



Volume 2 | Issue 4: Emancipation After Hegel

11-48 | ISSN: 2463-333X

---

# Emancipating Hegel: Synthesis, History, and the Example of Whitman

Russell Sbriglia

For a fellow disciple of what, in my estimation, is the single most important tradition informing Todd McGowan's *Emancipation After Hegel*, that of the Ljubljana School, many possible responses to the book present themselves. One could, for instance, point out all of the ways in which McGowan's book constitutes what, to date, is the most ambitious attempt at articulating precisely the type of "Hegelian critique of Marx" that Slavoj Žižek long ago called for.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one need look no further than McGowan's contention that Marx is a "rightist deviation" from Hegel – a reading sure to raise some eyebrows – to realize that Adrian Johnston's claim that "McGowan forges an unprecedented type of Left Hegelianism" is in no way hyperbolic.<sup>2</sup> Another potential avenue of response would be to point out all of the ways in which McGowan's book constitutes what, to date, is the most subtle attempt at achieving another of Žižek's career-long aims, that of "reactualiz[ing] Hegelian dialectics by giving it a new reading on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis."<sup>3</sup> I say "most subtle attempt" because though McGowan devotes an entire chapter to the topic of "Hegel After Freud" – a chapter in which he argues that Hegel came "almost a century too soon," for it is only with the advent of Freud and psychoanalysis that we get an

adequate language for articulating the primary aim of the dialectic: namely, “to sustain and extend contradiction” – Lacan is conspicuously absent, yet nonetheless present, virtually nowhere, yet simultaneously everywhere, throughout the book, a (more or less) silent partner.<sup>4</sup> Or, to give one final example, one could respond to the book by pointing out all of the ways in which the ontology of Hegel’s that McGowan lays out therein – an ontology according to which epistemological impasses and contradictions are not to be abandoned as precluding true ontological inquiry, but are instead to be viewed as symptoms of contradictions in being itself – offers a much needed corrective to the object-oriented ontologies underwriting the various new materialisms and realisms currently *en vogue* throughout the humanities and social sciences. Whereas these object-oriented ontologies are all marked by a desire to bypass the subject and return philosophy to the pre-Kantian aim of “thinking substance” as it is “in itself,” to regain, in the words of Quentin Meillassoux, access to “the *great outdoors*, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers,” McGowan demonstrates with devastating clarity that, from the vantage point of Hegel’s ontology, insofar as substance is ineluctably also subject (i.e., non-self-identical, divided against itself), such a great outdoors, as Lacan says of the big Other, simply does not exist.<sup>5</sup>

Tempting as all of these avenues are, however, in what follows I have opted to follow none of them. With respect to the first two, those familiar with the work of the Ljubljana School will no doubt be able to register for themselves the degree to which McGowan’s book not only draws upon Žižek and company’s approach to Hegel vis-à-vis Marx and Lacan, but further radicalizes it. As for the third avenue, I have already said pretty much everything I have to say about the challenge that Hegel’s “broken ontology” (as McGowan elsewhere puts it) of subjectivized substance poses to object-oriented ontologies of the aforementioned sort.<sup>6</sup> What I intend to do here is to pay careful consideration to how McGowan’s interpretation of Hegel as a thinker of radical emancipation at the same time radically emancipates Hegel himself from long-held misconceptions about and misprisions of his philosophy, not only by his detractors but even – perhaps especially – by his defenders. My means of so doing will be to focus on one particular figure in the long history of Hegel’s reception, a figure who was one of Hegel’s earliest, most enthusiastic champions in the United States: Walt Whitman.

I have chosen Whitman as my focus not simply because, as McGowan himself notes, with the exception of Hegel, he is arguably the most iconic thinker of

contradiction in the nineteenth century, but also, and more importantly, because his understanding of and engagement with Hegel throughout his later poetry and prose illustrates two of the main “catastrophes,” as McGowan characterizes them, from which Hegel’s thought has long suffered: (1) the view that the dialectic can be understood by way of the model “thesis-antithesis-synthesis,” a view whose primary effect has been the miscasting of Hegel as above all else a prophet of synthesis; and (2) the central role that the *Philosophy of History* has played in the dissemination of his thought, a role whose primary effect has been the miscasting of Hegel as a teleologist whose notion of the “end of history” is deemed part and parcel of an unwavering belief in a utopian overcoming of political contradictions – indeed, of the very political itself. Though my approach throughout will necessarily be less theoretical than historical (though by no means *historicist*), it is my hope that such an approach will help to corroborate some of the fundamental claims of McGowan’s book while simultaneously helping to further clear the ground for future theoretical work on Hegel (especially in my own field of nineteenth-century American literary studies) – theoretical work upon which it will be difficult to avoid bringing McGowan’s book to bear.

### **Non-Synthetic Hegel, or, Absolute Contradiction**

Allow me to begin this section with a brief personal anecdote – one that will help to illustrate just how crucial an intervention into the field of Hegel studies McGowan’s book truly is. A few months ago, while sharing a drink with friends following the conclusion of the day’s panels at this year’s LACK Conference, my phone began the proverbial process of “blowing up.”<sup>7</sup> In the first of many text messages and emails I would receive over the next two weeks regarding the matter, one of my colleagues in the English Department at Seton Hall University texted me a screenshot of a passage from the latest entry in the ever growing “quit lit” genre, an article by Andrew Kay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled “Academe’s Extinction Event: Failure, Whiskey, and Professional Collapse at the MLA.”<sup>8</sup> The article is a by and large cynical narrative of Kay’s experiences while attending the annual MLA Convention in Chicago, Illinois this past January after having decided to leave the academy nearly three years ago as a result of its beyond dismal job market. The passage from the essay that my colleague (later several colleagues) sent me was the following one:

I woke the next morning with a hangover. I looked at my phone: it was the three-year anniversary of my finished dissertation. . . . I showered, dressed, and headed to the elevator, where a young man from Seton Hall University effused to a peer: “If you practice the dialectic in the antinomian way that Adorno lays out, then you can’t achieve the synthesis Hegel envisions.” I stared straight ahead.<sup>9</sup>

The anonymous “young man” in this passage is me. I did indeed take an elevator ride with a peer (a fellow English professor at Seton Hall, though not the one who sent me the initial text), the short duration of which was in fact spent discussing Hegel.<sup>10</sup> Funny as it is, however, Kay’s recounting of what I said on that elevator ride couldn’t be more inaccurate, for though (in the interest of full disclosure) I can’t remember *exactly* what I said, I am certain that I did not say *this* – not only because I don’t believe I’ve ever uttered the word “antinomian” aloud before, but also, and more importantly, because, like McGowan, I insist that Hegel’s dialectic in no way rests on a vision of synthesis. Of course, the target of Kay’s parody is neither Hegel nor his dialectic (synthetic or otherwise) but rather, as Micah Mattix points out, “the language English professors have adopted over the past fifty years.”<sup>11</sup> And yet, that Kay can confidently rely on the trope of Hegel as a prophet of synthesis to serve as the vehicle for his jab at academic-speak illustrates just how universally shared such a view of Hegel is.

Ironically enough, the person I happened to be sitting next to when I received this first of many messages regarding my (not so) anonymous appearance in Kay’s article as a champion of Hegelian synthesis was Todd McGowan, who opens the first chapter of *Emancipation After Hegel*, “The Path to Contradiction,” by confronting head-on the accepted wisdom, even among many Hegelians, that the dialectic can be understood by way of “the mantra ‘thesis, antithesis, synthesis.’” As McGowan explains, though Hegel “never employs these terms to describe his philosophy” – indeed, he even “implicitly criticizes this way of organizing the movement of his thought” – because the dialectic “often seems to move from a one-sided claim to an opposing one-sided claim to a third claim that addresses the shortcomings of both,” an “image of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis takes hold.”<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, such an image is appealing, for it not only “make[s] the notoriously difficult Hegel easier to understand,” but also “provides a comforting image of how conflicts and contradictions end up working out.” On the other hand, it makes Hegel an easy

target for those who would like to paint him as a thinker who “believes in tidy and necessarily progressive resolutions of oppositions in a universe that constantly gives the lie to this verdict,” a “bright-eyed optimist incapable of registering the unresolved messiness of real life.”<sup>13</sup>

Though not the first to critique the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model of understanding the dialectic, McGowan’s approach to so doing is unique in that it rests on demonstrating that this model isn’t one of contradiction at all but, rather, one of “mere opposition.”<sup>14</sup> As the impetus behind McGowan’s reading of Hegel is ultimately political (how could a book with both “emancipation” and “revolution” in its title not be?), perhaps an example from the realm of political theory will best serve to illustrate the distinction he draws between contradiction and opposition. The most iconic instance of oppositional thinking in political theory over the past century is Carl Schmitt’s “friend-enemy” model of the political. According to Schmitt, the distinction between friend and enemy is the necessary “criterion” for the political as such insofar as it is the “distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced.”<sup>15</sup> As he puts it in *The Concept of the Political*, “a world without the distinction of friend and enemy” would, perforce, be “a world without politics,” for “the political can be understood only in the context of the ever present possibility of the friend-and-enemy grouping.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast to this oppositional model (wherein “friend” plays the role of thesis while “enemy” plays the role of antithesis), Hegelian contradiction, McGowan contends, entails “not the assertion of a thesis and a contrary antithesis,” but rather grasping the inability of any thesis to be “stable” or “self-identical” in its own right – the inability, as Hegel would put it, of any thesis to be “substantial.”<sup>17</sup> Contradiction is for Hegel not the process whereby a thesis encounters an external obstacle or “enemy,” but the process whereby, “follow[ing] its own logic,” a thesis “thereby finds itself at odds with itself,” “undermines itself by exposing its own internal division.”<sup>18</sup> Whereas opposition is premised upon a relation of externality, contradiction, understood as “the inability of anything to be identical with itself,” is premised upon a relation of internality.<sup>19</sup> In short, in order for a given conflict to be truly contradictory rather than merely oppositional, it must be an *immanent* one.

