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Herausgegeben von
Andreas Arndt, Myriam Gerhard, Jure Zovko

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Wilhelm Raimund Beyer (†)

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Herausgegeben von
Andreas Arndt, Myriam Gerhard, Jure Zovko

in Verbindung mit
Önay Sözer und Alper Turken

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The Symbolic Role of Art in Hegel versus the Absolute Function of Beauty

Hegel's theory of art is generally condensed into two main claims that have been critically elaborated and interpreted in various ways over the last two centuries: i) Art is a form of presentation of the absolute spirit, and ii) a successful work of fine art displays a thoroughgoing identity of form and content. These two generic tenets have contributed to build the image of Hegel as one of the fathers of classicist aesthetics, or better, as the philosopher who gave theoretical dignity and a speculative foundation to the theory stating the absolute excellence of classical Greek art.¹

The first claim concerns the systematic and philosophical determination of art: it specifies the relationship between art and the absolute. This kind of conceptualization simultaneously establishes the relationship that art maintains with the other forms of comprehension of the absolute spirit, i. e. religion and philosophy, and it concerns the absolute function of beauty. The second claim, on the contrary, closely concerns the field of aesthetics, and its reception has affected a large part of the aesthetic theories in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Hegelian verdict concerns the aesthetic category of beauty and it asserts the perfect identity between form and content.

When we read Hegel's dual determination of art, however, a sort of mutual tension stands out in its theoretical implications: if it is true that absolute spirit is the content of art, and if it is also true that art is a sensible presentation of spirit, the postulated identity of form and content undermines the Hegelian conception of the absoluteness of spirit. The absolute spirit is in fact infinite rationality, and its absoluteness (*ab-solutus*) involves a complete autonomy and freedom: the absolute spirit is free from the sensible bonds of matter and its infinite freedom is such that it is unintelligible in the immediate medium of art. In order to explicate this tension we have to understand what the „identity of form and content“ actually means, and how art can possibly refer to the absoluteness of spirit. To anticipate my conclusions, I support the following position: The semantic category that best explains the relationship between form and content, the incarnation of meaning, in Hegel's aesthetics is the category of the symbol.

1 The beginning of the system and the role of art

In the third systematic project, developed by Hegel in Jena (1805/6), art has – for the first time in his works – the same role later assigned to it in the Heidelberg and Berliner Encyclopedia: art is the first part of the absolute spirit, and it will be overcome by religion and philosophy (here called Science).

However, in this context it is crucial to note the kind of expressions Hegel uses to describe the connection between art and spirit. He writes that „it [the spirit] is immediately art“,² and a few lines later: „art produces the world as spiritual, and for the intuition“. ³ Art is indeed the immediate and sensible way in which the spirit creates itself; art is, according to the same text, a „quiet

¹ Against this interpretation see: A. Gethmann-Siefert, „Hegels These von Ende der Kunst und der ‚Klassizismus‘ der Ästhetik“, In: *Hegel-Studien*, 19 (1984), 205–258.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III*, Hamburg, 1976, 278.

³ *Ibid.*, 279.

presentation of the divine“.¹ But this form of self-consciousness of the absolute at once reveals its limitations:

Its element is the intuition – it is however unmediated immediacy – the spirit is therefore inadequate to this element. [...] This medium of finiteness, intuition, cannot grasp infinity, it is just an alleged infinity.²

This quote clarifies Hegel's conception of art and at the same time underlines his position in relation to the Romantic school. On the same page, in fact, we read: „Art is rather the veil that covers the truth, and not its revelation;“ art is also described as „excited spirit – that wraps its self in sensation and image, under which is hidden the awful“. The position of art *vis-a-vis* spirit is thus ambiguous. It is part of the revelation of spirit, and it is also a sort of concealment of the absolute truth. Art is a necessary step in spirit's clarification, but artistic awareness of it is also partial, incomplete, and confused.³

This is an important point for understanding both Hegel's critique of Romanticism and his opposition to Schelling's theory of the absolute.⁴ What Hegel wants to emphasize is the gap, the lacuna, of the intuition, that is to say, its necessary immediate form of knowledge, that the Jena Schelling considered the only access to the highest truth.⁵ Hegel was also aware of the difficulty in considering the absolute spirit as the content of art, and especially in considering the artistic form as identical to it: if art is a sort of hiding of spirit, its form cannot be identical to it.

