

## HEGEL'S END-OF ART THESIS

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"Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place." <sup>1</sup> This is the most forceful of Hegel's many formulations of what we may designate his End-of-Art Thesis, and it appears very near the beginning of the published version of his *Lectures on Aesthetics* - his *Vorlesungen uber die Aesthetik* - delivered for the fourth and final time in the Winter Semester of 1828, at the University of Berlin. The thesis is so intricately woven into the texture of Hegel's text, however, that it must be regarded as a central and indeed a structural feature of his philosophy of art, rather than a critical *obiter dictum* regarding the art of his time. And it as much addresses what other philosophers have said about art, as art itself.

Of course art will go on being made. There will be art after the end of art. "Art can be used as a fleeting play, affording recreation and entertainment, decorating our surroundings, giving pleasantness to the externals of our life, and making other objects stand out by artistic adornment." <sup>2</sup> So understood, art will play any number of roles in what Hegel terms the *objective spirit* of a society - the system of meanings and practices that constitute the form of life its members live. But Hegel was not speaking of art in terms of objective spirit when he advanced the End-of-Art Thesis. "The universal need for art...is man's rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self." <sup>3</sup> That is art's "highest vocation," to which alone the End-of-Art Thesis has application. So the truth of

the thesis was consistent with art, and even great art, continuing to be made. In the Epilogue to his lecture, *Origins of the Work of Art* (1935-36), Martin Heidegger wrote:

The judgment that Hegel passes in these statements cannot be evaded by pointing out that since Hegel's lectures...we have seen many new art works and art movements arise. Hegel did not mean to deny this possibility. The question, however, remains: is art still an essential and necessary way in which truth that is decisive for our historical existence happens, or is art no longer of this character? <sup>4</sup>

Heidegger implied, wrongly, that despite a century of artistic revolution, it was still too early to say whether the End-of-Art Thesis were true. It is wrong because the Thesis makes no prediction as to the future of art. It is not primarily a thesis about art so much as a thesis regarding our relationship to it. It is a thesis about human beings, whose progress in self-understanding means that we can never again relate to art as our predecessors did when it "afforded that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it." <sup>5</sup> For us, art is merely an object of intellectual consideration – "and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is."<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, aesthetic preoccupation with taste, as in Hume or in Kant, testifies precisely to the fact that the older relation to art has been superseded. "Taste is directed only to the external surface on which feelings play," he wrote. "So-called 'good taste' takes fright at all the deeper effects of art and is silent when externalities and incidentals vanish."<sup>7</sup> Art is now an object for study and philosophical analysis, but it no longer satisfies, by itself alone, the deepest needs of the spirit. We have outgrown art, so to speak.

If, then, there were going again to be a moment when art regained its earlier purpose, that would not be because of the kind of art that came about, but because we ourselves

had reverted to an earlier condition. If that *were* to happen, we would not be able to say of the art in question that it was “an essential and necessary way in which truth that is decisive for our historical existence happens.” It is the end of art precisely when that question can be entertained. The moment it is entertained, the answer is clear. When art really does express the kind of truth in question, no one, in the spirit of cultural or artistic criticism, can wonder whether it does. We cannot undo the history of mind, which has brought us to our present situation.

I use the word Mind where Hegel employed the word Spirit, or *Geist*. “Spirit” is not a word to which the spirit of the English language is especially hospitable, corrupted as the word has been by occult preoccupations and New Age metaphysics. Broadly speaking, the defining activity of Spirit is thinking. In this, Hegel was very close to Descartes, who attempted to prove that he was, essentially and necessarily, a thinking being – an *ens cogitans*. Where Hegel differed from his predecessors lay in the fact that he saw thinking as having a history. The various historical phases of art are phases of thought expressed as art. Art is “born of the spirit and born again”<sup>8</sup> he wrote: *Aus dem Geiste geborene und wiedergeborene*. Hence art is through and through a product of thought, though limited by the fact that it must express its thoughts by sensuous means. *The End-of-Art Thesis* proclaims our liberation from having to find sensuous equivalents for the content of thought. Thinking has risen above and beyond what art is capable of. Art belongs to a less evolved mode of thinking than what the mind, not only ideally but actually, is capable of – and we find this higher capability only in philosophy.

