

only in its independence. It obviously owes nothing to the guild that has reduced the study of the past to a blinkered colonialist knowledge. What is more important is the wisdom that informs his observations. It is wisdom born of the experience of living dangerously close to the limit of language as one must to be a truly creative writer. For it is the latter's vocation to exhaust language and push it to the brink. Which is why Tagore had learned to recognize a limit when he saw one, and the limit of World-history could hardly escape so keen a poet's eye. However, his reproach about the poverty of historiography is not only a comment on the failure of the genre but also a call to historians for a creative engagement with the past as a story of man's being in the everyday world. It is, in short, a call for historicity to be rescued from its containment in World-history. Our critique is our response to that call.

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History at the Limit of  
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## 2 Historicity and the Prose of the World

*The concept of limit—the Renaissance idea of “people without history”—Hegel on India: “No state, no history”—the instance of Ramram Basu—history and prose in Western thinking—the distinction between prose and poetry according to Vico and Condillac—statehood and prose as conditions of eligibility for World-history status—the twofold character of prose in Hegel’s philosophy of history—the prose of the world: how it disrupted the primal unity of the age of poetry—intersubjectivity and the struggle for mutual recognition between self-consciousnesses—the everyday and the notion of temporal particularity—opening up the prospect of a historiography adequate to historicity.*

To start with, let us consider the name given to this book. What, one may ask, does the word *limit* have to do in the title flanked by a referent seemingly so illimitable as *World-history*? The answer is that it is there precisely to provoke a question like this and bring out in relief the obviousness taken for granted, so that it may be questioned in its own turn. If *limit*, as defined by Aristotle, is “the first thing outside which there is nothing to be found and the first thing inside which everything is to be found,”<sup>1</sup> its function in the title may be understood as a signal of our attempt to explore the space beyond World-history. In other words, we shall try and think World-history in

terms of what is unthinkable within its boundaries. In this attempt to probe the limit of historical thinking we follow Wittgenstein. To draw a limit to thought, he says, "we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly in our move towards a thinking of historicality as what cannot be thought, we shall set out from that side of World-history "inside which everything is to be found," taking the concept of "people without history" for our point of departure.

We owe this concept, among other things, to the navigational errors and adventures which led to the conquest of America. It is well known that apart from violence and plunder legitimized simply by hoisting a flag in the name of a king or queen, this was also the occasion for a comprehensive exercise in discrimination. Thanks to it, Renaissance Europe learned to identify itself by the otherness of a multitude of races, religions, languages, and cultures. Names and categories were invented to enable the knowledge systems of the Old World to cope with the exigencies of the New. One such invention that was to find a place for itself fairly soon in the expanding lexicon of alterities is the concept "people without history."

Presupposed in that phrase was a view of history which, according to Walter Mignolo, had already been assimilated to the historiography of the period giving currency to "the idea that people without writing were people without history and that people without history were inferior human beings."<sup>3</sup> For the conquistadors, the people excluded thus from history and pushed to its margins were the conquered themselves—the Amerindians. It would take the idea another three hundred years to reach South Asia and put the subcontinental Indians beyond the pale of history as well. Here again the strategy was the same as in the previous instance—that is, a joint operation of wars and words, modified only to the extent that the wars were to be British and the words German.

Three centuries was a lot of time of course. Meanwhile, guns and gunboats had grown in size. Equally, if not more significantly, the hands and minds that deployed them were those the West had put at the helm of each of its emergent nation-states. Philosophy was attuned to this development at an early stage, as already apparent from

some of Kant's political essays. But it was left to Hegel, caught up as he was in the ebb and flow of the European revolutions of his time, to lay the foundations of a comprehensive philosophy of history with the question of the state at its core. A people or a nation lacked history, he argued, not because it knew no writing but because lacking as it did in statehood it had nothing to write about. He dismissed the Amerindians as "obviously unintelligent" and spoke of them as "unenlightened children" distinguished only by "inferiority in all respects." The states in South America were "still in the process of formation," according to him, while even in North America "the universal purpose of the state [was] not yet firmly established," the influx of Europeans notwithstanding.<sup>4</sup> In 1830, when these words were written, the continent as a whole was, presumably, still without history just as Columbus had found it.

India was a different matter altogether, culturally speaking. Hegel, unlike James Mill, his English contemporary, had nothing but admiration for its intellectual achievements. But these did not qualify it for statehood in his view. The promise of some development in that direction was "incipient" in the earlier phase of "social distinctions" among its people, but came to nothing as these "petrified into natural determinations—i.e. the caste system." Which is why India has no history, he says. This is a comment that punctuates his observations like a refrain. Thus,

It is obvious to anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of the treasures of Indian literature that this country, so rich in spiritual achievements of a truly profound quality, *has no history*.

And again,

India not only has ancient religious books and splendid works of poetry, but also ancient books of law. . . .; nevertheless, *it still does not have a history*.

These extracts taken from the Second Draft of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* indicate how the rules for admission to

World-history had changed between the adventures of Hernando Cortes and those of Robert Clive.<sup>5</sup> The bar was raised, so to say, by a few notches. Writing was still regarded as a necessary condition, but not sufficient. A people had to have statehood to qualify fully. Since writing to be historical needed the state to write about, it was subsumed in the latter. The Renaissance formula, "No writing, no history," so popular with the conquistadors, was updated by 1830—the year of the Second Draft—to read, "No state, no history." The revision followed inexorably from the logic of historical developments in the West. The formative energies and expansionist drives of its new nations would henceforth be invested in the state as the locomotive of that most modern and dynamic of inventions called World-history.

Yet the nexus in which history, historiography, state, and writing were so intimately joined, was not free from anomaly. For unknown to Hegel, the limit he imposed on history at the mark of statehood had already proved to be a line drawn in the sand. He is clearly in error in insisting, as he does in 1830, that India, with all its intellectual and spiritual resources, "has no history"; and I quote him again to underline his use of the present tense: "It still does not have a history." The evidence is against this pronouncement. A work on Indian history, the first of its kind written by a Bengali in his own language, but done in conformity with the Western model of historical writing, was published in Srirampur (anglicized often as Serampore) in the neighborhood of Calcutta in 1801, and it was not the only one of its genre to appear in print during the next three decades.

What does that make of World-history and India's exclusion from it? For an answer let us start with a quick look at that first specimen. It was commissioned by William Carey of Fort William College set up by the English East India Company in 1800 at its eastern headquarters in order to train its European employees in the use of the major languages of the country they were learning to govern.<sup>6</sup> Carey, a Christian missionary, who headed the Bangla department of the College, had "no books or helps to assist" in teaching and relied on the indigenous scholars who worked under him to produce the manuals he so badly needed. Ramram Basu, a junior pandit, was asked "to

compose a history of one of their kings."<sup>7</sup> Basu obliged by writing *Raja Pratapaditya Caritra* in Bangla, his mother tongue. It was hailed at once as "an authentic history of the government of Bengal from the beginning of the reign of Achber to the end of that of Johangeer."<sup>8</sup> Since then, succeeding generations of political and literary historians—Nikhilnath Ray and Jadunath Sarkar amongst the former and Sushil Kumar De and Sisir Kumar Das amongst the latter—have examined the text critically for its use of evidence as well as for its narrative mode. It has not escaped their notice that the author allowed his story to lapse occasionally into myth and fantasy; but they all agree that this flaw—almost unavoidable under the circumstances—has done little to undermine the overall authenticity of the work as an exercise in modern, rationalist historiography.

This is an assessment with which Basu himself would have readily agreed. For he takes care to distinguish his work clearly from the tradition of Persian chronicles that had been in vogue since the beginning of Mughal rule and flourished under the patronage of the court and regional elites. There is a little bit (*kincit*) written about Pratapaditya in the Persian language, he says somewhat vaguely without referring to any texts by name. But whatever may be there by way of such accounts is, he maintains, fragmentary and incomplete (*sanga panga rupe samudayik nahi*). It is nothing that can satisfy the curiosity of those who want "to know the story of that prince from beginning to end (*anupurbik*)."<sup>9</sup> There is something patently modernist about this insistence on continuity and completeness—all that sets the proper historical narrative apart from the premodern annal and chronicle.<sup>10</sup> One understands, therefore, why William Carey was so proud to announce the forthcoming publication of Basu's manuscript as it was on its way to the printers in the summer of 1801:

I got Ram Boshu [Ramram Basu] to compose a *history* of one of their kings, the first *prose* book ever written in the Bengali language; which we are . . . printing.<sup>11</sup>

Here, according to Carey, was a double first for an Indian language—the very first instance of its historiography and that of its prose—both

achieved under the aegis of colonialism, for it was the missionary acting for the Company's government who "got" the native to write the book that he did. However, the claim is somewhat exaggerated. He was right to speak of Basu's work as the first Western-style historical narrative in Bangla, but not as "the first prose book ever written in the Bengali language." Yet the importance of this error is hard to overestimate. It illustrates the connection between history and prose that had come to be taken for granted in the West by that time. Indeed, we have in Carey's description not only a record of what he found so exciting about the work commissioned by him. More important, it allows us to see how by the end of the Age of Enlightenment two of the most powerful movements of contemporary Europe—one in politics and the other in thought, that is, the drive for overseas expansion and the passion for history—happened to intersect in an apparently small detail of South Asian life. Long before the first modernist historian of Bengal was to sit down to write his narrative in prose, the latter had already been assimilated to a global process of historicization.

