

On the Lord-Bondsman Model

What is perhaps most immediately remarkable about Hegel's lord-bondsman toy model is the explicit presence of a third party fixing the interaction: Hegel names it a *thing*,¹ and it is presumably to be understood as the physical object with which or in whose context the bondsman labors, which he "forms and shapes,"² exerts his will upon. I say *fixing the interaction*: I do think it precisely to be the presence of such a "good object" upon which the proper functioning of the interaction hinges. For given the object Hegel is able to rather lucidly—too lucidly, I would say—describe the lord and bondsman into their respective positions: the lord as he who for lack of an "independent opposition"—a co-resident of the way-things-are free to engage him in a combat, a "life-and-death struggle"³ (it is indicative that Hegel here resorts to a martial metaphor, as is standard for those wishing to smuggle a certain measure of received idea into their thought) by which the former and latter might come to the truth of their being-for-themselves—is unable to come to such a being-for-himself; the bondsman as he who has come, thanks to the lord's tyranny, to the fear, the consciousness of himself as given over to another, which is the proper fruit of the combat which the lord evades, and who simultaneously is given the chance to come to a consciousness of himself as agent rather than mere fact by means of his work, his lordship of sorts over the object: to whom it is therefore only left to sublimate the two consciousnesses into a true being-for-himself. The lord is certain as to his fulfilment of himself as subject—he can give any number of correct statements about his position—but he cannot know this fulfilment to be *true*, to have meaning, worth, not to be simply delusional—for legitimacy, which is one's being-of-worth, must, as a title, be conferred upon one by the other, not simply taken for oneself; and there is no one in the model who could perform this conferral who is not already tainted, as is the bondsman, by the fact that he will do anything he is ordered to do, that his consent is bought and not earned.

But meanwhile it is due to the presence of the object that certain questions are able to be raised about Hegel's model: questions that seem to indicate that what is taking place within it ought to be read rather more carefully. Most immediately: it is not exactly clear what the object is to be in the case in which the bondsman is a real proletarian: a Marxian would point to the conspicuous "missed connection" between the assembly-line worker and that in the production of

1 Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, s190ff.

2 Ibid., s195.

3 Ibid., s187.

which they take part, but there is also the cannon-fodder infantryman, the house-servant... Anyhow Hegel's portrait of the bondsman in no way accounts for the disillusionment and directionless anger of a Wozzeck or Franz Biberkopf, or the strange, half-cowering febrility of a Walser protagonist; clearly those whom Hegel has in mind are artisans at worst. And then there is the entirely otherwise danger, to which Fanon is attuned, that the artisanal bondsman refuses to listen to Hegel and "turn away from the master and turn toward the object," instead "turn[ing] toward the master and abandon[ing] the object"; I imagine such a bondsman might be found among the less flattering of the portraits of serfs with which the Russians would stock us: Chekhov's or Leskov's bitterer stories ("The House with the Mansard," *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*), or even those of Gogol, are perhaps most indicative. The issue in this case is that to work upon an object is not in particularly many cases to exert any sort of mastery over that object; more often, one is simply worn out by the object's recalcitrance, and so, or for economic reasons, is forced to cede a certain amount of the potential mastery to elves (as the cobbler in the fairy-tale) or tools, technological instruments (as all of us—I am writing this essay not by hand but on a laptop, after all—in real life). We therefore must accept that the scheme into which the bondsman is placed is not nearly as universal as Hegel, but more especially his commentators,⁴ seems to want it to be: his giving of them an object out of which they are to draw some sort of solace is not the easiest maneuver to imagine—I, for one, cannot really describe what this would look like.

