

Hegel and Picture-Thinking, or, an Episode in the History of Allegory

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Abstract: In this paper, I want to pay tribute to Gerard Lebrun's great book, *La Patience du concept*, published in 1972. Regrettably, there is as yet no English translation of this fundamental work of modern philosophy by drawing on rich materials which turn precisely on representation and "picture-thinking." In a certain sense, picture-thinking has suffered the same fate in philosophy, where the term metaphoric has become a bad word; and in painting, where the doorkeepers of Worringer's abstraction have long since rendered "the figural" homeless among the fashionable galleries. It is thus interesting to rediscover this now dogmatic antagonism at work in the deeper levels of the Hegelian scientific laboratories. In doing so, I aim to add a chapter to the historical narrative of this concept.

Keywords: Lebrun, picture-thinking, reason, understanding, Hegel

But perhaps the matter of picture-thinking is too interesting to be trivialized into a footnote in that now distant historical struggle between allegories and symbols: the latter now superannuated by Jungian archetypes and Joseph-Campbell-style myths (from which only the exotic structural complexities of Lévi-Strauss' Brazilian and North-Coast-Indian exhibits seems capable of rescuing it); the former threatening to clatter out of the closet like so many skeletons eager to take their places. The symbol was thought to be somehow transcendent, organic, and on the side of life: Worringer's notorious opposition between the deathly geometries of abstraction and the warmer sympathies of *Einfühlung* playing its part here, along with that ideology of Nature and the natural which played so powerful a role in the supercession of late-feudal artificiality by a more bourgeois Enlightenment. Durkheim's peculiar reversal in his classification of societies, in which it is the mechanical which represents standardization, democratization and Identity, while the organic stands for difference and hierarchy, only reminds us that we tend to leave the organism itself out of our conventional prejudices against homogeneity and the organic, and to forget that it is composed of a host of heterogeneously functioning organs, a multiplicity Joyce underscored in the allegorically themed chapter divisions in *Ulysses*. Still, a turn-of-the-century vitalism swept all before it for a time, reinvigorating the symbol and its sibling the sublime, and not even blinking when a Bergsonian Deleuze managed to endow his machines and mechanical apparatuses with joy and vitality, and a not-so-Freudian Lacan transformed the master's death wish into the very apotheosis

of desire in his concept of *jouissance*. But his choice of the term Symbolique for his linguistic order did not succeed in reviving the value of the older “symbol”, whose obsolescence drew even the omnipresent Metaphor - replaced by an appropriately heterogeneous multiplicity of lesser tropes - down into the trashcan of the history of ideas along with it. The discovery that there is no literal language, however, failed to revive the mortal remains of the great antagonist Allegory, the latter now a mere period mode, like the deliberate archaism of a moment of 18th-century counterpoint in Beethoven or Brahms, or the personification of minor characters and their names in this or that modern novel.

In a certain sense, picture-thinking has suffered the same fate in philosophy, where the term metaphoric has become a bad word; and in painting, where the doorkeepers of Worringer’s abstraction have long since rendered “the figural” homeless among the fashionable galleries. It is thus interesting to rediscover this now dogmatic antagonism at work in the deeper levels of the Hegelian scientific laboratories (today rebuilt after long decades of disuse). In what follows, I want to pay tribute to Gerard Lebrun’s great book, *La Patience du concept* (1972)¹, by drawing on rich materials which turn precisely on representation and “picture-thinking”, in order to add a chapter to the historical narrative I have just sketched in.

It is well-known that two powerful allegorical figures, *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, are locked in titanic struggle at the very opening of the Hegelian philosophical edifice. *Verstand*, the omnipresent 18th century term of “understanding”, characterizes a kind of common-sense empirical thinking of the spatial type we use in navigating our everyday world: a thinking in terms of qualities and quantities, of objects and their measurements, of substances and their predicates - a thinking that has no truck with those categories and relationships which are unconsciously flexed in their normal conceptual operations, only occasionally calling attention to themselves in those paradoxes and antinomies which are something like the stretched muscles, cramps or sudden twinges of empiricism as such.

Such paradoxes and antinomies are indeed the domain of *Vernunft* or Reason; or at least of those operations Hegel called “the determinations of reflexion”, the dialectical structures only visible to a philosophical self-consciousness, which do not yet constitute that third term of the Speculative or of Absolute Spirit which Hegel sometimes, like

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¹ Page references in the text are to the PUF edition. Regrettably there is as yet no English translation of this fundamental work of modern philosophy (Lebrun’s long association with São Paulo accounts for the existence of a Portuguese version).

