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Some Genres of Post-Hegelian Philosophy

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SOME GENRES OF POST—HEGELIAN PHILOSOPHY*

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There are a number of important texts, sometimes treated as philosphical and sometimes as literary works, which do not usually find an appropriate audience. Paradigms of what I have in mind are: Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings, almost all of Nietzsche, Marx's narratives of capital and class-struggle, Sartre's complex series of fictions, plays, treatises, critical performances and autobiography, and Heidegger's hypnotic meditations and textual exegeses. Responses by philosophers, especially Anglo-American ones, seldom take account of the specific literary forms of these works or of their authors very self-conscious concern with the problems and strategies of writing. It is true that the texts in question are often regarded as poetic, but the designation is usually code for nonsense. The positivistic assimilation of poetry and metaphysics to emotive utterance not only has deep roots and affinities in the English critical tradition but continues to have unacknowledged influence among philosophers. John Stuart Mill's idea that poetry is a voice overheard, expressing powerful emotions, continues to be paradigmatic for the way in which many philosophers construe poetry, despite its qualification or abandonment by literary critics. As a result, the deviation from the stylistic norms of the Descartes to Kant period of the texts mentioned above is often attributed to the personal peculiarities or even madness of their authors. Kirkegaard's broken engagement and Nietzsche's egomania and rivalry with Wagner have been invoked in order to interpret their writings; these interpretations are often so simplistic that a literary life-and-works critic of the old school might not be able to endure them with a good conscience. In any case, there is something paradoxical about attempting to explain a literary performance by invoking notions of personality and character from the contexts of ordinary life. For personality is originally the *persona* or mask of the dramatic actor and character a mark in a piece of writing: and this suggests that a reduction of literary practice to such notions may be short-circuited to the extent to which our ideas about character, personality and the like have already been formed by literary models.

When these works are not dismissed as poetical nonsense or biographical symptoms, they are sometimes mined for views or theories which can be abstracted from the text, reduced to a relatively prosaic form, and then submitted to conventional modes of analysis and criticism. Two supposed doctrines of this sort which have received a good deal of play lately are that

of "the eternal recurrence of all things" (Nietzsche) and "truth is subjectivity" (Kierkegaard). Before the philosopher seizes upon these as grist for his mill, he might pause to note that each occurs within a highly organized and complex literary structure, and is attributed to a figure within a text who is sharply distinguished from the author. So the preliminary task for the serious (or playful) reader of these works is to understand their larger strategies and moves, both in relation to their own parts and to the tradition of philosophical writing.

When Kierkegaard and Nietzsche come to sum up their careers they portray themselves not as thinkers or wise men, but as writers. In this connection it is instructive to think of *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* and the major portion of *Ecce Homo* which is entitled "Why I Write Such Good Books". To recognize the literary or poetic character of these works should not be a rationale for declaring that they are "not philosophy", however, and handing them over to the literary critic; to do so would assume that we are in possession of some clear metaphilosophical distinction between philosophy and literature. Yet it is just this distinction, among other things, which is *in question* in these texts, in terms of the more formal arguments they contain and, more significantly, in terms of what is shown in their form and structure. Similarly, to characterize these works as exhibiting a particular literary form, device, or trope — the most popular in recent years being metaphor — may assume a certain theory of literature which, if we read these texts more carefully, may be subject to serious interrogation. Metaphor, for example, is sometimes depicted as a concrete, rich, condensed meaning which contrasts with the schematic operations of literal prosaic language; or it is said by Hegel to contain only suggestions and undeveloped implications which require filling out by some more adequate form of discourse. As Heidegger suggests, such conceptions are already infected with the metaphysical contrast between the present and the absent, the phenomenal and the noumenal.[1] And the crucial role which has been assumed for metaphor may very well be questioned, simply by recalling the manifold figures of speech, genres, and rhetorical stances which are distinguished by the rhetorical tradition in literary criticism. In fact I believe a close reading of the works in question shows that far from yielding to analysis in terms of some ready made philosophical conception of metaphor, they anticipate such readings and demonstrate their insufficiency. A case in point: in *Zarathustra* not only are some of the work's apparently crucial metaphors called in question but the poetic principle of metaphorical writing is attacked as an unwarranted confusion of realms (cf. the chapter "Of Poets" in Part Two).

