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I Hegel and the Subversion of the System

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Subversion of System/Systems of Subversion

Gary Shapiro

Dear Reader: I wonder if you may not sometimes have felt inclined to doubt a little the correctness of the familiar philosophic maxim that the external is the internal, and the internal the external.

—Victor Eremita, Preface to *Either/Or*

What might it mean to think outside or beyond the Hegelian system of philosophy? Already in Hegel's own time this was a question that came to occupy those who labored under the weight of his speculative and comprehensive system of thought. The easiest and most immediately appealing strategy was to seize upon some category that seemed to be relatively neglected within the system, something that seemed to have been too easily *aufgehoben* into the totality. Kierkegaard is sometimes represented as centering his challenges to the Hegelian system around the valorization of the unhappy consciousness; that is, the consciousness aware of the immensity of the gap between itself and the infinite for which it longs.¹ There is a danger in choosing just one category from the entire Hegelian array, however, or in wanting to reverse the privileged status that the system accords to one of a pair of values (in Kierkegaard's case the reversal of the values given to the happy and unhappy consciousness). The danger is one that, as Derrida formulates it, is an ingredient in any practice that "put[s] the old names to work, or even just leave[s] them in circulation"; it is "the risk of settling down or of regressing into the system that has been, or is in the process of being deconstructed. To deny

this risk would be to confirm it.”² So Kierkegaard, who rejects the system so vehemently, can be and has been read as elaborating a dialectics of existence that is simply the Hegelian system inverted or reversed. The reasons are not difficult to see. To the extent that the old terms bear their old meanings and affiliations with the other terms of the system, simply denying those meanings and affiliations is to invite a return of the repressed. Marx himself introduced the figure of inversion or reversal for the operations he intended to perform on Hegel, although he was much more respectful of the system than Kierkegaard, and most plausible reconstructions of Marxist thought still tend to be Hegelian. Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, aimed at a certain transformation of the *Logic* by radicalizing nothingness. Twenty years later, in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, he had come to embrace a much more explicitly Hegelian position, as abstract Being had been transformed into the practico-inert and the drama of human freedom was no longer played out in the *Phenomenology’s* early chapter on “Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness” but had advanced all the way to “Absolute Freedom and Terror.” These subversions of the Hegelian system are not entirely unsuccessful; but they do raise the question of whether and to what extent a subversion more profound than inversion or reversal is possible. We might note that all of these subversions of the system could equally well be described as systems of subversion. In this respect we could point out that Hegel’s philosophy is itself a system of subversion: one that sees the negative everywhere, that applies criticism universally (beyond the limits assigned to it in the Kantian critique), and that deploys a set of categories that will throw into high relief the actual and potential contradictions of whatever exists. More specifically, Hegel aims at a subversion of the systems of Fichte and Schelling. One sense of the equation of the actual and the rational is surely that the actual shares in the movements, contradictions, and tensions of reason and that its limits are accordingly subject to reasonable articulation and critique. To the extent that a subversion of the Hegelian system operates in the spirit of this (left) Hegelian system of subversion we detect a certain modification and diversification of the Hegelian enterprise as well as its reconfirmation.

Perhaps Heidegger’s questioning of Hegel does appropriately seek to establish a distance between itself and these various systems of subversion. As Heidegger pointed out in his “Letter on Humanism” the reversal of a metaphysical formula simply reconfirms metaphysics.³ Although provoked by Sartre’s formula “existence precedes essence,” it could be amplified to include his variation on being and nothingness from the *Logic*, or lord and bondsman from the *Phenomenology*. Heidegger’s own questioning of Hegel proceeds not by isolating an aspect of the Hegelian system but by interrogating the spirit of the system itself. It is not

enough, Heidegger notes, in the rich pages he devotes to systematicity in his book on Schelling, to set oneself against all systems.⁴ We must ask what is presupposed, and most fundamentally presupposed, by the project of systematicity itself. Like the other systems of German idealism, Hegel's seeks to demonstrate the identity in difference of subject and object, to manifest an Absolute that knows itself. In "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," Heidegger attempts to show that what remains unthought in this call to "the thing itself" (*die Sache selbst*) is the metaphysics of presence and its limits. It is assumed by the system that its task is to present the way in which the thing itself becomes present: "Hegel's speculative dialectic is the movement in which the matter as such comes to itself, comes to its own presence."⁵ The system, along with Husserl's phenomenological "principle of principles," is the most advanced realization of the metaphysics of presence. Heidegger aims at subverting the metaphysics of presence by means of a *historical reduction* or bracketing, in which the entire sequence of thought from Plato to Hegel, Nietzsche, and Husserl is put into parentheses. Outside those parentheses lies a different kind of thinking, a play of absence and presence, *lighting and concealment*, in which truth is not the *telos* of a system but an inevitably partial dis-closure that always wavers or trembles between presence and absence.