The immanence of contradiction is the fundamental lesson behind such classic Hegelian notions as “tarrying with the negative,” the “night of the world,” and the “cunning of reason,” all of which encapsulate McGowan’s point that for Hegel “a thesis is never an isolated starting point that subsequently confronts an antithesis.” On the contrary, because a thesis “always generates its own contradiction,” it is “at

odds with itself on the basis of its own articulation, not through the emergence of an antithesis that responds with a counterpoint.” From this it follows that not only is there “no isolated thesis for Hegel,” but so too is there “no external opposing antithesis.”<sup>20</sup>

So why, then, does this image of the Hegelian dialectic as a battle between thesis and antithesis continue to hold so much sway? McGowan’s answer is ideology. As he asserts, “When opponents of Hegel transform this internal division into the opposition of thesis and antithesis, they make his philosophy an easier target while at the same time performing the fundamental ideological gesture that this philosophy tries to combat.”<sup>21</sup> Marx, of whom McGowan is deeply critical in the book, famously theorized ideology as “false consciousness,” a phenomenon best encapsulated by the line, “They do not know it, but they are doing it.”<sup>22</sup> Yet whereas Marx’s definition of ideology rests on the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (for it is the bourgeoisie that, by way of various mystificatory processes, causes the proletariat to misperceive social reality, to see it “upside-down, as in a *camera obscura*,” as Marx famously put it in *The German Ideology*), for McGowan, following Žižek, ideology is the transposition of an *immanent* antagonism into an external one – the transposition, in short, of contradiction into opposition.<sup>23</sup>

Having already mentioned Schmitt, a man once infamously crowned the “Crown Jurist” of the Third Reich, it is perhaps worth illustrating this point by way of the phenomenon that Žižek often characterizes as the “zero-level” of ideology, “ideology as such”: anti-Semitism.<sup>24</sup> As Žižek explains, what happens in anti-Semitism is that an inherent social antagonism is projected onto an Other, the “Jew,” who is thereby transposed into “a foreign intruder who stands for the threat to society as such, for the antisocial element, for its excremental excess.” Such a process establishes the “elementary coordinates” of ideology insofar as it takes an immanent antagonism, one inherent to a given social order, and “mystifie[s] or displace[s] it” so that its cause can be projected onto [an] external intruder.<sup>25</sup> Hence Žižek’s conclusion that “the real ‘secret’ of the Jew is our own antagonism”: “the fascinating image of the [Jew] gives a body to our own innermost split, to what is ‘in us more than ourselves’ and thus prevents us from achieving full identity with ourselves.” In short, “*The hatred of the [Jew] is the hatred of our own excess.*”<sup>26</sup>

To return to McGowan, this is why he insists that “the popular reading of Hegel that imagines contradiction in terms of antithesis” not only “thoroughly betrays his radicality,” but also (and more nefariously) allows us to cling to “the figure of the

enemy who serves as a foil for our identity” rather than confronting the fact that our identity is itself non-identical, riven from within.<sup>27</sup> Insofar as he “systematically uncovers contradiction lurking within opposition,” thereby “enabl[ing] us to see that oppositions are really just contradictions in disguise” and that “those we imagine as enemies most often turn out to be versions of ourselves,” it is Hegel, not Marx, who should be considered the father of modern ideology critique.<sup>28</sup>

And yet, to recall Kay’s quip about Hegelian synthesis, as McGowan stresses, it is with this third term in the faux-Hegelian triad that “the problem begins in earnest,” for though synthesis is “the term most popularly associated with Hegel,” it is at the same time the term “most alien to his philosophy.” To quote McGowan at length:

[T]he movement that results from contradiction is not a synthetic one. What Hegel calls the resolution (*Auflösung*) of contradiction is not its elimination through a third term, as the idea of synthesis suggests. Instead, it is the reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) with contradiction, the recognition that contradiction is not a problem to be eliminated but the driving force of all movement in being. One cannot arrive at a synthesis that would eliminate contradiction because contradiction is the basic fact of all being. This is the heart of Hegel’s philosophy, which the formula “thesis, antithesis, synthesis” utterly betrays.<sup>29</sup>

From this perspective, the movement of the dialectic isn’t, as Hegel defenders (like Robert Pippin) and detractors (like Karl Popper) alike believe, “a progressive one” (at least not in the typical sense of the term “progressive”), for rather than “creating an increasingly secure position for himself through the conquest of successive contradictions,” as the synthetic/progressive model suggests, Hegel instead “serially tear[s] away from the possibilities for escaping contradiction.”<sup>30</sup> Though there is indeed what Hegel calls “unity” (*Einheit*) at the end of each dialectical process, this unity “does not do away with contradiction but enacts a reconciliation with it.”<sup>31</sup>

Here we come upon a problem akin to that of the confusion between contradiction and opposition discussed above. Whereas reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) is often understood throughout Hegel studies as interchangeable with synthesis (the latter of which, as McGowan notes, never appears in Hegel – at least not in the sense of the result of a merger between a thesis and its antithesis), Hegel uses reconciliation to mean not the “overcoming” of contradiction by way of a fusion

between two opposing theses, but rather the recognition of contradiction's recalcitrance. Reconciliation for Hegel entails not the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of contradiction, but recognizing contradiction's "intractability."<sup>32</sup> Rather than referring to some mystical process performed by the dialectic itself, reconciliation refers to an act of recognition on the part of the subject. This is why McGowan continually uses phrases such as "reconciling ourselves with" or "being reconciled to" contradiction throughout the book.<sup>33</sup> And it is precisely this act of reconciling ourselves to contradiction that for McGowan constitutes the core of what Hegel calls the "absolute."

According to McGowan, the dialectic advances toward the absolute not by resolving contradictions via ever more complex syntheses, but by moving "from simple contradictions to contradictions that more and more resist resolution." We reach the apogee of the dialectical process – "absolute knowing" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the "absolute idea" in the *Science of Logic* – when we arrive at a contradiction that is utterly recalcitrant, "a contradiction that we cannot overcome but must reconcile ourselves to."<sup>34</sup> What Hegel calls the "absolute" is thus "nothing but the affirmation that contradiction is unsurpassable. At the position of the absolute, we recognize that we cannot ever eliminate contradiction, no matter how long or how hard we strive to do so."<sup>35</sup> As Stanley Cavell might put it, contrary to its typical caricature as a pretension on Hegel's part to know or to think absolutely everything, up to and including a preternatural ability to "read the mind of God" and thereby "deduce all of reality out of the self-movement of (his) Mind," the Hegelian absolute rests not upon knowledge but, rather, an "acknowledgment" of contradiction's intractability.<sup>36</sup> And Hegel's acknowledgement of contradiction's intractability, its absoluteness, is precisely what the view of him as a thinker of synthesis absolutely prevents us from acknowledging.

### **With Friends Like These . . . , or, Whitman's Synthetic Hegel**

That contradiction is for Hegel absolute is why he ultimately ended up rejecting the principle of noncontradiction – a principle, as McGowan stresses, that underwrites virtually all of Western philosophy.<sup>37</sup> In "The Difficulties of Contradicting Oneself," the final section of the book's opening chapter, McGowan turns to the self-professed poet of contradiction, Walt Whitman, as a means of placing Hegel's unique method of rejecting this cherished principle in greater relief. As the section's title suggests, the lines of Whitman's in which McGowan is primarily interested are the following iconic

ones from Section 51 of “Song of Myself”: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then, I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes).”<sup>38</sup> As McGowan has it, in these few brief lines, Whitman not only “articulate[s] Hegel’s opposition to the principle of noncontradiction,” he also does so in a way that, unlike Hegel’s prose, “few readers struggle to make sense of.” And yet, McGowan maintains that from a properly Hegelian perspective, Whitman’s straightforwardness is precisely the problem, for to either “simply abandon the principle of noncontradiction and contradict oneself” or “straightforwardly announce in a noncontradictory fashion that contradiction exists” is to “implicitly accept the very principle [Hegel] shows to be untenable.” Though directly rejecting the principle of noncontradiction makes for greater “lucidity” (not to mention a more “compelling poem”), such an “unambiguous embrace of contradiction would be untenable for Hegel as a philosopher” insofar as the “trick” of his dialectical method is to “embrace the principle of noncontradiction in order to show that it ultimately does not hold.”<sup>39</sup>

If Hegel, however, doesn’t go about pulling off this trick poetically, he nonetheless does so *dramatically*, for, as McGowan contends, “the logic of the movement in Hegel’s works is one of the dramatizing of a position in order to make its contradiction apparent.” Hegel can neither simply embrace contradiction nor openly reject the principle of noncontradiction because “in the drama that his philosophy unleashes, every position reveals its own undoing, exhibiting that rather than being self-identical it is at odds with itself. Dramatization exposes each position to its own crisis.”<sup>40</sup> As a student of nineteenth-century American literature might put it, though Hegel, as McGowan asserts, “cannot be Walt Whitman,” he can nonetheless be Edgar Allan Poe, a thinker who, like Hegel, most effectively rejected favored principles not by openly renouncing them, but by taking them up and parasitizing them, undermining them from within by following their logics to their contradictory ends. Indeed, to follow the logic of this particular thought to its end, if the dialectic is a drama, then Hegel, its stage manager, is an “imp of the perverse.”<sup>41</sup>

McGowan concludes his remarks on Whitman by noting that “even though he embraces Hegel as a primary inspiration, [his] Hegelianism offers tacit support to the maxim that the greatest threat to a thinker are acolytes rather than enemies.”<sup>42</sup> Though I agree with McGowan that Whitman illustrates the truth of this maxim, it is not “Song of Myself” that best does so. While Whitman did indeed full-throatedly endorse Hegel as a primary inspiration, at one point proclaiming that “Only Hegel is fit for America – is large enough and free enough,” and esteeming him “Humanity’s

chiefest teacher and the choicest loved physician of my mind and soul,” what is most interesting about McGowan’s attribution of the aforementioned lines from “Song of Myself” to Whitman’s Hegelianism is that these lines were actually written *before* Whitman’s definitive encounter with Hegel – an encounter, as a number of critics have discussed, that had a major influence on his later poetry and prose.<sup>43</sup> In fact, from the perspective of McGowan’s Hegel, “Song of Myself” represents Whitman at his *most* Hegelian, a point that illustrates the other side of McGowan’s aforementioned maxim: namely, that the greatest acolytes of a given thinker are often unconscious ones.<sup>44</sup>

Though he likely knew of Hegel at the time of his initial drafting of “Song of Myself” in the mid-1850s, Whitman’s true discovery of Hegel by all accounts didn’t occur until the 1860s.<sup>45</sup> As Whitman biographer David Reynolds notes, Whitman’s friend F. S. Gray gifted him a copy of Frederic Henry Hedge’s popular 1848 anthology *Prose Writers of Germany* in August of 1862.<sup>46</sup> One of the founding members of the Transcendentalist Club (which was originally dubbed “Hedge’s Club” because it typically convened whenever he came down to Cambridge, Massachusetts from Bangor, Maine, where he held a Unitarian pastorate), Hedge, though Boston-born, studied in Germany between the ages of thirteen and seventeen (1818–1821), during which time he is said to have read Kant’s Critiques in the original German as well as works by the other German Idealists. He would go on to become a professor of German at Harvard.<sup>47</sup>