I have sketched some of the difficulties these texts have had in finding an understanding audience because it is just the problem of mutual understand-

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[1] "Only within metaphysics is there the metaphorical." Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz von Grund* (Tübingen, 1957); see also Ronald Bruzina "Heidegger on the Metaphor and Philosophy" in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy,* ed. Michael Murray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 184–200.

ing between author and reader which is a matter of acute self-consciousness in them. When philosophers divide discourse into the poetic and prosaic they obscure the subtle and manifold variations in the relation of author and reader which are a response to this problematic. Such considerations are paramount in theories of rhetoric and genre, but tended to be eclipsed during the romantic era for both philosophers and critics. They have lately begun to reappear in literary studies, although philosophers have tended to persist in the romantic theory of the literary symbol as a fullness of meaning, a fusion of spiritual and sensory significance which obtains independent of the rhetorical context.[2] Here there is a parallel between theories of symbol and metaphor, on the one hand, and philosophical stances which also aim at transcending rhetorical differentiation. Philosophy from Descartes on leans heavily on the assumption that the philosophical writer can expect his readers to identify with him as he advances in his meditations or analyzes the contents of his consciousness into basic elements. Hegel sought to justify and rationalize these assumptions by showing the historical development of the philosophical "we" which is Absolute Spirit's self-knowledge without any trace of opacity. There is a parallelism, then, between the theory of the literary symbol and the absolute "we" which determines much philosophical and poetical hermeneutics since the romantic era. Both approaches seem to involve assumptions that the self is autonomous and capable of self-knowledge and has some psychic independence of time. In a historical context these can be seen as the philosophical foundations of the universalistic ideology of bourgeois culture. A stylistic paradox arises when the assumptions are subjected to rigorous questioning by philosophers who fail to ask whether the mode of philosophical communication sanctioned by the assumptions can remain as normative when its props have been kicked away.

I think we will understand post-Hegelian philosophy in the literary mode more acutely when we recognize that it has given up universalistic aims not only in its explicit and implicit doctrines but in the way it is written and offers itself to the reader. that is, it is all *generic,* and I emphasize the specificity of *a* genre which supposes a particular relation of author and reader. In their self-conscious concern with this problematic, these texts can be compared with literary works that play upon the same themes. Hans-Georg Gadamer has suggested that it is the tragedy of the modern artist to be burdened with the quasi-religious imperative of establishing a universal community of understanding only to find himself caught in various forms of particularity. As he says

The experimental search for new symbols or a new myth which will unite everyone may certainly create a public and create a community, but

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[2] Paul de Man's revaluation of the literary symbol is significant. See "The Rhetoric of Temporality", in Charles Singleton, ed. *Interpretation.* Unlike de Man, however, I believe that a subject-object dialectic need not culminate in a poetics of symbolism. For some suggested parallels between Goethe and Hegel, see Karl Lowith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche.*

since every artist finds his own community, the particularity of this community-creating merely testifies to the disintegration that is taking place.[3]

Gadamer has perspicuously shown that the universalistic aspirations of art led to an aestheticism involving the systematic neglect of the context and occasion of the utterance. Hegel's career and his view of the relation between poetic and philosophical discourse is paradigmatic for understanding the ways in which later philosophers have dealt with the problematics of particularity in their discourse. In the "earliest system-program of German idealism" which Hegel at least endorsed, if he did not write, philosophy is described as giving up its particularistic associations with an elite group by merging with religion and art.

