What's the Time?
On Being Too Early or Too Late in Hegel's Philosophy

Mladen Dolar

It's too late. It's over, it's finished, it's done with. We've missed it, whatever the "it" was, and if it's too late, what are we waiting for? What's left for us to do? Why did we come to this conference to endlessly discuss it being too late? Maybe we are not taking the title of our conference seriously. Or maybe we are giving in to either one or the other of the two wrong reactions provoked by the title: first, the attitude of mourning, of bemoaning, lamentation over "it" being too late, having missed the right time, over the irretrievable loss; and second, the hasty assertion, the proclaimed assurance that no, no, it's not too late, there's still time, we have to act swiftly, we must hurry up to catch up. So we linger on, either to mournfully do nothing (no doubt enjoying our wretchedness and lamentation) or to engage in hyperactivity to make up for the loss. But if these two reactions are mistaken, what would then be a more proper response? Are these the only alternatives?

"It's too late"—but too late in relation to what? How to establish the scale, the measure, the timeline, the schedule on the basis of which one can proclaim "it" being too late? Hence my title, "What's the time?"—and I have to mention in passing that in German, the language of Hegel, the common expression runs "*Wie spät ist es?*," or "How late is it?," so the terms of the question already presuppose that it's late, it's only a question of

degree, and in German the answer imposes itself quite naturally. Being implied in the question, it merely extends the question, saying "It's too late," "*Es ist zu spät*." The moment one asks, it's already late; the neutral expression in German presupposes belatedness.[1] But quite apart from the German, maybe there is something in the very idea of time that makes it endemically late, so that the moment we think of time, of "what's the time," we have already structurally missed something, we are already too late to capture it. "It" is too late—What is the "it" that we are missing? Before "us" being too late, "it" is already too late, we lag behind its belatedness.

It has been the business of philosophy, one of its essential tasks since its inception, to ask "what's the time," in the double meaning of *was ist Zeit* and *wie spät ist es*, asking about the essence of time, and asking about a particular moment and its placement in the scheme of things. It has been its task to establish the schedule by which we are supposed to gauge our lives and according to which we are supposed to deploy our thought. Thought establishes its own temporality, and maybe this is what defines thought from the outset—it sets its temporality apart from common time, the supposed natural temporality, if such a thing ever existed, so thought is "always already" not only the thought of time, but also out of time, *unzeitgemäß.* It sets up a new schedule, and it's by being placed in this schedule that one can establish one's timeliness, or one's out-of-timeness. But once the idea of time was established, as the proper time of thought, it immediately entailed the idea of coming too late for the great times that already passed. Maybe this is what philosophy inherited from the mythic legacy, namely the idea that once there were times when things were in their proper places, and since then things have gone downhill.

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[1] Is there any language in which one would neutrally ask, "How early is it?" or "*Wie früh ist es?*" There is actually a song, as I found out on YouTube, performed by Roger Whittaker (the author is Rudolf Müssig), called "Wie früh ist es zu spät?" Not that I recommend it.

Time is the corruption of time. In her famous essay "What is authority?" Hannah Arendt started off by asking:

> In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What was—and not what is—authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question because authority has vanished from the modern world. […] [W] e can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experiences common to all […] (Arendt 1961, p. 91)

Apart from linking authority to a certain temporality (and there has always been a politics of time, with the conception of time linked to a political script—cf. Osborne 1995), one may well ask the general question whether this was ever different at any point in history, since the beginning. Maybe this is what defines the human condition: there is a crisis, a downfall, we come too late. The supposition is: There once was a time when things were on time, in the rightful order vouchsafed by a proper authority, there were firm foundations of the social, "authentic and undisputable experiences common to all," but these times are gone, there has been a decline, there is a loss, we are in a crisis. But has it ever been otherwise? Not since Plato's times, at least (what is Plato's *Republic*, and the *Laws*, but an attempt to recuperate the lost origin, the way things used to and ought to be?). The history of humanity starts with tales of collapse and the demise of some originary authority in an originary presence—it begins with the supposition that there once was an order, which we missed, so now we live in a time that is already corrupt. There once was a proper past, but the present is diminished, degraded, reduced, decayed in relation to it; it has always begun with degradation. So "it's too late" sort of defines the human condition, or at least one of its conspicuous facets. To sum up with three slogan-like adages: 1. "There were times when there was time." 2. "Time is the afterlife of time." 3. "We are human, so we come too late; we are never on time."

