**On What is Not in Hegel**

Paul Warden Prescott, 2001

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Step out of history

to enter life

just try that all of you

you’ll get it then.

Charlotte Delbo[[1]](#footnote-1)

Consider the infamous parable, first told by Nietzsche, of the madman, the townspeople, and their confrontation one morning in the marketplace of the town (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, §125). It is sometime after dawn. The madman (having just returned from the tomb, its stone still in place?) has run to the marketplace, crying out. In his madness, he tries in vain to testify to a horrifying loss—a trauma, a caesura, a rupture in the very fabric of the universe. “We have killed him,” he cries out! We have unchained the earth from the sun! “Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? . . . Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder?” In the end, of course, the entire confrontation gives rise only to silence. The townspeople laugh. Later (perhaps to their credit), for a moment at least they are unnerved enough to register a speechless “astonishment.” The madman, for his part, is silenced both by the implications of what he has witnessed—“Who will wipe this blood off us?” “Must we ourselves not become gods?”—as well as by the failure of those around him to acknowledge or comprehend what he has witnessed. “I have come too early,” he finally says, “this tremendous event is still on its way . . . deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard.” As the day draws to a close, having trespassed upon the sanctity of several churches, people begin to call the madman to account for his “*requirem aeternam deo*”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Now, having considered all this (and yes, my brief reading is slanted), consider one question further. If one were to search him out—and having done so actually find him—where in this parable’s world would one find G. W. F. Hegel?

The point, to make a beginning, is that in Hegel’s case such a question is not easily answered. Death in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—the death of anything whatsoever—is a rather intricate and critical business (to say nothing of the issue of God). As Richard Bernstein once pointed out regarding Hegel, in spite of (and perhaps precisely because of) all his undeniable genius, the very “core of his thinking” is rife with “systematic ambiguities” and ‘unstable tensions.”[[3]](#footnote-3) “What is so acute in Hegel,” Bernstein says, “. . . is his incisive ability to locate and specify the deepest oppositions, conflicts, and contradictions in every domain of culture—philosophy, religion, art, history, politics—and to work and think through these antimonies in order to show how they are reconciled . . .”[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, in a philosophical move that is at once both inspiring as well as inspired, Hegel attempts to defy all the preexisting oppositions of his day, from the so-called “dualism” of Kant to those of the Judeo-Christian tradition in relation to the Enlightenment sciences. Although his philosophy retains what Bernstein calls “quasi-theological overtones,” Hegel nonetheless saw it as “ultimately the task and achievement of philosophy to show how differences, oppositions, ruptures, conflicts and contradictions can and must be reconciled.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In short, for Hegel the ultimate and attainablegoal of philosophy is nothing less than the satisfaction of reason’s longstanding desire to know all that truly is. This being the case, death is a *very* serious business for Hegel. Through participation in what Hegel christened “the labor of the negative,” death can be found intimately intertwined at the root of his most fundamental, powerful (“and perhaps seductive”[[6]](#footnote-6)) themes.

“In itself,” Hegel asserts, “life is indeed one of untroubled equality and unity with itself, for which otherness and alienation, and the overcoming of alienation are not serious matters.”[[7]](#footnote-7) But this “in itself,” Hegel points out, is merely an abstraction; one in which all movement, development and actualization has been left out of account. Such a life, therefore, is not yet one which is truly living. The true may be the whole, he reminds us, “but the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development” (PhG, 11). The truth of any moment, therefore, is essentially its *telos* or result. All things must become what they are. “Only in the end is it what it truly is” (PhG, 11). Just as “the bud disappears in the bursting forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the later; similarly, when the fruit appears the blossom is likewise shown up in turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead” (PhG, 2). Hegel therefore argues that while “death is of all things most dreadful . . . the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation but rather that life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it or nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it” (PhG, 19).

