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Temporality, Ontology, Dialectics: Hegel Against a Formal Concept of Time

One of John McDowell's most recurrent criticisms of Kantian idealism is its conception of space and time as *a priori* conditions for any and all experience. This criticism leads McDowell to state that:

The harshest way to put this criticism is to say that although the Aesthetic purports to ground *a priori* knowledge that is objective in the only sense we can make intelligible to ourselves, what it puts in place is indistinguishable from a subjectivistic psychologism.¹

In this context, one can speak of subjectivistic psychologism because a transcendental institution of time and space is not likely to escape from being a mere projection of the subject's organising capacities over a shapeless external reality. So one must follow the idea that:

The image of a projection from a self-standing subjectivity gets no purchase if we insist, as we should, that thought and the world must be understood together. The form of thought is already just as such the form of the world. It is a form that is subjective and objective together, not primarily subjective and thereby supposedly objective.²

In this article, I would like to delve further into McDowell's deep understanding regarding a holism between the form of thought and the form of the world that does not imply subordination. I intend to go into this holism as part of a reflection on time, seen not merely as a category of perception, but also as a structure of reason in its capacity to join concept and world. This will allow us to show how Hegel criticises all formal conceptions of time in order to expound, through

¹ McDowell, John, *Having the World in View: essays on Kant, Hegel and Sellars*, Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 76.

² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

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a broad articulation between temporality and history that does not appear as a systematic object of McDowell's reflections, a concept of concrete temporality that is not merely the fruit of the subjective activity of the organisation of the conceptual capacities of perception. This concrete temporality is, in a way, the conceptual elaboration of the impact of the time of things, that is, of the impact of events initially not predicated by current forms of experience, but which nonetheless forces these forms to modify their ways of determination. Thought and world should be understood together, but not under the form of specularly or of immediate identity. The point, then, is to understand how the experience of time can show us the dialectic process that allows thought and world to come together in a movement proper to the free self-development of reason. This dialectic process should enable us "to understand the spatial and temporal forms of our sensibility in terms of adjustment to the mode of being of all reality"³.

The Criticism Against Duration

It is said that everything is born and passes away in time. When everything is abstracted from time, namely, the content of time and space, then empty time and empty space will be left, i.e., time and space are posited as abstractions of externality and represented as if they were for themselves. But not everything is born and dies in time. On the contrary, time itself is the *becoming*, the arising and passing away, the existing abstraction, Chronos, who engenders everything and destroys his offspring.⁴

It is clear how Hegel rejects here the notion, so important to Kant, that there is a pure form of time, or a pure form of space, established as a general condition of the possibility of movement and change. For Hegel, the idea so well summarized by Kant that time does not pass but the existence of changeable things passes in it, that things change in time while time doesn't change, hide the wrong belief that the form of the time would not be subjected to changes, genesis or exhaustion. This means thinking time as a immobile totality due to the formal stability of what allows the perception of becoming. If time is an immobile totality then everything that happens in its interior, every becoming and succession will be

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³ McDowell, John, "Hegel et le mythe du donné", *Revue Philosophies*, 99, 2008, p. 61.

⁴ Hegel, G.W.F. *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis, 1991, para. 258.

an expression of such totality. Singular things could change but they will just actualize the possibilities of a totality assured in its eternity. Thinking changes under the idea of a “succession of opposites determinations,”⁵ as Kant does following an aristotelician tradition, would mean understanding movement through the stability of a counting principle.

Thinking on these problems, Hegel will understand that, taken as pure forms of intuition, time and space are abstractions of externality. There can be no transcendental deduction of the categories of time and space. This is not surprising for a philosophy in which “all transcendental constitution is a social institution”⁶. This is apparently confirmed when Hegel states that temporality (*Zeitliche*) is an objective determination of things, and not merely a subjective determination of the subject that grasps them. “The process of effective things themselves produces time”⁷ (*macht also der Zeit*) not only in the sense that the changes we perceive in things, their generation and destruction, would reveal to us the existence of time: a classical *topos* that insists that, if things neither changed nor moved, we would be unable to perceive the time that goes by. If we are to state that the process of effective things themselves produces time, it is because this concrete process makes time be born and perish, changes its mode of passing, paralyses it or speeds it up, or removes it, for example, from the regime of succession and places it in a dynamic of simultaneities. Time is engendered by the process of things because time itself is a formally changing processuality. There is a fundamental plasticity of time, which may explain why Hegel found it necessary to say that time itself is the becoming, the being born and the perishing⁸.

