

Time for Hegel: History and the Absolute Now

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There is a persistent and profound question that surfaces when we consider absolute agency in terms of revelation, according to the reading of Hegelian Science (system) that I am putting forward. If the Absolute is really *absolute*, then why should its revelation take place over time? In other terms, why would such revelation not be ever-present, eternal and eternally “now”? If we conceive of the Absolute as Hegel appears to do at the end of the *Encyclopedia*, in explicitly Aristotelian terms, as a divine, motionless self-contemplation or self-revelation, then why would such a maximal Being bother to make itself historical, measuring itself out in the coffee spoons of earthly time, instead of instantaneously taking place in an eternal present or presence?

In fact, through our earlier chapters, we already anticipate the Hegelian answer to these questions: because Science conceives of absolute revelation as concomitant with human reason, it must make itself historical. Simply put, that is how human reason operates: over time, historically, and, we may add, pedagogically. Just as Lessing had conceived the human narrative in terms of an education, unfolding historically over time, Hegel’s idea of human self-knowing must progress gradually, incrementally building on acquired knowledge. To investigate the relation between eternity and history, I will look at Karl Löwith’s crucial misreading of Hegelian temporality, in his magistral *Von Hegel bis Nietzsche*.¹

¹ In no way do I mean to diminish the importance of Löwith’s great work. Indeed, one could argue that without such pivotal “misreadings”, there would be no history of philosophy at all.

Perhaps we might begin by wondering why Löwith, in his important book, addresses the German idealist first and foremost through a discussion of the notion of time. Indeed, in Hegel, whose philosophy is fundamental to the entire progression of Löwith's book, temporality per se does not constitute a privileged subject matter that is dealt with in a sustained and explicit fashion. The question "why time?" is all the more concerning since Löwith, in order to enter into the matter, refers to three fragmentary and marginal texts, on the outskirts of Hegel's main body of work.

Of course, a thinker like Hegel, who dares philosophize on such a broad range of subjects and who develops systematic philosophies of nature, spirit and *history*, in its political, aesthetic, religious and indeed philosophical forms, must of course address temporal themes. Further, a 19th Century thinker dealing with the fundamental questions of free subjectivity in its multiple relations to substantial objectivity, and who practices philosophy following the Copernican temporal Revolution brought about by Kant, should invite us to reflect on the objective engagements of a subjectivity whose essential form must, from that point on, prove temporal. Thus, for Hegel, time articulates itself through forms of consciousness, of temporally informed subjectivity instantiating itself, and thus its time, in the world. The worldly reality of Hegelian time allows Löwith's early mentor, Heidegger, to judge that, in Hegel, time only has meaning in that it passes, in the shadow of figures of worldly, and ultimately vulgar presence that form the historical configurations of *Geist*.

Löwith does refer to Heidegger's analysis of Hegelian time. Indeed, even though the former does not share his teacher's insistence on the *possible*, on the futurity of existential time, he nonetheless shares with Heidegger the conviction that Hegel's conception of time is

fundamentally common and erroneous.² So, the question remains: Why does Löwith concentrate on Hegelian time when his very notion of temporality is judged to be lacking and deeply problematic? In this chapter, I will explore the fundamental temporal contradiction that Löwith attributes to Hegel's thought, in a way that brings to light the relation between historical, human time and the eternal "Now" that absolute revelation seems to imply. It is the supposed contradiction between these two temporal expressions that informs Löwith's entire project, as carried out in *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche*, and which, according to him, brings about the tragic failure of German philosophical thought in the 19th Century.

In his analysis of time in Hegel, presented in a few short pages of a quasi- Hegelian density, Löwith begins with the claim that the German idealist is above all inspired by Aristotle, for whom the "Now" expresses the punctual moment that is both instantaneous and eternally present, a Greek vision inspired by the "circling constellations of the heavens and the real ether"³. Briefly, according to Löwith, Aristotelian time, determining Hegelian temporality, should be comprehended as the instantiation of the contemplative and immobile activity of god.

