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The Owl of Minerva from Dusk till Dawn, or, Two Shades of Gray

Abstract *The paper takes as its starting point the figure of the owl as the emblem of philosophy, it looks at its history and takes up its most significant philosophical use, the notorious passage where Hegel uses the owl as the indication of philosophy's necessary belatedness. This is the passage which is usually taken as the point of indictment of Hegel's position and the role he ascribed to philosophy. Hegel's adage 'What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational' is scrutinized in its various aspects, particularly in view of its other version, 'what is rational must happen'. The tension between the 'is' and the 'ought' is perhaps the clue to understanding this adage, where Hegel doesn't opt for the one or the other, but aims at the paradoxical intersection of the two. Hegel's adage is put in contrast with Marx's Thesis Eleven. The paper considers the concepts of the rational, the actual, the belatedness/retroaction, the grayness and finally the owl (and the part that bestiary plays in philosophy), thus trying to circumscribe the task that should be assigned to philosophy.*

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Keywords: *Hegel, the owl of Minerva, reason, actuality, retroaction, Heine, Marx*

The owl always served as an emblem of philosophy. The connection has its genealogy, its founding myth, philosophy has always been a Greek affair, bearing the mark of its Greek origin however universal and global it has become. The best Greek poster during the debt crisis ran: 'We gave you philosophy, we gave you democracy, we gave you theater, now it's pay-back time', and indeed if there would have to be a default on 'the Greek debt', then on the European side, not the Greek. The owl has been the animal accompanying Athena (the Latin Minerva), the goddess of wisdom and the patroness of Athens, the birthplace of philosophy proper, hence the philosophical 'patroness saint'. The image of the owl is all-pervasive in the Greek and particularly the Athenian culture, to the point that Chris Marker, making a TV series on the ancient culture in the eighties, called it *L'Héritage de la chouette, The owl's legacy*.¹

1 It featured, among others, Iannis Xenakis, George Steiner, Elia Kazan, Theo Angelopoulos, Cornelius Castoriadis etc. The entire Greek legacy can be put under the emblem of the owl.

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But Athena was also the goddess of courage, purity, learning, civilization, law and justice, mathematics, strength, war strategy, arts and crafts. Here are some of her features: she was always depicted in full armor, with the shield, the helmet, the spear, in the outfit of a warrior ready for battle, apart from the somewhat incongruous owl that rather looked like a peculiar pet. She was also the virgin goddess, never entering into the sexual circulation and transgression so common among Greek gods. Not that she was immune to feminine vanity about her beauty – the judgment of Paris, which famously instigated the Trojan war, concerned a beauty contest among three goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, and Athena, with her virginity and wisdom, was ultimately no match for Aphrodite, the goddess of love, with the trump-card of the beautiful Helen up her sleeve. Another story tells about Tiresias who stumbled upon Athena bathing, and he was struck blind by her to ensure he would never again see what man was not allowed to see. (Don't look at naked goddesses if you can help it, another Greek wisdom to be heeded, this will finish badly, as other Greek myths testify – cf. Diana and Actaeon.)² But having lost his eyesight, Tiresias was given a special gift – to be able to understand the language of birds and thus to foretell the future. Birds and wisdom hang together, one has to understand the bird language to acquire wisdom, and Athena always had a special relation to birds. Yet another story is told of Athena's birth – she was not born of a woman, she famously sprang out of Zeus's head, already in full armor and splendor, with all her attributes, and one wonders about the owl. Was it there already at birth? – Significantly, being born in full-blown shape and outfit, she has never been a child. She was already born 'beyond Oedipus', thus by-passing the oedipal initiation to philosophy.³

I am listing these haphazard various sides of Athena (Minerva), the patroness of philosophy, to remind us of the strange and incongruous context that presided over the birth of philosophy, the imagery with which it was intertwined. The warrior, the crafty war strategist, virginity, the austere feminine beauty, the owl, blindness and insight, wisdom, the springing out of the head, as if she were an idea which materialized, a man's idea

2 Is truth a woman, as Nietzsche maintained in the beginning of *Beyond good and evil* (Nietzsche 1981/II: 9)? A naked woman? Is the condition of acquiring wisdom to be blinded by a naked woman and thus to direct one's gaze to the naked truth? Or is the propensity to deal with naked truth born of the philosophical ineptitude to deal with women?

