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Minima Moralia

Reflections from Damaged Life

Verso

Translated from the German by E. F. N. Jephcott
in the realm of the legally undefined that strife, defamation and endless conflict of interests flourish. The whole sombre base on which the institution of marriage rises, the husband's barbarous power over the property and work of his wife, the no less barbarous sexual oppression that can compel a man to take life-long responsibility for a woman with whom it once gave him pleasure to sleep—all this crawls into the light from cellars and foundations when the house is demolished. Those who once experienced the good universal in restrictively belonging to each other, are now forced by society to consider themselves scoundrels, no different from the universal order of unrestricted meanness outside. The universal is revealed in divorce as the particular's mark of shame, because the particular, marriage, is in this society unable to realize the true universal.

Inter partes. - In the realm of erotic qualities a reversal of values seems near completion. Under liberalism, up to our own times, married men from good society, unsatisfied by their correct spouses of sheltered upbringing, were wont to indemnify themselves with chorus girls, bokhminen, Viennese süsse Mädle ['sweet wenches'] and cocottes. With the rationalization of society this possibility of irregular bliss has disappeared. The cocottes have died out, the equivalent of süsse Mädle probably never existed in Anglo-Saxon and other countries with a technical civilization; but the chorus girls and the bohemians now parasitically grafted to mass culture, are so thoroughly imbued with its reasoning that he who voluntarily flees to their anarchy, the free control of their own exchange value, risks waking up under the obligation, if not of engaging them as assistants, at least of recommending them to a film magnate or script-writer of his acquaintance. The only women still able to indulge in anything resembling uncalculating love are now these very ladies whose husbands once forsook them for the tiles. While they remain as tedious to their husbands, through the latter's faults, as their mothers were, they can at least bestow on others what they are otherwise denied by all. The long-since frigid libertine represents business, while the correct, well-brought-up wife stands yearningly and unromantically for sexuality. So at last society
ladies achieve the honour of their dishonour, at the moment when there are no longer either society or ladies.

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Protection, help and counsel. - Every intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated, and does well to acknowledge it to himself, if he wishes to avoid being cruelly apprised of it behind the tightly-closed doors of his self-esteem. He lives in an environment that must remain incomprehensible to him, however flawless his knowledge of trade-union organizations or the automobile industry may be; he is always astray. Between the reproduction of his own existence under the monopoly of mass culture, and impartial, responsible work, yawns an irreconcilable breach. His language has been expropriated, and the historical dimension that nourished his knowledge, sapped. The isolation is made worse by the formation of closed and politically-controlled groups, mistrustful of their members, hostile to those branded different. The share of the social product that falls to aliens is insufficient, and forces them into a hopeless second struggle within the general competition. All this leaves no individual unmarked. Even the man spared the ignominy of direct co-ordination bears, as his special mark, this very exemption, an illusory, unreal existence in the life-process of society. Relations between outcasts are even more poisoned than between long-standing residents. All emphases are wrong, perspectives disrupted. Private life asserts itself unduly, hectically, vampire-like, trying coivulsively, because it really no longer exists, to prove it is alive. Public life is reduced to an unspoken oath of allegiance to the platform. The eyes take on a manic yet cold look of grasping, devouring, commandeering. There is no remedy but steadfast diagnosis of oneself and others, the attempt, through awareness, if not to escape doom, at least to rob it of its dreadful violence, that of blindness. Utmost caution is called for, particularly in the choice of private acquaintances, as far as choice still remains. Above all, one should beware of seeking out the mighty, and 'expecting something' of them. The eye for possible advantages is the mortal enemy of all human relationships; from these solidarity and loyalty can ensue, but never from thoughts of practical ends. Hardly less dangerous are the mirror-images of
the mighty, lackeys, flatterers and cadgers, who ingratiate themselves with those better off than they in an archaic manner that can flourish only in the economically extraterritorial circumstances of emigration. While they may bring their protector trivial advantages, they drag him down the moment he accepts them, as he is ceaselessly seduced to do by his own helplessness in a strange country. If in Europe the esoteric gesture was often only a pretext for the blindest self-interest, the concept of austerity, though hardly ship-shape or watertight, still seems, in emigration, the most acceptable lifeboat. Only a few, admittedly, have a seaworthy example at their disposal. To most boarders, it threatens starvation or madness.

