

Hegel and the End of Art

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Art no longer affords the satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone ... Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past ... [It] invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is.¹

This (abridged) quotation is perhaps the best known from all the 1,200 pages of Hegel's *Aesthetics*. It is certainly a strange statement. On the one hand, it still strikes us as bizarre, a senselessly irritating provocation which (as the English translator suggests) simply cannot mean what it says. It surely struck Hegel's students and followers in that way—including, unfortunately, the editor of his lectures, Heinrich Hotho, who undertook some radical editorial intervention to tone it down and make it more palatable.² Felix Mendelsohn, who in the late 'twenties listened to these lectures in Berlin, in a letter to his sister, wrote of the sheer madness of declaring art *mausetot* (stone dead) only a few years after Beethoven's death and a time when Goethe and Thorwaldsen were still living. Thus the best way to deal with Hegel's aesthetics is perhaps just to forget about this madness, as is done for example by its most recent English interpreter, Stephan Bungay.³

But it is not so easy to forget the 'end of art' when dealing with Hegel. This is not only because (together with its supplementary, the paradigmatic character of Greek art) it constitutes one of the most basic structuring principles of the *Aesthetics*, so that its omission inevitably transforms interpretation into a proposal of re-writing (as with Bungay, who declares about half of the text philosophically irrelevant). Equally, the idea has become a cliché, or at least a historical topos which returns in judgements about contemporary art again and again, seemingly easily applicable to the constantly and radically changing character and circumstances of art. It returns from Heine's prediction of the end of the art-period with the death of Goethe, to Arthur Danto's locating it sometime after World War II. And, of course, it is this judgement of Hegel, in a reinterpreted, weakened form, that stands behind all theories of artistic decadence,

be they Marxist in origin, as with Lukacs and Adorno, or Heideggerian. For Heidegger, this judgement remains in force as long as *Geschick* does not decide otherwise about the truth of our whole world-understanding, which originated with the Greeks.

In view of the many voices of dissent and reinterpretation I would like to present here a rather orthodox defence of Hegel: that what he meant by the thesis of the 'end of art' is quite true, and discloses something of genuine importance about the situation of the arts in modern times. There is, of course, a catch in this simple-minded confession of a straightforward Hegelianism: that what Hegel really meant is strictly true. To unravel this meaning it is worthwhile to recall that Hegel declared not only the end of art, but in the same breath the end of religion and the end of history too. By reminding ourselves of what is implied in this last, the seemingly most outrageous claim, we can perhaps gain a better understanding of how to approach at all the presumed end of art.

When Hegel affirms the end of history in normatively conceived modernity, he certainly does not mean thereby some apocalyptic ending of all times. A history in its empirical meaning, as a sequence of irreversible changes brought about by human actions and activities, will continue into an indefinite future without foreseeable end. What ends is what the philosopher—always searching for reason in the play of accidentalities—understands by history: a progressive process towards the full comprehension of the meaning, the requirements and the conditions of the realisation of freedom. This history has been realised in the past in the successive radical transformations of the forms and constitutions of states, always the results of the deeds of world-historical individuals who were able to hit upon the solution to the crisis of their age. These crises were rooted ultimately in the expectations of freedom that a social-political system evoked in its members, and the barriers to their realisation which were imposed upon them by the same institutional structure that brought them to life. And this history ends when its end, its *telos*, becomes achieved. That is in modernity, with its complex system of institutions, in principle able to reconcile the demands of self-realisation of developed personalities with the functional requirements of social-political integration—in so far as that is at all possible under conditions of human finitude. There is nothing utopian—as any reader of the *Philosophy of Right* will know—in this end of history: finitude involves the uneliminable role of accidentality in the life of individuals, and Hegel discloses a whole series of contradictions even within

the normatively conceived framework of modernity. But these contradictions can be, not eliminated but pacified in their systematic effects, constrained by the very working of modern institutions in the course of their continuous adaptive change through rational reform. It is this which is the end of history. For even everyday consciousness vaguely presumes that history is what happens to us, and happens owing to some memorable deeds deciding the fate of nations and states. From now on, however, history is made, and made rationally, by the anonymous many. It is rational, not so much because of the depth of their insight or the energy of their will, but because of the inner logic of their positionally determined, interlocking activities. History ends because the distinction between the philosophical and empirical concepts of history disappears. What philosophical inquiry had to discover through the hard labour of thought in history, acts of freedom for the realisation of freedom, from now on becomes prosaic, empirical reality. *Die Vollendung ist das Ende*—reaching the end is the ending. The vocation is now fulfilled; what remains is its everyday exercise.

This parallel with the end of history may bring into focus that one can only comprehend the Hegelian idea of the historical end of art through the understanding of what Hegel regards as the teleological end, the 'vocation' of art. Art in its empirical sense certainly will not disappear: 'we may well hope', he writes of his present, 'that art will always rise higher and come to perfection' (103). What is ended is what philosophy discloses as the meaning of art, and it is ended because its task has been fully realised. In the course of its historical development art has become fully and solely art, and thereby lost its deepest sense and highest vocation.

