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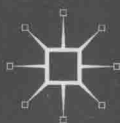
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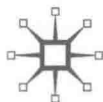
The Art of Reconciliation

Photography and the Conception of Dialectics in Benjamin, Hegel, and Derrida

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Also by Dag Petersson

ACTUALITIES OF AURA: Twelve Studies of Walter Benjamin (*edited with Erik Steinskog*)

THE MAKING OF THE OTHER HALF: Jacob A. Riis and the New Image of Tenement Poverty

List of Abbreviations

AP Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999)

CC *Theodor Adorno & Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999)

GS Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften unter Mitwirkung von Theodor W. Adorno und Gershom Scholem herausgeben von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972–89)

SW *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, volumes 1–4, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996, 1999, 2002, 2003)

TW Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden. Theorie Werkausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969–1971)

Acknowledgments

Preface

> Philosophy guided by a sense of responsibility for everything should no longer lay claim to a mastery of the absolute, should in fact renounce all such notions, in order not to betray them in the event, without, however, sacrificing the concept of truth itself. The province of philosophy lies in such contradictions as these.
>
> *Theodor W. Adorno*[1]

> The philosopher should start by meditating on photography, that is to say the writing of light before setting out towards a reflection on an impossible self-portrait.
>
> *Jacques Derrida*[2]

Two thieves once had a love affair. This was in the early 1940s and the two lovers, Jean and Java, were simple street hustlers. Like the rest of their lot, they were often penniless and homeless, living from hand to mouth as pickpockets, smugglers, and whores. Sometimes they begged on the streets, they burgled a house, or they would rob someone – at times even a fellow thief – but now Jean and Java were in love. They lived together, passionately in love and infatuated with each other. But after some time, they fell out and had many bitter fights. Java said things that made him soft in Jean's eyes: things that made of his cold stupidity and crystalline cowardice something vulgar, simple, and dull. Java confessed to having feigned sex with a client – having cunningly protected his ass with his hand. Jean accused Java of letting him be had for too little money. On another occasion, Java appeared much too willing, almost anxious to help a new acquaintance rob an old roommate of his. Jean started to hate him and decided to break up but couldn't bring himself to it. Not until he suddenly realized that Java's hand was much too weak for his body was he certain that their relationship was irrevocably over. But Jean never feared that their love would end as an incurable wound. He always knew – even during their most painful fights – that he and Java would finally reconcile, and eventually the two thieves mended their broken hearts. In a tender moment, Jean grabbed Java's hand, placed it on the swollen bump that betrayed his erection and looked him calmly in the eyes. Java then cried a little, and that put an end to it.

Jean, here, is better known as Jean Genet: a beggar and a thief, but also a poet and a storyteller. The episode with Java is recounted in his autobiographic novel *Journal du voleur* (*The Thief's Journal*) from 1949. In 1971 a new French edition appeared with a slightly revised text. Among other emendations, the appeasement scene with Java was replaced with a brief remark: *'(A text – reconciliation with Java – is omitted due to the considerations demanded by the author's tender feelings for the heroes.)'*[3] This change is not reflected in any of the English editions that follow Bernard Frechtman's translation, which first appeared in 1954 and again, slightly emended, in 1965. Readers in English still enjoy the reconciliation scene that French readers are made to understand is inconsiderate.

In a certain philosophical context, Genet's editorial intervention might point to something beyond a literary curiosity, for it contains elements that address the basic principles of dialectic thought. Love, misrecognition, conflict, culpability, unification, responsibility, and, above all, questions of reconciliation: why, one might ask, was the original version of the story disrespectful? In what sense was it an offence, a breach, a violation? Did the actual reconciliation between Jean and Java involve some implicit confidentiality agreement? Is reconciliation always a singular event? Did the later edition of *Journal du voleur* amend the first publication, forgive it? Is an offence against reconciliation forgivable?

