

Hegel's End-of-Art Revisited: The Death of God and the Essential Finitude of Artistic Beauty

Abstract

Hegelians reflecting on the philosopher's reported pronouncement on the "death" or the "end" of art have either tended to deny Hegel ever really said such a thing or to claim that if he did say it, then he was referring only to a "classical" view of art, thereby liberating art for its true, modernist vocation. Still others acknowledge Hegel's pronouncement and see it as raising issues in aesthetics that stretch beyond Hegelian philosophy, contradicting its systematicity. The present article demonstrates how beautiful art (*schöne Kunst*) ends with the death of Christ, as the most accomplished, perfect artwork, the singular realization of Classical beauty. Post-Classical art seeks to reclaim lost beauty, a search condemning it to "end" ironically in the unending approximation of modern artistic actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). By allowing the endless iterations of modern art to culminate historically in the systematic narrative of *Encyclopedic Philosophical Science*, Hegel seeks to save art from its own bad infinity, conferring meaning on its otherwise senseless reiteration of the "new". Perhaps such a salvation comes at the cost of configuring Hegelian Science itself as a singular work of art.

We Hegelians generally do not like the idea that our philosopher forecloses on art, pronounces its end, its death or, in a gentler form, says that it is a thing of the past.¹ Unlike the metaphysical and some might say "ideological" constructs that are God and Man, both of which contemporary thought is quite comfortable declaring dead, Art has arguably now become the new "sacred". Pronouncing its "end" may thus strike many thinkers today as deeply sacrilegious. Consequently, a great deal of scholarly ink has been spilled trying to come to terms with this troubling aspect of Hegelian philosophy.

The idea that art is no longer of any consequence is particularly galling since there seems to be so much vibrant artistic activity surrounding us, soliciting us, involving us, informing us, educating us, entertaining us and even, let it be said, humanizing us. Not only does art appear to be everywhere but everyone is, to some degree, an artist. Similarly, almost everything we do has become an artistic production, from the way the food hits the plate, to

¹ In fact, Hegel says, in his introductory lectures on the philosophy of art, that art is a "thing of the past; it has lost for us its pure truth and life". Hegel, *Werke in 20 Bänden* [Works in 20 Volumes], ed. Moldenhauer and Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 13 [W13], 25.

the latest Alt Country creation, to the newest HBO series or hip-hop sensation. The postmodern artistic configuration of ourselves and virtually all of our activities as creative and “artistic” means that the “end of art” rubs us personally.

More to the point, what is revered today as “fine art”, and which is the art that Hegel is concerned with (as *schöne Kunst*), seems to have enjoyed a historical development that reaches far beyond the forms that the philosopher was surrounded with in the early 19th Century. Further, according to the generally accepted history-of-art narrative, these newer forms are meant to demonstrate a progress in artistic creation: Impressionism begat Cézanne, who begat cubism, which brought about abstract expressionism, installations etc. How can such undeniable progress take place if art has been finished for the last two centuries?

Responses to these troubling questions generally take the form of arguments demonstrating that either Hegel never really pronounced the end of art or, if he did, that he did not really mean it as such. Of course, both these approaches allow Hegel scholars to bracket his alleged idea of art’s eclipse while continuing to mine the substantial resources provided by the rest of his texts on aesthetics. A third approach accepts Hegel’s end-of-art scenario and fully recognizes it as an essential element of his aesthetics, one that cannot but inform our contemporary views on art. Following this approach, it is perhaps now impossible to philosophically consider “art” without somehow taking into theoretical account the idea of its “ending”. This is Eva Geulen’s approach, as it was Heidegger’s.² However, whereas both these thinkers take the terminal aspect of art, in Hegel, as surpassing and even contradicting his systematic project, I want to show how art’s ending is an essential feature of the system that he calls Science.

² Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumor After Hegel*, trans. James McFarland (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006 [2002]). Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 50-52.

Hegel scholars have adopted forms of the above-mentioned approaches:³ 1) a philological denial of the texts themselves, whereby Hotho's canonical edition of the student notes, from which Hegel's *Aesthetics* are drawn, is claimed to be unfaithful or misread, i.e. Hegel never really pronounced the end or death of art per se;⁴ 2) a "modernism" denial, which says that Hegel was only referring to "classical" art, thus leaving room for, and even celebrating, the future blossoming of "modern" art, and the theoretical/philosophical elements that are integral to it. This second scholarly current interprets the "loss of life" that Hegel refers to as not really meaning the end of art per se but rather the end of a specific, antiquated type of art, an ending that opens the way to a new more progressive type of artistic production, which we today qualify as "contemporary".⁵ I think Stephen Houlgate can be included here. His article, "Hegel and the 'End' of Art", while attenuating the terminal aspect of art in Hegel, also celebrates its new, modern vocation: the portrayal of beauty as the representation of freedom. Robert Pippin's book *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* also participates in this tendency: the "end" that Hegel envisioned could not have foreseen the new vocation for art, engendered by the modernist current.⁶ Of course, Hegel scholars in this contemporary tradition present post-Hegelian,

³ I must thank my former student, Martin Desrosiers, for his insightful work in developing the first two currents in Hegel scholarship, on the question of the end of art. I would like to thank Martin Donougho for his helpful comments on this paper, as well as the anonymous reviewers for *Clio*.

⁴ The philological denial is abetted by publications of Hotho's own student notebooks from Hegel's 1823 *Lectures on Aesthetics*. As Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert points out in her important Introduction to *G.W.F. Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Art: The Hotho Transcript of the 1823 Berlin Lectures*, Robert F. Brown (ed., trans.), (Oxford: Clarendon, 2014), Hotho downplayed the end-of-art thesis in order to "provide a grounding for the future of art in the modern world (p.16)". Scholars recognizing the Hegelian "end of art" thesis include, Gethmann-Siefert, B. Croce, E. Heller, and T.M. Knox. As adherents of the philological deniers, Desrosiers' research cites J. D'Hondt, D. Henrich, P. Soual, T. Fisher, M. Carriere. C. L. Carter invokes the philological denial when he refers to Bosanquet's argument that Croce, in pronouncing the death of art, simply overdetermined Hegel's term "*Auslösung* (dissolution)".

⁵ In this category, we find T. M. Knox, C. L. Carter, J. Surber, P. Soual, J.-P. Lefebvre, B. Bosanquet, as well as A. Danto. Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel and the 'End of Art'", *Owl of Minerva* vol. 29. 1 (Fall 1997), 1-21.

