

THE UNRULY SPIRAL: DIALECTICS IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

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But truly to escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him. It assumes that we are aware of the extent to which Hegel, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it implies a knowledge, in that which permits us to think against Hegel, of that which remains Hegelian. We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed at us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us.

(Foucault, *The Discourse on Language*)

A ghost never dies.

(Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*)

At an informal level, dialectics implies a mode of thinking that avoids one-sidedness and recognizes the diversity of being. Gramsci, among others, subscribes to this view of dialectics. Though in his more explicit and formal statements on dialectics Gramsci prioritizes the popular triadic view of thesis/antithesis/synthesis, he leaves enough hints to the reader that this triadicity exists only at the level of socio-economic structure; as a way of thinking, dialectics implies an opening to the many diversities of life and functions as a device to hold theory and practice together. Gramsci's faith in multiplicity, however, is not one that is universally accepted in dialectics. When Plato, for example, lionises dialectics as *the* supreme philosophical method, "the coping-stone of the sciences" (*The Republic*), he refers to its talent to search for an unchanging essence. Here lies the key problem of dialectics: while it holds that truth is in its dismemberment, it also subscribes to a philosophy that aims at unity. For Hegel, who remains the *locus classicus* of unifying discourse, diversity is the progressive unfolding of truth (i.e., singularity). Along with this, however, Hegel also maintains that the Spirit "wins its

truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself” (1977: 19).

The present paper attempts an intellectual cartography of the state of dialectics after poststructuralist incursions. Much of the claims of dialectics as a philosophical method have clearly come under the scanner with the advent of poststructuralist theorizing. Some such issues that we will try to address are: in what sense is dialectics a going beyond from where it starts, “the course that generates itself, going forth from, and returning to, itself” as Hegel puts it in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (p. 53) and of which a more contemporary, obviously psychologised, expression is Freud’s treatment of the so-called ‘da and fort’ episode? How does the final term—synthesis—come about from the other two in Hegel’s triad? Is the process of undoing (of whatever is ‘inadequate’) and preserving (of whatever is ‘valid’) that each of the two terms initiate—thesis and antithesis—merely arbitrary and symptomatic? Is dialectics, as Nietzsche would argue, bereft of the ability to offer interpretations? How far is Derrida correct when he claims that any effective understanding of the dialectical reality (generated by the dialectic of modernity) cannot restrict itself to a purely dialectical method but per force calls for its supplementarity? Is the search for the rational kernel of dialectics (Marx’s reading of Hegel) always already complicated by the ‘setting wild of the seminarium’ (as Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak puts it in the context of interpreting Derrida in *Glas*),¹ a gesture of dispersal that, constitutively and strategically, derives its meaning only from the moment of provisional stasis and minimal idealisation? These are some of the issues that have come to the foreground with the rise of poststructuralist theories. We shall attempt to discuss some of these here, albeit within the restrictions of space and knowledge. We shall follow the spirit of poststructuralist interventions in not rejecting dialectics but instituting a tenacious (and, hopefully, productive) ambiguity—‘a conflict of forces rather than a contradiction of meanings’ as Collinge has put it (2008: 2617), at the heart of the dialectics as a philosophy and a method.

HEGELIAN DIALECTICS: ‘OPPOSITION WITHOUT DIFFERENCE’

Dialectics has a long and complex history going far beyond the limited reference of Hegelian and Marxist terminologies or even of those of the early Greeks. Studies in anthropological philology have shown that concept formation by contrasting simultaneously what something both *is and is not* is a practice not unknown to early

civilizations. Freud notes that languages of ancient civilizations such as of Egypt, China and India reveal that many words bear two meanings, one exactly the opposite of the other (“The antithetical meaning of primal words”, 1910). There are ample historical evidences of the practice of reasoning based upon dialectical meanings among the ancients. Mo Ti, for instance, founded a school of dialectical thought in China exactly around the time (470 - 391 BC) as that of Socrates—a remarkable parallel in the history of philosophy—while the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*, foundational texts of Indian philosophy, are classic espousals of dialectical principles applied to the mundane affairs of life.²

The notion of dialectics as we now know it is, however, clearly of Hegelian derivation. Hegel prefaces *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* arguing that philosophy is, ultimately, dialectical. He asserts that “once the dialectical has been separated from proof, the notion of philosophical demonstration has been lost” (p. 40). He urges that philosophical exposition should preserve dialectical form while dialectics should not be severed from philosophical speculation. In other words, philosophy draws from dialectics its form while supplying dialectics its content. Croce (1969), among others, argues that Hegel’s bid to wed philosophy and dialectics is based on a number of skewed assumptions. Hegel privileges philosophy and considers historical and scientific inquiry as semi-philosophical activities to be perfected and superseded by philosophy. This allows him, Croce points out, to attribute methodological autonomy to historiography such that historical events, once processed in the purgatory of dialectics, reach the perfection of philosophy³.

Marx and Engels claim to have remedied the situation by removing dialectics from the world of ideas to the material world. In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels puts it as follows: “(T)he dialectic of the concept itself became merely the conscious reflection of the dialectical motion of the real world and the dialectic of Hegel was placed upon its head; or rather, turned off its head on which it was standing before and placed on its feet again” (54). In this new alignment of history and philosophy (via dialectics), the final triumph belongs not to the Absolute Idea but to the conception of exploitation-free society, reached through successive stages of struggle. Dialectical materialism sees the world as a process, developing and evolving new and more complex synthesis out of the simpler ones, according to the dialectical laws of development. These laws are (i) the law of transformation of quantitative into qualitative changes; (ii) the law of interpenetration

of opposites, involving the existence of contradictions within nature; (iii) the law of the negation of negation. The essential point about these laws is that the genuine novelty and qualitative difference in the world defies any complicated mechanical system.

Dialectical materialism, notwithstanding its claims, is essentially a continuation of the Hegelian search for unity. The hallmarks of a dialectical process (be it from a Marxist standpoint or otherwise) are the notions of the unity of opposites, the principle of the positivity of the negative, the concept of one-sidedness, and the categories of identity and difference. While Marxists have been more faithful to Hegel's triadic view, they usually prefer to retain distance from the 'idealist' scheme whereby higher categories of thought and forms of consciousness emerge from lower ones or ones that privilege an onto-phenomenological interpretation, which regards dialectics as an ontological process automatically reflected in the mind of the philosopher. (Instead, this ontological process is located in the realm of history.) In both streams, however, there is an implicit (and much valorised) assumption that philosophy is dialectical because it is at once "pluralistic, conceptual, concrete, self-reflective, self-referential, negative" which also ultimately reaches the unity supposed to be behind such oppositions as truth and falsity, change and permanence, form and content, subject and predicate, etc.⁴ Some of these binary oppositions are basic to Hegel's scheme—like identity and difference, internal and external, essential and inessential. While urging that one presupposes the other, Hegel leaves little doubt that he considers categories such as 'identity', 'internal' and 'essential' more important than their respective oppositions. The unity of opposites, i.e., the identity in difference, is what has the final say:

difference as such is already *implicitly* contradiction; for it is the unity of sides which are, only in so far as they are *not one*—and it is the *separation* of sides which are, only as separated in the same relation (1977: 431).

