



"Was it for this?"
Brandom, Hegel, Wordsworth, Žižek, and the Terror

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Abstract: In this essay I compare Robert Brandom's and Slavoj Žižek's interpretations of G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I do so directly, in terms of what they say about Hegel, and indirectly, in terms of what they say about William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. One aim of the essay is to assess Žižek's claim that Brandom fails to account for Hegel's conception of absolute freedom as revolutionary terror. Another is to show that Brandom's and Žižek's different ways of thinking about what it would mean, for Hegel, to successfully confess and forgive revolutionary terror amounts to a restaging of the *Phenomenology's* dialectic of confession and forgiveness.

Keywords: Brandom, Robert; Hegel, Georg W. F.; Wordsworth, William; Žižek, Slavoj; absolute idealism; absolute freedom; French Revolution.

I do now let loose my opinion, hold it no longer:
this is no fish, but an islander that hath lately
suffered by a thunderbolt.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air.¹

Hegel's and Wordsworth's Responses to the
French Revolution

William Wordsworth began working on an autobiographical poem on a trip to Germany in October 1798. By December 1799 the 150-line fragment had grown into a two-part poem of almost a thousand lines. By May 1805 it was a thirteen-book poem of some eight and a half thousand lines. For the next forty-five years Wordsworth would occasionally tinker with it, leaving behind a fourteen-book version for posthumous publication under the title *The Prelude*.²

Robert Brandom took almost as much time to complete *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*.³ About halfway through the book's nearly four decades of gestation he made a brief remark about *The Prelude* in a note to the introduction of *Tales of the Mighty Dead*:

Wordsworth said that the child is the father of the man. But his *Prelude* was more than just his account of how he started out and developed on his way to being who

¹ William Shakespeare, "The Tempest," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edition, eds. Stephen Greenblatt et al., New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company 2016, pp. 3238, 3253 (2.2.32-34, 4.1.148-50), my emphasis. [Henceforth cited as *TT*]

² Jonathan Wordsworth, "Introduction," in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, New York, NY: Penguin 1995, pp. xxv-xxvi.

³ Robert B. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. [Henceforth cited as *ST*]

and getting where he is at the time of writing it. It is the greatest achievement of his maturity. That account of the roots of his self, his sensibility, and his work is his achieved self, sensibility, and work.⁴

By appending this note to a summary of Hegel's conception of how self-conscious individuals transform themselves by transforming their self-conceptions, Brandom implies that something similar could be said of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: its account of the roots of spirit's self, sensibility, and work purports to be spirit's achieved self, sensibility, and work. The same can now be said as well of *A Spirit of Trust*.⁵ All three works illustrate the conception of

self-transformation that Brandom attributes to Hegel: "The way we understand and conceive what we are doing affects what we *are*, in fact, doing. We find a way forward by reconstruing the path that brought us to our present situation" (TMD 15).

The relation between the *Phenomenology* and *The Prelude* deserves further scrutiny. As M. H. Abrams observed fifty years ago, these two masterpieces of nineteenth century literature resemble each other both in "general content and overall design."⁶ The *Phenomenology* presents a series of "shapes of spirit" that culminates in Absolute Knowing. *The Prelude* presents a series of "spots of time" that culminates in something like Absolute Imagining. Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude* to explain how he came to think of himself as a poet. Hegel wrote the *Phenomenology* to explain how spirit — "I that is We, and We that is I"⁷ — came to understand itself as spirit. The *Phenomenology* was completed in 1806; the thirteen-book *Prelude* was put aside in 1805. Why a German philosopher and an English poet should have felt compelled to tell stories of self-development at roughly the same time is a question worth considering. It was not just the popularity of the *Bildungsroman*. They both felt that in order to move forward with a new project — in Hegel's case, the rest of his projected *System of Science*; in Wordsworth's, a philosophical poem to be called "The Recluse, or Views of Nature, Man, and Society" — they had to tell a story about how they came to find it necessary to tell that very story. Only by telling it, they felt, could they "find a way forward."

Measured by this Brandomian standard, Hegel succeeded in a way that Wordsworth did not. After publishing the *Phenomenology* in 1807 Hegel went on to write the *Science of Logic* (published in 1812) and the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817). But Wordsworth was frustrated by his inability to make significant progress on *The Recluse*.⁸ Accidents

⁴ Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2002, p. 369 n. 9. [Henceforth cited as TMD] As far as I know, this is Brandom's only explicit reference to Wordsworth, but it is by no means his only engagement with English language poetry. In *A Spirit of Trust* he illustrates various Hegelian theses through references to Richard Lovelace's "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars" (ST 35), William Blake's "My spectre around me night & day" (ST 618), Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais" (ST 166), Alfred Tennyson's "Merlin and Vivien" (ST 481), and T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (ST 456) and "Little Gidding" (ST 683). Brandom's model of a "conceptual tradition...exhibit[ing] a symmetrical recognitive structure of reciprocal authority and responsibility diachronically" (ST 618) is the history of case law, but he bases his conception of the retroactive impact of a new legal decision on Eliot's description, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," of the way that a new work of art reconfigures the tradition to which it belongs (ST 449-50; the same passage is cited and discussed in TMD 93). He later inverts this order of comparison by taking Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* to do for the history of art what judges do for the history of case law (ST 629). In Brandom's eyes, Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* are "[m]uch more central to Hegel's project" (ST 630) than the lectures on aesthetics. He himself could probably tell a fascinating dialectical story about the history of English language poetry, but despite his pivotal reference to Eliot's conception of a poetic tradition, such a story would be peripheral to the central semantic concerns of *A Spirit of Trust*. One aim of the present essay is to highlight significant relations between the center and the periphery.

⁵ Brandom writes: "Like the *Phenomenology* itself, *A Spirit of Trust* exemplifies the process of recollective rationality whose structure it is its business to articulate" (ST 769).

⁶ "[I]n general content and overall design the [*Phenomenology of Spirit*] is notably parallel to Wordsworth's exactly contemporaneous poem on the growth of his own mind." M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton 1971, p. 236.

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. Michael Inwood, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2018, p. 76, §177. [Henceforth cited as PS]

⁸ Obviously this depends on what one counts as significant progress. He did compose "Home at

of biography aside, it is tempting to suppose that these divergent outcomes had something to do with the different focuses of their respective projects. Maybe Hegel would have faltered if instead of composing a phenomenology of spirit he had written about his childhood pastimes and residence at Tübingen. Maybe Wordsworth would have succeeded if instead of reminiscing about stealing a boat and crossing the Alps he had tried to make sense of the zeitgeist. The problem with these counterfactuals is that they are barely counterfactuals at all. Hegel may not have explicitly talked about his time at Tübingen, but he implicitly recounted his own philosophical development.⁹ Conversely, Wordsworth was not just talking about himself when he wrote about his time in Cumbria, Cambridge, and Paris. Despite the different emphases of the new genres they invented—the dialectically recollective philosophical narrative and the long autobiographical poem—the genres themselves do not explain their divergent outcomes.

A more plausible explanation has to do with how both writers changed their conceptions of their projects in midstream. When Wordsworth began to write about his childhood, he did not plan to discuss his time in France. Only after completing the two-part *Prelude* did he realize that he could not make sense of his vocation as a poet without recounting his experience of the French Revolution. Likewise, Hegel did not plan to discuss the French Revolution when he began writing the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As the first part of his *System of Science*, the *Phenomenology* would comprise what came to be the sections on consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason (ST 412). When Hegel decided to add the lengthy chapter on spirit it was partly, if not primarily, to take stock of the Revolution's causes and consequences. Neither author could account for the roots of their protagonists' selves, sensibilities, and works without reflecting on their travels through France.

Like many of their contemporaries, Hegel and Wordsworth had been filled with enthusiasm when the Revolution began. As Wordsworth famously recalled: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!"¹⁰ Hegel says almost exactly the same

thing in his lectures on the philosophy of history:

Anaxagoras was the first to say that the world is governed by νοῦς; but only now did people come to recognise that thought ought to govern spiritual reality. This was accordingly a glorious dawn.¹¹

Yet it was one thing to greet the Revolution's glorious dawn, another to confront its Minervan dusk.