During the second half of the 1990s, reconciliation became a major issue at the opposite end of the social scale. World leaders including Pope John Paul II, Queen Elizabeth II, and the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, all asked for forgiveness, albeit for very different reasons. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee declared itself ready to forgive and reconcile *all offences* committed during the apartheid regime. What these processes had in common was that they were all publicly broadcasted and widely debated. In the spring of 1999, I had the opportunity to follow a lecture series by Jacques Derrida that was fully devoted to these issues.[4] He made the point that all these public political offerings of reconciliation made sense only within a Christian framework. None of the public figures (not even Clinton) asked for forgiveness for themselves, as private persons, but for themselves as embodied representatives of a sovereign power. Only with Christ had the possibility appeared of reconciling a breach within the embodied sovereign.

In his lectures, Derrida focused on the limits of forgiving. Forgiveness, he insisted, has to be absolute in order to be forgiveness. Only a forgiveness that forgives the unforgivable is forgiveness. To forgive a

crime that is forgivable is less to forgive than to trade in excuses or apologies. Absolute forgiveness is both unconditional and aneconomic and should not be mistaken for the forgiveness that demands repentance in exchange. In a short text from 2001, 'On Forgiveness', Derrida remarks that a similar meditation on forgiveness was already proposed by Hegel. 'Hegel, the great thinker of "forgiveness" and "reconciliation," said that all is forgivable except the crime against spirit, that is, the reconciling power of forgiveness.'5 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, whose dialectics aspired to 'complete the System of Philosophy',6 played a central role in Derrida's lectures, or his 'theater of forgiveness', but was explicitly not allowed on stage. By contrast, in his book *Glas*, published 25 years earlier, Hegel shared the main stage with none other than Genet: two writers in each column on every page – a philosopher and a thief with surprisingly similar concerns.

It is in this context that Genet's omitted reconciliation episode draws attention to the moment of self-conception in Hegel's dialectics. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is the forgiveness of Christ that enables philosophy to raise itself and finally determine its own being as science. At the pivotal moment of self-determination, Hegel's dialectics appropriates the Christian reconciliation of finite faith and infinite being in order to reconcile within itself finite knowledge and infinite reason. Thus the foundation for a proper self-reflective determination of philosophy is established, whereafter it has only left to develop the proper mode of expression for its own Concept, its own ideal reconciliation. By contrast – and not to be dismissed – Genet's moment of reconciliation cannot even be expressed in public without thereby violating the reconciled other. The gulf between Genet and Hegel turns speculative dialectics once more toward the question of its inaugural expression. This is not a dismissive judgment on dialectics. To bring Hegel together with Derrida, Genet, and Walter Benjamin is not necessarily an attack on Hegel, but a way of developing a new different mode of thought from his philosophy. In that process, photography will emerge as a new concept, grown from the tradition of Hegelian thought, and enabling us to rephrase the question: what is dialectics?

At first, now, here, some formal rudiments about the basic procedure of dialectic thought. We begin by noticing that reconciliation does not stand on its own. As in everyday life, it always follows a breach, an offence, or a wound. In dialectics the wounds to be reconciled consist of undetermined arguments, propositions, or concepts. This is why Nietzsche says that dialectics has always been a reactive mode of

thinking. Ever since Socrates, it has worked as a response to a concept, a proposition, or an utterance that is not dialectical but that will necessarily become so. It will always have the last word, the last answer, if not the first. Literary critic Werner Hamacher has, with a view to this concern, laid out the consequences for a return to Hegel.

> A philosophy like his, closed as it is in order to round out the circle of the encyclopaedic system, one which has supposedly arched its way back to the very beginning of all philosophy, cannot possibly exclude its future either, must, like a maelstrom, draw every other conceivable theory, every critique which contests it, every new reading which addresses it, back into its circle, must suck everything back in ....What is supposed to be closed, once and for all, can never cease to close. And thus every new reading of Hegel's writings finds itself confronted by the dilemma of inevitably figuring at a place already appointed for it within the text it seeks critically to locate, of already being grasped by what it struggles to grasp, of already belonging in advance to what it would appropriate understandingly for itself.[7]