Kant, also included under the heading of Reason (and sometimes not).

So it is a question, in Hegelian “objective idealism”, of abstracting from *Verstand* or better still, of subjecting it to an x-ray, in order to purify it of those reifications (“fixed determinations”, Hegel called them) into which an inveterate habit of substantification, a habit developed in Western philosophy since Aristotle, tended to perpetuate, under the empiricist delusion that thoughts are things (or words) and that the spatial categories of the material world in which *Verstand* lived and moved were applicable *tel quel* to the mind itself.

Those categories, to which *Verstand* is as inseparably conjoined as the mind to the body, are what Hegel will call *Vorstellungen*; and the German word is here the strategic nub of the argument. For what the translator often loosely calls “idea” is in reality a kind of “picture-thought” in which something is placed or positioned before us, before our mind’s eye, like an object. No doubt, an idea is often contemplated in that way, particularly when it bears a name. But a *Vorstellung* is also a theatrical performance or “spectacle”; it is a kind of image or imagining (“*stell Dir vor*” - “just imagine”); and we will here, following Lebrun, also want to insist on this visuality, as when we - to be sure, partially and misleadingly, in the service of our polemic bias here - associate *Verstand* in general with picture-thinking.

This rekindles, to be sure, a rather different philosophical quarrel which turns on Hegel’s professed idealism. It will come as no surprise to anyone with an interest in post-war philosophy that with the exception of the spiritualisms (and traditional religion) there are virtually no respectable idealists left and your standard philosopher takes materialism in one form or another for granted, even when not driven by an irrepressible drive to root out idealism as such in all its forms. But without an idealist opposite number, something vaguely identifiable as materialism tends to lose its identity as well, along with its status as a respectable philosophical and academic problem.²

The Marxist tradition was however, one of those in which the polemic against Idealism was tenaciously kept alive, despite Lenin’s warning: “Intelligent idealisms are closer to intelligent materialisms

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² Matter is, as Deleuze might say, a bad concept. Indeed, Bishop Berkeley himself sounds like Deleuze when he denounces the obliterating effect of this pseudo-idea on sensory vividness. This is at any rate why the greatest materialist philosophers practice what Frank Ruda in a marvelous phrase has called a “materialism without matter”. Still, in order to construct such a materialism, it is necessarily to invent an idealism to negate. Thus for Deleuze himself, Hegel, but above all Plato. For Althusser’s very different materialism - that of ancient Greek atomism - a rather different Hegel, the one first attacked by Marx, is deployed. And what kind of materialism does idealism require for its equally constructed negation? The body itself is at least one candidate for such idealist repression/sublimation.

than unintelligent materialisms.” And it must be said that much standard Marxian polemic has to be judged to be among the unintelligent materialisms, neglecting the fundamental distinction made by Marx himself between historical and mechanical or 18th century materialisms, or in other words between history and nature, between properly Marxist analyses (“historical materialism”) and quasi-philosophical or metaphysical systems, such as “dialectical materialism”. This distinction in fact throws another kind of monkey-wrench into the idealism/materialism debate, namely a distinction between the collective and the individual. Historical materialism proposed the analysis of social and collective movements and ideologies; 18th century or mechanical materialism (of the type resurrected by Engels in “dialectical materialism”) focused on the problem of the individual body and its consciousness, the latter’s determination (or “determinism”) by the material body (and nowadays of course by the material operation of the brain and of genetic structures).

If one looks at the problem from this angle, Hegel’s idealism takes on a wholly different meaning: not some quasi-religious horror of the body, but rather the attempt to move away from the immediacy of individual consciousness towards that more universal and collective dimension Hegel called the *Begriff* or notion, the so-called “concept”, a realm or *Geist* (variously translated as mind or spirit) which might better be rendered for the contemporary intellectual public in terms of a Lacanian Symbolic Order, or language as such as the collective and social dimension of reality within us, the Other of a collectivity from which we are inseparable as human biological individuals. But this is not the place to pursue this argument, only to defuse or problematize initial objections to Hegel’s theory of representation from a stereotypical materialist position.

