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HEGEL AND THE AD-VENTURE OF THE TOTALITY

Jamila M.H. Mascat

The false modesty of understanding does not get around the problem of the whole.

M. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1973)

In the 1975 text *Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?* Louis Althusser wrote:

If I may be allowed to be a little provocative, it seems to me that we can leave to Hegel the category of totality, and claim for Marx the category of the whole. It might be said that this is a verbal quibble, but I do not think that this is entirely true. If I preferred to reserve for Marx the category of the whole rather than that of the totality, it is because within the totality a double temptation is always present: that of considering it as a pervasive essence which exhaustively embraces all of its manifestations, and — what comes to the same thing — that of discovering in it, as in a circle or a sphere (a metaphor which makes us think of Hegel once again), a centre which would be its essence.¹

While agreeing with Althusser in recognizing that the very notion of totality entails such a ‘double temptation’, it is still possible to argue that Hegel may have been tempted by something else. What else it could be is precisely what this article aims to engage with, by suggesting that the Hegelian totality may be interpreted as a speculative construct densely charged with temporal implications: it is both one that expresses a timely standpoint — the standpoint of its time which is, as claimed by Hegel at the end of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, only ‘for the time being (*für jetzt*) completed² and one that has achieved for the philosophies yet to come the irrevocable gain of *comprehending* (*begreifen/concipere*) their time as a totality, assigning to thought precisely the task of constituting and re-constituting wholes.

I.

As a preliminary consideration, it is necessary to point out that the notion of totality is understood here as that peculiar principle that

Hegel mobilized since his early Jena writings in order to refer to the very idea of completion and completeness that is essential to any philosophical aim.³ According to Hegel in fact, ‘*jede Philosophie ist in sich vollendet und hat, wie ein echtes Kunstwerk, die Totalität in sich* [Every philosophy is complete in itself, and like an authentic work of art, carries the totality within itself].⁴ Therefore, as suggested by Gwendoline Jarczyk, the idea of totality functions in Hegel’s works as the ‘speculative figure’ of the system contemplated from the perspective of its totalizing *Stimmung*.⁵ Concrete totality, unlike abstract totality as formal identity with itself, designates an intricate knot of qualitative aspects that cannot be merely reduced to a quantitative connection (*Zusammenhang*) of elements, nor to a simple all-encompassing unity (*Einheit*). Thus, logical totality as a *knot* and historical totality as a *plot* are the driving schemes of the present reconstruction of the *ad-venture* — the coming-to-be — of the Hegelian totality, as a timely achievement rooted in its own historical contingency, which consists of a peculiar proportion of speculative freedom that entails neither the end of speculation nor the end of history but rather hands on to posterity the philosophical assignment to comprehend its *Zeitgeist*.

If one considers the theoretical *loci* where Hegel provided paradigmatic examples of various degrees of accomplished totalities — namely ‘Absolute Knowing’ in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the concept *qua* ‘Absolute Idea’ in the *Science of Logic*, and ‘Absolute Spirit’ in the *Encyclopaedia* — totality appears as characterized by its vocation to absoluteness, a sin of hubris that attests not only totality’s claim for all-comprehensive extension but also its claim for self-justification and presuppositionlessness, or in other words, totality’s aspiration to be *ab-soluta* — etymologically: detached, free from bonds, disengaged, not relative to anything else, hence *total*.

The undeniable risk at stake in the presence of the Hegelian ‘concept that comprehends itself conceptually, being as the concrete and just as absolutely intensive totality’, as stated at the end of the *Science of Logic*,⁶ is the danger that everything other than speculation (matter, time, contingency, history) may end up being reduced to a mere moment of thought itself and caught in the yoke of the ‘circle of circles’ of scientific knowledge.⁷ This aspect cannot be completely denied, and yet it cannot be taken as a final verdict. Indeed, despite being some kind of whole, Hegel’s totality paradoxically is not *all*, since it is possible and to some extent necessary to recognize that there is *more*, namely a concep-

tual overflow that resides precisely in the complex asymmetrical temporal relations that make the Hegelian totality conceivable.

First of all, such an intricate plot becomes visible when one looks at the processes of totalization letting totality appear in motion, instead of approaching totality *qua structure* as Althusser seemed to frame it. Secondly, one needs to supersede a bi-dimensional spatial notion of totality in view of a three-dimensional one, at once 'strong and fragile',⁸ where the third dimension would be that of time. And lastly, in order to decipher the temporal rhythms that punctuate the paths of logical, historical, as well as philosophical totalization scattered throughout the system, one should complicate the understanding of the circular metaphors often used by Hegel as recalled by Althusser, for whom Marx's 'edifice', as a foundation of 'one or two upper floors', would indeed have been preferable to the Hegelian topography of the 'circle of circles'.⁹

II.

