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In memory of Salim Kemal (1948–1999)

What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)

Robert B. Pippin

1

The emergence of abstract art, first in the early part of the twentieth century with Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, and then in the much more celebrated case of America in the 1950s (Rothko, Pollock, et al.), remains puzzling. Such a great shift in aesthetic standards and taste is unprecedented in its radicality. The fact that nonfigurative art, without identifiable content in any traditional sense, was produced, appreciated, eagerly bought, and even, finally, triumphantly hung in the lobbies of banks and insurance companies, provokes understandable questions about both social and cultural history, as well as about the history of art. The endlessly disputed category of modernism itself and its eventual fate seems at issue.

Whatever else is going on in abstraction as a movement in painting, it is uncontroversial that an accelerating and intensifying self-consciousness about what it is to paint, how painting or visual meaning itself is possible, a transformation of painting itself into the object of painting (issues already in play since Impressionism), are at issue. Given this heightened conceptual dimension, one might turn for some perspective on such developments to that theorist for whom "the historical development of self-consciousness" amounts to the grand narrative of history itself. Even if for many Hegel is, together with Locke, *the* bourgeois philosopher (the philosopher of the *arrière-garde*), he is also the art theorist for whom the link between modernity and an intensifying self-consciousness—both within art production and, philosophically, about art itself—is the most important. And the fairly natural idea of abstraction as a kind of logical culmination of modernist self-consciousness itself, that way of accounting for the phenomenon, is the kind of idea that we owe to Hegel. More broadly, the very existence of abstract art seems to represent some kind of deliberate departure from the entire tradition of image-based art, and so involves some

sort of implicit claim that the conditions of the very intelligibility of what Hegel calls the "highest" philosophical issues have changed, such that traditional, image-based art is no longer as important a vehicle of meaning for us now, given how we have come to understand ourselves, have come to understand understanding. And Hegel was the only prominent modern philosopher who in some way gave voice to that departure, who argued—at the time, outrageously—that traditional art had become "a thing of the past" and that it no longer served "the highest needs of human spirit." (That is, it still served many extremely important human needs, it was hardly "over" or finished, but it had declined in importance, could not represent "the highest" or most important self-understanding.)

Of course, all these ideas—that a form of art could be in some sense historically required by some sort of conceptual dissonance in a prior form, that a historical form of self-understanding could be called progressive, an advance over an earlier stage, that various activities of "spirit," art, politics, religion, could be accounted for as linked efforts in a common project (the achievement of self-knowledge and therewith the "realization of freedom"), and so on—are now likely to seem naive, vestigial, of mere historical interest. But the justifiability of this reaction depends a great deal, as in all such cases, on how such Hegelian claims are understood. For example, it is no part at all of any of the standard interpretations of Hegel's theory that, by closing this particular door on the philosophical significance of traditional art, he could be understood to have thereby opened a door to, to have begun to conceptualize the necessity of, non-image-based art. And, given when Hegel died, it is obviously no part of his own self-understanding. But there is nevertheless a basis in his philosophical history of art for theorizing these later modern developments. Or so I want to argue.

2

Consider the most obvious relevance: the general trajectory of Hegel's account. The history of art for Hegel represents a kind of gradual dematerialization or developing spiritualization of all forms of self-understanding. Put in the terms of our topic, the basic narrative direction in Hegel's history of art is toward what could be called something like greater "abstraction" in the means of representation—"from" architecture and sculpture, "toward" painting, music, and finally poetry. "Abstraction" is not the word he would use (he would insist on greater "concreteness" in such a progression), but his stress on less reliance on "representation" and on greater

reflexivity are consistent with the colloquial sense of that term. (The putative inadequacy of "representational" notions of intelligibility is of course tied to very large themes in Hegel's account of the famous "subject-object" relation. In general, he wants to deny that such intelligibility requires that subjects be both cut off from and connected with the objects of understanding by some mediating medium, by means of which we are directed to some intentional object, a general picture of the mind-world relation which also generates unsolvable skeptical problems. In the Hegelian account of modernism, the question becomes something like what, say, painting looks like, how it presents a notion of intelligibility, without reliance on such a representational model.) So, within the narrative of developing self-consciousness presented by Hegel, not only would it not be surprising to hear that at some point in its history, art might come more and more to be about "abstract" or conceptual objects, like "paintingness" or some such, but we might also hope to find some explanation of why the development of art might have brought us to this point. There will be much that remains surprising, especially the dialectical claim that with such a topic the capacities of art itself would be exhausted, would no longer be adequate to its own object, but the cluster of topics raised by the question of the meaning of abstraction naturally invites an extension of Hegel's narrative.[1]

Sketching this trajectory already indicates what would be the philosophical significance of this development for Hegel: that human beings require, less and less, sensible, representative imagery in order to understand themselves (with respect to "the highest issue"—for Hegel, their being free subjects), that such a natural embodiment is less and less (on its own, considered just in itself) an adequate expression of such a genuinely free life; especially since the essential component of such a free life is an adequate self-understanding.

It is within this narrative that we hear the final, famous Hegelian verdict that artistic expression in Western modernity, tied as it ever was to a sensible and "representative" medium, could no longer bear a major burden of the work in the human struggle toward self-understanding, was no longer as world historically important as it once was, no longer as necessary as it once was to the realization of freedom. (Hegel's claim is thus not about the end of art, however much he is associated with that phrase, but the end of a way of art's mattering, something he thinks he can show by presenting a kind of history and logic and phenomenology of anything "mattering" to human beings, within which art plays a distinct and changing role.[2] Said another way, the prior question for Hegel is always the human need for art.[3] Again, the claim is not that there will not be art, or that it won't matter at all, but that art can no longer play the social role it

did in Greece and Rome, in medieval and Renaissance Christianity, or in Romantic aspirations for the role of art in liberation and *Bildung*. Each of these historical *worlds* has come to a kind of end, and, or so the claim is, there is no equivalently powerful role in bourgeois modernity. (In a way, what could be more obvious?) Accordingly, if Hegel's account is roughly correct, art must either accept such a (comparatively) diminished, subsidiary role (whatever that would mean), or somehow take account of its new status by assuming some new stance, perhaps "about" its own altered status, or perhaps by being about, exclusively and purely, its formal properties and potentials, perhaps by being about opticality as such, or perhaps about purely painterly experiments as the final assertion of the complete autonomy of art, or perhaps by still announcing some form of divine revelation after the death of God, a revelation, but without content and indifferent to audience (as perhaps in the work of Rothko).[4] It could then matter in all these different ways that there be art, a way not like its prior roles and one more consistent with the situation of European modernity, but a way not imagined by the historical Hegel, even though some such altered stance might be said to have been anticipated in his theory.

3

It is certainly true that Hegel seems to have had some presentiment of the great changes that were to come in post-Romantic art, and to have appreciated the significance of those changes, to have realized that they amounted to much more than a change in artistic fashion. Contemporary artists, Hegel says, "after the necessary particular stages of the romantic art-form have been traversed," have liberated themselves from subject matter, from any nonaesthetically prescribed determinate content.

> Bondage to a particular subject-matter and a mode of portrayal suitable for this material alone, are for artists today something past, and art therefore has become a free instrument which the artist can wield in proportion to his subjective skill in relation to any material of whatever kind. The artist thus stands above consecrated forms and configurations and moves freely on his own account [*frei für sich*], independent of the subject-matter and mode of conception in which the holy and eternal was previously made visible to human apprehension. . . . From the very beginning, before he embarks on production, his great and free soul must know and possess its own ground, must be sure of itself and confident in itself. (*A* 1:605–6)[5]

Admittedly, again, the historical Hegel would never have imagined the extent of the "freedom" claimed by modernists and would no doubt have been horrified by abstract art. He was a pretty conservative fellow. But the principle articulated in this quotation, as well as the link to freedom as the decisive issue, are what is important for our purposes. And Hegel seemed to have foreseen the shift in the modernist understanding of artistic experience, away from the sensuous and beautiful and toward the conceptual and reflexive.

