

ESCAPE VELOCITY:
Exodus and Postmodernism

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Our age, whether through logic or epistemology, whether through Marx or through Nietzsche, is attempting to flee Hegel.
(Foucault 235)

WHY IS OUR AGE ATTEMPTING TO FLEE HEGEL? How does this movement of liberation, which proceeds along several paths, come to define the us and our age? And why is this exodus qualified as “an attempt?” Is it because the totality of the Hegelian system may have already anticipated and enveloped this maneuver? Is it a consequence of the condition, as Hegel warns in the *Zusatz* to section 95 of the *Encyclopedia*, that “the one who merely flees is not yet free; in fleeing he is still conditioned by that from which he flees” (Hegel, *Enzyklopädie* 200 [Wallace 138])?¹ Or do we still find ourselves nostalgic for the security and certainty guaranteed by bondage? Do we not hear ourselves complaining like the Israelites in the desert that all our hope, all meaning, and all truth have been ruined beyond recuperation? Do we not fear that we now stand in the wilderness of meaninglessness, untruth, madness, and silence? Indeed, is this not said of everything associated with the age following modernism?

The following investigation is concerned with this gesture, which is said to define us and our age. It examines the curious association between the postmodern and liberation, and specifically endeavors to question the strategies, risks, and complications of the exodus that defines the contemporary scene.

This interrogation will be located in two particularly instructive texts: Derrida’s “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,” a text that concerns Georges Bataille’s

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reading of the bondage of Hegelian philosophy, and one of the oldest texts of slavery and liberation, the second book of the Bible, *Exodus*.²

DEATH AND WORK

[Hegel's] philosophy is not only a philosophy of death. It is also one of class struggle and work. (Bataille 17)

Derrida's "From Restricted to General Economy" begins with an examination of Bataille's reading of the dialectic of lordship and bondage found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, *Phänomenologie* IV.A). The *Phenomenology* traces the different appearances of spirit in its progressive unfolding which begins with the certainty of sensation and concludes with absolute knowledge. The second main section is entitled "self-consciousness," and the first subdivision of this section concerns the dependence and independence of self-consciousness [*Selbstständigkeit und Unselbstständigkeit des Selbstbewußtseins*]. This subdivision is entitled "Lordship and Bondage" [*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*]. Here, Derrida's caution should be heeded: "The rigorous and subtle corridors through which the dialectic of master and slave passes are well known. They cannot be summarized without being mistreated." Instead, Derrida turns our attention to Bataille: "We are interested, here, in the essential displacements to which they are submitted as they are reflected in Bataille's thought" (Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 254). Reflection is an operation that belongs to philosophical speculation, yet what is reflected in Bataille's simulacrum is not merely the process of speculative reason but (also) its deranged specters.

The displacements that interest Derrida are two conditions that first make self-consciousness possible.

This [process] is possible only under two conditions which cannot be separated: the master must stay alive in order to enjoy what he has won by risking his life; and, at the end of this progression so admirably described by Hegel, the "truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of bondage." (Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 254)

Derrida is interested in a certain critical moment, when Bataille demonstrates within the dialectic of lordship and bondage two "conditions for the possibility" of the process. The first is the preservation of life in the face of the negativity of death which

will have been accomplished through a reinterpretation of the negative. This reinterpretation will be marked by the word *Aufhebung*. The second is the absolute privilege of slavery. These two conditions are not separable. The reinterpretation of negation and the privilege of slavery are coordinate conditions for the possibility of the progressive development of self-consciousness.

According to the *Phenomenology*, immediate self-consciousness comes to achieve its truth as independent self-consciousness through a “movement of recognition” [*die Bewegung des Anerkennens*]. Self-consciousness can achieve its truth only through the negation of another which opposes its immediacy and in which it finds itself. Immediate self-consciousness is brought back to itself by recognizing itself in an other. An essential moment in this procedure is the negation of alterity which is at the same time a negation of the self-same. Hegel describes this operation in the following fashion:

It must sublimate [*aufheben*] this *otherness*. . . . First it must proceed to sublimate the *other* independent essence in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essence; *secondly*, in so doing it proceeds to sublimate *itself*, for this other is itself. (*Phänomenologie* 128 [Miller 112])

This negation is initially made manifest to immediate self-consciousness as death, namely the death of the other and the death of itself. Recognition is achieved through a life-and-death struggle. This “trial of death” is essential to the emergence of self-consciousness. According to Hegel, “the individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a *person*, but he has not established the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness” (*Phänomenologie* 131 [Miller 114]). It is the encounter with death that impels the speculative process in general, that constitutes the very life and being of spirit. From the preface to the *Phenomenology*:

The life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. . . . Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. (*Phänomenologie* 26 [Miller 19])

Biological death, however, will not suffice for the appearing of spirit. Here the text manifests a crucial decision. Biological death

will not serve the process of recognition. “This trial by death, however, sublates [*aufhebt*] the truth which should issue from it, and so, too, with the certainty of self generally” (Hegel *Phänomenologie* 131 [Miller 114]). Death remains a negation that is inappropriate to the exchange of recognition. It collapses the oppositional difference that structures the dialectical exchange. It leaves the two sides as unopposed extremes that do not, in turn, enter into recognition.

However, with this there vanishes from the play of exchange the essential moment of splitting itself into extremes of oppositional determinations; and the middle collapses into a dead unity, which splits into dead, merely existing, unopposed extremes; and the two do not reciprocally give and receive one another back from each other consciously but leave each other free only indifferently like things. (Hegel *Phänomenologie* 131 [Miller 114])

This stagnant and unproductive negativity which is now named *abstrakte Negation* [abstract negation] would put an end to the phenomenological undertaking. The *Phenomenology* opposes the negativity of death to “the negation of consciousness that cancels such that it preserves [*aufbewahrt*] and maintains [*erhält*] what is canceled and thereby survives its being sublated” (Hegel *Phänomenologie* 131 [Miller 114-15]). In this way, the opposing terms do not merely fall apart as indifferent, unopposed, dead things but engage in and survive through interactions that are productive of self-recognition. Only a self-consciousness that survives its own negation can recognize itself through its negation.