Wordsworth was profoundly disturbed by the sequence of events from the September Massacres to the crowning of Napoleon as Emperor in 1804. In the 1850 version of *The Prelude* he describes his vain attempts to make sense of what had happened by critiquing all principles of practical reason:

So I fared,
 Dragging all precepts, judgments, maxims, creeds,
 Like culprits to the bar; calling the mind,
 Suspiciously, to establish in plain day
 Her titles and her honours; now believing,
 Now disbelieving; endlessly perplexed
 With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground
 Of obligation, what the rule and whence
 The sanction; till, demanding formal proof,
 And seeking it in every thing, I lost
 All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
 Sick, wearied out with contrarities,
 Yielded up moral question in despair.¹²

Wordsworth professes to have recovered from his crisis not by settling on firm principles, but by receiving from his sister—"now speaking in a voice / Of sudden admonition" (1850, XI, 336-7)—the emotional support

Critical Essays, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, New York, NY: W. W. Norton 1979, 1805 text, Book X, lines 692-3 (in the 1850 version the "h" in "heaven" is capitalized: XI, 108-9). In 1805 Wordsworth says that when he first arrived in Paris in November 1791 he "pocketed [a] relick" of the fallen Bastille "in the guise / Of an enthusiast," "[a]ffecting more emotion than I felt" (IX, 66-7, 71). Later, his "heart was all / Given to the people" (IX, 124-5). [Henceforth cited as *TP* year, book, line number]

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Political Writings*, eds. Laurence Dickey and H. B. Nisbet, transl. H. B. Nisbet, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1999, p. 215. Harvey Gross notes the same parallel in "Hegel, Beethoven, Wordsworth: 1770-1970," *The American Scholar* 40/1 (Winter 1970-1), 142-156, here p. 144.

¹² *TP* 1850, XI, 293-305. The phrase "precepts, judgments, maxims, creeds" in line 294 of the 1850 version replaces "passions, notions, shapes of faith" in 1805 (*TP* 1805, X, 889).

Grasmere" and several other texts, but by his own lights such progress was insignificant.

⁹ Brandom discusses the relevance to Hegel of the Tübingen curriculum in *ST* 524, 532.

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception*, Recent

he needed to maintain "a saving intercourse / With my true self." Dorothy Wordsworth helped William discover his vocation as a poet: "She, in the midst of all, preserved me still / A Poet, made me seek beneath that name, / And that alone, my office upon earth" (1850, XI, 336-37, 341-2, 345-7). When Wordsworth describes the "renovating virtue" of the memories or "spots of time" that come to our aid when we are "depressed / By false opinion and contentious thought" (1850, XII, 208, 210-11) he is already carrying out the work of *The Recluse*. He hoped his projected philosophical poem would revive the dejected spirits of those who, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Prelude's* principal addressee, regarded the French Revolution as a "complete failure." When the "spots of time" passage was first drafted in 1799 it had nothing (ostensibly) to do with the Revolution, but in later iterations of the poem it reinforces Wordsworth's account of how he dealt with his disillusionment over the events in France and belatedly came to admire Edmund Burke, who had warned in 1790 that the Revolution would end in tyranny.¹³

Hegel was not one of those who regarded the Revolution as a complete failure; for him it was a partial failure and a partial success. As he explains in the *Phenomenology*, the Revolution began when absolute freedom first appeared in the world:

This undivided substance of absolute freedom ascends the throne of the world without any power being able to offer resistance to it. For since, in truth, consciousness alone is the element in which the spiritual essences or powers have their substance, their entire system, which organized and maintained itself by division into masses, has collapsed, now that the singular consciousness conceives the object as having no other essence than self-consciousness itself, or as being absolutely the concept...In this absolute freedom, therefore, all estates, which are the spiritual essences into which the whole articulates itself, are abolished; the singular consciousness that belonged to such a member, and willed and accomplished in it, has sublated its limitation; its purpose is the universal purpose, its language universal law, its work the universal work. [PS 234, §585]

¹³ According to the Norton editors, the passage in the 1850 *Prelude* celebrating the "genius of Burke" (TP 1850, VII, 512) was added in 1832, expressing "an admiration certainly not felt by the younger, republican Wordsworth" (TP 1850, 255n). The passage recounting his exultation upon learning of the death of Robespierre is present in the 1805 text but it undergoes stylistic changes that would warrant further analysis.

Rebecca Comay observes that Hegel does not explicitly distinguish the political optimism of the Tennis Court Oath from the nightmare of the Terror; instead, he "backdates the Terror to the very onset of the revolution: June 17, 1789."¹⁴ In Hegel's eyes, absolute freedom led directly to the Terror precisely because it was absolute, that is, unconstrained. Spirit has to pass through the Terror for the same reason that each individual self-consciousness has to pass through a struggle to the death with another self-consciousness. Individual freedom requires mutual recognition, but Hegel finds this to be impossible to achieve without each individual first trying to annihilate another individual in a vain attempt to achieve unrestricted autonomy. The life-and-death struggle between two individuals culminates in the capitulation of one of the two parties who, terrified of dying, renounces its claim to autonomy. In the ensuing master-servant relation, the servant explicitly recognizes the freedom of the master, but the master only implicitly recognizes the freedom of the servant.

Hegel represents the French Revolution as repeating this dialectic in the more developed social setting of the world of culture. His analysis builds on Immanuel Kant's observation that when Louis XVI convened the Estates General he implicitly abdicated, thereby throwing the French nation back into a pre-political state of nature.¹⁵ Hegel represents the Revolution as a political state of nature in which individuals confronted one another as bare citizens rather than as bare individual self-consciousnesses. The Terror was a collective "struggle to the death" in which every individual identified its will with the general will, suspiciously regarding every other will as particular, selfish, and private. It subsided only when "the fear of death, of their absolute master" prompted the survivors to recognize one another as co-responsible contributors to a collective social project (PS 237, §593). Instead of returning to the predetermined social roles that Hegel characterizes as *sittlich* (ethical), they repudiated absolute freedom in favor of the self-determining type of *moralisch* (moral) freedom that Kant theorized in his *Metaphysics of Morals*. Hegel suggests that this new social project could not have

¹⁴ Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2011, p. 75. [Henceforth cited as MS]

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and transl. Mary Gregor, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1996, 6:341-2. [Henceforth cited as MM]

been achieved without the detour through the Terror. Thus instead of repudiating the Revolution's birth, as Burke did, or ambivalently dividing its dawn from its dusk, as Wordsworth tried to do, Hegel affirmed it in its entirety. As Comay explains:

In identifying the Terror with the origin of the Revolution, Hegel has inevitably been compared to Edmund Burke...But it is precisely at this point that comparison with Burke proves irrelevant. Hegel's unflinching identification of the Terror as the inauguration of political modernity does not prevent him from affirming the Revolution in its entirety as inevitable, comprehensible, justifiable, horrible, thrilling, mind-numbingly boring, and infinitely productive. I'm not referring to Hegel's personal sensibilities (the legendary dance around the freedom tree, the annual toast on Bastille Day, and so on) – 1789 without the rest, the standard reflex of the German intelligentsia... Hegel's palpable oscillation between an unqualified and lyrical "enthusiasm" – his (unmistakably) Kantian word – for the "tremendous spectacle" unfolding before the world and his unequivocal condemnation of this same event as 'the most terrible and drastic' to have ever happened is expressed in the same breath; and this vacillation is moreover repeated constantly from 1794 to 1830. [MS 75-6]

Only by affirming the Revolution's outcomes, however multifarious, could Hegel get on with the rest of his system, including, eventually, the *Philosophy of Right* (1820).

Brandom's Construal of Hegel's Spirit of Trust

Brandom takes Hegel to represent the Terror as an extreme consequence of normative alienation. For Hegel, he claims, human beings achieve their status as normative subjects by passing from "the organic space of living beings to the normative space of responsible selves" (ST 326). Individuals cross this threshold by existentially identifying with something for which they are willing to die (ST 328). This is the basis of the allegory of the struggle to the death that culminates in the master-servant relation.¹⁶ Mastery is a defective normative status because it purports to involve normative authority (independence) without incurring the burden of normative responsibility (dependence); servitude is the correspondingly defective status that purports to involve normative

responsibility without correlative normative authority (ST 340). In traditional societies, normative statuses are treated as natural facts. Before the French Revolution, for example, the responsibility to recognize a king as a king was traditionally perceived to be based on the natural or divinely sanctioned fact that the king was a king. It was a major development in the life of spirit – for Brandom, the only significant thing that according to Hegel has ever happened to spirit as a whole thus far – for modern societies to recognize that normative statuses are instituted by normative attitudes: anyone recognized as a king is a king only insofar as he is recognized as such. Achieving this modern insight makes it difficult to see what traditional societies see, namely, that there is nevertheless a sense in which normative attitudes are answerable to (instituted) normative statuses. Even if the normative role of king is inherently defective – as the French revolutionaries argued when they proclaimed themselves to be republicans – there are some normative social statuses that, when properly instituted, confer on their bearers a legitimate task-specific authority. Traditional societies fetishize normative statuses, but modern societies suffer from alienation, or an inability to account for the binding force of any norms whatsoever (ST 30). It was easy for the normatively suspicious French revolutionaries to undermine the authority of Louis XVI but difficult for them to establish any new type of normative authority. By treating normative attitudes as fickle expressions of non-normative, selfish preferences, they made quasi-principled suspicion of professed principles the order of the day. The animal-like fury displayed during the Reign of Terror was the flip side of its normative impotence. To overcome modernity's corrosive suspicion toward norms – a suspicion that according to Brandom manifests itself in various naturalistic meta-attitudes – Hegel argues that it is necessary to balance the Enlightenment's insight into the attitude-dependence of normative statuses with Faith's recovery of the status-dependence of normative attitudes. Just as spirit first emerged when individuals identified with something they were willing to die for, so alienation can be overcome only when individuals collectively identify with something they are "willing to live for" (ST 527). According to Hegel, Brandom argues, Faith's mistake is to treat this insight as cognitive rather than as recognitive; in other words, Faith treats the object of its identification as a transcendent being rather than as the mutually recognitive community of rational agents. Faith without Enlightenment is superstition, but

¹⁶ For Brandom's general account of allegories in the *Phenomenology*, see ST 173-4.