What is this vocation, the philosophical concept of art? Hegel discusses this question in the whole first part of the *Aesthetics*. But he does so in a rather strange way; he does it twice. In the first part he offers a systematic 'deduction' of the concept and essential characteristics of the work of art from the metaphysical idea of beauty. But before that, in the long Introduction, he presents a reverse train of thought. In an informal manner, largely through criticism of some popular theories of art, he deduces from the empirical concept of art that beauty is the *sui generis* value criterion of the aesthetic sphere which works of art ought to satisfy. These two 'deductions' should be strictly equivalent, but they are not. What in fact is deduced from the metaphysical idea of beauty is not the work of art in general but the classical work of art. And what is derived from the empirical

conception of art is not really beauty as such. It is the idea of a necessary correspondence between sensuous appearance and meaning-content that is satisfied not only by works of beauty, even though it is these which fulfil its norms most fully and in a perfect way. In fact Hegel ends his relevant considerations in the Introduction with an emphatically sharp formulation. Not everything which is beautiful is a work of art; and the lack of beauty is not necessarily an artistic defect, the sign of an 'unintentional lack of technical skill or practice' (74), but may well be something demanded by the character of the aesthetic content, making the product a work of art though no more corresponding to the Ideal.

This incongruence between the two 'deductions' offers the key to the Hegelian understanding of the end/vocation, the philosophical concept of art. Art is rooted in the same human need that gives rise to religion and philosophy: to find and disclose an abiding meaning in the seemingly senseless accidentality and contradictoriness of finite existence, in the externality and alienness of the world of life; to make the world ultimately man's own home. Art solves this task not through elevation in thought over the particularity and finitude of empirical reality but within this world of appearances itself, by creating sensuous or imagistic existents that display this meaning for immediate apprehension. 'Thinking is only a reconciliation between reality and truth within thinking itself. But poetic creation and formation is a reconciliation in the form of a real phenomenon itself, even if this form be presented only spiritually' (976).

This already determines two fundamental features of the *Aesthetics*: its being an anti-mimetic work-aesthetics. Anti-mimetic, since the vocation of art is to create something that never can be pre-given, for it is called upon to overcome the defining feature of any finite natural existent, its non-correspondence to its own concept. And it is—in opposition to the Kantian aesthetics of reception and the Romantic aesthetics of production—a work-aesthetics because in its understanding the aesthetical is properly present only in those artistic objectivations which as art-worlds satisfy the indicated need in a requisite way. The task of a philosophical comprehension of art is to disclose their structure in art's historical change and in the various modalities, kinds, of art.

From this, clarification of the empirical concept of a work of art follows directly. It is an intentionally created individual sensuous object or image configuration which, in and through its concrete, apparent characteristics, directly displays a unitary meaning for

immediate apprehension. This, on the one hand, defines the ontological status of the art work as the untranslatable *Schein*, an inwardly reflected immediate existent which is what it is only owing to a pointing to (*Verweisung*), an expression of, something else as its own essence. On the other hand, it also posits the work of art in two different, though interrelated, normative dimensions. The first is the complete unity, full interpenetration, of the outer and the inner, of sensuous or imaged externality and immanent meaning: the value standard of beauty. It requires that every sensuously discernible component of the work has some meaningful significance, contributes something to its overall meaning, the unity of which is disclosed in the free, unenforced harmony of all the particular aspects and constituents. Since it is the human eye that most adequately reflects the soul, the inward essence of an individual, in this respect Hegel compares the art work to 'a thousand-eyed Argus, whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point' (153–54). This simile will find its resonance almost a hundred years later in one of the great poems of German literature, Rilke's *Archaischer Torso Apollos*:

... denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du musst dein Leben ändern.

Beauty is the *sui generis* value of the aesthetic sphere, and in this sense the central concept of aesthetics, the concept of artistic perfection. But the work of art necessarily (in view of the very need of art) stands in another normative context as well, the decisive one for its philosophical comprehension. This is the requirement of full correspondence between the particular and its concept, the universal which is Hegel's ontological definition of truth. This is the viewpoint, not of perfection, but of significance, in respect of which one must first of all ask the question: what is the meaning-content that an art work can bring to sensuously immediate expression? This is, however, a badly stated question, akin to asking: what can be said by words, or thought in general concepts? Everything and anything: the work of art can bring forth 'every possible kind of content and worth' (47). It belongs to the *Schein* character of the art work that it is endowed with an illusion-creating power; beauty can confer the aura of significance upon even the trivial and inessential. The real question is: what is the highest possible accomplishment, the most significant truth-content, still expressible in such a sensuous form? And to this the answer is that it can disclose the highest truth: the 'truth of determinate being [*Dasein*]', the objective rationality which rules

