns to the work of Georges Bataille. Indeed, he is quick to admit that ‘all of Bataille’s concepts are Hegelian’ (FR, 253). But such is precisely the point for Derrida: on the conceptual level there is no escaping Hegel, and the conditions for any displacement of the internally rational movement of dialectics will be found in another, nondialectical mode. Bataille is put forward as capable of both prescribing and exemplifying this nondialectical mode with his own writing. But, as we will argue, the very idea of a nondialectical departure from the dialectical scene will prove to be both problematic, insofar as it so quickly slips into an ideological valorization of a transcendent outside, and unnecessary, insofar as dialectics actually displaces itself *as* dialectics. By examining the Hegelian *Aufhebung* and the difficult movement between abstract and dialectical negativity in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we

1. Jacques Derrida, ‘From Restricted to General Economy’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1978, p. 252. Henceforth cited as FR.

will be well-placed to assess the stakes of Derrida's subtle challenge, as well as offer our own defense of Hegel in the process.

However, we must first pause to inquire into the problem that instigates Derrida's attempted dislocation. Both Derrida and Bataille will focus their critique of Hegel on the *economic* structure of his dialectics. That is, while it would be obviously false to deny that there is a persistent emphasis on negation present throughout Hegel's writings, it is Derrida and Bataille's contention that such negation or detachment is nevertheless, in the end, converted into another sort of attachment, stockpiled, returned with interest, and put to positive and profitable use. This is a conversion that might be described as *capitalistic*.

Take for example the Lordship-Bondage section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Alexandre Kojève begins his summary of the section by highlighting the role of consciousness's desire, which is satisfied by the negation, the consumption, of the independent existence of the thing. Through this appropriative transformation of the thing, consciousness affirms its own independence by stripping the autonomy of the non-I, and attempts to assert in the process its identity as both *für sich* and *an sich*. Yet '[f]or there to be Self-Consciousness, Desire must therefore be directed toward a non-natural object... Desire itself';² the desire to be desired by another self-consciousness, the desire for recognition. And so enters the other and the subsequent conflict that occurs as a result of wanting to appropriate this recognition without recognizing in return.

The direct outcome of this antagonism is the production of two characters: the master, who proves his ultimate independence from natural life by his willingness to put his life at stake in order to free himself from all attachment, and the slave, who is unwilling to detach himself from his objective mode. To summarize very briefly, the slave then works for the master, mediately providing him with natural goods in such a way that the master is able to continue to immediately, abstractly negate (consume, enjoy) them while also continuing to receive the recognition needed for self-consciousness. But the master's initial victory is exposed as insufficient as soon as one notices that the master has not been recognized by an equal self-consciousness but by a slave, another thing attached to nature. As Hegel writes, 'what really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one...his truth is in reality the unessential consciousness.'³ Furthermore, through this process of encounter, battle, and the final conclusion of labouring for the master, the slave is able to change his relation to this nature and actually transform the world around him: 'through his service he rids himself of his attachment to natural existence in every single detail; and gets rid of it by working on it'⁴

So, on the surface, the conclusion here is plain enough: the final victory lies with the slave who negates the master's negation and through such a negation of negation unites through work the master's detachment with his own attachment. Kojève describes this movement as dialectical (rather than abstract) negation: 'It keeps and preserves the

2. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1969, p. 5.

3. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, §192.

4. *Ibid.*, §194. Henceforth cited as PS.

overcome-entity and, for that very reason survives the fact of being overcome'.⁵ It would seem, then, that the truth of self-consciousness is this slavish preservation and overcoming. And according to Derrida and Bataille, this movement, which they describe as the accruing of meaning, is not restricted to the Lordship-Bondage section. Instead, Derrida and Bataille, following Kojève, interpret the victory of the slave as the paradigmatic *Aufhebung* of the entire dialectical project par excellence, a move present in the Good Infinite of the *Science of Logic* and repeated with concluding grandeur in the moment of Absolute Knowing in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. If, for Kojève, the Hegelian 'end of history is marked by the coming of Science in the form of a Book...or of absolute Knowledge in the World',⁶ then the first writer of this book is the slave. Although the direct connection between the *Aufhebung* of the slave and Absolute Knowing is perhaps disingenuous (for the *Phenomenology of Spirit* does not end with the Slave, not all of its transitions and sublations can be explained in an identical manner, and drawing such a connection to Absolute Knowing risks neglecting what lies between), what is clear, for our purposes, is that for Derrida and Bataille the logic of exchange that inflects all of Hegel's dialectical philosophy is first revealed in the figure of the slave.