3 Cf. Goux (1994), who forcefully argued that Oedipus was the key to the inception of philosophy.

(an idea of a macho God?).⁴ One is bemused and puzzled with the plot that brings all these together. One cannot simply leave this aside and claim that philosophy, with its abstraction, ideality and conceptuality, has nothing to do with this mythical mess. But what would philosophy be without its imagery, without its bestiary, which constantly accompanied its rarefied abstractions as a counterpoint, a counterpart to concepts, their necessary and incongruous flipside, both incompatible with them and mandatory? Philosophy constantly secretly needed its mythical other in order to be philosophy at all. As the heroic narrative goes, philosophy started its career by disentangling itself from myth, by cutting the umbilical cord with the supposed archaic mythical kind of wisdom, leaving it behind, proposing and implementing logos instead of mythos, but the puzzling part is how philosophy nevertheless kept reproducing its mythical other in its own bosom, with the imagery and the bestiary that underpinned its elevated conceptual moves. Witness the owl. One easy, too easy, way would be to understand this as the return of the repressed, the mythical substratum tended to revenge itself by popping up in the midst of pure theory that tried to do away with it but never quite managed (cf. all the myths flooding Plato's philosophy, something he could never do without), constantly reproducing it in ever new versions. The umbilical cord, so it seems, was never quite cut so that logos always had to strike a secret alliance with the powers of the myth that it rejected but which provided some blood to its anemic concepts, the fuel to its ideas, providing the imaginary sway to what cannot be imagined at all, namely pure concepts. Could one say – the myth without logos is blind while the logos without myth is empty?

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A spectacular version of this argument is presented by Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of enlightenment* (2007, reputedly a 'mythical' book, given the history of its production and publication). Dramatically, the elevation of reason over myth and nature came with a price: reason, in its endeavor of enlightenment, kept unwittingly reproducing its other, its opposite, which took revenge – this is the basic script of dialectic of any enlightenment, the proposed grand historical narrative: nature, and myth, from which reason tried to extricate itself, always forced its return in forms that reason couldn't master. The suppressed myth, the suppressed nature,

4 A Christian apologist from the 2nd century, Justin Martyr, curiously interpreted the birth of Athena from the Zeus's head as the birth of logos from which the world is to be created: "They said that Athena was the daughter of Zeus not from intercourse, but when the god had in mind the making of a world through a word (logos) his first thought was Athena." (Justin Martyr 1999, *Apology* 64.5) From Athena to St. John's Gospel *il n'y qu'un pas*. In the beginning there was logos, the word, the happy invention of a God, be it as the logos become flesh of a virgin.

revenge themselves on reason which pretends to be master over them, but which is unwittingly prey to what it has seemingly suppressed and done away with.

Another account could see this as the question of metaphoricity, the metaphorical usage of myths in deploying philosophy's own agenda, be it as the reduced reference to the owl of Minerva. The concepts had to recur to the help of analogy to purvey their message, with metaphors providing so many handy analogies inscribed in the cultural background heavily interwoven with mythical remnants. Is there such a thing a mere concept without some metaphorical crutch? And is there such a thing as an innocent metaphor, a mere metaphor? Derrida's "White mythology" (in Derrida 1984), the myth that there could be a philosophical language without a myth, the invisible myth subtending the alleged universality of logos, epitomizes this second line of argument.

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If the owl of Minerva is a metaphor, then a metaphor of what exactly and by what analogy? By recurring to analogy one always subscribes to more than one catered for, there has never been nor can there be a pure philosophical language that could stand on its own and proceed by its means alone. The idea of such a language has instituted the very realm of logic as an artificial formal language which has severed its ties with the ordinary language and all imagery, the pure letter with no owls flipping their wings, set free from the treacherous duplicity and ambiguity that is the fate of any language – but isn't this the ultimate fantasy? We must recall that Athena was, among other things, also the goddess of mathematics, thus a strange condensation of the two, the owl and the letter.

But if both these options fall short of what is at stake, neither the return of the repressed nor the endless metaphoricity – is there a third option? The animality, the bestiary which recurs in the midst of philosophy but which cannot be quite reduced either to the resurgence of a mythical remnant nor to mere metaphor? What could be its status? This is like philosophy's inherent totemism, where the owl would figure as the totem of our clan and we are called upon to pay tribute to our totemic ancestor. What is the owl of Minerva the name of? *De quoi la chouette est-elle le nom* (to speak with Badiou)? What is it the harbinger of?

