

Introduction

Hegel in Our World

In a recent best-seller entitled *The Grand Design*, the authors Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow confidently proclaim on the first page that philosophy is “dead.” Why? They say it has not kept up with the latest scientific developments. In the next few pages, they offer what they take to be a number of “radical” ideas: that the universe does not have “an independent existence,” that knowledge of the world is not just derived from “direct observation” through our senses, that we can construct various “models” of reality, that there is no single theory but only a collection of overlapping theories that can explain “everything,” and that our presence “selects” which universes are compatible with our existence.¹

Ironically, every single one of these “radical” ideas is over 200 years old and was expressed in the work of various philosophers, most notably in that of Hegel. What prevents us from seeing this – and what tempts us into viewing old ideas as “radical” – is a tendency to remain unfamiliar with his thought, or to view it as defunct and superseded. Perhaps we have fallen too complacently into the habit of affirming that certain kinds of thinking or certain figures are “dead.” Over a decade ago, both conservatives and liberals were confidently proclaiming that Marx was dead, though many phenomena in recent history – such as the global spread of capitalism and the widening gap between the world’s rich and poor – have belied this claim. And over a century ago, thinkers were proudly proclaiming that “God is dead” – a statement usually attributed to Nietzsche but which can be traced to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. Indeed, it has long been fashionable in our postmodern and poststructuralist world to view Hegel as dead. But, in our century, it has become clearer than ever that each of these “deaths” – of Hegel, Marx, and God – is

¹ Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam, 2012), pp. 5–9.

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fraught with problems. If, as Sylvia Plath said, dying is an art, then these three have done it exceptionally well. Their ghosts, if you will, continue to speak and to shape both our thought and our world. This book will be concerned primarily not with Marx, but with the thinker who made him possible; not with God, but with the thinker who first proclaimed both his death and his reincarnated possibility: Hegel.

Our world is deeply pervaded by Hegelian thinking, but most people – having avoided Hegel’s works – are simply unaware of what we owe to him. When we say, for example, that we need to look at the whole picture, or that we can’t divorce something from its context, or that everything is related, or when we talk of the movement of history, or say that science moves through higher stages, or that religion and philosophy take different paths toward the same truths, or that our identity is shaped by our world and vice versa, or that we create ourselves through our work, or that our rights and our very subjectivity are born in mutual recognition, or that reality lies deeper than appearances, or that the concept of God is somehow a projection of human subjectivity, or even when we make ethnocentric pronouncements about the superiority of our culture – in all these cases we are somehow repeating and reaffirming Hegelian insights.

A number of literary theorists have expressed this unacknowledged influence very well. The American critic Paul de Man states, “Whether we know it, or like it, or not, most of us are Hegelians ... Few thinkers have so many disciples who never read a word of their master’s writings.”² Stuart Barnett also talks of an “invisible yet rampant Hegelianism.”³ Jacques Derrida called Hegel the “last philosopher of the book and the first philosopher of writing.” For Derrida, logocentrism, the reliance of language and thought upon reference to a stabilizing transcendent reality, begins with the Bible and reaches its climax in Hegel. Derrida’s statement implies that the structure of Hegel’s dialectic is the enabling condition of its own supersession. It is a dialectic that can lead to Sartre or collapse into Nietzsche. From a Marxist viewpoint, Hegel is among other things the philosopher of the French Revolution, his system being the supreme articulation of bourgeois political ascendancy in Europe.

The difficulty of escaping Hegel’s influence has been aptly registered by Michel Foucault’s comment that “our age, whether through logic or

² Paul de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s ‘Aesthetics,’” *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1982), 763.

³ Stuart Barnett, “Introduction” in *Hegel after Derrida*, ed. Stuart Barnett (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 23.

epistemology, whether through Marx or through Nietzsche, is attempting to flee Hegel ... But truly to escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him ... We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us.”⁴ And, according to Alexandre Kojève (who himself exerted a profound influence on Hegel’s reception by literary theorists in France), “Hegel’s discourse exhausts *all* the *possibilities* of thought. One cannot bring up any discourse in opposition to him which would not already be a part of his own discourse.”⁵ In a similar vein, William Desmond states that “Hegel strangely is both a Hegelian and a post-Hegelian philosopher,” viewed as both panlogist and irrationalist, religious and atheist, foundationalist and deconstructionist, a thinker of identity and also of difference.⁶ In short, whatever our own niche in the humanities, we continue to mirror Hegel’s blinding centrality to our world. We are compelled to acknowledge the historical summarizing power of Hegel as well as the seemingly limitless shadow cast by his thought over our own endeavors.