> The *philosophy* of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in days when art itself yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration [*denkende Betrachtung*], and that, not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is. (*A* 1:11)

Art (like the modern social world itself) has thus "become philosophical," invites more of a philosophical than a purely aesthetic response, and so, for that reason, could be said now to be superseded in world historical terms by philosophy itself, by the very philosophy it itself calls for.

This is certainly a distinctive, bold candidate among other more familiar explanations. It competes with what can loosely be called the Marxist claim about the dissolving coherence of late bourgeois culture reflected in the self-images expressed in such art, or the neo-Marxist claim about the active "negation" of that culture by an art produced so that it could not be assimilated, consumed (or even understood) within it. (A link between modernism in the arts and resistance to the cultural logic of capitalism—not just expressive of it and its failure to make sense—is also characteristic of the sophisticated new account by T. J. Clark.)[6] It competes as well with more so-called essentialist or reductionist accounts, like Clement Greenberg's: how painting, threatened with absorption by the mass culture and entertainment industries, retreated (or advanced, depending on your point of view) to the "essence" of painting as such, flatness and the composition of flat surface, an insistence on art's purity and autonomy as a way of resisting such absorption or colonization by other, especially narrative, art forms. And there is Michael Fried's compelling emphasis on the attempt by modernists to continue to make *great* art, art that did not at all reject or refuse its tradition, and aspired to be an art that could stand together with the great art of the past. Such art had to be produced under such radically different historical conditions as to make this most unlikely, especially conditions of intense, expanding, and deepening self-consciousness about the painting itself both as artificial object beheld and as directing the beholder to the painting's intentional object.

Given such self-consciousness, painters had to respond by creating a different sort of painterly presence, and by solving in ever more complicated ways what Fried has called the problem of the painting's "theatricality." Hegel's account of our growing awareness of the limitations of a traditionally representationalist notion of intelligibility (for the expression of "the highest things"), and the consequences of this development for the status of visual art in our culture (its way of mattering), is a bold entrant in such a sweepstakes. The core of that case is Hegel's argument for the explanatory priority of the notion of spirit, *Geist*, a collective subjectivity, and its development; that such notions amount to a more comprehensive and fundamental *explicans* in accounting for conceptual, political, and aesthetic change than appeals to "capitalism," "negation," the "essence" of painting, and so forth. This in turn obviously commits him to showing just how such an appeal to spirit's self-alienation, externalization, and eventual reconciliation does in fact account for fundamental shifts in aesthetic values, especially in what is for Hegel its end game, its "culmination" as art itself.

There are of course hundreds of elements in such claims that specialists and philosophers will want to attack. There are no grander grand narratives than Hegelian ones, and his have been put to such strange and implausible uses that one might be advised to stay well clear of any claim about abstraction (understood as a turn to reflexive self-understanding as its own object) as the culmination or completion or exhaustion of the Western art tradition.[7] But there must be *something* of some generality and scope that we can say about the historical experience of the inadequacy of traditional representational art, just then and just there (that is, at the forefront of European modernization), and whatever there is to say, it is unlikely we will get a handle on it without understanding the relation between this momentous, epochal shift in art history and the history of modernity itself, as well as corresponding changes in religious, institutional, and sociopolitical life.

So *why* then did traditional, representational art come to be experienced as inadequate, a kind of historical relic rather than a living presence? To understand Hegel's (or "the Hegelian") answer to this question, we also face right away the difficult question of gaining any adequate access to the 1,200 pages of lecture notes organized by his student H. G. Hotho in what we now know as the standard edition of Hegel's lectures.[8] But we can start reconstructing a Hegelian reaction to abstractionism by noting several peculiarities of Hegel's aesthetic theory. I note four such distinct peculiarities because, I will try to show, they are the most important in understanding a comprehensive Hegelian view (or possible view) on the issue of abstractionism.

4

The first and most peculiar is how Hegel ties art ubiquitously, in all cases, to *the divine.* In a way that greatly complicates his use of the term, Hegel does not confine that issue solely to explicitly religious art of the classical Greek, Roman, medieval, Renaissance, and early modern periods. All art, no matter the subject matter, from still life to portrait to landscape to historical scene, is understood as an attempt "to portray the divine." This ought right away to alert us that this sweeping reference is, to say the least, nonstandard and will require considerable interpretation. Art is called "one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the Divine, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of spirit [*Geist*]" (*A* 1:7). This set of appositives appears to gloss the divine *as* "the deepest interests of mankind and the most comprehensive truths of spirit" rather than vice versa, and this quite radical humanism (or divinization of the human) is prominent elsewhere in the lectures too. The divine is often treated as if its relevant synonyms were *das Wahre* and *das Wahrhaftige,* the "true" or the "real truth," and art is regularly treated as the attempt by spirit to externalize its self-understanding in a sensible form, and thereby to appropriate such externality as its own, to be at home therein, and to express more successfully such a self-understanding. (And all of *that* is called an expression of the divinity in man. As Hegel is wont to put it, this is the truth that the Christian religion tries to express in its "representation" of a father-god externalized in his son.) Art, in other words, is treated as a vehicle for the self-education of human being about itself, ultimately about what it means to be a free, self-determining being, and when Hegel calls *that* dimension of aesthetic meaning divine, he seems to be rather flattering the seriousness and finality of the enterprise (its independence from sensual need, utilitarian interest, and so on; its "absolute" importance) than in any sense worrying about the God of revealed religion. Another way to put Hegel's quite heretical view would be to say that for Hegel artistic activity is not about representing divinity, but *expressing* divinity and even *becoming* divine. "God," he says, "is more honored by what spirit makes than by the productions and formations of nature," and this because "there is something divine in man, but it is active in him in a form appropriate to the being of God in a totally different and higher manner than it is in nature" (*A* 1:30).[9] (This is all the basis of Hegel's fantastic, extravagant claim that in effect *religion* is an inadequate vehicle of the divine.)[10]

5

Likewise, second, Hegel is one of the very few philosophers or writers or artists of this period—I would guess the only one—for whom *the beauty of nature was of no significance whatsoever.* Nature's status as an *ens creatum,* as a reflection of God, or natural beauty as an indication of purposiveness, are of no importance to him, and he expresses this while evincing no Gnostic antipathy to nature itself as fallen or evil. Nature is simply "spiritless," *geistlos;* or without meaning, even boring. (Hegel goes so far as to claim that a landscape painting is the proper object of human attention and speculative contemplation, not a natural landscape itself [*A* 1:29], or, in a near-Kafkaesque claim, that a portrait of a person can be more like the individual than the actual individual himself [*A* 2:866–67].)[11] When a natural object or event is portrayed aesthetically it acquires a distinct sort of meaning, what it is within and for a human community, that it would not have had just as such an object itself. (Hegel is, after all, an idealist of sorts, and we shall return to this reflexivity or doubled meaning of art objects later in this essay.) The object becomes suffused for the first time with a human meaning.[12] In a memorable passage, Hegel notes that it is as if an artistic treatment transforms every visible surface into an eye, the visible seat of the soul's meaning, such that in looking at such painted surfaces—looking at, he says, "the thousand-eyed Argos"—we search for what we search for in looking into another human's eye. It is crucial to note that Hegel describes looking at art objects this way, as if each one had eyes (which, whatever it means, does not mean we are looking *through* the image to a source or original; a human soul is not literally visible inside the eye). Nor are we looking at art objects the way subjects look at objects. That would be like looking at *persons* that way, and suggests a different sort of link between art and morality than what Kant wanted to suggest (*A* 1:153).[13] And this is all also part of Hegel's case that painting is the first "romantic art" (in his hierarchy of art), and therewith first on the way to an adequate expression of human freedom. This is so because, for example, in a painting the object "does not remain an actual spatial natural existent, but becomes a reflection [*Widerschein*] of spirit." The "real" is thus said to be "cancelled" and transformed into something "in the domain of spirit for the apprehension by spirit"—which natural objects are not (*A* 2:805).[14]

This touches on an important point that *is* part of the traditional Hegel reading: that Hegel played a very large role in shifting aesthetic appreciation from one founded on taste, beauty, and pleasure to one concerned with criticism, with meaning, and with a kind of self-education.