⁶ Robert Pippin, *After the Beautiful* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). In the work of Gethmann-Siefert, Hotho himself is portrayed as a forgotten philosopher of "speculative aesthetics". His tendentious editing of the lecture notes is, in her view, foundational to the modernist current of interpretation: "Hotho not only intervenes in the text of Hegel's *Aesthetics* with the intention of mitigating the thesis of the end of art; ... he creates the impression that Hegel himself largely abandoned his thesis of the end of art. But in fact in the *Aesthetics* it is stated and considered at the outset". Introduction to G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*, trans. and ed. Brown (2014), 16.

modern art in critical perspectives that are, in various ways, informed by his philosophical thought generally (e.g. his notion of freedom). This fact supports what I wrote above, that one may profitably downplay the crepuscular aspect of Hegel's aesthetic theory, while still deriving interpretive power from his reflections on fine art. Such modernist accounts thus tend to bracket or ignore the more systematic claims of Hegelian philosophy.⁷

My approach to the question departs from the two above-mentioned currents and participates in what I presented as a third approach, one which accepts Hegel's end-of-art thesis as an important element in his aesthetic theory, but without having to rely on the modernist turn in order to save or rehabilitate it. However, among those espousing this third approach, there is a further, fundamental distinction to be made, namely between those who use the end-of-art thesis in order to present a non- or post-systematic account of art and those, like me, who seek to understand the terminal nature of art as an essential aspect of Hegel's systematicity. Eva Geulen is emblematic of the first tendency. She recognizes the terminal aspect of art in Hegel within a broader context, one that reaches beyond Hegel and his philosophical system, even contradicting it. According to her, without his end-of-art scenario, we would not have reaped the benefits of the fruitful theoretical reflections on art that we discover in later, post-systematic thinkers like Nietzsche, Benjamin, Adorno, Heidegger (Lukacs, Marcuse, Derrida...) In fact, for Geulen, following Hegel, it is now impossible to theorize on art at all without taking into account its ending. For this current of interpretation, art's ending implies the liberation of philosophical reflection from the presence of its actual, finite objects. The end of art opens onto infinite, critical theorizing.

⁷ This approach generally fits into the contemporary discrete approach to the Hegelian oeuvre, i.e. leaving aside its systematic pretensions in favor of specific areas amenable to contemporary thought: aspects of moral or political theory, dialectics, theory of knowledge etc.

Among those who accept Hegel's end-of-art scenario while recognizing its role within Hegel's systematicity, I believe that Stephen Bungay may be included. Indeed, his *Beauty and Truth: A Study of Hegel's Aesthetics* should be read in this vein. Bungay presents an end-of-art topography of scholarly attitudes somewhat similar to mine, while grasping art's ending as only comprehensible within the Hegelian system as a whole.⁸ However, he does not approach the question, as I do, through the essential finitude of the art object, as exemplified, as I will argue, in the death of God.

William Desmond's general approach also seems to fit into the integrative tendency that I am describing, although his account of systematicity is resolutely deflationary, taking pains to interpret the absolute, Scientific claims of Hegel's philosophy of art as expressions of organic "wholeness", over against "totalitarian closure". The problem, in my view, is that Desmond's notion of Hegelian systematicity thus appears to be rather amorphous. Eschewing "closure", the idea of "wholeness" can express no more than art's "infinite inexhaustibility", in a way that attempts to reconcile the apparently contradictory facets of, on one hand, continuing artistic activity and, on the other, the idea of art's completion.⁹ Such is indeed the fundamental challenge that I am addressing: how to accept Hegel's end-of-art scenario as informative of the philosophical system that he refers to as Science (*Wissenschaft*), without denying on-going, ever-present and contemporary artistic actuality as a meaningful human activity?¹⁰ My contention, in the present article, is that only by

⁸ Stephen Bungay, *Beauty and Truth: A Study of Hegel's Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984). See particularly 71-4. Bungay adds Christian Hermann Weisse to the list of "end of art" deniers. Apparently, according to Weisse, the end of art was a popular idea with Hegel's students at the time, but was not Hegel's own.

⁹ William Desmond, *Art and the Absolute* (Albany N.Y.: SUNY, 1986), 75.

¹⁰ Such a reconciliation, between the actual and systematic aspects of Hegel's philosophy of art, is the project that Gethmann-Siefert grounds on her philological critique Hotho's foundational edition: "Instead of expecting from the lecture sources a deliverance from the system, we should take the philosophy of art in the way that Hegel developed it, namely as the historical discussion of the basic thesis regarding art, of its being 'ideal', consequently, a form of absolute spirit (Introduction to *G.W.F. Hegel, Lectures*, 34)".

considering the essential finitude of the art object are we then able to grasp, within a holistic narrative, the meaning of the apparently endless artistic activity that characterizes modernity.

Comprehending art in terms of its essential finitude will help us understand not only how its ending is an inescapable element of what art means, in Hegel, but will allow us to reconcile its necessary closure with its on-going actuality. Briefly, my project is to show how art's "infinite inexhaustibility" is a necessary feature of its essential finitude. Further, if finitude is indeed an *essential* part of what art is, then it may well be that it is its *ending* that provides the possibility of meaning for those of us who care to reflect upon it within Hegel's systematic enterprise. I will begin by demonstrating the necessarily finite nature of what I believe is, for Hegel, the paradigmatic art object, as *schöne Kunst*. This demonstration involves making a the crucial distinction between finite singularity (*Einzelheit*) and finite individuality (*Individualität*). Subsequently, I will look at how the finite nature of the modern (post-Classical) artform comes to constitute an apparently never-ending progression, in worldly, historical actuality. Finally, I will show how this on-going production of new forms may itself be construed as a finite history, a move that involves assigning it the narrative closure of systematic Hegelian Science.

1. The Essential finitude of the beautiful art object

First, we do not understand art in Hegel if we do not take it as a revelation of the Absolute, of the Idea, and, although I hardly dare say it, of the "divine". This is why, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, reflections on art appear in Chapter 7 on Religion and later, near the end of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, as one of the figures of Absolute Spirit, along with Religion and Philosophy.¹¹ Of course, art is also an expression of human reason (as are religion and philosophy), but if we leave aside the revelatory or "absolute"

¹¹ For a sustained examination of the revelatory agency of the Absolute in Hegel, see Jeffrey Reid, "Reason and Revelation: Absolute Agency and the Limits of Actuality in Hegel", *Symposium*, 21,1 (2017), 182-202.

aspect of art (or religion or philosophy), then we are doing Feuerbachian humanism, not Hegelian (absolute) idealism. Nonetheless, it is precisely in the confluence between the agencies of absolute revelation and human reason that art takes place. It is also in this context where the end of art reveals its most fundamental meaning. Placing art under the sign of the Absolute's self-revelatory agency is what Hegel does in the opening paragraphs of the *Phenomenology's* Religion chapter. There, the subject of discussion is no longer spirit per se, i.e. the human odyssey of reason that we have observed through the first six chapters of Hegel's book. Now, we are looking at "the spirit of religion", where the Absolute undertakes its own odyssey. This newly presented form of spirit is "again [like human spirit] the movement away from its immediacy towards the attainment of the knowledge of what it is in itself (M680/W3, 499),"¹² but now from the point of view of the Absolute, i.e. from the point of view of the "absolute Being [*Wesen*, also essence]".