What follows from this (rather, one of the things that can follow from it, my account is of course grossly simplifying), what lies closest at hand, is a call for a heroic attempt to recapture what was lost, a plea for restoration, the reinstatement of something that went corrupt and that we never witnessed in its full presence, having come too late. This is a past that was never quite present, except as already lost, and it calls for a future as the vindication of the lost past. So the simple question "What's the time?" tends to imply a whole plot, a narrative from which it is hard to escape, and which held in check so much of the history of philosophy.

Arendt's quote also implies a twist in this everlasting plot, a turn instigated by modernity. For her, authority is gone from the modern world (this is what ultimately defines its modernity), with the supposition that there used to be times of unalloyed authority, say, times when the big Other still existed and allegedly ruled supreme, not ridden with lack. But even if such times never existed, there was nevertheless a break in this non-existence: time may have always already been doomed to an afterlife, but modernity turned this "in itself" into "for itself," the reflected afterlife, the (new?) afterlife after the (old?) afterlife. "It's too late" may have always accompanied the notion of time, but it is only with modernity that it has begun to be reflected on. The time may have always been out of joint, but this condition has become reflected on only once the paradigmatic modern hero declared: the time is out of joint. Maybe this is a handy way to put a date on it.

Of course, there is also another kind of answer to "what's the time," also pertaining to the dawn of the history of philosophy. The answer would be, tentatively, "the time is now," giving rise to what has become known as the notorious metaphysics of presence—or metaphysics *tout court*, since being "of presence" is what allegedly defines metaphysics, which would make the phrase "metaphysics of presence" a pleonasm. If we cannot get hold of the proper time, the time already lost, we can at least take hold of the now and turn it into our foothold. We access time through the

imposing immediacy of presence, the privileged now, in relation to which all other temporality is derivative. Metaphysics, on this view, is based on a certain take on time privileging full presence as the authority of thought, conceiving time as a succession of nows. This is what Heidegger would call the vulgar notion of time, with the claim that this kind of notion largely persisted from Aristotle to Hegel, thus framing metaphysics altogether.[2] Metaphysical time (if such a thing exists) seems to be suspended between the time always already lost and its elusive counterpart in the hold of the present now.

The two stories about "what's the time," the one about coming too late in relation to the great time that is already over, and the other about being on time for the now of pure presence, since time cannot be conceived of without this privileged vantage point—these two stories don't really and necessarily contradict each other but can rather mutually support each other and actually serve a third one: a recuperation of time lost and degraded is to happen in the future, the advent of a proper "real" presence, the *parousia*, which will ultimately coincide with eternity—and Hegel himself put it bluntly, "The true presence [*Gegenwart*] is thus the eternity" (TWA 9, p. 55). If we come too late for the proper presence, already gone at the time of our arrival (like DOA), there is still the prospect of it being recuperated, not only retrieved, reclaimed, and restored, but produced and constructed so that the loss will turn into a gain. For now to be fully now, it has to

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[2] This is not the place to enter into a convoluted debate about this issue, where one would have to bring in, say, Derrida's complex and labyrinthine rumination in his seminal "*Ousía* and *grammé*" (1968, 1982) and Catherine Malabou's lucid comments in her *The Future of Hegel* (1996, 2005). Let me just say, in a cursory manner, that I have always been a bit bemused by the ease with which these sweeping claims were made—both Aristotle's and Hegel's enigmatic and dense texts still leave me rather perplexed or, rather, awestruck, as they seem to resist any reduction to a neat and generalized pattern—just as I am, more importantly, bemused by there being so much talk of metaphysics. But this is a far longer story than what can be reasonably treated here.

be relegated to the future. It is because we come too late that we have a future, a future of vindication, where the minus will turn into a plus and the original failure will be doubly rewarded. The now is suspended between the glorious past and the glorious future to come. There can be multiple scenarios for this, religious or secular (or, mostly, secularized theological).

