

Hegel-Studien

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*Guido Kreis, Friedrike Schick, Marc Nicolas Sommer, Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer: Lässt sich das Unendliche widerspruchsfrei denken? Ein Buchsymposium zu Guido Kreis' *Negative Dialektik des Unendlichen*. Kant, Hegel, Cantor*

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AUTOREN

SALLY SEDGWICK LAS Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Affiliated Professor of Germanic Studies, The University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Philosophy, 1423 University Hall (MC 267), 601 South Morgan Street, Chicago, IL 20064, USA
sedgwick@uic.edu

LAURE CAHEN-MAUREL Post-Doc Researcher with the Belgian Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique. Université Saint-Louis – Bruxelles, Centre Prospéro, 43 Boulevard du Jardin Botanique, 1000 Bruxelles, Belgique
laure.cahen-maurel@usaintlouis.be

GUILLAUME LEJEUNE Post-Doc Researcher with the Belgian Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique. Université de Liège, Département de philosophie, 7 Place du 20 août, 4000 Liège, Belgique
guillaume.lejeune@uliege.be

THOMAS MEYER Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter im Kopernikusprojekt „Energiewende Navigationssystem (ENavi)“ und im Projekt „Energieverantwortung“, Philosophisches Seminar der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Domplatz 23, 48143 Münster, Deutschland
thomas.meyer@uni-muenster.de

ARNO SCHUBBACH Oberassistent und Leiter des SNF-Projekts „Begriffe und Praktiken der Darstellung in Philosophie, Chemie und Malerei um 1800“, ETH Zürich, Departement Geistes-, Sozial- und Staatswissenschaften, Professur für Philosophie, Clausiusstrasse 49, 8092 Zürich, Schweiz
arno.schubbach@phil.gess.ethz.ch

GUIDO KREIS Associate Professor in Philosophy, Aarhus University, School for Culture and Society, Department of Philosophy and the History of Ideas, Jens Chr. Skous Vej 7, 1467/624, 8000 Aarhus C, Danmark
guido.kreis@cas.au.dk

FRIEDRIKE SCHICK Außerplanmäßige Professorin am Philosophischen Seminar der Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Bursagasse 1, 72020 Tübingen, Deutschland
friederike.schick@uni-tuebingen.de.

MARC NICOLAS SOMMER Wissenschaftlicher Assistent an der Professur für Geschichte der Philosophie an der Universität Basel, Universität Basel, Department Medien, Künste, Philosophie, Philosophisches Seminar, Steinengraben 5, 4051 Basel, Schweiz
Marc.Sommer@unibas.ch

PIRMIN STEKELER-WEITHOFER Professor für Theoretische Philosophie, Universität Leipzig, Institut für Philosophie, Beethovenstraße 15, 04107 Leipzig, Deutschland
stekeler@uni-leipzig.de

Laure Cahen-Maurel

(F.R.S.-FNRS / Université Saint-Louis, Brussels)

AN ART OF FALSE MYSTERIOUSNESS?

Hegel's Criticism of the Painting Style of Caspar David Friedrich

ABSTRACT: Der Aufsatz untersucht Hegels ästhetisches Urteil über den deutschen Maler der Romantik Caspar David Friedrich, das erstmals mit der Veröffentlichung der Ascheberg-Nachschrift von Hegels erster Vorlesung über Ästhetik an der Universität Berlin im Wintersemester 1820/21 zugänglich wurde. Zuerst wird der aktuelle Stand der Forschung zum Verhältnis zwischen Hegel und Caspar David Friedrich kurz betrachtet, wobei auffällt, wie wenig Resonanz Hegels Urteil über Friedrich bislang in der Sekundärliteratur gefunden hat. Über einige eher spekulative Resultate der bisherigen Forschung hinausgehend, wird dann gezeigt, daß man durch die Berücksichtigung bisher übergangener Originalquellen und Dokumente aus den Jahren 1820-1821 präzise bestimmen kann, welche Gemälde Caspar David Friedrichs Hegel bekannt gewesen sein konnten bzw. welche er sogar persönlich angeschaut hat. Hegels in der Ascheberg-Nachschrift überlieferte Kritik wird sodann auf genau diese Gemälde Friedrichs angewendet und schließlich in den größeren Zusammenhang von Hegels Überlegungen zum Stil sowie zum Geheimnis in der Malerei gestellt. Dadurch wird deutlich, daß aus den beiden wichtigsten Vorwürfen des Philosophen an Friedrich, der Strenge und Affektation, eine Reihe von Konsequenzen folgen, die sowohl für die Hegel- als auch für die Caspar David Friedrich-Forschung von Bedeutung sind.

I. Introduction: The Ascheberg Transcript of 1820/21

Hegel's abiding hostility for the writers and philosophers of Early German romanticism is so well known that it barely needs retelling. As early as 1807, upon the publication of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel criticizes the problematic attitude of what he calls the "beautiful soul" ("die schöne Seele" – Hegel 1807, 608 ff.), a conception that in subsequent works he explicitly associates with the German romantics. Continuing this theme, the *Lectures on Fine Art*, first edited into book form posthumously in 1835-1838 by Hegel's former student Heinrich Gustav Hotho (W 10,1-3), contains a severe rejection of the romantics for their supposedly pernicious subjectivism. Here the philosopher's dismissal of the kind of negative irony espoused by Friedrich Schlegel, for example, is just as notorious as his persistent castigation of the empty longing for the absolute that engenders a *krankhafte Schönseligkeit*, a "morbid beautiful blessedness," which Hegel attributes to the poet-philosopher Novalis (W 10,1: 87 and 205; cf. English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975a, 67 and 159).¹

¹ According to Hegel, the striving of romantic irony to transcend the world is nothing more than the vain affirmation of a subjectivity that believes itself superior to all objectivity (see W 10,1: 86). And because the beautiful soul does not want to risk confronting its inwardness with the external world, the result is an empty self-enclosed consciousness that lacks any substantiality. Hegel goes so far as to draw a link between the beautiful soul's attitude of a purely reflexive inner life disconnected from reality, and the cause of Novalis's death, who died of consumption in 1801.

² The Hotho edition is in part based on two of Hegel's notebooks that he used for his lectures on aesthetics: the Heidelberg notebook from 1818 and a notebook from his Berlin course. Hegel intended to redraft them for

In contrast, it was not until 1995—only twenty-two years ago—with the publication of the separate edition of the Ascheberg transcript of Hegel’s first lecture course on aesthetics, held at the University of Berlin in the winter semester of 1820/21, that Hegel’s judgment of the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich came to light (see Hegel [1820/21] 1995). His remarks were not included in the above-mentioned and better-known Hotho edition of the *Lectures on Fine Art*.² The philosopher’s verdict of Caspar David Friedrich in the Ascheberg transcript reads as follows:

Oft giebt es aber auch so einen gemachten strengen Styl, und der Künstler setzt darin zuweilen eine Affectation, z.B. bei den Werken Friedrich’s aus Dresden [But there is also often a manufactured severe style, and the artist sometimes puts an affectation into it, e.g. in the works of Friedrich from Dresden]. (GW 28,1: 120)³

At first glance this criticism appears to be simple, and perhaps even trivial. Moreover, on account of its brevity, one could imagine that Hegel’s criticism does not represent any sort of noteworthy contribution to the ongoing discussions about C. D. Friedrich’s place in the history of art and the question of his painting style. However, as I will show, this is not the case. It must be first of all noted that the philosopher’s judgment is interesting as much for the specific place in the lecture course where it is situated as for its relevance. Indeed, this passage is not to be found in Hegel’s philosophical history of the development of European painting, alongside other painters from the Dresden Academy, but in the introduction to this history.⁴ This introduction contains a rather detailed reflection on the concept of style in the arts that is freely based on Winckelmann’s historical typology of artistic styles. Here Hegel presents three broad stages in the development of the individual arts: 1) the beginning of a specific art; 2) the ideal centre at the culminating moment of the history of this art; and 3) the end or dissolution of it. A distinct style corresponds to each of these three stages; the severe, the ideal and the pleasing (graceful) style. In order to understand Hegel’s criticism of Caspar David Friedrich it is therefore important to bear in mind that this reference to the painter in the Berlin lecture course of 1820/21 occurs within Hegel’s considerations on the nature of style.