For, since Columbus, Europe had been obsessively engaged in voyages of self-discovery requiring it to try and match the coordinates of intercontinental space by those of universal time—geography by history. This exercise relied on a new mathesis of comparison. Climates and habitats, customs and politics, belief systems and phonic systems of the most diverse kinds were all collected and displayed side by side on epistemic spreadsheets to be measured and calculated for their worth on a civilizational scale standardized in the West. Since civilization stood for progress in time, the scale itself was identified with history enriching its concept with discriminations and differentials it had not known before.

Language was one of those spreadsheets of knowledge at which European science and imagination were incessantly at work for four hundred years between the Discovery of America and the Scramble for Africa. But even before the formation of comparative linguistics as a special field of studies a delicate but clear distinction between poetry and prose had emerged from this exercise. Poetry was assigned priority on the temporal scale. Correspondingly, the status it gained

on the scale of values was that of the originary and the primordial. Neither the sanctity associated with the former nor the mystic of the latter applied to prose. Subsequent and younger, its time was regarded as that of the everyday world and its values as mundane and modern.

Although such a distinction was generally agreed on, not all thinkers approached it in the same way. Indeed, some of the most important amongst them testified in effect to its power and range by using it for historical scenarios that had little in common. Early in the eighteenth century Giambattista Vico had already identified the first language of man—the foundational language of laws and religions—as poetic. For him the origin of poetry was independent of human design. It was, he believed, "a proof of Providence."<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Condillac was to take a more secular view of the same phenomenon. In *An Essay on the Origin of the Human Language* (1746) he would trace the beginnings of poetry to a remote past when languages were not rich enough in structure and vocabulary to serve the entire range of human needs. Consequently people "adopted all sorts of figures and metaphors" and had recourse to mimicry and pleonasm to make up for the deficit. Thus it was the "sterility of languages" and a primitive "mode of speaking by action" that made communication "originally poetical" by force of necessity. "But in proportion as languages became more copious," he writes, "the mode of speaking by action was abolished by degrees, the voice admitted of less variety of tone, the relish for figures and metaphors . . . insensibly diminished, and their style began to resemble our prose." It was the philosopher Pherecydes of Scyros who, "disdaining to be fettered by the rules of poetry," we are told, "first . . . ventured to write in prose."<sup>13</sup>

Condillac was convinced that his story of progress from poetry to prose was a genuinely "historical account."<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida contests this claim. All this talk about "the history of language" as "the human spirit," he protests, is nothing but "history as a narrative retracing a prescribed progress, a natural progress . . . only the development of a natural order."<sup>15</sup> Even if there is a role for "men of genius" in this account, that does not make progress any the less natural for the younger philosopher who cites Condillac's own words: "When I say *men of genius*, I do not exclude nature whose favorite disciples they

are."<sup>16</sup> If this is an attempt to trap Condillac in self-contradiction, I am not sure it succeeds. For, "men of genius" do not cease to be human just because they happen to be the "favorite disciples" of nature, nor, by the same token, does a "natural" progress or development, mediated by them, lose its entitlement to historicity.

Indeed, by bringing man and nature together into his explanation of the origins of language Condillac not only maintained his consistency but helped to historicize a phenomenon which had been shrouded in mystery until then. He belonged to an age that was seized by an insatiable curiosity about the newly discovered languages but baffled at the same time by their multiplicity, diversity, and complexity. It was almost inevitable that his attempt to reach these at their source, like that of many of his contemporaries, should occasionally get mired in speculation. He was modest enough to acknowledge the difficulty. "Some perhaps will look upon this whole history as a romance," he remarked toward the end of the *Essay*, "but they cannot at least deny its probability."<sup>17</sup> He was not, of course, the only thinker of the period to enlist probability in support of history. For the beginning of poetry and prose, generally of language, was still hidden in a past beyond evidence, relics, and memories. In that darkness one could only grope for some primordial clump of roots. Amongst those who believed they had found it, Vico spoke of it as a gift of God, and Condillac as a gift of nature. The latter, to my mind, stands for a considerable advance in historical thinking.

But the scene shifts again with Hegel turning to the question early in the next century. For him, the priority of poetry over prose had little to do with the economy of language and an initial state of poverty overcome eventually by expansion into prose. Poetry and prose figure in his thinking as terms of development in a rather different sort of history—that of Spirit (*Geist*) itself. The latter is, according to him, an indivisible totality which comes to know itself and achieve self-consciousness through a process of self-division, self-opposition, and, finally, reintegration. This is a movement of becoming—"a *conscious, self-mediating* process—Spirit emptied out in Time,"<sup>18</sup> and is, as he put it, "the labour which it accomplishes as actual History."<sup>19</sup>

In this history, poetry was the first to emerge from Spirit's labor. But it was prior to prose logically as well. At this stage, says Hegel,

It is the original presentation of the truth, a knowing which does not yet separate the universal from its living existence in the individual, which does not yet oppose law to appearance, end to means, and then relate them together again by abstract reasoning, but which grasps the one only in and through the other.<sup>20</sup>

It is the function of prose to disrupt this unity by the force of individuation. Under its impact all that is whole and integral splinters into the utmost relativity. History, both as a writing about the past and as the past it writes about, feeds on this prose. But even then it is not a sufficient condition for the production of history. That condition is provided by the state, according to Hegel. "It is the state which first supplies a content," he says, "which not only lends itself to the prose of history but actually helps to produce it."<sup>21</sup> How to explain, then, that thirty years before this formulation India, described by him as historyless and stateless, had already succeeded in producing its first history and first work of prose by an indigenous author? Excluded from World-history by definition, Ramram Basu and his writing seem to have sneaked across the border somehow.

This is not a puzzle solved readily by reference to any precolonial tradition of annals and chronicles, if only because these, too, go back to a time before state formation, hence before history, according to the Hegelian chronology. Nor can Basu's historiography be traced to an educated acquaintance with English historical literature. He had a smattering of English—*alpasvalpa ingreji-jnan*—according to Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay.<sup>22</sup> But that did not stretch beyond the requirements of rudimentary conversation with his mentors among the Christian missionaries, as one of them observed, somewhat patronizingly, at the time: "He is a very sensible man; speaks English pretty well, though he cannot read it."<sup>23</sup>

The achievement of this humble employee of Fort William College—an assistant pandit with a salary of forty rupees per month—is

that it takes us to the limit of World-history, although it does so from the inside. To recall what Wittgenstein says, one must approach a limit from both sides. Starting off from the inside, we have come upon a phenomenon that enables us precisely to do so. With nothing to show for itself except an unself-conscious audacity that defies the Hegelian scheme of things, it opens up a vista of historicality beyond World-history. What to make of this transgression, so naive and yet so radical in its implications? Does it mean that philosophical thinking of the kind under discussion has overextended the sign "World" by compounding it with history? One wonders if it has not indeed exceeded its semantic competence to endow universality on what is no more than a regional experience of writing history in a condition of statehood. To put it another way, a particular manner of thinking about the past has perhaps been inflated into a genre—*vyakti* into *jāti*. The work of Ramram Basu, mere gravel that stops World-history in its globalizing track, incites us to break out of this generic containment and join historicality on the other side of the border.

In order to do so, it will help, first, to inquire what kind of containment it is and how it works. It is written large over Hegel's texts, paradoxically, by the liberal use made of two of the most inclusive phrases one can think of—namely, prose of the world and prose of history. World and history: taken together, they add up to a space big enough, one would have thought, to house all of historicality. But that did not happen: several continents and their populations were still left out of history. To understand why, let us consider how in this usage prose relates to world and history. Linked by a semblance of uniformity, prose here stands both for a condition of language and a condition of being. The frequent and surprisingly fluid traffic between the two is characteristic of much of Hegel's writings on history and accounts, to an extent, for some of their turns and twists.

