

*Literature and Action. On Hegel's Interpretation of Chivalry*<sup>1</sup>

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The presence of literature in Hegel's philosophy takes many forms and its role goes well beyond the reflection on an artistic form in a strictly aesthetic context. All of Hegel's work, starting from the fragmentary texts of his juvenile years, is interwoven with literary references, both classic and contemporary, whose function is rarely one of mere adornment or exemplification. In the years of Frankfurt and Jena, Hegel shared Hölderlin's and Schelling's interest in Greek tragedy in the period in which a canon of modern literature was being elaborated, in the context of a *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, updated on a speculative basis<sup>2</sup>. A paramount example of the above is the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In this self-styled, speculative history of conscience, images and figures from literature enter directly in the philosophical discourse, contributing to the structure of the argument of the self-understanding process of the spirit. Thus, besides Sophocles' *Antigone*, which represents and enacts a specific configuration of the relation between the action of the individual and the ethical context in which it takes place, we find Diderot's *Le neveu de Rameau* as the central reference for the analysis of the relation between *Bildung* and the Enlightenment, or, Jacobi's *Woldemar*, as the starting point for the figure of the beautiful soul. What the above literary motifs have in common, and this is true of many others that surface here and there in Hegel's writing, from Goethe's *Faust* to *Don Quixote*, is that they always revolve around individuals who, through their actions, actualize the ethical principles and the intellectual presuppositions that regulate the relations of the subject with the life-world. It is no chance that the concepts of action and agency as the underlying structure of Hegel's conception of literature have been studied mostly in relation to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>3</sup>. One could object that this work differs from other works of Hegel, to the point of having been considered a literary work, or at least a work with a highly developed narrative dimension, in which the category of action is therefore structurally intrinsic to the *ductus* of the argument<sup>4</sup>.

One should therefore consider whether and to what extent the concept of action is useful to explain the meaning and function of literary texts also in contexts in which literature is dealt with as such, in which it is the explicit object of the analysis, as in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. The purpose of the present paper is to show how the concept of action remains crucial to the interpretation of literary phenomena in the *Aesthetics*, but assumes different configurations in relation to the historical transformation of the concept of subjectivity. In particular, to verify the specifically aesthetic import of concepts such as action and recognition, which technically belong to the ethical-political sphere, I will examine the theme of chivalry, which is present in various areas and with different functions in the structure of the *Aesthetics*. This topic has been little studied but offers an interesting perspective on some problematic points of Hegel's theory: the controversial relation between the structural dimension of the concept of art (form-content relation) and historical development of artistic forms, the apparently univocal paradigm of classic beauty, and the definition of artistic modernity.

Chivalry and the associated system of cultural values is a fundamental part of the intellectual history of the West, and occupy a significant part of Hegel's theory of historical forms of art. Its fundamental

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<sup>2</sup>Notwithstanding all his reservations on the romantic movement and the Schlegel brothers, Hegel never questions this canon, which he includes among the "moderns," Dante, Ariosto, Shakespeare and Cervantes indeed adopts it, using it as the basis for the historical-systematic framework he constructs for his philosophy of art.

<sup>3</sup>See for example Wiehl 1971, Gethmann-Siefert 1984: 310f. and Speight 2001.

<sup>4</sup>A review of the discussion on this topic is provided by Garelli 2009.

thematic nuclei correspond to so many stages in the development of the autonomy of subjectivity in the modern world. Following the development of the theme of chivalry from its origins up to its satirical re-elaboration in Ariosto and Cervantes, Hegel sees a parallel development from the mundane and intersubjective sphere of the Christian Middle-Ages to the affirmation in the modern era of a self-determining free subjectivity, for which exteriority becomes contingent and casual. In the aesthetic domain this casual quality translates into a «free disposition» of the exterior element in the artistic creation, characterized by literary re-utilization, pastiche and the prevalence of comedy, parody and humour.