This 'preservation' and 'overcoming' of the master's negativity defines a 'restricted economy', an economy restricted to the reproduction of meaning, converting everything into productive *form*, into property. In this way, Derrida will follow Bataille in suggesting that the first type of negation explored by Hegel in this section, the Master's absolute negation—his willingness to die and be detached—is nothing but a farce, simply a moment to be quickly overcome by dialectical negation. But any direct, anti-Hegelian opposition to the dialectically negating (accumulating) slave, and thereby Hegelian dialectics, will necessarily fail to destabilize the position of the slave, since the slave is understood to preserve in itself such oppositional negation. We can recall Hegel's discussion of limitation in the *Science of Logic*, where he demonstrates how anything said to be beyond a limit, any external point of critique, is already presupposed and determined by the structure of the limit and thereby cannot properly be conceived in excess or exclusion of the limit.⁷

According to Derrida, to the extent that there is no alternative to the slave as presented here, 'philosophy, Hegelian speculation, absolute knowledge and everything that they govern, and will govern endlessly in their closure, remain determinations of natural, servile and vulgar consciousness. Self-consciousness is servile' (FR 276). Derrida's claim here is that in Hegel there is no true place for meaninglessness, no place for transgression, no place for transgression, restricted as his onto-economy is to the production of meaning. The negativity of the slave, insofar as it is always presented, never genuinely risks anything. In *Glas*, Derrida will repeat this sentiment:

When one says 'death is', one says 'death is denied'; death is not insofar as one *posits* it. Such is the Hegelian *thesis*: philosophy, death's positing, its pose...The *Aufhebung*

5. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 15.

6. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 148.

7. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, Amherst, Humanity Books, 1969, pp. 131-132.

is the dying away, the amortization of death. That is the concept of economy in general in speculative dialectics...The economic act makes familiar, proper, one's own, intimate, private. The sense of property, of propriety, in general is collected in the *oikeios*...The *Aufhebung* [is] the economic law of the absolute reappropriation of absolute loss.⁸

The conversion of the abstract negation of the master into the dialectical negation of the slave is, for Derrida, evidence that Hegel never truly confronts negativity, never really thinks it, *for he takes it seriously*, he confronts it head-on without trembling in front of it; he has '*respect* for death at the very moment [he] looks *directly* at it' (FR, 255). If he truly had thought (abstract) negativity in all its unproductive power, he would surely have avoided it; that is, he would have avoided systematically formalizing it, subjecting it to philosophical positing and its processes of recuperation. Taking negativity seriously and approaching it philosophically always amounts to the suppression or the domestication of the absoluteness of its detachment. The real problem with dialectics, as Derrida and Bataille see it, is that its very structure of reappropriation denies the possibility of any alternative economy that would avoid such formalization, that would, instead, insist on an endless abstract negation that could not be sublated. From the perspective of dialectics (or Derrida's picture of it), this abstract, unoblatable negation is considered an impossibility, while Derrida considers it 'the blind spot of Hegelianism' (FR 259). Derrida is thus interested in employing Hegelian dialectics (rather than dismissing it) in such a way that he is able to disrupt it and open up a space for such impossibility: a Hegelianism without reserve.