Hegel’s Significance in Modern Thought

Why is it that Hegel occupies such a central position in modern Western thought? Why do his ideas continue to exert such a profound influence across a broad array of disciplines? Why do some people swear by him while many others swear *at* him?⁷ To answer these questions, we need to understand the historical context in which Hegel’s thinking was forged. Conceived in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789, Hegel’s vast philosophical system represents the most articulate expression of a bourgeois worldview. In the early nineteenth century the bourgeoisie was a revolutionary class, attempting to wrest political power from the feudal aristocracy. Its success transformed the entire structure of European (and American) society, laying the political, economic, and cultural groundwork of the entire modern Western world. The old

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 235.

⁵ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 194.

⁶ William Desmond, “Introd.,” *Hegel and his Critics: Philosophy in the Aftermath of Hegel*, ed. William Desmond (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. viii–x.

⁷ Hegel’s philosophy has been called a “totalitarianism of reason,” Ernst Behler, “Introduction,” in G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline and Critical Writings* (New York: Continuum, 1990), p. xi. Karl Popper also sees Hegel as the prelude to modern totalitarianism.

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Christian-feudal state, a hierarchy based on divine authority, monarchy, and a hereditary aristocracy, was sustained by an ethic of obedience, loyalty, and honor. Bourgeois hegemony displaced this feudal structure with its own political framework and values. The new political ideals were democracy, equality, individualism (as expressed primarily in property rights), freedom of trade and of profit-making (which had been severely restricted under feudalism).

Hegel brings together the two broad movements that express this transition from a feudal world to a bourgeois society. The first is the Enlightenment, whose main streams were materialism, rationalism, and empiricism, all of which found institutionalized expression in the growth of science, technology, and industry. The other movement, Romanticism, reacted against the divisive, atomistic, and disintegrative tendencies of Enlightenment reason. Romanticism aimed to see the world as a totality and to restore a vision of unity between the individual and nature, individual and society, individual and God. In synthesizing these two tendencies, Hegel made considerable use of Kant's philosophy, which itself proved an agent of historical mediation between Enlightenment thought and the growth of movements such as Romanticism in the nineteenth century. Hence Hegel's system encapsulates the entire movement of modern Western philosophy, from the Enlightenment through Romanticism, stressing the supreme value of reason as well as the need for a totalizing vision of the world and human history.

In turn, Hegel's system exerted a profound and seminal influence on many major streams of subsequent Western thought. These include the Anglo-American idealism of the later nineteenth century, Marxism, and historicism, as well as the thought of many twentieth-century theorists ranging from feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva to so-called poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Moreover, many systems of thought arose in direct reaction against Hegel. These included major figures in the existentialist tradition such as Kierkegaard and Sartre; the tradition of heterological thinkers from Schopenhauer through Nietzsche to Bataille; the sociological positivism of Comte, Durkheim, and Herbert Spencer; the realism advanced in the earlier works of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore; and the analytic philosophies and various brands of empiricism and logical positivism which survived through the twentieth century.

In their diverse ways, many of these modes of thought – including many branches of literary theory – rejected the notions of totality, of historical progress, the idea that things in the world were somehow

essentially related, and the notion of reason itself. As noted earlier, a widespread reaction against Hegel's thought came in the form of positivism, a generally conservative philosophy which held that the world as it is given, the world that is immediately presented to us – by our own senses, by tradition, by the past, by the history of feudalism – is the only reality we can know. As Theodore Adorno characterized it, Hegel's philosophy was a "philosophy of the negative," which attempted to challenge the world as merely given and to refashion both the world and human subjectivity in the (then) revolutionary light of bourgeois rationality. While many literary theories have embraced this "negative" potential, they have sharply criticized the notion of rationality as well as Hegel's Eurocentrism and masculinism. But, as will be argued in this book, their central critical instrument is derived from Hegel himself – the dialectic as arrested in its second or "negative" phase. We can see, then, that most modern European systems of thought arose as modifications of, or reactions against, Hegel's dialectic. Hegel has enabled our worlds of thought on many levels, even those that are vehemently opposed to him.