These kinds of issues were addressed in the course of the development of Hegel's thought, especially with the historicization of aesthetics and the controversial thesis of the „end of art“. First, the historical repartition of art explains why aesthetic knowledge remains confined to the formal perfection of ancient Greece, and why it cannot be recovered in the modern condition; second, the tripartition allows Hegel to think the perfection of Greece as an historical result, and not as an original moment that precedes the occurrence, as something placed outside, before the history. The classic aesthetic dichotomy of ancient and modern, of Greek and Romantic, is resolved by Hegel into the famous triad of symbolic, classic and romantic.

2 The semantics of symbol

The symbolic form of art accordingly constitutes the first moment of artistic function and it is confined to the oriental cultures. The symbol is the first way in which human beings can produce something as spiritual, but this production is still incomplete, imperfect, and the form of symbolic art cannot be determined as the harmony and tranquility that would be required to create an object of beauty. The symbol is an unceasing search, a longing for beauty, but without the consciousness of this need. The symbol, in fact, is overcome by the Greek myth of Oedipus: the hero solves the enigma of the Sphinx and states the answer: man. Thus he unveils the content, hitherto asleep inside the stones of the enormous manufacture, and finally provides spiritual content to his people. Ancient Greece could thus sculpt statues with the form of spirituality, the same form of the Olympic gods: the form of a human being.

Moreover, in order to understand why the symbol can explain the artistic relationship between form and content we have to analyze its determinations as developed by Hegel especially in the *Lectures on Fine Art*.

1 Ibid., 278.

2 Ibid., 279.

3 On the third systematic project: G. Cantillo, *Le forme dell'umano. Studi su Hegel*, Napoli, 1986, esp. 130–145.

4 See O. Pöggler, „Die Entstehung von Hegels Ästhetik in Jena“, In: *Hegel-Studien*, B. 20 (1980), 252.

5 A. Gethmann-Siefert, *Die Funktion der Kunst in der Geschichte*, Hamburg, 1984, 174.

The first description of the symbol we find in the *Lectures* distinguishes it from the sign. A sign is a relationship arbitrarily decided, while the form of symbol maintains a necessary connection with its meaning.⁶ According to the lectures of 1823:

The sign as such has no relation with itself [...]. In its peculiarity it has no proper relation to the representation. The symbol however is a sign that contains in its exteriority, together, the content of the representation that must be presented. Symbol therefore presents together itself.⁷

The necessary bond between content and exteriority bespeaks the immediacy of symbol. Intellectual mediation is what allows the sign to have an arbitrary relationship with the meaning. In the first lecture on aesthetics (1820/21), Hegel describes the significance of the symbol as follows: „In a completely general way, I call the symbolic an autonomous, exterior, figuration that could however be conceived according to its meaning“.⁸ Hence, corresponding to Hegel's two determinations, we can say i) that a symbol is an exterior and hence sensible figuration that we grasp by seeing something like a meaning in its materiality; and ii) that this meaning cannot be arbitrarily decided by the producer, otherwise we would be dealing with a sign. So we can isolate four characteristics of the symbol: sensible exteriority, the necessary bond between exteriority and meaning, the producer lack of awareness of the actual meaning of the symbol, and last, the inadequacy of the symbol to explain completely its own meaning. We shall now consider these characteristics in more detail.

