

# HEGEL'S SEMIOTIC FUTURE: BEYOND THE END OF ART

William D. Melaney

American University in Cairo, *Egypt*

wmelaney@aucegypt.edu

## Abstract

Without contesting the validity of dialectics to Hegel's system, I plan to show how Hegel attempts to appropriate the decisive and irreversible aspects of Romantic ideology in four moves that indicate the "semiotic turn" that typifies his contribution to philosophical aesthetics. The four moves that enable me to read Hegel as an early master of semiotics are grounded in a hermeneutical conception of how the work of art displaces the classical moment that is usually assumed to constitute the core of his aesthetic theory, which is often used to relegate his reflections on modern art to the periphery of his thought. My conclusion is that Hegel's profound ambiguity with regard to the classic is an indication that all was not well in his progressive historicism. But rather than simply argue that this ambiguity is a matter of inconsistency or a structural error, I argue that Hegel's aesthetics can be read on its own, rather than in a totalizing context, as an early example of semiotic thinking that invites us to translate the ascendancy of sign over symbol as a displacement of intuitive fullness in favor of a more "conceptual" but also less controllable proliferation of cultural signs.

Hegel's ambiguous attitude toward the development of art in the modern age complicates his contribution to aesthetics, which has been canonized as "classical" in the strong sense. My dispute with the canonical reading takes issue with the retrospective approach to Hegel's understanding of art and with received interpretations of the "end of art" thesis with which his position is identified. In this paper, I plan to show that Hegel attempts to appropriate the irreversible aspects of Romantic aesthetics in four ways: (i) Hegel radicalizes Kantian aesthetics on the basis of a basically *textual* approach to sublime experience that opens up the question of community as a philosophical one; (ii) without demoting classical conceptions of art, Hegel privileges Romantic conceptions that demonstrate the ascendancy of sign over symbol in a spiraling chain; (iii) Hegel laments the fate of art in the triumph of Romantic subjectivism but also suggests how communities can reconstitute themselves on the horizon of aesthetic dissolution; so that, finally, (iv) art can be reconceived as a emancipatory adventure that redefines metaphysics through its historical unfolding as an unending series of semiotic transformations.

## 1. Hegel and sublime art

A careful reading of the *Critique of Judgment* demonstrates the essential modernity of Kant's response to the problem of reconciling these two conflicting aims. In transforming beauty into a symbol of morality, Kant points back to the originality of Platonic metaphysics and also opens a new path that would be traveled by the Romantic generation that followed him (Kant 2000:248–52). Beauty in the Kantian framework is not reducible to cognitive considerations but involves a process of reflection that enables the subject to assess the aesthetic object through considerations of feeling, which are irreducible to logical considerations (61). From another standpoint, if the experience of beauty refers to a realm of moral value that transcends the senses altogether, it also registers the difference between a world of pure reason and a more limited world that cannot exclude the otherness of nature. The role of the sublime in this dual system would be problematic to the degree that it marked the threshold of moral Reason. Kant distinguishes the mathematical from the dynamical sublime in the Second Book of the *Critique of Judgment*, but, on a more basic level, remarks on how the judgment of the beautiful refers the imagination to cognition, whereas the judgment of the sublime refers this same faculty to the Ideas the Reason (117).

Hegel confronts the problematic features of Kant's apotheosis of nature, while also radicalizing its aesthetic potential. The advantage of Kant's symbolic conception of beauty is that it offered an account of aesthetic experience that potentially harmonized the opposition between universal and particular in a disinterested community of spectators. And yet, aesthetic harmony becomes difficult to maintain at the exact moment that sublime experience enters into the construction of moral identity. Sublimity in transcendental aesthetics can be the prelude to reverence for the law and acquires ethical significance when it carries perception to a new phase of inwardness. This very movement threatens to invalidate the aesthetic framework itself. Hegel's response to this dilemma is to redefine sublime experience in order to restore its underlying unity but, at the same time, to reground this experience in an intersubjective setting that would allow the possibility of community to be given a new shape and form.