That program says:

> Until we express the ideas aesthetically, i.e. mythologically, they have no interest for the *people,* and conversely until mythology is rational the Philosopher must be ashamed if it. Thus in the end enlightened and unenlightened must clasp hands, mythology must become philosophical in order to make the people rational, and philosophy must become mythological in order to make the philosophers sensible.[4]

However, Hegel's career culminates in an *Aufhebung* of art and religion by philosophy, rather than a fusion. His *Phenomenology of Mind* claims to be the ladder to Absolute Knowledge, establishing a potentially universal philosophical community on the presumed basis of a society which has attained the universal recognition of human freedom and so is ripe for a flowering into self-consciousness. Like the rest of his later philosophy, Hegel's poetics is all narrated from the standpoint of this "we". It is organized around the generic divisions of epic, lyric, and drama which present an ascending series of approaches to subject-object identity by traversing a sequence of stages, connected with various forces of human community, in which there is a one-sided domination by either subject or object. Hegel's analyses show that he conceives of the subject-object dialectic as more than the meaning or content of the poetic genres. The roles of author and audience undergo a similar series of developments which culminate in a comic identity. Hegel suggests, then, that the particularities of the author-audience relationship are necessarily expressed in generic forms whose very lack of universality is the key to their transcendence; this transcendence occurs first within the history of poetry itself and is completed by that philosophical culture which establishes the absolute "we".

Although Hegel declares that "the wounds of the spirit heal without

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[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (new York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 79.
[4] The so-called "earliest system —program of German idealism", translated in H.S. Harris, *Toward the Sunlight*   (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

leaving a scar", Jacques Derrida correctly points out that this is not true of the philosophical struggle with writing. Commenting on the modern era in philosophy he says "What threatens is indeed writing . . . a battle is then declared. 'Hegelanism' will be its finest scar."[5] With the return of the repressed writing the wound bleeds again quite profusely. This may be the point of Nietzsche's metaphorical assimilation of reading and writing to bloody acts of violence in the chapter of *Zarathustra* called "Of Reading and Writing".

Hegel's claims and achievements were certainly great enough to produce an anxiety of influence in his successors. Whether we view them as rebelling against his attempt to complete the western philosophical tradition, as rejecting his picture of the ideal social circumstances which the philosophical "we" was supposed to enjoy, or as questioning those views of time and the self on which his presentaion rests, we need to see that these differences are expressed formally as well as thematically. Although they rejected various aspects of the Hegelian synthesis they were all sufficiently under its sway so as to move within its categories — again not only in terms of explicit doctrines and methods, but in respect to their strategies of writing and communication. In particular their rejection of these Hegelian universalisms took the form of a regression (from the Hegelian standpoint) from the usual textual conventions of philosophy to the necessarily limited genres of poetry.

One general theme of this regeneration of poetry within philosophy is decidedly Hegelian. Although it might be thought that the point of a philosopher's using a poetic or literary form would be to gain a greater audience — the thesis of the "earliest system-program" -- in fact the generic contract between author and reader which obtains in literature is always to some extent exclusive and conspiratorial as well as mutual. So we find philosophical authors relying on literary models to dispel the illusion of universality and to reach a very special audience at the expense of sacrificing the larger one. One might write a new version of Hegel's poetics in which the basic genres of poetry — epic, lyric, and drama — were exemplified not by the rich assortment of literary works which Hegel considers in his lectures, but by post-Hegelian philosophy. Such an analysis would sketch the ways in which the rejection of the fundamental Hegelian identity of subject and object is reflected not only in the content or world of these works, but in the relationship they establish between author and reader. Such a neat inversion of the relations between philosophy and poetry, in which poetics becomes the master-science for the understanding of philosophy, would read like one of Kierkegaard's parodies of Hegel, as written by a new pseudonym shamelessly mired in the aesthetic stage. Rather than working out all the details of such a parody by inversion, I would prefer to suggest some ways in which the fact of textuality as well as the simultaneous assertion of authorial power and the reader's freedom of interpretation constitute keys to the interpretation of some of the texts in question.

[5] Jacques Derrida *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), p. 99.