The first, namely the sensible exteriority, does not raise any particular issues. In all the meditations about symbol in classic German aesthetics, sensibility is the constitutive characteristic of the symbolic. Consider for example Goethe's theory of the symbolism of art,⁹ on which the Romantic conception largely depends, or the Kantian image of beauty as the symbol of morality in § 59 of the *Critique of Judgment*.¹⁰ Hegel is part of this tradition and he elaborates his notion of the symbol specifically in conjunction with Creuzer's ideas in *Symbolik und Mythologie* (1810–1812, 1819, 1837).¹¹

As regards the second characteristic, the necessary bond between exteriority and meaning, we have to understand how Hegel considers this connection. The external and sensible structure of the symbol is completely inseparable from the meaning it contains. We can say that the symbol is precisely this double face of sensibility: on the one hand the symbol is something merely material, an object of common life; on the other hand it is a modality in which the truth comes to light, in which the spirituality tries to join the externality. More specifically, the symbolic structure is neither just a simple sensible thing, nor a high and spiritual meaning, it is at once both the meaning and the object, the letter and the spirit, but it cannot perfectly complete their union.

Inside, the meaning always remains something material, and in the object the connection to the meaning is always included. That means that the way the symbol alludes to the spirit is inaccurate although necessary. This is the privilege of symbolism: with the symbol it is impossible to avoid the display of something spiritual. It would be easy to see something similar to Benjamin's

6 On Hegel's determination of symbol in the *Lessons*, see J.-I. Kwon, „Die Metamorphosen der ‚Symbolischen Kunstform‘. Zur Rehabilitierung der ästhetischen Argumente Hegels“, In: *Hegel-Studien*, Bd. 34 (1992), 41–89; J.-I. Kwon, *Hegels Bestimmung der Kunst. Die Bedeutung der „symbolischen Kunstform“ in Hegels Ästhetik*, München, 2001, in particular 81–230; P. D'Angelo, *Simbolo e arte in Hegel*, Roma-Bari, 1989, 123–178.

7 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst. Berlin 1823. Nachgeschrieben von Heinrich Gustav Hotho*, Hamburg, 1998, 119.

8 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik: Berlin 1820/1821; Eine Nachschrift*, Frankfurt/Main 1995, 110.

9 See for example *Reflexionen*, nr. 751 and 752; J. W. Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, München, 1999, 471.

10 I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Berlin, 1913, 258.

11 F. Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, Leipzig, Darmstadt 1819–1821. On the development of the notion of symbol in Kant, Goethe and in the Romanticism, see U. M. Ugazio, „Friedrich Creuzer e l'infinito romantico“, In: *Filosofia*, 4 (1982), 405–462; H.-G. Gadamer, „Symbol und Allegorie“, In: *Archivio di filosofia*, (1958), 25–33; H.-G. Gadamer, *Hegel und die heidelberger Romantik*, In: H.-G. Gadamer, *Hegels Dialektik*, Tübingen, 1971; Z. Todorov, *Théories du symbole*, Paris, 1977.

idea of allegory in this description, but we must be careful and avoid such simplifications, as suggestive as they may be.

The third characteristic concerns the unconsciousness of the symbol's producer.¹² It must be remarked that Schelling, too, in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), conceived art as symbolic and partially unconscious, but from this fact deduced the priority of symbols over other forms of spiritual knowledge.¹³ Hegel, on the contrary, determines the unconsciousness of the symbol as a residual form of natural instinct. He describes, in fact, the Egyptian artistic activity, the case of symbolism *par excellence*,¹⁴ as „the infinite instinct of building, as now we observe in bees“;¹⁵ we find a similar example in the pages of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹⁶ But what does „instinct“ and „unconsciousness“ mean here? It cannot refer either to the particular form of the artistic work or to the particular representation that the artist has to present. A pyramid, for example, is obviously the form that the artist wanted to create; and the Sphinx, too, was the very commingling of human and animal that the maker had in his own mind.