It may be difficult to see why, in the *Phenomenology*, art appears under the umbrella of religion. One might object that art per se only appears later in the subchapter entitled "*Kunstreligion*", where religion takes the form of art in the Classical world of sculpture. However, I would argue that art is there, in the Religion chapter, from the outset, in the different natural embodiments that characterize art in the "Natural Religion [*die Natürliche Religion*]" section, first, in the shape of "God as Light (M685/M3, 505)", then in the shapes of "Plant and animal (M689/W3, 507)" worship. In all these embodiments, the absolute Being (*Wesen*) takes on forms that are clearly presented *artistically*, perhaps with reference to Egyptian culture. Specifically, "Natural Religion", deals with artistic forms that espouse "the shape of shapelessness (M686)", where "revelation (M685)" takes the form of the "all-pervading essential light of sunrise (M686)"; subsequently, in the "Plant and animal" section,

¹² References to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* refer to the paragraphs in A.V. Miller's translation, which I sometimes alter, followed, where helpful, by references to W3. For Miller's translation: *Hegel's Philosophy of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977).

we find “a form that is produced by the self”, a “self that becomes a thing (M689)”. In both these “religious” contexts, Hegel is therefore talking about sacred objects in which the Absolute reveals itself in non-human forms. These objects are nonetheless man-made artworks, a truth of which we contemporaries have thankfully become aware.¹³ In other words, in “Natural Religion”, Hegel is not referring to natural things but to their presentation as fashioned, sacred art objects, for example, in animal sculptures and hieroglyphics.

The third subchapter in “Natural Religion”, the “*Werkmeister* [architect/builder] (M691/W3, 508)” section deals with sacred architecture, for example, pyramids or the stone of Mecca. Here, we are clearly in the Hegelian province of art, as indicated by the fact that, in the later *Lectures*, architecture forms a fundamental element of his aesthetics. Consequently, The Religion chapter has already been discussing art, throughout the “Natural Religion” section, before the word “art” is explicitly mentioned in “*Kunstreligion* [Religion as Art] (M699/W3, 512)”.

The fact that Hegel begins chapter 7 on Religion, in the *Phenomenology*, with a discussion of art demonstrates two things: first, from its conceptual beginning in the fashioned presentation of natural objects in “Natural religion”, art will always remain infected with the natural. And the natural, for Hegel, is, above all, characterized by the singularity of its objects, where finite things (of nature) collapse into forms of undifferentiated universality. This fundamental dynamic is already at play in the *Phenomenology*’s first chapter on Sense-certainty where the immediate apprehension of finite things dissolves into the indifference of “here” and “now”. The objects of art cannot shake their natural embodiment.

¹³ The artforms presented in the *Phenomenology*’s “Natural Religion” section correspond to the pre-Classical, “Symbolic” category presented in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*.

Second, the inescapably natural aspect of art, its reliance on singular embodiments, allows us to distinguish it from Revealed Religion (i.e. Hegel's presentation of religion *per se*, in the *Phenomenology*), where the sacred is no longer revealed in singular forms but in linguistic forms of shared (in worship) doctrines. In fact, in coming to espouse linguistic forms, e.g. epic poetry and tragedy, art is already moving on to Revealed Religion. As I will discuss below, the move to actual religious language implies the end of art, as it is presented in its natural, finite, singularly embodied form.

In Hegel, the most catastrophic but also the most essential and "revelatory" end of art took place about 2000 years ago, with the destruction of the most perfect work of beautiful art: the singular body of Jesus Christ. I do not mean representations or images of the Son of God but rather the death of God himself, in the Passion and Crucifixion of his individual natural, human form, considered as a divine work of art.¹⁴ In the divine singularity of the actual body of Christ, the human and the Absolute find their complete, immediately revelatory aesthetic expression. Thus, the Christ fully realizes Hegel's definition of the beautiful art object: the perfect cohabitation of individual *natural* form and universal content. In this light, the human body of Christ should be seen as the fulfilled, living embodiment of the "beautiful individuality", which Greco-Roman art could only, up until then, present in the stone configurations of divine human shapes. In the living, perfect art object that is the actual body of Christ, the individual human form is fully incarnated with universal content, and thus immediately true, good, beautiful and *alive*. In other words still, the natural necessity of individual bodily form is fully invested with the highest content of freedom: the life of the

¹⁴ Cf. Robert R. Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012). Williams, like most others who discuss the theme in Hegel, mistakenly takes the death of god as that of the father, not the son.

infinite Idea itself,¹⁵ forming an instance in *schöne Kunst* that Classical sculpture could only present in its beautiful and yet ultimately lifeless forms. In Hegel, the fact that the *depictions* of Christ herald the beginning of a new, modern chapter of spirit should not occlude the fact that, in the story of art, his crucifixion presents the culminating moment of the Classical world and, indeed, of beautiful art itself. The undeniable beauty of Classical sculpture that Hegel stresses in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* is not contradicted by Christ, but rather, is realized and fulfilled in his terminal, *singular* form.

It may seem that, in the paragraphs above, I have been playing fast and loose with the terms “singularity (*Einzelheit*)” and “individuality (*Individualität*)”, and indeed Miller’s translation of the passages in the *Phenomenology* that I am discussing encourages such equivocation. However, my use of these terms attempts to reprise the general distinction found in Hegel’s usage of them, a distinction that is germinal to our discussion of the art object and its finitude. Hegel generally uses “singular” and its derivatives when he is referring to the singular’s dialectical role in the syllogistic logic of the Concept, where the immediate, innumerable singularities of finite natural entities dissolve into universality. Of course, the *Singular* does reappear, finally, in the systematic conclusion of the syllogistic whole (*Schluss*), but then as the *universal* Singular: the one that is all, according to the ontology of the Concept, in the movement of thought through the moments of Universal, Particular and Singular. This syllogistically realizes Singular is what Hegel presents as Science. On the other hand, singular entities, as fundamentally natural, are always predisposed to vanish into greater conceptual configurations.

¹⁵ Conceiving artistic beauty as the unity of freedom and necessity replays Kant’s ideas of both aesthetic judgment, where the categories (necessity) play with the imagination (freedom), and artistic production, where genius is both natural (necessity) and feely creative.

Conversely, “Individualität” is generally used when the singular resists its conceptual destiny, when individuality refuses its inherently terminal, finite nature and hangs on to its ipseity by investing itself with fixed properties and qualities. This enterprise is meaningful but ultimately futile. In fact, individuality remains essentially finite because the qualities and properties that it uses to determine and maintain itself are themselves universal and predispose it to *general* particularity. This is the paradoxical dynamic that Hegel describes in the Perception chapter of the *Phenomenology* (M130/W3, 105), where perceived individual things attempt to anchor their truth in a profusion of essential properties but under whose particular *generality* individuality itself must fall.

The problem is that the art object is always ambiguously both singular and individual. To the extent that it is the locus where the Absolute reveals itself, the beautiful art object is singular. Its sacred embodiment guarantees the fact that there is nothing else like it. In Kantian terms, it is beautiful according to a reflective judgment that falls under no general rules; the singular art object is its own law. In Hegelian terms, the natural singularity of the beautiful work of art is completely invested with, overwhelmed and overcome by the universality of the Absolute that it is meant to embody. Its universality overflows its singular form. Thus, as Hegel writes in the Natural Religion section, in the art object, “Spirit beholds itself in the form of Being [*Sein*], though not of the non-spiritual being that is filled with the contingent determinations of sensation [i.e. individuality]... On the contrary, [the artwork] is Being filled with spirit (M686)”. As “filled with Spirit”, the singular art object is swept up in its syllogistic destiny, overcome in its finitude and folded into a larger structure of meaning.