Althusser's criticism of Hegel's conception of totality can be traced throughout all his works, starting from his early dissertation, written in 1947 and entitled *Du contenu dans la pensée de G.W.F. Hegel*. The Hegelian totality, understood here mainly as a historical achievement, is analyzed and questioned with the purpose of disclosing the peculiar relationship established between its form and content. Countering the Marxian and Marxist *vulgata* according to which in Hegel's theory it would be possible to separate the 'good' form from the 'bad' content, Althusser argued that, given that the form of the Hegelian totality is the concept that comprehends reality and existence, such form may be as 'bad' as its content, insofar as in the last instance it is precisely that form that does not allow to adopt any other attitude *vis à vis* the content than 'faire bonne contenance au mauvais contenu' — i.e., 'to keep a certain composure in front of a bad content'.¹⁰ Hegel's totality is thus conceived mainly as a *form containing a content*, and while that form for the young Althusser may already have been a defective and dysfunctional one doomed to decay, its content, once it is historically deprived of its conceptual truth, becomes merely a 'corpse in history', 'an existence without concept', or in other words, a formless content.¹¹ The sharpest arguments of Althusser's critique, however, are probably formulated in the 1975 essay *Est-il simple d'être marxiste en philosophie?*

and in *For Marx*.¹² The first of Althusser's remarks concerns the problem of multiplicity, i.e. the problem of phenomena. Hegel would have banned the independence (*Selbstständigkeit*) of phenomena by framing totality as a simple unity in which an internal essence exhausts all of its manifestations so as to provide material objectivity only with an ephemeral and estranged existence.¹³ A second related issue concerns the problem of indifference, which stems, according to Althusser, from the fact that the single components of totality, as simple moments that are negated as soon as they are affirmed, would remain 'all equally indifferent' to each other and practically equal to one another in their respective inconsistency.¹⁴ Lastly, a third objection that summarizes the two previous statements claims that Hegel's totality, in Althusser's words, embodies an 'expressive totality, in which all the elements are total parts, each expressing the internal unity of the totality which is only ever, in all its complexity, the objectification-alienation of a simple principle'.¹⁵ Hegel's totality would then be a *spiritual* totality in which every element as *pars totalis* should express the whole, conceived once again as a delimited circular structure or a comprehensive sphere whose geometry would impede the development of real and concrete complexity.¹⁶

Concerning the first two remarks on the status of the phenomena that the Hegelian totality would confine to the role of indifferent and inconsistent moments of the whole, one may observe that the movement described by Althusser and ascribed by him to Hegel's conception of totality should be more properly referred to the dialectic of the *doctrine of essence* exposed in Book II of the *Science of Logic*. Here indeed the shine (*der Schein*) appears as 'essence's own positing', and Hegel accurately pointed out that 'this shine is not something external, something other than essence, but it is essence's own shining'. Since it has no independence in itself, 'it has existence only with reference to another', and 'it is the non-self-subsistent which exists only in its negation'. In other words, as Hegel insisted, 'the being of *shine* consists solely in the *sublatedness of being*, in being's nothingness; [...] and apart from its nothingness, apart from essence, it does not exist.'¹⁷ However, according to the exposition of the *Science of Logic*, such a dynamic, which belongs to the early deployment of the *doctrine of essence* (part II), does not concern the unfolding of the subjective logic of the *concept* (part III), at the end of which the totality appears in the shape of the Absolute Idea. The concept indeed presupposes as its ground the already achieved

actual unity of essence and phenomena, which is reached at the level of *Wirklichkeit* (section 3 of part II), where ‘*shapeless* essence and *unstable* appearance — or subsistence without determination and manifoldness without permanence — have their truth’.¹⁸ In this sense, Althusser’s observation does not hit the mark.

The third Althusserian remark about the so-called ‘expressive totality’ obliges us to look closer at the significance and functioning of the *Begriff*. What does the concept do? Clearly it does not ‘express’ anything. Hegel, on the contrary conceived of the concept predominantly as internal activity (*Tätigkeit*) and development (*Entwicklung*). While the dialectic of the essence properly consists in ‘shining in the other’ — a move that fundamentally relies on the inessential exteriority of the shine — the proper movement of the concept, which ‘possesses as such, within it, the beginning of the advance and development’, consists in its concrete positing of what is already present in itself and is ‘the universal absolute activity’ as self-determination and self-realization of its own accomplishment.¹⁹ Thus, the temporality of the concept appears to be an uncharacteristic form of temporalization that mirrors the peculiar texture of the *Science of Logic*, where the logical and the chronological can hardly match and where the logical *Anfang* (beginning) cannot coincide with the chronological or phenomenal one.

