

MATERIALIST REGRESSIONS AND A RETURN TO IDEALISM

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Abstract: Over the last decade or two, judging by the frequency and jubilation of its sundry invocations, “materialism” seems to have finally returned from discursive exile, having barely survived and only with aid from the most unlikely ally. That this new materialism is barely recognizable matters little, for the stories of conceptual adventure and the promise of a world beyond our wildest conceptual grasp are so captivating that most fail to notice that the human never appears in them. That is precisely the point. Under the guise of materialism, a redemptive nihilism has taken the place of the revolutionary hubris that once struck fear in ruling classes and ideas alike. How did it come to this? The stodgy old materialism did not so much lose to the imposter in some marketplace of ideas as it was systematically appropriated, its concepts expropriated, aspirations falsified and entire traditions effaced. A sustained philosophical and political effort to weaken the Left Hegelian tradition – the concept of alienation in particular – preceded today’s ontological restoration, enabling new “materialists” to maintain what is entirely an absurdity (materialism that resides solely and immanently in the object) and an obscenity (radical politics built on arch-conservative principles). This essay will identify a few points of ontological infiltration and argue that critical social theory, for the sake of materialism and not against it, must recuperate the

prohibitively idealist conceptual framework – one that is by no means foreign to it and that once went by the name of Reason in History.

Keywords: Materialism, idealism, Left Hegelianism

*Neka Bog kojeg nema
Blagosilja zemlju koje nema
Jer čega god ima i čega god nema
Sve je milost Božija.*

Muharem Bazdulj, “Odlazak u noć” (2010)¹

A distinction commonly drawn in thinking about the concept of alienation pits materialist political economy against idealist philosophical anthropology, history against nature, in a way that is not particularly helpful to understanding how the social and historical process of separation from an earlier or “first nature” has itself become naturalized or, in other words, how alienation has become a “second nature.” This distinction is even less useful to the task of overcoming alienation in history, not through some mythical return to a pristine state of immediacy, but through the production of a new nature, which is to say, through the means of alienation itself. This is so by design, for this distinction and its many real expository merits are themselves predicated on an outright dismissal of traditionally metaphysical questions about truth, essence, origins and the transcendence of reality. No longer burdened by metaphysical longings, discussions of alienation appear free to move from an idealist to a fully materialist formulation, shedding their original naiveté along the way. The textbook example of this distinction has Feuerbach throwing the first punch at Hegel’s abstract and speculative view of alienation [*Entfremdung*], only to have Marx complete the beating so that the Master could not tell his head from his hind. An apocryphal ending to the story adds that, while victorious, the pupil left the ring so confused that he could no longer differentiate between *Entfremdung* and *Entäusserung* (externalization) and thus thought it best to abandon both terms after 1845. Following the “epistemological break” this apparently caused, alienation is either made to disappear as a legitimate theoretical concern² or

¹ “May God who is not / Bless the country that is not, / For all that is and all that is not / By the grace of God is so” (trans. author). I am grateful to Timothy Brennan, Robin Brown, Keya Ganguly, Alice Lovejoy, Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo and Marla Zubel for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this essay. I would also like to thank two anonymous readers at *Kontradikce* whose thoughtful reviews I found most useful.

² For Althusser, alienation is a “pre-Marxist ideological concept” (Louis Althusser, *For Marx* [London: Verso 2005], p. 239.), an unscientific and politically dangerous idea, abandoned by Marx in his Mature Works and then resuscitated by Althusser’s “petty-bourgeois” interlocutors who, as he says elsewhere, “like to weep over the ‘reification’ and ‘alienation’ of objectivity (as Stirner used

– in an even stranger historical turn – it attains such a degree of concretization that it effectively becomes the *prima materia* of fundamental ontology. While the first of the two after-lives came as an open Structuralist provocation to the “simple,” “young” and “primitive” in thought and was as such vehemently contested, the other after-life went largely unnoticed, spreading unchecked even to the gardens and intellectual traditions once considered safe from ontology. It is for this reason that I will frame my essay in terms of the damage that the ontologizing of alienation under a materialist guise has done not only to the concept of alienation, but also to the very possibility of conducting a materialist study of alienation and, more generally, a critical theory of society. In other words, a thorough assessment of the current state of critical social theory begins not with a survey of recent theoretical literature, nor with an empirical accounting of broken promises on this somber anniversary of the demise of state socialism;³ it begins instead with a methodological discussion of the alienation of materialism itself. I propose we recall Horkheimer’s well-known distinction between traditional and critical theory and ask, anew, to what extent do human beings “as producers of their own historical way of life in its totality” remain the object of critical theory?⁴ The answer to this question takes a longer historical view and a distinctly philosophical detour.

to weep over ‘the Holy’), no doubt because they attach themselves without any embarrassment to the very antithesis which constitutes the basis of bourgeois legal and philosophical ideology, the antithesis between *Person* (Liberty = Free Will = Law) and *Thing*” (Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism* [London: New Left Books, 1976], pp. 116–117). In terms less acidulous, Althusser appears to suggest that the concept of alienation carries hopelessly within itself the ideological assumptions imbedded in the empiricist-idealist model of knowledge production (“empiricism of the subject implies idealism of the essence”) and that even in its inverted, purportedly materialist form, alienation betrays the humanist conceit of the subject-object dialectic (Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 228). The concept of alienation cannot be salvaged if there is any hope for a new science of history – a point Althusser not only made repeatedly but also attributed to Marx. In fact, the much-debated “epistemological break” of 1845 – when Marx is said to have broken “radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man” and where this very “rupture” with “philosophical anthropology or humanism” is seen as *the* “scientific discovery” that marks the birth of the true science of Historical Materialism – is dated to the precise moment in which Marx abandons the language and the problematic of alienation (*ibid.*, pp. 227, 190). The other side of the epistemological “intervention” Althusser staged in the 1960s (“the confrontation between Marx and Hegel”) also had alienation as its object of criticism, this time as a formal historical category that bespoke the essence of history and not only of man (*ibid.*, p. 12).

³ I presented an early draft of this essay at a roundtable titled “For Marxism after Marxist States” at the 46th Annual Convention of the *Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies* in San Antonio, TX, on 21 Nov. 2014. The theme of the conference was celebratory: “25 Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall: Historical Legacies and New Beginnings.” I am indebted to Rossen Djagalov and Marina Antić for organizing this panel.

⁴ Max Horkheimer, “Postscript,” in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell and others (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 244–252, here 244.

Lines of Succession, Lines of Argument

To argue that the concept of alienation gradually gains in materialist determinations what it lacked at the moment of its inception in Hegel's *Phenomenology* is neither a recent nor an entirely unjustifiable proposition. In the extant pages of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* – to mention only the most obvious example – Marx appears to situate his own intellectual formation and his own contributions to the study of alienation within such a trajectory.⁵ If the evidence (Marx in his own words) is too overwhelming to ignore, it is also a bit too convenient to accept without also accounting for the polemic context and the exact charge he leveled against the Young Hegelians: Marx mocked them and their “theological” or “critical criticism” not simply for their “moribund idealism” but also, paradoxically, for not being Hegelian enough with respect to their “idolatry” of the ostensibly Hegelian abstraction.⁶ A simpler way to say this is that critique takes an idealist turn not with Hegel – who already “conceives the self-genesis of man as a process, conceives objectification [*Vergegenständlichung*] as loss of the object, as alienation [*Entäusserung*] and as transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of this alienation” and who “thus grasps the essence of *labour* and conceives the objective man (true, because

⁵ See, for example, Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 66–125, here 67–70 (“Preface”) and 106–112 (“Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole”). Ever since it appeared in 1927 and in 1932 (the first “complete” edition), the *Manuscripts* has become one of Marx's most widely circulated and discussed works. In spite of this, the work remains difficult to understand without taking into account its complicated publication and interpretation history (for an excellent primer on these issues, see Marcello Musto, “The ‘Young Marx’ Myth in Interpretations of the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*,” *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 43 [2015], no. 2, pp. 233–260), and its presentation as a single, if incomplete, philosophical work. The *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* dealt with the latter problem by publishing “The Manuscripts” in two separate forms (see *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, vol. I/2 [Berlin, DDR: Dietz Verlag, 1982], pp. 187–444).

⁶ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” pp. 69, 107. This point is as important as it is difficult to parse in Marx's early prose. Objective idealism was in terminal decline on the Hegelian left. It reverted to subjective (Fichtean) idealism because its adherents had failed to grapple with the Hegelian dialectic. Due to a set of distinct historical reasons, the Young Hegelians responded to what they saw as Hegel's political accommodation by denying Reason's unity with what exists. They realized that absolute unity was the lynchpin of Hegel's philosophy, but they failed to notice that without this seemingly conservative thesis the critique also loses its radical character. A purely negative critique carried out by an infinite self-consciousness is thus born anew. In the context of the Prussian political restoration this may have appeared a radical gesture, but it remained nonetheless mired in exactly the kind of dualism Hegel attempted to overcome. The political futility is tied here directly to the philosophical naïveté. All of this, in short, is what I think Marx means in this rather cryptic passage from the *Manuscripts*: “For to the theological critic it seems quite natural that everything has to be *done* by philosophy, so that he can *chatter* away about purity, resoluteness, and utterly critical criticism; and he fancies himself the true *conqueror of philosophy* whenever he happens to *feel* some ‘moment’ in Hegel to be lacking in Feuerbach – for however much he practices the spiritual idolatry of ‘*self-consciousness*’ and ‘*mind*’ the theological critic does not get beyond feeling to consciousness” (*ibid.*, p. 69).

real man) as the result of his *own labour*" – but with the Young Hegelians.⁷ What thus appears as a materialist correction of the Hegelian abstraction is in fact Marx's critique of the idealist regression among the epigones or the "Hegelian Diadochi" – a phrase Engels used to explicitly tie the question of materialist methodology to the struggle over lineage and succession in intellectual history.⁸ Again, none of this is to suggest that Marx's notes and manuscripts from 1844 are not open to other interpretations. A more skilled reader, and certainly one with different intellectual and political commitments, will easily identify numerous other passages where Marx appears to directly contradict my line of argument. But even in the passages where Marx himself speaks of settling accounts with the Hegelian dialectic, we should learn to recognize an essentially Hegelian insight and, obviously, a dialectical operation at work. Marx turns to Hegel and, in particular, to the category of alienation through which Hegel first broached the question of the reciprocal mediation of subject and object in order to advance a conception of history that, as Marx says, is neither idealist (left-Hegelianism) nor materialist (classical political economy) and that yet expresses the unifying truth of both. Marx's term for his methodological breakthrough, viz. "consistent naturalism or humanism," is well known.⁹ What is less known and perhaps even purposefully obfuscated by the tale of materialist inversion is that this "consistent naturalism or humanism" simply expresses the truth of Hegel's critique to an age that had succumbed to the empty promises of immediacy and immanence. One part of that truth consists of recognizing, as Adorno does a full century after Marx, that "the central idealist motor of Hegel's thought is at the same time anti-idealist."¹⁰ Note that Adorno does not say that Hegel's idealism *becomes* or is *transformed* into anti-idealism upon the pounding it receives from Marx;

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112 (trans. modified).