Nonetheless, as Lebrun so masterfully demonstrates, we do in this theory confront a systematic attempt to withdraw from the visible to the abstract, or in other words, from the immediacy of our sensory experience of the world towards its various meanings - meanings which are not only collective (this is how one should translate *Geist*), but also abstract in the sense in which their rendering in the picture-language of *Vorstellung* or representation is inadequate, misleading and “defective” (another good Hegelian term). But here we must be careful with our language, that is to say, we must raise the dilemmas of representation from the outset: for if terms like picture-language are more or less satisfactory ways of describing our immediacies, our spatial and visual relationship to the physical world around us as individuals, the word “abstract” is utterly unsatisfactory as a characterization of what must replace them in

the movement Hegel’s system prescribes. They are abstract only insofar as they are no longer a form of thinking in pictures or in physical (for Lebrun essentially visual and even aesthetically contemplative) terms, however deeply such terms are buried in actual linguistic usage. It is Enlightenment rationalism that is abstract in the ordinary sense of the word, the object of so much anti-Enlightenment and sometimes anti-rational) critique: abstraction in the sense of science and law, repression of the affective dimension, promotion of what for Hegel himself would have been a confusion of *Verstand* - in this bad sense a truly abstract mixture of thinking and measurement, a kind of dialectical mixture of the abstract and picture-thinking - with *Vernunft*, or in other words Hegel’s own far more capacious version of Reason as such and as an embodiment of *Geist* or spirit that greatly transcends the narrow kind of Enlightenment or rationalistic thought in question here.

So while we know more or less what figurative or picture-thinking looks like, its opposite number, the kind of consciousness to emerge in its place and after it has been transcended, is less clearly identifiable (except no doubt as the Hegelian Absolute Idea itself, about which no one has ever been able to propose an explanation on which historians of philosophy can reach consensus).

But with that proviso, we may then begin an exposition of Hegel’s positions on representation and or figuration which Lebrun traces back to the young philosopher’s first positions on religion, and in particular on the difference between Greek subjectivity and Christianity as a new mode of “belief”. Hegel’s contemporaries, indeed, grew up in the neo-classical revival of which, and not only in Germany, Winckelmann was somehow the apotheosis and the founder. This newly discovered ancient Greece (via Roman copies) seemed to offer the solutions to all the problems of modernity, from poetry to politics, from individuality to daily life: let Hölderlin stand as the very paradigm of this Greek “solution” (in which, in a rather different form to be sure, Heidegger will later on follow him). For most of the other contemporary or Romantic thinkers and poets as well, the return to Greece, the “temptation” of Greece as E.M. Butler will put it, remains alive as a dream if not a practical solution, with Byron’s life as its tragic epitome.

Only Hegel broke early with this nostalgia which he too shared as a student (he was, to be sure, Hölderlin’s roommate); and it is this break which not only determines his attempt to theorize the historical “superiority” of Christianity over Greek religion, but also, and even more significantly, his characterization of the Greek moment as one of an essentially “aesthetic” religion. With the problem of representation, and of the representation of gods and the godhead in particular, we are then

at the very center of Hegel's confrontation with the problem of figuration that concerns us here.

The anthropomorphism of the Greek gods is then the issue, and in particular its distinction from the incarnation of Christ in Christianity: in as much as for both, and unlike what passes for the numenal in the other religions - light, the fetish, animals, lightning, mountains, natural elements or monstrous statuary of various kinds - presuppose that the human figure, the human body, is an adequate vehicle for the revelation of the divine.

In the case of the Greeks, however, Hegel wishes to see such "incarnations" - perfectly acceptable in the various myths or literary narratives in which they figure this or that force in the universe - as discontinuous and uniquely ephemeral events; the "descent" of a god into human form, as in Zeus' multiple conquests, is not the acquisition of a durable human individuality or subjectivity (as is the incarnation of Christ in Jesus), but rather, if anything, reinforces their radical difference from the world of human beings (and this is why, Hegel tells us, Socrates' claim to visitation by a daimon was blasphemous for his contemporaries). "The human presence [of the Greek gods]", Lebrun declares, "ironically recalled their fundamental inhumanity" (25). "The human in God" Hegel explains, "marks only his finitude, and this religion therefore [that of the Greeks] still in that fundamental sense belongs to the religions of finitude" (quoted, 30). This sentence must be understood in the light of Hegel's association of modern subjectivity with "infinity"; and given the preponderance of the imagery of the inside and the outside in his philosophical terminology, might well be rewritten in terms of exteriority; with the Greek gods and their anthropomorphic appearances, we have to do with a purely external contact with the divine, and one which (as Lebrun underscores) is accessible only through visibility (and as it were mocked by the now blinded eyes of Greek statuary).

