

Hegel and Arbitrariness [*Willkür*]

Hegel says: "To comprehend *what is* is the task of philosophy, for *what is* is reason."¹ For him it is not a particularly controversial claim: what, after all, is given to us with which to think, but for what is? The contention is certainly not that philosophy cannot speak of what ought to be; for, really, it is not clear how there is any philosophy or need for philosophy except as an articulation of what ought to happen, what ought to be: the imminent self-consciousness of the spirit brought definitely closer with each word Hegel writes. And insofar as Hegel's *kallipolis* seems to have much more to do with schemata which, at the time of his flourishing, were only on paper (i.e. never-enacted liberal reforms) than with the architecture of any contemporaneous state; insofar as Hegel, not willing to abide the liberal's constant appealing to what is all too loudly insisted to be perfectly apparent to any sane human being, directly aims at a "rephrasing" of the matter of his state, an adopting of an angle upon the material which is already there so as for it to be seen to unfold in a linear (i.e. rational) manner; it is dishonest to depict him as committed to the social situation exactly as it presents itself. In fact, it is impossible, in Hegel's analysis, for that situation of stasis, of the spirit's fulfilled self-consciousness, in the era of which we at least now are—for this to be *utopia*, in the sense of Plato, of William Morris, of Fourier, of Chernyshevsky. For the coming of each national spirit to actuality marks what Hegel names the *evaporation of [the nation's] profounder interests*;² since this withering is not tied to the supersession of the nation, the withdrawal of the spirit proper from it, but simply by the ceasing of its development, it is not clear why the same atrophy would not take place in the coming to itself of the spirit proper. The end of history is the death of philosophy, of all thought as all motion; and while a thinker may accept or even endorse the closing off of that endeavor to which he has given his best years, surely this does not mean that he must *like* it.

That being said, a thinker's distaste for a given outcome, for the notion of there being an *outcome* in the first place, is powerful incentive for him to attempt to cast aspersion upon or evade its necessity. This is to say: Hegel's identification of the rational and the actual is in some real sense system-defining, and thereby implies an end to thought; more explicitly, given that there is nothing standing in the

¹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, preface (p21).

² Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 58.

way of the actual in its coming to be (and that it is not really clear what sense there is in the claim that such a coming-to-be would never end, neverendingness being not a concept but the *Grenze* to one), there is also nothing standing in the way of the rational in its coming to be entirely written out. And the writing out of the entirety of rationality, of what is, would by Hegel's definition be a finishing with philosophy. Thus, there would likely have been some parallel current of thought, not philosophical thought by Hegel's definition but possibly within the Western philosophical canon regardless, which worked neither for nor out of the what-is, which took some more foreign schema as given.

The difficulty in articulating what such a philosophizing would take as its matter (for what is there to work with but what is?) seems to indicate that such a philosophizing could hardly have been carried out in an intellectually honest, a not entirely sporadic or terroristic manner; the narrative (and I think this would be Hegel's narrative, or part of it) is that the modern embrace of rigor, and the adoption of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and perhaps one or two other premodern figures into the tradition of philosophical rigor, would have been an epistemological break of sorts in the history of philosophy, a making science out of salon-conversation. But what of theology? It is not exactly clear what the New Testament *is*, but certainly it is not a history nor an account of a particular experiencing of the world or a particular sociopolitical situation: it can be read in this way, and often is, but in the researcher's doing so the text's capacity to be *scripture*, to demand faith—for its concepts to have been handed down by an alien god—is totally elided. The (pre-Enlightenment, or at least pre-Scholastic) theologian is rather concerned with a conceptual material which has been delivered to him entirely ahistorically, without earthly context: arbitrarily, one might say. The difference is that Hegel's rational theology, his Trinitarian thought, is in fact a justification, an articulation, a making justified by its proper articulation, of what is, and is relevant precisely in its capacity as such: he is concerned with the accessibility to intellection of the divine *for otherwise the divine could not have any relevance*. (Hegel is explicit about the worth of Christianity stemming from its being the "religion of freedom,"³ a crude instrumentalism which would have had him burned a millennium prior.) While the theologian might also argue for the accessibility to intellection or experience, or even the naive existence,

³ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, s18.

of the divine, he does so out of desire: the purpose of theology, as of mystic experience, is ultimately to bring one closer to God, to accede to *fruitio Dei*. What is almost immediately dismissed as insufficient for satisfaction, insufficient for a thinking which one could really enjoy: perhaps it is uniquely Christianity within which there is no mystical experience without the textual experience of God, taking *text* to mean that which is written by and betrays the character of not an other but the properly foreign Other, a presence truly unlike mine and unintelligible to me.