⁸ Friedrich Engels, "Karl Marx: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 16 (New York: International Publishers, 1980), pp. 465–477, here 473: "The rule of the Hegelian Diadochi, which ended in empty phrases, was naturally followed by a period in which the concrete content of science predominated once more over the formal aspect. Moreover, Germany at the same time applied itself with quite extraordinary energy to the natural sciences, in accordance with the immense bourgeois development setting in after 1848; with the coming into fashion of these sciences, in which the speculative trend had never achieved any real importance, the old metaphysical mode of thinking [...] gained ground rapidly. Hegel was forgotten and a new materialism arose in the natural sciences."

⁹ Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," p. 115.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1963), pp. 1–52, here 31. A more obvious point of reference in discussing the "inner connection between revolutionary theory and Hegel's philosophy" is Marcuse's extraordinary essay on the *1844 Manuscripts*: Herbert Marcuse, "The Foundation of Historical Materialism", in Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (London, New Left Books: 1972), pp. 1–48, here 48. Published the same year the *Manuscripts* appeared in Germany (1932), Marcuse's essay is to my knowledge the first to show the depth of Marx's philosophical engagement with the *Phenomenology* and its significance to Marx's examination of political economy – a methodological

no, it is anti-idealist already in Hegel's idealism. Why insist on this? What can possibly be at stake in dwelling on the questions of affinity and succession between Hegel and Marx, the site of many a past theoretical battle? Why do so now? Why reintroduce the relic of Hegelianism at the moment when materialism seems to have finally returned from "discursive" exile, having barely survived and only with assistance from the most unlikely pre- and non-Marxist allies? I do so because I believe idealism still holds the key to the future of materialism, a future in which materialism must address itself not only to the enemy formations of yore but also to the "materialist" imposters who have returned home with the wildest stories of conceptual adventure.

A Matter of Lexical Discretion

The textbook example I mentioned at the outset was not just a figure of speech. One such case of the propaedeutic division between the idealist and materialist approaches to the question of alienation is found in Gajo Petrović's entries on "Alienation" in two widely used works of reference: Paul Edwards's *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967) and Tom Bottomore's *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (1983). I have already expressed my reservations about making this distinction and only bring this up again to note a striking difference between the two entries. In the latter, explicitly Marxist compendium, following the standard account of materialist progression in thinking about alienation, Petrović suddenly introduces Martin Heidegger as a "non-Marxist" thinker "who gave an important impulse to the discussion of alienation" when, "in *Being and Time*, he used *Entfremdung* to describe one of the basic traits of the inauthentic mode of man's Being."¹¹ Petrović is justified in pointing to Heidegger's use of *Entfremdung* – a practice to which we shall return below. It is less clear, however, what "important impulse" Petrović has in mind until one reads about an apparent "analogy between Marx's self-alienation"

link Lukács will further elaborate in *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics* (1968). According to Marcuse, Marx recognized the "revolutionary concreteness of Hegel's *Phenomenology*" and saw that in it, "praxis" was already the "inner meaning of objectification and its supersession" and thus the "leading concept through which the history of man is explicated" (*ibid.*, pp. 46–47). Since my emphasis in this essay differs from Marcuse's in that I wish to focus on the idealist side of the methodological link, I decided to go with Adorno's formulation. To wit, in even starker idealist terms than the above: "The farther Hegel takes idealism, even epistemologically, the closer he comes to social materialism [...] Spirit's confidence that the world 'in itself' is spirit is not only a narrow illusion of its own omnipotence. It feeds on the experience that nothing whatsoever exists outside of what is produced by human beings, that nothing whatsoever is completely independent of social labor" (Theodor W. Adorno, "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," in Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 68). Incidentally, Marcuse's essay remains relevant to our current task for another reason since he, too, appears to direct his critique at "people who believed they could reduce Marx's relationship to Hegel to the familiar transformation on Hegel's dialectic" (Marcuse, "The Foundation," p. 48).

¹¹ Gajo Petrović, "Alienation," in Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 11–16, here 14.

and Heidegger's concepts of "*Heimatlosigkeit*" (homelessness) and "*Seinsvergessenheit*" (oblivion of being), as well as "between revolution and Heidegger's *Kehre*" (turning).¹² Although Petrović did not consider himself a Heideggerian Marxist, he insisted throughout his life on drawing parallels that could be productively pursued between the works of Marx and Heidegger. Petrović felt this task was bequeathed to him by Heidegger's own failure to adequately do so in his "Letter on 'Humanism.'" ¹³ The task was one of the utmost philosophical importance (primarily for Marxism) and it held a promise of conceptual clarification forfeited by more doctrinaire approaches to either thinker. In most of his other works, encounters between Marx and Heidegger function as occasions for Petrović's own careful critique of the "dis-comforting" ramifications of fundamental ontology and, by extension, of his own comparatist approach.¹⁴ This moment of critical intervention is absent in the 1983 entry on "Alienation." A reader simply consulting the authoritative work of reference on "Marxist Thought" will wait in vain for Petrović's critique. Perhaps this is because such an emphatic intervention would not fit the dictionary genre (assuming that staging unorthodox encounters is not in itself emphatic); or because the "analogy" is meant merely as a provocation or food for thought (assuming that all one consumes will amount to nourishment and not poison)? Are there other explanations? It is hard to know with certainty. An answer specific to the Yugoslav case, where even a hint of structural alienation could go a long way in assailing exaggerated claims of actually-existing socialism, is too narrow to explain this omission in the entry never intended for domestic consumption.¹⁵ My guess is that most of the people using Botto-

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See Gajo Petrović, "Izreka Heideggera [Heidegger's Saying]," *Praxis* 6 (1969), nos. 5–6, pp. 781–798. The essay was written in German as "Der Spruch des Heidegger" for a collection dedicated to Heidegger's 80th birthday. Reprinted in *Prolegomena za kritiku Heideggera: Odabrana djela u četiri knjige [Prolegomena to a Critique of Heidegger: Selected Works in Four Volumes]*, vol. 4 (Zagreb and Beograd: Naprijed/Nolit, 1986), pp. 283–309.

¹⁴ Gajo Petrović, "Praksa i bivstvovanje [Praxis and Being]," *Praxis* 1 (1964), no. 1, pp. 21–34, here 32 (translation modified to reflect that Petrović is referring to Heidegger's use of *unheimlich*). An even earlier essay, the 1959 "Marksova teorija alijenacije" (*Filozofija* 1959, nos. 3–4, pp. 34–40), is as instructive here since it effectively shows Petrović working on the questions of alienation and essence from the outset of his career without once romanticizing Heidegger's contribution. The essay is also available in English, see Gajo Petrović, "Marx's Theory of Alienation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23 (1963), no. 3, pp. 419–426. Petrović's views did change over time but not in this respect. For example, even in the retrospective "Preface" he wrote for the fourth volume of his collected papers, *Prolegomena to the Critique of Heidegger*, Petrović maintained that while "unavoidable," Heidegger's thought is still "significantly different" and "even opposed" to that of Marx – and this is explicitly extended even to the areas of kinship Petrović previously identified between the advent of Being (*Die Ankunft des Seins*) and the "thinking of the revolution" (Petrović, *Prolegomena za kritiku*, p. 5).

¹⁵ To be clear, Petrović rejects Heidegger's view of alienation as a "necessary structural moment of man's existence" (Petrović, "Marx's Theory," p. 423). He does so again in a rather equivocating

more's *Dictionary* over the last thirty years are not thinking about Petrović's lifework or about the trials and tribulation of the Yugoslav Praxis Group. Instead, in an entry on one of the most critical and controversial terms in Marxism, after barely encountering Lukács, Bloch or Lefebvre, the readers stumble across clear and much more detailed praise of the "important impulse" Heidegger's treatment of alienation delivered to the body of Marxist thought. What I think we can see in this case of lexical discretion is a small example (the most well-intentioned of the five examples I will mention in this essay) of a sustained effort, spanning at least two continents and three generations of scholars, to weaken the left-Hegelian tradition not by opposing it, but by appropriating it. The example also shows, I think, that two seemingly disconnected intellectual endeavors – dissociating Marx from Hegel and delivering alienation to Heidegger – may have something to do with each other and that the future of materialism may depend on our ability to stop both of these operations.

