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“Hegel, Marx, Bloch: On the Margins of the Spirit”

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Hegel, Marx, Bloch: On the Margins of the Spirit

Johan Siebers and Sam Dolbear¹

Aura, Ornament, Materialism

In the Ernst-Bloch-Zentrum's reconstruction of Bloch's last Tübingen office, the room where he collapsed and died of a heart attack in August 1977, there is a copy of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Phenomenology of Spirit, 1807) from 1952.² On a visit to Ludwigshafen in 2013, we opened this volume and discovered a large number of marginal notes. Concentrated in the preface, there is a dense network of spider-like lines, marked in a spectrum of coloured pens and pencils. Between the pages were pressed pieces of pipe-tobacco, suggesting the volume had not been opened since Bloch had used it in 1966, or at most a few years later.³ The markings are messy and seemingly drawn in haste. They accumulate on the page: lines overscore lines, comments in one colour are underlined or circled in another, arrows and lines are drawn forming connections and associations with other lines and marks. The margins represent a space of effacement, qualification and clarification, but they also reveal a certain narcotics (a term to which we will return) of thought, writing and reading. After seeing the book, our attention was drawn to Bloch's death mask, locked in a box in a room upstairs. A similar atmosphere emanated from both artifacts, monuments to a crystallization of gesture, of petrified unrest, now lost and solidified, visible only in this moment.

The text's image-like impression persisted for some time. This was partly a negative experience: Bloch's handwriting was notoriously messy, elongated and loose, and here even more so, perhaps because he made the notes solely for himself and at a time when his bad eyesight had deteriorated even further. They reflect the rapidity of his thoughts and gestures. At times, the pencil blunts so much the text is barely legible. This made the process of

¹ Sam Dolbear first discovered the marginalia and conceived the idea of writing this text. Johan Siebers wrote the first paper on the marginalia, which was published in the *Bloch Almanach* (Siebers 2017). We collaborated on the present chapter, retaining the mosaic, associative and spontaneous quality of the marginal notes, which always falls short of commentary, in the fragmented character of our text.

² G.W.F. Hegel, Johannes Hoffmeister (ed.), *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952).

³ The marginalia mention a seminar of 6 July 1966 but they also suggest, given the layers of pens and pencils on the page, that they were written down over a larger period of time, perhaps as early as Bloch's first teaching at Tübingen in 1961-62 and extending to his final seminars some years before his death in 1977. Bloch did not take any books with him when he left the GDR in 1961, see Peter Zudeick, *Der Hintern des Teufels: Ernst Bloch, Leben und Werk* (Zürich: Elster Verlag 1985).

detection, decoding and transcription tricky. A host of academic and paleographic endeavours was required: first with Frank Degler at the Ernst-Bloch-Zentrum, then with Cat Moir, subsequently with Johan Siebers and finally with Klaus Kufeld. Parts of the text retained their image-like character for a long time and could be resolved only after speculation followed by a critical moment of decision. Letters occasionally had to become lines in order to become letters again. From words to letters to marks and then back to words.

The consideration of the page as an image allowed for the appearance of the margin as a space both for instrumental clarification and elaboration but also for the interplay between foreground and background, past and present, closed and open, which adds a new dimension to the meaning of the text. The margin forecloses the foreclosing of the text, enlivening Hegel's words with new spirit. This spirit is auratic and sensual. It speaks of certain smells, of places where the book had once been held. The book has returned home, but to a home reconstructed in an institutional setting – an aura of displacement evoked in Walter Benjamin's *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* (Little History of Photography, 1931): "What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance – this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch".⁴

This copy of the *Phänomenologie* smelt – of tobacco, must, book. It was in Bloch's company that Benjamin first used the word aura in a text. In his "Hauptzüge der zweiten Haschisch-Impression" (Main Features of My Second Impression of Hashish, written in 1928, but not published during his lifetime), he writes: "Bloch wanted to touch my knee gently. I could feel the contact long before it actually reached me. I felt it as a highly repugnant wound to my aura."⁵ Under the influence of hashish, all movements grow in "intensity and intentionality",⁶ which Benjamin says is impossible to handle. This comes from a particular experience of the narcotic. In his own protocol of the same drug experiment, Bloch captures this experience: "I can transform the Goethe house into the London opera. Can read from it the whole of world history. I see, in this space, why I collect colportage

⁴ In *Sel. Writing*, ed. Jennings et al., vol. 2.2, pp. 507-30 (citation on pp. 518-19). Benjamin refines this definition of aura in his essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility' see *Sel. Writings*, vol. 4, pp. 251-83, citation on p. 255.

⁵ *Sel. Writings*, vol. 2.1, pp. 85-90 (citation on p. 87).