2. DERRIDA'S ALTERNATIVE: DECONSTRUCTIVE WRITING, GENERAL ECONOMY

If dialectical negativity is set up as the undisputable, all-consuming conclusion of philosophical dialectics, then to get at this so-called blind-spot, to displace the weight of dialectics with an alternative economy of absolute negativity, one has no choice, so says Derrida, but to greet negativity nonphilosophically, non-seriously, nonsensically. He writes, 'Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity' (FR, 256). It is only by 'exhausting the discourse of philosophy' (FR, 252) through mimicry and other unassimilable strategies that one might rend with the slave's *Aufhebung*.

But a simple return to the Master will, as Hegel demonstrates, be insufficient insofar as the master was finally shown to be dependent on the slave. Furthermore, Derrida and Bataille take the master to be a mere moment on the way to slavish sublation. So, instead, Derrida invokes Bataille's concept of sovereignty, a concept in many respects synonymous with mastery but, because of this equivocalness, one not able to be direct-

8. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 133 (left-hand, Hegel side of page).

ly addressed ('taken seriously') and inscribed into philosophy as the master had been. Unable to directly define such sovereignty, unable to take it up directly or seriously, Derrida ascribes to this concept meaninglessness, the rejection of the desire to be desired, the renunciation of recognition. The sovereign 'laughs at the *Aufhebung*' (FR, 334).

The sovereign is said to open up a new economy of absolute difference, of a *différance* which at first looks like a difference that can be immediately grafted onto the dialectical schema, but nevertheless silently slides away, escaping the assimilation that accompanies recognition (the difference between difference and *différance*, with its silent 'a', is ineffable and thus unable to be audibly distinguished). This cut between meaning and non-meaning inaugurates, in place of the restricted economy, a general economy. Describing how the restricted economy functions and its eventual undermining, Bataille writes in *The Accursed Share* that

the products of this wealth can be employed for productive ends only insofar as the living organism that is economic mankind can increase its equipment. This is not entirely—neither always nor indefinitely—possible. A surplus must be dissipated through deficit operations.⁹

The general economy, on the other hand, basks in this endless dissipation, this useless consumption, without trying to enlarge its scope in order to prevent wastefulness. But as soon as these particular deficits are acknowledged, however, the restricted economy quickly expands to account for them. As soon as one addresses the general economy in discourse, it reverts back to something meaningful.

Yet, Derrida will acknowledge that we must speak and that even silence and the unspeakable can, when recognized, be put to words, uttered, and therefore sublated. The only solution on offer is to 'redouble language and have recourse to ruses, to stratagems, to simulacra' (FR, 262), to invent a new, deconstructive writing that '*exceeds the logos*' (FR, 267) and uses words to silence language. But, a problem arises insofar as we, the readers of Derrida's obviously philosophical article, can arguably make sense of what he is calling for, a prescriptive call for a new writing of dislocation that always eludes the grasp of the dialectician. We can account for the double entendres, we can notice the puns, and ascribe to their employment certain formal characteristics. How, then, is his own writing ever excused from language assimilable to philosophical (Hegelian) discourse? Where is there an example of this sovereign writing, this general economy?

Perhaps Derrida's other writings come closer to satisfying this requirement. In *Glas*, for example, another text that opposes the conservative philosopher (Hegel) to the radical poet (Jean Genet), the text is split into two columns, references to citations are left out, there is no proper beginning or ending, and the font sizes and margin spacing are played with in unconventional ways. Does this offer an alternative to philosophical language, a true 'potlatch of signs' that sacrifices stability for play? It might be true that this has the possibility of frustrating the reader, but it hardly counts as exceeding rational logos. Indeed, *The Glassary*, a reference guide for deciphering and formalizing the dif-

9. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Zone Books, 1991, p. 22.

ficult work, was published alongside the English translation.¹⁰ And Derrida himself has gone on to note that as time passed, he lost interest in experimenting with these particular types of formats as technology made them easier to compile and navigate:

It was well before computers that I risked the most refractory texts in relation to the norms of linear writings. It would be easier for me now to do this work of dislocation or typographical invention—of graftings, insertions, cuttings, and pastings—but I am not very interested in that any more from that point of view and in that form. That was theorized and that was done—then ... and today has become ordinary. So we must invent other ‘disorders’, ones that are more discreet, less self-congratulatory and exhibitionist.¹¹

