Tropes of Transport

Pahl, Katrin

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It . . . has . . . the most painful feeling and the truest insight about itself—namely, the feeling of the dissolution of all of its self-assurances, the feeling that it has been rolled upon the wheel through all the stages of its existence and that every bone in its body has been broken.

—Phenomenology, § 538

The twentieth century has read the Phenomenology of Spirit as a coherent narrative of progress. It has commonly accepted that “the Phenomenology raises empirical consciousness to absolute knowledge” while understanding this “raising” as an improvement and “absolute knowledge” as the final mastery of truth (Hyppolite 1974, 39). Fink, for example, describes the itinerary of the Phenomenology as a straightforward movement with “a definite point of departure and a definite end. The point of departure is the ordinary conception of being, in which we lodge, as it were, in a blind and ignorant fashion. . . . The end of the path is for Hegel the insight that is attained into what being is, that is, the truth of being or absolute knowledge” (Fink 1977, 42, my translation). Solomon spells out the common assumption that this passage is a progression from darkness to light when he suggests that “the ‘root-metaphor’ of the entire Phenomenology [is development understood as] growth and education. Hegel several times uses the image of a growing tree or a growing child to illustrate his model of philosophy, but perhaps the dominant philosophical image is Plato’s metaphor of education, in which the philosopher leads the uneducated out of the shadows and into the light of truth” (Solomon 1983, 277).

The introduction to the Phenomenology, however, describes consciousness’s path toward absolute knowledge as a “path of despair” (Weg der Verzweiflung, § 78). Quite contrary to the optimistic interpretations of many of its readers, “this path has a negative meaning” for the protagonist of this narrative of Bildung (ibid.). The Phenomenology emphasizes repeatedly that the formation or Bildung of its protagonist means for
this model subject “the loss of itself” (ibid.). Entwined with such self-loss is the loss of truth: “for it is on this path that it loses its truth” (ibid.). Consciousness starts its journey of formation as a righteous subject with a clear idea of the world. Then, not once, but many times, again and again, it loses itself and is forced to abandon the certainty of its knowledge until consciousness, “through a complete experience of itself, achieve[s] a cognitive acquaintance of what it is in itself”: a consumed and shattered subject (§ 77).

The Phenomenology presents Bildung as a “path of despair,” that is, as a path of spiritual and physical ruin. I will discuss over the course of this chapter how the subject in despair consumes and dismembers itself; how it loses its head, how its heart breaks, how its spirit is crushed but restless, how it loses a leg, and how its every bone is broken so that it feels like rubber. When we reach the part of the Phenomenology where consciousness begins to understand that it is not simply a natural given, but that it is the result of a long and ongoing path of formation—when we reach the self-alienated spirit of cultural maturation (Bildung)—the protagonist rather poignantly registers the despair of this journey: it has the “feeling that it has been rolled upon the wheel through all the stages of its existence and that every bone in its body has been broken” (durch alle Momente ihres Daseins hindurch gerädert und an allen Knochen zerschlagen zu sein, § 538, trans. modified). At that moment, it must dawn on the reader as well as the protagonist that Bildung is torture.

Yet the despair of the Phenomenology remains strangely impalpable. After the brief but powerful mention of it in the introduction, despair barely ever becomes a topic again. The feeling of despair is largely covered over by the teleological thrust of the narrative. Žižek points out that while subjectivity, in Hegel’s sense of negativity, essentially creates self-disturbance, the stories we tell about the self have a stabilizing function. “The organization of the narrative history of ‘what I am,’” (or of what spirit is) designates “the formation of a new, culturally created homeostasis which imposes itself as our ‘second nature’” (Žižek 2006, 210). It is thus not surprising that spirit’s autobiography—the bildungsroman of consciousness—creates a feeling of confidence and trust in automatic growth rather than communicating a sense of despair. Consciousness does not have the face of despair: every time it is crushed, it picks itself up and cheerfully starts anew. The introduction to the Phenomenology announces that what follows will be a text of despair but, once the story begins, this proclamation seems forgotten.

Nevertheless, despair affects the entire organization of the Phenomenology. It plays a syncopating and performative, rather than a thematic role. This is why it is important to read the Phenomenology not only for its
narrative, but also for its theatrics and its rhythm. Attending to the significance of despair for the textual structure of the *Phenomenology*, I will follow a threefold approach. First, I will examine two of Hegel’s rather curious and, in the traditional sense, non-philosophical mentions of despair: despair (Verzweiflung) as an etymological relative of doubt (Zweifel) and despair as an emotion of animals. Then I will discuss two examples of the breaking of a shape of consciousness: the judgment of phrenology and the hard heart of the beautiful soul. These last two sections will be bracketed by two explorations of textual performances of despair: the (dis)organization of rational thought, and the (dis)organization of the *Phenomenology*’s narrative. Throughout, I will move beyond an exegesis of Hegel toward an account of despair that I hope will be useful for emotion studies today. For this purpose, I will draw upon *The Passion According to G.H.* (1994), a novel by the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector that describes an unexpected crisis in the life of an upper middle-class Brazilian woman: the encounter with a cockroach. An insignificant incident that is usually aborted by the quick killing of the cockroach takes greater, spiritually transformative dimensions for this woman who, for no particular reason, opens herself to the experience of the encounter. Without calling this experience by the name of despair, Lispector’s text offers a poetic phenomenology of despair’s (self-)shattering and (self-)consuming qualities. While called on the scene here to interrupt Hegel’s narrative, *The Passion According to G.H.* thus resonates across a productive distance with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—not least because they both offer de-Christianized, perhaps even parodistic, versions of the Passion.²

**Wordplay**

In the introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel links the two conceptually rather disparate terms Verzweiflung (despair) and Zweifel (doubt, skepticism). As is often the case with Hegel, his attention to the linguistic material determines the thrust of his conceptual operation here. Added to the root zweifel are the prefix ver- (which can indicate the thorough accomplishment, but also the negation, of the action expressed in the verb it modifies) and the suffix -ung (English: “-ing,” which is regularly used to turn verbs into nouns, and which emphasizes the continuous aspect of the action expressed). Hegel uses the resulting word (ver-zweiflung) to present despair as a thoroughgoing self-doubt or a “self-consummating skepticism” (sich vollbringende Skeptizismus, § 78). He thereby draws attention to three characteristics that make him validate despair over
skepticism. First, with the use of the reflexive pronoun “self,” Hegel affirms the self-reflexivity of despair. By contrast, he critiques the skeptic for directing his negativity solely toward the outside—that is, for being skeptical about everything except his own power to negate. Second, Hegel considers despair to be more genuine and more effective than doubt. When skepticism pretends to negate accepted opinions and prejudices, it ends up reinforcing them. Despair actually carries through what skepticism only claims to do. Finally, Hegel underscores the nature of despair as process: despite despair’s effectiveness, the gerund “self-consummating” (vollbringend) presents despair as an ongoing movement that does not come to completion. Despair forms the self as constitutively incomplete, as torn between self-affirmation and self-negation without either one ever reaching its end.

As self-reflexive doubt or self-doubt, despair reveals that, while the essence of consciousness is negativity, this essence is only improperly called its nature. The self tends to want to claim a substantive essence for itself by protecting itself from its own negativity and employing its negativity solely against what is foreign to it. But consciousness cannot avoid becoming self-conscious. “To think does not mean to think as an abstract I, but as an I which at the same time signifies being-in-itself [An-sichsein], that is, it has the meaning of being as an object in its own eyes, or of conducting itself vis-à-vis the objective essence in such a way that its meaning is that of the being-for-itself of that consciousness for which it is” (§ 197). Thus, when consciousness negates the object, it cancels its own being-for-self as well. As soon as consciousness begins to genuinely think, it must realize that it truly is a self in despair.

In contrast to the genuine actuality and effectiveness of despair, Hegel describes doubt (Zweifel) as an incomplete despair (Verzweiflung). Descartes’ skeptic philosophy asks consciousness to “advance but very little” because it is concerned about security, safety, and certainty (Descartes 1979, II.5). Hegel’s Verzweiflung, on the other hand, leaps without falling back onto the originally presumed truth. According to Hegel’s analysis, the skeptic’s ineffective frenzy to denounce the vanity of all existence is driven by a “fear of truth.” The skeptic masks this fear with a “fiery enthusiasm for the truth [heisse Eifer für die Wahrheit]” and a general scorn for all appearance (§ 80). But in fact he even “hide(s) . . . behind the appearance” (sich . . . hinter dem Scheine verbergen, § 80, trans. modified). He needs illusions in order to demonstrate his scorn for them. Once he has abolished all untruth, he finds himself deprived of shelter. The skeptic then is on the verge of the abyss, exposed to the emptiness all around him. He freezes in terror until he manages to forget his situation and can begin anew: “Skepticism which ends with the abstraction of nothingness
or emptiness cannot progress any further from this point but must instead wait to see whether something new will come along and wait to see what it will be if indeed it is then to toss it too into the same empty abyss” (§ 79). Oblivious to his predicament, the skeptic performs an unconscious version of self-negation: a self-negation that does not consummate genuine self-doubt, but takes the form of naive self-contradiction.