The more human individuality of Jesus is then radically distinct from this purely external (and thereby purely contemplative or aesthetic) divinity: for it becomes interiorized through his life and teachings. But it is here that Hegel's account suddenly shifts its codes and adopts a radically different set of philosophical coordinates (indeed, we may see in this shifting of gears an instructive lesson in the dialectic as such, and its capacity for mediation between incommensurable systems or levels). For now the fundamental absence that marked the representation or picture-thinking of the Olympians - that they are occasional and that the attempt to give them true body in statuary can only convey their blindness to our attempts to approach them in space and in visual contemplation - is displaced onto history as such; the meaning of "event" thereby changes

radically. For Hegel the crucial feature in the Christian narrative is not the resurrection but rather the crucifixion as such, the death of Jesus, his disappearance from the visible and phenomenal world. Suddenly the life of Jesus, marked by this unique new type of event, has become what the Olympians could never be, namely *historical*. A new kind of temporality has entered the picture along with interiority as such: the place of the external/visible/aesthetic has been taken not only by inner feeling and love but above all by the temporality of history as such, which dictates a new relationship to the divine, namely historical memory or *Erinnerung* (the German word, with which the *Phenomenology* concludes, retains the sense of interiorization within itself).

Yet we have so far failed sufficiently to underscore this movement from the Olympians to Christianity as a process not merely of thinking, - for if the picture-thinking has been modified here, it has not altogether disappeared - but also and above all as a disembodiment, a movement away from the finitude and externality of the individual body towards something else, for which the term spiritual is as inadequate as we have shown the word abstract to be.

But it is also important to distinguish this other, non-pictorial realm of subjectivity (what Hegel will eventually call speculative thought or simply, to distinguish it from religion as such, philosophy) from that third religious system which in fact explicitly forbids picture-thinking. That is of course Judaism, with its ban on graven images; and this is the moment to say that Hegel will radically distinguish this absence of pictoriality from that philosophical conceptuality he has in mind as some ultimate position among these alternatives.

The central problem of a sublimation of the figural has in recent discussions however been obscured by a more scholarly debate about the relative position of Islam in Hegel's "philosophy of religion"; and in fact there would indeed seem to have been a hesitation as to where the order of the two religions of the book are to be positioned in the dialectic of figuration we have been concerned with here.³ How to evaluate the negativities of these two anti-figural subjective formations - Judaism and Islam - and the relative significance of the seemingly empty Absolutes they propose? It is a problem which also involves the universality of Islam and the exclusivity of Judaism, and is unsurprisingly tainted by the "current situation" in the Middle East (and by rather hysterical efforts to decide whether Hegel was anti-semitic or not).

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3 Of the now enormous literature generated recently on this topic I will limit myself to mentioning Yovel 1998.

For us here, what needs to be stressed is the interest of Hegel in religion in the first place. Far more than any selective history of the various periods in the development of artistic production, the various religions offer a set of structural variations on the relationship between letter and spirit - a kind of combinatoire or permutation scheme in which all possible alternatives are formally worked out. This means that his treatment of religion must necessarily be comparatist; and that it makes little more than anecdotal sense to ask ourselves what Hegel thought about Christianity, for example, or whether his thinking was not essentially Christian in the first place, on the basis of the trinity and of triads in the bulk of the early writings; any more than the positioning of his discussions of Judaism and Islam is suitable evidence for resolving the question of some unlikely personal anti-semitism.

The positions offered by the structural permutation scheme of the religions (comparable today to a similar operation by the Lacanian school, which to be sure is enriched by all manner of familial content of no little psychoanalytic interest)⁴, is in fact a useful testing ground for the varieties of structural and signifying possibilities raised by the opposition between allegory and symbol. In particular the gap necessarily implied by the various versions of the religious problem - what we have called the opposition between letter and spirit, but which might also take the form of an opposition between body and mind, figuration and abstraction, immediacy and the mediated, and so forth - this essential distance within the phenomenon, a well-nigh Lacanian split or gap - focusses our attention on the structural problem at the heart of the allegorical phenomenon itself rather than the surface effects of the various possible structures (as when we tax allegory with its boring didactic intentions or grow fatigued with the complacency of the various symbols). But it is this same structural or intrinsic gap or distance which also makes possible what we may call the contagion of allegory, its capacity to parasitize texts and thoughts not first primarily allegorical in their construction, to endow simpler forms with a variety of allegorical overtones and undertones they did not initially vehiculate.