We can find the answer to this question particularly in the third lecture series on the philosophy of art (1826). Hegel here speaks about a particular interpretative activity called „symbolic observation“.¹⁷ In this lecture Hegel reinforces the difference between symbol and sign, and explicitly declares that if something is arbitrarily produced as a symbol it loses its symbolism. If something „is explicitly indicated as a symbol, than it stops being a symbol, it is merely image, an image of something“.¹⁸ Symbolic observation thus consists in the interpretative function whose aim is to discover the meaning that makes an image into a symbol. In the same lecture, Hegel defends Creuzer against the criticism of academic philologists, saying:

It is historically false, or unprovable, that those people thought themselves in that way [as symbolic]. It is not necessary [...] that they were conscious of their thought and then sought to give it an expression that would conceal it. Mythology is a product of spirit, of rationality, and what it contains must be rationality, and to seek out the rationality in it is the aspiration of symbolic observation.¹⁹

The symbolic observation is therefore a kind of interpretation that looks for spiritual rationality in the objects of symbolic art. Those objects are related to the spirit only for the interpreter, because the artist doesn't know the spiritual meaning of the symbol.

Finally, it must be remarked that the real symbolic content, the meaning symbolically related to the external material, is the spirit, the infinite truth. The symbolic work is not the symbol of a particular religious representation, is not the symbol of a figuration, but a symbol of spiritual meaning.

The fourth characteristic of the symbol that we have to emphasize is its inadequacy. Hegel always says that a symbol is unclear, confused, and disproportionate. The figuration of ancient people, the pre-classical figuration, cannot reach the harmony of beauty, and their artistic works are something enormous and terrifying. This specific kind of inadequacy is based on the peculiarity of the content that must be presented: the spirit, in this historical condition, is not yet the clear spirit of classical Greece. Therefore the figuration has to adapt itself to this lack of a clear meaning, and symbolic art can relate the figuration to the meaning only in this inadequate manner.

¹² F. Chiareghin, „La funzione dell'inconscio ne *Lo spirito vero* della Fenomenologia dello spirito e le dinamiche dell'inconscio nel *Simbolismo inconscio* delle Lezioni sull'estetica di Hegel“, In: *Verifiche*, 3–4 (2007), 133–197.

¹³ See F. W. J. Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, München 1977, see K. Düsing, „Spekulation und Reflektion. Zur Zusammenarbeit Schellings und Hegels in Jena“, In: *Hegel-Studien*, 5 (1969), 95–128

¹⁴ See M. Pagano, *Hegel: la religione e l'ermeneutica del concetto*, Napoli, 1992, in particular 109–130.

¹⁵ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik: Berlin 1820/1821*, 119.

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hamburg, 1980, 375.

¹⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik. Nach Hegel. Im Sommer 1826. Mitschrift F. C. H. V. von Kehler*, München, 72.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

We can thus define the symbol as Hegel understands it as an external figuration in which the form is necessary and immediately related to the spiritual meaning. However, the producer of the symbol is unconscious in regard to this content and he creates the symbol by a sort of natural instinct.

3 Art as the symbol of absolute spirit

In the lectures of 1820/21 Hegel says: „In a completely general way, what I call a symbol is an autonomous, exterior figuration that should however be conceived accordingly to its own proper meaning“.²⁰ A symbol is therefore an input of meaning inside the materiality, inside the immediate structure of natural things.²¹

One of the most famous images used by Hegel describe the work of art likens it to an Argus with a thousand eyes. The artistic activity has the property of imparting meaning to material, external nature. This corresponds to a human need to modify nature and to „impress its seal onto it“.²² Spirituality is therefore a modification of nature and art is a form of this modification, that is to say, a form of this imparting of sense to the immediacy of nature. The symbol, what Hegel calls „an autonomous, exterior figuration, that should however be conceived according to its own proper meaning“ seems to explain this activity, because the modality in which the form indicates the infinite can achieve this incarnation of meaning. But in order to demonstrate this correlation, I have to compare the determinations of art with the determinations of the symbol.

Again, the symbolic entails immediacy, necessity, unconsciousness, and inadequacy.