Hegel and Liberal Humanism

In order to grasp Hegel's impact on literary theory, we need to situate this impact within the broader context of liberal humanism. Hegel is *the* philosopher of liberal humanism. This has been recognized by scholars of Hegel such as J. N. Findlay, as well as by Marxist commentators such as Lukács.⁸ Ripalda sees Hegel's entire life as a "struggle to reach an understanding of capital."⁹ Instructively, Teshale Tibebu, whose primary concern is with Hegel's connections to race and imperialism, sees Hegel's social philosophy as a "reflection of the capitalist world system."¹⁰ And Adorno sees Hegel as a thinker who ascertained the "limits of bourgeois society" but who, as a "bourgeois idealist," was unable to resolve the contradictions of that society (TS, 80).¹¹ In his massively intricate study *The Young Hegel*, Georg Lukács states that Hegel aims "to grasp the true inner

⁸ J. N. Findlay explicitly refers to Hegel as "The Philosopher of ... Liberal Humanism" in his *Hegel: A Re-examination* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 354.

⁹ José María Ripalda, *The Divided Nation: The Roots of a Bourgeois Thinker, G.W.F. Hegel* (Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1977), p. 163.

¹⁰ Teshale Tibebu, *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), p. 326. Hereafter cited as HTW.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. S.W. Nicholson (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1993), p. 80. Hereafter cited as TS.

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structure, the real motive forces of the present and of capitalism and to define the dialectic of its movement ... His preoccupation with this theme in fact determines the structure of his system and the particular character of the dialectic as well as the greatness of his achievement.”¹² Hegel, as we shall see in the next chapters, is the philosopher *par excellence* who expressed the contradictions of capitalist society. Marx acknowledged as much when he stated that Hegel’s standpoint was that of “modern political economy.”

Having said all this, we do perhaps need to ask: What is liberal humanism? Generally, liberal humanism might be described as the spectrum of philosophical and political orientations that emerge from, express, shape, and justify the capitalist economic system. What is the core of these orientations, of the liberal humanist worldview? The commonly held perception is that liberal humanism embraces a fixed and static view of identity, of the human subject, that it believes in an objective, independent world, and that language is an instrument that represents this independent reality.¹³ This is what I have called the “myth” of liberal humanism.¹⁴ This myth has a foundational importance for much literary theory, which has to a certain extent come to rely on this “straw person,” attacking the notions of fixed identity, etc. However, it’s simply not true that these notions are principles of bourgeois thought. Rather, they are Medieval notions that go back to Plato and Aristotle, and they were challenged even in Plato’s later dialogues, in the Neoplatonic tradition, and in the writings of Aquinas.

The bourgeois thinkers of the Enlightenment were radical precisely because they *challenged* these notions. They undermined, for example, the idea of a stable human self or ego. Locke regarded the self as a *tabula*

¹² Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1975), p. xxvii. Hereafter cited as YH.

¹³ In his discussion of liberal humanism, Peter Barry rehearses some of these characterizations in a book which otherwise, I think, is an excellent introduction to theory for undergraduate students. Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (1995; rpt. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 13–21. Barry states that liberal humanism became current in the 1970s, embodying “the kind of criticism which held sway before theory” (p. 3). He tends to over-identify liberal humanism with New Criticism and its focus on the “words on the page.” But, of course, liberal humanism was far broader, and it would be more feasible to think of the New Criticism as merely one of its expressions. Barry does, however, valuably point to one significant feature of “literary” liberal humanism, viz., its characteristic refusal to articulate its positions, as with F. R. Leavis’s refusal to spell out his critical principles (p. 16). One might also cite Arnold and his refusal to define great literature except by ostensive definition, by pointing to examples or “touchstones.”

¹⁴ See M. A. R. Habib *Modern Literary Theory and Criticism: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 225–32.

rasa or blank slate, which acquires character only as experience writes upon it. Hume saw the self as a convention. Kant viewed it as a necessary presupposition for the coherence of our experience. Hegel conceived it as a product of historical forces and reciprocal interaction with other selves. The only stable subject in bourgeois thought is that presupposed by bourgeois economics, as an abstract unit of economic value, competition, production, and consumption. All these philosophers strongly impugn the Aristotelian notion of “substance” as the underlying reality of identity and the world (Kant even makes substance one of the subjective categories *through* which we view the world); they challenge the notion of essence, which Locke effectively relocates from reality to language. In fact, long before Saussure, Locke recognized the arbitrariness of the sign.¹⁵ Equally, the major philosophers of the bourgeois Enlightenment wished to reject any transcendent basis for political sovereignty, morality, or for their formulations of identity, subjectivity, and the external world. They even rejected the notion of “reality” as grounded in any extra-human basis: they saw it as a projection of the human mind, of human categories of understanding, and of human language.¹⁶

