

The Philosophy of Right/Hegel at 250¹

Jean Luc Nancy

Here we are at the 250th anniversary of the birth of Hegel, and Jean-Clet Martin has asked me to help celebrate or mark this anniversary. But how should we do so? Let me go straight to one of the most famous passages in Hegel, which you can find in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*: the owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk/nightfall. We know what this means: philosophy takes place, it comes about or takes flight, as the immediate context of the preface tells us, when a form of life has reached its twilight years/its greying limit (*a vieilli*). And what philosophy does, then, is think the form of that limit, that greying: the way it does so—to stay in this same context—the way philosophy thinks this form is by putting its grey (zones) on the greying (of the world, of that form, that limit, that age/aging). This passage is familiar to us all, everybody knows it. But as Hegel says elsewhere, that which is *well* known, that which we think we know well, is precisely what we understand/know the least. The passage in question is indeed quite poorly known—it has certainly given rise to much discussion, commentary and exegesis. Yet I think that we need to understand it as saying, first and foremost, that philosophy indeed always takes flight in the aftermath of an age/an aging, after the ending of a form of life. Hegel says this elsewhere as well, about the history of philosophy. Elsewhere, he'll claim that first philosophy arises, precisely, in the wake of a disappearance—in the aftermath of the disappearance of a certain way/form of life which knows no philosophy [in which there is no philosophy] because it is the form of life of a world in which everything is structured and animated by what we call myths, mythologies. Now, in light of everything that the preface says about it, we need to think of what's at stake here as the gradual disappearance, the *greying*, if not the exhaustion, in a certain sense, of political thought; of political philosophy and of Prussian politics itself at the moment Hegel is writing [*la politique de la Prusse à ce moment là*].

Now, I don't want to get dragged into the history of all that [i.e., Prussian politics at the time of the *Philosophy of Right*], as it's not all that interesting. Rather, what I'd like to do is tarry with a question, one that is no doubt on your minds as well: if philosophy is just grey on grey, if it is just the greying light of dusk, what's the point of philosophy? What use is it to us? In certain sense, it's true that philosophy doesn't have a use-value, is of no use [*ne sert à rien*]. In any event, it cannot be used to pave the way or prepare [us] for another form [of life?]; it does not help us enter into new moments or eras of history. Hegel definitely says as much in the same preface: philosophers aren't here/come about to make

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1 Jean-Luc Nancy was a frequent contributor to *Crisis and Critique*. His unexpected passing saddened and continues to sadden us deeply. Not only did we establish a most amicable working relationship, his death also violently and shockingly broke off a number of ongoing projects, one of which manifests in the subsequent paper. This text is a transcription of a talk that Jean-Luc Nancy gave on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Nancy's promise to expand and rework this text further will remain unfulfilled.

anything advance /to move anything forward, but neither are they here to do little more than impassively observe things, to slather another layer of grey on the grey. How should we put it, rather: in each instance, each real philosopher arrives—philosophy takes place—as a certain form of life is coming to an end because they are able to think/philosophize what is happening at that moment by returning the event to thought, to *true* thought: to thought concerned with truth. What that means, for instance, is that in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel is writing about society, rights, and the state as he really understands them as the truth of the State. That's not at all to say that he thinks that *this* is what is fading away, or that this is what we ought to understand when he talks about the 'Prussian State'. Certain readers of Hegel often manage to make this monumental error when they read Hegel, seeing in him little more than an intellectual today for the power of the State in the world he found himself in.

No, what Hegel is trying to understand and account for is the underlying *truth* of the State. Consider, for instance, the opening sentence of that same text, in the section on the state, and which affirms that the State is the "moral idea in action," even though the word "moral" is completely inadequate [*très mauvais*] in this case because the idea in question is that of *Sittlichkeit*, if you will, the idea of a moral [schema]. But he doesn't at all say that the Prussian State of his day and time which realizes that idea of the State which the text is describing—he simply says that *this* is the truth of the state (i.e., the moral idea enacted) that we can appreciate it in one form or another. At the very end of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel goes on to evoke the figure of a monarch: a prince, the reign of an individual predicated on the principle of the 'one and only,' the one of a non-contingency who *naturally* must represent—though 'represent' is not quite the right word—, who must *incarnate*, rather, the State because the latter has to be rooted in a physical body, a person. And that physical person—whatever their particular qualities might be—incarnates a certain idea of the State, gives it a form of presence, if you will, (re)presents its majesty. *But*, Hegel goes on to note, *only philosophy is in a position to give the measure of that majesty*.