Undauntedly, but with due respect for this maelstrom, one may venture the hypothesis that Hegel's power is coextensive with the capacity of thought's determinateness (the Concept), as it, in pursuit of absolute knowledge, invests in everything a general ontological responsibility. This, I believe, is what Adorno refers to in the epigraph. Whatever exists makes, by its existence, thought responsible for that existence – that is, not only for its form, content, or truth, but also for its being as a determinable being. Hegel says: 'It is in the determinations of thought and the Concept that [the subject matter] *is* what it *is*.'[8] Dialectics will mend any breach of this responsibility with a reconciliation that integrates the undetermined being back into reason. Every thought will be determined dialectically and become part of dialectics.

Critical voices against Hegel's dialectics have often identified his thought as a prison of reason. From Kierkegaard to Levinas, from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty, and from Nietzsche to Foucault: the plans to escape Hegel usually involve an outside that his circling coils are unable to internalize. Regardless of strategic variations, this liberating criticism always attacks the closing symmetry between Hegel's responsibility and reconciliation. For our dialogue with dialectics, it is crucial that we grasp the economy of this symmetry. It can be described in quite simple terms.

Whenever I assume responsibility for something, I oblige myself to answer for it to someone else, perhaps to several others with different interests. Under all circumstances, I always assume responsibility in front of an other, even if that other is myself. I answer for something to someone else. But once I have accepted this responsibility I immediately run the risk of failing to respond to my commitment. To fail one's responsibility is to be unable to keep what has been promised. Such a failure causes a breach between me and the other to whom I made myself responsible, and I therefore come to owe it to that person that I shall make up for my broken promise. To pay this debt is to reconcile. But the act of reconciliation demands that I pay back a sufficient amount; should the payment not be enough for the creditor, there has not been a reconciliation. If, however, the payment is accepted, I have reconciled the breach as well as relieved myself of my responsibility. There should now be no hard feelings, no grudge, no unfinished business; to reconcile is to mend the breach, to forgive and forget, so as to remember all the better in the process of moving on.

This may illustrate the symmetrical economy of a dialectical moment. To assume dialectical responsibility is to enter such a moment, and every moment consists of three installments, or positions. Recognizing the risk of failing to respond to the other is the first position, where I recognize the other as the medium in which I negatively determine the particular object of my responsibility. Subjecting to his or her possible demands for retribution is the second position, where I determine myself as the negative of the negated object and therefore become a subject for myself in this relationship. Fulfilling my responsibility, or better yet, paying the debt of reconciliation is the third position, where the former opposite positions are unified, and the other is internalized into the subject, which thus becomes ready to assume a new responsibility.

Hegel's philosophy is guided by a sense of responsibility for everything – that is, for an absolute unity of being, truth, and knowledge. It could also be said that Hegel takes the dialectical economy of determination to its ultimate liability. But rather than assuming this enormous task at once, his total responsibility is divided into minor ones that are successively fulfilled by an accumulative subject called Spirit. Through the repetitive determinations of Spirit, a history of increasingly absolute stages is formed. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is therefore the history of Spirit's consciousness determining its own being by reflecting itself in the world that appears to it in increasingly more true and absolute forms. History is, as it were, the formal framework of Hegel's philosophy. But in order that Spirit may also determine

this framework, it must eventually reach a particular moment where responsibility can be assumed for the history it has lived. This moment constitutes the transition from ethical Spirit to absolute Spirit; it inaugurates the movement of self-determination where Spirit will recognize itself as absolute reason. At this point, everything is at stake. To reconcile with its own being – that is to say, to reconcile its encyclopedic history of contents with its economic power of forgiveness – this requires an unconditional, *aneconomic* reconciliation.