Stress Test

While there is something reassuring about the account of materialist theodicy of alienation that allows each new generation to so easily atone for the sins of their fathers, I suspect that we would gain more from this common genealogy if we instead attempted to understand the dynamic of knowledge production implicit in this tale and, more importantly,

distinction he sets up in Bottomore's *Dictionary* between the "existentialist" views on the permanence of alienation and those of "Engels and many present-day Marxists" who believe in the non-alienated pristine condition and thus in man's capacity to return to it (Petrović, "Alienation," p. 15). Petrović dismisses both of these positions on the basis of their inadequate understanding of human essence and temporality, and in their place proposes an alternative: "Man's essence [...] as his historically created human possibility" (Petrović, "Marx's Theory," p. 422). Petrović points out, correctly I think, that his new position is "in the spirit of Marx's whole philosophical conception." What he does not say, however, is that one could as easily arrive at the same position, at least the way it is formulated, via Heidegger (which is what Petrović does) or via Hegel (the "real" in Hegel is not what *is*, but a possibility embedded within it once it is grasped by the subject). Petrović himself explains what is at stake and – just like the Young Hegelians before him – appears to side with the empty political promise of a pure abstraction: "That man alienates himself from his nature would mean, then, that man alienates himself from the realization of his historically created human possibilities. 'Man is not alienated from himself' would *not* mean: man has realized all his possibilities; *on the contrary, man is at one with himself if he stands on the level of his possibilities, if in realizing his possibilities, he permanently creates new and higher ones*" (*ibid.*, emphasis added). Elsewhere, he speaks of man's ecstatic nature as an act of "living as a revolutionary" in the "never-ending process [...] of the socialist revolution" ("The Philosophical Concept of Revolution," in Mihailo Marković and Gajo Petrović [eds.], *Praxis: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences* [Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing, 1979], pp. 151-164, here 160). The entry on "Alienation" is less incendiary, but it makes the same point in privileging the notion of "relative" over "absolute de-alienation" since, as he argues, "from a factual standpoint, it is easy to see that in what is called 'socialism' not only 'old', but also many 'new' forms of alienation exist" (Petrović, "Alienation," p. 15).

its dismissal of idealism with prejudice. In posture and inclination we have all become materialists, and I am not thinking only of the new materialisms, thing theory, and object-oriented ontology, or of the old facticity and historicity, but of a methodological reaction formation according to which most of us know to reproach outdated idealist tendencies for positing too much. Yet, if I can be so crude as to offer a basic test, materialism entails an analytic that purports to understand reality in terms of the change in its material conditions. Whether these changes are understood as natural or historical, materialism has to account for them even when it limits itself to the immediately given versus developed and true actuality in the Hegelian sense. In fact, it is precisely because of the seemingly static quality of its organizing trope (matter) that materialism must account for change. This is a contradiction (moving matter) that classical idealism can afford to disregard simply because it thinks in the concepts that, again, in the crudest possible sense and in contrast to matter, already account for motion (idea, will, God, etc.; whether these are immutable or not has no bearings on positing of motion). Since this may sound counter-intuitive, I will restate it in the following way: in a philosophical concept such as, for example, the “unmoved mover,” motion is already happening and all idealism has to explain is why this motion does not extend to its proto-principle. Idealism tends to lead to metaphysics precisely because the world is already understood to be in motion. Unlike the world of the “unmoved mover,” the world of “moving matter” is understood to be primarily static so that the defining problem of materialism then becomes that of change or of setting undifferentiated mass into motion.¹⁶

The second basic test I propose follows from this. Neither idealism nor materialism should be evaluated solely in terms of what they purport to deliver at the end of their analyses (permanence and change, respectively), but also in terms of the pre-analytical assumptions they make about the world to which they are historically delivered (change and permanence). Asking about ideological functions of knowledge is important but only one part of what I am suggesting. Metaphysical naiveté will teach us little about Platonic Ideas or about God, but it may disclose a lot about the conditions from which these ideas had to develop. The same goes for materialism and, in particular, for its sophisticated permutations we are dealing with today – permutations largely unaware of the extent to which they proliferate and repeat the lines of argument from the mid-ninetieth century as well as from the inter-war period of the twentieth century.¹⁷ I bring up old philosophical

¹⁶ If I were to think of a pre-Socratic – for Heidegger, this meant pre-metaphysical – counterpart to my Aristotelian example of *kinoun akinēton*, it would probably have to be Anaximander’s *apeiron*, an undifferentiated and indefinite mass from which all matter is derived and to which all forms of life return following their destruction. I do not think it is a coincidence that it is precisely Anaximander to whom Heidegger “returns” and who Nietzsche praises for his fatalism.

¹⁷ Timothy Brennan has made this argument convincingly both in his *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) and in *Borrowed Light, Vol. 1: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

quibbles not because I am particularly vested in Greek antiquity, German Idealism, or Weimar culture, but because I think that the adjustment entailed in the second materialist test can help us explain what, in Walter Benjamin's turn of phrase from the *Arcades Project*, is the "Hell" we live in, where we are not simply dealing with halted motion, but with motion that is itself halting.¹⁸ In due course, this sentence will make more sense conceptually and grammatically.

The third test is perhaps the most rudimentary and yet it is the easiest to miss in the age of Dasein's ecstatic essence, history without a subject, and posthumanism. No materialism can afford *not* to account for the way the subject interacts with or – in the prohibitively bourgeois language of German Idealism where, we are told, trade and commerce express repressed sexual desires – engages in intercourse [*verkehren*] with the object. This is not to hypostatize the subject; on the contrary, to prevent hypostatization one ought to be clear that the material is acted upon either through a seemingly passive cognition or through a transformation in the process of labor. Whatever limitations the subject brings to this interaction – and there are plenty, and all are historically and socially mediated – these limitations cannot be placed under a duplicitous half-measure of erasure¹⁹ nor willed away by appealing to some ur-principle of indeterminacy, an origin that was never lost and that unbeknownst to us has always kept all things, human beings included, safe

¹⁸ "Hell," for Benjamin, "is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now" (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999], section N9a.1). As a dialectical image, it is usually traced to Benjamin's discussion of "modernity [as] the time of hell" (i.e., a temporality that appears dynamic and yet transfers nothing) in what Adorno famously called "the glorious first draft of the *Arcades*" (Walter Benjamin, "Early Sketches," in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 827–868, here 842; for Adorno's comment see Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno [eds.], *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], p. 496). The extent to which the image of Hell is preserved in Benjamin's later drafts remains contentious. Adorno lamented its omission (*ibid.*), while Susan Buck-Morss demonstrated, convincingly I think, that it remained central to Benjamin's conception of natural-history (see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991], pp. 121–124). Yet Benjamin had something even more ambitious (and retrospective) in mind. "Theology of hell," he wrote, was the theme "common" to both the *Arcades* and the *Trauerspiel* book, a methodological approach that united his entire opus (Benjamin, "Early Sketches," p. 854).

¹⁹ This is what happens when one confuses the question of meaning (and language) with logic. "Erasure" is a typographic device that is supposed to signify that a term is "inaccurate yet necessary," to use another handy Heideggerian phrase made famous by Spivak's preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Gayatri Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976], pp. IX–LXXXVII, here XIV–XV). "Inaccurate yet necessary" to what, one should obviously ask? To the meaning of "correspondence" – both in terms of the actual letter Heidegger is writing to Ernst Jünger where this phrase originates and in terms of the correspondence theory of truth. Or, in Derrida's even more extreme and fatalistic view: "inaccurate yet necessary" to all of signification. The materialist stress test I am proposing here reverses Spivak's phrase to its original, which is to say, Hegelian formulation, where an objective limitation is seen as *accurate yet unnecessary*.

from history.²⁰ To continue to paraphrase Adorno, one can reject the solipsistic premise of constitutive subjectivity and still insist the subject remain the agent of the object.²¹ Once the subject is removed through what often amounts to incantation, the object that supposedly awaits the new materialism is not purified but falsified – a product of subjective manipulation that dare not speak its name.²² In programmatic terms, there can be no materialism without subjective mediation of the object.

Materialist Regression

The three materialist tests I briefly outlined here – the account of change, pre-analytic inversion, and role of a historical subject – amount to the following: without a philosophy of history and a clear political position, all materialisms with all their thisness, thatness, and givenness will relapse *not* into idealism, for even that is too philosophically advanced, but into blind affirmation (positivism, vitalism, romanticism, etc.) or into what today passes for the philosophy of immanence and fundamental ontology. I have recently written about the latter in terms of its impact on Slavic Studies²³ so here I will only briefly comment that much worse than Nietzsche's arch-conservative affirmation of life and rejection of transcendence is a Heideggerian trick, whereby affirmation of the chasm of modern subjectivity – Dasein coming to "understand" and, by virtue of this understanding, "choose" itself as a fundamentally alienated being – is itself understood as transcendence.²⁴ In other words, affirmation does not supplant transcendence with-

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 90.

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 245–258, here 254. In his 1959 lectures on Kant's first critique, Adorno goes even further than this: "I would almost be willing to say," Adorno tells his students, "that [transcendental] idealism may be false when understood as an abstract system, as a scheme of knowledge that asserts itself once and for all. But I would insist that it is undoubtedly true as the index of a specific state of the self-consciousness of spirit and, at the same time, as a mediated stage in the history of thought, that is to say, one that does not naively oppose itself to reality. [...] I should certainly like to underline the fact that no philosophy which does not possess these mediations can claim to have moved beyond Kantianism and idealism. This remains true regardless of whether philosophies that imagine they have been cured of idealism call themselves an 'ontology' or 'dialectical materialism'. Rather, all such philosophies regress to a more primitive stage. To echo Feuerbach's saying [about religion], the challenge is not to be *against* idealism but to raise *above* it. This means that the themes of idealism should be integrated into theory, but without their being given the status of absolutes" (Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rodney Livingstone [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002], p. 136).

²² Adorno, "On Subject and Object," p. 253.