On the other hand, as a finite object, the work of beautiful art cannot also help being a beautiful *individuality*. In the Greco-Roman context that Hegel discusses in *Kunstreligion*, *individuality* is a feature of the sculptures of the gods. As such, they are never *entirely* singular but always also *particular*, a generality. A statue of Athena is a beautiful art object

whose individuality is sculpted into its form: it represents the particular, general qualities of that goddess: war-like, beautiful, wise, capricious... And her sculpture presents particular traits that express those qualities and properties that ensure her individuality and make her recognizable in "Athena" statues sculpted throughout the Greek world.

If we take Christ as the *absolute* art object, because it conjoins the human (reason qua Spirit) and the divine (revelation qua Absolute Spirit) in one unique figure, then we must also recognize its ambiguity as both singular and individual. As singular, it is destined to go under, to go to ground (*zu Grund gehen*) as spirit. The absolute universality of its content cannot be contained in such a singular vessel and indeed Christ's destiny is to die and *become* Spirit. As an *individual*, however, Christ is a human figure, with the particular qualities and properties that make him so, and without which his vanishing would be humanly meaningless. We might say that, as the ultimate (last) art object, as the fully realized beautiful Classical sculpture, he dies as an individual (man) but his singularity ensures his meaningful resurrection as Spirit, within the larger discursive framework of Revealed Religion.

The textual support for my interpretation of Christ as the ultimate (Classical) art object can be found in M702-704 (W3, 534-15), i.e. *not* in Revealed Religion but rather toward the end of the introductory paragraphs to "Religion as Art", where Hegel is still presenting Classical Greco-Roman art. It is thus at the culmination of the Classical period that art reaches its fulfillment in the death of (the son of) God. This is what Hegel means when he writes, "In such an epoch, absolute art makes its appearance (M702)". Absolute art *is* Christ. His finite nature is made clear: "Later on, spirit transcends art in order to gain a higher representation of itself (*ibid.*)", namely in Revealed Religion. However, spirit's actualization in religion is only possible because Christ has died. Following a clear reference to the last supper and betrayal (M703), we find that "ethical spirit is resurrected as a shape freed from nature and its own existence (*ibid.*)". In other words, the resurrection of spirit

implies that Christ as a beautiful art object is freed from its natural, bodily individuality. It is this individuality “that spirit selects to be the vessel of its sorrow... [and which] suffers [the] violence of the universal (M704/M3, 515)”. The *finite* nature of Christ’s individuality ensures his singularity and his resurrection qua spirit.

While I acknowledge the idea of taking Christ as the ultimate artform may be shocking to both those who want to attach a strictly human vocation to artistic production and to those who prefer to take their Hegelian Absolute in either more obviously religious or metaphysical terms, I believe that Hegel’s phenomenological narrative leads us to this conclusion: the death of (the son of) God is the most significant ending of art. As such, it is the definitive enactment of art’s essential finitude, the destiny and meaning of all its beautiful, individual forms qua singular. The hard lesson is this: no individual form of *schöne Kunst*, no matter how beautiful, is adequate to Absolute content. Beauty is always also singular, and as such, must disappear and be enfolded into a structure of greater meaning, first, into the narrative of Revealed Religion and then, into systematic Science. The question that the present article leaves us with is whether the syllogistically realized Singularity of Science may itself be qualified as beautiful.

If you are uncomfortable with the religious connotations and prefer your artistic references to be resolutely anthropological, then you are already modern, or in Hegel’s view, Romantic, or rather late-romantic and even ironical. For Romantic art is the modern human pursuit that endlessly yearns to reproduce what, in fact, can no longer be *artistically* presented: the indwelling of absolute meaning in an essentially finite, human or human-made form.¹⁶ Ironic art has, in Hegel’s view, given up on this pursuit entirely, i.e. on the idea of sacred embodiment in individual form. I will return to irony and the endless actuality of art’s

¹⁶ For Hegel, “Romantic” or “modern” art is that which follows the culmination of Classical art, i.e. after the death of Christ. In other words, Romantic, modern art is that of the Christian era.

history below. For now, I want to continue the discussion of the beautiful art object itself and the linguistic fate of its essential finitude.

1.2 Singular beauty ends in Revealed Religion: *Darstellen to Vorstellen*

The death of the Christly art object as the final, singularly beautiful individuality and its outcome in spirit directly imply the second way of conceiving the finitude of art, as syllogistically enfolded into greater structures of meaning. Specifically, beautiful art, which Hegel presents as Classical art culminating in the living/lived Christly artwork, gives way to a new form of the sacred that is no longer artistic but genuinely *religious*. Revealing its conceptual singularity, the individual, all too natural art object has given up the ghost (*Geist*), and that “holy ghost” now becomes the animating spirit of what Hegel refers to as Revealed Religion. While Revealed (Christian) Religion does have its art objects and icons (particularly in Catholicism), they are now to be seen as painfully nostalgic (Romantic) presentations, for example, in the depictions of the Stabat Mater or the Crucifixion, of what is missing: the Absolute Being (*Wesen*: essence or meaning) that was once incarnate in the most perfect artwork of the Classical world. The same painful yearning is again expressed in Romantic landscape painting, where the things of nature are no longer presented as sacred in themselves but rather as pointing achingly to a lost essence, to the “beyond”, to the now departed spirit of the dead God. Consequently, the objects of modern (Romantic) art are always symbolic of the essence that they can only point to. Endless striving for the “beyond” is a feature of artistic actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), as I will present it below, whose narrative of infinite progress is only possible because, on Hegel’s reading, the last and most perfectly beautiful art form has come and gone.

Before moving on, it is important to stress two points here. Presenting the death of Christ as the end of art means comprehending this terminal moment as the end of *schöne*

Kunst, and thus, of the possibility of producing art objects that are truly beautiful. Artistic beauty per se, as a human-informed *individual* object invested with universal content, i.e. as the perfect cohabitation of spirit (freedom) and nature (necessity), can do no better. All the undeniable beauty realized in the particular, stone forms of Classical sculpture is finally achieved in the living/dying Christ. Consequently, we can say that the end of art as the end of *schöne Kunst* (which is what Hegel is concerned with) is the achievement of *das Schöne in der Kunst*. Second, in demonstrating how the *Phenomenology*'s Religion chapter clearly moves between distinct discourses on art and religion, I have shown how that work operates the same distinction between these two expressions of Absolute Spirit that we find in later forms, i.e. in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* versus those on *Religion*, and in the final section of the *Encyclopedia*. Consequently, the Religion chapter of the *Phenomenology*, which I am concentrating on, provides a crucial, Hegel-penned text on the terminal nature of art.

