Librarians of a Vampire: Fighting Against Hegel's Dialectic Narrative of Colonialism and Slavery

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"I had a vision"

Chinelo Onwualu's dystopian flash fiction, "When We Call a Place Home," opens with a vision of ominous ships coming towards a utopian homestead in West Africa. The three ships "sailed upon a sea of blood and left fire and terror in their wake." The main protector of the homestead, the vampire Nesiret, is reminded of a similar episode in the distant past. Perhaps Nesiret remembers back to the mid-fifteenth century when Portuguese ships began raiding West Africa's shores for slaves? Millions of Africans would die and tens of millions would be enslaved and sent to the Americas, providing labor for colonial European powers and later the American republic. While the growing transatlantic slave trade bothered a few Europeans, popular opinion condoned and even celebrated the trade in human beings. Philosophers, scientists, and theologians would build rationales, philosophical systems, and stories to justify this moral evil. As Nesiret struggles with how to communicate such atrocities, she tells her daughter, "'Greed and ambition rarely coexist with reason, child.'"

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Lord-Bondsman allegory is one such story, a powerful philosophical narrative that provided a moral justification of slavery. Later philosophers would need to fight back against this story, and they used various methods: telling a contradictory narrative, undermining its racist conclusion by showing Hegel's indebtedness to Black minds and bodies, and imagining a new interpretation for Hegel's own story. These later philosophers all used the power of narrative themselves to fight back against the underlying ideas of Hegel's narrative.

"Will you come with me to the library? I fear its classification systems these days confound me."

Is it a coincidence that Plato, one of the fathers of Western philosophy, started out as a playwright? I think not. Renowned translator Benjamin Jowett remarked, "we lose the better half of Plato when we regard his Dialogues merely as literary compositions" (Dyer 166). All of Plato's Dialogues have characters engaged in conversation. Yes, the stories explore abstract ideas, such as love, wisdom, or art, but we remember the characters. These characters have interests and personalities. Socrates was haughty but noble. Cephalus is old, wise, and kind. The Sophists were rash, cantankerous, and daft. These characters bickered with one another. They fought. They fell in love. When Plato sought to explain the nature of reality itself (his *Theory of Forms*), he told a story. He described a group of people shackled in chains inside a deep cave. They have never seen the sun; instead, they have spent their entire lives watching shadows on a blank cave wall. What the people observe as real things are nothing more than the silhouettes of objects passing in front of

a fire that sits behind them. Plato argued through narrative that observed reality is nothing more than inaccurate perceptions of real, ideal objects—a philosophy that would dominate the Western worldview for over a millennium.

"For thousands of years, religious leaders, philosophers, and scientists have reinforced abstract ideas through fiction, through story. The Gautama Siddhartha, Jesus of Nazareth, and Confucius use narratives, stories, and parables to explain the right way to live. Augustine of Hippo's Confessions presents an argument for his theological worldview through a recounting of his own life. Many of the major moves in philosophy are cemented in narrative. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, one of the foundational figures in existential philosophy, wrote only fictional novels. Camus similarly did not write philosophy, but he explored absurdity (the search for meaning in an irrational universe) through his novels. Kafka explored morality by writing about it under strange hypothetical circumstances—like if one were to wake up as an insect. Isaac Asimov explored humanity in "The Bicentennial Man" by telling the story of a robot who believed himself to be human. Einstein used the image of a passenger on a train to explore the nature of light. The list of fiction writers who argued philosophy or philosophers who argued through fiction is legion: Dante Alighieri, Ibn Tufail, John Bunyan, Mary Shelley, Voltaire, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Ayn Rand are but a sampling. Kendall Haven, a neuroscience researcher explains, "Every human brain is wired to make sense of the world through [story]" (Haven).

The way we think about thinking, the way we understand understanding—philosophy is extremely pervasive and no less so in speculative fiction. The morning Nesiret learns of the oncoming ship, she heads for the library and finds that others shared her inclination. Often great philosophers and impactful philosophical schools emerge during moments of great political, moral, or ecological turmoil to help make sense of the age. And in an age of scientific advancement and political revolutions, Hegel rose as one such figure.