Therefore, the time of the concept is neither a continuum (which would imply the immutable permanence of an internal principle supposed to remain identical through the whole series of contingent metamorphosis) nor a gradual advancement (which would imply a progressive quantitative growth without leaps), since, as Hegel stated in the *Philosophy of Nature*, ‘the old saying, or so-called law, *non datur salutus in natura* is altogether inadequate to the diremption of the Notion [Concept]’.²⁰ Yet the time of the concept is not that of a plain harmonic synchrony either. Thus, the temporal deployment of the *Begriff* must be of a different kind, neither synchronic nor serial.

III.

Hegel often recurred to the image of the *circle* in order to illustrate the unfolding of the Absolute, or he referred to the ‘circle of circles’ in order to portray his system of science. The preface to the *Phenomenology* provides a remarkable definition of the figure of the *Kreis* as ‘the circle that presupposes its end [*Ende*] as its goal [*Zweck*], having its end

[*Ende*] also as its beginning [*zum Anfange*]; and only by being worked out to its end [*Ende*], is it actual'.²¹ The final chapter on 'Absolute Knowing' re-proposes a similar formulation defining the movement of the Spirit as 'the circle that returns [back] into itself, the circle that presupposes its beginning [*Anfang*] and reaches it only at the end [*im Ende*]'.²²

Circularity depends here on the paradoxical notion of *sich wiederherstellende Gleichheit* ('self-restoring sameness'), i.e., the non-original and non-immediate unity that characterizes the becoming subject of the substance,²³ and in this regard the accomplishment of the concept seems to be nothing but a return to the beginning. Nevertheless, such circularity does not imply a setback for the speculative task of the *Begriff*, nor an eternal return of the identical, inasmuch as, according to Hegel, a circle does not go back to the immediacy of the *Anfang*; rather, it returns to a second degree of immediacy, which is already a result, and thus it preserves in itself the process from which it derives. Thus circularity determines a peculiar relation between the end and its beginning, which accounts for the temporality *sui generis* of the concept *qua* totality and that may be understood according to the logical trope of the 'positing of presuppositions'. Slavoj Žižek has explained the trope as follows: 'What Hegel calls "positing the presuppositions" is the mystery of how contingency retroactively "sublates" itself into necessity — how, through historical repetition, an initially contingent occurrence is "transubstantiated" into the expression of a necessity.'²⁴ Žižek has also pointed out that 'the "necessity" of a totality does not preclude its contingent origins and the heterogeneous nature of its constituents', the latter being precisely its presuppositions, 'which are then posited, retroactively totalized, by the emergence of dialectical totality'.²⁵ Therefore, retrospection (as the temporal dimension through which presuppositions are actually posited) suggests a way to address the uneven and combined temporality of Hegel's speculative totality. The retroactive aspect of totalization whereby the end comes back to its beginning without simply returning back to it reveals the temporal overflow generated by the concept. It appears thus an atypical twist of diachrony and synchrony, a knot of not-coinciding correspondences, since within Hegel's systemic articulation, beginning and end can be correspondent without being coincident. And one can already point out that if the notion of totality in Hegel's terms implies such a 'discordance of times', Althusser's hypothesis of an 'expressive totality' turns out to be inap-

propriate, for it assumes a synchronic harmony that evidently does not pertain to the Hegelian concept of totality.

IV.

Interestingly, Althusser in his early dissertation caught a glimpse of the temporal character of the Hegelian totality. He defined it as a *plenitudo temporum*, namely ‘not only an attempt to grasp reality, but also the act by which truth is fulfilled and accomplished, *sich vollzieht*’. Furthermore, Althusser described the process of totalization as the achievement of a whole that ‘fills a void it discloses in the very act of filling it’.²⁶ Nevertheless, the scheme of *plenitudo temporum* so conceived recalls a topography made of fullness and void that conceals and annihilates the very temporal texture of Hegel’s totality by imposing a substantialist reading of it. In fact, what could seem completely incongruous in terms of spatiality may acquire a different meaning once transposed onto a temporal horizon. The wager concerns the real nature of the Hegelian totality and its vocation to be both complete and infinite, as well as the possibility of liberating Hegel’s philosophy from the deadlock of Martin Heidegger’s *parousia*, allowing us to provide a different re-articulation of the relationship between the temporal and the eternal, the logical and the historical.