Despair is an unending process. The subject in despair effectively negates itself and disarticulates the certainty of its own (positive or negative) opinions. Yet despair ruins the self without ever completely annihilating it. The self in despair will always contradict even its own negation; it will multiply, fly ahead of itself, and spoil the peace of its own death.

Mere negations are too simple for a hyperactive consciousness in despair. Despair does not lead into an abyss of nothingness because the desperate is too obsessively attentive not to find the trace of affirmation within negation that turns the entire operation around:

This nothingness is determinately the nothingness of that from which it has resulted. . . . That nothingness is itself thereby determinate and thereby has a content. . . . When the result is grasped as determinate negation, that is, when it is grasped as it is in truth, then at that point a new form has immediately arisen. (§ 79, trans. modified)

Consciousness “can find no peace” (keine Ruhe finden, § 80). Because it reflects upon itself, it is always beyond itself: “Consciousness . . . is . . . its concept, and as a result it immediately goes beyond the restriction, and, since this restriction belongs to itself, it goes beyond itself too” (§ 80). Precisely because it grasps itself, the self will never grasp itself completely. Precisely because it negates itself, the self will never negate itself completely. It is always one step ahead of itself, and thereby one step behind. The subject can never catch up with itself. It doubles and therefore it doubts itself. It drives itself to despair. Torn within, it will never fall apart. There is a tension between its different sides that will always keep them from coinciding while always holding them together. “But as the self . . . [the ‘I’] is the absolute elasticity” (die absolute Elastizität, § 517): a rubber subject.

Consciousness moves by the elasticity of its rubber nature. Despairing, consciousness ruins its current existence, but this self-loss never keeps it down for long. It always bounces back. It neither stands nor falls: it does both at the same time. Like a Weeble, consciousness wobbles, but it doesn’t fall down. Even though it feels heavy with despair, it always flips up again. This is not its own freely exercised decision. Consciousness simply does not have the choice to find peace on the ground. While
it keeps its head up high, it is ruled by its butt. And even though its butt is heavy, it touches the ground only ever so slightly, causing the head to always flip up again, without a purpose. Consciousness keeps staggering and bouncing back until, almost by accident, it realizes that it cannot stop. This does not mean that it has reached its goal. Despair is unending in the active sense; it undoes the internal teleology that some readers emphasize in the *Phenomenology*. When the protagonist realizes that it cannot stand still, all it has understood is that self-negation and being beside itself (*Außersichsein*) are part of what it is; they belong to its denaturalizing nature. On the path of despair, the protagonist “achieve[s] a cognitive acquaintance of what it is in itself”—a self in despair (§ 77).

Self-reflection leads into despair. But that is only the beginning. Doubtful, consciousness hesitates even to make one step—it is called to “advance but very little” (Descartes 1979, II.5). Desperate, the subject of the *Phenomenology* rolls on the wheel of determinate negations through its various shapes, on and on. At the end of the “path of despair” that is the *Phenomenology*, we fall even more thoroughly into a now utterly light-hearted despair. The movement of despair does not lead to the restoration of knowledge and self; it continues in the affirmation of restlessness and brokenness. The protagonist is crushed by the wheel, but it never falls apart completely. The self-reflexive energy of despair’s determinate negations holds together the various shreds or shapes of the *Phenomenology*’s subject. The protagonist is both singular and plural, for it is “an ‘I’ that is genuinely self-dividing [*sich wahrhaft unterscheidendes*] in its simplicity, that is, an I remaining-in-parity with itself [*sich gleichbleibendes*] within this absolute division” (§ 197, trans. modified). There is one protagonist throughout, and yet there are different “shapes” or “figures” of this protagonist—different shreds of the broken subject. While despair ruins the original and final unity, it also prevents the shreds from settling into a shape completely of their own. Each figure speculatively relates to other broken figures and to the ruined whole. The subject of the *Phenomenology* is a subject in despair that keeps changing its form and does so to no end (no purpose, no limit). Despair is unending (the self).

The desparate loses the legs that provide stability and begins to float slightly above ground; he self-divides and begins to hover lightly above himself. Despair lets consciousness lo(o)se: it unleashes consciousness’s (self-)destructive forces. This has its own pleasure: “a very difficult pleasure; but it *is* called pleasure” (Lispector 1994, i). When the path of despair opens onto the pleasure of despair, this pleasure consists in the difficult bliss of living the elastic tension between two irreconcilable yet unending pulls: to unify (without ever reaching complete unification) and to dismember (without ever reaching complete dissolution).
The word “despair” might carry too much pathos for the light-hearted despair that the *Phenomenology* produces. The term tends to leave us with our false imaginations of the worst. As an elastic transport—a “plastic” transport in Malabou’s sense or a “speculative” transport in Hegel’s sense—despair keeps its subject tumbling back and forth between its torturous and its pleasurable poles. The German word is perhaps more felicitous in that it draws us playfully into the double twist of *Verzwei* (two)-fl-ung. In the *Phenomenology*, despair doesn’t take itself too seriously. It rather has an air of irony, with its simultaneously affirmative and negative gestures. Consciousness remains quite unpossessed by despair; it never experiences an absolute depth of nothingness, but always different degrees of a despair that is *aufgehoben* from the onset.

Animal Despair

Now that we have touched on the pleasurable aspect of despair, it might not be surprising that Hegel describes as despair something that we usually consider to be an enjoyment, namely eating. His first explicit example of a despairing act is the literal consumption—the eating up—of that which has no stable being. Sense certainty—the first and most immediate figure of consciousness—must, based on its own notion of truth, conclude that sensuous objects are unreal. For consciousness, true reality means unchangeable, everlasting being. Therefore, the figure of consciousness that has staked all its certainty on the reality of sensuous things will have to despair:

What one can say to those who make assertions about the truth and reality of sensuous objects is that they should be sent back to the most elementary school of wisdom, namely, to the old Eleusinian mysteries of Ceres and Bacchus and that they have yet to learn the mystery of the eating of bread and the drinking of wine. This is so because the person who has been initiated into these secrets not merely comes to doubt the being of sensuous things. Rather, he is brought to despair of them. (§ 109)

Hegel in no way claims here that sensuous things are indeed unreal. Rather, he contends that a consciousness that views reality as everlasting being must come to the conclusion that sensuous things are not real. This does not preclude the protagonist/s of the *Phenomenology* from changing their understanding of what counts as truth. In fact, over
the course of a long process of self-education, consciousness will begin to appreciate the notion of a dynamic and transient truth. And then the status of sensuous things will be reevaluated.

This said, we can turn our attention to the puzzling fact that Hegel describes the consumption of sensuous objects—“the eating of bread and the drinking of wine,” for example—as a way of despair. As discussed in the previous section, Hegel maintains in the introduction that despair genuinely negates what skepticism merely “resolves” to annihilate. In the first chapter of the Phenomenology, despair’s actual negation takes the form of a physical destruction: the gobbling-up of the object. Such unmediated violence poses a problem for human taste. Therefore, those animals that are presumed to have no taste or culture or conscience are better at it:

Nor are the animals excluded from this wisdom [of the Eleusinian Mysteries]. To an even greater degree, they prove themselves to be the most deeply initiated in such wisdom for they do not stand still in the face of sensuous things, as if those things existed in themselves. Despairing of the reality of those things in the total certainty of the nullity of those things, they, without any further ado, simply help themselves to them and consume them [zehren sie auf]. Just like the animals, all of nature celebrates these revealed mysteries which teach the truth about sensuous things. (§ 109)

Hegel considers animals to be able to despair but unable to doubt. In speculative circularity, a step forward is a step backward. And the abstract or merely “natural” negation that death is turns into a life-giving force. The reason animals don’t doubt is that doubt requires a distancing from the object of doubt, a separation that creates the other as an object or Gegenstand—as something that stands stationary opposite to (gegen) the subject. But animals don’t freeze the frame and “do not just stand idly in front of sensuous things.” Instead, by eating the other, they affirm transience and interrelatedness. To eat the other means to abolish the separation between subject and object. Feuerbach will later coin the aphorism Der Mensch ist, was er isst—for Hegel, man is not the focus of this thought and the verb sein must be taken in the double (intransitive and transitive) sense: one is or becomes what one eats and one exists or brings to life what one eats.