There are of course also contextual reasons for Hegel's interest in this type of texts. The Romantics in Hegel's time, and Herder before them, had made medieval literatures the focus of critical and aesthetic attention, stressing, according to the case, the folk quality or the romantic-adventurous aspect of this dawning phase of modern literary culture<sup>5</sup>. One can reasonably state that Hegel did not have an accurate first-hand knowledge of medieval chivalric romance cycles and his approach to this tradition was mediated by its historiographical systematization undertaken by the Schlegel brothers: Friedrich, with whose work he was certainly familiar already from the time of Jena, but also and especially August Wilhelm, whose lectures on Romantic poetry (Berlin 1801-1804) had an enormous diffusion in all Europe and were crucial for the reception and interpretation of the Middle Ages in European Romanticism<sup>6</sup>. Herder, of whom Hegel cites the (pseudo) translation of the *Cid*, was instead Hegel's main mediator for the Hispanic side of Medieval chivalric romance<sup>7</sup>. The *Orlando Furioso* and *Don Quixote*, instead, which are also key works for the Romantics, were literary masterpieces that Hegel knew well. In any case, Hegel rarely has an analytic and formal approach to literature and, in general, to the artistic materials that are incorporated in his discourse on aesthetics. They represent, rather, materials for the reconstruction of the history of consciousness, or, in other words, of the intellectual world-vision of a period<sup>8</sup>: Hegel therefore adapts to his interpretive and theoretical design the canon of European literature established by the Schlegels, in which Romance literature and the theme of chivalry, mediated or direct, play a dominant role.

We could say that Hegel's conception of literature is part of his theory of subjectivity. His literary characters have the prerogative of cogently representing the dialectic relation between subject and the life-world, that is, of providing a synthesis of the ethical conceptions of a given period through the representation of actions. Hegel's philosophical analysis of literary materials is based on the categories of individuality and action. The first one, «individuality interpreting and determining itself in its activities»<sup>9</sup>, constitutes the central figure in the theory of the subject, and takes on different characteristics in the classical world and in the modern one. This difference affects the specific relation between form and content in historical forms of art. In the case of the heroic in ancient Greece, Hegel speaks of a beautiful individuality, meaning by this a subject that through his action expresses a position within an ethical horizon that is still not consolidated in a system of external norms. What moves the individual to action is pathos, that is the emotional and rational embracing of an ideal principle that forces him to clash with an opposite and equally legitimate principle. *Pathos* for Hegel are the manifestation of universal ethical powers; it is significant that Hegel speaks of pathos exclusively in relation to the classic world where he does not limit it to tragedy. One of the models of this substantial universality is Antigone, whose character coincides with pathos, without any split between subjective interiority and the horizon of values in which her existence takes place. But this interpretive scheme is applied in general to the figures of the Greek heroic universe. From this derives,

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<sup>5</sup>In reality Hegel did not fully share the Romantic enthusiasm for the Medieval and in general he seems quite critical of works of the German Middle-Ages such as the *Nibelungenlied*. See for example Hegel 1986 1: 308; transl. 238.

<sup>6</sup>See Schlegel 2008, 66-143.

<sup>7</sup>*Der Cid* (1803-1804), in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke*, vol. III, hrsg. von U. Gaier, Frankfurt a. M 1990:545-694.

<sup>8</sup>The prevalence of historical and political issues in Hegel's aesthetics is discussed in Pippin 2008.

<sup>9</sup>Rószka 2012:179.

among other things, the secondary role that the subjective-personal motif of love has in classic tragedy.

In the modern world, instead, the individual is on the one hand a single, self-referential and self-reflective subject, and on the other hand defines himself essentially through relations with other individuals. Singularity and personality are therefore conceptual specifications of a subject whose relations with other individuals develop against the background of a complex system of norms and institutions. An individual who positions itself as independent in relation to the objective world, a subject defined by the contrast between the absolute affirmation of interiority and the immediacy of his existence.

The second category, that of action, although clearly Aristotelian, is not intended in Hegel as a formal element of dramatic literature, but as expression of subjectivity observed in its process of self-objectivation in the life-world and in relation to other subjects. Hegel does not speak of the imitation of an action, like Aristotle, but tends instead to identify the action with the content (*Gehalt*) of the work<sup>10</sup>. In the literary text, through their actions, individuals make explicit what is implicit in the historical structure of the world. Hegel underlines how art as an instrument for understanding the world uses specific figures, which are nothing other than the actual moment of action. In any case, the complexity and intrinsic processuality of the interaction of the subject with the situation ensure that the concept of action refers primarily to poetry: «Now the presentation of the action, as in itself a total movement of action, reaction, and resolution of their struggle, belongs especially to poetry, for it is given to the other arts to seize only one feature in the course of the action and its occurrence»<sup>11</sup>. This dynamic quality of literary representation and in general its semantic complexity is what, in the context of a cognitivist aesthetics like that of Hegel, determines the intrinsic superiority of poetry to other artistic forms.