Adorno argues that the praxis of negation in dialectics is "in itself, before any particular content, negation, resistance against that which is forced upon it. This is the heritage which thought takes over from the relation of labour to its material." (1973: 19) Thought uses praxis, Adorno continues, as its material just as what labour does to raw material, and in so doing negates it in its given form. To us, however, it is not entirely convincing to hold that negation in a dialectical scheme has the same significance as labour has to its raw material, since it is not clear whether the 'resolution' of contradiction

(negation of negation) is resolution in the sense of what labour's work on its raw material is or whether it is merely a mutual (analytical) interdependence of opposite concepts. In fact, it may be pointed out here that the 'positive' and the 'negative' are general terms used by Hegel to refer to any pair of opposition, and 'negation' in such usage means neither 'undoing' nor 'nothing'. Rather, just as its opposite term, it too denotes a positivity of meaning and has a reality of its own, very much like the negative qualities of mathematics. Does 'negation' contain the entirety of the entity? Nietzsche calls this "opposition without difference". Below is Deleuze's compelling elaboration of Nietzsche's position:

The dialectic does not even skim the surface of interpretation, it never goes beyond the domain of symptoms. It confuses interpretation with the development of the uninterpreted symbol. ...It is not surprising that the dialectic proceeds by opposition, development of the opposition or contradiction and solution of the contradiction. It is unaware of the real element from which forces, their qualities and their relations derive; it only knows the inverted image of this element which is reflected in abstractly considered symptoms. ...Dialectic thrives on oppositions because it is unaware of far more subtle and subterranean differential mechanisms: topological displacements, typological variations. ...Deprived of its claim to give an account of difference, contradiction appears for what it is: a perpetual misinterpretation of difference itself, a confused inversion of genealogy. (1983: 156)

To continue with Deleuze, Nietzsche argues that one dialectician (the reference is to Engel's remark quoted earlier) cannot accuse another of standing dialectics on its head since such a gesture is part of the fundamental character of dialectics itself portraying as it does the movement of appearance as the genetic law of things and retaining only an inverted image of the principle. The whole dialectical process is, thus, one of *simulacra*, of *fiction*. Dialectics is the art of reconciling man and God, religion and philosophy, property and alienation. Killing God, Man became God but remained as servile as ever - a machine for the manufacture of a new kind of God, namely himself. Nietzsche calls this bad conscience, "the ideology of resentment".

Sartre, the most powerful post-war exponent of dialectical logic, privileges precisely what Nietzsche identifies as the principal source of undoing—namely, the strong bond of dialectics with the ego. Sartre:

Man constructs signs because, in his very reality, he is signifying; and he is

signifying because he is a dialectical surpassing of all that is simply given. What we call freedom is the irreducibility of the cultural order to the natural order. (1963: 152)

Sartre diagnoses the cardinal error of Marxist method as synthetic progression. “Lazy Marxists”, as he terms the practitioners of such a method, make use of it to constitute the real, to prove what has happened had to happen just as it did. They can, Sartre argues, discover nothing by this method of pure *exposition*, since they know in advance what they must find. In contrast, he claims that his method is heuristic; at once regressive and progressive, it unearths something new every time. The progressive dimension tells us of society’s future trajectories which need to be complemented by cross-references to the past in order to set our understanding right. The system of cross-references establishes the particular conditions emanating from a particular individual and elaborating a full picture of a particular civilizational context. Sartre calls this temporal weave a “totalizing movement” which gathers together “my neighbour, myself, and the environment in the synthetic unity of an objectification in process” (1963: 154-5). Sartre’s individual is the centre of ‘totalization’, carrying an entire age like every wave that carries the whole of an ocean, to echo the beautiful beginning of his autobiography, *The Words*. This is Hegelian dialectics at its most expansive, read through the lens of Kojève. Notwithstanding his criticism of ‘lazy Marxists’, Sartre remains very much within the broad fold of Hegelian Marxism.

UNENDING UNITY: THE LOGIC OF SERIES AS AGAINST ORIGIN AND EGO

No matter what qualifications and reformulations he attempts to bring to the concept of historical inevitability present in dialectical materialism, Sartre considers the placement of ‘man in his proper framework’ the crux of his enterprise. This is in sharp contrast to Foucault. Foucault, for whom the concept of discontinuity undercuts a progressive as well as regressive procedure, characterizes such search for appropriate frameworks as one of ‘unending unity’. Sartre cannot help, argues Foucault, but retrospectively unify all knowledge in accordance with its reference back to the individual(s) in question. Foucault, conversely, concentrates on series, divisions, limits, differences of level, possible types of relations, etc. He rejects any project of retrospective unity, calling the historical-transcendental recourse (one that attempts to find a primary

foundation in historical manifestations) “the opening of an inexhaustible horizon ... constantly unwinding play of an unending unity” (1972a: 227). In a similar vein, he rejects the other dominant approach in traditional historiography, viz., the empirical or psychological recourse, one that follows up the trail of the author, “interpreting what he meant, detecting the implicit meanings which were lying silent and dormant in his discourse, following the thread of the destiny of these meanings, describing the traditions and the influences, fixing the moment of awakenings, of lapses, of awareness, of crises, of changes in the mind, the sensitivity or the interest of men” (1972: 227). If the first recourse is tautological, the second is extrinsic and inessential.

As Foucault’s comment indicates, the problematic of the origin and of the ego are inseparable, one acting as the *raison d’être* of the other. This in a way is *the* problem of the Cartesian understanding of presence - the ideality of the present moment in/to consciousness. Given the way the logic of such a universe operates, the equivalence of the structures of presentation (essence) and of representation (derivative) is to be maintained at all cost, allowing no room for the rupturing play of the sign. The dialectical enterprise of bringing two entities into one would imply that the opposite is also true: that is, one entity can be broken into two. But this is an impossibility since every time one divides something into two, one merely distinguishes multiplicities from multiplicities, or what Foucault calls “the pragmatics of the multiple”: “the opening of an inexhaustible horizon... constantly unwinding play of an unending unity”⁵. When history is radical discontinuity, nothing is negated. This is precisely what Foucault’s archeo-genealogical history is all about. The operative figure of opposition to dialectics is what he calls “non-positive affirmation”. Things emerge and disappear unpredictably, contingently. However, emergence is connected with an act of affirmation of the disappearance of their genealogical predecessors and of the space left behind by these. Not the *definite negation of something*, but the *affirmation of the absence of something* is therefore the (non-dialectical) ‘act’ constitutive for a discontinuous history. Not telos but transgressions.⁶

Similar to the attempt of dialectics of finding unity between two opposed sides is Cartesian linguistics’ (impossible) attempt to make language faithful to thought. Together they constitute a purely reflexive discourse that essays to tantalise the experience of the outside back to the dimension of interiority. Kojève attempts to put Cartesianism and dialectics together by prioritizing the role of

agency in dialectics. He argues that Hegel was wrong to extend the dialectics of the real to a dialectics within nature, since the negating action of dialectics can only originate from a person. Hegel, on his part, did maintain a distinction between subjective (or, external) dialectic and objective (or immanent) dialectic; the former rests in the contemplative subject while the latter inheres in the contemplated object. Hegel's *Absolute*, which far from being a static moment is actually the point of highest motion, is also the absolute (or final) point of the contemplative subject.