Eating the other alive draws both parties into a mutual death-and-life-giving relation. Non-human animals can openly engage in a behavior that humans must keep a secret. They grasp the truth that remains a mystery to humans. Lispector suggests that the moral categories of victim
and perpetrator do not exist in the animal realm because they presuppose a distance between subject and object: “The most profound of murders: one that is a mode of relating, a way of one being existing the other being, a way of our seeing each other and being each other and having each other, a murder where there is neither victim nor perpetrator but instead a link of mutual ferocity” (Lispector 1994, 74). Partaking in the cycle of eating and being eaten, animals consume in despair. “Without any further ado,” they expose themselves to the whirl of consumption, and thus show that they not only grasp the truth of sensuous things, namely that sensuous beings (including animals) are transient, but that they also accept the higher, speculative notion of truth, namely that truth itself is dynamic. For these animals, transience does not mean unreality, and negation does not end in nothingness.

The element of self-reflexivity that distinguishes despair from doubt might not be immediately obvious in the context of the Phenomenology’s first chapter, on sense-certainty, but it becomes clearer against the background of Hegel’s discussion of life at the beginning of the Phenomenology’s second part, on self-consciousness. Here, Hegel describes the “cycle” (Kreislauf) of life as a “circulation” of (self-)consumption, where eating the other means eating oneself, and devouring means giving life ($\S$ 171).

Hegel first distinguishes between life in general and individual life. Organisms are individual forms of life, while life in general is unindividuated or de-individualized life matter (somewhat misleadingly, Hegel calls it “inorganic” to emphasize its opposition to the organism). Living organisms eat life matter. Here, consumption functions as separation: the organism “affirms itself . . . as preserving itself . . . by virtue both of its separation from its inorganic nature and by its consuming this inorganic nature” ($\S$ 171). The organism defines and sustains itself as individual living being over and against life in general. But when the living being eats life, “what is consumed is the essence” (was aufgezehrt wird, ist das Wesen, $\S$ 171). The organism isst, was es ist. It negates its own essence. It incorporates that against which it means to stand out, and thereby undoes the separation. Es ist, was es ist. In other words, it is now life in general or unorganized life matter that consumes the living individual. The negation is mutual in the rigorous sense that the act of eating unorganized life matter makes it impossible for the organism to maintain its own separate and self-sufficient individuality. Consumption means both the destruction of the other, and the ruin of the self.

But consumption also restores the self and gives life to mere substance: “The sublating of individual durable existence is, conversely, equally its own engendering. . . . Since it posits the other as being within
itself \([\text{das Andre in sich setzt}]\), it in that way sublates its simplicity . . . , i.e., it estranges that simplicity. This estrangement of the undifferentiated fluidity is the very positing of individuality" (§ 171). When life eats up the living—that is, when undivided and unorganized matter literally swallows \((\text{in sich setzt})\) the individual—it introduces difference into the general fluidity, which in turn individuates life. The mutual (self-)negation is a mutual (self-re-)production. Each part of the cycle of life has its essence in the other. In the end, it becomes clear that the distinction between life in general and individual life doesn’t hold: “The fluid element . . . is only \(\text{actual}\) as shape; and that it organizes itself \([\text{sich gliedert}]\) is . . . once again a dissolution (§ 171, trans. modified). To say that the living eats life matter and that, in the same act, life consumes the living is, therefore, just another way of saying that the living eats itself. Animals eat themselves and each other alive. “Alive,” then, has to be taken in both the attributive and the predicative sense. Animals eat living animals, and they make what they eat come alive.

Lispector offers a variation on this thought. The first-person narrator of *The Passion According to G.H.* has caught a cockroach between the two doors of a wardrobe. For G.H., the cockroach exemplifies eternal life, impersonal, unindividuated life matter that has survived millions of years on earth unchanged. Her description of the cockroach departs from the organicist, expressionist, and individualist paradigm: “A cockroach is an ugly, shiny being. The cockroach is inside out. No, no, I don’t mean that it has an inside and an outside; I mean that [it] is what it is. What it has on the outside is what I hide inside myself” (Lispector 1994, 69). The cockroach is what it is: undivided, divine being. Its absolute nakedness reveals without revelation since it knows not even the trace of a secret. G.H. keeps many secrets; she is capable of lying. In other words, G.H. has a heart. She is the proud proprietor of an interiority that allows her to “hide . . . behind the appearance” (§ 80). And yet she begins to see herself—inverted—in the cockroach: “What it has on the outside is what I hide inside myself.” Then G.H. watches how white pus slowly oozes out of the cockroach’s cracked body: “The cockroach’s pulp, which was its insides, raw matter that was whitish and thick and slow, was piling up on it” (Lispector 1994, 54). What was about to die is coming alive.

Mother, I only pretend to want to kill, but just see what I have cracked: I have cracked a shell! Killing is also forbidden because you crack the hard husk and you are left with viscous life. From the inside of the husk, a heart that is thick and white and living, like pus, comes out, Mother, blessed be you among cockroaches, now and in the hour of this, *my death of yours*, cockroach and jewel. (Lispector 1994, 86, my emphasis)
The whitish pulp—life in general—slowly dissolves the boundaries of the individual—that is, of G.H. G.H. sees herself in the cockroach. She has projected her heart onto the cockroach that has no heart but wears its insides out. “A heart that is thick and white and living, like pus, comes out” of the first-person narrator G.H.—Georg Hegel, perhaps—who abandons the attachment to interiority: “As if saying the word ‘Mother’ had released a thick, white part in me, . . . like after a violent attack of vomiting, my forehead was relieved” (Lispector 1994, 86). Cockroach and G.H. are each other. They eat each other and they vomit each other into existence—each one the mother of the other. G.H. has been swallowed by the neutral, non-individual eyes of the cockroach, and she tastes the white pus, the thick matter of life. G.H. despairs of the cockroach’s reality and, without any further ado, consumes it. Despair lets her lo(o)se. She abandons the defining traits of her persona, the adornments of her ego, the initials that mark her property.17 “My death of yours” is a resurrection to “a life that at last is not eluding me” (Lispector 1994, 57). The “suitcases with the engraved initials” of the narrator and the “hard husk” of the cockroach are but different pieces of dried surface from the same continuous fluidity of life (Lispector 1994, 107, 86). G.H.: two pieces from the alphabet, nothing behind it. And the cockroach has become an “I.” Like G and H, I is a letter to be exchanged. “I, neutral cockroach body, I with a life that at last is not eluding me because I finally see it outside myself—I am the cockroach” (Lispector 1994, 57). I am the external interior; I “remains the same,” I has survived millions of years on earth unchanged because it is empty—“the proper empty core of subjectivity” (Žižek 2006, 227).

Desperate Analysis

By eating each other and themselves alive, animals grasp and share (in) some truth of sensuous beings. For Hegel, eating is a way of thinking.18 “All of nature, like the animals, celebrates these open Mysteries” (Hegel), this “link of mutual ferocity” (Lispector). But man likes to part from the feast. While animals “prove themselves to be the most deeply initiated in [the] wisdom” of the mysteries of despair, man emerges from the revel of mutually consuming reflection by way of a peculiar kind of stupidity (§ 109). He fixes his gaze, wherever he looks, on the dull but stable opacity of self-identity.

Identification is a unilateral reflection that interrupts the circle of mutual reflection. It relies on the rational work of the understanding: “The act of parting [Scheiden] is the force and labor of the under-
standing, the most astonishing and the greatest of all the powers, rather, which is the absolute power” (§ 32, trans. modified). Men—including Hegel—take great pride in this rational faculty, which nevertheless stops short of the speculative movement of reflection that animals are capable of. By cultivating the power of distance and analysis, man protects himself against the destabilizing effect of despair’s “being-of-itself-outside-itself-in-the-other” (Nancy 2002, 35). He refuses to join the round, go in circles, and lose his head in despair.