While clearly indebted to Kant, Hegel's view of the sublime suggests a 'radicalization' of what emerged as a sign of nature in previous aesthetic theory. The waterfall at the edge of the forest, the view of the Alps from a majestic height and the avalanche of snow on a deserted plain are sublime in different ways, but these three examples place the aesthetic subject in a limit condition that can be preparatory for ethical reconstitution. From Hegel's standpoint, however, the problem with such examples is that they import the weight of external nature into the ethical domain itself. Hegel recognizes the degree to which any natural residue can rebound as a *fatalitas* in the general economy of aesthetic experience. Hence, rather than threaten the value of the sublime with the possibility of crumbling

under the burden of sheer otherness, Hegel transposes this same value into a human setting in which language performs the crucial role in healing the break between spirit and nature that opened up in Kantian versions of the sublime.<sup>[1]</sup>

This crucial reorientation enables Hegel to place the sublime in a new aesthetic context just as it allows him to introduce a specifically religious thematic into what would otherwise emerge as a purely literary event. First, Hegel strongly identifies sublime experience with the *symbolic* work of art in which substance predominates over concept in an unstable disequilibrium of forces. Thus, instead of standing in for the point of contact between the actual thing and the thing represented, the symbol in Hegel's dialectical presentation of aesthetics would have its home in a relatively early phase in the history of art. Nonetheless, in Hegel's system, the sublime also registers this distance in a manner that shows how the spirit has begun to liberate itself from the most oppressive aspects of material dominance. The experience of the sublime enables substance to achieve independence from finitude through a process of inwardization that involves freedom from nature. This process is described as involving religious intuition: "Only through this intuition of the being of God as the purely spiritual and imageless, contrasted with the mundane and natural, is spirit completely wrested from nature and sense and released from existence in the finite." (Hegel 1975, 1: 371).

Hegel emphasizes the role of monotheism in this manifestation of the sublime in describing the poetry of medieval Persia but more strongly in citing Hebrew scripture, where the birth of light is achieved through a divine utterance and the mind is elevated through a lyric appropriation of sovereign power. The situation of the human individual in the biblical tradition is nonetheless fraught with uncertainty. The human believer comes to view himself as unworthy before God and expresses this sense of unworthiness in cries of pain and passionate outbursts of grief, but the believer also establishes an affirmative relationship to God that is based on "righteousness and adherence to the law" and provides an internal criterion for self-assessment" (377). This division needs to be thought through philosophically so that that the distance between the finite believer and the infinite God no longer restricts us to an endless oscillation between two separate spheres of being.

## **2. Sublimity and romantic art**

Both Kant and Hegel attempt to show that sublimity entails division and cannot provide stability to an aesthetic realm that is ancillary to a higher state of being that resolves tensions along moral or religious lines. Nonetheless, we might identify Hegel's crucial departure with his use of *religious writing* as the key to transforming the meaning of sublimity into a concern for the individual's communal existence, since the *text* that communicates sublime experience has now

become a shared one. In contrast, Kant's version of the sublime offers a road that could be deceptive in the long run due to the manner that it provides an insecure basis for ethical life. In Kant's philosophy, the universality of aesthetic experience is not clearly preserved in sublime feeling, which signals a crisis in the unity of the aesthetic subject. On the other hand, although Hegel calls attention to how the subject is limited by external factors in sublime experience, his evocation of the sublime text places the conflict between spiritual independence and impersonal fate in a decisively interpretive context.

In Hegel's aesthetic theory, the divided nature of symbolic expression is what precipitates a new artistic phase in which the opposition between substance and concept can be resolved in favor of philosophical unity. Hegel often speaks glowingly of how this basic opposition is resolved in classical art, particularly Greek sculpture, which represents an achievement of adequacy that is only achieved when neither term in this basic opposition is excessive to the other one. The positive value assigned to ideal adequacy explains why Hegel is sometimes identified with an extreme form of aesthetic classicism. And yet, much of what he has to say about Greco-Roman antiquity is merely historical rather than the basis for a normative conception of the classical work of art. The role of self-reflection is crucial in establishing a ground for what is best in the classical tradition, and the notion of aesthetic adequacy partakes of a particular moment in art history when adequacy was possible to achieve. Nonetheless, Hegel's account of the dissolution of the classical work of art provides us with insights into why the Greco-Roman world was incapable of providing the basis for a new and higher phase in aesthetic development. Echoing Plato's rational theology, Hegel observes how the gods of antiquity are drawn into the struggles of the finite world and "become involved in a contradiction between their grandeur and dignity and the beauty of their existent embodiment," thus reducing them to a field of arbitrary conduct (503).