Dialectics is, thus, centred on a notion of a *cogito* as the function of certitude - an inner confirmation to which the outer bonds must continually respond. Dialectics cannot admit to any language that arrives at its own edge, to any void that stretches beyond the game of positivity. Hence, it is not 'forgetting' (in the sense that Heidegger uses the term) but reflection, not effacement but contradiction, not erosion but unity that is the grist of the dialectical mill, so to say. Foucault associates the rise of dialectical thought (and of certitude) with the 'dismissal' of madness since the seventeenth century and views them together as signs of colonization of *otherness*. He is critical of the 'open-ended' style of discourse in dialectics. Structured as an interplay of opinions in a 'co-operative' enquiry through questions and answers, dialectics also functions right from its early days as an art of refuting an opponent's statement by getting him/her to accept as an ultimate consequence a statement that cancels out his/her initial position. Reaction to such procedures explains Foucault's project to shift the focus of attention from subject, consciousness and 'interior' to *pure* surface(s) or, as Deleuze would perhaps explain it, to visibility and readability as the two forms of exteriority.

THE TERRIBLE INFINITY OF THE PARTICULAR: SUPPLEMENTARITY, ALTERITY AND ITERABILITY

The infinite which owes its being through a negation of the finite—and is thus limited by what it limits—Hegel calls '*schlecht Unendlichkeit*', literally translated as 'bad infinity'. Taken from Kant, the common understanding of bad infinity is that it is an additive or counting infinity—ceaseless adding at one point gives way when it can no more be continued. This then becomes an infinite. An example of this kind of infinity is a straight line. Some translators have preferred to translate it as 'spurious infinity', presumably as an opposite of the other term Hegel used, '*echt Unendlichkeit*', which they translate as

genuine infinity. However, we prefer to go with Wayne M. Martin's argument⁷ for retaining the expression bad infinity since by '*schlecht Unendlichkeit*' Hegel did not mean that it is not an infinity, but a special kind of infinity (just as a bad dog is a dog only) vis-à-vis another variety of infinity—namely, one that does not have to posit itself against the finite to being infinity. An example of this second variety is a circle, since it is not a case of addition, adding one more point but of eternal self-renewal. Every point in the circle is infinitely completed.

However, the example of a straight line as a counting or additive infinity is not sustainable since, architectonically speaking, it is either, expansively, a step beyond the limit reached or, intensively, one more unit between the two points. Neither is the circle a perfect example of '*echt Unendlichkeit*' on the grounds that it is a case of infinite renewal where every point in infinitely completed. The circle too ultimately is a metaphor of itself, as Heidegger's comment makes clear:

The question which immediately comes to mind is . . . to know if and how the dialectical movement itself can be prevented from falling back under the domination of finitude – finitude in the shape of false infinity, or endlessness (*Endlosigkeit*). Several responses, in particular the suggestion of circularity, simply stumble into this difficulty rather than resolving it⁸.

For Hegel, the infinite is the culmination of every finite stage into the speculative reality of the absolute. In that sense, for him the real meaning of infinity lies in speculative actualization: how a particular totality has reached a stage where every finite moment has become sublated from its original location and now this infinity is both in recurrence of the entire process and at the same time in eternal repose where it has no dependence on its past. This is speculative eternity. In that sense, the circle is a figure and given that it is only a figure, it is always a very doubtful metaphor.

For Hegel, infinity is a speculative idea. It is neither a mathematical idea nor a religious idea. There are several ideas of infinity. One is the Greek cosmic idea, a cosmos where the outer limit is not known to us, which keeps on extending, hazy and formless. The other is the religious idea, something that is of infinite power compared to which the human is of limited power. The third is a mathematical idea. Here infinite is the concept of a number which we can know through mathematical formulae but not by counting. Also there is no general idea of infinity. Each infinite has its own formula. In mathematics, there are infinite infinities. Each

infinite has its own formulation, its own character. In numbers, simultaneous infinities are possible. In Hegel, we find a fourth kind of infinity, speculative infinity, where each finite moment ultimately auto-generates a subject which actualizes infinity in history, a historical infinity. In concrete terms, it would refer to a State which for all times would be the final stage of the State; a divinity or religion will come which will ultimately remain that religion only. But such speculation, given the vastness of the enterprise, is effective only in producing contingencies, slippages and departures. The common point of all these varieties of infinity is the virtuality of the particular. Correspondence with infinity opens up the particular to the theatre of plurivocity and fissiparousness. For example, in religion God's infinity as an ever receding centre (Marx will later use this trope to understand the ever expanding grid that capital is) as against man's finitude allows every creation to be open to newer and newer meanings in the eyes of the believer which becomes part of its facticity. To the degree that religious infinity makes the meanings of particular immanence stable, it makes it unstable too. As a mark of this non-correspondence between signifier and signified, we prefer the expression the terrible infinity of the particular.

Nietzsche calls "the dialectical man" at once the most successful and the most wretched because suppressing alienation and recuperating his properties, he functions as the perfect replacement of God. The speculative motor of dialectics is contradiction and its resolution, while its practical motor is alienation and its transcendence. As theology is replaced by anthropology, everyone becomes a property of *Man* and dialectics cannot be stopped until everyone becomes a proprietor. Nietzsche detects a deep-seated nihilism behind the rise of modern dialectics—the reactive nihilism of a will to deny (as a will to power) giving way to the passive nihilism of a negation of all wills. Man kills God by sheer excess of pity and takes his place. Heidegger remarks:

(I)f God ... has disappeared from his authoritative position in the supersensory world, then this authoritative place is always preserved, even though as that which has become empty. (1977: 69)

Nietzsche challenges the death of God and along with this the whole dialectical tradition that hinges on this. With Nietzsche, Deleuze comments, the age of naive confidence comes to an end as does the age of replacement of God by man as a sign of superseded opposition, the reconciliation of finite and infinite, of changeless and particular. Dialectics ratifies ego's dream of omnipotence, while

in reality the individual faces a hopelessly restricted situation in consumerist capitalism. To overcome the threatening split between the two, the individual escapes into substitute formations - viz., collective narcissism.

Getting back once more to the Cartesian problematic, it may be stated that Saussure's relationalism and his challenge to the notion of a fixed element of consciousness that is concomitant with a meaning anterior and external to the production of meaning through language, virtually wrecked Cartesianism. Saussure, however, operates within the boundaries of a well-formulated system, which is the point where Derrida intervenes, reminding that a system can never be fully mastered. The chain of distinctions that constitutes a single meaning always already exceeds presupposed system borders, while structures of meanings, discourses and languages function only under the conditions of relatively closed systematicity. This tension is the constitutive source of meaning and for which Derrida's term is *writing*—a non-ontological reference point, which defines language against any intended ideality of meaning. In other words, *writing* is the name for strategic positionality against the logic of 'thing itself' and of the self-sufficiency of thing.⁹ In the Cartesian system, the centre acts as reassuring certitude only by turning a blind eye to the reality of *writing*. With *writing*, the centre (like anything else) cannot escape play—the centre is no longer the centre, it disseminates as much as it anchors. Incidentally, this is one more area where Foucault and Derrida converge, as the following passage towards the end of *The Order of Things* should illustrate (though Foucault's observations come across as far richer given the frame of reference with which he operates):