All right, metaphysics, loss, presence, *parousia*, eternity, and everything else that I have given here in a very cursory outline is all very well, but can Hegel be held accountable for such a view? Is there a Hegelian reading of temporality which exceeds this stance, or displaces it, or escapes it, while seemingly remaining within the same parameters?

First, belatedness, the coming-too-late, the slogan of our meeting. The stark criticism directed at Hegel regarding too-lateness has an obvious point of origin—the crown exhibit, the article of indictment, one of Hegel's most famous quotes, the passage from the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), where Hegel states directly and unambiguously:

> One word more about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it [*so kommt dazu ohnehin die Philosophie immer zu spät*]. As the *thought* of the world, it appears only when actuality has completed its process of formation and attained its finished state. […] The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the falling of dusk [*die Eule der Minerva beginnt erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug*]. (Hegel 2008, p. 16; TWA 7, pp. 27–8)

One can only say that he had it coming. There can be no doubt that he is adamantly and explicitly maintaining that it's too late for philosophy to do anything much apart from knowing [*nur ekennen*], which is perhaps nevertheless quite something. One can, of course, immediately start bemoaning Hegel's conservatism—everything is already done, finished, completed, fulfilled, there is a call for a reconciliation with the given, and all this is enough to dismiss Hegel's position altogether.

But maybe one should first stop for a moment to consider the strangeness of this declaration (of defeat?), or its unique nature, its novelty. To my knowledge, nobody in the history of philosophy has ever said anything quite like it. A quarter of a century later, Karl Marx would famously scribble in his notebook: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point [however] is to change it." The odd thing with this quote is that if one starts looking for philosophers who wanted to merely interpret the world, one will find none. They all wanted to change it in various ways, from Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* to the philosophers of the Enlightenment paving the way for the Revolution (and to Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* as the closest to Hegel). No philosopher has ever entertained the idea of doing something as innocuous as merely interpreting the world—except for one, who spelled it out in all letters. My hunch would be that Marx's adage is not directed against the rule ("all philosophers"), but against the exception; it has only one addressee. Everybody thought there was still time (and we would have to seize it and change), only Hegel, seemingly, on the face of it, if we take him literally (which one never can), proclaimed it being too late. (Although, to be sure, Hegel would never use the notion of "interpreting" or entertain the idea of an innocent interpretation; he says "*erkennen*," which is very different.)[3] So instead of bemoaning the arch-conservatism of Hegel's "too late," one should perhaps for a change appreciate its novelty, its audacity—shall one say its revolutionary character? What cheek, to say "it's over, it's too late." My proposal would be to read it not as a closure, but as an opening—or perhaps as something that escapes the unsatisfactory binary dilemma of having to choose between "closure" and "opening," the vocabulary so often used in relation to Hegel, with "closure" usually referring to his cardinal

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[3] I am here and elsewhere in this paper resuming and expanding the argument of my paper on the owl of Minerva (Dolar 2015).

sin. As the textbook script goes, the major Hegelian fallacy lies in having presented a self-enclosed system, a totality closing upon itself. The axiom of this view is: open is good, closed is bad—a spontaneous assumption that one would have to shift and undo.[4]

The proposition "it's too late" can have two opposite readings. It can mean "everything is fine, it's all for the best," and it seems that this is the direction in which Hegel is heading in his Preface, given his notorious adage "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational." The world such as it is actually already *is* the embodiment of reason, the actualization of reason, so in order to know it by reason, one has to come to a match: reason on the part of the knowing subject must find its match in the reason already embodied and actualized in the world. Thus, reason inhabits both the subjective and the objective part, and the two should find reconciliation, *Versöhnung*, in their overlap. One comes too late only to find that it's all for the best. The other reading of "it's too late," which is closer to our sensibility, I suppose, closer to the bone, would be "everything is messed up and bungled." It's broken beyond repair, we are helplessly too late to mend it, it's over. Which is it going to be? Do we have to choose? Can we? Is there a parallax, looking at the same state of affairs and seeing two different pictures? Are the two pictures dialectically connected?

