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# Hegel's Dialectic of Artistic Meaning

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GARY SHAPIRO

# *Hegel's Dialectic of Artistic Meaning*

## I. ARTISTIC MEANING: INTENTION OR INTERPRETATION?

WHATEVER ELSE they are, works of art are intentional human products. Our responses to such works are understandings and interpretations. That the works are or may be physical objects, cultural symptoms, or commodities and that audiences may be shocked, sexually excited, or politically instructed are irrelevant to the cognitive poles of intention and interpretation; these make art philosophically significant and differentiate it from that which has no meaning, despite possible similarities in apparent structure or emotional effect. Cognitivist theories of art usually tend to focus rather exclusively on just one of the two poles which characterize art so conceived — the artist's intention or the interpretation given by audience or critics. Philosophers with idealistic commitments have often argued, as do Croce and Collingwood, that the artist's experience, understood as a unique expression, is not merely the meaning of the work of art, but the work itself. New Critics object to any reference to the artist's intentions as tending to distort the sense of "the text itself." The structure of disputes in aesthetics, to a large extent, consists either of conflicts within these tendencies or between them.<sup>1</sup> So intentionalists may very well disagree as to whether intentions are general or unique, conscious or unconscious. Those who reject intentionalism but retain a cognitive conception of interpretation may dis-

agree as to the proper criteria of interpretation and the degree to which a work admits multiple significations. These family quarrels can sometimes be shelved for polemics against the "intentional fallacy" or for charges that a work sundered from its author's intention must be radically ambiguous. Such disputes can lead to rather extreme and uncomfortable claims. One such extreme holds that the meaning of a work is simply identical with the author's intention, the audience's role being simply to identify themselves with the artist's thought. The complement of this view is that which takes as paradigms of art those independently existing works which encourage us to discover a multiplicity of meanings, interpretations, and possibilities. The choice between individual solitary expression or a celebration of ambiguities is not a happy one.

One way of dealing with the apparently deep inconsistency of these approaches is to adopt an empirical point of view which rejects the exclusive validity of either tendency. It may be suggested, quite plausibly, that works vary in the extent to which their makers have authority over their meaning or in the degree to which their texture or structure is open and consequently admits a variety of interpretations. I believe that this fact offers only a partial solution to the dilemmas posed above. For intentions and interpretations seem to play a fundamental role in art which tempt us to seek some intelligible connection between them. If it is a fact that works of different styles, artists, or periods may be found which exemplify

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one or the other of the theories discussed above, the task for aesthetics should be to exhibit this as a *reasoned fact*.

It is an interesting and (as far as I can tell) little-noticed virtue of Hegel's discussion of art in the *Phenomenology of Mind* that it aims at such a reasoned account of the roles of intention and interpretation in art. In brief, Hegel recognizes that insofar as it is cognitive, art revolves around these two poles. Rather than focus on one of these to the exclusion of the other, however, Hegel tells a story, or more accurately, rationally reconstructs the philosophical history of art. The story has a place for the happy moment of union between the artist and his audience, for the confusion of variant meanings guessed into a work by a public alienated from the producer, and for a variety of intermediate stages. The key to the story is Hegel's view that the kinds of questions raised about artistic meaning are not simply external to art, and therefore limited to the discipline of philosophical aesthetics. He suggests that art itself involves the tendency to become aware of the problems which arise from the gap between intention and interpretation; with this awareness it searches for a solution having the form of an identity of artist's and audience's meaning through the medium of the work. While one-sided theories tend to enshrine the identity or ambiguity detected in a particular artistic phase, Hegel suggests a rational historical analysis which demonstrates their interconnection.

Before examining the details of this ideal story as Hegel tells it in his chapter on "The Religion of Art" (*Kunstreligion*), some clarifications may be useful. First, I will treat Hegel's discussion somewhat selectively, dealing with those elements in it which are related to questions of artistic meaning. Second, there is an apparent problem posed by Hegel's limitation of his analysis to classical Greek art with a religious interest. The ensuing discussion will show that Hegel was largely correct in thinking that the attitudes of Greek artists and audiences have quasi-universal significance. In the meantime these points should be kept in mind, which will be confirmed

by what follows: Hegel's reconstruction of Greek art is only apparently chronological; its true order is a logical sequence of increasingly adequate attempts to realize a purpose. This is, of course, the pattern of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and to some extent of his entire system; chronological order tends to but does not exactly coincide with teleological order. That the art in question is religious should not appear strange when we recall that for Hegel religion is a figurative way of attaining self-knowledge. In fact the particular development with which we will be concerned shows a progress from the naive religious consciousness which takes the gods to be independent subjects to the more philosophical awareness that our thought about the gods is a form of reflection on ourselves.

Like some other writers on aesthetics Hegel begins by distinguishing the artist from the craftsman or artisan. The artisan who produces symbolic objects with abstract form (such as pyramids and obelisks) is like the artist insofar as what he produces serves no obvious external purpose, as do the products of the cook or the carpenter. Yet he differs from the artist because he acts more instinctively and mechanically than the latter. Where the artisan simply follows a pattern without much thought, the artist constructs or invents a pattern. In Platonic terms, it is not that the artisan is closer to the form of the bed than the painter; it is rather that the artistically painted bed is the imaginative construction of a bed rather than the slavish imitation of a pattern. Despite some apparent similarities, Hegel's contrast of artist and craftsman also differs in some respects from that which Collingwood has made current. For Collingwood the artist is free from the mechanical imposition of form on matter only to the extent to which he expresses an absolutely unique emotion, disregarding all concepts and ideas which might govern his product.<sup>2</sup> According to Hegel, the artist is a kind of conceptual thinker; he does have a specifiable aim, as does the craftsman, but his aim is reflectively chosen. His activity is not invariably determined by his concepts; but this is because his concepts are subject

to progressive clarification and determination, not because he escapes the conceptual for the emotional.

