

Spring 1986

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## Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. "An Ancient Quarrel in Hegel's *Phenomenology*." *Owl of Minerva* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 165-80. doi:10.5840/owl19861722.

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## An Ancient Quarrel in Hegel's *Phenomenology*

Gary Shapiro

### I

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* has been in rich and equal measures a source of both frustration and fascination to its readers. Coming to it from the more conventional texts of our tradition (even including Hegel's later writings) readers have been puzzled, first, by the structure of the *Phenomenology*. Despite his suggestions that he is following an actual historical development of some sort Hegel will pass from the Terror of 1793-94 to prehistoric religions of nature, or from Kantian universality in morality to the life of the Greek *polis*. In addition the *Phenomenology* contains a vast number of allusions to particular texts and authors which seems disproportionate to its claim to have followed a necessary path to absolute knowledge. One may have the impression that the highway of despair has been so named because of its constant and confusing detours into wildernesses which have only the most peripheral connection with the promised land of spirit. All of this has prompted an amazing quantity of ingenious hermeneutical activity. The leading directions in such exegesis can be sorted out into the logical (or logical-allegorical), the existential, and the poetic; each is governed by the intention of saving and preserving the integral value of the text. There is also, of course, a skeptical reading of the *Phenomenology*, often appealing to philological evidence, which attempts to suggest (as in the case of some similar approaches to Kant's first *Critique*), that what we are dealing with is at best a patchwork of essays on various subjects and with different purposes, hurriedly put together to meet the demands of the printer. I regard the patchwork theory as a last resort and will pass over it in silence here, since I have not yet been reduced to its level of desperation or irony. The logical reading such as that given in recent years by Stanley Rosen claims that the *Phenomenology* presupposes the *Logic* rather than serving as an introduction to it; but Hegel repeatedly says that the *Phenomenology* is such an introduction or ladder to the standpoint of science. An existential approach to the text finds Hegel to have surrendered joyously to the drama and possibilities of the *Lebenswelt*, both contemporary and historical. As Robert Solomon puts it in his recent book on Hegel:

It was as if Hegel began a casual drive from Stuttgart . . . to Freiburg to attend another Neo-Kantian lecture on the need

for a "system." But driving through the Schwarzwald he became enchanted by the light and the shadows, the dancing forms of the high trunked trees and the sunlight piercing through the umbrella of pine leaves, watched them with increasing absorption in all of their variety and soon enough forgot where he was going, or no longer cared. He had discovered something more exciting than the absolute unity of experience, the transcendental unity of apperception and the synthesis of freedom and nature; he had discovered endless, restless contingency, the transience of forms, Heraclitus' flame, the variety of human experience and the way one form of experience transforms itself, often by a sudden leap, into another . . . But then—already late, he dashed to his rendezvous point, ran into the lecture, and quickly tried to forget his most *unwissenschaftlich* enchantment, his brush with endless contingency and change.<sup>1</sup>

A third reading of the *Phenomenology* is the view that the book's unusual structure and content are to be accounted for by Hegel's reliance on a literary model of some kind. Such suggestions range from Josiah Royce's reading the text in the light of the *Bildungsroman* (especially *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*), to the claim of John Dobbins and Peter Fuss that it is a redoing of the stages of the *Divine Comedy*, to Jacob Loewenberg's more general thesis that it is a comedy with many acts in which each form of consciousness with any pretensions to absoluteness is exposed and ridiculed for its self-contradictions.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these approaches of course has its own illuminations, but each is limited. The logical reading is a rather forced allegory which is at odds with Hegel's own pronouncements about the text. The same could be said of Kojève's attempt to see the *Phenomenology* as a Marxist allegory. The existential reading shows us Hegel, with life and vigor, coming to terms with questions of death, freedom, work, and religion, but it is forced to dismiss his own claims about the systematic point of his work and its elaborate structure as afterthoughts or self-deception.

For some time I was attracted to one or another of the poetic readings of the *Phenomenology*, in part because they promised to be able to account for the extensive treatment and analysis of literature which occupies so much of the text.<sup>3</sup> If we think of just the last half or so of the book, for example, from spirit

1. Robert Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), chapter 4a.

2. See Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), pp. 147-155; cf. John Dobbins and Peter Fuss, "The Silhouette of Dante in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," *Clio*, 11, 4 (Summer 1982), 387-413; and Jacob Loewenberg, *Hegel's Phenomenology* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1965).