In his dialogue *Cratylus* Plato deals extensively with names and naming, with the foundation of names *in re*, in the things they name, evoking the mythological name-giver who has originally named things by names that befit them. Athena is, by the fanciful etymology, reduced to wisdom, the

divine wisdom as the core of her being, her name allegedly stemming from “divine intelligence” (*theou noesis*), “she who has the mind of God” (*a theonoa*), “she who knows divine things” (*ta theia noousa*) (407b, cf. Plato 1997). This would be the way that her name spells out her essence, the mythical umbilical cord that attaches names to things.⁵ But as opposed to her name her depictions couldn't disguise her animal other nature: in many early renderings she had features of a snake (also one of her attributes) and of a bird, she was often depicted with wings (in black-figure vase pottery). Where does the owl stem from? As one theory would have it, Athena, once she became the goddess of wisdom, shed away her animal forms which were then isolated and reduced to her external attributes (cf. Gimbutas 1999). Having once been a part-owl herself, she was then equipped with an owl, so that her bird-like traits were turned into her animal companion. The owl would thus be the stand-in of the animal features that the goddess once possessed herself and which she has shaken off and cast away if she was to become the goddess of wisdom. Hence the owl would not be the emblem of philosophy at all, but rather the stand-in for the other of philosophy, for what philosophy cannot quite encompass in its conceptual web, the beast within the concept, the stand-in for her suppressed winged habitus, for her shed-off animality.⁶

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Yet, within the animal kingdom the owl was also seen as particularly apt for this stand-in, being endowed with features conducive to wisdom: in particular, the owl can see at night, through the dark, its gaze reaches further than the common sight, it sees what we cannot, and so philosophy should see clear in the darkness of our common opinions and misconceptions. Furthermore, the owl fixes its gaze, it stares unperturbed and motionless, it doesn't deflect its stare, it looks at things as if through things, steadily, fixedly, without flinching an eye, without recoiling. It is the epitome of what philosophical speculation should be (speculation from *specular*, to watch intensely, to observe, to explore, to examine): to stare undauntedly where the others look away. Then again, the owl is a bird of

5 As names go, Plato's elder brother was called Glaucon, which can be rendered as owl-like, owl-eyed, from *glaux*, the little owl. Glaucon was not just anybody, he was the main interlocutor of Socrates in the *Republic*, as if Socrates needed an owl-like sparring partner to develop his theories of state and justice.

6 In Christian iconography the four evangelists are commonly depicted with their symbols or attributes: Matthew with an angel, Mark with a lion, Luke with an ox, John with an eagle. The common feature that immediately strikes the eye is that all these creatures are presented as winged, not only the angel and the eagle, but also the winged lion (the symbol of Venice) and the winged ox. Apart from that there is the Holy ghost which is a dove. One has to have wings to rise above the earthly? Is philosophy a winged knowledge, carried on owl's wings?

prey, a rapacious creature which mercilessly devours its prey, a ferocious predator. Its calm fixity and stone-like steadiness is but a ploy, a deceptive mask, for it is only waiting to seize the propitious moment and to swiftly move into action, unexpectedly, to dismember and tear apart what it has calmly observed with its fixed gaze in seemingly reflective speculation. Its speculation was but a preparation for action. A perfect image of philosophy, the philosophical bird par excellence? Seeing in darkness, the steady gaze, the ruthless capture. Speculation and assault, speculation on the verge of attack, speculation and destruction, speculation and annihilation – maybe, as metaphors and analogies go, this is not a bad one.⁷

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This was not what Hegel had in mind when he brought up this image of the owl of Minerva, in probably the most famous spot in all his philosophy, the one to have turned into proverb. At least it doesn't seem so on the face of it. The most famous spot appears also to be the most damaging one, so apt for a quick wholesale indictment of the Hegelian enterprise as such. For what seems to follow from it amounts to resignation and reconciliation, Hegel acquiescing to the world such as it is. Here is the incriminating passage:

One more word about *teaching* what the world ought to be: Philosophy always arrives too late to do any such teaching. As the *thought* of the world, philosophy appears only in the period after actuality has been achieved and has completed its formative process. The lesson of the concept, which necessarily is also taught by history, is that only in the ripeness of actuality does the ideal appear over against the real [*dem Realen*], and that only then does this ideal comprehend this same real world in its substance and build it up for itself into the configuration of an intellectual realm. When philosophy paints its gray in gray, then a configuration of life has grown old, and cannot be

7 Another dimension can be mentioned in passing. Athena being the patroness of Athens, she was duly depicted on coins, engraved on one side of tetradrachms, the silver coins which on the other side featured the owl as her emblem. There is not only the streak of wisdom, but that of currency and economy (trading in owl currency?). Hence the common expression 'to bring owls to Athens', originally meaning that it was unnecessary to bring money to Athens since Athenians coined their own currency, so this is an expression for something futile or superfluous. In a curious echo there is a microscopic owl depicted on the one dollar bill, on the upper right hand corner of its 'Washington' side, and one needs a serious magnifying glass to detect it. Its origin may have some connection with the secret societies of initiate knowledge, Illuminati, freemasonry etc., with which the American founding fathers were involved and which prominently heralded the owl as the symbol. Don't try to decipher its meaning on the net, it's swarming with conspiracy theories and suppositions of occult messages, though it's curious that the alleged counterfeit protection would yield so many tiny details whose meaning can go in all directions. Apart from a currency unit it's also like the unit of the 'currency of meaning': it means that it means, it symbolizes that it symbolizes, while the meaning runs wild and escapes.