Or, might *Chora L Works*, a collaboration between Derrida and architect Peter Eisenman, wherein nine squares are cut through the entire book making certain words impossible to read, count as a true disruption of language?¹² But if we can herald this text or perhaps one of Bataille’s pornographic novels to be texts that truly *work* as examples of sovereign writing, have we not already ascribed a discursive significance to them? If something was to be written that was so incomprehensible, so ‘indifferent to any possible results’ (FR, 264), it would rightly be judged as obscurantism. Assuming that such pure, obscurantist nonsense was possible (for could it even be recognized as writing, or as nonsense, or as anything at all?), then the question turns to why one should write at all if not to communicate some meaning. Indeed, why write organized (even if rebellious) theoretical pieces on or in order to demonstrate sovereign writing?

In fact, Derrida and Bataille might drop such treatises altogether and turn to Hegel’s own example of a nonphilosophical, non-communicative stance that requires no new writing:

The weaker can be seized and penetrated by the stronger only in so far as it accepts the latter and constitutes one sphere with it. Just as in the material sphere the weak is secured against the disproportionately strong (as a sheet hanging free in the air is not pierced by a musket ball...) so the wholly feeble spirit is safer from the strong spirit than one that stands nearer to the strong. Imagine if you like someone quite dull-witted and ignoble, then on such a person lofty intelligence and nobility can make no impression. The only consistent defense against reason is to have no dealings with it at all.¹³

But against this type of naïve irrationalism, Bataille writes that ‘I think this anti-intellectualism accounts for that which is basically very limited and ... It is only beyond knowledge, and perhaps in that un-knowing which I have presented, that we can *win the right* to ignorance.’¹⁴ So, it seems that there is some *proper* way to oppose Hegel’s restricted economy, a more *significant* way to move beyond, rather than under, philosophy. The

10. John P. Leavey, Jr., *The Glassary*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 1986.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 25.

12. Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*, New York, Monacelli Press, 1997.

13. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 719.

14. Georges Bataille, ‘Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears’, trans. Annette Michelson, in *October*, vol. 36, p. 102; my italics.

'drunkenness, erotic effusion, sacrificial effusion, poetic effusion, heroic behavior, anger, [and] absurdity' (FR, 256) that is present throughout Bataille's supposedly non-dialectical texts, utilized to act 'by contagion and by mime...beyond the limits'¹⁵ in order to be unknowable, anonymous, and general, is, after all, still of a particular, restricted, intellectual type. Compared to the feeble spirit or hanging sheet, it appears that Bataille and Derrida, much to their chagrin and to the contrary of their claims of excess through laughter, do not cease to take philosophy quite seriously.

Furthermore, we can critique Derrida's idea of such sovereign writing or general economy as both messianical and fetishistic. On the one hand, Derrida insists that Bataille's sovereignty does not amount to a new transcendent critique of Hegel. To be sure, Derrida is quick to point out that Bataille's position is atheological, ateleological, and aneschatological. But what should we make of Derrida's repeated claims that 'sovereignty is totally other' (FR, 256), that it 'exceeds the oppositions of concepts' (FR, 263), that it is 'the beyond of absolute knowledge' (FR, 261) and that it absolves itself of absolute knowledge? (FR, 270). We can continue: the supposed great failure of the *Aufhebung* is that it 'blind[s] oneself to the experience of the sacred' (FR, 257), and 'what is exceeded by sovereignty is not only the "subject" but history itself'. (FR, 272). Sovereignty is wholly other, excessive, the beyond, and sacred, yet we are supposed to believe that 'Bataille is above all not a new mystic' (FR, 272) and that sovereign writing is not comparable to mysticism? (FR 269) Why? The fact that Bataille starts by acknowledging the conceptual power of the Hegelian enterprise before pointing to a place beyond it is an insufficient reason to exempt him, and Derrida in his turn, from what is admitted in the insistence on some ineffable, pseudo-transcendent position. Do not mystics also begin within the world before they attempt to ascend to some higher, external plane of existence? Indeed, for all of Derrida's protest to the contrary, it will be the Bataille of *Inner Experience* who will, after criticizing a version of mysticism he equates to 'dogmatic servitude', affirm what in his own words he entitles a 'new mystical theology' of the secret 'which has only the unknown as object'.¹⁶