We have seen how labour, life, and language acquired their own historicity, in which they were embedded; they could never, therefore, truly express their origin, even though, from the inside, their whole history is, as it were, directed towards it. It is no longer origin that gives rise to historicity; it is historicity that, in its very fabric, makes possible the necessity of an origin which must be both internal and foreign to it. (1970: 329)

Every binary opposition conveys a hidden hierarchy—mind above body, speech above writing, market above government, exchange value above use value, abstract social labour above concrete labour and so on. In order to transgress the code, accordingly, these hierarchies cannot be simply reversed; they must be subverted. (This incidentally is Derrida's point against Baudrillard.) *Writing* aims at precisely this. In order to achieve this, it removes sign from its

Saussearean understanding of a homogeneous unit bridging an origin and an end (as in semiology) to one where it must be studied *under erasure*, always already inhabited by the trace of another sign, carrying within itself the trace of its perennial *alterity*. A sign *is* and *is not*, inaccurate yet necessary. Semiology, says Derrida, must give way to grammatology. Saussure is against attributing separable primacy of meaning but his scheme has no room for 'alterity' or 'erasure'. Derrida completes the devastation of Cartesian intentionality that Saussure had initiated by bringing in another notion - *iterability*, making purity impossible.

To Derrida, the hall-mark of *writing* is its indeterminateness, positioning as it does between poison and cure. Hence, he considers Socrates' reference to writing as *pharmakon*—a Greek word which can mean either poison or remedy—as absolutely relevant. Socrates, to be sure, makes a case against writing since for him writing is the art of sophistry, deprived of any direct communion with wisdom and truth. Derrida argues that the preferred dialectic discourse of Socrates has to be in the form of speech alone since *writing* would have brought out the uneasy fact that what is known as truth is basically nothing more than a *representation* of truth. Attributing inferior position to writing is just a paranoid reaction to the fact that behind the metaphors of light lies the reality of reflection. The experience of a receding centre makes presence unattainable and thereby attributes its halo. Derrida writes:

The absolute invisibility of the origin of the visible, of the good-sun-father-capital, the unattainment of presence or beingness in any form, the whole surplus Plato calls *epekeina tes ousias* (beyond beingness or presence), gives rise to a structure of replacements such that all presences will be supplements substituted for the absent origin and all the differences, within the system of presence, will be the irreducible effect of what remains *epekeina tes ousias*. (Derrida, 1981a: 167)

The whole history of western philosophy, Derrida claims, is the history of the derogation of supplementarity. As a simultaneous operation of addition and replacement, it threatens to expose in all the major philosophical projects their common construction centering the idea of an original presence. For instance, Plato's *form*, Hegel's *idea*, Marx's *mode of production*, Husserl's *transcendental ego*, etc. The original presence is held responsible for determining empirical reality, while philosophy's task is the restoration of *origin* through meticulous excavation of one layer after another. Saussure too, as discussed earlier, privileges the relationship of speech to meaning over that

of writing, ‘everything that links the sign to phone (speech)’ (Derrida, 1981: 21). “The theme of the arbitrary,” argues Derrida, “thus, is turned away from its most fruitful paths (formulations) towards a hierarchising theology” (1981: 21). In trying to emphasise the unity of speech and thought (i.e., signifier and signified), Saussure makes voice/consciousness the vehicle of ‘truth’. Hence, his radical insight into the constitutive role of the arbitrary notwithstanding, Saussure joins the mainstream of western philosophy flowing from Plato. Emphasising the unity of the signifier and the signified, and holding speech and consciousness in an implied relation, Saussure undervalues the signifier to the point where its material exteriority is denied and the metaphysics of presence fully reconstituted. Derrida:

In this confusion, the signifier seems to erase itself or becomes transparent, in order to allow the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence. The exteriority of the signifier seems reduced. (1981: 22)

The denial of “the exteriority of the signifier” is also the assertion of the univocity of meaning, or, in other words, of dialectics over iterability. In writing, the opposition of signifier and signified is maintained and underlined. Hence, writing is inherently multiple which is also the reason why writing is always suppressed—what is written is read as speech.

Derrida explains the irreducible metaphoricity of language through an analysis of *usure*, a term meaning both acquisition of surplus (usury) and clearing up or wearing away. In traditional philosophical discourse, *usure* is the standard example of metaphor—a word’s transition from one meaning to another. Hegel gives a ‘continuist’ interpretation to *usure* as a process of metaphorization: a word’s journey from one station to another in a continuous semantic course, or, as Derrida puts it, “a progressive erosion, a regular semantic loss, an uninterrupted exhaustion of the primitive meaning” (1982: 215). Hegel’s chosen word is *Aufhebung*—the annulment and simultaneous upgrading of a concept. Derrida’s course of explanation is altogether different. Using a numismatic analogy, he says that just as coins have their ‘exergue’ rubbed off (which releases them from belonging to a particular register), words too lose their literal sense and acquire a versatility beyond the specifics of time and space to which they were originally rooted. From this argument, Derrida derives two conclusions. First, since philosophy as practice borrows words from everyday parlance,

philosophical discourse is by nature metaphorical. Second, *usure* represents not the continuist scheme that Hegel lays out, but its precise opposite: “a displacement without breaks, as re-inscriptions in heterogeneous systems, mutations, deviations without origin” (1982: 215). Re-utilization of terms need not follow a pattern based on unity, identity, resemblance, or similarity. The arbitrary extension of the term’s sense is what Derrida calls *catachresis*. This is a trope that means forced metaphor. Following the path of catachresis, philosophy joins hands with the literary and not to do so means remaining blind to the endless possibility of non-identical deviations. (Incidentally, it is precisely for this quality that Plato chastises ‘writing’ as ‘the bastardised form of communication’.)

In a detailed exchange with Derrida, Paul Ricoeur (1977) maintains that language is an *event* in which intention and understanding *dialectically* unite. Following a part Hegelian and a part Aristotelian line of argument, Ricoeur focuses on the role of spontaneous human activity in language and reduces the work of language itself. Derrida, on the contrary, highlights the materiality of language, its opaque and obfuscating nature. Rejecting the path of dialectics, he follows carefully the consequences of iterability: Intentions do not follow a straight line and are of necessity displaced; no context is saturable and metaphoricity is irreducible.

Let us compare Derrida’s position with that of Ricoeur in some detail. For Ricoeur, dialectics is a process of ‘productive opposition’—a process by virtue of which two opposing things interact as content and get to form something new. The opposing registers (since they are valued only for their contents) are seen as thematic monoliths. Hence, the whole process is geared towards the ideal of ‘unity in diversity and diversity in unity’ (where the former dominates the latter). While Ricoeur admits that ordinarily a word can have multiple meanings, he maintains that in a sentence it can have no more than one meaning. Sentences form one discrete whole providing a protocol that aids the reader to reduce (if not eliminate) equivocity; otherwise there can be no communication. Reading is the art of coming to decipher that precise meaning. A number of consequences follows from Ricoeur’s analysis. Since the discursive event consists of sentences, discursive presence is singular and whole, and discursive context is total. Repetition is homogeneous, and meaning is separable from its sensuous embodiments. Ricoeur admits that in the case of poetry rules are broken and novel semantic and syntactic configurations are created. Ricoeur, however, explains poetry as a challenge to the reader’s

hermeneutic capacity. The reader treats a poem in terms of its novelty, imaginatively follows the traces of metaphoricity of the words and, finally, creates appropriate meanings. The point that Ricoeur is trying to make is that even though the meaning that a reader gives to a poem and its words may never have existed before in any linguistic code, here as elsewhere the dialectic of event and meaning ultimately leads to univocity, since the reader finally gives one unified and identical sense to the poem.

