Volume 23 Issue 23
Originally issued as F3



Global Journal of human-social science: F
Political Science
Volume 23 Issue 3 Version 1.0 Year 2023
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

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GJHSS-F Classification: LCC: B2948, PG3476.M363



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The Fate of the Unsightly: Hegel and Mandelstam

Alexander Yeremenko

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyze some aspects of the Hegelian dialectic, in particular some aspects of the doctrine of sublation which, in our opinion, are not always correctly understood in the conventional interpretation of Hegel. We will try to show the hidden ambiguity in Hegel's doctrine of sublation. This ambiguity of dialectical sublation can be visibly revealed by comparing the doctrine of the negation of negation with O. Mandelstam's poem 'Lamarck'. This great poem is characterized not just by depth, but by a delightful paradox of meaning.

LAMARK

There was an old man, as shy as a boy,
A clumsy, timid patriarch...
Who is a swordsman for the honor of nature?
Well, of course, the fiery Lamarck.
If all living things are just a blot
Over a period of a short lifeless day
On Lamarck's movable stairs
I will take the last step.

I will go down to the annelids and the barnacles,
Rustling among lizards and snakes,
On elastic gangways, on wide gullies
I will shrink and disappear like Proteus.
I will put on a horn mantle,
I will refuse hot blood
I will overgrow with cupules and into the foam
Of the ocean I will stick like a swirl
We have passed the ranks of insects
With liquor glasses of eyes.
He said: nature is all in the faults,
There is no vision - you can see for the last time.
He said: no more orotundity,
You loved Mozart in vain,
Spider deafness sets in
Here failure is beyond our strength.
And nature has retreated from us
As if it doesn't need us
And it put up a longitudinal brain,
Like a sword, into a dark scabbard.
And it forgot about the drawbridge
It was too late to lower it for those
Who have green graves
Red breath, flexible laughter… [1, p. 183-184].[1]

Vast literature is devoted to the interpretation of this poem. A. Zholkovsky notes the variety of studies that outline the place of the poem in the previous literary, natural-philosophical and historiosophical tradition [2]. He highlights the main themes of the poem: the motif of the path, in particular, the way down, the grave/death; the motif of metamorphoses and, on the one hand, transformations into heroes of classical art, on the other hand, mythological and fabulous transformations associated with the difficulty and even impossibility of returning to their previous state, in the latter case, the motif of a certain punishment of the hero who violated world harmony; the motif of searching for the supreme Sense (Grail, the meaning of being, evolution, history) [2]. As a result, Zholkovsky adjoins the widespread understanding of the poem as a gloomy Aesopian warning of an impending cultural catastrophe [2].

J. Probshtein understands the meaning of the poem in a similar way. In 'Lamarck' he sees an 'Aesopian' poem, which encodes the poet's despair in the face of reality, in which 'only the lowest, most primitive types survive, there is no need for art, poetry, or music' [3, p. 102].

Since the poem is dedicated to the outstanding biologist, some researchers delve into its biological implications. A. Zholkovsky, D. Danin [4], and M. Epshtein [5] emphasize O. Mandelstam's great passion for the works of the classics of biology, inspired by friendship with B. Kuzin, to whom the poem 'Lamarck' is dedicated.

M. Epstein pays special attention to the images of insects in the poem, which fit into the context of the 'insect' imagery important for Mandelstam's poetry (wasps, bees, dragonflies, butterflies, etc.) [5]. According to Epstein, the dialectic of evolution and

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[1] In the Appendix we place the Russian text of the poem "Lamarck".

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involution in the poem is a manifestation of O. Mandelstam's intuition about the end of the era of heroism, social and spiritual aristocracy, humanistic individualism, which is being replaced by the time of mass-like, primitive, 'insect-like' consciousness [5]. Similar insights sound in other poems of the poet. "The leitmotif of the whole animalistic theme of 'Century' is a broken spine. The era of vertebrates has ended - proud, graceful, with a slender posture. The imperious rapacity is replaced by small, swarm robbery. The era of invertebrate insect predators begins. Mandelstam sensitively caught the transition from the era of individuals to the era of the masses and captured new features of animal energy and sensuality that were close to his time. Perhaps, it is with Mandelstam that the insect becomes the super-image of Russian poetry, for the first time the animalistic theme turns into an entomological one'' [5].