⁵ Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of pure reason*, London: Dent, 1991, B 291/A 461.

⁶ Brandom, Robert, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 285.

⁷ Hegel, G.W.F., *ibid.*, para. 258. This phrase must be read against Kantian ideas as: “Time is not an empirical concept. For neither co-existence nor succession would be perceived by us, if the representation of time did not exist as a foundation *a priori*” (Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of pure reason*, *op. cit.*, B 46).

⁸ This problem concerns the plasticity of time is also a problem about the structure of a time in revolution. A major question for a philosopher like Hegel, if we accept that: “the French Revolution will remain the burning center of Hegel’s philosophy: the event crystallizes the untimeliness of historical experience” (Comay, Rebecca, *Mourning sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 5). A time in revolution is a time relieved from the illusion of stativity of its formal determinations, time that produces other categories of movement and change.

But if things are so, what can be said of this mute tendency of Hegelian dialectics to try to overcome time toward the eternity of the concept? Such a movement, at least externally, would seem to reiterate Spinoza's defense as regards reason necessarily conceiving from the perspective of eternity. It is impossible to forget how Hegel clearly states that: "time itself is eternal in its concept". Nor was he afraid to construct an apparent opposition between time and concept already present in a famous passage in the last chapter of *Phenomenology of the Spirit*:

Time is the concept itself that exists there and is represented to consciousness as empty intuition. Consequently, spirit necessarily appears in time, and it appears in time as long as it does not grasp its pure concept, which is to say, as long as it does not annul time. Time is the pure self externally intuited by the self but not grasped by the self; time is the merely intuited concept. Since this concept grasps itself, it sublates its temporal form, comprehends the act of intuiting, and is intuition which has been conceptually grasped and is itself intuition which is comprehending.⁹

We should note, however, the specificity of this eternity of the concept. Two characteristics should draw our attention, namely, the distinction between eternity and duration, and the Hegelian definition of eternity as "absolute present"¹⁰. Regarding the first characteristic, Hegel said: "For this reason, duration is distinct from eternity because it is merely a relative sublating (*Aufhebung*) of time. But eternity is infinite, that is, not relative, a duration reflected into itself"¹¹. Duration is only a relative sublating of time because eternity presupposes neither staticity nor permanence. If Hegel states that in the self-apprehension of the concept there is a sublating of time, one must remember that something of the restlessness of time is conserved by the eternal movement of the concept.

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In this regard, Hegel's insistence on discrediting permanence itself in his reflection on time and history is not by mere chance. We might remember the meaning of a statement of his like: "The Persians were the first people in history, because Persia was the first empire to disappear (*Persienist das erste Reich, das vergan-*

⁹ Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of Spirit* (translation of Terry Pinkard in: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/21288399/Phenomenology%20translation%20English%20German.pdf>) p. 721.

¹⁰ Hegel, G.W.F., *Encyclopaedia, op. cit.*, para. 247.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, para. 259.

gen ist),”¹² leaving only ruins behind. This phrase says a great deal about what Hegel really understands by “progress” in his philosophy of history. Progress is the awareness of a time that is no longer subject to simple repetition, but rather is subject to disappearance. Initially, “progress” does not refer to a destiny but to a certain way of thinking about origin. This is because, under progress, origin is that which, from the very beginning, appears marked by the impossibility of remaining. “Origin” is, in fact, the name we give to the awareness of the impossibility of remaining in silent stativity. For this reason, the true origin, that which appears in Persia, is characterised by a space full of ruins, by a mixture between time and fire that consumes all.

This is an important statement, in that it reminds us that the ruins left in the wake of history’s continual movement are actually modes of the manifestation of Spirit in its potential for irrealization. If the Persians are the first historical people, that is because they allowed themselves to be animated by the restlessness and negativity of a universal that brings particular determinations to ruin.

But this act of disappearing isn’t a flawless statement of the need for an sublat-ing toward perfectibility. In fact, there is a continuous pulsation of disappearance within history. This continuous pulsation is a part of the telos of history. Actually, history performs its purpose when this movement gains continuity, when it is no longer experienced as irreparable loss, but when the disappearance paradoxically opens us to a new form of presence, a form different from the paradigm of the presence of things in space. This explains why Hegel will say that “One must first discard the prejudice that the duration would be more valuable than the disappearance.” Only things with the power of disappearing allow to manifest a spirit that only builds destroying their finite determinations.