3. See Gary Shapiro, "The Owl of Minerva and the Colors of the Night," *Philosophy and Literature*, 1 (Fall 1977), 276-294. For a close reading of one part of Hegel's text which uncovers a large and complex network of literary allusions, see Moltke S. Gram "Moral and Literary Ideals in Hegel's Critique of 'The Moral World-View,'" *Clio*, 7 (Spring 1978), 375-402.

to absolute knowing, we find that it contains a long commentary on Sophocles' *Antigone*, an analysis of culture and alienation which coincides with an explication of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, a review of the moral evasions of German romanticism in the section on conscience and the beautiful soul, a systematic discussion of Greek art (which Hegel calls *Kunstreligion*), and in the penultimate chapter, on revealed religion, some considerations of the text of biblical narrative and of the problem of its interpretation. Yet there is a difference between a text which has an overall poetic or literary structure (whether epic, *Bildungsroman*, or some variety of comedy) and one which comments on and analyzes literary material. The two coincide only if one denies the distinction between poetry and criticism. In Hegel's day such a denial can be attributed to Friedrich Schlegel, among others. But when Goethe observed to Eckermann that Hegel was always a good critic he might very well have had these sections of the *Phenomenology* in mind; if he did, however, we know that he did not intend to praise Hegel's accomplishment as a poet.<sup>4</sup>

While I think that those who read this text poetically are alert to something of great importance, they have not conceived it quite properly. Hegel was no poet, as his readers well know. He was also not a failed poet, despite his occasional earlier indulgence in verse under Hölderlin's influence. Let me suggest Hegel's attitude toward poetry by a rather free interpretation of one of his own parabolic or allegorical statements. Hegel described the *Phenomenology* in later years as his voyage of discovery; commentators, however, have often thought that this was in part a reference to the *Odyssey*. Now we all know that an odyssey is a homecoming, and the *Phenomenology* does indeed tell the tale of how spirit comes finally to be at home with itself after experiencing itself in a multitude of alienated forms. In addition, the adventures in Hegel's odyssey can be compared to the Homeric version insofar as many of them are strange deviations from the straight way home which would be chosen by the prudent traveler, whether philosopher or seafaring warrior. But whether Hegel intended it or not, I think we can learn something by insisting on the peculiarly legendary, mythical, and poetic flavor of Odysseus' adventures. The *Odyssey* is the story of a return home to the good solid ground of prose after experiencing the poetic temptations and dangers of Circe, the Cyclops and other figures of legend and myth. I propose that we read the *Phenomenology* as being in large part a confrontation, an *Auseinandersetzung*, with poetry and the poetic principle, rather than itself a poetic text.

This suggestion has the advantage of placing the *Phenomenology* squarely within Hegel's own intellectual milieu as well as allowing us to see that many of the issues with which the text is concerned are quite similar to some under discussion today. We need look no farther afield than the so-called "Earliest System Program of German Idealism" to find the young Hegel himself endorsing the romantic program of a union or merger between philosophy and art:

. . . the highest act of Reason, the one through which it encompasses all Ideas, is an aesthetic act, and . . . truth and

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4. Conversation of February 17, 1829, in Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations With Goethe* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), p. 296. But see also the conversation of March 28, 1827, in which Goethe criticizes H. F. W. Hinrichs' book on ancient tragedy, which was inspired by Hegel's discussion of the *Antigone*.

*goodness only become sisters in beauty*—the philosopher must possess just as much poetic power as the poet . . . Poetry gains thereby a higher dignity, she becomes at the end once more, what she was in the beginning—the *teacher of mankind*; for there is no philosophy, no history left, the maker's art alone will survive all other sciences and arts.<sup>5</sup>

The other presumed authors of this piece, Hölderlin and Schelling, never gave up their efforts to effect such a synthesis, although the poet emphasized the poetic side of the union and the philosopher the philosophical one.

There were, in fact, two distinct branches of thought concerning the status of philosophy among the romantics, granted their common agreement that it was a mistake to suppose that it could properly be an autonomous form of discourse. These may be distinguished as the poetic and the critical. The poetic side, exemplified by Hölderlin, Schelling, Jacobi, and Novalis, held poetry to be our most significant means of access to the truth: like Heidegger in our own century they were fascinated by the idea of a primal saying in which the poet transcended the merely finite and human abstractions of conceptual thought. In his *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Schelling had argued that the Absolute is a synthesis of the conscious and unconscious, of mind and nature; as such it has two forms, art and nature, in which the conscious and unconscious sides respectively predominate. To read the *Phenomenology* as a critique of Schelling it should be seen that Hegel's basic objection to these views is that they exclude the possibility of full rational comprehension or wisdom. So just as (I will soon argue) Hegel's analysis of Greek art is in part a reply to Schelling's indeterminate conception of artistic infinity, so his account of "Observing Reason" is in part a reply to Schelling's notion of nature as one of the ultimate expressions of truth. For Hegel such a view reduces to the absurdities of proto-behaviorism, phrenology, and physiognomy. Novalis was discontent with the *Bildungsroman* and its chief exemplar, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, because of what he took to be the banality of its development from the world of poetic fantasy (the theater) to the ordered world of prose (marriage, a regular profession, and bourgeois order). So he devised his own characteristically unfinished *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* as a *Kunstlerroman* in which the movement is precisely the reverse, from the stable world of home to an involuted series of dreams and poetry. According to Hegel, Novalis is an aestheticizing disciple of Fichte. The wise man who appears in the second part of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* helps Heinrich to realize that conscience is the truth of virtuous action and

. . . that there is a startling similarity between a genuine song and a noble deed. Conscience at ease in a smooth, non-resisting world turns into fascinating conversation, into fable telling everything . . . Like virtue, fable too is the godhead immediately operative among men and the wonderful reflection of the higher world.<sup>6</sup>

5. The "Earliest System-Program of German Idealism," translated by H. S. Harris in *Hegel's Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 511.