Foregrounding the concept of iterability, Derrida puts up an agenda which for all practical reasons is in diametric opposition to Ricoeur. Derrida disbands Ricoeur's metaphysics of discursive presence by emphasising the non-presence or absence of iterability, its plurality and incompleteness. Together they imply that a context is always already in excess of any totality and no repetition is homogeneous, disrupting all teleology or attempts to reach dialectical synthesis. Derrida argues that every time the question of *proper* (of the self-same, of appropriation, of knowledge as possession) emerges, the onto-hermeneutic form of interrogation shows its limit. He agrees with Ricoeur that to clarify the meaning of a word one needs to find out precisely how it differs from other words in a sentence. But for Derrida this is only one of the many determinants of a word that of necessity partakes in many different texts and contexts, many linguistic systems, each of which determines the word differently. Also, a trait signifies by virtue of its hieroglyphic and ideogrammatic characteristic, thus creating a network of textual referrals through both similarities and differences. Hence, every time a trait refers or alludes, it makes a case of non-identical repetition, i.e., iterability. They participate without wholly belonging, leaving the possibility of re-contextualization ever open. Derrida calls this 'dissemination'. No identity is fully constituted, no relation is fully able to absorb any identity. Literality, to Derrida, is a prime instance of figuration, while figuration is part of the terrain where the *social* is created. This is an acknowledgment that reality is not a field of delimited positivity, but a relational logic pierced by contingency.

Understandably, Nietzsche calls figuration *Gleichmachen*, i.e., making equal of dissimilar things. Truth is 'a mobile army' of metaphors that has forgotten its figurative roots. There is no self-identical meaning just as there is no *true* interpretation. Hegel says that empiricism is thinking *by* metaphor (since it employs the verb 'to be') without thinking the metaphor *as such*. Derrida, however, takes issue with Nietzsche for indefinitely expanding the concept

of metaphoricity to the point where it becomes the name for signification itself rather than a critique of the process. It would have been acceptable, argues Derrida, if Nietzsche had put metaphor, or figure, or, for that matter, truth itself under erasure. It may be suggested that here Nietzsche had initiated a move towards that direction by critiquing the unified notion of subject and foregrounding its constructiveness. Be it as the case is, metaphor as the symbol of transformation, errancy and alteration for ever jeopardises the dream of dialectical identity of knowledge and meaning, exposing the will to truth as the subterfuge of the will to power. We continue this discussion in the next section by critically examining an essay of Lucio Collette, celebrated in its time, and written during the author's Hegelian-Marxist phase. We try to demonstrate that any effective understanding of the dialectical reality cannot restrict itself to a purely dialectical method but perforce calls for its supplementarity and how this applies to dialectical materialism as well even in its most sophisticated rendering.

LUCIO COLLETTI'S "MARXISM AND DIALECTICS": DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM IN A NEW FRAMEWORK

Marxist cultural theorist Göran Therborn argues that Marxism puts "a dialectical perspective of emancipation against the linear liberal project of rationalization, progress and growth, explicitly affirming that capitalism and colonialism were exploitation as well as progress."¹⁰ This he contrasts to postmodernism's 'Baroque style of assemblages' that lacks an engagement with history and a commitment to the making of the world. More than three decades before, Lucio Colletti in his 'confident and original' essay, "Marxism and Dialectics" (1975), has sought to deal with the problem of the difference between 'real opposition' (Kant's *Realopposition* or *Realrepugnantz*) and 'dialectical contradiction' basically with the same understanding of Therborn. In the final section of the paper we take up the essay for detailed discussion to investigate this unchanging kernel in the various reworkings of Marxian dialectics.

Colletti argues that at the very centre of Marxist epistemological discussion, an ambiguity reigns over these two 'radically distinct' instances of opposition. Colletti contends that in the overwhelming majority of cases (starting right from Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin to Lukács, Mao and the Frankfurt School), Marxists have mistaken 'real opposition' for dialectical contradiction, causing profound

distortions in the form of either a polemical neglect of Marx's theory of fetishism and alienation or a downright underevaluation of the scientific potentials of Marxism. He concludes, iconoclastically, that the very notion of a dialectical contradiction in reality is incompatible with the canons of science. Colletti's Marxism is written in terms of Hegel and as such is in a different order from the notion of the science of society that Marxist sociology espouses (here Colletti refers particularly to the work of his fellow Italian Marxist and one-time mentor, Della Volpe).

Very much like Hegel's speculative dialectics, Colletti's account is at once fascinating and pernicious. While the distinction between the two oppositions that he draws is important, by over-emphasising it, he constructs a neat binary division between them and thus causes an annulment of any possibility of their alterity. One of the lessons that deconstruction may provide dialectics is that alterity can never be fully reduced; in fact, it is a way of questioning the metaphysical desire to reduce alterity. It posits the undecidability of identity and non-identity, pries it open through the other-relation or trace. In other words, in deconstructive dialectics (if we may be allowed to call it so), the process of differential supplementarity (the irreducible necessity of an 'other' to constitute something 'proper' or selfsame) encompasses dialectics as one determined moment of its chain. Derrida calls this 'Hegelianism beyond Hegelianism' (1978). To the extent that presence is characterised as a determination and an effect of a more primordial differential process, it is Hegelianism; to the extent that it introduces differential supplementarity within dialectics, attempts to annul a reductive sublation of a possibly recalcitrant heterogeneity and thus rejects a conflating synthesis of non-identity and identity, it is beyond Hegelianism.

To return to Colletti, he cogently defines the difference between real opposition and dialectical contradiction as follows:

'Real opposition' (or 'contrariety' of incompatible opposites) is an opposition 'without contradiction' (*ohne Widerspruch*). It does not violate the principles of identity and (non)-contradiction, and hence is compatible with formal logic. The second form of opposition, on the contrary, is 'contradictory' (*durch den Widerspruch*) and gives rise to a dialectical opposition. (1975: 3)

Explaining the specific nature of dialectical contradiction, Colletti takes recourse to the formula 'A not-A'. It is the instance in which neither A nor B (as not-A) have any existence beyond the negation

of the other: “Neither of the two poles is anything in itself or for itself; each is a negative-*relation*.” The result of this negative-relation is a unity (the unity of opposites): “Only *within* this unity is each term the negation of the other.” Real or non-contradictory opposition, on the other hand, is expressed in the formula ‘A & B’, where both A & B are opposite, real and positive. This type of opposition can be called exclusive opposition since here what is absent is any ‘mutual interpenetration’ (or ‘interdependence’): “the one does not bear within it a longing, a need, an anticipation of the other.” Hence, in real opposition if A is positive, B is not a mere negation of it but is counterposed to it as something itself affirmative; it is a *negation* but not a *non-being*. Examples of real opposition are falling bodies as against rising bodies, attraction as against repulsion, etc. The poles of these oppositions, as Marx argues, ‘cannot mediate each other’ nor ‘do they have any need of mediation’. Colletti quotes Kant:

Two forces, one imparting movement to a body in one direction, and the other imparting an equal effect in the opposite direction, do not contradict each other: they are both possible as predicates of a single body. The outcome is equilibrium, which is a thing (*repraesentabile*). (1975: 7)

If the principle of real opposition or (non)contradiction can conceive of opposition only in terms of real negation, then by the same logic dialectical contradiction (as its opposite) should be a gesture towards the inexorable multiplicity and heterogeneity of phenomena. Hegelian dialectics both confirms and dissolves this possibility. In its first step, it complicates the simple determinations of such metaphysical categories as presence and property (‘presence’ as the truth of Being; ‘property’ as selfsameness, etc.) through the differential relation of alterity. To determine Being as presence requires a corollary determination of Non-Being as absence. Similarly, a negative otherness (alterity) arises when one attempts to determine the property of an entity as its selfsameness. In the second step of Hegelian dialectics, however, this insight gets sublated into a holistic unity. The other relation which problematizes presence or self-identity is now turned into a moment of more complex, comprehensive self-identity. Ryan succinctly summarises this metalepsis:

It (Hegelian dialectics) recognizes the mediated nature of all supposedly proper entity, their constitutive expropriation (nothing is self-sufficient), but it orders this potentially heterogeneous differential into a system of simply binary oppositions or contradictions negations (Being / Non-Being,

Cause / Effect) and suppresses the heterogeneity of alterity and difference in favour of a theology of truth as self-identity or “propriation”, which arises from the process of mediation - that is, the return of the other-relation into the self-identity of the entity, concept, or subject.

The ultimately Hegelian roots of Colletti’s notion of dialectics is nowhere clearer than in the grand scheme he evokes towards the end of the essay:

In the beginning there was a oneness, succeeded by an era of rupture and separation, destined to culminate in capitalism; then, on the basis of these newly-emerged, superior conditions, an eventual reconciliation of the contradiction between individual and class, a supercession of the separation of man from man, and man from nature, becomes possible. If somewhat modified, the scheme of Hegel’s philosophy of history blooms again. Therewith is revealed the second face of Marx, alongside that of the scientist, the naturalist and observer (1975: 28).

If the infinite can have no other existence than being a negation of the finite, then it inevitably fosters a monadic scheme and postulates an immediate unity. This is the metaphysical side of Hegel’s principle of mediation whereby the other-relation is characterised merely as a negation (not an undecidable or extendable seriality of differentiation or of traces) that can be negated and sublated back into self-identity. Similarly, if the finite’s only claim to existence is its logical contradiction with the non-finite, then the non-finite should gain meaning through its opposition to the finite. It is here that Hegelianism cracks. Hegel cannot emphasise the finiteness of the non-finite because he prioritizes the non-finite. In this context, Della Volpe’s criticism of Hegel’s hypostatisation (the speculative exchange of reason and matter) gains validity. Colletti describes:

Hegel’s exchange ... consists in reducing, on the one hand, material differences to differences within the bounds of Reason, i.e., to a moment of logico-dialectical contradiction, and then in surreptitiously restoring material non-contradiction, i.e., real oppositions, which had formerly been transcended, and presenting them as manifestations or modes of existence of their opposite, i.e., of contradiction or dialectical Reason embodied in this form. (1975: 17-18)

By strictly following the A / not-A logic (or, in other words, by interpreting alterity or trace-structure as mere logical negation), Colletti has no way to appreciate the inherently fragmentary constructs of entity. Hence, it is not surprising that Colletti marks out the ‘fourth principle of dialectics’ as peripheral to the problem of dialectics. The fourth principle states that all objects and

phenomena possess their own internal ‘contradictions’ and that the struggle between these contradictions is the principal driving force behind their progress and development is not in conflict with the principle of (non)contradiction. As is clear, these ‘internal contradictions’ are not logical contradictions but opposed forces which operate from opposite directions and hence are only compatible with real oppositions. In this context, it may be suggested that to rescue dialectics from operating as another grounding principle, real opposition and dialectical contradiction have to be thought together. Even if Luporini might not be right (as Colletti points out) when he argues that there is a germ of dialectics in Kant, invoking Kant in the midst of Hegel serves a metaphorical purpose: It is a gesture not of resolving the problems of Hegel in the realm of the Kantian anti-speculative or practical reason but to inscribe a mark that fissures the neat trajectory of Hegelianism.

Colletti solves some of these problems for himself by citing the special case of Marx’s notion of the circulation of commodities (commodities - money - commodities) where real entities (commodity and money) by their very nature get sublated into dialectical contradiction. The separation between commodity and money (Colletti reiterates Marx’s position) is a necessary condition for the appearance of crisis in capitalism. Colletti emphasises the Hegelian aspect of Marx when he tries to explain this crisis strictly within the terms of a philosophical orderliness:

(A)s regards commodities and money - the ‘two complementary phases of the complete metamorphosis of a commodity’ - ‘the split between the sale and the purchase become too pronounced’, then it must be true that ‘the intimate connection between them, their oneness, asserts itself by producing - a crisis. (1975: 25)

Here Marx is speaking of capital’s effort to reduce circulation time to an ‘impossible zero’. Circulation of commodities is a hindrance as well as a condition for capital-accumulation. It may be argued that the fundamental impossibility (non-identity) that lies at the heart of capitalism need not be sublated to a more complex identity for the sake of philosophical elegance. A deconstructive reading, suggests Spivak (1987), makes us glimpse the limits of utopianism and of the constant search for strictly philosophical descriptions of ‘the historical justification for resistance’. A purely philosophical justification can happen to undermine potential for revolutionary practice. In that case, the political prerogative would depend on the strategic misrepresentation of the philosophical account.

DIALECTICS ON THE EDGE: ON CATHERINE MALABOU'S READING OF HEGEL

Catherine Malabou's groundbreaking account, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (2005; originally published in French in 1996), attempts to rescue continental philosophy from what Derrida in his celebratory preface to the book describes as the "reassuring certainty that the Hegelian legacy is over and done with".¹¹ Derrida's engagement with Malabou on Hegel centres on what he calls 'to see what is coming', a phrase that will keep returning elliptically through the entire course of his long preface. Unfurling the expression 'to see what is coming', Derrida explains it as seeing what hasn't arrived yet but also what hasn't not arrived, since it is already arriving. After Heidegger's rather perfunctory dismissal of Hegel as a philosopher of no contemporary import, Hegel largely became a figure of the past to an entire generation of philosophers in the continent, though he remained a recurrent, at times active, at times absent, presence in Derrida, Foucault, Agamben and other major thinkers. This said, let it be admitted that though in such accounts there was no dearth of acknowledgement of Hegel's greatness and his singular contribution to the history of philosophy, the common thrust of these philosophers was to depict Hegel as a philosopher of identity, resolution and reason, all of which were candidates for immense scrutiny. And all these traits were taken to have crystallized in – or generated from – the Hegelian dialectic. As per Derrida this served as 'an active and organized allergy' for thinkers of his generation, though it must have been a matter of fascinating dislike since, as this paper has tried to show, both Foucault and Derrida among others kept coming back to it at least in the first part of their intellectual careers, even if to reject it following a Nietzschean-Heideggerean path.