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A close reading of the chapter dedicated to spirit in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* reveals, for instance, the history of spirit to be a peculiar movement that brings into relief the ruptures in and insufficiencies of systems of social determination, which accounts for why such figures as Antigone (who exposed the disintegration of the normative substance of the *polis*), Rameau’s nephew (who exposed the disintegration of the normative substance of the *ancien régime*), and the

¹² Hegel, G.W.F., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hambourg: Felix Meiner, 2005, p. 215.

“beautiful soul” (who rather tragically reveals the limits of morality) have such central roles in this particular narrative. If they have a important role in the account of Spirit is because such narrative is fascinated by moment where the act of give an account is confronted with the disaggregation of the language, with the dry violence of a indifferent death and with the impasse about norms. We might recall here the words of Gérard Lebrun:

If there is any certainty to be had regarding the fact that this progress is not repetitious, but renders explicit what had been hidden, that is because Spirit does not come to be through the production of finite formations, but, on the contrary, by refusing them one after another. It is not the strength of empires that endows History with its ‘reason,’ but their downfall. ... From the perspective of the history of the world, all state formations are but evanescent moments.¹³

It may seem that with this, we are vulnerable to some criticisms of Heidegger, for whom: “Hegel shows the possibility of the historical actualization of spirit ‘in time’ by going back to the identity of the formal structure of spirit and time as negation of a negation.”¹⁴ As if the movement of the negation of a negation was just the formal structure, the generic normative basis for the possible forms of time and spirit. The succession as general form of movement would be replaced by dialectical sublations produced by negations of negations. However, we must insist that the negation of negation doesn’t expresses in this context any strength of normative determination. It is the assumption of the existence of relationships between processes that consciousness sees as disconnected. It is the requirement that consciousness think relations “unthinkable” because contradictories. We must not think these relations under the form of previous modes of relationship, such as causality, the relationship between substance and its accidents or even as reciprocal action. Hegel’s logic is the exhaustion of all these previous forms of relations and the openness for relations that are constituted upon the contingency of its situation. That is why the negation of the negation can not be defined as a formal structure of the time. That is why, too, is difficult to agree with Adorno when he states that:

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¹³ Lebrun, Gerard, *L'envers de la dialectique*, Paris: Seuil, 2005, pp. 28–33.

¹⁴ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and time*, SUNY Press, 1996, p. 396.

As his version of dialectics extends to time itself, time is ontologized, turned from a subjective form into a structure of being as such, itself eternal ... For Hegel, the dialectic of time and temporality logically turns into a dialectic of time in itself.¹⁵

The Concrete Temporality

If the eternity of the concept is not to be confused with duration, then one must ask how we are to understand its absolute present, so well described in passages such as: “Eternity is not before or after time, not before the creation of the world, not even when it comes to an end. But eternity is absolute presentness, the now without before or after.”¹⁶ In fact, time, as that which not being is, and as that which being is not, ignores absolute presence, as we might find it, for example, in Cartesian instantaneous time, the latter being a time of pure presence, for it is unaware of potency and is totally act¹⁷. Hegelian time is an eternity that overcomes time by conserving it. That is, by refusing a simple denial of time and its latencies, it could also not establish the absolute present as absolute presence. The absolute present is time without expectation, without fear, without hope, as it has no longer raised contingency to a process that could break immanence with eternity. The absolute present is not time of pure presence, which would imply the total absorption of the instant into itself. The absolute present is the expression of concrete temporality, the expression of how: “The concrete present is the result of the past and is pregnant with the future.”¹⁸ A temporality that is the production of the concrete process of things. We may try to understand its structure if we start off with an important statement by Hegel:

The life of the present spirit is a circle of stages that, on the one hand, remain simultaneous (*nebeneinander*), and only on the other hand appear to be past.

¹⁵ Adorno, Theodor, *Negative Dialectics*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 331–332.

¹⁶ Hegel, G.W.F., *Enzyklopädie*, *op. cit.*, para. 247.

¹⁷ As Jean Wahl says about Cartesian time, everything is totally act: “because the idea of potency isn’t a clear and distinct idea. Everything that is, is given in each instant. Descartes’s idealism is an actualism” (Wahl, Jean; *Du rôle de l’idée d’instant dans la philosophie de Descartes*, Paris: Alcan, 1920).

¹⁸ Hegel, G.W.F., *Encyclopaedia*, *op. cit.*, para. 259.