Before interpreting this passage in more detail, I will first of all briefly examine the current state of research on the relationship between Hegel and Caspar David Friedrich. It is striking to note how little resonance Hegel’s judgment has found in the secondary literature. Going beyond some of the more speculative results of earlier scholarship, I will then show that by consulting a number of overlooked original German sources and documents from the years 1820-1821 it is possible to precisely determine those paintings of Caspar David Friedrich that Hegel would have known about and even viewed in person. By comparing

² The Hotho edition is in part based on two of Hegel’s notebooks that he used for his lectures on aesthetics: the Heidelberg notebook from 1818 and a notebook from his Berlin course. Hegel intended to redraft them for publication but this did not happen. Both notebooks are no longer extant, so that the only certain material from Hegel’s own hand on the subject of aesthetics is the systematic, though extremely condensed, exposition on art to be found in the *Encyclopedia*, first published in 1817 and then revised for its re-edition in 1827. See §§ 456-64 in the 1817 *Encyclopedia*, GW 13: 241-43; cf. §§ 556-63 in the 1827 *Encyclopedia*, GW 19: 392-99. Most of Hotho’s edition of the *Vorlesungen* consists of transcriptions he made himself and the notes of other students who attended the Berlin lectures. The Hotho edition omits the lectures from the winter semester of 1820/21, and is based on the subsequent lectures from the summer semesters of 1823 and 1826, and the winter semester of 1828/29. See Gethmann-Siefert (1991, 92-110) and Jaeschke ([2003] 2016, 384-388) regarding the problematic nature of Hotho’s edition, and more generally on the philosophically debated problems raised by the fact that the materials of Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics do not come from Hegel’s published writings or handwritten papers.

³ Cf. Hegel [1820/21] 1995, 192.

⁴ See the Ascheberg transcript (“Besonderer Theil,” GW 28,1: 116-21), or the third part of the Hotho edition entitled “The System of the Individual Arts” (W 10,2: 243-465 and W 10,3).

Hegel's criticism in the Ascheberg transcript with these particular paintings of Friedrich, and furthermore reading this criticism in the larger context of his considerations on style and the topic of mysteriousness in painting, the succeeding sections will argue that a number of consequences can be drawn from the philosopher's two key reproaches of severity and affectation that are significant for both Hegel scholarship and Caspar David Friedrich research.⁵

II. Hegel's Judgment of C. D. Friedrich—a "Stupidity"?

As mentioned above, although it has been available for over twenty years, Hegel's judgment about Caspar David Friedrich has been hardly discussed in the research. For the most part it has either been ignored or overlooked, or merely noted, for instance by Hegel experts such as Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert and Stephen Houlgate.⁶ A few other researchers have briefly commented on this passage, and speculated as to which paintings of C. D. Friedrich the philosopher could have had in mind when labelling Friedrich's style artificially severe and affected. For example, in his 2010 book *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, Benjamin Rutter conjectures that Hegel's reference to a severity of style probably refers to a painting like *The Monk by the Sea* (1808/10), one of Friedrich's most celebrated works (Rutter 2010, 109). Rutter does not elaborate on the reasons why the style of this particular painting should be considered severe. Most likely it is because of the bleak emptiness of the scene, with the tiny solitary figure of the monk standing on the shore, who almost vanishes into the seascape. As for Hegel's charge of affectation, Rutter associates it with another well-known painting of Friedrich, the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818), underscoring the effect of "theatricality" in this painting because the figure in it is depicted from behind (Rutter 2010, 109).⁷

To my knowledge, Otto Pöggeler—the German specialist of Hegel—is the only scholar to have devoted an entire article to Hegel's criticism. This seminal article in German is entitled "Hegel und Caspar David Friedrich" and it was published in 2005 (Pöggeler 2005, 227-243). One of Pöggeler's main claims is that Hegel did not include Friedrich's pictorial art in his descriptive and normative history of painting because of a twofold repression. On the one hand, Hegel rejected C. D. Friedrich's art for purely aesthetic reasons; and on the other, he excluded it on account of the political views of Friedrich: the painter had expressed patriotic and nationalistic feelings in his works that the philosopher himself could not endorse (see Pöggeler 2005, esp. 232 and the third section "Die Rückkehr des Verdrängten," 238-243). The political aspect of Pöggeler's reading of this passage is justified to the extent that a painting like the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, which Pöggeler also takes as an example, clearly contains political motifs, such as the wanderer wearing the green uniform of the *Jäger*, the Prussian military volunteers in the War of Liberation against Napoleon. It is common knowledge that Caspar David Friedrich was close to Ernst Moritz Arndt, and that his patriotism is intimately connected with the history of Germany's struggle for unity and

⁵ For scholarship on Caspar David Friedrich that treats specific philosophical questions, see, among others, Décultot (1996); Busch (2003); Koerner ([1990] 2006); Grave (2011).

⁶ See the discussion of this point in the revised February 2016 version of Houlgate's article "Hegel's Aesthetics" in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-aesthetics/#EngTraKeyTexHeg>> [consulted 17 January 2017].

⁷ As Rutter puts it: "The *Wanderer above the Mist* suggests a certain theatricality, an estrangement of the spectator from the scene, which seems already to contain a spectator, and thus a disruptive and ultimately insubstantial pursuit of surprise." Here Rutter explicitly uses Michael Fried's term *theatricality*, but in his own manner. Cf. Fried (1980). Fried has recently published a book chapter on Caspar David Friedrich in relation to Kant; see Fried (2014, 111-149).

freedom, in the name of a country's right to national independence. Hence, Pöggeler is surely right to draw attention to the political elements in certain of Friedrich's paintings.⁸

However, what about the issue of artistic style, the main context in which Hegel's criticism of Friedrich occurs? In Pöggeler's eyes, Hegel here commits two blunders or stupidities—Pöggeler's word is "Sottise" (Pöggeler 2005, 230). First, Pöggeler thinks that Hegel's judgment of severity refers to a regressive and anachronistic tendency in the painter's works: a return to the earliest state of art, when it did no more than imitate nature or the most immediate empirical reality. In his article Pöggeler also hazards a guess as to the paintings of C. D. Friedrich that Hegel might have personally seen or known. In line with his political reading, Pöggeler cites Friedrich's most controversial painting, the *Tetschen Altarpiece* (*Cross in the Mountains*), as evidence of the above return to the earliest state of art. The *Tetschen Altarpiece* was a work painted in 1807/08 during the years of the occupation of Dresden by Napoleonic troops. The painting depicts a nature scene with Jesus on the cross, surrounded by fir trees. Although it is explicitly Christian, Pöggeler emphasizes the way this painting points to the raw natural elements—to the rocks, trees, rays of the sun—to a nature sacred in itself, like in the Nordic mythology of Ossian. In Pöggeler's eyes, Hegel's reproach that Friedrich has regressed back to the earliest state of art is a stupid statement to make because it shows a lack of understanding of the importance and radical novelty of this painting, proved by the fact that it is now enjoying a considerable renaissance in modern times, and that for many people this style of painting is not considered regressive but progressive. Thus, Hegel's reputation has to bear this consequence—the notorious "return of the repressed," to use the psycho-analytic language of Pöggeler (Pöggeler 2005, 238)—of our contemporary verdict. In other words, for Pöggeler we are correct in believing that with his 1820 criticism Hegel had misunderstood the essence and originality of Caspar David Friedrich's landscape paintings, and that this artist should now be considered as a painter ahead of his time.

The second "stupidity" for Pöggeler concerns the question of affectation, where Hegel connects Caspar David Friedrich with the tradition of the French, who tend to make the value of the artwork depend on whether it pleases or affects the public (Pöggeler 2005, 230). In one respect Pöggeler is correct: it does seem strange of Hegel to bring Friedrich into connection with the affectation style of the French. Not only because the painter drew his audience into a world where austerity reigns, but also because Caspar David Friedrich notoriously hated the French, so much so that he was labelled a "Franzosenfresser," as someone who ate Frenchmen for breakfast, as it were.

