Stones, Screens, and Spirits:
Opacity and Transparency in Hegel and Beyond

There are always stones, hard and heavy, lying about separate from one another. Then we put them together into buildings. For Hegel, architecture is a curious art. It stands at the beginning of his hierarchy of the arts, the least spiritual, yet with its own distinctive mission. The other arts, in various ways and to various degrees, create objects whose materiality is permeated with meaning internal to the object. As we ascend the hierarchy of the arts the artworks become increasingly like organisms with their own internal teleology. But the unifying teleology of an architectural artwork is external. The meaning (purpose, telos) of the art work is found in the community and activity it houses and serves. For Hegel a clear sign of this is the Greek temple, where wonderfully wrought architecture houses the god within. The "function" of the architecture is found in the statue inside and the communal ceremonies outside the temple. The architecture does not present itself as a meaningful object for itself, as do the other arts, because the building's self is outside itself, in the community's activity. Furthermore, in this serving, architecture works with brute matter at its most external: heavy and extended, and shown as such. The details of Greek temple and classical architecture all express aspects of heaviness and support and load.

Architecture never overcomes the one-thing-after-and-outside-another of brute heavy matter. The community's place is assembled from materials without intrinsic connection, which are arranged by but never fully penetrated by function and meaning. Stones and bricks get put together for an outside meaning that uses the stones' hard mutual externality to serve a function beyond them. Spirit's higher transparent self-positing and self-exposition winds around or over this hard stone.

I want to discuss how the external endures amid that self-transparency, and what happens to Hegel's strategies today.

Because of its submission to "external" meaning and activity, and because it is manipulating matter at its most external, architecture earns its position at the beginning of the arts. Nonetheless architecture enacts something essential about spirit; otherwise it wouldn't be there at all. Architecture presents spirit's dependence on and location within "external" opaque matter.

Amid those heavy stones and bricks, spirit comes to a more concrete and full awareness of itself as the process of its own self-positing. Art and spirit move on from the lack of unity in symbolic art, of which architecture is the prime example, to the balances of classical art, of which sculpture is the prime example, to the transcendences of romantic art, of which music and poetry are the prime examples.

Hegel finds exciting architecture in the romantic sphere of art, but by that point he sees art as engaged in projects that are more than architecture can do. Romantic architecture is on the verge of transcending the status of architecture, not towards sculpture, the next art in the hierarchy, but towards a kind of self-awareness that is not art at all, but rather is found in religion and philosophy. By the end of romantic art Hegel proclaims that art can no longer serve as an adequate vehicle of our self-awareness. At that end spirit is more transparent to itself in more complex self-motions than can be expressed in material shapes and images. Spirit is aware of itself as a self-knowing and self-positing awareness of itself. (Hegel's *Encyclopedia* ends by quoting Aristotle's *noesis noeseos*.)

For Hegel, philosophy re-places art. It places art within a process and a development that art cannot com-prehend, cannot hold together. Philosophy understands and exposes the movement that is spirit's being, and that being is the movement of exposure of itself to itself.

Yet even in that triumphant self-coincidence, the princess on her way to the marriage of true minds must still find a pea (or a stone) under her mattress -- and she has to sleep. The architectural moment and the confrontation/use of brute externality still endures.

This is where critics of Hegel gather, accusing him of unholy penetrations and unrealistic transparencies.

We should be careful here to distinguish Hegel from another more familiar approach to externality and opacity. This approach is similar to that of the Greek atomists, who build the cosmos from a set of atoms whose shapes are outside any explanation and function as given starting points for all explanations of physical phenomena. We are more familiar with this strategy in its empiricist and epistemological guise: there are given perceptual contents on whose basis is erected a massive structure of language and theory. That structure can become amazingly self-transparent, with meta-languages and self-analyses and awarenesses of the creative acts and social conventions involved. It can become so transparent because what it does is to create forms for manipulating its external empirical content. And our activities that create and manipulate such forms and systems can themselves be analyzed in still further formal ways.

