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Die heilige Poesie: toward a practical account of the Hegelian art of sublimity

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Introduction

The subject of this dissertation is Hegel's theory of the sublime (*das Erhabene*), more specifically, what I claim to be its core: *die heilige Poesie*; i.e., the Judaic Psalms. In his aesthetics, Hegel discusses different cases of sublimity,¹ but he explicitly emphasizes the Judaic Psalms as a key moment within the symbolic form of art. According to his conception of art, the artwork constitutes “the external particularization of the idea of beauty for sensuous apprehension,” which allows—by means of the contemplation of the sensualized idea in a determinate figure—“an act of self-reflection” (Donelan 2008, 70).

The development of this sensuous apprehension has a complex relation to historicity. As Gethmann-Siefert points out: “[D]urch die Anschauung wird die Idee konkret-geschichtlich vermittelt, wird sie [...] ‘ästhetisch’ und ‘mythologisch’” (2003, XL). There lies, in Hegel's approach to art, a thorough reflection on the historical development of the artwork. These two axes, the sensualization and the historicity of what Hegel calls the *ideal* of beauty, are developed in three forms in what Hegel terms the “Entwicklung des Ideals zu den besonderen Formen des Kunstschönen”:² the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic forms of art. The sublime is characteristic of the first stage of the ideal's realization.

I claim that Hegel's sublimity has not been sufficiently explored in the field of Hegel studies or aesthetics. There is a void in the reception of Hegel's aesthetics in general and of his theory of the sublime in particular. The main reasons for this neglect are two: first, the literature on Hegel's aesthetics has mainly focused on the problem of the end of art (a diagnosis supported by Houlgate 2007; Gethmann-Siefert 2003; Henrich 1970; Donougho 2001, and 2007; Peters 2015; Bernstein

¹ For instance, the Hindu and Persian cases or the symbolism of ancient Egypt. However, these cases vary depending on the lectures and the edition, unlike the Judaic reference, which remains stable. See *infra* chapter 3 of the first part of the thesis, “Hegel's *Erhabenes* and *die heilige Poesie*.”

² According to Hotho's edition of the *Ästhetik*.

2007, among others) to the detriment of other aspects of Hegel's *Ästhetik*; second, within the renewed interest in the sublime since the Second World War, Kant's theory of sublimity has been dominant (as shown by Pillow 2000; Donougho 2001; Houlgate 2007) largely overshadowing that of Hegel (which can be seen in Lyotard 1991b; Nancy 1993; Lacoue-Labarthe 1993; Rancière 2009). This lack of a critical approach has led to severe mistakes in the interpretation of Hegel's sublime, the prime example being the erroneous idea that Hegel's sublimity is a mere objective translation of Kant's subjective aesthetics and, hence, "identical" to some extent with the latter (Rancière 2009 is a paradigmatic example of this). It has also led to the oversimplification of Hegel's approach to art (Nancy 1993, for instance), an oversimplification that has become commonplace; that is, the idea that art constitutes a minor step toward the realization of the absolute spirit: "Another error—less a misreading, more an overinterpretation—is to accuse Hegel of privileging philosophy (and indeed his *own* philosophy) at the expense of art and individual works of art" (Donougho 2007, 181-182).

This exclusion of Hegel's sublime could, at first sight, be justified by the "marginal place accorded the sublime in Hegel's scheme of things," meaning that apparently "he simply was not interested" (Donougho 2001, 1), a suspicion that Oyarzún (2010) also suggests. This is noteworthy: Hegel is the only thinker within the aesthetic tradition who does not show any particular enthusiasm for the sublime. Since the origins of the philosophy of art, the sublime has occupied a place of prominence: in Pseudo-Longinus, for instance, it constitutes a powerful discursive weapon, and even for Kant, who includes it in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* as a mere appendix, the moral disposition of the subject (the superiority of a supersensible faculty over nature), which arises from the impotence of imagination, is relevant not only to the reflective power of judgment but also to the whole subsequent Romantic tradition springing from Kant himself.³ Hegel does not belong to this Romantic tradition (Donougho 2001)—at least as far as the understanding of the sublime is concerned.