M. Yampolsky considers 'Lamarck' in the broad context of the history of culture, paying special attention to the comparison of art history and natural science paradigms. He expresses, in our opinion, the most insightful thought in Mandelstam studies about 'Lamarck': 'One of the difficulties in understanding the poem lies in the almost enthusiastic description of what apparently seems to be degradation' [6]. Perhaps, our comparison of 'Lamarck' with the figures of Hegelian thought will provide a clue to this paradox. M. Yampolsky draws attention to the ambiguous attitude of O. Mandelstam to the theory of progress, and when applied to literature, this attitude becomes clearly negative [6]. Part of the clue to the enthusiastic description of degradation can be found by comparing the image of the stairs in Plato's Timaeus, which describes the degradation of man into animals with the loss of harmony, with Lamarck's stairs, the descent along which means only apparent degradation, but in fact - a movement towards simple forms of 'the very concept of species' [6].

We will not yet offer our own interpretation of the poem 'Lamarck', but this does not mean that we do not have it. Our interpretation will go into the subtext of reflections on the Hegelian sublation in order to 'emerge' at the end of the article.

First, we recall some banal provisions of the Hegelian doctrine, perhaps even stereotyped ones. We will have to start from some simplified stereotypes of understanding the Hegelian method precisely in order to debunk them and show the real complexity of the Hegelian dialectic.

The main figure of Hegelian thought is the dialectical triad: thesis - antithesis - synthesis. Dialectical sublation is usually understood as negation with retention. At the same time, the positive, true, capable of development, corresponding to its concept is retained. Allegedly, everything which is false, incapable of development, and not corresponding to its concept is discarded and denied. In this way, the enrichment of positive content takes place, so to speak, 'accumulation of positivity', 'accumulation of truth'; this accumulation is supposedly progress.

The following question arises: what is the fate of that negative which is discarded in every act of synthesis, which is not included in successive acts of sublation? While thinking about this question, we will come to a rather unexpected solution. A clarifying question arises so far: what exactly is being discarded? Is some evil, insidious, actively opposing the positive, hostile to truth and progress being rejected? Or is the weak, false in the sense of erring, imperfect, not corresponding to its concept, incapable of progressive development, so to speak, passively negative being discarded? Is that which stubbornly refuses to enter into positivity discarded, or that which cannot? It would like to, but it cannot.

At first glance, the second option is correct. Let us recall G. Hegel's indication of truth as the correspondence of a concept and reality, and the untrue in this regard is 'inconsistent with itself': '...untrue in general consists in a contradiction between a definition or concept and the existence of an object' [7, p. 125]. In this context, we present the following argument. If what was discarded were actively negative, sublation would be impossible. When synthesizing from the thesis and antithesis, the positive is taken. But at the next synthesis, the positive is again taken from the thesis and antithesis. It does not represent the entire content of the thesis and antithesis, for then the thesis and antithesis would enter into the synthesis as a whole. So, at each stage of synthesis something negative is discarded from the thesis and antithesis. But this is such negative, which at the previous stage was recognized as positive. And this happens in each case of sublation. If what is thrown out were actively negative, malicious, etc., it could not initially enter into synthesis, and it could not be retained at any stage of synthesis. Some 'blots'are discarded: weak, unsuccessful, unsightly, insufficiently perfect.

What is the fate of the discarded? Does it go into non-existence, or is it in a miserable vegetative state of chaotic existence, or is it also synthesized in its mode of being? Isn't there, so to speak, the perfection of the negative, a kind of anti-sublation in which the accumulation of the negative takes place? Doesn't this negative line up in a certain system, which is, as it were, a shadow of the positive system of ascent to the Absolute Idea in its adequate expression?