Because the abstract negativity of death would annihilate the very initiation [*arche*] and success [*telos*] of the phenomenological project, the negative is reinterpreted in terms of the double meaning of *aufheben* (to overcome and to preserve). Negation is submitted to *Aufhebung*. Such submission is the condition for the possibility of any productive and meaningful opposition. It is, according to Derrida, “the essence and element of philosophy, of Hegelian ontologies” (Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” 257).

The second condition for the possibility of the process of lordship and bondage is the privilege of slavery. In a decisive moment, the *Phenomenology* reinterprets the negativity of death as *Aufhebung*. It is an *enslaving* of the negative in service to the appearing of spirit. It is this proto-bondage that first makes possible the opposition of lord and slave and their ensuing self-recogni-

tion. Slavery has privilege insofar as it is the condition for the possibility of opposition and the resultant process of recognition. Without the bondage of the negative in *Aufhebung*, the two extremes collapse into lifeless indifference and do not engage in speculative exchange. Bondage is the means by which the negativity of death is reinvested such that it can be employed for the work of spirit, and *Aufhebung* reinvests the negative by enslaving it in the system of phenomenological production.

Slavery is imposed in the face of death. The lord enslaves in order to ensure his security and progress. The same mechanisms are operative at the beginning of the *Exodus* narrative.

Then there came to power in Egypt a new king who knew nothing of Joseph. "Look," he said to his subjects, "these people, the sons of Israel have become so numerous and strong that they are a threat to us. We must be prudent and take steps against their increasing any further, or if war should break out, they might add to the number of our enemies. They might take arms against us and so escape out of the country." Accordingly they put slave drivers over the Israelites to wear them down under heavy loads. In this way they built the store cities of Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. But the more they were crushed, the more they increased and spread, and men came to dread the sons of Israel. The Egyptians forced the sons of Israel into slavery, and made their lives unbearable with hard labor, work with clay and with brick, all kinds of work in the fields; they forced on them every kind of labor. (*Exodus* 1.8-14)

It is because the Israelites constitute a threat of death, a negation of Egypt's prosperity, that the Egyptians enslave the children of Israel. This imposed labor reinvests the negative for the benefit of Egypt. Through slavery the Egyptians divert the threat of death into useful, productive, and meaningful work.

Slavery protects the life of the lord. It ensures the prosperity of his kingdom by reappropriating the threat of death into useful expenditure. This, however, is one-sided, for slavery also protects the life of the slave. The bonded, he who once constituted a negation of the lord, is also threatened by death. He is threatened by his own death, a death that could be imposed upon him by his master. Slavery, however, ensures that the life of the bonded is also preserved. Because the slave serves his lordship, the lord is compelled to restrain his potentially destructive power. The lord would not annihilate an essential, serviceable component of his own economy. In slavery, then, the life of the slave is preserved

by the lord for the sake of lordship. The dialectic of lordship and bondage thus constitutes a closed system by which both the lord and the slave secure their own lives from the threat of death constituted by the other. It is in slavery that the Israelites abate death. After the exodus, when the chains of slavery have been broken and the threat of death again supervenes, the Israelites express nostalgia for the protection and security provided by their bondage.

To Moses they said, "Were there no graves in Egypt that you must lead us out to die in the wilderness? What good have you done us, bringing us out of Egypt? We spoke of this in Egypt, did we not? Leave us alone, we said, we would rather work for the Egyptians! Better to work for the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (*Exodus* 14.11-13)

Exodus will be resisted not only by the lord but also by the slaves that would be liberated. The Hebrew slaves, for example, did not want Moses and his promise of deliverance. "May Yahweh see your work and punish you as you deserve! You have made us hated by Pharaoh and his court; you have put a sword in their hands to kill us" (*Exodus* 5.21-22). It is in reference to this passage that a young Hegel once wrote: "Through the greater hardships that followed from the performance of Moses before Pharaoh, the Jews did not become more strongly stimulated, they only suffered more severely; against no one were they more enraged than against Moses, whom they cursed" (Hegel, *Der Geist* 281-82 [Knox 189]).

Exodus, then, seems impossible. The structure of the Hegelian slavery of *Aufhebung* and the bondage of the Hebrews in the land of Egypt constitute closed systems that appear to be immune to the very possibility of escape. Exodus, it seems, is not only structurally impossible but cannot appear, be expressed, or even understood in the system of lordship and bondage. For the chains of bondage remain the condition for the possibility of any meaningful and productive operations whatsoever. Therefore, any thought of liberation, any discourse addressed to or situated beyond these necessary restrictions is not only inconceivable and meaningless but always ineffectual. Emancipation, if it ever comes, can only occur as a disruption of this system. Disruption (within the fabric of meaningful and productive discourse) cannot be anything other than strange and disorienting. "For those who are thus fettered, the great liberation comes suddenly like a

shock of an earthquake: the youthful soul is all at once convulsed, torn loose, torn away — it itself does not know what is happening” (Nietzsche 5).