⁶ *Sel. Writings*, vol. 2.1, p. 88.

images. Can see everything in this room – the sons of Richard III and what you will”.⁷ Within a colportage experience of time and space, distance and proximity collapse. The mountains enter the interior, the book the archive. Aura is activated. It is unclear whether Bloch actually touched Benjamin’s knee, but the violation of aura comes at a time of mutual distrust between them.⁸ At certain points in their friendship, there was a porosity of exchange, a communist practise of mutual intellectual endeavour, eventually inscribed under a single authorship, which generated mutual accusations of plagiarism between both of them. When published, these industrial realities are solidified and distributed in the commodity form. But, then, the margin can become a means to re-establish a porous relationship, now between absent writer and present reader, even in its commodified, congealed form. This act occurs within the generations – between, say, Bloch and his contemporaries, including Benjamin – but also between the generations: in this case, between Bloch and Hegel.

At this point, the marks on the page alongside the shreds of tobacco become *ornamental*, a concept that featured prominently in the first edition of Bloch’s *Geist der Utopie* (Spirit of Utopia, 1918), which Benjamin had read before meeting Bloch, a reading that would inform Benjamin’s concept of *Eingedenken* (a form of remembrance which breaks through the homogeneity of time), another case of plagiarism or porosity. For Bloch, the ornament is an excess or surplus that has no place in the identity of the object or its environment, showing the object as that which it is not. He argues that the ornament is not an embellishment, but also that it cannot be interpreted as simply an element in the self-manifestation of the object. Both views of the ornament – as embellishment and as self-manifestation – reduce it to a mere factor in the fetishized consistency of the thing. Ornament is not-yet, both too much and not enough. It is the margin of the object as it appears in its world and carries the promises of the object, its communication to other objects, to humans and animals and to the world as a whole. Taken in this way, Bloch’s marginal notes in the *Phänomenologie* express an intention with respect to the text they comment on, they circle around the not-yet of Hegel’s philosophy. In other words, they can be understood as the intention to express an aspect of Bloch’s materialism that is always present, but often only

⁷ *Gesammelte Schriften* VI, p. 567; translation from Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish* trans. by Howard Eiland et al (Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 31.

⁸ This was a time of plagiarism between the two of them: after spending time together in Capri in 1924, Benjamin wrote ‘Naples’ with Asja Lācis, published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 19 August 1925. A year later, in the same newspaper, Bloch’s ‘Italy and Porosity’, which explores very similar themes. Later the same repeated with Benjamin’s aphoristic *One Way Street* (1928) and Bloch’s *Traces* (1930).

implicitly – and never unambiguously – acknowledged by him: the place of truth is the place unoccupied, and incapable of being occupied, by dialectics. Dialectical materialism embodies that place because it is a materialism and therefore always more than dialectical. Materialism is, after all, that mode of thought that affirms some kind of unmediated real residue in whatever relational or ideational framework we might develop. “Matter” is a name for that which escapes mediation by mind, so therefore that which lies outside of dialectical relations, which is always more than what we can grasp in thought. When we hear the paradox in the term dialectical materialism, we catch a glimpse of the epistemology of the margin.

Library as Margin

Bloch first encountered Hegel’s writings in the library of his adolescence – the palatial library in Mannheim on the other side of the Rhine from Ludwigshafen, the proletarian river port of his birth. In the library was the “whole speculative spectrum from Leibniz to Hegel and his school”,⁹ the distance from school, the family, the smokestacks of the industrial port. Philosophy grounded in homesickness turns material here: the shelter that is the library is a shelter from the outside world. The promise to return home, as with the call to return to a childhood that never was, as invoked in the final pages of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*Principle of Hope*, 1959), is located in home’s negation, when it is left on the other side of the river. Displacement was a permanent feature of Bloch’s life: he found refuge along lines connecting Switzerland, Italy, Prague, Paris, the United States (New York and Cambridge, Massachusetts), Leipzig, and Tübingen. On his journeys into various forms of exile, his library was lost many times – an enduring reminder of destruction and precarity, of a both material and spiritual homelessness. It followed him around everywhere.

When Bloch eventually settles late in life, in Tübingen, he does so with what he described as a *Kutscherbibliothek*, a cabbie’s library.¹⁰ He left behind the carefully cultivated scholar’s library, built up in sedentary circumstances over a lifetime of study, as much as the bourgeois’ representative book collection “still in glorious binding [*Prachteinband*]”.¹¹ The cabbie’s library, though also encrusted with jewels, is marked by the traces of transgression and displacement. It is a migratory and always preliminary collection in which what fails is perhaps even more present than what it contains. The library itself is marked by the

⁹Werner Traub, Harald Wieser (eds.), *Gespräche mit Ernst Bloch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1975), 29.