Most of the classical Marxist texts have an epic quality in both thematic and formal respects. The epic is typical of a loosely organized, heroic society, in which individuality emerges out of the fabric of common life. Nature and society — and society is conceived as a second nature — form a flexible but ineluctable background for all action. Actions typical of the epic are those battles for survival, glory, and recognition which Hegel describes in his analysis of master and slave. Marxist texts, which reject Hegelian identities by insisting on the primacy of nature, adopt the stance of objective science and impersoanl history, corresponding to the epic poet's self-effacement as the instrument of a super-personal Muse. Like the ancient epic they are ostensibly addressed to a heroic group sharing a common ethos: the modern proletariat replacing the Greek aristocracy. Just as the ancient epics when recited within later urban contexts had to be subjected to allegorical readings in order to adjust them to changed circumstances, so readings of Marxist texts by con-temporary intellectuals become moves within a relatively closed academic group or adjustments to new socialist institutions. The self-consciounsess of Marxist epic is noticeable in its displacement of the heroic age from past to future; this involves a deconstruction of reified society toward free associa-tion and the return of human products to their "natural" conditions of use.

The lyric is a literary form which is appropriate to an atomized society of private individuals — Rome, for example, as opposed to Greece. The relation which it projects between author and reader parallels its thematic bias. Its subject is an imaginative vision of or perspective on the world; it is presented to the reader as a voice overheard and therefore presents strong problems of interpretation as we try to place the speaker and his attitude. It is significant that Harold Bloom's paradigms of creative interpretation and misreading come from the romantic lyric tradition in which questions of the poet's voice have a special role. Kirkegaard's pseudonymous (or "aesthetic") works are, as he recognized, good examples of the "dialectical lyric". They take their origin in a prosaic society, a commercial market town which has the formal freedom of the Hegelian state without the transcendent dimensions of art, religion, and philosophy. In such a setting, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works raise the question as to whether a formal individual — one marked out by a social identity or its literary analogue, a character with a name — can be a real individual. Not only are these works concerned with the struggle to be an integrated person, but they focus attention on the status of the various pseudonyms and sub-authors in the text. In reading a work like *Either/Or* or *Stages on Life's Way* we are forced to ask how many voices are really speaking who they are, whether their experiences are to be taken as real or imaginary, and so on. How we should understand the idea that "truth is subjectivity" depends upon how we assess the fact that its speaker, Johannes Climacus, is not himself a Christian (as we suppose that Kierkegaard is), but an imaginary proto-existential philosopher. In some ways the history of existentialism is a massive misreading of some Kierkegaardian texts which depends upon taking the views of pseudonyms or characters which are themselves extremely pro-

blematic, as straightforward ideas or doctrines; yet what Kierkegaard is often doing is showing the impossibility of such a view or its inconsistency with Christianity.

If we were to continue the attempt to follow out in detail Hegel's triad of poetic genres — the epic, the lyric, and the drama — it would be tempting to think of Nietzsche as a tragic philosopher. Yet while it is possible to find ideas in Nietzsche which lend themselves to a tragic interpretation, such as the conception of the eternal recurrence, the predominant literary model of the texts themselves seems to be rhetoric rather than tragedy. The joyful acceptance of eternal recurrence as both exalting and limiting suggests something like a tragedy of fate in the ancient sense; yet this requires qualification when the teaching is seen as Zarathustra's song to himself within a highly complex rhetorical alternation of modes of discourse. That the book is "for all and none" shows Nietzsche's sense of the universalistic aims of drama (not surprising in the author of *The Birth of Tragedy*) as well as an awareness of the problematics of universalism, whose assumptions are questioned. Drama supposes more mutuality than is allowed in Nietzsche's conception of the self. More to the point, the subtitle suggests something about the special way in which this text mediates between its author and its readers. Part of what Nietzsche intended when he predicted that he would be understood only in a hundred years is surely that his texts would themselves help to create an audience which they could not have at the time of their publication. What kind of readers this audience would consist in is suggested in some of Nietzsche's remarks (in his posthumously published notes and lectures on rhetoric) about the ideal reader of classical rhetoric. Reading has to be active involvement in an endlessly complex play of rhetorical figures and maneuvers. Since it is impossible for the reader to coincide with the author in the way projected by earlier philosophy, the fact of difference, misreading, and the very lack of a contemporay audience become central features of the text itself. What seem on a hasty reading to be referential concepts — such as self-overcoming and the eternal recurrence — need to be *textualized*. Just as Nietzsche applies existential categories to himself in *Ecce Homo* mainly in so far as he is a writer, so the reader is invited to assume these notions in an authentic way by applying them to the activity in which he is immediately engaged — reading the text. Self-overcoming thus becomes a willingness to let one level of discourse, such as the metaphorical speech of Part One of *Zara-thustra*, be challenged by the metonymical reductive arguments against poetic metaphor in Part Two of the book. Eternal recurrence becomes a textual category having to do with the infinitely self-referential play of the text's motifs, images, and tropes.[6]

