

# rivista di estetica

n.s., 81 (3/2022), anno LXII

*The Aesthetics of Idealism: Facets and Relevance of a Theoretical Paradigm*  
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THE AESTHETICS OF IDEALISM. FACETS AND RELEVANCE OF  
A THEORETICAL PARADIGM. INTRODUCTION

I.

More than two centuries later, the aesthetic reflection of Idealism does not seem to have lost interest in philosophical debate at all. It is a multifaceted interest, which has partly historical-conceptual reasons, since it was post-Kantian philosophy that first posed the problem of defining art in systematic and cognitive terms, and partly more genuinely theoretical ones, for instance the contemporary declinations of a typically Idealistic theme such as the socio-historical determination of art. Above all, the recent debate on Hegel's philosophy, which is very lively in Anglo-American academia, has significantly concerned aesthetics, certainly giving new impetus to the reflection on art as a structural moment of the self-understanding of the modern subject<sup>1</sup>. The interplay between the actualizing approach of Arthur Danto or Robert Pippin and the novel interpretations that ensued from Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert's work on the composition history of Hegel's *Aesthetics* has produced a large number of studies on different aspects of Hegel's philosophy of art and its theoretical consequences. At the same time, this "Hegel Renaissance" opened the door to a broader reflection on the contribution made by the various representatives of classical German philosophy to the theoretical understanding of aesthetic phenomena.

Much attention has been devoted, next to Hegel's aesthetics, also to a variety of partly conflicting positions taking their lead from Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and Schiller's conception of the aesthetic education of the human being, which together produced what Friedrich Schlegel called an "aesthetic revolution"<sup>2</sup>. Fichte,

<sup>1</sup> See among others Houlgate 2007; Rutter 2010; Squire and Kottman 2018; Moland 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Schlegel I: 560. S. Jaeschke 1990.

Hölderlin, the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Schelling, Solger, and Schleiermacher, to name only the best-known figures, can be considered part of an intellectual constellation. They are tied together not only by underlying conceptual affinities, but also, and especially, by polemical contrasts. Together, they brought art, understood as a cognitive practice, fully into the orbit of reflection on the determinations of subjectivity<sup>3</sup>.

The differences between the various conceptions of art among the members of this constellation are of course significant. This has given rise to an articulate scholarly debate regarding the existence or non-existence of an uncrossable dividing line between Idealists such as Fichte, Schelling or Hegel and the Romantics, whose frontrunner is Friedrich Schlegel. The two contrasting positions are best represented by Manfred Frank, according to whom the thought of the Romantics, Schlegel *in primis*, is fundamentally anti-Idealistic, and by Frederick Beiser, who instead distinguishes between a subjective Idealism (Fichte) and an objective Idealism, to which Schlegel as well as Schelling and Hegel belong with different nuances<sup>4</sup>. Based on a conceptual reconstruction drawing on Dieter Henrich's constellation method, Frank argues that Schlegel and Novalis developed their theory not from Fichte, but rather in opposition to the foundationalist view of Fichtean subjectivism, and that they espoused a kind of skeptical realism radically different from the Idealistic metaphysics of the subject. According to Frank, the Romantics attribute a key position to art on very different grounds than the Idealists, namely because of the impossibility to conceive self-consciousness as autonomous and self-founded, which precludes an absolute content being attainable through reflection: only art can be the end point of philosophical speculation<sup>5</sup>. Following Frank's account, there is a fundamental divergence on the question whether art and poetry have the power to grasp truth that leads to a sharp distinction between Idealism and Romanticism. Beiser, on the contrary, tends to situate Romanticism within the Idealistic tradition, emphasizing affinities. In the aesthetic sphere, they concern primarily the objectivization of the Kantian position and the consequent shift from a theory of aesthetic experience to a theory of artistic creation. The label "classical German philosophy" in this sense comprises a series of thinkers united by a dynamic vision of the human subject, conceived of as active, formable and self-creating<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, one of the most evident points of convergence between explicitly contrasting positions such as those of Schlegel and Hegel is, for example, the historicization of the concept of art, anticipated by Schiller's (and Schlegel's own) reinterpretation, in