A temporal reading may produce relevant changes in the totality’s physiognomy with regards to its fundamental and traditionally ascribed geometrical trait of circularity. Within a temporal framework, the attributes of comprehensiveness — as the capacity to enclose everything — and consummation — the completeness resulting from the accomplishment of totality — need to be understood in the light of temporal features such as timeliness and contingency. This is why a temporal re-orientation also compels us to re-elaborate the relationship between philosophy and its recalcitrant others — to borrow W. Desmond’s words — or its allegedly redundant others: time, history, and temporal contingency.²⁷

The concept *qua* Absolute Idea — i.e., the accomplished totality of the *Logic* — is not in fact the final word of Hegel’s philosophy system. It is rather the peak of the *Science of Logic*, but the *Logic* does not bring the architecture of Hegel’s system to a close. In this sense, the Absolute Idea constitutes ‘as final result also the beginning of another sphere and science’; and sciences are meant to be fragments ‘each of

which has a *before* and an *after* — or, more accurately said, has in possession only the *before* and in its conclusion points to its *after*.²⁸ Through the articulation of the system, history and philosophy constantly chase each other. From the viewpoint of Hegel's speculation, the *Philosophy of Spirit*, with its whole charge of historical content, unfolds after the *Logic* and the *Philosophy of Nature*, and the completion of 'Absolute Spirit' that concludes the *Geistesphilosophie* marks the very acme of thought in the *Encyclopedia*. But then again the 'Absolute Spirit' of philosophy falls into the *History of Philosophy*, which in turn intertwines with the *Philosophy of History*. After all, in Hegel's philosophy, the relation between speculation (what the concept does) and history (what happens to the concept through time) seems to be far more intricate than any categoric statement about the end of history or the end of philosophy.

To this end, Jean Hyppolite argued in *Logic and Existence*, 'The passage from history to absolute knowledge, from the temporal to the eternal [that takes place at § 552 of the *Encyclopedia*] is Hegelianism's most obscure dialectical synthesis.'²⁹ It is indeed through this transition from Objective Spirit to Absolute Spirit that

the spirit which thinks world history, stripping off at the same time those limitations of the several national spirits and its own temporal restrictions, lays hold of its concrete universality, and rises to apprehend absolute spirit, as the eternally actual truth in which the contemplative reason enjoys freedom, while the necessity of nature and the necessity of history are only ministrant to its revelation and the vessels of its honour.³⁰

However, the transition from history to speculation is not univocal, and speculation is actually confronted with an opposite transition, which is even more obscure and embarrassing: the ad-venture of the totality as the advent of the Absolute into history. While taking into account the mutual interweaving of 'Absolute Knowing' and history and their mutual sublation, it is at the same time necessary to disentangle this reciprocity in order to push the antinomy all the way and follow each opposite path, one after the other: on the one side the sublation of history into the eternity of the Absolute and, on the other side, the sublation of Absolute Knowing into the course of history.

V.

Hegel outlined this chiasmic path through two over-quoted passages of the *Preface* to the *Philosophy of Right* that illustrate the significant tension arising at the very core of the system between what one could call the speculative and the historicist instances of Hegel's thought: 'For what matters', he wrote, 'is to recognize in the semblance of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present'; and then he added, 'Thus philosophy, too, is *its own time* comprehended in thoughts.'³¹ While the former quote stresses the presence of the eternal in time, the latter emphasizes the conceptual comprehension (*begreifen*) of the course of time that happens in history.

The same kind of tension is echoed on a larger scale throughout all of Hegel's works, but the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the context where such a tension emerges as a process in the making with particular incisiveness, precisely in the last chapter on 'Absolute Knowing'. The following quote then matches with the two previous ones: '*Time* is the concept itself that *is there* [...]; for this reason, spirit necessarily appears *in time* just so long as it has not grasped its pure concept, i.e. [as long as it] has not annulled time.'³² Two opposite aspects are simultaneously staged here: on the one hand, the existentiality of the *Begriff* that testifies to its temporal dimension; and on the other hand, the erasure (*tilgen*) of time that results from the conceptual rise of the Spirit, so as to express the antagonistic rapport between time and concept that would lead one to think of the *Begriff* as an intrinsic threat to the flow of time.

Indeed, in this final chapter of the *Phenomenology* the relation between the temporal and the atemporal appears in the shape of the relationship between concept and representation.³³ Hegel highlighted here that representation and concept (or religion and philosophy) share the same content, though expressed in different forms.³⁴ Nevertheless, the issue is eventually more intricate, as proved by the fact that, starting with the preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel introduced the element of the *Vorstellung* in a way that ostensibly seems to undermine the possibility of conceiving of any peaceful dwelling between concept and representation. Thus, he stated that consciousness normally deals with representations, but 'knowledge, on the other hand, is directed against the representation thus formed, [namely] against this [mere] familiarity (*Bekanntsein*)' that embodies the most proper mark of *Vorstellung* as

an insufficient and improper medium for speculation.³⁵ At a closer look, therefore, concept and representation turn out to entail ‘different times of thought’, namely a linear and a circular one.³⁶

The fate of representation is essentially related to the flow of phenomenal time, and Hegel provided an incisive definition in the *Encyclopedia* that clearly emphasizes this aspect: representation, he wrote in §565, ‘gives independence to the moments of its content and makes them into presuppositions with respect to each other and into appearances *following each other* (*aufeinanderfolgenden Erscheinungen*)’; their relationship is then conceived as ‘interconnected happenings’ (*ein Zusammenhang des Geschehens*).³⁷ Concept, for its part, also seems to be unable to avoid its temporal fate, since the highest freedom gained by the spirit at the end of the *Phenomenology* is proved precisely by its capacity to reach the peak of Absolute Knowing, re-plunge into phenomenality, and start its journey anew, embodying an ek-static temporal mode of permanent self-estrangement. *Begriff* and *Vorstellung* thus identify with different coefficients of temporalization. There is neither a correspondence between the serial time of representation and the circular and totalizing time of the concept, nor even a *concordia discors*, and they remain somehow incommensurable magnitudes that nevertheless allow moments of tangency.