In this respect, we could say that what's at stake in philosophy is something more than the adding of grey to the gloomy grey light of nightfall. Philosophy is that which goes or *is* somewhere else, out of the bounds of discourse, thought being as though beyond language, beyond the logic of the proposition, which demands a linking of subjects to predicates; philosophy is, rather, a thought of co-existence, a thinking of subject and predicate in an unity that simultaneously keeps wholly and singularly intact the duality of both. This is what philosophy *knows*, allows us to grasp [*C'est cela que la philosophie sait*]. We could think of this as something like a moment of ex-stasis in Hegel's thought, an ecstatic moment which is of course always situated at the limit of whatever it is that philosophy allows us to say/put into words. What philosophy can

say is, of course, limited to the sayable, to what can be said and spelled out, written and pronounced, and *this*, Hegel says, is what we can call 'the grey'. So, from this postulate, let us come back and look anew at this colour, this grey, this *lack* of colour.

Is this grey the greying of things as they expire, as they reach an end? The end of a form of life? Of an era, *une fin d'époque*? Is this grey both the grey of a civilisation ending, fading away, as well as the faint greying of print in the pages of a book? Does this grey have a meaning [*une signification*], or not? Of course it does – what this grey signals/ signifies is extremely important, as it happens.

In Hegel's *Encyclopedia*, grey is the initial form taken on by the mixing [*la conjonction*] of light with shadow—a simple enough combination, if you will, but one that is not, and this should interest us, a *dialectical* one. That is to say, in the grey there are not two entities conjoined in a third which, at the same time, allows them to remain distinct in and of themselves, to subsist in their specificity [*subsister pour elles-mêmes*]. By grey, we might initially understand a kind of discoloration, a fading of distinctive colouring, even if, as we well know, grey is also a colour in its own right, one in which we can detect and appreciate all manner of varieties and nuances. But that's another question—Hegel, in any case, doesn't *seem* too interested in thinking (through) the different nuances of grey one might encounter. Consequently, grey signifies [a] lack of colour. And lack of colour is something we will indeed run into in Hegel's *Aesthetics*: we find it throughout the introduction, as the characteristic mark or tint of the present—that same present which he will *not* qualify as aging or greying in the introduction to the *Aesthetics*—as well as of the time of abstraction, of reflection, and thus indeed, of philosophy. Abstraction and reflection need to be taken in this context however, as a manner or mode of observing, of thinking, the world and thus of reducing the world to a universal that is more or less monochromatic, more or less *grey* (although Hegel doesn't use the term at this point in the introduction).

So what role, then, is being played by this discoloration² in the introduction to the *Aesthetics*? This fading of a present that is also a time in which we seem to know everything, in which everything comes back or down to a certain knowledge formation or discourse [*ce présent comme un temps où en effet on sait tout, où tout se rapporte à du savoir*] but in which, at the same time, we seem to be losing something that has to do with (a form of) life: liveliness, an aliveness [*quelque chose de la vie: du vif, du vivant*]. This is why Hegel goes on to claim in the same text that our age, our time, no longer lends itself to the practice of art [*n'est pas propre à la pratique de l'art*]. And here we have stumbled upon a second error when it comes to reading Hegel, a second kind of misreading that we encounter

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² *déploration? décoloration?* The audio here is difficult to discern – ELM/RSC.

far too frequently [in scholarship on his thought]: namely, that misreading which consists in thinking that he claims in the *Aesthetics* that art is finished, that art has come to an end, is no longer possible. He doesn't say anything of the sort. [*On pense que Hegel a dit que l'art est fini—pas du tout!*] Yes, admittedly, he says that we've arrived at a period in history in which our relation to truth requires or demands something other than artistic representation. But at the same time—of course we can always say that the question is a complex one, that the knot is a difficult one to cut given how sinuously it weaves in and out of several sites and layers in Hegel's thought—but at the same time, artistic *presentation*, that is to say, sensuous presentation [*la présentation sensible*], is a form/mode of presentation which, for Hegel is *absolutely necessary*. We can go even further: artistic presentation *qua* sensuous presentation is what makes/constitutes colour [*Elle est, justement, ce qui fait la couleur*]: recall that, in the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel states that color is exactly akin to what he calls the concept. [...]³ Colour is the concept, but, again, concept needs to be grasped as the copresence of two entities which do not disappear in a third, but which form an unity while remaining distinctly dual [*qui forme une unité tout en restant une dualité*]. What we're talking about is Hegelian thought at its most fundamental level: which is to say, a dialectical thought, a thought of relations/relationality [*au fond, c'est la pensée viscérale de Hegel: c'est la dialectique et les liens*]. To take yet another well-known example, think of the Hegelian notion of Spirit—far from recoiling in horror when faced with death, Spirit stares it in the face, enters into it even. Life and death, together; life as death [*la vie e[s]t la mort*], that's the concept, that's the idea—or however we want to call it—for Hegel.