The twofold prose belongs to a hierarchy of stages in Spirit's progress towards self-realization in history. To start, in ascending order, with the prose of the world, it signals the end of the primordial unity celebrated by poetry since the beginning of time. In that undifferentiated universe nature had been conspicuously lacking in media-

tion between "life in general" and the living individual. The division of genus into species and of species into individuals made no difference in this regard. Unable to break away from their originary bonding with the earth and its environment, all such "moments of simple determinateness" would be absorbed in "the process of Becoming merely as a contingent movement." For, as Hegel reminds us, "organic Nature has no history." By contrast, "Spirit is time," and the prose of the world heralds the advent of consciousness—"the middle term between universal Spirit and its individuality or sense-consciousness." The latter mediated in its own turn by the "structured shapes" that consciousness assumes as "a self-systematizing whole of the life of the Spirit," realizes "its objective existence as world-history."<sup>24</sup>

We are now at the inaugural moment of history. Consciousness has triumphed in the unity of the universal and the individual. The uncomplicated integrity of the age of poetry has dissolved to open up the world so that Spirit can actualize itself in a myriad relativities. It marks the triumph of individuality, which had never been more free. A discrete and isolated drive that had nothing to do so far other than to reproduce itself cyclically in nature, it would now combine that function so essential to species-being with the particularity of a self-consciousness related to other self-consciousnesses. For particularity, we know from the logic of reflective judgment, connects the immediate individual predicatively with something else. Thus to say "This plant is medicinal" is to regard the subject, plant, "as standing in connection with something else (the sickness which it cures) by means of its predicate (its medicinality)." Or, to cite yet another of Hegel's examples on this point, "Man as *this* man, is not this single man alone; he stands beside other men and becomes one in the crowd."<sup>25</sup> By the same token, to speak of any individual as self-conscious is to relate him at once with other self-conscious individuals endowing history thus with an inexhaustible concreteness. This is what Jean Hyppolite has called intersubjectivity.<sup>26</sup> In the *Phenomenology* it is the epiphenomena of *Geist* itself as "the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I.'"<sup>27</sup> But it is precisely such exchanges between "I" and "We"

that make the history involved in all this much more than an episode in Spirit's career. The interplay of these self-consciousnesses constitutes the human condition itself. As Hegel puts it, "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged."<sup>28</sup> This amounts, of course, to a "double movement" in which two self-consciousnesses are related in such a way that "each sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same." Consequently, each serves as the middle term for the other; so that through this process "they *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another."<sup>29</sup>

It is this process of recognition that takes us to the very core of the prose of the world. We have seen that world present itself in the aspect of individuality to allow self-consciousnesses to emerge in freedom. However, particularity as the second aspect of the development makes sure that the self-consciousnesses are, for all their independence, related to other things by means of predication. If the interconnections so formed stand for prose, their worldhood may be said to be affirmed in mutuality. For it is in the dynamics of mutual recognition that the prose of the world finally comes to its own, fulfilling the promise of individuation and particularization. This makes for a most interesting world identified usually by two of its great philosophical landmarks—the unhappy consciousness and the dialectics of master and slave. But there are some passages, less known because buried in the massive tome of the *Aesthetics*, where the concreteness of that world is presented in a broad outline with Hegel saying: "Here is revealed the whole breadth of prose in human existence."

What he refers to is an intricate web of relativities formed by self-conscious individuals "recognizing themselves as mutually recognizing one another." Mutual recognition requires that the individual, "in order to preserve his individuality," must lend himself as a means to others for use to satisfy their interests and reduce others to mere means as well to satisfy his own interests at the same time. Consequently, he can never be "an entirety in himself" in the eyes of the

others who come to know him and deal with him only in terms of "the nearest isolated interest which they take in his actions, wishes, and opinions." Furthermore, the individual subject is also defined by his dependence on such externalities as laws, customs, social and political institutions, and so forth, "which he just finds confronting him, and . . . must bow to . . . whether he has them as his own inner being or not." In short, it is precisely by trying to make his individuality secure through mutual recognition that man alienates himself. Anticipating latter-day thinking about that predicament by about a hundred years, Hegel writes:

The individual as he appears in this world of prose and everyday is not active out of the entirety of his own self and his resources, and he is intelligible not from himself, but from something else.<sup>30</sup>

But alienation is only one of the features of "this field of relative phenomena," the other being fragmentation. The participation of an individual even in the great actions and events of his community's life can help little to lift his effort above the level of a mere trifle. This applies not only to the common man but in some ways, if not quite to the same extent, also to "those who stand at the head of affairs." For everything is caught up in the particularity of "circumstances, conditions, obstacles, and relative matters." There is nothing that is whole. All is dissolved in a mass of details. "Occupations and activities are sundered and split into infinitely many parts, so that to individuals only a particle of the whole can accrue." Summing up his survey of the concreteness of a highly complex and relativized world where individuals connect with one another as alienated and fragmented beings involved in a struggle for mutual recognition, Hegel observes:

This is the prose of the world, as it appears to the consciousness both of the individual himself and of others:—a world of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of necessity from which the individual is in no position to

withdraw. For every isolated living thing remains caught in the contradiction of being itself in its own eyes this shut-in unit and yet of being nevertheless dependent on something else, and the struggle to resolve this contradiction does not get beyond an attempt and the continuation of this eternal war.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly this tangled and volatile prose relies for its dynamics on the individual interacting with others to constitute a world. And that, of course, is nothing other than the familiar everyday world. Which goes to explain why "prose" and "everyday" and their derivatives shadow each other so closely in Hegel's writings. A certain outlook is described as a "mode of *everyday* consciousness in our *prosaic* life"; some German authors are taken to task for representing "*daily life*" in rather "*prosaic*" terms; Protestantism with its "sure footing in the *prose* of life" is credited to have inspired Dutch genre painting to seek its subjects in "*daily life*;" and so forth.<sup>32</sup> And as already mentioned, it is in a "world of *prose* and *everyday*" that the individual is called on to join the game for two to play. Everyday stands thus for the temporal dimension of the prose of the world.

This is an essential dimension. It determines the concreteness of the I-We transactions which give that prose its content. For it is in the everyday that individuals encounter one another in the process of mutual recognition. It is there that they have or do not have time for others. In short, it is the everyday that provides the prose of the world with a basic framework on which to display the fabric of inter-subjective relationships as the phenomena that constitute it. Consequently we do not have to stretch the idea too far to think of everyday as the general form of the temporality that informs the prose of the world.

Expressed in this form everyday appears initially and obviously as the present. However, this is a present distinguished by a forward lurch even as it makes its debut. For what drives a self-consciousness to seek another with which to negotiate recognition is desire. According to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Self-consciousness is *Desire* in general."<sup>33</sup> As such, it stands clearly apart from need. Unlike the latter, it is not directed towards any sensuous object in particular with

which to satisfy its appetite. "What it desires, although it does not know this explicitly, is itself," says Hyppolite; "it desires its own desire. And that is why it will be able to attain itself through finding another desire, another self-consciousness. . . . Desire seeks itself in the other; man desires recognition from man."<sup>34</sup> But this proves to be an endless pursuit. For any recognition whatsoever is superseded at once to give rise to desire for another, constituting an interminable series of successions. Desire, as Jacques Lacan has observed, is thus "caught in the rails" of metonymy "eternally stretching forth towards the *desire for something else*."<sup>35</sup> If self-consciousness is the movement of desire, it is inexorably forward-moving. That is how, as a participant in the everyday struggle for recognition, it propels what is present in the prose of the world necessarily towards the future.

But this is not all that is there to the temporality of the prose of the world. Its everyday present, ever on its way to the future, is laden with the past as well. For each individual brings along with him a past as part of the equipment he must have for his encounter with an other. Correspondingly, the particularity, thanks to which he has been caught up in the mesh of interconnecting subjectivities in the first place, turns into a *temporal particularity* predicated on a specific past. This temporal particularity mediates the everyday being-together-in-the-world of all who have time for one another. The past figures in this mediation as a set of reciprocities with the subject arriving at the scene as someone with a history. The other he is about to meet has a history as well. Thus history stands, in each case, for the experience of what he has been so far as a particular being in body and soul, and what in his past has not only induced him to enter the game of recognition but also determined the other with whom he will be involved in that game and how the latter will proceed. Each will bring his own history to the process of recognition as an essential condition of its mutuality.

However they will do so in terms of an answering movement that complements for each the knowledge of his own past by an interpretation of the other's he does not know yet. What he knows, or thinks he knows, is only his own history. Yet recognition demands that he should know the past of the other as well. Understanding gets to work,



therefore, to make sense of the latter by providing the preconceptions and presuppositions an individual needs as foreknowledge or intuition that runs ahead of itself about what he is connecting with. The other he connects with reciprocates in similar terms. In this way, each in his predisposition acquires a grasp of the other's past as material that is already available for historicization. The prose of the world in which human beings make one another intelligible in the course of their everyday struggle for mutual recognition becomes imbued thus with historicality.