6. Novalis, *Henry von Ofterdingen*, trans. by Palmer Hilty (New York: Frederick

Such a view receives a detailed rejection in the *Phenomenology's* treatment of conscience and the beautiful soul, but it also forms part of the poetic metaphilosophy against which the *Phenomenology* as a whole is directed.

The critical position, on the other hand, was represented by the brothers Schlegel, especially Friedrich, who held that an inspired criticism or genial conversation could include all that the poet or philosopher might accomplish within his own traditionally more restricted discourse.<sup>7</sup> Absolute criticism or conversation was held to be the most wide-ranging of all discourses, being able to effect mediations and connections between those varieties of talk or writing which would otherwise be separated by social or disciplinary conventions. This more skeptical version of the romantic program corresponds to Derrida's notion of *l'écriture* or Richard Rorty's idea of "conversation," both of which are modifications of Heidegger's more emphatic claims. Here it is worth noting a difference between Rorty's conception of the relation between Kant and Hegel and Hegel's own version of that relation. For Rorty, Kant is the paradigm of normal philosophy, that is, of a philosophy which finds an unshakable ground in a set of basic epistemological principles. Hegel introduces history, change, and life into philosophy, serving as the paradigm for a new conception of philosophy as writing.<sup>8</sup> Hegel's own reading of the development from Kant to himself is in many ways just the contrary of this. His *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, like the *Phenomenology*, see Fichte as the genuine heir and systematizer of Kant and classifies a number of the romantics (Schlegel, Schleiermacher, and Novalis) as "followers of Fichte." My present point is not so much to endorse this philosophical genealogy as to suggest that Hegel saw Kant's thought as containing the seeds of poetic romanticism. By denying the possibility of the knowledge of things in themselves, Kant paved the way for the many forms of intuitionism which claimed to do what discursive cognition could not; and by indicating in the *Critique of Judgment* that the aesthetic was a means of glimpsing that a unified world was possible, Kant left it to his successors to make art into the "organon of philosophy" (in Schelling's words). For Hegel, then, Kant, Fichte, and Fichte's followers, as well as Schelling, all point to poetic conceptions of reality and of philosophical method which it is his task to overcome for the sake of reason. Such confrontations between philosophy, jealous of its own boundaries and discursive conventions, and a poetry which aspires to a place as a master-form of discourse, are not only a product of post-Kantian thought; they are also a major theme of Plato's *Republic*, which takes up a quarrel, said to be already ancient, between philosophy and poetry.<sup>9</sup>

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Ungar, 1964), p. 167. See also Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) pp. 11-12.

7. See F. Schlegel's *Critical Fragments*, nos. 34, 42, & 115; *Athenaeum Fragments* nos. 82, 220, 252, 281, 302, 304, & 438. An English translation by Peter Firchow is available: *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

8. Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," in *New Literary History*, 10 (Autumn 1978): 141-160, esp. p. 143.

9. Allan Bloom's commentary on Plato's *Republic* gives a central place to the "ancient quarrel." See Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

The *Phenomenology* has long been regarded as aiming at the establishment and justification of philosophical science. What I would add to this correct view is that Hegel is to a very large extent concerned with establishing philosophical discourse against the claims of the poetic. The point is stated clearly enough in the preface, in a passage which has too often been taken as a rather adventitious swipe at the style of Hegel's contemporaries, whereas I would read it as summing up much of the intent of the *Phenomenology*:

Genius, we all know, was once all the rage in poetry, as it now is in philosophy; but when its productions made sense at all, such genius begat only trite prose instead of poetry, or, getting beyond that, only crazy speech (*verrückte Reden*). So, nowadays, philosophizing by the light of nature, which regards itself as too good for the Notion (*Begriff*), and as being an intuitive and poetic thinking in virtue of this deficiency, brings to market the arbitrary combinations of an imagination that has only been disorganized by its thoughts, an imagery that is neither fish nor flesh, neither poetry nor philosophy. (para. 69)<sup>10</sup>

Just a few paragraphs later, in concluding the preface, Hegel draws a contrast between Plato's "scientifically valueless myths" on the one hand and, on the other hand, both Aristotle's "speculative depth" and Plato's *Parmenides*, the latter of which he significantly calls the "greatest work of art (*Kunstwerk*) of ancient dialectic" (para. 71). That Hegel believed in the superiority of philosophy to art is hardly a novel or shocking suggestion. It is written in very large letters in the progressive ascent of Absolute Spirit through art, religion, and philosophy in his final system. It is also the main burden of his view that the art of his own time and later must be in a state of dissolution (*Auflösung*), a view which is sometimes misconstrued as a belief in the death of art. Yet there is a difference in tone and intent between the later writings, which take the autonomy of philosophy (or science) for granted, and the *Phenomenology*, in which the quarrel between philosophy and poetry is very much a live issue. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel must show that philosophy is autonomous; in his later work he is able to assume this, in part because of the demonstrations of the *Phenomenology* itself.