rejuvenated by this gray in gray, but only known [*nur erkennen*]; the Owl of Minerva takes flight only as the dusk begins to fall. (Hegel 1986, 7: 27–8; hereinafter translation mine)⁸

It's too late, it's always already too late, philosophy is doomed to come too late, structurally it is lagging behind, it comes too late to teach the world how it ought to be, the world is already there in its formation, philosophy can only understand/know the world such as it already is, it can seize it by knowledge and cognition (*erkennen*). And to add insult to injury, with a further and specifically Hegelian twist, the world such as it is *is* already the embodiment of reason, the actuality and actualization of reason, so in order to know it by reason one has to come to a match: reason on the part of the knowing subject must find its match in the reason already embodied and actualized in the world. Thus reason inhabits both the subjective and objective part, and the two should find reconciliation, *Versöhnung*, in their overlap. Philosophy arrives *post festum*, literally after the feast, but what it has been looking for, the realm of reason, is miraculously already there, in a strange loop, it can know the feast without partaking in it. Hegel spells out this supposedly happy match, this overlap of the two, in the famous quote:

Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich;
und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig. (Hegel 1986, 7, 24)
What is rational is actual;
and what is actual is rational.

One thing to be noted is the punctuation and spacing: the adage appears not in the running text, but in a separate paragraph, actually two lines set apart from the text, like a two-liner, a poem, a distich, two verses, consciously and ostentatiously put in a form of a slogan. It runs two syllables over a haiku (19 vs. 17), still one is tempted to put it in a haiku form:

Was vernünftig ist,
das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist,
das ist vernünftig.

8 Here is the original: "Um noch über *das Belehren*, wie die Welt sein soll, ein Wort zu sagen, so kommt dazu ohnehin die Philosophie immer zu spät. Als der *Gedanke* der Welt erscheint sie erst in der Zeit, nachdem die Wirklichkeit ihren Bildungsprozeß vollendet und sich fertig gemacht hat. Dies, was der Begriff lehrt, zeigt notwendig ebenso die Geschichte, daß erst in der Reife der Wirklichkeit das Ideale dem Realen gegenüber erscheint und jenes sich dieselbe Welt, in ihrer Substanz erfaßt, in Gestalt eines intellektuellen Reichs erbaut. Wenn die Philosophie ihr Grau in Grau malt, dann ist eine Gestalt des Lebens alt geworden, und mit Grau in Grau läßt sie sich nicht verjüngen, sondern nur erkennen; die Eule der Minerva beginnt erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug."

What is the meaning and the impact of this strange spacing? Hegel suddenly turned poet? Putting the adage in a verse-like form, the burst of poetry in the middle of prose?⁹ It's like a break in the midst of the 'normally' conducted argument, the cut in the prose of philosophical development, giving these two lines a status of a dogma-like pronouncement beyond argument.

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What is rational, what is actual, what is the common ground that enables the equation of the two? The equation seems to have the same structure as Hegel's notorious infinite judgment, equating two entities that have no common measure and are equated precisely on the basis of their incommensurability, famously 'the spirit is a bone', where the common ground is precisely the absence of a common ground, and its very absence is transformed into a lever, the infinity opening up in the unbridgeable abyss between the two, yet the unbridgeable which is bridged by the judgment. This equation of the rational and the actual has ultimately the same structure, although its tenet is seemingly different, even opposite, namely that of a tautology, but which nevertheless equates two incommensurate entities – then again, this is perhaps what every tautology does under the guise of self-evidence. Couldn't one say that Hegel reads tautology, the proposition of identity, precisely as an infinite judgment, introducing an abyss where everyone else saw a self-evident smooth passage? Isn't $A=A$ also a paradigmatic case of an infinite judgment? Opening an abyss in the midst of the same and bridging the abyss of the radically heterogeneous – aren't these two opposed forms part and parcel of the same move, two sides of the same Hegelian coin?

Let me take two digressions. The first one is anecdotic and stems from Heinrich Heine. Heine came to study in Berlin in 1820, precisely at the time of the composition of this text, and he was assiduously following Hegel's lectures, so this is a first-hand account.

I often saw how he anxiously looked around, fearing that people would understand him [*aus Furcht, man verstünde ihn*]. He liked me a lot since he was certain I wouldn't betray him; I even thought at the time that he was servile. When I was once uneasy about the saying 'all that is, is rational', he smiled in a peculiar way and remarked: 'This could also read 'all that is rational must be' [*es könnte auch heißen:*

9 The spacing is actually in line with two other passages in the same text, the Goethe quote from Faust (actually a misquote, the same misquote Hegel committed already in the *Phenomenology*), and the adage *Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*, taken from Aesop and given in the Greek original, in Latin version and in Hegel's own 'poetic license' rendering, 'Here the rose, here you should dance'. The spacing is not neutral, it singles out Hegel's own attempt at a striking distich, on the par with Goethe and the ancient proverb.