²³ Djordje Popović, "Circuits of Influence: Joseph Brodsky's Platonov and the Ontology of Alienation," in Asher Ghaffar (ed.), *History, Imperialism, Critique: New Essays in World Literature* (London: Routledge, 2017).

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), p. 287. The best example of Nietzsche's affirmation is the first *amor fati* passage in

in Heidegger's system; affirmation, instead, becomes transcendent. This "radical but imaginary overcoming," as Bourdieu calls it in *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, leaves both the inauthentic Dasein and the fallen world intact, but it does so while posturing as a negative and materialist philosophy.²⁵ It is thus not enough to agree with Bourdieu that in "identifying ontological alienation as the foundation of all alienation," Heidegger effectively "banalized and yet simultaneously dematerialized both economic alienation and any discussion of this alienation, by a radical but imaginary overcoming of any revolutionary overcoming."²⁶ While it is certainly the case that what is once ontologized cannot be overcome, we have to look past the affirmative moment in Heidegger (ontologizing of alienation) and recognize that Heidegger, unlike Nietzsche, pretends to offer a negative moment or to supplant the affirmation of life with its negation. Both are thinkers of some primordial immediacy, but only Heidegger locates it in the future. This is not a minor difference between two conservative authors, for it explains why the Heideggerian system appears to be more dynamic and why it had historically appealed to those whose political affinities should be elsewhere. Ontologizing of alienation in Heidegger is not simply a condition to diagnose, but itself becomes a remedy for those "lesser" forms of alienation Bourdieu mentioned above. This is precisely why Heidegger qualifies the "always already" fallen essence of Dasein not only as an "initial" condition, implying that some other condition is to supersede it, but also as a necessary one: "not-being-its-self [*Nicht-es-selbst-sein*] functions as a *positive* possibility of beings [*Seienden*] which are absorbed in the world."²⁷ Impressions are important in the folksy German and the impenetrable English translations of Heidegger's prose, and the impressions his philosophical system leaves are those of motion, agency, and even betterment. These are not the function of his ahistorical notion of "historicity" as it is often observed. One can readily see through historicity as Bourdieu does in a memorable turn of phrase: "historicity" amounts to the "eternalization of history" in order to avoid the "historicization

his 1882 *Gay Science*: "I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [New York: Vintage, 1974], p. 223, emphasis in original). The first cryptic reference to "accusation" stands for "negation," while "I do not want to accuse those who accuse" is a reference to *Aufheben*, understood as a negation of negation. *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* is precisely the work and the above may even be the passage that Adorno wishes to repudiate in the opening words of his *Minima Moralia*: "*Die traurige Wissenschaft...*" (Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott [London: Verso, 2005], p. 15).

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 176, emphasis in original. The translation is misleading here but I do not know how to render it less so. "*Das Seienden*," or the entities that are absorbed in the world so that they are essentially "nonbeings," is Heidegger's way of talking about reification.

of the eternal.”²⁸ Rather, these seductive impressions stem from Heidegger’s seeming embrace of some mechanism by which fallen existence can transcend or switch into an authentic mode *within* the ontic or experiential realm. This mechanism consists, as I said above, in Dasein’s coming to “understand” and, through this understanding, “choose” itself as a fundamentally fallen or guilty/indebted being.²⁹ This new understanding or what Heidegger called in a coded swipe at conceptual thinking, “a modified grasp of everydayness,” makes Dasein quite literally “answerable” (*verantwortlich*) to the guilty summons.³⁰ Note that Dasein is not found guilty as charged (of some infraction); the charge itself is that of guilt, which means that Dasein is guilty of being. I will refrain from elaborating on the creeping anti-Semitism of these paralegal formulations and will instead offer a contemporary analogy that more fully captures what is conceptually at stake in this confounding of epistemological and ethical categories. To assert that authenticity consists of assuming responsibility for one’s own fallen existence is tantamount to mistaking a confession produced by torture for an ethical position. Heidegger takes this a step further when he uses this newly manufactured ethical selfhood of tortured Dasein – the new transcendental subject in the age of catastrophe – to unite all that remained disjointed within his system. In Heidegger’s own language, the temporalities of history and historicity come together once again in the ethical position of resoluteness. Attaining authenticity is thus a matter of affirmation – not overcoming – of the ontic-ontological difference, and, as such, it has no impact on the absolute triumph of inauthenticity in life. Both inauthenticity and authenticity can and indeed must coexist side by side in a strange arrangement wherein actualization is understood as negation of Being in history while ethical thinking becomes transcendent in its affirmation of alienation. One should recognize in this depiction the elements of the anti-political view I take to be prevalent in the current theoretical and historical moment: politics is by definition a failure that led to the present condition; ethical posturing is a solution that can lead us out of it. More importantly for our present purposes, one should also recognize that the prescription embedded in ontology takes the form of Hegel’s philosophy. To understand the extent of damage this maneuver has caused we ought to look a bit more closely at the poison pills that fill this prescription.

Ontology as Primitive Accumulation

Two quick examples of Heidegger’s use of language will each demonstrate the Hegelian ground in which Heidegger stakes out his claim as well as what he leaves behind in this garden. We have already come across one of these in Petrović’s dictionary article.

²⁸ Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology*, p. 63.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 287.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

“Alienation,” as *Entfremdung*, is explicitly used in *Being and Time* to designate the most extreme stage in Dasein’s “entanglement” in the world or what Heidegger calls Dasein’s falling away from itself/falling prey to the world.³¹ Both in terms of its seeming “worldishness” and in terms of its place within Heidegger’s hierarchy of all that could go wrong in one’s way of being in the world, *Entfremdung* appears in a vaguely familiar form until we realize that *Entfremdung*’s sole purpose in this schema is to get “factual” Dasein to “fall into the disowned way of being himself,” that is, to accept alienation as his own ontological category.³² It turns out that Dasein was “always already” alienated not due to its place in the world, but because of his ecstatic essence, and that Dasein’s alienated way of being in the world ends with his internalization of alienation (a new and more profound understanding of himself in terms of potentiality and not actuality). Heidegger thus appears to follow the contours of the *Phenomenology* only to return Dasein to a place more backwards than the one he “always-already” finds himself “thrown” in. In Hegelian terms, we see here a counter-revolutionary thrust that takes the world of the self-alienated spirit following the breakup of the ethical substance *not* towards enlightenment and revolution as Hegel does, but backwards to a pre-rational (pre-idealist) state of unhappy consciousness – a being internally divided against itself who projects into a transcendent category his own alienated essence. There is further significance to the precise stage within the *Phenomenology* to which Heidegger’s appropriation of *Entfremdung* has delivered us. If we now notice that the final few paragraphs of “Unhappy Consciousness”³³ already contain Feuerbach’s basic assertion that “the divine being is nothing else than [...] the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective – i.e., contemplated and reversed as another, distinct being,” we will begin to surmise the dangers in the materialist theodicy of alienation I announced at the outset.³⁴ As was the case with Petrović’s take on Marx, there is nothing in itself wrong with Feuerbach’s position. It only becomes wrong when we mistake what is but a moment within the *Phenomenology* for a (materialist) correction of Hegel’s speculative whole. To put this a bit more abstractly and in terms that will only be fully defined by the end of this essay, Hegel would agree with Feuerbach’s criticism that it is not *Idee* that is alienated in man, but man who is alienated in the *Idee*. This is indeed an important moment within the dialectic and Feuerbach is right to emphasize it. But, the moment Feuerbach forgets how to understand his own fix speculatively, he risks handing the

³¹ The difference between *abgefallen* (falling away) and *verfallen* (falling prey) is important but immaterial to our discussion here.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 179. The hierarchy I referred to above spells out three stages in Dasein’s entanglement in the world: temptation, sedation and alienation, where alienation is said to trigger the final Fall or what is often called the plunge.

³³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §223–230.

³⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 14.

control of his materialist method to the wizards of the Schwarzwald, who are going to turn his emancipatory gesture to nefarious ends.

Another place to witness Heidegger's appropriation of the Hegelian tradition is in the word *Dasein* itself.³⁵ In Heidegger's idiom, *Dasein* refers specifically to a human being, that is, a being unique among all other entities because he always has his own being to be. *Dasein*'s essence is in existence, as Heidegger famously said, and this means that his essence is nothingness. *Dasein* is a common German word but, as a philosophical concept, it is taken directly from Hegel (and Feuerbach) to designate precisely what Hegel does *not* mean by it. In Hegel, *Dasein* is a word for any determinate [*bestimmtes*] being or entity, which is to say that it is an *Objekt*. The anthropomorphizing of *Dasein* by the author of "Letter on 'Humanism'" – where Sartre's humanism is accused of positing too much ("reversal of metaphysics [...] remains metaphysics")³⁶ – should not distract us from detecting an even more serious transgression. As a determinate being, Hegelian *Dasein* is explicitly a sublated form of a more immediate or indeterminate being, which passes over into nothing precisely because it has no qualities. Not only is Hegel's *Dasein* thus a negation of Heidegger's *Dasein*, but the fact that pure being has nothing but potentiality is a problem that Hegel's *Dasein* solves, whereas in Heidegger this problem becomes a definition of (all) Being. To explain this in more convoluted philosophical terms or, as Hegel would say, "with the strenuous effort required to think in terms of the concept," one can say that Heidegger's *Dasein* is an in-itself [*an sich*], an empty or indeterminate essence, a pure form.³⁷ In contrast, Hegel's *Dasein* is a being-in-itself once it becomes a for-itself [*für sich*], a being that receives its determinations or content in relation to other beings (being-for-itself is being-for-another). There is, however, an additional step in Hegel's thinking about existence that finds an even more surreptitious reformulation in Heidegger. Hegel's determinate *Dasein* returns to its essence, that is, the content acts on the once empty form and in doing so it becomes a being that is in-and-for-itself

³⁵ I will differentiate between Hegel's and Heidegger's use of the word by italicizing Hegel's *Dasein* since, in terms of his use, it remains a foreign word that is usually translated as "determinate being," "existence," "embodiment," and is sometimes used in place of *Objekt* and even *Realität*. I treat Heidegger's *Dasein* as an English word, for it has in fact become that, and am thus not italicizing it.

