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Hegel in the Mirrors of Soviet Philosophy: From Love to Hate and Back Again

“Now old desire doth in his deathbed lie,
And young affection gapes to be his heir.”

William Shakespeare

Hegel evoked strong and contradictory feelings in Soviet philosophers. The initial feeling was love. It was hardly romantic love though – too many critical reservations.

Vladimir Lenin began to read Hegel, his *Greater* and *Smaller Logics*, in Siberian exile in the late 1890s. However, in his book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909), the traces of those first studies are virtually invisible. The name of Hegel is mentioned occasionally, but there is nothing that would go beyond Engels’s popular writings on “the end of classical German philosophy.”

Reading Hegel, the materialist must be able “to retrieve the pearl of dialectics [...] from the dung heap of absolute idealism,” Lenin writes.¹

The grotesquely harsh and aggressive style of Lenin’s philosophical creations is reminiscent of the paintings of Russian avant-garde artists or the *Manifesto of Futurism* by Marinetti (of the same year 1909 as *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*). All those revolutionaries deliberately broke the canon and shocked the public. Like the futurists, Lenin called to destroy the old world and glorified the bright world of future, in which technological progress would make human labour free, and “every cook” could govern the state, until it “wither away” at all.

Lenin turned philosophy into a direct continuation of politics and set about to toss lexical bombs into the camp of “bourgeois philosophy.” He formulated his credo quite openly: “Non-partisans in philosophy are just as hopeless dunces as they are in politics.”² Lenin’s “militant materialism” (not to say philosophical terrorism) served as the official pattern of style during the entire Soviet era.

He started painting the portrait of Hegel in the year when the World War broke out. He was studying not only the *Science of Logic* and other works by Hegel, but

¹ V. Lenin, “Materializm i empiriokriticizm”, in: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, vol. 18, Moskva 1968, 256.

² *Ibid.*, 303.