But the point here about the importance of Hegel's indifference to nature and beauty introduces a more radical one.[15] In fact, fine art, and especially its history, Hegel claims, should be understood as a *liberation from nature;* not a rejection of its (or our) inherent inadequacy, but the achievement of a mode of self-understanding and self-determination no longer set or limited by nature as such, as well as a humanizing transformation of the natural into a human world. (Art is said to enable a "free subject" to "strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself" [*A* 1:31].)[16] Hegel starts out from a premise in which art is treated cognitively, as a way of becoming more self-conscious about aspects of intelligibility, meaning, and about the activity of meaning-making itself, and so is said to be *the sensible shining or appearing of the Idea,* where "the Idea" is that comprehensive, sought-after self-conscious understanding of "rendering intelligible." And it is *this* function that is treated as partaking of a kind of divinity. ("The universal need for art, that is to say, is man's rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self" [*A* 1:31].) From there he proceeds to a conclusion that runs so counter to contemporaries like Kant, Schiller, and Schelling: that art "liberates man . . . *from the power of sensuousness*" and art "lifts [man] with its gentle hands [*mit milden Händen*] out of and above imprisonment in nature" (*A* 1:49).

In what we now characterize as the Romantic dimension of post-Kantianism, most visible in Schiller, the significance of beauty and art, its mattering as it does, was an expression and experience of an original harmony between our corporeality or natural fate and our agency, spontaneity, and freedom, a harmony partially lost in the assertion of modern autonomy or self-rule, but that could be recovered in the "play" of the imagination's spontaneity "at work" in, not on, the sensuous immediacy of perception and delight. Hegel's formulation indicates that if there is to be such a reconciliation it must be achieved rather than recovered, and that part of that process will be an active negation in some way of the "power" of sensuousness and "imprisonment" in nature (not, it should be stressed, "nature" as such). Nature will not be lost or rendered a mere object in this process (which is, after all, a "gentle" process), but transformed, remade into a "second nature."[17] A standard example of such a transformation is Hegel's account of the habits of mind and unreflective practices of "ethical life" (*Sittlichkeit*), and another might be, I am suggesting, the achievement of those habits of mind, sorts of lived embodiment, for which modernism in the arts becomes timely, appropriate.

Admittedly, this is a difficult position to understand. Hegel is neither appealing to some subjective act of "investing" the natural world with an imposed, human/divine meaning, nor is he ascribing to aesthetic experience a religious function, as of a revelation of divine purposiveness in the natural world. And the putative inadequacies of representational meaning and of natural embodiment in art are not introduced in order to suggest a rejection of all representation, nor to introduce some possible transcendence of natural embodiment. As noted before, the "inadequacy" issue concerns only the issue of "the highest" matters of human importance, and Hegelian transcendence (or *Aufhebung*) is always also a preservation and recollecting, even if with an altered sense of such "matterings." Without a fuller account than is possible here of such a "highest" self-understanding and the place and status of nature in such an accomplishment, not to mention Hegel's final take on the mind-world issue, his position on the "limitations" of traditional fine art cannot be adequately understood, but we shall have to make do here with such a provisional account.

Likewise in Hegel's account, this development is not a result of a growing realization of the inadequacy of the iconic relation to a transcendent God, as Alain Besançon has recently claimed.[18] What Hegel describes is a much more practical struggle with the natural world, such that the achievement of various forms of real independence from natural determination is reflected in the self-images manifested in art. There is, in other words, no negative theology in Hegel's strange humanistic theology. His progressivism is everywhere decisive; we have *broken* free of a fundamental dependence on such sensible images not so much because of *their* inadequacy as because of *our* having made ourselves independent of them, and art must be understood as part and parcel of that work. (Again, none of this means that we become, or realize we always were, supernatural beings, or that we can now ignore our corporeality. We remain finite; constrained in all the obvious ways by natural limitations. But the experience of, the very meaning of, such naturality is now to be regarded as a human achievement, in the way that the natural desire to reproduce has become inseparable from romantic values and the norms of familial and social existence; or inseparable from egoistic or hedonistic or any other such value. The unavailability of mere nature, as such, within experience, is the point at issue.) As Hegel puts it in a famous passage,

> No matter how excellent we find the statues of Greek gods, no matter how we see God the Father, Christ and Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is of no help; we bend our knee no longer [before these images]. (*A* 1:103)[19]

6

Third, Hegel is well known as the philosophical founder of the historical study of art, the most important proponent of the idea that artworks must be understood as "of their time," where such a time could itself be understood comprehensively as an integrated whole, a point of view or *Weltanschauung*. And this premise contributes as well, in quite an unusual and unexpected way, to the thesis that art cannot matter for us now as it used to, that representational art has become, with respect to the highest things, a "thing of the past." We can begin to see how this works by noting that Hegel, although associated with the philosophical Romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Germany, veers off that course pretty radically on this historical issue. He sees "what his age requires," what is a "need of spirit," in quite a different way, and that will be quite important for the "fate of art" issue.

By contrast, Kant, for example, fits the Romantic pattern much better and provides a useful foil for appreciating this point. Kant had denigrated the importance of fine art because the experience of fine art involved not a wholly "free" but what Kant called a "dependent" beauty, and so inevitably, he claimed, was too much a matter of concepts and conceptualizing. An art product was always of a kind, produced with a certain recognizable intention, within a school, after a style, and so on. And this hindered (though it did not absolutely prevent) the "free play" of the faculties that Kant thought essential to aesthetic pleasure. Artworks tend to be instances of kinds, and recognizing and cataloging instances was not what the experience of the beautiful was about. Aesthetic experience involved precisely a kind of inconceivability, together, nonetheless, with some intimation of harmony and meaning, all of which the rule-governed production of fine art made very difficult. This was all connected in Kant to much larger issues, especially his attempt to distinguish the separate contributions of sensibility and the understanding, contra the Leibnizian school. And because Kant insisted on the limited role of the understanding in aesthetic intelligibility, he was somewhat unwittingly preparing the way for a much stronger emphasis on artistic autonomy and even on the aesthetic as a *superior* mode of intelligibility.[20]

The historical Kant clearly intended by such an argument (especially in his insisting on beauty's dependence on some extra-human source of significance, on the "super-sensible") to accentuate the theological and moral importance of natural beauty. However, Kant's legacy for the art world was to accentuate the greater importance of genius and the sublime in fine art, the former because the unprecedented, inimitable creation of the genius allowed a kind of novelty or delightful surprise that Kant

thought essential to aesthetic experience, and the latter because the defeat of our imagination by the magnitude, dynamism or, in later Romantic versions, the horror of the sublime, also allowed a kind of intelligibility and experience not rule-bound or intellectualizable.[21] One might hypothesize that such a notion corresponded to a new modern need, for a kind of divine significance without any determinate transcendent realm, without the metaphysics that Kant's first *Critique* removed from the philosophical agenda, a place marked out from and higher than the utilitarian calculation and mass politics already on the horizon, or from the "iron cage" beginning to descend on European societies.