The moments that the spirit seems to have left behind, it still possesses in its present depth.¹⁹

This is the present as a circle of stages that appear, at one and the same time, as both simultaneous and as past. These moments are, at the same time, behind and present. As we can see, this is a contradictory temporal experience from the perspective of understanding, but it can be comprehended if we remember how concept, as an expression of eternity, is a form of movement that transforms all disconnected processes into moments of a unity that had not existed before. That is, it is created *a posteriori*, but (and this is the fundamental point) it can only be created because it radically puts in check the form of unity and connection that had been in place until then. It could not be otherwise since concept is not the expression of an ontologically ensured substance in its eternity, but an operator of pragmatic adaptation. Since it is a pragmatic operator, it can performatively produce entirely new forms of synthesis, thus imploding the impossibilities of language with the strength of the confession of another language that is born. At first, the concept obliges the world to speak a different language.

With the strength to place in simultaneousness what until then had been radically disjointed and to create the contemporariness of the non-contemporary, concept can instate the time of an absolute present where there is nothing more to expect. But there being nothing more to expect does not mean that, from now on, events will be bereft of history or that history will be bereft of events. There is nothing more to expect because the impossibles can now become possible because contradictory relationships have been reconstructed in the same process in progress. In this sense, we could remember what is presupposed in Hegel's construction of the concept of "universal history", history that is progress in the awareness of freedom.

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To accept that something like "universal history" exists would seem to imply that the multiplicity of historical and temporal experiences should be subject to a single measurement of time. As Reinhart Koselleck might say, this is a necessary

¹⁹ Hegel, G.W.F., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, *op. cit.*, p. 104. English translation from: https://books.google.com.br/books?id=WxYoBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA67&_lg=PA67&dq=hegel+%22now+without+before+or%22&source=bl&ots=AsCeYacLyU&sig=vEZK3EMVmsHiKicENxZouBIChvU&hl=en&sa=X&ei=-ABQVenfC4GdgwT2kICADQ&ved=oC-BoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=hegel%20%22now%20without%20before%20or%22&f=false

consequence of the definition of history as a “singular collective”. According to Koselleck:

The collective singular permitted yet another step. It made possible the attribution to history of the latent power ... power that connected and motivated everything in accordance with the secret or evident plan for which men could feel responsible, or in whose name one could believe oneself to be acting.²⁰

It seems that Hegel had something similar in mind when he talked about the spirit of the world as “the inner soul of all individuals,” or as a unified social body in the multiplicity of its national spaces through a plan that is a secularised version of Divine Providence.

However, the figure of the circle of stages, simultaneous and past, does not entail any reference to temporal unifications that are reducible to an all-embracing general plan from which all becomings, all transformations, flow. It is better to think of the coming of a time defined as a relationship between times that are immeasurable without being indifferent to one another. And this is related to the fact that national spaces, animated by the spirit of the world, cannot, in turn, be subject to a common plan for eternal peace without making room for sovereign decisions marked by contingencies. The national spaces that comprise universal history inter-relate without guaranteeing either peace or stability²¹.

Likewise, immeasurable but not indifferent times inter-penetrate one another in a continual process of change. This is something very different from the universality produced by the primacy of the homogeneous, measurable, and abstract time of global capitalist production so well described by Marx. In this regard, to speak of “universal history” implies simply defending that immeasurable temporalities are not indifferent. This interpenetration of immeasurable times entails a constant openness to what is not subject to the previously stabilised form of time. And this makes the totality represented by universal history – and the absolute present that this history instates – a processuality in continual reorganisation,

²⁰ Koselleck, Reinhart; *Futures past: on the semantics of historical time*, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 52.

²¹ As we see in hegelian criticism against Kant’s perpetual peace in Hegel, G.W.F., *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Recht*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986, para. 333.

by contingent events, of the form of the series of elements previously put into relationship with one another. This results in its changeable plasticity.

In this sense, we can say that the relations among moments obey a process of transfiguration from contingency to necessity, but this does not imply simple denial of contingency. In Hegel, contingency is not seen as the result of a “defect in our knowledge” as in Spinoza. For him, contingency is integrated as a moment in a process of the constitution of necessity based on a retroactive historicity. Hegel tries to understand how the necessary is engendered *upon* actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), how actuality produces necessity. But this doesn’t mean that actuality must be totally philosophically justified, a usual criticism against Hegel. Actually, this means understanding how contingent phenomena don’t find a place within the necessary determination of actuality, how they appear initially as existence in disperse situation (*zerstreuer Umstände*) and how they can open singular processualities that create necessity.