We should digress for a moment to examine how Hegel constructs this crucial moment: he begins by reconciling the reconciliation of Christ. Christian forgiveness is the highest ethical expression of faith (the unity between finite consciousness and infinite being), and it extends infinitely into the past and the future. What Hegel during this moment calls 'Pure knowledge' is synonymous with faith; his point is that although the Christian pure knowledge unites finite consciousness with infinite being, this knowledge is not unified with itself, but is divided into a Catholic and a Protestant faith. Therefore it is not capable of assuming responsibility for an absolute, scientific knowledge of knowledge. But faith may transcend itself and let the word of reconciliation become the concept that assumes dialectical responsibility for an absolute, unified knowledge. The opposition intrinsic to Christian faith can unify dialectically and thereby make it possible for the Concept to reflect on itself. Hegel reflects on the *word* of reconciliation:

> The word of reconciliation [*Das Wort der Versöhnung*] is the *objectively* existent Spirit, which beholds the pure knowledge of itself *qua universal* essence, in its opposite, in the pure knowledge of itself *qua* absolutely self-contained and exclusive *individuality* – a reciprocal recognition which is *absolute* Spirit.[9]

As an undetermined word of reconciliation, Spirit experiences the two opposite modes of faith: a Catholic faith in reconciliation as universal essence and a Protestant faith in reconciliation as individual receiving of grace. Their unification will be an unconditional reconciliation. The Absolute Spirit, which here recognizes itself with 'a reciprocal recognition', performs this determination without the common progressive economy of experiencing its other. It performs it at first by simply recognizing as absolute the reciprocal opposition within the word of reconciliation. Because of this reciprocity, Spirit *does not* identify evil consciousness, i.e. individuality's crime against the reconciling power

of forgiveness, with the object of absolute forgiveness. That would have been the economical, but also impossible movement. Instead, Absolute Spirit spontaneously divides itself into 1) a pure self, which is the continuation of universal duty in the counter-reformation, and 2) an individuality which is conscious of itself as essence and hence appears to the former as a manifestation of evil. About this division, Hegel writes: 'Each of these two self-certain Spirits has no other purpose than its own pure self, and no other reality and existence than just this pure self. But yet they are different; and the difference is absolute, because it is set in this element of the pure Concept [*reinen Begriffs*]. It is also absolute, not only for us, but for the Concepts themselves which stand in this antithesis.'[10]

Absolute Spirit transcends self-certain faith into reason by recognizing that the absolute difference between the two Concepts of reconciliation describes in fact a synthetic *a priori*, the highest form of Concept so far produced in the history of philosophy.[11] The proposition emerging from recognizing absolute reconciliation in the form of a Kantian dialectics is 'The Self is absolute Being.'[12] With this formula of identity, a new Concept declares its existence in its first pure form. *Aufhebung*, the famously untranslatable term for Hegel's mode of unification has just barely recognized itself.

Now, it is necessary that the utterance of selfhood may rid itself of evil individualism. Spirit must develop a proper form of expression for its unity with the absolute. The aesthetics must therefore begin to develop. Art must continuously negate sensuous particularity in the expression of the absolute, so that Spirit may eventually express its rational reconciliation in true, philosophical form. Aesthetics in Hegel is the first of three realms where absolute Spirit develops the perfect communicable form of the absolute Concept.[13] Like everything in Hegel, aesthetics emerges historically. It becomes a history of art that begins with the purely sensuous fire worship of the Mazdaists, the sun rituals of Zoroastrians and the monuments of ancient Egypt, and ends after Goethe's high poetry in an undecidable conclusion, as The Romantic Arts reaches a form of humor described as 'a sensitive abandonment of the heart in the object'; a 'fugitive Concept'[14] perhaps, a promise of an ideal beauty that would be able to transcend art itself. In order to truly become absolute Concept, the rational word of reconciliation must leave behind both the aesthetics and the revealed religion that negates it; the Concept must neither be sensuous nor hidden away in theological secrecy. Eventually, the absolute form of expression will emerge as the dialectical movement in grammar. Thus, contrary to the omitted reconciliation scene in

Genet, Hegel's *Aufhebung* must be spoken, clearly but disembodiedly, for only an absolute mode of articulation can express absolute knowledge.