In the ancient world, the aesthetic subjectivity manifests itself in the action of the heroic individual, which serves as a moral and institutional foundation. In this case, what the action determines is a mode of collective operating and feeling, which manifests itself ritually in ceremonies and religious feasts. In the modern world, instead, we have the action of an individual subject who presupposes the acknowledgement of a given historical situation, yet positions itself as independent of it. The chivalry of Medieval epic cycles occupies in this scheme an intermediate position between the ancient and the modern proper. It becomes part of modern literature, instead, in the phase Hegel calls the dissolution of the Romantic, in which the characters and atmospheres of those poems become at once the object of nostalgia and of parody, as in Ariosto and Cervantes.

The primary thematic context of the Romantic world, according to Hegel, is that of Christian religiosity, that is the representation in sensible intuition «of the absolute history of the spirit that conceives itself as such»<sup>12</sup>. The religious sphere expresses the interiority of the spirit itself, which tends towards the negation of naturalness. From this exclusive relation with the self and with divinity, the Romantic subject emerges through what Hegel calls in the lesson of 1826 «the affirmative reflex of the interiority of spirit», that is, spirituality manifesting itself in the virtues of the subject<sup>13</sup>. This is precisely the context in which the central values of chivalry -- love, loyalty, honor, courage come to the foreground, defining the properly mundane sphere of the Romantic. The transition from the religious dimension to the historical-mundane one of Romantic art may be described «by saying that subjective individuality (*Einzelheit*) now becomes explicitly free as individuality independently of a reconciliation with God»<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup>See Hilmer 1998: 98-104.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel 1986 I: 285; transl. 219.

<sup>12</sup>Hegel 2004: 159.

<sup>13</sup> See Hegel 2004: 135.

<sup>14</sup>Hegel 1986 II: 171; transl. 553. An analysis of the role of freedom as the key element of the concept of action in the modern world is provided by Pinkard 2010.

In the Medieval chivalric romance the object of artistic representation is the personal relations among individuals, against the background of an historical world in which the process of formation of social and political institutions is based on the capacity of some individuals to become leaders and attract within their orbit other individuals. These relations, both in the private sphere and in the public one, have an affective component and are characterized by the needs for the self to be acknowledged by another subject which, no longer rooted in a natural ethos, seeks for a positive essentiality in the mundane and intersubjective sphere. Especially in chivalric narratives of the Romance area, in the Arthurian cycle, the Carolingian cycle, the *Cid*, Hegel sees the expression of an ideal universe in which the spirit exists essentially in its relation with the other, a relation that manifests itself in the arbitrary exclusiveness of love, in the sense of honor or in bonds of loyalty. This attitude of the subject presupposes that the virtue towards which actions are oriented are no longer ethical virtues in the proper sense, that is based on a common idea of family, state, motherland, but rather private virtues, associated with the life of the individual<sup>15</sup>. The romantic-chivalrous virtues are the positive form of the mundanization of religious conscience. Hegel calls them «forms of the romantic self-filled inwardness of the subject»<sup>16</sup>. On these virtues, a mode of action is based that defines the transition from the classic individuality of intersubjectivity as the self-overcoming of the isolated individual<sup>17</sup>. The motifs of love, honor and loyalty are considered as modes of the development of a subjectivity that no longer has in front of it «any mythology, any imagery, any configuration lying there already cut and dried for it to express them» and can freely concentrate on itself<sup>18</sup>.