We can certainly say that liberal humanism was a product of the mainstream philosophies of the bourgeois Enlightenment, such as rationalism, empiricism, and utilitarianism. The economic principles of bourgeois ideology, such as rationality, *laissez-faire* economics and free competition, were formulated by the classical economists Adam Smith, Jean-Baptiste Say, and David Ricardo. The political principles of democracy, individual rights, and constitutional government were expressed by figures such as Rousseau, John Locke, and Thomas Paine. The imperial ideology and mission not only to conquer other parts of the world for their economic resources but to submit them also to the civilizing effects of

¹⁵ Indeed, in his groundbreaking study of Locke, William Walker presents this philosopher as much more complex than conventional accounts suggest, as a “proto-Nietzschean” thinker who enlists various forms of figural representation when dealing with the mind and its ideas, as well as in his treatment of history and the political state. In *Locke, Literary Criticism, and Philosophy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 156–88.

¹⁶ In their now classic study of liberal humanism, Wilson H. Coates and Hayden V. White saw the secular humanism of the Renaissance as articulating “a new theory of civilization,” based on an integrated program of educational reform. Along with Protestant Christianity and modern science, this eventually impelled the aim of modern liberal humanism as a “liberation from all transcendentalists aspiration.” Hence Western intellectual history since the early modern period was viewed as the rise of liberal humanism which, impelled in particular by science and the Enlightenment, has sought religious, political, and economic freedom. In *The Emergence of Liberal Humanism: An Intellectual History of Western Europe: Volume I* (London and New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 4–5.

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Western literature and culture were expressed by figures such as Thomas Babington Macaulay, and many politicians, philosophers and scientists. All of these tendencies, as refracted partly through the philosophy of Kant, achieve a kind of synthesis in the philosophy of Hegel, the supreme expression of bourgeois thought, built on the philosophical principles of the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, uniting the divergent modes of Enlightenment thought such as rationalism and empiricism, and combining these with a Romantic emphasis on totality and the unity of subject and object, all integrated into a Eurocentric notion of historical progress.

However, the foregoing tendencies – toward rationalism, empiricism, scientism (an inordinate aspiration to scientific status) – yield an incomplete picture. For, when we turn to what has been viewed as liberal humanism in the registers of literature and literary criticism, we find another, almost *opposed*, set of values, as enshrined saliently in the work of Matthew Arnold, Irving Babbitt, and F. R. Leavis.¹⁷ Most generally, we find an anti-theoretical and even anti-rationalist impulse, sometimes grounded on a mystical or theological basis. We find an insistence on a loosely empirical method, on “practical” criticism, which shies away from broad conceptual or historical schemes.¹⁸ We often find a belief in “human nature” as something stable and permanent, as well as a belief in universal and timeless truth. We find a commitment to the past or to “tradition.” This commitment often embodies a desire to return – as with Edmund Burke and other opponents of bourgeois reform – to an alleged pre-bourgeois harmony and stability, resting on permanent values. And we find an insistence on the moral and civilizing nature of literature, viewed as a broad education in sensibility and (a redefined) citizenship. “Literary” liberal humanism might be viewed as an afterthought of liberal bourgeois humanism, a concerted attempt of bourgeois humanism to correct itself, to counteract or at least to temper its own most mechanizing and spiritually debilitating tendencies and excesses.

Hence, what we call liberal humanism has included *both* formalism and historicism, both scientism and moralism, both rationalism and

¹⁷ See also Terry Eagleton’s comment that “The impotence of liberal humanism is a symptom of its essentially contradictory relationship to modern capitalism. For although it forms part of the ‘official’ ideology of such society, and the ‘humanities’ exist to reproduce it, the social order within which it exists has in one sense very little time for it at all.” In *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983; rpt. London and Minneapolis: Blackwell/University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 174.

¹⁸ For a fascinating discussion of these issues, see John Schad’s “Epilogue” in *life. after. theory*, eds. Michael Payne and John Schad (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 168–89.

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empiricism, both objectivism and subjectivism. Again, the commonly held view of liberal humanism – as harboring fixed notions of identity, the human subject, an independent external world, and as affirming that language represents reality – is a myth. This myth of liberal humanism sets up a straw person, applicable, if at all, only to its reactive literary variant. It is important to realize, however, that the liberal humanist desire in literary and artistic spheres to reverse or react against or harmonize the foregoing “philistine” tendencies of bourgeois thought is not something haphazard but a process so consistent and continuous that it emerges as a structural phenomenon, this internal contradiction – between bourgeois thought and the humanistic modes of its subversion – being embodied in the Hegelian dialectic.