It is this Greek notion of time as a Truth that is ever-present in the "Now", which brings about "a contradiction, an enigma" when it is placed in relation to the temporal idea, equally found in Hegel, of an "emancipation of Spirit resulting from the advent of Christianity".

Consequently, according to Löwith, the Hegelian idea of time as an "eternal present" will always

² According to Heidegger's critique, Hegelian spirit (Geist) falls into time, as if the history of spirit were distinct from and less essential than a more fundamental temporality. Heidegger conceives Hegelian time as an limitless representation of present instants, each one a self-negating negation, according to a leveling, banal logic. Thus, the only "eternity" involved is one of the unlimited duration of present and evanescent moments, conceived (erroneously) as an essential substance (ousia). My colleague Francisco Gonzales, who has worked on the archives from Heidegger's seminars, has told me that Löwith attended the seminar of 1925-26 (with the student Gadamer), whose theme was time. In the seminar, there was constant reference to Hegel and Aristotle. The Hegel texts Heidegger refers to in *Being and Time*, and probably in his seminar, are the same ones that Löwith quotes in his book.

³ Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, David E. Green (trans.) (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 209.

be pulled between “the historical instant” of Christ’s actual, worldly birth and the immobile eternity of the First (and final) Cause. In other words, time as the eternal “Now” enters into conflict with the fundamentally historical structure of the Christianity-inspired narrative, according to which the Truth unveils itself in a progressive and salutary movement toward the different forms of the Hegelian Absolute. The Hegelian successors that Löwith discusses, principally Feuerbach, Stirner, Marx, Kierkegaard, Ruge and Bruno Bauer, should then be seen to incarnate more or less radical expressions of this same contradiction, between two apparently opposed notions of time. On Löwith’s reading, these thinkers are consequently condemned to a fundamentally futile self-contradiction, cashed out in the aporia of Nietzschean philosophy.

The fully actual stakes involved in the path leading from the Young Hegelians to Nietzsche implies, according to Löwith, that their failure is ultimately that of the Western world itself, whose Christian history and culture has always been in contradiction with its essentially Greek foundation. Thus, Nietzsche represents and indeed embodies the aporetic character of the Western project itself. As Löwith writes in his chapter titled “Nietzsche, Philosopher of our Age and Eternity”, “The question is whether, beyond Nietzsche, there is any practicable path at all.”⁴

To support his fundamental notion of Hegelian time as an eternal present, a notion central to the argument of his book, Löwith refers to a passage from the Jena *Logic*, the unpublished sketch of what will later become the mature works that are the *Science of Logic* and its *Encyclopedic* cousin, aka the *Greater* and *Lesser Logics*.⁵ As well, Löwith refers to the Addition (*Zusatz*, composed of various student notes) to section 259 of the *Philosophy of Nature*, in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*,⁶ and finally, to a sentence fragment that is supposed to

⁴ Löwith, p. 174.

⁵ Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe II, Logik, Metaphysik, Naturphilosophie*, p. 206-210.

⁶ *Werke in 20 Bänden*, vol. 9 [*Werke* 9] E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (eds.) (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1972), p.55.

be found in the Preface to the *Principles of the Philosophy of Right*. Curiously, the well-known passage from the same Preface, and which Löwith does not cite, is precisely the one where the true sense of Hegelian time is to be found, there where philosophy “paints its grey on grey”, at dusk, when the famous owl of Minerva takes flight.⁷ For, as I will show in this chapter, the flight of Hegelian scientific wisdom implies a historical movement toward an actually present moment where the eternal Truth has indeed come to light, albeit in the form of Science (systematic *Wissenschaft*).