¹⁰ Peter Zudeick, *Der Hintern des Teufels: Ernst Bloch, Leben und Werk* (Zürich: Elster Verlag 1985), p. 363.

¹¹ Ernst Bloch, *Literarische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1965), 18.

marginality of the incidental and accidental. But this *neben-bei*, the ‘*alongside*’ of the *collection*, becomes the moment of illumination, the light shone on a childhood that never was, the discovery of a marginal life as a place of truth. This is a process of discovery *into* the margin. In the end, you do not want it any other way.

And then, when Bloch sits with this late 1952 edition of the *Phänomenologie*, some time around 1966, he discovers the margin again, the experience of his generation’s life, of his thought, returning in a new moment of displacement. In this sense, the marginal notes can be understood as a late work: in the reading and marking of an early text that shone through childhood, in the home away from home that was Bloch’s first library, where he “misunderstood and yet understood” the text, reading it “erotically, botanically”, as he heard the nightingale singing in its pages.¹² At this point, late in life, he returns to the margins and finds the promise of a cab ride – of momentum, liberation and openness, of what he came to formulate as materialism. Marx understood the materiality of his age. Bloch marks out these moments in the late reading of Hegel, as it appears in the margins we are considering here, the traces of a journey, a stagecoach of the spirit, this time on the margins, both digressive and transgressive. But for Bloch, in contrast to Hegel, it is a journey whose destination is not yet known, a journey of history, not just ideas that unfold themselves in a pre-given logical realm. In Bloch, the dialectic jolts and jumps; in Hegel, it proceeds along a path mapped out from all eternity. The margin is the place of the new, of dialectical advance. The materiality of this book, that Bloch held in his hands, manifests Bloch’s own relation to Hegel, discovering the openness in the dialectic; always a hotel, never a home.

Hotel as Residency

On the eleventh page of this edition of the *Phänomenologie*, Bloch wrote “Hotel” in the margin. At least, we think, now hope, this is the word. This notation is underlined twice, but the context gives little indication as to what he might have had in mind. He noted down: “The specific difference of a thing is rather its limit; it is where the thing stops”. The remark echoes the classical metaphysical notion of the degrees of being. Each finite entity that can be defined by a proximate genus and specific difference is a limitation of being conceived of as a pure act, which itself cannot be contained in a genus, specific difference or category as it

¹² Werner Traub, Harald Wieser (eds.), *Gespräche mit Ernst Bloch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1975), 29.

ranges across and over all of them. Every finite being is a stage, a point on the journey to absolute being or, in Hegel's case, the actualisation of absolute spirit.

But why *hotel*? Hotel, perhaps as a transient and transgressive space on the journey of the spirit. The place of rest, but the rest of a temporary intermission of travel. A hotel is a place of sojourn. The hotel simulates the home as a lost object and may put us in touch with the awareness that we never possessed what appears to us as lost. The object as such is constituted by its lack, a kind of *surplus enjoyment* – expressed also through the pencil markings themselves, both in their colour and frozen gesture.¹³

The hotel may also take the form of the “Grand Hotel Abyss”, Lukacs’ metaphor for Schopenhauer’s philosophy which he later extends to Adorno, which sits on the edge of groundlessness, an “off-ground”, in the refined comfort of private enjoyment on the edge of catastrophe.¹⁴ The hotel is a refuge from the world, but only as a simulation, like the palatial Mannheim library; it curiously gives with one hand what it takes with the other. A hotel can give us a closer approximation of home than anywhere else, and yet we are always expelled from it. Are not arrival and departure in dialectical relation, both suspended in an uncanny moment of rest in which sounds cease to travel beyond themselves and we are *in* the world but no longer *of* the world? For Bloch, the hotel is a real symbol, like the bridge, the mountain, or the correspondence between the deep blue of the sea and the deep blue of the sky, the reflection into each other of deep and high. In the same way, the hotel can provide a mythical retreat, a world away from the world.

During this time, a time of generational displacement, the hotel became the residence of exiled life. Walter Benjamin’s address book, used from 1933 until his death, is testament to this: names are crossed out, hotel rooms recorded – rooms which the occupant has probably already vacated.¹⁵ In this instance, the hotel is a simulation of home where the violence of the world is guarded against, if only temporarily.

¹³ Cf. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), where gesture is important for José Esteban Muñoz’s use of Bloch’s conception of historical anticipation. The “upright gait” is gestural in its semantics, perhaps flowing and preliminary in its anticipatory character and certainly not a march into an already given future. The marginal note here resists the moment when it becomes an appropriation, judgement or colonisation of the text.