over the course of the world and life, the Divine, the Absolute as Spirit. And only when it does this, does the work really meet the need that gave rise to art, the 'vocation' of art. In its philosophical meaning, art is a form of the Absolute Spirit, of the self-comprehension of the Absolute in human consciousness and activity. In Hegel's historicist conception of truth this means primarily that a genuine work of art makes manifest what was or is, for a people or epoch, the Absolute—that is, that which is for them unconditionally and universally valid or significant, the centre of their highest interests. The work discloses how they conceived the ultimate powers ruling life, the way of their world—and self-understanding. The art work makes this manifest in a sensuous, immediately comprehensible, form, therefore in a way available, understandable, for everyone. In its philosophical concept it is an effective way of forming a collective consciousness, a force of social-political integration: 'a point of unification for men'. In respect of art, questions of cognitive significance and of social relevance are directly linked by Hegel. His aesthetics is work-aesthetics also in the sense that philosophical interest in art centres on the question of how art 'works'; on the question of its possible cognitive/cultural and social-political functions.

The twin values and requirements of beauty and of ultimate truth (with its associated social relevance) are in no way incompatible. The case of their joint satisfaction, that of Classical art, represents the fullest flowering, the realisation of the highest potential, of art. Such a unity, however, cannot be sustained all the time. Under some conditions it falls apart, not because of accidental circumstances but owing to the very character of the content expressed, of the historically specific comprehension of the Absolute. If this comprehension is inherently abstract and undetermined, then any concrete sensuous representation of it will be overdetermined, and therefore the form only ambiguously related to its content. This was the case with the 'Symbolic' art of the Orient: a not yet beautiful art. If, on the other hand, the understanding of the Divine by its very nature transcends the possibilities of being fully expressed by any sensuously individual configuration, the form will become underdetermined in relation to the content. This is the case with 'Romantic', i.e. Christian, art, a no more beautiful art. The development of this leads necessarily to the end of art as a form of Absolute Spirit.

This is, in the most simplified form, the conceptual background of the Hegelian idea of the 'end of art'. This very background, though,

may give rise to some not infrequently encountered misunderstandings of what Hegel meant by his thesis.

Since Hegel regards art in its highest vocation and philosophical concept as the disclosure of the Divine in individual configurations of sensuous or imaged nature, it is plausible to think that he means by its end nothing more than its secularisation, in the simple sense of the gradual disappearance from art of religious themes and subjects, first of all of representations of the godhead. Hegel, a thinker of onto-theology, identifies this with the loss of art's genuine significance. The *Aesthetics* clearly points to such a process and portrays it as necessary. Its necessity, however, is consequent upon the fact that the epoch of the end of art is that of the end of religion as well. Under conditions of modernity, organised religious life becomes a social formality, genuine religiosity retreats into pure subjectivity of feeling and private piety, while the dogmas of faith, constituting the cognitive content of religious imagery, become a topic one cannot mention without embarrassment in polite society and are treated even by theologians in a historical manner. Therefore, 'we must take refuge in philosophy, if we wish to learn anything about God'.⁴ Thus if one thinks that in Hegel the end of art is synonymous with the disappearance of religious thematic, then one has to conclude that modernity not so much lacks genuine art but rather lacks the presence and the consciousness of the Divine itself, of the Spirit. This is hardly Hegel's view.

The equation of the disclosure of the Divine with the representation of God or gods rests, however, on a basic misunderstanding. It conceives (just as the imagery-thinking of religion does) the Divine as Deity, as some Supreme Being or beings transcending the world of empirical existence. But for Hegel the Divine is the Absolute Idea, the objective Logos of Being which is externalised in an alienated form in nature and comes to self-comprehension only in the collective historical consciousness of human beings. The finite is the infinite—in so far as it overcomes its finitude. And since the vocation of art is the disclosure of the Divine in the form of sensuous, therefore finite, reality, it can most adequately fulfil its task if it takes for its central object of representation not the Absolute, Spirit as such, but 'the human element in spirit' (279), the human being in his/her spirituality, in his/her relation to the Absolute. Hegel's conception of art is not theocentric, but explicitly anthropocentric. 'Since the objective and external, in which Spirit becomes visible, is ... determinate and particularised throughout, it follows that the free

spirit which art causes to appear in a reality adequate to it, can in its shape be only spiritual individuality equally determined and inherently independent. Therefore humanity constitutes the centre and content of true beauty and art ... '(432). Art is foremost the cultural form of human self-discovery.

This radical anthropocentrism finds perhaps its clearest expression in Hegel's discussion of the limitations of Classical art, the art of beauty. The usual criticism of Greek religious art emphasised its anthropomorphism, its inability to comprehend and express the diremption (separation) and contradiction between nature and spirit, the finite and the infinite. On this view the Greek gods and their artistic representations in sculpture and poetry are and can be beautiful, because they are 'not really other', but only idealised human characters. Hegel accepts this criticism—and regards it as superficial. For the fundamental limitation of Greek art-religion consists in the fact that it is not sufficiently anthropomorphic; more exactly, 'it is anthropomorphic enough for art, but not enough for higher religion' (435). The Greek gods are only idealised human characters; that is, in their image all that constitutes the finitude of the finite is idealised away. They do not know and express the contradiction between the accidental particularity of the concrete individual and the freedom and universality of inward thinking awareness; they lack self-consciousness. In fact they are not 'really the same'. 'The anthropomorphism of Greek gods lacked actual human existence, whether corporeal or spiritual' (505). And so therefore Christian-Romantic art—the art of a religion of *Menschenwerdung Gottes*, of God incarnated into the pain, shame and death of finite existence, to be resurrected in the spiritual faith of religious community alone—is more radically anthropomorphic and anthropocentric than Classical art. This makes it no more beautiful, no more perfect, but a more true art.