Hegel distinguishes three modes of thought, which he terms *subjective, objective, and absolute spirit*. Subjective spirit corresponds to Descartes’s *cogito* – to cognitive operations of the mind. *Objective Spirit*, by contrast, is thought *objectified*, as it is, for

example in works of art, or in our political institutions, moral codes, or forms of family life. It is from the perspective of objective spirit that any institutional theory of art is credible. The subjective mind of the artist is constrained by the objective structures of the art world. Art becomes a matter of Absolute Spirit when, whatever other roles it may play, it offers, like religion and philosophy, “one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit.”<sup>9</sup> It is as a superceded moment of Absolute Spirit that art has come to an end. Art will no doubt “intersperse with its pleasing forms everything from the war-paint of savages to the splendor of temples with all their riches of adornment.”<sup>10</sup> But trammled by its dependence upon sensuous means, art is incapable of showing spirit to itself as spirit. Religion clearly failed to register this limitation, since it recruited art as a way of giving its ideas vivid and graphic images:

The advent of art, in a religion still in the bonds of sensuous externality, shows that such religion is on the decline. At the very time it seems to give religion the supreme glorification, expression, and brilliancy, it has lifted religion over its limitation... Beautiful art, from its side, has thus performed the same service as philosophy: it has purified the spirit from its thralldom.”<sup>11</sup>

But *philosophy* has lifted thought over art’s ineradicable limitation. “Art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone, a satisfaction that, at least on the part of religion, was most intimately linked with art.”<sup>12</sup> Alas, “The beautiful days of Greek art, like the golden age of the later Middle Ages, are gone.”<sup>13</sup>

The spirit of our world today, or more particularly, of our religion and the development of our reason, appears as beyond the stage at which art is the supreme mode of our knowledge of the Absolute. The peculiar nature of artistic

production and of works of art no longer fills our highest need. We have got beyond venerating works of art as divine and worshipping them, The impression they make is of a more reflective kind, and what they arouse in us needs a higher touchstone and a different test. Thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine arts. <sup>14</sup>

It must be clear from this barest of outlines that the End-of-Art-Thesis is systematically connected with the whole of Hegel's thought, and far more loosely connected with the actual history of art than may have been evident to his critics. He saw Art as, so to speak, a staging area in the epic of self-knowledge. Having served that transitional but momentous service, art may now lapse back into the entertainment and ornamentation so important in the enhancement of human life. The End-of-Art thesis is the defining idea of Hegel's philosophy of art, and his philosophy of art is the heart of his entire philosophical system. He could not have based his philosophy of art on an empirical study of artistic practices, as an art historian or a psychologist of art. For these empirical studies yield no clue to art as a phase of Absolute Spirit. There are the deepest differences, then, between the End-of-Art Thesis in Hegel, and in its various formulations in the late twentieth century <sup>15</sup>, where it really does serve as a summary judgment on the present condition of art. It is not, in general, today enunciated as corollary to a great philosophical system like Hegel's, which brings the whole of spirit into a tremendous whole. Philosophy in the late twentieth century would hardly be regarded as affording "that satisfaction of needs which earlier nations sought in it." Its role in human thought is a question mark, and its recent history an agony of self-critique. More than this, the intellectual context in which the end of art is currently addressed is very different from that against which Hegel's thesis must be viewed.

As may have been sensed from Hegel's constant exaltation of philosophy over art, his system of aesthetics had a polemical edge. To get a clearer sense of this, let us turn to the last section of Part One of *Lectures on Aesthetics* – “The End of the Romantic Form of Art” where the term *Romantic* takes on a double meaning. It refers to one of the great stages through which art has passed, culminating perhaps in the Renaissance. This is “romantic” in the sense of one of the synonyms for certain narratives – “romances.” But it also refers to a set of philosophical attitudes that defined German romantic poetry and inflamed German poets. Romanticism held that art is *superior* to philosophy. The End-of-art Thesis translates into the end of Romanticism in this sense. It does so because Romanticism's claim to superiority rested on the fact that, unlike mere philosophy, art presents its ideas in sensuous form. This was the defining position of German Romanticism, which exalted art and artists in the larger scheme of life. “It was proposed to hold that in art the real religion, the truth, and the Absolute was to be found and that art towered above philosophy because it was not abstract but contained the Idea in the real world as well and presented it there to concrete contemplation and feeling.”<sup>16</sup> Any of Hegel's auditors in 1828 would have heard, through these words, a characteristic thought of Friedrich Schelling, in which he makes an invidious comparison between philosophy and art.