Much is built into Hegel's original characterization of the artist. His activity is said to be intentional and self-conscious; he is beyond the world of feeling and emotion which both expressionist theory and popular opinion tend to confuse with art, just as he is distinct from the unreflective craftsman. As an artist he is already a kind of thinker; so Hegel might suggest that all art is "conceptual art," genuine art being constituted by intentional activity capable of reflective modification. What will such an artist aim at doing? Hegel suggests that he will attempt to depict the gods, and we are immediately tempted to think that he is either guilty of a false generalization from the Greek experience or that he has illegitimately imposed his own belief that all rational activity aims at knowledge of the divine (or Absolute) on the great variety of artistic modes and styles. Whether the divine is the ultimate subject of all judgment is indeed a large question; by discussing Hegel's attempt to articulate this insight in his treatment of art, it may appear surprisingly plausible and subtle. If we recall that the gods are to a large extent alienated and externalized visions of ourselves, Hegel's point becomes a bit clearer. The artist is a self-conscious being, no longer content with a life which would consist only of instinctual and social routines. He will be most true to himself when he attempts to manifest or express his self-consciousness. But why should the gods be the necessary medium for such self-expression? According to Hegel they will not always be necessary — not even, as we shall see, in art-religion — but they do represent the logically simplest form in which the artist's self-knowledge will take shape. And the activity of this simplest form exhibits our tendency to recognize human traits elsewhere before we recognize them in ourselves. The artist has to *learn* self-expression, just as children learn to articulate their own states of mind by commenting on the (projected or actual) mental life of others (including such surrogates as

animals and dolls). Hegel's reconstruction of the phases of artistic activity attempts to exhibit the ideal order of such self-education. Coincidentally it will become clear why the artist's self-education will involve the establishment of an artistic meaning accessible to himself and his audience.<sup>3</sup>

## II. FROM ABSTRACT SEPARATION TO COMIC IDENTITY

### A. The abstract work of art.

The simplest artist (already far removed from the craftsman by his self-consciousness) aims at exhibiting the features of the gods. Now although he will tend to presuppose that the gods are distinct from himself and his audience, the artist must embody their ideal self-consciousness; and the only forms of such embodiment with which he is familiar are the human manifestations of self-consciousness. So the initial result of representing the gods in a plastic medium will be, typically, the statue of an idealized human being. Here the point is not that sculpture is the first art-form to arise in a historical sequence, but that a static, non-verbal representation will be the most primitive means of realizing art's purpose.

However, as soon as the artist reflects on his achievement, he is struck by its inadequacy. The inadequacy which the artist detects in his own work is the vast discrepancy between the object — e.g. the sculpture — and that which it is meant to represent or embody. Hegel draws attention to the difference by saying that such works of art are "abstract"; they are not living or self-conscious either in the way that their putative object is or, more significantly, in the way that their creators and audience are. The failure of abstract art lies in its separation of artist, art-work, and audience. Structurally the defect of such art is that for either the artist or the audience, an experience of this actually triadic situation tends to be dyadic. The audience sees some meaning in the work but attempts to understand the work as an independent object. Such understanding is necessarily indefinite and indeterminate, for there can be no meaning without purpose or intention, and by neg-

lecting the artist the audience attempts to discover impossibly free-floating meanings. (Although Hegel does not remark on the matter specifically, he may have in mind the Greek tendency to regard the plastic artist as a mere craftsman, inferior both because of his manual labor and his lack of theoretical activity.)

Those who refuse to accept dialectical accounts of historical matters may plausibly claim that the artist might not reflect, but proceed indefinitely to create works which he would reject if he ever were in a more reflective mood. Now Hegel will probably agree that such an unreflective continuation would be logically possible. What he would insist on are: (1) since the artist is a self-conscious agent, there is an intrinsic probability that such reflection will occur at some point in the practice of art, and (2) despite the possibility of repeating poorly conceived attempts indefinitely, once critical reflection intervenes the problematics of the situation and the nature of self-consciousness allow us to observe the rational nature of the criticism and the resulting modification of the initial intention. These are the crucial aspects of Hegel's analysis, not simply of art, but of the various attitudes of mind which he traces throughout the *Phenomenology*, and they help explain the interplay of contingent and rational factors in his account of human activity.

Hegel brings out the incoherence of abstract art by noting the opposition of its internal and external sides. For a work to be meaningful and significant it must have an "inner" or intentional meaning of its own. Yet abstract works are "external" insofar as they give the impression of being relatively independent objects or surfaces. For both artist and audience, the completed work is unhappily externalized: for the artist, because it is radically unlike his own activity, and, for the audience, because it cannot serve as the basis of the inner meaning which they wish to discover in it. The upshot is the discovery by the artist that "the work is, therefore, not by itself really an animated thing; it is a whole only when its process of coming to be is taken along

with it."<sup>4</sup> Even this restriction must be strengthened; for Hegel's full analysis requires that the satisfactory work is one whose reception or understanding must also be "taken along with it."