Honor is a particularly significant manifestation of the absolute autonomy of individual subjectivity. It is the expression of the personality and especially of its own self-representation. The subject's goal is to have others acknowledge his value, without there being any connection with an objective ethical foundation: The measure of honor thus does not depend on what the man actually is, but on what this idea of himself is<sup>19</sup>. The affirmation of the virtue of honor finds a particularly favorable environment in a world characterized by the absence of a codified law in which «the mightiest and most overpowering individuals get into the position of being fixed centres; i.e. leaders and princes, round which others group themselves of their own free will»<sup>20</sup>. Hegel insists on the difference between the chivalrous conception of honor and the motivations for the actions of the Greek hero - Achilles' rage in response to Agamemnon's offense -, which has to do with the fact that honor is directly associated with the individual's personality, whose value the individual wants to be acknowledged, and not with the material aspects of one's social existence, such as property, duty or status. The individual can of course include these elements in the sphere of his honor, but what is at stake for him is «the affirmative conscience of his infinite subjectivity», which is independent of the concrete content. Honor in this sense is only a reflection of this infinity. The appearance of the subject here has a central role, as evident from a passage in the 1820-21 lectures: «what in my honor as such is offended is my appearance (*Schein*). I am an infinite and therefore my appearance too is infinite, and my appearance is my existence (*Daseyn*), because through my appearance I am for the others and this appearance is the identity of my existence and of my self as an abstract subject»<sup>21</sup>.

The same holds for the relation between subjectivity and love, one of the fundamental motifs of Romantic art, also very present in chivalric culture. In this case too we find a centrality of the individual and an arbitrariness of attraction that is unknown to the ancients: romantic love «is only

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<sup>15</sup> Hegel's interest for the chivalric literature is connected to the conception of action as expression of right in a broad sense, which intrinsically involves recognition. See f. i. Houlgate 2010. In-depth discussion of the recent literature on Hegel's concept of action in the domain of practical philosophy, and of its relationship to aesthetics, would be interesting, as an anonymous reviewer rightly points out, but has to be left for further research, as it would exceed the scope of this article also due to space limitations.

<sup>16</sup>Hegel 1986 II: 171; transl. 553.

<sup>17</sup>On the transition from the religion-oriented subjectivity to intersubjectivity see Hilmer 1998: 202.

<sup>18</sup>Hegel 1986 II: 173; transl. 556.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel 1986 II: 177; transl. 558.

<sup>20</sup>Hegel 1986 II: 192; transl. 570.

<sup>21</sup>Hegel 2015: 105.

the accidental passion of one person for another and, even if it be widened by imagination and deepened by spiritual profundity, is still not the ethical relation of marriage and the family»<sup>22</sup>. The mutual recognition that is at the basis of the love relation does not translate however, as in the ethical sphere proper, into a family union, but aims instead at merging the two interiorities overcoming any external obstacle<sup>23</sup>. And it is the negative dialectic between passion and obstacle that determines the genuinely poetic and literary import of the love motif, in contrast with the ordinariness that results from the successful establishing of the love relation.

In chivalric literature, the basic indifference towards ethical institutions such as marriage is often accompanied by the idea of sacrifice as a demonstration of fidelity and humiliation, functioning as a mundane transposition of the humiliation in front of God. Love and honor represent in different forms a thematization of intersubjectivity: Love –Hegel writes in his *Aesthetics*– is «the realization of what was already implicit in honour because honour needs to see itself recognized, and the infinity of the person accepted, in another person»<sup>24</sup>. On this basis the Romantic artist constructs figures and situations in which reality is transfigured into the intimacy of feeling.

After honor and love, Hegel mentions fidelity as an essential moment in the mundane sphere of Romantic subjectivity. It is *in primis* fidelity towards one's lord, therefore a relation with a single individual. It does not concern the general interest of a political body, but the mutual interests of the two subjects: the lord and the vassal. Its ethical character is therefore only apparent. As a paradigmatic example of this relation, Hegel mentions Charlemagne and the knights of his circle. If, on the one hand, the relation of fidelity institutionalizes the advantages of the subjects involved, on the other hand it is a relation conditioned by subjective arbitrariness since «every individual takes it that the persistence of his obedience along with the persistence of the universal order is dependent on his pleasure, inclination, and private disposition»<sup>25</sup>. Aesthetically speaking, it is a very productive motif, since it creates the possibility for a series of clashes with other inclinations or subjective motifs, such as love, friendship or offenses to one's honor, which allow for an infinite number of narrative situations. The Cid's turbulent relation with his king represents for Hegel the paradigmatic example of such a clash, which highlights the sense of the Romantic value of the human (*der Humanus*), which is for Romantic art, what the sacrality of the collective ethos founded on the Olympic religion was for the classic artistic world<sup>26</sup>.