Returning to the phenomenon of religion as such, it would seem that, as Lebrun sees it, Hegel has isolated three fundamental forms of picture thinking. The first would be the occasionalization of meaning, as when an Olympian temporarily assumes the guise of a mortal being. This would seem to reduce Greek religion to the level of what Hegel calls

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4 Such pioneering work is to be provisionally associated with the names of Slavoj Žižek, Eric Sandtner, Kenneth Reinhard, Fethi Benslama, Lorenzo Chiesa, Gabriel Tupinambá, and Moustafa Safouan.

the natural religions or religions of nature, in which the divine takes the form of a natural elements, such as light. Yet the relationship to light, as a crucial instance in Hegel's typology, is highly valued, insofar as light seems to be pure of determinate properties and to have so much in common formally with pure subjectivity. Meanwhile, what is distinctive about this form is that light is not multiple and that its sacred value is relatively permanent (no doubt owing to the fact that its transparency only rarely allows its unique presence to be felt as a distinct yet non-figural phenomenon).

After that, the various fetishisms, which seem to be as far from specific religious languages as possible, owing to their "deficient" form as a block of wood or stone which is incapable of articulating any more complex inner relationships. Here then the specifically religious power of such forms will be essentially quantitative: as in the pyramids or other overwhelming presences of sheer matter; and it is always worth noting the distinction with Kant in this instance, for Hegel explicitly borrows Kant's term of the sublime to characterize such religions, thereby utterly inverting the evaluation Kant meant to establish. We do not need to impute Hegel's low estimations of so-called "picture-thinking" to Kant to note that the latter assuredly shares the former's valorization of philosophy as the ultimate form of self-consciousness. Indeed, this was the spirit in which for Kant the "sublime" has a more elevated function than the merely beautiful (the merely aesthetic): for the challenge to the mind's limits of the sublime is akin to what the author of *The Critique of Pure Reason* sought to achieve philosophically.

For Hegel, however, the sublime means little more than the imprisonment of spirit in matter, in sheer quantity, and is the lowest form of religious consciousness. As we have noted, however, he seems to distinguish between two varieties of such "natural religion": light, as the One, is sharply distinguished from the multiplicity we find embodied in his entertaining descriptions of the Eastern polytheisms and pantheisms, which, under the obligation of finding and combining the divinities available in the immense varieties of forms to the natural world, can only give figuration to their multiplicities by way of monstrosity.⁵ They nonetheless bear witness to the attempt, in all religion, to strain towards unification, and to conceive of the One as such, something the religion of light was able effortlessly to accomplish. There is a sense then, in which Greek religion is simply a more respectable solution to this dilemma, for

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5 I have myself proposed something like a structural analysis of the rather delirious account of Egyptian religion in the *Philosophy of History* (1956, p. 209), which seems to me a more promising mode of analysis than standard denunciations of Hegel's eurocentrism or Orientalism.

it acknowledges an immense variety of divinities and divine forces, but on the one hand allows for temporality and the ephemeral appearance of this or that god, in order to ward off the enormities of Eastern simultaneity; while on the other, for the most part, it privileges one unique form of the natural over all the others, namely the human body.

As we have seen, both these features – temporality and the human body - will return in Christianity, but to a wholly different effect, which we have already, following Lebrun, characterized: for here a single human body is individualized (the One thereby recovered from the multiplicity of mythological human characters, but then obliging the theologians in its turn to reinsert it in a different kind of multiplicity, namely the Trinity); while temporality is dramatized as an absence rather than an appearance, and the death of Christ becomes almost more significant than his historical incarnation (which is to be sure itself, as a date in history, a new kind of temporal absence in its own right).

Judaism becomes then no doubt not only the void from which this new kind of religious figuration can emerge, the negation and cancellation of a polytheism which must now make place for a different kind of image (despite its resurgence later on in the form of a kind of pantheon of saints and angels - the addition of Mariolatry posing a rather different problem). But it is also the refusal of figuration as such, and thereby proves incapable of absorbing the old content into some new system. Hegel's absolute spirit, however, will prove to be the opposite of this abstract negativity, being a repudiation of picture-thinking by way of a genuine *Aufhebung*. It should of course be clear that this is not merely a refusal of Judaism as a religion, but that insofar as all religions consist necessarily in picture-thinking, it amounts to a repudiation of all of them, but in distinct or determinate negations which respect their unique structures and ratios of the subject-object relationship.