This leads directly to another, even more frequent, objection to Hegel: that the thesis of the 'end of art' is based upon the profound classicism of his art theory, on a completely idealised conception of the accomplishment of Greek art which then overcharges art with a function that it never did or could fulfil. No doubt this thesis is directly related to its counterpart and supplementation, the idea of the unsurpassable perfection of Classical art, of which Hegel says, 'nothing can be or become more beautiful' (517). This perfection, however, is not meant by Hegel in terms of a purely formally characterisable (and therefore in principle recreatable) beauty. In fact for the naive

reception found in modern times (a subject-attitude that alone is truly adequate to art), these works do not appear as perfect at all. They seem to be cold and lacking individuality, especially in comparison with the inner warmth of Romantic painting. 'We cannot take it amiss if people do not show that profound interest in profound sculptures which they deserve. For we have to study them before we can appreciate them' (797). Their full appreciation today demands the historico-hermeneutical reconstruction of their original meaning in its thoroughgoing unity of the aesthetic, religious and political significance. And while this idea may reflect Hegel's idealisation of the reality of the Greek polis as the 'beautiful work of political art', at least he makes a plausibly argued case for it. It was the epic poets of Greece who first transformed the amorphous and incoherent multitude of local myths and legends into the Pantheon and theogony of Olympic gods, the framework for the consciousness of the cultural unity of a nation. It was the plastic representations of these gods that endowed them with a determinate shape and character for religious imagination, and due to the presence of these sculptures the temples were not only places for worship but the abodes of deity. These temples of tutelary gods defined the public space of the polis, the place for its communal meetings and institutions, from which its political unity acquired a physical presence and reality. More importantly, it was the epic and tragic portrayal of gods and heroes as ethical powers and ethical individualities, each with its particular *pathe*, which created tradition-fixed clusters of exemplary conduct pertaining to appropriate situations. In this way—through the aesthetic power of affirmative identification—individuals were directly, practically, oriented in their public behaviour. Hegel may well have overestimated the practical effectiveness and political significance of such an aesthetically constituted world view, but this at least was not based on any 'classicist' bias on his part. For he applied the same considerations, though in a less elaborated way, to the 'Symbolic' art of the Orient as well, with reference to a lack of clear discrimination between sacred and literary texts (for example in the case of Indian epic). This was done first of all through an analysis of monumental architecture (the dominant art of the Symbolic art form) as the embodiment and physical manifestation of the unifying political power of the state. (Appropriately for Symbolic art, he undertook its analysis in a symbolic form, through discussion of the tower of Babel.) As a result Hegel regarded the question of the instrumental versus autonomous role of art as devoid of meaning in respect of

either its Symbolical or Classical form, for in both cases the spheres of art, religion, and politics are not clearly demarcated. It is, however, this question which becomes determining for the development of Romantic art.

Christianity as revealed religion is no more created or co-constituted by art. The content of the faith is independent of, and pre-given to, artistic representation. This representation becomes something secondary and superadded, no more essentially demanded by religious consciousness. But this relegation of art to an instrumental, illustrative position in respect of religion primarily follows from the character of the content of the faith. Christianity as the religion of inward, spiritual reconciliation, in the diremption of the finite and infinite withdraws from the externality of appearances into the depth of subjectivity. From this viewpoint, all sensuous-natural things constitute 'not the presence of God but only powerless accidents which in themselves can only attest to him, not make him appear' (374: my correction of translation). This content cannot therefore be brought, at least not in its entirety, to that concrete, individual, sensuous presence which art by its very nature demands. Only some particular aspects of it are suitable for aesthetic purposes at all, and even they do not generally satisfy the requirements of beauty.

The whole process of the development of Romantic art is portrayed by Hegel as a process of its emancipation from this instrumental functionalisation, as the liberation of art to that full autonomy which belongs to its very concept as spiritual activity. This is a process of secularisation which, of course, runs parallel to the already indicated *Verweltlichung* (becoming worldly) of religion, with the loss of its community forming cultural power. This secularisation of the arts is not, though, to be understood only in its negative aspect, as the disappearance of religious thematics. It means an ongoing conquest by art of the object and content which, by a conceptual necessity, always constituted the centre of its interest: human life, in its whole complexity and diversity. In our time,

... art strips away from itself all fixed restrictions to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes *Humanus* its new holy of holies: i.e. the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds and fates.... [N]othing that can be living in the human breast is alien to that spirit any more.... [Art] does not need any longer to represent only what is absolutely at home at one of its specific stages, but everything in which man as such is capable of being at home.... It is the appearance and activity of imperishable

humanity in its many-sided significance and endless all-round development which in this reservoir of human situations and feelings can now constitute the absolute content of art. (607–8)