To what extent does Heidegger's subversion of system then still remain indebted to Hegel? To what extent is he practicing a system of subversion that leans upon Hegelian modes of thought? The context within which such questions are to be explored is perhaps suggested by Heidegger's way of telling a story and by his use of the first person plural. The story of the metaphysics of presence, from Plato through the *Gestell* of the technological world (the Plato to NATO story) comes to seem more and more Hegelian as we acquire a certain distance from its initial shock and as more of the details are filled in. Certainly it has all the earmarks of the *grand récit* or metanarrative; the ghost of *Geist* seems to haunt it still.⁶ And Derrida's question to Heidegger — "Who we?" — is not coincidentally the question that Kierkegaard and Marx asked of Hegel. In the same essay Derrida suggests that Hegel, too, could say with Heidegger and Foucault that the end of philosophy is the end of man because man has no role or activity beyond the completion of the system. In this sense Derrida can also state more explicitly than Heidegger will allow himself, albeit with the qualification that it is said "within the metaphysics of presence" (where Heidegger would not like to speak), that: "we believe, quite simply and literally, in absolute knowledge as the *closure* if not the end of history. And we believe *that such a closure has taken place.*"⁷

When Derrida says that, he also anticipates speaking with another voice, or writing otherwise, that is, a voice that can give up the claim to a

logocentric legitimation and a writing that is no longer constrained by the boundaries of the book. This “voice” and “place” can be anticipated only in the form of “monstrosity.” The key to the Derridean project of subversion will be to speak and write in both ways at the same time. What is called a *double reading* and a *double writing*, then, is one that refuses the forced alternative between subversion from within and subversion from without. And this is because the inside/outside binary itself is precisely one from which the Hegelian system derives much of its nourishment; it is a prime motor of its machinery. Every theme, category, or topic that might be valorized from within — nothingness, labor, and the unhappy consciousness, for example — will prove to have limits that point to the need for totality. At the same time going outside — to Feuerbachian sensuous immediacy or to the Heideggerean history of Being — will turn into an illusory exercise in so far as these apparently absolute “others” will turn out to have been already comprehended in the system and in fact will push us toward increasingly comprehensive and totalistic readings of the system itself. For the internal/external binary, simply interpreted, is but an egregious form of that abstraction of the understanding that can also be formulated as the contrast between the finite and the (bad) infinite. To choose one or the other is to invite Hegel to explain once more the systematic distinction between the finite and the (good) infinite, that is the whole or totality.

When Derrida describes the work of *differance* as operating “at a point of almost absolute proximity to Hegel,” he is refusing the strategies of extremist subversion that would look for weapons only within or without the system.⁸ The point of absolute proximity itself can be understood in (at least) two ways (and not surprisingly, for both Hegel and Derrida are suspicious of any reductionist approach to limits that would yield an absolutely determinate point — the “almost” indicates the movement here). One focus of the ellipse that deforms or displaces the circle of the system will be a vigilant attention to the constant use of the inside/outside binary itself. The other focus will be the interrogation of the workings of the Hegelian text. In a certain sense these two foci correspond to Hegel’s own distinction, articulated in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* and elsewhere, between the rational core of the system and its external literary expression. Due to Hegel’s systematic and literal insistence on such a distinction we find here a kind of fissure or gap that, like the other wounds of the spirit, cannot be healed without leaving a scar. How great is the distance between these two foci? The point of Derrida’s textual labor is to establish that distance or, in other words, to investigate the various forms it takes when the system is interrogated with different strategies. The opening of deconstruction, and its territory or field, are made possible because there is indeed a spacing or difference here that the system simul-

taneously calls for and rejects. Hegel sees the same problem in the systems that he explicitly criticizes. In his essay on *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* he notes that at the "center" of Fichte's system, speculation and reflection do not quite coincide; "the two standpoints," he writes, "that of speculation and that of reflection are absolutely necessary and without union at the center of the system."⁹ Hegel suggests a way of systematically raising a question about any claim to systematicity: Do the two poles or dimensions that the system attempts to identify really come to coincide in the system? Hegel poses this question to previous philosophy, where it then operates as a system of subversion in regard to the systematic as such. But the question may also be asked of Hegel's system itself. Consider the way Hegel announces the identity of the internal and the external sides of the system at the beginning of the *Phenomenology*:

The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth. To help bring philosophy closer to the form of science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title "love of knowing," and be *actual* knowing — that is what I have set myself to do. The inner necessity that knowing should be science lies in its nature, and only the systematic exposition of philosophy itself provides it. But the *external* necessity, so far as it is grasped in a general way, setting aside accidental matters of person and motivation, is the same as the inner, or in other words it lies in the shape in which time sets forth the sequential existence of its moments. (*Phenomenology*, p. 3)¹⁰

The Preface itself is external, Hegel says, to the genuine movement of science, but to the extent that it orients us to that movement it is internal to it. This orientation to distinguish and identify the internal and external necessities impels knowing to become science or system or to attain its "true shape" (*wahre Gestalt*). Yet if the Preface is not part of the "true shape," does it distort that shape and impair the perfection of the circle? At the same time it is suggested that science may not yet have attained this "true shape," for as Hegel announces (in the first person), this is the project he has set for himself. The internal necessity is timeless, the external necessity is temporal and historical, and these are said to be the *same*. Hegel finds it necessary to distinguish between the "external necessity grasped in a general way" and "accidental matters of person and motivation." This sounds like good scientific procedure. The circle, the "true shape," will be produced from either the internal or the external center, and because these are the same center, the two circles coincide. If we press this geometrical figure or analogy too far, we will find ourselves

involved in the interminable problems that arise from attempts to map the *Logic* and the *Phenomenology* onto each other. Hegel might well point out that the mathematical figure of the circle is itself only an external image of the “true shape” of a scientific system. Because the Preface is self-excluded from the system, there should be no problem in placing any particular aspect of it under erasure. However, similar figures crop up throughout the Hegelian text, subverting its own claims to accomplishing an inside/outside distinction of prefaces and books or figures and thoughts.

The point to be noticed about this binary of the inside and the outside is that Hegel himself judges systematic thinking in terms of its ability to deploy and reconcile this opposition. In the *Phenomenology*, whose own status as inside or outside the system must remain puzzling, he does this in two places that must at first seem quite removed from one another. The question of system is first brought together with the inside/outside binary in the Preface (an outside of the outside?) and in a range of other observations on the relation of philosophical science to various mathematical, historical, or literary forms with which it might be confused. The second occurs in the analysis of the *Beobachtung der Natur* (“Observation of Nature”). The coincidence is marked by the fact that the word *System* and its derivatives occur much more frequently in these two sections of the *Phenomenology* than anywhere else in the text. Yet it might be objected that the mere appearance of the word is hardly a sign that the same issues are at stake; for a *System* of philosophy, it could be argued, is a very different thing from a biological organism considered as a system or from the systems (as Kiehmayer and Schelling called them) of sensibility, irritability, and reproduction that help to constitute an organism. It may also be seen that Hegel’s discussion of observational reason and the biologically organic is the most outdated section of the *Phenomenology*, tied as it is to the methods and findings of the empirical and speculative natural sciences of 1806, whereas the Preface still speaks to us about the question of how one ought to “do” philosophy. The contrast cannot be drawn so easily, however. As Hegel pointed out, the text of the *Phenomenology* is a complex network of references, interlocking back and forth.

One model of *System* that Hegel wants to subvert is the abstract Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*, which comes in for critique in both sections of the text. In both contexts system is something more than an ordered or comprehensive form of knowledge. System is a crucial concept in the analysis of observational reason because what is in question there is *life*, understood as a certain unity of the inside and the outside; specifically life is conceived on the model of an exterior as an *expression* of the interior. These very aspects of systematicity—life, expression, and a certain relation of interior and exterior—are also decisive in the thought of the Preface.