We have thus in effect several axes to coordinate here. There is the representational one just discussed: can the divine be represented or not, is picture-thinking possible or must it be absolutely negated? We know the answer to that as it can be inferred from Hegel's refusal to admit absolute error: picture-thinking cannot be wholly condemned or negated, it necessarily includes its moment of truth, or better still, constitutes a necessary stage on the road to whatever lies beyond picture-thinking in some realm of what cannot any longer simply be called abstraction. Picture-thinking can therefore no longer simply be dismissed as idolatry, as Judaism will do, without losing its implicit conceptual or philosophical content.

But picture-thinking would seem to come in the two distinct forms of fetishism and Greek religion, in which forces are conveyed either

through inanimate objects (or animals) or the human body: here in either case, however, their representational privilege is provisional, or if you prefer the other formulation, non-temporal (insofar as an apparition in the present, a fleeting identification, is presumably neither a temporal nor an eternal event). We have here, as it were, yet a third species of time: neither the past-present-future of chronology, nor the absolute present of consciousness but rather the blink of the apparition, which, like the proverbial leprechaun, is neither present nor absent. To these three temporalities suddenly a new form of religious representation adds a fourth: for on Hegel's view the uniqueness of Christianity lies not in its assumption of a human incarnation (as with the Greeks) but in its mortality and historicity, which seals its essence as a pure past, as what once existed but does so no more. (That there is a kinship here between this absolute pastness of the Christian religious structure and the philosopher's commitment to what is past - to the interiorization of what is past (*Erinnerung*), to the absolute turn away from the future, as in Hegel's position on the coming history of the New World⁶ - this kinship is undeniable. But it does not mark Hegel as a Christian philosopher of some sort; rather it secures Christianity an indispensable place in the pre-history of Hegelianism, as a necessary stage in the approach to "objective idealism", the speculative, etc.)

It is, however, this historicity of the religions of the book which is the crucial development in the evolution of picture thinking - the natural religions, the Greeks - towards philosophy and absolute thought or abstraction. To be sure, as we conceive abstraction it remains an allegorical process, inasmuch as the very word implies something, some object or objectivity, from which the abstraction is itself drawn and of which it is somehow visually or conceptually purified and yet sublimated. This second element remains within it, albeit cancelled: abstraction in this sense is a kind of negative allegory, which carries its object within itself like a shadow. The translation of *Geist* as spirit is not much better, since it is dogged by the phantom opposites of body or letter, themselves profoundly allegorical insofar as allegory would seem fatally to entail some such opposition. The speculative, the concept or *Begriff* - these are among the impoverished terms which alone carry the freight of what transcends picture-thinking and what even the term Reason or *Vernunft* fails to convey (it being itself ensnared in the opposition to *Verstand*). The speculative, if we could grasp its full meaning and implications, is the

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⁶ As he puts it in a famous passage about the Americas: "as a Land of the Future, it has no interest for us here, for, as regards *History*, our concern must be with that which has been and that which is." (Hegel 1956, p. 87).

very climax of Hegelian philosophizing - the Absolute Idea, the Notion in traditional, quaint English-Hegelian language, which we can think of in some vague external and non-Hegelian way as a kind of identification, and at the same time supercession, of the opposition between the subject and object - the transcendental and the empirical, or Spinoza's two modes of extension and intellection. For our purposes it is enough to grasp this ultimate thought mode as the supercession of all picture-thinking and its subsumption, without a trace, into the logos, which we must try to think not as logical abstraction (always a kind of abstraction from something else) but as pure meaning.