Enlightenment without Faith (in the form of communal trust) is Terror. As Brandom puts it:

When pure consciousness in the form of Enlightenment is the self-understanding of actual consciousness in the institutional form of State Power (the practical recognitive expression and actualization of a theoretical cognitive view), the result is the Terror. [ST 535]

Reconciling Faith's recognitive achievement with Enlightenment's cognitive insight into attitude-dependence yields a shared commitment to create, by identifying with, a postmodern "community of trust" or "spirit of trust" (ST 537).

Creating a spirit of trust involves collectively taking responsibility for repairing and forgiving past normative lapses. To repair a perceived normative failure is to correct it; to forgive a perceived normative failure is to recast it as a normative success. When brought to bear on past judgments, forgiveness is primarily retrospective; when brought to bear on past actions, it is also retroactive because forgiving a past failure (such as, for example, the Reign of Terror) involves turning it into a success by extending its normative consequences into the future (ST 624-5). From this point of view, forgiveness is just as much proactive as it is retroactive. It is also prospective insofar as the commitment to forgive functions as a regulative ideal. As Brandom readily acknowledges, there will always be things that we find ourselves unable to forgive, but we trust that those who come after us will be able to forgive what we cannot (ST 747). Brandom is aware that Hegel typically dismisses Kantian regulative ideals as ways of disavowing a present task by deferring a goal, but he argues that for Hegel himself the ongoing character of experience and action—including their answerability to the immediacy of being—entails the inevitability of future normative lapses that will need to be confessed, repaired, and forgiven (ST 690). For this reason, the conception of a world in which "all is forgiven" cannot but function as a regulative ideal.

By showing how Hegel made sense of the Reign of Terror, Brandom offers readers of *The Prelude* a clue as to why Wordsworth was unable to do so. It was not, as we might initially think, that Wordsworth lapsed from the modern meta-attitude to the premodern meta-attitude, but rather that he did not advance from the modern meta-attitude to Hegel's postmodern meta-attitude. Late modernity is characterized not only by its one-sided emphasis on the attitude-dependence of

normative statuses, but also by its oscillation between this one-sided insight (that of Enlightenment) and Faith's reconstruction of traditional society's one-sided emphasis on the status-dependence of normative attitudes. Wordsworth was caught in this oscillation. His description of his dissatisfaction with all principles of practical reason is typical not of traditional society but of Kantian modernity, and even of the hypermodern suspicion that manifested itself during the Reign of Terror. His confession of his moral crisis to his sister was a kind of confession of evil. When she responded by recognizing him as a poet she forgave his normative lapses, enabling him to assume the normative status of a poet. Here he ran the risk of adopting the disengaged attitude of Hegel's beautiful soul who in order to save its purity of heart fails to formulate any definite intentions, let alone perform determinate actions. Wordsworth, however, took his status as a poet to carry with it the moral responsibility to recognize the dignity of people with marginal social statuses, as he does in poems such as "The Mad Mother" and "The Old Cumberland Beggar." Writing the *Lyrical Ballads* with Coleridge was how he initially continued his work in the wake of the Terror. When Coleridge urged him to articulate his practical principles in a long philosophical poem, he wholeheartedly embraced this project. Unfortunately, he got stuck because he did not know how to tell a forgiving story about the French Revolution. Hegel did, and by telling it he managed both to expand its normative consequences and to get on with the rest of his system.

In this sort of way, Brandom's account of Hegel's success can help us make sense of Wordsworth's failure. The key concept is that of forgiveness understood as a way of reconceiving a perceived normative failure as a normative success. As Brandom emphasizes, committing oneself to forgiving something does not mean blithely accepting it at face value. One needs to work at reconceiving a perceived normative failure as a normative success, and one may fail (by one's own lights, as well as those of others) in this endeavor (ST 619-20). It is one thing to baldly say that the Reign of Terror was a good thing because it contributed to the project of political emancipation, another thing to justify such a claim. Brandom takes Hegel to take on the burden of providing such a justification even while knowing in advance that the justification he provides will be judged by others to be inadequate. Whatever aspects of the Terror Hegel may have failed to forgive he left to his successors to forgive, trusting that they would forgive his failure to forgive properly.

Žižek's Critique of Brandom's Hegel

According to Slavoj Žižek, Brandom himself fails to make sense of the significance of the Terror for Hegel. More generally, he fails to account for the "extreme self-destructive moments that are part of Hegel's recollective narrative," including "self-destructive revolutionary terror as the outcome of absolute Freedom."¹⁷ For Žižek the task that Hegel bequeaths us is not to forgive the Terror but to repeat it, as he indicates in his book *In Defense of Lost Causes*, whose original cover featured a guillotine:

does the (often deplorable) actuality of revolutionary terror compel us to reject the very idea of Terror, or is there a way to *repeat* it in today's different historical constellation, to redeem its virtual content from its actualization?¹⁸

Žižek alludes here to Hegel's claim that the repetition of a past event changes its modality from that of a random occurrence to a historical necessity:

But it became immediately manifest that only a single will could guide the Roman State, and now the Romans were compelled to adopt that opinion; since in all periods of the world a political revolution is sanctioned in men's opinions, when it repeats itself. Thus Napoleon was twice defeated, and the Bourbons twice expelled. By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency, becomes a real and ratified existence.¹⁹

Brandom takes this statement to mean that when one tells a forgiving story about a historical event one gives it the Whiggish form of normative necessity (ST 442). For Žižek, by contrast, a historical event is redeemed not by redescribing it, but by literally reperforming it in a new historical setting. Brandom allegedly shies away from this interpretation of Hegel. This criticism deserves scrutiny, not only for its bearing on Hegel, but for its further bearing on the relation between the *Phenomenology* and *The Prelude*.

According to Žižek, Brandom's interpretation of the

Phenomenology involves a "renormalization of Hegel" (D 91). This process begins with his characterization of Hegel's dialectical concepts of determinate negation and mediation. Brandom equates "determinate negation" with material incompatibility, and "mediation" with material consequence. Material incompatibility involves the mutual exclusion of determinate conceptual contents, the fact that something's being determinate in one way precludes its being determinate in other ways. Relations of material incompatibility entail relations of material consequence, or the fact that something's being determinate in one way necessitates its being determinate in other ways. For Brandom, conceptual contents are "hylomorphic" in the sense of having both an objective form and a subjective form (ST 80, 84-5). In their objective form they exhibit modally robust relations of alethic incompatibility and consequence, while in their subjective form they exhibit normative relations of deontic incompatibility and consequence (ST 668, *passim*). Objective reality cannot be contradictory, while cognizing subjects ought not to contradict themselves. Experience has an implicitly dialectical structure in that discrepancies between the way things are in themselves and the way they appear to be forces us to revise our concepts, judgments, and inferences. Dialectical thinking makes this implicit structure explicit. Hegel shows how language users give to concepts the normative authority that they come to have over their judgments and actions. Contradictions arise only at the level of cognitive and practical discrepancies the recognition of which obliges those who detect them to repair and forgive them. Things in themselves are not contradictory. Indeed, it is the normative conception of the essentially non-contradictory character of things that enables the apparent contradictions generated through experience to oblige concept users to revise their concepts and commitments. Brandom accordingly rejects interpretations of Hegel that take him at his word when he insists that things themselves are contradictory.

Žižek takes this interpretation to be insufficiently dialectical. In his view, Brandom overlooks two important features of Hegel's philosophy: "the key passage from determinate negation to negative determination" and the "immediacy of mediation" (D 91). Negative determination is lack conceived not as a thing's exclusion of incompatible properties (for example, X's not being red because it is blue) but as a thing's inherent incompleteness (for example, X's missing a part). The immediacy of mediation—

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*, New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic 2016, p. 117. [Henceforth cited as *D*]

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, New York, NY: Verso 2008, p. 164. [Henceforth cited as *DLC*] A similar claim with more explicit reference to Hegel is stated in *D* 336.