The unhappiness and disappointment produced by abstract art suggest the perennial problems of false understanding which provoke philosophical reflections on intention and interpretation. In this sense there are some significant analogies between Hegel's sense of "abstract" art and the more modern use of the term; and recent minimal art seems to be a paradigm case of what Hegel has in mind. For the latter reduces art to its minimal abstract or formal situation, inviting speculation about how such a skeletal structure can support the flesh of meaning. The audience's joy in such a work rings false to the artist for, as Hegel says, he sees that it has overlooked "the pain of his self-discipline and the pain of production, . . . the exertion and strain of his own toil."<sup>5</sup>

The key to Hegel's analysis is the view that the history of art exhibits a rational development which aims at overcoming the incoherence of its abstract form. This orientation gives his account of certain art-forms an apparently schematic structure. Yet this structure is derived from the three components of the artistic situation — the artist, the work, and the audience. Even within abstract art, which is dominated by the work or the objective point of view, Hegel discerns the hymn and the cult as alternative ways of resolving the problem of artistic meaning. The lack of explicit self-consciousness in these forms, however, lays them open to the same objections as sculpture. Hegel distinguishes two other major artistic modes in addition to the abstract; these are living and spiritual art. Their general structure derives from art's aim at a totality which will include a work to mediate between artist's intention and audience's interpretation. Such mediation occurs in a paradigmatic fashion when, as in art-religion, the object of artistic production is insight into self-consciousness. For the general form and phases of the solution can then be anticipated: the self-conscious



artist attempts in his work to exhibit the general nature of self-consciousness to an audience which is also self-conscious. As the object of art becomes increasingly self-conscious, the boundaries between it and the artist or audience tend to dissolve. Hegel himself points to this, somewhat enigmatically, when he says:

As the work comes closer to itself in the coming together of its aspects, there comes about thereby at the same time the other fact, that the work comes closer to the self-consciousness performing it, and that the latter attains in the work knowledge of itself as it truly is.<sup>6</sup>

#### B. The living work of art.

Since the abstract work of art is handicapped by the sheerly external nature of the art-work, the artist can be tempted to collapse the distinction between himself and the object. He does this simply by shaping himself into an aesthetic object. What he does or is is the work of art. The strangeness in Hegel's own time of counting a Bacchic revel or the Olympic games as works of art has largely vanished in an artistic world filled with happenings, living theater, and various more or less bizarre ways in which the artist becomes his own exhibit. In the Bacchic revel, as conceived both by Hegel and its modern practitioners, there is an indulgence in unrestricted, spontaneous feeling which is also represented as an identity with the gods (or, in modern language, participation in a higher state of consciousness). By assuming the role of artistic object, the artists or performers have in fact liberated themselves from the constraints of form and the discipline of artistic work. What they mean is just what they do; it requires neither to be thought out nor to be interpreted from their works. However, this apparent liberation is not as complete as it claims to be; because its content is immediate natural enthusiasm it is subject to the instability of all unobjectified feeling. While performing, the artists are filled with meaning (which they take to be divine) but to a spectator (or to themselves, when the mood has passed) the meaning is not apparent. Like the naive advocate of sense-certainty who thinks of a

"now" or a "here" as the fullest possible meaning, the art of emotional celebration passes from imagined fullness to abysmal emptiness as soon as it ceases to be immediate.

If stability of meaning cannot be reached this way, however, it may possibly be gained by importing some regularity and balance into the activity of the subjective artist. He now sees that his activity "must produce a work which confronts it as the statue stands over against the enthusiasm of the artist in the previous case." However, in the subjective (or "living") mode of art which is now operative this work cannot be a lifeless statue but "man . . . himself as the figure elaborated and moulded for perfectly free movement."<sup>7</sup> We might think here not only of the Olympic games but of various (choreographed) forms of dance. The problem with both forms of subjective art is that they exhibit a dialectic like that found in the objective phase. Each variety aims at a kind of wholeness or totality of meaning. But by placing himself directly in the position of the art-work the artist must end either in a purely transient activity or as a beautiful, but detached object. Each is a one-sided parody of the life of mind which involves both movement and rest. The artist must find a way of objectifying self-consciousness (which the revel fails to do) while not losing the self-consciousness of the object (as does the game or dance). Hegel analyzes both the problem and its solution in an important passage which describes both the last possible form of living art and the minimal conception of spiritual art:

In the case of the Bacchic revelling enthusiasm the self is beside itself; in bodily beauty of form it is spiritual being that is outside itself. The dim obscurity of consciousness in the one case and its wild stammering utterance, must be taken up into the transparent existence of the latter, and the clear but spiritless form of the latter into the emotional inwardness of the former. The perfect element in which the inwardness is as external as the externality is inward, is once again language.<sup>8</sup>

Language is a uniquely privileged medium, according to Hegel, because it resolves the

tension of internal meaning and external vehicle which until now has sabotaged all of the artist's efforts to produce a totality of meaning. Here Hegel is considering not the emotional expression of the hymn, or the cryptic utterance of the oracle, but the clear, universal, and deliberately employed language of the poet. The poet says just what he means and he does so in a series of words which can be repeated and examined. Language is an external embodiment of internal meaning which obviously suggests a speaker and at least a potential listener. Language cannot be mistaken for an independently existing object, as can the statue, or for a mindless performance, as can the movements of the dancer or gymnast. It offers the possibility of an identity of meaning in artist, work, and audience, for thought and understanding are their expression in speech; they are not, as in the previous forms of art, conceived of as peripherally attached to the work from different directions by artist and audience.