This model we find familiar and appealing. It was the backbone of early 20th century analytic philosophy from the logical positivists on. Hegel can be read in a related way. Then he is seen as providing a more elaborated self-knowledge of the form of our conceptualizing activities. On this reading, he gives us a formal analysis of the production of ontologies and social grammars.

Yet, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel made one of the strongest critiques of the notion of given-content versus formal-concepts. And in his logic Hegel argues that there is no external point of view from which we might talk about the relation of the system to some external reality. There are no conceptual dualities -- such as form/content -- which can be used to surround or locate the process of meaning in language and thought. Any duality that might be proposed to describe a limit around the process of meaning will be found to be already overreached by that process. The idea that there is an 'outside' to the process of meaning is just the Kantian ghost of the old empiricist model. His arguments connect backwards to Kant and forwards to Quine and Sellars and Davidson's critiques of the empiricist model.

But if Hegel is not erecting some meta-analyzable formal structure on top of an empiricist base of given data, what is he doing? He can look like thinkers such as Davidson or Rorty for whom there can be no sharp distinction between conceptual form and given content. On such a reading, Hegel gives us a story about historical a prioris and languages, together with what many take to be dubious claims about historical necessity, progress, and finality in the progression of languages.

Though this reading avoids attributing to him the notion of raw data, it does not do justice to the ways in which he differs from Davidson or Kuhn or Foucault. That is, Hegel does write a logic that claims to be providing something 'absolute' -- thought knowing itself, in the self-transparency and self-coincidence of spirit to itself.

It can appear that Hegel's logic is just a higher level formal analysis, and Hegel himself sometimes talks that way. But we should understand the difference between formal and dialectical analysis. What Hegel offers is awareness of logical moments and their movements. This is not quite the same as presenting the form of a process. Involved here is his distinction between understanding and reason.

A form/content or form/process distinction is made by the understanding, as a fixed duality. The distinction is (usually) made from an outside analytic point of view (though Kant suggests how to avoid that). Form is knowable as separate from content. But spirit's moments are not knowable separately. Spirit or the logic's moments are not fixed poles but are self-transforming in their relation to one another. Forms have content, moments have motion.

The absolute idea at the end of the logic describes the motion of its highest moments in terms of the same moments themselves. The final moments of revealed by the analysis, and the "form" of their motion, are the same.

> Die Methode ist auf diese Weise nicht äußerliche Form, sondern die Seele und der Begriff des Inhalts, von welchem sie nur unterschieden ist,

insofern die Momente des Begriffs auch an ihnen selbst in ihrer Bestimmtheit dazu kommen, als die Totalität des Begriffs zu erscheinen. Indem diese Bestimmtheit oder der Inhalt sich mit der Form zur Idee zurückführt, so stellt sich diese als systematische Totalität dar, welche nur Eine Idee ist, deren besondere Momente ebensowohl an sich dieselbe sind als durch die Dialektik des Begriffs das einfache Fürsichsein der Idee hervorbringen. -- Die Wissenschaft schließt auf diese Weise damit, den Begriff ihrer selbst zu fassen, als der reinen Idee, für welche die Idee ist. (E 243) (p. 196/)

So, if the external is not content to spirit's form, is it then a moment in spirit's coming to itself? The answer has to be: Yes and No. That there are spatial objects is a moment, and for Hegel the large scale forms of the world express moments. But this or that stone or type of stone is not a moment in the system.

What is at stake here is the relation between Hegel's logic and his philosophy of nature and spirit.

The logic presents the self-development of pure thought, the motion of the moments of what it means to be and to be fully. The other parts of the system further determine those moments and find them in various types and stages in nature and spirit.