"The minds that had once conceived of sexism, colonialism, and slavery"

The democratization of knowledge that hit Europe due to the Gutenberg press led to a series of social disruptions and scientific discoveries, as knowledge generation could occur outside the Medieval institutions capable of manually recopying texts (monasteries and universities). Bacon, Descartes, Galileo, Copernicus, Leibniz, Newton, and many others had a discernible influence on the philosophy of the Renaissance (Hofer). The power of Reason became a ubiquitous concept in European philosophy. The revolutions in the United States and France had shocked the world. In essence, the Enlightenment ideals of natural human rights, individual freedoms, and popular sovereignty espoused by seventeenth-century philosophers Grotus, Hobbes, and especially Locke came to fruition in the American revolution, and a few years later, Rousseau's writings had the same effect in France. While Hegel's own Germany was a prime example of the horrible societal effects of despotism, there was a palpable change in the zeitgeist. (Marcuse 30–35)

Geist (Spirit = God = Mind) in Hegel's philosophy is reminiscent of divine providence, similar to how St. John considers God to be the divine *Logos*. Hegel envisions a future utopia drawn forth

by the forward motion of the power of Reason upon human society. (At the same time within the field of economics, Adam Smith's invisible hand envisions a comparable teleological world-force.) There is a push and pull, a positive-ness and a negative-ness that moves the universe forward towards a final culminating unity in *Geist*. There is a similarity between Hegel's concept of *Geist* and the oft-quoted moral universe of Martin Luther King Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" (King, qtd. in Smith). *Geist* is the end goal of all things, culminating in freedom and reason for all. *

Arguably Hegel's most famous writing is a narrative from within his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: The Lord-Bondsman allegory (a.k.a. his Master–Slave dialectic), an archetypical description of *Geist* at work in human relationships (or nations or races). In the allegory, two men come face to face. They each begin to recognize that the other has a living, self-sufficient consciousness, similar to their own experience of consciousness. Both men perceive the other's life as a threat to their own sense of self, their own freedom, and a fight to the death ensues. Eventually one man wins and subjugates the other. He becomes the Master (who is free) and forces his Slave (a mere *Thing*) to care for all his needs. However, in doing so, the Master becomes lazy and complacent, while the Slave becomes creative and skillful. Eventually the power dynamic is reversed, and the Slave achieves liberation through his subjugation. In the end, both must recognize the other as self-conscious, free, and equal—the push and pull of *Geist*.

This idea would influence the emergent field of psychology and the ideas of Marx (the proletarian revolution against the bourgeoisie), but it would also be used as a strong justification for the trans-Atlantic slave trade. One of Hegel's notes shows his line of thinking: "This subjugation of the slave's egotism forms the beginning of true human freedom... To become free, to acquire the capacity for self-control, all nations must therefore undergo the severe discipline of subjection to a master... Slavery and tyranny are, therefore, in the history of nations a necessary stage and hence relatively justified". (Hegel, qtd. in Moellendorf 253) For Hegel, American slaves were losers in the fight for self-consciousness, and their subjugation was justified. Slavery was a necessary step on the path towards self-consciousness. The slaves would eventually emancipate themselves through servitude, but until that future time, Hegel considered these people as mere *Things*.

When Nesiret imagines the fall of the Old World, she envisions hierarchies between people, oppression of vulnerable people, in essence a life-and-death struggle ending in subjugation and exploitation. Perhaps she thought back to Hegel's allegory?

"The storytellers went first"

The fight against Hegel's story begins fifty years after the publication of *Phenomenology of Spirit* with Frederick Douglass. At the time that Douglass was writing his autobiography, there were Hegelian societies active in America who used the Hegelian narrative to justify slavery. (Kohn 497) In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass inverts the Hegelian narrative by recounting an actual fight between a master and a slave: himself and Edward Covey.