Although the “entelechial” sense of Hegelian philosophy is essential to Löwith’s argument and even forms the title of a chapter in the book *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, the historical movement that Löwith finds in Hegel is one that can only culminate in a fundamentally mundane inevitability, i.e in the “present” merely conceived as the current bourgeois, Christian *actuality*. The problem, according to Löwith, is that such an actuality can never attain to the eternal “Now” that is nonetheless imagined by Hegel and which is prefigured by the temporality of Greek cosmology. Briefly, Löwith’s argument is based on an apparent contradiction that he finds, in Hegel, between his notions of time and history.

Besides the distinctly marginal nature of the texts presented by Löwith in support of his “eternal” notion of time in Hegel, the fact that he refers to the most nontemporal dimension of the Hegelian system, that is, to his logic, is already problematic. Indeed, within the economy of the Hegelian system, the mature *Logics* are always presented downstream from historico-introductory articulations, the best known of which is the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here, in this emblematic ladder-like work, historical time comes to be explicitly expiated, finished off toward the end of the book, in the Absolute Knowing chapter, in an eruption of pure nontemporal

⁷ *Werke* 7, p. 28

thought, which will ground the entire *Encyclopedic* endeavor that follows and which begins, in fact, with its own *Logic*.⁸ Time only reappears, and initially in an entirely abstract and indeterminate manner, at the beginning of the *Philosophy of Nature*, the second book of the *Encyclopedia*. In that systematic articulation of Hegelian Science, time that is fully determinate and meaningful does not return until the last book, namely in the *Philosophy of Spirit*. It is in this ultimate context that the spiritually *human* expressions are actualized in an appropriately historical form, i.e. articulated in the retrospective narratives of the development of individuals, states, art, religion and philosophy itself. In other words, discussions of temporality in Hegel must involve us in a reflection on the human aspects of what he refers to as Spirit, either in its *Phenomenology* or in its *Philosophy*, the *final* book of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, the first of which is the nontemporal *Logic*.

In distinguishing worldly historicity from temporal essence, as Löwith does when he presents Hegelian temporality in the mode of the eternal “Now”, the latter must be divorced from any historical character. Briefly, the (eternal) Truth is cut off from its own story. Further, the comprehension of Hegelian time essentially according to its “Logical”, i.e. nontemporal expression leads Löwith to affirm a contradictory break between the temporal dimension per se and the idea of a historico-political progress, which was so dear to the Young Hegelian legacy. This tendentious reading, which separates the historical dimension from the Truth, leads Löwith to ignore what is perhaps the best-known and most determinant pronouncement that Hegel makes on time, which I referred to briefly above, namely where, in the last pages of the *Phenomenology*’s chapter on “Absolute Knowing”, time is defined as “the concept that is there ”,

⁸ I.e. the *Encyclopedia Logic*. In the *Science of Logic (Greater Logic)*, the introduction also presents the historical aspect of pre-Scientific philosophical positions (empiricism, pre-critical metaphysics, intuition or intellectual faith), which are all dissolved in Hegel’s presentation of indeterminate being-nothingness, with which that work begins.

i.e. as the activity of thought (the concept) that exists in the historical movement of Spirit.⁹

Significantly, this reference is found immediately prior to the prelogical culmination of historical time in the ecstatic instant that Hegel describes poetically with the famous image, borrowed from Schiller, of the overflowing chalice.¹⁰ Here, in the last moment of the *Phenomenology*, thought has finally freed itself from its *past* forms (errors). It is now free to make itself *Logic*, the first moment of *Encyclopedic Science*, the systematic setting where the culmination of human historical time (in art, religion and philosophy) is now presented, in the Absolute Spirit chapter, as fully revelatory of the Absolute's complicit self-knowing.