Among other notable German intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – including Hamann, Herder, Goethe, Jacobi, Lavater, Lessing, Novalis, Schiller, Schlegel, and Schleiermacher – Hedge’s *Prose Writers of Germany* features English translations of selections from all four major German Idealists, including excerpts from over a dozen of Kant’s texts (particularly his writings on aesthetics), Fichte’s *The Destination of Man*, Schelling’s *Philosophy of Art*, and Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* and “Who Thinks Abstractly?” Though fluent in academic German, Hedge, in the book’s preface, attributes the translations of Kant and Schelling to fellow transcendentalist (and eventual Emerson biographer) James Elliot Cabot, while the translations of Hegel he attributes to “an anonymous friend possessing peculiar qualifications for that difficult task”—a friend identified by Loyd Easton as Henry Boynton Smith, who had not only studied in Germany (as had Hedge), but who, while there, had also struck up a friendship with Hegel’s widow.<sup>48</sup> The anonymous Smith is likewise credited with having written the brief introduction

to Hegel that precedes the excerpts from the *Philosophy of History*. Especially relevant to our discussion is the following passage from this introduction:

His philosophy claims to be the absolute system, the result and culmination of all other systems. In it he resumes the whole progress of the human mind, and alleges that his system, and that alone, is able to explain the whole course of history, all the phenomena of nature, all the problems of speculation. There is one *Absolute Substance* pervading all things. That Substance is *Spirit*. This Spirit is endued with the power of development; it produces itself the opposing powers and forces of the universe. All that we have to do is to stand by and see the process going on. The process is at first the evolution of antagonistic forces; then a mediation between them. All proceeds by triplicates; there is the positive, then the negative, then the mediation between them, which produces a higher unity. This again is but the starting point for a new series. And so the process goes on, from stage to stage, until the Absolute Spirit has passed through all the stadia of its evolutions, and is exhibited in its highest form in the Hegelian system of philosophy.<sup>49</sup>

From the standpoint of McGowan's Hegel, there are a number of problems with this passage. For starters, there is the problem of Smith's casting of Spirit as absolutely substantial, as the "one *Absolute Substance*." Though Smith claims that Spirit "produces itself the opposing powers and forces of the universe," this Spirit is ultimately one of pure positivity, pure "development." Smith gives no indication that Spirit, too, is riven by contradiction, that Spirit, as Hegel famously puts it in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, "finds itself" only by way of its "utter dismemberment," becomes Spirit only by "looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it," a negativity whose "power is identical with . . . the Subject."<sup>50</sup> As regards our present discussion, however, an even more elementary problem with this passage is its perpetuation of the "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" model of the dialectic. Though the exact terms themselves are absent, everything else from this model is here, as Smith presents Spirit as unfolding triadically, with "positive" (thesis) clashing with "negative" (antithesis) and the "mediation" between the two generating a "higher unity" (synthesis).

Whitman wasn't merely influenced by Hedge's book, he also cribbed from it.<sup>51</sup> Consider, for instance, the following passage from Whitman's "Sunday Evening Lectures," a series of unpublished lecture notes on the German Idealists written at some point during the late-1860s or early-1870s:

Penetrating beneath the shows and materials of the objective world we find, according to Hegel . . . that in respect to human cognition of them, all and several are pervaded by *the only absolute substance* which is SPIRIT, endued with the eternal impetus of development, and producing from itself the opposing powers and forces of the universe. A curious, triplicate process seems the resultant action; first the Positive, then the Negative, then the product of the mediation between them; from which product the process is repeated and so goes on without end. In his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, this is illustrated in the portion on "History as a manifestation of Spirit."<sup>52</sup>

The influence of Hedge's book is unmistakable here, as Whitman reproduces nearly verbatim the language Smith uses to describe both Spirit ("*absolute substance*," "endued with the eternal impetus of development," "producing from itself the opposing powers and forces of the universe") and the "process" of Spirit's unfolding ("triplicate," "Positive," "Negative," "mediation"). What's more, among the excerpts from the introduction to the *Philosophy of History* included in Hedge's collection (excerpts about which we will have more to say below) is a section titled "History as the Manifestation of Spirit."<sup>53</sup>

Another well-documented source upon which Whitman relied for his knowledge of Hegel was British author Joseph Gostwick's 1849 textbook *German Literature*.<sup>54</sup> Though Gostwick likewise refrains from using the terms thesis, antithesis, and synthesis to characterize the dialectic, in his remarks on Hegel he too casts him as above all else a synthesizer, a resolver of contradictions. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

Kant explained the laws of the understanding. But are these laws accordant with external truth or reality? . . . Hegel professes to solve the . . . question (left open by Kant) . . . by a method of thought which he styles 'absolute logic;' a process of reason which (as he shows) is found

not only in the human mind, but throughout external nature. The heavens and the earth, and all things within their compass, all the events of history, the facts of the present, and the developments of the future, must be (according to Hegel's doctrine) only so many steps in one eternal process of creative thought. The leading principle of this process is found in the development of a series of oppositions which are at once produced and resolved by reason. Truth is represented as consisting in the just 'relation' of objects to each other. Unity pervading apparent opposition, and variety, is the mark of truth in all systems, both natural and intellectual.<sup>55</sup>

While these comments reflect a somewhat more nuanced understanding of the dialectic than that of Smith, Gostwick nonetheless frames the dialectic as a process of "eternal" progression. Not only does he take "unity" to mean reason's resolution of contradictions as opposed to its reconciliation of them, but he also holds that all contradictions are merely "apparent," a point he reiterates a few pages later when he claims that Hegel treats "all the oppositions or apparent contradictions found in the world of thought, as also in the external world, . . . with regard to the essential unity from which they proceed."<sup>56</sup>

Though Whitman briefly quotes from *German Literature* in the "Sunday Evening Lectures," it is his 1882 essay "Carlyle from an American Point of View" that reveals the full extent of his debt to Gostwick.<sup>57</sup> As is the case with Hedge's book in the "Lectures," Whitman in this essay doesn't merely adopt Gostwick's language, but also appropriates a number of passages from *German Literature* (especially the ones we've been looking at) nearly verbatim. The following passage is exemplary in this regard:

According to Hegel the whole earth . . . with all its infinite variety, the past, the surroundings of to-day, or what may happen in the future, the contraries of material with spiritual, and of natural with artificial, are all, to the eye of the *emsemblist*, but necessary sides and unfoldings, different steps or links, in the endless process of Creative thought, which, amid numberless apparent failures and contradictions, is held together by central and never-broken unity – not contradictions or failures at all, but radiations of one consistent and eternal purpose; the

whole mass of everything steadily, unerringly tending and flowing toward the permanent *utile* and *morale*, as rivers to oceans. . . . Truth consists in the just relations of objects to each other. . . . All apparent contradictions in the statement of the Deific nature by different ages, nations, churches, points of view, are but fractional and imperfect expressions of one essential unity, from which they all proceed.<sup>58</sup>

While a line such as “Truth consists in the just relations of objects to each other” is useful to note, for it illustrates the degree to which Whitman’s purported “recounting” of Hegel, however “freely,” is really just a recapitulation of secondary sources like Gostwick and Hedge, of far greater importance are the lines in which he reiterates Gostwick’s contention that, ultimately, contradictions for Hegel are merely “apparent,” “not contradictions . . . at all.”<sup>59</sup> Following Gostwick’s lead, there are, so far as Whitman’s Hegel is concerned, no contradictions that reason or spirit cannot ultimately overcome because, as it turns out, there are no true contradictions, just “fractional and imperfect expressions of one essential unity.”

It is precisely this triumphal understanding of the Hegelian dialectic that we find in a brief poem of Whitman’s written around the same time as the Carlyle essay, 1881’s “Roaming in Thought (*After reading HEGEL*)”:

Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is Good steadily  
hastening towards immortality,  
And the vast all that is call’d Evil I saw hastening to merge itself and  
become lost and dead.<sup>60</sup>

In their editorial notes to this poem for the Norton Critical Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Sculley Bradley and Harold Blodgett, upon pointing out that Whitman “felt that his own idealism was affirmed by Hegel’s,” assert that the dialectic (which, tellingly, they characterize via the formula “thesis, antithesis, synthesis”) is “essentially illustrated by these lines.”<sup>61</sup> Yet, while Whitman does indeed cast Good and Evil as thesis and antithesis in the poem, he doesn’t introduce a third term to occupy the crucial position of synthesis. Indeed, it would seem that what we are left with at the poem’s end is not some new entity, a hybrid of Good and Evil, but rather Good alone. Moreover, it’s not altogether clear with what Evil actually merges in the poem. When Whitman says that Evil is “hastening to merge / itself,” does he mean us to

understand that Evil is hastening to merge itself *with Good*, in which case Good would be responsible for having vanquished Evil, or are we instead to take the “itself” to mean that this merger occurs *solely amongst Evil*, that Evil *vanquishes itself* in a process entirely separate from the Good? Whatever the case, as in the Carlyle essay, there is simply no place here for what McGowan terms “the constitutive status of contradiction” for Hegel, no sense that the Hegelian absolute “involves the recognition of the constitutive necessity of” contradiction.<sup>62</sup> By the poem’s end, Evil is left for “dead,” while Good is assured of achieving “immortality.”

As noted earlier, McGowan points out that a primary reason for the persistence of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model of the dialectic is that it “provides a comforting image of how conflicts and contradictions end up working out.” For a number of Whitman’s commentators, it is precisely this understanding of Hegel as a “bright-eyed optimist,” a thinker who offers “tidy and necessarily progressive resolutions of oppositions,” that so attracted the poet to him. As the aforementioned David Reynolds argues, Whitman found in Hegel the “philosophical consolation” he so desperately needed in the wake of the Civil War, the bloody carnage of which he witnessed firsthand while serving as a volunteer nurse for the Union Army.<sup>63</sup> Invoking one of the iconic lines from “Song of Myself” likewise invoked by McGowan, Reynolds contends that:

With slight rewriting, we could say that by the late [eighteen] sixties America was too “large” for Whitman, who now looked to the Hegelian dialectic for solutions to cultural problems which his poetic “I” – itself once “large” and “containing multitudes” – had formerly tried to solve. Hegel’s formula of thesis-antithesis-synthesis brought great consolation to Whitman. It suggested that, no matter what, things would work out in time.<sup>64</sup>

As Reynolds concludes, in contrast to Kant’s “subjectivism” – a subjectivism that “ultimately made Emersonian Transcendentalism distasteful to” Whitman as well – the “synthetic idealism” of Hegel, “the all-resolving philosopher,” “accorded with Whitman’s jingoism,” leaving him “more confident than before” that the “problems” of postbellum America “would disappear with time.”<sup>65</sup>

Reynolds is far from alone in painting Hegel as Whitman’s philosophical panacea. For instance, in her discussion of Whitman’s 1871 political pamphlet