THE WORK OF EXODUS

[Hegel] did not know to what extent he was right. With what precision he described the intimate movement of Negativity. (Bataille 22)

To flee Hegel, to escape the grasp of that philosopher who is always right as soon as one opens one’s mouth to speak, to exceed the compass of speculative truth — all this would entail a disruption of what has been called the *economy of death* — the system in which the tremendous power of the negative [*die ungeheure Macht des Negativen*] (Hegel, *Phänomenologie* 26 [Miller 19]) is put to work and thereby becomes effective and meaningful. It would require a kind of negation that is not comprehended by and put to work for the process of speculative recognition, that is, a kind of *workless negativity* that as such never takes place, becomes present, or is able to be represented. It would involve a meaningless expenditure that, although dissimulating the labor of the negative, annihilates the meaning of production and the production of meaning. This disruptive operation necessarily takes aim at the negative. According to Derrida, “it is convulsively to tear apart the negative side, that which makes it the reassuring *other* surface of the positive; and it is to exhibit within the negative, in an instant, that which can no longer be called negative” (“From Restricted to General Economy” 259). This *other* negativity that falls outside of and resists the system of efficacious work has been, however, already made manifest, in a subversive and fleeting manner, within the fabric of negativity itself. It has already been seen by the master without his seeing it; he has showed it while concealing it. Emancipation, therefore, is effected by following the master to “the end, without reserve, to the point of agreeing with him against himself and of wresting his discoveries from the too *conscientious* interpretation he gave them” (“From Restricted to General Economy” 260).

There is something strange about the bondage of *Aufhebung*. A disturbance of *Aufhebung* supervenes at the very moment that the *Phenomenology* enslaves the negative. On the one hand, the text has recourse to *Aufhebung* in order to ensure the operation of

recognition. This recourse is the decisive moment for the phenomenological enterprise. For it is in this moment that the *Phenomenology* ensures its future, its progress toward truth and its production of meaning. *Aufhebung* bestows significance on negativity by making it serve the work of meaning, truth, consciousness, progress, etc. On the other hand, this recourse suppresses another kind of negation — the negation of biological death. This other negativity cannot be reserved for meaningful work. Rather, it causes opposition and the process of recognition to collapse. This negativity was named abstract negation. “In naming the without-reserve of absolute expenditure ‘abstract negation,’ Hegel, through *precipitation*, blinded himself to that which he had laid bare under the rubric of negativity” (Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” 259). This self-blinding, however, leaves a blind spot.

The blind spot of Hegelianism . . . is the *point* at which destruction, suppression, death and sacrifice constitute so irreversible an expenditure, so radical a negativity — here we would have to say an expenditure and a negativity *without* reserve — that they can no longer be determined as negativity in a process or a system. (Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” 259)

The term “abstract negation” marks biological death as an unproductive and unserviceable negative. This name allows its radical negativity to remain concealed. It permits one to expel from the field of vision an absolute loss that would interrupt the structure of dialectical exchange. This concealment or self-blinding enacts the very negation that the recourse to *Aufhebung* restricts. In one decisive move, the *Phenomenology* both decides for a negation that preserves what is negated and, at the same time, negates a negativity that is not preserved. The *Phenomenology*, therefore, secures the structure of speculative recognition in *Aufhebung* and negates a negativity that is never to be *aufgehoben*. It produces meaning by deploying an operation that exceeds all possible significance. It closes the system of phenomenological production while opening it to a loss that can never be put to work. In this way, the *Phenomenology* had already traced the means of exodus at the moment in which it secured the “fettters of science.”³

The Egyptians also manifest the means of emancipation while fastening the fetters of slavery on the Hebrews. “Pharaoh then gave his subjects this command: ‘Throw all the boys born to the Hebrews into the river, but let all the girls live’” (*Exodus* 1.22).

The king of Egypt shortly after he enslaves the Israelites in order to abate the threat of death also executes every Hebrew boy. He negates the threat of death by expelling it from the land of Egypt through death. But, in doing so, he interrupts the institution of slavery. He annihilates a negativity that shall never serve Egypt in bondage. This is a curious and seemingly contradictory operation. On the one hand, the threat of negativity is reinvested through slavery. On the other hand, the male progeny of the slaves are negated in a way that does not reserve them for productive labor.⁴ In decreeing both slavery and infanticide, Pharaoh both constitutes and deconstitutes the system of Egyptian lordship and Hebrew bondage. He, therefore, secures the structure of lordship and bondage while tracing the manner of its disruption.⁵

The movement of exodus cannot proceed from the outside of the lord's system. For outside there can be nothing more than nothing. Rather, it arises — if it ever does arise — through operations that are situated in an almost absolute proximity to lordship. It is manufactured, like all significant products, by using the only tools available, those initially belonging to and placed in the service of the master. Departure, therefore, is effected through a kind of calculated reissue and redeployment of the mechanisms of lordship. Bataille, for example, takes philosophy seriously — not in order to repeat (as in a mirror) its structure but to mimic it, employing all its strategies and at the same time releasing a tremendous disruption of it within its own corridors.

To laugh at philosophy (at Hegelianism) — such, in effect, is the form of the awakening — henceforth calls for an entire “discipline,” an entire “method of meditation” that acknowledges the philosopher's byways, understands his techniques, makes use of his ruses, manipulates his cards, lets him deploy his strategy, appropriates his texts. Then, thanks to the work which has prepared it — and philosophy is work *itself* according to Bataille — but quickly, furtively and unforeseeably breaking with it, as betrayal or as detachment, drily, laughter bursts out.⁶ (Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” 252).

Bataille's dissimulation of Hegelian philosophy is instituted by employing the concept of *Erinnerung*. Bataille tries to remember what the phenomenological process forgets. He strives to remember what had been uncovered but then simultaneously concealed. In this task of excessive memory, he must wrest from

philosophy what had been laid bare under the negative but remained concealed through self-blindness. He must follow the philosopher to the end, to the point of agreeing with him against himself and of wresting his discovery from the too *conscientious* interpretation he gave it (Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 260). The Hegelian text, therefore, must be reinterpreted against Hegelianism.