¹⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree, Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books 1991, p. 313.

as opposed to the mediation of immediacy—is differentiality. (Note that mediation in Žižek's sense seems to include both relations of incompatibility and relations of entailment.) In an earlier publication, I took Žižek to equate determinate negation with material incompleteness, thereby blurring the distinction developed in *Disparities* between determinate negation and negative determination.²⁰ I also mistakenly suggested that the difference between Žižek's construal of determinate negation as material incompleteness and Brandom's construal of determinate negation as material incompatibility could be understood in terms of Kant's distinction between the logical "principle of determinability" of concepts and the metaphysical "principle of thoroughgoing determination" of things (AN 146). The former principle allows for gaps in phenomena while the latter precludes gaps in noumena. It now seems to me more plausible to say that Brandom and Žižek are both committed to a version of Kant's principle of conceptual determinability, albeit, in Brandom's case, one based on a Hegelian (*vernünftige*) rather than a Kantian (*verständige*) conception of conceptual determinateness. Brandom explains this distinction as follows:

Concepts that are determinate_{Vernunft} articulate the world only via the *process* of refining them—a process that in principle has no end point. It is the *process* that is the truth. Thinking that it must have an endpoint, on pain of leaving an unconceptualizable residue, is looking for determinateness_{Verstand}. [ST 442]

What remains unclear is how to reconcile this claim of Brandom's with his suggestion that for Hegel the world could exist even if there were no actual concept users and thus no ongoing process of conceptual determination (ST 207). Žižek suggests that Brandom's commitment to this counterfactual possibility places him closer to Kant than to Hegel:

Brandom's position remains all too Kantian since it leaves open the question: If there *were* "objects, facts, or laws before there were people to use singular terms, sentences, and modal vocabulary such as 'necessary,'" i.e., if they exist independently of our reasoning (of our social practice), can we somehow conceive them in *that* state, or are they Kantian "things in themselves"?²¹

²⁰ Andrew Cutrofello, *All for Nothing: Hamlet's Negativity*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2014, pp. 141ff. [Henceforth cited as AN]

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic 2020, p. 32. [Henceforth cited

Žižek cites an unattributed passage in which Brandom argues that a purely differential system of relations would be "threatened by incoherence" since no intrinsically contentless element could acquire determinate content merely by being distinguished from other equally intrinsically contentless elements. Whatever might be said for or against the structuralist thesis that the signifiers of a language acquire their status as signifiers through differential relations, Brandom holds that such relations must be grounded in immediately perceivable, non-differentially determinate features of the system's basic elements (ST 217, 707). Otherwise, the system would be without a ground. For his part, however, Žižek takes Hegel to embrace such a groundless conception of noumenal reality:

This, incidentally, is an old reproach to Hegel formulated already by Schelling (who dismissed Hegel's thought as a "negative philosophy" in need of an immediate positive Ground)...Lacan's answer to this reproach is that the symbolic order precisely is such a differential structure which "hangs in the air", and, furthermore, than [*sic*] this "hanging in the air", this lack of roots in any substantial positive reality, is what subjectivizes the symbolic structure. [D 92]

Žižek goes so far as to suggest that Hegel's differential ontology anticipates quantum mechanics:

it is only this tension between the proto-reality of quantum vibrations, a reality of absences, and the positive reality which results from the collapse of quantum waves that allows for the self-overcoming of inanimate matter: quantum waves are the "absentials" of even the most inanimate positive material reality. Was Hegel not on the trace of this "absentials" in his interpretation of ancient Greek atomism: the void is not the empty space around the atoms but the void in the very heart of atoms, and it is this void that is the zero-level of subjectivity?²² [D 39]

From this perspective, what enables reality to appear for Hegel is an element within the differential

as SFA] For a similar worry about an ambiguity (or even bait-and-switch) in Brandom's position, see Dean Moyar, "Intentional Agency and Conceptual Idealism: Brandom on Hegelian Reason," in *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*, ed. Gilles Bouché, New York, NY: Routledge 2020, pp. 87-104, here pp. 92-3.

²² Elsewhere Žižek indicates how Hegel's system would have to be revised in light of quantum mechanics (SFA 155, 283).

system that signifies its own lack (that is, its negative determination). In structuralist theory, such an element plays the role of a zero-signifier in relation to which the other elements of the system can be determined. The appearance of a zero-signifier is somehow correlated with the appearance of subjectivity. Every subject is said to be ideologically sutured to a single element of a symbolic system that plays the role of a master signifier, a term that alludes to the figure of the master in Hegel's master-servant relation (*D* 93-5). Differentiability is hylomorphic in the sense of being instantiated both on the side of differentiating subjects and on the side of differentiated objects.

For Brandom, Hegel's absolute idealism involves three interrelated theses: (1) conceptual realism, (2) objective idealism, and (3) conceptual idealism. Conceptual realism is the claim that objects are conceptually structured and would be so even if there were no concept-using subjects (*ST* 213-4, 54).²³ Objective idealism is the claim that the conceptual articulation of objects and the conceptual articulation of subjective processes of inference are mutually sense-dependent but not mutually reference-dependent (*ST* 205). Finally, conceptual idealism is the claim that the relation between the conceptual articulation of objects and the conceptual articulation of subjective inferential practices has to be understood on the basis of the inferential practices (*ST* 369).²⁴ Contrasting analogues of these three positions can be found in Žižek. For him, Hegel's absolute idealism involves (1) transcendental idealism, (2) transcendental materialism, and (3) dialectical materialism. Transcendental idealism is the roughly Kantian thesis that objects are differentially structured through the transcendently synthetic differentiating activity of subjects.²⁵ Transcendental materialism is the thesis that the transcendently synthetic differentiating activity of subjects is "inscribed" within objective (material) reality (*LTN* 906). Finally, dialectical materialism is the thesis that the relation between the transcendently synthetic differentiating activity of subjects and the differential structure of objects has

to be understood in terms of a "gap" within objective reality that enables subjectivity to appear (*LTN* 907). The last of these claims is Žižek's construal of Hegel's thesis that the absolute must be conceived not only as substance but as subject: "the disparity between subject and substance is simultaneously the disparity of the substance with itself" (*D* 9).

For both Brandom and Žižek Hegelian subjectivity is fundamentally linguistic, but they represent language use in radically different ways. Brandom's linguistic subject is basically Chomskyan in the sense that to be a speaking subject is to have the ability to formulate an indefinite number of sentences each of which expresses a possible commitment (*ST* 520). Žižek's linguistic subject is fundamentally Lacanian in the sense that to be capable of signification is to be able to name an indefinite number of objects. For Žižek, the capacity to name provides a *de re* foundation for the capacity to make *de dicto* assertions about objects. For Brandom, by contrast, *de dicto* speech is connected to *de re* reference not via bare names (which, if they existed by themselves, would be inferentially inert) but via truth-functional parts of language. On his reading of the *Phenomenology's* chapter on sense-certainty Hegel takes the capacity to refer to particulars to be grounded in the capacity to use indexicals and demonstrative expressions as "token reflexives" (*ST* 115). Terms such as "now," "here," "this," and "I" ground the possibility of reference (through the use of names and definite descriptions) within a linguistic setting that is primarily assertoric and inferential rather than nominative. Since practices of inference are governed by rules, the alienation characteristic of modernity has to do first and foremost with the recognition of the conventionality of rules rather than with the recognition of the conventionality of names or titles such as "King." For this reason, Brandom takes normative alienation to reach its apogee in the perplexities about rule-following behavior first noted by Ludwig Wittgenstein and later developed by Saul Kripke. For Žižek, by contrast, the basic form of alienation is that of a hysterical subject wondering why they are called by the name they happen to be called by (*D* 211). Being the bearer of a name is the most basic social status, one that opens up a subject's participation within the symbolically structured space of normative engagement. For this reason, every subject is potentially hysterical, even if they succeed in repressing their awareness of the contingency of their symbolic identity.

²³ See *ST* 54, where the view is taken to follow from modal realism.

²⁴ See *ST* 374 for Brandom's summative conception of absolute idealism.

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, New York, NY: Verso 2012, p. 906. [Henceforth cited as *LTN*]

This difference between Brandom's and Žižek's conceptions of discursive engagement shows up in the ways they conceive the dialectical structure of experience. Brandom's normative subjects are inescapably confronted with the never-ending task of resolving truth value gluts (sentences that are both true and false). For this reason, as Elena Ficara has noted, Brandom's conception of experience could be modeled on the basis of a paraconsistent logic, even though he rejects dialetheism (the view that being itself is contradictory).²⁶ By contrast, Žižek's potentially hysterical subjects are inescapably confronted with truth value gaps – sentences that are neither true nor false. Thus for him dialectical logic suspends the law of the excluded middle in a way that is more fundamental than the way it suspends the law of noncontradiction.