Malabou in her book attempts to read Hegel against the grain, arguing that his mammoth systematization of the historical realization of the Spirit contains within itself a series of displacements, a series of sliding and departures. She tries to show that Hegel's notion of overcoming is never complete or neat; as we move from one stage to another, traces remain. The structures of the earlier stages become simplified but not abrogated, erased or blanked out. She imitates Hegel in such a way that it allows her to derive a supplementarity, something other, something else from Hegel's schematizations and his philosophy. That something else is part of

Hegel but also not part of Hegel in so far as they are not the subjects of Hegel. It is a forming which yields no form yet thinking always goes with this forming. This, Malabou calls plasticity. Ideally no plan or schema or code should allow for spaces in between; the demand is that it in itself should be complete. Yet no scheme or plan or code is free of interstitial spaces. This in-betweenness is what plasticity brings to entities, the state between not having a form and yet not being formless. Always on the edge of something, plasticity is the precarious essence of being. It is not full presence, neither is it a simple absence. It is a passage. What is the being of this passage is what thinking would engage and guide.

To make her point, Malabou privileges Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, a text not generally discussed, and tries to provide an anti-humanist reading of his scheme of the animal/human divide. Animal, argues Hegel, has no higher determinacy than propagating and ultimately passing onto death. In other words, determinacy is limited to preserving and perishing. The capacity of what is called higher determinacy is the preserve of the blessed of animals, man. What allows man his unique status is his capacity for language and ratiocination. Malabou problematizes this neat divide of animal and human by bringing the domain known as habit into philosophical scrutiny. As the conjunction of continuity and change, habit is always an unstable equilibrium. Viewed in this manner, the constitutive principle of habit and dialectics is similar, both captured by the notion of plasticity which for Malabou is "a capacity to receive form and a capacity to produce form" – in other words, to absorb and create through *transformation*. To place habit in this framework, Malabou draws from Hegelian dialectics the notion of *Aufhebung*. Translated as sublation, it is explained by her as suppression and preservation. In the transformation from one stage into another, certain traits of the past are preserved and certain traits of the new are kept under rein, so that change does not become autonomous of the system. Habit is an attempt to codify this alchemy of change and continuity. It is the interface of singularity and repetition, the grafting of the new in the existing and making a pattern out of it. If habit is continuity, by the same measure habit is also change, because this continuity is premised on change. In other words, the point of continuity in habit is also its possibility of discontinuity.

In habit, argues Malabou, the individual feels the weight of his own existence. Every change indicates towards some present lack which will become something else. This is the weightlessness that the individual encounters in change. But this weightlessness ought

to be borne as if it is itself of weight, or, to put it another way, as if it is a kind of ontological given. So, the pull of change that the individual experiences also puts him in a state of cusp, a liminality, a kind of nothing-point. How to convert this pull of change or better, contingency, into regulated work is the challenge of habit. Therefore at the heart of habit's continuity lies a moment of emptiness, a complete emptying out of itself at every turn. Derrida's epiphanic figuration 'seeing what is coming' carries with it the possibility of seeing more than what is coming. Here seeing is hinged on infinity. Similarly, if habit is a system to deal with what is coming, then because what is coming is potentially infinite it acquires the necessary possibility of overrunning itself, becoming hallucinatory. In Freud, what cannot be habituated becomes the material of habit. In madness or schizophrenia, what normally is ruled out of habit, becomes habit.

The inwardness of man, his much vaunted trait that he thinks differentiating him from the animal, does not as a matter of fact belong to him. Language is the sum total of this inwardness and allows him access to his most precious possession i.e., the ability to signify everything metaphorically in its absence. As such, man's inwardness exists outside him; it is not what Heidegger would call man's 'ownmost'. Reading into Hegel's distinction between animal and man, it can be said that what liberates man from the animal also captures him in an economy of a so-called higher order, the interior. Man is destined to an inner existence. His organs cannot simply remain instruments but have to be endowed with the power of signs. As part of the same economy, what separates man from the animal also separates him from other men. Because inwardness is what man puts into language, it stares him at the face. The face becomes the unresolved manifesto of man's constructed inwardness. Between man (the essential being) and language (the system of signs), between his putative interiority constructed through language and his indulgence in the illusion that he actually possesses language, stands the face as a third element grafting the power of signification of language onto man. Hence there is the special significance of physiognomy in modern times which acquires a life of its own.

Habit as a lower idea that has its origin in the animal kingdom – something that is repetitive, which does not exactly go by reason – keeps invading the regimentation of man's habit, thus blurring Hegel's dichotomy between animal and man. If habitus is the generalization of the field of habit, then its individualizing,

physiognomic, affective, almost aesthetic, surface is the face. Face is taken as the spontaneous expression of man; it is not his mask. But Hegel, in Malabou's reading, shows that even as spontaneous expression, the modern understanding of face incorporates all the attributes of the Roman notion of *persona*: his status, his property, his family, etc. In this light she cites Hegel's example: 'You certainly act like an honest man, but I see from your face that you are forcing yourself to do so and are a rogue at heart'¹², indicating how both signifier and signified – bearers as they are of a purely imaginary referent – fail to coincide. The premium on the inside makes man the site of an exhibition, his physiognomy serving as the cartography of the interior. But because everything is immediately transformed into its sign, the interior can never express itself adequately. There is an opacity along with this transparency. This opacity haunts the sign system and the dream of acquiring a crystalline, transparent form through language. It is eruptive, the passage to the delirious, the mad, the 'primordial nights'. An existential phobia marks the sign system because in truth it signifies nothing and both the signifier and signified are actually governed by the purely imaginary status of the referent, an invented and ever receding *original* nature.

A concept's negation of itself is not the cancellation of itself, but its self-introspection. Because it is concept, its own negation must have an orientation, a positing. So it is as part of being a concept that it negates itself and thus becomes deepened. In Hegel, whatever is transforming stands cancelled. Essence is the collection of predicates that belongs from the past, and appearance is what is coming to presence now. Hence, appearance in Hegel is always more important than essence. Every translator tries to convey the twofold sense of the term *aufheben*: to suppress and to preserve. But why has no translator or interpreter of Hegel, asks Malabou, dreamt of applying to the term the very meanings for which it stands?

Aufheben, she continues, happens also to produce itself; it makes something new of itself each time (see, Malabou pp. 144-145). What comes into being through the dialectical process is not simply the result of a process. The new affirmation cannot be read merely in terms of negation and positing – that is, simply as the result of a process. Instead, core to the dialectical enterprise for Malabou is to come to be born, the being that is birth, or what Hannah Arendt calls natality. What we call synthesis is not merely the culmination of two entities in interaction. Active in it is also something singular, something excessive, something that falls outside the calculated and expected, something that as excess has a life of its own – in short, it

stands for *the very happening of singularity*. Malabou refers to Hegel in support of this new direction of reading:

In actual fact, and in the entire course of spirit's development, there is no perfect identity between preservation and suppression: they are neither unchangeable nor undifferentiated. What must be demonstrated is that Hegel does indeed restore the essential dialectical performativity of the *aufheben* and *Aufhebung*. The possibility of a new reading of Absolute Knowledge emerges from this truly plastic reading. (p. 145)

Because of such a take, for Malabou the two modalities of suppression and preservation are deeply implicated in the *virtual* and *imaginary*. Together they form the *energy of the negative*. Virtuality here, à la Deleuze, would refer to the endless openings that a real event goes through, at times completely transported from its context and put to strange use. A film or a novel is a good example of this – the more the artistic virtuosity, the more its potential for virtuality. This would also mean that virtuality is no result of schematization; it has something real to it. Malabou's attempt is to take Hegel's dialectics out of transcendental schematization by emphasizing the historical part of Hegel's scheme. She tries to put Hegel's thrust on history through the grid of imagination and virtuality, which she sees as sources of energy, thus incorporating Deleuze in her very own way. Every result is the site of infinite virtual existence. For example, Hegel's understanding of the modern Prussian state is the ultimate realization of the state. In contrast, the thought of virtuality would suggest that the modern Prussian state was a nodality through which an infinite virtuality of the modern state could be generated. The real, rather than being a closure, functions as a generative principle of multiplicity. Here politics approximates aesthetics, since the imagination that brings virtuality into life is not of a schematic order in the sense that it does not tie up a particular reality to a pre-existing form but transforms it into a play that invents a form for itself every time. This involves an excess of energy that Malabou calls 'the energy of the negative'.