If the writing of history were to ground itself in such historicality, it would have a subject-matter as comprehensive as the human condition itself. The world would open up with all of its pasts ready to serve for its narratives. No continent, no culture, no rank or condition of social being would be considered too small or too simple for its prose. On the contrary, we would be ushered into a complex universe "of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of necessity from which the individual is in no position to withdraw."<sup>36</sup> As one can see from this description, it would be the world of the prose of the world itself. And what stories it would have to tell!

It may not be too idle to speculate that Hegel himself was excited, however momentarily, at the prospect of a historical discourse embracing "the whole breadth of prose in human existence," that is, the prospect of a historiography fully adequate to historicality. After all, he had seen the light of a dawn awakening and enlarging the world of his early academic days in Tübingen. Perhaps a glint of that vision still lingered in his aging eyes when he wrote to remind the historian that he had "no right to expunge these prosaic characteristics in his material" and that, to all circumstances, characters and events confronting him, "he must give free play in their external contingency, dependence on other things and uncounselled arbitrariness." For it is in the historical situation, he says, that "the play of chance" reveals itself as "the breach between what is inherently substantive and the relativity of single events and occurrences as well as of the particular characters in their own passions, intentions, and fates." Thus history

as "this prose" of the world has, in his view, "far more things that are extraordinary and eccentric than those miracles of poetry."<sup>37</sup> He goes on, therefore, to warn the historian against the temptations of poetry.

If the historian carries his subjective inquiries [he writes] so far as to probe the absolute reasons for what happens and even Divine providence, before which all accidents vanish and where a higher necessity is unveiled, nevertheless, in respect of events as they appear in reality, he may not allow himself the privilege of poetry.<sup>38</sup>

Ironically, however, the philosopher was to succumb to that temptation himself. Not long after he had written this cautionary advice into his lectures on aesthetics, he would exercise "the privilege of poetry" in his lectures on the philosophy of World-history. He would do so in the name of a prose of history devised strictly according to divine providence. Not only that "events as they appear in reality" would be hitched to "a higher necessity" cutting out contingency and arbitrariness. But entire continents and peoples would be cut out of history as well. Except for a region of relatively developed statehood and designated, with some exaggeration, as World-history, the greater part of the prose of the world with all its historicality would be left to stagnate in "prehistory." How and why this happened will be the subject of our discussion in what follows.

### 3 The Prose of History, or The Invention of World-History

*Advent of the prose of history—its role in developing a historiography to display Spirit's progress as Reason in History or World-history—dynamism of the process of actualization—the idea of historical "stages" in Condorcet and Hegel—the shift in Hegel's thinking toward a notion of history as providential design—centrality of statehood in the criteria of eligibility for World-history—the principle of exclusion and Eurocentric bias underlying the Hegelian schema—the category of Prehistory and its implications—the politics of displacement in the philosophy of World-history as seen from the other side of the limit.*

The prose of history comes after the prose of the world as a staging post on Spirit's road to self-consciousness. Here, no less than in the instance of primal differentiation between poetry and its successor prose, it is the younger that is more developed, more progressive. For, in Hegel's evolutionary model, the subsequent is distinguished by a higher value. "In the case of spiritual phenomena," he writes, "higher forms are produced through the transformation of earlier and less advanced ones."<sup>1</sup> Nothing testifies better to this order of precedence and importance for Hegel than the emergence of the prose of history out of the prose of the world, a new prose out of the old. In the *Aesthetics* he shows how the latter constitutes a field of particularities,

conflicts, and contingencies with the Spirit still not free from its entanglement with nature. It will have to assert its freedom and through freedom achieve self-consciousness by objectifying itself in the concreteness of the world. World-history will draw for its content precisely on this process of Spirit's self-objectification, and it will be for the prose of history to conceptualize and write it. And since Spirit is reason, World-history and its representation in historiography stand for reason in history—a phrase made famous by the subtitle of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. However, years before that publication he had already constructed a nexus relating World-history to reason and Spirit thus in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821):

Since spirit in and for itself is *reason*, and since the being-for-itself of reason in spirit is knowledge, world history is the necessary development, from the *concept* of the freedom of spirit alone, of the *moments* of reason and hence of spirit's self-consciousness and freedom. It is the exposition and the *actualization of the universal spirit*.<sup>2</sup>

Actualization is of strategic importance in this formulation. For, it is thanks to actualization that "the spirit attains its most concrete reality" in what Hegel calls the "theatre, province, and sphere of [its] realization [as] the history of the world."<sup>3</sup> But actualization presupposes potentiality, that is, what is still implicit and holds itself back until finally achieved as a goal attained or an object grasped. It might be tempting, therefore, to think the potential in the image of a germ, except that it could lead one to believe Spirit's actualization in history as being somehow similar to what happened in nature. But the analogy does not work, and Hegel cautions us by pointing out that "in nature, [Spirit] actualizes itself only as the other of itself, as dormant spirit," whereas in the state—and by implication in history—Spirit "which is present in the world . . . *consciously* realizes itself therein."<sup>4</sup> This is a significant distinction, which corresponds, in Hegelian ontology as developed in the *Encyclopaedia*, to that between being as "unreflected immediacy" and existence as the "immediate unity of

being and reflection [,] hence appearance.” The latter makes itself explicit as an externality which is its “energizing,” as Hegel calls it.<sup>5</sup> He chooses, therefore, to characterize potentiality as an impulse (“just as the Aristotelian *dynamics* is also *potentia*,” he reminds us)—the “inherent impulse of spiritual life to break through the shell of natural and sensory existence, of all that is alien to it, and to arrive at the light of consciousness, i.e. at its own nature.”<sup>6</sup>

Actualization is thus the process by which Spirit overcomes the natural determinations of its being to assert its freedom and take to the path of its realization in self-consciousness. It is a dynamic process that suggests a great deal of movement on the road to reason. For what is at issue here is “the aim of world history,” as Hegel puts it, to assimilate itself to Spirit’s career, so “that the spirit should attain knowledge of its own true nature, that it should objectivise this knowledge and transform it into a real world, and give itself an objective existence.”<sup>7</sup> The truly historicist character of this aim, “itself a product of the spirit,” shows up in a passage bristling with temporal indices. Thus:

This *process* [of actualization], in which [Spirit] mediates itself with itself by its own unaided efforts, has various distinct moments; it is full of *movement* and *change*, and is determined in different ways at different times. It consists essentially of a series of separate *stages*, and world *history* is the expression of the divine *process* which is a graduated *progression* in which the spirit comes to know and realise itself and its own truth. Its various *stages* are *stages* in the self-recognition of the spirit; and the essence of the spirit, its supreme imperative, is that it should recognise, know, and realise itself for what it is. It accomplishes this end in the *history* of the world; it produces itself in a series of determinate forms, and these forms are the nations of world *history*. Each of them represents a particular *stage* of *development*, so that they correspond to *epochs* in the *history* of the world.<sup>8</sup>

Process, movement, change, stages, progression, development, epochs: words which seem to bear out the dictum that “the utterance of the actual is the actual itself.”<sup>9</sup> Witness to Spirit’s labor at actuali-

zation in World-history, they are marks left by that project on the sands of time. They speak of its drive and direction, its transformative energies, its imprimatur on the designation of ages and periods. But it is the phrase “stages” that stands out of this welter most clearly to define Spirit’s involvement in history and measure its extent. For a stage is a resting place that punctuates the line of an ongoing movement. If Spirit were on its journey in the world, a stage would indicate how far it had traveled, how much farther it had to go, where it had stopped and for how long. But a stage is also a platform used for display as in a theater, and World-history is, for Hegel, “the theatre in which we are about to witness [*Geist*’s] operations.”<sup>10</sup> In undertaking thus to put the latter up for show on the stage of World-history, the philosopher assumes the role of impresario or producer—the wise man who, as an accomplice of Spirit itself, already knows the plot. Or he may be acting as the *sūtradhāra*, the controller of the story line, who, in a Sanskrit drama, could also be the *vidūṣaka*, i.e., the jester. If the stage is meant to display Spirit’s performance in the world not merely for entertainment but also for the evaluation of what it has achieved, the prologue can make a difference depending on who delivers it. I leave it to my audience and readers to identify the figure they first see on the stage when the curtain goes up. Is that the philosopher of history or history’s fool?