The contrast with Hegel could not be sharper, more anti-Romantic. Hegel regarded the experience of the sublime as historically regressive, an indication of a much less well-developed understanding of "the divine" in all the manifold, elusive senses discussed above. Vague intimations of an indeterminate, horrifying power were, by virtue of their very indeterminacy, already an indication of a much less self-conscious and even less free stage of being in the world. Products of genius also traded, for Hegel, on a kind of indeterminacy and elusiveness that he thought amounted to mere *Schwärmerei*, or romantic claptrap, which were only vestigial in the modern age.

Of course at this point one might wonder, if Hegel is right that such suspicion of indeterminacy, mystery, ineffability, the awe-inspiring, and so forth does comprise our starting position with respect to the "spirit of the times," what then *could* be said for the contemporary role of art, the way it might matter (as high art, not as mere decoration or monuments from the past)? Without further ado, it might seem that Hegel almost treats the domain of art itself as atavistic, as if a bit like reading bird entrails, or astrology. As we have seen, the question at issue for Hegel is not the end of art-making and appreciating, but something like a shift in its status and social role. But we can now see that this modern displacement occurs for him for an unusual reason. Put simply, one of the main reasons for Hegel's view that image- or content-based art seems to matter less and less derives from his comprehensive view of the nature of the modern world. It is, he repeats frequently, a *prosaic*, unheroic world, not much of a subject for the divinizing or at least idealizing transformations of aesthetic portrayal at all. The "Idea" *need* not "sensibly shine" any longer because it can be grasped conceptually; norms get their grip on us without primary reliance on the sensual. But, said the other way around, the Idea *cannot* "shine"; the sensible appearances of modern ethical life themselves are not fit vehicles for such "shining" because they and our very sensual lives have themselves been rationalized, transformed into practices, habits, and institutions with some sort of rational transparency to themselves.[22] *The modern social*

world itself may be rational, in other words, but it is, to say it all at once, just thereby not very beautiful, and its "meaning" is not very mysterious. It has its own kind of domestic, and rather small-screen beauty, we can say—hence all that Hegelian praise for Dutch celebrations of the bourgeoisie—but the "sacredness" of orderly city streets, piano playing, milk pouring, needlework, and fine clothing does not, given that Hegel's aesthetics is so content-driven, satisfy very lofty aesthetic ambitions.[23] ("Spirit only occupies itself with objects so long as there is something secret [*Geheimes*], not revealed [*nicht Offenbares*], in them," but now "everything is revealed and nothing obscure" [*A* 1:604–5].)

This introduces a complicated topic in Hegel studies, especially with regard to his political theory, because such a position represents quite a change from Hegel's younger days and his Hölderlin-intoxicated hopes for a beautiful Christian community of love. He appears to have become quite impressed with the altered situation of modern individuals, with the, let us say, "dispersed" character of subjectivity in modern societies, all reflecting an acknowledgment of the spiritual effects of ever more divided labor first apparent in Rousseau. In such a world, no one simply could be heroically responsible for much of anything (and so could not be beautiful in action), and the legal and administrative tasks, the daily life, of modern society are indeed, in his favorite word, prosaic. We have already discussed the aesthetic consequences of a disenchanted nature. And it is a striking oddity in Hegel's project that the full realization of art *as art* should occur quite early in his story about art, that he should insist that Greek art, the art of the Greek polis, *as art* is "better" art, but that modern romantic art is simply better, a greater human accomplishment. But however complicated the issue and Hegel's reasons for this alteration, such an antisentimental, realist modernism (Hegel does not even credit what would be Baudelaire's aesthetics of the beauty of modern speed and instability), together with Hegel's Protestant secularization of the divine, and his view that art evinces the self-image of an age, are all clearly playing a role in Hegel's restraint with regard to the social and spiritual role of traditional art. This represents a kind of wager on Hegel's part that the satisfactions of modern (or bourgeois) romantic, familial, economic, and political life were, in a sense, *enough,* that we could do without beautiful depictions of ourselves and our lives or even sublime warnings about its potential emptiness, and so could do without the living role for fine art imagined later. I think it is fairly clear by now that, to say the least, this was a bad bet, as the whole phenomenon of aesthetic politics (especially in fascism) demonstrates, but that is surely another and a longer story.

7

The fourth or last peculiarity in Hegel's treatment of art is the most important and the most difficult to discuss economically. It involves the basic reason why Hegel opposed the grandiose hopes of many of his contemporaries for a renewal of monumental, culturally important, transformative art, and claimed instead that in a certain respect, art (or what we would now regard as premodernist art) had become for us a thing of the past. That reason has much more to do with a new understanding of the mind-world and self-other relations, and at the heart of this new understanding is an altered picture of sensibility, perceptual meaning, and "lived" sociality, or a new sense of what it is to be a materially embodied being for whom experience can mean what it does. Hegel's full case about the status of art within a modern society ultimately relies on a case for a great alteration in the way things basically make sense to us, and a large component of that "basically" involves an altered relation to our own sensibility, something most clearly at play in visual art and its historical transformations.

After all, up to this point one might still characterize Hegel's position as some sort of return to classicism, especially with his definition of beauty as the sensible appearing of an intelligible, essentially nonsensible ideal. Since Hegel understands art cognitively, as a way of apprehending the truth (he rarely mentions aesthetic pleasure as such), and understands that way as a sensible "shining" or appearing, the inference that he was some kind of neoclassicist would not be unreasonable. But Kant's revolution in philosophy, which Hegel, despite criticisms, enthusiastically accepted, essentially destroyed the classical picture of the sensible-intelligible relation.[24] Sensibility could not now be understood as an unclear representation of the world which reason could work to clarify or could represent better, nor could it be understood as a vivid, "lively" impression, guiding the abstracting and generalizing intellect. In Kant's famous phrase (the one most relevant for the altered situation within which, according to Hegel, art must make sense now) the senses do not err, not "because they always judge rightly, but because *they do not judge at all.*"[25] The content of sensibility was, after Kant, to be understood as the material object of the understanding's synthesizing, active work, and the entire intelligible domain (any "possible experience") was now understood as a result of the activity of the understanding, the product of its work. Sensory data became representative as a result of this work by the understanding, and considered apart from such en-forming, conceptualizing activity, it counted as mere stuff, preintelligible materiality. This all also meant that not *all* aspects of our knowledge claims could be said to be guided by the

world, from without. The ultimate authority or legitimacy of our knowledge claims had also to be in some respect *self*-authorizing, required as a condition of there being any sensible evidence.[26] In another of Kant's memorable phrases: reason does not beg from nature; it commands—a phrase that already sounds the deepest theme of what would become modernism in the arts: that is, the theme of freedom.[27] (Indeed, Kant had himself so spiritualized religion, risking blasphemy by insisting on discussing it "within the limits of reason alone" and making it merely a moral postulate or practical faith, that any sort of "representation" of the divine had already become, thanks to Kant, not inadequate, but simply irrelevant.)

Hegel's narrative of an expanding critical self-consciousness thus fits the modernist refusal to take for granted what a painting or art is, what writing or being an artist is. Such notions were now treated as norms not fixed by nature or human nature but actively (and in Hegel, historically) "legislated" and subject to criticism. And with such questions raised this way, it would be no surprise that art-making and novel writing would themselves become the subjects of art; Proust and James, de Kooning and Pollock being only the most obvious examples.