For Hegel, there might ultimately be no dilemma: "Denn erst das ganz Schlechte hat die unmittelbare Notwendigkeit an sich, sich zu verkehren" (TWA 3, p. 257). "For only what is wholly bad [the worst] is implicitly charged with the immediate necessity of changing round into its opposite" (Hegel 1977, p. 206). Only the worst possesses the necessity to change round, so what is bungled is already bungled for the best. Could one say, "It's too late,

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[4] Agamben's comment on Kafka's parable of the law proposes the formula that openness is the modern way of closure, epitomizing our predicament in the face of the gate of the law always being open (Agamben 1998). One could say that nothing is more claustrophobic than openness.

but no matter, the worst will yield the best anyway"? If there is something that separates us from Hegel, 200 years later, it is our inability to quite share this seeming optimism. This is what Slavoj Žižek called the Hölderlin paradigm, to evoke the other birthday boy, the other 250th anniversary we are celebrating this year. It is based on Hölderlin's famous line, "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch," or, "But where danger is, the saving powers grow as well," as one English translation has it (or "where danger is greatest, deliverance is closest"). One counts on the redemptive reversal of the worst.[5] Is there a *secret belief in magic* at the bottom of it all, by which the worst would be dialectically overturned by its own inner necessity? Or is it that the worst predicament is in itself already (the beginning of) a solution? The question arises whether the Hölderlin paradigm is also the Hegel paradigm. Or is it rather a certain misreading of the Hegel paradigm (to which Hegel himself was not quite immune)?

Coming too late, structural belatedness, may most conspicuously be pinned to this one celebrated quote (notorious to the point of entering the Zeitgeist and popular culture with the widespread reference to the owl of Minerva), but actually "it's all over" in Hegel (if I am allowed this pun)—but not as a handicap to be deplored. In a way, in Hegel's philosophy one always comes too late, and this is coterminous with a structural illusion. The thing was there, in itself, in its splendor, in its full magnificence, inexhaustible in its richness, in its immediacy, in its unrestrained indeterminacy, but the moment we come and want to grasp it with thought we miss it, we lose it, we impoverish it, reduce it, distort it, we are alas too late to get hold of its glory. The first chapter of the *Phenomenology* on sense-certainty is very much to the point here,

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[5] Cf. Žižek 2014, pp. 344–349: "[…] the danger of the catastrophic loss of the essential dimension of being-human also opens up the possibility of a reversal (*Kehre*) […]" (p. 344). Žižek sees this paradigm at work in very different quarters, from the Judeo-Christian legacy to Marxism and Heidegger. But ultimately not Hegel.

since it deals mainly with the question of "now" in its elusiveness and its relation to language, to logos, to the symbolic. When the natural consciousness opens up its mouth for the first time to say something on its own, it's to utter: "Now is night" (which oddly happens to be the proper time for philosophy; it comes too late for the daylight, but in good time for philosophy). We are immersed in the wealth and the splendor of the multi-faceted inexhaustible sensible being, in colorful sensuality and perception, but the moment we try to spell it out, it's gone. The moment we open our mouth to speak, it's too late, the thing we wanted to capture has escaped, the richest experience turns into the poorest expression. Key here might be the fact that language always comes too late in relation to "real" experience, it misses its target, structurally and necessarily so, and this may appear as the source of all trouble. Language comes too late to capture the experience, but *it is this very inadequacy that ultimately constitutes the experience*—the full presence of experience turns out retrospectively to have been a mirage. This inadequacy will haunt the (natural) consciousness all throughout the *Phenomenology*, to the very last page, for it will always be doomed to saying something else than intended.