Hegel characterizes contingency as an “external necessity,”²² since events appear to be caused by something other than themselves, and they do not integrate into the immanence of an “internal necessity” that posits its own circumstances. “The ground of its being isn’t in itself, but in an other”²³, says Hegel about a notion of contingency understood as pure possibility, as the possibility to always be an other. However, this externality is not an error that we should abstractly deny. It is rather a necessary moment resulting from the fact that the immanence of the concept to the empirical world is not immediately posited. Externality is retroactively constructed from the liberty of reason in seeking to retroactively integrate what is produced on the basis of contingent empirical events²⁴. The major question for Hegel is how to understand the transformation of the “immediate actuality” of contingency into a presupposition (*Voraussetzung*) for a “new actuality”, integrating contingency as a moment of “the self-movement of form”²⁵.

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²² Hegel, G.W.F., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte – Band 1: Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, op. cit., p. 29.

²³ Idem, *Encyclopaedie*, op. cit., para. 145.

²⁴ For that reason is very complicated to follow Gilles Marmasse in his idea about a paralelism between Hegel and Spinoza concerning the problem of contingency in Marmasse, Gilles; “Raison et déraison dans l’histoire”, *Revista Eletrônica de Estudos Hegelianos*, n. 14, v. 1.

²⁵ As Hegel puts it: “This self-movement of the form is activity, activation of the matter [itself], as the real ground, which sublates itself into actuality, and the activation of the con-

At the limit, such liberty requires that we think of the totality posited by universal history as a system open to periodic instability because the continuous integration of new events, initially experienced as contingent and indeterminate, reconfigures the meaning of events that have already occurred. If we want, we can say that a beautiful example of this movement is the way Hegel remembers that the spirit can “undo what has happened” (*ungeschehen machen kann*)²⁶ by re-absorbing the fact into a new meaning. It is only in a totality of thought as processuality in continuous formal plasticity that what has happened can be undone and that the wounds of the Spirit can be healed without leaving scars. On this point it is difficult not to agree with Gerard Lebrun, for whom:

If history progresses, it is to look back; if it is progression from a line of meaning, it is by retrospection. ... Hegel’s “necessity-providence” is so minimally authoritarian that it seems more to learn, with the course of the world, what its designs were.²⁷

On the other hand, this can explain why there is no formal time nor mere becoming without time in Hegel. There is a very specific type of concrete temporality. The point is not to define the general forms of the experience of time, with its limiting immanent normativity of the possible modes of experience. The point is to explain *how temporal forms are empirically engendered and modified* through the continuous interpenetration and the retroactive integration of discontinuous temporalities that were, in turn, produced by the “process of effective things”. In this way, time does not appear as a transcendental normativity. It is a field of

tingent actuality, i. e., of the conditions: their inward reflection and their self-sublation into another actuality, the actuality of the matter”. (Hegel, G.W.F., *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, *op. cit.*, para. 147).

²⁶ “The wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind; it is not the deed which is imperishable. The deed is taken back by spirit into itself; it is the aspect of individuality, whether present in the deed as intention or as an existing negativity and limitation to the deed which immediately vanishes” (Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *op. cit.*, para. 669).

²⁷ Lebrun, Gerald, *L'envers de la dialectique*, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–6. Accepting this lecture, Slavoj Žižek will say: “This is how one should read Hegel’s thesis that, in the course of the dialectical development, things “become what they are”: it is not that a temporal deployment merely actualizes some pre-existing atemporal conceptual structure—this atemporal conceptual structure is itself the result of contingent temporal decisions” (Žižek, Slavoj, *Less than nothing: Hegel and the shadow of dialectical materialism*, London: Verso, 2012, p. 54).

plastically reconfigured relationships (in their dimensions of past, present, and future), based on the impact of events that were initially contingent.