With this in mind, then, the official Hegelian claim goes like this. The basic principle of modern philosophy (that is, post-Kantianism), modern politics (liberal, republican politics, after a fashion) and modern religion (Protestant post-Reformation religion) has become what Hegel calls "subjectivity" or "reflection," ultimately a version of critical and rational self-consciousness about the way we actively render the world intelligible, or legislate normative constraints on claims and conduct.[28] Normative claims to knowledge, rectitude, spiritual life, or even claims *to be making art,* or that *that is good,* are now made with the self-consciousness that the authority of such claims can always be challenged and defeated (or such claims can simply "die out," lose historical authority) and must be in some way defensible to and for subjects if they are to be defensible at all. The pre-Hegelian situation is one in which we acted on the basis of such norms but could not fully understand their autonomous status and so proposed social and philosophical justifications to each other that could not be reconciled, that always betrayed an element of "positivity" or mere contingency or power. (One of the most important things Hegel says about this situation, the one most relevant to his use of religious terminology, is that the basic state of human dissatisfaction or alienation is a *self*-alienation, not one from a transcendent God, or even from the truth. Spirit, human being itself, is said *to be* a "wound" which it inflicts on itself, but which it can heal itself [*A* 1:98].) Art is to be understood as an aspect of the age's reflection on itself (that healing), a way for the spirit of such an age not just to be lived-out, but itself aesthetically thematized.

To put the point in another way: an enduring, continuous human life is not an event or occurrence, a happening, like others. Lives don't just happen; they must be actively led, steered, guided, we now for the first time fully appreciate. As in the stoic tradition, which influenced the German tradition through its influence on Kant, living a human life is not the natural realization of an essence; the great problem being to find a way to "allow" it to grow and flourish in the conditions "naturally" right for it. Rather, it is fundamentally a self-relation, a self-directing agency; at the very minimum a life must be *actively* preserved and protected. A subject must not only "take up the reins" of a life in order to do this, but must do so continuously, and with an eye toward the unity and integration without which lives cannot be coherently led. Moreover, leading a life in this way is reflexive because it always involves actively taking a point of view or stand on some relevant event or person or state in the world, *and* this in an always challengeable and revisable way. In the (Kierkegaardian) language developed by Heidegger and Sartre to make this point, one *is* a subject (does not flee such an unavoidable self-responsible stance in bad faith or inauthenticity) only by not presuming simply *to be* a subject or *to be* an anything, even while one is not some free-floating mere possibility, not nothing at all.

All of this was necessary to state what is for Hegel the essential limitation of traditional art, and it is not a religious limitation: *representational art cannot adequately express the full subjectivity of experience, the wholly self-legislating, self-authorizing status of the norms that constitute such subjectivity, or thus cannot adequately express who we (now) are.* Only philosophy can "heal" such a self-inflicted wound and allow the self-determining character of experience its adequate expression. ("Only philosophy," that is, in Hegel's official account. I am trying to suggest that there is no reason a form of art, like abstraction, could not make such a point in a nondiscursive way.)[29] After such a "healing," of course, fine art will certainly continue to be produced (indeed, Hegel says that he hopes art will always "rise higher and come to perfection" [*A* 1:103]).[30] But what is now possible in post-Kantian speculative philosophy makes the limited and only partially realized subjectivity or self-legislation embodied in works of representational art (art tied directly to "objecthood," to borrow Fried's phrase)[31] clearer by comparison, and art becomes "a thing of the past."[32] It is the historical realization of subjectivity in the modern world (especially the greater realization of freedom in philosophical and political life) that makes representational art (or all art up to and including romantic art) matter less for us than it once did and had to.[33] In an obviously deeply contestable claim: what has come to matter most to us has less and less to do with a visual or even corporeal intelligibility based on what we might now call "pre-

Kantian" assumptions about representation and intelligibility, all because what unavoidably must matter now is the realization of a kind of freedom, autonomy.

8

There are many questions here worth asking, especially since it seems much more intuitive to say that if the underlying theme of modern art is the achievement of freedom, traditional visual art could just give us one indispensable perspective on the lived meaning of freedom, and philosophy, perhaps a modernist philosophy, discursively, *another.* Hegel's disjunction and claim to hierarchy seem extreme. But it is at least clear that this line of thought in Hegel has very little to do with many of the conventional qualifications on the status of art, almost all of them religious in tone: such things as the Platonic worry about art as illusion, or with the Christian worry about art as idolatry. And Hegel's historicist stance excludes any nonhistorical answer at all to the question of "the" status of the sensible image or "the" nature of art.[34]

That is, Hegel's view of the limitations of aesthetic intelligibility should not be understood as a reflection of what Hegel would call a philosophy of finitude, in the way that religious concerns about the adequacy of the sensible image for representing the divine would express. Such iconoclastic worries amount to a claim about limitations, boundaries, and so on, either because of our inadequacy or the awesome majesty of the represented object, or both, that Hegel, unlike every other post-Kantian modern philosopher except Nietzsche, explicitly rejects. (That is why the "finitude" framework fits Kant so well. It fits Heidegger's denigration of the "ontic" spectacularly well, but that is another story altogether.) Hegel never tires of distinguishing himself from such a stance. This means that he thinks fine art *is* doing what the "finitists" say it can't: represent "the divine" (just that it does so partly or incompletely, and under the assumption of Hegel's own heretical notion of the divine). The contrast to such iconoclasm is not mysticism, negative theology, the ineffable, or some sort of authenticity. According to Hegel it is "the philosophy of infinity," a discursive account of the whole human world, and therewith the realization of God. By this, Hegel does not mean a philosophy of the limitless void or the like, but an understanding of the "absolute" status of human autonomy, a life understood and lived out—very much in a corporeal, affective, sexual, laboring world—as a collective, rational self-determination, not one determined by nature and fate.

Admittedly, this all amounts to no more than a prolegomenon to a full Hegelian case for modernism in general and for abstraction (a conceptual function for art) in particular. Why traditional art might have become a thing of the past, reminders of a different sense-making practice still partially invoked but no longer endowed with authoritative priority; why on Hegel's view that's the right way to put it, and so forth, are all one thing. What might be reconstructed in any detail in a Hegelian position about future art is quite another, and the variety of artistic moments in any account of the trajectory of modernism is obviously overwhelming. But there are some elements of such a bridge between Hegel's narrative and later modernism that, by now I hope, stand out. The most important issue is that discussed in the preceding section about the historical conditions of sense-making, intentional content, practical authority, and so on. These issues are much like those already obvious much earlier, in Post-Impressionism, say, and especially in Cézanne, as the constituent elements of painterly meaning begin to "come apart," or perhaps come to seem more and more a result of having been actively put together (held together in order to belong together), and where all that becomes thematized as such. (Seurat's points and Cubism's lines and planes could serve the same function.) The relationship between shape, plane, and a sense of weight, actual components in the density of objects, and so their very objecthood, can be now thematized as such. It becomes historically possible, in the extended post-Kantian aftermath that Hegel's narrative relies on, for a sensible take on such individual and independent components *to make sense* as a painting, a material "image," a new way of capturing the mind-world relation (a spontaneity-in-receptivity), because and only because many other aspects of political, religious, and philosophical life have come to make sense, succeed in invoking a norm, in analogous, interconnected new ways too. There is a new historical whole within which these new sorts of "painterly claims" can make sense. That is the heart of the Hegelian prolegomena.[35]

Correspondingly, we can then begin to see that painterly and indeed sensible representations cannot be understood on some mimetic model of seeing through the image (or sensation) to the object itself, and that without the work of (historically variable) meaning-making in perception, the constituents of meaning are shapes, borders, dots, frames, and so on, *potentialities;* not just as such, but understood conceptually, as moments of sensible meaning which painting can be *about,* thus being about both itself and the possibility of sensible meaning itself. Said another way, the bearer of visual meaning can no longer be taken to be the sensible image just as such, or even the idea, the mental state as such. The bearer of meaning is the concept of painting as such (it is "*abstract*" in this

sense), itself a collectively constituted norm (like all norms, after Hegel), and "realized" as such in modernism. "Abstraction" in this Hegelian sense does not mean abstracting "everything that was not intrinsic to art as such,"[36] but abstraction from dependence on sensual immediacy, and so a kind of enactment of the modernist take on normativity since Kant: *self*-legislation.[37] (There is an obvious danger here, the temptation of irony, the suspicion that "structures of depiction" are "purely contingent, nothing but devices."[38] Overcoming such temptations is an important element of Hegel's treatment of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* and Friedrich Schlegel's doctrines in the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* and goes to the issues raised earlier as "second nature.")