## II

The *Phenomenology* can be read, then, as a metaphilosophical book about the relative claims of philosophical and poetic discourse. To show this in detail would require a much fuller explication of Hegel's own development and his relation to romantic thought than I have just sketched. It would also require a close analysis of the text of the *Phenomenology*, chapter by chapter. Rather than giving merely an impressionistic sketch of these, I propose to look at a

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10. All references to the *Phenomenology* are to numbered paragraphs, as in the translation by A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford, 1977).

crucial aspect of Hegel's confrontations with poetry, an aspect which has traditionally stimulated a great deal of interest. This is Hegel's account of tragedy, or, I should immediately say, his two accounts of tragedy in the *Phenomenology*. Those like A. C. Bradley, who have been impressed by "Hegel's theory of tragedy," have tended to focus their attention on the chapter called *Sittlichkeit*, which is based on Sophocles' *Antigone*.<sup>11</sup> But that chapter itself can hardly be understood as an independent essay about the nature of tragedy, since it is an attempt to clarify the most basic form of ethical life, a form of culture with a very large natural component. And it cannot be taken as Hegel's definitive word about tragedy, even within the confines of the *Phenomenology*, since that text also contains a chapter on *Kunstreligion* in which tragedy plays a very important part. Tragedy, we have been told, from Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Stanley Cavell, is a paradigmatic art form for philosophy. Hegel has been claimed for this tradition of the philosophical admiration of tragedy as well; but it is important to keep in mind, as we follow his account, that Hegel ends by criticizing tragedy and arguing for the philosophical superiority of comedy, a step which is repeated in its essentials in his later *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Hegel offers us two theories of tragedy because he wants to pacify the Dionysian god, giving all proper respect to this god's art before proceeding to show how that art can be treacherously misleading. We might call these two theories of tragedy Aristotelian and Platonic, in that order. The first proceeds on the principle that tragedy, being more philosophical than history, is a proper way of understanding the activity of *Geist*; the second shows that the tragic world-view itself is philosophically defective.

Hegel is sufficiently indebted to the romantic philosophy of art to begin his analysis of *Geist* with a commentary on a particular tragedy. He does not justify or explain this procedure directly, but assumes that his reader will agree with him that art can reveal the essential structure of a way of life more effectively and succinctly than any historical narrative can. The account which Hegel offers simultaneously of the *Antigone* and of Greek *Sittlichkeit* is what we would today call a structuralist reading. Both the play and the society which it reflects are structured by a number of bipolar distinctions which stem essentially from the dichotomy of nature and culture. *Sittlichkeit* is a form of life or consciousness which is cultural and yet regards itself as natural. Therefore it conceives of its mores as divinely ordained and rooted in natural divisions—notably the sexual distinction between men and women. From these dichotomies flow others, as in the following set of contrasts:

nature	culture
divine law	human law
women	men
life in the family	life as a citizen of the <i>polis</i>
particularity (concern for	universality (acting with

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11. A. C. Bradley, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," reprinted in *Hegel on Tragedy*, edited by A. and H. Paolucci (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), pp. 367-388. For some correctives to Bradley's view see Walter Kaufmann, "Hegel's Ideas About Tragedy" in *New Studies in the Philosophy of Hegel*, ed. by Warren Steinkraus (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 201-220, and Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).



family members as  
particular people)  
Hades  
death

the impersonal standards  
of the *polis* in view)  
the upper world  
action in the upper world

Like the societies analyzed by the structural anthropologists, the world of *Sittlichkeit* appears as totally meaningful. Considered as a way of ordering life by imposing a meaning on natural human existence it is, as Hegel says:

. . . an immaculate world, a world unsullied by any internal dissension. Similarly, its process is a tranquil transition of one of its powers into the other, in such a way that each preserves and brings forth the other. We do indeed see it divide itself into two antitheses and their reality; but their antithesis is rather the authentication of one through the other, and where they come into direct contact with each other as real opposites, their middle term and common element is their immediate interpenetration. (para. 463).

Before examining the way in which this structure will tear itself apart through dialectical activity, a few observations are in order. Contrary to Aristotle's definition of tragedy as an imitation of human action, Hegel agrees with Plato that death and the underworld are essential to the tragic pattern. Yet while Plato attacked tragedy for being morally and cognitively corrupt just because of its preoccupation with the nether world, Hegel boldly asserts that its *inclusion* of "the other side" is just what enables tragedy to delineate the structure of a world of *Sittlichkeit*.<sup>12</sup> It should also be noticed that the analysis which Hegel gives here of the relations between the sexes is tied specifically to a culture which has not emerged very far from the natural, but which is poised on the very edge of the distinction between nature and culture. Whatever the defects of Hegel's general views of the sexes (and whatever excessive attachment we may guess at between him and his sister), the analysis which Hegel gives *here* is in no way meant to describe the eternal natures of men and women, but is intended to explain the structure and forms of action of a specific way of life. Hegel does say that the union of men and women is such that it converts the two patterns of movement, which he fancifully calls syllogisms—one from the upper world to the lower world, the other in the reverse direction—into one and the same harmonious process. But he immediately goes on to show that this harmony is ephemeral, doomed to destruction by the rigid dichotomy at its origin.