The promise of this unknown, this beyond, this new contraband, is, as Fredric Jameson writes, 'the *hope* on which deconstruction itself is founded, yet it is ominous enough that we have to go through the entire Hegelian dialectic'.¹⁷ This is the messianical hope in some outside, some secret that will finally frustrate the immanence of dialectics and liberate us from philosophy, and from Hegel. So, is it Hegel who fears the blind spot or is it, rather, Derrida's so-called rebels, Bataille and Genet, who, in their attempt to completely break free of the material 'tissue' of the logic, cling to the promise of eschatological safety in pure excess? (FR, 276)¹⁸ If the latter is true, then sovereignty is not an

15. Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt, Albany, SUNY Press, 1988, p. 109.

16. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 102. 'The New Mystical Theology' is the subheading to Part Four of this text.

17. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, New York, Verso, 2009, p. 112; my italics.

18. Derrida contrasts the 'vulgar tissue of absolute knowledge' to 'a vision', a revelation. It would not be a leap to understand this metaphor as characterizing precisely the differences between the immanent materiality of dialectical philosophy and the transcendent messianism of Bataille's non-philosophy.

alternative to the choice between dialectics and transcendence, but falls properly on the transcendent side. Bataille's sovereignty ends in messianical hope.

Yet, on the other hand, Derrida knows that there is no clean break, no final escape. He knows that the messiah upon which deconstruction's hope is founded will always be coming, yet will never arrive. It is here that we can identify a fetishistic disavowal at work. Slavoj Žižek defines the idea of the fetishistic disavowal as 'I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know'. I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know.¹⁹ We must speak, but let's not speak. Derrida is aware that as soon as we define sovereign writing, give an example of its work, put it to work, and construct a philosophical argument defending the idea of a sovereign, general economy, that we can no longer do this in secret, and thus it is all in vain. Sovereignty 'risks making sense, risks agreeing to the reasonableness of reason, of philosophy, of Hegel, who is always right, as soon as one opens one's mouth in order to articulate meaning' (FR, 263). *Yet nevertheless...* There still remains the hope that this secret gift will not slip back into a system of exchange, that the potlatch will stay pure. Insofar as this sovereignty is taken to be entirely irreducible to reason and philosophy, it is not too far to depict it, as Žižek has, as something to which Derrida 'clings to...as to an article of *faith*'.²⁰ Without examples to demonstrate such non-dialectical sovereignty, all defenses of its inherent irreducibility to dialectics remain *fideistic*.

Catherine Malabou writes, 'On the face of it, the fetish always occurs outside the operation of exchange, outside the market.'²¹ Indeed, the demonetized and dematerialized idea of an outside, imperceptible and unthinkable, yet nevertheless held up as worthy of our hope and faith, is precisely the fetish that defines contemporary ideology. Jodi Dean identifies the unique function law plays in this respect. The idea of an impossible place outside of the law allows the subject to 'think it could get what it wants were it not for law's prohibition,'²² consequently transforming all impediments to this transcendent fleeing into infringements and repression. With this story in mind, those subject to the law are able to suppress their own fear of the law, assuaging their uneasiness through dreams of escape. Following Žižek, Dean points out that, in reality, true transformation does not occur through ideologically fantasizing about the suspension of the law but, instead, through the subject's radical identification with the law and recognition of the law's own emancipatory potential, its internal short-circuits, its own negativity.²³ In Malabou's words, 'It is not a question of how to escape closure but rather of how to escape within closure itself.'²⁴

19. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, New York, Verso, 2008, p. 53.

20. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, New York, Verso, 2008, p.73.

21. Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 77.

22. Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 147.

23. Dean, *Žižek's Politics*, p. 164.

24. Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, p. 65.