Despite its merits and relevance, in many ways Pöggeler's political reading does not go far enough to make full sense of Hegel's criticism of Friedrich, including the reference to the artistic style of the French. Furthermore, by relying on the fact that C. D. Friedrich's art only became extremely popular more than a century after his death, and is recognized today as a landmark in the history of art, Pöggeler's analysis invokes an argument from authority. It only has to be reversed to see its tenuousness: if the painter had not experienced a popular and critical revival in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries then Hegel's judgment would still be correct. Arguments from authority remain insufficient because they do not tell us why or

⁸ Pöggeler cites the striking anecdote about one of Friedrich's most well-known paintings, *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (c. 1819), completed during the year of the promulgation of the Carlsbad decrees; see Pöggeler (2005, 238). The latter were intended to muzzle the movements of the liberals, including the student fraternities (*Burschenschaften*) claiming to unite the German people in the post-Napoleonic period. The Carlsbad decrees forbade the student fraternities to assemble at the Wartburg Castle in old-German clothes, that is, in the frock-coat and cap, the cape and the old-German beret. Alluding to the persecutions at that time of the political "demagogues," C. D. Friedrich reportedly said with humour about the main two characters of his painting, who were wearing the outlawed old-German clothes: "They are indulging in demagogic machinations." Reported in: Förster (1846, 157).

how Friedrich's work is important, but only that it is currently considered as such. Moreover, the modernity and greatness of this art continues to be questionable for a number of people. And because Hegel's criticism emphasizes the artificial aspect of Caspar David Friedrich's painting style, it could be argued that Hegel's criticism is actually in keeping with many contemporary judgments that regard this painting as kitsch.

Finally, another question could be asked: Instead of speculating on the possible paintings of C. D. Friedrich that Hegel could have known, might it be possible to know which ones Hegel was referring to? If this were possible, then we could directly compare these paintings with Hegel's criticism, to see if this might help us better understand the latter. In the following section I will argue that it is indeed possible to precisely know the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich that Hegel would have known about and even personally seen.

III. Hegel's Visit to the 1820 Annual Exhibition of the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts

According to the principal available documents, Hegel's judgment of Friedrich arose from first-hand experience of the painter's works. Just before holding his first Berlin course on aesthetics in the winter semester of 1820/21 (as recorded in the Ascheberg transcript), Hegel had attended the Annual Exhibition of the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts on 27 August 1820 (his birthday).⁹ His stay in Dresden was on the cusp of the German summer and autumn, lasting from 26 August to 11 September 1820, and is detailed in a number of contemporary documents, including Hegel's own letters. For example, in a draft of a letter to Creuzer, dated the end of May 1821, Hegel characterizes and praises the city of Dresden as "an *otium* (leisure) of life in common for friends," writing:

But still one thing—the main thing. Last autumn, I spent 15 days in Dresden and, having seen this city, I regretted not having visited it already 30 years earlier; I especially realized that it could become a meeting place for well-educated and learned friends. [...] There would be nothing more beautiful for me than occasionally to meet up with you there during the autumn holidays. (B, 268)¹⁰

Hegel's visit to the Academy of Fine Arts is furthermore documented in the diary of Karl August Förster, who was Hegel's host in Dresden, and an uncle of Hegel's student and friend Friedrich Förster. K. A. Förster had gone to the exhibition with the philosopher, and noted this visit in his diary:

We were expecting Hegel, and he arrived here on the 26th [...]. I accompanied him to the art exhibition, and a conversation about art in general developed on the way; despite his dialectics, he displays a vivid and ardent sense for art and life; but he predominantly focuses on the technical aspects, and because he analyses the work, he often loses the impression of the whole. He said he did not like Old German art, and was delighted when

⁹ Several researchers have mentioned the fact that Hegel attended the Annual Exhibition of the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts in 1820 (e.g. Pöggeler 2005, 229), but they do not investigate or try to determine which paintings of C. D. Friedrich were on display at that time.

¹⁰ Hegel had already travelled to Dresden a first time in July 1820 and continued to regularly visit the city in autumn during the following years. His stay in 1820 is also recorded in a report from the Dresden police, whose task it was to pass on information concerning Hegel's movements in the Saxon capital to the Prussian police back in Berlin. The latter had not ruled out that Hegel might have wanted to secretly participate in the councils of the Dresden student fraternities (*Burschenschaft*). For further details, see d'Hondt (1998, 298 and 307 f.)

I told him that it was also not in line with the spirit of our exhibition. However, he had imagined the exhibition to be more significant. (Förster 1846, 176-177)¹¹

Since 1816 the exhibition had always been inaugurated on 3 August, and generally lasted “between two and four weeks” (Prause 1975, 9). In the year 1820, however, it lasted almost 8 weeks, finishing at the end of September.¹² Hegel had especially gone to the exhibition of 1820 to write a review of Gerhard von Kügelgen’s paintings.¹³ The review was never published, and has only survived as a draft (see “Über von Kügelgens Bilder,” GW 15: 204-206), but the *Lectures on Fine Art* contain traces of its considerations (cf. W 10,3: 79 f.). The brutal death of the history and portrait painter Kügelgen, who had been murdered a few months earlier, caused a huge stir, and unsurprisingly the presentation of his final works was a main focus of the exhibition. Kügelgen had been a paid member of the Dresden Academy and his final five works included: a Madonna and Child, and four half-length figures in portrait size of the Prodigal Son, John the Apostle, John the Baptist, and Christ.

Because Caspar David Friedrich was a paid member of the Dresden Academy in 1820, he was also required to exhibit his work to the public. It is therefore possible to precisely know which paintings C. D. Friedrich exhibited when Hegel was in Dresden that summer/autumn. This can be done by not only consulting the official catalogue of that year¹⁴, the *Verzeichnis der am Augustustage den 3. August 1820 in der Königlich Sächsischen Akademie der Künste zu Dresden öffentlich ausgestellten Kunstwercke (Verzeichnis 1820)*¹⁵, but also the reviews of the exhibition in the journals and newspapers of the time. The official catalogue for the year 1820 reports that Friedrich exhibited four oil paintings (and no drawings, as he sometimes did). These paintings of Friedrich were exhibited directly next to the works of Gerhard von Kügelgen (see *Verzeichnis 1820*: 50-51). Here are the titles and exhibit numbers of the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich as listed in the official 1820 Dresden catalogue:

544 Vollmond [Full Moon].

545 Zwey Schwäne auf dem Weiher im Schilf [Two Swans on the Pond in the Reeds].

546 Bergegend am Morgen [Mountain Region in the Morning].

547 Die Schwestern auf dem Söller am Hafan [Sisters on the Harbor View Terrace].¹⁶

The fact that these four paintings were actually exhibited is confirmed by a number of contemporary reviews of this art exhibition.¹⁷ Moreover, it appears that Friedrich even

¹¹ “Hegel, dessen Ankunft wir erwarteten, langte den 26. August hier an. [...] Auf dem Wege zur Kunstausstellung, wohin ich ihn geleite, entwickelt sich ein Gespräch über Kunst im Allgemeinen, bei aller Dialektik zeigt er doch viel warmen regen Sinn für Kunst und Leben; nur daß er immer mehr dem Technischen sich hingiebt und über dem Analysiren des Kunstwerkes den Eindruck des Ganzen oft verliert. Er ist der altdeutschen Kunst nicht hold und freute sich, als ich ihm sagte, dass dies im Geiste unserer Ausstellung sei. Er hatte die Ausstellung doch bedeutender gedacht.”

¹² See *Literarisches Conversations-Blatt*, No. 10, 11 January 1821, 37.

¹³ Regarding Hegel’s views on Kügelgen, see Gethmann-Siefert and Stemmerich (1986, 139-168). See also Pinna (2005, 143-153).

¹⁴ I first referred to this document—the *Kataloge der Dresdner Akademie – Ausstellungen 1801-1850*—as a source for determining those paintings of C. D. Friedrich that Hegel would have seen, in my PhD, which was defended in January 2014. See the book version of this PhD: Cahen-Maurel (2017, 77-81).

¹⁵ A more recent reprint of this catalogue edited by Marianne Prause is also available: see Prause (1975).

¹⁶ Kügelgen’s works are listed on p. 51 of the *Verzeichnis 1820*. His exhibit numbers are: 549, 550, 551, 552 and 553.