In the lectures of 1826, Hegel added to the above virtues, audacity (*Tapferkeit*), which he saw as associated with the adventurous and fantastic dimension of the Romantic epos. We are not talking about the, so to speak, physical, natural courage of Homeric heroes, but of a disposition that is rooted in one's interiority, in the sense of honor which is, once again, conditioned by the relations of the subjects with themselves. It applies to finalities of a religious-fantastic nature, as in the case of Parsifal, or to any heroic action, even the most gratuitous one, that is aimed at affirming the value of the individual. In general, we can say that audacity represents for Hegel a subjective attitude that pervades the entire chivalric culture, from its Medieval origins to its Renaissance and modern re-elaborations, representing, in light of its independence from any material motivation, its most clearly Romantic trait.

The conceptual delimitation of the mundane sphere of Medieval art and of the specific 'virtues' of the chivalric world falls within the classic-romantic opposition, within which two different historically determined structures of self-consciousness take form. However, if one considers the same thematic nexuses from the perspective of the speculative theory of literary genres, and of the epic in particular, the opposition appears as much more nuanced in the case of Medieval chivalric literature. Medieval chivalric matter appears rooted in the world of objective values which also characterizes the 'natural' culture and the ethos of the classic world. The reason for this partial shift

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<sup>22</sup>Hegel 1986 II: 172; transl. 554.

<sup>23</sup>The term recognition is used in a broader sense than in the *Phaenomenology of Spirit*. See Ferrarin 2016.

<sup>24</sup>Hegel 1986 II 182; transl. 562.

<sup>25</sup>Hegel 1986 II. 192; transl. 570.

<sup>26</sup>On the category of the human as the new sacred of romantic art, see A. Gethmann-Siefert 1984: 319f.

in perspective lies in Hegel's very definition of epic poetry, which includes Homer as well as the narratives of the adventures of Medieval knights: «The epic, having *what is* as its topic, acquires at its object the occurrence of an action which in the whole breadth of its circumstances and relations must gain access to our contemplation as a rich event connected with the total world of a nation and epoch»<sup>27</sup>.

We must first of all note that for Hegel what defines the epic genre is not the style of the exposition or the chronological structure of the narrative, but rather the content, that is the conception of the world that it expresses. What Hegel is interested in is the necessary conditions for epic poetry, the historical-cultural conditions that make it relevant in certain periods<sup>28</sup>. The epic is, in short, the narration of a collective state of things through the actions of individuals.

The objectivity of the narrative and the connection between individual action and collective interests are conditions that occur in the *Iliad* as well as in the histories of Charlemagne. This would seem at first glance in contrast with the process of subjectivation of art that Hegel finds in chivalric literature. How then can one reconcile the general definition of epic poetry with Hegel's above interpretation of chivalric 'virtues' as the expression of a self-referential subjectivity? The explanation is that for Hegel the chivalric universe occupies an intermediate position between the ancient and the modern, both in terms of the philosophy of history (which is no doubt an essential component of Hegel's philosophy of art) and in terms of the more strictly aesthetic aspect of the literary form.

As of the philosophy of history, in general, the necessary conditions for the epic are provided by a world that has already developed, but whose institutional organization is still forming. This is a phase in the development of nation in which a social identity, so to speak, has already developed but is present as a general state of mind, not yet as a social or religious dogma. Because these relations still have not been objectified in a system of rules, the intellect cannot place them in contrast with the sphere of passions and of individual inclinations. This objectivation, which Hegel calls the «prose of the world», is an historical phenomenon characteristic of the modern period and is reflected in the opposition between the prosaic aspect of existence and the imaginative leap that is at the basis of modern literature and, in particular, of its epic form: the novel, including comic or novelesque re-elaborations of the chivalric matter. The Medieval epic poet shares with the classic poet and adherence to the spiritual universe depicted in their work. The ethico-political dimension in which the chivalric conception develops is still tied to the formation of a national conscience (the reference here is mostly to the Spain of the Reconquista). For Hegel it has an aesthetic correlative in the 'objective' treatment of the poetic matter, which the writers see as an active component of their intellectual conscience and not as alterity or a ancient or fantastic past.