Le bourgeois revenant. – Absurdly, the Fascist regimes of the first half of the twentieth century have stabilized an obsolete economic form, multiplying the terror needed to maintain it now that its senselessness is blatant. Thereby has private life also been marked. With the strengthening of external authority the stuffy private order, particularism of interests, the long-outdated form of the family, the right of property and its reflection in character, have also re-consolidated themselves. But with a bad conscience, a scarcely concealed awareness of untruth. Whatever was once good and decent in bourgeois values, independence, perseverance, forethought, circumspection, has been corrupted utterly. For while bourgeois forms of existence are truculently conserved, their economic pre-condition has fallen away. Privacy has given way entirely to the privation it always secretly was, and with the stubborn adherence to particular interests is now mingled fury at being no longer able to perceive that things might be different and better. In losing their innocence, the bourgeois have become impenitently malign. The caring hand that even now tends the little garden as if it had not long since become a ‘lot’, but fearfully wards off the unknown intruder, is already that which denies the political refugee asylum. Now objectively threatened, the subjectivity of the rulers and their hangers-on becomes totally inhuman. So the class realizes itself, taking upon itself the destructive will of the course of the world. The bourgeois live on like spectres threatening doom.

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Le nouvel avar. – There are two kinds of avarice. One, the archaic type, is the passion that spares oneself and others nothing; its physiognomic traits have been immortalized by Molière, and explained as the anal character by Freud. It is consummated in the miser, the beggar with secret millions, who is like the puritanical mask of the unrecognized caliph in the fairy-tale. He is related to the collector, the manic, finally to the great lover, as Gobseck is to Esther.1 He is still occasionally to be found as a curiosity in local columns of newspapers. The miser of our time is the man who considers nothing too expensive for himself, and everything for others. He thinks in equivalents, subjecting his whole private life to the law that one gives less than one receives in return, yet enough to ensure that one receives something. Every good deed is accompanied by an evident ‘is it necessary?’, ‘do I have to?’ This type are most surely revealed by the haste with which they ‘aveng’ kindness received, unwilling to tolerate, in the chain of exchange acts whereby expenses are recovered, a single missing link. Because with them everything is done in a rational above-board manner, they are, unlike Harpagon and Scrooge, neither to be convicted nor converted. They are as affable as they are implacable. If need be, they will place themselves irrefutably in the right and transform right into wrong, whereas the sordid mania of stinginess had the redeeming feature that the gold in the cash-box necessarily attracted thieves, indeed, that its passion was stilled only in sacrifice and loss, as is the erotic desire for possession in self-abandonment. The new misers, however, indulge their asceticism no longer as a vice but with prudence. They are insured.

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On the dialectic of tact. – Goethe, acutely aware of the threatening impossibility of all human relationships in emergent industrial society, tried in the Novellen of Wilhelm Meister’s Years of Travel to present tact as the saving accommodation between alienated human beings. This accommodation seemed to him inseparable

1. The miser and the courtesan in Balzac’s Splendeurs et Misères des Courisssans. Gobseck was Esther’s great-uncle.
no longer offers adequate protection. No agreements, in the Fascist era, are binding enough to secure headquarters against air attacks, and commandants observing traditional caution are hanged by Hitler and beheaded by Chiang Kai-shek. It follows directly from this that anyone who attempts to come out alive — and survival itself has something nonsensical about it, like dreams in which, having experienced the end of the world, one afterwards crawls from a basement — ought also to be prepared at each moment to end his life. This is the mournful truth that has emerged from Zarathustra’s exuberant doctrine of freely-chosen death. Freedom has contracted to pure negativity, and what in the days of art nouveau was known as a beautiful death has shrunk to the wish to curtail the infinite abasement of living and the infinite torment of dying, in a world where there are far worse things to fear than death. — The objective end of humanism is only another expression for the same thing. It signifies that the individual as individual, in representing the species of man, has lost the autonomy through which he might realize the species.