¹⁷ Some of the contemporary reviews discussing C. D. Friedrich’s paintings from the 1820 exhibition are to be found in the weekly journal *Literarisches Wochenblatt*, renamed from December 1820 onwards *Literarisches Conversations-Blatt*; see “Ueber die Kunstausstellung in Dresden. Ende September 1820,” in: *Literarisches Conversations-Blatt*, No. 10, 11 January 1821, 37-40. And in the leaflet *Kunst-Blatt* of the *Morgenblatt für*

exhibited a fifth painting at the 1820 Annual Exhibition, which was apparently submitted late and therefore did not make it into the official catalogue. The existence of a fifth painting exhibited by Friedrich in 1820 is noted in a review in the *Literarisches Conversations-Blatt*, a literary organ edited by August von Kotzebue in Weimar.¹⁸

Of the five paintings of Caspar David Friedrich on display in 1820, three are still extant. Firstly, *Swans in the Reeds* (exhibition number 545), which is now at the Goethemuseum in Frankfurt (see ill. 1, reproduced in *CDF Werkverzeichnis* 1973, No. 266: 360):



Ill. 1: C. D. Friedrich, *Swans in the Reeds*, c. 1820.
Oil on canvas, 44 x 35.5 cm. Frankfurt, Goethemuseum.

This small canvas shows a pair of swans on a pond, in the middle of the night, protected by a curtain of reeds. Virtually the whole surface of the composition is filled by the tight clusters of the plants. There are two sources of light to illuminate the scene, a quarter moon, not quite at the centre of the canvas, that can be seen through a breach in the reeds and is reflected on the still water of the pond, and the evening star, higher in the sky and at the right of the painting. These two light sources visually parallel the birds, and are respectively placed on the same axis. The colours are mostly browns, dark greens, grey-whites—the sombre tones of the night. In addition, there is a touch of yellow and pink in the plumage of the swans. Friedrich has set the horizon so low in the picture that a spectator would have to be up to their breast in the water to properly view the scene, as if he were attempting to place the viewer into the rather secretive location of the picture.

A second larger extant painting from 1820 is listed as number 546 in the catalogue, and was originally called *Berggegend am Morgen* [*Mountain Region in the Morning*]. This painting is now at the Neue Pinakothek in Munich and has acquired the new title, *Riesengebirge Landscape with Rising Fog* (see ill. 2, reproduced in *CDF Werkverzeichnis* 1973, No. 264: 359-360). Here we move from the moonlit nocturnal scene of the *Swans* to a bright morning glow. Massive rocky rounded tops of high mountains protrude from the morning mist that is still covering the valleys. A patch of blue sky appears in the top left of the canvas behind a veil of white clouds.

gebildete Stände published by Johann Friedrich Cotta in Stuttgart and Tübingen; see No. 95, 27 November 1820, 377-380.

¹⁸ The review was written just after the exhibition had closed at the very end of September. See “Ueber die Kunstaussstellung in Dresden. Ende September 1820,” 39.



Ill. 2: C. D. Friedrich, *Riesengebirge Landscape with Rising Fog (Berggegend am Morgen)*, 1819/20. Oil on canvas, 70.4 x 54.9 cm. Munich, Neue Pinakothek

The third extant painting of Friedrich that was on display at the 1820 Dresden exhibition is called: *Sisters (Night in a Harbour)*, number 547); it is now at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (see ill. 3, reproduced in *CDF Werkverzeichnis* 1973, No. 262: 357-358). The picture is not in the traditional horizontal format of a landscape painting but in a vertical format with a tight framing. Two female figures (the sisters) are standing at a railing looking at a harbour at night. Extending out of the sepia-violet tinted fog are the towers of an old German church in the left half of the canvas, and multiple boat masts in the right half. Venus, the evening star, is the unique and tiny source of light illuminating the painting. It twinkles above in a large sky that is almost entirely empty, except for this one element. Conversely, the space in the lower part of the picture is constricted, busy, and filled with a number of intersecting axes. The towers, spires and masts partly block the view, and here again Friedrich has painted a night scene with dull hues. The foreground is occupied by the two contemplative sisters, who are dressed in city clothes, and are standing with their backs to the viewer.



Ill. 3: C. D. Friedrich, *Night in a Harbour (Sisters)*, c. 1818/20. Oil on canvas, 74 x 52 cm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum.

Two other paintings exhibited by Friedrich in 1820 are now unfortunately lost. The first one is listed in the official 1820 exhibition catalogue as number 544 and described as a round oil painting. The full description in the catalogue reads: “Vollmond. Wolken vorüberziehend. Eine Eule fliegt auf. Rundgemälde in Oel [Full Moon. Swept by clouds. An owl flying away. Round oil painting].” (*Verzeichnis 1820*: 50) A review in the *Kunst-Blatt* describes the painting in these terms: “No. 544. [...] becomes rather burlesque. Think of a cloud-filled round disk, a moon at its centre, an owl flying below just near it. This painting is supposed to be revealing, but it does not tell us anything, because it is difficult to see what it ought to conceal. It resembles a shooting target, and even this compelling idea destroys every impression.” (*Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände / Kunst-Blatt*, No. 95, 27 Nov. 1820: 320) From its description it appears that it was part of a series of works of which we have mainly later sepia drawings; for example, the following sepia *Flying Owl in Front of the Moon* (see ill. 4):



Ill. 4: C. D. Friedrich, *Flying Owl in Front of the Moon*, c. 1836-37.
Pencil and sepia, 27,9 x 24,4 cm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum

The second lost painting—the one Friedrich sent to the exhibition late—appears to have been another mountain landscape. The reviewer of the *Literarisches Conversations-Blatt* compares this painting with its counterpart *Riesengebirge Landscape with Rising Fog*: “The two larger paintings of Friedrich present mountainous regions illuminated in the early morning; the latter painting is desolate, cool and isolated, with vapours rising from the valleys and between the bare shrubs, while the second painting unfolds in a cheerful and busy manner in a warmer morning glow.” (“Ueber die Kunstausstellung in Dresden. Ende September 1820,” 39) As we saw, the art reviewer for the *Kunst-Blatt* of 27 November 1820 had initially criticized what he saw as the fantastical allure and forced mystical approach of the round landscape “Full Moon”. However, here he highlighted the unusual precision of the highly realistic elements of *Riesengebirge Landscape with Rising Fog*: “Perfectly true and depicted with great knowledge of the high mountainous nature. The treatment, especially of the stony, mossy foreground, is excellent.” (*Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände / Kunst-Blatt*, No. 95, 27 Nov. 1820: 380)

This was the body of work from Caspar David Friedrich that was on display when Hegel attended the Annual Exhibition of the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts in the summer and autumn of 1820. With these five paintings Hegel primarily encountered the misty and/or nocturnal and moonlit version of romanticism that can be found in the painter’s oeuvre, and also a sample of works containing a mixture of the fantastical and the real. And in one case, the *Sisters*, we find an instance of Friedrich’s famous *Rückenfiguren*, those enigmatic figures painted from the back.

It is worth noting that Hegel was most probably familiar with, if not the paintings, then at least the name of Caspar David Friedrich, already before this visit to Dresden, because by 1820 Friedrich was a well-known and even controversial landscape painter. In addition to the public controversy of 1809 generated by *The Tetschen Altarpiece* (*Cross in the Mountains*), and Kleist's appreciative review of *The Monk by the Sea*, published the following year in 1810 in the *Berliner Abendblätter*, Hegel also could have been introduced to the work of Friedrich through the natural philosopher Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert, his colleague at the Nuremberg High School, where Hegel had been the headmaster (from 1808 to 1816). As Pöggeler remarks, "Hegel had already offered to review von Schubert's *Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaften* (1808) in the *Heidelberger Jahrbüchern*" and some of the analyses it contained were based on a cycle of drawings of the ages of life painted by C. D. Friedrich (Pöggeler 2005, 234 f.).

IV. *The Question of Style in Hegel's Philosophy of Art*

In order to correctly evaluate the nature and relevance of Hegel's criticism of Friedrich's painting style, it is worth remaining within the scope of the paintings exhibited in Dresden in 1820. We will now do this by examining what Hegel himself understands by style in art. As one may recall, Hegel's philosophy of art is a *metaphysics of art*—its point is to show that art, like religion and philosophy, is one of the forms of the manifestation of the Idea as spirit, by other means than those of faith or concepts. According to a well-known formula in the Hotho book edition of the *Lectures on Fine Art*, art or the beautiful is "das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee" (W 10,1: 144),¹⁹ that is to say, "the sensuous shining of the Idea," where 'the Idea' is that free and lively process of unfolding, expression or realization and self-conscious understanding of a universal substance by its own activity. Art, as one stage in this process, is something ideal-sensuous, but since it is not the ideality of feeling or thought, it is still present externally as a thing.