Glorifying the Status Quo

But let us go back to this strength of the Spirit to “undo what has happened” because it can provide us with further orientation as to what is at stake in the concept of the absolute present. It has often seemed, with this strength, that we were dealing with a defence of the theory of consummated fact that transforms the violences of the past into necessities along the road to fulfilment of the normative universality of a Spirit that narrates history from the perspective of one who is “deifying what exists”²⁸. In this case, trust in the Spirit might be seen as a password for a certain quietism regarding the present. It might look like a philosophy trying to explain how “historical men” [*geschichtlichen Menschen*] or, one might say, the “individuals of world history” [*welthistorischen Individuen*] – those whose particular ends are not posited only as particular ends, but who submitted these ends to transfiguration, thus allowing them to contain the “will of the spirit of the world” [*Wille des weltgeistes*] – could only lead us to some sort of justification of the course of the world. Adorno expressed this fear in his *Negative Dialectics*, repeating a criticism already made by Nietzsche in his second *Unfashionable Observations* and by Marx when he accuses Hegel of “glorifying the status quo”²⁹. For, if what is manifested by the wishes of historical men is the will of the Spirit of the world, then how can one escape from the impression that, retroactively, the Hegelian philosophy of history constructs universality based on those particularities that ended up winning the battles of history? As Nietzsche might say: “those who learned early to kneel and bow down before the power of history, kneeling and bowing down to all power”³⁰. But one can avoid this impression by further exploring two fundamental characteristics of historical action in Hegel, namely, first its unconscious nature and, second, its strength to recuperate what seemed lost, in other words, to reactivate lost opportunities that seemed paralysed, by reopening what is at stake in the present. In this process of recuperation it is not a matter of simply justifying the current configuration of the present, but of modifying the potentialities of the present

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²⁸ Adorno, Theodor, *Negative dialectics*, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

²⁹ Marx, Karl, *The Capital vol. I*, London: Penguin, 2002, p. 93.

³⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Unfashionable Observations*, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 73.

by un-fulfilling what seemed fully determined reality. These two characteristics are linked together, since the understanding of the existence of an unconscious dimension of action dismantles the illusion that the present is only what is determined by the established form of the representation accessible to the current historical configuration of consciousness. On this first point, we might recall statements by Hegel such as the following:

In world history in general, other things issue from people's activities than what they are striving for, what they achieve, and what they immediately know and want. They bring about their own interest, but in doing so they bring about something more that is hidden within it, but that did not lie in their consciousness or their intentions.³¹

That is, history is made of actions in which men do not see themselves, in which they do not understand themselves. There is an apparently involuntary dimension that constitutes the field of history. Or, better said, there is a motor of history, which, for the individual conscience, necessarily appears as something in the order of the unconscious. It is the trust in this involuntary realm, this unconscious, that constitutes "historical men". This may seem strange if we continue to accept that there is some type of reconciliation between consciousness and time remembered in history. It is a strange reconciliation where consciousness should recognise itself in the dimension of that which this consciousness itself cannot see, because this is a reconciliation with something it does not know how to get nor how to use. In a certain way, historical men are not under the jurisdiction of themselves, because they are continuously dispossessed by their own actions (and we could say that Hegel, in his own way, takes this contradiction to the extreme: *To be dispossessed by what is my own*).

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By taking this into account we can understand, among other things, why it is not the individuals who cling to the finiteness of their particular systems of interest who make history. Therefore, they are not the ones who can narrate it. For Hegel, it is not men who narrate history, but the Spirit³². When the Spirit comes

³¹ Hegel, G.W.F., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, op. cit., p. 42.

³² We are in agreement, then, with Derrida, for whom "the *Phenomenology of Spirit* ... does not have to do with something one might simply call man. As the science of the experience of consciousness, the science of the structures of the phenomenality of the spirit itself relating to itself, it is rigorously distinguished from anthropology. In the *Encyclopedia*, the

on the scene and narrates history, its prose is radically distinct from the prose of those individuals who actually witnessed the facts. First, because the Spirit does not witness. It totalises processes and reviews what happened behind the back of consciousness. The spirit is Minerva's owl that remembers but can only take flight after the event. This is a totalisation that is not mere recounting, re-description, but performative construction of what, until then, did not exist. An account is not just an account, it is a decision about what will have visibility and be perceived from now on. This is why accusations that see in Hegelian philosophy a form of "pastism" miss their mark entirely. In this regard, we might remember, for example, Vittorio Hösle, for whom Hegel's pastism shows how

[p]hilosophy is remembering, a retrospective look at the past. It is not a prolepsis or a project of what is to come, of what is to become reality. And, to the extent that what it should be is not yet fulfilled, it cannot be of interest to philosophy. Philosophy should embrace only what is and what was. Kant's question, 'What should I do?', therefore, has no place in the Hegelian system. An answer to this question, at best, might be: 'Recognise the rational in reality.'³³

Nothing could be farther from the perspective I would like to defend, because this position presupposes that "to remember" is equivalent to "rediscovering" facts that were filed in the social memory. If it is true that, for Hegel, philosophy is remembering, we should recall that all acts of remembering are re-inscriptions of what happened based on pressures in the present. To remember is also to act, and not simply to arrive after reality has lost its strength. To remember is rather to show how the past is continually reconfiguring and redefining possibilities for both present and future. In this sense, to ignore the strength of the decision of the description of the past is to operate with the fiction of history as a stable framework "of what really happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)," as Ranke said. But we will be more faithful to Hegel if we say that the past is what is constantly happening because it is not comprised of a succession of instants that are disconnected from one another. It is comprised of moments in retroaction.