'Alles, was vernünftig ist, muß sein.']. He quickly looked around, but soon calmed down.¹⁰

The quote is great. First it gives us a view of Hegel as someone who is not at all complacent with the ambient political order, but someone who must constantly attempt to hide his subversive underside. His fear was that people would understand him all too well, not at all that his teaching was too difficult and obscure for students to grasp. (One has to keep in mind that at the time the lectures were held under the heavy shadow of the Carlsbad decrees which imposed harsh censorship, so this was no imaginary fear.)¹¹ But he liked Heine as someone who wouldn't betray him, so he could confide in him the esoteric message hidden in the exoteric version, within the seeming endorsement of what exists by the mere virtue of existing – namely the coded message that what is rational must be, *muss sein*. But he quickly looked around fearing that he might be overheard, this was for Heine's ears only. Although the anecdote might be apocryphal (Heine put it down a quarter of a century later), it actually has a textual basis in Hegel himself. The first manuscript versions of this sentence (in his lecture notes some years earlier) read: "Was vernünftig ist, muss geschehen", 'what is rational must happen' (Hegel 1992: 192), and later "Das wirkliche wird vernünftig und das Vernünftige wird wirklich", 'the actual becomes rational and the rational becomes actual'. The two formulations introduce two elements that are implicit in the famous adage: first, the tension between 'is' and 'ought', between what there is and what there should be, present also in the Heine testimony. This is like the Kantian division into *Sein* and *Sollen*, but condensed in the same spot, inextricably, infusing an inherent tension into every 'is' – nothing 'is' independently of what it should be. So as not to get entangled in the Kantian alternative between 'is' and 'ought', one may propose the simple didactical device that Lacan was so fond of, the intersection of two circles. What Hegel aims at is neither the realm of what is nor the realm of what ought to be, but the point where the two circles of 'is' and 'ought' intersect and overlap, the intersection which secretly underpins both, connects them and separates them. Shall one say, using Kant against Kant, that 'ought' without 'is' is empty while 'is' without 'ought' is blind? And second, there is the dimension of becoming, *Werden*, which makes it impossible to read any 'is' at its face value. To be

10 Heine, *Briefe über Deutschland* 1844/45, in Heine 1976, V: 197.

11 "While the censor might be glad to discover that Herr Professor Hegel sanctifies everything that exists with the halo of reason, the philosophical savant will easily comprehend that not everything that exists is rational by its mere existence – since it is not yet actual." (Yovel 1996: 39)

is to become, to be caught in becoming. Reason is 'becoming rational' and actuality is 'becoming actual', to use the Deleuzian parlance.

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The second detour is through Marx. Thesis Eleven on Feuerbach famously runs: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point [however] is to change it." The pronouncement can be seen in the maximal opposition to Hegel's owl of Minerva, its direct counterpart, its polemical twin. "Theses on Feuerbach" were written by Marx in 1845, as a brief scribbled addition to the large manuscript of the *German ideology*, actually at the time when Marx was in friendly communication with the same Heine in Paris, Heine being the literal embodiment of the intersection between Hegel and Marx, a person to have known and been close to both, the intersection of two circles. "Theses on Feuerbach" were first published by Engels only in 1888, after Marx's death, and soon turned into an epitome of Marxism, its shortest and most succinct statement – not something that Marx would ever imagine or condone and he would certainly be very surprised. Thesis Eleven gained the status of an icon. In a strange historic condensation it is carved in stone at the entrance of Humboldt University, precisely the Hegel's university, Marx's adage literally coming to supplant Hegel's on the same spot, but in a supreme stroke of historic irony it was carved in marble in 1953 by SED, the East German Communist Party. Stalinists always loved that slogan, for for them it read 'don't think and reflect, but act'. In that reading the thesis seems to promote a depreciation of thought in general and philosophy in particular, as being secondary, of a lesser reality, confined to impotent interpretation.¹²

One can ask a simple question: which philosophers have merely interpreted the world? There were none. In ancient times such division between theory and practice didn't apply. Philosophy was there to teach how to live a just and happy life – unless it could be translated in 'practical advice', the ways to change one's life, it was considered to have no worth (Cf. a great testimony to this, Pierre Hadot (1995), *Philosophy as a way of life*). Both Plato and Aristotle were grand political philosophers in a narrower sense, proposing an overarching agenda of political reform, for better or worse. They certainly didn't merely interpret Greek polis. In Christianity, to make it quick, Augustine and Aquinas were the knights of faith, certainly very much out to change the world. Giordano Bruno finished burned up at