Refuge for the homeless. — The predicament of private life today is shown by its arena. Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible. The traditional residences we grew up in have grown intolerable: each trait of comfort in them is paid for with a betrayal of knowledge, each vestige of shelter with the dusty pact of family interests. The functional modern habitations designed from a tabula rasa, are living-cases manufactured by experts for philistines, or factory sites that have strayed into the consumption sphere, devoid of all relation to the occupant: in them even the nostalgia for independent existence, defunct in any case, is sent packing. Modern man wishes to sleep close to the ground like an animal, a German magazine decreed with prophetic masochism before Hitler, abolishing, with the bed the threshold between waking and dreaming. The sleepless are on call at any hour, insatiably ready for anything, alert and unconscious at once. Anyone seeking refuge in a genuine, but purchased, period-style house, embalms himself alive. The attempt to evade responsibility for one’s residence by moving into a hotel or furnished rooms, makes the enforced conditions of emigration a wisely-chosen norm. The hardest hit, as everywhere, are those who have no choice. They live, if not in slums, in bungalows that by tomorrow may be leaf-huts, trailers, cars, camps, or the open air. The house is past. The bombings of European cities, as well as the labour and concentration camps, merely proceed as executors, with what the immanent development of technology had long decided was to be the fate of houses. These are now good only to be thrown away like old food cans. The possibility of residence is annihilated by that of socialist society, which, once missed, saps the foundations of bourgeois life. No individual can resist this process. He need only take an interest in furniture design or interior decoration to find himself developing the arty-crafty sensibilities of the bibliophile, however firmly he may oppose arts-and-crafts in the narrower sense. From a distance the difference between the Vienna Workshops and the Bauhaus is no longer so considerable. Purely functional curves, having broken free of their purpose, are now becoming just as ornamental as the basic structures of Cubism. The best mode of conduct, in face of all this, still seems an uncommitted, suspended one: to lead a private life, as far as the social order and one’s own needs will tolerate nothing else, but not to attach weight to it as to something still socially substantial and individually appropriate. 'It is even part of my good fortune not to be a house-owner', Nietzsche already wrote in the Gay Science. Today we should have to add: it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home. This gives some indication of the difficult relationship in which the individual now stands to his property, as long as he still possesses anything at all. The trick is to keep in view, and to express, the fact that private property no longer belongs to one, in the sense that consumer goods have become potentially so abundant that no individual has the right to cling to the principle of their limitation; but that one must nevertheless have possessions, if one is not to sink into that dependence and need which serves the blind perpetuation of property relations. But the thesis of this paradox leads to destruction, a loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people too; and the antithesis, no sooner uttered, is an ideology for those wishing with a bad conscience to keep what they have. Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.