Reinterpretation is a simulated repetition of Hegelian discourse. In the course of this repetition a barely perceptible displacement disjoins all the articulation and penetrates all the points welded together by the imitated discourse. A trembling spreads out which then makes the entire old shell crack. (Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 260)

Reinterpretation consists of a double gesture — a repetition without identity. On the one hand, reinterpretation institutes a repetition of the master's discourse; it reuses his concepts and redeploys his signs. On the other hand, there is something about this repetition that simultaneously interrupts and disrupts the usual meaning and function of the imitated discourse. This operation, which Bataille sometimes calls poetic or ecstatic, does not constitute *another* kind of discursive structure. "There is only one discourse, it is significant, and here one cannot get around Hegel. The poetic or the ecstatic is that *in every discourse* which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense . . ." (Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 261). Therefore, the poetic or ecstatic is instituted through a specially kind of *paleonymy*.

The *same* concepts, apparently unchanged in themselves, will be subject to a mutation of meaning, or rather will be struck by (even though they are apparently indifferent) the loss of sense toward which they slide, thereby ruining themselves immeasurably. To blind oneself to this rigorous precipitation, this pitiless sacrifice of philosophical concepts, and to continue to read, interrogate, and judge Bataille's text *from within* 'significant discourse' is, perhaps, to hear something within it, but assuredly not to read it. (Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy" 267).

Departure, therefore, consists of a double maneuver. It acknowledges and repeats operations that are proper to the work(ings) of the master's system but does so in such a way that they can no longer be comprehended and contained by the system whence they were borrowed. Exodus, therefore, constitutes a kind of bastard operation, and it will be instituted by an agent

that occupies a similar relative position. Consider the complicated heritage possessed by Moses.

There was a man of the tribe of Levi who had taken a woman of Levi as his wife. She conceived and gave birth to a son and, seeing what a fine child he was, she kept him hidden for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him; coating it with bitumen and pitch, she put the child inside and laid it among the reeds at the river's edge. His sister stood some distance away to see what would happen to him. Now Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe in the river, and the girls attending her were walking along by the riverside. Among the reeds she noticed the basket, and she sent her maid to fetch it. She opened it and looked, and saw a baby boy, crying; and she was sorry for him. "This is a child of one of the Hebrews," she said. Then the child's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and find you a nurse among the Hebrew women to suckle the child for you?" "Yes go," Pharaoh's daughter said to her; and the girl went off to find the baby's own mother. To her the daughter of Pharaoh said, "Take this child and suckle it for me. I will see you are paid." So the woman took the child and suckled it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who treated him like a son; she named him Moses because, she said, "I drew him out of the water." (*Exodus* 2.1-10)

Moses is a foundling. He is the son of Hebrew slaves adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. He is, therefore, an Egyptian. He belongs to the house of Pharaoh. He speaks the language of the lord, is familiar with the strategies of lordship and is held in high regard by the court. "Moses himself was a man of great importance in the land of Egypt and of high prestige with Pharaoh's courtiers and with the people" (*Exodus* 11.3). Moses, although belonging to the house of the lord, also exceeds this position insofar as he also belongs to the Hebrews. Therefore, it is Moses, a member of the royal family, who is most capable of dissociating Egyptian lordship, for his very familial position already intersects and disrupts the royal domicile.⁷

Discourses that seek to depart from Hegel, that interrupt Hegelianism, that fissure its closed structure hold the same relative position. They are foundlings or bastards. Such texts are situated in an almost absolute proximity to the Hegelian system and yet they somehow intervene in such a way as to disrupt it. "Bataille doubtless put into question the idea or meaning of the chain of Hegelian reason, but did so by thinking the chain as such, in its totality, without ignoring its internal rigor" (Derrida, "From Re-

stricted to General Economy” 253). It is only a bastard son of Hegelianism, a son both belonging to and yet exceeding the Hegelian family, that can disrupt the philosophical economy. Elsewhere Derrida indicates the necessity of a bastard course in an examination of the Hegelian family. “A bastard path, then, that will have to feign to follow the circle of the family, in order to enter it, or parcel it out [*partager*], or partake of [*partager*] it as one takes part in a community, holy communion, the last supper scene, or part [*partager*] it as one does by dissociating” (Derrida, *Glas* 6).

Exodus proceeds by a kind of bastard operation — a repetition of the maneuvers of the lord that do not remain identical with or comprehended by lordship. Therefore, it takes place as a deconstruction of lordship and bondage.

Let us turn now to sacrifice as it has been employed in the Exodus narrative. The “choice” of this operation is neither capricious nor one possible alternative among several others. It is necessary, precisely because it is sacrifice that constitutes the representation of death in and for life. From the beginning, it must be acknowledged that sacrifice names an operation that is identical to the work(ings) of the master’s system. As Bataille has indicated: “one cannot say that Hegel was unaware of the ‘moment’ of sacrifice; this ‘moment’ is included, implicated in the whole movement of the *Phenomenology* — where it is the Negativity of death . . .” (Bataille 22). Sacrifice, therefore, occupies an essential position in Hegelian philosophy and Egyptian lordship. In both systems, it is deployed according to a logic that puts the negative to work as the accomplice and underside of a positivity. Sacrificial death constitutes an investment or expenditure that promises a profitable and significant return.

Exodus supervenes through a dissimulation of sacrifice, a strategic repetition that neither neutralizes the dialectic of lordship and bondage nor confirms it by residing within the space of its closed field. “Sacrifice” will be extracted from the system in which it usually functions, the system in which the negative is given meaning and made productive, and struck with a mutation that permits it to slide towards the nonsense of a radical expenditure that cannot be reserved for meaningful production or the production of meaning. In order to designate these two senses, or better, in order to indicate the difference between the sense

and nonsense of sacrifice, let the former be named “productive sacrifice” and the latter “radical or unproductive sacrifice.”