In the recognition of absolute agency, in Absolute Spirit, time does appear as an eternal self-reflection, and Hegel does acknowledge Aristotle's unmoved mover in the lengthy quote from the *Metaphysics* with which the *Encyclopedia* ends. Such an outcome shows that it is indeed the historical destiny of the *Phenomenological* concept that leads us to grasp the eternal "Now" for what it truly is, namely the retrospective comprehension that is instantaneously recapitulative of its own past course, now necessary and "rational", according to the implicit sense of the *Logic*, where human reason partakes in and of absolute revelation. It is this implicit sense that is re-discovered, fully demonstrated in the culminating singularity of the Idea (cf. Aristotle's god), at the end of the *Encyclopedia's* Absolute Spirit section.

To the extent that the eternal "Now" is first expressed in the nontemporal context of Hegelian *Logic*, it should nonetheless be apprehended as the culminating result of the *Phenomenological* path that pours itself out in a moment of recapitulative achievement. Such a moment, far from being empty and abstract, thus carries within itself the remembrance, or indeed

⁹ *Werke* 3, p. 584 and 591. This Hegelian text on time is one that is discussed by Heidegger, which shows that Löwith was aware of it.

¹⁰ *Werke* 3, p. 591.

the *spirits* of past human experience. In other words, the eternal Hegelian moment, embodied in the *Logics* and recaptured at the end of Absolute Spirit, is neither conjugated in the past nor in the present but rather in the grammatical time of the *Perfekt*, where the content of the present is expressed through the auxiliary verb “to have”, which affirms the whole past experience as *having been* acquired and thus possessed by and constitutive of the present.¹¹ In Hegelian terms, the comprehension of the Truth of the eternal “Now” is therefore an *Erinnerung*, an internalized remembrance of its past historical course. It is this experiential content, told through the epic journey of the concept, that guarantees the tenor of the terminal, recapitulative “Now”, which is now anything but empty. Contrarily, the vacuity of the purely punctual and abstract “now” can be found at the departure points of Hegel’s great works, in initial positions that are always stamped with natural immediacy. This is the case, for example, in the *Phenomenology*, in the chapter on Sense-certainty where we learn that any attempt to conceive the immediate singularity of sense experience according to its punctual sensuous reality dissolves into the indifferent “now” of empty universality. The same is the case in the *Encyclopedia’s Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* (section 448 *Zusatz*) where Hegel describes the pure mental apprehension of time (and space) as providing only “extremely impoverished, superficial determinations”. In other words, the immediate and momentary feeling of the present “now” has no other tenor than the vanishing vacuity of immediately sensuous experience.¹²

Time’s association with the movement of the concept grasped retrospectively as the *Erinnerung* of its past course clearly shows that Hegelian history must not be understood as a

¹¹ Hegel refers regularly to the genius of the German language and its sense of the *Perfekt*, e.g. in the *Encyclopedia’s Philosophy of Spirit* (§ 450 *Zusatz*). The same sense of the present perfect exists in English. French has occluded the “present” sense of the perfect tense by using the tense to replace its literary *passé simple* in spoken language.

¹² The ambiguity of the “now”, equally sensuous and sublime will allow Kierkegaard to conceive of the ecstatic commonality between the esthetic and the religious stages.

dialectically predetermined progression towards a future that is “to come”. Such a model would indeed espouse the logic of the Christian narrative, according to which history is said to either end in the Germanic, bourgeois, Protestant state or (and this is Löwith’s view) tragically, in the infinite and ever-failed approximation of its absolute purpose, where, taking the last sentence of Löwith’s book, “the Christian pilgrimage” is a perpetually “homeless land where it has never been at home.”¹³

