

Benjamin Rutter

Hegel on the Modern Arts.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010.

296 pages

US\$89.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-521-11401-1)

Rutter develops a novel and powerful approach to the issue of the ‘end of art’ that has dominated scholarship on Hegel’s aesthetics for the past thirty years. While the majority of commentators who consider the arts of modernity to continue to be relevant for Hegel are content to amass textual evidence, Rutter joins the rank of the few who actually provide an account of how presently ongoing and original artistic activities (as opposed to museum pieces) might have a distinctive value for him. This ‘bottom-up approach’ (61) is commendably faithful to the text (mainly, the series of lectures in the 1820s transcribed and compiled by Hegel’s student Hotho as the *Lectures on the Fine Arts* [LFA]). It reconstructs ‘an account of the prospects for and values of modern art by paying a good deal of attention to Hegel’s comments on particular (if paradigmatic) works of art’ (61). Four of the book’s five chapters are devoted to an examination of Hegel’s critical assessments of particular artists, artworks, schools or movements with the aim of developing the account. Chapter 2 works out the rationale behind Hegel’s positive appraisal of 17th century Dutch genre paintings, while Chapters 3 through 5 do the same for Hegel’s discernible shift to a more positive regard for the 19th century German lyric in the 1828 lectures (as evidenced by his approbation of ‘objective humor’ and Goethe’s poem-cycle *West-östliche Divan*). Thus, Rutter’s book will be of tremendous interest not just to philosophical historians, but also to artistic and literary theorists and historians.

Rutter does not delve into detail without first discussing the philosophical stakes and outlining his account of the arts’ *indispensability* for Hegel in the opening chapter. Such an account is called for in the first place by the standard interpretation of Hegel as claiming that art’s role as the carrier of the absolute idea is ceded to philosophy and hence no longer matters in modernity. This interpretation finds a clear voice in such prominent commentators as Henrich, Danto, Speight, Houlgate and Donougho. Henrich points out that for Hegel art is redundant upon the advent of speculative philosophy as it ‘merely reiterates, accessibly and with local inflection, a body of speculative propositions expressed with greater clarity and rigor by the philosophers’ (10). Rutter replies, first, that this interpretation relies on a ‘distinctly un-Hegelian conception of the content and the form’ (10) which takes one to be dissociable from the other, and second, that there is a sense of the ‘sublation’ (*aufheben*) of something (as illustrated in Hegel’s account of the family in the *Philosophy of Right*) which does not involve the loss in its significance and the sublation of art should be understood in this sense.

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Still, Hegel’s pessimistic tone throughout the lecture-series remains to be explained. By comparing Hegel’s view of artistic creativity with Kant’s, Rutter argues that Hegel’s pessimism stems not from a principled obsolescence of the modern arts, but from the difficulty of achieving true art in modernity. The universal content that is essential to true art is not externally given to the modern artist as it is to artists of a

religious-iconographic past. The modern artist is a *freie Geist* who has not just to master a craft, but to ‘(achieve) the cultivation and integration of his personality’ (35), which he might then endow on the trivialized and fragmented subject of his work. In the face of the difficulty, fraudulence or artifice becomes a real problem.

So far Rutter’s argument has only been critical. Of greater originality and interest is his positive account of how the arts might continue to be indispensable for Hegel in modernity: given that Hegel incorporates a theory of art history into his theory of art itself, he might continue to maintain the ongoing relevance of *art* while acknowledging the end of *art history*. For him, art is both ‘a historical phenomenon that can undergo a sort of exhaustion and a basic human possibility immanent in all human history (and thus in some sense outside of it)’ (16). Instead of competing, art might co-operate with religion and philosophy to yield insights into the absolute idea. Rutter carves out an indispensable role for the arts in the Hegelian system as ‘(offering) eye-level insights into the local domains of human experience’ (17). At least some of the distinctive values of art, he argues, ‘consist in the attention of artworks to dimensions of modern life whose inherent contingency has left them unsuited to the more abstract treatments of philosophers, and which require a kind of animation if they are to appear to us as dimensions of life in which we can be at home’ (61).

The last section of the important first chapter outlines Rutter’s remaining task: granted that art history has come to an end in romantic art, the question might still be posed whether we should regard modern post-romantic 19th century painting and poetry as ‘(belonging) to outside of art history, and (lingering) in (a) sort of post-historical condition,’ or as ‘essentially late romantic, in which case it still belongs to history’ (50). With the broad aim of establishing the continuity of modern post-romantic with romantic art Rutter turns, in the remaining chapters, to examine Hegel’s positive regard for 17th century Dutch genre paintings and 19th century German lyric.