The rational withdrawal from and dissection of the whirl of life has a deadly ring to it (Scheiden also means “to depart this life,” “to die”): “It is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy . . . of the pure I. Death, if that is what we wish to call that non-actuality, is the most fearful thing of all, and to keep and hold fast to what is dead requires only the greatest force” (§ 32). The source of man’s power is his ability to analyze, that is, to detach elements from the fluidity of life and to assign object status to these elements that as such really don’t exist. “That . . . what is bound to other actualities and only exists in their context should attain an isolated freedom and its own proper existence is the effect of the tremendous power of the negative, of the energy . . . of the pure I” (§ 32, trans. modified). By virtue of hypnotic fixation—facing death or “look[ing] the negative in the face”—man gives this non-actuality a face in the first place (ibid.). By fixing his gaze on abstractions, he confers upon them an objective identity: “This lingering is the magical power that converts it into being” (ibid.). The same prosopopoeial operation is also applied to the one who uses it: the “pure I” is itself an abstraction with no actuality. It comes into being by way of a concentrated self-contemplation, a form of autosuggestion. Through the magic of the understanding, the rational “I” generates itself. That is to say, this epigenetic operation of man takes the shape not so much of a self-birth as of a suicide. By giving itself its own, authentic, Heideggerian death—and thus by actively resisting “my death of yours”—the “I” posits itself. Facing death, man gives himself a face.

With the declaration, “to keep and hold fast to what is dead requires only the greatest force,” Hegel contributes to the human conceits of grandeur. Man likes to see himself as the superior animal and Hegel locates this superiority in the ability to keep a cool head. For the sake of maintaining his self-conceit, man abhors nothing more than to “roam about as a throng of madly rapturous women, the untamed revel [ungebändigte Taumel] of nature in self-conscious shape” (§ 723, trans. modified). Hegel here combines women, animals (via the adjective “untamed”), and gods (Dionysus, Demeter) in one dizzying semantic field of bodies in ecstasy that threaten the authority of the rational “I.” Lispec-
tor helps us to reclaim this potentially misogynous combination for a phenomenology of the intensity of neutral life that is declined in the feminine: “Living life instead of living one’s own life is forbidden. It is a sin to go into divine matter. And that sin has an inexorable punishment: the person who dares go into that secret, in losing her individual life, disorganizes the human world” (Lispector 1994, 136). Neutral life or life in general, which is indifferent to the individual’s life and death, cannot be owned; its ecstasy is improper and unpossessed. Lispector calls this impropriety of living neutral life “immund” (immundo in Brazilian Portuguese). With this word she retrieves connotations of “unclean” (in the sense that some religions place a ban on eating certain animals), but also of “unadorned” (the Latin adjective mundus can refer to a woman’s elegant dress and jewelry), and of “chaotic” (the Latin noun mundus means “world”; it translates the Greek cosmos, which represents the world as an orderly arrangement; the antithesis of cosmos is chaos). To “go into” the unclean nakedness of chaotic life is a sin that can neither be attributed to nor borne by an individual, because the individual life gets lost in the process. The punishment for this sin therefore strikes not the individual, but human society as a whole: it “disorganizes the human world.” Living neutral life instead of living one’s own life ruins the intelligibility of the anthropocentric world. The cosmos becomes unpredictable. We begin to stagger and fall into despair.

In order to prevent such stagger and remain in control as best as possible, man parts and analyzes. And yet, it is precisely this rational analysis that produces the fragmentation and despair of the whole. Lingering with the negative, the understanding gives separate existence to what in itself exists only as a passing moment in a fluid movement. The analysis was meant as an intellectual exercise, a rational self-discipline, and a kind of self-cultivation (Bildung). But here, epigenesis does not enable a claim to absoluteness; rather, it ruins the absolute. Here, the stabilizing effect of rationality speculatively joins the shattering effect of rationality. Against its intention, the understanding creates despair by scattering the dynamic whole. And this is precisely the reason why Hegel praises the work of the understanding. Rational analysis brings about the disruption and dismemberment that keep moving speculative, despairing self-reflection. The locus of agency in man’s “act of parting” thus turns out to be rather uncertain (§ 32). As doer, man is done. Avoiding despair, he falls into despair. Pentheus, who keeps his distance from Dionysian revelry, will have his head torn off by his mother. Like him, every king will lose his head on the Phenomenology’s path of despair: Hegel will break anyone who “asks for a royal road to science” (§ 70).

Of course, the reader rejects such violence. Similarly, the protago-
nists of the Phenomenology resist despair’s unending movement. They do not lightheartedly give themselves over to be transported by despair. Instead, each figure of consciousness develops a “tremendous power” (ungeheure Macht, § 32) to hold fast to the abstraction that it is (compared to the whole). In the face of these resistances and since, according to his own diagnosis, “it is much more difficult to set fixed thoughts into fluid motion than it is to bring sensuous existence into such fluidity,” Hegel has developed complex strategies to break shapes of consciousness and shatter readers’ expectations (§ 33). In the following, I will discuss two of them—the breaking of the phrenologist’s judgment and the breaking of the hard heart.

Lacerating Judgment

Phrenology, which is the attempt to scientifically determine a person’s character based on the shape of her skull, emerges within the sphere of reason—more specifically, of “observing reason.” The sphere of reason is animated by the assumption that the objective, material world is foreign to the world of the mind: “It is the concept of this entire sphere . . . that thinghood is the being-for-itself of spirit itself” (§ 359). This not only means that the mind has access to the external world and that it finds its own rules of intelligibility confirmed in nature. It also means that it is perfectly rational to regard spirit—and by consequence any individual consciousness—as a thing, for example, a bone.

How does the phrenologist model of observing and classifying human subjects emerge? Despite the fact that “observing reason” is happily reconciled with external reality, reason develops a strong introversion. For its own epistemic purposes, it creates a stable opposition and law-governed relation between an inner world and an outer world. That is to say, it “creates the law that says the outer is the expression of the inner” (§ 262). The law of expression arrests the self-moving concept and relegates it to interiority. Reason here clings to an inwardsness that it has inherited from the dialectic of the understanding. When the understanding noticed the transience of the empirical world, it developed the image (Vorstellung) of a supersensible “inner of things” (§ 142). At that time, self-consciousness identified with this interiority, and now reason, still beholden to the understanding, cannot quite live up to its own idea that the (external) real is rational and the rational is (externally) real. Instead, it takes external reality as an expression of internal reality. The demand for expression perpetuates, within the anti-metaphysical per-
perspective of reason, the metaphysical stance of the understanding—the “image [Vorstellung] of appearance and appearance’s inner” (§ 165, trans. modified).

The theory of rational existence—that the rational exists in objective form—governs all of reason’s assumptions, including its assumption of an inner life. The law of expression dictates that there can be no inwardness that is not linked to outwardness. So reason ends up with a rather problematic, even at times downright silly, and yet extremely influential image of interiority. Rational consciousness imagines the internal as coming in a solid and fixed, that is to say, essentially external shape: “the inner as such must have an outer being and a shape just like the outer as such, for the inner . . . is itself posited as existing and as available for observation” (§ 264). This reification of inner life makes reason less spiritual than spirit because the “inner being of spirit” remains “spiritless” when it is “interpreted as a fixed . . . being” (§ 340). In the sphere of reason, the truth criterion of unchangeability or timelessness, which has governed all previous shapes of consciousness from sense certainty to the unhappy consciousness, is once again used as the measure to test certainty, and once again it will fail this protagonist.

The proper response when one finds oneself evaluated based on phrenology would be to bash in the critic’s head: “the retort here would really have to go as far as smashing the skull of the person who makes a statement like that” (§ 339). This would be appropriate in the sense that it would respond to the allegations on the phrenologist’s terms. Somebody who has reduced the dynamic life of spirit to something as rigid and random as a boss of the skull might not be able to understand otherwise than through hard evidence that his skull is not as solid as he thought. One would have to break his skull “in order to demonstrate to him in a manner as palpable as his wisdom that for a person a bone is nothing in-itself and is even less his true actuality” (§ 339).

And yet this mimetic identification—responding to the phrenologist on his own terms—is not sophisticated enough to set the phrenologist on the path of despair. Doing violence to his body will not move his thoughts. As mentioned earlier, “it is much more difficult to set fixed thoughts into fluid motion than it is to bring sensuous existence into such fluidity” (§ 33). I have suggested that Hegel beat in many a head and broke many a bone with his Phenomenology of Spirit. The text certainly registers that spirit’s self-knowledge comes at the expense of the bone health of its protagonist, who, in a moment of “truest insight about itself,” has the “feeling that it has been rolled upon the wheel through all the stages of its existence and that every bone in its body has been broken” (§ 538, trans. modified). At this point, it is time to attend again
to the self-reflexivity of despair, that is to say, to the fact that there is no transitive sense of despair. In the case of the phrenologist, while smashing his head might be warranted by his own logic, he would still experience this negation as coming from the outside and therefore it would not bring about the self-doubt that is despair. And indeed, Hegel doesn’t quite break the phrenologist’s skull.