completely, in Dewey's strenuous pragmatism: a sense of proportion, a way of putting things in their correct perspective, plain but obdurate common sense. If Hegel seemed himself, in his conversation with Goethe, to come close to such a view, when he defended his philosophy against Goethe's platonism on the grounds that it was 'basically no more than the spirit of opposition innate in each human being, regulated and methodically developed, a gift which proves its worth in distinguishing truth from falsehood', the veiled meaning of his formulation mischievously includes in the praise of what is 'innate in each human being' a denunciation of common sense, since man's innermost characteristic is defined as precisely a refusal to be guided by common sense, indeed, as opposition to it. Common sense, the correct assessment of situations, the worldly eye schooled by the market, shares with the dialectic a freedom from dogma, narrow-mindedness and prejudice. Its sobriety undeniably constitutes a moment of critical thinking. But its lack of passionate commitment makes it, all the same, the sworn enemy of such thinking. For opinion in its generality, accepted directly as that of society as it is, necessarily has agreement as its concrete content. It is no coincidence that in the nineteenth century it was stale dogmatism, given a bad conscience by the Enlightenment, that appealed to common sense, so that an arch-conservatist like Mill had to inveigh against the latter. The sense of proportion entails a total obligation to think in terms of the established measures and values. One need only have once heard a diehard representative of a ruling clique say: 'That is of no consequence', or note at what times the bourgeoisie talk of exaggeration, hysteria, folly, to know that the appeal to reason invariably occurs most promptly in apologies for unreason. Hegel stressed the healthy spirit of contradiction with the obstinacy of the peasant who has learned over the centuries to endure the hunts and ground-rent of mighty feudal lords. It is the concern of dialectics to cock a snook at the sound views held by later powers-that-be on the immutability of the course of the world, and to decipher in their 'proportions' the faithful and reduced miroir-image of inordinately enlarged disproportions. Dialectical reason is, when set against the dominant mode of reason, unreason: only in encompassing and

cancelling this mode does it become itself reasonable. Was it not bigoted and talmudic to insist, in the midst of the exchange economy, on the difference between the labour-time expended by the worker and that needed for the reproduction of his life? Did not Nietzsche put the cart before all the horses on which he rode his charges? Did not Karl Kraus, Kafka, even Proust prejudice and falsify the image of the world in order to shake off falsehood and prejudice? The dialectic cannot stop short before the concepts of health and sickness, nor indeed before their siblings reason and unreason. Once it has recognized the ruling universal order and its proportions as 'sick' – and marked in the most literal sense with paranoia, with 'pathic projection' – then it can see as healing cells only what appears, by the standards of that order, as itself sick, eccentric, paranoia – indeed, 'mad'; and it is true today as in the Middle Ages that only fools tell their masters the truth. The dialectician's duty is thus to help this fool's truth to attain its own reasons, without which it will certainly succumb to the abyss of the sickness implacably dictated by the healthy common sense of the rest.

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On the morality of thinking. – Naivety and sophistication are concepts so endlessly intertwined that no good can come of playing one off against the other. The defence of the ingenious, as practised by irrationalists and intellectual-baiters of all kinds, is ignoble. Reflection that takes sides with naivety condemns itself: cunning and obscurantism remain what they always were. Mediatively to affirm immediacy, instead of comprehending it as mediated within itself, is to pervert thought into an apologia of its antithesis, into the immediate lie. This perversion serves all bad purposes, from the private pigheadedness of 'life's-like-that' to the justification of social injustice as a law of nature. However, to wish on these grounds to erect the opposite as a principle, and to call philosophy as I once did myself – the binding obligation to be sophisticated, is hardly better. It is not only that sophistication, in the sense of worldly-wise, hard-boiled shrewdness, is a dubious medium of knowledge, forever liable, through its affinity to the practical orders of life and its general mental distrust of theory, itself to revert to a naivety engrossed with utilitarian goals. Even when