As indicated earlier, the elusive motto for all this, the broad implications of which Hegel understood better than Kant, is Kant's dense redefinition of any possible object: "that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united."[39] This would provide the context for seeing abstraction as self-conscious, conceptual; not, as with Greenberg, reductionist and materialist. Pollocks and Rothkos are not presentations of paint drips and color fields and flat canvas. They thematize and so render self-conscious components of sensible meaning that we traditionally would not see and understand as such, would treat as given. Said another way, they present the materiality of such components in their conceptual significance; such materiality is mentioned, cited, or quoted, as well as used, as well as occupying space on a stretched canvas. And this can make sense because the "result" character of even sensible apprehension, a generalized idealism evident even in the likes of Nietzsche and Proust, has come to be part of the intellectual habits of mind of modern self-understanding, even if unattended to as such. Such is for Hegel the new way nonrepresentational art might matter.

Modernism after Hegel would then look something like what Hegel prophesied after romantic art: "the self-transcendence of art but *within its own sphere and in the form of art itself*" (*A* 1:80, my emphasis). One could say that for both Hegel and a major strand of modernism (the strand that culminates in abstractionism), the decisive modern event was the end of the authority of nature as such, in itself, as a norm—a hard-fought practical achievement—together with the insight that this did not, could not mean what the traditionalists always feared—mere "normlessness." What, instead, a kind of self-authored normativity or human freedom might *be* is a terribly difficult question. But perhaps, over the last hundred years, and especially in the experiments of abstraction, we now have some sense of what it *looks like,* thus both confirming and undermining Hegel's claim about the way art could now matter.[40]

Notes

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1. This is not at all the same thing as saying that the development of Western art tends toward ever greater "formalism," in the sense of a preoccupation with "pure" form, understood as "without the content." So again "abstraction'" can be a misleading word. But in aesthetic theory as well as ethical theory, Hegel claims to have been able to show how there can be "concrete universals," a *kind* of independence from particularity that is not the adoption of a "mere one among infinitely many" stance. An analogy: when we say that abstract painting is "formal," we ought to mean that it has only itself, or painterly possibilities, as its own content, in the same way that for Hegel the content of speculative philosophy is nothing but the history of philosophy itself. Or Proust's novel is about novel writing and so has its own form *as* its content. But the novel is not "*empty*" of content. Or when people say that Henry James novels are "too stylized," are "formal" experimentations, they often don't appreciate that such a stylization represents an independence from a fixed perspective on content that itself has a profound moral meaning, *that* content ("independence from a fixed perspective on content").

2. More specifically, it is "with respect to its [art's] highest vocation" (*nach der Seite ihrer höchsten Bestimmung*) that it does not matter as it once did (Hegel, *A* 1:11). Second-place on a list with *that* criterion would still rank awfully high. In this note and hereafter, references to G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts,* trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), will be abbreviated as *A*. I have cited Knox's translation, but where there might be some confusion, have added the problematic German phrase from the original German text, G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik,* ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). References to Hegel's as yet untranslated Berlin lectures, *Vorlesung über Ästhetik: Berlin 1820/21,* ed. Helmut Schneider (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), are abbreviated as *VAB*.

3. See the essay by Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel and the Art of Painting," in *Hegel and Aesthetics,* ed. William Maker (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 61–82. (I disagree with Houlgate's version of what Hegel would have disagreed with in Greenberg's famous account of abstraction. See note 10 below.)

4. I refer here to the set of issues raised by the well-known letter of Gershom Scholem to Walter Benjamin, quoted and glossed in a very interesting way by Eric Santner in *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 38.

5. In one respect, all Hegel might be saying here is that the production and

appreciation of art in the modern era has become something important in itself, and not because of some religious or civic function. What else he might mean, especially about art's self-reliance, is what is at issue in any interpretation of Hegel's aesthetic theory.

6. T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). A standard classification of such philosophic narratives: there is the Kant-Greenberg (and some people assume Michael Fried) line (the last depends on how one interprets philosophically the categories of "theatricality" and "absorption"); the Hegel-Marx-Clark line; and the Nietzschean line, visible in very different ways in Adorno, Benjamin, and Heidegger, where the whole possibility of sense-making breaks down, initiating a different, perhaps more archaic role for art.

7. One should also note that in most respects, Hegel's lectures on fine art do not present an "aesthetic theory" in the sense that came to be established in British, French, and German thought in the eighteenth century. He only deals in a glancing way with one of the three canonical questions in that aesthetics:

(a) What is the *ontological* status of the artwork or of aesthetic properties; how are such objects to be distinguished from craft works, natural objects; how are properties like beautiful or sublime or ugly to be distinguished, and so on? (Or, what is beauty; a question Hegel rarely takes up as such, merely pronouncing that it is the appearance, the shining, of the Idea [*das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*].)

(b) What is distinctive about aesthetic *experience;* how is it different from simple pleasure in sights and tastes, etc., or simple perception, for that matter? (What do we know or understand when we understand that something is beautiful?)

(c) And what can be said about the possibility of distinguishing expressions of aesthetic preferences ("I like this") from *aesthetic claims* ("this is beautiful")? Do aesthetic judgments have any normative authority, and if so on what basis?

There is some Hegelian discussion of the first issue in connection with the relation between art, religion, and philosophy. This is already not a traditional categorization issue, and Hegel does not deal with the standard issues. Rather, Hegel's project might be said to offer an account of what Dieter Henrich has variously called the "resonance" of art in human life and a "diagnosis of the state of art in our time." See Dieter Henrich, *Versuch über Kunst und Leben* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2001). Henrich's account is one of the very few to have appreciated, and with great subtlety, the links between Hegel's philosophy of art and modernism. (Clark's, in a very different way, is another.)

8. Hegel's lectures certainly do have a kind of Protestant, anti-Catholic, Reformation tone, as if the point were something like the growth of such a Reformation spirit of inwardness and anti-idolatry in visual art ("to the Lutherans truth is not a manufactured object"); see G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History,* trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 416; G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte,* in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden,* ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969–70), 12:496. See also Hegel, *A* 1:103.

9. Compare Schiller's remark in his letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man,* trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Frederick Unger, 1965), 63: "Beyond question

Man carries the potentiality for divinity within himself; the path to divinity, if we may call a path what never reaches its goal, is open to him in his senses."

10. Religion is always said to be a mere "representation." Contrast here Stephen Houlgate's interpretation in "Hegel and the 'End' of Art," *Owl of Minerva* 29, no. 1 (fall 1997): 1–19. Houlgate argues that because art has "lost" its link with the "divine," it can no longer serve our highest interests and needs, which presumably in his view are still religious. See Houlgate's remarks on p. 9, where he claims both that Hegel approved of Protestant art because it "freed art from dominance by religion" and so allowed it to become "*fully* secular" *and* that such art allowed us to see "secular forms of activity" as "*not* simply falling outside the religious, monastic life but as 'holy' in themselves" (my emphases). He wants to say both these things because, in his view, Hegel treats modern secular activities such as labor, marriage, the family, and citizenship as truer forms of religiosity than the monastic virtues of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Both these claims seem to me right, but not yet to make clear the limitations of art for Hegel within this new post-Reformation sense of religiosity. I am indebted to Houlgate for correspondence about this issue.

11. Hegel is discussing Titian's portraits.

12. Hegel's expression is that art creates a reality that is itself "besouled [*für sich beseelt*]" (Hegel, *A* 2:834). Another way to put Hegel's point would be to note his appreciation of some dimension of what would be called the "disenchantment" of the world (by Weber, borrowing from Schiller), but that such a realization does not consign us to a banal fate. An appreciation of the "divinity" of human freedom does not reenchant the world; it elevates us above the need for enchantment, an elevation that can have a painterly presence all its own. See Clark, *Farewell to an Idea,* 34.