Confronting the task of the impossible synthesis of the temporal and the atemporal, Hegel’s philosophy ends up triggering a short-circuit between them, which derives from the fact that Hegelian eternity, as Hyppolite meaningfully remarked, ‘is not simply an eternity *before* time, but the mediating thought that presupposes itself absolutely *in* time’,³⁸ in the same way as the logic exists both *beyond* history — being the eternal thought of God before Creation — and *inside* of it — being also the story of its own manifestations into history. Absolute Knowing — ‘this last shape of the Spirit’, as Hegel called it in the *Phenomenology*³⁹ — thus combines the linear time of representations and the circular time of the concept which indeed short-circuits linearity by weaving together the multiple layers of the speculative totality: the logical retropection that ‘posits the presuppositions’, the externalization of Spirit in nature and history, and its phenomenological recollection (*Erinnerung*), as well as the ‘conceptually comprehending knowledge’ that corresponds to the supreme goal of philosophy (*das begreifende Wissen*).⁴⁰

However, once one assumes that representation stands for the manifestation of the phenomena in time, the question that arises concerning the relationship between *Vorstellung* and *Begriff* is whether the realization of the concept marks an instance of recollection *within* phenomenal — i.e., temporal — knowledge or the overcoming of it *tout court*, namely the end of time. In other words, how can the concept have a history? How can truth (*qua* eternity) and development (*qua* historical time) coincide? And how can history be conceptually grasped to become a ‘comprehended history (*begriffne Geschichte*)’ before the end of time?⁴¹ How can time be the ‘existing concept itself’ (*der daseiende Begriff selbst*)⁴² and simultaneously be ‘in its concept eternal’ (in ihrem Begriffe ewig)?⁴³

VI.

In the attempt to disentangle the dense overlap of logical, chronological, and historical temporalities in Hegel’s discourse, it is necessary to make a short digression into the hermeneutics of 1930s French Hegelianism and its legacy.⁴⁴

Along the lines of Alexandre Koyré’s and Alexandre Kojève’s earlier formulations, Jacques Derrida highlighted in *Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note on Being and Time* the temporal character of Hegel’s dialectic, recalling that ‘at each stage of the negation each time that the *Aufhebung* produced the truth of the previous determination, time was requisite’ and that ‘negativity in the structure of *Aufhebung* already was time’.⁴⁵ Elsewhere Derrida remarked that ‘Koyré and Kojève recognized, contrary to Heidegger, the “prevalence” or the “primacy” of the future on the present’ in Hegel’s Jena lectures; however, ‘we should also not forget that Koyré and Kojève were amongst the first readers of Heidegger; [and] they also recognized this influence in their interpretations of Hegel’.⁴⁶ What they inherited from Heidegger is precisely a peculiar emphasis on the aporetic dimension of the Hegelian conception of time in which there would be no future, only immutable being. Drawing on a famous marginal note of the 1803–04 Jena manuscripts on the ‘Philosophy of Nature’, which states that ‘Geist ist Zeit’,⁴⁷ Koyré, in his ‘Hegel à Iéna’ (1934) famously stressed the fundamental matrix of time that sustains the whole enterprise of the Hegelian dialectic. According to Koyré, Hegel’s early conception of time as human time coincides with the restlessness (*Unruhe*) of logical infinity, and it is a

negative temporality in which the future embodies the truth of the present. From Hegel's attempt to dialectically reconcile time and eternity through the notion of a 'timeless becoming' (*devenir intemporel*) derives, according to Koyré, the main paradox of Hegelian philosophy, which he synthesized as follows:

The dialectical character of time alone makes possible a philosophy of history, but at the same time the temporal character of the dialectic makes it impossible [...]. The philosophy of history — and in that respect the philosophy of Hegel as a whole — the system — could only be a possibility if history has come to an end, if it has no more future; only if time can stop.⁴⁸

Actually, Koyré did not provide any solution to the paradox he himself formulated; he left us with a mere dichotomy that separates Hegel's Jena writings from his later works, positing Absolute Knowing as a joint between the authentically unfinished and unforeseeable dimension of the Hegelian temporality of the early period and the closure (or the elimination of the future) subsequently brought about by the system.