12 Thesis eleven did a lot of damage, it seems to promulgate an anti-intellectual stance and resentment (intellectuals endlessly interpret and quibble over interpretations, instead of engaging in change and practice). This still has drastic resonances in today's leftist movements where the anti-theory stance is doing well in many quarters.

stake. Spinoza, who may seem more remote from worldly concerns, risked his life while writing the graffiti (*Ultimi barbarorum*) and wrote one of the most explosive books of the 17th century (*Tractatus theologico-politicus*), a rational critique of the Bible. The enlightenment philosophers paved the way for the revolution. Where is a single interpreter of the world in the entire history of philosophy? Philosophy was always done in view of changing the world, the idea of mere interpretation, if such a thing exists, never crossed anybody's mind. Not that the world would have necessarily been a better place if one heeded their advice (think of Plato-Dion-tyranny, up to the philosopher Stalin), but one certainly cannot reproach them for the lack of trying. Hence the provocation that Slavoj Žižek loves to make in his lectures: philosophers were always trying to change the world, let us finally interpret it properly, this will maybe make a change; rush to action is more often than not an acting out, a flight from a conceptual deadlock that only 'theory' can tackle.¹³

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Given that there were no philosophers who ever wanted something as innocent as merely interpreting the world, against whom is then Marx's sentence directed? One could propose that there was only one who ever maintained such a thing: namely Hegel on this particular spot of the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*. The owl of Minerva would be the very epitome of philosophy which always comes too late and can merely interpret (*nur erkennen*, says Hegel, but knowledge is precisely not interpretation). So Marx's adage is directed not against the rule but against the exception. And what an exception it is! There is a sort of crux, a straight line that connects these two most famous adages, on the one hand mere knowing, mere interpretation, always already too late, philosophy to be practiced at dusk when the day is over, and on the other the call to change, transformation, revolution, philosophy to be practiced at dawn, at the day-break. Hegel's quip poses two 'empirical' questions: when is the proper

13 Apart from this empirical or a bit commonsensical objection, there is also a more serious one pertaining to the very notion of interpretation. Marx's sentence implies a rather weak or impoverished notion of interpretation, an innocent interpretation that would leave the interpreted thing unaffected. Interpretation is always intervention, there is always a violence of interpretation, both justice and injustice – and one should also keep in mind the productivity of wrong interpretations abounding in history of philosophy. This doesn't go merely for textual interpretation, but also for various ways of interpreting 'reality': ideology is precisely a spontaneous self-evident interpretation which presents itself as non-interpretation, a view of how things really are. Maybe a minimal definition of ideology would be: this is not an interpretation. If philosophers have indeed interpreted the world, this is not such a small feat, for interpretation has the power to displace the very parameters in which the world presents itself to us and is thus not at all at odds with change, it is its precondition and rather coincides with it.

time to practice philosophy? Evening? Night? Dawn? Morning? Nietzsche's answer, to cut this Gordian knot, was to propose the noon, high noon: "Um Mittag wars, da wurde Eins zu Zwei", (Nietzsche 1981, 2: 173), 'It was at noon that one split into two'. And the second question, what is the proper philosophical bird, its adequate totem? Marx opposed Hegel's owl to the French rooster, *le coq gallois*, the French national symbol and the emblem of the French revolution, the morning bird, announcing the dawn. Nietzsche, yet again, wouldn't be confined to this choice, he proposed a whole zoo, lion, eagle, camel, snake etc. (Deleuze, who wouldn't lag behind, proposed the tic, the animal that sticks to the surface.) The question of the philosophical bestiary is a convoluted one.

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Marx himself, by the way, despite the incautious wording, didn't have such a poor opinion of philosophy so as to simply oppose philosophy as interpretation to change and action. Philosophy is part of the world, it should become aware of its attachment to the world and work against the world it is part of. There is never a simple situation where thought would stand at the opposite end to the world. There is a materiality of thought for Marx as well, and Marx's project was after all how to hold on to the legacy of German idealism of which he was a heir, and how to link this tremendous legacy to the social forces that can realize its emancipatory potential. But he tended to see this as an alternative between 'is' and 'ought', placing Hegel on the side of reason that already is, and placing change and revolution on the side of what ought to be. Marcuse's *Reason and revolution* (1999, first published in 1941) is an elaborate development of this idea. But as already indicated, Hegel is not to be squeezed into this alternative, he aims precisely at the intersection of the two circles of interpretation and action, the point where thought is both interpretation (actually knowledge, *erkennen*) and action 'in one'.¹⁴

Now to proceed in a more sober and scholarly (not to say scholastic) manner, I can give some brief indications about the notions that are used in this famous quote: reason, actuality, belatedness, gray on gray, finally the owl.