sophistication is understood in the theoretically acceptable sense of that which widens horizons, passes beyond the isolated phenomenon, considers the whole, there is still a cloud in the sky. It is just this passing-on and being unable to linger, this tacit assent to the primacy of the general over the particular, which constitutes not only the deception of idealism in hypostasizing concepts, but also its inhumanity, that has no sooner grasped the particular than it reduces it to a through-station, and finally comes all too quickly to terms with suffering and death for the sake of a reconciliation occurring merely in reflection — in the last analysis, the bourgeois coldness that is only too willing to underwrite the inevitable. Knowledge can only widen horizons by abiding so insistently with the particular that its isolation is dispelled. This admittedly presupposes a relation to the general, though not one of subsumption, but rather almost the reverse. Dialectical mediation is not a recourse to the more abstract, but a process of resolution of the concrete in itself. Nietzsche, who too often thought in over-wide horizons himself, was nevertheless aware of this: 'He who seeks to mediate between two bold thinkers', he writes in the Gay Science, 'stamps himself as mediocre: he has not the eyes to see uniqueness: to perceive resemblances everywhere, making everything alike, is a sign of weak eyesight.' The morality of thought lies in a procedure that is neither entrenched nor detached, neither blind nor empty, neither atomistic nor consequential. The double-edged method which has earned Hegel's Phenomenology the reputation among reasonable people of unfathomable difficulty, that is, its simultaneous demands that phenomena be allowed to speak as such — in a 'pure looking-on' — and yet that their relation to consciousness as the subject, reflection, be at every moment maintained, expresses this morality most directly and in all its depth of contradiction. But how much more difficult has it become to conform to such morality now that it is no longer possible to convince oneself of the identity of subject and object, the ultimate assumption of which still enabled Hegel to conceal the antagonistic demands of observation and interpretation. Nothing less is asked of the thinker today than that he should be at every moment both within things and outside them — Münchhausen pulling himself out of the bog by his pig-tail becomes the pattern of knowledge which wishes to be more than either verification or speculation. And then the salaried


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*De gustibus est disputandum.* — Even someone believing himself convinced of the non-comparability of works of art will find himself repeatedly involved in debates where works of art, and precisely those of highest and therefore incomparable rank, are compared and evaluated one against the other. The objection that such considerations, which come about in a peculiarly compulsive way, have their source in mercenary instincts that would measure everything by theell, usually signifies no more than that solid citizens, for whom art can never be irrational enough, want to keep serious reflection and the claims of truth far from the works. This compulsion to evaluate is located, however, in the works of art themselves. So much is true: they refuse to be compared. They want to annihilate one another. Not without cause did the ancients reserve the pantheon of the compatible to Gods or Ideas, but obliged works of art to enter the agon, each the mortal enemy of each. The notion of a 'pantheon of classicity', as still entertained by Kierkegaard, is a fiction of neutralized culture. For if the Idea of Beauty appears only in dispersed form among many works, each one nevertheless aims uncompromisingly to express the whole of beauty, claims it in its singularity and can never admit its dispersal without annulling itself. Beauty, as single, true and liberated from appearance and individuation, manifests itself not in the synthesis of all works, in the unity of the arts and of art, but only as a physical reality: in the downfall of art itself. This downfall is the goal of every work of art, in that it seeks to bring death to all others. That all art aims to end art, is another way of saying the same thing. It is this impulse to self-destruction inherent in works of art, their innermost striving towards an image of beauty free of appearance, that is constantly stirring up the aesthetic disputes that are apparently so futile. While obstinately seeking to establish aesthetic truth, and trapping themselves thereby in an irresolvable dialectic, they stumble on the real truth, for by making the works of art their own and elevating them to concepts, they limit them all, and so contribute to the destruction of art which is its salvation. Aesthetic tolerance that simply
sidered absolutely, a mere abstraction. He has no content that is not socially constituted, no impulse transcending society that is not directed at assisting the social situation to transcend itself. Even the Christian doctrine of death and immortality, in which the notion of absolute individuality is rooted, would be wholly void if it did not embrace humanity. The single man who hoped for immortality absolutely and for himself alone, would in such limitation only inflate to preposterous dimensions the principle of self-preservation which the injunction that 'He that loses his life, shall save it' holds in check. Socially, the absolute status granted to the individual marks the transition from the universal mediation of social relation—a mediation which, as exchange, always also requires curtailment of the particular interests realized through it—to direct domination, where power is seized by the strongest. Through this dissolution of all the mediating elements within the individual himself, by virtue of which he was, in spite of everything, also a part of a social subject, he regresses, impoverished and coarsened, to the state of a mere social object. As something abstractly realized, in Hegel's sense, the individual cancels himself out: the countless people who know nothing but their naked, prowling interest are those who capitate the organization and terror overtake them. If today the trace of humanity seems to persist only in the individual in his decline, it admonishes us to make an end of the fatality which individualizes men, only to break them completely in their isolation. The saving principle is now preserved in its antithesis alone.