Kojève's reading of Hegel locates itself on the path carved out by Koyré, deepening and dramatizing the issue of the system's closure with the well known theme of the 'end of history'.⁴⁹ Maintaining the primacy of the future in the economy of human finite temporality and emphasizing the negative character of history as the proper domain of the Spirit, Kojève imagined the destiny of the world as a post-historical and post-human condition from which negativity and the future have disappeared once and for all. In this context, Absolute Knowing ends up being the last temporal moment, one that preludes to an eternal present where mankind is extinguished as much as history because of the collapse of the ontological difference between Spirit and Nature. From this perspective, Hegel's System embodies the very last world of philosophy to which the later history of philosophy could only provide a punctual update (*mise à jour*), a notion that introduced in the discourse of the late Kojève several paradoxical consequences that cannot be explored in the present article.⁵⁰

To come full circle, in her book on *L'avenir de Hegel*, Catherine Malabou raised once again the issue of Hegel's future as central. Her work actually tackles multiple questions: the futurity of Hegelian philosophy, our relationship to the future of his work, and of course the notion of the future in Hegel, the role it plays within the system. Did

Hegel conceive of the future and allow us to do likewise? Or, to challenge Kojève's peremptory reading, 'Can there be any temporality which corresponds to this "end of time" except time's stasis in the congealed form of a *perpetual present*?'⁵¹

The concept of plasticity helps Malabou focus on Hegel's future not as a simple moment of/in time but rather as an excess. 'Plasticity amounts to displacing the established definition of the future as a moment of time', and to thinking of it as 'the excess of the future over the future'.⁵² In Malabou's terms, the future remains undecidable because it corresponds to the structure of 'seeing (what is) coming' (*voir venir*) as well as to the kind of anticipation that is implicit in the act of *seeing what is coming without ever seeing it coming*, as pointed out by Jacques Derrida in his preface to *The Future of Hegel*.⁵³ Malabou's notion combines 'the irresolvable doublet of anticipated certainty *and* uncertain expectation, of knowledge properly bound to necessity *and* of the impossibility of knowing the future, of phronetic patience *and* frenetic anxiety'.⁵⁴

Confronting Koyré and Kojève on the terrain of the alleged Hegelian impasse of the end of time, Malabou has suggested a possible path to overcome it:

The moment of Absolute Knowledge only causes the dialectical suppression of one certain time, one specific temporality. From this moment on, far from closing all horizons, Absolute Knowledge announces in fact a new temporality, one born from the synthesis of two temporalities, the Greek and the Christian. The moment which dialectically gives rise to the two temporalities marks the emergence of a new era of plasticity in which subjectivity gives itself the form which at the same time it receives.⁵⁵

According to Malabou, 'Hegel in effect "sublates" *aufheben* into *aufheben*, *Aufhebung* into *Aufhebung*.' Therefore, she has noted, 'The possibility of a new reading of Absolute Knowledge emerges from this truly plastic operation.'⁵⁶

VII.

In the context of the *Hegelforschung*, the notion of plasticity constitutes an innovative contribution that certainly has the merit of restaging (without merely repeating) the classical debate on the topic of

Hegel's conception of time. However, as far as the interpretation developed here is concerned, Malabou's fruitful concept of plasticity plays only a very limited role: whereas the present reading shares the emphasis on the *Begriff's* passive activity of giving and receiving form and on the twofold nature of Hegel's complex conception of temporality that resumes the Christian and Greek traditions, it displays at least two significant elements differing from Malabou's plastic reading of Hegel. Firstly, it is interested in exploring Hegel's present⁵⁷ instead of Hegel's future (the present of his philosophy, meaning his philosophy today, as well as the tools which his thought provides in order to seize its time as its present and, accordingly, our time as our present) with the aim to rescue it from the timeless *parousia* of being that is portrayed by Heidegger and to understand it rather through the notion of *timeliness*. Secondly, it conceives of Absolute Knowing (and *Begriff*) as a process of totalization that entails cuts and interruptions instead of plastic metamorphosis, precisely in virtue of the seizing power of conceptual knowledge *qua* *begreifen*.

The notions of limit (*Grenze*), sacrifice (*Aufopferung*), externalization/release (*Entäußerung/Entlassen*), and recollection (*Erinnerung*) evoked in the very last paragraphs of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* offer a consistent framework to develop a tentative description of how total-ity *qua* Absolute Knowing emerges from the phenomenological flow and creates its own historical conjuncture. All these concepts display a meaningful in-betweenness, insofar as they describe acts and gestures aimed at bringing something to a close but at the same time point to the possibility of overcoming the closure, envisioning a beyond, a new beginning, or new starting moves.