First, reason, *Vernunft*, is to be put in stark opposition to understanding, *Verstand*. *Verstand* presupposes and assumes a division into subject and

14 These remarks have no ambition of being a proper exegesis of Thesis Eleven. For a far more elaborate and exhaustive account cf. Frank Ruda (2015). Based on Ruda's elaboration of the history of the early Hegel reception, one could propose a simple line of division: the 'old-Hegelians' read Hegel's adage on the side of 'is' and the 'young-Hegelians' on the side of 'ought', and these parallax readings were at the bottom of their dispute. In the reading proposed here this is precisely not a parallax.

object, where subject tries to understand, to grasp by its conceptual means the world out there which stands opposed to it as its other, cut of a different stuff than it. We enter the realm of reason when no such division applies: reason is neither subjective nor objective, what it has to deal with is its own other, its own inner split. Hegel was absolutely clear about this already in the *Phenomenology*: "Reason is the certainty of consciousness that it is all reality. ... it is certain that it is itself reality, or that everything actual is none other than itself; its thinking is directly actuality ..." (1977: 140, 139) The split into world and thought is the internal split of reason, not an external opposition. This is why I proposed earlier that Hegel's dictum is actually a tautology, since reason by definition implies actuality of thought ('thinking is directly actuality', "sein Denken ist unmittelbar selbst die Wirklichkeit", 1986, 3: 179), not thought as something subjective that should be applied to external objectivity. The disparity between subject and object, thought and world, is the inherent disparity of reason itself. 'Is' in 'rational is actual' is premised on this disparity, on the gap which it both bridges and holds apart.

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Second, actuality, *Wirklichkeit*, is no *passe-partout* word that would indiscriminately encompass objectivity, world, reality, being, existence etc. Hegel is extremely careful to distinguish *Sein*, *Dasein*, *Realität*, *Existenz*, *Wirklichkeit*, *Objektivität* etc. So as not to get lost in convoluted exegesis of Hegelian terms, one can just take up the opposition between existence and actuality. Existence is treated by Hegel in the realm of phenomenon, *Erscheinung*, it is what phenomenally is, and what phenomenally is is appearance, the manifestation of a supposed beyond that would be its rational essence. We enter the realm of actuality (which is the next chapter in *Logic* after the phenomenon, actuality is precisely not a phenomenon) when no such duality applies: the beyond is directly manifested on the surface, mediated by it: the disparity between the two is the inner disparity, the rational essence is nothing else but the way that the surface is at odds with itself, the way it is its own beyond (cf. Yovel 1996: 33). Hence, philosophy can never simply teach the world how it ought to be, that is, to extricate the rational essence and impose it on existence. This has traditionally been philosophy's delusion of grandeur, there was no lack of it, to dispense recipes how the world should be according to reason, and to feel slighted if the world didn't want to oblige and comply. We have such good ideas but people are too stupid to get them. This is for Hegel precisely not to take the actuality of thought seriously.

Third, belatedness, always coming too late, is not a handicap to be deplored and bemoaned. In Hegel's philosophy one always comes too late,

or rather, one has the necessary illusion of coming too late. The thing was there, in itself, in its splendor, in its full magnificence, inexhaustible in its richness, in its immediacy, in its unrestrained indeterminacy, but once we come we miss it, we lose it, we impoverish it, reduce it, distort it, we are alas too late to get hold of its immediate splendor. In sense certainty, the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, we are immersed in the wealth and the splendor of the multi-faceted inexhaustible sensible being, the colorful sensuality and perception, but the moment we try to spell it out, it's gone. In *Logic*, we start with the pure indeterminate immediacy of being, but the moment we try to get hold of it it turns into nothing, it evaporates. But this temporal sequence is an illusion, a necessary structural illusion: actually what comes after constitutes what seemingly went before. Missing it retroactively creates what was missed. One loses what one never possessed. By coming too late one creates the right time to come, which wasn't there before. It is the fall which retroactively creates the paradise from which we have fallen and which seemingly preceded it (which is Hegel's reading of Genesis). Or to use the title of Žižek's book, *Absolute recoil*, and his line on it: "Hegel uses the unique term '*absoluter Gegenstoss*' (recoil, counter-push, counter-thrust ... counter-punch): a withdrawal that creates what it withdraws from." (Žižek 2014:148) The recoil retroactively brings forth what it recoils from – this is the main argument of his book. Thus in this light philosophy coming too late once that actuality is already seemingly accomplished is not simply the sign of its impotence – this belatedness is endowed with the retroactive power of bringing forth the actuality which was not yet simply there, despite its air of completion. It has the power of changing the very condition of an accomplished actuality, which is actual only by virtue of us coming too late and thus producing what seemed to be already there and accomplished. Coming too late produces the very conditions in relation to which it came too late, by coming too late philosophy can construct and anticipate. Nothing ever simply is.

