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Hegel as Philosophy's Shakespeare: drama and the unconscious

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ABSTRACT

The break that Hegel introduces into the history of philosophy stems from the way that he transforms the basis for philosophical work from argument to drama. For this project, he takes Shakespeare as a paradigmatic figure and models his works on the structure of Shakespeare's tragedies. Rather than asserting and defending concepts, Hegel places them in a drama. Whereas Shakespeare's characters undergo a tragic denouement, Hegel's concepts reveal their own inadequacy when Hegel reveals how they play out in the course of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic*. By examining Hegel's philosophy through the lens of Shakespeare's plays, we can discover the nature of the epochal change that Hegel presents and what makes him such a divisive figure in the history of philosophy.

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From Understanding to Reason

Hegel's most significant philosophical discovery is that of the relationship between the understanding [*Verstand*] and reason [*Vernunft*]. Whereas Kant emphasizes the constitutive role of the understanding and criticizes the excesses of reason, Hegel sees the necessity of conceiving a dialectical relation between these two faculties. According to Hegel, we require the understanding to separate ourselves from objects (and objects from each other), while we require reason to reveal our connection to them.[1] Although Hegel at times has harsh words for those thinking only in terms of the understanding (like Kant), he nonetheless contends that we cannot do without the initial moment of distinction that it provides. As he puts it in the preface to the *Phenomenology Spirit*, "The activity of separating is the force and labor of the *understanding*, the most astonishing and the greatest of all the powers, or rather, which is the absolute power" (Hegel 2018, 20). This homage to the understanding as the absolute power seems more like something Kant would say, but Hegel's entire philosophical enterprise relies on the power of separation as the basis for reason's capacity for seeing a dialectical connection. For Hegel, separation plays a constitutive role in the recognition of the relationality of the whole. Thinking dialectically involves seeing apparently invisible connections, but the connections would not be graspable without the separating force of the understanding. To move directly to reason without passing through the understanding ends up eliding difference—and contradiction—through the affirmation of pure identity.[2] It is only thanks to the relationship between the understanding and reason that we can arrive at what Hegel calls speculative identity—the identity of identity and difference. Grasping what's at stake in this relationship doesn't just illuminate Hegel's philosophy but also the nature of dramatic art.

[1] For Hegel, reason indicates our involvement in what we know, our inability to sustain the distance from the object of knowledge implicit in the viewpoint of the understanding. In this sense, Hegel's turn to reason and his belief in the capacities of reason represent his refusal of Kant's assumption that we can maintain distance from objects and avoid being implicated in them. This is a point that Sally Sedgewick insists on in *Hegel's Critique of Kant*. She states, "Despite Kant's repeated warnings against the speculative flights of reason, despite his unwavering insistence upon modesty in our estimation of our cognitive powers, he was nonetheless too confident in the resources of critique. He was too confident in his own capacity as a critical thinker to abstract to a standpoint wholly 'external' to common reality.'" Sally Sedgwick, *Hegel's Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 180. As long as Kant refuses the standpoint of reason and sticks to that of the understanding, he remains in an external position to reality, what Sedgwick rightly labels evidence of an excessive confidence in the power of critique.

[2] When Gilles Deleuze attacks Hegel as a thinker of identity, it is as if he forgets the role that the understanding plays in Hegel's philosophy and views him purely as a thinker of reason. According to Deleuze, Hegel is a thinker simply incapable of thinking difference without reducing it to identity. In *Difference and Repetition*, he claims that in Hegel's thought "difference remains subordinated to identity, reduced to the negative, incarcerated within similitude and analogy." Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, [1968] 1994), 50. Here, difference has no status of its own. But when Hegel gives the understanding and its activity of separation its due, he grants difference precisely the status that Deleuze calls for.