The most surprising answer would be that nothing is actually discarded.

How and - most importantly - who came up with the idea of discarding when interpreting the negation of the negation? Isn't such an interpretation an unacceptable simplification of the sublation figure? Did it

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not originate in the circles of revolutionary progressivists who emerged from the New-Hegelianism?

In the interpretation of Soviet Marxism, Hegel's dialectic was perceived not simply as an unambiguously progressive doctrine, but as a kind of apotheosis of progress. A. Herzen's aphorism was popular: 'Hegel's philosophy is the algebra of revolution' [8, p. 194]. That is, Hegel's teaching is not just a justification for universal and, so to speak, unrestrained progress, but such progress which is carried out thanks to revolutions. And in revolutions, the 'rejection' of reactionary, conservative, obsolete progress that hinders a firm pace of progress is inevitable (more precisely, the rejection of what the revolutionaries consider reactionary, etc.).

With such a perception, the majestic tread of the world spirit acquires the features of splendor, bravura, the feeling of permanent victory. The World Spirit marches on a solemn march to the shining heights of perfection. It must be said that some of the statements of G. Hegel in the 'Lectures on the Philosophy of History' give reason for such an interpretation.

This is especially evident in the doctrine of world-historical personalities. According to Hegel, world-historical personalities embody the will of the world spirit by their actions. Hegel's philosophy of history is permeated with genuine admiration for world-historical personalities, one might say, their apotheosis. They are forgiven everything. 'But such a great personality is forced to trample on another innocent flower, to crush a lot in his path' [9, p. 84]. Just think, the flower has been trampled! Leave me alone, here we are talking about higher matters: 'But from this point of view, it is impossible to make moral demands on world-historical deeds and on the persons who commit them, which are inappropriate in relation to them. Boring complaints about the personal virtues of modesty, humility, love of people and compassion should not be heard against them' [9, p. 115]. "After all, world history takes place in a higher sphere than that to which morality is confined…" [9, p. 114] - so stand back, boring moralists.

G. Hegel's famous teaching about the cunning of the mind in world history fits into this context: the World Mind uses world-historical personalities as its tools, while being in the shadows. Historical figures selflessly fight, perform feats, suffer and die; as a result of their activities, as a rule, it turns out not at all what they were striving for, but the World Mind, the Absolute Idea does not suffer damage: 'The particular in most cases is too small compared to the universal: individuals are sacrificed and doomed to death. The idea pays tribute to existence and frailty not from itself, but from the passions of individuals' [9, p. 84].

One gets the impression that the spirit of Christian mercy is disappearing in the victorious procession of dialectical sublation. Before us there is a worldview in which there is no place for a stone rejected by the builders, in which the last will never be the first. This is a world in which the wise, the strong, and the meaningful have been chosen once and for all, while the unwise, the weak, and the meaningless are forever doomed to vegetate.

My personal life experience, not read from books, leads me to the conviction that *the triumphant is false*. The lie hides in the very depths of the celebration. Something is not satisfied with the existing, suffers, fights, and creates. In this eventfulness it finds itself. It may fail, perish. Maybe win. Here it is in danger. It begins to glimmer already at the moment of victory. And it manifests itself in full measure when the victorious becomes triumpant, when it begins to triumph. Every triumph is, in one way or another, trampling. *Everything that tramples is false. The very act of trampling turns the victorious truth into a lie.*

Since the doctrine of sublation was developed mainly in the 'Science of Logic', we will rely on Minor and Major Logic.

Contrary to the stable revolutionary-progressivist stereotype, when being sublated the steps of ascent are not discarded at all, but are preserved and taken in. At least, this is the case in the realm of essence, which is 'pure negativity, having nothing outside of itself that it would negate" [10, p. 19].

Contradictions both negate each other and contain each other in themselves, thus they are equalized, since each of them is the sublation of the other and of itself [11, p. 187-188]. If we try to think according to this model of the relationship between the perfect and the unsightly, then we will have to admit that they negate each other and contain each other in themselves, become one and the same; each sublates the other and itself. It turns out that the unsightly sublates itself in the perfect, and the perfect - in the unsightly?