Therefore, a critical approach to Hegel's sublimity is lacking in the two traditions mentioned above: Hegel studies and aesthetics. However, the Hegelian

³ This statement will be further developed *infra*, in "Kant's Sublime." For now, suffice it to say that it is noteworthy how, from Schiller on, the sublime became central to Romanticism and modern aesthetics in general, since, thanks to Schiller, the sublime was identified as the key to tragedy and the tragic. According to Wagner (1987), Schiller's twist on the previous tradition is his detachment from the Aristotelian notion of catharsis as the paradigmatic core feature of tragedy. Instead, Schiller proposes the sublime as the characteristic source of pleasure of the tragic. It must be said that his sublime is also highly Kantian, specifically derived from Kant's dynamically sublime. See Wagner 1987, 71ff.

sublime deserves to be studied further not only because of its relative neglect in the past or because of the general relevance of Hegel's philosophy, but mainly because its proper comprehension can be fruitful for the very aesthetic context that ignores it and for the Hegelian tradition obsessed with the end of art. Only a thorough reconstruction of the constitutive features of Hegel's sublimity, its systematic comprehension, can eventually give a sufficient account of this particular sublime and, subsequently, shed light on both these traditions—although for reasons of length, only the first of these tasks will be accomplished in this dissertation. Hence, a systematic examination of the core of the sublime (*die heilige Poesie*) is the necessary first step to understand Hegel's critique and rejection of the art of sublimity.

With this in mind, the problem of this dissertation can be formulated in terms of two questions:

1. Why have the fields of Hegel studies and aesthetics shown a lack of interest in Hegel's sublimity, and why is Kant's sublime preferred to that of Hegel?
2. How should Hegel's apparent lack of interest in the sublime be interpreted, and how should we understand his reference to the Judaic Psalms—that is, *die heilige Poesie*—as the preeminent definition of sublimity?

In addressing these questions, I will attempt both to explain the dearth of literature on the topic and put forward a systematic reconstruction of Hegel's sublime.

I propose that the explanation for Hegel's treatment of sublimity is not to be found in his aesthetics or his general reflections on art,⁴ but in the early practical objections he raises against Kantian morality and Judaism before 1800. My thesis is that, in order to comprehend Hegel's take on the sublime, the reference to *die heilige Poesie* must be thoroughly reconstructed. It is in Hegel's critique of the Judaic conception of divinity that the ultimate explanation of his lack of enthusiasm for the sublime can be found. This elucidation takes place in the exact moment in which Hegel condemns both Kant's morality and the Judaic relation to divinity as illegitimate, as erroneous conceptions of *freedom*, namely, in his so-called theological writings. A systematic account of Hegel's sublime will show that Hegel's lack of interest is, in fact, for this reason, a rejection of the art of sublimity.

In his definition of the sublime apropos *die heilige Poesie* Hegel lays out his understanding of the Jewish relation to God: God creates his subjects and abandons

⁴ Which can be found in the *Enzyklopädie*, for instance.

them.⁵ Consequently, God's creatures lack divinity, they are "empty" of God. The individual creature is impotent before his absolute creator, incapable of representing him. The creature, humanity, is powerless—God is almighty. God, absolute and infinite, has removed himself from his creatures, and thus the art of the creature is merely the discourse on the inability to apprehend divinity—or being powerless before God: It is, in sum, a discourse that celebrates dualism. The characteristic of *die heilige Poesie* is the affirmation of this dualistic conception of the world, which implies for Hegel a lack of freedom, as will be shown throughout this dissertation. Hegel's aesthetics is mainly responding to this "dualism" and standing against it—a dualism that, according to him, is shared by Judaism and Kantian philosophy.

Hegel criticizes the dualism of the sublime mainly for two reasons: First, because it relies on an erroneous conception of infinity; i.e., God as infinity is separate from the finite creature—this is a logical problem. And second, because this way of positing the absolute as an ontologically fixed and separate entity that stands outside of us puts us in a heteronomous position: An absolute God gives the law to his subjects from outside (heteronomy) instead of allowing humankind to craft the law itself, immanently (autonomy); this is a practical problem. This dissertation is devoted to the latter problem.