*Democratic Vistas*, Betsy Erkkila claims that, “In his attempt to reconcile the ideals of democracy with the carnage of the war and the corruptions of post-Civil War America, Whitman found philosophical support in the ideas of Hegel and the German idealistic thinkers,” adding that “Hegel’s idea of a triplicate process through which opposites are merged into a higher synthesis, and his vision of history as a manifestation of spirit, rationalized Whitman’s own vision of American democracy progressing through the evils and contradictions of the present toward divine ends.”<sup>66</sup> One even finds such a view among philosophers. Reflecting on the affinity between Whitman’s and Hegel’s thought, Richard Rorty, in an oft-anthologized essay, asserts that

Whitman, like Hegel, . . . wanted competition and argument between alternative forms of human life – a poetic agon, in which jarring dialectical discords would be resolved in previously unheard harmonies. The Hegelian idea of “progressive evolution,” which was the nineteenth century’s great contribution to political and social thought, is that everybody gets played off against everybody else. This should occur nonviolently if possible, but violently if necessary, as was in fact necessary in America in 1861. The Hegelian hope is that the result of such struggles will be a new culture, better than any of those of which it is the synthesis. This new culture will be better because it will contain more variety in unity – it will be a tapestry in which more strands have been woven together. But this tapestry, too, will eventually have to be torn to shreds in order that a larger one may be woven, in order that the past may not obstruct the future.<sup>67</sup>

It is one thing for literary critics like Reynolds and Erkkila to rehearse the “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” mantra and to characterize Hegel as an “all-resolving philosopher.”<sup>68</sup> Not only is their primary focus Whitman rather than Hegel, but, as we have seen, their accounts of Whitman’s understanding of and engagement with Hegel are altogether accurate.<sup>69</sup> It is quite another thing, however, for a philosopher like Rorty to accept uncritically and thereby help to perpetuate the view of Hegel as a thinker of harmony, synthesis, resolution, and progressive evolution. And yet, who better than a philosopher – not to mention one of the most revered American

philosophers in recent memory – to illustrate just how pervasive and persistent is the “catastrophic” view of Hegel as a prophet of synthesis?

But Rorty’s discussion of Hegel’s influence on Whitman doesn’t end here, as he goes on to note that “Hegel’s philosophy of history legitimized and underwrote Whitman’s hope to substitute his own nation-state for the Kingdom of God.”<sup>70</sup> Rorty here steers us toward another of the posthumous catastrophes McGowan identifies as having befallen Hegel’s philosophy, one that likewise drew Whitman to Hegel: the central position that the *Philosophy of History* has played in the dissemination of his thought. We will examine both the nationalistic and imperialistic purposes to which Whitman put Hegel’s philosophy of history below. In order to demonstrate just how far afield from Hegel’s own philosophy of history Whitman’s pseudo-Hegelian version is, however, we must first consider McGowan’s attempt at correcting this second catastrophe.

### **Non-Substantial Hegel, or, Freedom as the End of History**

McGowan begins his book’s seventh chapter by asserting that “the most unfortunate development in the dissemination of Hegel’s thought after his death was the central role that his lectures on the *Philosophy of History* played in this dissemination.” Though based largely on transcriptions of Hegel’s lecture notes, as well as notes from students who attended the lectures, this posthumously published work, McGowan laments, “came to define the popular image of Hegel.” Indeed, for most non-specialists, the *Philosophy of History* constitutes “the beginning and end of the Hegel canon.”<sup>71</sup> While this is still largely true today, it was even truer during Whitman’s era. Aside from the short essay “Who Thinks Abstractly?,” the brief selections from the *Philosophy of History* included in Hedge’s anthology were the only writings of Hegel’s to which most Americans, even learned ones, would have had access until the late-nineteenth/early twentieth century.<sup>72</sup>

As McGowan explains, though as a general rule “there is no bad choice when one begins to read Hegel for the first time,” for each of his major works “has a legitimate claim to serving as an introduction to the entire system,” the exception to this rule is the *Philosophy of History*.<sup>73</sup> In addition to the fact that Hegel didn’t himself prepare the lectures for publication, two other, more pressing problems present themselves. In the first place, throughout the lectures, “dialectics has only a peripheral role relative to the description of various societies and their development of freedom.” Whereas “each of Hegel’s other major works rehearses in some way his

dialectical system while introducing the subject matter,” be that subject matter logic, philosophy, religion, or politics, “the *Philosophy of History* does not.”<sup>74</sup> In the second place, many of the key terms that Hegel uses throughout the text, such as “world-historical individual,” “exist nowhere else in Hegel’s philosophy.” And yet, such terms, “along with other clichés from this work (like Hegel’s dismissal of the importance of the individual in history),” are nonetheless “often the only references to Hegel that many people have at their disposal.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, as McGowan correctly concludes, many people – especially those largely unfamiliar with the rest of Hegel’s work – hold the false impression that the *Philosophy of History* is Hegel’s “key text,” one that serves as a “shorthand for [his] entire philosophy.”<sup>76</sup>

McGowan makes a convincing case for supplementing the *Philosophy of History* not with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as Alexandre Kojève (in)famously did, but with the *Science of Logic*.<sup>77</sup> As he argues, “though Hegel himself never says as much,” properly understanding the *Philosophy of History*, especially the notion of freedom discussed therein, requires first reading the *Science of Logic*. To read the *Philosophy of History* before having navigated “the minefield of Hegel’s most difficult work” – a work in which he defines freedom (in McGowan’s words) as “the refusal to endow the Other with wholeness or self-consistency,” “the refusal to treat the Other as a substantial being” – is to be misled into thinking that the *Philosophy of History* “present[s] a triumphant image of progress that leads inexorably to the Europe of Hegel’s time without any consideration of those sacrificed for the sake of this progress.”<sup>78</sup>

This triumphant image of progress and the attendant dismissal of those world-historical individuals sacrificed for the sake of this progress is precisely that which the excerpts from the *Philosophy of History* featured in Hedge’s anthology help to paint. Of all the famous passages from the *Philosophy of History* – including those in which Hegel proclaims that “Europe is absolutely the end of History” and that “America is therefore the land of the future” (both of which we will discuss shortly) – the only one included in Hedge’s excerpts is the following one regarding the cunning of reason (with cunning [*List*] here translated by Smith as “craft”):

In the history of the world something else is generally brought out by means of the actions of individual men than they themselves aim at or attain, than they directly know of or will; they achieve their own ends, but something farther is brought to pass in connection with their acts, which

also lies therein, but which did not lie in their consciousness and purposes. . . .

. . . Caesar fought to maintain his own position, honor, and safety, and the victory over his opponents was at the same time the conquest of the whole kingdom: and thus he became, leaving only the forms of the constitution of the State, the sole possessor of power. The carrying out of his own at first negative purpose got for him the supremacy in Rome; but this was also in its true nature a necessary element in the history of Rome and of the world, so that it was not his own private gain merely, but an instinct which consummated that which, considered by itself, lay in the times themselves. Such are the great men of history – those whose private purposes contain the substance of that which is the will of the spirit of the world. This substance constitutes their real power; it is contained in the general and unconscious instinct of men; they are inwardly impelled thereto, and have no ground on which they can stand in opposing the man who has undertaken the execution of such a purpose in his own interest. . . .

Should we, farther, cast a look at the fate of these world-historical individuals, we see that they have had the fortune to be the leaders to a consummation which marks a stage in the progress of the general mind. That reason makes use of these instruments we might call its craft; for it lets them carry out their own aims with all the rage of passion, and not only keeps itself unharmed, but makes itself dominant. The particular is for the most part too feeble against the universal; the individuals are sacrificed.<sup>79</sup>

Though Smith, in the brief introductory remarks on Hegel that accompany his translation of these excerpts from the *Philosophy of History*, doesn't comment on this passage, Gostwick surely has it in mind when he claims that history is for Hegel "a progressive enunciation of truth through a series of imperfect interpreters. Through all the errors of all times the process of truth may be traced. Individuals and communities, and even nations, may fall as sacrifices to this error; but even this error is a part of the process by which truth reveals itself."<sup>80</sup> For McGowan, it is precisely claims like this – claims according to which Hegel's position is that individuals, communities, and even entire countries are ruthlessly "sacrificed" for the sake of the

universal, which “directs human history like a puppeteer” – that help to perpetuate “the worst stereotypes of Hegel’s philosophy.”<sup>81</sup>

And yet, as McGowan stresses, Hegel is himself largely “responsible for much of the misunderstanding that surrounds” the *Philosophy of History*, for he “leads the reader unfamiliar with his other work to believe that he sees history as a progressive march to a preordained goal achieved only by Christian Europe.”<sup>82</sup> “Unfamiliar with his other work” is the operative phrase here, which is why, as noted above, McGowan contends that the *Science of Logic* is a necessary prerequisite for understanding what, exactly, Hegel is up to in the *Philosophy of History*. This is especially the case when it comes to properly grasping another fundamental concept from the *Philosophy of History*, one which, like the “world-historical individual,” doesn’t appear anywhere else in Hegel’s oeuvre, yet which, unlike the world-historical individual, doesn’t appear in the selections from the *Philosophy of History* included in Hedge’s anthology: the “end of history.”

Perhaps no other passage from the *Philosophy of History* has received more attention – much of it negative – than that in which Hegel boldly proclaims that “the History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History.”<sup>83</sup> While many Hegelians either apologize for or attempt to disavow this pronouncement of history’s end, McGowan not only insists on maintaining it, but also maintains that it is a “crucial pillar of Hegel’s edifice,” for reaching the end of history necessarily entails “the recognition of universal freedom.”<sup>84</sup> As McGowan explains, contrary to its typical understanding, the end of history for Hegel entails neither the cessation of “significant historical events,” nor our ceasing to discover “new avenues for the articulation of freedom” (as in the discovery of, say, “some new form of communism”).<sup>85</sup> Rather, the end of history designates the point at which “freedom becomes accessible for all,” with freedom here understood in the precise sense discussed above, as the recognition of “the absence of any substantial authority” and the subsequent “refusal to treat the Other as a substantial being.”<sup>86</sup>

To schematize McGowan’s account of how Hegel arrives at the end of history, we might say that the end of history is for Hegel achieved by way of three Events, all of which constitute crucial desubstantializations of the Other. The first Event, that which stands as the beginning of the end of history, as it were, is the death of Christ on the cross, an Event which demonstrates that “even the highest authority imaginable, even the infinite authority of God, suffers from the same contradiction that besets the lowest subject.” It would take a second Event, however – the

Protestant Reformation – to fully realize the radical freedom that this first Event entailed. In contrast to Catholicism, which “sustains God’s obscurity for the subject and leaves God in a position where divine contradiction does not become evident” (a key example of which is the sacrament of Reconciliation, wherein, rather than seeking absolution for one’s sins directly from God, one must rely on a priest, who, acting in God’s stead, himself prescribes acts of penance), Protestantism “offers subjects a direct relation to God.”<sup>87</sup> The third Event, that which for Hegel definitively brings about the end of history, is the advent of modernity in Europe, an Event which “permits every subject to experience this revelation of the inconsistency of authority” insofar as “no subject in modernity has any necessary superiority to any other.”<sup>88</sup> This is why modernity is “the epoch of revolutions” (every one of which, as Domenico Losurdo reminds us, from the American Revolution to the French Revolution to the Haitian Revolution, Hegel celebrated), for “if there is no undivided Other, no figure of authority that avoids contradiction, then no one has a right to rule. As a result, rule becomes the object of contestation, and, what’s more, subjects must learn to exist without reliance on any consistent external authority whatsoever.”<sup>89</sup> The end of history is thus for Hegel another means of articulating the fundamental claim from the preface to the *Phenomenology* that substance is also subject. History ends with the “subjectivation” of substance, with the realization that substance is non-substantial, a realization/desubstantialization that leaves the subject radically – abyssally – free.