For our part, let us get on with the show taking “stage” in the first of these two senses for cue. We do so because it refers Hegel’s thinking back to its roots in the Enlightenment and points at the same time to an orientation that is all its own. Throughout the eighteenth century the European mind had been occupied with speculations about progress as it made its way through the world along a path called history. And with the world expanding in space under the impact of conquests and discoveries and in time by contact with the older civilizations, the road became long and arduous enough to require an occasional stop between one lap and the next. The metaphor of progress as a journey in stages was an attempt made by the philosophical language of the time to grasp this movement. It was a legacy Hegel had acquired in direct line of descent, but what he did with it would not have amused the forefathers.

Take Condorcet, the last of the *philosophes* to write on the history of progress. His *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, published in 1795, sums up a great deal of what the most eminent intellectuals of the century, Voltaire and Turgot amongst them, had to say on this subject.<sup>11</sup> It is a magisterial survey of progress as a journey in ten stages and the remarkable thing about it is that it is firmly set in the world. There is nothing about it, nothing that connects its stages or makes up their content as history, which is not strictly secular. Universal history, as constructed by the Enlightenment, might have differed between some versions and others in scope and interpretation. But they all had man at the center. Which is not what one could claim for Hegel's construction of World-history.

Hegel scholars have noticed a remarkable shift in his thinking between an earlier youthful phase and another that was more mature dating from the Jena days. Nothing so clear-cut as a lurch from left to right, it was nonetheless conspicuous for the caution that had displaced the radical enthusiasm of his Tübingen period. The revolutionary wave of the 1790s had peaked and passed and with it was gone what Charles Taylor calls "the man-centred conception of regeneration" characteristic of Hegel's ideas in his early theological manuscripts. He would now proceed to match the "notion of *Geist* as a subject greater than man" to "a notion of historical process which could not be explained in terms of conscious human purposes, but rather by the greater purposes of *Geist*." Henceforth "the subject of history in Hegel's thought" would no longer be man but *Geist*.<sup>12</sup> All this is copiously documented in the later writings and especially in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, as the following extracts show:

World history is nothing more than the plan of providence. The world is governed by God; and world history is the content of his government and the execution of his plan. (p. 67)

The overall content of world history is rational, and indeed has to be rational; a divine will rules supreme and is strong enough to determine the overall content. (p. 30)

That world history is governed by an ultimate design, that it is a rational process—whose rationality is . . . a divine and absolute reason—this is a proposition whose truth we must assume; its proof lies in the study of world history itself, which is the image and enactment of reason. (p. 28)

Since World-history is a providential plan, Hegel insists that it is not and cannot be subject to arbitrariness, chance, or anything else that may imply contingency. In the *Logic* he acknowledges the part played by contingency in nature and "in the world of Mind" as well. However, it is up to science and philosophy, he says, to realize that for them "the problem . . . consists in eliciting the necessity concealed under the semblance of contingency."<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, in the *Lectures on World History* he proceeds "to eliminate the contingent" by taking his stand on what he considers "the religious truth that the world is not a prey to chance and external contingent causes, but is governed by providence."<sup>14</sup> The outcome of the exercise, as noted above, was to found history on *Geist's* design. The very embodiment of reason, it was destined fully and faultlessly to realize itself by matching its end to its concept and the concept to the process of its actualization.

The problem with this design to cast history in cement, albeit in the name of God, is that it is hardly amenable to the practice of historiography. Immune from contingency it is obviously not subject to those mediations which alone can transform the potential into the actual. In other words, it is frozen in a condition outside time and history. The discourse for such a design may, arguably, be a kind of hard-eyed objectivist description with no room for interpretation in it. Whether it is possible to conceive or write such a discourse is itself an intriguing question. But leaving that aside, it may be difficult in any case to write the story of Spirit's journey through the world if its freedom is not free enough to slip into uncertainty or its itinerary is indeed so secure as never to be upset by accident.

We know, of course, that in his lectures on World-history Hegel has sought to cover himself preemptively against the charge of inflexibility. He has done so, first, by allowing passion a certain amount

of play in its encounter with reason and, secondly, by the proviso that the execution of *Geist's* plan may run into difficulty, or contradiction as he calls it, in particular instances of its working at the national level. But these allowances, made in an empiricist gesture, apply only to the local and the incidental without affecting the cosmic design. Fortuitous exceptions, they highlight the fundamentally inexorable aspect of the latter. There is no room for irony in this history. It may put up with the occasional titter and tickle at the margin, but no laughter to mock the providential discipline on guard at the center. All of which must make the story of the past very dull reading indeed. But can such a history be written at all?

The question seems to have occurred to Hegel as well. That is why at a critical turn in the argument—between remarks on the principles governing Spirit's development and those on the stages of its progress—he pauses briefly to reflect on historiography:

[Development] contains not just the purely formal aspect of development itself, but involves the realization of an end whose content is determinate. And we have made it clear from the outset what this end is: it is the spirit in its essential nature, i.e. as the concept of freedom. This is the fundamental object, so that the guiding principle of development endows the development itself with meaning and significance; thus, in Roman history, Rome is the object which guides our consideration of the events, and conversely, the events have their source in this object alone, so that their entire significance and import are derived from it.<sup>15</sup>

This, to me, is a statement about method according to which the writing of history requires a selection of material (or evidence, as historians call it) that is relevant to the theme, topic, or problem written about. Any decision I take in this regard will serve as a "guiding principle" to determine the choice of evidence—generically speaking, "events"—and endow them with significance as they go into the making of my narrative. Handled with care this method might work. With care—one cannot emphasize that enough—so as

not to use the terms of the principle concerned as blinkers and deny evidence the freedom to interact with hypothesis and plot correcting the flaws in one and infelicities in the other.

But even if I were to adopt this method for my history, I would still hesitate to follow Hegel's example in naming it. For the name should be true to the nature of the exercise so that no one is misled about its scope. Since the scope is itself strictly circumscribed by the governing principle which nominates the theme and selects the content for my narrative, I would have to designate it in accordance with these determinations, just as "Roman history" is named after Rome, the "principle" that in Hegel's view thematized the history so called and furnished it with all the relevant "events." Working by this analogy, as the philosopher expects his readers to do, it would be hard for them to justify "World History" as title or description of *his* narrative.

It is a narrative about the development of Spirit, which, we have been told, is "a form of progress."<sup>16</sup> The end or aim of progress is Spirit's realization of itself "in its essential nature, i.e. as the concept of freedom," and this is what, in Hegel's opinion, "endows the development itself with meaning and significance." In other words, the story, which has this development as its "object," relies on "the guiding principle" to select its *matériel* from the world where Spirit realizes itself as freedom in the course of its progress. The world is witness thus to the progressive self-realization of Spirit and provides evidence for its narrative. But that does not make the latter World-history any more than an account of Marco Polo's travels in China makes his travelogue a history of China. The subject of Hegel's philosophy of history is *Geist* and not the world.

Yet this hypostasis has its uses. As an Indian, I recognize in this an idealist device similar to what the ancient school of Vedānta called *adhyāsa*. Translated into English usually as "superimposition," it functions as a basic concept in the theory of illusion (*māyāvāda*), and means, according to Śaṅkara, the ninth-century philosopher (788–820 A.D.), "the apparent presentation of the attributes of one thing in another thing."<sup>17</sup> This is conventionally illustrated in the texts by the analogy of seashell (*śukti*) mistaken for silver (*rajata*) with its metallic sheen superimposed on the other's translucence. In much the same

way, the Spirit overdetermined by the world generates a space for ambiguities of all kinds, the most relevant of which is, for us, the confounding of *Geist's* development with historical progress. It will be assumed henceforth that these movements, which are supposed to be concurrent, almost coincidental, follow the same path and are grasped best by the understanding with the help of a common set of signposts. Installed to indicate the stages of a journey, these are used to promote an easy exchange of attributes between the fellow-travelers making the historicization of Spirit hard to distinguish from the spiritualization of history.

Hegel leaves us in no doubt about the importance he attaches to these stages, which, he says, "supply us with the divisions we shall observe in our survey of world history and which will help us to organise our discussion of it."<sup>18</sup> This is somewhat of an understatement. For it is obvious that their function in the text, as it unfolds, is much more basic than that of sectional markers or editorial devices. They describe the conversion of the prose of the world into the prose of history in terms of Spirit's progress towards freedom and self-consciousness. This involves, first, the choice of a set of basic "principles" as the means of historicization; secondly, some general considerations about natural and historical change; and, thirdly, the formulation of conditions required for what should or should not count as history. We shall discuss these in turn.