The strong practical tenor of the Hegelian sublime has not been recognized in the literature so far. This constitutes one of the original contributions of this study. As already mentioned, a critical approach to Hegel's sublimity is lacking, which has been overshadowed by the question of the end of art and the preeminence of the Kantian sublime. There is, of course, some literature directly concerned with Hegel's sublimity (Saxena 1974; De Man 1997; Pillow 2000; Donougho 2001; Barniske 2019), but it is rather brief (with the exception of Barniske 2019), focused exclusively on the aesthetics, and some of it is, moreover, informed by Kantian positions. An example of the latter is Pillow (2000), who attempts to develop his own theory of the sublime based on Kant's aesthetic ideas. As Kant's approach to these ideas is rather brief, Pillow's reconstruction of Hegel is mainly directed to support his argument:

This book is about Hegel as well as Kant, although Kant provides the general account of aesthetic reflection that remains the theoretical orientation of the

⁵ It is noteworthy that the way in which Hegel addresses Judaism is coherent throughout his work; namely, in the theological writings, in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in the *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, in the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* and in the *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* or *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst*.

entire argument [...]. Hegel's massive philosophy of art will offer theoretical equipment essential to the full articulation of these interpretive activities. (2000, 7)

Pillow's account of Hegel's sublime is therefore directed toward his Kantian theory, not toward a fair understanding of Hegel's position concerning the sublime.

Barniske's *Hegels Theorie des Erhabenen* (2019) delivers a very accurate and detailed account of Hegel's sublimity within the limits of Hegel's aesthetic concerns, not only regarding his *Ästhetik* but also his *Vorlesungen über Philosophie der Religion*. He even devotes a chapter to the "Erhabenheit und hebräischer Monotheismus." However, he does not address the period of Hegel's work, which, according to the hypothesis of my dissertation, explains the core of Hegel's *heilige Poesie* and his rejection of the underlying dualistic structure of the sublime—that is, the early writings.

This is another original aspect of my dissertation: Not only the recognition of a practical side of Hegel's sublimity, but also the need—in order to understand this particular problem—to return to the early fragments which have not been commonly considered part of Hegel's practical philosophy. For instance, regarding the group of fragments known as "Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal," Ormiston says: "Rather than as a philosophical text in its own right [...] this early essay by Hegel has received attention mainly in terms of its place in the development of Hegel's thought" (2004, 9). The fragments that precede Hegel's period in Jena have seldom been treated philosophically, but only historically. According to the reading that I offer in this dissertation, they must be understood as being part of Hegel's practical philosophy insofar as they deal with the question of freedom, describe human agency, and try to determine a "normative domain"—to use Pippin's (2008, 3) definition of practical philosophy. I intend to show their important role in the emergence of Hegel's practical philosophy, which can be understood only in the light of Kant's theory. The theme of Judaism and, therefore, of sublimity in Hegel's work emerges in the early writings precisely as a response to Kant's morality.

In this sense, I agree with the scholars who have seen in this diverse group of fragments the origin of many questions relevant to the mature Hegel. As Dilthey affirms:

Die Bruchstücke aus dieser Periode haben wie die Jugendarbeiten Kants nicht nur für das System Hegels Bedeutung: wie sie noch unbeengt vom Zwang der

dialektischen Methode aus der Vertiefung in den großen Stoff der Geschichte entstanden, wohnt ihnen ein selbständiger Wert bei: zudem sind sie ein unschätzbare Beitrag zu einer Phänomenologie der Metaphysik. (1990, 3)

or, with a different emphasis, Derrida:

one could go back toward the works of the young Hegel, toward the so-called youthful works, toward the philosophy of love and life in the texts on Christianity. What is found in them in effect is presented at once as a germ and as an ensemble of the system's invariant traits. (1986, 20)

It is in these texts that Hegel's critique of Judaism draws its origin and primary explanation.

Kant's morality is the key to comprehend the early Hegelian conception of Judaism. It must be said that Hegel's rejection of Judaism is part of a larger tradition of Protestant thinkers; and, as Rotenstreich has shown (1953, 36), this general criticism of Judaism has Mendelssohn as its immediate source, a relevant influence also recognized by other scholars, like Hamacher (1978, 32ff.). Nevertheless, it seems that Hegel's reception of Mendelssohn is mediated by his understanding of Kant's practical philosophy. In that sense, this dissertation aims to show how Hegel's analysis of Judaism strongly depends on Kant's practical philosophy. In other words, to understand Hegel's specific conception of Judaism, we must focus on how he develops his own "opinion" of Judaism by reading Kant's practical philosophy. Herein lies the specificity of Hegel's theoretical refusal of Judaism.