The essential *content* of Revealed Religion, i.e. the “beyond” that art can henceforth only aspire to, without ever reaching, is now *represented* in narrative form, in the communally celebrated language of worship (*Cultus*). Here, art's missing essence actually *takes place*, not in the individual art object, but in something less natural, more spiritual: in discursive language, which, in Revealed Religion (specifically, in Protestantism) takes the form of shared church doctrine (*Lehre*). While the idea that art ends in church doctrine may appear almost blasphemous in our own atheistic, materialistic and yet deeply Romantic culture, it is true in Hegel, a fact that may perhaps be made more palatable by acknowledging how the move from art to church doctrine takes place in the very human context of language and fully acknowledges the pedagogical role of doctrine (*Lehre* = teaching).¹⁷ More

¹⁷ In the 1827 set of *Lectures on Religion*, Hegel puts it this way, “[In the church] that which is doctrine must also be taught. It is, it exists, it is valid, it is acknowledged and immediately presupposed.” Through doctrine, “spiritual truth” becomes known, “and the fact that spiritual truth appears is precisely that it is taught” as doctrine. This allows Hegel to affirm that “the church is essentially a teaching church, by virtue of which there is a teaching office whose function is to expound doctrine.” Vol. 3, *The Consummate Religion*, ed. P. Hodgson,

precisely, the move from the singular art object to Revealed Religion is a move from *Darstellen* to *Vorstellen* (from presenting to representing), a transition obscured by persistent translations of *Vorstellung* as “picture-thinking” and the lumping of art and religion together as expressions of it, over against the discourse of speculative philosophy.

The linguistic distinction between *Darstellung* (or *Darstellen*) and *Vorstellung* (or *Vorstellen*) is apparent in Hotho’s reconstituted *Lectures on Aesthetics* and in the *Lectures on religion*¹⁸ and it is already clearly in play in the *Phenomenology*. For example, in M702 (W3, 514), where Hegel is writing about the Absolute art object, he uses the term “*Darstellung*” twice. On the other hand, when discussing the content of communal worship, later, in Revealed Religion, he repeatedly uses “*Vorstellen*”. For example, he writes, “This form of representation (*Form des Vorstellens*) constitutes the determination in which Spirit becomes conscious of itself in its religious community [*Gemeine*] (M765/W3, 556)”. The introduction of representational language actually precedes and anticipates the move from art to Revealed Religion. For, in fact, the first instance of representational language (*Vorstellen*) occurs in the communally shared and celebrated Homeric epic. Hegel writes, “The external existence of this *Vorstellens*, language, is the earliest [sacred] language, the epic as such (M729/W3, 530)”. It is this notion of language as the “external existence” of Absolute Being (*Wesen*) that comes to inform the religious community of worship (*Cultus*) through shared doctrine.

The linguistic representations (*Vorstellungen*) of church doctrine (e.g. the Nicene Creed) are much better suited to the indwelling of spirit than are the individual, always finite

trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, J. M. Stewart, with H. S. Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press) 334. Cf. *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion, Die vollendete Religion*, ed. Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg : Felix Meiner, 1983), 257.

¹⁸ For example, in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* we find, “Among the various artforms, sculpture is best suited to present (*darstellen*) the Classical in its simple repose...” *Werke* 14, p. 87. In his own lecture notes on the *Philosophy of Religion*, distinguishing between the art, religion and philosophy, Hegel writes that the first comes to consciousness in “the form of immediate intuition [*Anschauung*]”, the second (religion), in the form of “representation [*Vorstellung*]”, and the third, in the form of “thinking [*Denkens*]”. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, Vol. 3, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion, Der Begriff der Religion*, ed. Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg : Felix Meiner, 1983), 143. My translation.

works of art, a truth illustrated by the fact that worship is both communal and temporal: the creeds are invoked, chanted and sung together, discursively, in a community of believers. We might say that the temples erected by the architectural *Werkmeister* (M699/W3, 512), which were left empty by the death of the individual artform,¹⁹ are once again filled. However, such places of communal gathering are no longer populated with beautiful stone sculptures but rather inhabited by living celebrants, sharing and incanting sacred phrases and pronouncements. The “objectivity of representational language (*Vorstellens*)... is the life of the community (M766/W3, 557).”

Consequently, the move from art to Revealed Religion, from *Darstellung* to *Vorstellung*, allows us to grasp how the essential finitude, i.e. the end of the singular, beautiful art object is enfolded into a greater structure of meaning. The presentation of *the* individual art object (Christ) has been revealed to be absolutely singular, whose end informs the discursive, historically temporal language of Revealed Religion. We might say that whereas the singular art object manifests itself as a word (Christ, the word [logos] made flesh), the language of communal worship enfolds singular words into meaningful sentences and propositions. This linguistic move into propositional language is also a necessary step in art’s philosophical vocation, where its history is further embraced in the systematic, speculative narrative (logos) of Hegelian Science.

However, the finite nature of the individual artform is also responsible for its on-going, modern (in the Hegelian sense) actuality, which can be read as an apparently endless pursuit to find (again) the perfectly adequate embodiment of absolute essence/meaning that defines beauty. In other words, it is the essentially finite nature of the art object that fuels the apparent progression of its continuing history. The fact that we are still happily caught up in

¹⁹ One of the most remarkable passages of the *Phenomenology*: “The statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown... (M753/W3, 547).”

artistic activity, creativity, history, criticism etc. does not contradict the end of art scenario but rather depends upon it, if we understand “end” as the finitude of individual art products themselves. I want to now discuss this on-going, putatively never-ending artistic activity as participating in what Hegel calls “actuality (*Wirklichkeit*)”. Rather than understanding this important ontological concept according to the reassuringly idealistic mantra of “everything that is actual is rational” and vice versa, I present Hegelian actuality as fundamentally unfinished, as the crucially *human* pursuit of *something* absolute that always escapes it. The actual is indeed reason-able, but it is precisely its grounding in (human) reason that condemns it to what both Kant and Fichte conceived of as an endless approximation of an intuitively present but actually absent “beyond”. Consequently, artistic actuality arises *after* artistic beauty has been achieved in the most accomplished Classical artwork (Christ), whose individual form was perfectly adequate to the universality of its content. To be once again beautiful is nonetheless what the actuality of modern (Romantic, post-Classical) art yearns for, while remaining a consummation devoutly to be wished; for such an accomplishment can never be realized *in actuality*, as Hegel conceives it. Rediscovered beauty will thus remain out of reach for human, all-too-human artistic striving, fundamentally divorced from the revelatory agency of the Absolute. Only the conceptual interplay between reason and revelation can bring about the adequate discursive structure of meaning, carried out in the fully syllogized beauty of Science. But for now, let us come back to earth, to the world of actuality.

2. Actuality and modern art’s never-ending finitude

Certainly, the fact that artistic activity is ever-present, everywhere and ongoing seems to contradict any idea that art itself may have somehow ended, if we take such “ending” naively, as an activity simply having stopped or even in the more sophisticated sense of “having become insignificant”. In order to avoid both of these end-of-art interpretations,

some commentators embrace the avowedly modernist turn that I described at the outset: the idea that Hegel only forecloses on a specific, *démodé* (Classical) kind of art, leaving room for the flowering of art in the modern and indeed contemporary expressions that we are familiar with today. Hegel may thus be recognized and thanked for having opened philosophical doors onto modern and even post-modern artistic creation, an essential element of how we generally conceive and define our humanity.