13. Kant's account traded on the notion of "disinterestedness."

14. See also Hegel, *A* 2:809, on natural and artificial light. There are several other issues in Hegel that are relevant here, but which would require a separate discussion. Especially important are Hegel's claims in the second volume of the Knox translation of the lectures, where he defends a hierarchical system of the arts themselves, and where the "place" of painting, especially with respect to literature, is an important theme, relevant here as well.

15. It should be noted that these remarks about nature are heretical in another sense too: from the viewpoint of traditional Hegel interpretation. This has it that Hegel held a position somewhat like Plotinus (or at least Schelling), in which the sensible, natural world was an emanation of and so linked to God, or the One. Nature was supposed to be the externalization of God, finally fully self-conscious or "interiorized" in absolute spirit, in philosophy. These passages make that interpretation implausible. This was more specifically and more clearly put by Hegel: "The connection between the beautiful and ourselves is that we catch sight of our own essence in the beautiful" (Hegel, *VAB* 57).

16. These are the kinds of passages that prompt the kind of characterization of the Narcissistic Hegel, he of the great devouring Maw of Subjectivity, familiar to readers of Adorno. Again, it all depends on what one takes the claim to mean. See remarks on this issue in my "Hegel, Modernity, and Habermas," in *Idealism*

as Modernism: Hegelian Variations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 157–84.

17. Like many of the terms of art necessary to state Hegel's position, "second nature" is another that deserves a book-length treatment. See my "Leaving Nature Behind; or, Two Cheers for Subjectivism," in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World,* ed. N. H. Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 58–75.

18. Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm,* trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 219–20.

19. Compare this statement with: "Modernism turns on the impossibility of transcendence" (Clark, *Farewell to an Idea,* 22). As indicated above, what is "left" without such transcendence is the issue, and for Hegel, and for Hegel's modernism, what is left is neither materiality as such (resistant to sense, to the work of painting), nor a mere object to be transformed and humanized by the "labor of the concept." What that all amounts to is a large independent issue. For an indication of Clark's view, see his analysis of David's painting *Death of Marat,* especially p. 48.

20. All of this Hegel will dispute, but without, I think, a reversion to classicism. The fact that *art* belongs to the domain of the self-articulation of reason tells us something about Hegel's notion of reason, and hardly makes a point about his regressive classicism.

21. The Kantian sublime should also be distinguished from modern, religious views of the sublime, as in nature's void or infinity in Calvin and Pascal, and that will make clear the heretical character of Kant's position. Rather than provoke a humbling awe, the experience of the sublime is a *two*-step process in Kant and finally confirms a sense of man's absolute supremacy over all of nature by virtue of his moral vocation and its independence from any natural condition or power.

22. I am of course aware that, glancing back at European history in the twentieth century, expressing such Hegelian views without irony or qualification can seem a little naive. But, as in so many cases, we need a comprehensive view of what Hegel means by insisting on the "rationality" of modern ethical life, and I don't believe such an interpretation is yet available among the prominent competitors, descendants of the nineteenth-century left-right Hegel wars. For what I hope is a start, see my "Hegel's Ethical Rationalism" in *Idealism as Modernism,* 417–50.

23. "Works of art are all the more excellent in expressing true beauty, the deeper is the inner truth of their content and thought" (Hegel, *A* 1:74).

24. This is another endlessly contested issue. See my *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) for the argument defending a reading of Hegel through Kantian lenses.

25. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), A 293; B 350.

26. The central problem in that endeavor is the one Kant created for aesthetics but which after him, with the rejection of his formalism, became the core modern problem: genuine lawfulness but without a determinate law, or without a possible appeal to a determinate law. And therewith another preview of the modernist spirit. See section 39 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment;* and Luc Ferry's discussion in *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age,* trans. Robert de Loaiza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 15 and 96. The principle that Hegel will settle on in his account of this possibility is basically similar to that introduced by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment:* "An der Stelle jedes anderen denken" (section 40).

27. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A 653; B 681. When the "ideal," after Kant, could no longer be identified with a distinct intelligible world (but was instead a goal of ideal and complete intelligibility, the postulation of the "unconditioned"), the status of the sensible also changed dramatically. For the modern Anglophone tradition, it meant the problem of formulating a coherent empiricism, one consistent with mathematical physics, with self-knowledge, memory, and personal identity, one that could deal with the problem of skepticism, and so on. On the other hand, one prominent feature of what is called the "Continental" tradition, viewed in this light, is a much-heightened attention to the significance of aesthetic sensibility, the significance of the fact that a merely empirical apprehension of an artwork is inappropriate. See the first four chapters of Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus;* and J. M. Bernstein's interesting discussion in *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). (The much-discussed "subjectivization" of the aesthetic realm is thus not a relocation of aesthetic meaning "from" objective perfectionism, classical rules and formulae, and so forth, inward; it is not an interiorization of what had been "out there." Self-reliance, self-certitude, and constructivism are not in isolation the modernist problems [for Hegel], but a making, the products of which fully embody the freedom of the maker, and reflect that freedom adequately.)

28. See Clement Greenberg: "I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant" ("Modernist Painting," in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969,* ed. John O'Brian [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], 85). For a different account that makes the same beginning, see my *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). Greenberg treats modernism as beginning with a kind of Kantian inspiration not to take painting itself (as color on a flat surface) for granted anymore, but to explore *what it is* to put color on a flat, limited (framed) surface. It doesn't seem to me possible to understand *the significance* of that without understanding the significance of the ideal of critical autonomy, and that move always seems to appear to Greenberg "impure," an attempt at the tyrannization of painting by something nonpainting, like philosophy, or social theory (very un-Hegelian dichotomies). See the difficulty in his position in "The Case for Abstract Art," *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* 80, where such a move to abstraction is treated as an antidote against hyper-self-interested, materialistic, anticontemplative mass society (this is what the art *means*) even while he insists it functions as an example of something that "does *not* have to mean" (my emphasis). From Hegel's point of view this is not a debater's point, but an indication of how deeply Kantian Greenberg's program remains. What results from this unclarity in Greenberg is his occasional odd homage to empiricism, scientism, and scientific experimentation in abstract painting. See his extraordi-

nary claims about the "results" of what appears to be modernist "research" in "After Abstract Expressionism," *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* 131. The point where Greenberg and Hegel join forces is in their opposition to sentimentality in criticism, or to the "aesthetics of sentiment" generally, and a commitment to the conceptual intelligibility of modernist art. This does not necessarily commit either of them to one side of dualism, as Ferry has claimed. Ferry's view seems to be that if you are not with Bouhours and Debos, you must be attempting to circle back to Boileau. See Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus,* chapter 4.

29. A remark in the spirit of such a reading of Hegelian modernism is T. J. Clark's on a photograph of Picasso's paintings at Sorgues: "Painting at Sorgues, says the photograph, stands on the threshold of a new order and chaos; and not just painting, by the looks of it, but picturing in general; and not just picturing, but maybe perceiving; and not just perceiving but maybe being-in-the-world, or at least having-the-world-be-visible; maybe the world itself." (Clark, *Farewell to an Idea,* 174). Clark is quite right, I think, then to quote an apposite passage from Hegel on the world historical individual. (My differences with Clark concern a number of points of emphasis, especially over the range and depth and usefulness of appeals to categories like "capitalism" and "socialism," and with his melancholic treatment of a putative "failure" in a social reconciliation between autonomy and embeddedness in a community, reflected in the "failure" of modernism. See especially chapter 4 on "Cubism and Collectivity," and chapter 6 on Pollock as "unhappy consciousness," and, inter alia, pp. 1–13 and p. 259. Although he insists that he is praising Abstract Expressionism, Clark's reliance on these social categories leads him to characterize the painting movement as "vulgar," or "the style of a certain petty bourgeoisie's aspiration to aristocracy, to a totalizing cultural power" [389]. But despite such disagreements, the spirit of the narrative in *Farewell to an Idea* certainly qualifies it as the most ambitiously "Hegelian" treatment of modern art, known to me anyway.)