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper, 1977), pp. 213–265, here 232.

³⁷ I am using A. V. Miller's 1977 translation of *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, changing as little as possible along the way. In the quote above (§58) and throughout the essay I use the term "concept" for Hegel's *Begriff* since Miller's ethereal "Notion" communicates neither the philosophical rigor nor the tactile sense of German *Begriff*, understood in terms of the physical act of grasping or comprehension. Miller's decision was apparently influenced by Kant's interchangeable use of *Begriff* and Latin *notio*, which then leads to a whole new series of problems because it suggests a false equivalence between Kant's (passive) and Hegel's (active) role of concepts. Michael Inwood's *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992) and *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999) are also useful in making and maintaining these distinctions, as is the volume Jon Stewart (ed.), *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

[*Anundfürsichsein*]. Another word Hegel uses for this is *Beisichsein* or “being at home” with oneself in the other. Being is thus at home in Hegel’s system only once it, its surroundings, and other beings are all transformed. In contrast to this dynamic vision of homecoming, Heidegger’s *Dasein* dwells in language, the proverbial “house of Being,” that in his words is guarded by those who think and create with words, a creative class of poets-cum-landlords.³⁸ We can see here that a fundamentally historical, material, and social process in Hegel is transformed into an inward psychological drama of an individual *Dasein* coming to terms with his own death (through the death of others, of course, since *Dasein* can never experience what is his “ownmost,” his death).³⁹ There are other examples one can develop but I think the point is sufficiently clear: Heidegger and his disciples intentionally make their mark within the left-Hegelian tradition.⁴⁰ This fact alone is our curse – a word that is perhaps overly dramatic but appropriate inasmuch as

³⁸ Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” p. 217.

³⁹ Heidegger’s valorization of death as *Sein-zum-Tode* is obscene not only because of what his fellow party members would do a few years after he wrote about death as the possibility of being with others, but also because of the understanding of ownership and property advanced implicitly through *Dasein*’s internal structural relationship to nothingness. When death is said to be *Dasein*’s “ownmost,” i.e., the only property he has any claim to, property then no longer designates a social relation as it does in Hegel but merely an internal paradox unaffected by the world dominated by private ownership of the means of production.

⁴⁰ Lucien Goldmann already sensed this in 1944 when he noticed that the true target of *Being and Time* – from the transposition in its title to the smug reference on its final page – was Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, while Heidegger’s true philosophical task was the appropriation and the rethinking of reification along ahistorical, immaterial, and ultimately anti-Hegelian lines. Even Benjamin, who was apparently the member of this tradition least familiar with Hegel’s work, felt himself keenly a target of Heidegger’s infiltration. One can thus find in his correspondence a stream of invectives directed against the threat posed by Heidegger, some as early as 1920. For example, in a 1930 letter to Scholem, Benjamin confesses bluntly that Brecht and he “were planning to annihilate Heidegger” (*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940* [New York: Schocken Books, 1989], p. 365). Since Adorno’s critique of Heidegger is well known, I will only note that it spans Adorno’s entire career. As for Heidegger’s response, it came a few weeks after Adorno’s death when, in a 1969 TV interview with Richard Wisser, Heidegger explained that he had no interest in acquainting himself with the work of a “mere sociologist” (this description of Adorno is a reference to the “cat burglar” passage in Adorno’s inaugural lecture of 1931, and it perhaps shows that Heidegger had indeed already “acquainted” himself with Adorno’s work) who also happened to act with malice and was a dilettante: “With whom did Adorno study philosophy,” Heidegger asked Wisser rhetorically; “Did he study under anyone at all?” (Richard Wisser, “Das Fernsehinterview,” Günther Neske [ed.], *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger* [Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1977], p. 284; quoted in Iain MacDonald, “‘What Is, Is More than It Is’: Adorno and Heidegger on the Priority of Possibility,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19 [2011], no. 1, pp. 31–57, here 31.) MacDonald is at the center of an international group of scholars trying to reconcile Heidegger and Adorno through what else but a “novel concept of *possibility* that is central to both their thoughts” (emphasis added). This, in a single sentence, is the truth of academic production today. Under the ambiguity of *potenza* all cows remain black.

it points back to my earlier reference to Benjamin's Hell. It is through Heidegger's expropriation, openly sanctioned by contemporary theory's insistence on endless proliferation of meaning, that we can catch another glimpse of this Hell.

Hell of Immanence

A word or two about Benjamin's own use of this image is in order. In writing about Hell, Benjamin was not only or even primarily talking about the Hell of the commodity form. While he certainly maintained that the commodity form had taken the place of the dissociative and estranging effect of the allegorical mode of apprehension, most of his writings, and the two methodological expositions in particular – the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to the *Trauerspiel* study and “Konvolut N” of the *Arcades Project* – are also concerned with a failure of epistemology and philosophy of history, which is to say, with a subjective failure.⁴¹ In fact, the very next fragment after his invocation of Hell reads as follows: “It is good to give materialist investigations a truncated ending [*abgestumpft Schluss*].”⁴² Benjamin's call for the “truncating” of materialist study is often mistaken for an unqualified endorsement of fragmentation. We probably owe this mistake to the formalist bias in our interpretive predisposition that (close) reads only with difficulty anything that is beyond the formulaic. Thus, since the same phrase in an even more fragmented form appears at the end of Benjamin's *Zentralpark*,⁴³ where it effectively brings his study to an untimely end, we tend to conclude that Benjamin is doing little more than extolling the virtue of fragmentation and implementing it, ironically, in his own writing in a feat of stylistic virtuosity. If one can speak of irony at all – and I tremendously dislike doing that – it consists here in suddenly seeing a subject make an appearance in a system supposedly known for its “epistemological asceticism and anti-subjectivism.”⁴⁴ We will meet this subject soon enough, but not before we address the question of fragmentation,

⁴¹ The subtitle of “Konvolut N” is “*Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts.*” While Benjamin's language is directed against Neo-Kantians, Heidegger was never entirely off his mind – just look at N8a.4 on verso.

⁴² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, section N9a.2; also in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 592.

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 4: 1938–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 161–199, here 191.

⁴⁴ “In keeping with his epistemological asceticism or anti-subjectivism,” Benjamin apparently “remained a staunch foe of the primacy in modern philosophy of epistemology over ontology.” Thus argues Richard Wolin in his “Experience and Materialism in Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*,” in Gary Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 210–227, here 213. Apart from his oblique reference to Heidegger (ontology over epistemology), Wolin is not entirely wrong, for already in the *Trauerspiel* study one reads that “the only element of an intention” – that is, subjective intention – in the scholastic *tractatus* is the “authoritative quotation” (Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [London: Verso,

the self-estranged aesthetic, epistemological, and historical form, that has garnered this poor man so much recognition precisely when he needed it the least and when he could no longer defend himself against it.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Benjamin has become the most trafficked of the left Hegelian thinkers in the humanities. We have become entranced with the *figura* of the martyr standing in resolute opposition to any totalizing scheme to impose order on the radically heterogeneous, eccentric, and fragmentary material. This position is not without some merit (see fn. 44), but it errs when it mistakes the fragmentary form of Benjamin's prose, as well as his discussion of allegory and ruin, for an emancipatory gesture in itself. This has become such a common scholarly conceit in the postsocialist milieu that entire works are organized around it.⁴⁵ While the esoteric prose of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study may account for some of the obfuscation surrounding his early writings on allegory, the same cannot be said of the *Arcades*, where the arbitrary nature of allegorical relationship⁴⁶ is explicitly and repeatedly linked to the exchange principle.⁴⁷ This alone should be enough of a hint that we may not be able to grasp the status and the stakes involved in Benjamin's discussion of the allegorical without first abandoning the usual explanation that "allegory signifies the necessary fragmentary nature of [man's relation to the absolute] in a world that has itself been reduced to fragments or ruins."⁴⁸ If this were the case, if allegory merely reflected an object (even if that object was one of disintegration), the concept of allegory would not fundamentally differ from that of a more familiar metaphysical symbol. The difference between allegory and symbol is not in the object of signification ("convention of expression"); it is, instead, in the manner of representation ("expression of convention"), wherein the allegorical comes to signify

1998], p. 28). "Its method is essentially representation [*Darstellung*]," Benjamin famously writes. "Method is a digression [*Umweg*]. Representation as digression – such is a methodological nature of the treatise. The absence of the uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic" (*ibid.*). This is carried over into the *Arcades* and, in particular, into "Konvolut N," where Benjamin comments most explicitly on the method of his project, namely, "the art of quoting without quotation marks" that enables the author who "has nothing to say and everything to show" to "write history" by "ripping historical objects out of their context" (N1.10, N1a.8, N11.3, N10a.3; trans. modified in N1a.8; all in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, p. 574.). Benjamin's name for this evidently anti-subjectivist method is, of course, "literary montage." My contention here is that only once we fully account for the role of Benjamin's subject will we be able to understand that his "literary montage" bears little resemblance to some avant-gardist aesthetic sensibility.

⁴⁵ For example, the ontologizing of separation in Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), or the rupturing of history in Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

⁴⁶ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, sections J59a.4, J65.1, J67.4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, sections J80.2, J80a.1, J59.10; J60.5; see also sections J24.2, J79a.4, J83a.4, J66.2.

