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Review of Rebecca Comay, Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution

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Rebecca Comay. Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution. Cultural Memory in the Present. Series editors Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. xiv + 202 pages.

I

In *Mourning Sickness*, Rebecca Comay offers an interpretation of Hegel's conception of "historical experience" (p. 4). Through a compelling reading of the Spirit chapter of the *Phenomenology*, she argues that Hegel demonstrates the "nonsynchronous" or "anachronistic" structure of this experience (pp. 2 and 3). She focuses on his treatment of the French Revolution and its cultural-political aftermath in the German lands, making a convincing case that Hegel's engagement with broad questions of history, experience, and politics was largely driven by his desire to make sense of those events. She reads the Enlightenment, Absolute Freedom and Terror, and Morality sections of the *Phenomenology* as articulating historical experience's nonsynchronous or anachronistic structure; she then uses the reconciliation outlined in the Conscience section of that text as the basis for interpreting the apparently positive normative doctrine of the *Philosophy of Right*, in which she finds yet another instance of nonsynchronicity. While her book is primarily oriented toward reinterpreting and reactivating Hegel's thought in the context of recent French philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, the interpretive knots and problems Comay addresses—What is the nature of the transition from Terror to Morality? How satisfied should we be with the reconciliation offered at the end of Spirit? What does that reconciliation have to do with the proposals in the *Philosophy of Right*? How are we to understand Hegel's doctrine on the actual and the rational?—are common to all thoughtful readers of Hegel, and she presents her discussion in such a way that only the most theory-allergic will find it objectionable. And so much the worse for them, since Comay has written a powerful and richly suggestive book.

II

In her introduction, Comay lays out the stakes of her argument directly: she will argue that though the French Revolution/Terror, due to its extremism and dead-end violence, is a "seeming exception" to the smooth dialectical progress of the *Phenomenology*, it in fact "constitutes the norm" for Hegel's articulation of the structure of "historical experience" (p. 6). This structure—which Comay identifies with trauma (and hence relates to mourning, melancholia, and a number of other Freudian-Lacanian concepts [pp. 4 and 5, but also *passim*])—is one of nonsynchronicity or anachronism, and Hegel is its "most lucid theorist" (p. 4).

Comay begins in the first chapter by establishing a benchmark view of the relation between German culture (where this designates something like: the culture of Protestant, German-speaking areas of Europe) and the French Revolution, by means of which she first introduces a more detailed conception of anachronism. The benchmark view has it that the Revolution's principles were essentially correct, but that it went off the rails into the Terror due to France's alleged lack of cultural preparation for genuine autonomy. That cultural preparation requires Protestantism, expunged from French culture through the Edict of Nantes. But German culture, thanks to Luther, has prepared itself properly for what France has bungled; thus German culture can now take over the Revolutionary project, with no need for French theatrics, hysterics, or mass slaughter, carrying this project out peacefully to its rightful and orderly conclusion.

From among the many provocative elements of this picture, Comay zeroes in quickly on her main topic of interest: the odd temporal structure it involves. For according to the benchmark view, German culture is both prior to the Revolution (in terms of its basic notion of freedom) and posterior to it (in terms of completing that Revolution), while the Revolution itself is both too early (starting before France can acculturate itself to Lutheran freedom) and too late (once the Edict has condemned France to spiritual backwardness). This temporal structure, insofar as it is not a merely contingent one but rather expresses the proper rational-conceptual movement of history, provides the book's first example of structural anachronism.