The exodus of the Hebrews is concomitant with the latter kind of sacrifice. Yahweh instructs Moses to bring this message to Pharaoh: “Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, has come to meet us. Give us leave, then, to make a three days’ journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifice to Yahweh our God” (*Exodus* 3.18-19). Exodus, then, is coextensive with sacrifice.⁸ The demand for exodus is predicated upon sacrifice and vice versa. The sacrificial offering must take place in a locale that is, according to Egyptian estimations, no place at all — a wasteland, the desert. For if the sacrifice is performed within the Egyptian city in proximity to the Egyptian gods, it risks remaining significant for and comprehended by Egyptian mastery. In this way, the sacrificial operation risks becoming reincorporated into and by the master as a negativity that is the accomplice and underside of a positivity. This is made explicit at *Exodus* 8.25-26: “Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said to them, ‘Go offer sacrifice to your God, but in this country.’ ‘That is impossible,’ replied Moses, ‘because the victim we are to sacrifice to the lord our god is an abomination to the Egyptians.’” In order for the sacrifice to constitute a wasteful expenditure, it must be performed outside the limits of Egyptian comprehension. It must be performed in a wasteland before a god of the wasteland. Therefore, unproductive sacrifice and exodus cannot be separated. In order for the sacrifice to be unproductive, the Hebrews must leave the city and perform their sacred rites in the desert. And in order to leave, they must disrupt the system of Egyptian lordship by deploying thoroughly monstrous expenditures that fall outside of and resist any and all productive service.

The restricted economy of death cannot endure the ordeal of a wasteful sacrifice, for through it one would again release the threat of an absolute and meaningless loss. “The king of Egypt said to them, ‘Moses and Aaron, what do you mean by taking the people away from their work? Get back to your laboring.’ And Pharaoh said, ‘Now that these common folk have grown to such numbers, do you want to stop them laboring?’” (*Exodus* 5.4-5). The lord of Egypt employs a variety of strategies that endeavor to reinscribe the requested sacrifice within the constraints of Egyptian domination. The opposition of Pharaoh to Moses’ request, a

struggle that endures nine plagues, can be read as an attempt to place restraints upon wasteful and unproductive expenditures.

Initially, Pharaoh tries to abate the desire for sacrifice by increasing the slaves' work load. In the system of work, workers who have excess time and energy to expend elsewhere (i.e. a desert sacrifice) must not be adequately employed. Their labors must be increased to such a degree that their energies will be completely exhausted within the system for which they toil. Pharaoh, therefore, reappropriates leisure, which, beyond momentary repose (recreation) for continued labor, can be nothing more than wasteful inactivity.

That same day, Pharaoh gave this command to the people's slave drivers and to the overseers. "Up to the present, you have provided these people with straw for brick making. Do so no longer; let them go and gather straw for themselves. All the same, you are to get from them the same number of bricks as before, not reducing it at all. They are lazy, and that is why their cry is, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.'" (*Exodus* 5.6-9)

Each plague against Egypt increases the threat of economic ruination. In order to relieve this threat, Pharaoh promises to grant Moses his request but within certain limitations. Through these restrictions, Pharaoh tries to maintain control over the sacrificial expenditure. He tries to save as much as possible for Egypt at the very brink of losing it all. He imposes restrictions of proximity in attempt to ensure the prompt return of the Israelites: "I will let you go to offer sacrifices to Yahweh your god in the wilderness provided you do not go far" (*Exodus* 8.24-25). He also attempts to limit the number of participants and to secure their return by holding their families and livestock as ransom. But in each case, the promise is retracted as soon as the threat of plague is removed. "But as soon as Pharaoh saw that relief had been granted, he became adamant again and, as Yahweh had foretold, he refused to listen to Moses and Aaron" (*Exodus* 8.11).⁹

Emancipation becomes possible only at the point at which sacrifice constitutes a negativity that falls outside of and resists the system of meaningful production. Exodus begins at the hour of the tenth plague. This final plague borrows from the resources of Egyptian lordship. It reissues Pharaoh's decree of mass infanticide. The infanticide effected by Yahweh, however, reverses the victims. During the passover it is the Egyptian progeny who perish. This occurrence, however, cannot be a mere revolution, if by

revolution we understand the simple inversion of a hierarchy. For such an undertaking would remain comprehended and controlled by the system that was overturned. Therefore, an additional operation must be introduced such that the reversal, although dissimulating the Egyptian massacre in every way, sets into play a disruption of the system of lordship and bondage in general. Let us recall the passage in question:

And at midnight Yahweh struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt: the first born of Pharaoh, heir to his throne, the first-born of the prisoner in his dungeon, and the first-born of all the cattle. Pharaoh and all his courtiers and all the Egyptians got up in the night, and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without its dead. And it was night when Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. "Get up," he said, "you and the sons of Israel, and get away from my people. Go and offer worship to Yahweh as you have asked and, as you have asked, take your flocks and herds, and go. (*Exodus* 12.29-34).

Exodus proceeds by a double operation. On the one hand, there is a repetition of infanticide.¹⁰ This repetition, however, does not simply install the Israelites in the place of the Egyptians. It does not merely invert the relative positions of Moses and Pharaoh. Rather, this overturning is accompanied by another operation. In the face of infanticide, Pharaoh, while maintaining his position as lord, summons Moses and Aaron to his chamber and dissolves the institution of lordship and bondage by expelling the Israelites from the land of Egypt. The Hebrew exodus, then, is not a departure initiated by the bonded but an expulsion instituted by the lord himself. It is a deconstruction of the system of lordship and bondage, "an overturning of a classical opposition and a general displacement of the system" (Cf. Derrida, *Margins* 329).

Exodus is concomitant with a sacrificial expense that necessarily remains unproductive and meaningless. It is effected through the release of an irretrievable loss. It becomes operational when the threat of death once again supervenes within the space of productive work and meaningful exchange. To engage in this process, however, is to risk utter annihilation and absolute meaninglessness. Exodus always runs the risk of again wanting to make sense, of becoming reappropriated into a productive system of meaningful exchange. To tarry with an unproductive sacrifice is exceedingly difficult, for it requires absolute surrender of every-

thing that had been secured through the work(ings) of the system — meaning, truth, certainty, progress, history, etc. Few are able to remain, and none are able to remain as they were. Unproductive sacrifice will always be accompanied by the risk of nostalgia for the securities of slavery, for the reassuring, determinate negativity of an *Aufhebung*.