The development of Romantic art thus leads to the realisation of the concept of art, of art becoming fully and solely art. But this is the very end of art, the end of art in its 'highest vocation' and philosophical concept as a spiritual-cultural power able to form collective consciousness and legitimately claiming universal significance. In the Introduction Hegel argued that when art aims to bring home to us 'everything which has a place in the human spirit' (46), simultaneously it loses the capacity to disclose that 'common' and 'substantial end' which can confer unity on diversity and difference. One could argue, in the spirit of Hegel, that under conditions of modernity (as he conceives them), the deepest need that gave rise to art disappears: the need to create a sensuous reality in which particularity and universality are reconciled. The need disappears because in the modern world as the end of history, this reconciliation becomes an empirical fact. Human beings no more need the world of art to possess some concrete imagery in which they are at home; they are, or at least now can be, at home in the world of social actuality. But art is not only not needed for this task of reconciliation; by its own means, no more can it bring the reconciliation to an adequate, if imaged, presence. For it is 'the firm and secure order of civil society and the state' (592), the impersonal working of this vast institutional structure as the rational mediating mechanism of social objectivity, that now effects, in principle, a reconciliation that can be penetrated only by speculative thought. The developed individuals of modernity, who do not identify themselves with, but have a distanced, reflexive relation to their social position and function, are no more representatives of the social whole or of its distinct 'ethical powers'; their deeds and fate no more can disclose the ultimate truth of the totality:

[I]n the world of today the individual subject ... does not appear himself as the independent, total, and at the same time individual living embodiment of this society, but only as a restricted member of it.... [H]e is not, as he was in the Heroic Age proper the embodiment of the right, the moral and the legal as such. The individual is no longer the vehicle and sole actualisation of these powers as was the case in the Heroic Age. (194)

Therefore when art, with its individuating means of representation, attempts to address itself to the ultimate question of the age, to that of

the relation between the striving of the free personality for a self-fulfilling life and the objective, anonymous rationality of modern institutions, inevitably it will falsify the complex reality of modernity. It must either (as Hegel's critique of the modern idyll demonstrates) mendaciously conceal, or at least ignore, the never eliminable possibility of conflict and contradiction between the striving of the free personality and the power of unforeseeable accidentality which follows from the enmeshment of individual fate in the complicated web of depersonalised interactions. Art then becomes an apologetic ideology characterised by 'mawkishness and sentimental flabbiness' (191). Or, it will abstractly fix this opposition, the contradiction between 'the poetry of the heart and the opposing power of circumstances' (1092) as something untranscendable. Thereby it will express only the equally distortive ideology of a rebellious, anarchic subjectivity. This may have had a subjective justification in the pre-revolutionary world of the struggle against the ancient regime, but now is simply anachronistic. By becoming autonomous, art ceases to be a form of Absolute Spirit; by finding what always was its ultimate subject matter, *Humanus*, human life in all its freedom and variety, it also loses the ability to make manifest its highest, universally binding, ends in their historical, cultural relevance to the present. Under contemporary conditions art must content itself with the partial, with the finite: it 'makes itself at home in the finite things of the world, is satisfied with them, and grants them complete validity' (594). Certainly it can, and ought to, disclose this finite reality as suffused and enlivened by Spirit, as man's 'own human and spiritual work' (574). But it no more discloses Spirit in its infinity as working itself through all finite circumstances, actions and interests towards unconditional, universally valid, and therefore community creating ends.

I think that the indubitable effectiveness of the Hegelian thesis of the 'end of art', its being a constantly renewed topos in discussions of the art of modernity, is due principally to the radicalness with which it identified the problematic situation of modern art, the lack of clarity and the insecurity surrounding its social relevance and cultural accomplishment. It is a problematic situation due not to some external limitations, but to the autonomisation of art as the *telos* of its development, to art becoming fully and solely art and nothing else. However, the idea of the 'end of art' in itself articulates this situation only negatively, as the loss of its 'highest vocation', of its power to disclose for immediate apprehension the ultimate, binding

ends of a community, and in this way to be an effective form of practical action orientation and socio-cultural identity. But Hegel also clearly maintains that art in the empirical sense can flourish and 'rise ever higher' even after its 'philosophical' end. One may then expect that his work-aesthetics, so decidedly concentrating on the question of the socio-cultural 'work' art can perform, also will tell us something of its possible function and significance after its end.