30. At the close of the lectures, Hegel appears to give fine art a new, different, and quite important function. "Art itself is the most beautiful side of that history [the unfolding of truth in world history] and is the best compensation for hard work in the world and the bitter labor for knowledge" (Hegel, *A* 2:1236–37). Note too that Hegel claims that the supersession of art by philosophy also provides "an inducement for taking up the essence of art too in a profounder way" (Hegel, *A* 1:21).

31. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72. I agree with what I take to be Fried's attitude: there was no failure of modernism, no exhaustion by the end of Abstract Expressionism. Rather, there was (and still is) a failure to appreciate and integrate the self-understanding reflected in such art (the same kind of failure to appreciate modernism, or the same kind of straw men attacks, in what we call postmodernism). The aftermath—Minimalism, "literalism," Op and Pop Art, postmodernism—can better be understood as evasions and repressions than alternatives.

32. Again: a thing of the past only with respect to what Hegel called the

"realization of the Absolute." Hegel's position does not entail the dispensability of art, especially when viewed from other perspectives, like rhetoric and education. In fact, Hegel treats both art and religion itself as forms of "representation" that, while inadequate philosophically, are nevertheless indispensable elements of modern life, however imperfect when viewed from the Olympian heights of "the Absolute."

33. There is a tension here in Hegel's position. Prior to the Hegelian stage of modernity, the intuitive expression of "the truth" which art alone made possible was counted as a necessary element in the becoming self-conscious of such a truth, while after that stage, art was to merely express sensibly a truth attained properly by philosophy. But this would mean that in such a philosophical stage, art would no longer be functioning *as art.* As art, it is an aspect of a sensible reflection of truth unavailable in any other way. See the discussion by Dieter Henrich in "Art and Philosophy of Art Today: Reflections with Reference to Hegel," in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism,* ed. Richard E. Amacher and Victor Lange, trans. David Henry Wilson et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 107–33. See especially Henrich's note on p. 114 about Hegel's 1828 aesthetics lectures. (This essay is a catastrophically bad translation of a powerful, original article by Henrich that compellingly defends the relevance of the Hegelian analysis for modern art. See D. Henrich, "Kunst und Kunstphilosophie in der Gegenwart," in *Poetik und Hermeneutik,* vol. 2: *Immanente Ästhetik—Ästhetische Reflexion,* ed. W. Iser [1966; München: Wilhelm Fink, 1983], 11–33, 524–31.)

34. Hegel's position is not easy to get out on the table for a hearing, not least because post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian European philosophy have been so hostile to and so suspicious of the notion of "subjects leading their lives reflexively." Subjects have become epiphenomena of social forces, texts, discourses, language, gender, the unconscious, Being, the ethnos, and so on. Hegel's attempt to enlist art in the project of the actualization of self-conscious subjectivity is viewed under the shadow of that suspicion, and so his even wilder claim that romantic art finally revealed the limitations of art as such in such a project is not now taken very seriously.

35. I am assuming that it is obvious that none of these claims depends on demonstrating any actual historical influence of Kant on modernist painters. The "realization" of philosophy in the historical, social world is a complex, contentious topic, but there is no reason to set out by limiting such realization to instances of painters reading the *Critique of Pure Reason.* And perhaps it would be better to call this an introduction to a prolegomenon. We would still need a defense of a number of controversial notions to make the Hegelian account more philosophically defensible: the notions of *distinct historical epochs,* a distinctly *philosophical diagnosis* of an epoch, of the *causality of fate,* or of *philosophical fate,* and the sense of *historical rationality* invoked, the claim that there is a way of considering a major cultural change as a *rational outcome* in some way of a prior form of life.

36. Hans Belting, "The Dream of Absolute Art," in *The Invisible Masterpiece* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 295.

37. Again, this is a very long story. For an abstract formulation, see my

"Hegels Begriffslogik als die Logik der Freiheit," in *Der Begriff als die Wahrheit: Zum Anspruch der Hegelschen "Subjektiven Logik,"* ed. Anton Koch, Alexander Oberauer, and Konrad Utz (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002).

38. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea,* 221. One more remark about Clark. The difference between this take on modernism and his involves a different tone in the invocation of Hegel. Hegel's defense of the modernity of art (romanticism in his view, even if of diminished importance with regard to the highest things; modernism, even abstraction, in the view I am attributing to the immortal Hegel) is indeed a defense of the ultimacy of "bourgeois modernity." But, as with everything else, that depends on what that involves. Hegel's soberness about what it involves can be bracing, but it is not, to invoke an old term from Marcuse, "one-dimensional." On the contrary. See chapter 7, "Unending Modernity," in my *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem.*

39. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* B 137.

40. This last remark pulls hard at only one thread intertwined with many others in Hegel's assessment of the state of art at the end of romanticism. Specific aesthetic issues—his evaluation of the greater importance of color over drawing and linear perspective, his apparent commitment to the paramount importance of human beings and objects that reflect human moods, and his apparent linking of aesthetic with ethical ideals (with regard to Christian love, for example)—would all need further treatment before this suggestion of a Hegelian sympathy for abstraction could be defended. But Stephen Houlgate, in the two articles noted earlier in these notes, already seems to me to go too far in excluding the abstractionists from the Hegelian aesthetic realm, the realm of inwardness and "objectless" freedom. The question is not really about abstraction but about which historical forms allow what Hegel, in his comments on late romantic art, described as the attempt to preserve something "substantial" in art (Hegel, *A* 1:602)—an impetus that already sounds "Friedean." And that issue cannot be assessed in modernism without attention to the rather heterodox view of freedom that Hegel defends as the modern "substantiality." This whole situation is, again, made somewhat more difficult by the influence of Greenberg's criticism, which treats the autonomy of art so purely, so "surrenders" (to use Greenberg's telling word) to the flatness and materiality of painterly expression, that he makes it hard to answer the obvious Hegelian question: What does it mean (why does it matter) that such self-authorizing painterly norms (flatness and frame) came to lay claim on the aesthetic imagination so exclusively?

Art, Religion, and the Modernity of Hegel

John Walker

In Hegel's philosophy, art and religion both come to an end and yet continue to be in modernity. In this essay I want to explore the relationship between the ending and the afterlife, and consider what light that relationship can shed on the relevance of Hegel's philosophical aesthetics today.

1

The structure of Hegel's thought suggests a paradoxical kind of analogy between the fates of art and religion in the modern age: that is to say, Hegel's own. Art and religion are both modes of absolute spirit. Both therefore, in different ways, express and communicate—they reveal—the ultimate cognitive and ethical truth which is what Hegel means by "spirit." Art manifests that truth in sensuous embodiment or intuition (*Anschauung*), while religion enables us to worship it in the mode of religious representation (*Vorstellung*).[1] But the capacity of art and religion to reveal the truth of spirit also means that they are connected to both history and the third mode of absolute spirit, which is philosophy. For Hegel, absolute spirit cannot be without being revealed in and through human history.

The crucial feature of the modern consciousness, Hegel argues, is its demand for self-conscious knowledge. In philosophy, the critical philosophy inaugurated by Kant insists that the key to reliable reasoning is our capacity to become reflectively aware of the categories which govern our thought. In politics, the legacy of the French Revolution means that political authority in modern societies depends upon the self-conscious assent of their members. In religion, the culture of civic conscience and ethical inwardness fostered by Protestantism means that the certainty of faith itself must become self-conscious. The modern believer's relation-