In the section *Beobachtung der Natur*, Hegel's analysis of systematic thinking is placed, it seems, between what could be called *structuralist* or *post-structuralist* alternatives. Systematic thinking is preceded by a stage at which reason notices only the *signs* by which organisms are differentiated. These *Merkmale* (signs, marks, indications), however, are not purely arbitrary. They are "*differentiae*" (as Miller translates *Merkmale*) that not only "enable cognition to distinguish one thing from another" but they are also that by which the organisms "*break loose* from the general continuity of being as such, *separate* themselves from others and are explicitly *for themselves*" (*Phenomenology*, p. 149). The differences are marked by such things as claws, teeth, and sexual division, which actually *make* a difference. It is not simply a question of constructing taxonomic schemes of classification into which these features of life might be inserted; it is part of the experience of reason to see system, in the first instance, as a system of difference. "Our artificial system," Hegel notes, "is supposed to accord with nature's own system" (*Phenomenology*, p. 149). Yet what is discovered is not system in the form of totality, but rather system as sheer differentiation, what Hegel had called "*absolut differente Beziehung*" in the *Jena Logic*.¹¹ This collapse of our expectation of systematic unity is one that is reiterated in the *Phenomenology*, very often recurring in this figure of nature differentiating itself endlessly, "nature red in tooth and claw"; for example, the expectation of an intellectual system that is aroused by the social institutions and practices of the intellectual is discovered to have as its *truth* an "intellectual jungle" (*das geistige Tierreich*).¹² To escape from this relentless system of differences, consciousness moves on to the search for laws and relations. The search is important, and the reasons for its failure are significant, but let us first look at the results of this failure, upon the eventual collapse of the quest for lawful systematicity in the world of life. We will be left in a condition in which we have a certain freedom with regard to the assignment of meaning; it will be a state that might variously be called *pre-systematic* or *post-systematic*. Such an "unspiritual freedom of 'meaning' (*Meinen*) will offer on all sides the beginnings of laws, traces (*Spuren*) of necessity, allusions to order and system, witty and plausible connections" (*Phenomenology*, p. 179). These comments can be read as pertaining to more than biology; they are also an account of what remains after the deconstruction of a classical philosophical text or system like the Hegelian one. We must return to the question whether Hegel himself gives us grounds for such a reading.

After experiencing the disorder of a world of signs or *differentiae*, observational reason turns not only toward laws and relations as such but to that which appears to be its own law: the organism considered as self-preserving and autotelic. In such an investigation, we are told, reason seeks its own *Begriff*, which has been displaced onto the organism. Here

the *Begriff* is to be thought of as coinciding with actuality, but because of the displacement, the *Begriff* “is taken roughly to mean the *inner*, and actuality the *outer*; and their relation produces the law that *the outer is the expression of the inner*” (*Phenomenology*, pp. 159–160). Given this law it becomes important to see what *shape* is attained by both the inner and the outer. In the Preface the *shape* of the system of science is one of Hegel’s major concerns; in this text external shape has an apparently more univocal sense than it does in the case of *the system*. But in so far as the “shape” of the system is something external, perhaps in so far as the system can be said to have a shape at all, are not the spatial and visual aspects of *Gestalt* implicated in what Hegel has to say about the order and structure of the system? I will not lead you through the torturous paths of Hegel’s discussion of the systems of sensibility, irritability, and reproduction. But it is clear that his general verdict on the search for systematic unity that those concepts were intended to enable, that is, the demonstration of a systematic expression of the inner by the outer, is a failure because it leads to trivial and tautologous pseudo-laws. It becomes an “empty play of formulating laws” that “can be practiced everywhere and with everything and rests in general on a lack of acquaintance with the logical nature of these antitheses” (*Phenomenology*, p. 164). By such criteria everything whatsoever becomes a system and it becomes impossible to rank and differentiate systems with regard to their degree of comprehensiveness and totality.

The *denouement* of reason’s experience of the principle that the outer is the expression of the inner is reached with the discovery that each of these terms itself has an inner and an outer dimension. The inner has an inner and an outer; the outer has both an outer and an inner (*Phenomenology*, pp. 171–172). The outer is both the “inner outer” of a purely mathematical description and the “outer outer” of (literal) shape. The inner is both the “inner inner” of the *Begriff* as the “unrest of abstractions” and the “outer inner” of its more specific form of teleology. Rather than a third term, *expression*, which would provide a *systematic* interrelationship of inner and outer we seem to have arrived at something like the typical structuralist double binary matrix that can be used for generating an indefinite series of differences. And so we arrive at the post-systematic state, or the ruins of system, at which we glanced earlier. Thus Hegel subverts one variety of organic system based on the coincidence of the inside and the outside.

There is some mutual resonance, I suggest, between these concerns with “true shape,” “inner and outer,” “system,” and “life,” and those that Hegel addresses with the same language when he comes to discuss the ground, status, and texture of a philosophical system. The difference, it seems, is that in the Hegelian system the *Begriff* is always both subject