On the other hand, the logic of the concept in its temporal unfolding shows that Hegelian history leads to a “Now” understood as a self-knowing (*gnothi seauton*) where the selfhood of humanity (what Hegel calls Spirit) recognizes itself in the history of its own course, apprehended as essentially *past*. It is precisely this self-recognition in the world as *having become* that Hegel calls “Reason” in the historical context. Consequently, when Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, defines reason as “the certainty that consciousness has of being all reality”,¹⁴ then that reality should there be conceived as historical, i.e. as a phenomenon articulated according to the time of the *Perfekt* grammatical tense. The famous formulas according to which Hegelian history is supposed to be, above all, an affair of reason should not be understood in the sense where the movement of history is predetermined by an implicit dialectical rationality but rather according to the idea where human consciousness is brought to the certainty of being able to recognize itself in its own past. It is precisely this aspect of self-recognition in historical otherness that will pose a problem for the Young Hegelians discussed by Löwith (Feuerbach, Ruge, Stirner, Marx, Kierkegaard and Bauer). In refusing to recognize themselves in Hegelian history, they also refuse, by that very fact, the *reason* in that history and the tenor of the present world which is its essential result.

¹³ Löwith, p. 385.

¹⁴ *Werke* 3, p. 179.

Such a humanistic reading of Hegelian historical temporality, where the “Now” appears as the recapitulative moment of a human experiential epic, already encourages us to see the punctual moment that Löwith attributes to Hegelian temporality as something other than an instantaneous grasp of emptiness. Nonetheless, we might well wonder how such a rich tenor, developed over the course of human historicity, can espouse the eternal aspect that Löwith discovers in the Greco-Hegelian “Now”. The answer to this question, whose apparent insolubility leads Löwith to observe a fundamental contradiction (between the historical and the eternal, between the Christian and Greek temporal narratives), can be found in the “absolute” qualification that Hegel attributes to the completion of the human epic of self-knowing, and which I have been presenting in the previous chapters.

Indeed, in Hegel, at the level of Spirit, i.e. of humanity as a world-historical phenomenon, self-knowledge as the retrospective grasp of Spirit’s own past course is realized in a moment of ecstasy that invites us to interpret this journey in light of something that stretches infinitely beyond us, but yet in which we do participate. If the expression “absolute knowing”, the title of the *Phenomenology*’s final chapter, remains ambiguous enough to lend itself to a whole palette of interpretations, sometimes contradictory, the one that I want to, above all, put aside, and which makes Hegel into a Feuerbach before his time, is the reading where the qualifier “absolute” is applied solely to the historical activity of humanity, understood simply as a species. Contrarily, the “absolute” dimension, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, implies the recognition that human self-knowing partakes in and of the movement of self-contemplation that is essential to the life of the Absolute itself, the movement evoked, as I explained above, in the long quote from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, which closes the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*.

It is indeed in this ultimate context, at the end of the *Encyclopedia* chapter on “Absolute Spirit”, that the both human and divine activity are qualified (by both Hegel and Aristotle) as “eternal”. In other words, our self-knowledge, at the level of Absolute Spirit, is conjugated with divine self-revelation. As Hegel expresses it in his *Lectures on Religion*, which we will look closer at in Chapter 8, humanity is the historical actor in the self-consciousness activity of God or the *Idea*, to use the speculative or Neoplatonic term favored by Hegel. Returning to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we thus see why the chapter on Religion replays the *history* of Spirit but from the point of view of divine revelatory agency and immediately precedes the last chapter on Absolute Knowing, where the self-knowing activities of the human and the divine are harmonized in a beautiful, eternal unity between reason and faith. This ultimate reconciliation was the highest object of the main currents of German post-*Aufklärung* thought, an outcome which Lessing, Kant and Schiller had already postulated. Within this absolute unity, conceived by Hegel’s philosophy, the relation between history and the historically-informed eternal “Now” (understood as Revelation), proves itself to be entirely complementary and hence noncontradictory.