At the same time, the introduction of language also does away with some of the exclusively national or ethnic characteristics which tend to make works of art idiosyncratic or esoteric. Statues, for example, must represent certain physical types; but in using language (assumed to be translatable and not merely a dialect), art has "laid aside the particular impressions, the special tones and chords of that nature which it, as the actual spirit of the nation includes."<sup>9</sup> Hegel does not mean to suggest that all traces of particularity are destroyed in linguistic art, but rather that the search for a totality of meaning will tend to give up those specific and particular aspects of art which are restrictive of universal meaning. If Hegel is right, then he has answered the criticism that he has falsely generalized from a particular artistic tradition. For he is attempting to show that the *particular* aims and characteristics of Greek art are such that they have, when pursued, the dialectical consequence of raising themselves to *universality*. It is not simply a fact, for Hegel, as it was for many of his contemporaries, that Greek art had a uni-

versal appeal; rather its history itself exhibits a rational development toward such universality.

### C. The spiritual work of art.

In terms of the dialectic of intention and interpretation, the special importance which Hegel attaches to the spiritual work of art should be clear. The poetry he has in mind is that in which the three elements of the artistic situation, i.e., the artist, the work, and the audience are all distinctively self-conscious. The middle term of this relationship now consists in the depiction or performance of human actions. A poet uses the self-conscious medium of language and creates images of human action to an audience who can (and ultimately *will*) succeed in partially identifying themselves with both poet and characters. Because there is no premature attempt to collapse artist's meaning and audience's understanding into an intuitive or emotional unity, this identity is stable and articulate; it is a developed and structured identity which Hegel in his *Logic* calls the "true" identity as distinct from the trivial identity of a physical object, event, or feeling with itself.<sup>10</sup>

Hegel is claiming that art can find a solution to the problem of artistic meaning and understanding. Our own experience of literary art and criticism, however, may lead us to wonder whether in fact this solution is excessively formalistic. For although it seems to outline a way in which artistic meaning can overcome the apparent dichotomy of intention and interpretation, we all know that literary works are notoriously subject to divergent interpretations; and works of literary art have been the paradigm cases in modern disputes about the "intentional fallacy" or in discussions of the "hermeneutic circle." Hegel, as I understand him, would not deny any of this. His point is not that all which we call poetry is specially suited to overcome the problems of authorial intention and multiple meaning, but that within poetry a way of dissolving such problems arises out of poetry's own goals and materials. Two considerations make this view somewhat plau-

sible: (1) Hegel has in mind poetry which is quite clearly addressed to an audience; he is excluding at this point the esoteric hymns and oracles which purport to be sheer communions with or reports from the gods. The dyadic structure of such poetry makes it merely "abstract" and not "spiritual" art. (2) It may be that literary works figure so prominently in discussions of artistic meaning and criteria of interpretation precisely because, while they promise more articulate significance than do visual or musical works, we are puzzled to encounter problems of meaning *even* in their case.

The way in which Hegel presents the varieties of poetry shows his intention to demonstrate that poetry can *in fact* attain a totality of meaning as opposed to simply aiming at it. Like the other forms of art, poetry realizes itself through a series of progressively more complex and adequate forms. In the epic, it is a communication by a singer to an audience by means of represented human actions. Yet at such a minimal level the poet will continue to think of true self-consciousness as bound up with the gods. So in effect the human characters of the epic form the "middle term" of two "syllogisms." They connect *mere* humans (the epic singer and his audience) with the gods by means of their heroic extraordinary nature (as in the *Iliad* such heroes are typically of at least partially divine descent). They also connect the understanding of the audience with the poet's intention. To the extent that the content of the epic involves a different kind of mediating (between human and divine) than does its form (between human and human) it will exhibit inconsistencies which show that it is not a fully adequate way of realizing the totality of artistic meaning.

Far from being an uncritical admirer of Greek art, Hegel's critique of Homer's inconsistencies is more radical than Socrates' charges of poetic ignorance or second-level imitating. The key to the inconsistencies lies in the fact that humans must *act* in the epic, suggesting that human activity is not simply an accessory instrument in clarifying the nature of things but part of that very nature. This emphasis on action de-

feats the purpose of the epic "syllogism" which is supposed to mediate between human and divine self-consciousness. For the singer represents himself as passively inspired by the Muse and does not look at his own activity as genuine work. While the singer acts without seeming to, the gods seem to act but are in fact the butts of an unconscious comedy. The gods are the ostensible agents of the epic with control over earthly events; yet this condition renders their often frantic concern for the doings of humans unintelligible. The gods exert themselves over what they might perform without effort and they rely on humans to give them an occupation and diversion. It is the gods who are actually dependent on humans. The gods also retain the duality of particularity and universality which has been prominent in the preceding dialectic of art. On the one hand they are universal self-consciousness, free of ordinary human constraints; on the other they have a specific identity or character which links them with specific inclinations toward love or violence, for example. Thus the gods stand in a "relation to others, which, in virtue of the opposition it involves, is one of strife, is a comic self-forgetfulness of their eternal nature."<sup>11</sup> Artistically the epic recognizes this by introducing fate which is an "unintelligible void" to which the gods "stand related selfless and sorrowing, for these determinate natures do not find themselves in this purely formal necessity."<sup>12</sup>

There is an intricate process of reduplication occurring at this point in the *Phenomenology*: the unhappy consciousness previously attributed to men unsuccessfully seeking union with the divine has been internalized by the gods themselves. As humans become more conscious of themselves through artistic presentations of the gods the latter are fated to travel that "highway of despair" from which the humans are emerging. Hegel indicates that the epic singer is in some ways superior to the gods by pointing out that whereas the singer's task is recollection (*Erinnerung*) the gods are comically self-forgetful. Recollection or re-internalization is in fact the fundamental principle of the *Phenomenology*. By this



process of internalization what is otherwise external, abstract, and fragmentary is incorporated into a developing totality of meaning. The epic poet is perhaps the first figure in the dialectical progression of the work who is not only an object of that principle but a user of it. In contrast with the abstract artist who has unhappily externalized himself, the epic poet has begun the task of recapturing what has been estranged.