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Jamme and Cooper 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Frank 2014; Beiser 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Frank 2014; Millán-Zaibert 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Frischmann 2010 proposes a typology of idealistic thought: transcendental (Kant and Fichte) religious (Jacobi), Romantic (Schlegel and Novalis), absolute (Schelling and Schlegel).

philosophical terms, of the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, which brought to the fore the question of the intrinsic reflexivity of modern art<sup>7</sup>. The “historicization of the transcendental” (Arndt 2014) enacted by Friedrich Schlegel concerns both the development of rationality in general and of artistic activity. Its consequences are, in part, not dissimilar to the Hegelian conception of art as a sensible concretion of the historically determined process of the subject’s self-understanding and its striving toward freedom.

It is almost superfluous to note that the theme of the historical and social determinacy of art and its cognitive function in the modern world is the starting point of most attempts to actualize Hegel’s aesthetics. These have been used, sometimes against their original theoretical intentions, as an instrumentarium for the explanation of the transformations of the inner/outer (i.e., form/content) relation in modernist art and its social impact<sup>8</sup>. The controversial thesis of the “end of art” is referred to in different ways by both analytically oriented thinkers like Danto, who see in the Hegelian interpretation of post-classical art a diagnosis of the self-problematizing tendencies of contemporary art, as well as by scholars who emphasize the notion that the work of art can shape the idea of the human in the Hegelian theory of modern art<sup>9</sup>, or that it connects the subject to its fundamental orientation and to its cultural-historical determination<sup>10</sup>.

While it is true that the conceptualization of historicity reaches its most articulate form in Hegel’s aesthetics, so much so that Ernst Gombrich attributed a kind of paternity over modern art history to him<sup>11</sup>, in fact even an author like Schelling, who first elaborated a true metaphysics of art, integrates the “historical construction of works” into the systematic development of his *Philosophy of Art* lectures<sup>12</sup>. It can also be noted, regarding the interaction between Idealists and Romantics in the formative stage of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, that the analysis of artistic forms based on the distinction between ancient and modern, which did not appear in the first formulation of the philosophy of art in Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*, is directly dependent on August Wilhelm Schlegel’s Berlin Lectures of 1801, one of the cornerstones of early Romantic criticism. The elaboration of a common cultural canon on a

<sup>7</sup> Both Schiller’s writing *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* and Schlegel’s essay *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie*, which both appeared in 1795, propose through the distinction between ancient and modern poetry a philosophy of art history that aims at a definition of tasks and boundaries of artistic representation in relation to modern subjectivity. See Hühn 2018.

<sup>8</sup> See Pippin 2002 and Pippin 2008. For an overview of the issue of actualization of Hegel’s aesthetic conceptions see Campana 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Gethmann-Siefert 1984.

<sup>10</sup> See Feige 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Gombrich 1977.

<sup>12</sup> See Galland 2013; on the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* see Jacobs 1990.

philosophical basis is a crucial point of intersection between Idealism and Romanticism that remains out of focus if one looks exclusively at the speculative foundation of the different doctrines (foundationalism or anti-foundationalism, absolute knowledge or skepticism), but which is relevant because of the status of a discipline such as aesthetics, which is not completely reducible to the cognitive dimension. It expresses, especially as far as modernity is concerned, a “categorical Idealism” (Matuschek 2013) common to Romantics and Idealists, which sees modern art as a way of productively opposing the freedom of human beings to the constraints of reality. Schelling in particular is at the origin of the shift in perspective away from Kant’s aesthetics, from a theory of aesthetic experience to a philosophy of art that places the productive activity of the creative subject at the center. His conscious rejection of the term aesthetics is connected with the marginalization of the receptive dimension of aesthetic experience and the exclusion of natural beauty, an exclusion that unites the theories of the Romantics and the Idealists.