This contradiction is clearly demonstrated in sculptural works that could be located in religious settings, which display a certain lifelessness, lack of feeling and the quiet trait of mourning: "It is this mourning which already constitutes their fate because it shows that something higher stands above them, and that a transition is necessary from their existence as particulars to their universal unity" (503). Again the contradiction between an abstract and indeterminate fate and particular existence is what underlies the capricious entanglement of the gods in the affairs of mortals. In short, Hegel attributes the dissolution of the classical form of art to contradictions that are introduced from the religious sphere and cannot be resolved in the domain of culture alone. For this very reason, we might even say that the religious sphere explodes the classical totality and its apotheosis of ideal form as an external force that requires a new aesthetic constellation in order to provide art itself with a further justification.

The emergence of the romantic work of art is therefore a necessary event when considered in terms of a contradiction that can only be resolved if the classical model can be diminished or subverted. The equilibrium between concept and substance that prevails in the classical work of art is only temporary. At the same time, while the pre-classical work of art remains embedded in substance to a degree that occludes its subjective meaning, romantic art connotes a process of inwardization in which the Idea continually overshadows material embodiment. Thus, Hegel can argue that “there is something higher than the beautiful appearance of spirit in its immediate sensuous shape, even if this shape be created by spirit as adequate to itself.” (517). The unification that occurs in classical art does not disclose “the true essence of spirit,” so that the totality of the Ideal dissolves into subjective being and external appearance before the spirit can pass through this rift to attain “a deeper reconciliation in its own element of inwardness” (518).

What Hegel calls romantic art, therefore, should not be identified with unique cultural manifestations in the fields of music, literature and painting that mark his own period. While it is true that medieval-modern art is romantic in a manner that cannot be detached from a general chronology, Hegel might easily discover signs of romanticism in art that exceeds this historical framework. A crucial assertion of dialectical aesthetics, however, is that the content of art cannot be judged on its own but in relation to an ongoing process that introduces the possibility of contradiction into the unity of the work as an aesthetic object. Contradiction may not be evident in the case of classical art, but the moment of truce may be little more than an illusion in an ongoing movement that cannot be interrupted by the momentary solace of harmony and equilibrium. It would seem, therefore, that Hegel’s classicism is largely undermined as soon as the temporality of the aesthetic is given its due as a constitutive feature of what must be acknowledged as soon as the work of art is approached in dialectical terms.

Temporality pervades both aesthetic experience and the formation of art in a manner that raises the question of how it can remain a distinctive feature of the dialectical process. On the other hand, when the temporal nature of the dialectical process opposes the classical modality that assumes historical form in Greco-Roman art, aesthetic experience runs the risk of losing its distinctive unity. The spirit of reconciliation that animates romantic art brings about a momentary truce, but it testifies to a heightened subjectivity that threatens to undermine the impressive cultural gains that follow the classical age. Hegel locates the origins of romantic art in a religious attitude that enables infinite subjectivity to emerge from itself and *in a relation to an other* that allows it to remain at one with itself: “Therefore the romantic Ideal expresses a relation to another spiritual being which is bound up with depth of feeling that only in this other does the soul achieve this intimacy with itself.” (533). In time, however, the religious domain in which romantic art originates yields to an increasingly secular mentality that re-

establishes the division between inner and outer. The role of subjective inwardness in chivalric romance, Shakespearean drama and Romantic fiction ultimately leads to the dissolution of romantic art, which collapses in a world in which “what was so magnificently sung, what so freely expressed, has been expressed; these are materials, ways of looking at them and treating them which have been sung once and for all” (608).