At the end of the *Phenomenology* Hegel wrote that 'to know one's limit, is to know how to sacrifice oneself', establishing a strong connection between *Wissen* and *Aufopfern*.⁵⁸ But what does knowledge sacrifice in knowing its own limit as that 'which cannot simply be included, integrated or asserted in knowledge'?⁵⁹ On the one hand, one could say that it actually sacrifices the absoluteness of its *Wissen* for a knowledge that knows that limitedness is constitutive of any knowledge. On the other hand, such sacrifice as 'the full assumption of the instability and contingency of the emergence of knowledge itself'⁶⁰ reinstates the absolute character of *Absolutes Wissen*.

The sacrifice of knowledge consists in the 'eternal externalization' (*ewige Entäußerung*) of the Spirit's 'continuing existence' (*Bestehen*) in

space and time, whereby the Spirit itself exposes (*darstellt*) its coming-to-be-spirit in the form (*Form*) of a ‘free contingent happening’.⁶¹ Thus, the act of changing shape — or trans-forming — turns out to be essential to sacrifice, as Hegel himself underlined by portraying the Spirit’s externalization as an *Entlassung*, namely as a ‘release of itself from the form (*Form*) of its own self’, which ‘is the supreme freedom and assurance of its self-knowledge’.⁶²

The term *Entlassen* sums up several meanings: to let something go, to discharge, to dismiss, to fire someone from a job. But most importantly, as Frank Ruda has observed, ‘It means that there is an act involved — this is what the “*Ent*” of *Entlassen* suggests, but at the same time the “*lassen*” implies that this act is an act of letting things be (as in Heidegger’s term *Gelassenheit*).’⁶³ Totality — meaning here the achievement of Absolute Knowing — realizes itself through this gesture of *Entlassung* as the sacrifice entailed by the comprehension — or the embrace — of its own limit. At the same time, totality also comprehends itself in another distinct albeit complementary sense, which Hegel portrayed with the following words:

The other side of [spirit’s] coming-to-be, history, is that conscious, self-mediating coming-to-be — the spirit emptied out into time. [...] This coming-to-be presents a slow-moving succession of spirits, a gallery of images, each of which, endowed with all the riches of spirit, moves thus slowly just because the self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of its substance. As its fulfilment consists in perfectly knowing what it is, in knowing its substance, this knowing is its withdrawal into itself in which it abandons its outer existence and gives its existential shape over to recollection.⁶⁴

If the spirit knows itself by comprehending its whole path as its substance, then comprehension designates its *In-Sich-Gehen* or the *Erinnerung* that sinks the *Geist* into ‘the night of its self-consciousness’, sublates its existence, and makes of its sublated existence ‘a new world, and a new shape of spirit’. Thus, the spirit’s recollection does not merely recapitulate the past as such but seizes the present enabling novelty and the unexpected to appear. Precisely through this double gesture of release (*entlassen*) and seizure (*begreifen*), the ad-venture of totality rehabilitates Hegel’s alleged timeless present and turns it into a *timely conjuncture* determined by a punctual standpoint — the speculative standpoint of totality or ‘the standpoint of the present time’.⁶⁵ This

standpoint appears as the result of a certain degree of accomplishment of bourgeois modernity that occurred in Hegel's time, a time perceived by the philosopher as a 'birth-time' and as a 'period of transition to a new era'.⁶⁶

Being a program, a strategy, rather than a content, totality represents neither a necessary nor an automatic achievement. On the contrary, as stated earlier, Absolute Knowing knows the historical contingency of its necessity and the necessity of its contingency.⁶⁷ The contingent nature of the ad-venture of totality invests the speculative movement of the *Begriff* with a practical twist: totality has to be accomplished or realized in the present as the invention and articulation of the sense of the present itself. Within this process, contingency — which Hegel described as the 'unity of possibility and actuality' (*diese Einheit der Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit*) — enacts the mutual conversion (*Umschlagen*) of the possible and the actual (*wirklich*).⁶⁸ Indeed, contingency, for its restless and contradictory structure, expresses not only the simple *Dasein* of what is there but also the instability of it being there and the possibility of it being otherwise,⁶⁹ so as to confer totality the contingent freedom of its unexpected coming-to-be. Philosophy's enterprise of apprehending its time in thoughts then does not amount to relativism nor to historicism, but rather to the task of enlightening the world as it is in order to bring to light the unseen and the unforeseeable, the transient and the permanent, and to disclose the constitutive fragility of all beings and events.⁷⁰ Thereby, totality emerges as the light in which — or the standpoint from which — Absolute Knowing grasps and exposes the speculative texture of the present together with its contingency. And by embracing contingency as its own limit, Absolute Knowing reaffirms the status of its absoluteness precisely because of its capacity to sacrifice itself and let it go.