In these brief and necessarily incomplete introductory remarks, I limit myself to naming only one other of the most impactful themes of Idealistic aesthetics: the tragic. It is Schelling again, according to Peter Szondi’s well-known thesis, who placed tragedy at the center of the Idealists’ aesthetic reflection, crucially shifting the focus from the effect of dramatic representation to the speculative understanding of the tragic phenomenon<sup>13</sup>. Placed in an intermediate theoretical space between aesthetics and practical philosophy, the tragic as a prefiguration of dialectical thought represents a cross-cutting theme of Idealistic and Romantic thought, the declinations of which reflect the specific philosophical questioning of the different authors. In a very simplified way, one could summarise their different conceptions of the tragic conflict thus: Schelling interprets it as a paradoxical affirmation of the freedom of the individual through voluntary submission to necessity, Hegel as a collision between opposing ethical powers resulting into a reconciliation at a higher level of complexity of social life, Solger as the expression of the annihilation of the absolute in the finiteness of existence, Hölderlin, for whom the tragic is actually not reducible to a purely theoretical matter, as an image of the violent opposition between nature and art.

The characteristic elements of the Idealistic philosophy of the tragic are, on the one hand, the focus on the dialectical structure of the tragic event, i.e., conflict, and on the other hand the question whether the speculative paradigm derived from Greek tragedy is compatible with the moral configuration of the modern individual. These two elements have continued to be an inescapable point of comparison, either positively or negatively, for contemporary discussion on the meaning and the forms of tragic representation. Although the banishment of the pathetic-emotional dimension of tragedy as well as the Hegelian doctrine

<sup>13</sup> Szondi 1978: 158f.; L. Hühn 2002.

of the exclusive relevance of the tragic to Greek culture have provoked multiple polemical reactions<sup>14</sup>, the Idealistic model has not lost its incisiveness in either the philosophical or the philological domain.

2.

A number of new editions and commentaries have contributed to the broadening of the thematic horizon of studies on Idealistic aesthetics in recent years, making hitherto neglected texts more easily accessible, and sometimes also changing the approach to their contents. The best known and most striking case in this regard is that of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, the reception and discussion of which was based, for more than a century and a half, on the 1835 edition of his pupil Heinrich Gustav Hotho, who had put together some transcripts (*Nachschriften*) of the four Berlin lecture series on the philosophy of art (1820-21, 1823, 1826, 1828-29) and (now lost) notes by Hegel himself with the intention of giving them a coherent structure and a fluent form. The work on the lecture notes of several of Hegel's students (including Hotho himself), conducted at the Hegel-Archiv in Bochum especially by Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert since the 1980s, has made it possible to survey the different stages of elaboration of Hegel's philosophy of art and to illuminate its relationship to other parts of his philosophical system, such as anthropology or the philosophy of nature. It has raised a number of questions regarding the extent of Hotho's intervention in the systematic structure of Hegelian aesthetics<sup>15</sup>, and there is no doubt that the recently completed critical edition of the lecture transcripts enables more accurate work on the analysis of artistic forms<sup>16</sup>. Beyond the controversy over the authenticity of the text provided by Hotho, it should be kept in mind that his edition, which in part was based on materials that are no longer available and in several places offers a more thorough exposition of issues related to the theoretical framework of the system, is the text on which the most influential interpretations of Hegelian aesthetics were based until very recent years.

Less complex and full of interpretative consequences, but not irrelevant to the emergence of a more articulate analysis of the theoretical legacy of the post-Kantian philosophy of art, are the new editions of writings by other thinkers. To limit ourselves to only the most recent publications, mention may first be made of the critical edition of Schelling's Lectures on the *Philosophie der Kunst*, a text that belongs to a phase immediately following that of the more studied

<sup>14</sup> See Pinna 2021. On the critique of the idea of conflict see Bohrer 2009, Eagleton 2002. On the permanence of the tragic in modernity (against Hegel) see Menke 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Gethmann-Siefert 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel 2015-2020.