* * *

In this book, the analysis of Hegel is placed in the middle, like a spinal cord. The object under analysis there is the development of *Aufhebung*. By tracing it from Hegel's earliest writings on theology and up to the *Science of Logic*, it will be shown that the formation of *Aufhebung* depends on the ability of light to gain intelligible form. As light, in Hegel's terms, is understood to be the most natural element of mediation, light is also the primal means of transition from the Christian word of reconciliation to the responsibility of aesthetics. In my second epigraph, Derrida indicates that light in intelligible form, as writing, constitutes a beginning, an opening to philosophy. To commence a meditation on the writing of light while reflecting on the self-portrait of dialectical representation is, quite literally, what this book will attempt to do.

This meditation will recognize two distinct developments of dialectics after Hegel: Benjamin's historical materialism and Derrida's deconstruction of speculative dialectics, each one with concepts of photography in direct relation to his light-writing. These two philosophical bodies will flank the book's middle section on Hegel. At the beginning, then, are six chapters devoted to Benjamin's development of dialectics. His responsibility for history is no less dialectical than Hegel's, but it is far less completing in its account: while the wounds of Hegel's 'Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind',[15] such scars are of great importance to Benjamin. In an unfinished methodological foreword to his book on the French poet Charles Baudelaire, he wrote, 'The tradition of Baudelaire's works is a very brief one, but it already bears historical scars which must be of interest to critical observers.'[16] Benjamin's resistance against accumulative knowledge and progressive history gained methodological force from a dialectics that, comparable to photography, produces images across, rather than along, the flow of continuous time. These dialectical images result from an act of redemption that is equally absolute as is reconciliation in Hegel, but neither as final nor as Christian.

Photography as a concept emerged slowly in Benjamin's writings, eventually modelling both the method and mode of expression of dialectics at a standstill. Though in close rapport with Hegel's *Aufhebung*, photography sets other limits for what is dialectically knowable. The notion developed slowly, and, it seems, in parallel with ongoing methodological

reconstructions. To show this double development of methodology and concept, Benjamin's writings will be analyzed in a specific order. The first chapter deals with his correspondence with Theodor Adorno, then follow chapters on his work on Marcel Proust, Surrealism, *The Arcades Project*, Charles Baudelaire, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and finally, an analysis of the short essay 'On the Concept of History.'

After the chapters on Hegel, another dialectics unfolds with its own distinct concept of photography. This is the dialectics developed in Jacques Derrida's seminal work *Glas* from 1974. Here a dialectical concept of photography emerges between Hegel's Natural Religion and Genet's autobiographical misreminiscences. Photography, to Genet, reveals a historical bifurcation of a past experienced event as it separates into, on the one hand, a literary mode of expression, and on the other, the remembrance of it. The photographic effect appears most dramatically when the differentiation of expression and memory models the ethical self-determination of a subject. Photography is particularly valued in Genet for its capacity to produce and preserve such an irreducible difference in the constitution of identity.

Throughout this investigation of dialectical systems, we encounter photography as the mode of expression whereby selfhood is constituted. In fact, the moment of constituting an absolute self for dialectics is what links photography to the aesthetics of reconciliation, or redemption. But photography is also a variable term, as there are at least three different processes of dialectical self-conception and not just one. This conflicting conceptualization of photography brings at least two consequences for the reader. The first concerns methodology.

My readings and analyses follow the messianic materialism of Benjamin, the speculative dialectics of Hegel, and Derrida's deconstruction, but in the course of its own pursuit, the study subjects to none of them. My method of investigation is designed strictly for the task at hand: to pry into dialectics and discover concepts for the founding relations that appear in two different modes of dialectical thought after Hegel. As these modes consistently evoke light-writing at the moment of determining their own being, I make of photography a relational constant. Photography is a constant in the sense of a pivot, or an axis, from where the being of dialectical expression is determined. But it is not itself a determinable being, as it conditions the expressive conception of selfhood in different constructions of self-determination. Because photography holds this position, it belongs to it that dialectics cannot fully determine it, although it belongs exclusively to dialectics. Photography, I will argue, carries a difference that separates, and manages to keep

separated, distinct modes of dialectic thinking. My methodology can therefore not be synthetically dialectical. Rather, it determines and preserves a dialectical auto-mutation: it is an iterative reading of dialectical consistencies in pursuit of differentiating concepts.