Once in the wilderness, the Israelites do experience nostalgia for their slavery. This nostalgia is expressed at least three times in the course of the Hebrew exodus.

1. To Moses they said, "Were there no graves in Egypt that you must lead us out to die in the wilderness? What good have you done us, bringing us out of Egypt? We spoke of this in Egypt, did we not? Leave us alone, we said, we would rather work for the Egyptians! Better to work for the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (*Exodus* 14.11-13)
2. "Why did we not die at Yahweh's hand in the land of Egypt, when we were able to sit down to pans of meat and could eat bread to our heart's content! As it is, you have brought us to this wilderness to starve this whole company to death!" (*Exodus* 16.3)
3. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Was it so that I should die of thirst, my children too, and my cattle?" (*Exodus* 17.3)

The Hebrews have nostalgia for their slavery in the face of impending death. For bondage reinterprets the negative not only for the sake of the lord but also for the slave. The lord avoids his own death by enslaving the threat of death in service to the system of lordship. The slave avoids death by remaining enslaved in a system that ensures his life through the activity of work.

Upon completion of the egression from Egyptian bondage, Moses instructs the Israelites to offer sacrifice. This sacrificial offering, however, does not remain unproductive. Rather, it becomes a determinate negation that is reappropriated into the work of redemption. It is a sacrificial expense that serves the work of a new lord — Yahweh.

When Yahweh brings you to the land of the Canaanites — as he swore to you and your fathers he would do — and he gives it to you, you are to make over to Yahweh all that first issues from the womb and every first-born cast by your animals: these males belong to Yahweh. . . . Of your sons, every first-born of men must be redeemed. And when your son asks you in days to come, "What does this mean?" you will tell him, "By sheer power Yahweh brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, Yahweh killed all the first-born in the land of Egypt, of man and of beast alike. For this I

sacrifice to Yahweh every first born male that first issues from the womb and redeem every first-born of my sons." (*Exodus* 13.11-16)

In sacrificing the first born of their animals, the Israelites redeem their first born sons. Sacrifice, instead of a wasteful expenditure, becomes the mechanism by which to ensure life. It is a preserving negation. Strictly speaking, the Hebrews never accomplish exodus; their departure is — at the moment of its sacrificial fulfillment — a reintroduction and reappropriation into another servitude — service to Yahweh.

Exodus, then, is a text that recoils in the face of its very radicality. It is unable to sustain the radical fissuring of servility that it initially produces. At the moment in which it would perform its most radical expenditure — a desert sacrifice — it recoils and reappropriates such activity into the restricted economy of meaningful work. Death once again is given meaning and made productive. *Exodus*, then, is a narrative of servility that takes bondage to its extreme limit, opening the gates of Egypt and laying bare the pathway for egress, but recoiling in the face of the very radicality that it manifests. In the end, it too did not know to what extent it was right, With what precision it described the movement of emancipation.¹¹

Our age — an age after the so-called closure of modernity — has been delimited according to a certain movement of exodus. It is an epoch — beyond the phenomenological determination of epochality — that has sought to escape the process and teleology of Hegelian totality. This exodus, however, is not simply revolutionary. Although revolution constitutes a necessary component of the operation, it is only the first part of a twofold gesture. Exodus is instituted by practicing a double move — an inversion of an hierarchy and a general displacement of that system. Such deconstructive operations are never simply liberated from or finished with the dominant system but must take seriously the structure and function of domination. Exodus can only be effected by a bastard transaction that continually inhabits, remarks, and retraces the mechanisms and techniques of the master's system. For this reason, the postmodern is never simply released from or situated outside modern thought. As Derrida has explained in *Positions*, "we will never be finished with the reading or rereading of Hegel, and, in a certain way, I do nothing other than attempt to explain myself on this point" (77).

Postmodern liberation, therefore, is situated in an almost absolute proximity to the mastery of modern philosophy. And, as a result, its disquieting operations continually run the risk of becoming confused with and reappropriated into the system on which they operate. Again, Hegel did not know to what extent he was right, or with what precision he had described the intimate movement and complexity of exodus.

NOTES

1. All translations from Hegel's works are my own, adapted from the English translations identified in the square brackets following each citation.
2. The reading of this text will be supplemented by another reading of the exodus narrative — Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. DeMille actually produced two films under this title, the first in 1923 and the second in 1956.

The Ten Commandments (1923), as we finally developed it, is a modern story with a Biblical prologue. The prologue, following the Book of Exodus, shows the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, their trek across the desert to Sinai, and the giving of the Commandments. The modern story is of two brothers, one of whom keeps the Commandments while the other breaks them all and is in the end himself broken by his defiance of the Law. (DeMille, *Autobiography* 251)

In the 1956 production, the prologue overflowed its bounds, occupying the space of the entire film. "But the final decision, and I think the soundest, was simply to put the Bible story on the screen and let it speak for itself" (DeMille, *Autobiography* 412).

What is of interest for the examination at hand is the latter, the film that was to have let the exodus narrative "speak for itself." Of particular interest are those moments in which the scriptwriter found it necessary to say more than the original text, those places in which the film was compelled to supplement the "speaking for itself." These additions were made in accordance with and justified by the dictates of cinematic drama.