As Comay notes toward the end of the first chapter, the anachronism in question coincides with some emphatic gestures of cultural delimitation and distinction, particularly around the time when Napoleon served as the vehicle of political change in the German lands. But even when the Revolution was first getting off the ground, German culture was working hard to assimilate it—or in Comay's nicely chosen term, to “translate” it. Kant was among the most noteworthy laborers here, and Comay devotes her second chapter to his translation strategies, focusing on Kant's persistent characterization of German culture as observer or spectator in the historical theater on whose stage the Revolution played out with increasing gore and nihilism. Through a discussion of the trial of Louis XVI and of the spectacle of the guillotine in general, she argues convincingly for a parallel between this Kantian characterization and the Revolutionaries' own understanding of the theatrical or performative aspect of political institutions. Most central to her purpose, however, is her continued exploration of the anachronistic structure of historical movement, which she finds at the very core of Kant's thought. Kant famously holds that an outer, political revolution can never be legitimate, yet as Comay points out, he not only allows for but demands an inner, moral revolution, consisting in the recognition of our fundamentally rational practical nature. Thus one can become a moral subject only by performing an inner moral revolution that is itself only incumbent upon already-moral subjects—surely a structure of anachronism if ever there was one. What's more, this inner revolution must be thought of as one that will be realized eventually (even if never quite yet) out in the world; otherwise it is a merely empty demand. Then again, although the full actualization of the inner revolution only occurs with its complete realization in the world, this realization cannot appear in the world as an outer, political revolution, on pain of being necessarily illegitimate, always too early. Read in this way, Kant's view adds a deeper level of nonsynchronicity to the picture: such anachronism holds not only between major moments of historical progress but also within the moral individual and her relation to the meaning of moral action and moral life in the world.

By the third chapter Comay is ready to turn to Hegel, to whom she initially attributes, more or less, the benchmark view—an attribution borne out by Hegel's own Berlin lectures on the philosophy of history. Her aim is thus not to deny that Hegel holds such a view, but rather to show that Hegel is aware of its structural anachronism and regards this structural anachronism as basic to history, moral individuality, ethical life, the dialectic, and actuality in general. Comay's main source of evidence for her view is not the lectures on the philosophy of history, but the Spirit chapter of the *Phenomenology*, of which she provides a lively *précis*. One major task of this *précis* is to show that Hegel's arguments can be recapitulated helpfully in the vocabulary of recent Continental and psychoanalytic theory, but readers not steeped in that tradition will find it valuable and engaging nonetheless. The main Hegelian claims she first draws attention to are the standard ones: that the Terror reveals the core truth of Enlightenment reason, itself the engine of

Absolute Freedom, and that its core conceptual move is abstraction. Less standard, however, is her further conclusion: that for Hegel, abstraction is not really the problem responsible for the Terror. Abstraction is not only *per se* unproblematic, but necessary: it is one of the basic activities of thought as such, the negative in general. Like Kant, Hegel admits the revolutionary potential in the abstractive effort of Absolute Freedom—the break from the particular and the singular it provides, hence the universality it gives access to—and endorses it as the way to break free of “the stranglehold of tradition” (p. 77). The problem is rather that the Terror tries to obliterate the nonsynchronicity of historical experience. Here the nonsynchronicity in question is the mismatch between the norms of universalism supposedly established by the Revolution and the failure of any specific action to measure up to those norms—a mismatch that Comay shows playing out temporally in many ways—and the Terror consists in trying to get universality and singularity completely to coincide in the instant.

In the fourth chapter, Comay considers Hegel’s critique of Kant, suggesting that from Hegel’s perspective, Kantian and much post-Kantian moral theory is, like the Terror, concerned with bringing about a re-synchronization. Kant’s attempt proceeds by internalizing (“translating”) the universality/ singularity division into the subject herself in the form of a division between practical reason and inclination. This move leads in its turn to the invocation of the moral genius as the individual who can overcome that division and whose public declaration of conviction is now revealed as the reprise of Revolutionary political theater. The Kantian spectator-subject of the second chapter becomes the Beautiful Soul, and the outer murderous rage of the Terror becomes the inner paralytic rage of a subject unable to synchronize her nature with itself and unable to accept her nonsynchronicity.