⁴⁸ Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 69.

the disruption in the instantaneous temporality and the pre-given unity within the symbolic order.⁴⁹ This means that allegory admits only one object, the allegorical itself (the convention or history), as it seeks to destroy all that remains of the immediacy of the symbolic mode.⁵⁰ It is with and through the deployment of allegory that Nature becomes history, that the world is disenchanting, and that transcendence is supplanted by immanence. In Benjamin's words from the *Arcades*, "allegory has to do, precisely in its destructive furor, with dispelling the illusion that proceeds from all 'given order,' whether of art or life: the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness which transfigures that order and makes it seem enduring."⁵¹ Benjamin refers to this as the "progressive tendency of allegory." It produces certain philosophical, historical and semantic discontinuities that we can avow only if we keep in mind that – within the same fragment – Benjamin also refers to allegory's "regressive tendency" to "hold fast to the ruins," to ontologize separation, transience, and the hollowness of subjective experience, and thus to return history to nature.⁵² Accounting for both of these tendencies or moments within the allegorical – Nature becoming history and history reverting to Nature – is key to understanding Benjamin's critique. In Benjamin's own words, the allegorical mode of expression emerges "by virtue of a strange combination [*sonderbaren Verschränkung*] of nature and history."⁵³ Robert Hullot-Kentor explains this in the following way:

⁴⁹ Benjamin, *The Origin*, pp. 165–166.

⁵⁰ Benjamin explains that allegories could not be symbols because "the thought symbolized was nowhere expressed" (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, sections J90.1; he is quoting from Proust). This does not mean, however, that allegories express nothing. What Benjamin calls the "triumph of allegory" (*ibid.*, J60.5) is the "triumph of subjectivity and the onset of an arbitrary rule over things" (Benjamin, *The Origin*, p. 233) and, as such, it expresses a historical truth by way of nonexpression (cf., Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Critique of the Organic: Kierkegaard and the Construction of the Aesthetic," in Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2006], pp. 77–93, here 89; and Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Title Essay: Baroque Allegory and The Essay as Form," in Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, pp. 125–135, here 128). In Adorno's words, "Benjamin shows that [...] the allegorical is not an accidental sign for an underlying content. [...] The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental signification, but the playing out of a particularity; it is expression. What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but historical relationship. The theme of the allegorical is, simply, history" (Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," in Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, pp. 252–269, here 262–263).

⁵¹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, section J57.3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, section J56.1.

⁵³ Benjamin, *The Origin*, p. 167; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 344. I am not sure if the word "combination" contains the sense of "entanglement" or "intertwining" evident in the original. Under the "*sonderbaren Verschränkung*" Benjamin has in mind, the two "combined" elements maintain the tension existing between and within each of them – each term has within itself both

What Benjamin discerns in allegory is its double aspect. On one hand he finds in it the essential mechanism by which history regresses to a mythical state of nature: allegory dominates nature; it represents “the triumph of subjectivity and the onset of an arbitrary rule over things.” Yet allegory is also the critique of domination. In it *thésis* (positing, convention) becomes the expression of *physis*: “It may not accord with the authority of nature; but the voluptuousness with which signification rules, like a stern sultan in the harem of objects, is without equal in giving expression to nature.”⁵⁴

There is another reason to heed Benjamin’s warning about the “regressive tendency” of allegory. It has become easy to see that allegory can itself “see *through* the mysterious ‘natural’ appearance of objects in their ‘given’ form *to* the historical dimension of their production.”⁵⁵ Allegory certainly can and, in fact, it already has rendered nature transitory, but once it did so, it also had to withstand the enchantment of history. It serves no purpose to replace the semblance of objective truth with the illusion of subjective autonomy, one type of eternal recurrence with another. I think the following passage from Benjamin confirms as much:

[A] critical understanding of the *Trauerspiel*, in its extreme, allegorical form, is possible only from the higher domain of theology; so long as the approach is an aesthetic one, paradox must have the last word. Such a resolution, like the resolution of anything profane into the sacred, can only be accomplished historically, in terms of a theology of history, and only dynamically, not statically in the sense of a guaranteed economics of salvation.⁵⁶

At stake here, in other words, is the possibility of redemption through the recuperation of objective truth and the restoration of expressive content to language while continuing, nonetheless, to use allegory against myth.⁵⁷ Benjamin was acutely aware of this, and to

a historical/transitory and natural/mythical pole (see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* [New York: The Free Press, 1977], p. 54). Furthermore, this “combination” ought not to be taken for a false synthesis or provide an implicit justification of any given reality. The dialectical *Verschränkung* of nature and history, or as Adorno would later polemically call it “*die Idee der Naturgeschichte*,” allows the allegorical mode to comprehend historical being as natural where it appears most historical and as historical where it appears most deeply natural (cf., Adorno, “The Idea of Natural-History,” p. 260; see also p. 264). In both Benjamin’s and Adorno’s work, these types of formulations are primarily directed against Heidegger’s historicity.

⁵⁴ Hullot-Kentor, “Title Essay,” p. 128.

⁵⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Origins*, p. 55.

⁵⁶ Benjamin, *The Origin*, p. 216.

⁵⁷ I owe this point to Hullot-Kentor. See, in particular, Hullot-Kentor, “Title Essay,” pp. 126–127.

mistake his position for an endorsement of indeterminacy means to learn only one half of the critical import of his theory of allegory. Perhaps we can even say that the most salient question he struggled with his whole life was the following: given the necessary transience of the world free of the semblance of myth, how can one still represent a transcendent, messianic truth within the realm of immanent historical experience? The style of literary montage – whose fragmentary nature Benjamin incidentally shared with most of his left-Hegelian contemporaries from Adorno and Bloch, to Brecht and Gramsci – is used here in the name of totality contained within each fragment. To confuse aesthetic necessity for the work of “theology of history” would mean, in our context, to give up on the possibility of historical transformation, to confirm that the world, “this life here and now,” has not only become Hell, but that the Hell on earth will remain for eternity. I think Adorno saw the stakes of this most clearly when he remarked that the fragmentary nature of Benjamin’s work cannot be “ascribed solely to a hostile fate” – note that “hostile fate” here refers as much to the fate Benjamin suffered as it does to the “hostile fate” of the world of immanence he rejected. “Built into the structure of his thought [...] from the start,” Adorno continues, “this literary principle claims nothing else than to express Benjamin’s conception of truth. No more than for Hegel is this for him the mere adequacy of thought to its object – no part of Benjamin ever obeys this principle – rather it is constellation of ideas that [...] together form the divine Name, and in each case these ideas crystalize in details, which are their force field.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Adorno’s quote is from his “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 220–232, here 223. Adorno could have said as much about his own writing since it, too, is often mistaken for some polysemic textual strategy meant to disrupt Hegelian dialectic (“Dialectic theory, abhorring anything isolated, cannot admit aphorisms” – is the oft-quoted verdict from Adorno’s “Dedication” in *Minima Moralia*). This of course misses the obvious: Adorno’s “reflections from a damaged life” are written “from the standpoint of subjective experience,” which is to say, from the impossible and “false” perspective of the “vanishing” subject reflecting on life that “does not live,” or on the object of which it is deprived (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, pp. 18, 15, 19). How and why can Adorno then insist on the subjective experience when from the outset of *Minima Moralia* he claims this experience is “false to the same extent that life has become appearance” (*ibid.*, p. 15)? He does so because truth – a category he very much retains – can only be gained subjectively. In *Minima Moralia*, it is the fragment or, as Adorno calls it, the aphorism, that carries out this procedure by wresting truth from what is so obviously false. It does so by negating any claim to immediacy whether it is made on behalf of the subject or the object. The fragment, in other words, insists on negativity and this is precisely what Adorno says in the only place in *Minima Moralia* where he directly speaks about its fragmentary character, just four sentences after the anti-Hegelian “verdict” I mentioned above: “If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty ‘to consider the evanescent itself as essential.’ They insist, in opposition to Hegel’s practice and yet in accordance with his thought, on negativity” (*ibid.*, p. 16).

Tending to Gardens

We are now ready for the subject who was going “to give materialist investigations a truncated [*abgestumpft*] ending” to emerge from “epistemological asceticism and anti-subjectivism.” I would like to suggest that we think of this subject as a “gardener” wielding a blunt [*abgestumpft*] instrument with enough force to nonetheless truncate all that mistakes itself for an organic matter.⁵⁹ In Benjamin this variously refers to a fetishized commodity, progressive history, a certain type of materialism and, of course, to the subject itself (in this last sense, Benjamin’s gardener is not unlike Adorno’s *Münchhausen*, “pulling himself out of the bog by his pig-tail”⁶⁰). But, as we saw above, it also refers to the “regressive tendency” of the allegorical mode that has returned history to nature. This truncating is thus an act of a “damaged” subject who takes a dull axe to all ontologizing of separation. Simply put, Benjamin calls for stunning or – in a word that shares the “root” of the German *abstumpfen* – for stumping the organic growth of second nature. What is this crude object that Benjamin thinks can cut through the thicket of the new organic matter overtaking our gardens? What can keep materialism from regressing into the “thinging of a thing” – Heidegger’s term for an object escaping subject’s domination of nature so that it can remain in the process of becoming, an object of pure potentiality? The three materialist tests I began with and the tenor of my polemic already hint at the answer. For the sake of materialism one has to turn back to or, as it were, “return” to idealism and in particular to its speculative and binding thought. This cannot be a matter of a philosophical parlor game. At stake today is our ability to even perceive contradictions, let alone resolve them.⁶¹ We are not even sure if we can tell which concepts are in motion and which are static, to say nothing of routinely mistaking the sound emanating from hollow words for the thing itself. I do not mean to suggest that dialectical thought is any less important than the speculative, but it may just not be “blunt” enough considering the truncating task ahead of us. Also, because our moment is marked by ontology’s semblance of negation, dialectics – its negative force notwithstanding – may not even be the appropriate measure to take on its own.