Contrary, then, to the typical complaint that Hegel’s proclamation of the end of history signals an “opting out of political struggle,” that it functions as “an escape hatch from politics or freedom,” Hegel’s pronouncement of history’s end “assures us that we are condemned to freedom, that we cannot turn back to the assurances of a consistent authority.”<sup>90</sup> As McGowan concludes, “At the end of history, [subjects] must give duties to themselves rather than receiving them from an authoritative Other. Every subject must wrestle with the self-division of the Other,” with the fact that (in Lacanese) the big Other does not exist.<sup>91</sup> As we will see, it was, paradoxically, the very “Hegelisms he fashioned for himself” in the wake of the Civil War that prevented Whitman from grasping this sense of the end of history.<sup>92</sup>

### “Historic Denouements,” or, Whitman’s End of History

Bruno Bosteels begins a recent essay titled “Hegel in America” by noting that “the expression ‘Hegel in America’ should resound with something of the comic incongruence associated with [a] title . . . such as *Tintin in America*.”<sup>93</sup> The reason for

this incongruence, Bosteels points out, is that though, in the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel designates America “the land of the future,” he at the same time “excludes America from the purview of both history and philosophy.”<sup>94</sup> Bosteels here refers to the following iconic passage from the introduction to the *Philosophy of History* briefly alluded to above:

America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World’s History shall reveal itself – perhaps in a contest between North and South America. It is a land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of old Europe. Napoleon is reported to have said: “*Cette vieille Europe m’ennuie*.” It is for America to abandon the ground on which hitherto the History of the World has developed itself. What *has* taken place in the New World up to the present time is only an echo of the Old World – the expression of a foreign Life; and as a Land of the Future, it has no interest for us here, for, as regards *History*, our concern must be with that which has been and that which is. In regard to *Philosophy*, on the other hand, we have to do with that which (strictly speaking) is neither past nor future, but with that which *is*, which has an eternal existence – with Reason; and this is quite sufficient to occupy us.<sup>95</sup>

Bosteels notes that many of Hegel’s readers have identified this ambivalent treatment of America as “a fundamental paradox in [his] entire philosophy of history.” As Bosteels himself suggests, “the ambiguity of the very expression . . . ‘the land of the future’ to designate America sums up a pivotal vacillation on Hegel’s part, as though he were not altogether certain that the continent in question could not also open up a vista on the spirit’s future,” a future that would “anticipate the possibility of an end to the end of history” that Hegel, a mere handful of pages later, will claim has already come to pass in Europe.<sup>96</sup>

As the title of his aforementioned political pamphlet *Democratic Vistas* suggests, Whitman had little doubt that America would open up a vista onto the spirit’s future. Whereas Hegel had insisted that “prophecy is not the business of the philosopher,” for Whitman prophecy was precisely the purview of “the poet of the modern,” the “divine literatus” whose works, he insisted, must be “not only possess’d of the religious fire and abandon of Isaiah, luxuriant in the epic talent of Homer, or for

proud characters as in Shakspeare [sic], but consistent with the Hegelian formulas."<sup>97</sup> Hegel may have been ambivalent about the role America would play in the unfolding of world history, characterizing it as "a Land of the Future" while at the same time quarantining it to the past as merely "an echo of the Old World," but Whitman had no doubt that Hegel's "formulas" were applicable to the American scene, proclaiming at the outset of the Carlyle essay that Hegel's "principle works . . . might not inappropriately be this day collected and bound up under the conspicuous title: *'Speculations for the use of North America, and the Democracy there, with the relations of the same to Metaphysics, including Lessons and Warnings (encouragements too, and of the vastest,) from the Old World to the New.'*"<sup>98</sup> The encomium to Hegel continues, with Whitman later in the essay crediting his philosophy with "providing the most thoroughly *American points of view* I know" and once more hailing his "formulas" as "an essential and crowning justification of New World democracy in the creative realms of time and space," adding that "there is that about them which only the vastness, the multiplicity and the vitality of America would seem able to comprehend, to give scope and illustration to, or to be fit for, or even originate."<sup>99</sup>

As claims such as these suggest, Whitman almost certainly never encountered the passage from the *Philosophy of History* in which Hegel insisted that America, as a land of the future, has nothing to do with world history, which has already come to an end in Europe.<sup>100</sup> And yet, what is so uncanny about *Democratic Vistas* – along with a number of Whitman's other postbellum texts, including prose pieces like the aforementioned "Sunday Evening Lectures" and "Carlyle from an American Point of View" and poems like 1865's "Years of the Modern" and 1871's "Passage to India" – is its casting of America not only as a land of the future, but also, *precisely because of its role as an envoy of futurity*, the end of history.<sup>101</sup> More than a century prior to Francis Fukuyama's faux-Hegelian declaration that the unchallenged global hegemony of liberal democracy following the Cold War was a sign that mankind had reached the end of history, Whitman used Hegel's "formulas," as he understood them, as a means of buttressing his belief in American democracy as "the fervid and tremendous IDEA" destined to "dominate the world" by "melting everything else with resistless heat, and solving all lesser and definite distinctions in a vast, indefinite, spiritual, emotional power."<sup>102</sup> In passages such as this one from *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman's understanding of Hegel as a prophet of synthesis merges with his understanding of Hegel as a prophet of the end of history. Indeed,

Whitman need not have encountered Hegel's actual proclamation regarding the end of history, for the view of Hegel as a thinker of synthesis – a thinker, as Whitman puts it in the "Sunday Evening Lectures," of "unending progress," one for whom the "contradictions and paradoxes of the world and of life" are "a series of infinite radiations and waves of the one sea-like universe of divine action and progress, never stopping, never hasting" – leads, perforce, to a teleological understanding of history.<sup>103</sup>

Whereas prior to his encounter with Hegel, Whitman, in poems like "Song of Myself," not only rested content with but even flaunted his penchant for contradictions, in his "post-Hegelian" writings, so to speak, he is far more anxious to cast himself as a resolver of them. The following passage from the outset of *Democratic Vistas* is exemplary in this regard: "[T]hough it may be open to the charge of one part contradicting another – for there are opposite sides to the great question of democracy, as to every great question – I feel the parts harmoniously blended in my own realization and convictions, and present them to be read only in such oneness, each page and each claim and assertion modified and temper'd by the others."<sup>104</sup> Such a passage demonstrates that, in the later Whitman, the hallmark of the divine literatus' "consisten[cy] with the Hegelian formulas" is not his ability to contradict himself, but to "harmoniously blend" contradictions, to "essentially harmonize, satisfy, and put at rest."<sup>105</sup>

To put at rest "History, with all its long train of baffling, contradictory events" is precisely the role Whitman envisions America playing throughout *Democratic Vistas*.<sup>106</sup> To put a name to it, this role, as Jefferson oxymoronicly dubbed it, is that of an "empire for liberty."<sup>107</sup> Hence Whitman's grand vision of America "march[ing] with unprecedented strides to empire so colossal, outvying the antique, beyond Alexander's, beyond the proudest sway of Rome."<sup>108</sup> Like charity, empire begins at home, as Whitman touts the annexations of Texas, California, and Alaska, the first of which he didn't merely support, but publicly advocated for in his role as editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in the mid-1840s.<sup>109</sup> In time, however, this empire's democratic vistas, according to Whitman's vision, would become far more expansive, progressing from continental to hemispheric to global, as America would not only "reach north for Canada and south for Cuba," but also seek (as the title of his last great poem has it) "passage to India."<sup>110</sup> The continental and hemispheric element of this vision is repeatedly emphasized throughout *Democratic Vistas*, perhaps no more forcefully than in the following passage:

Long ere the second centennial arrives, there will be some forty to fifty great States, among them Canada and Cuba. When the present century closes, our population will be sixty or seventy millions. The Pacific will be ours, and the Atlantic mainly ours. There will be daily electric communication with every part of the globe. What an age! What a land! Where, elsewhere, one so great? The individuality of one nation must then, as always, lead the world. Can there be any doubt who the leader ought to be?<sup>111</sup>

Published the same year as *Democratic Vistas*, "Passage to India," as the following lines demonstrate, picks up where the former leaves off, painting an even bolder picture of America's global destiny:

Passage to India!

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?  
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,  
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,  
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,  
The lands to be welded together.

A worship new I sing,  
You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours,  
You engineers, you architects, machinists, yours,  
You, not for trade or transportation only,  
But in God's name, and for thy sake O soul.

. . . .

Struggles of many a captain, tales of many a sailor dead,  
Over my mood stealing and spreading they come,  
Like clouds and cloudlets in the unreach'd sky.

All along history, down the slopes,  
As a rivulet running, sinking now, and now again to the surface rising,  
A ceaseless thought, a varied train – lo, soul, to thee, thy sight, they rise,  
The plans, the voyages again, the expeditions;

Again Vasco de Gama sails forth,  
 Again the knowledge gain'd, the mariner's compass,  
 Lands found and nations born, thou born America,  
 For purpose vast, man's long probation fill'd,  
 Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish'd.<sup>112</sup>

As he does in *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman here casts America as the agent of the globe's "welding," the nation whose purpose is to bring about, at long last, after "long probation," the end of history, to "accomplish" the "rondure of the world," or, as he puts it in "Years of the Modern," to bring about "historic denouements."<sup>113</sup> What's more, Whitman also suggests that this end of history is brought about by the cunning of reason, a concept which, as we have seen, he would have encountered in the excerpts from the *Philosophy of History* included in Hedge's anthology. As Whitman stresses, all of the individuals who have helped "accomplish" this "rondure of the world," who have helped bring about these "historic denouements" (the captains, voyagers, explorers, engineers, architects, machinists), have (unwittingly, unconsciously) given their lives "not for trade or transportation only," but also for the "sake" of the "soul" – not merely, or even primarily, Whitman's own soul, but rather what, in *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman terms the "absolute soul," a figure which, like Emerson's "Over-soul," is effectively a "poeticized version of the Hegelian *Geist*."<sup>114</sup> We might thus say that works like *Democratic Vistas* and "Passage to India" are just as much Whitman's "Phenomenology of Spirit" as they are his "Philosophy of History."