It is undeniable that contemporary artistic activity forms an important feature of our own actuality. Artists have obviously not stopped producing their art. Galleries, theaters and publishing houses are full of it to overflowing. Certainly, today more people are producing art, presenting it, experiencing it, thinking about it, writing about it than ever before, a statement that Hegel himself could even have accurately made, two centuries ago, in Heidelberg and especially in the vibrant cultural setting of Berlin where he spent the last chapter of his life, going to the theater, the concert hall, the opera etc. Furthermore, art's history is generally studied and taught according to a narrative that seems to celebrate its present novelty and continuing progress. Has no one informed the world that art is dead, that it is insignificant, that people should abandon the theaters and galleries, and get to church?

When I first presented the *Encyclopedia Logic* (EL) in a graduate seminar, I used art as an example of “actuality”, an ontological category that Hegel presents in the eponymous chapter of his work. Some years later, when I went back and re-read my notes in preparation for another go at the EL, I scratched out the art example and replaced it with the idea of written political constitutions, as better expressions of the type of reality that Hegel means by *Wirklichkeit*.²⁰ Art, it seemed to me, was too elevated, too absolute a form of spirit to

²⁰ In EL §142 *Zusatz*, Hegel refers to systems of taxation. In *the Principles of the Philosophy of Right* §344, Hegel describes the “determinate principle” of each people or state, within the narrative of “world history”, as “having its actuality in their constitutions (W7, 505).” Against Kant’s idea of perpetual peace, Hegel states that international accords between nations can never get beyond the “ought-to-be” since they are always infected by

represent human actuality. However, when I looked again at the *Zusätze* (Additions) to the “Actuality” chapter in the EL, I found that Hegel does indeed refer to art there, albeit in passing.²¹ How can that be the case when “Art” per se is only specifically evoked much later in the *Encyclopedia*, in the last section, on Absolute Spirit? Upon discovering a reference to art in the “Actuality” chapter, one might wonder how artistic productions and political constitutions are ontologically alike.

The answer is that, from the point of view of actuality, they are both expressions of spirit that are once again, “all too human”, in that they bracket the revelatory agency of the Absolute. What the *Logic* demonstrates is the ontological similarity, within the category of *Wirklichkeit*, between the *human* strivings involved in artistic production, and political jurisprudence. As features of actuality, both artistic production and political constitutions (and law generally) are examples of what Hegel qualifies as *Objective* as opposed to *Absolute* Spirit. Taking place in the world and aspiring to something greater that remains stubbornly beyond, both the productions of contemporary artistic activity and the penning and amending of political constitutions are condemned to be endlessly works-in-progress. Both spheres of activity represent un-ending approximations of something absolute, something beautiful, true and good, akin to the Platonic forms, presupposed by the pursuit itself and yet never fully attained.

On Hegel’s reading, there will never be a peaceful, just cosmopolitan world order underscored by the perfect constitution, just as there will never be *another* perfectly beautiful art object. The *Logic* shows that actuality may be more ontologically meaningful than natural contingency; it is undoubtedly a level of reality that is informed by human reason and in

contingency – i.e. world history, as objective spirit, is a feature of actuality, and thus a never-ending approximation of peace. *Philosophy of Right* § 333 (W7, 499-500).

²¹ EL Section 145 Addition (W8, 286).

which reason may recognize itself. However, actuality, in its historical progress, can do no better than reiterate bad infinities, unending attempts in search of systematic completion.²² Such closure (*Schluss*) is only afforded by the Scientific (systematic) point of view where art is speculatively or conceptually enfolded into the historical narratives of (the philosophies of) art, religion and philosophy. However, we are not there yet. For now, let us say that the finitude of actual, individual art objects guarantees their never-ending re-iterations in modern artistic actuality.²³ Indeed, art seems to end in its own endless progress, whose (bad) infinity is a direct consequence of the finite nature of its own man-made products. Consequently, observing ever-present, ongoing, present-day artistic activity does not contradict the notion of art's end but rather helps us see it as a feature of Hegelian *actuality*, comprehended in terms of infinite striving and approximation.

I do not mean to imply that, for Hegel, continual artistic activity qua modern, post-Classical art is somehow bad or spurious nor that its narrative of progress is a self-delusional fiction. As is the case with political constitutions, the manifold expressions and schools of modern art may indeed be conceived as a progression, one that conveys the excitement and challenge of the new and original. However, without an encompassing (“absolute”, “systematic”, “speculative”, “Scientific”) narrative of presupposed “wholeness”, to use William Desmond’s term, the progress of art has no meaningful purpose nor end; it is literally going nowhere. Constantly inventing new figures, caught up in an endless series of new expressions, new flavors, new forms and new personalities, the only thing definitive in artistic actuality is the evanescent character of “newness” itself. Along with the endless

²² See note 11 above.

²³ This ending might correspond to what Desmond celebrates, above as an “open wholeness” of art’s “infinite inexhaustibility.”

striving for lost beauty, the constant and continual reiteration of “the new” is another recognizable feature of late Romantic, ironic art, which is arguably our present-day art.

2.1 The ironic “end” of artistic actuality

In my book *The Anti-Romantic*, I show how Hegel sees Romantic irony as characterizing his present-day artistic actuality, where the incessant search for new forms breaks down into the individual, critical pronouncements that Hegel associates with Friedrich Schlegel’s ironic hypercriticism.²⁴ As the expression of his contemporary actuality, Hegel sees the “art” of Romantic irony as the *Vereitelung* (“vanitization”) or rendering vain²⁵ of all that is truly objective, i.e. of all that is systematically coherent and Scientific. The fact that Hegel’s most explicit polemic against Romantic irony is found in his later Berlin lectures, two decades after the demise of the Jena circle, demonstrates the persistent, on-going character of the actuality that Hegel attributes to ironic forms and the contemporary challenge that their fragmentary, critical iterations present to his own systematic view of Science. Nonetheless, the essential emptiness and vanity of Romantic irony’s artistic expressions are already powerfully prefigured in the Religion chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel’s pronouncement of the death of God in the world is followed by some of his most evocative prose: images of vacant, dead artforms, statues, empty temples, formerly beautiful individual artworks that are now void of essence or meaning.²⁶ As we saw above, only in the

²⁴ In the words of Fr. Schlegel, “Since today philosophy criticizes everything it finds, a critique of philosophy could only be a just revenge”; or: “One can never be too critical.” P. Firchow, trans. and Intro., *Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde and the Fragments* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1971), *Athenäum* Fragments 56 and 281. Art’s ending in ironic Romanticism is the subject of Carl Rapp’s “Hegel’s Concept of the Dissolution of Art”, in William Maker, *Hegel and Aesthetics* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2000), 13-30. Rapp, like me in my book, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), sees Hegel’s characterization of Romantic irony as prescient of certain currents in postmodern thought.

