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

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Summary

This dissertation deals with Hegel's theory of the sublime (*das Erhabene*). I focus specifically on *die heilige Poesie* (sacred poetry), a form of art that he identifies with the Judaic Psalms and which I claim to be the core of Hegel's approach to sublimity. The sublime characterizes the symbolic form of art, and the symbolic form of art is, in turn, the first stage of development of the ideal of beauty; i.e., that which Hegel considers to be the origin of art.

I argue that Hegel's conception of the sublime has been insufficiently explored by Hegel studies and by aesthetics in general. I see two main reasons for this neglect: first, the focus on the problem of the end of art has overshadowed many other subjects worth analyzing in Hegel's aesthetics; second, the preeminence and influence of Kant's third *Critique*—especially of his theory of sublimity—in the field of contemporary aesthetics has consigned Hegel's reflections on the sublime to the sidelines.

As is manifest in the literature, Hegel's attempt to develop a theory of sublimity has been interpreted as evidencing his lack of interest in the subject, insofar as this area seems to play only a marginal role in his aesthetic project. I claim, however, that the lack of a critical examination of Hegel's conception of the sublime has led to its misinterpretation and its oversimplification in two respects: first, the mistaken idea that Hegel's theory of the sublime is a mere objective translation of Kant's conception, which, by contrast, is described as subjective; second, the error of simply disregarding Hegel's aesthetic concerns—not only regarding the sublime, but his entire project—on the supposition that his interest in art is motivated exclusively by the development of philosophy; that is to say, that he sacrifices art for the sake of philosophy.

I claim that Hegel's *apparent* lack of interest in the sublime must be clarified and interpreted in the light of his comments on the *heilige Poesie*. I argue that it is precisely Hegel's critique of the Judaic conception of divinity that explains his lack of enthusiasm regarding the sublime. In order to sustain this interpretation, it

is necessary to move beyond the domain of Hegel's aesthetics: my thesis is that we should turn to his early practical dispute, before 1800, with Kantian morality—which is also the origin of his critique of Judaic religion—in order to reconstruct and fully elucidate Hegel's attitude toward sublimity. In this early period, Hegel condemns both Kant's morality and the Judaic relation to divinity as mistaken approaches to free agency; that is, according to Hegel, Kant's philosophy and the relation to divinity expressed in the Judaic Psalms constitute erroneous conceptions of *freedom*.

On Hegel's view, *die heilige Poesie* as the art of sublimity conceives of a God who creates subjects and then abandons them. The Judaic Psalms express the impotence of the creatures before God the Creator, who has detached himself from them. The creature is incapable of apprehending divinity, because it is absolute, infinite, *separate*—the origin of law. In this sense, the creature stands abandoned, “outside” of infinity, obeying. According to Hegel, this understanding of divinity as a separate infinity and as the origin of law grounds a dualist conception of the world, in which the individual cannot achieve any kind of freedom. Thus, he objects to this kind of sublimity on practical grounds. Ultimately, the idea of a finite creature standing “outside” infinity conveys—in Hegel's opinion—a false concept of infinity: How can something lie outside of infinity if infinity is meant to be measureless, the whole? Hence, apart from the practical objection, he also makes a logical claim against the structure outlined in the art of the sublime. This dissertation focuses on the practical problem grounding Hegel's reflections on the subject.

I argue that the above-described structure of the sublime finds its explanation in Hegel's early dispute with Kant's practical philosophy. In the period before 1800, Hegel criticizes the Judaic conception of divinity for the first time and rejects Kant's moral philosophy in similar terms, considering it a form of Judaism. His critique of Kant's dualism ultimately explains his opposition to the dualistic conception of divinity outlined in the Judaic Psalms, *die heilige Poesie*, and Kant's categorical imperative. Even though Hegel's rejection of Judaism is part of a long tradition of Protestant thinkers, going back to Mendelssohn, Hegel's analysis of Judaism relies strongly—and specifically—on Kant's practical philosophy.

I argue that Hegel's critique of Kant's morality and the Judaic conception of divinity—because of their common dualism—depends paradoxically on Hegel's early Kantianism. That is to say, the conceptual tools that Hegel develops—the language he uses—in rejecting said dualism are carved from Kantian materials. This is an important subsidiary hypothesis of this dissertation. I analyze how,

between 1795 and 1800, Hegel first embraces Kant's practical philosophy and then drifts away from it. I show that he radically changes his position regarding autonomy and that, in doing so, he remains indebted to Kant and his 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 sense in which Kant comprehends "heteronomy" in his moral philosophy—i.e., as an agency based upon external, not internal commands; an agency determined by inclinations or sensible stimuli in a broad sense. However, later, in "Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal," Hegel rejects Kantian philosophy and condemns it as Judaism precisely by means of the Kantian notion of heteronomy.

Hence, the understanding of Judaism as heteronomy will persevere in Hegel's philosophy, as a Kantian element, despite his detachment from Kant, and it is the key that ultimately explains why and how the law outlined in the sublime grants no freedom to creatures. Hegel's apparent lack of interest in the sublime is thus clarified in this dissertation by reference to his practical reflections on autonomy vis-à-vis the heteronomy that he diagnoses in dualist conceptions of the world, the art of the sublime being a paradigmatic case of such powerlessness and unfreedom.

To develop the above-mentioned philosophical problems, I have divided this dissertation into two main parts. In the first part, I deal with the aesthetic dimension of Hegel's theory of the sublime, while in the second part, I approach the practical dimension of the sublime and develop the main thesis of this dissertation. In what follows, I will give a synoptic description of each part.