After a series of mistakes, Douglass was sent to Covey, who was known as a harsh man, known for breaking slaves. Douglass's first task was to break stubborn oxen, about which he wrote, "I now saw, in my situation, several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property, so was I; they were to be broken, so was I. Covey was to break me, I was to break them; break and be broken—such is life". (Douglass ch. 15) Finally, after six months and on the verge of suicide, Douglass fled into nearby woods, where he had a profound experience where freedom became more important to him than life. "The Douglass who emerged from the woods was the antithesis of everything that slave society had trained him to be: a docile, obedient, ignorant, faithful slave". (Kohn 511) The next time Covey came at him with a whip, Douglass decided to fight back, and the pair fought ferociously for two hours, after which Covey never punished him again. In stark opposition to the Hegelian narrative, Douglass had not achieved freedom through obeisance and hard work, but through fighting back while a slave.

"Next came the librarians"

Susan Buck-Morss in *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* similarly fights against Hegel's allegory through narrative, by telling the story of the Haitian revolution. In 1791, only a few years after the American and French revolutions, Toussaint Louverture led a slave uprising against the French empire, leading to the foundation of the free state of Haiti, governed by ex-slaves. While most of the Haitian revolutionaries were illiterate, they appear to have been influenced by the same concepts (*liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*) popularized through the news and global ripple effects of the two previous revolutions. Indeed, at the siege of La Crête à Pierrot, the eventually victorious Haitians sang *La Marseillaise* at the French army, leading one soldier to remark to his superior, "Wherever we sang it we came to set the people free... Can you tell me, Major, what have we come here for?" (Newsinger)

The impact on imaginations around the world was undeniable, and numerous academics understand the Haitian revolution as one of the most significant events in world history. (Joseph) Despite Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic about a life and death struggle between men that ends in slavery, Hegel never references the event. Buck-Morss writes the book as "a mystery story", (3) where she uncovers the obvious influences of the Haitian revolution on Hegel's philosophy and then uncovers why he censures all references in his writings. (One major reason was that Napoleon was ransacking Jena, his university's town, at the time he was finishing up *Phenomenology of Spirit*.) Buck-Morss argues that Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic is in fact a direct parallel of the contemporaneous Haitian revolution. She specifically attacks the dissonance that existed in Hegel's Enlightenment thought, specifically the ethnocentric universal *freedom* in Hegel that coexisted with an acceptance of slavery.

"Is there another way?"

Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* also fights back against the oppressiveness of Hegel's philosophy through narrative. The book is written as an auto-theory, or highly philosophical autobiography. Fanon recounts story after story that highlight how colonialism has forced Black

minds and bodies to adhere to White and European ways of thinking and doing: "There is nothing more exasperating than to be asked: 'How long have you been in France? You speak French so well.' … Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world" (Fanon 23). He argues that the colonial idea of modernization is no more than ethnocentrism, and that the imposition of a colonizer's culture on other people groups causes a negative psychological effect on the people in those colonized groups. Fanon describes colonialization as a double process of subjugation, both external (economic) and internal (psychological). Fanon both critiques and extends Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic. He argues that the final state of recognition between the two men risks subjugating Black minds again to a synthesis modeled on White, European ways of thought. Rejecting Hegel's conclusion to the story, he applies the allegory to the struggle of Black colonized people against White colonizers: the fight for cultural identity is a life-and-death struggle, where colonized people must completely break with Whiteness.

"Nesiret's heart was finally at rest"

The ending of Onwualu's narrative leaves the reader in suspense, not knowing the outcome; however, there is hope. "She and her kind had spent centuries teaching humanity new ways to live with the world, and with each other." Her great-granddaughter Nya argues that reason would be able to convince the arriving ships to engage in peaceful trade rather than exploitation. Could this be Nesiret's lesson? Perhaps Douglass, Buck-Morss, and Fanon offer a reasoned approach towards Hegel's philosophy of colonialism and slavery. If so, one could certainly imagine a strange circle in the story of Hegel's story. If Hegel's allegory can be imagined as a negative push, then the narrative critiques might just be the positive pull that leads even Hegel into a reasonable *Geist*.

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