3. TWO INFERIOR HEGELIANISMS

If the idea of a sovereign economy is either impotent, subsumed under dialectics as soon as it is defined, or messianical and fetishistic, ideologically posed to serve an escapist fantasy, are we then simply forced to accept the Hegelianism that Bataille and Derrida wished to move beyond? On September 22, 2009, Slavoj Žižek gave a lecture at the University at Buffalo entitled ‘Is it Possible to be a Hegelian Today?’ In this lecture he bemoaned the two ways this question has been answered in the affirmative.

There is a *kitsch* Hegelianism that simply ignores the shifting history of ideas that has followed in Hegel’s wake. That is, in the face of post-Hegelian depictions of Hegel as the totalizing idealist par excellence, who concludes philosophy (and, moreover, history) with a triumphalist eradication of all alterity, transformation, or change, such ‘Hegelians’ implicitly, if not explicitly, embrace such caricatured charges. Choosing to dogmatically insist on the comprehensiveness of Hegel’s metaphysics, as if Hegelianism in the twentieth century had not been the equivalent of what Spinozism was in Hegel’s own day, such a group simply dismisses preemptively any objections to the contrary, whether they originate from Schelling or Marx or Kierkegaard and deconstructionism. A bellicose Hegel.

In response to this ironically anti-philosophical dogmatism, Žižek identifies a second group (he identifies specifically the Pittsburgh School²⁵) that offers an alternative, ‘deflated image of Hegel’, a Hegel stripped of his ontological commitments, stripped of the very logical necessity of the dialectical movement, and employed pragmatically and post-metaphysically by a post-philosophical generation. Here, Hegel is understood to offer us a useful taxonomy of possible theoretical topics, but where his conclusions become problematic in the eyes of the aforementioned post-Hegelian critics, his work is selectively pruned, his concepts substituted, his conclusions dismissed. Such ‘Hegelians’ set out to pragmatically tweak Hegel, removing the controversial, ostensibly outmoded bits like the *Aufhebung*, Good Infinity, the victory of the slave, and Absolute Knowing. Gillian Rose identifies the consequence of such substitutions:

In their very different ways, both the non-Marxist and the Marxist critiques of Hegel attempt to drop the notion of the ‘absolute’, but, at the same time, retain the social import of Hegel’s thought...The ‘Absolute’ is not an optional extra, as it were...Hegel’s philosophy has no social import if the absolute is banished or suppressed, if the absolute cannot be thought.²⁶

An impoverished Hegel.

Rejecting the pseudo-transcendent alternative of Derrida’s Bataille, are we simply left to choose between these two inferior Hegelianisms? No, for left out of this forced

25. The Pittsburgh School is the name often given to the recent Analytic, pragmatic appropriation of Hegel or Hegelian motifs. Such a movement, usually represented by University of Pittsburgh philosophers Robert Brandom and John McDowell, is unique insofar as the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, under the influence of Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore, had until very recently been characterized by its decades-long blacklisting of anything related to Hegel. For a survey of this movement see Paul Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

26. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, London, Athlone Press, 1981, p. 42.

choice between an anti-philosophical and post-philosophical Hegelianism, is a *philosophical* Hegelianism, to which we must now turn.