¹⁴ Bloch refers to Lukács’ 1952 invocation of the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’ in his *Leipziger Vorlesungen*, in the lecture on Schopenhauer. (*Leipziger Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Philosophie 1950-1956*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1985), 390.

¹⁵ *Das Adressbuch des Exils, 1933–1940*, ed. by Christine Fischer-Defoy (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 2006).

This was our first understanding of the notation. On the other hand, the word “hotel” also seems remarkably out of context. We take our immediate response as itself a marginal note, a thought that occurred in the interstices of the gap between foreground and background that provides the framing of our reading of these marginalia; a thought for which the practice of transcription provided only temporary lodgings.

Hegel’s Denial of the Margin

Hegel’s philosophy is a philosophy without margins¹⁶. Just think of the dialectical cancellation of the introduction performed in the very text we are considering here. Where there are moments in the development of the spirit that as yet remain unmediated, they will in due course be taken up into the movement of the unfolding of the concept. Indeed, the beginning of the preface to the *Phänomenologie* explicitly reflects on the impossibility of providing an introduction to philosophy, because philosophy as speculative reason has no outside from which we might watch it run its course and decide to jump in or not. The speculative proposition holds together articulation and unity in a permanent, paradoxical buzzing of the living spirit, a “sharp pizzicato” as Bloch says about the dialectic of being and nothingness at the beginning of Hegel’s *Logik*, so that there exists no outside to thought in the end.¹⁷ Indeed, the dialectic between internal and external, spirit and nature, underlies the whole movement of Hegel’s thought, ultimately affirming the identity of the two, of identity and difference. Nothing remains outside of thought as the realisation of the concrete universal. Hegel’s philosophy is thus properly speaking without context: it evacuates itself from every contextuality and contextualisation because it is concerned to think this single obliging thought: that the true is the whole.

Bloch was especially sensitive to the problems this created with respect to negation, the negative and also the satanic as the obstructing dimension of reality. For Hegel, negation is a straightforward element in the dialectical process, albeit with different functions, or it is something that drops out of the history of the spirit and is mere chaff, mere issueless nothingness. Human tragedies and immense suffering are sometimes rather casually

¹⁶ See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) for an alternative, poststructuralist, account of the margin of thought. Whereas for Derrida the margin is a space of permanent displacement of signification, for Bloch the margin is the space of the not-yet and the new, the pre-figuration of utopia. The new embodies a relation to the ultimate for Bloch, for otherwise novelty would reduce to the sameness of mere variety. We cannot further explore the, now largely historical, relation between Bloch’s philosophy and postmodernism here. See Jamie Owen, Tom Moyland, *Not-Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (London: Verso 1997).

¹⁷ Ernst Bloch, *Subjekt-Objekt. Erläuterungen zu Hegel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1962), 165.

dismissed by Hegel as of no function in the history of the spirit and therefore ultimately meaningless. We might say that if there is room for a margin, a contingency that does not become necessity, it is to be found here. Bloch often refers to Hegel's view of the Thirty Years' War as pure negativity that had no sublated afterlife, that led to nothing.¹⁸ One cannot even use the word *example* here, for of what universal could we say that this event was a mere instance? Pure nothingness is not a concept.¹⁹ We miss something if we look at the singularity of suffering and destruction in this way. The reception-critique that began with the Left Hegelians, Feuerbach, Kierkegaard and indeed Marx, was continued into the twentieth century along these lines: the concrete, irreducible entity or individual becomes an unmediated and invisible other to this way of thinking.

As Bloch puts it in the first edition of *Geist der Utopie*, we must not forget Kant over Hegel: "Kant burns through".²⁰ It is regrettable that much of the contemporary reception of Hegel in both analytical and Continental schools of thought has little time – or little understanding – of this dynamic and seeks to avoid or suppress it by decapitating Hegel; that is to say, by eliminating the speculative proposition from its interpretation of Hegel. In this way, we achieve the worst of two worlds: the spirit becomes naturalized or socialized as the concrete historical manifestation of reason, while the radical, revolutionary dynamic that resulted from Hegel's absolute universalism is removed. We end up with a recipe for a stifling, ignorantly gloating conservatism that reminds us of the worst of Hegel's own flirtations with the state. Such a reading of Hegel reverts to a kind of Feuerbachian bourgeois thought in which the human being, while conceptualized in its concrete individuality, is not seen as embodied and engaged in transgressive development, but merely as individual subjective consciousness. The interpretation of Hegel becomes liberal, in the sense of seeking to cure the ailments of the state by a return to the bourgeois subject and ascribing to this a transcendent status. To this entire symptomatic complex the turn to materialism had once

¹⁸ Ernst Bloch, "Aufklärung und Teufelsglauben, die Fortdauer des Widersacherischen", in *Experimentum Mundi, Frage, Kategorien des Herausbringens, Praxis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1975), 230-238.