For, as Hegel remarks, at this point of the analysis "no deed (*Tat*) has been committed"; a deed must disturb "the peaceful organization and movement of the ethical world" (para. 464). The details of Hegel's account of the tragic colli-

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12. Cf. Allan Bloom's commentary on Socrates' statement in the *Republic*, that the myth of Er is "no tale of Alcinous"; that is, it is not a terrifying story of the other world, as in Odysseus' account to Alcinous of Achilles' comment that he would rather be a day-laborer in the world of the living than king of the underworld.

sion between the laws of the family and those of the state, represented by Antigone and Creon, are rather well known. There is a significant methodological twist at this part of the analysis, however, from a structuralist to a dialectical approach. (Could it be that Hegel was already a post-structuralist?) So far as it goes, the structuralist model (which is close to the culture's ideal view of itself) fails to allow for the "deed" (*Tat*), that is, the act which transgresses the bounds which have been set. Here we should think of Fichte's praise of the creative *Tat* and of Faust's "*Am Anfang war die Tat.*" Tragedy shows the dialectically destructive effects of the *Tat* in a world which possesses only a structuralist self-understanding, confused as it is about the distinction of nature and culture. This destructive interaction of the two sides, throwing both into confusion, is the *Handlung*, or action, which corresponds to Aristotle's *praxis*. The activity of each side is one-sided; for each side the world is divided into the known sphere of its regularly sanctioned action and the unknown sphere into which it has ventured. Tragic action is necessarily based upon ignorance, but when followed through to its terrible extreme it leads to what Aristotle called reversal and recognition. While Aristotle conceived of these as changes within the individual character, however, Hegel gives them a wider significance as revealing that "the law that is manifest to [ethical self-consciousness] is linked in the essence with its opposite" (para. 469). There is a strong social dimension to this dichotomy of the known and unknown. In ancient tragedy individuals as such do not act:

. . . it is not *this* particular individual who acts and is guilty; for as *this* self he is only the unreal shadow, or he exists merely as a universal self, and individuality is purely the *formal* moment of the action as such, the content being the laws and customs which, for the individual, are those of his class and station. (para. 468)

The poetic necessity of death in Greek tragedy, then, is a function of the shadowy existence of individuals within such a society.<sup>13</sup> It should be clear that however great Hegel's admiration for the *Antigone*, his analysis implies a sharp criticism of the aesthetic world of the Greeks which he, along with Schiller, Hölderlin, and Schelling, had idealized in his earlier days. A fate (*Schicksal*) hangs over the Greek world which that world does not comprehend; in fact "omnipotent and righteous fate" is simply the negative side of the universal ethical substance (*Sittlichkeit*). That is, tragedy gives a beautiful representation of the universal destruction and death that is brought about by just that beautiful social order which is the presupposition of any action in such a world. Hegel's admiration for tragedy, then, is already qualified. Tragedy reveals a world torn apart and allows us to articulate the nature of that tearing-apart, but it is bound to a culture which must systematically misunderstand itself, representing the necessary effects of its own social structure as the decrees of an impersonal fate.

13. Cf. Alexander Kojève's accounts of this section of the *Phenomenology* in his *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947); some selections from the section concerning *Sittlichkeit* are translated in *Moderns on Tragedy*, ed. by Lionel Abel (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1967), pp. 295-299.

There is probably no view more central to Hegel's philosophy than his rejection of the unknowable, whose paradigmatic form is Kant's thing-in-itself. When Hegel returns to the subject of tragedy in *Kunstreligion* it is tragedy's commitment to the unknowable or to the ineluctability of fate upon which he focusses his criticisms. Since it is comedy which finally banishes the unknowable in a supremely healthy round of laughter, it is possible to read the contrast between tragedy and comedy as a contrast between the theories of knowledge and reality of Kant and Hegel.<sup>14</sup> First, however, it is important to see the systematic differences between the two major contexts in the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel examines tragedy. In the chapter on *Sittlichkeit* Hegel is using tragedy as a document through which to read the structure and tensions of a certain kind of communal life. In the chapter on the religion of art he is both explaining how such a use of tragedy and other forms of art is possible, and examining the claims of the various forms of (Greek) art to be whole and truthful modes of human life and expression. For example, in the first treatment Hegel simply assumes that poetry, or more specifically tragedy, is about things both human and divine (thus disagreeing with Aristotle's conception of poetry as the imitation of *human* action alone). In the second analysis Hegel gives a complex argument designed to show why all Greek art is essentially concerned with the problem of understanding the divine by means of the human. It is thus, considered as itself, a form of knowledge, in Hegel's rich sense of knowledge as involving activity and practice as well as contemplative beholding.