Every drama is a conflict between the understanding and reason. Drama begins with the separating act of the understanding, or else no drama is possible. There would be only stasis, which even the worst dramas avoid. In the classical tragedies, Clytemnestra readies herself to kill her husband Agamemnon, an aged Oedipus finds himself expelled from the sacred ground of Colonus, and Medea plots to avenge herself on Jason. In each case, the drama depends on the playwright establishing clear distinctions that appear in the form of an antagonism. One cannot even imagine a drama that did not rely at least initially on antagonistic separation. Without it, there would be a distinctly nondramatic oneness without any tension whatsoever. Oneness is inherently resistant to drama.

Dramatic tension, such as we see in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, or Euripides's *Medea*, thrives only through the establishment of differences that are at odds with each other. This is the work of the understanding, which breaks masses apart. Thanks to the power of the understanding, we don't just see an amorphous bunch of characters on the stage but distinct figures in antagonistic relations with each other. As the play unfolds and concludes, we typically see reason come to the fore to uncover the connection between what the understanding holds apart. We can see this in each of the classic dramas that I have mentioned. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, for instance, Oedipus comes to be buried on the sacred ground in Colonus from which the citizens there initially expel him. The initial separation gives way to an underlying dialectical connection that the denouement of the play shows. The contradiction between Oedipus and the sacred ground remains, but the people bury him there nonetheless. The play doesn't show the contradiction being overcome. Instead, it becomes actualized through the burial. Reason doesn't eliminate the antagonism, but it does make evident the relationality that exists between what the understanding establishes as utterly distinct and at odds with each other. Reason shows that identity and difference exist in a contradictory unity. This is the core of Hegel's philosophy and of his relationship to dramatic art.

The end of the play reveals that the exclusion of Oedipus from the sacred ground is itself included in the sacredness of the ground. What appears initially as an external relation becomes evident as an internal one, which is the consummate Hegelian gesture. This is something that Slavoj Žižek insists on again and again in *Less Than Nothing*, where he explores the political implications of Hegel's thought. The key, for Žižek, is to break down our separation from reality without simply moving to a statement of identity. We do this by seeing how the barrier to reality—the exclusion of Oedipus from the sacred ground—is the form of inclusion. Or, as Žižek puts it, "we cannot gain full neutral access to reality *because we are a part of it*. The epistemological distortion of our access to reality is the result of our *inclusion* in it, not of our distance from it" (Žižek 2012, 646). The challenge that Hegel presents is one of seeing exclusion as a form of inclusion, as a dialectical relation a fundamental contradiction. According to Hegel, reason is the faculty that enables us to apprehend contradictions in

precisely this way. While the understanding separates, reason connects not by overcoming contradictions but by identifying a contradictory connection. In order to accomplish this, reason requires the initial act of the understanding that creates the separation that obscures the dialectical connection. For Hegel, the understanding represents a necessary error that makes the demonstration of a dialectical connection possible.

Hegel discovers the relationship between the understanding and reason not by reading philosophers (who typically take up one side or the other, to which Kant and Spinoza, respectively, attest) but by paying attention to dramatic form.[1] Hegel's philosophy doesn't teach us how to understand drama. We don't need to apply Hegel to drama to interpret it. Instead, the form of drama offers us the key to making sense of Hegel's philosophy.

Typically, when one looks at dramatic works alongside philosophy, the philosophy provides the framework for advancing an interpretation of the drama. Perhaps most famously in the case of Shakespeare, Sigmund Freud uses psychoanalysis as a key for making sense of *Hamlet*, which becomes a paradigmatic instance of the Oedipus complex. The role of the play for Freud is illustrative, not constitutive. He would remain capable of theorizing the Oedipus complex—and it would exist—without reference to Shakespeare's work. Psychoanalytic theory has its own logic that operates independently of the play that allows us to interpret what the play has to say. Freud is not anomalous in this regard but takes up the typical relationship between the theorist and the work of art: theory treats the artwork as illustrative.

The relationship between Hegel's philosophy and drama is entirely different. Hegel takes the dramatic form as a model for his philosophizing. For him, dramatic art is constitutive, not illustrative. The epochal gesture that Hegel makes involves the internalization of dramatic art into speculative thinking. No thinker prior to him considered this radical possibility—to take drama as the new form of philosophy. But despite his outsized affection for *Antigone*, Hegel's paradigmatic dramatist is not one of the Greek tragedians. It is Shakespeare.