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Bequest. — Dialectical thought is an attempt to break through the coercion of logic by its own means. But since it must use these means, it is at every moment in danger of itself acquiring a coercive character: the ruse of reason would like to hold sway over dialectic too. The existing cannot be overstepped except by means of a universal derived from the existing order itself. The universal triumphs over the existing through the latter's own concept, and therefore, in its triumph, the power of mere existence constantly threatens to reassert itself by the same violence that broke through the absolute rule of negation, the movement of thought of history becomes, in accordance with the pattern of immanent antithesis, unambiguously, exclusively, implacably positive. Everything is subsumed under the principal economic phases and their development, which each in turn historically shape the whole of society; thought in its entirety has something of what Parisian artists call le genre chef d'œuvre. That calamity is brought about precisely by the stringency of such development; that this stringency is itself linked to domination, is, at the least, not made explicit in critical theory, which, like traditional theory, awaits salvation from stage-by-stage progression. Stringency and totality, the bourgeois intellectual ideals of necessity and generality, do indeed circumscribe the formula of history, but for just this reason the constitution of society finds its precipitate in those great, immovable, lordly concepts against which dialectical criticism and practice are directed. If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic.

It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must needs deal with cross-gained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic. This can most readily be seen in art. Children's books like Alice in Wonderland or Struwwelpeter, of which it would be absurd to ask whether they are progressive or reactionary, contain incomparably more eloquent ciphers even of history than the high drama of Bebel, concerned though it is with the official themes of tragic art, turning points of history, the course of the world and the individual, and in Satie's per and puerile piano pieces there are theses of experience undreamed of by the school of Schönberg, with all its rigour and all the pathos of musical development behind. The very grandeur of logical deductions may inadvertently take on a provincial quality. Benjamin's writings are an attempt in ever...
new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has not yet been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically.

Gold assay. — Among the concepts to which, after the dissolution of its religious and the formalization of its autonomous norms, bourgeois morality has shrunk, that of genuineness ranks highest. If nothing else can be bindingly required of man, then at least he should be wholly and entirely what he is. In the identity of each individual with himself the postulate of incorruptible truth, together with the glorification of the factual, are transferred from Enlightenment knowledge to ethics. It is just the critically independent late-bourgeois thinkers, sickened by traditional judgements and idealistic phrases, who concur with this view. Ibsen’s admittedly violated verdict on the living lie, Kierkegaard’s doctrine of existence, have made the ideal of authenticity a centrepiece of metaphysics. In Nietzsche’s analysis the word genuine stands unquestioned, exempt from conceptual development. To the converted and unconverted philosophers of Fascism, finally, values like authenticity, heroic endurance of the ‘being-in-the-world’ of individual existence, frontier-situations, become a means of usurping religious-authoritarian patmos without the least religious content. They lead to the denunciation of anything that is not of sufficiently sterling worth, sound to the core, that is, the Jews: did not Richard Wagner already play off genuine German metal against foreign dross and thus misuse criticism of the culture market as an apology for barbarism? Such abuse, however, is not extrinsic to the concept of genuineness. Now that its worn-out livery is being sold off, seams and patches are coming to light that were invisibly present in the great days of its opposition. The untruth is located in the substratum of genuineness itself, the individual. If it is in the principium individuationis, as the antipodes Hegel and Schopenhauer both recognized, that the secret of the world’s course is concealed, then the conception of an ultimate and absolute substantiality of the self falls victim to an illusion that protects the established order even while its essence decays. The equation of the genuine and the true is untenable. It is precisely undeviating self-reflection – the practice of which Nietzsche called psychology, that is, insistence on the truth about oneself, that shows again and again, even in the first conscious experiences of childhood, that the impulses reflected upon are not quite ‘genuine’. They always contain an element of imitation, play, wanting to be different. The desire, through submergence in one’s own individuality, instead of social insight into it, to touch something utterly solid, ultimate being, leads to precisely the false infinity which since Kierkegaard the concept of authenticity has been supposed to exercise. No one said so more bluntly than Schopenhauer. This peevish ancestor of existential philosophy and malicious heir of the great speculators knew his way among the hollows and crags of individual absolutism like no other. His insight is coupled to the speculative thesis that the individual is only appearance, not the Thing-in-Itself. Every individual, he writes in a footnote in the Fourth Book of The World as Will and Representation, ‘is on one hand the subject of cognition, that is to say, the complementary condition of the possibility of the whole objective world, and on the other a single manifestation of that same Will, which objectifies itself in each thing. But this duality of our being is not founded in a unity existing for itself: otherwise we should be able to have consciousness of ourselves through ourselves and independently of the objects of cognition and willing: but of this we are utterly incapable; as soon as we attempt to do so and, by turning our cognition inwards, strive for once to attain complete self-reflection, we lose ourselves in a bottomless void, find ourselves resembling the hollow glass ball out of whose emptiness a voice speaks that has no cause within the ball, and, in trying to grasp ourselves, we clutch, shuddering, at nothing but an insubstantial ghost.’