Immediacy is one of the main characteristics of art and it is also emphasized in the *Encyclopedia* where art is defined as „the form of *immediacy* as such“,²³ and the first form of absolute spirit is described as „immediate (the moment of the finiteness of art)“.²⁴ Exactly like the symbol, a work of art is a sensible, external, natural object that relates its form to a spiritual meaning. Therefore, artistic knowledge is always sensible, even when we consider poetry, that is understood by the internal sense of imagination. The second characteristic of the symbol is the necessary bond between external form and spiritual content. We have seen that the particular „necessity“ of the symbol consists in a sort of obligation to bind the external form to a spiritual meaning. If we consider the relation between form and content in a general work of art, we see the same kind of necessity. The body of a Greek god sculpted by Fidia is, under a general observation, just a piece of stone that looks like a real man. However, aesthetic observation can discover a meaning inside this material, and the meaning cannot be decided by the observer, it is a meaning necessarily related to the external form. This is the basis of Hegel's objective aesthetics.

The unconsciousness of production is the characteristic of the symbol that seems to be more problematic in order to explain art in general. But if we read the pages dedicated by Hegel to art in the last edition of the *Encyclopedia*, this issue disappears. In § 560 Hegel analyzes the subjective side of the artistic work, namely the determination of genius, and talking about the producer he writes: „The artist's *enthusiasm* is like a foreign force under which he is bound and passive, like an unfree pathos; the artistic *production* has on its part the form of natural immediacy“.²⁵ Like the

²⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik: Berlin 1820/1821*, 110.

²¹ Paolo D'Angelo describes Hegel's conceptions of art and symbol as a „projection of sense“ (P. D'Angelo, *Simbolo e arte in Hegel*, Roma-Bari, 1989, 232).

²² G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst. Berlin 1823. Nachgeschrieben von Heinrich Gustav Hotho*, Hamburg, 1998, 13

²³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)*, Hamburg, 1992, § 557, 453.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., § 560, 445.

production of symbols, the artist composes his work without the complete consciousness of its meaning; there always remains a residual moment of nature, something outside the intellectual activity of the artist. Precisely, the absoluteness of the spiritual meaning of art.²⁶

The last determination of the symbol is its inadequacy. The symbol cannot reach the precise comprehension of its proper meaning, actually the spirituality. Likewise, art is a form of knowledge of spirit that must be overcome by religion and philosophy, since the artistic comprehension of spirit is a knowledge affected by nature. It is not an infinite development of freedom and reason, but it is an incarnation of spirit inside the limitations of nature, it is a form of truth that contains the finiteness of the material: „art is rather the veil that covers the truth, than its revelation“.

At the beginning of this paper I highlighted the problems of Hegel's conception regarding the identity of form and content in a work of art. Now we can see more precisely what kind of solution the symbolic interpretation of art offers to this problem. In the *Encyclopedia* Hegel describes art as a unity of nature and spirit, because a work of art is a natural object that contains a spiritual meaning. But this relation is denoted by Hegel as a „so-called unity“.²⁷ By considering the semantics of art as part of the symbolic significance, we can comprehend this particular kind of unity. It is an incomplete unification that always shows its fragility. The observer has to exercise his interpretation in order to recognize the spiritual meaning of art. Anyhow art is always inadequate to the spirit and the harmony of beauty is more a lucky coincidence than the regular standard of art. The ancient Greece remains however a model of perfection, and nothing could be more beautiful than classical sculpture; but the reason for this perfection concerns the availability of spirit to be known through the external materiality: just the quiet, ethical, and simple spirit of ancient Greece could exist in harmony with nature; and only this kind of spirit could be satisfied by the sensibility of the material. The absolute spirit in its infinity is ever inadequate to art, and the artistic identity of form and content, of spirit and nature, is always a so-called identity: a symbolic reference.

Dr. Mario Farina
Via Iglesias 35
20128 Milano
Italia
mario.farina82@libero.it

²⁶ See M. Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologisch-politischer Traktat*, Berlin, 1970, 150–160.

²⁷ Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, § 557, 444.