It is thus left to the fifth chapter to deliver the “positive” Hegelian goods, and here Comay reads Conscience as Hegel’s attempt to show how anachronism itself can provide the key to its acceptance as the basic structure of historical experience. The centerpiece of her reading is again a temporal oddity: the lag between the moment of confession and the utterance of the “reconciling ‘yes,’” or the counter-confession. She argues that the delayed response from the hard-hearted judge allows the “evil” confessed to be transformed from some singular, specific wrong act into our finitude more generally—the need for mutual recognition of that finitude. The “reconciling ‘yes,’” accomplishes what the struggle for recognition could not, by counting as the acceptance of the normative non-authority of any single individual. In Comay’s terms, what is accepted is just the very nonsynchronicity she had identified earlier: on my own I can’t get my act and my norm to line up, to concur, to correspond—on my own I can’t act from the law I also at that very time and in that very act would have to be authoring. In the reconciling “yes,” then, we all give up our claim to exclusive authority, abstracting from our past struggles and evils by confessing all at once to our finitude. The result: “the wounds of Spirit heal and leave no scars behind.”

This disturbingly conciliatory conclusion seems to exclude Hegel permanently from the camp of those who see modern life as essentially fragmented, scarred, haunted, aporetic, and mournful. But Comay has other ideas, with which she turns to her final task: demonstrating the anachronistic structure in Hegel’s most “positive” vision of an actual normative regime in the *Philosophy of Right*. This demonstration is faced with a basic conceptual challenge: if we read the end of Conscience as she suggests—as calling for a mutual recognition of our inability

individually to establish satisfactory (or even intelligible) norms—then we will be forced to hold that the reconciliation available in forgiveness could not itself underwrite the establishment of any concrete normative regime. All existent norms and institutions seem to fall within the scope of that whose basic “evil” was confessed, and if that is so, then the reconciling “yes” looks to be wholly and necessarily void of any concrete normative content, beyond the admission of mutual dependence and finitude. Furthermore, Comay’s own reading, with its emphasis on the liberating force of abstraction, seems to call for just such an “empty” understanding of reconciliation. Yet if the reconciliation is empty, how are we to understand Hegel’s focus on the “actual” in his own political philosophy—a focus that seems to embrace existing concrete political institutions with decidedly problematic roots? We cannot retreat to the idea of a merely “inner” reconciliation, and in any case the fact of his deep complicity with the conservative Prussian regime makes it obvious that some more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of that reconciliation will be necessary.

Comay proceeds here as elsewhere through argument by concession: the *Philosophy of Right*, she concedes, is undoubtedly largely conservative. Yet what is proposed in the *Philosophy of Right* is not merely the resuscitation of old institutions, but the reinterpretation of those institutions. A parliamentary monarchy is here no longer either a degraded absolutism or a not-yet-fully actualized republicanism, but a system built on the mutual dependency of multiple institutions. Seen in this way, the generalization or abstraction involved in confession and reconciliation doesn’t completely obliterate the past, as the Revolution had dreamed of doing. Instead it frees up the past to function in a way it could not function when it was merely the record of opposing forces, the record of a struggle for recognition in which each subject was not merely a Kantian observer, but a participant, and of which each is a survivor. Reinterpreted as the process leading to such reconciliation, history becomes my means of access to a norm that precedes and has for now authority over me, and to which I can then hold my subsequent actions, including the activity of transforming those very norms and establishing new ones. The state proposed in the *Philosophy of Right* is thus not at all the last word, but a first new word: the first stage of a reset process whose “inner being” (*Phenomenology*, ¶808) is the recollection of a past to which we are now reconciled.

Thus reconciliation is not the end of the story; the *Philosophy of Right* does not present the final re-synchronization of history, of experience, and of normativity. Even here the structure of anachronism can be seen at work, leaving open the future of the state and its normative force. Within the state, Comay argues, the structure of anachronism is exhibited in the thorny problem of the *Pöbel* or “rabble,” and more specifically in Hegel’s choice neither to omit the conceptual problem the rabble poses, nor to deny that it poses such a problem, nor to propose a solution to it (see *Philosophy of Right*, §244–245). In the *Pöbel* the state produces a problem its own norms must recognize but which its institutions cannot resolve or eliminate. By intentionally including this irresolvable glitch in his argument, Hegel left a text that does not directly thematize, but does recognizably perform, its own anachronism—a text that does not announce or openly indicate, but does instantiate, the nonsynchronicity of the norms it endorses in its vision of appropriate concrete institutions. Philosophy’s painting of gray on gray is thus the painting of an identity that undoes itself. Comay urges us to give up our hard-hearted judgment, reconciling ourselves to Hegel’s anachronism and our own. In so doing, we get some distance from our locked-in understandings of both Hegel and normativity, and we have the chance to return to our own