Instead, Hegel sympathizes with the phrenologist and takes his judgments seriously. There is of course a certain irony in Hegel’s sympathy, but that is nothing new. A mix of sincere identification and ironic distance characterizes all the discussions of the various shapes of consciousness/spirit. As I have suggested in the introduction, the *Phenomenology* presents the philosophems of its protagonist/s in free indirect discourse—oscillating often imperceptibly between the protagonist’s voice and the phenomenologist’s voice. Hegel uses the freedom afforded by this style of thought representation in order to gain and communicate an intimate knowledge of perspectives. Such intimacy would be precluded by a more straightforward approach. Hegel points out that “the raw instinct of self-conscious reason will reject out of hand [unbesehen verwerfen] such a science” as phrenology (§ 340; trans. modified). But the Hegelian phenomenologist refrains from crude reasoning and outright rejection and, instead, approaches the phrenologist in a more cultivated manner: he takes the perspective of phrenology, he speaks its language, he ventriloquizes its thoughts. And after he has done so in detail, he introduces a referential shift when he declares that, even though this is not what observing reason in the shape of phrenology means to say, “what in truth [it] has been saying is expressed in the statement that the being of spirit is a bone” (§ 343, trans. modified). Here Hegel doesn’t speak directly with the voice of phrenology anymore, but takes the liberty to reflect on the phrenologist position and to distill it down to one tangible verdict. Hegel won’t be trapped by the intentional fallacy. It doesn’t matter what the phrenologist means to say; his pedestrian ideas have already disqualified him. What matters is what his position actually comes down to, namely “that the being of spirit is a bone.” In keeping with his rejection of expressionism, Hegel detaches the judgment from the person who pronounced it. He separates thought and mind. As soon as the thought is no longer taken as an expression of a mind, he can treat both—the judgment and the phrenologist—as things, to be broken. Rather than literally bashing in his head, Hegel demonstrates that the phrenologist doesn’t know what he is saying, that he is indeed the bonehead he idiotically claims he is, that he is indeed an abstract thing without self-awareness.

Then again, Hegel’s use of free indirect discourse gives him the liberty to swing all the way back to a sympathizing identification with
the phrenologist. Hegel gives him credit, suggesting that the future of spirit harkens back to the phrenologist when he feels some embarrassment about his position. The thing that is the phrenologist’s mind knows embarrassment—a promising fact, one would think: “Out of a kind of natural honesty which lies at a deeper level of self-conscious spirit,” the phrenologist “conceals from [him]self the shamefulness of the naked, conceptless thought [begrifflosen, nackten Gedankens]” that underlies his position (§ 345, trans. modified). And yet, the phrenologist’s sheepishness only drives his mind further into the traps of un-self-reflection. Toning down “the crudeness [das Grelle] of the proposition,” that the being of spirit is a bone, he inadvertently obscures the significance of his stance (§ 345, trans. modified).

Since the phrenologist either doesn’t know what he is saying or is too embarrassed to state the naked truth, the phenomenologist has to carve out the actual shape of the phrenologist position: “what in truth the foregoing has been saying is expressed in the statement that the being of spirit is a bone.” Now Hegel can begin to break this thing. First its referent: what, a bone?!—In order to tear the statement to shreds, the phenomenologist simply needs to point out “that for a person a bone is nothing in-itself.” A bone is nothing essential and certainly not the true expression of a mind—“even less his true actuality” (§ 339). That was easy.

But let’s not get carried away by the “raw instinct of self-conscious reason”! Let’s linger a while longer with the most dazzling verdict, “that the being of spirit is a bone.” The sphere of reason is animated by two contradicting premises, that of rational existence and that of interiority. Hegel’s attack on phrenology is leveled not so much against the idea that spirit could be a thing as against reason’s investment in interiority. The discussion of phrenology serves to show that reason remains utterly spiritless when it seeks to satisfy its desire for unchanging and solid reality by looking inward. To project interiority as the abstract opposite of exteriority means to reify it, to turn it into a dead thing and thus—against the intention of the discourse of interiority—to turn it into something external. The idea of an “inner being of spirit” renders spirit “as a fixed spiritless being”—and that is why thinkers belonging to the sphere of reason are faced with the conundrum that, to put it bluntly, there seems to be no such thing as inner life: whenever we can put our finger on it, it is already dead.25

But this is not the end of Hegel’s discussion of phrenology. Given the paradoxical, or rather, the speculative workings of Hegel’s Aufhebung, his attack on the (inner) thing is not a destruction, but a spiritualization of the (outer) thing. The speculative reading of the proposition “that the being of spirit is a bone” reveals that even “externality . . . in the sense
of a dead thing” is indeed spiritually animated and presents “the outer immediate actuality of spirit” (§ 343). Not just the organism, not just language—where one might expect a certain impersonal capacity for self-reflection and self-negation—but any simple object, even a bone, has a kind of mind of its own. Rational self-consciousness’s declared “certainty of being all reality” may seem egocentric (§ 230), but the flip side of this worldview is the contention that all reality is self-conscious, including such utterly objectifiable and seemingly inert matter as the boss of a bone: “The concept of this image [Vorstellung] is that reason is to itself all thinghood, even purely objective thinghood” (§ 346, trans. modified). In the distilled verdict of phrenology, we have thus found the most concrete and spiritual actualization of reason’s governing premise of rational existence.

The spiritualization of things completely depends on the reading of the judgment “that the being of spirit is a bone.” If read at face value, it turns the reader into a spiritless bonehead who pisses away his capacities for self-reflection. But read speculatively, the judgment negates and spiritualizes itself. When, in her discussion of defenses against hate speech, Riley quotes Hegel saying that the aim is to “have done with the thing altogether,” she knows that treating the thing as a thing or the other as an object does not present an effective strategy, especially if the goal is destruction (Riley 2005, 25). The Phenomenology famously demonstrates that the object must negate itself in order for the subject to be able to have done with it: “on account of the self-sufficiency of the object [I] can only achieve satisfaction if the object itself effects the negation in it” (§ 175).

The proper response when one finds oneself evaluated by phrenology is, then, to make room for and respect the freedom of the judgment to negate itself. This can be accomplished by a not-quite-straightforward reading of the judgment. It is therefore absolutely no accident that Hegel renders the phrenologist judgment about spirit in indirect speech. From the slightly removed and oblique vantage point of indirect discourse, the phenomenologist allows the thought of phrenology to develop its peculiar form so that it can appear as “the infinite judgment that the self is a thing—a judgment which sublates itself” (§ 344). Read categorically or crudely as positive judgments, the propositions “the self is a thing” or “spirit is a bone” are easily rejected. But read as infinite judgments, they are actually true. It is true that underdeveloped forms of reason (like phrenology) have an ossifying notion of interiority. At the same time, this very insight sublates the factual truth—the infinite judgment negates itself—and transports us to a more sophisticated conception of spirit.

The larger truth of this infinite judgment is that spirit is indeed
a thing in space and time, but a speaking and self-reflecting thing—or rather, an infinite number of things that communicate (with) and reflect each other and themselves. This truth can barely be conveyed in the propositional form of a judgment. The infinite judgment presents a borderline judgment. It hovers precariously and emotionally at the edge of its own self-negation by adjoining two terms that cannot be logically related. Spirit and Bone are like apples and oranges. There is no expressive continuity between them but simply a gap of negativity. They are so unrelated that the identity posited by the copula cannot be achieved via subordination (which is the usual procedure by which the judgment identifies what appears different). 28 Instead, the infinite judgment says that the abstract is the abstract: spirit, understood abstractly as substance, is a bone, understood abstractly as a solid being. In this very judgment—“the abstract is the abstract”—each abstract thing or term reflects itself in the other abstract thing or term. Through this self-reflection, they become “concrete.” We are witnessing the process of mutual acknowledging between bone and spirit. Passing through the infinite judgment, one term becomes affected by the other: Spirit emerges as ossified and Bone as spiritualized. It is hard to tell them apart at this point. One is entangled in the other. Neither being nor self-consciousness can be taken as a fixed term anymore; instead one must juggle both as dynamic subjects constantly in the process of self-dissolution and self-generation. The entanglement of spirit and bone, ideality and materiality, inwardness and outwardness forms an emotional thought—the self-reflective emotionality of the Bacchanalian revel “where no member is not drunk” (§ 47, trans. modified).

Come Break My Heart

While on the one hand the protagonist breaks bone after bone in the course of the Phenomenology, on the other hand it hardens more and more. Consciousness is scarred and scared. Its scars are traces of a loss that it is afraid to endure again, traces of a fear that it hasn’t really felt (because it was unbearable) but of which it becomes more and more afraid. Its fear grows with every new scar pulling it together tighter and tighter until the rubbery pulsating mass petrifies, and consciousness takes the shape of a “hard heart.” The “hard heart” is the last figure of consciousness in the Phenomenology. It dialectically emerged from the figure of the “beautiful soul,” which had no substance to speak of.