Now, from the very beginning of its career, Hegel finds that Greek art is bedevilled by some form or other of the unintelligible. His philosophical narrative of artistic history is thus a critical commentary on the idealized romantic accounts of Schiller and Schelling. With the Greeks in mind Schelling had said that "the infinite finitely presented is beauty" and had celebrated the infinite meaning in a genuine work of art. Each such work, he says:

. . . is susceptible of infinite interpretation, as though there were an infinity of intentions within it, yet we cannot at all tell whether this infinity lay in the artist himself or whether it resides solely in the artwork. On the other hand, in a product that merely simulates the character of a work of art, intention and rule lie on the surface . . .<sup>15</sup>

This of course is an almost exact repetition of Kant's conception of the aesthetic idea and it shows, in Hegel's analysis, that Schelling's conception of the infinite is still more indeterminately Kantian than he might care to acknowledge. Hegel's own philosophical history of *Kunstreligion* begins with the sculptured form of the god, the divine in human form, which was admired by both Kant

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14. Cf. Lucien Goldmann's several remarks on Kant as a tragic philosopher in *The Hidden God*, trans. by Philip Thody (London: Routledge & K. Paul; New York: Humanities, 1964), e.g., p. 46.

15. F. W. J. von Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, selections trans. by Albert Hofstadter in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*—revised edition—ed. by Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 368.

and Schelling, and proceeds to criticize the indefiniteness of meaning which sometimes passes for the richness of the aesthetic idea. Hegel calls this first form "abstract art"; its abstractness lies not in its refusal to represent, for it does provide the image of an idealized human body, but in its failure to develop a meaning which is both present and integral.<sup>16</sup> The object is the product of the sculptor's work; but as a stationary beautiful object it fails to present the pain and effort of that work. The many thoughts and emotions to which it gives rise in its audience are related only in the most flimsy way to the intentions and experience of the artist. And the statue does not help the situation by simply standing there mutely, refusing to divulge its secret. To abbreviate Hegel's complex chapter, it is only the arts of language which can and do promise a true infinity of meaning rather than a false infinite, a knowable totality rather than some version of the unknowable. Language, Hegel says, is both inside and outside, both expression and meaning. Hegel then proceeds to a systematic account of the three most highly developed arts of language: epic, tragedy, and comedy. What has been obscured by Hegel's reputation as a lover of the Greeks and a friend of tragedy is the fact that this review is highly critical, at least of epic and tragedy. It revolves around the question of the degree to which each art form is tied to the concept of fate (*Schicksal*), conceived as the eruption of the unknowable into human life, with a consequent division of the world into two parts, one of which is thought to be intrinsically incomprehensible. Even the gods are subject to such fate—as in the decree that Troy must fall or that Achilles cannot be saved from an early death if he should choose to fight. The gods seem at first to act with supreme freedom and insouciance, but:

. . . the universal self [i.e., fate] . . . hovers over them and over this whole world of picture-thinking to which the entire content belongs, as the irrational (*begrifflose*) void of Necessity—a mere happening which they must face as beings without a self and sorrowfully, for these *determinate* natures cannot find themselves in this purity. (para. 731)

This incomprehensible element in the content of the epic is echoed in its form as a piece of artistic communication. The epic poet engages in a form of false consciousness, denying that the poem is a work of human agency and attributing it to the inspiration of the Muses. The audience of the epic, as in Plato's parable of the magnetic rings in the *Ion*, sees itself as simply the last link of a chain. The gap between artistic production and consumption produces a dichotomy of understanding, just as the division of labor between the male and the female in *Sittlichkeit* produces a view of society as being naturally and incomprehensibly divided into distinct segments. (On the division of labor, see *Phenomenology*, para. 351.)

Hegel calls tragedy a "higher language" because it promises to overcome these gaps and makes some progress in doing so. Tragedy generally eliminates the gods from the action of the play itself. More significantly, perhaps, the

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16. Cf. Gary Shapiro, "Hegel's Dialectic of Artistic Meaning," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 35, (Fall 1976), 23-35, for a slightly more detailed reading of the section on *Kunstreligion*.

characters of tragedy speak directly to a present audience, with a directness which emphasizes the self-consciousness of both sides. These speakers also help to demystify artistic production for "they are artists" who give a definite shape to their thoughts and feelings, rising above the unformed talk of daily life; for the first time the artist *per se* appears in the work of art as a productive agent. Siding with Aristotle against Plato, Hegel defends the cognitive superiority of dramatic imitation to mere narrative:

Just as it is essential for the statue to be the work of human hands, so is the actor essential to his mask—not as an external condition from which artistically considered we must abstract; or so far as we do have to make abstraction from it, we admit just this, that art does not contain in it the true and proper self (para. 733).

In sculpture the sculptor can be thoughtlessly dismissed as external to his work; in tragedy the mask can hardly be conceived apart from the actor.