¹⁹ We refer here to the classical view of this matter since Plato: we cannot form a positive conception of pure nothingness, precisely because it is nothing.

²⁰ Bloch uses the verb "durchbrennen" in its double meaning of, on one hand, literally "burning through" (Kant's thing-in-itself burns through the logical web of Hegel's dialectic; it cannot be mediated by that web) and on the other the figurative meaning of "running away", "eloping" (Kant's regulative idea always transcends the world as it is given). In other words, there is an aspect of Kant that survives after Hegel and is, in a way, untouched by Hegel's philosophy.

been the antidote. For our purposes, we suggest that it is precisely the philosophical relevance of materialism that becomes apparent in the status of the marginalia.

For what do Bloch's markings reveal? In their materiality, they reveal the materiality of the text, the words on the page. We skip over them all too easily, seeing the physical copy of the text as precisely that – a copy of an ideal score that has an existence outside of space and time even if we can trace its origin to certain historical occurrences (Hegel writing the text). We overlook the fact that it is only because of the blank page that words can be put down at all. The marginalia occupy the margins of the printed text, highlighting the background – the blank page – against which the words of the text can be foregrounded. Marginalia occupy the region between foreground and background, bringing them to our attention as something that cannot go, and has not gone, into the text and yet makes that text possible. A form of “negativity” becomes palpable that is given with the material form of the text and which turns out to be a universal feature of all forms of meaningful utterance; the letter has a material embodiment. Yet the relation between background and foreground is not a dialectical one. There is no resolution of one into the other and no higher synthesis in which they both become moments of a totality. The object, the book here in front of me, is no dialectical totality of background and foreground, but a play of one against the other in which both remain what they are even if they cannot be separated from one another. By inscribing itself into the margin of the text, a note illuminates what must escape all attempts at a conceptual recuperation: the material process itself.

Bloch himself struggles with this dimension. In his version of dialectical materialism, he tries to combine the preponderance of unity and resolution with the irreducibility of interruption in the process. But he is never unambiguous, often suggesting that the interruption of the materially unison, the foundation of spirit, is ultimately at one with the material process. A basic question, what the space is within which matter can be cut or interrupted, torn apart, receives no answer. Yet here, in the marginal notes to Hegel's text, which Bloch had read so often and for so long, the awareness of the intractable that signals truth is visible on the page. The markings appear like drawings and as such, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, express how we are drawn out and sketched out by lines we draw: “To exist is to sketch oneself (*s'esquisser*). One would like to write *s'esquisser* – to open oneself to a form which shows itself in the movement of its uprising (*surgissement*). No one would

consent to live if they did not experience this desire – to open oneself to the desire of (letting oneself) being drawn to the outside.”²¹ We have here a dialectical materialism of the margin.

Bloch shows his awareness of the materiality of the text in the lectures on Hegel he held in Leipzig between 1948 and 1956. There, he discusses various editions of Hegel’s works, concluding that while modern scholarship is useful and necessary, it is only the “old edition”, published by the *Verein der Freunde des Verewigten* (Society of Friends of the Immortalized One) that has history and patina and which is marked out by contemporaneity, *viva vox*, the “living voice of the professor”. With respect to the modern editions, he says that “too many cooks spoil the broth”.²² We can add friends and not just cooks to the spoiling. What stands out is the singularity, the localisation of a form of thought that seems itself to accord no truth value to the historical specificity of mere circumstance. Yet for Bloch these contextual dimensions are essential if we wish to understand what Hegel’s philosophy has to say to us and had to say to others. Bloch’s verdict in his long study of Hegel, that “Hegel repudiated the future, no future will repudiate Hegel”²³ is here enacted in the discussion of the afterlife of the texts. Even the eternalized subject is determined by the time and space of actuality. It would be wrong to say the eternalised subject *cannot exist in a vacuum*, for the context or background we spoke of is by metaphoric extension a kind of vacuum within which something can exist as foregrounded. Hence, to some extent everything exists in a vacuum. It would thus be better to say that Hegel’s *horror vacui* was so great he sought to eliminate it completely.

Bloch Place in Hegel’s Margin

After Hegel’s *Enzyklopädie* was published in 1817, he ordered a volume with blank pages inserted between the printed sheets.²⁴ On these blank pages he would write a parallel text that eventually worked itself into the second edition of the *Enzyklopädie*, which appeared in 1827. In this case, the page had become the margin; space intended for elaboration became the text itself. As a stage in the completion of thought, the margin lists what is yet to be incorporated into the movement of thinking itself. In Hegel’s attempt to raise the margin to the level of a

²¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, tr. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press 2013), xiii.