*System of Transcendental Idealism*, the position of which regarding the relationship between art and philosophy is significantly modified<sup>17</sup>. The *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik* (1819) by Karl Solger, an intermediate figure between Romanticism and Idealism, appeared recently in the first modern edition<sup>18</sup>. Solger, who in the early twentieth century had been accorded a prominent position in post-Kantian aesthetics by scholars with phenomenological-existentialist (O. Becker) and Marxist (Lukács) orientations, has re-entered recent debates mainly through studies on the conception on irony as a negative dialectic<sup>19</sup>.

The edition of Schleiermacher's lectures on aesthetics also testifies to a broadening of the historiographical framework<sup>20</sup>. Although in fact his theory of art diverges significantly from that of the Idealists regarding some aspects, such as the subordination of aesthetics to the ethical sphere and the psychological orientation, his concentration on subjectivity, of direct Kantian derivation, and his close interaction with the Jena circle, places him in the intellectual constellation of the aesthetics of Idealism.

Not only new editions deserve mention, however. Among the significant trends in recent studies on the aesthetics of Idealism is the change of status, so to speak, of Fichte. His doctrine had long been regarded simply as the starting point of Friedrich Schlegel's and Novalis' poetology without any direct aesthetic implications. Now, on the one hand, the thesis of the direct doctrinal dependence of the early Romantics on Fichtian subjectivism has been substantially called into question, without thereby forgetting the aesthetic productivity of concepts such as the *Wechselbestimmung* and its influence, especially on Hölderlin<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, the role of aesthetics in the overall Fichtian project of philosophical science has been reevaluated, in part on the basis of posthumously published preparatory materials<sup>22</sup>.

### 3.

The essays collected here explore some aspects of the reflection on art in classical German philosophy and its twentieth-century reception.

The first three papers are devoted to Hölderlin, a key figure in what we might call the founding phase of post-Kantian aesthetics. In the first essay, Andrea

<sup>17</sup> Schelling 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Solger 2017.

<sup>19</sup> For an account of recent studies on Solger see the introduction and essays collected in Baillot and Galland-Szymkowiak 2014. On irony see Rush 2016: 198-211 and Pinna 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Schleiermacher 2018.

<sup>21</sup> S. Waibel 200: 117-140.

<sup>22</sup> See the essays collected in Radrizzani and Oncina-Coves 2014.

Mecacci proposes a reconstruction of the meanings of the concept of the aorgic and its intrinsic dialectical relation to the organic, the latter being understood not as nature (as in Schelling and Goethe), but as a principle of organization, hence as culture. Considered in its twofold dimension, mimetic and genuinely ontological, the aorgic is, on the one hand, placed at the center of the Hölderlinian view of the tragic as the “manifestation of the original in the other than itself” and is in this sense linked to the analysis of the tragic contradiction formulated by Schelling in his *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*. On the other hand, the aorgic as the *Ungeheuer*, a dimension of the divine as opposed to the human, represents a significant variation on the post-Kantian conception of the sublime, akin in some respects to Schelling’s sublime, centered on the concept of chaos (which, one might add, is itself borrowed from Schiller’s late writing *Über das Erhabene*). Precisely as an extreme of the sublime, Mecacci argues, the aorgic constitutes the pivot of a radically anticlassical vision of Greek culture.

The conception of the tragic is also the focus of David Alvarado Archila’s essay. Starting with a detailed analysis of the fragment *Über die Bedeutung der Tragödien*, he shows how Hölderlin considers the foundation of the tragic phenomenon in a way that substantially diverges from the traditional Aristotelian model, taken up and reworked by Lessing and Schiller in their early writings on tragedy. Indeed, for Hölderlin the essential structure of the tragic occurrence is the paradox, exemplified by Oedipus’ self-condemnation following the “too infinite” interpretation of the oracle and by Antigone’s intention to preserve the law by breaking the law. Consequently, Alvarado Archila argues, the foundation of tragic representation for Hölderlin is not the mythos, as in Aristotle, but the character and the paradoxical dialectic it enacts.