Even more unexpected is the fate of the unsightly in the light of the Hegelian category of being-for-oneself. An example of being-for-oneself is true infinity. If the infinite is something special along with the finite, then it turns out to be a bad infinity. It repeats the same thing. For example, such is the infinity of space and time. 'First they set the boundary, then they step over it, and so on *ad infinitum*' [7, p. 232]. The finite does not stand next to the infinite, but is sublated in it [11, p. 151]. The opposite of the finite and the infinite 'is not true', 'the infinite actually eternally goes out and does not go beyond its limits' [7, p. 232]. In true infinity, the other merges with itself. The finite is removed at infinity, but the infinite is not 'blunted' against the finite [7, p. 234-235]. "The negation of negation is not neutralization; the infinite is the positive, and only the finite is the sublated" [7, p. 235].

If we try to apply this dialectic to the unsightly and perfect, we get something like the following. We must think the unsightly in the perfect and the perfect

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in the unsightly; we must understand *the unsightly as the other of the perfect*. The perfect passes into the unsightly and in this transition merges with itself. *It is completely unsightly; it has the perfection of unsightlyness*. Inconsistency is potentially contained in the perfect. The perfect in the unsightly as its other coincides, merges with itself. But is the same true for the unsightly? Is it possible to say that the unsightly coincides with itself, passing into the perfect as its other? What is it that the unsightly potentially contain the perfect?

The Hegelian dialectic of something and the other is reminiscent of Plato's sophisticated dialectic of the one and the other. The other in itself is the other of itself, that is, the other of the other. Therefore, it is unequal within itself, negating itself, changing. But at the same time, 'it remains identical with itself because what it has changed into is the other' [12, p. 180]. That which has changed unites in the other with itself. Thus, his otherness is its moment [12, p. 180].

The unsightly is the other of itself; as unequal to itself, it changes and passes into its other. But its other is the perfect. Therefore, the unsightly becomes perfect. But in this perfection it unites with itself. Having become perfect, it remained unsightly - and this is its truth. It is as unsightly as it should be; it is as unsightly as it corresponds to its concept; it is the true unsightly. When we contrast the unsightly with the perfect and keep them in this abstract opposition, then the very statics of this opposition is false.

The negation of negation does not at all imply such a primitive move as discarding. When the negation is negated, the first disappears into the second; but this is not an abstract disappearance - in fact, 'the first is contained in the second and this second is the truth of the first' [13, p. 299]. In its truth, the second (negative, mediated) is a relation, for it is 'the negative of the positive and contains the latter in itself' [13, p. 300]. It is not an indifferent other - it is different in itself, therefore it contains its own other, thus it is a posited dialectic of itself [13, p. 300].

Thus, in the course of sublation what is negated is not discarded at all. Whatever it may be: weak, false, erroneous, imperfect, unsightly, it is the other of the strong, true, correct, perfect, and contains this other of its own. It is not destroyed at all and is not ignored for subsequent development.

'The second negative, the negative of the negative, which we have arrived at, is the aforementioned removal of the contradiction, but just like the contradiction, it is not the action of some external reflection; it is the most intimate, most objective moment of life and spirit, thanks to which the subject, the person, the free person has the objective reality' [13, p. 301].

If the perfect is attributed to the first item of the triad (affirmation, positive), then the unsightly (imperfect) will be the first negation. What will turn out to be the second negation, that is, the third, synthetic moment of the triad? It is such a 'most intimate moment' that includes the first (perfect) and the second (unsightly) as different from the first; and if we remember that 'this second is the truth of the first', then the unsightly will turn out to be the truth of the perfect.

How to name the first and third? We are having trouble naming for example, it is possible to call the first positive untrue, 'flat' perfect. Then the third will turn out to be 'true perfect', which will contain in itself the unsightly as its other. And it is precisely this truly perfect that will turn out to be vital and developing.