⁵⁹ *Abgestumpft* is an adjective (derived from the verb *abstumpfen*) that, in addition to a “truncated” limb, can also refer to a “blunt” or “dull” edge of an instrument; senses that are “deadened” or deprived of vitality; and a person “stultified” by some routine. The cutting that Benjamin has in mind will have to be carried out by a measure that is pretty blunt or “crude,” as Brecht would say. Of course, the cruder the object, the more force will have to be applied.

⁶⁰ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 74.

⁶¹ Another way to say this is that contradictions are once again cast as antinomies of thought. Hegelian contradictions [*widersprüche*], which are both subjective and objective, and which finite thoughts and things alike are immanently disposed to reveal and overcome, are today dismissed in favor of equally ineluctable Kantian *antinomien* that are either kept insoluble as aporias or whose resolution is predicated on the complete separation of the phenomenal from the noumenal order. Thereby the process of overcoming becomes a proliferation of differences, determinate negation is turned into ironical detachment, struggle is reconfigured as play. Implicit in this philosophical realignment is a cowardly obscurantism that sees time as treacherous and humanity as fallen.

Hegel's distinction between dialectical and speculative reason is famously controversial.⁶² At first sight it appears to be a part of yet another triadic form in his system and is ultimately what allows him to attain the perspective necessary to write his *Phenomenology*. I do not think I am saying anything that is not, at least formally, obvious and necessary: if *Vernunft* was only capable of its dialectic or negative phase, that is, if there is no account of speculative reason, the infamous "we/for us" of the *Phenomenology* – the fact that consciousness is never aware of the transformation it goes through but that it can nonetheless record it – would not have the absolute knowledge it takes to see dialectics through (a less generous interpretation of Hegel would either simply dismiss the man who claims to stand at the end of history or mistake the situation consciousness finds itself in for a case of dramatic irony). To complicate this further, the much-pilloried moment of subjective synthesis that is said to complete the triad is inextricably tied to speculative reason and to German Idealism in general. This accusation can be made against Fichte since the terms "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" originated with him, but is patently false in reference to Hegel, who quite explicitly rejected the triadic form as "lifeless" and as an "instrument of monotonous formalism."⁶³ Adorno, who apparently felt an "instinctual" and "violent antipathy to the concept of synthesis" and whose tone in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* is hardly favorable to Hegel, had to admit as much to his students: "the status of synthesis in Hegel [...] is actually somewhat anomalous."⁶⁴ Dispelling the myth of synthesis does not, however, put the question of speculation to bed since Hegel does indeed talk about the overcoming of oppositions by dialectical *and* speculative reason. In other words, Hegel's problem with synthesis was its formulaic nature, not its supposedly naïve intention to unite the irreconcilable. It is precisely what synthesis failed to accomplish in Kant and Fichte – in the former because he ruled it out categorically and in the latter because he achieved it subjectively – that Hegel's speculative reason

⁶² "Speculative" and "dialectical" reason [*Vernunft*] are two different phases of the same faculty of reason that is itself different from and, in contrast to Kant, superior to the faculty of understanding [*Verstand*]. This is perhaps the most important in a series of reversals and challenges Hegel presented to the Kantian architectonic. If Kant's first *Critique* is concerned with establishing limits of experience, *Vernunft* is precisely the faculty that he feared would "seduce" [*ausschweifen*] us beyond permissible limits and into "intelligible worlds" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], p. 381 [A289]). Adorno noticed that the overtly sexual language of Kant's prohibition here bears some resemblance to the wrath of Luther's sermons directed against *Vernunft*: "And what I say of passion [...] must also be understood of reason, for the latter violates and insults God [...] and has far more horrible whorish evil than a whore" (quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason: Lecture 1959* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001], pp. 249–250). Although Hegel was Lutheran, his views on *Vernunft* and *Spekulation* are far closer to the scholastic view, the target of Luther's ire, according to which one could catch a glimpse of God in speculative thought as in a mirror (*speculum*).

⁶³ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §50, 51.

⁶⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 29.

will attempt to do through the means less synthetic and *not* at all subjective. This is an important point to bear in mind: the final conceptual reconciliation in Hegel's idealism is not subjective because the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity has itself been sublated (subjective certainty is reconciled with objective truth in religion, while objective truth is reconciled with subjective certainty in the ethical substance).

Often and at times through perfidious means we are told that the above two objections (synthesis and subjectivism) are leveled against Hegel even by those inclined to agree with him. This is supposed to put one on notice that it is futile to defend speculative thought. Even Adorno had supposedly positioned his own thought precisely between or in opposition to both Kantian *Verstand* and Hegel's speculative *Vernunft*. In fact, the same *Münchhausen* passage from which I quoted above is meant to confirm Adorno's distaste for the speculative: "Nothing less is asked of the thinker today," Adorno writes, "than that he should be at every moment both within things and outside them - Münchhausen pulling himself out of the bog by his pig tails becomes the pattern of knowledge which wishes to be more than either *verification* or *speculation*."⁶⁵ The champion of negative dialectics, in one of the most programmatic aphorisms of his fragmented *Minima Moralia*, confirms beyond doubt that "the morality of thought" (the title of the aphorism) best resist affirmation on both sides of the triad. It appears irrefutable that Adorno comes out against both *Verstand's* "verification" and *Vernunft's* "speculation" until we realize that the key word in this sentence is rather curiously translated. The German word that Adorno uses and that in a possible reference to Hegel is translated as "speculation" is actually "*Entwurf*," or a "state of projection," the single most important and recognizable concept in Heidegger's ontology that refers not simply to Dasein's alienated essence but rather to alienation as the essence of Dasein.

Before I turned to Adorno's original I did not know that I would find the worst of Heidegger hiding behind the liberties the translator took with the text. I did, however, have a pretty good sense of where to dig, for the simple reason that something quite important did not add up about this particular aphorism (the same goes for Benjamin's "truncated endings").⁶⁶ This is after all the same aphorism where Adorno speaks of Hegel's "double edge method which has earned Hegel's *Phenomenology* the reputation among reasonable people of unfathomable difficulty, that is, its simultaneous demands that phenomena be allowed to speak as such - in a 'pure looking-on' - and yet that their re-

⁶⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 74, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ In addition to Jephcott's translation in *Minima Moralia*, I have thus far listed four other instances of direct intervention in the left-Hegelian tradition: an example of Petrović's lexical discretion; a common case of a lazy, formalist interpretation of Benjamin; Heidegger's own appropriation of Hegel; and, in passing, an emergence of a "new" philosophy of history in the wake of socialism's collapse in Eastern Europe (this article fn. 45). While these five cases are different in scope, offense, and motivation, they do have one thing in common: in each of these cases we see a categorical preference given to separation and fragmentation.

lation to consciousness as the subject, reflection, be at every moment maintained.”⁶⁷ The “double edge method” Adorno describes here, and whose subjective formulation I have touched on above in terms of the status of the *Phenomenology*’s “we/for us,” can only be an outcome of speculative reason. Furthermore, it does not hurt to recall one of the most basic and yet far-reaching pieces of advice from Alex Thomson’s “guide” to Adorno: “Bear in mind that Adorno rarely thinks in sentences, but only in paragraphs.”⁶⁸ Finally and most importantly, regardless of a handful of endlessly rehearsed anti-Hegelian maxims (bombers, the whole, Auschwitz, etc.) and the tone of the *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* I mentioned above, Adorno was actually quite consistent not only in his regard for Hegel, but also about the dangers of the dialectic mistaken for a simple method without the speculative prop.⁶⁹ This is precisely what makes me think that Adorno, too, would insist that we return materialism to Hegel and to his “idealism” in particular.

Return to Idealism

I will express my point in even more extravagant terms so that our task is clear. I am *not* only calling for an all-important return *to* materialism in Hegel, *to* the material, social, and historical “kernel” that is already present in the “mystifying shell” of Hegel’s philosophy and of which we have become largely oblivious because we read Hegel through Marx if we read him at all.⁷⁰ It is indeed important to establish that much of what we recognize as a distinctly materialist imagery in Marx’s argument against Hegel actually comes from Hegel himself. But establishing this is only a preliminary, if necessary, step

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 74.

⁶⁸ Alex Thomson, *Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 153; also see Adorno’s “Skoteinos” essay for the identical advice on how to read Hegel: “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel,” in Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, pp. 89–148, in particular pp. 122–123.

⁶⁹ The key passage about the performative bias in the “use of the dialectic” and “the threatening relapse of reflection into unreflectedness” is the penultimate aphorism in *Minima Moralia*, “Warning: not to be misused” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, pp. 244–247). Regardless of the use it is put to, dialectics remains for Adorno “the ontology of the false condition” (Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 11; trans. modified). He was famously reluctant to say what the “right state of things” would look like, and while he was mercilessly criticized for it towards the end of his life, the *Bilderverbot* was precisely the meaning of utopia for him. This is best expressed in his 1964 radio conversation with Bloch, published as “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing,” in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), pp. 1–17. Towards the end of this brief but powerful exchange, Adorno offers a speculative instantiation of Anselm’s ontological proof: “you used the phrase from Brecht – ‘something’s missing’ – a phrase that we actually cannot have if seeds or ferment of what this phrase denotes were not possible. Actually, I would think that unless there is no kind of trace of truth in the ontological proof of God, that is, unless the element of its reality is also already conveyed in the power of the concept itself, there could not only be no utopia but there could also not be any thinking” (*ibid.*, p. 16).