The producer will sometimes overrule the research consultant, deliberately and without apology, for reasons of legitimate dramatic license; for, as Professor Keith C. Seele of the University of Chicago wrote to us, "The challenges which you meet . . . are even greater than that faced by the historian. What he does not know he may leave unexpressed; you, however, must solve every problem, no matter how small or detailed, for pictures can contain no gaps or lacunae and no uncertainties." (DeMille, Introduction 2)

The additions were legitimately employed for the sake of drama. The imperative that dictates the remedy of all gaps and lacunae in dramatic narrative is coextensive with the requirements of good philosophical discourse. Namely, all problems and incongruities must be solved in order that the presentation make sense and demonstrate itself logically. Therefore, the cinematic retelling not only fills in textual fissures with a supple-

mental inscription but also indicates those problematic and incongruous openings that constitute a disruption of the original Biblical narrative. However, as we shall soon learn, it is only through such openings that exodus supervenes. In this way, then, DeMille will both blind himself to exodus and, by doing so, will leave a blind spot by which the openings of exodus will be made manifest. By taking account of these supplemental scenes, the examination will not only demonstrate to what extent DeMille blinded himself but will also make manifest those places in which exodus first became possible. The account of this supplemental writing will be inscribed in a supplemental position.

3. Cf. Kant B xxxvii.
4. The structural incongruity of decreeing both bondage and massacre obtrudes through a supplemental scene provided by DeMille.

High Priest: Divine One, last night our astrologers saw an evil star enter the house of Egypt.

Pharaoh: Meaning war?

Commander: From the frontiers of Sinai and Libya to the cataracts of the Nile, what nation would dare draw the sword against us?

High Priest: The enemy to fear is in the heart of Egypt, the Hebrew slaves in the land of Goshen.

Pharaoh: I number my enemies by their swords not by their chains, High Priest.

High Priest: Chains have been forged into swords before, Divine One. Among these slaves there is a prophesy of a deliverer who will lead them out of bondage. The star announces his birth.

Commander: Then let the Hebrews die!

Pharaoh: Slaves are wealth, Commander. The more slaves we have, the more bricks we make.

Commander: I would still see fewer bricks made and fewer Hebrews in Goshen; it is our eastern gate.

High Priest: Since this deliverer is among their new born, only the new-born need die.

Pharaoh (after a pause): Every new-born Hebrew man-child shall die. So shall it be written, so shall it be done.

High Priest: So speaks Rameses the First.

DeMille solves the logical incongruity of slavery and massacre by the addition of astrology. Through the astrological report and counsel of the High Priest, a distinction is made between functional slaves and the disruptive deliverer. Once this distinction is drawn, the decree of massacre no longer endangers the structure of slavery but now protects it by limiting the scope of infanticide to include only those who constitute a possible threat to slavery.

5. Perhaps the strange logic by which labor and death are coordinated would constitute a way by which to begin to approach the second massacre, the Nazi Holocaust.
6. The emphasis on mockery and a certain sense for the comic is not restricted to the Bataillean subversion of Hegelian philosophy. Indeed, the same kind of operation can be found at play in the writings of Kierkegaard. Although Kierkegaard continually criticized Hegelian philosophy, one cannot say that he was simply *opposed* to Hegel and Hegelianism. Kierkegaard understood (all too well) from Hegel himself how an opposition to or negation of the speculative system collaborates in the work of dialectical produc-

tion. He knew that Hegel “is always right, as soon as one opens one’s mouth to speak in order to articulate meaning” (Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy” 263). However, despite the seriousness of this realization, Kierkegaard continually found something at work in the philosophy of Hegel that could be called comic. From Kierkegaard’s Journal:

I here would beg the reader’s attention to a remark I have often desired to make. Let no one misunderstand me, as though I imagined I were the devil of a thinker who might transform everything. Such thinkers are as remote from me as possible. I cherish a respect for Hegel which is sometimes an enigma to me; I have learnt much from him, and I know that on returning again to him I could still learn much more. The only things I credit myself with are sound capacities, and then a certain honesty which is armed with a sharp sight for the comic. I have lived and have been perhaps unusually tried in life’s *casibus*; trusting that there might be paths left for thought to find, I have had recourse to the writings of the philosophers, of Hegel among others. But it is precisely here he leaves one in the lurch. His philosophical knowledge, his astonishing learning, the sharp-sightedness of his genius, and whatever else can be alleged to the advantage of a philosopher, I am as ready as any disciple to concede — but no, not to concede, that is too proud of an expression; I would say rather, willing to admire, willing to let myself be taught. But for all that, one who is thoroughly tried in life’s vicissitudes and has recourse in his need to the aid of thoughts will find him comic — in spite of the great qualities which are no less certain. (ctd. in Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 558n.4)

7. DeMille extrapolates if not exaggerates the relationship of Moses to the Egyptian court. First, the daughter of Pharaoh proclaims Moses heir to the throne.

Pharaoh’s daughter: This is my son, he shall be raised in my house as the prince of the two lands.

Memnet: I will not see you make the son of slaves the prince of Egypt.

Pharaoh’s daughter: You will see it, Memnet. You will see him walk with his head among the Eagles and you will serve him as you serve me.

Second, when Moses the prince of Egypt is introduced, he has just returned from a campaign against Ethiopia. He returns in glory, and his victory is cheered by all of Egypt. At the court, he is announced as: “The lord Moses, prince of Egypt, son of the Pharaoh’s sister, beloved of the Nile god, commander of the southern gate.” After this triumphant return, Pharaoh assigns Moses to serve as lord over the Hebrew slaves in Goshen. Moses takes up this post and erects Pharaoh’s treasure city.

Third, Moses, as a prince of Egypt, is in competition with Rameses for the throne of Pharaoh. Rameses is portrayed as less competent than Moses who has since won the favor of Pharaoh. Rameses is naturally jealous and expresses his disdain: “I am the son of your body. No pretend brother will ever have your crown.”

8. The structural connection between sacrifice and exodus is not made evident in DeMille’s reading. Without the emphasis on sacrifice and the ambiguity produced in this word by the release of a difference between the unproductive and productive deployments, the Hollywood *Exodus*, from the moment of Moses’ first audience with Pharaoh, already reappropriates the Hebrew slaves into a new bondage under the laws of Yahweh. This event is

finally achieved at the film's climax. When Moses enters the Egyptian court for the first time since his exile, his request lacks the emphasis on sacrifice and therefore already foretells of a new slavery.