For Hegel, Absolute knowing, as I just presented it, i.e. as the conjugation of human and divine agencies of self-knowing, should not be comprehended as a kind of golden fleece that the reader of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* should strive to grasp and which would only present itself in the last station of the long and twisted trial the book recounts. For according to the logic of the concept, which espouses a circular or spiral epistemology, the realized result must already be found there, at the departure point but only in an immediate or intuited form. Put differently, the absolute “Now” that appears at the end of *Phenomenology*, depicted in the image of the foaming chalice, must already be there at the outset but as an empty moment, namely as an instantaneous

intuition of the Singular universal, of the *hen kai pan* (the One and the All) that the Hegelian narrative tasks itself to fulfill. Such a preliminary, as yet totally indeterminate and thus ambiguous intuition is indeed to be found first in the Preface of the *Phenomenology*, where the famous expression of the “night where all cows are black”,¹⁵ evokes Schelling’s notion of intellectual intuition, and then, as I mentioned earlier, in the chapter on Sense-certainty, where the punctual and instantaneous “now” of sensible intuition dissolves into the experience of an unfulfilled *universality* without content.

In order to fully comprehend the critical (in both the momentous and polemical sense of the term) character of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is necessary to grasp the fact that intellectual intuition, whose universal immediacy so strongly interpellated Hegel’s speculative thought, constitutes a massive datum of scientific actuality at the beginning of the Germanic 19th Century, a fact equally evidenced in the philosophical reflections of his friends Schelling and Hölderlin (also present in the intuitional forms of knowledge in Jacobi, Schleiermacher and Novalis). The demands of the time, felt by Hegel and to which he so thoroughly and systematically responds, consist in *carrying out* the intellectual intuition of the eternal “Now” and finding in it the tenor that will save it from a purely sensuous and empty fate. It is this rich tenor that Hegel subsequently develops according to the three syllogistic moments of the concept: the Universal, the Particular and the Singular (the Whole) of the system of Science articulated in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, the system actualized and practiced in the university teaching of that work. However, before taking on such an *Encyclopedic* performance, the task that Hegel gives himself is to *demonstrate* that the intellectual intuition which is acknowledged in the German philosophical scene around 1800, in spite of its Kantian

¹⁵ *Werke* 3, p. 22.

proscription, already carries within itself all the richness of its own *Phenomenological* history, that is to say, the content of human self-knowing in complicity with divine Revelation.

Consequently, in Hegel, the systematic complicity between the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Encyclopedia* guarantees that the two temporal dimensions, namely the eternal “Now” and history, become manifest as actually and objectively united.

The temporal reconciliation operated by Hegelian thought implies two fundamental conditions, and it is precisely these conditions that are problematic for the post-Hegelian philosophers presented by Löwith: first, the sense of historical movement must be apprehended in an essentially retrospective fashion; second, this movement toward Absolute Knowing must be comprehended in terms of a self-revelation that is both human and divine. The Young Hegelian legacy very clearly refuses both the idea of a divine complicity involved in human self-revelation and the essentially retrospective view of historical time, for such a past-directed view must necessarily result in the idea of a present that is fully informed with an absolute character and thus standing against any temporal logic directed toward fulfillment in the future.

Both of these aspects of refusal are clearly presented in the chapter of Löwith’s book entitled “The Reversal of the Hegelian Philosophy by the Young Hegelians”, where the author discusses their legacy in three moments: Feuerbach and Ruge; Bauer and Stirner; Marx and Kierkegaard. These three moments form an oppositional progression that ends, with the last pair, in the critical destruction of the “bourgeois-Christian world”,¹⁶ that is to say, their own contemporary world. Each of these rebellious successors proves to be “hungry for the future [...], out of step with the world as it is [...], with the wild idea that their first job is to set right a world that has gone off the rails.”¹⁷ However, condemned as they are to adopt forms of

¹⁶ Löwith, p.69.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 63. Translation modified.

dialectical historical progression devoid of any “absolute” culmination, and whose anticipated culmination and purpose must therefore espouse the vague forms of an endlessly *future* golden age, the Young Hegelian current of thought is condemned to finish tragically, as Löwith very clearly observes, in the posthuman vision of Nietzsche. Consequently, the post-Hegelian failure can be comprehended in terms of a contradiction between historical and eternal notions of temporality but only on the condition that we are aware of how the disciples knowingly refuse the reconciliation proposed by the master.