Hegel himself seems to think of comedy as the supreme genre. It requires an even greater consciousness of freedom than does tragedy, for it involves the happy renunciation of the security to be found in the substantial and

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[6] See Gary Shapiro "The Rhetoric of Nietzsche's *Zarathrustra*" in *Boundary 2* (1980).

objective — the gods, the state, and customary morality. Transcending the separations of other literary modes, the author and audience achieve an identity in difference through the medium of the comic hero. The latter is able to laugh not only at the external — whether natural or social — but most importantly at himself. When author and reader attain this same condition they achieve the greatest community of which art is capable. The philosophical equivalent of this kind of comedy is the Hegelian system itself or, if we are looking for a paradigmatic text, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (of which Jacob Loewenberg has given a fine comic reading). Philosophy so understood would be a genre beyond genre, a literary form unencumbered by any particularity in the stances of reader and writer. Since all are free in the modern world it is possible to achieve that community of "we philosophers" who go beyond all perspective in their comprehension of past perspectives. This, at any rate, is the view that Hegel would presumably take about his own work as a literary phenomenon. In fact the official view is challenged from within the texts themselves by the appearance of narrative structures and metaphors which threaten a collapse back into poetry. The famous passage about "the owl of Minerva", for example, refers to a complex network of images of light, dark and color, and the sun's apparent passage from east to west which run through the Hegelian corpus and connect with a traditional metaphysics of light and Goethe's ideas about color. Read closely, they suggest a much more ambivalent attitude toward the completion of philosophy and history than Hegel is usually credited with; and this very thematic ambivalence entails that the metaphors in question resist reduction to a non-metaphorical level. For the uncertainty which they reveal about the nature and desirability of complete wisdom is echoed in an uncertainty about whether metaphor might indeed have a genuine place in philosophy.[7] Hegel thus joins an illustrious group of philosophers, like the British empiricists with their Leviathans and internal theaters of the mind, whose vigorous denial of the figurative dimension of philosophy determines them to a significant but unconscious use of such figures. In Hegel's case this fall into poetry requires the reader to become an interpreter of images; but such a hermeneutic and critical interest is quite different from the ascent to identity with the author which the texts officially employ.

Hegel's example suggests that the philosophical desire to overcome the generic and rhetorical restrains which seem to structure most literary texts may be a form of *hybris* which does not succeed in actually transcending the boundaries in question but reveals their necessity despite itself. Two representative modern philosophers, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, have produced texts which disclose such unexpected generic forms. Heidegger's later essays depend upon obscuring or dissolving the human voice or radical of presentation in order to let language speak by itself. In form they resemble the

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[7] See Gary Shapiro "The Owl of Minerva and the Colors of the Night", *Philosophy and Literature,* Fall, 1977, pp. 276–94.

oracular religious poetry which Hegel discusses in his treatment of symbolic art. Both attempt a negative and indirect approach to that which is other and transcendent (whether God or Being) by accumulating a series of tentative metaphorical approximations whose adequacy is finally denied. Religious poetry of the sublime insists that God's relation to the world is only vaguely figured by the way in which elemental natural forces overshadow particular objects in nature; Heidegger's poetry of the history of philosophy depicts its succession of metaphysical concepts as illuminating only if we are aware of the vast discrepancy they exhibit between representational thought and Being. The impersonal voice of the inspired religious poet has its Heideggerian equivalent in the prophetic text of Being which not only says that *"die Sprache spricht"* but offers itself as an instance of that speech. Given this self-interpretation by the text of its own authority, there can be very little explicit sense of the reader's own position. He is called upon to follow another's path, one of those *Holzwege* or *Feldwege* with which Heidegger's writings are replete; in following the path it is expected that he will shift his response from conceptual thought and interpretation (which Heidegger sees as bound to subjectivity and the will to power) toward meditative silence. Yet this strategy provides the grounds for its own dialectical reversal by forcing the reader into becoming an interpreter of metaphors and ambiguities. Like the ancient interpreter of oracles (and it is not only Heidegger's style but his interest in a primal *Sagen* which links him to the oracle), the contemporary reader of Heidegger reverses the apparent domination of the text through his hermeneutical activity.