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section entitled *Phenomenology of Spirit* comes after the *Anthropology*, and quite explicitly exceeds its limits" (Derrida, Jacques, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by A. Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982, p. 117).

³³ Hösle, Vittorio, *O sistema de Hegel: O idealismo da subjetividade e o problema da intersubjetividade*, Belo Horizonte: Loyola, 2006, p. 468.

Work of Mourning for the Concept and its Ghosts

We can better understand this performative power of remembering if we explore how the narrative of history in Hegel is similar, in certain important points, to the work of mourning. This fact is hard to ignore in someone who describes the sequence of experience of awareness toward absolute knowledge as a “path of despair”. In this sense, perhaps the clearest expression here is his canonic passage in *Reason in History*:

Everything seems to pass, nothing stays the same. What traveller among the ruins of Carthage, of Palmyra, Persepolis, or Rome, has not been stimulated by reflections on the transitoriness of kingdoms and men, and to sadness at the thought of a vigorous and rich life now departed?³⁴

Again, ruins, the discovery of which now shows up initially as a sign of sadness. This sadness seems to express fixation on the ruined past, where things could apparently have been otherwise and continued in their splendour. This fixation discredits the status quo for supposedly not having been on a par with the promises that the ruins of great conquests once assured. What else could this sadness produce except a circuit of loss and reparation, and the belief that transitoriness tells us about the suffering over our extreme vulnerability to the contingency and bitterness of the present? We might also remember that “universal history is not a place of joy”. This is a melancholic position where the rejection of the status quo can easily be transformed into conformist resignation with what is³⁵. But it is up to us to get free of any melancholic fixation on the past and open up to retroactive processuality, which concept will deal with. Thus, in the same passage Hegel says, “But this category of change is also connected to another aspect, where new life emerges out of death.” This is truly a work of mourning, but the work does not take place by a mere substitution of the lost object by displacing libido. To call this work a substitution would seem to be equivalent

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³⁴ Hegel, G.W.F., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte – Band 1: Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, op. cit., p. 35.

³⁵ “This dialectic explains the ideological versatility of melancholia: an uncompromising rejection of the existent (nothing short of total transformation is tolerable) coupled with an easy accommodation to whatever happens to be the case (everything is equally terrible, so why bother ...). Accepting nothing, I tolerate everything: the formalist impasse” (Comay, Rebecca, *Mourning sickness*, op. cit., p. 120).

to placing the objects in a system of structural interchangeability, a system by which the lack produced by the lost object could be completely filled in by the construction of a substitute object to occupy its place. The time of mourning is not a time of absolute reversibility. The emptiness that the loss of the object produces is not simply reversed. Therefore, to equate mourning with an operation of forgetting would be to raise lobotomy to the status of an ideal for life.

Mourning is neither substitution nor forgetting, nor does it mean to stop loving lost objects. We might state that a compromise operation proper to the work of mourning is inseparable from the establishment of a form of existence between presence and absence, between permanence and duration. A *spectral existence*, which, far from being a flirt with the unreal, is objective existence of what inhabits a space that forces present determinations through temporal resonances.

As Derrida saw quite clearly regarding Marx: “The semantics of the *Gespenst* haunt the semantics of the *Geist*.”³⁶ To an extent, this association also applies to Hegel because the existence of the Spirit is only describable in a language of spectres that animate the living, who give reality a spectral substance, because life is that which, in dead objects, was never destined to disappear. It is life that still pulsates by taking the spirit from other objects in continuous metamorphosis. Hegel was not afraid of this metamorphosis when he found his first and imperfect elaboration in the oriental representation of the transmigration of souls (*Seelenwanderung*).³⁷ Even though Derrida would not accept this, we can say that there is nothing better than the Hegelian Spirit to show, in this quotation from Derrida himself, that:

If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and, especially, there are reasons to doubt the borderline between the present, the actual or the present reality of the present, and everything that is contrary to it, such as absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, backwardness, virtuality, or even simulacra in general, and so forth. There is first of all the doubtful contemporaneity between the self and the present. Before knowing whether one can differentiate between the specter of the past and the specter of the future, of the past present and the future present, one must perhaps ask oneself whether

³⁶ Derrida, Jacques, *Spectres de Marx*, Paris: Galilée, 1993, p. 175.