For Hegel, the concept of style precisely concerns this *external part of art*. Without returning to the Kantian question of taste, i.e. to 'aesthetics' as a question of the subjective or inter-subjective reception of the artwork and of the affective life of its viewer—her pleasure or displeasure—, style in art is defined by Hegel first and foremost as what *manifests itself to the senses and to the imagination of the spectator* (see GW 28,1: 116-121).²⁰ The question of style in general, however, is not that of the artist's manner. It should not be reduced to simple surface effects, or to the mere form. Rather, it rests on the "concrete unity" of the form and the content, the exterior and the interior, or the sensible configuration and the sense—a unity that Hegel contends is constitutive of the very idea of art, or what he calls the "ideal" (GW 28,1: 271 f.).²¹ In other words, style in art concerns the manner in which spirit shines

¹⁹ It was already established in 1931 by Georg Lasson that this definition of art is actually nowhere to be found in the various extant transcripts of Hegel's lecture course. On this point, see Gethmann-Siefert (1991, 107). Cf. the Ascheberg transcript (GW 28,1: 12): "Die Darstellung, Offenbarung des Wahren ist aber das Schöne;" and the Hotho transcript from 1823 (GW 28,1: 223): "Beide Extrême versöhnt die Kunst, ist das bindende Mittelglied des Begriffs und der Natur. diese Bestimmung also hat die Kunst einerseits mit der Religion und Philosophie gemein, hat aber die eigentliche Weise, daß sie das Höhere selbst auf sinnliche Weise darstellt und der empfindenden Natur so näher bringt."

²⁰ The definition of style in the Ascheberg transcript reads as follows: "der Styl aber betrifft mehr die Thätigkeit, wodurch das Werk heraustritt in die Erscheinung, für andere da ist" (GW 28,1: 119).

²¹ Cf. also § 457 in the *Encyclopedia* from 1817 (GW 13: 241): "Die Bedeutung des Ideals ist die Substantialität als das identische und concrete Wesen der Natur und des Geistes;" or § 556 in the 1827 edition of the *Encyclopedia* (GW 19: 392), where the figure of beauty is defined as: "die konkrete *Anschaung* und Vorstellung des *an sich* absoluten Geistes als des *Ideals*."

through its actual incarnation in matter according to a definite form. This medium that has been deliberately shaped by human beings into a form that expresses a spiritual content presents itself to us in sensible perception, in the here and now, in the singular existence and individuality of the artwork. Each work of art therefore has a style, and these different styles are different modes of the manifestation of the works to their spectators.

However, the way in which the substantial content of art itself is conceived depends on, or is primarily, that of an epoch and a civilization—of a collective subjectivity. Hence, style is also a historically defined category. In the *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel places historical-stylistic considerations on the level of an even more profound particularization than the considerations regarding the varying degrees of the embodiment of spirit in the three “art-forms” of the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic. Indeed, although they are characterized by the pre-eminence of one art or a group of arts, these art-forms do not primarily concern a specific artistic medium, i.e. the different realisation in individual arts, such as painting or sculpture. They are first of all to be understood as essential determinations of the Idea. The symbolic, classical and romantic art forms are rendered necessary by the very concept of art; they are necessary particular stages of the history of art. In other words, the concept of ‘art-form’ (*Kunstform*) is more narrowly based on the essence of artistic beauty or the “Ideal” than the concept of “style” is. Conversely, at the level of style, the link to the content of art, that is to say to the universal or the absolute, can become more or less contingent: with the increasing accentuation of the external side of the appearance of art throughout its history, there is a shift in style towards the accidental.²²

Hegel therefore proposes in the introduction to the particular part (“besonderer Theil”) of the lecture course a tripartite typology of styles that consists in a succession of the different epochs of the development of each individual art. The development from one artistic style to another generates what he regards as the distinctive history of the relation of the work of art to its audience. Each particular fine art has an ideal centre at the culminating moment of its history and two flawed extremities. One of these extremities is at its starting point, and falls short of ideal beauty, and the other is at its point of termination. The latter goes beyond ideal beauty, toward the dissolution of art as a unity of the sensuous and the spiritual. The beginnings of art have produced simple, cold and abstract works that are short on detail, and lacking in movement, life and freedom. Following Winckelmann, this is what Hegel calls *der strenge Styl*, the “severe style”.²³ This is because “the beautiful appears there [in the severe style] as something weighty and grand, and for the latter it is not a matter of secondary elements, but the object itself should emerge” (GW 28,1: 119).²⁴ Nothing ought to divert from the essential element, i.e. from the greatness of the thing itself that is represented in the *content*. Here the manner and *form* in which the content is represented, any personal invention, or the role of the subjectivity of the artist, becomes almost entirely effaced. The aim of the severe style is to ‘do’ nothing else than imitate nature. Accordingly, a severe artwork is not nature reflected by an intelligent and sensitive mind, but the mere reproduction of the “given,” of a nature that is already there. Hegel defines this style as the “higher abstraction of beauty” (GW 28,1: 119; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 616). Here

²² Especially in the modern field of painting, according to the Hotho transcript of the 1823 lecture course: “Indem es das Eigenthümliche der Malerei ist, daß die Besonderheit der Meisterschaft eintritt,” “[j]eder Meister hat in Betreff auf die Gegenstände und die Darstellung in Farbe und Hervorbringung der Erscheinung, seinen Styl” (GW 28,1: 475).

²³ For more on Hegel’s conception of style in relation to Winckelmann, see Houlgate (2007, 73-75).

²⁴ “[E]s tritt aber da das Schöne als ein Gewichtiges, Großes auf, es ist ihm nicht um die Nebensachen zu thun, sondern die Sache selbst soll hervortreten.” Cf. W 10,2: 247: “Dieser strenge Stil [läßt] die Sache allein herrschen und [verwendet] auf die Nebendinge vornehmlich nicht viel Fleiß und Ausbildung [This severe style [...] grants domination to the topic alone, and above all does not devote much industry and elaboration to accessories (Hegel [1842] 1975b, 616)].”

abstraction is meant in a technical sense that is particularly explained in the terminological part of the course on aesthetics: “the still abstract Idea has its shape [...] external to itself, not settled by itself” (W 10,1: 99; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975a, 75). The abstraction of the severe style is therefore synonymous with the inadequacy of the sensuous, visible form of expression and the Idea because of the Idea’s lack of self-determination.

At the opposite end of history, the progress of the arts has given more value to the immediate appearance of the work: it is no longer the one topic itself to which the whole external appearance refers; it is now the appearance of the work, independently of its content, that is consciously and deliberately the aim of the representation.²⁵ “Pleasing, an effect produced from without, is declared as an aim and becomes a concern on its own account.”²⁶ In this sense, the ‘pleasing or agreeable style’ is the ‘aesthetic’ style proper that leads to the production of an “effect” (GW 28,1: 120).²⁷ In this particular style, the work of art may become overloaded with superfluous details. Whereas the severe style limits itself to imitating nature, the pleasing or agreeable style puts forward the artist’s intentions and work, or her virtuosity: “Here we see at once that the artwork is something manufactured” (GW 28,1: 120).²⁸ The range of the pleasing style is vast, and includes the art of ornament, the mannerism of Gothic art, or the more unpleasing than attractive art of the colossal (that of Michelangelo for example). But most of all, the agreeable style is the style typical of the French, as opposed to the Germans, “who make too strong a demand for a content in works of art in the depths of which the artist is then to satisfy himself, unconcerned about the public” (W 10,2: 252; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 621).²⁹

Indeed, whereas in the severe style the artwork leaves us cold, for “it is as if nothing at all were granted” to the spectators (GW 28,1: 120; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 619), the particular details of the appearance of pleasant or graceful artworks “have their essential purpose solely in relation to the spectator or reader, they flatter the person for whom they have been devised” (W 10,2: 251; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 619). In this way, “the public becomes entirely free from the essential content of the topic and is brought by the work only into conversation with the artist” (W 10,2: 251; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 619).³⁰ According to Hegel, the history of Western art and especially of French art therefore results in the purely finite—the finite point of view of the artist’s and of the spectator’s (arbitrary) subjectivities—in contrast to true or universal spirit.