And yet, from the vantage point of McGowan's book, these Whitmanian versions of spirit's phenomenology and history's "denouement," regardless of how Hegelian Whitman himself believed them to be, fall wide of the Hegelian mark. Though it is difficult to imagine McGowan disagreeing more with his understanding of Hegel, Thomas Haddox is nonetheless correct when he claims that Whitman's position in *Democratic Vistas* and other postbellum writings is one that is "all too amenable to conservatism and complacency."<sup>115</sup> Rather than confronting "the modern abyss of freedom" and "achieving a contradictory revolution," as McGowan's Hegel prompts us to do, Whitman, paradoxically enough, uses Hegel as a means of "fantasiz[ing] a consistent Other," an Other none other than the Hegelian Spirit itself, a concept which Whitman believed to be "convertible" (i.e., interchangeable) with "Democracy" and "America."<sup>116</sup> Whereas for McGowan's Hegel the end of history neither signals the end of political struggle, the ushering in of a perpetually post-

political epoch, nor entails that no new avenues for articulating, no new forms of achieving, freedom will be discovered, for Whitman, conversely, democracy – or, as he alternately puts it in *Democratic Vistas*, “liberalism” – is equivalent to, “convertible” with, “political liberty,” and *for that very reason* the agent of the post-political.<sup>17</sup> McGowan is thus more correct than he knows when he claims that Whitman’s Hegelianism illustrates the maxim that the greatest threat to a thinker are acolytes rather than enemies. Reading Whitman’s post-Hegelian poetry and prose after reading McGowan’s book, it is indeed difficult not to pose the proverbial question, “With friends like these, who needs enemies?” And yet, Whitman’s Hegel is merely symptomatic of the main catastrophes to which Hegel’s work has long been subjected.

As discussed above, McGowan interprets the dialectic as a drama. “Catastrophe” is itself a dramatic term, of course, one that connotes the denouement of a drama, particularly a tragedy. The Greek *strophē* (στροφή) means “turning” (from *strephein* [στρέφειν], “to turn”), while the prefix *kata* (κατα) is typically taken to mean “down”; hence the “downturn” that occurs in the final act of a classical tragedy. But *kata* can also be translated as “back” or “over,” in which case *katastrophē* (καταστροφή) can also mean “overturning.” With this meaning of the term in mind, perhaps the highest compliment one could pay McGowan’s book is to say that it is itself a catastrophe, one that, as the example of Whitman demonstrates, overturns more than a century and a half of misreadings, misunderstandings, and misprisions of Hegel. In so doing, McGowan not only gives us a Hegel of radical emancipation; he also radically emancipates Hegel himself.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 26. Žižek’s call for a Hegelian critique of Marx comes amid a discussion of the typical Marxian critique of Hegelian “reconciliation” as “a mere ‘reconciliation in the medium of thought’ that leaves the social reality undisturbed.” Countering such a view, Žižek asserts that “after more than a century of polemics on the Marxist ‘materialist reversal of Hegel,’ the time has come to raise the inverse possibility of a Hegelian critique of Marx” (26).

<sup>2</sup> Todd McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 212. The Johnston quote comes from his blurb for the book’s dustjacket, which can also be viewed online at <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/emancipation-after-hegel/9780231192705>.

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 7.

<sup>4</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 40–41. To be precise, Lacan *does*, in fact, appear in the “Hegel After Freud” chapter, as McGowan, following the lead of both Žižek and Mladen Dolar, likens the Hegelian absolute to the Lacanian traversal of the fantasy (54). Nearly all other references to Lacan throughout the text, however, all but one of which are relegated to the endnotes, concern the negative influence that Alexandre Kojève had on his understanding of Hegel.

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 6, 7. That “substance is ineluctably also subject” is, of course, a reference to Hegel’s iconic claim in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that “everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to doing so in the introduction to the forthcoming collection *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism*, ed. Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), I also critique various object-oriented materialisms and realisms throughout my essay “Object-Disoriented Ontology; or, the Subject of *What IS Sex?*,” *Continental Thought and Theory* 2, no. 2 (2018): 35–57. “Hegel’s Broken Ontology” is the subtitle of McGowan’s chapter in *Subject Lessons*, “Objects after Subjects.”

<sup>7</sup> As per its website, <http://www.lackorg.com>, LACK is “an organization devoted to the promotion and development of thought in the tradition of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and German Idealism.” The 2019 LACK Conference, “LACK iii: Psychoanalysis and Separation,” was held at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts on May 9–11, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Though the term “quit lit” sounds as if it has specifically to do with quitting the profession of literary studies, the “quit” in “quit lit” is actually adjectival, descriptive of the genre of writing itself (i.e., literature about quitting academia). The term is generally applied to articles by academics – more often than not from the humanities – in which they detail their reasons for leaving academia. For a brief overview of the genre (at least in its current iteration), see Colleen Flaherty, “Public Goodbyes,” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 9, 2015, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/09/09/essays-academics-fed-higher-ed-mark-resurgence-quit-lit>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Kay, “Academe’s Extinction Event: Failure, Whiskey, and Professional Collapse at the MLA,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190510-academes-extinction-event>.

<sup>10</sup> If memory serves me, we were on our way to attend a panel (“The Persistence of Ideology Critique”) featuring a speaker whose talk Kay writes glowingly about in his article, a fellow contributor to this special issue, Anna Kornbluh.

<sup>11</sup> Micah Mattix, “Marilynne Robinson’s Heterodox Theology, in Praise of the Cheeseburger, and the Word that Hasn’t Changed in 8,000 Years,” Proofrock (blog), *The American Conservative*, May 14, 2019, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/prufrock/marilynnerobinsons-heterodox-theology-in-praise-of-the-cheeseburger-and-the-word-that-hasnt-changed-in-8000-years/>. Taking Kay’s caricature of academic jargon at face value, Mattix, current literary editor of *The American Conservative* and former contributing editor to the conservative magazine *The Weekly Standard*, views the use of such language as symptomatic of a much larger “problem with the discipline” of literary studies: namely, its having “replaced literature with politics” by viewing “literary works [as] mere tools in a power struggle between individuals and groups in a society.” From here, Mattix goes on to conclude that, given this

state of affairs, “it should come as no surprise that literature is seen by politicians and others as superfluous.” As a professor of American literature who specializes in poetry, Mattix should know that American literature, poetry especially, has from its very inception been inseparable from the political. The discussion of Whitman below will serve to illustrate this point.

<sup>12</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 11. McGowan also notes Hegel’s “profound fondness for threes” (11). The “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” model of the dialectic can be traced back to Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus and his 1837 book *Historische Entwicklung der spekulativen Philosophie von Kant bis Hegel*. Two separate English translations of the book appeared in 1854: *Historical Survey of Speculative Philosophy from Kant to Hegel*, trans. Alfred Tulk (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans), and *Historical Development of Speculative Philosophy, from Kant to Hegel*, trans. Alfred Edersheim (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark). Both Tulk’s and Edersheim’s translations feature Chalybäus’s claim that the dialectic proceeds “methodical[ly]” according to the “trinity” of “thesis, antithesis, and synthesis” (317, 366).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* One might wish to add that such an understanding of the dialectic can just as easily lead to a view of Hegel as an arch-conservative quietist.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. McGowan would be the first to point out that many others have critiqued the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model of the dialectic. Upon a closer look, however, the majority of these critiques don’t so much aim to overthrow this model as to merely refine it. Exemplary in this regard is J. M. Fritzman. Like McGowan, Fritzman begins his book on Hegel by not only rehearsing the typical thesis-antithesis-synthesis model with which “people with only a limited exposure to Hegel’s dialectics” are familiar, but also emphasizing this model’s limitations. And yet, Fritzman goes on not to reject this model but, rather, to simply “supplement” it, contending that the main problem with it is that its terms have been misunderstood. In Fritzman’s understanding, an antithesis is for Hegel not something “alien from” a given thesis, for a thesis “emerges as a reaction to [its] antithesis,” while synthesis is “best described not as the resolution of thesis and antithesis, but rather as the thesis becoming a position within the antithesis.” Though this does indeed constitute a more complex version of this model of the dialectic, Fritzman nonetheless errs in continuing to use its terminology – terminology which, again, Hegel himself never used to characterize the dialectic. J. M. Fritzman, *Hegel* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2014), 3–4.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 12, 14. Though he doesn’t mention Schmitt by name, McGowan clearly has him in mind when he claims, “By asserting the primacy of contradiction in relation to opposition, Hegel breaks with all philosophies that establish identity through the contrast between self and other or between friend and enemy” (13–14).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> “They do not know it, but they are doing it” is Žižek’s translation of the following line from volume one of *Capital*: “Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es.” Karl Marx, *Das kapital: Kritik der politischen*

*oekonomik*, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Verlag von Otto Meissner, 1872), 51; Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 28. Differing slightly from Žižek, Ben Fowkes translates this line as “They do this without being aware of it.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 166–67. Technically speaking, it was Engels who coined the term “false consciousness” to characterize ideology. See Engels’s letter to Franz Mehring of July 14, 1893, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Correspondence, 1846-1895* (New York: International Publishers, 1942), 511.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology: Part I*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 154.

<sup>24</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (New York: Verso, 2012), 23. The moniker “Crown Jurist” of the Third Reich was bestowed upon Schmitt by his former friend and student, Waldemar Gurian. See Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 40.

<sup>25</sup> Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 205–6.

<sup>27</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. As McGowan explains, “Hegel’s theory of ideology is never explicitly laid out as such in his philosophy. Though he evinces familiarity with the term (which had recently been coined), he does not devote any time to theorizing it by this name. But at the same time, Hegel tacitly indicates how one could conceive ideology through his understanding our relationship to contradiction” (223n3).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. This passage features another of McGowan’s fundamental claims throughout the book, one gestured toward in my introduction to this essay: namely, that contradiction is for Hegel not merely epistemological (as it was for Kant) but ontological, that contradiction exists at the level of being itself.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18. Perhaps the best way to explain this point is to say that while the dialectic *progresses* (i.e., moves forward), it doesn’t do so in the name of *progression* (i.e., the elimination of contradiction), for, as McGowan stresses, “the point is not to eliminate contradiction but to find a path to sustain it.” Contradiction is not something that the dialectical process seeks to overcome; on the contrary, it is the very catalyst of the dialectic, that which “animates” it (16). As McGowan concludes:

Our thought moves forward not in order to escape the contradiction that confronts it but because we can no longer sustain that contradiction as a contradiction. As we engage with each contradiction and think through how it emerges, it ceases to pose enough of a problem to catch thought’s interest. The resolution of each contradiction is the indication of its ultimate poverty and inadequacy for thought. Successive resolutions lead to more and more appealing contradictions. Thought advances so that it might remain engaged with contradiction. (17–18)

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 31, 54, 138, 177, 202, 212, 213, 215.