That spreadoutness of the moments often resembles the direct reading of ontological conditions into empirical categories that Hegel worried about in Schelling's philosophy of nature. While Hegel has a much larger repertory of forms to notice, and a larger area for sheerly contingent detail, the underlying claim is similar, that the generative ontological moments must be expressed separately in the details of reality, in both space and, more worrisomely, in time.

(Although Hegel speaks of being "*in den reinen Gedanken eingeschlossen*" as "*in die Subjectivität eingeschlossen*," he says in the same passage that "*Diese Bestimmung ist aber nicht ein Gewordenseyn und Uebergang, wie, nach*

oben, der subjective Begriff in seiner Totalität zur Objectivität, auch der subjective Zweck zum Leben wird." (WL 253)

Those stones are mutually exterior to one another. And they are opaque. Their "interior" cannot be penetrated. But, for Hegel, this is because have no interior. They have no more to offer than brute spatial externality. They are opaque not because they are hiding anything, but precisely because they have nothing to hide.

Now, science can analyze the stones, and Hegel tries to show in his philosophy of nature that such analysis will discover chemical components and relations that exemplify and concretize various logical categories that are logically necessary moments of what it means to be real. Nature is the arena where the logical moments are spread out in mutually external ways, though that externality begins to weaken in the "higher" organizations of natural objects.

So that there are spatial objects is a moment, and for Hegel the large scale forms of the world express moments. But this or that stone or type of stone is not.

Around the architectural stones and the contingencies of nature rises the self-awareness of spirit. It may seem, at this point, that the advance of spirit would consist in breaking down externality and bringing everything into internal relations and subjective presence. But that reading distorts what Hegel is up to. Put in his terms, the reading makes it seem that the goal of the dialectic is to have everything *für sich*. But the third stage of the dialectic is *an und für sich*, with a return to immediacy.

Hegel doesn't want a total transparency of spirit and world. Spirit should be dialectical, not simply dominant, in relation to nature and otherness. Externality and brute matter are needed for the internality of spirit and logic to become 'real' -- to come to itself, as in the triple syllogism. Blunt matter offers a kind of otherness that needs to be expressed, not transformed into more intimate relations. **Architecture shows that dimension of the world; to**

make it totally transparent would be, paradoxically, to diminish spirit's awareness of its own nature and situation.

Before going on, we need to consider transparency as a goal **today**. For materiality in the arts seems less stubborn than it used to be. Digital art is just the latest of a series of technical improvements that give the artist more control and more choices. We are only beginning to find out how that freedom might be used to create music and images and other as yet unknown and mixed kinds of artworks.

In one of the "extras" on the DVD of a recent Star Wars movie, the staff discusses the new freedoms to cut and paste and rearrange individual elements in a scene. In their example one actor had, in the original shot, crossed in front of another as both were approaching seats. By digital manipulation, the crossing actor was held back and made to approach his seat after the other had seated himself. Nothing else in the scene or its timing was changed. No longer does the director have to accept or reject whole takes of scenes. This brings freedom, and a new transparency of the result to the director's intention, but also less tolerance on the part of audiences who will come to expect the results of such pinpoint control.

But such control and transparency doesn't need hi tech. Many art works, novels or paintings or films, for instance, are surrounded by an ironic self-reflection that exalts the controlling presence of the author even as, perhaps, it denies the standard sorts of unity to the novel or story -- or to the implied author or audience.

Arthur Danto reminds us of the ways in which art has come to question its own nature and borders. Artworks get produced challenging any given definition of art. In the process, Hegel's notion of pure conceptual self-awareness of process has spread out into all sorts of artistic and para-philosophical byways. There seem to be more modes of self-awareness than were dreamed of in Hegel's hierarchy.

Even architecture is dematerializing. New materials and complex

mathematical manipulations create buildings that do not appear tied to gravity and weight. They can be inflated membranes held up by the air within them. They can be supported by tension members rather than compression. Recent Frank Gehry buildings emphasize their materiality as spreading and expanding but not as settling and heavy. Such buildings neither visibly support weight, as in the Greek temple, nor visibly rise beyond it, as in the Gothic cathedral. They just ignore it.