²⁵ See Reid, *The Anti-Romantic*, 47-8. *Vereitelung* might also be translated as “rendering vain” or “emptying out”. It also expresses the narcissistic, self-reflective quality that Hegel attaches to the Romantic ironist and to Fr. Schlegel particularly. W11, 233. The reference is from Hegel’s review of K.W.F. Solger’s writings. For Hegel’s (tendentious) take on Romantic irony, see also W13, 96, from the Introduction to his *Lectures on Aesthetics*.

²⁶ “[I]n his games and festivals, man no longer recovers the joyful consciousness of his unity with the divine”; works of ancient art are “beautiful fruit, already plucked from the tree (M753/W3, 547)”.

representational language of Revealed Religion (and in later expressions of Absolute Spirit) will these empty “temples” be discursively and temporally re-inhabited by the now-absent, essential, universal content.

Ironic art has given up on essential content altogether, whether artistic or religious, and it has filled this absolute void with the hollow form of its own individual subjectivity, which has consequently been promoted to absolute status. That is why Hegel uses Fichte’s foundational formula of “*Ich bin Ich* (I = I)” as the paradigmatic expression of Romantic irony’s empty and vain self-reflection.²⁷ In modern irony, as read by Hegel, there is no distance between the form/content of artistic expression and the form/content of the living, “creative” individual. Viewed in a contemporary light, I might say that my blog comments, Twitter feed, Facebook page, Reddit writings etc. are as “artistic” or creative as anything else in the world, simply because they are the reflections of my own subjective vanity (*Eitelkeit*).

One could end the story of art here, and simply say that Hegel’s critique of Romantic irony is a critique of (post)modernity, and that in our current celebration of artistic actuality, irony seems to have had the last word.²⁸ However, the “wholeness” that Hegel assigns to the story of art must somehow embrace into the systematic body of Science, and the narrative closure that it implies, the on-going and indeed, never-ending actuality of art’s progress. In other words, rather than ensure the integrity of his philosophical system by simply rejecting and repulsing the fragmentary discourse that is inimical to it, Hegel’s audacious project seeks to incorporate the “ending” that stands against it as its absolute Other: the end of artistic actuality in Romantic irony.

²⁷ W13, 93.

²⁸ See Jeffrey Reid, "Hegel on Schleiermacher and Postmodernity" *Clio*, 32,4 (Summer 2003), 457-472.

2.2 Ironic art as systematic negativity

In order for the endless actuality of art's progress to be conceived as folding into a systematic narrative of wholeness, it must be accorded an end that is more discursively meaningful than its ending in Romantic irony. The (bad) infinity of art's never-ending iterations of individual artforms must itself be made finite and singular. Hegel accomplishes this feat by comprehending the actuality of Romantic irony as a critical *moment* of dialectic negativity within his systematic account. In so doing, he is taking Friedrich Schlegel's self-declared hypercritical enterprise at its word, thereby incorporating it and indeed harnessing its dialectical negativity into the systematic Hegelian discourse of Science.

In the Hegelian story of art, critical negativity is necessary in order to break down the recalcitrant, repetitive particularities of modern art's actuality, its endless "progress" through different schools and "isms" and, one supposes, the stultifying dogmatic discourses found in "history of art" manuals. Critical negativity is the solvent element in the story of art, allowing us to go beyond, question and even overturn such dry, bookish accounts, thus giving life to the philosophical narrative of art, ensuring its organicity. Indeed, by incorporating the Romantic/ironic actuality of art into the body of Science, Hegel's project is to save art from its own incessant and futile finitude, according it a new (spiritual) life. He can only do so by putting an end to the endless strivings of art, while nonetheless preserving the dialectical character of its progression, reborn as critical negativity within the narrative of Science.

In Hegel's introductory *Lectures on Aesthetics*, we see how this works. Several pages before his scathing attack on Friedrich Schlegel as the father of irony and vanity, Hegel refers to Friedrich and his brother August in a relatively positive light. They are acknowledged in this context for introducing a new sense of freedom into German art scholarship, and for their

critical openness to other cultures in history (e.g. Indian). In the Schlegel brothers' critical theories, writes Hegel, the old "rules and theories have been overturned," in a way that involves "a clever polemic against the traditional views". Most importantly, the thrust of the Schlegels' recent art criticism participates in a broader philosophical project, by making possible a "deeper way" of grasping the truth of artistic beauty, by subverting the standard theorizing on the history of art.²⁹ To what extent Hegel succeeds in thus incorporating the terminal nature of ironic criticism into his systematic narrative remains, of course, an open question, one that perhaps testifies to the openness of the Hegelian system itself. In any case, modern art's narrative of meaningful progress depends on the incorporation of criticism into the presupposed wholeness of Science.

The incorporation of ironic actuality into the holistic account of art, as its essentially critical moment, is not idiosyncratic. The same dynamic is replayed in Hegel's introductory *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where we find "Critical History" presented as a dialectical element allowing us to move from the dogmatic "reflective" historiography, and particularly its calcified moralizing expression in "pragmatic" historiography, to the lively systematicity of philosophical history. Indeed, as I have tried to show elsewhere, in an article on "Cometary Negativity", it may be possible to find the solvent agency of critical negativity at play throughout the *Encyclopedic system*,³⁰ where it appears as the "second" moment of particularity (for-another), within the general Hegelian syllogism (*Schluss*) of Universality, Particularity and Singularity.

2.3 Historicizing the singular beauty of art

²⁹ The first reference is found at W13, 92, the second, polemical reference to Friedrich Schlegel is found on pages 93-5.

³⁰ Jeffrey Reid, "Comets and Moons: The For-another in Hegel's Philosophy of Nature", *Owl of Minerva* (45, 1-2, 2013-14), 1-11.

The systematic narrative that Hegel develops, where the Schlegels' critical activity is briefly acknowledged, is historical in its account. Indeed, in presenting irony as a critical "moment" and as a necessarily modern feature within a historical development, Hegel has already presented it as *past*, as a late chapter in the story of art, a twilight episode that can only be truly comprehended according to the *philosophy* of art, which, in Hegel, is necessarily historical in its configuration (pre-Classical, Classical, Romantic-modern). In other words, artistic actuality finds its meaning through its historical outcome, which, in turn, shows itself to be philosophical, i.e. running on the syllogistic lines of the Concept.

In historicizing artistic activity, Hegel brings it into the narrative realm of Absolute Spirit as presented in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* and in the *Encyclopedia*, where art is revealed as the complicit expression of both Absolute and human self-knowing. It is the human aspect that characterizes Hegel's idea of *Geist* (spirit) in general, the idea that the Absolute must temper its revelatory activity, must not pour itself out in one punctual, singular instant of *Anschauung* (intuition), even if endlessly reiterated. The articulations of (human) spirit must rather build upon themselves progressively, pedagogically, through developing forms of human consciousness,³¹ instantiated in the corresponding historical moments of artistic activity, taken up in the representational discourse of Revealed Religion and then, in philosophical Science.