This temporal sequence is based on a necessary structural illusion: actually, what comes after constitutes what seemingly went before, it creates a time (a fore-time, a pre-time) that was never actually present but emerges as a pre-time only once it has been missed. Formulaically speaking, missing it retroactively creates what has been missed. Or, more pointedly: *one loses what one never possessed*. Yet this loss, this initial minus, is also the condition not for regaining what was lost, but for creating, constructing something that wasn't there before. By coming too late, one creates the right time to come, the time that was impossible to establish beforehand. It is the fall that retroactively creates the paradise from which we have fallen and which seemingly preceded the fall (which is, roughly, Hegel's reading of Genesis in a nutshell). The same kind of logic is also encapsulated in the

title of Žižek's book *Absolute Recoil*, and here is the bottom line on it: "Hegel uses the unique term '*absoluter Gegenstoss*' (recoil, counter-push, counter-thrust […], counter-punch): a withdrawal that creates what it withdraws from" (Žižek 2014, p. 148). The recoil retroactively brings forth what it recoils from—this is the main argument of Žižek's book. In this light, philosophy coming too late, once an actuality is already seemingly accomplished, is not simply a sign of its impotence—this belatedness is endowed with the retroactive power of bringing forth the actuality in question, which was not yet simply there despite its air of completion. It has the power of changing the very conditions of an accomplished actuality, which is actual only by virtue of us coming seemingly too late and producing what seemed to be already there and accomplished.[6] Coming too late produces the very conditions in relation to which it came too late, and hence spells them out in construction and anticipation.

In a general way—and I am well aware that I am mixing different levels here, each of which would demand separate and detailed proper treatment, I am just trying to disentangle a very general mechanism, which, I think, is ubiquitous in Hegel—in a general way, this also goes for the Hegelian triad "in itself, for itself, in and for itself." The "in itself" is never simply there, or always deceptively so—it is created retroactively by its turn into "for itself." It's only the second step that constitutes the first, and the third step, "in and for itself," is perhaps nothing but an insight into the constitutive nature of this inadequacy and retroactivity. *Sichanderswerden*, the excellent Hegelian term, as if off-handedly thrown into the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, captures this succinctly: the apt English translation is "self-othering," implying that any "self," any "*sich*" can only be captured through its

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[6] One can imagine Hegel saying something like Clov at the very beginning of Beckett's *Endgame*: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (Beckett 1986, p. 93). These are the first lines of the play, the apparent finish constitutes the beginning.

turning into other than (it)self, thus by being betrayed, in the two senses, first, of being mis-presented, distorted, falsified in relation to what it's supposed to be, and second, to be thus revealed and disclosed. The "self" is empty without self-othering, it cannot be captured by itself, on its own, it's a mirage retroactively produced by its becoming other. Or, in other words, the distortion creates the very measure against which it can be deemed distorted.

As an aside, this inspires some skepticism regarding the formula "making it explicit" (or "the explicitation of the implicit"), proposed as a shorthand for the Hegelian enterprise (which gained notoriety with Robert Brandom's famous book of that title; see Brandom 1994). In short, the implicit is a retroactive creation of the becoming explicit, it is only there in a backward movement, which creates a retroactive illusion that everything was already encapsulated at the outset, lying low, it only had to come out, it had to unfold (in line with the etymology, i.e., *plica,* fold, *ex-plicare*, to unfold what was folded). The forward movement is endowed with the secret power of retrospective production, so that it's only when something lying low comes to light that it is established as having been lying low. It is an unfolding where, strictly speaking, nothing was folded beforehand, it is the unfolding that produces the fold as a backward necessity.

This is what basically counters the cartoonish common criticism of Hegel, which can be put under the heading of "spirit lost and found again." Spirit is there in its initial substantial/substantive unity, then it undergoes a long process of alienation, becoming other than itself, losing itself in its otherness, opposing itself, and then finally all otherness is recuperated, sublated, recovered, re-appropriated, so it can coincide with itself in the final reconciliation, having been enriched by this journey of loss and retrieval, so that ultimately there is no loss at all, all loss has been made good. Spirit has to lose itself in order to find itself, and this constitutes the life of spirit. What is wrong with this widespread story? First, there is no substantive identity to start

with that could be recuperated, it is only produced by its loss, everything is produced on the way, so what is found is not at all what was lost, and the reconciliation can only be a reconciliation the inherent lack of spiritual substance. There is no origin to be recovered, no proper to be re-appropriated (as opposed to what Derrida called the metaphysics of the proper, *la métaphysique du propre*), no identity to be restored. There is a constitutive split, which conditions the whole progression.