In his analysis of Hegelian thought, Löwith appears fully aware of the recapitulative character involved in the idealist’s take on history, as is clear from the chapter on “The Eschatological Meaning of Hegel’s Consummation of the History of the World and the Spirit”, where one reads: “The history of the concept [*des Begriffs*] comes to an end with Hegel; in recollection, he understands all history... as the fulfillment of ages.”¹⁸ However, it is also clear that, because it is the result of a unilaterally human progress, the spiritual presence that is manifest in such a recapitulation can never meet the demands of an eternal, Aristotelian “Now”, to which it must endlessly strive. The “enigma” that Löwith encounters in Hegelian temporality is thus the result of an unhappy contradiction between the Greek notion of time and the entelechical character of the Christian narrative. Indeed, “the ultimate basis of Hegel’s eschatological system lies in his absolute evaluation of Christianity.”¹⁹ Löwith’s error, to call it such, lies in the failure to understand that Hegel’s project was precisely to overcome and reconcile the opposition between these two temporal notions, in the idea of a “Now” that is both eternally absolute and worldly human or historical. In Hegel, this absolute reconciliation is presented (and made present), following the *Phenomenological* apprenticeship, in his

¹⁸ Löwith, p. 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences. This work represents the actual realization of the original intuition of the eternal “Now”, expressed at the time as an intellectual intuition but now deploying itself syllogistically out of the first universal moment, i.e. the *Logic*.

To the extent that the *Encyclopedia*'s vocation was thoroughly pedagogical (academic), it is helpful to recognize the performative actuality of the Hegelian system within the state university, taken as a place where a self-knowing that is both human and divine comes to recognize itself in and through its history. More precisely, as a teaching manual, which systematically incorporates a philosophical reflection on every aspect of university-level knowledge, the *Encyclopedia*'s vocation was to form a discourse whose true presence would be embodied in the recently founded (1810) University of Berlin.²⁰ It is not by accident that Hegel perceived in the three main faculties (Theology, Medicine, Law) the reflection of the three books of his systematic philosophical teaching manual, namely the *Logic*, the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Philosophy of Spirit*.²¹ Judged according to such a perspective, the different academic failures or rejections experienced by the Young Hegelians, which are discussed by Löwith, become completely coherent with their refusal to recognize the reconciliation of the two apparently opposed notions of time as actualized in the Hegelian university project, a fact obscured in Löwith, who tends to reduce the academic failures of the Young Hegelians to their personal lack of the intellectual capacities necessary to solve the temporal enigma that was already present in Hegel himself.

The failure of the Young Hegelians is thus attributed to the philosophical weaknesses that Löwith finds in Feuerbach, Ruge, Bauer and Stirner (less in Kierkegaard and Marx). Indeed,

²⁰ Of course, the first edition of the *Encyclopedia* had the same mission, at the University of Heidelberg, where Hegel taught before moving to Berlin in 1818.

²¹ See Chapter ? or my Real Words, on Hegel and the State University.

“their writings are manifestos, programs and theses, but never anything whole, important in itself. In their hands, their scientific demonstrations became sensational proclamations... leaving an impression of insipidity.”²² Consequently, lacking the resources to resolve the temporal challenge apparently posed in Hegel, these largely journalistic or *pamphlétaires* thinkers found themselves caught in an insoluble dilemma that they inherited, and which they dealt with by simply abandoning one of the temporal alternatives, namely the notion of the eternal “Now”, while conserving the idea of a salutary historicity, one which must necessarily prove aporetic. Löwith does not seem to realize that it is above all the refusal of any Hegelian complicity between the two temporal notions that condemns his successors to failure. For by unilaterally suppressing the absolute dimension of time as an eternal present, the essentially dialectical and progressive project of the Young Hegelians no longer has an endpoint. Briefly, without the moment of the recapitulative “Now”, their narratives, like their century, are condemned to iterate stories that have neither meaning nor end.