The very impossibility of experiencing despair is one of the main
characteristics of despair. Despair quite literally breaks the subject by dividing it from its own experience: “unendurable is the measureless interval separating me from suffering. Suffering such that I cannot bear it is this interval, this gaping void dividing me from suffering” (Smock 2003, 8). The inability to despair drives one to despair. “I whom pain has liquidated before I even begin to undergo it, have always yet to endure it” (ibid.). What Smock formulates here so poignantly in dialogue with Blanchot, helps us to understand the paradox that the despairing protagonist of the Phenomenology faces. As a result of its missed encounter with despair, consciousness learns to fear despair. It fights despair toward the end of its journey even more than in the beginning. The final figure of consciousness in the Phenomenology displays the toughest resistance to the self-negation of despair.

With the glue of an extreme self-will, the hard heart keeps itself together. Unwilling to open, it “rejects any continuity with the other” (§ 667). As if it were casting pearls before swine, it “refus[es] to throw itself away against another” (sich gegen einen andern wegzweifen) and, “mutely keeping itself within itself,” it throws but stinging predicates (not even full judgments) at the other (§ 667, trans. modified). “In crying out ‘base,’ ‘vile,’ and so on against the hypocrisy” of the other, it keeps the other at a distance, and “repels this community” (§ 663, trans. modified; § 667). The verbal projectiles allow the hard heart to remain firm in its position. While the arrows are flying, it doesn’t budge an inch. “Stiff-necked,” it insists on its judgment about the other and resists any turn the judgment might take when the other receives and interprets it (§ 667). “This was not what was meant by the judgment—Quite the contrary!” is the response implied by the hard heart’s posture when the other accepts the judgment to enter its own flesh and then returns it, expecting the hard heart to touch the blood-smeared dart again (§ 667). The fact that the other accepts the accusation instead of fending it off cannot move the hard heart: “Following on the admission of the one who is evil—I am so—there is no reciprocation of the same confession” (§ 667, trans. modified). Stubbornly and self-righteously, the beautiful soul turned hard heart holds its head high where the air is thin but pure, and where it doesn’t have to smell the baseness of the other.

Opposite the hard heart Hegel positions a consciousness that, in full knowledge of the contingency of all standards, nevertheless finds it important to answer a call to action. This figure of consciousness is clearly the wisest, freest (in both senses of freedom, as self-determination and as self-abandon), and most plastic single manifestation of spirit in the entire Phenomenology.

The acting consciousness acknowledges the judging consciousness
by pronouncing the other half of its judgment; it finishes the other’s speech act. While the beautiful soul only throws predicates around, the other completes its sentences by saying, “I am so” (Ich bins, § 667, trans. modified). Together, they form statements such as “‘bad!’ . . . ‘I am so’” or “‘vile!’ . . . ‘I am so.’” Hegel presents us here with a dance of shared speech. The judgment (Urteil) is literally divided (geteilt) between the two figures. The bits of judgment and their corresponding configurations of consciousness enjoy a certain kind of independence, but each also reaches out to the other and complements the other. Ich bins—which can also be translated as “it’s me”—can be heard then as a sign of familiarity. One answers the question “who is it?” with “it’s me” only within the horizon of a trusted intimacy. These two know each other so well that one can complete the other’s sentences. One can mirror the other’s steps as they move across the dance floor. One is the protagonist of the Phenomenology and the other the phenomenologist. They have moved together through so many life stages of spirit at this point that they know each other inside out. Along the path, the phenomenologist has again and again furnished the predicates for the protagonist’s naive propositions of being, and the protagonist has ever anew realized in action what the phenomenologist could only abstractly posit.

Now it is as if the judging consciousness does not hear the pronouncements of intimacy. It does not react. It never receives the love letters that the acting consciousness sends. It is too set on denying (itself) pleasure, too judgmental. When the other says “it’s me; I am so,” the judging consciousness hears a self-deprecating admission of guilt. It sees a slobbering dog that gets so excited at the slightest attention that it is unable to differentiate between love and maltreatment. “This was not what was meant by the judgment”; it’s not love, “quite the contrary!”—it’s hatred and disgust, says the hard-hearted judge (§ 667). Meanwhile the drooling puppy eagerly acknowledges, “I am base” and “I am vile,” because any interpellation—no matter how degrading—offers at least a minimal amount of recognition.

Of course, the acting consciousness doesn’t mean its admission of guilt as a definitive and final account of its character. It means it as a contextual response.—“Yes, I can see why you think that I am vile and, yes, I think it is true that I am vile, but that is not all that I am, plus, we all have vile aspects or moments.” Here, the beautiful soul refuses to follow. But the other has just outed himself as a Romantic ironist. When he says, “I am base” and “I am vile,” he means what he says and does not mean it at the same time. He states a passing truth. He simultaneously affirms and negates that he is base or vile. That is to say, he puts the emphasis on the subject when he says Ich bins (I am so). Within the coercive parameters
of interpellation, the “I” insists on its right to bind or unbind the pieces that make these sentences. In no way does it submit to an essentializing character statement.

But whether we see ourselves as drooling puppies or, more flattering, as Romantic ironists—how can we get the hard heart to admit a mistake and to ask for forgiveness? How do we facilitate another’s despair? Perhaps the one who resists despair is precisely not the other. “We”—that is probably the phenomenologist/s. But if these last two figures of consciousness in the Phenomenology figure the relation between phenomenologist and protagonist, the acting consciousness (the wisest and freest figure) would be the protagonist—it is the one involved in the action. And the phenomenologist is revealed here to be the judgmental hard heart who since the beginning of the story has done nothing but “cry out ‘base,’ ‘vile,’ and so on against” each and every incarnation of natural consciousness. Such phenomenologists, it turns out, do not learn much because they resist transport; they miss the love letters because they refuse to acknowledge (to think-along-with).

A pure heart can hardly love. In order to reach out to another, it must “let go of its own simplicity and rigid unchangeableness” (§ 786). If nothing else helps, it will need to be broken: “its one-sided unacknowledged [nicht anerkanntes] judgment must be broken in a way that for the former, its one-sided, unacknowledged [nicht anerkanntes] existence of particular being-for-itself had to be broken” (§ 669, trans. modified). Mutual acknowledging means the death of the solitary, unmoved being-for-self: “The former dies back from its being-for-itself and empties itself [entäußert sich] and confesses; the latter disavows the rigidity of its abstract universality and thereby dies back from its lifeless self and its unmoved universality” (§ 796). But—just as with the phrenologist—force won’t produce lovers. Since its hard-heartedness is an effect of its denial of its broken-heartedness, all one can do is to show that the beautiful soul is not as “lifeless” as it appears, that there is a crack that runs through the hard heart and that this crack makes transport possible, and finally that the judgment is in fact already doubled and broken in half and thus shared and moving, and that this is where the beauty lies.

At this late point in the phenomenological game, consciousness knows itself as continuously changing. This knowledge is its power: “conscience is this power because it knows the moments of consciousness to be moments, and as their negative essence, it rules over them” (§ 641). Through self-knowledge, consciousness rises above its ever-changing manifestations to find a lasting self-identity in the ethereal essence of its ever-changing forms. Whatever material reality consciousness gives itself, either in acting or in speaking, has no importance for it. For itself,
it has its essence in spirit—but it understands spirit in a non-speculative, un-Hegelian way as the distilled negativity of the “I” that is devoid of any material impurities. The beautiful soul grounds itself in its conscience. Conscience defines itself as the “assurance [that] assures that consciousness is convinced that its conviction is the essence” (§ 653, trans. modified). “This absolute certainty into which substance has been dissolved” is consciousness’s last bastion against despair (§ 657).

And yet the bastion is obviously on the verge of falling apart. The self-reflexivity that guarantees the absoluteness of the certainty of conscience on the one hand, disintegrates it on the other hand. The verbal doublings of an “assurance [Versicherung] [that] assures [versichert]” and a being “convinced [überzeugt] [of] its conviction [Überzeugung]” can sidetrack the tight-knit circle of conscience. Each doubling forms two lips ready to open and to eat conscience alive. Absolute certainty is self-consuming: the “absolute self-consciousness within which consciousness drowns [versinkt]” because “substance has been dissolved,” this absolute self-consciousness will not be able to remain pure (§ 657, trans. modified).

