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Hegel After Derrida (review)

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Hegel After Derrida, edited by Stuart Barnett. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. Pp. x + 356. \$85.00 cloth; \$29.99 paper.

We will never be done, says Derrida, with the reading of Hegel. When we think we have gotten beyond Hegel in trumpeting our escape from the strictures of reason, teleology, metanarratives, idealism, we are most Hegelian. Yet we frequently find, even in the most theoretically naïve works, claims to have “deconstructed” prevalent interpretations or notions of reason, identity, consciousness, nature and the natural, morality, history, and so forth. Such trends may lead us to believe that we are done with Hegel, but, as Barnett says and this volume demonstrates, not only does Hegel define “the modernity that our postmodern era seeks to escape” (1), but there is a Hegel that we have yet to examine. Nowhere is this more true than in the present calls to deal with the strategies of representation in literature and the concomitant theses that culture is a signifying system and knowledge is regulated by the material interests of institutional powers. We would be hard pressed to find a questioning of the grounds of representation and technicity, concepts that lie at the heart of culture and institution. For this, we would do well to follow the example of these writers and turn to Derrida’s reading of what remains of Hegel in our thought today.

Those unfamiliar with Hegel will find these essays challenging, but they disclose the Hegelianism that dominates the American critical scene and provide models of rigorous readings that we can call for the sake of convenience “deconstruction.” Just what deconstruction is still remains obscure for many. Sometimes confused with critique, at other times reduced to the absurdity of being unconcerned with truth, deconstruction has entered the vocabulary as something of a ghost, to borrow a figure from Derrida frequently invoked in this collection: its presence is felt but its features remain obscure. One reason for this ghostly presence is our refusal, or inability, to confront Hegel, whom Derrida calls in *Of Grammatology* “the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing” (26). Hegel, says Barnett, “taught philosophers to examine all fields of knowledge as quasi-autonomous language games. . . . Yet Hegel emphasized the cultural and historical specificity of language games; he also devoted a good deal of his thought to dissecting the internal logic of various language games” (5) These games, then, are not mere games. Hegel narates the unfolding of spirit in world history and its culmination in the Absolute, but he also historicizes reason, charting its contradictions and limitations. He is both the philosopher of unitary reason and the thinker of difference. Ultimately, it is the role of the negative in speculative idealism, the

otherness operating within reason, that makes Hegel's philosophy the limit that defines the modernity our postmodernity remains within.

In its confrontation with speculative idealism and the *Aufhebung* (a term that designates the negation, conservation, and elevation of a previous stage in consciousness), deconstruction is "to disrupt the virtual self-realization of onto-theology in speculative idealism" (26). This disruption is not critique, the investigation of the criteria for philosophy, for it is not a work of making distinctions and judgments (in a Kantian sense) but a questioning of these very categories. Deconstruction operates from within the text, responds to its irreducible alterity. If Hegel's text, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in particular, can be characterized as the totalizing thought of absolute spirit, Derrida's "text" can be defined as structurally infinite, a network without boundaries or closure. Rodolphe Gasché has demonstrated that what Derrida calls a text, which is traditionally understood as consisting of sensible signs and their intelligible content, is a "law" made up of the system of quasi-transcendentals (iterability, *différance*, the re-mark, etc.) that governs the relation between inside and outside, the ideal and the material. Derrida's "text" opens the self-identity implied in the traditional notion of the text by locating an unsublatable remainder that makes totalization impossible. The text, therefore, is governed by the traits of referral that make representation, self-reflection, and reference possible (impossibilities). This remainder reveals that the text, in this special sense, is already inhabited by its non-phenomenal other, its ghost, which both situates deconstruction within and against Hegelian speculative philosophy and characterizes the various readings found in this collection.

This double relation governs the essays in this volume. When Derrida called Hegel "the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing," he indicated that Hegel was both the culmination of Western metaphysics and the beginning of its deconstruction. Barnett says as much when he writes, "Hegel's text, in its performance of the thinking of difference, comprises the enabling condition of the strategies of deconstruction" (27). If we are to overcome Hegel (and modernity), then we must inhabit him—which we do, whether we know it or not. And to overcome him is to repeat him, with a difference. This contradictory structure is to be found already in Hegel: insofar as the truth of consciousness is self-consciousness, consciousness is already self-consciousness. Absolute self-relation is attained only when consciousness has returned from its other back to itself as self-consciousness. But this pathway is never smooth; it is marked by disruption, relativism, and plurality. Christianity, for instance, is the absolute religion but must be superseded by philosophy, Absolute Knowing; yet, as Simon Critchley comments, the *Aufhebung* of religion into philosophy is disrupted by what makes it possible, the holy family (205). In short, we are confronted with two ways of reading Hegel, which will amount to two ways of reading Derrida. Either Hegel's text needs

to be deconstructed or it is already deconstruction; either Derrida's reading of Hegel is an intervention that disrupts the system or it reveals a Hegel who is a thinker of difference as well as the philosopher of Absolute Knowledge. Our either/or is more properly a both/and: what unites these essays is a strategy of reading that asks, what remains in Hegel's text after the holocaust of Absolute Knowledge/after the text is deconstructed? What remains is the necessity of reading Hegel for these remains, that is, for what does not allow itself to be superseded or appropriated in the name of Absolute Knowledge. The Absolute is fissured, divided or fractured, like the columns in Derrida's most sustained reading of Hegel, *Glas*. In what remains, I will focus on the contributions to *Hegel After Derrida*.