Fourth, gray on gray. The quote poses not only the questions of what is the proper time of the day for philosophy and what is the philosophical bird/animal, but also the question of the proper color of philosophy. Trooping the color, as the English phrase goes, naming a grand military ceremony – but which color shall we troop? No doubt the choice of color is a quote, stemming from *Faust*: "Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, / Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum." 'Gray, my dear friend, is all theory, and green is the golden tree of life.' (Marx's version in a letter to Engels runs: 'Gray, my dear friend, is all theory, and only business is green'.) These words are put into Mephisto's mouth, the devil enticing the poor

Faust away from the dull philosophy to the supposed full enjoyment of colorful life (which was bound to finish badly, and Hegel has a great reading of this). Gray is not a color of life, it is a non-color, the discolored, dilapidated color, the indifferent mixture of all colors, the color of non-difference. It doesn't even have the appeal of the absence of color, which is white. So gray on gray is the difference of the indifferent, the minimal difference, the pure cut, the pure break. Not fifty shades of gray, just two shades of gray are enough. And since philosophy's time is at dusk, i.e. at the vintage moment of grayness, the indifference between day and night, the moment of transition and transience, it is to be matched by another moment of twilight, the moment of dawn, the transition in the opposite direction. So maybe gray on gray should be read in this way: the gray of dawn on the gray of dusk, the minimal difference between two transitions.¹⁵ Evening is indiscernible from morning, there is just the cut of their minimal difference, a hair-breadth. – Hegel may be seen to anticipate Malevitch, who, in order to be a proper Hegelian, should have painted a gray square on a gray surface. And also anticipating Beckett – to take just one quote: “Traces fouillis signes sans sens gris pâle presque blanc sur blanc.” (Beckett 1992: 62) “Muddled traces signs without sense pale grey almost white on white.” Pale gray almost white on white: this is an even more dilapidated version of Hegel's gray. There is the anticipation of Beckett also in a wider sense, in a very fundamental turn or figure of thought: everything is already finished, it's over, we come too late, always already too late – this is the initial situation of almost all Beckett's texts, this is where they begin: to turn this end into a beginning, a process, a persistence, this may be seen as Beckett's way to assume Hegel's legacy.

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And finally the owl of Minerva, the philosophical bird par excellence, the bird of dusk, the beast within the concept, the bird which can see through the dark, the bird of fixed stare and speculation, the bird of prey, the bird of speculation that suddenly springs into action, speculation and annihilation – maybe the owl is the harbinger (and the name) of this minimal difference, the gap, the break, perched on the thin line between belatedness and retroaction, knowledge and action, interpretation and change, the 'is' and the 'ought', the thin line between reason and actuality in their apparent tautology/disparity.

15 Cf. Comay 2011: 143: “The doubling of gray on gray marks the almost indiscernible interval between dusk and dawn, between one twilight and another ... Turning evening into morning ...” For some insights in this paper I am profoundly indebted to Rebecca Comay's book. Cf. Cutrofello's wonderful sequel to the *Phenomenology*, *The owl at dawn* (1995).

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Mladen Dolar

Minervina sova od sumraka do svitanja, ili Dve nijanse sive

Rezime

Tekst uzima kao polaznu tačku figuru sove kao amblem filozofije, gleda na njenu istoriju i razmatra njenu najznačajniju filozofsku upotrebu, ozloglašeni pasus u kome Hegel koristi sovu kao indikator neophodnog kašnjenja filozofije. Ovo je pasus koji se obično uzima kao tačka optužnice Hegelovog položaja i uloge koju je pripisao filozofiji. Hegelova izreka: „Sve što je umno jeste stvarno, i sve što je stvarno, umno je“ stavljena je pod lupom u svojim različitim aspektima, posebno imajući u vidu njenu drugu verziju: „Ono što je umno mora postati stvarno.“ Tenzija između „je“ i „treba“ je možda ključ za razumevanje ove izreke, gde se Hegel ne odlučuje za jedno ili drugo već ima za cilj paradoksalni presek oba. Hegelova izreka je prema tome u suprotnosti sa Marksovom jedanaestom tezom.

Tekst tako razmatra koncepte umnog, stvarnog, kašnjenje/retroakciju, sivilo i konačno sovu (i ulogu koju bestijalnost igra u filozofiji), pokušavajući na taj način da opiše zadatak koji je dodeljen filozofiji.

Ključne reči: Hegel, Minervina sova, um, stvarnost, retroakcija, Hajne, Marks