This is the beautiful chivalry (*das schöne Rittertum*) of the Medieval cycles (Ariosto's «cavalieri antiqui»), in which the action of the individuals is conceived as a moment in the process of development of forms of collective aggregation, whether ethical, political or religious. The vassal's loyalty to his lord, for example, which represents for Hegel an exemplary case of romantic loyalty, is attributed a greater value insofar as «on it depends the chief bond of a community's connection and its social organization»<sup>29</sup>. This associates the deeds of the Cid or Charlemagne's paladins to the actions of the Homeric heroes, and it not casual that Hegel uses the adjective 'beautiful' for this phase of chivalry, to indicate that adequacy between interiority and exteriority that is typical of classic art. With the dawn of the modern age, these literary works become material to be re-used, its stories and characters become, so to speak, building blocks for the fantastic and melancholic adventures of the characters of Ariosto and Cervantes. Adventure for the adventure's sake is the romantic-modern trait of the reinvented chivalric literature, which could be present but was not dominant in the original Medieval works in which instead «the imagination is not content to invent chivalric hero-figures and adventures altogether apart from the rest of the real world, but links their deed to great saga-centres, outstanding historical persons and decisive battles of the period, and in this way acquires, in the most

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<sup>27</sup> Hegel 1986 III: 330; transl. 1044.

<sup>28</sup>On this aspect of Hegel's conception of poetry see Bungay 1984, 113.

<sup>29</sup>See Hegel 1986 II 192.

general way at least, some basis, as is indispensable for epic»<sup>30</sup>. This universal nucleus is precisely what is lost in the evolution of the epic forms, that is, in the transformation into the novel, which is the expression of an autonomous and individual subjectivity.

In terms of poetics, what really distinguishes the classic from the romantic for Hegel is the distance between the matter and its literary elaboration or, in other words, between the ideal horizon of the poet and the objective characteristics of the world he describes. In romantic art the immediate represented object is de-sacralized, and the subject positions himself as something separate from the prosaic reality of his vital context<sup>31</sup>. For Hegel this subject is formal or abstract insofar as he concentrates prevalently or exclusively on his interiority, and relates himself to the historical world as a combination of materials, lacking any objectively valid connection other than through the medium of reflection. This position of the subject must not necessarily be seen as an impoverishment of art or as a decrease in its capability of giving shape to the intuition of the world. Indeed, through the prevalence of reflection, the artistic form acquires a complexity of content and a cultural stratification that reflects itself in the formal sophistication of modern works<sup>32</sup>. According to Hegel, «it is the effect and the progress of art itself which, by bringing before our vision as an object its own indwelling material, at every step along this road makes its own contribution to freeing art from the content represented»<sup>33</sup>. Summarizing, the denaturalization of the artistic process, which becomes self-consciously mediated and self-reflexive, corresponds to a complete availability of materials and a radical historicizing of artistic production.

There are two ways in which this formalism of subjectivity manifests itself in art and in literature in particular in the phase of the dissolution of the Romantic, that is in modernity proper. The first is the concentration on the autonomy of the character, which becomes the focal point and only motor in the action of Shakespeare's dramas. The second, the one which interests us in this context, has to do with the paradigm of formalism or abstract subjectivity *a parte obiecti*, that is as *Freilegung* or unloosening of the exteriority from concrete historical ties. The world becomes an infinitely varied ensemble of situations and possibilities. In other words, it becomes the result of a free dialectic interaction of actions and circumstances. If one considers objectivity in its historical configuration, the free arrangement of materials by the fantasy of the individual corresponds first of all to an oppositional stance in regards to the overall values of a period. This situation manifests itself in particularly significant ways in the literary thematization of a chivalric past in fantastic, comic, or ironical terms: «when the Middle Ages were closing, Ariosto and Cervantes began to turn against chivalry»<sup>34</sup>. Chivalry becomes the distorting mirror that reflects the contrast between the Self and the world at the dawn of modernity: «The romantic world has only one absolute work, the spread of Christianity. The legends are taken from this. The worldly work is the expulsion of the Moors, the Crusades. However, the deeds of these works too are instead adventures, and the remaining subject matters consist of the adventurous deeds of the heart as such, dedicating itself to one thing and another, to rescuing innocence and performing acts that involve only the subjective interests of exhibiting themselves»<sup>35</sup>. In his playful reduction of the chivalric universe to the gratuitous adventure, Ariosto unveils the basic incongruence between the religious goal (the defense of Christianity) and the mundane desire for conquest. The Medieval world is represented in its exterior forms, its values and its virtues are seen through the lens of a light comedy, which follows the thread of events that result exclusively from personal interests or sensual desires. In his poem *L'Orlando Furioso* – Hegel writes in the *Aesthetics* – which «still moves within the poetic aims of the Middle Ages», Ariosto «in a purely hidden way

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<sup>30</sup>Hegel 1986 III: 409; transl. 1105.

