

Material Reflections: Hegel, Fiction and the Truth of Being

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Da steht auch ein Mensch und starrt in die Höhe,
Und ringt die Hände, vor Schmerzensgewalt;
Mir graust es, wenn ich sein Antlitz sehe, –
Der Mond zeigt mir meine eigne Gestalt. (Heine, *Buch der Lieder*)

I begin with a mirror scene at the climax of Robert Louis Stevenson's novella, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; and the figure of the mirror will guide my entire paper.

The paper is structured as a Hegel sandwich, containing a portion of G. W. F. Hegel's insistent questioning of materiality, a questioning that involves light, mirrors, and reflection that cannot be a merely abstract or even psychological process. Time permitting, I then turn to the deeply Hegelian Theodor W. Adorno, who has a concern with the primacy of the object that is both ethical and political, as I would like to show with reference to his essay "Subject and Object" and his treatise *Aesthetic Theory*. In Adorno's negative-dialectical approach, possessive individualism and consumerism work to persuade the subject of his or her subject-hood, obscuring both the object-like qualities of the subject and the weirdly subject-like qualities of the object. What is thus obscured, I argue, tends to recur in the negative forms of abjection and waste.

For Hegel, the truth of being, namely essence, comes about through a process of negation that involves a kind of mirror stage. My aim ultimately is to explore the tain of this mirror, the infrastructure that enables the truth process to take place. What role does fiction play in this process?

I end by analysing part of "The Outsider," a weird short story by the pulp writer H. P. Lovecraft. The narrator, struggling to escape isolation and imprisonment, is traumatised by the discovery – in a mirror – that he is himself a kind of monster. Lovecraft has recently received considerable philosophical attention, and despite his manifest failings as a writer, this story powerfully dramatises aesthetic alienation and otherness as self-abjection. It also dramatises a threshold beyond which it would be difficult for any anthropocentric reading of materiality to pass.