The difference between ancient drama and Shakespeare's modern drama consists in the location of the antagonism. Antigone is an exemplary ancient hero because she suffers no internal division and is absolute in her defiance of Creon. From the beginning of *Antigone* until her death, she insists without compromise on her right to bury her brother Polyneices. The antagonism in *Antigone* between Creon's human law and the unwritten laws of the gods that Antigone invokes divides the Greek social order, but it does not divide Antigone herself.[2] A

[1] Perhaps it is not just a coincidence that Hegel was a great lover of drama and opera. These weren't just diversions for him but philosophical exercises, every bit as much as discussing the problem of evil with Schelling or contemplating the problem of truth alone in his study.

[2] Antigone's lack of self-division makes her a less-than-stellar paradigm for modern ethics, as she is for Jacques Lacan. Lacan views her as paradigmatic because she holds fast to her desire even though it takes her to a place between life and death. But at no time during Sophocles's play does Antigone act at odds with herself, which evinces her status as premodern subject. Lacan would have been better served by taking Hamlet or Othello—modern tragic heroes clearly revealing their self-division—as a model for ethical subjectivity.

modern hero like Shakespeare's Coriolanus, in contrast, suffers from an internal antagonism—his attempt and ultimate failure to control his own anger—that structures the play *Coriolanus*. His confrontation with Rome is only the manifestation of the internal antagonism, which is what interests Shakespeare and contrasts the modern playwright with the ancient.

Shakespeare is a dramatist of modernity because the structuring antagonism within his plays is an internal one, not an external one. Even his plays most centered on external dynamics ultimately revolve around the subject's fundamental self-division, at least after Shakespeare becomes Shakespeare in 1595. Hamlet struggles with his own questions about the authority commanding him; Othello goes back-and-forth about his own belief in Desdemona; Lear deals with his inability to confront his own evanescence from the position of authority; and Macbeth confronts the assault of conscience. Shakespeare's tragic hero is a thoroughly modern one because the antagonism that this hero encounters is internal to the character. The problem of subjectivity emerges as a problem for Shakespeare in a way that it didn't for Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

It is for this reason that Hegel's philosophy does not follow the structure of ancient drama but rather that of Shakespeare. He takes the structure of Shakespeare's plays as a model for how to formulate his philosophy. Although he didn't do this consciously, it's clear that the form of modern drama shapes how Hegel does philosophy much more than the work of any of his predecessors. Whereas Kant, Fichte, and Schelling write arguments, Hegel enacts a series of dramas that develop according to an internal logic. As a philosopher, he chooses drama over argument, and Shakespeare is, for him, the paradigmatic dramatist.

When Hegel presents a position in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* or the *Science of Logic*, he allows it to unfold according to its own internal logic rather than confronting it with an opposed position that would exist in tension with the original position. That is to say, he dramatizes each position so as to reveal its internal antagonism. The refutation of each position doesn't come from an external critique but through the development of the position's own logic. Each refutation in Hegel's philosophy is the position's refutation of itself, which occurs when it runs up against its internal contradiction, which becomes evident through the position's dramatization.

The contrast with Kant becomes especially clear. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant develops a convincing argument for the transcendental structure of subjectivity. As he argues for the structural necessity of space and time in the course of the Transcendental Aesthetic in that work, Kant contends that we know that space and time must be necessary for the subject because we cannot think any object without spatiality or without temporality. He proves the subject's dependence of space and time *a contrario* in a manner that has convinced many adherents of his philosophy. This leads Kant to associate spatiality and temporality with our appearances rather than with things in themselves. They are necessary for us but not for things

in themselves. Whether one accepts Kant's argument or rejects it, no one could question that it is an argument. This is where Hegel makes a drastically different turn.

Kant is guilty here of what Hegel will call "clever argumentation." Through such argumentation, it is always possible to refute an opposed position, but this refutation will remain external and thus arbitrary. Kant shows that spatiality and temporality have a transcendental status, that there can be no known objects without them, but he thereby leaves open the question of the objects that we don't know. There is no way for Kant's argument to address this problem from within the argument that he lays out.