With his stance that the origin is empty, the poorest of all, the most dilapidated, impoverished, reduced, scarce, meager, shrunk, devoid of qualities, Hegel is quite unique in the history of philosophy. In relation to our initial scenario of always coming too late, missing the wealth of origin, the proper order of things, witnessing degradation, any time being the corruption of time from the outset, tacitly implied in the very notion of time—in relation to this, Hegel's coming too late entails a reversal of perspective, an inversion of value: we never come too late, it's only by coming too late that the time is created according to whose measure we can be too late at all, and our having missed "it" created "it" in the first place. Belatedness and loss (of what was never possessed in the first place) are positive conditions. In this sense, Hegel is the furthest removed from the standard (always somewhat caricaturized) notion of metaphysics, where things are most precious and richest at their origins, and then incur a subsequent degradation. Degradation is empowering, and more generally speaking, negation is empowering.

The flipside of retroaction is anticipation, precipitation. For if one (always already) comes too late to catch things, to capture the alleged fullness of being, if there is no explicitation which would inexorably follow from the implicit, if one always starts with the second, not the first step (which is retroactively brought about and never had a proper time of its own), then one can only start by precipitation , by anticipating, with a forward thrust that has no proper coverage, no "sufficient reason" that would vouch

for it. There is no first step that would be firmly footed in the thing itself. By coming too late, one also comes too early. This is Hegel's argument in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, aimed, on the one hand, against Kant, who wants to come on time (and there are numerous anecdotes about Kant always being on time, be it for his walks), gets entangled in the preliminaries, in considering the conditions of possibility of the first move, and consequently never makes the first move (it's still too early for it)—a strategy doomed to procrastination; Kant is the one who would avoid precipitation (or belatedness) at all cost. On the other hand, Hegel's argument is directed against Schelling (and Fichte), who attempts to reach the absolute already with the first move, precipitating himself into it (like from a pistol, says Hegel), and thus missing it. Very schematically put, one strategy misses precipitation, the other misses belatedness—but the point is not the right measure or the middle ground between the two, i.e., to move in good time, but rather the co-belonging of belatedness and precipitation as the "wrong" temporalities to start with, which can nevertheless produce the "right" time through their inadequacy.[7] Time is produced by it never being the right time. Thus, one can only start in an inappropriate way, by striking a wrong note, by being too early or too late, or, rather, by being too early and too late "at the same time" (but how could the time be the same?).

Hence, the problems of Hegel's prefaces and introductions, placed at the beginning, which by Hegel's own adamant and explicit proclamations is not the right way to start philosophy, these problems shouldn't be rightfully there at all if what Hegel

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[7] As Comay puts it, "Either the work never gets started or the work gets finished all too soon. These are two sides of the same coin, which for Hegel stake out the outer limits of German Idealism—the evil twins, roughly speaking, of Kant and Schelling: the tepid waters of endless critical reflection versus the skyrockets of rapturous revelation; the bad infinite of interminable postponement versus the 'bad finite' of instant gratification; delay versus haste" (Comay 2015, p. 260).

proclaims about them were to be taken seriously. All the pre-liminaries ought to be dispensed with, they are improper ways to begin, inadequate by their own standards, yet they fulfill an indispensable function, namely to anticipate unduly,[8] without any proper coverage, to take unwarranted steps, which will hopefully be retroactively recuperated—but can they be?

If there is emptiness at the point of origin, if the origin is nothing but a split, then this is matched at the other end, i.e., at the end, the final point, not by some final fullness in the guise of absolute knowledge, which we are supposed to arrive at, but rather by a final empty point, which is nothing but a reflection of the initial emptiness. Just as the self is nothing without the process of self-othering, so there is no final self that would recuperate all otherness. There is no *parousia*, no epiphany waiting at the end, no revelation, no full presence—the final point is formal and empty in itself, it is the point of interruption: everything has already happened on the way there. While being too late or precipitating oneself forward, one has nevertheless produced time, which only exists, insists, through its violation, the excess over time.

On the face of it, Hegel thus keeps to the traditional script of conceiving of time, its framework, and the fall, the belatedness, the corruption, the recuperation, the *parousia* that it's supposedly leading to, but only by giving it an altogether different orientation and alignment. The empty origin, the empty endpoint, belated-ness, and precipitation are regarded not as flaws to be remedied, but as constitutive of temporality; the time of the other is regarded as constitutive of the self, the time of corruption as constitutive of the time of production, and, finally, negativity as constitutive of positive conditions.