### **3. Hegel’s thesis of art at an end**

Hegel’s widely cited remark that art is at an end can be interpreted in terms of both the history of art and the movement from aesthetics to semiotics, broadly considered. Hegel does not attribute the decline of art to the unique behavior of the artist, who “stands within the world of reflection and its relations” and has become too much a part of “our whole spiritual culture” to remain impervious to its demands (13). On the contrary, we learn that it is only in the long view and in a dialectical sense that our present situation can be reasonably assessed: “In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.” (11). What this means is that art, as the basis for expressing *the highest levels of human thought*, is threatened increasingly by a triumphant modernity that no longer requires or favors the reconciliation of sign and substance. Thus, on one level, Hegel’s statement seems to imply that art as such is no longer capable of anticipating and contributing to intellectual developments of the highest order. We might reinterpret this as saying that art in its classical form is outmoded to the degree that it no longer reflects the phenomenological unity that seals the meaning of aesthetic perfection. This would imply that art’s intellectual significance is exhausted in the post-classical epoch, which is overburdened on the level of the concept and therefore has lost the capacity to give form and shape to what animates it spiritually.

However, the end of art, if examined dialectically, has another significance that allows artistic meaning to be transformed according to conceptual, that is to say, philosophical, criteria. Romantic art may have dissolved historically, but it also paves the way to the future in calling attention to the dynamic process through which the mind outpaces all forms of aesthetic embodiment as it moves forward in time. The development of the concept moves inexorably from symbol to sign and thus opens up the possibility of a comprehensive semiotic in which all forms of aesthetic embodiment can be translated into ‘historical’ terms. Such a semiotic would presuppose an intellectual community that would, in some respects, resemble Kant’s *sensus communis*, but the difference between the two communities might be expressed in the difference between Kant’s eighteenth-century heritage, which enabled him to identify transcendental beauty with stability and consensus, and Hegel’s post-Romantic aesthetic position, which situated absolute knowing as immanent to the historical unfolding of Reason. [2]

From this second standpoint, romantic art would open up the possibility of a new phase in our spiritual history whereby the most advanced communities can be enriched and sustained through the protracted event of art's dissolution. This final outcome of Hegel's aesthetics would not be inconsistent with the general tenor of his thought. We learned previously that each major phase in cultural history springs forth against a religious background that nourishes a specific mode of art, whether symbolic, classical or romantic, until the community that founded it can no longer sustain what it made possible. At this point, order is reconstituted as contradictions are resolved in different ways and according to different conceptions of the absolute spirit. Clearly, the process of reconstitution that would follow the dissolution of romantic art would remain something of a mystery only because we are living through that moment ourselves. Nonetheless, Hegel provided us with the tools for imagining what future community could salvage humankind from the wreckage of the romantic work of art, which in the end might become less of a catastrophe than an opportunity for growth and development, pointing beyond to a form of shared life that would be highly improvisatory.

Nonetheless, the semiotic turn that Hegel's aesthetics anticipates can be viewed with regard to both a dialectical theory of the linguistic sign and in relation to the broader history of aesthetics. Jacques Derrida has discussed how semiology is crucial to both Hegel's philosophy of consciousness and to the dialectical logic that undergirds the phenomenological edifice. In this regard, the distinction between symbol and sign is indicative of a displacement of nature that looks forward to Ferdinand de Saussure's well-known structuralist thesis concerning the arbitrary features of the (linguistic) sign. Derrida remarks that a "relationship of absolute alterity distinguishes the sign from the symbol," whereas "a mimetic or analogical participation" characterizes the relationship between the symbol and the symbolized (1982: 84). Moreover, Derrida also insists that "the place of semiology is really at the center, and not in the margins or the appendix, of Hegel's *Logic*" (71).