An important subhypothesis of this dissertation is that, although Hegel criticizes Judaism and Kant's morality in the early texts because of their common dualism, the conceptual tools that he uses to carry out this criticism are remnants of his early Kantian phase. Between 1795 and 1800, Hegel first embraces Kant's practical philosophy and then drifts away from it. During this period, he radically changes his position regarding autonomy. Nonetheless, he retains something from Kant—Kant's conception of *Heteronomie*. In "Das Leben Jesu" and in "Die Positivität der christlichen Religion," Hegel condemns Judaism as a form of heteronomy, in the same way as Kant comprehends "heteronomy" in his moral philosophy—i.e., as an agency based upon external, not internal commands; an agency determined by inclinations (*Neigungen*) or sensible stimuli in a broad sense; that is, sensations and emotions. Even though later, in "Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal," Hegel rejects Kantian philosophy and condemns

it as Judaism (that is, as *non-freedom*), he does so through the Kantian notion of heteronomy. Hence, the understanding of the notion of Judaism as heteronomy resurfaces Hegel's philosophy, as a Kantian element, despite his rejection of Kant's philosophy. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify how Kant's practical philosophy first influences and, later, disappoints the young Hegel. Curiously, in rejecting Kant's practical philosophy by considering it heteronomous in a Judaic manner, Hegel criticizes Kant by means of Kantian materials and, at the same time, gives us the first indications of his notion of the sublime.

In his aesthetic reflections, in dismissing the sublime, Hegel is clearly recalling this notion of "heteronomy" or non-freedom. His "lack of interest" in sublimity, whose constitutive feature I claim to be *die heilige Poesie*, is a dismissal of the dualism of Judaic divinity and Kant's morality. The origin of this position regarding dualism is very clear in the early texts: Hegel there openly expresses his predilection for Christianity, condemning the scission between God and humanity in Judaism. Fichte illustrates this point in *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben* very lucidly: Whereas the Judaic God created humanity outside of himself (namely, in the world), in the case of Christianity we *are in* the logos, not outside of it—just as Saint John describes it. Humanity is *in* God since the beginning, it is not created outside of him—there is, strictly speaking, nothing outside of him. Therefore, there is no real split: The opposition between an infinite and powerful God and an impotent and finite humankind is merely apparent, not *real*.

Regarding the selection of the materials: For the aesthetic source of this dissertation, I will use Hotho's manuscript of the Berlin lectures of 1823, edited by Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert in 1998 as *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst*, and *not* the edition that Hotho initially edited under the title *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*. As Gethmann-Siefert has shown over the last two decades, there are significant differences between the available manuscripts of the Berlin lessons and the original publication of the *Ästhetik*—differences that highlight the dubious character of Hotho's edition of the text after Hegel's death. Nonetheless, contemporary aesthetics and the Hegelian tradition have received Hegel's aesthetic ideas as informed by Hotho (Donelan 2008). Therefore, by choosing to work with the revised manuscript, which is the source of the extended *Ästhetik*, I preserve a close link to the originally published *Vorlesungen* and, at the same time, recognize both the need to incorporate the critical revision of the text and the fact that it has

become a center of gravity within Hegelian studies in recent years. It must be said that *die heilige Poesie* is featured in both the manuscript of 1823 and the *Ästhetik*.

Regarding the early fragments, I use the revised Meiner edition. This means that there are significant differences with respect to the translated version available in English, known as the *Early Theological Writings*. The best example of this is the group of texts commonly known as “Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal.” Originally, this group comprised nine subfragments. Nohl, who gave this collection of texts the title “Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal,” edited these nine subfragments by shrinking and grouping them. This abridged version is the most widespread one. In Meiner’s version, the subfragments are grouped under the title: “Zur christlichen Religion.”

In order to tackle the above-mentioned philosophical problems, I have divided this dissertation into two parts. In the first part, I approach the aesthetic dimension of Hegel’s sublimity. **This first part** has, subsequently, three brief chapters.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the reception of Hegel’s sublime in both Hegel studies and the aesthetic tradition. It provides a general overview of the reasons for the lack of critical literature concerning Hegel’s sublimity; namely: the obsession with the thesis of the end of art, which has overshadowed other subjects worthy of analysis in the *Ästhetik*, and the preeminent influence of Kant’s approach to sublimity in the contemporary aesthetic debate. This chapter shows that there is a void concerning Hegel’s sublime in the current literature and that this critical gap has produced misinterpretations of the subject; namely, the questionable idea that Hegel’s sublimity is a mere objective translation of Kant’s subjective aesthetics and the reduction of Hegel’s account of art to the simplistic idea that art is but a minor step toward the realization of absolute spirit. **Chapters 2 and 3** are reconstructions of Kant’s and Hegel’s sublime, respectively. The role of these chapters is to show Kant’s and Hegel’s concerns about the sublime in the frame of their respective aesthetic theories, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* and *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst*, in order to refute the erroneous belief, set out in **chapter 1**, that they can be treated in continuity as subjective (Kant) and objective (Hegel) forms of sublimity. At the same time, this reconstruction will make clear the need to go beyond the realm of aesthetics for a thorough explanation of Hegel’s attitude to the sublime in his reference to *die heilige Poesie*.