Nevertheless, the epic poet, typically invoking the Muses to speak *through* him is not fully aware of his own power. The identity of meaning which poetry is formally capable of can be better realized in tragedy which makes the tragic actor into a kind of poet. In tragedy the action of the hero is combined with the formative power of the poet in the person of the tragic actor. The artist is no longer merely implicit in the work: tragic actors do not reproduce common or externally conceived human actions but "they are artists" who "make the very inner being external."<sup>13</sup> Hegel seems to be stressing the fact that the tragic characters appear as artistic shapers of their own lives; they have their own aesthetic sense of what constitutes a glorious or heroic life which appears in all their actions and words. Even when overtaken by calamity they rise superior to it by giving it a poetic meaning, often by the use of highly charged metaphorical language and extended images in the most desperate circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

The self-conscious artist takes his own activity more and more explicitly as a model for humanity in general. The self-knowledge of the tragic artist is logically prior to the Aristotelian "imitation of human action." However, the tragic actor does not yet stand in a coherent relationship to the chorus or audience and the gods. The chorus, which shares the audience's spectatorial attitude toward the heroic action, is still infected with passivity in the fact of the unfolding dramatic action; for it, the dialectical reversals of the action provoke pity and fear. These emotions are the *defects* of tragedy (and not, as Aristotle would have it, part of its characteristic virtue), for they reveal the persistence of an unhappy consciousness which confronts the

objective world as something overpowering and frustrating. These emotions are signs of a failure of understanding which even the artist-heroes are unable to overcome.

The persistence of the gods in tragedy is an indication that the other two elements in the artistic triad are also incompletely self-conscious and so contribute to tragedy's inconsistencies. The tragic hero's problem is itself one of knowledge and ignorance; in a world divided into two parts he is fully aware only of one, and therefore even his self-knowledge is deficient. Here's Hegel's well-known analysis of the social structure of the tragic world comes into play. The tragic world is that of customary morality raised to self-consciousness; it exhibits the conflict of the human law of the state and the divine law of family obligation on the level of knowledge. In *Antigone* it is the clash of the two moral tendencies, each having its own justification, which represents the moral dilemma of the ancient world. In his analysis of tragedy (as opposed to that of *Sittlichkeit*) Hegel is interested in the cognitive problems of the actors in this moral conflict. Their ignorance is not a merely human failing (an Aristotelian flaw or error) but is produced by the deceptive pronouncements of the gods. (Apollo, the god of light, leads Orestes and Oedipus into darkness by his obscure pronouncements.) In this context, the heart of tragedy is failure of self-knowledge due to the persistence of nature in customary morality and the incompleteness of the artist's effort to rescue self-consciousness from its objectification in the gods. Tragedy shows the partiality of the various divine powers and their reconciliation through death or absolution, suggesting that only the totality of these powers is real. Conceptually understood this is the notion (*Begriff*); artistically, it is Zeus as a sole deity who has shed some of his anthropomorphic traits. The gods themselves do not generally appear on the tragic stage and so Hegel can claim in a double sense that tragedy "completes the depopulation of heaven." Hegel is saying, in effect, that Plato was right in pointing out the inconsistent role of the gods in epic and tragic

poetry but that he failed to notice that "the expulsion of such unreal insubstantial ideas . . . demanded by the philosophers of antiquity, thus already has its beginning in tragedy in general."<sup>15</sup>

The abstract necessity of tragedy is also still external to the tragic actors. They disclose a kinship with the passive chorus: on the one hand they are moments in the progress of the notion, but on the other they are human beings playing a part. The object in the artistic triad which had apparently dropped out, leaving a direct relation between actors and audience, reappears: "The hero, who appears before the onlookers, breaks up into his mask and the actor into the person of the play and the actual self."<sup>16</sup> So tragedy repeats the problem of the statue at a more complex level: the original trichotomy of artist, work, and audience re-emerges in such a way that the self-consciousness of the different elements is distinct and art still fails at its task.

The need for a new form of art at this point should be evident, and the problems of tragedy indicate the general character which it will have:

The self-consciousness of the heroes must step forth from its mask and be represented as knowing itself to be the fate both of the gods of the chorus and of the absolute powers themselves, and as being no longer separated from the chorus, the universal consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

That is, the new form of art will do for the relation between art-work and audience what tragedy has done for that between the artist and his work. Tragedy makes the hero himself into an artist; comedy, the ultimate type of art-religion, breaks down the separation between such artist-heroes and their audience. The clear content of comedy is the identity of human self-consciousness in each aspect of the artistic triad, attained by eliminating the kind of role which the gods play in the preceding art-forms; since human self-consciousness is no longer seen in such externalized form the audience of art can see itself in the work as does the artist who creates artistic characters in his own image. While tragedy reduces the divine pantheon to the single distant figure of Zeus, comedy dethrones

even him, and the vortex reigns in his place. The general spirit of comedy is a relentless turning of the negative power of mind against anything which appears to be fixed and substantial. Along with the gods, the leaders of society, the philosophers, and the notions of a substantial good and beauty are represented as superficial, imaginary, or mere abstractions.