⁷⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 103.

for establishing a truth even more relevant today: Not only is Marx's materialism already present in Hegel, but Hegel's idealism remains in Marx. So, what are some of these preliminary steps we need to take, and how do we get from them to Hegel's idealism? I think the first procedure entails yet another close exegesis of some key passages in Marx and in particular his "Postface to the Second Edition" of *Capital*, Vol. 1, where most of the best-known caricatures of Hegel originate. I will spare you the details other than to point out that it is not "Hegel" who Marx stands on his feet as it is often misinterpreted, but "*it*" – viz. "the dialectic" which "suffered mystification in Hegel's hands" and which "by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner."⁷¹ So, the dialectic "is standing on *its* head" and it "must be inverted."⁷² This is more than a matter of literary pedantry, for it shows that Marx – in agreement with Hegel and for the sake of the dialectic – strategically inverts the dialectic from the "mystified" into "its rational form." If we now recall that in the very next paragraph Marx explains its mystified form in terms of glorification/transfiguration of what exists and in terms of fashion, we will see that the demystification Marx calls for is effectively the same demystification Hegel carried out against Kant and Fichte (the bad infinity of Fichte's theory of reflection has the same temporality as fashion). Of course, one does not need to be too fancy here and can instead just read on through the rest of the next paragraph in the "Postface" to realize that the passage reads as a summary of Hegel's own position.⁷³

The second procedure follows from the first in the sense that it focuses on what I have described above as a "strategic" deployment of Hegel's own argument against Hegel. It is, again, of the utmost importance to our understanding of Hegel (and Marx) that we do not lose sight of the polemic context of the second "Postface," in which Marx is responding to the specific accusation of "Hegelian sophistry" leveled against his work: "Marx is the most idealist of philosophers," the accuser charged, "and indeed in the German, i.e., the bad sense of the word."⁷⁴ In his initial response, Marx uses the critic's own words against the accusation, making it thus clear that Marx believed his accuser was simply mixing up his categories. Marx was not only in the business (pardon the expression) of ridiculing his many critics, which he of course did keenly and with wit. He was also a political organizer who, precisely because he made no specific predictions about revolution in his theoretical writings, acted to make revolution directly imminent. Thus, while the accusation made absolutely no sense philosophically and was not worth Marx wasting any of his own words on it, it was politically fatal and I think Marx understood the danger of being accused of the exact political tendencies he was trying to suppress, from his

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103, emphasis added.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

critique of utopianism in *German Ideology* to the expulsion of the anarchists from the First International. Adorno comments on this indirectly in *Negative Dialectics*: “They [Marx and Engels] wanted the revolution to come next day; hence their acute interest in breaking up trends that would, they had to fear, be crushed like Spartacus once upon a time, or like the peasant uprisings. Marx and Engels were enemies of Utopia for the sake of its actualization [Verwirklichung].”⁷⁵

The third and final procedure in rescuing Hegel from “Marx” involves forgetting Marx and the exigencies of his time, and returning to Hegel’s own philosophy to carefully outline its critical and revolutionary import to our own moment. This is in effect what Marx did, but if we are to “repeat” Marx’s procedure, we will arrive at what I think are different conclusions, more appropriate to our own moment. To be clear, I do not think that we have experienced an epochal break or some historical rupture and that we are facing fundamentally different social and material circumstances. On the contrary, I have argued above against the type of thinking that privileges radical separation that now cuts to the “soul” of every human being and to her every relation, so that one can no longer even speak of the social, political, historical or even of the human without negative inflection. In the words of Benjamin, “the enemy” has remained the same and as “victorious” as ever; what has changed, however, are the “tools” at his disposal, and it is these that we have to account for.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 322, trans. modified (p. 313 in the 1966 Suhrkamp Verlag edition of *Negative Dialektik*). E. B. Ashton had the unfortunate honor of having to be the first translator to attempt to render Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* into English some fifty years ago. As Hullot-Kentor once observed, Ashton “dragged the book into English,” and in the process became the most hated translator in all of critical theory (Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, p. 299). The charge is not altogether justified considering that the German text is itself written “at the limits of German syntax” with, e.g., omitted articles, ambiguous pronouns, missing objects, etc. (*ibid.*, p. 235). The effect of this Beckett-like exercise on the reader – in any language – is clear: the text “demands persistently reconstructive labor on the reader’s part” (*ibid.*). Before we dismiss this as a needless modernist exercise, we should recall the effort Adorno goes thorough in “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel” to convince his readers of the appropriate way to approach the style so severe that it yields nothing to the passive spectator: “One must read Hegel by describing along with him the curves of his intellectual movement, by playing his ideas with the speculative ear as though they were musical notes” (Adorno, “Skoteinos,” p. 123).

⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 253–264, here 255. Along similar lines, if we were to “repeat” Benjamin today, if we were to heed his command that “in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition [of the oppressed] from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (*ibid.*), we would need to mount a critique not against historicism of the Weimar SPD and its Neo-Kantian philosophers, but against the notions of historical discontinuity, disruption, and permanent crises. One can get there from Benjamin by realizing that the argument that appears to be about continuity and discontinuity is in fact his attempt to break with what he elsewhere called “vulgar historical naturalism” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, section N2.6). Vulgar historical naturalism is hardly the sole domain of historical continuity. Both continuity

With respect to the work of returning to Hegel's materialism, a lot has already been accomplished even if only in the margins of radical theory. It is thus possible today to clearly see that, for example, "Marx's statement [from *The German Ideology*] that philosophy passes over into history already characterizes Hegel;"⁷⁷ that it was already Hegel who historicized the solipsistic *Verstand* of the Kantian analytic; already Hegel who provided a materialist critique of the bourgeois state's abdication of its sovereignty to market economy; already Hegel who showed that the contradictions of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution cannot be reconciled strictly conceptually through a Robinsonade fantasy, but must be fought over on the island of Hispaniola; already Hegel who understood the international dimension of history and politics; already Hegel who taught us to recognize the failed state by the "ethical turn" (*Moralität*) of its denizens. That all stands but we may need to take an additional step of recognizing in each of Hegel's materialist feats the role of the *Idee*. This is what I meant earlier by *not simply* returning to materialism, but rather returning materialism – our materialism – to Hegel's idealism. To fully grasp this, we need to relearn what Hegel means by a whole range of technical terms in his philosophical system and we cannot do this without first wresting the same from their tendentious reinscription in hands of friends and foes alike. I have made a modest pass at this here and will now finish with an account of the *Idee*, the thorniest but most relevant term for my advocacy of idealism. In simplest terms, *Idee* is a union between the concept and its actualization, or the full realization of the concept *in* the object. From this statement alone it should be clear that *Idee* is not a concept (*Begriff*), and that it is neither entirely subjective nor objective. In his preface to *The Philosophy of Right* (which is supposed to be another famous source of Hegel's scandalous statements and which I, following Brennan's thesis in *Borrowed Light*,⁷⁸ take to be as radical a text as the *Phenomenology*), Hegel describes the philosophical *Idee* as the conscious unity of Form and Content, where Form is "reason as conceptual cognition" or intellectual apprehension that conceives its object; and Content is reason as substantive essence of social order and nature, or in his words, "substantial essence of both ethical and natural actuality."⁷⁹ A few pages later, he offers an even more useful

and discontinuity can equally succumb to it as long they are governed by the logic of inevitability and not by the concept of "actualization." When continuity succumbs to historical naturalism, it is called "progress," and it is this "idea of progress" that infected the Left of Benjamin's time. When discontinuity succumbs to historical naturalism, it is called "rupture," and it is this idea of rupture that infects the theory of our times.

⁷⁷ Adorno, "Skoteinos," p. 123.

⁷⁸ See Brennan, *Borrowed Light*, pp. 84–85.

⁷⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 22. I have switched from the *Phenomenology* to *The Philosophy of Right*, which is to say from an exposition of "*speculative Philosophie*" to that of the "*Idee*," because Hegel's discussion of the *Idee* in the latter work (an actual textbook he used in his classes) was easier to understand in translation than was his treatment of "*speculative philosophy*" in the "Preface"

configuration of what it means to think speculatively: “The science of right is a part of philosophy. It has therefore to develop the *Idee* – which is the reason within an object [*Gegenstand*] – out of the concept; or what comes to the same thing, it must observe the proper immanent development of the thing [*Sache*] itself.”⁸⁰ In language that is perhaps less abstract and that recalls Horkheimer’s question from the beginning of the essay, the *Idee* is an intercourse of the subject-object and the object-subject in the world to which they do not just belong in some pure immediacy, but which they actively transform. The final observation to make about Hegelian *Idee* is that in as much as it is dependent on the concept’s realization in the particular, the *Idee* is not an abstract “ideal” that the subject ought to achieve. Not an infinite task nor some fundamental, ecstatic capacity that reveals itself intermittently and only to those who pursue it resolutely. That reality lags behind its possibility, that it must be brought to reason to become actual, is itself only a knowledge made real through the transformation of reality.⁸¹ It is from experience of its own work or “in work,” as Hegel says, that the subject both learns of the “disparity between concept and reality” and “becomes what it is in truth” – a subject free from the empty concepts it had of itself.⁸² A world awoken from the dream it had of itself. In the end, it is still idealism that stands firm against the new materialist cult of potentiality and its empty promise of deliverance.

to the *Phenomenology* (Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §56–71). It may be due to Miller’s decision to use “speculative” for two different German words, the actual “*spekulative*” and for “*begreifende*.” Speculative philosophy is the knowledge of the *Idee*, not concepts as it implies in *begreifende*. Either Miller is not correct in his translation or Hegel indeed meant *spekulative* when he wrote *begreifende*, which I am not in a position to evaluate. My basic contention remains unchanged. Speculative thought can expose the empty transcendence of the Heideggerian proposition inasmuch as it can discern the unity (not identity) of things in their opposition.

⁸⁰ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy*, p. 26.

⁸¹ I am indebted to Keya Ganguly and Timothy Brennan for a particularly clear articulation of this point in “Materialist Conservation,” a précis for a guest-seminar they taught at the Franklin Humanities Institute, Duke University, Apr. 14–16 2015 (online at <http://www.fhi.duke.edu/sites/default/files/FHI%20Brennan%20Ganguly%20Seminar%20Description.pdf> [accessed May 5, 2017]).

⁸² Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §406.