Hegelian philosophy is essentially informed by and informative of the modern state university; the same is true of its author. Indeed, almost everything we read today under Hegel’s name was conceived and written either as a teaching manual or in the form of course notes, his own assembled together with those of his students’ notebooks. Moreover, given the epistolary reports that Hegel drafted for the government officials responsible for public education, and his own administrative work in the recently founded University of Berlin, it is apparent that he was solidly involved in the development of university-level pedagogical policy at the national level.²³

²² Löwith, p. 64.

²³ While he does briefly discuss Hegel’s pedagogical theory and its humanist and political mission, citing his graduation speeches from his time as a Gymnasium Principal, Löwith does not refer to Hegel’s reflections on the university institution, as found in the letter-report to his friend Raumer. In fact, the letter was only published in 1938 and would have probably been unavailable to Löwith, cf. *Werke* 4, p. 418-25.

The absolute character of Hegel's philosophy, i.e. its systematic dimension, cannot possibly remain purely ideal and abstract. It must concretely form and perform the scientific *word (logos)* of the university institution, conceived as the *present* space where the past course of self-knowing, both human and divine, has been actualized.

Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to claim that the Hegelian university is exclusively retrospective, entirely fixed on the great past works of human history. As with Hegelian Science itself, the university is constantly hungry for new content, depending upon the positive (empirical) sciences for new material upon which to reflect.²⁴ However, it is equally true that in its academic embodiment, Hegelian philosophy always comes after. Its vocation is to reflect again on the acquired products of human spirit; in this way, philosophy does paint its "grey on grey".²⁵ That is why, according to Hegel, philosophy takes flight only at the fall of day, in end times, even in those of decadence, where the colors are less vibrant, when the period has lost the luster of youth too immersed in the immediacy of life. Briefly, it is only when the intoxication of youth gives onto the sober reflections of maturity that philosophy does its work.

According to Hegel, the state university enjoys an ontological status that is informed by the absolute quality of the philosophical system that animates it, conferring upon it its actual meaning. Consequently, distinguishing Hegel from his "Young" successors in terms of time cannot but be reflected in their opposed ways of conceiving the university itself: either along the lines of Hegelian reason, i.e. as a present state institution where the Absolute's self-knowing deploys and reveals itself through the knowledge that students may acquire of their past, or, if those students are unable to recognize themselves either in their present time or in the history leading to it, as an outmoded, bourgeois institution. Indeed, in the latter case, the university then

²⁴ Ibid., p. 422.

²⁵ *Werke* 7, p. 28.

only represents a pointless institution of the past, one that transmits knowledge that is no longer meaningful, and worse still, one that advances and supports everything that is false and flawed in the present. Löwith sums up perfectly the Young Hegelian disdain for academic philosophy when he writes that for them, “philosophers no longer comprise a separate class; they are what they are in perfectly ordinary relationship to the state: civil-servant teachers of philosophy.”²⁶

So Löwith may be right in remarking that the terminal nature of Hegelian philosophy is drawn on the faded background of the crumbling Holy German Empire. Indeed, his philosophy ends with the world in which it came into being. Thus, again borrowing from the Hegelian palette, the philosophical poverty of his rebellious successors can be explained in light of the too harsh colors of the new European world, liberal, nationalist, imperialist, Bismarckean, that is, in light of the youthful character of that time and its revolutionary demands. The epoch is simply too busy living and feeling too full of the future to give itself over, in its search for meaning, to the calm retrospective reflection implied by the university community and its worshipful adherents. It is precisely this hope in youth that Nietzsche argues for in his *Untimely Considerations*, but only on condition that the future generations be formed outside the university institution, which Nietzsche himself had forsaken in favor of atemporal philosophical wanderings.

²⁶ Löwith, p. 66. Translation modified.