The ancients, apparently, could not have conceived such a third. What is perfect for them is static, it cannot develop. Gods do not develop. The idea of the Good does not develop, for it is the most perfect of all; in general, the world of Platonic ideas does not develop. The unity of the Neoplatonists cannot develop, for it is the fullness of being and the fullness of perfection. Its emanation into the material world is a kind of fall, not development. The absolutely perfect is the best of all - it can neither improve nor deteriorate, it is eternally frozen in its perfection.

But Hegel's truly perfect will not be such: since it contains its own other, it is capable of development. *The unsightly is, as it were, the disturbing conscience of the truly perfect.*

G. Hegel clearly formulates the methodological essence of the principle of the negation of negation, there is no question of any rejection here: 'To keep the positive in its negative, the content of the premise in its result, this is the most important thing in knowledge based on reason; at the same time, only the simplest reflection is enough to be convinced of the absolute truth and necessity of this requirement…' [13, p. 299]. The Hegelian system is built in such a way that nothing is discarded in it; everything is preserved, since each step 'is an image of the absolute' [7, p. 420].

Here is how G. Hegel characterizes his method: 'In the absolute method, the concept is preserved in its otherness, the universal - in its isolation, in judgment and reality; at each stage of further definition, the universal elevates the entire mass of its previous content and it does not lose anything from its dialectical movement forward, it does not leave anything behind, but contains everything acquired and is enriched and condensed within itself' [13, p. 306-307].

With such an understanding of the figure of dialectical sublation, the unsightly, so to speak, is problematized and its fate ceases to look so deplorable. Hegel shows the limitations and superficiality of the subjective volition, for which the pre-found object is insignificant and which is sure that it is this that brings about the good. This abstract duty turns out to be an inadequate perception of the world. 'The insignificant

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and the disappearing are only the surface of the world, and not its true essence. […] Unsatisfied striving disappears when we realize that the ultimate goal of the world is as fulfilled as it is eternally fulfilled' [7, p. 417].

So after all: Does the perfect develop or does it remain in the state of its perfection? It is eternally evolving and eternally abiding. It is in a state of eternal fulfillment of its goal, towards which it is eternally striving. And this desire is conditioned by the presence of the unsightly in the very core of the perfect.

Here we come to the most vulnerable point in the apologia for the unsightly. The third, as a synthesis of the first and second moments of the triad, is 'the positive through the sublation of the 'negative', the absolute reality obtained through the sublation of the original immediate reality [13, p. 303]. 'This result is therefore the truth' [13, p. 303]. This third is not in a state of rest, but is 'movement and activity mediating itself with itself' [13, p. 303].

The seeming lofty truth of the unsightly arises as a consequence of fixing the abstract first negation. If we do not stop at this one-sided moment, but delve into the dialectic of the negation of negation, the unsteady charm of the unsightly will melt no less than the dazzling triumph of the perfect. The unsightly one should not fall into the sin of humility more than pride, he should not engage in self-admiration that wrings the soul. Just think: miserable, wretched, inept, weak… 'Have pity on me, don't offend me'… The unsightly must do something, undertake something to get out of his miserable state, and not admire his wretchedness. Let us suppose that God has chosen the lowly and meaningless, suppose He thus abolished the significant. Okay, so be it. But what's next? Is there not the pride of the wretched in the penetrating lines of the Epistle to the Corinthians? Akaky Akakievich and Makar Devushkin evoke sympathy as long as they are infringed; the simplicity of Platon Karataev is charming until he is placed at the head of the army. But if you say to the unsightly: "You are the salt of the earth, you must rule; let the strong and wise bow down before you, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven", - as a result – alas! - concentration camps will turn out. Sharikov and Shvonder have stepped out of their Gogol overcoat.

If every triumphant is false, then the triumphant unsightly will also be false. The very act of triumph will make it false.

Neither the perfect nor the unsightly as immediate abstract moments of negation of negation are true.