Finally, Hegel situates the ‘ideal style’ or the beautiful style proper between these two opposing styles, i.e. the ideal style “hover[s] in between the purely substantive expression of the topic and the complete emergence of what pleases” (W 10,2: 248; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 617). The ideal style therefore consists not so much in the register of the greatness of its content as in its ‘liveliness’ (*Lebendigkeit*) and concreteness, as opposed to its stiff abstraction. Since “the inherently concrete Idea carries within itself the principle of its mode of appearance and is therefore its own free configurator” (W 10,1: 98; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975a, 75), it is able to find an entirely adequate expression of this

²⁵ See GW 28,1: 120: “In [den gefälligen Styl] geht der ideale Styl über, wenn das Erscheinen ihm zum Zwecke selbst wird, wenn die Sache nicht mehr Zweck ist.”

²⁶ “Das Gefallen, die Wirkung nach außen kündigt sich als Zweck an und wird eine Angelegenheit für sich” (W 10,2: 249; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 618).

²⁷ Cf. W 10,2: 250: “Insofern nun aber diese ganze Stufe der Kunst auf die Wirkung nach außen hin durch die Darstellung des Äußeren losgeht, können wir als ihre weitere Allgemeinheit den *Effekt* angeben [...]”

²⁸ “Hier sieht man schon, dass das Werk ein Gemachtes ist.”

²⁹ “Wir Deutsche dagegen fordern zu sehr einen Gehalt von Kunstwerken, in dessen Tiefe dann der Künstler sich selber befriedigt, unbekümmert um das Publikum [...]”

³⁰ Cf. GW 28,1: 120: “Bei diesem Heraustreten ins Gefällige giebt sich besonders der Künstler zu erkennen. der Zuschauer befindet sich oft sehr gut dabei; denn er wird von der Sache frei gelassen, und befindet sich bei dem Künstler”.

freedom in a sensuous, visible form. The free liveliness of the substantial content of the work of art that individualizes and determines itself is displayed even in the work's smallest formal and plastic details, it animates or penetrates them. Formally and plastically, the ideal style emerges from the stiffness of the preceding style by adding grace and diversity. No detail is unnecessary or aberrant because of the robust unity of the work—i.e. that concrete unity of the content (*Inhalt*) of the Idea and its phenomenal manifestation or figure (*Gestalt*) that defines the Ideal in Hegel. What manifests itself to the eye or to the senses of the public is a whole in itself, inherently calm, and independent of the spectator. However, without projecting itself outside, the work still grants something—grace—to the audience out of “courtesy” or as an “acknowledgement” (W 10,2: 248 f.; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 617).³¹

V. *False Severity and False Profundity?*

After this summary of Hegel's considerations on the concept of style in art in general, we are now in a better position to understand his criticism of the painter Caspar David Friedrich. In Hegel's conception of painting, colour and light are the two decisive mediums of expression or sensuous elements for the Idea as spirit to become embodied and manifest itself in a lively manner to the eye of the spectator (see, for ex., GW 28,1: 479). In his 1820/21 Berlin *Lectures on Fine Art* Hegel characterizes the essence of Caspar David Friedrich's style as the conjunction of two opposing stylistic types: the ‘severe’ style and the “*gemachter Stil*” that verges on the affectation style. In the ‘severe’ style the content is supposed to be of something grand and sacred and the form reduced to its bare necessity; whereas the affectation style concerns the production of effects and is a further general characteristic of the gracious style, emerging at the end of a long maturation of the plastic arts. In other words, according to Hegel, the severity of Friedrich's painting style has turned into its opposite: the content becomes inessential or insubstantial, whereas the reduced form (severe style) becomes the aim of the work of art and seeks to produce an effect (gracious style).

There is plenty of evidence that the paintings of C. D. Friedrich often produce an appearance of severity due to a certain number of factors. For instance, the painting *Sisters (Night in a Harbour)* reveals particularly well the systematic procedures that are characteristic of an artwork that initially shuts itself off to the external senses, leaving the spectator cold. To begin with, the visual severity of this painting is generated by the simplification of the phenomena of colour and light. Friedrich's narrow palette of colours makes the work almost appear like a monochrome painting: brown shades tending toward black in the lower part of the painting, only enhanced by the details of the yellow point of the evening star, the greenish-blue roof of the church, and the thin white edge on one of the black dresses of the sisters. As for the formative effects of the light, it is reduced to a contrast between the brighter heavenly dimension of the sky, and the tenebrous terrestrial dimension in the lower half of the canvas. Moreover, the severity arises because of the austere geometrization process present at every level of the painting: the railing and cross sharply emphasize verticality and horizontality; the characters and objects are grouped into pairs; and there is a rigorous symmetry between the city and port or sea on either side of the central axis of the painting. For Hegel, a regularity and symmetry of this kind produces an inorganic unity devoid of liveliness. The spectator is faced with the “severe” domain of the grandeur of the topic—there is something great and obscure, a remainder of mystery and the unknown.

³¹ Cf. GW 28,1: 119-20: “Mit dieser Lebendigkeit ist nothwendig der Charakter der *Anmuth, Grazie* verbunden. die *Grazie*, (*Charis*) ist eben ein Herauswenden zu dem Zuschauer, wie auch die Etymologie sagt.”

Although *Sisters* is indeed marked by an abstraction that may be said to impoverish the pictorial dimension of the work, this no longer holds for the other exhibited paintings of that time, like *Riesengebirge Landscape with Rising Fog*, the diurnal landscape that Hegel would have seen in 1820, as well as its lost mountainous pendant. These landscape paintings have a more realistic basis, a more sensual palette and a lively chromatic unity. Or in the words of the art reviewer for the *Literarisches Conversations-Blatt*: there is “a pure and peaceful colour harmony” (“Ueber die Kunstausstellung in Dresden. Ende September 1820,” 39) consisting of semi-tones. In *Riesengebirge Landscape with Rising Fog* the browns of the earth and the rounded tops of the high mountain rocks are warmed by dashes of yellow and red, with the summits lit by a touch of yellow and white. The painting points to an atmosphere and shows how an ethereal or almost insubstantial veil of mist can soften the mineral mass of the mountains to almost make them disappear. In other words, it seems that one can find here precisely the stylistic ideal of landscape painting in the sense of Hegel himself, i.e. a naturalistic vitality of colour and natural appearances reflected by an intelligent and sensitive mind. Though it may be difficult for some critics to acknowledge that the landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich was ahead of his time, it is also clear that the realistic element in his approach to art is not entirely out of step with nineteenth-century painting and therefore does not constitute a return to an earlier past.

In order to better understand Hegel’s central reproach of a false severity in Friedrich’s work that verges on affectation, it is important to examine more closely the Ascheberg transcript and the Hotho book edition of the *Lectures on Fine Art* together. The one critical sentence on C. D. Friedrich in the Ascheberg transcript may be fruitfully supplemented with a longer passage in the Hotho edition that occurs exactly at the same point in the lecture course and explains the flaw of false severity as a kind of false mysteriousness or “trading in secrets” (*Geheimniskrämerei*):

To be sure, this repelling [element in the work] might frequently be just a mere hypochondria on the part of the artist, who inserts a depth of meaning into his work, but will not pass over to a free, light, and serene exposition of the topic; on the contrary, he deliberately intends to make things difficult for the spectator. In that case, such a false mysteriousness is itself only an affectation in turn, and a false contrast with the pleasant. (W 10,2: 251-52; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 619)³²

Pöggeler does not take this passage into account in his 2005 article. But the order of its insertion in the Hotho edition of Hegel’s lectures, between remarks on the severity of a work shut in upon itself, and which grants nothing to the spectator, and the reflections on the affectation of the French, is identical with the order of Hegel’s judgment of Friedrich contained in the Ascheberg manuscript of 1820/21. This is the only place in each of the editions where Hegel talks about the French and the severe style, and the unusual sentence about the severe style reappears from one edition to the other in almost exactly the same wording.³³ One could therefore reasonably conclude that Hegel’s above remark is directed at artists like Caspar David Friedrich.

Hegel’s unflattering expression “*Geheimniskrämerei*,” or a false kind of mysteriousness, appears to stigmatize the profundity of painters like Caspar David Friedrich, implying

³² “Dies Zurückstoßende kann freilich oft auch eine bloße Hypochondrie des Künstlers sein, der eine Tiefe der Bedeutung in das Kunstwerk hineinlegt, doch zur freien, leichten, heiteren Exposition der Sache nicht fortgehen, sondern es dem Zuschauer absichtlich schwer machen will. Eine solche Geheimniskrämerei ist dann aber selbst nur wieder eine Affektation und ein falscher Gegensatz gegen jene Gefälligkeit.”