And so, far from claiming that “art is over,” or “we no longer need art,” from start to finish in the introduction to the *Aesthetics* Hegel *deploras* the fact that we find ourselves in an age which is no longer compatible with artistic creation, which no longer lends itself to Art [*qui n'est plus propice à produire de l'art*]. Now, time doesn't permit us to comment at much longer length on this question, but if you're interested in pursuing it further, I refer you here to Jean-Pierre Lefebvre's excellent [*French*] translation [*of Hegel's Aesthetics*], and especially to pages 17-18, though a bit further on in the same translation you'll find similar passages on what Hegel considers the possibility, or impossibility, of art and or artists 'today'.

So this [next] point is *extremely* important [*Donc, là, c'est extrêmement important*]. The important thing is that Hegel represents, I think, the first, truly the first, philosopher (not merely in modern history but indeed in all of the history of philosophy, with exceptions made for certain Stoics, Cynics and perhaps a few Epicureans who also felt as though they we're living in/through a time of loss, of disappearance, of

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3 A single word is inaudible after “le concept”. It sounds like the French noun “lubie” (a caprice), but is perhaps *Begriff*?

fading [*de déperdition*), Hegel is, in any event, the first philosopher of modernity/amongst the moderns to tarry with [a] loss [*le premier en tous cas parmi les modernes qui pense une perte*]. What's at stake in the introduction to the *Aesthetics* is the loss of something. Something has been lost. Hegel grapples with a loss—a loss that takes place, discretely, gently, in the grey and greying of things [*une perte doucement dans la grisaille*], in the greyness of reflection/reflective thought alone, of abstraction. And how striking is it to note that, if today we find ourselves in the throes of a kind of profound unease (*mal-être*) vis-à-vis our civilisation, this is so precisely because we are no longer able to find in that civilization the possibility of appealing, as Hegel does, to a sensuous presentation of truth or meaning. Every problem we encounter today in art—but not solely with art, the same holds for the politics—stems obviously from this dilemma.

How far we seem to have strayed from the Hegelian idea of the State! Now, you might be tempted to exclaim, “Ah, but that's a *good* thing; Hegel's State is totally idealist!” Nothing could be further from the truth. Nothing. If you look closely at what Hegel says, the idea of the State, *as well as* the idea of Art, is above all the idea of something that is *not* an idea [*c'est l'idée—c'est l'idée d'abord de quelque chose qui n'est pas une idée*]. It's the idea of a *reality*: a material [*sensible*], effective reality, present in/to experience. And so I believe Hegel may have been the first to grasp what, a century after his death, Husserl will call the crisis of European philosophy, and sciences, in general. Just as Heidegger will do, in his way, in the aftermath of Husserl (*dans le prolongement de Husserl*), or, in a very different manner, Wittgenstein and, in an even more different manner, Freud: each of these figures were thinkers not only of crisis, but of a sort of loss. Loss of self, loss of (a kind of) civilization. Each were thinkers, in other words, of the end of a form of life. Thus if Hegel insists on telling us anything, I believe it is above all the following: where we find ourselves is in the twilight, in the fading light, of a form of life. Now, this doesn't mean that another, different, form of life cannot or will not arise to replace it, but simply that we cannot say anything about what might be to come; neither philosophy nor any other discourse for that matter can predict what comes next. To the degree possible, then, our task is to remain within/remains rooted in the thought [the way of thinking] which, indeed, produces relation to the possibility of sense, relation as the possibility of meaning. A thought that makes possible, in other words, the sensuous presentation of truth, our relation to truth, or even our relation to the sensuous, the material itself, to go back to the question of colour that we raised a moment ago [*Mais nous avons, autant que nous le pouvons, à rester dans la pensée...de ce qui fait justement que c'est par rapport à la possibilité du sens.*⁴ *C'est-à-dire, de la présentation sensible*

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4 A slight parataxis here in French makes the line of thought especially sinuous.

de la vérité, de notre rapport, ou de notre rapport au sensible lui-même si on repense aux couleurs]. Everything is here, in the maintaining of and insistence on the necessity of meaning [*du sens*]. *Not* in the demand for meaning, not in the appeal by which we cry out, “Tell us what it means, give us more of a sense of meaning” [*Donnez-nous plus de sens!*] ... We know full well what sense/meaning is. We know full well what Hegel—I wouldn’t say “teaches us” but, rather—communicates, hands off to us: what he hands over to us is the sensuous intensity of sense, the liveliness of meaning itself [*ce sens très vif du sens*].

Transcribed and translated by Emily Laurent-Monaghan,
with Robert St.Clair