and object; it is not displaced into the world of life in the mundane sense. Rather it is the systematic comprehension of the ways in which such displacement operates and points the way beyond, so that the displacements are simultaneously the movements along the "highway of despair" and the road to wisdom. However, Hegel himself explicitly distinguishes a level of the merely accidental within the external dimension of systematic necessity that he describes as details of language and "accidental matters of person and motivation." Here, too, there is both an inner and an outer of the outer. We could establish even a further dichotomy of the inner and the outer of the inner; namely, between the most general sense of the system's purpose and its articulation in the form of a certain categorial apparatus and order. In Hegel's critique of the systems of *Naturphilosophie* it is the mathematical character of the inner outer that "is just that completely quiescent, lifeless, and indifferent determinateness in which all movement and relation is extinguished" (*Phenomenology*, p. 172). Now the outer side of the necessity of science becoming a system is *time*, which is also susceptible to mathematical ordering, and the outer side of the system as a work or accomplishment is a written text that is articulated mathematically in chapters, subchapters, and sequential pages. Is this not the same matrix for generating differences and undecidable meanings as what Hegel found in the systems of biology? Perhaps we will be dealing with the machinery of the text whenever we are concerned with the system of truth. The *Gestalt* as spacing appears where we had expected only the conceptual form of the system. This occurrence seems to be what Derrida has in mind (or in the machinery that operates his text) when he interrogates the status of the Hegelian preface, not just the Preface to the *Phenomenology* but the preface as a structural possibility that renders uncanny the system's claims to systematicity. In his essay "Out-work" (*Hors livre*), he observes, for example:

Hegel's preface elaborates a critique of prefatory formality as it critiques mathematicism and formalism in general. It is one and the same critique. As a discourse external to the concept and to the thing itself, as a machine devoid of meaning or life, as an *anatomical* structure, the preface always has some affinity with the procedure of mathematics.¹³

Subversion of system, then, can proceed by reading the system against itself. The price to be paid (or perhaps the reward) is that one never quite escapes from the system but reads it differently. The more that Hegel succeeds at the construction of system, the more he fails; for in succeeding he elaborates a systematic way of assessing claims to systematicity that can then be turned upon the system he is presenting. Above all, Hegel

insists, “the true shape of truth is scientific,” and science is to be contrasted with an intuitive immediacy that would escape analysis by claiming “immediate knowledge of the Absolute, religion, or being” (*Phenomenology*, p. 4). But scientific truth, like the scientific systems that emerge in *Naturphilosophie* must allow of an *articulated* distinction into inside and outside that will yet be recuperated at the higher level of expression.

Hegel himself has already read system differently in exposing the difficulties that ensue upon the construction of such expressive unities. He details its dissolution into “beginnings of laws, traces of necessity, allusions to order and system, witty and plausible connections.” That is to say:

1. “Beginnings” not in the sense of *archai*, first principles, but anticipations or gropings toward lawfulness.
2. “Traces” (*Spuren*) of a necessity that, according to the logic of the trace has never been present.
3. “Allusions” (or hints) in the direction of order, where it is not possible to decide once and for all whether an order is cited or demonstrated, used or mentioned.
4. Witty connections because, like Rameau’s nephew in another section of the *Phenomenology*, wit makes linguistic connections that are deeper than the empty laws of the understanding in announcing the “*absolute Verkehrung*” or subversion of the simple and discrete.

In Hegel’s narrative of the systematic impulse in the “Observation of Nature,” we have something like an allegory of how the human sciences deal with texts, including the Hegelian text. A typology of interpretive stances is sketched, beginning with the pre-systematic, proto-structuralist effort to understand the subject-matter by sheerly differentiating marks, with opposed and opposing sets of features; then there is the inquiry that postulates an expressive and systematic identity of inside and outside. When that effort collapses because structural oppositions appear within the inside and outside themselves, we are left with a different kind of order, an economy of phonemes, mythemes, or in the crucial case, philosophemes, which exhibit some interrelationships even if they do not constitute a classical, totalistic system. Hegel himself provides such allegories of the subversion of system that are themselves systematic operations of subversion.

Derrida calls Hegel “the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing.”¹⁴ As the philosopher of the book, he is the encyclopedagogue, presenting his system as a fully rounded volume with no

outside. As the thinker of writing, Hegel constantly deforms and subverts that volume by adding prefaces, introducing tropes that are irreducible to the *Begriff* (itself a trope for grasping or comprehending), and by writing of writing in a way that makes visible his own writing and prevents it from becoming part of a seamless sphere. In "Outwork" Derrida gives a rigorous reading of the relation between system and preface along these lines, which I will not continue to repeat here. The Hegel of the system, Adorno says, would have us read only "between the lines," but how can we avoid reading the lines as well and noting their words, margins, and spacings?¹⁵ As a piece of writing, the Hegelian text then produces a *moiré* effect of presence/absence and turns upon itself to perform topological variations on its "true shape." If the inside "is" the outside, this may be so only in the degenerate, mathematical sense in which this is the case for the Moebius strip. There the nonidentity is as patent as the identity; what we have is not an expressive unity but (because this construction can be indefinitely divided to generate more like itself), a permanent possibility of subversion.