What particularly defines comedy, however, is the unparalleled "state of spiritual good health" in which all of these negations occur.<sup>18</sup> For the spirit of comedy is to rejoice in the destruction and dissolution of all the elements of tradition and custom which it negates. In this respect it is the antithesis of what Hegel calls the unhappy consciousness: the latter is aware of itself as self-conscious mind, but is embittered by its sense of being radically separated from a stable and divine self which seems to exist quite independently. The unhappy consciousness turns its negative power within, supposing the impregnability of what is external to it. In comedy self-consciousness sees itself as being all that there is after its negative power has overcome what was apparently external. In this self-recognition the attitude of artist, art-work (or character), and audience reach a happy union. The puzzles of meaning which characterize the other forms of art are no longer present. The comic character cannot be sharply distinguished from the comic actor (as could the corresponding pair in tragedy) because both exercise the power of ridicule and each laughs at himself as well as the world. The actor is free to drop his mask because he stands in no danger of being severed from his *persona*. Similarly, the audience is no longer passive but participates in the process of negation, even if it is alternately the object as well as the subject of laughter. In logical terms, necessity, which appears in the enigmatic form of fate in epic and tragedy, has become incorporated into self-consciousness which now sees itself as both agent and spectator, subject to no external force.

In the context of the problems of artistic meaning which we have been pursuing, comedy marks a culminating stage. The

sense which artist and audience have of the art-work is precisely the same here, and it is so because each finds itself in the mediating element of the comic actor. Significantly the dispensability of the comedian's mask shows that the middle term here both is and is not an intervening element. In a formal sense it occupies the same position as the abstract statue. Yet the mask can be dropped, so as to eliminate any barrier to identity with the audience. Hegel enforces the point by means of a supreme pun:

The religion of art is fulfilled and consummated in [comedy] and has come full circle . . . the genuine self of the actor (*Schauspieler*) coincides with his *persona* or mask (*Person*), just as the onlooker (*Zuschauer*) is perfectly at home in what is represented before him.<sup>30</sup>

This may be one of Hegel's most accessible presentations of his notion of identity-in-difference. It is a significant point in the larger development of his *Phenomenology* which has as its aim the discovery of a form of mind in which the distinction between what an attitude or form of consciousness is in its own eyes and in the eyes of a wise observer (what it is for-itself and what it is for-us) collapses. What emerges finally is a kind of absolute subject or privileged "we" which knows that it has realized exactly what it has aimed at. Within the more limited context set by the problem of artistic meaning we might note that *Schau* or show (appearance, presentation) is the medium of art, as distinguished from the more purely conceptual activity of philosophy. Art realizes its aim when one who plays at or puts on this show is no longer clearly distinct from one who watches the show. That Hegel takes this development from abstract art to comedy to be paradigmatic for all art is confirmed by the fact that his later *Lectures on Fine Art* also end with comedy. There he makes it an essential characteristic of great comedy that the comic characters laugh at themselves as well as being laughable; that is, they share the attitude of the artist and the audience.<sup>20</sup> It has not always been noted that in Hegel's two major treatments of art comedy is the supreme or culminating form of art. The belief that he gave some special priority to

tragedy still seems to be prevalent; in fact he has attempted to show that tragedy is an incoherent effort to establish a totality of artistic meaning. If the preceding analysis is correct, Hegel has given what amounts to a transcendental deduction of comedy as the only possible way of overcoming the dichotomies posed by our experience of artistic intentions and interpretations.

### III. PROBLEMS WITH IDENTITY

Hegel has told a story about art which claims much but is apparently open to objections of several sorts. If viewed as a history of Greek art, it is undoubtedly highly schematic and arbitrary; while as a philosophical theory about art in general it seems unduly limited by the specific characteristics of Greek art. Such objections are variations of the venerable criticism that Hegel's *Phenomenology* exhibits a systematic confusion between history and transcendental psychology. Hegel's own style does not always help to clarify the situation, and English readers are not well-served by an edition which, by means of footnotes and critical introductions, makes Hegel appear to be more interested in historical detail than does the unvarnished text. Apparently Hegel (along with Schelling, Marx, and Nietzsche) saw Greek art as more than just the product of a particular culture. What lends it a universal significance is the fact that, as Hegel elaborates in his lectures on fine art, it tends to find the perfect fusion of spiritual content with sensuous form. Modern works of art may be richer in spiritual meaning, but tend to drop their connection with the sensuous. Hegel is also in good company in viewing Greek culture as itself fundamentally artistic insofar as it exemplifies the emergence of spirit out of its natural surroundings. Plato's apparently extravagant complaints about the pervasive effects of art (if not his analysis of the alleged destructive nature of these effects) become more plausible on this view. Moreover, Hegel gives us an analysis which purports to show how Greek art itself makes the transition from its more particular to its more universal phases: this development occurs precisely because of the artist's need

to eliminate the gaps between himself, his work, and his audience. What is peculiar about Greek art, Hegel might say, is not the presence of this problem and its solution, but the direct and concentrated manner in which it advanced from one to the other until it dissolved itself in laughter.