The book is divided into three sections: "Hegel after Derrida" consists of readings of Hegel opened up by Derrida; "After Hegel after Derrida" considers the Hegelianism in Freud and Marx that Derrida's interpretation of Hegel opens up; "Reading *Glas*" offers commentary on Derrida's most extensive essay on Hegel. Barnett's introduction deftly sketches the twentieth-century responses to Hegel in Britain, the United States, and France and indicates the way, despite our efforts to overcome it, that "ours is still a Hegelian culture" (36).

Robert Bernasconi's "Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti" is a well-documented study of Hegel's remarks on Africa in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* and *Lectures on the History of Religion*. Refusing to dismiss Hegel's comment that "Africa has no 'historical interest of its own'" as a culture-bound prejudice immaterial to his philosophy, Bernasconi demonstrates that Hegel distorted his sources, presenting Africans as barbaric and utterly lacking the sense of freedom necessary to be actors in world history (41). Hegel was not merely venting his prejudice (he read enough accounts of Africa that he could not plead ignorance); he required, writes Bernasconi, a null-point or basis to anchor his philosophy of world history (52). If this essay owes anything to Derrida, it is the insistence upon the centrality of a small, albeit notorious, passage in Hegel to the rest of his philosophy, but it stands alone in the volume in not locating some counterargument within Hegel that displaces his systematic philosophy.

In an analysis of *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, John H. Smith criticizes Derrida for conflating spirit and will. Had he given more attention to Hegel's writings on the will in the *Philosophy of Right*, writes Smith, Derrida would have found "a hermeneutic that accounts for both an objective disseminating and a subjective gathering of meaning" and a richer understanding of the "contradictory conditions of freedom" (65, 90). Will, understood as desire and lack, a wanting, offers a kind of politics that evades the metaphysics of spirit (*Geist*) because of its necessary arbitrariness. Here is a supposed correction of Derrida that owes its insights to him, but in insisting upon the role of

voluntaristic agency, Smith contains arbitrariness as the necessary ground of freedom, as what enables freedom rather than what limits it as well.

Jean-Luc Nancy's rich and rewarding essay, "The Surprise of the Event," exemplifies the quality of all his work. In what amounts to a double reading of Hegel, one that is both canonical and deconstructive, he proposes that Hegel set "philosophy the task of comprehending, *beyond* the truth, the taking place of truth," that is, "a truth beyond truth itself" (93). To think the truth as event/the event as truth is to think beyond metaphysics in order to think thought itself as the surprise (of the event as the coming-to-presence of what is). This step beyond metaphysics into the surprise of thought is to think the event in its irreducible singularity. It is to repeat the fundamental experience of philosophy, which begins in wonder.

Hegel's notorious declaration of the end of the art is subjected to an intricate reading by Werner Hamacher. "Art ends with irony, but in this ending art is also to complete itself and in this become art for the very first time" (105). In "Religion in the Form of Art," Hegel says art culminates in comedy, and Hamacher argues that it is only in comedy, where the subject realizes itself in the mask, that "self-consciousness shows itself as 'absolute essence'" (117). Rather than take on representational form, consciousness knows these externalized forms to be masks, something to be played with. Comedy is the spectacle of the disintegration of substance and the substantial subject. The end of art in comedy is the experience of art as the death of art, a death that preserves art as cenotaph. Ultimately, art, self-consciousness, Absolute Knowledge take hold of themselves in an end that never ends, an end that is the deconstitution of speculative ontology.

The consequences of this deconstitution can be seen in Stuart Barnett's thesis that speculative idealism is "a permanent Last Supper" (144). The Last Supper enacts the passage of the Absolute through the finite: in the consumption of the bread and wine, the material signs of God are destroyed in the very act of signification. "This is the mechanism of the *Aufhebung* in nuce" (31). The early theological essay "The Spirit of Christianity" makes clear "that speculative idealism is predicated upon the impossibility of its own founding premise." It attempts "to read the history of the Absolute on the basis of these signs of its disappearance" (144).

In asking why Hegel figures so prominently in *Glas* when Derrida's analysis of the family and phallogocentrism points to psychoanalysis, Suzanne Gearhart proposes that the *Aufhebung* is equivalent to Freud's concept of repression, which cannot be understood in terms of what is repressed "but only in terms of repression itself" as an ongoing process that serves the system of idealization; it does not merely forget or suppress but "also creates signification and value" (159). The *Aufhebung* is the equivalent of repression insofar as it constitutes rational self-consciousness but is itself prerational, as is revealed in Derrida's analysis of the Hegelian family. Gearhart advises us to address the

question of sexuality or gender from the concept of repression or else we lapse into a pre-Freudian logic of fetishism (169).