Even more, we already see architecture that tends toward pure image. Buildings become screens for giant displays. And in theme parks and other emphatic environments, constructional and functional expression becomes completely subordinated to image and meaning.

Such dematerialization increases as virtual reality becomes stronger. In a virtual world, everything is a constructed meaning, and the resistance of materiality becomes a planned effect. Even the physics of a virtual world results from conscious choices.

Whether in a virtual world or in Times Square or Disney World, the materiality of architecture becomes permeated with meaning and intention.

Amid all this, self-transparency now acquires a different valence. We no longer live in a nineteenth century world polarized between self-coincident subjectivity and brute Newtonian atoms. Transparency is not always a positive quality these days. Many critics see it as a loss rather than a gain of self. In a commodified world where all seems a play of simulacra amid the fetishism of the image and the commodity, where everything is fast, light, and out of control, we might need something opaque that refuses to be dominated and seen through. Something in us that is not just our arbitrary product, or the product of some process that sweeps us up in a perverse self-transparency. In an age where all is social constitution, we might seek again for nature, something fixed and just opaquely given as a foundation. Even if we can't have nature back that old way, we might want a little external heaviness and opacity to anchor our selves and our society. Fundamentalisms and conservatisms of all sorts may seek escape from a terrifying transparency

and weightlessness. Baudrillard advocates a mindless mineral opacity as a counter to the circulation of simulacra.

However, those appeals to a given fundamentalist nature are not the only response. Many critics of our too transparent society make Hegelian moves. Marx and the Marxists say that the seeming total transparency actually conceals. They see that transparency as a sham, as an abstraction and illusion to be located within a greater truer transparency. This isn't quite Hegel but the basic gesture is very similar. The commodity must be placed within a wider self-knowledge of our self-constitution through labor. This is basically a Hegelian move, seeking a more total and more concrete transparency in a self-understood process of self-constitution.

Then, there is another response, one that seeks to reinstate externality and opacity in the very heart of meaning. As materiality becomes pliable and light, meaning becomes opaque and resistant. Aggressively arbitrary and anti-necessary works have appeared in architecture as in the other arts. Peter Eisenman's designs often offer too much or too little meaning. In Rem Koolhaas's "big" constructions, parts insist on themselves without fitting into a harmonious totality. The open assemblages of Hegel's symbolic architecture return with a vengeance. These buildings don't resist meaning so much as allow it to play against itself and lose its way. These buildings suggest an opaqueness IN meaning and activity. What is external is within the activity of meaning, not below in some given definite sense data, nor outside as some Ding an Sich.

As a critical tool, this deconstructive approach shares with the Hegelian approach the tactic of seeing apparent total transparency as an effect of something larger and more "concrete," but this approach opposes Hegel on the transparency of that larger something. Opaque materiality reasserts itself, as it were, within the signifiers themselves. True, they are not atomic givens like empiricist impressions; they are in relation, but in too many relations, with no firm identities, in a next-to-ness that is generative -- too much so, undecidably so, not structured, under no external or internal control. This deconstructive move finds a different kind of externality and opacity, where

meaning is not confronted by something opaque external to itself, but is itself out of control, and the process of meaning making is no longer self-transparent but always working from within unacknowledged subject positions and blind spots, which, when acknowledged, are so from other subject positions and blind spots without any final or formal self-coincidence.

Deconstructive approaches want to surround our ordinary fixed meanings with an awareness of how that fixity is only an effect in a field it cannot control. That surrounding awareness is itself not another larger fixed meaning. Similarly, for Hegel, our fixed shapes of consciousness and conceptual dualities are surrounded by a speculative understanding of their conditions and necessities, and that speculative understanding is not itself another shape of consciousness or conceptual duality. Nor is it a subject position in the sense in which that has been analyzed recently. Nor is it, and this will be issue I will continue with, an awareness of a form for content.