<sup>33</sup> A key example of this is when, addressing Hegel’s discussion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of “the most extreme contradiction imaginable,” the death of God in the form of Christ on the cross, McGowan asserts, “This is a contradiction that we cannot overcome but must reconcile ourselves to.” *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 19. As McGowan explains, “the absolute takes different forms in Hegel’s works, but the point it announces is always the same” (21). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the absolute appears in the form of “absolute knowing,” which McGowan defines as “the recognition that one can never overcome contradiction because contradiction lies within being itself, that it is not just the subject’s own failure but a failure of being” (21); in the *Science of Logic*, the absolute appears in the form of the “absolute idea,” which McGowan defines as “the affirmation that contradiction,” the thinking of which, as Hegel stresses, is “the essential moment of the concept,” is “unsurpassable” (14).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>36</sup> These are the caricatures of the Hegelian absolute as rehearsed by Žižek in “Hegel’s Century,” his preface to *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), x. As Žižek insists, such “ridiculous” images of Hegel are not – indeed, cannot – be derived from his work itself, but are instead an effect of the psychic phenomenon that Freud termed “screen memory” (*Deck Erinnerung*), “a fantasy formation destined to cover up a traumatic truth” (x). For Cavell on “acknowledgment,” which is simultaneously his most central philosophical concept and his most important philosophical contribution, see, for instance, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 238–66.

<sup>37</sup> As McGowan notes, this is why Hegel was so fond of Heraclitus, the only classical philosopher to “recogni[ze] that contradiction animates being.” McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 246.

<sup>39</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 34.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 34. For an extended treatment of Poe as a Hegelian, especially with regard to his figure of the imp of the perverse, see my essay “Feeling Right, Doing Wrong: Poe, Perversity, and the Cunning of Unreason,” *Poe Studies* 46 (2013): 4–31.

<sup>42</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, vol. 6 of *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: NYU Press, 1984), 2011–12. The version of “Song of Myself” from which McGowan quotes is the version that virtually everyone, even in Whitman studies, quotes, that from what is commonly referred to as the “deathbed” edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1891–92). In the original 1855 edition of *Leaves*, the poem (like the other eleven in the book) was untitled. Whitman gave it the respective titles “Poem of Walt Whitman, an American” and, simply, “Walt Whitman” in the second and third editions of *Leaves* (1856 and 1860–61) before finally settling on “Song of Myself” for *Leaves*’ sixth edition (1881–82). In the 1855 version of the poem, the lines McGowan cites appeared as follows: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . I contain multitudes.” Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> This is precisely the argument that Žižek makes with regard to Lacan’s Hegelianism. As he asserts, “Lacan is fundamentally Hegelian, but without knowing it,” for his Hegelianism is located “not where one expects it,” in his “explicit references” to Hegel, most of which get Hegel wrong (a result of Kojève’s influence), but rather “in the last stage of his teaching, in his logic of the not-all, in the emphasis placed on the Real and the lack in the Other.” Slavoj Žižek, “Lacan – At What Point Is He a

---

Hegelian?," trans. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, in *Interrogating the Real*, by Slavoj Žižek, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (New York: Continuum, 2006), 28.

<sup>45</sup> With this in mind, the more likely contender for directly influencing these lines of "Song of Myself" is the man whom Whitman, in his prefatory letter to the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856), addressed as his "Master," Ralph Waldo Emerson. Many commentators have pointed out the resonances between these lines and the following passage from Emerson's 1841 essay "Self-Reliance":

But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this monstrous corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then?

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Out upon your guarded lips! Sew them up with packthread, do. Else if you would be a man speak what you think today in words as hard as cannon balls, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 265. For Whitman's prefatory letter to the 1856 *Leaves*, which is addressed directly to Emerson, see *Poetry and Prose*, 1326–37. We might also here recall another of Whitman's famous lines with regard to Emerson's influence on him, that which he is said to have delivered to John Townsend Trowbridge: "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil." John Townsend Trowbridge, *My Own Story: With Recollection of Noted Persons* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1903), 367. As Trowbridge notes, "The Emersonian influence is often clearly traceable in Whitman's early poems; seldom in the later" (367). What *is* clearly traceable in the later poems, however, is the Hegelian influence. Indeed, we could very well say that, following the Civil War, Hegel replaced Emerson as Whitman's primary philosophical inspiration.

<sup>46</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 253. Reynolds gives a considerably larger arc to Hegel's influence on Whitman than most other commentators. For instance, though he notes that Whitman didn't own a copy of Hedge's anthology until 1862, he nonetheless claims that the poet "had been aware of the volume long before that, perhaps as early as 184[8], when it was first published, and almost certainly by 1852, when another edition appeared." Reynolds likewise suggests that "though it was not until the 1860s that German philosophers, particularly Hegel, had a profound effect on him, their impact was visible in the early poems as well" (253).

<sup>47</sup> I am here drawing on Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 29, 46–48; and Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 27–29, 69–71. The other founding members of the Transcendentalist Club were George Ripley, George Putnam, and Emerson.

<sup>48</sup> Frederic H. Hedge, *Prose Writers of Germany* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1848), iv; Loyd D. Easton, *Hegel's First American Followers: The Ohio Hegelians: John B. Stallo, Peter Kaufmann, Moncure Conway, and August Willich* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), 14.

<sup>48</sup> Hedge, *Prose Writers of Germany*, 446.

<sup>49</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Other critics have noted Whitman's borrowings from the Hedge anthology. See, for instance, Mary Eleanor, "Hedge's *Prose Writers of Germany* as a Source for Whitman's Knowledge of German Philosophy," *MLN* 61, no. 6 (1946): 381–88; and Floyd Stovall, *The Foreground of Leaves of Grass* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), 195.

<sup>51</sup> Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 2012. As Edward Grier notes in his introductory commentary on the "Lectures," "There is little indication . . . that W[hitman] read the originals in translation. As usual he found what he wanted at second hand." This is undoubtedly true, but, at the very least, Whitman would have read the excerpts from the *Philosophy of History* in Hedge's anthology. Tellingly enough for our current discussion, Grier concludes his commentary by claiming that, finding "romantic individualism" to be "an inadequate attitude after midcentury" (i.e., after the Civil War), "something like a Hegelian synthesis enabled [Whitman] to reconcile the one and the many" (2009).

<sup>52</sup> See Hedge, *Prose Writers of Germany*, 451–52.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, Mody C. Boatright, "Whitman and Hegel," *University of Texas Studies in English* 9 (1929): 134–50; W. B. Fulghum, Jr., "Whitman's Debt to Joseph Gostwick," *American Literature* 12, no. 4 (1941): 491–96; and Stovall, *The Foreground of Leaves of Grass*, 195–96.

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Gostwick, *German Literature* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1854), 269. Though originally published in Edinburgh in 1849 by William and Robert Chambers, the first American edition, a reprint of the 1849 text, was published in Philadelphia in 1854 by Lippincott, Grambo & Co. Given that the Lippincott edition is the one with which Whitman would have been familiar, I have chosen to cite this edition.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 272. Here we would do well to not only repeat McGowan's aforementioned claim that for Hegel "the unity that occurs at the end of each dialectical process does not do away with contradiction but enacts a reconciliation with it," but to cite his following claim as well: "Rather than synthesize two opposing positions, what Hegel calls unity involves the recognition that the position is opposed fundamentally to itself, that it involves itself in what it is not. Unity enshrines contradiction as the constitutive form that identity takes." We should also here note that, contrary to Gostwick's contention, Hegelian reason (*Vernunft*) is for McGowan not a faculty that "resolves" contradictions. Rather than "lift[ing] the subject above contradiction," reason for Hegel actually "lowers the subject into the mire of contradiction, permitting the subject to identify with what undermines it." McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 21, 63.

<sup>56</sup> Whitman's quoting of Gostwick in the "Sunday Evening Lectures" appears as follows: "To use the summing up of Joseph Gost[w]ick whose brief I endorse: 'The heavens and the earth and all things within their compass – all the events of history – the facts of the present and the development of the future (such is the doctrine of Hegel) all form a complication, a succession of steps in the one eternal process of creative thought.'" Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 2011–12.

<sup>57</sup> Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 896–97. In fairness to Whitman, unlike the "Sunday Morning Lectures," in which he cribs from the Hedge anthology without any acknowledgment, "Carlyle from an American Point of View" features a footnote in which Whitman acknowledges that he is "much indebted to J.

Gost[w]ick's abstract" (897). We should also note that Whitman never published the "Sunday Morning Lectures" in his lifetime. Had he done so, he may very well have credited Hedge.

<sup>50</sup> I here refer to Whitman's claim at the conclusion of his comments on Hegel in the Carlyle essay that he has been "recounting Hegel a little freely here." *Ibid.*, 897.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>52</sup> Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, in *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973), 274. Michael Moon retains Bradley and Blodgett's commentary on the poem in the most recent Norton Critical Edition of *Leaves, Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 230n6.

<sup>53</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 9, 47.

<sup>54</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 480. Important to note here is that Whitman himself spoke of his fondness for Hegel in consolatory terms, asserting in the Carlyle essay that Hegel's "system . . . illuminat[es] the thought of the universe, and satisf[ies] the mystery thereof to the human mind, with a more *consoling* scientific assurance than any yet." Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 896; emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 480.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 254, 449.

<sup>57</sup> Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 248.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 24–25.