²² Ernst Bloch, *Leipziger Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1985), 269.

²³ *Subjekt-Objekt*, 12.

²⁴ See Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel Dahlstrom, ‘Introduction’ to G.W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010), ix.

blank page we find both the attempt to eliminate the distinction between printed text and notebook but also a blindness to the ontological and epistemological status of the margin. How does Bloch occupy the margin of the spirit, the site that for Hegel's self-understanding remains invisible?

Hegel's *Vorrede*, or preface, to the *Phänomenologie* famously opens with the acknowledgement that the traditional form of the preface masks the inability of philosophy to begin to speak (-rede) from a predetermined (Vor-) standpoint. There can be no didacticism in philosophy because any universally transparent starting point has to emerge from the process of philosophical thinking itself. Though the positivist might be able to summarise arguments, state the aims and conclusions of the work, the outcome can appear as nothing but "a string of random assertions and assurances".²⁵ You cannot place yourself outside of it to watch it run its course. Philosophy starts in the place where the "I" is now. In addition to the reflection on the margin which the reader might choose to occupy, this means that the "we" constituted by the authorial voice and the readership (the reading public) cannot be presupposed. It must forever remain abstract as compared to the individual act of reading or writing that affords the initial act of beginning to reflect. Hence, the *Vorrede* acknowledges its ability to not yet speak; Hegel's philosophy, despite its mobilisation of the principle of negation, is from the start a massive, solid, if intellectual, activism without cracks. Truth does not appear like a ready-minted coin²⁶ and is not shot out of a pistol like bullet²⁷, but these avowals of the processual nature of thinking are in tension with the impossibility of occupying anything else than centre stage when we begin to think. In other words, there is ultimately no room for marginalia in Hegel's philosophy, but until the moment of philosophy's completion, marginalia can be understood as entirely necessary. The marginal comment, the sidelong glance, are only ciphers of what remains to be incorporated into the march of the concept. For a completed system has no room for marginalia. Until you get to that point, the marginalia are necessary sites where the work of producing the system can be carried out. As the work of philosophy proceeds, the margins are being eliminated. They slowly reduce until there is nothing left to incorporate into the system. The insertion of blank pages becomes the deferral of philosophy to begin, the acknowledgement that the subject matter itself is not yet immediately comprehensible to either the writer or the reader.²⁸

²⁵ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, 9.

²⁶ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, 33.

²⁷ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, 26.

²⁸ Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, 9. Cf. Seán Williams, *Pretexts for Writing: German Romantic Prefaces, Literature, and Philosophy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press 2019).

The blank page is the moment in which deferral is further grounded as a new starting point, in Bloch's terms, as the opening up of a new world. This would be a reading of Hegel's empty pages, on Hegelian terms. The typography of philosophy parallels the unfolding of its logic. A defining feature of Bloch's materialist rethinking of Hegel's logic involves the recognition that the empty page, the margin, that which is not or not yet part of the system – the sphere of contingency as such – is a necessary condition for the process of actualisation (*die Realisierung des Realisierenden*)²⁹ to take place. Only in the interplay between blank page and printed letter can the text materialise. The margin as a writeable plane refers to the background-foreground structure of experience. An experienced content always stands out against a background that remains implicit, but without which the explicit thematic experience could not take place. This dimension of experience is missing from Hegel's philosophy. In the explicit drawing of our attention to the margins of this philosophy, the hidden and ignored background, that which remains impervious to inclusion in the system, becomes palpable itself. This allows Bloch to "rescue" the dialectic into his dialectical materialism. For the background promise of the dialectic is much more even than what Hegel held the explicit content of the dialect of the concept to be. The utopian redemption of the world appears in the backlight of the explicit, ignorant, absolute idealist dialectical movement as its condition of possibility and shows this movement as a sleepwalker through history, unaware of the sign it carries on its forehead even as it dreams of absolute truth. This sign is the trace of the utopian. In the margins of the *Phänomenologie*, we find a number of instances of this sign. The margin as the text's unconscious remains unthought and yet constitutes it as a utopian trace. Hegel's obliviousness to the background is, *ex negativo*, his truth moment as a trace, the childish expectation that all can be said, that the whole can be embraced, as an image of utopia.

Bloch, then, takes a very different approach than does Marx with his inversion of Hegel's dialectic. Bloch offers the possibility of saving something that cannot be incorporated into the dialectic. That is to say, whereas Marx, in his reception of Hegel, tries to put something straight, Bloch – in a more complex move – seeks to rescue an insight that remains implicit in Hegel, but which is necessary both for the correct interpretation of Hegel as well as for Bloch's own philosophy.