Yet Greek art, in Hegel's presentation, seems tied to a highly specific religious interest. To regard religious art as the pattern of all art seems patently absurd if one has any talent at all for imagining counter-examples. Nevertheless, I believe Hegel can be defended here. Hegel pictures the Greek artist as the inventor of the gods, as Herodotus regarded Homer and Hesiod. These gods are artistic gods; they serve the artist's need to create an image of pure or perfect self-consciousness. As soon as he begins to work with them, they lose their external and particular forms, while the artist sees that what he was seeking is in fact exemplified in his own activity. The religion in art-religion must be conceived not only in terms of its more or less arbitrary origins, but also in relation to its self-clarifying purpose which eventually celebrates the death of the gods and the human assumption of their place. Although from a Marxist or Nietzschean perspective this may appear as a crass justification of the bourgeois artist and his audience, Hegel would claim that such criticism depends on reading back into art-religion that particularity which it is in the process of transcending. In fact the religious aspect of this art, which allows it to serve as a paradigm for art in general, consists in its exhibition of the universal pattern of Hegelian reflection. Aiming at the truth or the essence of things, we tend to find it first in an apparently independent object; reflection forces us to an awareness of our own self-consciousness; but the problematic situation of self-consciousness, when confronted with an external object leads it to seek another which is truly its own. When such reflection occurs in art, the result can be viewed in the language of aesthetics as the identity of intention and interpretation; in Hegel's own terminology, the purpose which was at first merely implicit (*an sich*), although it

had a significance for us (*für-uns*), has become aware of itself (*für-sich*).

In this paper I have not attempted to evaluate Hegel's conception of artistic meaning. Instead I have suggested that he provides a brilliant solution to some of the dilemmas concerning intention and interpretation in art which have bedeviled modern aesthetics; to speak more strictly, he claims (in a more modest vein) to have shown that art itself is beset by these dilemmas and can offer solutions to them. That such solutions will exhaust the resources of art (and of a certain kind of religion) is one of the melancholy ironies so typical of his philosophy. To evaluate Hegel's view we would need to go beyond his analysis of art or art-religion and critically confront his conception of consciousness. Here the major problems bearing on the area we have been examining can at least be pointed out. They stem from two very central Hegelian claims (perhaps they are assumptions of his system): (1) every significant human activity tends to pass into the theory of that activity, the theory into meta-theory, and so on; (2) the overriding aim of consciousness is to reach an identity with its object; it will never be satisfied with any lesser degree of relatedness. The first principle leads to the incorporation of the problems of aesthetics into the activity of the artist. The second principle issues in the view that artists and audiences will be unhappy unless their understandings of art-works are completely identical. As in the more recent expressionistic theories of Croce and Collingwood this leads to the insistence that the art-work itself be simply a thought, feeling, or intuition; its apparently independent status must be undercut. Of these two principles, the first can probably be accepted with some qualification. There seems to be an ineradicable tendency for mind to reflect on its own activities, even if there are countless cases in which this tendency is not actualized. Yet in order for Hegel to establish that there is a *logic* of reflection in art (or other areas) which will lead to the kinds of conclusions he sketches, he requires his second principle. Here it seems to be plausible that we can



accept relations short of identity, and even prefer them to identity. To care truly for another person I need not be that other person; if I am, the structure of caring will be destroyed. In art the artist may aim at making something quite other than his own activity and those who care for art may find part of the value of that caring just in the independence and differences of the art-object.<sup>21</sup> It may be that Hegel has correctly found the clue to one strand in the history of art; accordingly, it is not surprising if phases of abstract, minimal art are challenged by varieties of living art and these finally overcome by a clearly meaningful poetry. Yet alongside such histories we may also expect to find artists who continue to be concerned with shaping external materials and audiences for art who care for the things made and exhibited without seeking to incorporate them into themselves.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I have tried to spell out some of this structure in "Intention and Interpretation: a Semiotic Analysis," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Fall, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> For Collingwood's distinction between art and craft, see his *The Principles of Art* (New York, 1958), pp. 15–41.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps some justification is necessary for treating Hegel's chapter on *Kunstreligion* from the standpoint of art, and not primarily as a phase of religion. In the structure of the *Phenomenology*, *Kunstreligion* is intermediate between the transcendent religion of light and Christianity. In this perspective, Hegel is clearly articulating a triadic structure of transcendent, immanent, and then immanent and transcendent religions. J. N. Findlay, in his *Hegel: A Re-Examination* (New York, 1962) classifies *Kunstreligion* as one form of "Pre-Christian Religion" while admitting that it "is as much a treatment of Greek art and literature as of Greek religion" (p. 134). Emile Fackenheim also stresses the religious aspect of the chapter, seeing it as the story of a religion which gains presence for its divinities at the cost of sacrificing their depth. Cf. *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Boston, 1970), p. 55. The religious orientation of Hegel's analysis is clearly important. However, the chapter itself is about *art*-religion, not simply religion. As I hope to make plausible in the text Hegel presents the mental activity in question as attempting to resolve problems which in recent years have been regarded as mainly aesthetic or artistic. When keeping the larger context of Hegel's argument in mind, it should

not be forgotten that no form of religion is the culmination of the *Phenomenology* but the state which Hegel calls Absolute Knowledge. As an approximation to this state, art-religion comes close to realizing the general cognitive end of a meaning whose purpose is completely fulfilled and in which separations between intention and interpretation are dissolved. A thorough justification of my own emphasis in reading the chapter would require a more explicit study of the role of art and the aesthetic in Hegel's philosophy than has yet appeared; in the meantime I hope that the striking similarity between Hegel's formulation and contemporary discussions warrants such a reading.