This opens up the space for a whole raft of recent realist thinkers, beginning with Quentin Meillassoux, who simply reject the transcendental altogether and argue the opposite—that we do have access to things in themselves and that spatiality inheres in such things. Because Kant argues with this position and because the realists argue back at him, they run into a dead end. The cleverness on both sides leads to arguments that convince only those who already believe, which is why Hegel rejects this way of doing philosophy.

Clever argumentation attacks opposing positions from the outside, which is what occurs in most philosophical and political debates. As Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "merely clever argumentation conducts itself negatively towards the content apprehended; it knows how to refute it and reduce it to nothing. It says, 'This is not the way it is'; this insight is the merely negative; it is final, and it does not itself go beyond itself to a new content"(Hegel 2018, 37). Clever argumentation insists on attacking through a negation that doesn't derive from the content itself. As a result, it leaves the critique with nothing. One cannot see the internal contradiction of a position when one approaches it with external critique.[1]

To grasp how Hegel's philosophy operates, one must look to how Shakespeare structures his plays. The form of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic* follows that of a Shakespearean tragedy, in which an initial separation works itself out to reveal the connections that the separation obscures. Characters begin by erroneously conceiving themselves as isolated from social processes, but this initial error leads to a truth that would have remained obscure and impossible to discern without the initial error.[2] Recognizing the path from error to truth illuminates this same path in Hegel's philosophy. One begins with the separating power of the

[1] Hegel's critique of mathematics is that it relies on operations external to the content of its proofs, so that mathematical proofs develop out of the internal necessity of the subject matter. This is a point that Hegel returns to again and again, most famously in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There he states, "The movement of mathematical proof does not belong to the object but is a doing that is *external* to the item at hand." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 25. A dialectical analysis always remain internal and brings out the internal contradiction of the position itself. External critique, as Hegel sees it, always fails to its target.

[2] In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel insists on the importance of error for arriving at truth. One must go through the false to arrive at the true, which is what happens during the course of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel states, "truth is not a stamped coin issued directly from the mint and ready for one's pocket. Nor *is there* 'a' false, no more than there is 'an' evil." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 24. To believe that true is entirely separable from the false is to fall for the illusion of the understanding and to fail to accede to the priority of reason.

understanding and then discovers the connection that reason makes evident. Dramatic form consists of this movement from understanding to reason, and Shakespeare's unparalleled development of it paves the way for Hegel to work out his philosophical system.

A Dialectical Drama

In each of Shakespeare's great tragedies, the hero tries to retract himself from the social order while still continuing to play a determining role within it. The separation is false, and yet it generates the drama that ensues. Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, and Coriolanus all view themselves as set apart from the social order with which they interact. This is also how the spectator sees them—as characters who defy the conventions that define the social order and that govern the other characters within it. Their heroic status derives from this refusal to bow to convention and from their ability to achieve a separation from their world. Despite the error inherent in believing oneself separate from one's social order, the gesture itself represents a necessary negation that makes emancipation possible. In Hegel's terms, the hero must go through the isolation of the understanding to achieve the speculative identity of reason, which is where we see each of these heroes end up.

Hamlet begins *Hamlet* isolated from the ongoing celebration, in which he only reluctantly takes part. Hamlet's mourning for the death of his father removes him from the festive attitude of all the other characters. His initial appearance in the play occurs on the sidelines. Furthermore, his first line is an aside, which serves to highlight his isolation, as does what he says in this aside. After Claudius addresses Hamlet as his son, Hamlet says, "A little more than kin and less than kind" (Shakespeare 1997, 1.2.65). The expression of Claudius's overproximity—"more than kin"—speaks to Hamlet's critique of the marriage with his mother and thus, ironically, the distance that this marriage creates between Hamlet and Claudius. But it is the second part of the statement where Hamlet most emphatically articulates his social isolation. In response to Claudius claiming Hamlet as a son, Hamlet states (to himself and to us) that they are fundamentally different in kind. The two are "less than kind." They do not belong to the same form of subjectivity.