The defects of tragedy, however, are exemplified by the attitude of the chorus, which Hegel sees as paralleling that of the audience. All which we (readers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, enlightened about the dynamics of social action) see as a consequence of the concept (*Begriff*) of Greek life, the chorus apprehends as an "alien fate" which produces in it "the empty desire for ease and comfort, and feeble talk of appeasement" (para. 734). It *fears* the higher powers and *pities* those who are destroyed by them. Here Hegel is giving a kind of transcendental deduction of the characteristics which Aristotle attributes rather unsystematically to tragedy. Yet, on Hegel's analysis, pity and fear are problems of tragedy rather than achievements; they show the continued presence of both *incomprehensible fate in the content of the action* and a similarly incomprehensible division between the activity of the artist and the passivity of the audience in the form of the drama. Hegel has moved from an analysis of the consequences of the general division of labor in society, poorly understood by that society, but represented in a play like the *Antigone*, to an analysis of the consequences of a division of spiritual labor into artistic production and artistic consumption, when that division is also only partially understood. In his analysis of *Sittlichkeit*, Hegel had shown the "content and movement of Spirit" which is the subject of tragedy; this was exemplified best by the *Antigone* in which the clash of the two laws is perspicuous. Now, however, he is considering art as a religious form in which the ethical world "attains to a consciousness of itself, or exhibits itself to consciousness" (para. 736). As a more articulate consciousness of ethical life rather than its reflection, tragedy will be centrally concerned with the relation between the known and the unknown, a relation which is exhibited best by Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, in which questions of knowledge and ignorance are the very center of the drama. Hegel now describes the drama which centers around the obscurity of the oracle and the human attempts to evade or abide by it. Action undertaken in ignorance—an ignorance necessary to the tragic view of things—can end in only two varieties of reconciliation. One is death, the end of dramas like the *Antigone*. The other is through absolution or acquittal (*Freisprechung*), which corresponds to the *katharsis* discussed by Plato in the *Laws* and Aristotle in the

*Poetics*.<sup>17</sup> Hegel says that these are two forms of the river Lethe, that is, two forms of forgetfulness. The point is that tragedy fails to provide an image of full human self-consciousness; for, rather than Platonic *anamnêsis* or Hegelian *Erinnerung*, it yields a forgetting. (Nietzsche's celebration of forgetting and of tragedy are connected with his own rejection of the ideal of full rational consciousness.) In tragedy the self does not appear as the real power but is merely parcelled out and "assigned to the *characters*" distributively; where we (philosophers or enlightened literary critics) would expect to find self as an intelligible category we find only an abstract unity, fate, "into which everything returns" (para. 742).

Hegel's dense text on tragedy could be articulated and unpacked in more detail, but I hope that these indications are sufficient to show that his discussion moves from cognitive acceptance and use of tragedy to cognitive criticism. However much he may appear to be an Aristotelian (in a general sense), his Platonic colors emerge at the end. So far as the *Phenomenology* is concerned, then, I take issue with Charles Karelis who, in his recent essay on Hegel's aesthetics, argues that Hegel's theory of art is a point-by-point reply to Plato's indictment of the arts in the tenth book of the *Republic*.<sup>18</sup> Of course one might say that Aristotle is *also* a Platonist; he defends tragedy only within a context made possible by Plato, that is, one in which poetry's claim to be a form of wisdom is no longer plausible. But, in the time of the *Phenomenology*, the supremacy of the philosophic paradigm or *epistêmê* (to use Foucault's term) is once again in question. In that context Hegel takes the radical step of claiming that comedy is superior to tragedy as a form of knowledge. For comedy banishes the unknowable by ridiculing the gods and fate; and it eliminates the gap between artist, work of art, and audience by presenting the audience with characters with whom it can identify. In tragedy the hero has a double nature: both artistic mask and animating voice. In comedy, self-consciousness drops the mask and the actor (*Schauspieler*) and the spectator (*Zuschauer*) are linked by their common identification with the persons (*Person*, *persona*, or *character*) of the drama. Fate has turned around from being an unknowable hovering in the background to become necessity, but a comprehended and intelligible necessity of self-consciousness (para. 747). We should not miss the systematic parallel between this state of unequalled "spiritual well-being" and the attained community of the *Phenomenology* which has also banished the thing in itself; we must also be aware that the tragic philosopher *par excellence* is Kant.

### III

Hegel's criticism of tragedy is one of the central confrontations in the *Phenomenology* with imaginative texts. Unlike Socrates, who would banish the tragedians from the philosophical state, Hegel is able to include and overcome

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17. For the legal conception of *katharsis*, see Gerald Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 224-232, 423-447.

18. See Charles Karelis' interpretive essay, pp. xi-lxxvi in *Hegel's Introduction to Aesthetics*, trans. by T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); see my review in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 40 (Winter 1981), 231-233.

them in his own philosophy. Philosophy must take the challenge of art seriously, but it is not itself art (as in Schelling or Heidegger). If it has a certain resemblance to comedy, it becomes absolute comedy, embracing and comprehending the particular comedies played by each partial form of consciousness. If it is to become criticism (as in Schlegel or Derrida), Hegel might say, let it become an *absolute* criticism which is able to take account of itself by a systematic structure of self-reference. Although this is not the place for a full account of all the appearances of poetry and the poetic attitude in the *Phenomenology*, let me say something about just the last two chapters, on revealed religion and absolute knowing. Hegel, living in the Christian world, had a more severe problem with literary texts than did Plato or Aristotle; the Christian world has a single canonical book which is held to be true, whereas the Greeks had many—and anticipated the production of new ones. So, in revealed religion, Hegel takes on the text of the Bible and subjects it to a thorough rationalistic criticism, showing the impossibility of its narrative account of the creation of the world and the fall and redemption of human beings. Narratives based on picture-thinking (*Vorstellen*) make the origin of human separation from God incomprehensible; in his ironic paraphrase of *Genesis*, Hegel says:

Man is pictorially thought of in this way: that it once *happened* (*geschehen*), without any necessity, that he lost the form of being at one with himself through plucking the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, and was expelled from the state of innocence, from Nature which yielded its fruits without toil, and from Paradise, from the garden with its creatures. (para. 775).