The issue dividing Hegel from the deconstructive approach concerns the self-transparency of that enfolding discourse or awareness. Both are saying that the meaning process has effects on the meaning structures, but the mode of influence differs; Hegel refuses to separate the ontological and the ontic; the structures of what it means to be fully show up in beings. Deconstruction separates the ontological and the ontic: the empirical details of classifications and structures are not defined by the motions of différance and its cousins, but the ontological status of those classifications and structures is affected. They become fragile, they can't be as totalizing as they pretend to be, etc.

Can this new kind of opacity be surrounded, located, linked, as are the stones? Can the deconstructive gesture be domesticated by the system? The official deconstructive answer is that it cannot. The dialectic would be the death of difference, and the self-exposition of spirit is the regimentation of meaning production.

But Hegel's story is more complex. Deconstructive opacity is not a moment within the dialectic. But could it be a kind of condition for the dialectic? A condition that, unlike the stones, is not mapped into the system? Does not

express the moments of the system? This would mean that the dialectic would have context that it cannot on its own account for. Heidegger and Kierkegaard would agree.

Yet even to say that suggests that there is a final philosophical transparency making these claims, an outside layer mapping these relations?

Hegel would likely ask, is there a shape of consciousness here, and what are its basic categories? Is the discourse that affirms the limitations of theory itself a theory?   He might look at the way the theory of meaning surrounds the deconstructive play and provides an overall self-coincidence. He might examine the disagreements about transcendental assertions in Derrida's theories, and the way that Derrida's constant changing of terms leaves a set of 'places' for those terms the same as an armature for the theory.

Now, to continue. Hegel is claiming, in effect, there can be self-knowledge of the process of meaning, a self-awareness or self-coincidence which is not from/in a finite subject position, not a shape of consciousness. Also, it is not an awareness of a form for the process of manipulation of some given opaque content.

One way of asking our question, then, might be: how can the meaning process be self-aware or self-coincident without being awareness of a form? And, how can opacity be "involved in" the meaning process without being content for a formally defined processing?

Hegel is not saying the same thing as the deconstructors, granted. But there are more similarities than might be apparent in the usual polemics. I want to make just one point that relates to the theme of externality. Many critiques, Heidegger among them, treat Hegel as a super cartesian. But we need to be very careful not to confuse Hegelian self-positing with self-creation, or Hegelian self-coincidence with Cartesian transparent self-certainty (whether this is of the individual or of the whole society). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* sections that start with an assumed self-certainty that always falls apart.

Hegel's process leads to self positing, self-coincidence, self-transparency, but of what? Spirit, but spirit is not an individual subject or community. Hegelian self-transparency is not the self-affirmation of the individual certain of itself raised up above all fixed content -- that would be the romantic ironist Hegel criticized in his aesthetics, and in another guise the moralist criticized in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*.

Self-positing is not some voluntaristic self-creation -- its real opposite is the *an sich*. There is no *ex nihilo* self-creation. Self-positing involves what is *an sich* becoming *fur sic*h, but this is not in an individual consciousness. In political community, for example, all the elements of spirit have to be explicitly posited, but this is a matter of creating institutions, not of expanding some individual's personal awareness.

Absolute knowledge and the absolute idea, may sound rather Cartesian, but they are not shapes of individual self-certainty. The full self-coincidence of spirit at the end of the system is not an individual possession. The Cartesian ego is an artifact of the process, not its summation, and the self-conscious individual must have elements of immediacy and opacity.

The final self-coincidence will be for Hegel in philosophy's retrospective scientific awareness. Everything else is debate and bureaucracy, and the king that symbolizes but is not the point of coming together. The philosopher is supposed to be that point, but philosophy too is a communal possession. (Given his Aristotelian interest in contemplation, Hegel probably doesn't think so, but I do.)