As the play continues and Hamlet questions the role of Claudius in the death of his father, his sense of isolation grows. He can find the solace of belonging neither in the Danish social order (which must surely be "rotten") nor in the obeying strictly the command of his dead father's ghost, because he's not sure of its authoritative status (whether it is "devil" that has assumed a "pleasing shape" or a genuine authority). Hamlet finds himself in a position of complete social exile, which is the source of his radicality as a character. Rather than conforming to the demands of the social order or those of paternal authority, he questions. This questioning isolates him from the rest of the society. His freedom, at least initially and for most of the play, is that of the isolated subject, which leaves him unable to act within the social order. He doesn't just disobey in the way someone like Antigone does. He embraces his alienation

from the society and its demands. But at the same time, Hamlet feels himself compelled to act. The isolation that defines his character makes the action required psychically impossible. In order to act, Hamlet must eventually see how his isolation exists in relation to the order from which he withdraws. He acts to both assert his freedom and affirm his connection, which is a dialectical relation, a case in which detachment is a form of involvement. Hamlet's connection to the social order emerges through his withdrawal from it, not because he abandons this withdrawal or decides to end the project of questioning. The play does not end with Hamlet's change of heart but with his recognition that withdrawal is a form of action that he must consummate. The trajectory of the play—like that of all Shakespeare's mature works—moves from the separation of the understanding to the connection of reason. Separation is a form connection.

This dynamic is also clear in the case of *King Lear*. Lear is the most delusional of Shakespeare's great tragic heroes, which is why it's fitting that he goes mad during the play. Othello allows himself to be deceived about Desdemona's fidelity, and Macbeth believes that he can kill himself up the political ladder with impunity. But Lear fails to recognize something much more basic: one cannot subtract oneself from the social order while retaining an authoritative say in how it functions. This is what Lear attempts throughout the beginning of *King Lear*, and it constitutes his tragedy.

King Lear opens with an action that characterizes the faculty of the understanding: Lear abdicates his power and proposes to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. He plans to apportion the largest share to his favorite daughter, the only one who shows love for him. But the plan almost immediately goes awry when Cordelia, the favorite, fails to engage in the public show of sycophancy that Lear demands from each of the daughters. Instead of following the lead of her sisters and announcing the extremity of her love for him, she opts to "Love, and be silent." (Shakespeare 1997, 1.1.62). After Lear expresses his utter dissatisfaction with this response, he gives her another chance to earn her portion of the kingdom. She replies, "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" (Shakespeare 1997, 1.1.91-93). This response displeases Lear even more than the first and leads to her being stripped of all inheritance while also becoming an outcast. Lear is unable to recognize that love exists not through its articulation but through what cannot be said. After bequeathing his kingdom to his two obsequious (but totally unworthy) daughters, Goneril and Regan, Lear finds himself completely isolated, as Goneril and Regan deprive him of all the accoutrements that he sought to ensure for himself. They strip him of all the privileges of his former symbolic position, leaving him abandoned and wandering about. This marks the extreme separation that the understanding accomplishes. Lear roaming isolated in a raging storm is the great figure of the understanding in Shakespeare's works.

The conclusion of *King Lear* reveals Lear's connection with Cordelia that he denies in the first act of the play. After his withdrawal from power, Lear's interactions with Goneril and

Regan illustrate the falseness of their expressions of love. He has a connection with them, but it is one of hostility. The loving bond with Cordelia shows itself in contrast. She loves Lear not for his symbolic position but through his loss of it. This love could not manifest itself as long as Lear occupied his symbolic position of authority because such love would always be tainted with symbolic recognition. It is only through Lear's attempt to isolate himself that the connection becomes evident. One recognizes love only through the total isolation of the subject, when the other can gain nothing from the expression of love. This is when Cordelia's love manifests itself, which makes this love genuine.