1. Let us start with Hegel's dictum that "world history as a whole is the expression of the spirit in time" and recall that he modifies it at once by adding, "But in one respect, the nations of history, which are spiritual forms, are also natural entities. Accordingly, the various patterns they assume appear to coexist indifferently in space, i.e. to exist perennially."<sup>19</sup> He then goes on to enumerate and describe these "patterns" as "three main principles"—the Asian principle (including the Chinese and the Indian), "the first to appear in history"; the Middle Eastern or Islamic principle of monotheism "coupled with unrestrained arbitrariness"; and "the Christian, Western European . . . the highest principle of all." These constitute, for him, a "universal series . . . existing perennially," and encountered as "a se-

quence of successive stages."<sup>20</sup> In other words, it is the function of the latter to reify timeless entities and designs for history by overlaying them in a regional schema. No wonder, then, that such historicization has imbued Hegel's construct of World-history with all the usual ambiguities of superimposition confounding seashell and silver, or, as in the present case, the regional and the universal.

2. The concept of stages is used next as a guide to the dynamics of history. This calls for a critical distinction between changes in nature and those in "the spiritual world," which is often the name Hegel uses for history. "Changes in the natural world," he says, "no matter how great their variety, exhibit only an eternally recurring cycle; for in nature there is nothing new under the sun."<sup>21</sup> It is not that things do not change in nature; they do, but only as individuals to be reproduced in the species. It is a world trapped in its own particularity: here, "the life which arises from death is itself only another instance of particular life." The result is a cyclicity thanks to which "the survival of the species consists purely in a uniform repetition of one and the same mode of existence."<sup>22</sup> By contrast, anything that is new emerges "only in those changes which take place in the spiritual sphere."<sup>23</sup> It does so, because "in the world of the spirit, each change is a form of progress." Here, unlike in nature with its reproductive cycles always churning out the same, "higher forms are produced through the transformation of earlier and less advanced ones." Which is "why spiritual phenomena occur within the medium of time"—that is, history.<sup>24</sup>

However, the distinction between linearity and cyclicity concerns not only the shape or form of change but its character as well. As Hegel points out, "The development of natural organisms takes place in an immediate, unopposed, and unhindered fashion, for nothing can intrude between the concept and its realization, between the inherently determined nature of the germ and the actual existence which corresponds to it." This is a relatively "peaceful process" that allows growth to retain its identity and remain "self-contained in its expression." But there is nothing so smooth about the path taken by Spirit. The process of its actualization is mediated by consciousness and will which "are themselves immersed at first in their immediate

natural life." Consequently they tend "to follow their natural determinations" pulling away from the direction of Spirit's urge "to fulfil its own concept."

All this makes progress "a hard and obstinate struggle" for Spirit, which "divided against itself . . . has to overcome itself as a truly hostile obstacle to the realisation of its end."<sup>25</sup> History, considered thus, appears as a turbulent scene of perpetual restlessness and uneven development. Its linearity, not to be mistaken for simplicity, is charged with tension and conflict. Its movement, always at transverse to the self-containment of nature, is characterized by an inexhaustible dynamism ready for investment in that open and unlimited prospect we have come to recognize as the prose of the world.

3. The division between the stage of Spirit's immersion in nature and that of its emergence in the fullness of history is a preliminary, though necessary, step for our understanding of World-history. It provides us with what at one point Hegel calls "the a priori structure of history to which empirical reality must correspond."<sup>26</sup> Much of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* is an exercise in fitting structure to reality and demonstrates what kind of world the author had in mind—and what kind of history.

It is in the course of this exercise that the stages are put to their most effective use not simply as narrative breaks but as integral to the argument itself. They have a dual function in this regard. They punctuate a lateral movement insofar as Spirit is on a journey in time. However, it is evolutionary as well, ascending from lower to higher forms. In that vertical construct the stages stand for a corresponding order of values rising from base to apex in a pyramid of civilizations. We have already come across these values as immanent in a number of "principles" constituting a universal series for Hegel. Now they will be woven, strand by strand, into time's warp to make up the fabric of history. As a classic of the idealist view the design is known quite well and requires no comment except to highlight an aspect left out of consideration by most writers on the subject.

They have discussed it at length for its metaphysical and political implications, but seem not have noticed a lacuna in the pattern. What is presented there as the subject of World-history turns out, on closer

look, to be no more than a region claiming to speak for the world as a whole. Consequently the history that goes with it proves to be highly reductive in scope—a short story with epical pretensions. The story belies the global and almost aeonic gesture of its title by leaving large chunks of historicity out of the plot. This is made abundantly clear by the strategies of exclusion used for this purpose.

Hegel had no intention to hide the exclusive character of his schema. In the First Draft of the lectures on World-history—a term used throughout the "Introduction" synonymously with "universal world history" and "philosophical history of the world"—he defines its scope thus at the very outset:

Nations whose consciousness is obscure, or the obscure history of such nations, are . . . *not the object* of the philosophical history of the world, whose end is to attain knowledge of the Idea in history—the spirits of those nations which [have] become conscious of their inherent principle, and have become aware of what they are and what their actions signify, are its *object*.<sup>27</sup>

Those who are lucky enough to qualify as the object of World-history are thus categorically distinguished from those who are not. Henceforth the excluded will be settled in a space called Prehistory with World-history reserved solely for the chosen nations. The line separating Prehistory and World-history—the upper case used to indicate their status as strictly demarcated areas of history—is drawn at consciousness. For *Geist*, the World Spirit, uses national spirits [*Völkergeister*] to actualize itself in the historical process, which is "the movement of its own activity in gaining absolute knowledge of itself and thereby freeing its consciousness from the form of natural immediacy and so coming to itself." In other words, self-consciousness assumes national "configurations" [*Gestaltungen*] in the course of its liberation from "natural immediacy."<sup>28</sup> These configurations—the Oriental, the Greek, the Roman, and the Germanic—four "world-historical realms" Hegel calls them (or three when the second and third are conflated on some occasions) are then allocated to the partitioned zones to make up a diptych of philosophical history.

Which configuration will be allocated where depends, first, on the

degree of its lack of "immersion in nature," and, secondly, on the extent of its affirmation of freedom. Both of these conditions are satisfied by the emergence of the state, which is regarded as a true measure of the maturity of a national spirit's self-consciousness. For, according to this view, it is by constituting a state that a people or nation (*Volk*) frees itself from its thralldom in "natural immediacy." With all the incipient and weak formations left out as inadequate it is only a fully developed statehood that qualifies nations for their place in World-history.

Three out of the four realms pass the adequacy test. The only one that fails is the Oriental. It does so because, as the very first of the configurations to emerge in time, it has not moved beyond the moment of "absolute beginning of every state's history" at which "*spirituality* is still *substantial and natural*."<sup>29</sup> However, this observation, which dates from the *Philosophy of Right*, is modified subsequently in the *Lectures on World History* where Hegel identifies the condition as "that so-called unity of the spirit with nature which we encounter in the Oriental World."<sup>30</sup> Whether it is a case of arrested development that could occur anywhere or just a typically Eastern phenomenon, this indicates, in any case, that Spirit is "still immersed in nature and not yet self-sufficient; it is therefore not yet free, and has not undergone the process by which freedom comes into being." Compared to the other realms where *All* are free as in the Germanic, or at least *Some* are as in the Greek and the Roman, only *One* is free in the patriarchal world of the Orient.<sup>31</sup> The latter, born before all the others—speaking in terms of stages—is trapped, paradoxically, in a condition of spiritual infancy, while Greece and Rome have pushed ahead respectively to youth and "manhood." However, Hegel, fond as he is of organic analogies, does not extend this one to the Germanic instance, which he describes as "the old age of the spirit." Old age, he says, is followed by death in the case of human beings, whereas Spirit cannot die, "so that the comparison is no longer applicable."<sup>32</sup> Rather ingenious, one may think. But let that pass. For it makes no difference to the Oriental's place in the sequence of stages. Lagging behind the rest of the pack on the road to self-consciousness or stuck at the bottom of freedom's tower—no matter whether the image of

progress is lateral or vertical—the Orient is condemned to remain where it was at the very beginning—that is, condemned to stay frozen in Prehistory.