For Hegel, synthesis as contraction is its productivity. Following Hegel then it can be suggested that the excess that contraction causes will produce forms that bleed into others; in that sense, no contraction can be total contraction. Malabou, like Badiou, uses dialectics to come to a point of exception. What comes about from the dialectical process is an exception, a singularity. For Hegel, this exception ultimately remains in the logic of oneness while for Malabou that would be an anti-dialectical move, for dialectics invites singularity marked by precariousness. This is not a matter of

transcendence; within immanence only, there can be a zone of newness, a natality. For Hegel, immanence ultimately becomes speculative and thus goes beyond the worldly. In that sense, it is a kind of transcendent immanence. Everything is immanent, very much within experience, but the ground of that experience ultimately becomes speculative. However, Hegel cannot bargain immanence for transcendence completely. The past moments that we take to be wholly transformed remain as a trace, a spectral presence, an insufficiently mourned demise. Its energy refuses to leave away.

Malabou tries to historicize absolute knowledge in the tracks of Hegel. She argues that even though absolute knowledge is absolute, only at a particular historical moment can it release an idea or meaning. As such, it is not something simply neutral to historical knowledge. In that sense absolute knowledge is also a kind of letting be or letting go. The empty form of sublation gets released at a specific historical moment. That release is interestingly also a kind of attachment; it creates a particular kind of passion and a particular kind of subject. Drawing from Kant, Malabou uses the word *hypotyposis* (literally meaning, vivid or picturesque description) to refer how a philosophical category at times acquires a sensuous body. There is a kind of sensuousness in plasticity which makes any particular body a shade unformed, a shade going out of itself. In other words, it has a degree of incorporeality, leading to an in-betweenness between thinking and body. This is what she derives from her reading of Hegel. Absolute knowledge is also a passionate knowledge. Hegel's understanding of absolute knowledge as speculative knowledge is interesting, as if in history there is now a possibility of speculative knowledge. It is an overall form that history reaches and at the same time, in reaching so, it also becomes something specific. It is not the end of history as in Fukuyama's brass announcement; rather, it is a singularity of the historical moment when a particular thought of the end becomes possible. So, instead of simply denoting the end of history, it is the thought of the end of history that becomes possible in Hegel.

What gains subjecthood here is not the 'I' that thinks, but the process and singularity that thinking is. There is a field but without any mastery, any transcendental 'I'. By 'giving up' the relation that the mastery of 'I' inevitably engenders – the subject-object dyad or what Malabou calls 'the differentiated content' – thought frees itself from the rigidity of a confrontation that has nothing left to show us. Calling it speculative abrogation, Malabou shows the close

connection between abrogation and *Aufhebung* i.e., between giving up or letting go and suppression-preservation. Among the several German verbs she cites that mean both preservation and letting away are *ablegen* and *aufgehen*. Both mean at once to abandon, to cast off and also to put in and file away. At once mourning and renouncing uniqueness and separate autonomy, each moment integrates and preserves itself in the totality (159). Do we mourn what we renounce? Or, better, do we renounce what we mourn? Is it the secret of all relationships? I prefer to end with a quote from the cultural philosopher Alexander Garcia Duttmann, written for a different context:

To what which was never before, we cannot relate, just as we cannot relate to that which has always already been. The moment we relate to that which was never before, we have transformed it into something recognizable, as if it had always already been. The moment we relate to that which has always already been, we have transformed it into something new, as if it had not been before.¹³ Alexander Garcia Duttmann, "Never Before, Always Already:"

NOTES

1. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, "Speculations on Reading Marx After Reading Derrida" in Derek Attridge, Geoffrey Bennington and Robert Young edited, *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, 1989, p. 44)
2. To cite one celebrated instance, consider this:
It stirs and it stirs not; it is far, and likewise near.
It is inside of all this, and it is outside of all this. (*Īśa Upanisad*)
3. It is interesting that for Enlightenment thinkers, especially Kant and Hegel, philosophy is the cornerstone of Enlightenment. The German word for Enlightenment is *Aufklärung* where 'auf' is above and 'klärung' means to clear up – that is, looking from above the muddle below for a better perspective of ground realities. In other words, while philosophy draws its lifeblood from the empirical world, it provides the empirical world with a reasoned perspective. And the crucial instrument of philosophy for achieving this is dialectics. What history, literature and other branches of humanities and social sciences find in philosophy, according to this line of argument, is a picture of perfection not possible in reality though never ruled out as an impossibility.
4. See, Maurice A. Finocchiaro, *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought*, 2002, p. 203-4.
5. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 227
6. I refer to my email correspondence with Pravu Mazumder (May, 2011)
7. Wayne M. Martin, "In defense of bad infinity: a Fichtean response to Hegel's *Differenzschrift*", *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 55/56, 2007, p. 3
8. 'A Heidegger Seminar on Hegel's *Differenzschrift*', *Southwest Journal of Philosophy*, 11, pp. 9–45. Translation modified. (Quoted in Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, p.142).
9. Derrida borrows the idea of *writing under erasure* from Heidegger. Heidegger argues

that to define something, one must broach and answer the question of being in general; but since being is the precondition of thinking, anterior to thinking, it can never be formulated as an answer to the question: "what is?". This, Heidegger points out, is the primordial problem of the language that we possess and which possesses us. On the other hand, to coin a new word is to forget the problem or believe it solved. Heidegger's answer to the problem is to both delite the word and to retain it. To cross out the existing word is tantamount to liberating it while to retain the crossed-out word is a testimony of the insurmountable nature of the problem. Borrows as he does from Heidegger, Derrida, however, brings about one crucial change in Heidegger's scheme. Having no nostalgia for lost presence, Derrida banishes the master word *Being*; instead, he brings in the concept of *trace*. As anterior to presence, trace by definition cannot be a master word. It can also be called *differance* or *arche-writing*.

10. Goran Therborn: "After dialectics: Postmodernity, post-Marxism, and other posts and positions" in Gerard Delanty (ed) *Handbook of Contemporary European Social Theory*.
11. I am indebted to my colleague, Soumyabrata Choudhury, for discussing Malabou's text on Hegel with me.
12. Quoted in Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, (p. 67)
13. Alexander Garcia Duttmann, "Never Before, Always Already: Notes on Agamben and the Category of Relation", ANGELAKI: Journal of Theoretical Humanities, Volume 6, Number 3, December 2001, p. 3

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