Andrzej Warminski considers the relation between Hegel and Marx and finds Marx to be a better reader of Hegel than the Marxists. Beginning with the well-known statement from *The German Ideology*, "It's not consciousness that determines life . . . but rather life determines consciousness," Warminski demonstrates that Marx's reading is a deconstruction, "an operation of inversion and reinscription" (171, 173). The contradictions and negations of life cannot be sublated into a determinate negation because life is not a positive, given fact but is the product of human labor. In a reading of chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology*, "The Truth of Self-Certainty," Warminski traces how consciousness can become itself, self-consciousness, only by converting life into a "phenomenal figure for consciousness," which means that consciousness is as much a material production of history as life is (184, 191). Warminski concludes that Hegel's text is fissured, and it is this Hegel, the *other* Hegel, whom Marx reads and reinscribes so that he might become Marx (191). This transformational reading makes Marx a deconstructor.

The remaining essays are devoted to *Glas*. Simon Critchley seeks to win over a skeptical audience of philosophers to *Glas's* importance as a work of Hegel scholarship. He covers not only Derrida's focus on religion and the transition from *Moralität* to *Sittlichkeit*, but also his method of reading, with its "fits and starts, jolts, little successive jerks . . . like a machine in the course of a difficult maneuver" (200). Derrida's treatment of the family, above all the brother-sister relationship and the figure of Antigone, points to a place in "the Hegelian system where an ethics is glimpsed that is irreducible to dialectics and cognition, which [he] would call an ethics of the singular," a recognition that ethics begins when the other is grasped not as "an object of cognition or comprehension, but precisely [as] that which exceeds my grasp and powers" (210–11). Critchley provides a very fine introduction to the reading of *Glas*.

Heinz Kimmerle examines Derrida's early essay on Bataille and Hegel, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," and writes, "Derrida errs in his supposition that Bataille laughs at Hegel" (229). According to Bataille, in "sacrificial ritual the participants experience the death of the other . . . as their own death. . . . By knowing death, they distinguish themselves from animal life" (230). This sanguine reading of Hegel relies on the preservative moment of the *Aufhebung*, and Kimmerle praises Derrida for being truer to Hegel's texts by replacing this notion with that of displacement, which "opens up the system of reason to experiences that exceed its parameters" (230). For Hegel, knowledge is absolute self-relation, the return of knowledge out of the object back to itself. Derrida, however, asks what remains in the holocaust, the all-burning, of Absolute Knowledge? "The structure of self-cognition of knowledge lies outside of time," but this annulment

of time is not successful. The system cannot “be brought coherently to conclusion” (237–38). It is in terms of this failure, says Kimmerle, that we can speak of a “Hegelianism without reserve.”

For Kevin Thompson, the unsublatable is not a sign of Hegel’s failure; deconstruction is intrinsic to the dialectic. The brother and sister relation, unlike all other relations, is “excluded from the circular constitution of *Geist*,” but their intrinsic opposition “is necessary for the *Aufhebung* of the conflict between divine and human law and thus the circular closure of the sphere of *Sittlichkeit*” (257). The natural diversity of brother and sister is both necessary to and excluded from the self-relation of *Geist*, and as such reveals that diversity functions as a quasi-transcendental, permitting “the movement from abstract to determinate negation, the logic of *Aufhebung*” (257). The affinity between deconstruction and speculative thought raises the question whether *différance*, being intrinsically opposed to the dialectic, is constrained by it.

In the final essay, Henry Sussman ranges through both columns of *Glas* and throughout what he calls the “broader modernity,” which encompasses Western culture from the Enlightenment to the present. *Glas*, he argues, delimits the epoch of idealism in metaphysics, remarking its effects upon “Western societies and their colonies” (261). The dissonance between the two columns echoes the “splitting and suspension between multiple and often conflicting obligations” that characterize subjectivity in the broader modernity (262). Derrida is not pointing to some transcendence or escape from Western values. Deconstruction perdures “as sustained dissonance *within* the Western system and *between* its elements, rather than as a *definitive* dismantling or de-bunking” (265). This is not to say Derrida leaves us to our postmodern cynicism. If the Hegel column discloses the idealistic orientation of our language, the Genet column, in its contrapuntal play on Hegelian themes of family, religion, and love, restores the density of language on the smallest of levels, the sub-syllabic *gl*, to acknowledge the blindness and biases operating within Western culture. The “death knell or *glas*” tolls for the “ambivalent architecture” of a modernity that arises from a “sense of freedom and possibility” and “a dread at the very same open horizons of possibility” (292). What I have described as the both/and nature of the Hegelian text, its status as metaphysical and deconstructive, is for Sussman a conflict embodied in Hegel’s and, indeed, the Enlightenment’s sense of an affinity between subjectivity and language, the affinity that Hegel’s dialectic employs in its injection of history and desire into the discourse of consciousness. Derrida’s “text-oriented counterpoint” does not so much dismantle Enlightenment ideology as it remarks the material operations implicit to this discourse that still defines, at least in our efforts to escape it, our postmodernity.

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