In the *Phenomenology*, this dialectic aspect is the authentic truth of the negative, its true “determinant” manifestation in contrast to what Hegel calls “abstract negation” (i.e., not yes, not true, not-p, etc.). It is important to note that this dialectic, and the entire organic economy which ensures from it, is *not* predicated merely upon dialectic as it is conventionally understood. Dialectic, for Hegel, is more than just a method. Hegel’s claims for it run much, much deeper. What may start out as a strictly semantic claim about determinacy along the way clearly comes to apply to ontology as well. Dialectic, therefore, is a claim about the nature of being. Things, Hegel is saying, are not substances. They do not stand alone. They are not self-sufficient atoms in relation to the world. Rather, they are what they are only in relation to another. Thus, if dialectic represents the truth of the negative, it is only because, ontologically speaking, dialectic corresponds. Negativity is *necessarily* determinate because reality (the whole) is dialectical. As the logic of the negative “conceived as it is in truth” (PhG, 51), the so-called labor of the negative, therefore, is nothing less than the *logos*, the internal language of God, the hermeneutical key to the universe.

At this point, let us pause for a moment. As yet, we neither need begin to agree nor to disagree with Hegel regarding these matters. Being an astonishingly insightful observer, Hegel is surely aware how his ideas must appear upon first encounter: both how compelling to some, no less how stunningly grandiose and preposterous to others. (No doubt, for this reason alone the *Phenomenology* is written less as an argument and more like a narrative.) The crucial point for our purposes thus far, however, is much more straightforward and far less controversial. Should Hegel one day be walking through the marketplace of a town—say perhaps, Jena—only to find himself startled out of his early morning stroll by some madman’s apprehensions about a dead God, it is unlikely that he would either laugh, or then, having done so, fall silent, turn away, and pass on to other matters. Rather, in ways distinctly and uniquely his own, as well as in others all too familiar, Hegel would have an *answer*.

**HIER IST KEIN WARUM: DERRIDA AND BATAILLE**

At one point in his early and pivotal essay on Hegel, Derrida remarks that the immense revolution entailed in the rise of German Idealism consisted—“it is almost tempting to say consisted simply”—in taking the negative seriously.[[8]](#footnote-8) In and of itself, this statement is hardly one to give rise to objection. In choosing to “tarry” with death, engage its presence in conversation, and thus move beyond the negative as mere opposition, Hegel clearly assigns to negativity and rupture a far greater significance than that to which it has been typically afforded. Having said this, however, one can nonetheless find oneself confronted with the disquieting sense that (e.g., when confronted by a madman in the streets of Jena, 1809) there is something a little too reassuring about Hegel.

In those sections of the preface of the *Phenomenology* which we have thus far considered, there is a point where Hegel makes the following observation (previously cited): “the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation but rather that life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself” (PhG, 19). This conclusion, of course, is entailed from the start by the logic of determinant negation. As we have already discovered, however (and furthermore, as should be clear by his very wording here), Hegel does very much acknowledge—at least in principle—another kind of negation which is much more terminal. In the case of the life that does not “endure and maintain itself,” he tells us, “Trial by death . . . cancels . . . the truth which was to result from it, and therewith the certainty of self altogether” (PhG, 233). The life in question, in other words, having been broken, would be over. As Derrida reminds us, setting the stage for his reading of Bataille on these matters, “Hegel calls this mute and nonproductive death, this death pure and simple, *abstract negativity*, in opposition to ‘the negation characteristic of consciousness, which cancels in such a way that it preserves and maintains what is sublated’” (255). Abstract negation, however, is not the truth of negativity according to Hegel. In truth, no such atomic entities exist in and of themselves to be thus cancelled in this terminal sense. It is at this point that Bataille—the voice to which Derrida would have us give our attention—can be heard laughing from some darkened corner of the room.

What we have here, according to Bataille, is a slight of hand: a shell game with a ball and some cups. The life Hegel affirms as so characteristic of consciousness is simply not the same life as that with which he started. “Through a ruse of life, that is, of reason,” Bataille asserts, “. . . another concept of life ha[s] been surreptitiously put in its place . . . This life is not natural life, the biological existence put at stake in Lordship but an essential life that is welded to the first one”(###).[[9]](#footnote-9) For all his considerable philosophical discourse with death and negation, Hegel has been “careful,” as Westphal later put it, “to exclude death itself from being philosophically significant.”[[10]](#footnote-10) He has ensured, in effect, that the negative will always do things in an intelligible way. It will always serve the interests of the positive. And thus, it will always “‘collaborate’ in the genesis of meaning.”[[11]](#footnote-11) From Bataille’s point of view, “[w]hat is laughable is the *submission* . . . to the force of this imperative: that there must be meaning, that nothing must be definitely lost in death, or further, that death should receive the signification of ‘abstract negativity,’ a work must always be possible which, because it defers enjoyment, confers meaning, seriousness, and truth”(256-7). It is this submission that Bataille sees at the heart of the entire Hegelian endeavor.