Hegel’s defense of modern post-romantic art is based on his concept of liveliness (*Lebendigkeit*). According to Rutter, liveliness is not the same as beauty. Both involve some sort of harmony between form and content, a content which must, Rutter stresses, itself be ‘self-harmonious’ (88). But while beauty requires a strict and perfect adequacy, liveliness ‘can involve a looser and more dynamic fit between the two related elements’ (87). Liveliness is present as long as there is a continual process of the positing, enduring and overcoming of opposition. The Dutch genre painters capture liveliness from the most mundane and contingent affairs by portraying their subject as intensely engaged in what they are doing, thereby producing an ‘intertwining of the man and his task’ which amounts to ‘a form of intimacy’ (*Innigkeit*) (94)—what Rutter calls ‘absorption’. Still, the universal content of *Innigkeit* is externally given to the painters from the cheerful bourgeois work ethic of the Dutch. The real turning point that opens up far-reaching possibilities for post-religious art comes with the painter’s realization that the energy he himself invests in recreating the most mundane and contingent of subjects might endow value on it. ‘By devoting himself to the painting of the scene in question, by giving it his all, the painter performs a sort of attentiveness and interest that suggests it may deserve our own attention in ways we had not expected’ (98).

In Rutter's view, Hegel comes to see various 19th century art—particularly the German lyric—'as deepening and radicalizing the possibilities of post-Reformation, post-iconographic art opened up in the Netherlands' (54). The mastery of skills and technique—what Rutter calls 'virtuosity'—is necessary (though not sufficient) for art. But virtuosity poses a special problem for the literary arts. Unlike sculptors and painters, writers and poets do not have any sensuous medium to overcome. Their medium is thoughts, 'and thoughts are precisely what we do own, all of us, already' (137). Hegel's answer to what constitutes the distinctly modern phenomenon of writerly virtuosity provides the key to 'why (he thinks) writerly virtuosity matters so much in the literatures of the late romantic period' (139). As prose usurps the traditional throne of poetry as the main channel of our communication in modernity, poetry demands 'a more deliberate energy' (143) involving the 'defamiliarization' (144) of prosaic objects, followed by the recreation of 'a new poetic world of subjective meditation and feeling' (146) through the sheer force of the poet's imagination and wit. Rutter elaborates at length on Hegel's views of the special uses the modern poet makes of various devices of figurative language to achieve this end.

If writerly virtuosity is most effective in tearing modern consciousness from the 'prose of life', it is also most susceptible to degenerating into a sheer formal and empty display of virtuosity. Hegel cautions against the pointless wit and irony of Friedrich Schlegel and Jean Paul. By contrast, he increasingly comes to endorse what he calls 'objective humor', or what Rutter prefers to call the 'poetry of reconciliation'. Rutter turns to consider how love poetry and occasional verse might reconcile formal virtuosity with universal content, before going on to examine how Goethe's *West-östliche Divan* presents a paradigm of such a reconciliation. The saving grace of love poetry is the sincerity of the poet's heart (*Herz*), while the universal content of occasional verse lies in the poet's cultivation of his poetic persona. Alluding to Goethe's *Werther* and Petrarch's sonnets, Rutter explains how love poetry best exemplifies the lyric's capacity to free us from the grip of our unconscious desires—in this case, erotic love—in such a way as to reconcile ourselves with their universal content. Through it, we are made conscious of 'a longing that satisfies itself as longing' (192), thereby making ourselves at home in it. Occasional verse goes even deeper in unearthing subjectivity itself. It explores any transient and fleeting impression, the subject '(being) wholly accidental, and the important thing (being) only the poet's treatment and presentation of them' (145). If the poet is not to lapse into self-indulgent idiosyncrasies, he must create his persona through the very way he lives. He must '(live) in such a way that poems emerge from it' (198). The central role of the poet's persona in the German *Lied* leads Rutter to discuss Hegel's ethnological view of the Germans' *Gemütlichkeit*, their soulfulness, interiority and depth of soul, before going on to explain Hegel's evaluation of Goethe's *West-östliche Divan* in terms of it.

If Rutter is right, it is interesting to consider which modern artworks or movements fail to meet, approximate to meeting, or actually do meet the very high standard which Hegel sets for late-romantic art, and how they do, or fail to do, so. Rutter

himself has made a fine start in the book by commenting on a remarkably wide variety of artistic figures and traditions (both known and unknown to Hegel) from a Hegelian perspective.

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