Žižek agrees with Brandom that to treat normative statuses as brute facts is to (ideologically) fetishize them. He also agrees with Brandom that defetishization entails alienation. The execution of Louis Capet – who was sentenced to death not as King of France but as a criminal who had tried to establish a tyranny – involved the de-suturing of French citizens from all master signifiers other than the empty signifier "France" (or, equivalently, *la nation*). On Brandom's interpretation, this was the moment when insight into the attitude-dependence of normative statuses caused all normative statuses to come crashing down. For Žižek, by contrast, the negativity unleashed in the Terror was not fundamentally an expression of normative suspicion. Absolute freedom – a Hegelian term that Brandom does not explicitly gloss, though he implicitly takes it to be "the *ne plus ultra* of appreciation of the attitude-dependence of normative statuses" (ST 543) – is for Žižek an expression of the negativity of bare subjectivity. On his reading of the *Phenomenology*, the Reign of Terror ended for Hegel when absolute freedom turned inward, that is, when the political terror of Robespierre gave way to the superegoic terror of the Kantian moral law (D 336). Unlike Brandom, for whom the dialectic of confession and forgiveness ushers in a

postmodern spirit of trust, Žižek takes it to culminate in a hypermodern "spirit of distrust."²⁷ He bases this assessment on Hegel's awareness of the fragility of reconciliation and the awareness that some crimes, as for example the Holocaust, are unforgivable (SFA 86n32, D 118). While political subjects should commit themselves to redressing past failures by repeating their normative aspirations, they are bound to keep failing in new ways; in the words of Samuel Beckett, the most they can hope to do is "fail better" (DLC 7).

Finally, Žižek claims that Brandom overlooks a third key feature of Hegel's dialectic, namely, the fact that reconciliation can only be achieved indirectly rather than directly (D 119-20). This criticism, however, seems to miss its target. For Žižek, alienation is ineliminable because the meaning of a subject's actions can only be retroactively determined by other subjects (LTN 321-2, D 112). However, what he means by alienation in this context is precisely what Brandom means by "fate." For Brandom, Hegel's postmodern conception of action (*Handlung*) synthesizes a traditional conception of heroic agency, according to which agents are responsible even for the unintended (fated) consequences of their deeds (*Taten*), with a modern conception of individual agency, according to which agents are responsible only for what they consciously intended to do (ST 487ff). Postmodern agency involves collective responsibility for both the fated and the intended aspects of everyone's acts. It is correlated with an expanded conception of practical success and failure. Every action necessarily fails insofar as it can be described as yielding unintended consequences. Likewise, every action necessarily succeeds insofar as it can be described as achieving normative outcomes. To confess is to describe an act as a normative failure. To forgive is describe an act as a normative success. To privilege one type of description over the other is to prefer either a magnanimous (*edelmütige*) meta-attitude toward normative attitudes or a base (*niederträchtige*) meta-attitude toward normative attitudes. The magnanimous meta-attitude involves trusting that normative attitudes are genuinely answerable to normative statuses so that actions can be taken to succeed as normative endeavors. The base meta-attitude of Hegel's valet (*Kammerdiener*) involves naturalistically reducing normative attitudes to mere

²⁶ "[T]he same processual, higher-order conceptual thought is determined sententially or representationally, and produces a ground-level, partial, and static determination. And, if we determine and sententially fix the same process of determining, we get a contradiction." Elena Ficara, "Truth and Incompatibility," in *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*, ed. Gilles Bouché, New York, NY: Routledge 2020, pp. 29-40, here p. 37.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Slavoj Žižek On What Really Makes Him Mad*, Oxford University Blog, 17 September 2019, <https://blog.oup.com/2019/09/slavoj-zizek-on-what-really-makes-him-mad/>.

expressions of Kantian inclinations so that all actions can be taken to fail as normative endeavors (ST 574). In attributing to Hegel a spirit of distrust Žižek might seem to "play the part of the valet of morality," that is, to prefer a *niederträchtige* attitude over a magnanimous attitude (PS 265, §665). In fact, however, Žižek does not reduce normative attitudes to natural inclinations. Taking a cue from Jacques Lacan he argues that for Hegel desire is fundamentally non-pathological, being directed toward a quasi-transcendental "object = x" (Lacan's *objet petit a*) that structures the subject's attitudes toward pathological objects (D 332). When Žižek accuses Brandom of renormalizing Hegel he links the concept of normativity to that of normality. For Brandom normalization involves the normative articulation of animal desires, such as hunger. For Žižek it involves the pathologization (in the Kantian sense) of sexual desire. Normal desire succeeds by failing: that is, desire preserves its purity by not being satisfied by any of the normal empirical objects toward which it directs embodied rational agents. Abnormal desire (perversion) fails by succeeding: it succeeds not by obtaining satisfaction through the acquisition of a pathological object, but by purporting to satisfy the desire of another subject (the so-called "big Other"). Perversion is not a normative lapse that an analysand might confess to a forgiving analyst; it is an abnormative act for which the analysand seeks the analyst's complicity.²⁸ By seeking to preserve the purity of desire Žižek's attitude toward orectic attitudes could be characterized as magnanimous in another way, just as Brandom's insistence on the natural basis of orectic attitudes could be characterized as being *niederträchtig* in another way.²⁹

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2006, pp. 303ff. [Henceforth cited as *PV*]

²⁹ As Žižek points out, psychoanalysis unites the modern and heroic conceptions of agency in a different way, namely, by attributing to modern individuals unconscious motivations for (apparently) unintended consequences of their acts. Žižek finds it telling that in his discussion of Oedipus "Brandom never mentions Freud" (D 105). In fact, Brandom does mention Freud as being a master of *niederträchtiger* suspicion, though not in connection with Oedipus (ST 565). Terry Pinkard complains that Brandom's conception of a tragic hero who takes responsibility for all of the consequences of his deeds does not fit Hegel's examples of mythical heroes who "found states." Terry Pinkard, "Semantic self-consciousness," in *Reading*

What makes it so difficult to assess Brandom's and Žižek's interpretations of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is that they are both strongly *de re* rather than *de dicto*. As Brandom defines these alternative hermeneutic methods, a *de dicto* interpretation attributes to an author only statements the author explicitly or implicitly endorses in their own terms, while a *de re* interpretation attributes to an author statements that follow (by the interpreter's lights) from those the author explicitly or implicitly endorses (ST 308). It is not clear whether Brandom is thinking of Žižek when he remarks in passing on the prima facie implausibility (though not *a priori* absurdity) of a reading of Hegel that would commit him to anticipating discoveries in quantum mechanics (ST 309). For his part, Žižek criticizes Brandom for not taking at face value Hegel's claim that Kant showed an undue "tenderness for the things of this world" by not allowing "the stain of contradiction...to be in the essence of what is in the world."³⁰ Brandom claims that when Hegel makes comments of this sort he is not saying that things themselves are inconsistent, though he "sometimes puts his own claims in ways that invite such a reading." What Hegel really means to be saying is that given the essential role that immediacy plays in experience, "no set of determinate empirical concepts" could possibly avoid giving rise to incompatible empirical judgments, just as, *mutatis mutandis*, no actions can escape fated consequences (ST 690).

Radically different *de re* interpretations of Hegel are legion. Going back to the letter of Hegel's texts rarely settles disagreements about their spirit (or, for that matter, about Hegel's conception of spirit). One way to adjudicate between rival interpretations of a text is to contextualize it. In *Tales of the Mighty Dead* Brandom characterizes this approach as the *de traditione* aspect of a *de re* interpretation. He derives his conception of *de traditione* interpretation from T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In this essay, Eliot explains how the appearance of a new text

Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust, ed. Gilles Bouché, New York, NY: Routledge 2020, pp. 107-22, here p. 113. The latter type of heroism would more closely fit Žižek's conception of revolutionary agency.

³⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part One of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, transl. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett 1991, p. 92. Cited in D 98.

subtly reconfigures the tradition to which it has been added. No text is an island, entire of itself; every text is a piece of a tradition that by continually evolving as a whole alters the sense of its parts. Brandom infers that "each generation, indeed, each reader, must reread and reinterpret potentially tradition-defining texts" (TMD 93). After citing Eliot's observation that "[t]radition...cannot be inherited...If you want it you must obtain it by great labour,"³¹ Brandom clarifies the nature of this labor:

Here one supplements the words on the page by further claims made by others whom the interpreter, but not necessarily the authors involved, sees retrospectively as engaged in a common enterprise, as developing common thoughts or concepts. One might treat such ascriptions *de traditione* as another species, besides ascriptions *de dicto* and *de re*. I prefer to use "*de re*" generically, to refer to *any* ascription relative to a context (from a point of view) that is *not* restricted to commitments the interpreter takes it would be acknowledged by the author of the text—that is, to use it as the complement to "*de dicto*." [TMD 107]

Žižek draws on the same passage in Eliot to explain how a present act can change the past (LTN 208-9, AN 142). Both he and Brandom interpret Hegel *de traditione*, that is, in light of things said by his predecessors (especially Kant) and successors (for Žižek, especially Lacan; for Brandom, especially Wittgenstein). Another type of *de traditione* interpretation involves justifying one's understanding of an author by using it to interpret another author. Brandom does this when he takes his interpretation of the *Phenomenology* to shed light on *The Prelude*. Žižek does the same thing when he interprets a key passage from *The Prelude* in light of his understanding of the *Phenomenology*. Assessing their respective readings of Wordsworth may help to assess their readings of Hegel, notably with regard to the French Revolution.

Wordsworth's Parallax

Like the *Phenomenology*, *The Prelude* begins with sense-certainty:

O there is a blessing in *this* gentle breeze,
A visitant that while he fans my cheek

Doth seem half-conscious of the joy he brings
From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.