If we return to O. Mandelstam, then the picture of evolution drawn by him differs significantly from Hegel's. Firstly, Lamarck depicts not evolution, but involution: the lyrical hero led by Lamarck descends through the stages of development of life to its simplest forms; the characters seem to descend into the very depths of evolutionary hell.

Further: Sometimes it seems that this descent is painted in unambiguously negative tones. But we agree with M. Yampolsky about 'an almost enthusiastic description of what apparently seems to be degradation'. The descent of the lyrical hero is voluntary; no one forces him to descend to the simplest forms of life. What is most striking here is that the journey into the depths of the elements of life is not so much epistemological as ontological. The lyrical hero is not just curious - he really simplifies.

Hegel's negation of negation is, nevertheless, a process of development and even progress. In the progressive ascent to itself, the Absolute Idea enriches its content at each subsequent step. And in this ascent, as has been found out, nothing is discarded; everything is retained, preserved and, so to speak, transformed in this preservation. It is this preservation that actually ensures progress.

In Mandelstam's poem, the characters, as it were, renounce the acquisitions of evolution, these acquisitions are actually discarded, and in this rejection some inexplicable charm shines through.

The question arises about the truth of the unsightly as such. According to Hegel, the unsightly turns out to be true, since it is another of the perfect and of itself. Reflections of truth, so to speak, fall on it. The picture drawn by Mandelstam stirs the soul: no, let the unsightly, discarded in fact, *be recognized as having an independent*, *its own truth*, and not at all a reflection of the truth of dialectical subtraction. With Hegel, the unsightly turns out to be, in the final analysis, an appearance. But what if this is not an appearance, but the innermost essence of the Universe? And another such turn: well, let us assume that it is visibility. But does appearance have truth, its own truth? At first glance, no: appearance is the inconsistency of the phenomenon with the essence, the inconsistency with its concept. But can there be truth to this discrepancy? We get a kind of oxymoron figure: the untrue is inconsistent with its concept, and it is in this discrepancy that its truth, the truth of the untrue, lies. The essence of appearance is precisely in being appearance, that is, in not conforming, and it is in this inconsistency that appearance acquires its own truth. And the unsightly has value not as a stage in the negation of negation, not as another perfect, but in itself; in its very unpretentiousness it acquires hidden truth. It is not saved by being included in the majestic step towards the heights of perfection - it is saved by itself, in its green grave.

It is necessary to realize the truth of the weak, imperfect, unsuccessful, unsightly, really rejected, the truth of the 'blots' of evolution. Paradoxically, there is a

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truth that does not correspond to its concept. Its truth lies precisely in this discrepancy.

In short: 'If all living things are just a blot / On a short lifeless day, / On Lamarck's movable stairs / I will take the last step."

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Appendix

ЛАМАРК

Был старик, застенчивый, как мальчик,
Неуклюжий, робкий патриарх …
Кто за честь природы фехтовальщик?
Ну конечно, пламенный Ламарк.

Если всё живое лишь помарка
За короткий выморочный день,
На подвижной лестнице Ламарка
Я займу последнюю ступень.

К кольчецам спущусь и усоногим,
Прошуршав средь ящериц и змей,
По упругим сходням, по излогам
Сокращусь, исчезну, как Протей.

Роговую мантию надену,
От горячей крови откажусь,
Обрасту присосками и в пену
Океана завитком вопьюсь.

Мы прошли разряды насекомых
С наливными рюмочками глаз.
Он сказал: природа вся в разломах,
Зренья нет – ты зришь в последний раз.

Он сказал: довольно полнозвучья,
Ты напрасно Моцарта любил,
Наступает глухота паучья,
Здесь провал превыше наших сил.

И от нас природа отступила
Так, как будто мы ей не нужны,
И продольный мозг она вложила,
Словно шпагу, в тёмные ножны.

И подъёмный мост она забыла,
Опоздала опустить для тех,
У кого зелёная могила,
Красное дыханье, гибкий смех… [1, с. 183-184].

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