This dramatic logic of the move from the understanding to reason reaches its apogee in the last of Shakespeare's great tragedies—*Coriolanus*. The play begins with an expression of absolute hostility from the crowd of plebians against the arrogant patricians who rule the city, of whom Coriolanus (named Martius when the play opens) is the most egregious representative. Coriolanus himself doesn't attempt to remedy this chasm but instead nourishes it. More than any other of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Coriolanus insists on his distance from the constraints of the social order. He evinces a belief in his own self-sufficiency.

Although he fights on behalf of Rome, the demands that the crowd makes on him cause Coriolanus to chafe. Coriolanus is ready to assume a leadership position about heroism in a recent battle. The populace expects soldiers that want to accede to the leadership to display publicly the wounds that they have acquired while fighting for Rome. This practice of publicly pleading for recognition represents debasement and humiliation, in the mind of Coriolanus. He asks the Roman authorities,

> I do beseech you
> Let me o'erleap that custom, for I cannot
> Put on the gown, stand naked, and entreat them,
> For my wound's sake, to give their sufferage. Please you
> That I may pass this doing. (Shakespeare 1608/ 1997, 2.2.135-139)

Coriolanus rejects the custom of displaying to the crowd the physical signs of his courage in devotion to defending Rome. The refusal to show his wounds signifies the distance that Coriolanus establishes between the social demands and his own subjectivity. But what follows in the play gives the lie to this distance. When he later rages at the people, the Roman authorities banish Coriolanus, which leads him to ally himself with the enemy of Rome, the Volsces.

The partnership between Coriolanus and the Volsces seems to confirm his status as an isolated subject, a figure of exile and homelessness. But in his final act leading the Volsce army, he makes peace with Rome, which leads the Volsces to execute him. His mother, Volumnia, convinces him to agree to the peace accord so that he will not be thought a traitor to Rome. Despite his contempt for the Roman masses and his exile from the city, the psychic connection to Rome proves stronger for Coriolanus than his desire to live (since he suspects that making

peace will prompt the Volsces to execute him, which it does). Shakespeare shows that the act of distancing himself from the masses was the way that Coriolanus evinced his connection with them. The relationality becomes apparent through the initial negation, not in spite of it. Connection requires separation, just as reason requires the understanding.

The audience for a mature Shakespearean tragedy experiences the journey from the violent act of separation that the understanding performs to the revelation of the identity that exists through the separation, a revelation that corresponds to the power of reason. One needs the act of the understanding to create a perceptible distinction from the indistinguishable mass. But this separation always belies a connection, which is what the subsequent moments of the drama reveal. Shakespeare's development of dramatic form offers Hegel a new way to philosophize that would change our grasp of what constitutes philosophy proper.

The Dramatic Philosopher

In his philosophy, Hegel employs the same dramatic structure that Shakespeare does in his plays. This is evident not just in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which traces how various conceptions of experience manifest themselves when worked out, but also in the *Science of Logic*, which deals with logical categories stripped bare of any empirical manifestations. Even in a work that, according to Hegel, provide "*the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of finite spirit*," he nonetheless uses a structure that parallels Shakespeare's modern drama much more than it does any prior or subsequent philosopher (Hegel 2010, 29). Because it recounts philosophies of experience, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* represent low-hanging fruit. It makes sense that Hegel would sound like a dramatist when discussing how we theorize our experience. But there is no such justification for this turn to drama in the *Science of Logic*, which is why it is here that we just look for it. We will find Shakespeare where we would expect to find Aristotle and Kant. This reveals just how radical Hegel's philosophical project is and why so many subsequent thinkers had to dismiss, ignore, or slander it in the most vehement terms.[1]

When he discusses being, nothing, and becoming in the opening section of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel does not highlight instances of them. He also does not assert an argument about these concepts. Instead, the *Science of Logic* dramatizes the relations that these concepts—and legions of others—have which each other. A work that professes to describe the mind of God

[1] Bertrand Russell and Karl Popper seem as if they are in a competition for slandering Hegel with the most invective. Although it's close, Popper comes out on top by linking Hegel to Nazism, whereas Russell simply sees him as a purveyor of nonsense. As Popper puts it, "Nearly all the more important ideas of modern totalitarianism are directed inherited from Hegel." Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Volume 2: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1943] 1966), 62. This claim is so far from being true that it hardly needs refuting. Every Nazi thinker despised Hegel as a universalist thinker opposed to their identitarian project, and Stalin had to eliminate Hegelian dialectics from his version of Marxism.

before creation cannot truck with empirical manifestations or illustrations. But this doesn't prevent this work from fully adopting a dramatic structure in the vein of Shakespeare.