³⁷ Hegel, G.W.F., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

the *spectrality effect* does not consist in undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective present, and its other.³⁸

Derrida did not realise how it is through this effect of spectrality that, in Hegel, disappearance disappears. This is how the Spirit affirms itself as a process of absolute conversion from the violence of losses and separations into a broadening of the present and allowing the concept and the world to become one. This space of metamorphoses produced by mourning is a privileged figure in the language of multiple temporalities that interpenetrate one another. So we can say that the work of mourning is the production of a temporality that may be available in an absolute present. This does not mean to justify reality but, in a certain way, to *unrealise* it and show how the spectres from the past are still alive and ready to inhabit other bodies and open up other potentialities. With this in view, we can understand the final paragraphs of *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, which are dedicated to absolute knowledge. Speaking about history as a becoming of the Spirit, Hegel states:

This coming-to-be exhibits a languid movement and succession of spirits, a gallery of pictures, of which each, endowed with the entire wealth of spirit, moves itself so slowly because the self has to take hold of and assimilate the whole of this wealth of its substance. Since its consummation consists in spirit's completely knowing what it is, in spirit knowing its substance, this knowledge is its taking-the-inward-turn within which spirit forsakes its existence and gives its shape over to recollection. In taking-the-inward-turn, spirit is absorbed into the night of its selfconsciousness, but its vanished existence is preserved in that night, and this sublated existence – the existence which was prior but is now newborn from knowledge – is the new existence, a new world, and a new shape of spirit. Within that new shape of spirit, it likewise has to begin all over again without prejudice in its immediacy, and from its immediacy to rear itself once again to maturity, as if all that had preceded it were lost to it and as if it were to have learned nothing from the experience of the preceding spirits. However, that inwardizing re-collectio1 has preserved that experience; it is what is inner, and it is in fact the higher

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³⁸ Derrida, Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 72. English translation from: https://books.google.com.br/books?id=llyB8oE4TncC&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=derrida+%22if+there+is+something+like+spectrality%22&source=bl&ots=oAs6gfCCHs&sig=-8o3qbeO9_ckKKk9ciLGAldo&hl=en&sa=X&ei=NG1TVe-wH8igNr3sgOAH&ved=oCC8Q6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=derrida%20%22if%20there%20is%20something%20like%20spectrality%22&f=false.

form of substance. However much therefore this spirit begins its cultural development all over again and seems to start merely from itself, still it is at the same time making its beginning at a higher level.³⁹

Yes, history is a recollection whereby the formations of the spirit pass like in a gallery of images where one must take one's time, perhaps going back to look again, as if one were in a work of mourning. In this way the Spirit transfers existence to recollection. But this transference is quite singular because it initially resembles forgetting as it takes us into the night of awareness of self. The spirit re-begins as if it had learned nothing, as if everything had been lost, left helpless for having lost everything. But this total loss is a necessity because it simply means that this "new world", this "new existence", is the result of the strength of the spirit to open up new beginnings with the naturalness of one who has nothing more to carry on one's back, with the naturalness of one who heals their wounds without leaving scars, undoing what has happened. By acting as if it had forgotten, the Spirit can re-encounter past experiences in a higher form. It can take them up once again from a more advanced point because it perceives that it simply allowed the unconscious depth of these experiences to act through its gestures and allowed its spectres to inhabit its gestures. Nothing is ever lost. It is just that a world that can no longer be sustained comes to an end, a world that gave everything it could give, so that another world can begin by reconfiguring the time of past experiences in another field of existence, another mode of existence. This is how the spirit re-encounters the productive destiny of the experiences that left it helpless. No pastism, no glorification of the status quo. Only the belief that no fact can make us lose forever the possibility to re-begin worlds. I quote from Heraclitus:

This Cosmos, the same for all, was not made by any god, nor by any man. It always was and is and will be an ever-living fire, kindling and being extinguished according to fixed measures.⁴⁰

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³⁹ Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., p. 719.

⁴⁰ Heraclitus, *Fragmentos contextualizados*, Rio de Janeiro: Odysseu, 2012, p. 135 – English translation adapted from: <http://www.philosophy.gr/presocratics/heraclitus.htm>.