At this point, the margin again becomes an auratic space. Here lurks danger. A halo of

²⁹ *Experimentum Mundi: Frage, Kategorien des Herausbringens, Praxis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1975), 241.

untouchability and uniqueness surrounds the material object and denies it its reproducibility. One should not overlook the playfulness in the marginalia, nor the playfulness in our text that seeks to add more marginalia onto these margins. If Benjamin, when taking hashish with Bloch, had seen better that aura is a margin – and hence a marker of contextuality and a cognitive, perhaps even an aesthetic, principle – he might have experienced his friend's closeness in a different way; namely, as forever assigned to its own space on the margins of his own writing. There would have been no threat. By the same token, our reading of the marginalia is not meant to issue in an auratic elevation of the margin. We should be happy to remain in the wings.

Bloch uses the margins of the *Phänomenologie* to insert his own anticipatory philosophy as a comment to Hegel's philosophy, while also transcending that philosophy. There are a large number of references to anticipation, to modelling, to the "real models" of his *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*, and to his lecture *Über das Vermehrende im Prozeß und seinen Gestalten* (On Augmenting in Process and Its Shapes, 1959).³⁰ He had often emphasised that the utopian kernel in the world tends to be found in the accidental, the sideline. His *Spuren* (Traces, 1930) is full of such intimations of the incidental: "More and more appears among us to the side. One should observe precisely the little things, go after them. What is slight and odd often leads the furthest".³¹ There, Bloch argues that certain things can only be thought about in the form of a story. They are too delicate and indirect, or too concrete and embodied, to survive the attempt at conceptualization and theorization. The idea can be extended to the note in the margin. The core of the utopian process – which Bloch variously called the darkness of the lived moment, the inconstructable question, the invariant of direction, and latency – resists conceptualisation. Yet it can flash up in the non-dialectical space between background and foreground.

Graphic Margins

When preparing the manuscript of *Die deutsche Ideologie* (The German Ideology, written 1845-46, but only published in 1932), Marx and Engels developed a formal technique of collaboration. They folded large sheets so that each sheet of manuscript could hold four pages of writing.³² As Terrell Carver observes, the process of construction was fairly elaborate:

³⁰ *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1970), 21.

³¹ Ernst Bloch, *Traces*, tr. by Anthony Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2006), p. 5.

³² Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank, *Marx and Engels's "German ideology" Manuscripts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2014) p. 2.

These sheets were actually offcuts, notes to be used later in other versions: Hence Marx's numbering was most probably an ordering device to keep track of loose pages. These pages had been set aside for copy/paste usage at the time of extraction, because Marx and Engels were rewriting the critiques of Bauer and Stirner as "fair copy." Possibly, they were saving these offcuts for further re-use piecemeal in future polemical critiques as circumstances arose – always at this time a complex web of political ambitions, publisher prospects, and financial backing. Their marginal notes from somewhat later on in 1846 suggest that they had any number of interests and subjects on their minds as they – for reasons we cannot adequately determine – looked over their previous thoughts. Feuerbach is mentioned there, but he is not the only subject of interest.³³

The book that is now *The German Ideology* was once the margins of something else. Marx and Engels wrote in the other's margins. In Terrell Carver's and Daniel Blank's words, the manuscript of *The German Ideology* reveals "what can be learned about the thinking of Marx and Engels as they worked" rather answering "'doctrinal' questions concerning their 'final [...] thought'".³⁴ As for Bloch, the margins become a demonstrative space of incompleteness. Displaying the construction of the manuscript renders visible the collaboration as a process of construction within the margins. As Terrell Carver argues, the publication of the manuscript of *The German Ideology* leads to the identification of the two separate authorial hands, that would otherwise be smoothed out with the single "typography of the [...] volume".³⁵ *Text-Schichten*, or layers of text, accumulate on the page, page upon page, margin upon margin. As with Bloch's marginalia, writing is crossed out, negated, emphasised, augmented. One sees the *process* of writing, its enjoyment, frustrations, openness, and truncations. The process of reading and writing creates *Spielraum* in the double sense of that word – room for manoeuvre and play-space. On one page, in the chapter on Feuerbach, a large number of doodles appears on the right-hand column of the page. There are faces of people, lambs, dogs, and masks. There are shapes and words. There are people upon people, so much so that faces and eyes become blurred. On another page, there is what looks like an archer, upside down, transcribed like a constellation in the night's sky. On another, one finds an orchid-like flower in a geometric form. There are half-moons and squares and circles. The doodle presents the movement of the blank page: it is a mark of the inadequacies of the blank page,

³³ Terrell Carver, 'Whose Hand is the Last Hand? The New MEGA Edition of "The German Ideology"', *New Political Science*, 41:1, 2019, pp. 140-148.