[TP 1850, I, 1-4, my emphasis]

Corresponding to the immediate object of Wordsworth's consciousness ("this gentle breeze") is his equally immediate self-consciousness, here indicated indirectly by the possessive "my." Like "observing reason" in the *Phenomenology*, Wordsworth seeks a reflection of himself in nature. He finds it in the breeze that he welcomes as a "visitant" that "doth seem half-conscious of the joy he brings" (in 1805 the breeze is an impersonal "it" rather than a personified "he"). He professes to have "a heart / Joyous, not scared at its own liberty" (TP 1850, I, 14-15), but soon he exclaims, "Dear Liberty! Yet what would it avail / But for a gift that consecrates the joy?" (TP 1850, I, 31-2). Wordsworth is conscious of having received a gift from nature, yet he feels obliged to do something with it. The breeze blowing on his cheek—the objective correlative of his own subjectivity—summons a "correspondent breeze" (TP 1850, I, 35) within him as if it were seeking a subjective correlative of itself: "A tempest, a redundant energy, / Vexing its own creation" (TP 1850, I, 37-8). Wordsworth looks forward to the time he has been given to write poetry—"Matins and vespers, of harmonious verse!" (TP 1850, I, 45)—but he is nervous about his prospects for success. By purporting to make "a present joy the matter of a song" (TP 1850, I, 47) he celebrates a past joy recollected in tranquility while at the same time envisioning a future sorrow dreaded in anxiety. The poem he is actually writing was originally conceived as a "tailpiece" to *The Recluse* (it was not yet, if ever, conceived by Wordsworth as its prelude). After considering and dismissing several possible topics for long poems that he could write—including his "best and favourite aspiration...some philosophic song / Of Truth that cherishes our daily life" (TP 1850, I, 228-30)—he shrinks back from "this awful burthen" (TP 1850, I, 234). His "days are past / In contradiction" (TP 1850, I, 237-8) and "vain perplexity" (TP 1850, I, 266), characterizations that anticipate the poem's later description of his chronologically earlier moral crisis.

Then comes Wordsworth's second sailing: "Was it for this / That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved / To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song...?" (TP 1850, I, 269-71, 274). This question introduces the recollective reconstruction of his self-development that the poet will pursue until his observed, developing self coincides with his observing, developed self: a

³¹ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition Volume 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 2021, pp. 105-114, here p. 106; cited, with minor elision, in TMD 107.

diachronic form of the "I that is We, and We that is I." The demonstrative "this" no longer refers to the gentle breeze of Wordsworth's sense-certainty; it now refers to the object of his unhappy consciousness, namely, his experience of contradiction and vain perplexity. When he first drafted this passage in 1798 he had not yet written the opening section or any other part of the poem. Both the 1798 fragment and the two-part Prelude of 1799 begin with the question "Was it for this...?" without identifying its demonstrative's referent. John Hodgson argues that Wordsworth could expect his readers to detect an allusion to Aeneas's question "*Hoc erat?*" in Book Two of Virgil's *Aeneid*.³² Aeneas tells Dido that he posed this question to his goddess-mother Venus when Troy was burning and he expected to die without having performed any glorious deeds. By implicitly identifying his own personal predicament with a crisis in the life of the legendary founder of Rome Wordsworth ambitiously projects a glorious future for himself, the hero of what would eventually become an epic-length lyrical poem. However, the glorious poem that Wordsworth intended to write was not *The Prelude*; it was *The Recluse*, or, failing that, "some old / Romantic tale by Milton left unsung" (*TP* 1850, I, 168-9). When he wrote the words "Was it for this" he was not suffering from writer's block; he was getting on with his philosophical poem just fine, albeit in fragments that he planned to synthesize later. Only after he came to think of the "poem to Coleridge" as a way of procrastinating did he draft what became the opening sequence of the 1805 and 1850 versions. Thereafter, the recontextualized referent of "this" became the explicitly described writer's block that he was trying to determinately negate by writing about it. It was around this same time that he decided to discuss his experiences in France. Closely related to his writer's block, although he does not thematize it until much later in the long versions of the poem, was his dejection over the fate of the French Revolution—spirit's writer's block—and his resolve to help determinately negate it by setting out in verse his views of nature, man, and society: "'Tis against *that* / That we are writing" (*TP* 1850, IX, 517-8, substituting "writing" for Beaupuis's "fighting").

When Wordsworth restructured the poem he anchored it in pleasant objects of sense-certainty rather than in the indeterminate object of his unhappy

consciousness. As his exulting persona quickly discovers, however, recording the fleeting objects of sense-certainty—even pleasurable, resonant ones—can only satisfy someone for a brief time. The poet feels the need to express a higher, more permanent truth, but he does not yet know how to do so. Hence his writer's block, to which he can now refer through a determinate use of the pivotal token-reflexive expression that will launch him on his way.

Brandom takes Hegel to show in his chapter on sense-certainty that determinate conceptual contents cannot be fixed through the use of demonstratives alone. The ability to use terms such as "this" and "that" presupposes the mastery of pronouns. In Brandom's succinct formula: "Deixis presupposes anaphora" (*ST* 125).³³ The developmental history of *The Prelude* illustrates this lesson. By retrospectively specifying the object of his spiritual crisis—the writer's block picked out by the demonstrative "this"—Wordsworth establishes an anaphoric chain that extends throughout the rest of the poem. The answer that he eventually gives to the question "What is for this?" is "No." Just as it was not for the burning of Troy but rather for the founding of Rome that Aeneas was born and nurtured, so it was not to fail to write great poetry but rather to succeed in writing it that one, the fairest of all rivers, loved to blend his murmurs with Wordsworth's nurse's song. It was not for this; it was for that. In this case, however, "that" (*The Recluse*) did not yet exist, just as the sought-for alternative to "that" against which Beaupuis and his fellow revolutionaries were fighting (the poverty exemplified by the hunger-bitten girl) did not yet exist. By envisioning these ends, Wordsworth establishes a teleological structure that Brandom calls "forward anaphora" (*ST* 408-9). For Hegel, Brandom argues, a protracted intentional activity such as writing a long poem—or, in Brandom's preferred example, Hegel's writing the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*ST* 412ff)—has the structure of a forward anaphoric chain the sense of which is prospectively anticipated through the agent's demonstrative reference to an intended outcome whose actual achievement will retrospectively determine what the intentional activity had prospectively been all along. Wordsworth's poem illustrates this structure. When he describes his confession of his unhappy consciousness to his sister and her forgiving reassurance, he implicitly

³² John A. Hodgson, "Was It for This...?: Wordsworth's Virgilian Questionings," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33/2 (Summer 1991), 125-136.

³³ Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1994, pp. 464ff.

describes his poetic endeavor both as a failure (from the prospective point of view of his past self) and as a success (from the retrospective point of view of his present self, a point of view in which he recognizes the crucial formative role played by his sister's past prospective point of view). In fact, the situation is even more diachronically complicated because Wordsworth is still measuring his past success prospectively on the basis of what he hopes to accomplish in *The Recluse*. This concern comes through later in the poem when he imagines a second scene of confession and forgiveness, this time between himself and Coleridge who, no stranger to writer's block himself, kept urging Wordsworth to get back to *The Recluse*:

Whether to me shall be allotted life,
And with life power to accomplish aught of worth
Sufficient to excuse me in men's sight
For having given this record of myself,
Is all uncertain; but, beloved friend,
[TP 1805, XIII, 386-90]

When thou dost to that summer turn thy thoughts,
And hast before thee all which then we were,
To thee, in memory of that happiness,
It will be known—by thee at least, my friend,
Felt—that the history of a poet's mind
Is labour not unworthy of regard:
To thee the work shall justify itself.
[TP 1805, XIII, 404-10]

In this passage Wordsworth expresses his trust that Coleridge will forgive him for writing *The Prelude* even though his future is "all uncertain." He thereby represents their friendship as a spirit of trust.