Thus, it is Bataille’s contention that Hegel has a blind spot—a critical lacunae around which his otherwise formidable thought is constructed. To Bataille, Hegelianism operates within the confines of a “reserved economy,” a universe that is in an essential way closed. “To go ‘to the end’ both of ‘absolute rending’ and of the negative without ‘measure,’ without reserve” defies the very logic at work behind the Hegelian order. “[I]t is convulsively to tear apart the negative side, that which makes it the reassuring other surface of the positive; and it is to exhibit with that negative, in an instant, that which can no longer be called negative . . . because it can no longer . . . be converted into positivity, because it can no longer collaborate with the continuous linking up of meaning . . . because it literally can no longer labor and let itself be interrogated as the ‘work of the negative’” (259-60). “The blind spot of Hegelianism . . . is the point at which destruction, suppression, death, and sacrifice constitute so irreversible an expenditure, so radical a negativity—here one would have to say an expenditure and negativity *without* reserve—that they can no longer be determined as negativity in a process or a system” (259, my emphasis).

A negativity that is no longer (merely) negative. A negativity without reserve. Faced with this, Bataille writes, “Hegel’s reaction is the fundamental human behavior” (258). While Hegel does speak of tarrying with the negative, he ultimately does so only within the confines of his own pre-established objectives. “In this fashion, Hegel is opposed less to those who ‘draw back’ than to those who say, ‘it is nothing’” (258). Somewhat ironically, in at least one respect this makes Hegel the Christian he always professed to be. “[P]ar excellence the expression that tradition has repeated infinitely” (258), Hegel quickly bypasses the trauma of death in favor of the resurrection.

Thus, at its core, Hegel’s blind spot is hardly one unique to Hegel. It is not at all surprising that we should tend not to see through it as well. It involves nothing more (or less) than the assumption of a meaningful universe, one which is amenable to reason, one which is in some basic sense hospitable to us. This assumption, however, as Derrida’s Bataille points out, is a bet, a gamble (though it does not take itself as such) for “discourse, meaning, history, etc.,” and “against play [in the Derridian sense of the word], against chance” (260). In Greek terms, no doubt, this would be seen as the sensible option for *kosmos* over *kaos*, or in Christian ones, for the life everlasting and the Kingdom of God. Having made it, however, Hegel promptly blinds himself to the possibility of his own bet. For all the logical necessity internal to the Hegelian system, the necessity of the system itself—in its entirety—is entirely open to question. Thus, the added implication that, to attain his system in the first place, Hegel must simultaneously secure it against this very possibility that has been disavowed. As a result, in the Hegelian logos reason is assigned a labor of its own. Something like this is what leads Derrida to say, “[t]o bear the self-evidence of Hegel, today, would mean this: one must, in every sense, go through the slumber of reason . . . the slumber of reason is not, perhaps, reason put to sleep, but slumber in the form of reason, the vigilance of the Hegelian logos. Reason keeps watch over a deep slumber in which it has an interest” (252).