Pharaoh (upon seeing Moses): What gifts do you bring?

Moses: We bring to you the word of God.

Pharaoh: What is this word?

Moses: Thus sayeth the Lord God of Israel: "Let my people go!"

Pharaoh: The slaves are mine, their lives are mine, all that they own is mine. I do not know your god nor will I let Israel go.

Moses: Who are you to make their lives miserable in hard bondage? Men shall be ruled by law, not by the will of other men.

Whereas the Biblical text, through its accent on sacrifice, momentarily allows a radical disruption of the economy of slavery and an opening of the gates of Egypt (even if, as we will soon see, it eventually recoils in the face of the radical displacement that it lays bare), the cinematic retelling never achieves such an opening. *The Ten Commandments*, as indicated by the very title, is not a text of egress but rather a tragic story of bondage and "freedom" under the laws of God. This suppression of exodus under the privilege of law was confirmed by DeMille in his autobiography.

The Bible story was timeless. It was also timely. It is a story of slavery and liberation, two words that the world's experience since 1923 had saturated with more vivid meaning, with more real fear and more anxious hope. When Moses stood before Pharaoh, voicing the divine demand, "Let my people go!", the same two forces faced that confront one another today in a world divided between tyranny and freedom. When Moses led his people to Mount Sinai, they learned, as the world today must learn, that true freedom is freedom under God. (DeMille, *Autobiography* 251).

9. In DeMille's narrative, the stubbornness of Pharaoh does not lay in his inability to hear, but rather in his jealousy which is hardened by his ability to hear all too well the taunting of his queen, Nephtrateri. Nephtrateri had taunted Rameses since his youth. She was the throne princess, promised to the prince who would inherit the throne. Because Moses and Rameses were in competition for the throne, they were also in competition for Nephtrateri. Nephtrateri, however, had always favored Moses and vowed her own death before she would be Rameses' queen. Rameses, therefore, was always jealous of Moses because this "pretend brother" not only had the favor of Pharaoh, but also the favor of the woman they both loved. However, upon Moses' discovery of his Hebrew heritage and his subsequent exile from Egypt, Rameses is made Pharaoh and Nephtrateri his bride. When Moses returns to lead the Hebrews out of slavery, the old love triangle is redrawn. And Nephtrateri carefully cultivates Rameses' jealousy. It is in the following exchange that Pharaoh's heart grows hard and stubborn.

Nephtrateri: Does the world bow to an empty throne?

Rameses: Empty?

Nephtrateri: Does the Pharaoh harden his heart against his son? If you let the Hebrews go, who will build his cities? You told Moses to make bricks without straw, now he tells you to make cities without bricks. Who is the slave, and who is Pharaoh? Do you hear laughing Rameses, the laughing of the kings in Babylon, in Canaan, in Troy, as Egypt surrenders to the god of slaves?

Nephtrateri's speech invokes all the elements of the dialectic of lordship and bondage: familial relations, the inversion of master and slave, and laughter. Furthermore, her conniving assists in gathering the narrative into the structure of dramatic tragedy. Her questions pull on Rameses' jealousy. It is noteworthy that this exchange occurs just prior to the scene in which Rameses' jealousy (now hardened by Nephtrateri) leads him to decree the tragic massacre of his own people.

10. DeMille makes the structure of repetition more emphatic and, in doing so, gathers the *Exodus* narrative into dramatic tragedy. According to DeMille's representation, Rameses repeats the decree of his grand-father only to have the massacre turned upon his own people by a tragic twist anticipated by Moses.

Pharaoh: If you bring another plague upon us it is not your god but I who will turn the Nile red with blood.

Moses: As your father's father turned the streets of Goshen red with the blood of our male children? If there is one more plague on Egypt, it is by your word that God will bring it. There will be so great a cry through out the land that you shall surely let the people go.

Pharaoh: Come to me no more, for the day you see my face again you shall surely die.

Moses (as he departs): Let it be written.

Pharaoh (to his courtiers): I will give this son of slaves and his god an answer the world will not forget. Commander of the Host, call in the chariots. There shall be one more plague, only it shall come upon the slaves of Goshen. The first born of each house shall die, beginning with the son of Moses.

With this decree, Pharaoh, as Moses had anticipated, specifies the last plague — the death of the first born of Egypt. This decree repeats the initial infanticide in all respects. It is spoken by the Pharaoh. It is directed towards the Hebrews. And it is given in order to avoid economic ruin. Yet there is a difference that supervenes in the decree. Through Moses' warning the decree is contorted in such a way that its meaning and structure is allowed to slide so as to disrupt the economy to which it properly belongs and from whence it was originally produced. Such sliding is difficult to take into account. DeMille redeems the operation tragically, making the reversal and disruption consequent upon the jealousy and pride of Pharaoh. A tragic reading, however, reappropriates the operation into the structure of narrative meaning. *Exodus* can never be tragic, for tragedy already reinterprets negativity as *hubris* and therefore gathers the narrative into the *logos* of tragic meaning.

11. This redemptive structure repeats itself at the time of a second liberation — the liberation from sin secured by the savior Jesus Christ. When Jesus comes to renew God's covenant with his chosen people, he supervenes through sacrifice. The crucifixion, however, is also a redemption from death and a re-enslavement. Jesus, the redeemer, is sent by the Father to save human souls. His death on the cross and triumphant resurrection secures the human victory over death and the promise of eternal life in (service to) the kingdom of Heaven.

It would also be worthwhile to examine the structure of the first covenant, particularly Abraham's sacrifice of his only, first born son. Abraham is promised progeny as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the grains of sand in the sea, if he will sacrifice his only son. Here we would want to

reread (most carefully) Kierkegaard's reflections in his pseudonymous work: *Fear and Trembling* along with René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*.

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