4. ANOTHER AUFHEBUNG

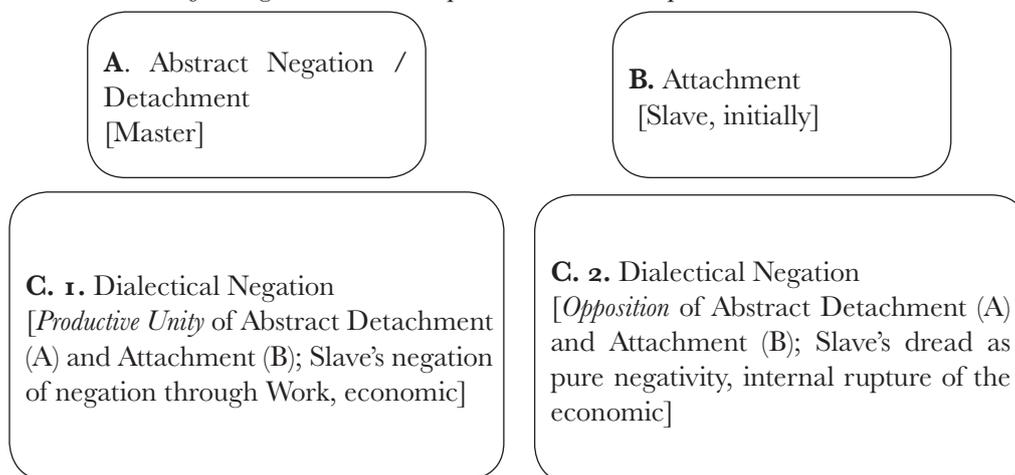
In *Dissemination*, Derrida names the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, in all its forms and wherever it might be found, as the ‘decisive target’ toward which ‘one must focus one’s critique.’²⁷ Where it appears with the slave, Derrida understands the *Aufhebung* to be an overcoming of the absolute risk inherent in the abstract negativity of the master. The slave turns the master’s negativity into a mere moment, into something temporary, by swallowing it up into the recuperative process of dialectical negativity. But we must interrogate this interpretation.

On the one hand, there is something absolutely correct about this reading. The slave is initially enslaved and has a relation of pure attachment to nature, to life. But what follows is the *Aufhebung*, where the slave, by performing his duty of serving the master, turns the attachment he has to nature into a new relationship with his surroundings and ultimately negates the master’s negation. Here, ‘Work...is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off’ (PS, §195). The working slave earning his freedom through his work is the third term here, the term that unites the dependent slave and the independent master. As far as this is dialectical negation, it does appear that abstract negation is no longer absolute but, instead, *held together* with attachment. As a worried Bataille observed, work promises the slave an enriched, productive position.

But this is only one side of this *Aufhebung*. In the paragraphs directly preceding and following this passage about work, Hegel outlines another outcome of enslavement. The slave’s situation ‘has not only this positive significance that in it the pure being-for-self of the service consciousness acquires an existence; it also has in contrast with its first moment, the negative significance of *fear*’ (PS, §196). The slave, in his unwillingness to die, to detach, becomes intimately aware of absolute destruction. This is an existential fear, an ‘absolute fear’. What this fear attests to is that the slave ‘does in fact contain within itself this truth of pure negativity and being-for-self... his whole being has been seized with dread’ (PS, §194). In his awareness of his own radical finitude, the slave has been ‘unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations’ (PS, §194). Although the slave was unwilling to die, his reflection on this very unwillingness leads to a complete detachment, an *un-manning*, abstract negation. The value of any attachment is entirely wiped out in the presence of death, ‘the absolute Lord’. Hegel makes it very clear what type of negativity he is talking about here: ‘the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, *absolute negativity*’ (PS, §194). Here, Hegel is not speaking, as we previously mentioned, of a negativity that harmoniously preserves both the slave’s initial attachment and the master’s detachment together in one. This absolute negativity is the pure detachment of the slave. Abstract negation is thus not confined to a moment nor confined to the master.

27. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, London, Athlone Press, 1981, p. 248n53.

What sense can we make of these two different aspects of the slave and the split nature of the *Aufhebung* he is said to represent? Let us map out this relation:



C (both C.1 and C.2) represents the *Aufhebung* of the slave. There are two sides to this *Aufhebung*: the productive side (C.1) which unites attachment and detachment, and the unproductive side (C.2) which holds up in opposition this attachment and detachment. For Derrida, the *Aufhebung* represents only C.1, the slave who works and productively brings together both A and B. Yet, the existential dread [*Angst*] that also afflicts the slave, that causes him to tremble, problematizes this one-sided reading of the *Aufhebung*. For A and B to actually be brought together, they must also be different, they must be opposed. So, as we see with C.2, the *Aufhebung* also opposes A and B to one another, and in so doing also opposes the productive, unifying side of itself (C.1) as well. In other words, the *Aufhebung* internally submits itself to *Aufheben*. The *Aufhebung* sublates itself and opens itself to self-transformation. As Lisabeth During summarizes, 'the interplay between 'abstract' and 'genuine' or concrete negation is the very dynamic of dialectic itself'.²⁸ Given this account, it is no longer possible to say that the slave's task is simply recuperative, but we must also think the slave in his discordant tension. As Malabou argues, 'Dialectical sublation proceeds through a movement whereby, at one and the same time, it *contracts* and *alienates* the material on which it acts'.²⁹ The *Aufhebung* is not simply the one that brings together the one and the multiple, but also the multiple that holds apart the one and the multiple; it is the identity of non-identity and identity *and* the non-identity of identity and non-identity. In Jameson's words, 'dialectics are dialectical'.³⁰

Betrayed by Derrida's conception of the *Aufhebung* are his unconscious attempts to contain it, to corner it as something essentially productive. By depicting it as simply accumulative, admitting no alterity, he is able to suggest sovereignty as its overflow, that which bursts open the gasket of self-enclosed dialectics. In this way, he ignores the

28. Lisabeth During 'Hegel's Critique of Transcendence', *Man and World*, vol. 21, 1988, p. 302.

29. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, trans. Lisabeth During, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 146.

30. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, p. 35.

dreadful, self-destructive side of dialectics and, ironically, puts the concept of the *Aufhebung* to work toward the end of producing an escape, a *beyond*. But the *Aufhebung* already destabilizes itself and tears itself apart; it is already a self-diremption. This self-destruction, the infernal melting-away of itself, immanently disrupts the restricted economy that only serves to preserve life and meaning. And it does this without the need of sovereignty, without absconding to someplace outside of itself. Instead, here we have, in a phrase, ‘alterity without transcendence.’³¹ Against Derrida, ‘the dialectic is, on the contrary, that the very moment in which the system confirms its structure as a closure—or in other words, it reidentifies itself as a philosophy (and thus necessarily a closed system)—it also reopens itself and begins all over again.’³² The self-transformation of the *Aufhebung*, its ‘self-sundering’ and ‘letting-go’ (PS, §796) marks the ability of philosophy, of dialectics, to change and shift its own form from within, without retreating into pure, wholly other formlessness. Philosophy posits its findings, but not without also turning on itself to shake the very foundations that allow for this positing. But all of this remains within the movement of philosophy.

To conclude, we can fully agree with Derrida that ‘the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung* represents the victory of the slave’ (FR, 275), yet with the necessary caveat that we recognize that this slave is a slave who works *and* experiences dread and that his ‘victory’ is understood, as Hegel instructs, in the light of its positive (productive) and negative (destructive) significance. Bataille and Derrida have a narrow view of the *Aufhebung*, yet they do us the service of highlighting the abstract negativity of the *Aufhebung* itself. In fact, while Derrida says that Bataille is less Hegelian than he thinks he is, perhaps at this point we might say that Derrida and Bataille are both more Hegelian than they think they are. And with this account of the *Aufhebung*, we are, furthermore, no longer committed to either of the inferior Hegelianisms that Žižek had identified. By understanding that the *Aufhebung* sublates itself, we can promptly retire any dogmatic defense of a dialectics that is unable to transform itself and which thus has no way of responding to post-Hegelian criticisms because it cannot account for alterity internal to its metaphysical closure. And, finally, the interpretation of the slave presented here also deems obsolete any imperative to look elsewhere and develop a pseudo-Hegelian, *Aufhebung*-less dialectics in order to open up a space for abstract negation, as Adorno, among others, have attempted.³³ A truly philosophical Hegelianism, which takes the time to read what Hegel says about the slave, will be one confident enough to ‘refuse the old ideological paradigm of closed versus open systems, a Cold War invention if there ever was one.’³⁴

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31. Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, p. 66.

32. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, p. 26.

33. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1966, pp. 31-35, 311-313.

34. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, p. 9.

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