The **second part** of this dissertation is devoted to the practical roots of Hegel's sublimity. It is divided into two chapters. **Chapter 1** shows how Hegel's early rejection of Judaism emerges in his dispute with Kant's practical philosophy regarding freedom, and how Hegel develops his own alternative conception of freedom—love—to overcome Kantian law. This first chapter is divided into two main sections.

In the first section (1.1), I explore the antecedents of Hegel's conception of Judaism in Kant's practical philosophy; i.e., I reconstruct Kant's notion of *Heteronomie*, which became the conceptual tool that Hegel used to criticize Judaism. In this section, I also justify why we should return to the early writings to comprehend Hegel's conception of Judaism and show, by analyzing *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785), which elements of Kant's practical philosophy are relevant for understanding Hegel's reception.

The second section (1.2) revolves around the following three fragments of Hegel's early writings: (1.2.1) "Das Leben Jesu" (1795), (1.2.2) "Die Positivität der christlichen Religion" (1795–1796), and (1.2.3) "Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal" (1798–1800).

Concerning fragment (1.2.1) "Das Leben Jesu," I argue that Hegel's refusal of Judaism is grounded in Kant's practical philosophy. I show how Hegel *applies* Kant's conception of the categorical imperative to the life of Jesus, which is narrated as a biography. Jesus is, according to this Hegel, the incarnation of the virtuous man. I focus on Hegel's treatment of Jesus as an autonomous agent and on how Judaism is always presented negatively, as the heteronomous way of approaching law. Hence, I prove that Hegel's notion of heteronomy—and therefore of Judaism—depends on Kant's practical philosophy and his conception of autonomy at this first stage.

Fragment (1.2.2), "Die Positivität der christlichen Religion," is divided into two subsections. My analysis of the fragment aims to show how Hegel extends his comprehension of heteronomy as conceptualized by Kant to a critique of all positive doctrines, especially that of Christianity. This critique is relevant in order to understand why Hegel refuses certain customs of the Christian church, insofar as these practices promote heteronomous relationships with authority—just as in the case of the Jewish people. This powerlessness was Hegel's primary concern regarding the sublime, insofar as it replicates the Judaic approach to divinity. In this fragment, Hegel develops a critique of positivity (understood as the alienation of the moral law, and therefore its perversion) that eventually, in the next fragment, will evolve into a critique of all objective forms.

The analysis of the third fragment, (1.2.3) “Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal,” is the most extensive. It comprises several subsections, organized according to each of the respective nine subfragments. Throughout this section, I demonstrate how the notion of “Judaism” remains the same (i.e., based on Kant’s notion of heteronomy), even though Hegel openly rejects Kantian morality and, in particular, Kant’s way of conceiving autonomy based on the categorical imperative. In rejecting Kant’s conception of law, Hegel compares the heteronomous Judaic law to the Kantian categorical imperative. As Hegel’s condemnation of Judaism is grounded in Kantian morality, what Hegel is doing in this comparison is confronting Kant with Kant—i.e., Hegel judges Kant’s categorical imperative as being *heteronomous* in Kantian terms. In doing so, Hegel searches for a new way of conceiving freedom, different from Kant’s. By thoroughly examining the notions of love, life, and *pleroma*, I show how Hegel rejects Kantian philosophy and Judaism—condemning them as dualistic—yet fails to develop a form of freedom based on the individual love of the living being.

Finally, in **chapter 2**, I briefly explain how the practical reconstruction of Hegel’s sublime could shed light on the aesthetic tradition that neglects him by analyzing Rancière’s criticisms of Lyotard’s approach to sublimity. According to the former, an art that denies humanity’s capacity to convey the sublime experience implies the risk of creating a dangerous Other, under whose law humanity is but a slave. In putting forward this criticism of Lyotard, Rancière does not recognize—despite his constant references to Hegel—that his objection echoes Hegel’s claim against dualism, because he, like many other contemporary readers, misunderstood Hegel’s sublimity, as is shown in **chapter 1** of the first part of this dissertation.