Holding on to its clear conscience, the beautiful soul inhabits the zone in between figurations. It refuses to take shape and thus becomes a figure for the phenomenologist who, of course, doesn’t take shape in the text, either, but emerges in the form of the first-person plural around the transitions from one figure of the protagonist to another, that is, around the zones in between figurations. As if it knew that it is the last figure of consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, and therefore has no new life to escape to but can only fall apart, the beautiful soul refuses to “commit itself to the absolute division [Unterschied]” and to expose itself to the alienating forces of reality (§ 658, trans. modified). And yet its spirituality overlaps with materiality. The utterly beautiful transparency of this soul takes shape as the absolute impenetrability of a heart of glass. Not only is the hard heart a thing, but it is a broken thing—glued together with its last reserves of clotted, rubbery blood. The crack is still noticeable and threatens to open any time. Only the softness of a $d$ holds the pieces of the hard heart together. A $d$ so hard to pronounce, so easily rendered as a $t$ (at least for me), that it betrays the latent doubletalk. It doubles the heart and makes it fall apart. One who heard the crack at the heart of the hard could give it a start. Unexpectedly, the beautiful soul turned hard heart might “let go of its own simplicity and rigid unchangeableness,” forgive evil, and begin to move out of its cardiac arrest (§ 786). It’s in the cards that, sooner or later, the heart won’t be able to ward off its breaking. Yet how this break comes about will be decided only by accident.

Unexpectedly, “acknowledgment [Erkennen] bursts forth as the *Yes* between these extreme terms” (§ 786, trans. modified). Acknowledgment
is not foreseeable. There is no guarantee that it will be reciprocated. When the other “repels this community,” the rejection certainly arouses “the utmost outrage [höchste Empörung] of the self-certain spirit” (§ 667, trans. modified). Even so, acknowledgment responds to no demand. Acknowledging is structurally mutual but, from the perspective of one, it can happen only accidentally. Using violence to break the hard heart won’t turn glass into flesh, and the blood that might flow will only be spent. Instead, in an instant of lightheartedness, a moment off guard, the hard heart falls apart and a Yes escapes the shell. Consciousness affirms the other, acknowledges the other, and feels an unexpected pleasure. It falls in love. And the scar opens.

Narrative (Dis)organization

We encounter the shattering force of despair also on the narrative level of the Phenomenology of Spirit. The narrative of the Phenomenology can be described as a path of despair because despair—in this case the text’s despair—breaks the dynamic “whole” that is “the true” into separate chapters, shapes of consciousness, or “stations” (Stationen).

None of the Phenomenology’s chapters or figures of consciousness alone speaks the truth in an absolute sense that transcends all conditions. Their truth and reality are relative and, in the end, none of them can stand on their own. And yet each shape of consciousness does present an iteration or instantiation of spirit and as such can claim a certain station and level of independence. This relative self-sufficiency of the different shapes produces a range of different activities undertaken in the interest of self-preservation. Not one shape of consciousness wants to change. Rather, each shape reacts to any potentially life-changing experience with an effort to integrate this experience into its existing set of ontological insights. The result is a narrative extension of each shape and of each chapter that makes it extremely hard for the reader to keep in view the whole of spirit’s story of formation.

From the perspective of the protagonist, survival would be guaranteed if it were the consciousness of a transcendent and stable truth. That is to say, consciousness resists not only its own despair but also spirit’s despair: it fears the truth that is self-negating: “The fear of truth may lead consciousness to hide both from itself and from others behind the appearance” (§ 80, trans. modified). Or, as the narrator of The Passion According to G.H. puts it, “I’m terrified of that profound disorganization . . . I know that I can walk only when I have two legs. But I sense the irrelevant loss of the third one, and it horrifies me, it was that leg that made
me able to find myself, and without even having to look” (Lispector 1994, 3–4). As we have seen in our discussion of fear in the previous chapter, whenever a figure of consciousness has reached a point where it cannot integrate its experiences any further, it loses consciousness and slips into oblivion. On the other side of this death, a new figure emerges. The resulting gaps in the narrative tear the body of the text apart. We might want to call it the cunning of spirit (as opposed to the cunning of reason) that the protagonist/s’ efforts to resist despair and to preserve themselves intact—through post-traumatic amnesia if necessary—effectuate despair on the larger level of spirit’s self-lacerations.

From the perspective of spirit, none of the figures of consciousness can lay claim to absolute knowledge, since “the truth is the whole. However, the whole is only the essence completing itself through its own development” (§ 20). Truth is, thus, achieved only in the narrative exposition of spirit, which exposes spirit:

This exposition [Darstellung] . . . can be taken to be the path of natural consciousness which presses forward towards true knowledge, or it can be taken to be the path of the soul as it wanders through the series of the ways it takes shape, as if those shapes were stations laid out for it by its own nature so that it . . . might purify itself into spirit. (§ 77, trans. modified)

The word “stations” certainly echoes the Stations of the Cross. The quote, then, figures the Phenomenology as the passion of the Christ: the suffering of the phenomenal aspect of God as he goes through the drawn-out and torturous process of purifying physical existence into the Holy Spirit. This is the Passion according to G. W. F. Hegel—according to most of his readers. But the description of the Phenomenology’s path as purifying the soul into the life of the spirit also resonates with Hegel’s description of the rites of the Eleusinian mysteries: “This cultus . . . is based on cheerfulness or serenity. The path of purification is one that is traveled physically [durchwandert] . . . . The physical traveling [Durchwanderung] of the road [counts] as an actually accomplished purification of the soul, an absolution” (Hegel 1987, 180). The cult of Demeter and Dionysus taught its followers the secrets of death, resurrection, and life. Traveling through a series of stations on the road to Eleusis, the Mystai were effectively absolved from the terror or panic (Pan is a companion of, and at times another name for, Dionysus) that death induces.

The myths of Dionysus’s double birth and repeated dismemberment, and of Persephone’s rape-rapture-capture by the underworld and periodic reemergence from it remind Hegel of spirit’s despairing mediation with itself.
The chief basis of the representations of Ceres and Proserpine, Bacchus and his train, was the universal principle of Nature; representations mainly bearing on the vital force and its metamorphoses. An analogous process to that of Nature, Spirit has also to undergo; for it must be twice-born, i.e. abnegate itself [sich in sich selbst negieren]; and thus the representations given in the mysteries called attention... to the nature of Spirit. (Hegel 1956, 248)

In the *Phenomenology*, spirit is not just born twice, but with each transition to a new chapter and a new figure of consciousness, spirit is born anew. This parceling out of spirit’s truth “may readily induce the traveler to lose sight of the road altogether in the course of... its bends and distracting stations [zerstreuende Stationen]” (Hegel 1971, 79, trans. modified).

Since Hegel superimposes the path of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the passion of Christ, and the initiation rites of the Eleusinian mysteries, I take the liberty to add *The Passion According to G.H.* In all four cases, some body will have been dismembered and consumed. Christ breaks the bread that is his body and gives it to his disciples to eat. Dionysus is torn to shreds by the Titans and Zeus asks Semele to drink his heart. G.H. cracks and tastes the cockroach. The readers of the *Phenomenology* are supposed to digest and re-collect the stations of this book. It’s always us, the mortals who are to swallow the pieces. But can we make them whole?

According to one topos of our cultural imaginary, true love can heal fragmentation: “To reconstruct ‘this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards...’ needs a special love... ‘Break a vase,’ says Walcott, ‘and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love that took its symmetry for granted when it was whole’” (Hartman 1996, 111–12). This statement modulates the deep-seated idea that desire is fed by lack, that love grows with labor, and that we therefore love the imperfect more than the perfect. But it also presupposes the idea of a proper shape (genuine and symmetrical) and bespeaks a strong investment in its restoration. Because the commitments to lack and to integrity are equally strong, this topos presents love as the desire to heal (in both the transitive and the intransitive sense) that never ends because it constantly reproduces the wound as the condition of its own continued possibility. Such love puts the burden again on us, asking us to unify emotional energies and to focus them exclusively on the one god, the one person, or the one work of philosophy.