Of course, one may also read literary texts,⁴ or outpourings from the analyst's couch, in this manner, though the mechanism here is rather more complicated, demands a certain removal in spirit of oneself from society and perhaps even from the socius. What is characteristic of all such readings is a reflexive and not merely political discontent for the way things are: *for me to straightforwardly and purely enjoy, says such a thinker, it would take a miracle. Nothing less—but also nothing more.*

The theologian, for Hegel, is the thinker of *Willkür*. Any thought which is not after comprehension purely of what is is not philosophy, cannot be conflated with philosophy as *Wissenschaft*: fails to meet the standards of rigor which delimit the discipline. "If [the philosopher's theory] builds itself a world as it ought to be, then it certainly has an existence, but only within his opinions—a pliant medium *in which the imagination can construct anything it pleases.*"⁵ Of course, the theologian is not *building himself a world as it ought to be*: in the scripture from which he works this construction has already taken place. Hegel is not attacking the character of the theologian, only his methodological choices; Hegel *is* attacking the character of the text. Plato, Saint Paul, Goethe, Maria von Herbert:⁶ all four, in their writing, had simply been free to say what they wished to say, insofar as they had broken from the spirit to look forward to historical transformations not rationally accessible to them. Martin Luther might have been necessary, but the substrate upon which he operated—that of Paul, of the Gospels, of the Church Father—was emphatically not: it could never have been, given his lack of loyalty to it, to its intention for itself; given

⁴ Though perhaps not artworks as artworks; I do not think this account can be made to accord straightforwardly with Hegel's aesthetics.

⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, preface (p22).

⁶ A correspondent of Kant—see Rae Langton, "Duty and Desolation"—whose accounts might (I assert entirely without evidence) perhaps be very fruitfully read psychoanalytically.

that Protestantism is the *religion of freedom* and neither of the orthodox Christianities were ever so.

And in his criticism of *Willkür*, Hegel comes to a wonderful and all-too-neglected insight: for him, what is arbitrary is not only too abstract, too purely formal to be relevant, it is also too directly and mechanistically product of the circumstances in which it is composed: there is an intolerable "dependence on an inwardly or externally given content and material."⁷ It is not that Saint Paul was not divinely inspired (nor that Plato was oblivious to the world around him, that poetry is not brought to one by the Mousai, that madness is not a possession...): it is that he was *too divinely inspired*, transcribed what was given to him far too naively, far too literally. Hegel's account of the poem being early moment of the dialectic is not really discernible from the account a Romantic poet would give of their own work: it is a first reckoning with the material, a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," *immediate*. Of course, for Wordsworth this immediacy does not really present itself as dubious, to be questioned, whereas for Hegel it quickly reveals itself as theoretically untenable, vanishes into an equally undesirable asceticism: did the Romantics not begin the doing away with of form, of compulsion within the craft of poetry, even as they began to see the content of their work as compelled from them by nature, by emotion? and was there not subsequently a Parnassian and more broadly neoclassical reaction?

This is to say, in his concept of *Willkür* Hegel captures the reality of artisanal poetizing as it presented itself in his time: it is unsympathetic though perhaps still appropriate to fault him for not anticipating the transition of poetry into something more proletarian with the Symbolists and modernists. Similar determinations can be given, I am sure, with regard to theology and psychoanalysis, though the history of theology is significantly less clean than that of poetry, and it is not exactly clear what the history of psychoanalysis before Freud ought to look like. It follows, per this account, that Hegel is able quite successfully to detach his concept of freedom from that of *Willkür*, even to reveal *Willkür* as both rationally untenable and of suspect value, as to be excluded entirely from philosophy. It is left, then, to the anti- or at least post-Hegelian thinker to rescue the *profounder interests* of man from their Hegelian sublation.

⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, s15.