³³ See GW 28,1: 120: “Im strengen Styl ist dem Zuschauer oder Zuhörer nichts eingeräumt, die Sache selbst nur gibt sich da.” Cf. W 10,2: 251: “In dem strengen Stile dagegen ist dem Zuschauer gleichsam gar nichts eingeräumt, es ist die Substanz des Gehalts, welche in ihrer Darstellung streng und herb die Subjektivität zurückschlägt.”

that they employ enigmas or mysteries in their painting solely to attract spectators, merely to pique or stimulate their interest.³⁴ Instead of visually expressing a depth of feeling or spirit as inwardness, which as the Christian art par excellence painting should do, according to Hegel, here the spiritual content of the painted landscape depends on an unspoken intention of the artist. The paintings are loaded with sense, but the artist has apparently hidden his intentions. Accordingly, it is difficult for the spectator to immediately grasp the veiled subject of the paintings—the content that the formal and plastic severity of Friedrich’s paintings seeks to emphasize.

This “conscious” form of symbolism comes under the category of the enigma (*das Rätsel*). An artist offering an enigma to the spectators starts from an idea of which he or she is perfectly conscious, i.e. that is clearly understood by the artist. However, the artist intentionally translates it into a confused form, in which the patterns markedly diverge and there does not seem to be any discernible connection (see W 10,1: 510 ff.). Yet only the discovery of a common denominator of the most heterogeneous elements that the artist has chosen determines the content or idea expressed in the artist’s style. Insofar as the meaning of the work in this case cannot consist in the interplay of the internal dependencies of its elements, the spectator is forced to find a back-story for the work. Spectators or researchers looking for clues about the deeper meaning of Friedrich’s landscape paintings might, for example, be tempted to turn to the writings or even the biography of the artist (see Friedrich 1999; and also Friedrich 2005).³⁵

VI. The Enigma in Caspar David Friedrich

A painting like *Sisters* undoubtedly works like an enigma or hermetic riddle. What the spectator initially sees is mysterious, for it combines a number of heterogeneous motifs—a night with no moon or source of light other than the evening star, high in the sky, illuminating the scene; the towers and spires of a church; the masts of boats that are not sailing, but anchored at port, the water obscured from the spectator; and a moment of contemplative stasis marked by two female figures dressed in city clothes. All of this produces a blurring of expression that forces the spectator to assume there is some kind of inherent intention or deeper meaning in the work, without ever being entirely sure what that meaning is. Indeed, the subject of *Sisters* is not the familiar topic of night as ‘part of the day,’ with the atmosphere and chiaroscuro presented in the occupations of people working in a harbour at night. Thus, one of the problems in Friedrich’s painting is how to characterize the motif of the two sisters dressed in city clothes. They are not depicted in the traditional manner as figures in a port scene, where people are usually hard at work (fishing, transporting the fish, etc.). They are immobile in their contemplation: in the absence of action, the spectator does not know where the two sisters have come from, exactly why they are standing there, and where perhaps they will subsequently go. Rather, a *minimal* narrative is displayed on the canvas: one of the women has her hand on her sister’s shoulder. But nothing else in the picture makes this gesture comprehensible. Friedrich has artificially assembled the motifs in this work without an obvious relation to their environment, and this new composition may become alienating or disconcerting to the spectator. Moreover, the two female figures standing side by side are seen from behind, and therefore are faceless: the spectator cannot see the expression of their facial features that could at least help convey some kind of feeling or spiritual inwardness. As a

³⁴ The German word *Krämerei* means the grocery trade, and originally the term *Geheimniskrämerei* referred to the feared and dishonest tricks of certain grocers (*Krämer*), cheating on the quantity and quality of the goods sold.

³⁵ For an overview and introduction to his main manuscript, see Cahen-Maurel (2011).

result, the viewer of this painting might end up wondering what it is that brings all these elements in the work together, what is the common denominator that could reveal to them the apparently profound meaning that the artist intends to reveal in the work. One could therefore ask: is the *Sisters* a mystical painting, and should only be interpreted mystically (e.g. the Christian hope of a life after death)? Or is it perhaps a political painting (e.g. the hope of religion as a factor of social renewal), or is it simply a human picture of sisterly love (e.g. in the sense of Schleiermacher's religion of humanity)?

Here we are far from the supreme "law" of "intelligibility" proscribed in Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art* concerning painting (W 10,3: 87; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 859).³⁶ This is because the function that Hegel ascribes to true art is to be, according to a formula of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a "clear" or "transparent" medium for spirit (Hegel 1807, 650). As mentioned above, since a major issue of Hegelian aesthetics concerns the "sense" or spiritual content (*Gehalt*) of a work of art, this relates to the specific issue of the readability of a painting. For Hegel, the visual intelligibility of the substantial content of painting is a matter of its narrativity or dramatization—or to use Hegel's term, the "dramatic liveliness" of the work (W 10,3: 515; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975b, 859). Insofar as the representation concerns inwardness, which in Hegel's eyes is the topic par excellence of painting as a romantic art-form, it should not remain a mere abstract and empty sentimentality that is detached from all context, but rather be mediated and explained by a situation and a whole set of actions or bodily movements. —According to some critics, this is precisely what is lacking in the supposedly 'non-narrative' painting of Caspar David Friedrich.³⁷

As a result of our analysis, one could say that Hegel's reproach of Friedrich's painting style concerns four flaws in his works: 1) Their form is too *abstract*, which for Hegel is a synonym of repression, or that it is *unfree*. 2) Furthermore, their content or subject-matter is fundamentally tainted with *subjectivism*, for its deeper sense is reduced to the arbitrariness of the subjectivity of the artist. Here Hegel's criticism of subjectivism clearly echoes his dismissal of the romantic writers Novalis and Schlegel.³⁸ 3) They therefore also reveal an *emptiness* characteristic of the theories and artistic productions of the early German romantics. 4) And ultimately, they do not preserve their independence, and imply instead a *heteronomy*, since their content does not provide its own explanation, but needs to be determined on the basis of an interpretation by the viewer. In Hegel's view, all these deficiencies signify that the paintings of Friedrich are inferior to the dignity of art as a manifestation of the universal spirit. Or rather, they are the perfect confirmation of the final,

³⁶ Cf. GW 28,1: 173: "Die Hauptsache bei einem Gemälde ist aber auch, daß die Situation verständlich sey."

³⁷ The review of Kugelgen illustrates this point, where Hegel comments on Kugelgen's pictorial treatment of the Prodigal Son, Christ, and the Christian saints John the Apostle and John the Baptist. Hegel not only comments on these four artworks as concrete examples of modernist portrait painting, but also on the treatment of these figures in the very format and size of a portrait, as isolated figures, without any specific situation or natural environment. According to Hegel, it is appropriate for saints and religious characters to be portrayed, as long as their individuality and personality are characterized in such a way as to make them recognizable in the outward features of their faces. The visual intelligibility of suffering, profound remorse and repentance in the face of the Prodigal Son is not enough to allow us to identify him as such. For Hegel, to achieve this effect Kugelgen should have depicted him leaving the parental home and later returning to his father—the place where the repentance takes place. See GW 15: 204-206.

³⁸ Although there are of course significant differences between Early German romanticism and the other later periods of romanticism, some scholars have argued for a methodological affinity between Novalis and Caspar David Friedrich. See especially Joseph Leo Koerner's analysis of the pictorial procedures of C. D. Friedrich using Novalis's philosophical tool of "romanticizing the world" (Koerner [1990] 2006, 23-28); and Werner Busch's reference to Novalis's mystical conception of a divine mathematics of nature (Busch 2003). I have elsewhere argued for a rapport between Novalis's philosophical romanticism and Caspar David Friedrich's art, especially concerning their recourse to fruitful enigmas and mystery; see Cahen-Maurel (2017).

famous Hegelian verdict that art has become for us a thing of the past (see W 10,2: 220 f.), insofar as “human beings require, less and less, sensible, representative imagery in order to understand themselves” (Pippin 2002, 3). This might be one of the reasons why the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich find no place in Hegel’s philosophical history of Western painting.