tradition, and our current views on that tradition, to reinterpret them and their remaining possibilities free of the burden of a demand for instant and final authority.

III

Readers familiar with Continental theory of the past few decades will recognize many themes in Comay's book, and they will recognize as well the basic gist of her argument: to make the case that Hegel is not only invulnerable to standard "aporetic" critiques, but should be regarded as an early advocate of (a particular view of) the fundamental aporiae constituting subjectivity, experience, representation, history, and normativity generally. Readers familiar with the relevant psychoanalytic theory are likely to have a similar experience of her engagement with the literature on trauma, mourning, and melancholia. By suggesting Hegel's (anachronistic!) anticipation of these discourses, Comay identifies her own interpretive approach to Hegel with the very anachronism she finds in his work: it is only after Derrida and Lacan that this kind of Hegel could really be encountered, even if that encounter shows that he was "there" all along. Yet although her interpretation has possibly extensive consequences for the self-conception of recent theory, Comay does not say much about these consequences. It would be illuminating to hear, for instance, whether Derrida's arguments regarding history, repetition, anachronism, mourning, and experience (not to mention spirit, and spirits) in *Specters of Marx* would have to be modified in light of Hegel's contributions to theorizing these topics.

Readers conversant with the usual scholarly literature on Hegel's ethics and politics will notice that Comay does not engage directly with this literature (though she shows in some endnotes that she is familiar with it). Her choice not to engage was clearly deliberate, and to complain about it would be not to find fault with this book, but to demand that she have written some other book. Yet it is possible to detect a kind of indirect engagement with this literature, at the level of rhetoric. Comay aims at what is sometimes called a rehabilitation, achieved by showing that Hegel not only doesn't make the mistakes imputed to him, but even avoids them better than most everyone else. Despite the fact that rehabilitating interpretations are not the bread and butter of Continental theory, it is not hard to see how a standard Derridean strategy could be used to rehabilitative ends. Put very broadly, such a strategy begins from an extant canonical interpretation of the target text, adopting that interpretation as expressing the target text's intended meaning or auto-interpretation, and then reading the text "against" itself qua canonically interpreted. It is easy enough to imagine a rehabilitating argument that would simply iterate this procedure, now taking the deconstructive reading as the canonical one. But Comay does no such thing; she subjects neither any canonical interpretation nor the deconstructive literature to a deconstructive reading.¹ Instead, she adopts a strategy familiar from "non-metaphysical" interpretations of Hegel. She first admits that things look very bad for Hegel indeed: that the *Philosophy of Right* does appear to endorse the then-current socio-political power structure, that Hegel does seem to think that history culminates in early nineteenth-century Prussia, that he does say that the wounds of Spirit heal and leave no scars behind—all familiar claims whose conservatism, teleology, and logocentrism have been the targets of well-known deconstructions. Then, just as a non-metaphysical interpretation aims not to vindicate a supposed Hegelian metaphysics but to get Hegel off the metaphysics hook entirely, Comay accepts the valuations underlying these deconstructive charges, and aims to show that Hegel is not vulnerable to them. If I am right about this unspoken strategic affinity, it would be good to hear more about how and to what extent her way of reading Hegel differs from these others, which

she conceives as “undertaken . . . for other purposes” than hers (p. 96). Are rehabilitating interpretations in general called for by the idea of reconciliation and anachronism? If so, is one kind of rehabilitation more effective than another at reactivating “the thwarted futures of the past” (p. 145)? Must all rehabilitations effectively share one strategy? The careful structure of her arguments—which I have not at all reproduced in this review—suggests that Comay has thought about these questions; it would be helpful to hear more.