The distinction between sign and symbol indicates the importance of negativity to the dialectical movement that pervades aesthetics in general. Hence, in overthrowing the Sphinx, Oedipus demonstrates how the massive creature who is half man and half animal, still deeply rooted in nature, gives way to the human being who solves problems and displays a lucid intelligence that is characteristic of a species that is no longer locked in instinctual reactions. Derrida notes that Hegel astutely connects semiotics and psychology when "the production of signs manifests a freedom of spirit" (87). Nonetheless, Hegel also argues in favor of the importance of this transition as a thoroughgoing historicist when he traces the movement from East to West as inexorable, thus forgetting the sporadic nature of a break that must repeat itself unceasingly and cannot in good faith be institutionalized as uniquely Western.

In order to perceive things anew and to liberate them from the mundane world in which they are encased, we need to reject a model of reality that simply turns the Infinite into a separate domain that lies beyond the finite plane of existence. Within the context of this ambitious project, Hegel's aesthetic theory resumes a political meaning that can be traced to the aftermath of the French Revolution, when his own thought was still in formation, just as it seems to turn away from engagement in the practical sense. In this sense, the end of art does not amount to the exhaustion of promises but coincides with a new manner of appropriating "the restlessness of the negative" and to the persistence of aesthetic internalization (Nancy 2002: 3–7). The end of art that Hegel identifies with an inner movement that is immanent in the historical process is also indefinitely prolonged in the textualization of the sublime that introduces the possibility of in-finite interpretation. A radicalization of Hegel's attempt to bring Heaven to Earth is therefore implicit in his aesthetic theory to the degree that inwardization can be conceived, or perhaps reconceived, as a condition of semiotic deferral that prevents interpretation from achieving temporal closure. In such a situation, the semiotic movement that lies at the heart of the dialectical process can be said to coincide in its essential features with the future of art.

#### **4. Semiotics and the future of art**

Hegel's pronouncement on the end of art is often considered to have been premature, not only from the perspective of the art that was crucial to his own time but also in terms of the emergence of late Romanticism, European Symbolism and the flowering of the avant-gardes that occurred in the twentieth century. However, the apparent classicism of this pronouncement can also be re-contextualized as an utterance that casts light on Hegel's early response to the French Revolution as a signal event of modernity but also as one that recreated on its own terms the Greek notion of a public space in which human beings can enjoy a sense of community and solidarity as equals who are no longer bound to the division between inner and outer that beset previous social arrangements. My argument here is not that Hegel interpreted the French Revolution as classical in the way that Greek art brought together sign and substance, but that like many other young German intellectuals of this tumultuous period, Hegel already thought of himself as *living after* a momentous time upon which he chose to reflect and in relation to which his own early meta-political reflections are already an idealization of history, rather than an attempt to explain and evaluate what actually happened.

We can easily relate the early Hegel's enthusiasm for political transformation to the emergence of aesthetics the strong sense, particularly in the work of Friedrich Schiller, who lives in the wake of Kant and provides a philosophical response to a revolutionary situation. The immature Hellenism that allowed Hegel to turn a modern event into a semi-classical one fades in his later work, but the experience of living in the aftermath of this event is one that he shared with his

contemporaries. In truth, modern aesthetics owes its origins to the outcome of the first political revolution in modern Europe. Jacques Rancière has discussed how Kant's notion of free play, which performs an aesthetic role in the apprehension of beauty, can be related to the need to surpass the harsh rule of law that instituted itself during the height of the French Revolution. Schiller, however, was even clearer than Kant about the theoretical importance of developing aesthetic categories in the wake of the Terror, which "still adhered to the model according to which an active intellectual faculty constrains passive sensible materiality" (Rancière 2009: 32). Schiller's response to this situation was published in 1795 as *Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, a philosophical treatise that adopts Kant as its starting point but, in the third and concluding section, suggests to Rancière how mankind can adopt an aesthetic viewpoint on matter as "the reflection of its own activity" (36).