But is the manufactured hermeticism of Friedrich’s painting style, both with respect to its visual form and its intelligible content, ultimately an insubstantial pursuit of effect? In Friedrich’s conception of painting, a major criterion of *true* art is also its spiritual content (*Gehalt*). In this regard, just as there is a brief judgement of C. D. Friedrich in Hegel’s work, so one can also find a passing mention of Hegel in C. D. Friedrich’s writings, in the main written text of the artist, *Äußerungen bei Betrachtung einer Sammlung von Gemälden* [*Considerations upon Contemplating a Collection of Paintings*] (c. 1830). Friedrich relates how the contemporary artist Ludwig Richter holds a diametrically opposed view to his own, one that Richter contrasts with Hegel’s ideas concerning art and religious feelings:

How different are the views of this painter on art, as I have heard them from his mouth. This is what he [Ludwig Richter] says: ‘Sensuous beauty, e.g. pure, redoubled sensuality, is the first requirement of all works of art, and only that alone. In no case should a work of art, to be true art, have to awaken sacred religious feelings within us, as is taught in Hegel’s philosophy’. (Friedrich 1999, 115)

Just before this passage, C. D. Friedrich states that the spiritual content (*Gehalt*) of what he views as true art is the expression of the artist’s inwardness and even piety, equating art to a prayer:

Art is not, nor should it ever be, a simple question of ability, as many painters appear to believe. Rather, it is so intimately the language of our sensibility, of our soul. Indeed, it should be our devotion and our prayer. (Friedrich 1999, 114)

Although in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel reserves the concept of a religion of art (*Kunstreligion*) to Greek antiquity, in his later lectures on fine art he still considers art to be highly dependent on religion, identifying the content of the romantic form of art with Christianity itself, as alluded to above. For Christianity has brought to light something that the moderns more fully experience in spirit than the Greeks were able to. Namely: the relation of the human being to the infinite. Modern culture is the product of this self-knowledge and self-representation of human consciousness as the finite in opposition to the infinite. Although the content (*Gehalt*) of the work is conceived in such a way in romantic or modern art that it is able to find an adequate expression in the sensuous and visible form, it ultimately transcends the latter realms, since they are now conceived as being distinct from the spiritual (see W 10,2: 120 ff.; English translation: Hegel [1842] 1975a, 517 ff.).

But unlike Hegel in his aesthetics, Friedrich does not conceive nature as itself spiritless and lifeless, since for him it is God’s creation, and therefore it could be argued that they understand vastly different things by the spiritual and religious content of art. That said, although for Friedrich spiritual content and sense reside in nature, in his art the landscape becomes an element of meaning and religious relevance only on the condition that the spectator carries out a subjective and spiritual appropriation. Thus, in this sense Hegel is perfectly correct in his judgment of Friedrich’s painting style: the visual severity of his landscapes in their form and enigmatic content are a means to heighten the mind and soul of the spectator, to make an appeal and put itself into a relation with them, and to this extent it is then correct to link Friedrich with the French tradition.

Nevertheless, in my view, the effect produced is not insubstantial. For example, with regard to Friedrich’s paintings like the *Sisters* or *Riesengebirge Landscape with Rising Fog*,

the night or fog as a veiling principle has a disruptive effect on the physical senses—it prevents sight and one has trouble discerning the shapes and motifs in the painting. However, the perturbation of one’s gaze is also subject to a remarkable inversion: the initial loss of visibility can ultimately become a gain in vision.



III. 5

A traditional painting places the most precise visual appearance of things directly before our eyes. In contrast, by hiding or obstructing objects from our sight, the paintings of Friedrich appeal to an effort of vision and/or the imagination on our part, in which the spectator has to repeatedly refine their perception, in order to bring out what to begin with only exists in the background of the painting. The spectator has to be active and seek to penetrate to a depth that is not immediately apparent at the surface, but can be seen or read in the painting nonetheless. Thus, a perceptive eye that perceives in an attentive manner, and does not simply cast a superficial glance at the painting, will discover that many other elements and details in the *Sisters* (ill. 5) may eventually come into view. For example, there is the infinitely elaborated gracefulness of the Gothic architecture of the church on the left, with all its decorations, but there are other hidden architectural elements, such as the buildings and tower behind the boat masts on the right-hand side of the painting. A practised gaze will also begin to discern the few tufts of vegetation and weeds that have started to grow between the slabs on the terrace in the immediate foreground of the work. More enigmatic still, is the stone cross flanked by three children (putti?) that is behind the railing and to the right of the sisters; once this cross is discovered by the spectator, it seems to considerably change the composition of the work, taking on the appearance of a third animated character, as it were, beside the other two standing figures. And there are not only stone putti. Any spectator who

approaches the image and gazes at it long enough to adjust their eyes to the darkness of the foreground, the contours of a real angel, drawn by very thin white brush strokes, seem to come into view at the feet of the two women, such as we find in other paintings of Friedrich, like the *Cemetery Entrance* (*Friedhofseingang*, c. 1825). This effect of the painting style of Friedrich is not at all a vacuous *Geheimniskrämerei* or false mysteriousness, which, if we were to draw Hegel's criticism of false severity to its conclusion, would not deserve to be called art or even be a part of the history of modern painting. On the contrary, Friedrich's romantic art of mysteriousness has a *true* profundity precisely because it creates depth in a different way: one grasps the significance and necessity of the onlooker, who shapes the form, and the form itself becomes part of the painting's active and dynamic reception. Perhaps the most important element of Friedrich's legacy lies precisely here.

VII. Conclusion

Hegel's criticism of the painting style adopted by the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich corresponds to and echoes some of his reasons for rejecting the romantic writers Novalis or Friedrich Schlegel. According to Hegel, the manufactured severity of style in Friedrich's work not only has to do with an impoverishment of the strictly pictorial appearances of colour and light in order to grant domination to the topic, but it also concerns the kind of symbolism that the painter deploys, which succumbs to subjectivism, a subjectivism that is also pernicious inasmuch as it strips his paintings of their substantial content. Unlike Pöggeler, who suggests that Hegel's main criticism of Friedrich can be reduced to the charge of anachronism and an anti-modernist resistance to the secularisation of Western art, I take Hegel's judgment of Friedrich to relate more to the romantic employment of enigmas and mystery. Hegel's expressive conception of style is the visible inscription and living manifestation of an irreducible individuality in the form it produces. German romanticism, in contrast, strives to go beyond this, moving towards a semiotic, hermeneutic, and active conception of style, i.e. a meaningful form that also engenders effects.

Hence, rather than an empty game of deceiving the public—*Geheimniskrämerei* or 'false mysteriousness' to use Hegel's words—, I have argued that Friedrich's art of mysteriousness does much more than merely imitate nature as something sacred in itself and already given. It creates depth both by means of the content it expresses, and more precisely through what its form actually *does*. That is to say, through the vivid and active relationship that this style brings about between the artwork and the spectator, through the tension that it creates between what one sees, and what one would like to see. It all depends on the spectator's own powers of attention and perception, on the questions that they ask, as well as on their imaginative and reflective activities. As Caspar David Friedrich himself puts it in an 1808 letter to Philipp Otto Runge: "Art is a game, but it is a serious game" (Friedrich 2005, 43).

Abbreviations

GW 13 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissen-schaften im Grundrisse* (1817). Vol. 13 of *Gesammelte Werke*. Edited by Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Klaus Grotzsch. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2001.

- GW 15 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Schriften und Entwürfe I (1817-1825)*. Vol. 15 of *Gesammelte Werke*. Edited by Friedrich Hogemann and Christoph Jamme. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990.
- GW 19 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1827)*. Vol. 19 of *Gesammelte Werke*. Edited by Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Hans Christian Lucas. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1989.
- GW 28,1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst I: Nachschriften zu den Kollegien der Jahre 1820/21 und 1823*. Vol. 28,1 of *Gesammelte Werke*. Edited by Niklas Hebing. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2015.
- W 10,1-3 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*. Vols. 10,1-3 of *Sämtliche Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe durch einen Verein von Freunden des Verewigten*. Edited by Heinrich Gustav Hotho. Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1835–1838.
- B *Briefe von und an Hegel. Band II: 1813-1822*. Edited by Johannes Hoffmeister. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, [1953] 1969.
- Verzeichnis 1820* *Verzeichnis der am Augustustage den 3. August 1820 in der Königlich Sächsischen Akademie der Künste zu Dresden öffentlich ausgestellten Kunstwercke*. Dresden: Gerlach, 1820.
- CDF Werkverzeichnis* *Caspar David Friedrich. Gemälde, Druckgraphik und bildmäßige Zeichnungen*. Edited by Helmut Börsch-Supan and Karl Wilhelm Jähnig. München: Prestel, 1973.

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