Together, these passages lend support to Brandom's interpretation of the poem in *Tales of the Mighty Dead*. When Brandom contrasts Wordsworth's thought that "The Child is Father of the Man" with his actual achievement in *The Prelude* it is to highlight the fact that Wordsworth acquired his mature self-conception by recollectively reconceiving the path that led him to it. His account of the "Growth of a Poet's Mind" (the poem's published subtitle) is a dialectical autobiographical narrative in which the poet recollects the contrarities and perplexities that he had to resolve in order to become its author. The father who left behind an unacknowledged child in France—and despaired over the course of the French Revolution—is neither literally nor figuratively the son of the boy whose experiences in the mountains of Cumberland he recounts (that would be to read the poem in a psychoanalytically base way); he is the adult the boy made of himself by engaging in

acts of confession, repair, and forgiveness.³⁴

Žižek discusses *The Prelude* in *The Parallax View*. Parallax is the apparent displacement of a visible object due to a change in the position of the viewing subject. As Žižek observes, Kant's transcendental illusions are instances of parallax. Kant compares them to optical illusions that persist even after one sees through them.³⁵ In the special case of the antinomies, which involve opposite ways of conceiving the idea of the world as a whole, the illusion involves two apparently contradictory perspectives between which human reason restlessly oscillates. Kant resolves these four apparent contradictions by distinguishing phenomena from noumena. He resolves the two antinomies he calls "mathematical" by arguing that their theses and antitheses mistakenly treat phenomena as if they were noumena, and he resolves the two he calls "dynamical" by arguing that their theses and antitheses mistakenly treat hypothetical noumena as if they were phenomena (CPuR 531-2, A529-32/B557-60). Hegel credits Kant with discovering these cosmological antinomies, but he criticizes him for failing to recognize that all four of them involve genuine rather than apparent contradictions. According to Hegel, things are inherently contradictory, although, as we have seen, Brandom thinks that Hegel is most charitably read as making the ontologically weaker claim that experience is contradictory. For Žižek, Hegel's crucial move consists not just in maintaining that each of Kant's four antinomies involves a genuine contradiction but, more fundamentally, in privileging the logical structure of the mathematical antinomies over that of the dynamical antinomies. Following Joan Copjec,³⁶ Žižek takes Kant's mathematical antinomies to exhibit a (gappy) logic of "non-all" (insofar as their theses and antitheses jointly assert that phenomenal reality is incomplete even though nothing is non-

³⁴ Julián Jiménez Heffernan has pointed out to me that Brandom's insertion (whether deliberate or accidental) of the definite article "the" before "father" in his paraphrase of "The Child is Father of the Man" arguably makes the line more susceptible to a psychoanalytic reading.

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1998, p. 385, A295/B351-2. [Henceforth cited as CPuR]

³⁶ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1994, pp. 201-36. [Henceforth cited as RMD]

phenomenal), and he takes his dynamical antinomies to exhibit a (glutty) logic of "constitutive exception" (insofar as their theses and antitheses jointly assert that everything is phenomenal with the exception of the noumenal ground of phenomenal reality) (*SFA* 107-36). This is how he arrives at his interpretive claim that for Hegel there is no positive noumenal ground of phenomenal reality. By insisting that for Hegel there is such a ground, Brandom implicitly takes him to preserve the Kantian logic of the constitutive exception. Žižek claims that the basic form of Hegel's debate with Kant recurs in Niels Bohr's debate with Albert Einstein about the nature of quantum reality: whereas Einstein believed that there had to be a non-contradictory noumenal ground of quantum phenomena, Bohr maintained that phenomenal reality was inherently incomplete and inconsistent (*LTN* 740ff). On this interpretation of quantum mechanics, incompleteness and inconsistency are two sides of the same ontological coin, not complementary alternatives as they are for a formal axiomatic system. For Žižek, reality is both gappy and glutty, though it is primarily gappy.

The two different ways of thinking about antinomies might be thought of as a meta-antinomy. Its dogmatic thesis would be that the relation between phenomena and noumena is governed by the logic of the constitutive exception, while its skeptical antithesis would be that the relation between phenomena and noumena is governed by the logic of non-all. Žižek defends the antithesis of the meta-antinomy on the grounds that the conception of the phenomenal world as incomplete has "logical priority" over the conception of the phenomenal world as grounded in a constitutive exception (*SFA* 144); to adopt the converse perspective, as Kant, Einstein, and Brandom do, is in his view to give antinomies "merely epistemological" significance (*LTN* 740).³⁷ For Brandom,

by contrast, to embrace a groundless conception of reality is to court nihilism. To avoid nihilism, he endorses the thesis of the meta-antinomy.

Brandom's paradigmatic example of how the Hegelian dialectic works involves an ordinary optical illusion: the way that a straight stick looks bent when it is half-submerged in water. When confronted with this phenomenon for the first time a normative subject will spontaneously judge that the stick is bent. After removing it from the water, they will judge that the stick is straight. If they are also committed to the judgment that being submerged in water could not by itself change the stick's shape then they will find themselves committed to a set of incompatible judgments and will take themselves to be normatively obliged to revise their commitments in such a way as to make them mutually compatible. The apparent possibility that the stick might be both straight and bent at the same time is dispelled *a priori*, not out of undue tenderness toward the stick but rather because grasping the sense of the concepts "bent" and "straight" entails believing that it would be impossible for the stick to be both straight and bent at the same time. After observing that the stick repeatedly appears to be straight both before and after being submerged in water, the subject is likely to conclude that it never really was bent when it was submerged. At this point, the previous appearance of a bent stick is retrospectively reconceived as a false appearance of a straight stick. This example illustrates how the ability to use the demonstrative "this" — as in "This is not bent" — makes *de re* reference possible. Once the subject is committed to the falsity of the appearance of the bent stick they can seek an explanation of the illusion in the laws of optics (*ST* 76-9). Without the assumption that noumenal (that is, objective) reality is never inherently contradictory, Brandom argues, this type of self-correcting experience would not be possible. One might think that an observing subject confronted with contrary appearances faces an unresolvable skeptical dilemma: Is reality inherently contradictory and experience of an objective world impossible, or is reality non-contradictory and experience of an objective world possible? Brandom takes Hegel to resolve this dilemma practically rather than theoretically, that is, by focusing on the significance of experience for action. As Hegel remarks, animals do not stare dumbfoundedly at the changing appearances of the putative objects of their appetites; they simply gobble them up (*ST* 241). Normative agents measure their assessments of objective reality on the basis of the satisfaction or non-

³⁷ In fact, for Žižek, the result of the epistemologization of the antinomies is not just to de-ontologize them but to de-deontologize them, since the incompleteness of reality is experienced by the (equally incomplete) subject as obliging it to act in such a way as to make itself, and reality, whole. Insofar as Kant is a deontologist he preserves the mathematical character of the antinomies and so is not a totalizing ontologist like Spinoza ("Kant is here opposed to Spinoza"); insofar as he privileges the dynamical antinomies he betrays his own status as a deontologist and falls back into Spinozistic ontology (Kant "remains all too Spinozean") (*SFA* 66, 70). Despite the supposed affinity between Hegel and Spinoza, "it is Hegel who 'deontologizes' Kant" (*LTN* 267).

satisfaction of their normatively articulated desires. Thus the first practical lesson of experience is that (cognitive) experience of an objective world is in fact possible.

Žižek would readily concede that half-submerged sticks are not really bent, but he nevertheless maintains that there are objects whose mode of being depends on how they appear either to themselves or to human subjects, so that a change in their appearance changes their mode of being (*D* 98). This is true of socially constituted objects such as commodities (*D* 125).³⁸ It is also true of quantum objects whose status as particles or waves depends on how they objectively appear. After Einstein discovered the photoelectric effect it would have been a mistake for him to have concluded that the wave-like behavior of light previously observed in the double-slit experiment was a false appearance of noumenal photons. Hegel was unaware of wave/particle duality, but he took Kant's cosmological antinomies to show that phenomenal reality is subject to similar pairs of objectively contrary appearances. In the *Encyclopedia Logic* he argues that antinomies can be found not only "in the four specific objects taken from cosmology [by Kant] but instead in all objects of all general, in all representations, concepts, and ideas."³⁹ In a word, parallax abounds.

To illustrate this point, Žižek discusses the "stolen boat" episode from Book One of *The Prelude*. When he was a boy Wordsworth stole a boat from a "rocky cove" (*TP* 1850, I, 359). As he rowed away from the shore, a "huge peak" (*TP* 1850, I, 378) came into view. The faster he rowed the larger the image of it grew as if it were

coming toward him. Terrified, he returned to shore. Like Brandom's apparently bent stick, Wordsworth's looming crag can easily be explained as an optical illusion, in fact as a case of parallax: it was Wordsworth's change of position that made it seem as if the crag were moving toward him rather than he away from it. The child did not understand this. For several days he meditated on the experience "in grave / And serious mood" (*TP* 1850, I, 389-90). Something in nature seemed to have come after him, something that had designs upon him. Later, he would tell himself that in fact nature did have designs upon him: in this and other memorable spots of time it was nature's intention to awaken his imagination and make him a poet. This aspect of his mature understanding of the episode would be lost if we reduced it to a lesson in optics. Brandom would surely agree with this point about the poem, but he would nevertheless maintain that what disturbed the child was still just an ordinary experience of parallax. After all, the crag was not really coming toward him. Once again, Žižek would agree, but he takes the crag to be a parallax object in another way. It was not a positive noumenal object that suddenly appeared within phenomenal reality; it was a negative noumenal object, the "gappy" objective correlative of the child's own subjectivity. Referring to it as a "thing from inner space" he explains the point psychoanalytically (*PV* 150):

far from being a simple descendant of the Kantian Thing-in-itself, the Freudian "Thing from the Inner Space" is its inherent opposite: what appears to be the excess of some transcendent force of "normal" external reality is the very place of the direct inscription of my subjectivity into this reality. In other words, what I get back in the guise of the horrifying-irrepresentable Thing is the objectivization, the objectal correlate, of my own gaze. [*PV* 151-2]

In support of this reading of the poem Žižek cites Wordsworth's description, in the "Immortality Ode," of the "sober colouring" that clouds take "from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality" (*PV* 152). The psychoanalytic aspect of the interpretation of the stolen boat has to do with Lacan's association of the logic of the constitutive exception with masculine subjectivity, and the logic of non-all with feminine subjectivity.⁴⁰

³⁸ Unlike Brandom, for whom fetishization is a subjective attitude, Žižek (following Marx) treats commodity fetishism as a kind of objective attitude that commodities take toward themselves. Italo Testa raises a similar point about the objective character of certain types of alienation: "Can an account in terms of meta-attitudes be sufficient to understand the alienated character of social institutions?" Italo Testa, "Spirit and Alienation in Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust: Entfremdung, Entäußerung, and the Causal Entropy of Normativity*," in *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*, ed. Gilles Bouché, New York, NY: Routledge 2020, pp. 140-165, here p. 148.

³⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Science of Logic*, transl. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2010, p. 94.

⁴⁰ For example, *SFA* 109. The structural parallel between Lacan's account of the difference between masculine and feminine desire and Kant's account of the difference between the dynamical and mathematical antinomies was first noted by Copjec.

Žižek argues that there are two different ways in which sexual desire can fail to "reach" the absolute — either by getting caught in the logic of the constitutive exception, or by getting caught in the logic of non-all (*SFA* 122-4). Since the logic of non-all has priority for him, he takes "feminine" desire to be truer to human subjectivity in general (*SFA* 135-6). For Hegel, he argues, the human failure to "reach" the absolute is due to the absolute's own incompleteness. Wordsworth's poem illustrates the same idea. Freudian interpretations of the stolen boat episode typically focus on the allegedly phallic character of the looming crag.⁴¹ Žižek avoids this type of base reading by representing the crag as a negative noumenal object that symbolizes the non-all rather than the constitutive exception.⁴²

Like the crag, the guillotine functioned during the Reign of Terror as a negative noumenal object. According to Žižek, it was the "objective correlate" of absolute freedom.⁴³ Wordsworth himself represents it this way when he compares those who wielded it to an innocent child playing with a pinwheel:

They found their joy,
They made it proudly, eager as a child,
(If light desires of innocent little ones
May with such heinous appetites be compared),
Pleased in some open field to exercise
A toy that mimics with revolving wings
The motion of a wind-mill; though the air
Do of itself blow fresh, and make the vanes
Spin in his eyesight, that contents him not,

But, with the plaything at arm's length, he sets
His front against the blast, and runs amain,
That it may whirl the faster. [TP 1850, X, 363-74]

Wordsworth's analogy is designed to keep its two terms apart, that is, to distinguish the innocence of the little ones from the heinous appetites of Robespierre and his "Atheist crew" (*TP* 1850, X, 502). From a Hegelian point of view, however, the comparison functions as a kind of "infinite judgment" akin to "the *Being of the I is a thing*" (*PS* 313, §790), that is, the being of an innocent child playing with a pinwheel is the guillotine. Instead of acknowledging this speculative identity of opposites, which would force him to recognize in the guillotine another objective correlative of the guilty freedom he enjoyed as a child rowing on Lake Windermere, Wordsworth describes himself falling back into the objectless state of the unhappy consciousness:

Most melancholy at that time, O Friend!
Were my day-thoughts, — my nights were miserable;
Through months, through years, long after the last beat
Of those atrocities, the hour of sleep
To me came rarely charged with natural gifts,
Such ghastly visions had I of despair
And tyranny, and implements of death.
[TP 1850, X, 397-403]

This description echoes his memory of the afterimage of the crag:

There in her mooring-place I left my bark, —
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.
[TP 1850, I, 388-400]

It is tempting to see in this description of a child's blank terror a retrospective shadow cast by the adult Wordsworth's experience of the guillotine. Like a guilty thing surprised, he characterizes his theft of the boat as "an act of stealth / And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice / Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on" (*TP* 1850, I, 361-3). While it would be a stretch to take his reference to "mountain-echoes" (or "hoary mountains"

⁴¹ David Ellis, Wordsworth, *Freud and the Spots of Time: Interpretation in The Prelude*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1985, pp. 39-40.

⁴² In this sense the experience Wordsworth describes would be closer to that of the Kantian mathematical sublime than to that of the Kantian dynamical sublime. It might also be taken to symbolize Kant's critical warning that it is safer to remain on the "island" of understanding than to set out on the "broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands" (*CPuR* 339, A235-6/B294-5). Compare Kant's warning to remain this side of the Pillars of Hercules (*CPuR* 439, A395-6).

⁴³ "The guillotine, this image of uncontrollable Otherness with which no identification seems possible, is nothing but the 'objective correlate' of the abstract negativity that defines the subject." Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, New York, NY: Verso 1991, p. 90.

[TP 1805, I, 384]) to allude to the name (*La Montagne*) given to the Jacobins in the National Assembly, the entire episode can be read as a "screen memory," that is, in Žižek's words, "a fantasy-formation destined to cover up a traumatic truth" (LTN 239). The child is father of the poet insofar as the poet's heart still leaps up whenever he beholds a mountain in the sky. While such a psychoanalytic interpretation would be both speculative and (in one way) base, it would help to explain why Wordsworth kept turning back instead of moving forward. He was unable to recognize his own subjectivity in the objects that terrified him.

A different kind of parallax shows up for Brandom in the double perspective we take in representing a normative tradition both prospectively (reconstructing the process by which a norm has been instituted) and retrospectively (representing the same process as having been implicitly guided by that norm all along). Looking at a normative tradition solely from a prospective point of view generates paradoxes about the nature of rule-following behavior: if one makes up the rules of the game as one goes along, in what sense can one be said to be following rules at all (ST 649)? Looking at a normative tradition from a retrospective point of view avoids these paradoxes, but it prevents us from seeing how norms get instituted in the first place. Instead of representing these as incompatible points of view between which one can only oscillate, Brandom takes Hegel to keep them both in view simultaneously through relations of mutual recognition. When recognition is properly reciprocated, every normative subject both recognizes and is recognized by others in complementary ways: each has a perspective on others that others cannot have on themselves. This is true both synchronically and diachronically. By distributing the cognitive labor of confession and forgiveness across time we reconcile the retrospective and prospective perspectives we take in representing ourselves as following rules of our own devising. People trust that others will forgive their failures by construing them as having succeeded (ST 618).⁴⁴ Parallax is avoided—or rather sustained—by

being socially distributed. Only a normatively deficient subject purporting Mastery—the incoherent status of being recognized without recognizing anyone else—would experience an insuperable gap between their putative authority and their disavowed responsibility.

The difference between Brandom's and Žižek's conceptions of parallax shows up in how they read both the *Phenomenology* and *The Prelude*. It is difficult to say that one set of readings is right and the other wrong, because the parallax exhibited in each of the two texts can be looked at in two different ways (just as antinomies can be conceived in two different ways). Perhaps the most glaring difference between them has to do with their respective assessments of Hegel's and Wordsworth's responses to the Reign of Terror. On Brandom's readings, both Hegel and Wordsworth converted a perceived normative failure into a normative success by telling forgiving stories about it. On Žižek's readings, Hegel converted a perceived failure into a better failure by learning how to repeat it, while Wordsworth apparently did not. Brandom emphasizes the *telos* of forgiveness, Žižek the necessity of repetition. In *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek cites Zhou Enlai's remark (or supposed remark) that it is (always) "too early to tell" whether the French Revolution has succeeded or failed (cited in DLC 157). Brandom observes that it is "never too late" to convert a perceived normative failure into a normative success (ST 415). What is striking about the relation between these two statements is its resemblance to the scene of confession and forgiveness in the *Phenomenology*. Žižek emphasizes the practical necessity of future evil and confession, Brandom the potential availability of forgiveness. In advocating these positions, they do not merely reinterpret the *Phenomenology's* dialectic of confession and forgiveness; they reenact it. They might seem to be talking past each other, yet either could say to the other, "As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free" (TT 3266, Epilogue 19-20).⁴⁵

sensible intuition but to the friction that inevitably forces us to revise our empirical concepts (ST 689).

⁴⁴ Instead of Wordsworth, Brandom's Romantic poetic witness on this occasion is Blake: "And throughout all eternity, / I forgive you, you forgive me" (citation slightly corrected). Blake lurks in the background again when Brandom observes that for Kant you could hold infinity in "the palm of your hand" in the sense of never running out of things to say about what you see. For Hegel the discrepancy between "the immediacy of objective being" and "what can be captured conceptually in subjective thought" is due not to the richness of the content of

⁴⁵ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Karl Jaspers Society of North America (January 2020), at an online meeting of the Slovenian Philosophical Society (May 2020), and at an online presentation at the University of Dundee (October 2020). I am grateful to the participants for their feedback, and to the *Existenz* editors for their extensive editorial suggestions. Any remaining errors are mine, for which I ask for forgiveness.