Before looking at the *Aesthetics* with this question in mind, I will consider two interpretations of the 'end of art' which from our vantage point of acquaintance with the post-Hegelian development of art may seem plausible, even attractive, but which are, perhaps regrettably, irreconcilable with Hegel's own conceptualisation. One of these has been proposed by Danto:⁵ that art ends because, beginning with Duchamps' *Fountain* and culminating in Warhol's *Brillo Box*, it becomes its own philosophy, an 'infinite play with its own concept'.⁶ Danto, as a 'born-again Hegelian', makes this proposal not as a strict interpretation of Hegel but as the free application of some of his ideas to understanding the evolution of contemporary art. It would hardly constitute an objection to him, therefore, if one simply suggested that no doubt Hegel would have rejected such a view furiously—as is attested by his deep hostility towards works of Romantic irony. A work which playfully deconstructs the conditions of its own possibility satisfies the requirements neither of beauty nor of truth, and thus it is for Hegel not a work of art at all but a piece of harmful ideology. But one can formulate more general objections, in Hegel's spirit, against seeing in this type of ironic, deconstructive self-reflexivity the main function 'post-historical' art is capable of fulfilling. It usually demands a relatively high level of philosophical sophistication to appreciate the point of such works of art; and once they are 'decoded', once the provocative surprise of making these abstract ideas present as a sensuous object or happening is gone, they seem to be exhausted. They lack not only the immediacy of impact but they do not sustain an impulse to linger upon them with an ear or an eye 'that never can be sated'. Furthermore, to have this power of provocation presupposes that art and its concept still has some genuine interest and importance for us, that it still possesses some other forms of relevance that can engage us directly.

A different approach was suggested in an interesting paper by Karsten Harries.⁷ He identified the end of art with the victory of the tendency of *l'art pour l'art*, with the emergence of the pure aesthetic attitude directed solely to the aesthetic form of the work. The problem

with this interpretation is that Hegel's *Aesthetics* does not really offer conceptual means for the articulation of what would in this sense constitute the purely aesthetic qualities of some sensuous or imaged object. The great strength of his theory, his insistence upon the historicity and the mutual conditioning of content and form, can be seen at the same time, in retrospect, as also its weakness. Since Hegel insists on the primacy and the determining role of content in this relationship of mutuality, he cannot admit the possibility of a form which could create its own content, independent of any pre-given meaning. This is especially clear in his unambiguous rejection of absolute music (music without text) as a 'misfortune' which is 'not strictly to be called art' (902). Hegel does accept as legitimate (as we shall see immediately) the tendency towards the emancipation of the sensuous material of art, but only under the condition that this material still serves as the vehicle of expression of some meaning, even if this meaning (as with his beloved Italian operas) is of no consequence or interest.

We will not find in the *Aesthetics* any explicit and coherent discussion of the question: what function and significance can art works possess after the end of art? Hegel is not engaged in speculations about the future of art; historical prophecy is not within the competence of philosophy. However, at different places and rather disjointedly, he does offer a number of observations concerning tendencies which he regards as significant and valuable in the development of contemporary art. These may allow us to formulate a more general answer to the question.

When Hegel states that art is a thing of the past, he means above all that for the contemporary recipient art first and foremost is the art of the past. This historicisation and museum-placing of art which, as Hegel clearly indicates, goes together with the broadening of the temporal and geographical compass of the aesthetically relevant traditions, plays an important functional role in modernity. The great art works of the past open the way to the understanding of those cultures that constitute our spiritual prehistory; they are the most important constituents of our 'historical memory'. They are the background against which we can comprehend the present itself as historical, as our own—therefore changeable—work. Interest in and acquaintance with the masterpieces of the past is thus a basic element of that formal cultivation (*formelle Bildung*) without which the modern individual cannot establish an adequate, self-reflexive, critically affirmative relationship with the general conditions of his/her life.

If the art works of the past retain their relevance because the aesthetic power of their beauty (or sublimity) makes us involved in the quest for their truth, in the disclosure of their meaning content, even though this quest now requires historico-hermeneutical reflection, then the problematic character of living, contemporary art aesthetically manifests itself in a disjunction between beauty and truth that allows only a narrowly circumscribed and insecure space for their, always partial, unification. In Hegel's understanding the evolution of contemporary art proceeds in two opposed directions. One pole is constituted by works of beauty, whose content is without any particular relevance or interest. Examples are Dutch landscape and still life painting, and, most of all, the modern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the contemporary opera. What makes painterly representations of commonplace objects and musical performances of obsolete, often stupid, texts aesthetically significant, is perfection of technical skill and execution, which infuses them with the subjectivity of vision and emotive expression, making 'poetical' exceptions to the overall prose of everyday existence. These works, with their magic of colour and expressive singing voices, make perceivable the most fleeting impressions of the senses and the minutest changes in feelings, which normally escape our attention. In general, they bring to presence the relatedness of the phenomenal world to man, the fittedness of the humanised world of appearances to our subjectivity. They function as works of a spiritualised enjoyment, of a humanised, reflective sensibility and free fantasy, of the joy, or at least *Gemütlichkeit*, of cultivated civic, *bürgerlich*, existence. This constitutes the limit of art at this pole. When this warmth of subjective vivacity and the spell of appearance is lacking, when the work becomes merely a faithful imitation of prosaic reality, the realistic-naturalistic portrayal of the everyday, it ceases to be a work of art.