Thus he called the mythical deception of the pure self by its name, null and void. It is an abstraction. What presents itself as an original entity, a monad, is only the result of a social division of the social process. Precisely as an absolute, the individual is a mere reflection of property relations. In him the fictitious claim is made that what is biologically one must logically precede the social whole, from which it is only isolated by force,

concrete whole is in the form of being, of immediacy, constitutes determinateness as such." The occultists take literally the non-being in 'simple unity with being', and their kind of concreteness is a surreptitious short-cut from the whole to the determinate which can defend itself by claiming that the whole, having once been determined, is no longer the whole. They call to metaphysics: Hic Rhodus hic salta: if the philosophic investment of spirit with existence is determinable, then finally, they sense, any scattered piece of existence must be justifiable as a particular spirit. The doctrine of the existence of the Spirit, the ultimate exaltation of bourgeois consciousness, consequently bore teleologically within it the belief in spirits, its ultimate degradation. The shift to existence, always 'positive' and justifying the world, implies at the same time the thesis of the positivity of mind, pinning it down, transposing the absolute into appearance. Whether the whole objective world, as 'product', is to be spirit, or a particular thing a particular spirit, ceases to matter, and the world-spirit becomes the supreme Spirit, the guardian angel of the established, despiritualized order. On this the occultists live: their mysticism is the enfant terrible of the mystical moment in Hegel. They take speculation to the point of fraudulent bankruptcy. In passing off determinate being as mind, or spirit, they put objectified mind to the test of existence, which must prove negative. No spirit exists.

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Warning: not to be misused. — The dialectic stems from the sophists; it was a mode of discussion whereby dogmatic assertions were shaken and, as the public prosecutors and comic writers put it, the lesser word made the stronger. It subsequently developed, as against philosophia perennis, into a perennial method of criticism, a refuge for all the thoughts of the oppressed, even those unthought by them. But as a means of proving oneself right it was also from the first an instrument of domination, a formal technique of apologetics unconcerned with content, serviceable to those who could pay: the principle of constandy and successfully turning the tables. Its truth or untruth, therefore, is not inherent in the method itself, but in its intention in the historical process. The splitting of the Hegelian school into a left and a right wing was founded in the ambiguity of the theory no less than in the political situation preceding the 1848 revolution. Dialectical thought includes not only the Marxian doctrine that the proletariat as the absolute object of history is capable of becoming its first social subject, and realizing the conscious self-determination of mankind, but also the joke that Gustave Doré attributes to a parliamentary representative of the ancien régime: that without Louis XVI there would never have been a revolution, so that he is to be thanked for the rights of man. Negative philosophy, dissolving everything, dissolves even the solvent. But the new form in which it claims to suspend and preserve both, dissolved and solvent, can never emerge in a pure state from an antagonistic society. As long as domination reproduces itself, the old quality reappears unrefined in the dissolving of the solvent: in a radical sense no leap is made at all. That would happen only with the liberating event. Because the dialectical determination of the new quality always finds itself referred back to the violence of the objective tendency that propagates domination, it is placed under the almost inescapable compulsion, whenever it has conceptually achieved the negation of the negation, to substitute, even in thought, the bad old order for the non-existent alternative. The depth to which it penetrates objectivity is bought with complicity in the lie that objectivity is truth. By strictly limiting itself to extrapolating the image of a privilege-free state, from that which owes to the historical process the privilege of existing, it bows to restoration. This is registered by private existence. Hegel taxed the latter with nullity. Mere subjectivity, he argued, insisting on the purity of its own principle, becomes entangled in antinomies. It is brought down by its own mischief, by hypocrisy and evil, in so far as it is not objectified in society and state. Morality, autonomy founded on pure self-certainty, together with conscience, is mere illusion. If 'there is no moral reality', it is consistent that in the Philosophy of Right marriage is ranked above conscience, and that the latter, even on its own level, which Hegel, with Romanticism, determines as that of irony, is accused of 'subjective vanity' in its bifocal understanding. This dialectical motif, operating on all levels of the system, is at once true and untrue. Truès because it unmask