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[8] Most spectacularly, the notorious "substance is subject" proposition: "In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *substance*, but equally as *subject*" (Hegel 1977, pp. 9–10). The grand claim is relegated to its future justification; it shouldn't be properly made at all.

I briefly took up the opening chapter of the *Phenomenology*, the chapter on sense-certainty, as providing one simple model of belatedness, and hinted at the problem that the model of belatedness may already be inscribed in language itself, in the vehicle of thought, coming too late to capture being at large, structurally missing it, introducing a basic inadequacy. And I want, at the end, to strike another note and take another step regarding the belatedness of language vs. being. It concerns the status of negativity, taking a cue from Paolo Virno's *An Essay on Negation* (published in Italian in 2013; see also Virno 2018). To put it bluntly and simply: Where does negativity come from? Does it depend on language, is it induced by language (coming too late), or is it somehow inscribed in being before the intervention of language and independent of it?

Negation is no doubt a linguistic entity, it has its linguistic markers, such as "no," "not," etc., but it doesn't have a signified, a referent, in the sense that it doesn't refer to or correspond to anything in the world, as apparently other words do—it refers to an absence. Nature arguably doesn't involve negation or the void as a pre-linguistic given (how can it refer to a non-given?). This is an old Parmenidian question, the question with which philosophy started: there can be no non-being out there, or, rather, there should be no non-being, it's not "real." If we imagine or speak about non-being, then any such non-being is merely induced by language, by its capacity for negation, and the danger is that it might gain a deceptive hold and be taken for something, although it's just a linguistic product and not an entity. We speak of a nonentity as if it was an entity, hence the peril, the threatening abyss, the risk that speech about absence might illusively induce absence, the void. (Or, to put it differently: speaking about nothing comes "too late," the world is already there in its positivity, hence the danger that one might wrongly imagine that speech could retroactively affect the world and produce the illusion that "nothing is.") This would be one way of reading Parmenides's warning or, rather,

the prohibition of engaging oneself on the path of non-being. An ontological abyss opens up there, not unrelated to the backdrop of our topic. So, can one imagine an experience of non-being, of negativity as such, "prior" to and independent of the symbolic, of the use of language at large, or is it exclusively brought about by language, produced by the symbolic, by "the linguistic turn"? Does language give an expression to something that "exists," insists, in-exists independently of language, or does language induce, produce, bring about a negative reality, non-being, or rather the mirage of non-being, which has no other ontological consistency apart from language? Does the symbolic, which is seemingly just an addition to "the order of things," affect "being" in itself and infuse nothingness into it? Is nature "in itself" without any lack and negativity, so that lack and negativity pertain to the specifically human invention, to the symbolic? (Such was, by the way, the basic claim made by Kojève, then, following in his tracks, by Sartre, and up to a point by Lacan, all of which could be put under the heading "the anthropology of lack"—but no such claim was made by Hegel.)

This is a staggering question, and the entire Hegelian enterprise hinges on it. And let me briefly say, to conclude and before we are engulfed by this abyss, that maybe both answers, both options are insufficient. One cannot simply maintain that there is a prior and primordial experience of non-being, apart from the intervention of the symbolic, but neither can one simply maintain that it is brought about merely by the "linguistic turn" and its vocabulary of negation. One cannot maintain the illusion, either, that there used to be a fullness of being, originally, which we missed and only got in trouble with negativity on the basis of language coming too late; or that the linguistic turn coincides with being and its ontology. What can there be in this intersection, this interface between the sign and the object, logos and being, culture and nature? Is there an ontological break or gap that neither quite pertains to "objective" reality nor is it quite just symbolically

induced? Or is there something in that reality (a real?) that the symbolic negativity brings to the fore, "isolates and concentrates," to use Virno's wording? Is this break-gap, which is not simply symbolic but also not simply "objective," an indication of what Lacan called the Real? This is perhaps where reflection on time, retroactivity, and belatedness should ultimately lead us.

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