<sup>31</sup>This process includes of course as its initial phase Medieval religious art which, unlike Greek art, does not identify representation with its object (the divinity). Paradoxically, it is precisely in Medieval religious works that the religious function of art begins to be lost.

<sup>32</sup>The main artistic consequence of this disconnection of the artistic form from the content can be called, following Rutter 2010: 120-169, virtuosity.

<sup>33</sup>Hegel 1986 II: 234; transl. 604.

<sup>34</sup>Hegel 1986 II: 234; transl. 605.

<sup>35</sup>Hegel 2015:196; transl. 346.

makes the fantastic merrily destroy itself within by incredible buffooneries»<sup>36</sup>. Since the subject follows exclusively the caprice of his inner self, low and high finalities are placed on the same level and digression acquires the status of a narrative method. Adventure, which in all its arbitrariness and variety becomes the center of this poetical universe, is nothing but the extension of the abstract subjectivity or the absolutization of individuality. In this fashion, the dissolution of chivalry, the more or less radical ironic re-elaboration of the constellation of values on which the chivalric universe was based, is consciously grasped and becomes itself the object of art.

For Hegel, Ariosto represents the historical-literary phase that immediately precedes the passage to the modern phase of the romantic, in which the real conditions of the world are foregrounded in contrast to the ideal universe and interiority of the subject<sup>37</sup>. *Don Quixote* is another step forward in this process of abstraction: chivalry is no longer the object of a playful vision, but is rather filtered through a «true irony», which comically dissolves its original signification, highlighting instead the contrast between the elevated character of the protagonist and his pursuit of goals that are at once noble and incongruous, in circumstances that make the whole situation ridiculous<sup>38</sup>. In a much more radical fashion than Ariosto, Cervantes distils the true form of the chivalric ethos, whose epical model is the Cid, projecting it on the system of relations that regulate the concrete existence of the modern individual.

It is the explicit and negative presence of reality that marks the difference between the epos and the novel. For Hegel, the modern novel is the expression of the split between a free and autonomous subjectivity and an objectivity devoid of an ideal foundation. It is in the transformation of the epos in the novel that chivalry, as a manifestation of the individuality of the subject, of his desires and imaginative projections is no longer a theme among many: «This romantic fiction is chivalry become serious again, with a real subject-matter»<sup>39</sup>. The chivalric literature satirized in *Don Quixote* is for Hegel a sort of prefiguration of the *Bildungsroman*, of which the contemporary model is Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. It is these young protagonists of these novels, «these modern knights who must force their way through the course of the world which realizes itself instead of their ideals»<sup>40</sup>. These antiheroes of the modern novel possess, as a characteristic of their age, the idealism that in *Don Quixote* is represented by the protagonist's ties to a bygone age. The conflict shifts from the explicitly historical context, in which the subject's noble ideals are shown to be unsuited to his period, to a biographical context, in which the protagonists refuse to bend themselves to the conventions and requirements of bourgeois society, only to achieve in the end a more or less sarcastic integration in the «prose of the world», professional and familial<sup>41</sup>. The adventurous spirit of Medieval knights, having gone through the erotic-warlike fantasies of Ariosto, the lyrical and religious themes of Tasso and the comic heroic desperation of Cervantes, relive in the peregrinations of the young protagonists of the modern novel in search of the essence of their Self in the wilderness of civilization.

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<sup>36</sup>Hegel 1986 III: 411; transl. 1007.

<sup>37</sup> On the reception of Ariosto in Hegel's Aesthetics see Stierle 1986 and Rivoletti 2014, 311-321.

<sup>38</sup> For an accurate analysis of the use of the comic in the chivalric theme of the *Don Quixote* see Hebing 2015, 402-406.

<sup>39</sup>Hegel 1986 II, 219; transl. 592

<sup>40</sup>Hegel 1986 II, 219, trans. 593.

<sup>41</sup>See on this Szondi 1974, 458.



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