<sup>4</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (*Phen.*), translated by J. B. Baillie. (New York, 1961), p. 715; *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hoffmeister edition (H.), p. 495.

<sup>5</sup> *Phen.*, p. 716; *H.*, p. 495.

<sup>6</sup> *Phen.*, p. 705; *H.*, p. 487.

<sup>7</sup> *Phen.*, p. 728; *H.*, pp. 504–505.

<sup>8</sup> *Phen.*, p. 729; *H.*, p. 505.

<sup>9</sup> *Phen.*, p. 730; *H.*, p. 506.

<sup>10</sup> *Logic*, paragraph 115.

<sup>11</sup> *Phen.*, p. 735; *H.*, p. 509.

<sup>12</sup> *Phen.*, p. 735; *H.*, p. 510.

<sup>13</sup> *Phen.*, p. 737; *H.*, p. 511.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox (London, 1975), vol. I, pp. 416–421. Except in this case, Hegel takes metaphor and symbolism to be inadequate modes for poetry because they merely suggest ambiguous meaning rather than expressing dialectical content, as does the best poetry. I have explored the contrast between dialectical and symbolic meaning in "Hegel on the Meanings of Poetry," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Spring, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> *Phen.*, p. 743; *H.*, p. 516.

<sup>16</sup> *Phen.*, p. 745; *H.*, p. 517. The frequent praise and criticism of Hegel's "theory" of tragedy have led to some neglect of this section of his *Phenomenology*, which attempts to demonstrate the inconsistency of the tragic form. In a recent essay, Walter Kaufmann has offered a healthy corrective to this tradition by claiming that Hegel has no theory of tragedy; apparently in opposition to A. C. Bradley's famous "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," Kaufmann calls his essay "Hegel's Ideas About Tragedy." Cf. Warren Steinkraus, ed. *New Studies in Hegel's Philosophy* (New York, 1971), esp. pp. 201 and 211. Kaufmann's denial is useful in reminding us that Hegel has no independent theory of tragedy as such; the reason for this, however, does not seem to be Hegel's alleged empiricism which would prevent him from subsuming the facts of tragedy under any "Procrustean" theory. It is rather that Hegel in each of the places where he writes or talks about tragedy has some more general philosophical end than defining a literary genre. It is not that Hegel abandons an interest in theory to an absorption in the variety of the facts (although Hegel's respect for the contingent and empirical is often neglected), but



that his theoretical interests have to do with how art can approach the goal of Absolute Knowledge. In general, there is a need for greater attention to the systematic context of Hegel's utterances about art. For example, Kaufmann cites as the "fatal flaw" of Hegel's treatment of tragedy the view that every tragedy involves two equally justified sides. The Hegelian text which most closely supports such a view is the treatment of customary morality (*Sittlichkeit*) in the *Phenomenology*. Hegel uses *Antigone* to throw light on the contradictions of a certain ethical-social arrangement. But here Hegel's subject is not tragedy as such, but tragedy as illustrative of ethical-social problems! When he considers tragedy in the chapter on *Kunstreligion* it is the problems of tragic knowledge and the incoherence of the actors' role with which he is concerned.

<sup>17</sup> *Phen.*, p. 745; *H.*, p. 517.

<sup>18</sup> *Phen.*, p. 749; *H.*, p. 520.

<sup>19</sup> *Phen.*, p. 748; *H.*, p. 520. (I have slightly altered Baillie's translation.) Findlay stresses the sense of loss and the reappearance of the unhappy consciousness in comedy (*Hegel: A Re-examination*, p. 137). Yet, given Hegel's dialectic, it is also in keeping for him to describe the comic attitude as an "unparalleled state of spiritual good health" and to have consistent praise for Aristophanes. Jacob Loewenberg is the only Hegel scholar I have encountered who consistently sees that there is a very important sense in which, for Hegel, comedy is a deeper form of art than tragedy. He has also suggested that the comic complacency in the face of contradiction and dissolution is very close both to the spirit of Hegel's dialectic and to the procedure of the *Phenomenology* in particu-

lar. See *Hegel's Phenomenology* (LaSalle, Illinois, 1965), pp. 326–333, esp. 331–2.

<sup>20</sup> *Hegel's Aesthetics*, vol. II, pp. 1233–1236. There are major differences in the scope and organization of Hegel's chapter on *Kunstreligion* and his later and long course of lectures. However, it seems to me that the relatively schematic dialectical structure of the *Kunstreligion* chapter supplies a crucial perspective on the argument of the lectures. The latter, encompassing as they do the art of the Oriental world, Greece, Rome, the middle ages, and modern times, are filled with empirical detail. It may also have happened that some of Hegel's argument has been lost in the course of transcription by his students. So despite the great wealth of its contents, the following conclusion of the lectures may appear to be obscure unless it is supplemented by attending to Hegel's account of the problems of intention and interpretation in the *Phenomenology*:

Comedy leads at the same time to the dissolution of art altogether. All art aims at the identity, produced by the spirit, in which eternal things, God, and absolute truth are revealed in real appearance and shape to our contemplation, to our hearts and minds (*Hegel's Aesthetics*, vol. II, p. 1236).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Albert Hofstadter's critique of Hegel's conception of identity in "Ownness and Identity: Re-thinking Hegel," *Review of Metaphysics*, June 1975.

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