The first sentence in Hegel's discussion of pure being is not a sentence. After the preliminaries that introduce where he will launch his interpretation of logic, he begins the book with the assertion of being as the philosophical starting point in a fragment. He writes, "*Being, pure being*—without further determination."[1] Pure being lacks any determinations and thus appears to avoid presuppositions that would indicate a logical structure hidden before the beginning. The fragmentary nature of the expression speaks to the indeterminateness of content: when it comes to pure being, there can be no specification at all, not even a complete sentence. The abstractness of pure being is its virtue because this abstractness testifies to its suitability as a starting point.

Here, another philosopher would proceed to build up a philosophical edifice on the basis of this starting point. Such a thinker might show how, beginning with absolutely presuppositionless pure being, one can work through a series of increasingly concrete determinations to construct a complete system of philosophy. The development of the system would include the refutation of possible objections that emerge along the way. Moving in this fashion, one would regard pure being as the first building block to which each subsequent permutation would add, resulting in a completed structure at the end point.[2] This is how Hegel's forerunner Fichte develops his system.

Fichte commences with the self-positing I as the first principle, and everything in his philosophical system—its logic, its ethical imperative, its political design—follows from this first principle. At no point does Fichte prove the existence of the self-positing I because he takes it as an irreducible starting point that we cannot do without and thus cannot prove. As Fichte (and almost every other philosopher along with him) sees it, the beginning represents an initial foundation upon which one constructs a philosophical argument. This is not just the standard way of doing philosophy. Prior to Hegel, it is the only way of doing philosophy, and after him, it remains predominant.

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[1] Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 59. Robert Pippin views the fragmentary nature of this opening as Hegel's commentary not just on the conceptual inadequacy of pure being but as a commentary on the necessary structure of our knowledge. This commentary evinces Pippin's evacuation of any ontological claims from Hegel's philosophy, his reduction of Hegel to an epistemological thinker. Pippin states, "This emphasis on showing the discursive nature of knowledge of any kind is no doubt the reason he begins the book with *a sentence fragment*, the linguistic representation of a thought that is, can be, no true thought, as signaled by its fragmentary linguistic representation." Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in The Science of Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 188. Pippin rightly sees that Hegel's turn to the sentence fragmentary indicates his belief in the adequacy of pure being as a concept for apprehending what is, but this is not an implicit analysis of the forms that knowledge must take. Hegel has bigger fish to fry, both here and throughout the *Science of Logic*.

[2] It is possible to interpret Hegel as a philosopher who constructs a system that builds on pure being as its foundation. This is a claim that Stephen Houlgate makes. See Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's "Logic"* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006).

Hegel does not philosophize in this manner but rather explicitly critiques it just before his discussion of pure being in the *Science of Logic*. In direct contrast to Fichte, Hegel lays out pure being as a first principle in order to show how it fails. It cannot be the basis for anything that follows because of its utter conceptual inadequacy. Hegel doesn't begin with his most fundamental point, with the idea most precious to him, but with the weakest and most vulnerable point. The beginning of Hegel's philosophy marks the moment of the worst failure, making impossible to serve as a building block for what is to come. Whereas Fichte's self-positing I is a success, pure being in Hegel's system is a failure. It fails to adequately assert anything at all about being, despite what it aims at asserting. This failure becomes evident because Hegel isn't making an argument based on pure being as the argument's starting point. Instead, he is enacting a drama, a drama that exposes how concepts fail, not how they succeed. Pure being is not just the first concept in Hegel's work. Even more importantly, it is the first character. It is the Lear of the *Science of Logic*.