<sup>59</sup> There are a handful of exceptions to this rule, the most notable of which are Kathryn V. Lindberg, "Whitman's 'Convertible Terms': America, Self, Ideology," in *Theorizing American Literature: Hegel, the Sign, and History*, ed. Bainard Cowan and Joseph G. Kronick (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 233–68; and J.P. Craig, "Walt Whitman & Hegel," *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science* 3, no. 5 (2015): 134–42. Noting that in Whitman's postbellum writings "the great expense of suffering during the Civil War [is] . . . swept up . . . as a moment of abstract struggle and dialectical opposition by which history progresses," Lindberg goes on to claim that "Whitman creatively misread the positive or unilaterally progressive force of the dialectic" (244). Seeing Hegel as "an optimist whose system solved contradictions" (245) by way of "dialectical resolution" (246), Whitman, Lindberg asserts, "appropriated Hegel" (249) to suit his own purposes, "translat[ing]" his philosophy into "a useful version of unilateral progress toward Unity or mystical Union" (255), the result being that "negation, the irresistible motive force of the dialectic, becomes merely instrumental," as "sublation gives way to change and to the American dream of progress" (256). Craig not only echoes Lindberg, pointing out that "the use to which Whitman puts Hegelianism is a bit of a misprision" (137) insofar as it mostly "ignor[es] the element of negation in the *Aufhebung*," but also (correctly) cautions that "treatments of the relationship between Hegel and Whitman that rely heavily upon negation may err by over-emphasizing its importance to Whitman and the 'Hegel' that Whitman knew" (135). Craig also correctly notes that much of the work done on the relationship between Whitman and Hegel has by and large "contained itself to source studies or interpretations of Whitman's poetry that frequently rely upon very general structures, such as triads, that cannot be conclusively shown to originate in Hegel's influence" (134).

<sup>60</sup> Erkkila, for instance, makes a convincing case that the influence of the dialectic, as Whitman understood it, can be seen in the very structure of *Democratic Vistas*: "The structure of *Democratic*

---

*Vistas* is itself Hegelian, working through oppositions and contradictions toward some higher synthesis. . . . The essay moves back and forth between present and future, fact and vision, individual and aggregate, urban and rural, culture and nature, matter and spirit, science and religion, working through these dialectical oppositions toward a dynamic democratic synthesis." Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 248–49.

<sup>70</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 20–21.

<sup>71</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 131.

<sup>72</sup> The main exception to this rule would have been the St. Louis Hegelians, one of whose leaders, the German-born Henry Conrad Brokmeyer, spent upwards of three decades translating the *Science of Logic*. Though no full manuscript of it was ever published, portions of Brokmeyer's translations of the *Science of Logic* frequently appeared in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, founded in 1867 by fellow St. Louis Hegelian William Torrey Harris. For more on the St. Louis Hegelians, as well as their contemporaries, the so-called "Ohio Hegelians," see Easton, *Hegel's First American Followers*, 1–27; and William H. Goetzmann, "Introduction: The American Hegelians," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America*, ed. William H. Goetzmann (New York: Knopf, 1973), 3–18.

<sup>73</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 132. As McGowan explains further, "One of the key features of Hegel's philosophy is that it contains multiple points of entry. One can begin with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *Science of Logic*, the *Encyclopedia*, or even the *History of Philosophy* without suffering any initial missteps" (132).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 131. The main exception is the "cunning of reason," which, as McGowan discusses, appears (albeit in slightly different form) in the *Science of Logic*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>77</sup> As McGowan discusses, Kojève was largely responsible for setting the precedent of using the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (in particular its section on the master/slave dialectic) to interpret the *Philosophy of History*. See *Ibid.*, 139–42.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 133, 136, 132–33.

<sup>79</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, in Hedge, *Prose Writers of Germany*, 452–53.

<sup>80</sup> Gostwick, *German Literature*, 270.

<sup>81</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 147.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>83</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1956), 103. Unless otherwise noted, all further references to the *Philosophy of History* will be to this edition.

<sup>84</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 142, 138. McGowan cites two primary representatives of the disavowal camp, which constitutes the "majority position" with respect to the concept of the end of history in Hegel studies: Stephen B. Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 230–31; and Philip Grier, "The End of History and the Return of History," in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, ed. Jon Stewart (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 186. As McGowan notes, Grier even goes so far as to argue that the notion of the "end of history" was invented by Kojève.

<sup>85</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 138.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 137, 136.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 136; Domenico Losurdo, *Hegel and the Freedom of Moderns*, trans. Marella Morris and Jon Morris (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 99.

<sup>90</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 137. To say that for Hegel we are “condemned to freedom” is another way of saying that “we will never move beyond the recognition that all are free” (138).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>92</sup> Lindberg, “Whitman’s ‘Convertible Terms,’” 247.

<sup>93</sup> Bruno Bosteels, “Hegel in America,” in *Hegel and the Infinite*, 67.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>95</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 86–87.

<sup>96</sup> Bosteels, “Hegel in America,” 68–69. Another of Bosteels’s claims is worth noting here insofar as it helps to reiterate McGowan’s point about the (over)determining role the *Philosophy of History* has played in the reception of Hegel’s thought. Speaking in particular of the Latin American reception of Hegel, Bosteels explains that

The most frequently rehearsed criticism of Hegel’s thought in Latin American circles . . . does not apply in the first place to his dialectical method or to his inveterate idealism but rather and inseparably to his philosophy of history with its pivotal concept of the world-spirit driving home the identity of the real and the rational. Even commentaries on Hegel’s *Logic* or his *Phenomenology of Spirit* always must undergo the retroactive effects of a gaze that is unable to stop staring at those remarkable opening pages from *The Philosophy of History*. (71–72)

<sup>97</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbit (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 171; Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 932, 988. I have cited Nisbit’s translation of the *Philosophy of History* in this particular instance for the simple reason that the clause “for prophecy is not the business of the philosopher” is absent from Sibree’s translation.

<sup>98</sup> Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 890.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 897. Though less jingoistic, similar paeans to Hegel as a thinker of democracy litter the “Sunday Evening Lectures.” The following passage is a good example: “If I were asked to specify who, in my opinion, has by the operation of his individual mind done the most signal service to humanity, so far, I sometimes think my answer would be to point to [Hegel]. . . . If I were questioned who most fully and definitely illustrates Democracy by carrying it into the highest regions I should make the same answer.” Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 2017.

<sup>100</sup> Worth noting here is that Whitman technically *could have* come across both of these passages from the *Philosophy of History*, for both appear in John Sibree’s English translation, which was first published in 1857 as *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (London: Henry G. Bohn). There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Whitman ever came across the Sibree translation, the first American edition of which (according to my research, at least) didn’t appear until 1899 (New York: Colonial Press).

---

<sup>101</sup> The best extended reading of Whitman's engagement with Hegel and history, especially along these lines, is that of Cody Marrs. Noting that Whitman's "altered historical sensibility" following the Civil War "finds its most comprehensive voice in *Democratic Vistas*, an essay-cum-prophecy in which Whitman redefines his theory of poetry through Hegel's philosophy of history," Marrs goes on to explain that Whitman's "grand vision" of American democracy "tak[ing] root micropolitically and reshap[ing] human character" across the globe "goes where Hegel himself never did." Echoing Bosteels, Marrs points out that, in the *Philosophy of History*, America's "exceptionalism" derives precisely from its "non-historicity," from "its definitive removal from time's dialectical oscillations." Hence Marrs's conclusion that, "On one level, *Democratic Vistas* and the later *Leaves of Grass* can be read as an extended and eloquent response on Whitman's part to Hegel's qualified statement about America's futurity." That level, however, would have to have been an unconscious one insofar as Whitman, as we have discussed, never encountered this passage from the *Philosophy of History*. Cody Marrs, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 44.

Originally published under the title "Years of the Unperform'd" in the 1865 *Drum-Taps*, "Years of the Modern" was retitled and incorporated into *Leaves of Grass* (as part of the "Songs of Parting" section) for its fifth edition (1871–72).

<sup>102</sup> Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 936, 930, 936. I am here referring, of course, to Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

<sup>103</sup> Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 2012, 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 930.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 988.

<sup>106</sup> Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 2012.

<sup>107</sup> This famous phrase of Jefferson's comes from an 1809 letter to then president James Madison in which, anticipating the Whitman of *Democratic Vistas*, Jefferson asserts that, were the United States to annex Canada and Cuba, "we should then have . . . such an empire for liberty as she has never surveyed since the creation." Jefferson to James Madison, April 8, 1809, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 12, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Berth (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), 277.

<sup>108</sup> Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 938.

<sup>109</sup> For a sampling of Whitman's editorials writings in support of the annexation of Texas, which was part of his larger support of the Mexican–American War, see *Walt Whitman's Selected Journalism*, ed. Douglas A. Noverr and Jason Stacy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).

<sup>110</sup> Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 938.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 981.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 532–33.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 597. As is the case with many other lines from "Years of the Modern," Whitman first used the line regarding "historic denouements" ("What historic denouements are these we so rapidly approach?") in his unpublished 1856 political tract, *The Eighteenth Presidency!* See *Ibid.*, 1325.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 597; Andrew C. Yerkes, *"Twentieth-Century Americanism": Identity and Ideology in Depression-Era Leftist Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17. For Emerson on the "Over-soul," see his essay, "The Over-Soul," in *Essays and Lectures*, 383–400.

---

<sup>115</sup> Thomas F. Haddox, "Whitman's End of History: 'As I Sat Alone by Blue Ontario's Shore,' *Democratic Vistas*, and the Postbellum Politics of Nostalgia," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 22, no. 1 (2004): 4. Haddox makes the unfortunate mistake of relying on Kojève's (mis)reading of Hegel, according to which "the Hegelian *method* . . . is not at all 'dialectical,'" but rather "purely contemplative or descriptive, or better, *phenomenological* in Husserl's sense of the term." Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980), 171. This reliance on Kojève misleads Haddox into labeling Hegel both a "monist" (13) – a move which mistakes Hegel for his primary rival, Spinoza – and a "utopian" (18) – a move which mistakes Hegel for Marx, whose "productive, critical use of dialectical thinking" Haddox champions as a "radical revisioning" of Hegel's "conservative"/contemplative pseudo-dialectics (22n23). Needless to say, this understanding of Hegel (and Marx, for that matter) couldn't be further from McGowan's, according to which Whitman would be far more Marxian than Hegelian.

<sup>116</sup> McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 151, 139. I here refer to Whitman's assertion at the outset of *Democratic Vistas* that, throughout the essay, he "shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms." Also worth noting here is Whitman's assertion toward the end of *Democratic Vistas* that the "other name" for the "absolute soul" (or "SOUL," as he sometimes styles it) is "LITERATURE." Here we come upon yet another "convertible term," for if, as Whitman maintains in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," "of all nations at any time upon the earth" that with "the fullest poetical nature," then "America" is not only convertible with "Democracy" and "Soul," but with "Literature" as well. As we might thus put it, Whitman's political imperialism is, perforce, a poetical imperialism – and vice versa. Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 930, 981, 5.

<sup>117</sup> Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 950, 942. Whitman's use of the term "liberalism" is derived from John Stuart Mill, whose 1859 *On Liberty* he lauds as a "profound essay" (929) at the outset of *Democratic Vistas*. As McGowan puts it, the end of history "marks the beginning of political contestation in its most authentic form," for "rather than struggling for freedom, subjects must now struggle for the form of life most adequate to their freedom." McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 152.