Hegel's reading of Schiller was crucial to the development of his own conception of dialectics, which adapted the idea of negation (*Aufhebung*) whereby "the intervention of some new and independent faculty" constitutes the sole basis for bridging the gulf that separates passive and active determination: "Thought is the spontaneous act of this absolute faculty," Schiller writes (1982: 130/131). Schiller explains that the apotheosis of feeling that strongly insists on the dynamic nature of beauty is formally opposed to the method of the intellect that strives to maintain the coherence of beauty on a conceptual level. However, there is also a "middle state" between sensuality and reason, passive and active sense, according to which "both these conditions totally disappear in a third without leaving any trace of division behind in the whole that has been made" (124/125). This third condition is the work of negation, which Julia Kristeva has identified with the "fourth term of the dialectic," the semiotic principle that cancels difference and allows difference to be preserved (1984: 109, 133).<sup>[3]</sup> Art is this movement in which the *agon* between sign and substance is temporarily abated in the epochal configurations of Spirit.

In conclusion, what first emerged in the sphere of Greek political life as the principle of mutuality and was extended during the French Revolution to include all men acquires a distinctively aesthetic cast in Post-Romantic culture when the work of art breaks up, at least partially, due to the onslaught of 'modern ideas' and the intellectual frenzy that accompanies the dematerialization of art objects. When viewed from another standpoint, however, this same progressive loosening, if not debasement, can be interpreted as a *breaking free* in which the challenge to traditional metaphysics is taken to new heights, that is to say, beyond the position that it achieved during the Age of Enlightenment. When Hegel's aesthetics is transformed from a limited conclusion within a complete system into a series of questions concerning the role of interpretation in a process that continually outpaces itself, we finally arrive at the semiotic condition that both guarantees the

productive unfolding of meanings and allows art in all its forms to perpetually recreate the horizon of its own transcendence.

## References

ARENDDT, Hannah. 1992. *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy*. Ed. Ronald Beiner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

DERRIDA, Jacques. 1982. "The pit and the pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's semiology." In *Margins of philosophy*. Tr. Allan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 69–108.

HEGEL, G. W. F. 1974. *Aesthetics I*. Tr. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

KANT, Immanuel. 2000. *Critique of judgment*. Tr. J.H. Bernard. New York: Prometheus Books.

KRISTEVA, Julia. 1984. *Revolution in poetic language*. Tr. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press.

LYOTARD, Jean-François. 1988. *The differend: phrases in dispute*. Tr. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

NANCY, Jean-Luc. 2002. *The restlessness of the negative*. Tr. Jason Smith and Steven Miller. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

RANCIÈRE, Jacques. 2009. *Aesthetics and its discontents*. Tr. Steven Corcoran. Cambridge: Polity Press.

SCHILLER, Friedrich. 1982. *On the aesthetic education of man*. Tr. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

[1] Jean-Francois Lyotard's contention that various philosophical positions are more or less reducible to "phrase regimes" is strongly applicable to Hegel, who seeks to recover the linguistic core of sublime experience. Lyotard tends to read Hegel as exemplifying a totalizing use of Reason, but speculative thought at least has the merit of releasing the Self from the conditions of fixity, which promote a kind of wandering that is not bound to the rules of any one language game (1988: 91–97).

[2] Kant's belief in a *sensus communis* is integral to his aesthetic theory has been interpreted as implicitly political in Arendt's reading of the *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 2000: 92–97; Arendt 1992: 67, 70–72). Hegel's classicism evokes harmony and concord, and then risks losing ideal unity when sign and substance diverge once and for all. But art for Hegel would have a place in the ethical world of the modern State, even if its conceptual role were greatly curtailed. We might argue that both views of the public sphere, as either the site of aesthetic accomplishment or as a special realm that supported art as an ideal institution, are complementary. It should be noted, however, that the Hegelian rapprochement of art and politics is just as precarious as Kant's attempt to contain a sense of the sublime in an aesthetic that is threatened by its overwhelming power.

[3] Kristeva's semiotic appropriation of Hegel turns away from a conventional reading of his system as tertiary but does not reject the possibility of triadic resolutions on a contingent basis. Negativity is what breaks up thetic modalities and allows semiotic motility to prepare for transformation, whereas "triplicity is only an appearance on the level of the understanding" (1984: 113).

ISSN 2414-6862 Proceedings of the world congress of the IASS/AIS

© IASS Publications & NBU Publishing House 2016; 21, Montevideo str., 1618 Sofia, Bulgaria