It is considered from this perspective that Hegel’s entire project may just be one of the most comprehensive and inspired (if unorthodox) theodicies ever composed—in effect, one more glorious miscarriage of an attempt at the problem of evil. Not without a certain irony, it is precisely the possibility of what Immanuel Kant first called “radical evil” that may lie at the heart of the Hegelian logos’ insecurity.[[12]](#footnote-12) While what Kant himself ultimately meant by this term may be debatable, its meaning since Hannah Arendt’s subsequent appropriation of it is less so.[[13]](#footnote-13) In an opposition directly relevant to Hegelianism, since Arendt radical evil has come to denote a negativity in its own final and absolute form—i.e., one that defies all attempts at comprehension, resolution, *Aufhebung*, or any assimilation into larger structures of meaning. The promise of the abstract negative, actualized. Considered as theodicy, Hegelianism of course is a failure. But in this sense, it is hardly alone. As Paul Ricoeur once observed, “the failure of absolute knowledge in the Hegelian sense” is born out in “the failure of all theodicies, of all systems concerning evil . . . In short, the problem of evil forces us to return from Hegel to Kant.”[[14]](#footnote-14) (Which, it would seem, is precisely Derrida’s motion.)

When written, death is not death.

Edmond Jabès[[15]](#footnote-15)

At this point, of course, we could all get up and go home, if only it were that simple. As Derrida bluntly reminds us however, dialectic may not be the true nature of reality, but it is still the true nature of discourse. “There is only one discourse, it is significative, and here one cannot get around Hegel” (261). “Negativity cannot be spoken of, nor *has it ever been* except in this fabric of meaning” (259). How is it possible, therefore, having recourse to no other discourse than this one, to signify the negativity that is no longer (merely) negativity, the negative without reserve? How, in other words, can one articulate this “extreme point of ‘experience’ which makes the Hegelian discourse dislocate itself[?]” (252-3). Derrida sees this as a particularly intractable dilemma, and it seems to me he is correct to do so. Of course, we must speak. But as Bataille observes, “the judgments should lead to silence” (262). Thus, like characters in Beckett, we cannot, but must, go on.[[16]](#footnote-16) To do so, however, risks meaning. “It risks making sense, risks agreeing to the reasonableness of reason, of philosophy, of Hegel, who is always right, as soon as one opens one’s mouth . . .” (263). And yet.

And yet, there is something at work here to leave one troubled. That madman breaking into churches, trying (at least trying) to speak the unspeakable, is that from whence the silence descends? Or is it rather something that arises from saying the unsaid? Geoffrey Hartmann, in a noted essay on historiography and the Holocaust, observed that postmodernity’s often defining anxieties over “‘the conceivable which cannot be presented [Lyotard]’ should lead to the question: ‘Cannot be presented to whom?’”[[17]](#footnote-17) The question is not one of the text, or the author, but rather one of the audience. In the absence of absolute knowledge, we tend to fall back on words like “unspeakable,” “incomprehensible,” and the “it” that “will always be a mystery.” Of course, some things always will be mysterious. However, the fact that some limitations are ours by virtue of our finitude does not imply that none are of our own volition. The point—and I think it is a crucial one—is that there is that which we *cannot* know, and then there is that which we *would not* know. That which cannot be said. And that which will not be heard. It is, of course, often very difficult to discern the difference between them, but there is one. Much as we might like, consciously or no, to substitute the one for the other, the blinders we impose upon ourselves are seldom of the same quality as those of our limited natures. Thus, whether or not death is still death when written may depend in no small part upon to whom the testimony in question is presented.

Of course, having said this, I just risked making sense. But perhaps this anxiety as well is grounds for laughter? From the outset, Derrida certainly warns us about Hegel. “Misconstrued, treated lightly, Hegelianism only extends its historical domination, finally unfolding its immense resources without obstacle” (251). And perhaps, he does so not without reason. After nearly two centuries of anti-Hegelianism, like all good fathers Hegel lives on. As Richard Bernstein recently noted, “[w]hether we speak of the history of philosophy, metaphysics, logocentrism, or, with Heidegger, of the story of Being, there is a subtext in many of the critiques which presupposes that Western philosophy from its beginning to its ‘end’ is indeed a single coherent story or narrative—one which is ‘now’ over, broken, to be overcome” (1991, 308). If the assumption of the history of anything as a single coherent narrative wasn’t enough to raise an alarm, there is the arrival of that eschaton. With that there can be little question. Reason is still keeping watch over its Hegelian slumber, for its dreaming again.