Wittgenstein, who was so concerned in a thematic way with the problem of the communicable and intelligible produced two texts which offer radically different versions of the author-reader relationship. The *Tractatus* is a self-enclosed, self-retracting text in which key concepts like "state of affairs" or "atomic fact" are intratextually defined, as in hermetic and symbolic poetry. In playing with the idea of the unspeakable it raises doubts about whether it can in fact have an understanding audience. If Wittgenstein was always a solipsist, as J.N. Findlay suggests, the production of such a radically self-inclosed book is not surprising. *The Philosophical Investigations* would be puzzling in this perspective not only because of its thematic denials concerning various possibilities of privacy but in respect ot its form: the reader is invited to dip in at random, to work the examples out for himself, and to observe the many threads which link the book to our common social pursuits, the most esoteric of which may be therapy which still requires a community of at least two. This very contrast suggests that the *Investigations* is the mirror-image of the *Tractatus;* if the latter is the solipsistic author's communings with his own soul then the *Investigations* is a solipsist's fantasy of unimpeded converse between author and reader and of a fully public role for philosophy. Given their totalistic exclusion or inclusion of the reader, these texts naturally lack any determinate sense of the specific relation of author and reader and so curiously lack any conception of textuality in philosophy;

a result which must stand in ironic contrast to the sacralization the books have undergone themselves.

It is writers like Heidegger and Wittgenstein who repeat the tragedy of the artist in the mode of philosophy (recalling now Gadamer's observation about the nineteenth century). This "ancient tragical motif as reflected in the modern" can be traced to a lack of explicit concern with problems of audience and genre and this neglect may itself be grounded in their respective conceptions of the human community. For Heidegger, men are largely under the domination of *Gestell*, the technological world-view which is the latest manifestation of Being. Given this constraint they are in need of a saving word to which they are woefully unprepared to hearken. Heidegger's own literary model for this situation seems to be Hölderlin who was reluctant to name the gods just because of this kind of concern with the problem of mediation; like the poet, Heidegger wants to back off from his own earlier texts which attempt a direct assault on Being to pursue the mode of the impersonal prophetic voice. Wittgenstein's community of customary language users also falls below the traditional level of the controlling and directing author, being apparently incapable of a deep poetic or philosophical revaluation of language. To the extent that this is so, the text becomes uncanny for it takes away with one hand the promises of sociality which it extends with the other.

My brief narrative suggests that there is some truth to the prophecies of Schlegel, Schelling, and the young Hegel that philosophy would ultimately return to its artistic origins; yet it also suggests that the optimistic mood of those prophecies requres serious qualification. For philosophy to become poetic it must become generic, and since a poetic genre rests on some more or less implicit picture of social arrangements, philosophy in the poetic mode is subject to many of the same enthusiasms and frustrations as is society and our shifting views of it. Given that there is some relationship between universal freedom and a philosophical form which escapes generic constraints, the form of philosophy becomes problematic when either the possibility of such freedom or the escape from genre, or both, is questioned. Nevertheless there are significant distinctions to be made among forms which are more or less explicitly aware of this underlying problematic, corresponding to those which Schiller was accustomed to make between naive and sentimental poetry. And although the Hegelian view of the relation between philosophical discourse and universal freedom may have to be surrendered as a description of present or future actuality, it continues to play a powerful role as a criterion by which we do both our reading and writing; in Kant's terms it functions as a regulative, but not as a constitutive Idea.

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