At the other pole of contemporary art stand works of genuine socio-cultural relevance, of 'great ethical interest' and 'genuine ethical pathos', which is how Hegel characterises the historical dramas of Schiller. But they achieve this end only by sacrificing the harmonious objectivity and immediacy of beautiful completion to the intellectualisation of the work of art, the intrusion of an abstract, didactic, authorial intent. Even at this price, they still cannot serve the end of direct, practical, action orientation. Since under the conditions of modernity 'universal ends cannot be accomplished by a single individual' (1224), the tragic denouement, the fated failure of heroic individuality, lacks the concluding accord of reconciliation that would

allow immediate, affirmative identification with the hero. We do not leave the modern theatre with 'a relieved heart', but with the confused feeling of an 'unhappy bliss in misfortune' (1232). This does not fortify the viewer to a definite ethical orientation but rather spurs him/her on to independent reflection upon the hard ethico-moral choices in life. This can lead to confusion; the subjective play with, and dissolution of, all ethical standards can become the end of the work, as in Romantic irony and 'subjective humour'. Such works annihilate the objectivity of both content and form, representing 'only a sporting with the topics, a derangement and perversion of the material' to 'emphasise the subjective wit of the author' (601). This again transgresses the limits of art, the work ceases to be a work of art even in an empirical sense. Contingent externality and contingent interiority, subjectivity, represent the opposed but interrelated limits of 'post-historical' art.

In between the two limits there is, however, an ill-defined territory, upon which it is still possible, if only in a partial and fragile way, to reunify beauty and truth, aesthetic immediacy and socio-cultural relevance. Hegel calls it 'objective humour'. His discussion, at least in the published text, is laconic and fragmentary, making interpretation a risky affair. In general, he seems to mean the aesthetic realisation of a subjective attitude which willingly immerses itself in, abandons itself to, the object. Thereby the representation becomes the expression, or at least the symbol, of some inward relation with the world which, through this objectification, loses its merely private character and becomes re-experienceable, an aesthetic summons to a shareable form of, or attitude towards, life. The concrete instances of such 'objective humour' which Hegel cites are, however, bafflingly heterogeneous. On the one hand it seems to be exemplified by Dutch genre paintings as aesthetic articulations of a national self consciousness. These works, masterfully evoking, even in representations of the most vulgar, even ugly, scenes of everyday life, a spiritual cheerfulness, an all-pervading attitude of life affirmation, of the ease of being at home in a world created by the prosaic labour and the heroic historical struggle of a small nation, serve the function of communal identification. They are certainly particularistic and limited, even perhaps narrow minded, in their bourgeois cosiness, but genuinely co-constitutive of the formation of a national unity.⁸ But then, he refers to this concept of 'objective humour' what seems to be precisely the opposite case: Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan*, a late cycle of poems attempting to transpose the spirit of Persian lyric poetry into contemporary emotive and expressive

idiom, which Hegel admired. For him, this is the outstanding example of modern art making the life attitude of an alien culture directly re-experienceable by aesthetic means. This serves the function of a cosmopolitan education, elevating the private citizen, the bourgeois, into a *citoyen* of the world, spiritually open to other forms of conduct and experience.

Lastly, it seems that he also subsumes under this category the accomplishment of the *Bildungsroman*, novels of education, with their objective irony of practical reconciliation. They portray growing up as apprenticeship to the rational realities of the present, against which, as a senseless and alien order of things, the youthful heart had revolted in the name of higher ideals and the infinite right of feelings. Ultimately, youth becomes 'as good a Philister as any' (593).

These dispersed observations about the various possibilities of 'post-historical' art clearly demonstrate that Hegel did not identify the 'end of art' with its simply becoming functionless, losing all vestiges of social relevance. But the concrete cultural functions he indicates as aesthetic potentialities in his analyses seem to be *ad hoc*, accidental and heterogeneous: cultivation of sensibility and intellectualised representation of the conflicts of modernity for conscious reflection, formation of a national cultural identity and cosmopolitan education, etc. But this is, I think, exactly what Hegel meant to say. Art after its own end is problematical, because what function it can possess becomes an unsettled problem, to which all answers and solutions will remain *ad hoc*, accidental, transient and heterogeneous. Art which became solely and fully art, that is autonomous, won for itself not only freedom from any prescribed content, independence from all hierarchies of themes and styles, but emancipation from a pre-given, settled function as its vocation as well. This is undoubtedly a great loss; art no more expresses the 'substantial spirit of a people', that unifying communal ethos which has an unconditional socio-political relevance. Under modern conditions, what genuinely unifies the individualised and privatised members of the state is the working of its impersonal, bureaucratic institutions, the rationality of which can be grasped by conceptual thinking alone. But this loss is simultaneously also a gain in freedom, an expansion of potential. The artist now has the freedom not to find, but to create, through the power of aesthetic representation and in response to particular situations, new types and models of socio-cultural relevance. The artist can endow his/her art with new modalities of meaning. Even at the end of art, the art work can and

ought to 'work'. Hegel's philosophy does not allow for the complete self-enclosure of the aesthetic sphere. This would not be the 'end' but the disappearance of art, its transformation into a mere hobby or game.