Philosophy *as* philosophy can never be universally valid. Absolute objectivity is given to art alone. If art is deprived of objectivity, one may say, it ceases to be what it is and becomes philosophy; give objectivity to philosophy and it becomes art. Philosophy to be sure reaches the highest level, but it brings only, as it were, a fragment of man to this point. Art brings *the whole man*, as he is, to that point, namely to a knowledge of the highest of all, and in this rests the eternal difference and the miracle of art.<sup>17</sup>

Something of this sort, Hegel wants to say, may very well have been true at certain stages in the history of Spirit. Indeed what Schelling may have been describing would be precisely art "in its highest vocation." But in the present moment of art – Hegel's moment - the relationship between philosophy and art is precisely opposite to Schelling's view.

Each of Hegel's three stages of art – symbolic, classical, and romantic – involve different kinds of relationship between the vehicle of art and its meaning. It is symbolic when there is, between the two, only an "affinity." It is classical when there is instead an identity. It is Romantic when some reference to spiritual states is the best explanation of why the art appears as it does. The end of art means the liberation of the artist from any such set of constraints "Bondage to a particular subject matter and a mode of portrayal... are for artists today something past, and art has therefore become a free instrument which the artist can wield...in relationship to any material whatever."<sup>18</sup>

It is astonishing that Hegel should see the end of art in what is in effect a total pluralism, though he could not have foreseen the kind of pluralism that defines the artworld today. "Today," he writes, "there is no material that stands in and for itself above this relativity." Any material, shaped in any way, can be art "only if it does not contradict the formal law of being simply beautiful and capable of artistic treatment."<sup>19</sup> It would astonish Hegel that beauty is no longer regarded as a "formal law of art." But otherwise the deep pluralism of art was already something he understood. "Every form and every material is now at the service and command of the artist whose talent and genius is explicitly freed from the earlier limitation to one particular art-form."<sup>20</sup> The artist, to paraphrase a stunning thought of Marx and Engels, can do symbolic art in the morning,

classical art at noon, romantic art in the afternoon – and the philosophy of art in the evening. The whole internal logic of the history of art culminates in an absolute artistic freedom.

But artists are no longer, in Hegel's philosophy, the great cultural heroes through reference to whom Romanticism defined itself. Their era in that capacity is irrevocably over. So the End-of-Art must be understood in terms of two opposed systems of German thought in the early nineteenth century, each of which deals in different ways with art and intellect, and with the role of each in terms of human understanding. Hegel is announcing a new age of reason, in which thought is the substance of spirit.

The sole thought which philosophy brings to the treatment of history is the simple concept of *Reason*: that Reason is the law of the world and that therefore, in world history, things have come about rationally. <sup>21</sup>

Historically, however, the Romanticist conception of art and of the artistic genius proved irresistible, long after Hegel's philosophy of art withered into a dusty topic for historians of philosophy. The Romanticist vision of art flourished in Wagner and in Nietzsche, in the Futurists and the Abstract Expressionists. It continued to exert a powerful attraction on Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Only late in the twentieth century, through the realization in artistic practice of the freedom Hegel foresaw, is his philosophy of art once again at the center of aesthetic discussion.



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*Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*. Translated by T. M. Knox. Oxford; The Clarendon Press, 1975. 10. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Hegel's writing are to this superb translation.

2 *ibid.*, 7.

3 *Ibid.* 31.

4 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art." Translation by Albert Hofstadter. *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*. Edited by Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns. New York; The Modern Library, 1964. 700.

5 Hegel, *ibid.*, 10.

6 *Ibid.*, 11.

7 Hegel, *ibid.* 34.

8 *Ibid.*, 2.

9 *Ibid.*, 7.

10 *Ibid.*, 3.

11 *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind. Part Three of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Science*. Edited by J.N. Findlay. Translated by TK. 296-297.

12 *Hegel's Aesthetics*, 10.

13. *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 Hans Belting, *The End of Art History?* Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 199TK. Arthur C Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton; Pinceton University Press, 1997.

16 *Ibid.*, 628-629.

17 Friedrich Schelling, "System of Transcendental Idealism." *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*. 374-375.

18 *Ibid.*, 605.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, 606.

21 Hegel. *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Translated by Robert S. Hartman. New York; Liberal Arts Press, 1953. 11.