During extensive parts of the text – especially while discussing Hegel – the word photography will not be mentioned. This is not because I am speaking of something else, but because as a relational constant, photography is less present to itself than to the series of conceptual threads that are formed around it. These series of concepts link together according to each dialectics' particular mode of determination. It is these series that constitute the materials of my reading. I call the determined modality of a system's self-determination its consistency, and I recognize that the variations on photography depend on their plurality. But as photography is also a constant, it becomes possible to investigate each one by following the conceptual threads that form around it, analyzing which concepts link together in what kinds of relations. While comparing the three dialectics, a majority of concepts may appear to be identical, merely relating differently to each other in individual structures. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that a concept is strictly speaking no longer the same when its relationship to other concepts is altered. The method of this study is primarily designed to map clusters of concepts pertaining to the relational constant photography.

The second consequence of thinking photography in this way is that the book is not about photography, neither as a technology, nor as a cultural practice, nor as an art form. It could not be. Neither is it about photographers, photographs, or the aesthetics of photography. However, as a book about photographic constitutions of dialectical self-determination, it may perhaps still be of interest for theoretical developments of the history and the aesthetics of photography. A photographic presence at the moment of dialectical self-determination might explain why photography has caused so much difficulty with regard to defining its own 'ontology' or mode of presentation. Hypothetically, the being of photography and its particular image-form is not definable by any ontological mode of determination that subjects to the dialectical Concept and its notorious maelstrom. Hence, the ontological character of the photographic image cannot be absolutely determined; we cannot claim that it has an essential being, or, conversely, that it is pure simulacra, or that it is only determinable from social or political contexts outside itself.

This negative hypothesis alienates me from both the so-called formalist tradition and the post-modern ontology of photography

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Preface

as defined and distinguished in the theoretical survey in Geoffrey Batchen's *Burning with Desire*.[17] As opposed to the post-modern view, my hypothesis insists on using the term 'photography' in the singular sense, while, contrary to the formalist tradition, it will not define a photographic essence or some unique and necessary properties. Photography as a relational constant is not an essence, neither of dialectics nor of photographic practices. It does not even allow an essence to be determined for itself as a concept. As a singularity at the moment of dialectical self-determination, photography falls outside both of Batchen's two lines of aesthetic theory and eludes furthermore the analytical reach of his own archaeology. But the analysis is not, therefore, without precedence.

Much important work in this field was done in the 1980s, and a few milestones ought to be mentioned. In 1982 Victor Burgin's article 'Looking at Photographs' appeared in the anthology *Thinking Photography*, and it concluded with the following remarks:

> Photography is one signifying system among others in society which produces the ideological subject in the same movement in which they 'communicate' their ostensible 'contents.' It is therefore important that photography theory take account of the production of this subject as the complex totality of its determinations are nuanced and constrained in their passage through and across photographs.[18]

Burgin's description of the productive power of photography is worth a closer look: while photography produces ordinary representations, it also engages with a number of other modes of communication to produce a new ideological subject. It means that photography is not merely a tool in the hands of a producer or a user, but that it produces new subjective faculties. Photography mediates determinations in two ways at once: it produces new images for a subject, but also a new subject for the images. The last sentence in the quotation above expresses a dialectical relation between, on one hand, photography as the mediation of a subject's ideologically invested determinations, and on the other hand, photography as the producer of the same determinations. As Burgin identifies the passage of mediation as the source of dialectical production, his analysis points toward the moment of dialectical self-determination, which is what we intend to pursue here.

Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser has suggested a wholly different approach. In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* from 1983 he distinguishes between three abstraction levels of the human relationship with

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