But is there no redeeming feature or factor at all? Is there nothing in, for instance, the great literatures, philosophies, and arts of India and China to entitle them to a niche in World-history? Hegel's answer is an emphatic no. He addresses this question again and again, and deals with it vigorously and at length on each occasion. In his writings of the later years he would return to the scene on the slightest pretext and often by the longest detour to deliver yet another blast, as if he felt he had not said enough already and the matter was far from settled. He did not deny that creativity and morality could be "encountered in every region, under all constitutions, and in all political circumstances" and that India and China were indeed remarkable for their achievements in this respect. Yet when it came to dealing with the favorable opinion expressed by some scholars about Indian or Chinese philosophy as compared with Eleatic, Pythagorean, and Spinozistic metaphysics, he reacted strongly to join issue with them. He dismissed their views as abstractions lacking in "determinate content." This implied, according to him, "that those distinctions which ar[o]se out of the degree of self-consciousness which freedom ha[d] attained [were] unimportant or inessential" for the advocates of a less restrictive view of history.<sup>33</sup>

What he means by "determinate content" and "distinctions" in this context is clarified further in his own evaluation of Chinese morality and Indian philosophy. The former, known in Europe through the writings of Confucius, has received, he notes, "the highest praise and the most flattering tributes to its merits even from those who are familiar with Christian morality," while the latter has been admired for the sublimity of its argument against "all sensual things."<sup>34</sup> However, he is not impressed. In his opinion,

These two nations are lacking—indeed completely lacking—in the essential self-consciousness of the concept of freedom. The Chinese look on their moral rules as if they were laws of nature, positive external commandments, coercive rights and duties, or



rules of mutual courtesy. Freedom, through which the substantial determinations of reason can alone be translated into ethical attitudes, is absent. . . . And in the Indian doctrine of renunciation of sensuality, desires, and all earthly interests, positive ethical freedom is not the goal and end, but rather the extinction of consciousness and the suspension of spiritual and even physical life.<sup>35</sup>

His critique of the Indian epics does not stray much from this line of attack. He is not insensitive to their charm, he admits with a touch of condescension, but finds that in the subcontinent, as elsewhere in the East, this particular kind of poetry does not allow the individual "to work his way through to that independence of personal character and its aims (with the collisions that these involve) which the genuine development of dramatic poetry imperatively demands."<sup>36</sup> The human element "remains repressed" here. In the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata man figures as a sort of apanage of the gods—either as an incarnation of one of them or as a mere accessory or simply as an entity assimilated to godhood by ascetic practices. In Greek poetry, by contrast, gods and men enjoy "freedom of independent individuality."<sup>37</sup> Hegel's verdict on Indian literature is indeed as negative as it is Eurocentric: "The substantive foundations of the whole thing are of such a kind," he writes, "that our Western outlook can neither be really at home there nor sympathize with it because we cannot resolve to abandon the higher demands of freedom and ethical life."<sup>38</sup>

Whether this has to do with philosophy or epic poetry, India just does not make the grade. For even in these fields of high achievement it does not know freedom. However, this freedom must not be mistaken for any particular will free to pursue its own ends. It stands for the freedom of each individual citizen to try to identify himself consciously with the general will—that is, the state. As Hegel puts it: "Freedom is nothing more than a knowledge and affirmation of such universal and substantial objects as law and justice, and the production of a reality which corresponds to them—i.e. the state."<sup>39</sup> Which leads us to the heart of the matter: the peoples and nations of the Oriental realm are excluded from World-history because, according

to the philosophy that has constructed it, they have not matured fully into statehood.

The centrality of the state in Hegel's system is a well-known fact of Western philosophy, and so are the debates it has inspired. He is firmly of the opinion that the process of Spirit's actualization in the world culminates in the state. All the salient aspects of that development are reiterated in various combinations tirelessly in his statements on the subject. In one he would speak of its implications for history, freedom, and will, thus: "The state is the spiritual Idea externalised in the human will and its freedom. All historical change is therefore essentially dependent upon the state, and the successive moments of the Idea appear within it as distinct constitutional principles."<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, taking history together with freedom, the state is said to be "the more specific object of world history in general, in which freedom attains its objectivity and enjoys the fruits of this objectivity."<sup>41</sup> Reason and existence, too, are served best by the state. "Only in the state does man have a rational existence," he says. "Man owes his entire existence to the state, and has his being within it alone. Whatever worth and spiritual reality he possesses are his solely by virtue of the state." Truth is assimilated as well: "For the truth is the unity of the universal and the subjective will, and the universal is present within the state, in its laws and in its universal and rational properties."<sup>42</sup> And to cover everything as comprehensively as possible there is that coping pronouncement in the *Philosophy of Right* according to which "the state consists in the march of God in the world."<sup>43</sup>

All that is, of course, metaphysics, which, however, has not stopped Hegel's critics from questioning its politics. His own method invited such questioning. As a child of his times he had his thinking colored inevitably by the events and sentiments of that epoch. "No philosophy can transcend its own age," says Jean Hyppolite, "or jump over Rhodes, as Hegel puts it." And Marx was one amongst a number of contemporaries and near contemporaries to identify "an essential tendency of Hegelian thought, which is to legitimate existing reality by conceiving it philosophically."<sup>44</sup> Whether that amounted to a bias in

favor of Prussianism or made his theory of the state into an instrument for “the preparation of fascism and imperialism,” as suggested by Ernst Cassirer, may be open to argument.<sup>45</sup> But it is beyond doubt that the continuing debate on this question for the greater part of two centuries is itself evidence of what so radical a statist doctrine like Hegel’s can do to perpetuate the fear of strong, centralized states and totalitarianism. However, the implications of such statism for historiography and generally for our understanding of history have not been a part of that liberal concern. For the latter it is only the doctrinal threat to Western European democracy that is a political issue, but not the exclusion of other peoples and continents from history. Prehistory is just prepolitical according to this view, whereas regarded from the standpoint of the excluded it is nothing other than political.

The line which divides World-history and Prehistory is itself an obvious clue to that politics. Obvious, because it is a line clearly drawn on the map. The three realms out of the four—the last three stages—are all European ranging successively, between antiquity and modernity, from the Greek through the Roman to the Germanic. Hegel’s use of the word “Germanic” (*germanisch*) is very broad indeed. It includes not only what he calls “Germany proper” (*das eigentliche Deutschland*) with its Franks and Normans, and the peoples of England and Scandinavia—generally, the Teutons—but also the “Romanic” peoples of France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal with the Lombards and Burgundians, the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, and moving somewhat to the east, even the Magyars and the Slavs thrown in for effect.<sup>46</sup> That adds up to about all of Western and Central Europe, as we know it.

Hegel identifies himself spontaneously with the region when he speaks in the name of a collective “we” to express his disapproval of something Oriental—as, of the Indian epics, in the instance cited above. Some of that self-identification might have induced him to bend his own rules of adequacy in order to admit the three European realms to World-history. Its gates are firmly shut, for instance, against India which does not qualify because its society is an unfree patriarchal structure, but the slave societies of ancient Greece and Rome do and so does medieval and early modern Europe with its tolerance

of slavery and its considerable dependence on servile labor. China and India are “out” because in these polities only One, that is, the despot, is free, while Greece and Rome are “in” with the stipulation about fully developed freedom modified to accommodate the fact that Some, though by no means All, are free there. The Germanic realm may have benefited from some special consideration in this respect as well. Here All are supposed to be free, for it is a “Christian World,” and, says Hegel, “In the Christian age, the divine spirit has come into the world and taken up its abode in the individual, who is now completely free and endowed with substantial freedom.”<sup>47</sup> This is a very tall claim to make and one that is altogether without foundation in the facts of European history, even if it were drastically foreshortened to date the beginning of “the Christian age” from the fall of the Roman Empire. What about freedom in the principalities and kingdoms ruled by despots and oligarchs throughout the region in that period with only One free in some cases and no more than Some in most of the others? What about the “freedom of All” under the absolute monarchies, all very Christian, which had ruled over large parts of Europe for three hundred years until Hegel’s time?

The discrimination that allows the conditions of eligibility for World-history to be suspended or modified in favor of Europe and strictly enforced against the rest of the world follows from Hegel’s theory of state. Considered in the light of his evolutionary idea of progress it is a Darwinist theory somewhat ahead of its time, but one with no pretension at all to scientific neutrality. On the contrary, the triumph of the strong over the weak is not only regarded as necessary but justified according to some primordial and presumably superior sense of right and wrong. It is “the *right of heroes* to establish states,” he says in the *Philosophy of Right*. It matters little whether the exercise is benevolent or violent or even evil in an ordinary sense of the word, for what is involved is the Idea objectified and actualized in the deeds of the hero acting as its agent.<sup>48</sup> In the *Aesthetics* he refers to Hercules as one such hero—“not exactly a moral hero,” he grants, judging by his lust on the Thespian night or his brutality at the Augean stables, but a hero nonetheless who, like other “Greeks of his kind,” appear in a pre-legal era, or become themselves the founders

of states, "so that right and order, law and morals, proceed from them."<sup>49</sup>

What holds for such heroes holds for "civilized nations" as well and "entitles [them] to regard and treat as barbarians other nations which are less advanced than they are in the substantial moments of the state (as with pastoralists in relation to hunters, agriculturists in relation to both of these), in the consciousness that the rights of these other nations are not equal to theirs and that their independence is merely formal."<sup>50</sup> The argument is extended thus in a number of ways. In the first place, it is not concerned with the individual hero but with "civilized nations." Secondly, the site has moved from myth to history with the "civilized" representing higher modes of production and states corresponding to them as compared to those of the "barbarians." Thirdly, right, conceptualized no longer in absolute terms by reference to the Idea or *Geist*, has been secularized in this instance as what actually obtains among nations and relativized according to degrees of difference between economies, states, and civilizations. And, finally, "in the wars and conflicts which arise in these circumstances," the so-called civilized nations are entitled to treat the barbarians as peoples whose rights are not equal to theirs and whose independence is "merely formal," hence not worth respecting.