From the point of view of the revelatory agency of the Absolute, which I introduced at the outset as essential to understanding art in Hegel as more than purely anthropological, every beautiful, individual art object is a form of incarnation. However, incarnation, in its eternal instantaneity, is radically *non*-historical. As an instance of the embodied Absolute, each individual instance of *schöne Kunst* has the status of a singular word, as I wrote above,

³¹ Hegel was certainly inspired, as were many of his generation, by G. E. Lessing's influential essay, *Education of the Human Race* (1780).

which may be taken as immediately invested with sacred content, but whose finitude nonetheless calls for greater discursive structures of meaning. Universal content always surpasses the finite artform that embodies it, leaving it behind. Even the beautiful Classical sculptures of the Ancient world are never fully adequate to the liveliness of their divine content, a fact illustrated by the serial reiterations of each *particular* godly statue; there can never be just one sculpture of Athena, no matter how beautiful. Introducing historical temporality into art, through the discourses of religion and philosophy, both recognizes and overcomes art's essential finitude, i.e. the punctual embodiments of universal content in beautiful, singular forms, and the endless production of individual objects striving for such lost beauty. Finally, in historicizing art, philosophy spiritualizes and humanizes it, making it something that is "by us" and "for us", within the larger pedagogical structure of meaning that Hegel calls Science.

3. The end of art in the Singular beauty of philosophical Science

Briefly, what have we learned, with regards to the different approaches to Hegel's end-of-art scenario that I presented at the beginning of the article? First, we have seen how "the end" should not be viewed as a fate that befalls art nor should it be seen as an external barrier that art "arrives at". Rather, "ending" is an essential feature of beautiful art's inescapable and *crucial* finitude. Because beautiful art is always expressed in an individual, singular form, it is always tainted with natural finitude and is destined to go to ground (*zu Grund gehen*); its essence or meaning is always embodied in an immediate fashion, and it is this natural immediacy that is its own limit, its end. On Hegel's reading, the finite nature of the beautiful art object is never adequate to the universality of its content, a truth fully realized in the catastrophic end of the most perfectly beautiful, i.e. Christly, art object. The "death of God", as Hegel puts it, thus evokes both the ontological finitude of the art object, in general, and art's culminating historical term, i.e. the moment when the full realization of

beautiful art *has taken place*. In this sense, the end of art *does* mean the end of Classical art and the birth of its “modern” actuality, along with its endless aspiration to recapture, in a finite individual object, that which is irretrievably beyond. It is again the essentially finite nature of the art object that condemns modern artistic production to the infinite approximation of artistic actuality, to a never-ending quest to reproduce what is forever missed in its unceasing production of individual objects: one beautiful, singular form that is, once again, adequate to absolute content. The heroic project of Hegel’s philosophy of art is to grasp its essential finitude within greater narrative structures of essence or meaning, to save art from its own incessant and ultimately ironic endings, to make sense of the obsessive, compulsive character of artistic modernity by enfolding its always-revolutionary “progression” into a systematic, historical narrative.

Such salvation therefore takes place within the narrative body of philosophical Science itself: the completed (*vollkommen*) outcome of Hegel’s grand syllogism, which passes from the Universal, through the Particular, into the universal Singularity, i.e. into the one that is all: to the mediated corpus of the Idea. Thus, at the end of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, the last book of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, the Ideas of the True and the Good are presented in a way that leads us to expect their culmination in the apparently missing third “Platonic” element: the Idea of Beauty. Instead, in its place, Hegel presents the Absolute Idea itself, the Singular recapitulative embodiment of everything that has come before.

If we accept the intimation of the Idea of Beauty here, in the culminating position of Science, beyond the Ideas of the True and the Good, then it becomes possible to see how Hegel meant the *Encyclopedia* to realize the project of the seminal “Oldest System Program of German Idealism”, which he worked on with his friends Schelling and Hölderlin around 1797. Indeed, in that early manifesto, we find that “*truth and goodness* are united like sisters

only in beauty”.³² If one were to object that this early writing is far removed from the mature Hegel of the Berlin years, I would answer that Hegel’s lifelong philosophical project consists in bridging the radical divide between the domains of the theoretical (the True) and the practical (the Good), a division that is grounded in the then-dominant philosophies of Kant and Fichte. And how else to conceive the union of the two apparently separate pursuits of the True and the Good than in the reconciling Idea of the Beautiful?³³ If the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* is indeed the embodiment of universal content, and the Singular reconciliation of the Ideas of the True and the Good, should we not then see it as a beautiful artform?

The claim that Hegel’s *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* may be viewed as the ultimate artwork, the Singular incarnation of Beauty, may appear to be just as outrageous as the notion that the perfect art object took place in the individuality of Christ. In fact, the two propositions are intertwined. Both forms are perfect (*vollkommen*) Singular embodiments of the human and the Absolute. Their difference lies in how the immediate *individuality* of the incarnated and dis-incarnated Christly art object has been given, in Science, a mediated narrative, in which the punctuality of absolute Revelation has been deployed through the discursive, historical and *anthropological* figures of spirit. Nonetheless, in both the living individuality of Christ and in the accomplished Singularity of Science, the Absolute reveals itself in “human form”, allowing for reciprocal recognition, where humanity is conscious of itself in the Absolute and the Absolute knows itself through human spirit, forming what Hegel refers to as Absolute Spirit.³⁴ In the Scientific exercises of art, religion and

³² The text has been assigned together and separately to Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin, from their time together at the Tübingen Seminary. W1, 234-6.

³³ In Kant, the judgment of beauty in the Third Critique can be seen to reconcile the First Critique, on theoretical knowing (necessity in the form of natural determinacy) and the Second Critique, on morality (the science of freedom).

³⁴ “[o]nly Spirit that is object to itself as absolute spirit is conscious of itself as a free actuality to the extent that it remains conscious of itself therein (M678/W3, 497).” Absolute spirit is the truth that human or actual spirit and the spiritual agency of the Absolute are one, through reciprocal self-knowledge: “The distinction which was

philosophy, the divine and the human can be said to come together in greater, historical forms of discursive meaning, which are no longer instances of finite revelation but are truly infinite. Whereas the human element embodied in the Christly art object was that of natural man, the humanity of Science resides in the fact that the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* is both the fruit of human spirit and destined to be *for* humanity, through its vocation as a book of philosophy and a teaching manual that was meant to be read and studied within the *Cultus* of the state university.

The final end of art, in Hegel, is perhaps nothing other than the *Encyclopedic* articulation of his own system, taken as the ultimate work of *schöne Kunst*. As is the case with the beautiful work of art whose *singular* finitude bespeaks an essential and therefore meaningful end within greater structures of meaning, taking the *Encyclopedia* as a fulfilled work of art invites us to a critical reflection on it, to overcome the hard individuality of its systematicity, and to appreciate and interpret the singularity of its finitude.

made between actual Spirit and Spirit that knows itself as Spirit... is superseded in the Spirit that knows itself in its truth (M681/W3, 500)".