The deeply problematical and paradoxical character of 'post-historical' art consists in the fact that while it endows the artist with this freedom, the power to make it effective does not reside with his/her art and artistry. For the emancipation of the artist from the 'bondage of particular subject-matters and a mode of portrayal' (605) also makes the recipient free. The ontological status of the work of art as *Schein* implies that it is what it is only for another. As a sensuous object it is 'incomplete; it has the status of a work of art only for, in relation to, the recipient. 'The art-work for itself is something lifeless, not self-consciousness; to it pertains a community [*es gehört eine Gemeinde dazu*] which knows and imagines what is represented as the substantial truth'.⁹ Its sensuous imagery character makes direct ('naive') apprehension the adequate subject-attitude towards art. Immediacy, however, is always mediated immediacy in Hegel; it always presupposes some unreflectively accepted form of conceptualisation, some unconscious prejudgements. Thus the naive, immediate reception of art is again typically restricted to those historical epochs when individuals share a common culture as the natural and evident precondition of understandability, when they are the 'representatives' of an ethical substantiality. For modern individuals, works of art are objects of personal taste, critical judgement and reflexive interpretation. As Hegel at one point remarks, even the painting of the penitent Maria Magdalena can now be equally an object of religious piety or a mild erotic stimulation. Whether or not a work of art achieves its intended impact, fulfils its projected function, transmits its envisaged meaning, depends not only, not even first of all, on its immanent qualities. It depends upon whether or not it finds an audience disposed towards these ends; and this is largely a matter of concrete historical conjuncture and social constellation. Whether an art work 'works' in any sense—and for Hegel this means whether or not it is a work of art at all—depends upon something external to it. This explains Hegel's maddening habit, even after the most positive characterisation of some contemporary tendency in art, or art work, of raising the question: is this, however, still a work of art?—and then leaving it unanswered. For artistic modernity does not simply replace the traditional question 'Is this beautiful?' with some much broader concept of aesthetic evaluation, for example the

Schlegelian 'interesting'. What it asks, again and again, is the question 'Is this at all art?' To this question, no answer can be given on the basis of formally definable aesthetic criteria or merely historical considerations alone. Ultimately the answer will depend on the facts of reception (including, of course, intra-art reception and influences). This is co-determined by what is external to art, by the accidentalities of the present. This is the ultimate meaning of the 'end of art', the fundamental paradox of modern art. Art, becoming fully autonomous, made the determination of what is art a matter of heteronomy. For, Hegel would say, nothing is truly autonomous but Spirit is the totality of all its manifestations.

Notes

- 1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, tr. Th. Knox, Oxford, 1975, pp.10–11.
- 2 From the mid-'eighties onwards, radical doubts have been raised about the authenticity of Hotho's text, still the only one available to us. The editor of a forthcoming text (based on the original student notes and on transcripts of the original lectures), Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert, first in her dissertation ('Die Funktion der Kunst in der Geschichte. Untersuchungen zu Hegel's Aesthetik', *Hegel-Studien*, Beiheft 23, 1984), then in a series of subsequent papers dealing with more particular topics, has underlined sharply that Hotho's edition significantly changed, even directly distorted, Hegel's views and superimposed upon them his own more conservative, nationalistic and religiously oriented aesthetic ideas. In the absence of the new edition it is not possible to evaluate this claim—which leaves the interpreter of Hegel's *Aesthetics* in an unenviable position today. In this paper I have relied, of course, on the available text. I have however taken into account some of the 'corrections' indicated by Gethmann-Siefert, especially when they were amply substantiated by quotations from the yet unpublished lecture transcripts. In this I relied particularly (beyond her dissertation) on the following publications: 'Hegel's These vom Ende der Kunst und der "Klassizismus" der Aesthetik', *Hegel-Studien* 19 (1984), 'Das "moderne" Gesamtkunstwerk: die Oper', *Hegel-Studien*, Beiheft 34, 1992, and 'Hegel über Kunst und Alltäglichkeit', *Hegel-Studien* 28 (1993).
- 3 See *Beauty and Truth: A Study of Hegel's Aesthetics*, Oxford, 1984, esp. pp.51-61.
- 4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction*, tr. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge, 1980, p.37. The idea of an 'end of religion' was most radically formulated by Hegel in the concluding discussion of his 1824 lectures on the philosophy of religion, concerning the 'dissolution (*Vergehen*) of religious community'.
- 5 See especially the paper 'The End of Art' in Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disfranchisement of Art*, Columbia, 1986.

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- 6 Danto, p.209.
- 7 'Hegel on the Future of Art', *Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1974).
- 8 This accomplishment of Dutch art is, of course, already a matter of the past for Hegel. But his repeated characterisations of Goethe and Schiller as *Nationalpoeten* seem to indicate that such a function of forming (or perhaps transforming) the self-consciousness and cultural identity of a particular nation is for him still possible and relevant in contemporary conditions.
- 9 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, ed. G. Lasson, Meiner, 1966, I, p.282.