Thinly veiled in philosophical language there is something in this formulation that all students of colonialism will recognize straightaway as the notorious right of conquest. It is the sort of right that encouraged the first architects of the British empire in the East to dismiss questions about the East India Company's legal entitlement to rulership in the subcontinent as "mere formalities," and boast, as one of them did before the House of Commons, "There was no power in India but the power of the sword, and that power was the British sword, and no other."<sup>51</sup> The man who carried that sword for the Company, Robert Clive, was obviously not far from Hegel's mind when he cited him as an example of the morality of conquest. Clive, regarded from the standpoint of the conquered as less of a hero than a crook who had luck on his side, represents in the *Philosophy of Right* "the true valour of civilized nations" and "their readiness for sacrifice in the service of the state."<sup>52</sup> The fact that he worked throughout his

career only for a merchant company and never for the state at a time when the two were not on the best of terms is a detail which seems to have been overlooked in statist haste. For the main thing is to uphold the primacy of the state, even by anticipation if need be, and do so by glorifying the imperial projects of European powers as a moral and spiritual achievement.

To stop such achievement from being trivialized as the triumph of a superior force in "any ordinary war between nations," Hegel rolls out a wide literary canvas to display the violence of territorial aggrandizement as a "higher undertaking . . . grounded in a higher necessity." That, he says in a passage remarkable for its candor,

arises above all in the Iliad where the Greeks take the field against the Asiatics and thereby fight the first epic battles . . . that led to the wars which constitute in Greek history a turning-point in world-history. In a similar way the Cid fights against the Moors; in Tasso and Ariosto the Christians fight against the Saracens, in Camoens the Portuguese against the Indians. And so in almost all the great epics we see peoples different in morals, religion, speech, in short in mind and surroundings, arrayed against one other; and *we are made completely at peace by the world-historically justified victory of the higher principle over the lower*. . . . In this sense, the Epics of the past describe the triumph of the West over the East.<sup>53</sup>

Hegel could have called that the triumph of World-history over Prehistory as well. The conceptual demarcation between these two terms in his writings on the philosophy of history coincides neatly with one that is geographical. As such it enables us to grasp the politics of its metaphysical phrasing by translating the so-called "victory of the higher principle over the lower" as that of "civilized" Europe over the "barbarians" of already colonized and yet to be colonized Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We who hail from those parts are posited by this geopolitics clearly at the lower end of the arch that spans millennia between the age of Homer and that of Columbus—the age of imperialism.

Hegel's inclination "to legitimate existing reality by conceiving it philosophically" has been the object of a great deal of comment in the West, but mostly for its regional implications, as we have noticed. Western scholars have only been concerned to justify or refute the notion that his radical statism contains elements hostile to the liberal-democratic state system of the West itself. It is therefore up to those excluded from World-history by that statism to try and understand what such segregation implies for historicity on the other side of the line of demarcation. This, I know, is easier said than done. It demands a lot of rethinking and involves the pain of unlearning what one has learned to take for granted in historiography. Which is perhaps why this is a task best left to an entirely new generation of intellectuals with eyes less tired than ours and minds less committed to shibboleths. They will see and think better. All we can do is to take some steps towards identifying and enunciating the problem and hope this may help them to tackle it if they know it is there.

A first tentative step in that direction may be to start by considering the uses of Prehistory for World-history. The latter gets its content from the colonial career of Western powers which require Prehistory in its Hegelian sense in order to dignify their dominance over the conquered and the colonized by some semblance of hegemony. For any power that aspires after such hegemony—and all liberal-imperialist states do—must either exploit the precolonial past of the subject population directly for purposes of empire building or process it by rewriting to serve the same end in more sophisticated ways. The British are exemplary in this respect, for they tried both in India. The past of the "historyless" people they had conquered proved to be extremely useful in their attempt to convert conquest into rulership. The East India Company's fiscal system, judicial institutions, administrative apparatus—cardinal and formative aspects of the colonial state—relied heavily on that past as the primary source of information required to formulate rules and set up structures for governance.<sup>54</sup> Prehistory was, in this case, the clay used by the regime to put itself in shape. But it also provided colonialism with space to install its own versions of the Indian past converting the latter into material for its edifices of colonialist knowledge. It is thus that the "peoples without

history" in the subcontinent got history as their reward for subjugation to civilized Europe and World-history, just as elsewhere in realms unredeemably sunken in Prehistory the colonized lacking in footwear and faith got shoes and the Bible.

One of the most outstanding achievements of British power in the East was indeed the production and propagation of colonialist historiography. It was cultivated on Prehistory's vacant plots. What was sown for seed came directly out of post-Enlightenment European and particularly English historical literature packaged for use in Indian schools and universities. The product was history written by Indians themselves in faithful imitation of the Western statist model. Unknown to Hegel, India had already been smuggled into World-history by the colonial state for which he had no place in any of his so-called stages, presumably because it did not fit the grand design. But, ironically, Indian authorship did nothing to recover the historicity discarded as Prehistory. Incorporated in World-history, the Indian past continued to be written as a history turning on the colonial and, since Independence, the postcolonial state as its axis.

If World-history has not only penetrated the realm of Prehistory but continues to flourish there, as it does in India and elsewhere in the colonial world by having its statist essence nationalized or indigenized, this is because there is something about the modern Western state-system that must historicize the past on its own terms wherever it operates. In the process the prose of the world loses ground and historicity shrinks in scope to enable a narrowly constructed historiography to speak for all of history. Insofar as such reductiveness is a defining feature of historical narratives produced by the colonized themselves, it shows how well they have been schooled in metropolitan historiography. For the triumph of the state, a Western phenomenon celebrated by philosophy, followed the routes of commerce and conquest to annex the continents of Prehistory intellectually as well. The complicity between imperialism and World-history is therefore not merely a question of the expropriation of the pasts of the colonized by colonizers. It stands also for the globalization of a regional development specific to modern Europe—that is, the overcoming of the prose of the world by the prose of history.

It is a matter of some curiosity that such overcoming has little to do with the state in the *Aesthetics* where, as Hayden White has pointed out, "Hegel elaborates his theory of historical writing itself."<sup>55</sup> Neither the characterizations of prosaic (as against poetical) mentality nor the conditions of historiography, all discussed at length in that work, require a role for the state to translate the prose of the world into the prose of history. However, in the *Lectures on World History*, drafted presumably at about the same time, the state figures as the principal instrument for the development of history and historiography. It is not merely what provides the prose of history with its central theme, but actually helps to produce it. Was this just a matter of compensating for some lacuna in the other text? Or is this evidence of the essentially theological make-up of World-history? Yet, in the *Aesthetics*, the hand of God is far from obvious in the transition from the prose of life to the prose of the world through to the prose of history. Indeed, there seems to be no problem at all about the compatibility of historiography and secular worldhood left to themselves as they are in that work. It is only when they are hitched to a divine plan that the state steps in as the sine qua non for its realization. From a Hegelian perspective the assimilation of history to theology could, of course, be justified as dialectics that help spiritualize the past by endowing it with some sanctity. But its consequence for a historicity determined to remain planted in the human condition appears to be highly problematic. One wonders if that is a dilemma which may be said to have pulled these two great texts—and with them philosophy itself—in opposite directions on the question of the state in the epoch of its ascendancy.

The prose of the world was, as discussed in the previous chapter, an opening up. It was an invitation to all of historicity, that is, to all of man's being in time and his being with others to write itself into that prose and enter it with all the multiplicity and singularity, complexity and simplicity, regularity and unpredictability of such being. The prose of history shuts that out by its exclusive and selective approach to the past. By its concentration on the state as the center of man's place in the world it operates as a strategy of containment. Walled in

by the state and its historiography the citizen is cut off from his historicity as a citizen of the world. It is up to us, of course, to try and critically understand the nature and consequences of that containment in order to combat it. But any attempt to develop a critique adequate to the task is bound to fail so long as it remains indifferent to the question how World-history tells its stories. For it is precisely these that the containing wall has for its brick and mortar. Which is why our survey requires the narratology of World-history to be put in a perspective that would allow other narrative modes—those on the other side of the limit—to show up and speak up in the next stage of our argument.