IV

Whatever its relation to past literature, Comay’s book suggests a number of further avenues of research that might take her arguments as their basis—whether or not their own conclusions would end up compatible with hers. I will mention just two possibilities here.

The first would be a study of Hegel’s discussion of religion, in the *Phenomenology* and elsewhere, in light of the structure of anachronism Comay identifies. She does devote a few lengthy endnotes to Hegel’s religious-theological context, but these do not show any direct connection to the basic thesis of her book. The mere names of some relevant Christian themes are enough to suggest how much could be done here: creation, fall, covenant, incarnation, redemption, justification, judgment, economy. As Comay rightly indicates, many of the shapes treated in *Morality* are representatives of various strains of Protestantism, and as she rightly reminds us, Hegel’s Berlin lectures testify to a lifelong philosophical and political hostility to Roman Catholicism. But \ it seems not quite precise to say that *Morality* contains “a dreary catalogue of every possible variation of contemporary Protestant inwardness” (p. 144) or (*pace* Kojève) to assimilate Napoleon, even as the world soul on horseback, to “Christ incarnate” (p. 138). Hegel’s conception of the resources of Protestantism, and his grasp of the incarnation (and of reincarnation), are richer than that, and while Comay’s own argument shows how very much we can get from Hegel’s thought if we avoid lazily dismissing it as “God-talk of the blandest kind,” such a demonstration leaves open the possibility that Hegel is deeply committed to God-talk of some other kind. Comay hints at this possibility when she says that Hegel’s model of confession and forgiveness cannot be subsumed under traditional models, such as those subjected to famous critical analyses by Nietzsche, Jankélévitch, Arendt, and Foucault. As a corollary to that claim, she asserts that this model can compete, on their own terms, with those offered by Derrida, Levinas, Blanchot, Arendt and Kristeva, and that he anticipates in important ways some more recent work on St. Paul by Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and others. Yet between escaping the former criticisms and holding up in competition with the latter innovations, there is considerable philosophical-theological wiggle-room. And considering that Hegel never so much as hints at a desire to cut loose from what he grasps as the Christian tradition proper, it seems natural to imagine that his answer to questions about how to think through reconciliation and forgiveness, along with the normative regimes reconciliation would open up for us, would have a substantive religious component. Of course, we needn’t imagine anything at all here, for between *Morality* and *Absolute Knowing* lies a chapter unexplored in Comay’s book: Religion. That chapter presents a wide field for the future development of the interpretation Comay advances.

The second would involve bringing Comay’s arguments into dialogue with the work of Catherine Malabou. In books on Hegel (including Hegel’s conception of time and its relation to his philosophical theology), Freudian trauma theory (including its relation to current neuroscience and neuropsychanalysis), and deconstruction (among other things), Malabou has

explored many of the questions of history and transformation Comay engages with, through her development of Hegel's concept of plasticity. Her project and Comay's are not to be hastily identified; there are a number of more or less obvious points of disagreement between them (for instance, on the proper understanding of Freud's concept of a death drive). A thoughtful consideration of their parallel achievements would be a real contribution to the current literature.

V

In summary, Comay has written a startling and refreshing book. She has marshaled an immense amount of cultural-historical analysis, a great deal of considered reflection, and a host of insightful arguments into an interpretation of Hegel that goes well beyond its avowed topic of the French Revolution. This interpretation poses challenges not only to its explicit targets, but to all serious students of Hegel who contend with the difficulties of his views on history, experience, politics, and the weight of cultural tradition. She accomplishes all this in a reasonably-sized book with a rousing prose style, and in a way that will hopefully provoke further work along the same or similar lines.

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Notes

1. One arguable exception here is her reading of Hegel on the *Pöbel*, which attributes to him a kind of intentional, if unacknowledged, performative undermining of his apparent explicit claims to completeness and closure. But if Comay is right, those explicit claims are only apparent.