NOTES

- 1 Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 181.
- 2 G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969–71), xx, p. 460.
- 3 In this sense, this article does not take into consideration the several different occurrences of the term *Totalität* that Hegel employed in different contexts throughout his works to refer, for example, to society as an ethical whole (*sittli-*

che Totalität) or to the concept of the beauty of art as ‘infinite totality’ (*in sich unendliche Totalität*).

- 4 Hegel, *Werke*, II, p. 19; G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. by H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977), p. 89, emphasis added.
- 5 Gwendoline Jarczyk, ‘Totalité et mouvement chez Hegel’, *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 37.3 (1981), pp. 317–22 (p. 322). The word *Stimmung* has usually been translated as *mood* or, alternatively, as *attunement*, in order to keep a trace of the phonetic dimension of the German word.
- 6 G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. by George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 752.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 751.
- 8 Jarczyk, ‘Totalité et mouvement chez Hegel’, p. 321.
- 9 Althusser, *Essays*, p. 182.
- 10 Louis Althusser, *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 149, translation modified.
- 11 Althusser, *Spectre*, pp. 37–39.
- 12 Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 102, 203–08.
- 13 Althusser, *Essays*, p. 181.
- 14 Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 203.
- 15 Althusser, *Essays*, p. 182.
- 16 Althusser, *For Marx*, pp. 203–04.
- 17 Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 340–42; emphasis added.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 465.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 737–40.
- 20 G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 22; Hegel, *Werke*, IX, 34, §249.
- 21 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 10. In German: ‘der Kreis, der sein Ende als seinen Zweck voraussetzt und zum Anfange hat und nur durch die Ausführung und sein Ende wirklich ist’ (Hegel, *Werke*, III, p. 23).
- 22 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 488.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 24 Slavoj Žižek, ‘Da capo senza fine’, in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 213–62 (p. 227).
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- 26 Althusser, *Spectre*, p. 41.
- 27 William Desmond, *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic: Speculation, Cult and Comedy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 4.
- 28 Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 751–52.
- 29 Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, trans. by L. Lawlor (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), p. 188.
- 30 Hegel quoted in Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, pp. 188–89.

- 31 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 20–21.
- 32 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 487, translation and emphasis modified.
- 33 M.H. Jamila Mascát, ‘Representation and Revelation: Hegel’s Critique of *Vorstellung* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*’, in *Hegel-Jahrbuch 2014*, ed. by Andreas Arndt, Myriam Gerhard, and Jure Zovko (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), pp. 100–06.
- 34 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 479.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 18, translation modified.
- 36 Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 18.
- 37 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. by W. Wallace and A.V. Miller, revised with an introduction by M.J. Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 264; trans. adapted.
- 38 Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, p. 188.
- 39 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 485.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 485, translation modified.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 493.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 43 Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, p. 36, translation modified.
- 44 Rory Jeffs, ‘The Future of the Future: Koyré, Kojève, and Malabou speculate on Hegelian Time’, *Parrhesia*, 15 (2012), pp. 35–53.
- 45 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 42.
- 46 Jacques Derrida, ‘Preface: A Time for Farewells: Heidegger (Read by) Hegel (Read by) Malabou’, in Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. vii–xlvi (p. xxv).
- 47 Alexandre Koyré, ‘Hegel à Iéna’, in *Études d’histoire de la pensée philosophique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 147–90 (p. 179).
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 189.
- 49 Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).
- 50 Alexandre Kojève, *The Concept, Time, and Discourse* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2015); M.H. Jamila Mascát, ‘In the Time of Wisdom: Kojève’s Philosophy after the End of History’, talk at the conference *Apocalypses and Catastrophes: The Cunning of Totality*, 14 June 2014, ICI Berlin <<https://www.ici-berlin.org/event/608>> [accessed 3 January 2016].
- 51 Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, p. 4.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.
- 54 Justin Clemens, ‘The Age of Plastic; or, Catherine Malabou on the Hegelian Futures Market’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 6.1 (2010), pp. 153–162 (p. 159).

- 55 Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, p. 133.
- 56 Ibid., p. 145.
- 57 Christophe Bouton, *Temps et esprit dans la philosophie de Hegel: De Francfort a Léna* (Paris: Vrin, 2000).
- 58 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 492.
- 59 Frank Ruda, 'Entlassen: Remarks on Hegel, Sacrifice and Liberation', *Crisis and Critique*, 1.2 (2014), pp. 111–29 (p. 124).
- 60 Ibid., p. 125.
- 61 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 492.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ruda, 'Entlassen', p. 126.
- 64 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 492, translation modified.
- 65 Hegel, *Werke*, xx, p. 460.
- 66 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 6.
- 67 Bernard Mabile, *Hegel: L'épreuve de la contingence* (Paris: Aubier, 1999).
- 68 Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 480–81.
- 69 Mabile, *Hegel*, p. 209.
- 70 Remo Bodei, *La civetta e la talpa: Sistema ed epoca in Hegel* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).

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