More problematic is the situation of the lord; while a bondsman "noble" or "saintly" enough to follow the Hegelian sequence is at least tenable as an ideal of sorts, we are asked to grant a certain fundamental incompetence on the lord's part, which, while empirically believable, cannot really be *a priori* granted. Most simply, I cannot imagine a man like de Rochefoucauld, de Maistre, or Lavoisier, despite his obvious lordship, conceding that he does not directly perform any labor: intellectual labor, the sort that results in a treatise or literary work, is always direct, and can reasonably be asserted to be more purely labor than that which the tailor or clockmaker engages in. (Incidentally, Marx manages to critique Hegel in another context—near that of my critique of the bondsman-concept—on precisely the opposite point: "The only labor that Hegel knows and recognizes is abstract, mental labor."⁵ Hegel has no room in his scheme for

⁴ *Vide e.g.* John O'Neill, *Hegel's Dialectic of Desire and Recognition*, 7, which seems to posit the lord-bondsman dialectic as component of *every* coming-to-(self)-recognition.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

the menial laborer, then, but neither does he have room for the real practitioner of art [and not just of *belles-lettres*.]) In what way can the bondsman lay claim to any sort of mastery over the object when said mastery would be of a vulgar, far-too-literal sort? And then there is the tendency among authors to see their works not as their own but as very much given to them by the muses, to see themselves qua authors as servants of some vaguely divine entity: we seem, then, to have made bondsmen out of the lords, except with their object, language, above them in this makeshift hierarchy, and the proper serfs irredeemably below. (It should be added that there is the even more radical maneuver of simply ceding life itself to one's bondsmen, which the protagonists of Villiers' *Axël* explicitly do. What the precise consequences of this are I am still nowhere near sure, two years after reading the play.)

It should be reiterated that I do not intend these as *criticisms* of the lord-bondsman model, not exactly: that the bondsmen within it are all too saintly and the lords quite stupid does not count against it in its function as a toy-model, an exemplar, as a scheme with no necessary correlate in reality. So long as Hegel is not thought to be positing a universal law of recognition, only explaining the process, we have no ammunition against him. One might even examine the bluntest criticism that can be made of the model: that it is essentially manufacturing a place for a third entity, the object, within a scheme which seems only to permit the presence within it of self and other. This criticism must explicitly be made from the perspective of the lord or the bondsman—we will opt for the latter—since for Hegel such a twofoldness will only polarize a to some extent untutored view. How, we might ask, does the bondsman explicitly maintain two completely opposite relationships with the other: fear of and service to what is picked out of the other as the lord, and "formative activity"⁶ toward what is picked out of the other as the object? For the picking of these entities out of the other seems to rely on some process of (mis)recognition already having occurred; but to (mis)recognize, reify the entities requires one to have developed attitudes toward "each of them," never mind that no *each* exists at this point. That is: it is easy to argue from a perspective like mine that Hegel fails in being rigorous where he fails in being solipsistic; he takes for granted the plurality of a world, the precise nature of the singularity of which is really all that his metaphysics has given thus far. (And of course Hegel cannot respond, as would a less responsible thinker, that the world is plural in this sense because we perceive it as plural.) But to make this argument would be, I think, to miss what makes

⁶ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, s196.

Hegel's systematizing so powerful: namely, he proves knowing what end toward which he is proving (this being the present way-of-things), and the steps he would need to take to get there (this being the historical sequence). The gap in the self-other twofoldness which Hegel exploits, into which he inserts the intensely polyvalent and polymorphous object, is there because it must be there, because it is there: perhaps Hegel has skipped a few steps in justifying its presence, but that is only the slip-up of the human chronicling, biographizing the Absolute; the Absolute itself is unassailable, and that—the way-things-are itself—is what one must go up against to go up against the substance of Hegel. (Lacan does this: he is perfectly comfortable situating himself as literally "against Hegel,"⁷ and indeed the perverting of Hegel which is the mirror stage might be read as an attempt on the life of the Absolute, an attempt to render [i/I]maginary in one fell swoop the entirety of the way-things-socially-are.) My previous reservations as to how Hegel knew when his dialecticizing was to stop are invalid by this same line of reasoning: he was to stop once he had the architectonic of the world written down, nothing more or less than that. That is: Hegel's refusal to invoke any sort of core or scaffold of brute fact, givenness in his systematizing was not a methodological precept but a heuristic he maintained so as to be able to perform such a commitment of world to paper; all of his supposed "presuppositions" ought, I think, to be read in this light.

After this we are still left with the question of how the model is to be more literally, faithfully read. I think I have found a lead in Klossowski, but I have not been able to work out a schema in time for it to be included in this essay. Perhaps I will be able to explain it somewhat by the tutorial tomorrow, if you would like.

⁷ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 215.