Indeed, two important features of liberal humanism are worth noting: first, that it has always been changing.¹⁹ In fact, it could be argued that its very essence is change: not that of total transformation but of self-enlargement and sublation or continual expansion to include and assimilate what is currently external to it. The second feature is its capacity to contain contradictions; as Walt Whitman might say, it is large and contains multitudes. For example, the liberal humanism of each of the Enlightenment philosophers is different from that of the others as well as from that of Matthew Arnold or Irving Babbitt. In this sense, the very essence of liberal-humanist thought is nonidentity or an essential fluidity of identity, identity as a process, or even a refusal of identity. Hegel recognized that bourgeois ideals embrace many seemingly contradictory movements, and his thought both expresses these contradictions and situates or annuls or sublates them within a larger ethical scheme.

¹⁹ Catherine Belsey usefully defines liberal humanism as “the ruling assumptions, values and meanings of the modern epoch. Liberal humanism, laying claim to be both natural and universal, was produced in the interests of the bourgeois class which came to power in the second half of the seventeenth century.” She acknowledges that liberal humanism “is not an unchanging, homogeneous, unified essence,” and that it has been sustained by “often contradictory ... discourses and institutions.” She states that the common feature of liberal humanism is a commitment to the “unified subject” as “the free, unconstrained author of meaning and action, the origin of history.” But this reading of the past as “the triumphant march of progress,” she says, is now being challenged as it emerges more clearly that the liberal-humanist subject was “constructed in conflict and contradiction – with conflicting and contradictory consequences.” *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1985; rpt. London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 7–9. On the other hand, Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller shrewdly observe that much theory has a reductive conception of humanism as the “distinctive intellectual mode of capitalism,” grounded on two features, an atomistic view of the self and a commitment to evaluative discourse on both moral and aesthetic planes. In *Re-Thinking Theory: A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1–9.

Hence, the commonly cited accomplishments of much literary theory – the critique of essentialism, the discrediting of correspondence theories of truth and meaning, the deconstruction of identity, the exhibition of the social and historical nature of subjectivity and objectivity, the emphasis on the constitutive role of language in that construction – had already been conducted *within* bourgeois thought, in the pages of Locke, Hume, Kant, and especially Hegel. They had also been conducted in the alternative or “heterological” streams of thought, from Schopenhauer through Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Heidegger, which had explicitly challenged the principles of the bourgeois Enlightenment.²⁰ Again, there is a continuity and common ground between liberal bourgeois thought and the channels of its own subversion – one of which, significantly, has been the vastly rich tributary of literary theory.

Indeed, literary theory in nearly all its modes involves a “negative,” rather Hegelian, endeavor to break down the Aristotelian notion of identity at various levels and in numerous contexts, ranging from gender and race through psychoanalytic notions to subjectivity, authorship, and textuality. The notion of identity is closely tied to the Aristotelian conception of substance or essence as the underlying reality of things. For example, we might want to question the idea that the term “man” or “woman” has an intrinsic identity. This questioning of identity opens up a number of other insights: First, the identity of the world as a series of objects is not separate from our own identity as subjects; we create the world just as it creates us. Second, subjectivity is inherently intersubjective; it can be created only in interaction with other subjects, just as objects themselves exist not in isolation but with a broad set of relations. Third, the identity of both subjects and objects, since it is necessarily

²⁰ The foregoing account is intended only as a sketch of the main tendencies of liberal humanism, which is a vast subject in itself, the details of whose manifold developments lie beyond the scope of this book. Needless to say, there are many political and sociological studies that document the various modulations and fragmentations of liberalism in particular circumstances. For example, in a British post-World War I context, liberalism was bifurcated into two streams, left and centrist, devoted in various degrees to individual liberty, private property, social justice, and welfare. Liberal theorists such as Leonard Hobhouse in his *The Metaphysical Theory of the State* (1918) and J. A. Hobson in his *Democracy After the War* (1917) attacked the neo-Hegelian idealists such as Bernard Bosanquet and, to a lesser extent, T.H. Green. In an atmosphere of anti-German sentiment, British liberals rejected the “false and wicked doctrine,” deriving from Hegel, of the State as the neutral agent of a rational society. They stressed the rights – and independence – of the individual as against what they saw as the coercive power of the Hegelian State, which they saw as subsuming individual subjectivity and as identifying freedom with law. The general point here is that, in such a context, Hegel’s influence was viewed as a pernicious threat to liberalism, not an expression of it. Michael Freedon, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought 1914–1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 4–37.