In the end, Bataille probably does have the right idea (if I have understood him, or should I say, Derrida, correctly) insofar as he critiques the Hegelian system as system, as the totality that it is. For there is something uniquely, and one might even say magnificently, all-encompassing about Hegelianism. Almost cult-like in its interwoven totality, it provides an answer to everything. There is nothing outside the closure of absolute knowledge. If all this is indeed the truth about Hegelianism, however, then like any other totalizing doctrine, it is a box that one cannot get out of because one was never in it to begin with.

# HOPE AND THE THREAT THAT IT POSES

The possibility of radical evil both destroys and institutes the religious.

Derrida[[18]](#footnote-18)

Nietzsche’s parable of the madman, like so many other stories and similar accounts, ends with the moment in question, the moment the audience finds so compelling, the moment of immediate crisis. The madman rushes in; the townspeople are astonished; the earth breaks free of its sun. For the purposes of the narrator, such is typically the main point of concern. To use this instance as an example, however, long after Nietzsche has moved on to §126, the madman must get up the next morning and go about the business of living. Perhaps, he must do this for many, many mornings after. One does not usually hear what happens in the long run. Such stories do not make compelling drama, and if that were not bad enough, there is often nothing reassuring, redeeming, or otherwise reconciling about them. They just go on until they are over. These are not the kinds of stories that we like to hear, not the kind of stories that are of interest to us, and so we tend to ignore them. As Hegel rightly pointed out, when it comes to the negative, consciousness quickly moves onward. Epistemically speaking, in and of itself this is not a problem—provided that such stories have nothing to offer that we might need to learn. Which is, of course, a rather large gamble.

In the end, Ricoeur seems quite correct to suggest that the problem is the problem of evil, and likewise, that Hegel’s is ultimately an (a)theodical endeavor. If the *Phenomenology* were the Book of Job, one must suspect that Hegel would be easily located amongst the friends of Eliphaiz, arguing passionately for a just and comprehensible order. Perhaps something like this is what Derrida meant when he said, “[t]o be indifferent to the comedy of *Aufhebung*, as was Hegel, is to blind oneself to the sacred” (257). I do not know precisely what Hegel would have said to Nietzsche’s madman had he met him, much less to his testimony about God. In the end, I doubt either would have been much persuaded by the other. Nonetheless, I do think that many of Hegel’s more grandiose commitments make a great deal more sense when considered in light of these alternatives. Hegel does not strike me as much liking wild-eyed madmen; he was very much unwilling to go anywhere near where Nietzsche ended up going. Philosophically speaking, however, given the timbre of his earliest writings, perhaps that was more or less where he was headed.[[19]](#footnote-19) That is, until he came to his senses.

As for the madman, with or without the likes of Hegel around, his is surely a perilous position to be in. The logos, whether Hegel’s or another, is often far more insecure than one might perceive at first glance. If not figuratively (or literally) crucified, all too often such people find themselves alone with their “madness,” left watching a world continue uninterrupted for everyone but them. Ethically speaking, live burial under silence is a form of murder the means of which Hegel identifies with great acuity: the ontological need for recognition. Perhaps in the end, in lieu of that, some such people manage to carve out a kind of sovereign existence. What they do not get to do, however, is go home again. Contra Hegel, so far as we know, “My God, My God, why . . .” is where the story ended.[[20]](#footnote-20)

As for the rest, well . . . we’re still waiting for an answer.

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1. Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All quotations from *The Gay Science* §125 are from the Kaufmann edition: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 181-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Bernstein, “Reconciliation/Rupture,” *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., Bernstein, 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10. Subsequent references will be marked in the text, PhG, referring to this edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jacques Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 259. Subsequent page numbers in the text refer to this article unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. To confine my subject, I will be unfortunately neglecting the greater detail provided by the issues of Sovereignty, Lordship, and Bondage. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Merold Westphal, “Laughing at Hegel,” *The Owl of Minerva*, 28, 1 (Fall 1996), 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 527. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Edmond Jabès, *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1991), 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Samuel Beckett, *L’Innommable* (####). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Geoffrey H. Hartmann, “The Book of Destruction,” *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jacques Derrida, “. . . and pomegranates,” in *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, eds. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Hegel, G. W. F., *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The last words of Jesus of Nazareth (Mark 15:34):“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)