the particular as a necessary illusion, the false consciousness of isolated things as being themselves alone and not moments of the whole; and this false consciousness it breaks down with the power of the whole. Untrue because the motif of objectification, 'alienation', becomes a pretext for bourgeois self-assertion of the subject, is degraded to a mere rationalization, as long as objectivity, contrasted by thought to bad subjectivity, is unfree and does not measure up to the subject’s criticism. The word alienation [Entäußerung], expressing the expectation of release from private willfulness through obedience of the private will, acknowledges by the very tenacity with which it views the alien external world as institutionally opposed to the subject — in spite of all its protestations of reconciliation — the continuing irreconcilability of subject and object, which constitutes the theme of dialectical criticism. The act of self-alienation amounts to the renunciation that Goethe called salvation, and thus to a justification of the status quo, now as then. From his insight into, for example, the mutilation of women by patriarchal society, and into the impossibility of eliminating anthropological deformation without its pre-condition, precisely the intransigently realistic dialectician could derive the master-of-the-house standpoint, and lend his voice to the continuance of the patriarchal relationship. In this he lacks neither valid reasons, such as the impossibility of different relations under the present conditions, nor even humanity towards the oppressed, who have to suffer the consequences of false emancipation; but all this truth would become ideology in the hands of male interest. The dialectician knows the unhappiness and vulnerability of the ageing spinster, the murderousness of divorce. But in anti-romantically giving objectified marriage precedence over ephemeral passion which is not preserved in a shared life, he makes himself the mouthpiece of those who practise marriage at the expense of affection, love what they are married to, that is, the abstract property-relationship. The logical conclusion of such wisdom would be that people do not matter, provided they accommodate themselves to the given constellation and do what is asked of them. To protect itself from such temptations an enlightened dialectic needs to guard incessantly against this apologetic, restorative element which is, after all, inherent in sophistication. The threatening relapse of

reflection into unreflectedness gives itself away by the facility with which the dialectical procedure shuttles its arguments, as if it were itself that immediate knowledge of the whole which the very principle of the dialectic precludes. The standpoint of totality is adopted in order, with a schoolsmasterly That-is-not-what-I-meant, to deprive one’s opponent of any definite negative judgement, and at the same time violently to break off the movement of concepts, to arrest the dialectic by pointing to the inexpressible inertia of facts. The harm is done by the theme probandum: the thinker uses the dialectic instead of giving himself up to it. In this way thought, masterfully dialectical, reverts to the pre-dialectical stage: the serene demonstration of the fact that there are two sides to everything.

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Finale. — The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects — this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.

1. *Dieser Weiseheit letzter Schluss*: ironic reprise of the words of Faust’s final monologue in Goethe’s play.