Still, the very organization of the *Logic* seems in some peculiar and original way to perpetuate the dual level we have been claiming as a fundamental vice in picture-thinking as such, namely the gap or distance between a signifier (image) and a signified or meaning. It does so, however, in a non-pictorial way, since the deeper level of philosophical (and presumably other) discourse lies in a series of what may be called categories; purely formal conceptual shapes without content (and without even that picturality the word "shape" would seem to convey), pure oppositions, such as that very distinction between form and content itself, or inside and outside, or essence and appearance. Such categories are the unconscious or preconscious forms which organize our surface thinking and language without our being aware of them or thematizing them in whatever we call self-consciousness. These forms – life and syllogism - which presumably exist at one and the same time in the object-world and in the mind (as we used to call this duality) are then the logos itself, the "logic" of the world. In a moment we will return to this level of non-pictorial meaning - what has been called Hegel's idealism; it is not necessary to defend its premises philosophically, but only to point out that, visual and pictorial or not - it still retains that gap between surface level and deeper organizational entities which was Hegel's fundamental reproach to picture-thinking, but which secured the latter's structural identity as an essentially allegorical one.

Let's recapitulate the stages: allegory necessarily combines two terms, much like metaphor: not all binary oppositions are allegorical, nor are all metaphors - yet metaphor itself suggests the fundamental temptation whereby the allegory slips into the false appearance of the elusive symbol, a promise of the concrete universal, some ultimate reconciliation between letter and spirit or tenor and vehicle.

Religion then disproves the possibility of the symbol: it aspires to the symbol as its fulfillment, but the symbol turns out merely to be the dream of realization of picture-thinking; only Christianity, among those various laboratory-experiments in which the world religions consist,

claiming some permanent symbolic reconciliation and realization in the incarnation as such. But it is at this moment that the symbol betrays everything illusory about itself in an unexpected way - by the insertion of temporality, and historical temporality at that, into the dilemma. The ultimate symbol, the reconciliation of letter and spirit, the incarnation of Christ, is possible only on condition that Christ - inserted into human history - die and as an event move at once into the past, lose that "immense privilege of the present" which, as symbol, it claimed.

It would be a mistake to think that the problem of picture-thinking (let alone allegory) is irrelevant for present-day philosophical concerns; but the mistake is certainly encouraged by an image culture so omnipresent as to cause the problem itself to fade into the background. What else is the notion of the "simulacrum" than a confused memory of this problem and the mirage of its solution at one and the same time? The well-nigh universal reception of some Deleuzian notion of immanence is meanwhile the expression of relief that a formula has been found which, without the embarrassment of Hegelian Absolutes, can testify to the magical dissolution of the gap between reality and meaning, to their seamless reunification. But immanence may well simply be the constitutive illusion of the human age, the obliteration of nature by human production (with doctrines of the simulacrum as its bad conscience).

Hegel's solution was far more prudent and cautious than this: for the doctrine of *Erinnerung* thrusts everything into the past and is content to transform the Absolute into History. Only twilight allows us to "understand", that is, to turn what happened into necessity. "Temporal difference holds absolutely no interest for thought", Lebrun quotes Hegel as asserting (356); and perhaps this is the one point at which his philosophy bears some resemblance to the Christian view of history, about which it is unclear whether what is historical is the positive fact of the existence of Jesus or the negative fact of his disappearance and an empty grave.⁷

Philosophy has no use for the future, he asserted (perhaps in both senses of the phrase); and as for that present in which he entertained mild constitutional fantasies in the midst of the most fanatical reaction, we may take his views as so many wish-fulfillments, tempered by the longing to be a new realist, a new Machiavelli (Machiavelli being for political people perhaps the only strong embodiment of Immanence as such).

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⁷ See the classic essay of Marin 1994.

As for capitalism - I was tempted to write, for capitalism and for us! - like Faust, it revels in its power to forget, to acknowledge no past and exercise no memory, to claim an existence beyond History, in the pure present.⁸

So at that point, then, picture-thinking gets assigned to the pathological, to the return of the repressed. We may as well conclude with a commemoration of the unhappy Silberer, whose experiments were noted by the master of modern research into picture-thinking, Sigmund Freud himself. Silberer had been able to observe, in these experiments, that in moments of extreme fatigue and of the lowering of mental *niveau*, the most abstract concepts became degraded into purely physical images.⁹ Immanence lapsing into some bad material transcendence? I prefer to see these interesting examples as nudging us, from the philosophical problem of representation, in the direction of what Freud himself rather termed representability (*Darstellbarkeit*).

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⁸ Althusser's characterization of Hegel's "expressive causality" as expressing a "present" which "constitutes the absolute horizon of all knowing", Althusser 2009, p. 105), however illuminating, seems to me misleading and ultimately unproductive.

⁹ Silberer 1909. Silberer was one of the brightest of Freud's younger followers (but on the way to Jungianism). He committed suicide at the age of 41.