While Hegel’s earlier theological writings call upon love—in particular the love of Jesus—to unify and reconcile what is disrupted, the *Phenomenology* invites us to disperse emotional energy in the negativity-
sharing movement of a lighthearted despair. With a laconic note in his wastebook of the time when he writes the Phenomenology, Hegel clarifies that repair can be counterproductive: “a mended sock is better than a torn one; not so with self-consciousness” (Hegel 2002, 251). The narrative of the Phenomenology, thus, draws more on the pleasure of Dionysian dismemberment than on the healing power of Christian love. Here is the beginning of the entry on Dionysus in Hederich’s Gründliches Lexikon der Mythologie, the authoritative source on Greek mythology during Hegel’s time:

DIONYSUS. . . . A common epithet of Bacchus, which according to some accounts is supposed to mean dionyzos, the one who opens and reveals [der Eröffnende], according to others, dianysos, the one who sweetly penetrates us [der lieblich in uns hinein geht], and according to yet other accounts, dialysos, the one who dissolves us [der uns auflöset]. (my translation)

Bacchus’s epithet speaks of mutual penetration. Like Dionysus, the Phenomenology’s narrative spreads open for its readers and penetrates them. The mutuality of this double movement dissolves the boundaries between remembering (or “inwardizing”) and dismembering. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, it has the effect that thesis and antithesis don’t complement one another in a synthesis, but share the same negativity.\(^{39}\) Hegelian-Dionysian negativity propels other configurations of consciousness to enter the scene and to play their part. It is the negativity of emotionality, or the power of transport, that doesn’t congeal into a fixed lack or a terrifying nothingness, but gives pleasure: “Thrice happy they of men that have looked upon these rites ere they go to Hades’ house” (Sophocles).\(^{40}\) Like the myths of Demeter and Dionysus, the Phenomenology explores the overlap of finitude and infinity, and thereby initiates the reader into an affirmation of despair.\(^{41}\)

Spirit—the subject of the Phenomenology—is broken and scattered; truth is offered up in morsels. This has its sex appeal, as Butler points out:

We begin the Phenomenology with a sense that the main character has not yet arrived. . . . Our immediate impulse is to look more closely to discern this absent subject in the wings; we are poised for his arrival. As the narrative progresses beyond . . . the various deceptions of immediate truth, we realize slowly that this subject will not arrive all at once, but will offer choice morsels of himself, gestures, shadows, garments strewn along the way, and that this “waiting for the subject,” much like attending Godot, is the comic, even burlesque, dimension of Hegel’s Phenomenology. (Butler 1999, 20)
Butler sketches the sexiness of the *Phenomenology*'s textual despair. We can linger on each part of the textual body. While reading, we disjoint the body of this truth that is often figured as an “organic unity” (§ 2). The sex act has a dismembering effect. Some might be disappointed in the end. Those who were not distracted enough by the activity of taking the narrative apart and tasting its bits might actually realize that Godot never came, that the grand subject never arrived, that their love for absolute knowledge was never consummated. Or was it? The sexiness and pleasure of this text, if it exists, lies not in deferred gratification, but in the orgiastic transport of every bit at any bend of the road: “The truth is the bacchanalian revel where no member is not drunk” (§ 47).

There is no reason for us to feel obliged to indulge the desire to heal when we read Hegel. Rather than labor to restore a presumed (w)holiness, we can join his text’s lighthearted despair. And yet, like the protagonist, most readers of the *Phenomenology* have their own resistance to despair. The *Phenomenology* has never been read as what it claims to be—a path of despair. There are two ways of resisting the *Phenomenology*'s despair, or rather, two despairs to be resisted: the protagonist’s despair and the text’s despair. The reader can escape the protagonist’s despair by distancing herself from the protagonist and instead identifying with the narrator—the phenomenologist. She can avoid the text’s despair by reading the text as a triumphant narrative of progress.

Rather than attending to the existential quality of the protagonist/s’ suffering, some readers sense the comedy in these desperate attempts and foreground the protagonist/s’ less-than-concrete existence, describing it as cartoonish. These readers notice that, while consciousness repeatedly gets knocked down, it always gets up again. As soon as it is back on its feet (however many) or its four wheels (for those who grew up in the U.S. of the 1950s and ’60s), the protagonist seems happier than ever:

> For Hegel, tragic events are never decisive. . . . What seems like tragic blindness turns out to be more like the comic myopia of Mr. Magoo whose automobile careening through the neighbor’s chicken coop always seems to land on all four wheels. Like such miraculously resilient characters of the Saturday morning cartoon, Hegel’s protagonists always reassemble themselves, prepare a new scene, enter the stage armed with a new set of ontological insights—and fail again. (Butler 1999, 21)

This non-identificatory absence of sympathy makes sense: after all, “consciousness” is not a real person, and it is rather delightful to follow the display of such magic resilience. Of course the resilience is purchased with oblivion. After each crisis, a new shape of consciousness sets out
with the confidence that it has found the truth that will last forever. This confidence is possible only because it has forgotten its history of many painful failures to find such truth. Consciousness’s resilience stems from its myopia, from the fact that it doesn’t see the whole, but simply universalizes its own particular moment. And yet it is precisely its blindness that will be each consciousness’s downfall. Amnesia produces resilience, but it also consumes the self; it is a way of despair. Similarly, the protagonist/s’ lack of awareness about their historical determinateness fragments the whole; it breaks the text apart into a series of positive shapes without much coherence. Because consciousness does not remember its previous life and does not recollect the many torturous self-negations that have led to where it is, the protagonist of the Phenomenology falls apart into many protagonists. And just as the protagonists’ turning away from despair generates despair—their own as well as the text’s—so the reader who dis-identifies with the protagonist/s and remains oblivious to their suffering produces a cartoonishness and lightheartedness that in fact overlaps with Hegelian despair.

The more common strategy to avoid the textual despair of the Phenomenology is to read for the happy ending. Such a reading assumes that spirit’s self-formation (Bildung) concludes in absolute knowledge. Instead of on oblivion, this strategy stakes its bets on recollection. Rather than giving in to the distraction of the various stations, this reader keeps in view the whole, relates all the shreds of experience, and thus unifies the many protagonists into the one: spirit. And yet—as Hegelian as it sounds—this kind of reading actually doesn’t take seriously Hegel’s speculative notion of Erinnerung. Inwardizing never produces a whole. It expropriates the one who appropriates. We have seen earlier in this chapter that consumption consumes the self. “Spirit only wins its truth when it finds its feet within its absolute disruption”—when it has lost the third foot, the foot of synthesis, and finds its feet within absolute disruption, not after the disruption has been repaired (§ 32). Relying on remembrance to produce a coherent story of progress leaves the reader with empty hands. In chapter 3 (“Release”), I have discussed how the final chapter of the Phenomenology (on “Absolute Knowledge”) yields nothing in the sense of stable and positive knowledge. It rather leaves us with a feeling of disappointment: remembering dismembers.

There is yet another way of neutralizing the threat of this path of despair; it consists in containing despair. Many have read Hegel’s dialectic as an economy of drama, where each conflict is brought to a head in order to provoke a solution. This solution inevitably takes the form of destruction and new beginning.43 Despair, then, appears not as an avoidable breakdown—along the lines of “don’t despair now, we are almost
there”—but as a necessary stage, because, without despairing, we would never get there. Each section of the road springs from the protagonist’s despair. This story has two problems. First, it integrates suffering into an economy of sacrifice in the service of absolute knowledge. But the solution does not follow in any necessary way from the sacrifice. It is only by accident that the heart opens. Second, this scheme is complemented by the logic of Aufhebung understood in such a way that the repetition of the dialectic process can be read as progress. Obviously, this understanding of Aufhebung relies on a notion of recollection that again does not do justice to the speculative character of Hegel’s Erinnerung. I agree with Rajan who sees in the repetitions and returns of the phenomenological narrative a suspension and even an undoing of teleology—what she calls “Hegel’s self-consuming narrative” (Rajan 1995, 164). If we take seriously the double vector of the movement of inwardizing, it becomes very hard to construct a teleology, and we ultimately have to accept that there is no use for and no redemption of despair other than the pleasure of despair itself.

The pathbreaking sentence of the Phenomenology’s preface—“spirit . . . wins its truth only when it finds itself in absolute disruption [in der absoluten Zerrissenheit sich selbst findet]”—does not mean that tears (teardrops) heal the tears (cracks) (§ 32, trans. modified). It does not mean that finding oneself in disruption or registering inner conflict undoes such incoherence. It means that self-remembrance is self-dismembering. I thus take issue with the dramatic reading of the Phenomenology that relies on a simple notion of memory in its interpretation of Aufhebung, and argue instead that Aufhebung works to slightly dissociate emotionality from itself and to produce not drama, but lightheartedness. The logic of lighthearted despair relies on the overlap of remembering and dismembering. To remember (to incorporate—to consume—to join and hold together—to learn by heart—to keep secret) and to dismember (to break—to shatter—to scatter and become scattered—to distract and get distracted—to forget—to open—to reveal) play each other and echo one another. “Dismembering” literalizes “remembering,” and “remembering” spiritualizes “dismembering.” Despair is fragmentation and stickiness. For the rubber subject of the Phenomenology, falling and getting up are one and the same movement. The elastic self stretches until it tears; and when it tears, its pieces still stick together, without pathos or ambition. The cracks of the cockroach heal without leaving scars. This healing is just as little triumphant as the cracking is dramatic. And yet a humble and unexcited emotionality pervades and propels all of these movements.