

G. W. F. Hegel. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art. The Hotho Transcript of the 1823 Berlin Lectures.* Ed. and Trans. Robert F. Brown. Clarendon Press 2014. 508 pp. £80.00 (Hardcover ISBN 9780199694822).

The Hegelian system, as is well known, is very complex. But there is an aspect of this system that has never received the attention it deserves: Hegel's aesthetics. Hegel never published a work on art when he was alive, but fortunately we have many manuscripts on this topic that Hegel used for his lectures; we refer to the lectures that he gave at the University of Heidelberg in 1818 and at the University of Berlin in 1820-21, 1823, 1826 and 1828-1829.

The book under discussion here is the Heinrich Gustav Hotho transcript of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of art in 1823, edited and translated by Robert F. Brown who states in his "Editorial Introduction" that 'our purpose here is to present the contents of Hotho's transcript as best as we can in an understandable and colloquial English' (3). One of the most famous features of the Hegelian style of thinking is its complexity, and the idea of translating this Hegelian work into colloquial English is an admirable one. Furthermore, the volume contains an extensive and extremely detailed introduction by Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert who introduces the reader to the Hegelian philosophy of art. Let's turn our gaze, now, to the contents of the Hegelian philosophy of art, but before doing this it is necessary to outline the main features of Hegelian system, in order to better understand what place art has in it.

The starting point of our analysis has to begin with the ideal region of Spirit that is characterized, according to Hegel, by three forms: art, religion and philosophy. Spirit, in Hegel's view, is reason that manifests itself in history, and during this ideal development reason passes through many phases represented by the already mentioned three forms: art, religion and philosophy. The object of all three forms is Absolute Spirit or (in religious terms) God, but while in art it is presented in an immediate way, in religion the Absolute is conceived as an intellectual representation, that is to say in a rational way. According to Hegel, however, this is not sufficient: it is philosophy that thinks the Absolute through the concept of reason. That way Absolute Spirit, through human self-consciousness, can think itself and at the same time be aware of itself. According to Hegel philosophy must aim at Totality because 'the Truth is the Whole', and in this respect the different aspects of reality should be understood not in their abstract separation, but rather in their articulation and becoming. Truth, in this way, is not conceived as a substance, as something already given, but as a process, as Spirit. This is, in a very brief sketch, the way the Absolute Spirit manifests itself in history, that is to say the *phenomenology of Spirit*.

What is interesting in Hegel's thought is his view of the nature of aesthetics. According to the thinker of Stuttgart aesthetics is not, as Alexander Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant uphold, the science of perception but rather 'philosophy of art' and its main domain is the realm of beautiful. As Hegel states at the beginning of his Introduction: 'The topic we are considering is defined as the realm of beautiful, more precisely as the domain of art' (182). Hegel, in opposition to Baumgarten and Kant, prefers the term *callistics* instead of *aesthetics*, in order to indicate the real issue of his reflections: 'The term "aesthetics" is also used here. So this is actually an inappropriate term, although the issue here is not what is beautiful as such; instead the issue is artistic beauty' (194). Hegel prefers to connect his ideas on aesthetics to artistic beauty just because beauty expresses itself in artistic production, and artistic production is primarily a spiritual activity. All that is spiritual, in Hegel's view, is higher than what is natural, which is why according to Hegel art has a philosophical status.

According to Hegel the beautiful is the Idea that expresses itself in a sensible form. But in this respect, art also falls under the triadic scheme of thesis—antithesis—synthesis. In fact, not all sensible intuitions are able to express the Idea, so it becomes clear that in the phenomenon of art there is a triadic development, a process thanks to which we can attain a larger awareness of the infinite essence. Obviously, this triadic scheme finds its practical expression in the historical process, so it is no wonder that Hegel talks about three historical modes of art: symbolic, classical and romantic.

The first mode is the symbolic one which, as Hegel states, ‘is seeking for this authentic unity, the striving for absolute unity, the art that has not yet arrived at this perfect mastery, that has not yet found its proper content and for that reason not found its proper form. So this seeking consists in the fact that the authentic content and the authentic form, not yet having found themselves and been united, stand apart from one another and prove to be still mutually external.... But because the content within itself is indeterminate, it also forces the expression of the content beyond the bounds of its determinateness. Therefore this art does indeed involve sublimity, but not beauty’ (211-12). This first mode of art finds its expression in Oriental art (especially in Egyptian symbols and architecture), but if, from one side, its sensible forms try to express the Absolute, on the other they are not able to do that because the universality they pursue is only something abstract, ‘symbolic’.

The second mode is classical art, which is the ‘free, adequate imagination of the configuration within the concept; a content that has the shape appropriate to it, a content that, as authentic content, does not lack authentic form. This is the locus of art’s ideal’ (213). Classical art finds its highest expression in Greek sculpture, where there is an almost perfect balance between the sensible form and the spiritual content that this second mode wants to show. Hegel states: ‘Here the sensuous, the pictorial, no longer counts as sensuous and is no natural being; it is of course a natural shape but, by removing the insufficiency of the finite, it is the kind of natural shape that is perfectly adequate to its concept’ (213).

The third and last mode is designated by Hegel as romantic art or Christian art where there is not, as in the case of the first mode, a perfect balance between form and content, but for different reasons. While in the first mode the knowledge was not adequate to its concept, in the third mode we have the opposite situation: romantic-Christian art is aware that the infinity of the Spirit cannot be expressed by (and in) the finiteness of the sensible form: ‘The third mode is the loosening of content from form, and therefore it returns to the antithesis of the symbolic but at the same time is an advance of art beyond itself... In Christianity, what is true has withdrawn from sensible representation. The Greek god is bound up with intuition. The unity of the human and divine natures becomes intuited in the Greek god, and becomes the only genuine mode of this unity. But this unity itself is only sensuous. In Christianity the unity is grasped in spirit and in truth; but what is concrete, the unity, remains grasped in a spiritual way that withdraws from what is sensuous. The idea has made itself free on its own account’ (213). According to Hegel, this is the reason romantic-Christian art disregards all those artistic forms in which the sensible element is decisive—sculpture, architecture, and so on—in order to focus its attention on those arts where the sensible element is almost irrelevant, such as music, poetry, and painting.

After these reflections on art Hegel formulates his well-known, but also misunderstood, thesis about the death of art. Hegel never wanted to claim that after romantic-Christian art, it is no longer possible to make art. What Hegel is telling us is that at this point Spirit is aware that it is not possible to express adequately the Absolute through art. It is therefore necessary to overcome art with other

forms of knowledge, namely religion and philosophy. This is why Hegel says at the end of his *Philosophy of Art*: 'For us, art in its seriousness is something bygone. We need other forms to make the divine into an object for us. We require thinking' (439).

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