³⁴ Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank, *Marx and Engels's "German ideology" Manuscripts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2014) p. 1.

³⁵ Terrell Carver, 'Whose Hand is the Last Hand? The New MEGA Edition of "The German Ideology"', *New Political Science*, 41:1, 2019, p. 146.

the necessity to overcome it. To doodle is to work into boredom and beyond. Engels is the likely author of these sketches, perhaps practicing for his caricatures of Max Stirner, “Saint Max” as he is called in *The German Ideology*.³⁶

³⁶Cf: Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993).





History's Place

The defacement or destruction of the book is referred to in a remark from the first edition of *Geist der Utopie*, published in 1918. In the section entitled 'On the Metaphysics of Inwardness', expanded in the 1923 edition and retitled 'On the Metaphysics of Our Darkness', Bloch follows Schelling: human existence, he contends, begins in the blind spot of the moment, which remains invisible because it is 'too near', 'lived in' (*gelebt*) but not experienced (*erlebt*).³⁷ The reader is grounded in the darkness of the lived moment, its distance from itself. The book, like its writer, refuses to make peace with the world.³⁸ "[D]as innere Buch [ist] letztthin weder Welt noch überhaupt ein Buch" (the inner book is ultimately neither the world nor a book at all).³⁹ The openness of the world – the possibility of the elimination of suffering and exploitation, or the hope that the world could become home, a dwelling place for all that exists – is contained in the margins: in that which cannot yet be read, detected, deciphered, understood. There we find a free space, away from the annexation of things by the relations they are caught up in. By denying the completeness of the book Bloch simultaneously affirms the incompleteness of the world – and this very incompleteness is our only ground for hope. Hegel, "the gravedigger", wrenches everything inward to the outside, which is the "regrettable achievement of an explicitly concluded system."⁴⁰ In the 1923 edition of *Geist der Utopie*, Bloch states: "the solution at least can sediment itself essentially in no book and just as little in an earthly church as in any kind of philosophy which would remain to be studied, if we finally constitute the correctly understood question as absolutely serious, which, when once it has occurred to us, signifies nothing less than the ineluctable end of this world, with all its books, churches, systems".⁴¹ As the margins and the traces of reading deface the book, they point beyond the text to an outside that remains incommensurable with the act of writing as well as with the act of reading what has already been written.

In her essay "Benjamin's Endgame", Rebecca Comay has analysed the relation between the blank and history. For Comay, the blank represents the interruption of catastrophic and homogeneous time: "Hegel, observing the 'slaughter-bench' of Spirit's progress, comments that, in the chronicle of history, periods of happiness are like 'blank

³⁷ Wayne Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (London: Palgrave 1982), p.26.

³⁸ *Geist der Utopie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1921/1962), p. 247.

³⁹ *Geist der Utopie, Erste Fassung, Faksimile der Ausgabe von 1918* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1985), p. 289.

⁴⁰ *Geist der Utopie* (1918), p.179.

⁴¹ *Geist der Utopie* (1921), p. 249.

pages' [*leere Blätter*], blank in the sense of an utter absence of determination – historicity – of the past. He calls these blanks holidays in that the interval or spacing of the blank, the condition of the possibility of the blank, the gap or fissure – *Sprung* – which ruptures the catastrophic continuity of tradition, exposing this as the merely factual continuity of hereditary power lines, thus revealing a jagged foothold for a new beginning". Just like storytelling, historical materialism explodes the "cosmic clock" of progressive history. The blank page or the margin is the "dispersing by endlessly rewriting what can be told".⁴² Just like history, the manuscript is told and retold, the past exploding into actuality. This is the sustaining hope of the philosopher-palimpsest. In Bloch's marginalia, the philosophy of anticipatory consciousness and anticipatory history inscribes itself into the blanks of Hegel's philosophy, where – to revert to Bloch's youthful botanical reading of the *Phenomenology* – it found the soil to spring from. On page 32 of the marginalia Bloch writes: "'Conclusion' of - Phän. d. Geistes, as a book. And then? Not contemplative?". And again, on page 58, with words taken from the Gettysburg Address: "Tolling bell of the philosophies = something thus far not emphasised in this way comes forward, at its hour, as principle and will - in its concept as in its praxis - no longer perish from the world!". The margins are the moment of enjoyment, the excess of reading, when reading is no longer the end: history is.

Appendix

We would like to include the transcription of the marginalia, if possible in the visual format that we prepared here:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1zjThHxqWpY-pwbkW_xLPrO5FeDVWl2InO2Mz0yAJx8I/edit?usp=sharing

If we can't include them all, a selection of images would also be possible.

⁴² Rebecca Comay, 'Benjamin's Endgame', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 268-69.