Rather than asserting pure being as an opening concept, Hegel shows its conceptual implications. What does it mean to understand everything that is in terms of pure being? This appears at first like a simple exercise: one includes everything within the concept of pure being regardless of any concrete determinations. One proceeds just like Parmenides, the paradigmatic thinker of pure being. Taking up this path, nothing remains left outside. But this is where the first problem of the *Science of Logic* arises. To think everything under the concept of pure being is to allow for no determination at all. One can make no distinctions whatsoever and must leave everything in a state of indeterminacy. Pure being reveals itself as pure emptiness when we work through its implications to their end point. This is the drama of pure being, and it inherently generates an opposing character—nothing. Nothing does not emerge contingently in Hegel's presentation but as a requirement of the drama that pure being enacts. In this way, pure being lays out the path to its own self-destruction.

The tragedy of pure being is that its insistence on its own purity results in an inability to distinguish it from nothing. The emptiness of pure being finds its truth in the same emptiness of nothing. After playing out their successive dramas, it becomes clear that there is no way to distinguish pure being from nothing, despite our commonsensical view that they are completely opposed to each other. As Hegel puts it, "Nothing is … the same determination or rather absence of determination, and thus altogether the same as what pure *being* is" (Hegel 2010, 59). This is the first instance of speculative identity in the *Science of Logic*, an identity that only becomes evident through the drama of pure being and nothing that Hegel lays out. He holds pure being and nothing apart from each other through the separating power of the understanding, and then he brings them together in a drama through which reason reveals their inextricable connection. The dramatic structure that he employs philosophically relies on the move from the understanding to reason just as dramatists do.

The drama of the *Science of Logic* doesn't end with the speculative identity of pure being and nothing. In order to sustain their distinctiveness amid their identity, becoming—the alternance of being and nothing—must emerge as a third distinction or a third character in the drama. As the work goes on, the characters multiply, but with each new character, Hegel highlights the underlying connection that unites through the separation, just as reason unites through the separations produced by the understanding.

In the same fashion that Lear creates a separation between himself and his kingdom, Hegel distinguishes being from all other concepts. He treats it without any relationality. The drama of being without any relationality transpires must more quickly than *King Lear*. It's over almost before it begins because we soon find out that being without any qualities, without any measure, without any negation, has no distinctiveness at all. It becomes impossible to distinguish being from nothing, which is why the drama of being quickly becomes the drama of nothing. But the indistinctiveness of nothing runs into the same problem as that of being. It is only becoming—the alternance of being and nothing—that generates distinctions. Through becoming, relationality begins to become evident, and the drama of the *Science of Logic* is off and running.

One could certainly employ Hegel's philosophy as a basis for interpreting Shakespeare's tragedies. This might even produce a compelling interpretation or two. But it's much more valuable to think of the relationship between Hegel and Shakespeare moving in the other direction. It isn't Hegel who helps us to understand Shakespeare but Shakespeare who helps us to understand Hegel. The monumental transformation that Hegel introduces into philosophy—transforming it from an argumentative to a dramatic structure—is only possible due to his investment in dramatists such as Shakespeare. Shakespeare isn't the Hegel of theater. Hegel is the Shakespeare of philosophy.

The dramatic structure enables Hegel to put into action the relationship between the understanding and reason that defies straightforward explanation. One must see it at work to grasp how it operates. The separation that the understanding enacts is an error, but it is a necessary error for the connection that reason reveals to become visible. Just as in Shakespeare's tragedies, a false separation must trigger the action in order for the play to show the true connection that the initial separation belies. The distortion created by the understanding is the conditio sine qua non for the revelation that reason provides. Without this initial distortion, reason could assert only a deceptive unity without the internal rupture that introduces difference into identity. The understanding's error is necessary for identity to become speculative and thereby include difference within it.

Examining Shakespeare's great tragedies sheds light on the revolutionary change that Hegel brings to philosophy. He doesn't advance an argument, announce axioms, or describe sense impressions. Instead, he places every concept that he finds being discussed into a dramatic logic that allows their internal antagonism to unfold. If for many Shakespeare has the status of a philosopher, Hegel should be granted the status of a playwright.

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