The first part is composed of three chapters:

Chapter 1 deals with the reception of Hegel's sublime in Hegel studies and aesthetics. It is meant to explain why Hegel's theory of the sublime has been overshadowed—in the case of Hegel studies, by the obsession with the thesis of the end of art; in the case of aesthetics, because of the preeminent influence of Kant's theory of the sublime, especially after the Second World War. This chapter shows the void concerning Hegel's sublimity in the current literature and how this void has led to misinterpretations of the subject. On the one hand, these misinterpretations revolve mainly around the treatment of Hegel's aesthetics as a mere objective translation of Kant's subjective approach to art and, on the other hand, the view of Hegel's aesthetics as a minor step toward the realization of the absolute spirit.

Chapters 2 and 3 are reconstructions of Kant's and Hegel's theories of the sublime in the context of their respective aesthetics: *Kritik der Urteilskraft* and *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst*. This detailed account aims to refute

some of the misinterpretations laid out in chapter 1. Specifically, I argue that Hegel's reflections on the sublime cannot be understood as an objective version of Kant's sublimity. The analysis of Kant's sublime shows the following: To the chaotic manifold of sensible impressions that resists conceptualization and interrupts cognition because it appears counterpurposive—which produces a feeling of displeasure in the agent—Kant opposes reason's ability to present the idea of a totality corresponding to nothing in the sensible realm. Thanks to this intervention of reason, the agent subsequently feels pleasure. In this way, Kant argues that nothing sensible can be sublime—the idea of the sublime resides in the agent. The agent initially feels impotent, but this sensible impotence allows, by way of the intervention of the mental faculties, some sort of inner freedom. This freedom, therefore, is merely internal, which for Hegel implies pure stoicism; that is, *a dualism* between the sensible and the intelligible.

The reconstruction of Hegel's sublime in chapter 3 emphasizes the lack of freedom that Hegel ascribes to the art of sublimity, *die heilige Poesie*. In his description of the relation between creator and creature, Hegel highlights the complete impotence of the latter and the incapacity of sacred poetry to give shape to infinity, which is conceived as a separate and fundamentally different substance. The law comes from divinity—the supreme legislator—and the creature must obey in its finite and powerless condition. There is no possible freedom for the creature, which makes Hegel's sublime incompatible with Kant's. Moreover, this chapter presents the sublime “unfreedom” as the key to understanding Hegel's apparent lack of interest in the subject. It is therefore necessary, in order to deliver a full explanation of the subject, to go beyond the sphere of his aesthetic reflections to the practical realm.

The second part is composed of two chapters. Chapter 1 shows the emergence of Hegel's critique of Judaism through a reconstruction of his reading of Kant's practical philosophy, his subsequent dispute with Kant's conception of freedom, and the development of an alternative to dualism; i.e., love as the overcoming of Kant's moral law. This first chapter is the longest of this dissertation because it is dedicated to the reconstruction of the practical roots of Hegel's sublime, the main task of this study. Chapter 2 shows how the reconstruction of Hegel's sublime can shed light on the aesthetic tradition that continues to ignore or misread his work.

Chapter 1 is—because of its length—divided into two sections, each of which is, in turn, subdivided into subchapters.

In the first section (1.1) of this chapter, I first explore the antecedents of Hegel's conception of Judaism in Kant's practical philosophy, precisely Kant's

notion of *Heteronomie*. To do so, I focus on the analysis of Kant's *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785).

The second section (1.2.) revolves around the three early fragments that are the focus of this dissertation: (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).

In the section devoted to the fragment known as "Das Leben Jesu" (1.2.1), I argue that Hegel's opposition to 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. Jesus is, according to this Hegel, the embodiment of the virtuous man. The analysis of this fragment proves that Hegel's notion of heteronomy—and therefore of Judaism—depends on Kant's practical philosophy, in general, and on his conception of autonomy, in particular, as laid out in the first section of chapter 1.

Fragment (1.2.2) "Die Positivität der christlichen Religion" is divided into two subchapters. The analysis of the fragment shows 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 for understanding why Hegel refuses certain customs of the Christian church, insofar as these practices get followers into the habit of establishing heteronomous relationships with authority—as is the case with the Jewish people as outlined in *die heilige Poesie*.

The analysis of the third fragment, (1.2.3) "Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal," is the most extensive because it is organized according to the nine subfragments that comprise this text. Throughout this section, I demonstrate how Hegel's critique of Judaism continues to be based on Kant's notion of heteronomy, even though Hegel now openly rejects Kantian morality and, in particular, Kant's way of conceiving autonomy based on the categorical imperative. The analysis shows how, 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., he 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. The analysis of the notions of love, life, and the *pleroma* shows how Hegel rejects Kantian philosophy and Judaism, condemns them as dualistic, yet falls short in developing a form of freedom based on the individual love of the living being.

Chapter 2 of part 2 offers a sketch of how the reconstruction of Hegel's sublime can shed light on contemporary aesthetics. To do so, I analyze Rancière's criticisms of Lyotard's reflections on the sublime. I show how, for Rancière, Lyotard's proposal of a purely negative art—that is, an art that refuses to convey the experience of the catastrophe; i.e., what could be called sublime experience—creates a dangerous Other toward which the art is devoted and which deprives it of its emancipatory power. In his analysis, Rancière highlights the dualistic character of Lyotard's approach to sublimity, which echoes, without recognizing it, Hegel's claim against the dualism of Kant and *die heilige Poesie*. I argue that his critique repeats the general objection made by Hegel against Kant and the Judaic Psalms; that is, that a sublime shaping of law denies freedom to humankind. Nevertheless, Rancière fails to substantiate his diagnosis because he, like many other contemporary readers, misunderstood Hegel's theory of sublimity, as is shown in chapter 1 of the first part.