Marta Vero discusses the question of the relationship between poetry and philosophy in Hölderlin. Again, this is a theme that plays a crucial role in Idealistic-Romantic aesthetic conceptions, for example in Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel, but in Hölderlin’s thought it is, so to speak, enhanced by the fact that the two terms stand in a relationship mediated by a reflection on his own poetic practice. Hölderlin’s analysis is triggered by a problematic confrontation with Schiller, who had advised his young pupil not to let abstract thought interfere with literary creation. The solution worked out by Hölderlin, Vero argues, is a theory of poetic production that takes the form of a kind of double movement, in which the spirit on the one hand comes out of itself by recognizing itself in matter, and on the other hand manifests itself as creative reflection, incorporating within itself the initial, abstract metaphysical enthusiasm. This is not a relationship of exclusion, then, but one of interaction or, to use a Fichtian term dear to Hölderlin, of *Wechselwirkung* between poetry and philosophy.

Francesco Campana’s essay addresses the question of the status of literature and its relation to historical knowledge in Hegel by comparing it with the Aristotelian thesis of poetry’s greater proximity to philosophical reflection than to history. What distinguishes literary narrative from historical knowledge is



the position of the subject in front of the narrated matter. For Aristotle, the author of fiction is free, whereas the historian is conditioned by the objectivity of facts. Hegel, instead, reversing Aristotle's argument observes that while the synthesis of universal and particular produced by poetry remains bound to the finiteness of the particular, historical narrative can access the universality of the concept as philosophical history. This insuperability of the contingent in literary art, exemplified by the comparison between history and the historical novel as the epos of modernity, indirectly refers back to Hegel's thesis of the pastness of art, which is here contrasted with the specific modernity of philosophical history.

The relationship between nature and art in Hegel's aesthetics is the focus of Davide Mogetta's article, which analyzes the systematic nexus between the idea of beauty and the concept of life, set forth in its fundamental features in the *Science of Logic*. Against Adorno's argument that the Hegelian conception of art implies the annihilation (and not the *Aufhebung*) of natural beauty, it is argued that for Hegel artistic beauty entertains a fundamental relationship with liveliness as an ideal principle. Indeed, the vocation of art is to show the appearance of vitality through the suppression of the immediate singularity of the natural body. In more general terms, Mogetta aims to bring attention to the logical-systematic foundation of the Hegelian theory of art, as opposed to interpretive approaches that privilege instead, in the wake of the critical work on the *Nachschriften* of the Berlin courses (e.g., Gethmann-Siefert), the question of the historical status of artistic forms and its relevance to understanding the function of art in the contemporary world.

Italian Idealism represents a significant chapter in the theoretical legacy of classical German philosophy. Paolo D'Angelo's essay examines a controversial aspect of Giovanni Gentile's and Benedetto Croce's theories of art, the refusal to consider the historical and social background as a relevant element in understanding and defining the artistic product. This essay reconstructs the critical positions of the two philosophers, especially Croce's, regarding sociological theories of literature and conceptions derived from historical materialism. Where the question of the relationship between history and poetry becomes crucial, in literary historiography, Croce reaffirms the idea of the autonomy of art by proposing, against Taine, De Sanctis and Lukács, a model focused on the specificity of the author, on his way of feeling. D'Angelo argues that Croce's reception of Hegel, while relevant, actually does not inform his theory of art. One may add that Croce's concentration on individual feeling recalls another figure in classical German philosophy, Schleiermacher, whose aesthetics according to Croce "is among the least known, albeit perhaps the most remarkable of this period" (Croce 1990:400)<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> On the influence of Schleiermacher's aesthetics on Croce Kelm 2021.

In an opposite direction to Croce's reception of Idealism is Adorno's, as shown in Mario Farina's article. In Adorno's elaboration of concept of 'material', Farina identifies a particularly productive outcome of the Idealistic conception of the work of art as the identity of matter and form. Starting from the idea that form is "precipitated content", material is conceived of as the basis on which the artist works, which serves as a productive limit to creative intention and which is always historically sedimented. The factual social-historical reality, which is also part of the artistic frameworks, on the one hand conditions the creative process, but on the other hand is called into question in the work of art, which through the resistance of the material produces new meanings. The intrinsic historicity of art, one of the underlying themes of the aesthetics of Idealism, is thus proposed by Adorno through a new theory of form.

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