In earlier essays, such as *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, Hegel had attempted to show that Judaism and Christianity both followed a tragic pattern. He did this by producing a revised version of biblical narrative, rewriting the Christian story—by deleting the resurrection, for example. The premise (later to be challenged by Nietzsche) was that a successful folk-religion cannot be tragic. Yet Hegel had nothing at that time to put in the place of Christianity. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel could opt for a comic version of Christianity by dismissing the text as a jumble of narrative inconsistencies and by arguing that no narrative account of such matters could be coherent. A narrative of mere happenings must give way to a truly revealed (*offenbar*) religion, an absolute narrative whose necessity is intelligible.

Many have sought deep mysteries in Hegel's last chapter, on absolute knowing; but it has also been remarked that the chapter is relatively thin. I am inclined to the second reading. Hegel is not finally letting the absolute cat out of its absolute bag here; that is the complex achievement of the *Logic*. The *Phenomenology* has had the task of making the world safe for logic by overcoming the dragons of poetry. In fact they have been absorbed and reconciled within absolute knowing itself; so confident is Hegel of this solution that he feels free to conclude the *Phenomenology* by citing a poem by Schiller and, in good critical fashion, deforming his lines without any acknowledgment. For Schiller's:

*Aus dem Kelch des ganzen Seelenreiches  
Schäumt ihm — die Unendlichkeit*

from the chalice of the whole realm of souls  
foams forth for Him — infinitude

Hegel substitutes:

*aus dem Kelche dieses Geisterreiches  
schäumt ihm seine Unendlichkeit*

from the chalice of this realm of spirits  
foams forth for Him his own infinitude.

Hegel's changes in the lines from "Die Freundschaft," Kojève notes,<sup>19</sup> tend to humanize the passage, eliminating any suggestion of an unknowable world of souls or an unreachable infinite. To understand the place of the poetic principle in the *Phenomenology* it is necessary to know that "Die Freundschaft" is a thoroughly Platonic poem. However, the Plato whom Schiller is paraphrasing and imitating is not the critic of poetry but the philosophical poet of the *Phaedrus*. The poem recurs to the imagery of the car and driver, the flight upward and the circular dance in which time and measure are submerged. Schiller has substituted friendship for Platonic *erôs* and has in other ways obscured the sexual aspect of the Platonic myth. But it is in essentials the Platonic story of an ascent to an indescribably divine realm through the passionate fellowship with one who also seeks. Now remember that Hegel had said in the preface that it is the *Parmenides* which is the greatest *Kunstwerk* of ancient dialectic, not Plato's "scientifically valueless myths." So the altered citation of Schiller may be taken not only as a rejection of the unknowable which haunts the philosophies of Plato, Kant, and some of the post-Kantians, but also as a rejection of the view of philosophy and poetry in the *Phaedrus*, in Schiller, and in many of the romantics. The *Phaedrus* suggests that true poetry and true philosophy are both forms of a longing which is in principle unsatisfiable for human beings. Since there is no absolute discursive mode of apprehending the real, dialectical poetry and dialectical talk are correlative modes of pointing us on the right path and indicating the proper way, even if it is a way which cannot be completed in human life.<sup>20</sup> Now in Hegel, the "we," the mutual knowledge and recognition

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19. Kojève, p. 442.

20. The reader may well wonder just where Plato himself is to be placed in terms of the ancient quarrel. I and Hegel seem to cite him against himself: as the enemy of poetry (*Republic*) and the practitioner of a stringent nonpoetic dialectic (*Parmenides*), but also as the genial poet of the *Phaedrus* (to which we might easily add the *Symposium* and other works). Plato is just not as single-minded about the dispute as we would like him to be. In part this is because the assimilation of philosophy and poetry in the *Phaedrus* (and elsewhere) is a genuine side of his thought; it is also due to the possibility that there is something self-serving in his claim that there is an "ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry. For this supposes that the two are rather clearly distinguishable from both the discursive and the institutional point of view. In fact the difference was hardly suggested with any firmness before Socrates.



of the scientific community, has replaced the longing of Plato's "lovers" and Schiller's "friends." Philosophy can cohabit with poetry only when it is still the love of wisdom and not wisdom itself. As Hegel says in the preface, his aim is to "bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title "love of knowing" and be *actual* knowing" (para. 5). Hegel's version of Schiller, then, is like the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*. Socrates introduces that story by saying that it is no "tale of Alcinous"; that is, it is not like the deceitful stories told by Odysseus which include a terrifying picture of the next world and leave us full of fear of the unknown. The myth of Er offers us a fundamentally rational structure to replace Homer's world of shades and its hinted horrors. Like Plato's story, Hegel's is poetry of a second order which has been purged of the unruly poetic element and is now obedient to a victorious philosophy. This is the way the poetic world ends, not with a bang, but with an editorial revision.

University of Kansas





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