

INTRODUCTION

Like many people I know, I enjoy the work of the literary critic James Wood, and I have enjoyed it all the more since coming to think of him as the contemporary critic closest in spirit to what I think of as Hegel's philosophy of art. On the one hand, Wood has developed or revived certain critical views with clear antecedents in Hegel's lectures. His account in *The Irresponsible Self* of the distinction between what he calls the comedy of forgiveness and the comedy of correction, for example, and of the superiority of the former to the latter, closely resembles Hegel's own effort to distinguish the reconciling power of Aristophanic laughter from the cynicism of, for instance, Molière. Meanwhile, the defense of a modest literary realism articulated in the *Broken Estate* and expanded in *How Fiction Works* – an account of fiction's origins in and responsibility to the real world that manages to acknowledge the ultimate artifice and unreality of the form – strikes just the sort of balance Hegel sought between the competing demands, in his own era, of artistic virtuosity and a sort of bourgeois naturalism. Wood himself, who refers to Hegel only occasionally, would no doubt be surprised to learn this. And there are of course endless ways in which they differ. (For one, Hegel didn't have much interest in the novel.) In any case, it is only the principles Wood holds in common with Hegel that have struck me, as it is the way in which his reckoning of the contemporary art of fiction, of its various traps and possibilities, recalls Hegel's own appraisal of the situation of German literature at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Wood's essay "Jonathan Franzen and the 'Social Novel'" received a good deal of attention in the literary world, in part because *The Corrections*, the novel it addressed, had been a recent bestseller, and in part because it forms a sort of companion piece to an ever better-known essay, "Hysterical Realism," also reprinted in *The Irresponsible*

Self, in which Wood states his brief against the maximalist tradition (Pynchon, DeLillo, Foster Wallace, *et al.*) in post-war, chiefly American fiction. In 1996, Wood recalls, Franzen had written a well-regarded essay in which he lamented the decline of what he called the “social novel,” the sort of challenging, sophisticated, and yet thoroughly public work of fiction that, in Franzen’s view, had dominated the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – Dickens, Tolstoy, Proust – but had come to seem an impossibility in a culture in which the novelist’s project of bringing “social news” had been taken up by newspapers (and television stations) themselves, and in which “literary fiction” was, in the end, one genre among others. Wood, in response, points to the curious premise of this disappointment, to the fact that “Franzen establishes a kind of competition between the novel and society, almost an equivalence. The novel must somehow match the culture, equal its potency.” Wood finds this ambition overwrought and likely to make for bad art, for if it cannot equal the culture, “then the novel has somehow lost, and must fatten itself up,” must become *Gravity’s Rainbow*.¹

Wood might seem to veer at this point from Hegel’s position. It is precisely Hegel, after all, the philosopher of *Geist* and the inventor of philosophical art history, whom we should expect to second Franzen’s demand, to call for the social work of art as the vessel of a culture’s deepest concerns, its social news. And, indeed, throughout much of human history, Hegel thinks, this is what the work of art has been: not only a match for the culture, a mirror in the road, but the matrix of its self-understanding as a coherent form of life. Homer, to take one of Hegel’s favorite examples, does not merely transcribe the facts of Greek religion; it is he himself who creates that religion, and who in “giving the Greeks their gods” also gives them their world. As readers of the *Aesthetics* know, however, art’s power to reflect a culture’s concerns dims significantly following the Reformation, and in an age of newspapers and bureaucracies, it has in some important ways a much slighter role to play. Many of Hegel’s readers have felt it has no more role to play at all – that art is over, in other words, on his view – and the impetus for the present study has been a desire to work out a satisfactory reply to this traditional and in many ways unsatisfying account of Hegel on the modern arts.

Wood ends up admiring *The Corrections*, a work whose best passages “constitut[e] a fine case for the vivacity of another kind of book” – not the social novel, with its Homeric ambition to comprehend the

¹ James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self* (New York: FSG, 2004), 198.

whole, but “the novel of character,” a form whose psychological depth shares something of the inwardness of lyric poetry, the literary form to which Hegel consigns his greatest hopes for modern art.² But Wood and Hegel are closest in their accounts not of the achievements but of the failures of contemporary fiction.

Among Franzen’s sources for the quixotic notion that the novel might stand in competition with the culture, with the newspapers and television outlets Hegel would refer to as the world of “prose,” was, by his own admission, the work of Don DeLillo. DeLillo, according to Wood, radicalizes the grandeur of the novel’s mission until it becomes almost unrecognizable: “at its root level,” Wood finds him saying in a 1997 essay, “fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism with elements of obsession, superstition and awe. Such qualities will sooner or later state their adversarial relationship to history.”³ It is difficult to know how to take such pronouncements, and Wood suspects a certain lack of seriousness here, attributing to DeLillo the “idea of the novelist as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer – a cultural theorist, fighting the culture with dialectical devilry.”⁴ It is just this mix of outsized ambition and uncertain seriousness that Hegel sees in Friedrich Schlegel, the theorist and *litterateur* who made such a vigorous mark on the German literary and cultural scene in the last decade of the eighteenth century. For DeLillo, the novel must become a vehicle for theory if it is to take on the culture. Likewise, the project of Jena Romanticism was to invigorate literature by destroying its distinction from philosophy. The *bête noire* for Hegel as for Wood is the ironist, the artist who wants us to take his subversions as a serious project and yet who knows himself that it is easier to destroy than to create.

A second and related form that literature assumes in its moments of crisis is the encyclopedia of trivialities that Wood calls hysterical realism and that Hegel refers to as subjective humor. The passages in which they poke fun at this approach are strikingly similar in tone. Pynchon and DeLillo write “books of great self-consciousness with no selves in them; curiously arrested books which know a thousand different things – How to make the best Indonesian fish curry! The sonics of the trombone! The drug market of Detroit! The history of strip cartoons! – but do not know a single human being.”⁵ This sort of “portable smartness,” as Wood calls it, is what Hegel finds in the modern German novel. He

² Ibid., 209. ³ Ibid., 198. The title of the DeLillo essay is “Power and History.”

⁴ *Irresponsible Self*, 201. ⁵ Ibid., 202.

chides Goethe, his favorite, for the digressiveness of *Elective Affinities*, its treatment of “the parks, the *tableaux vivants*, and the swinging of the pendulum, the feel of metals, the headaches, the whole picture, derived from chemistry.” Likewise, “in order always to have new material, [the comic novelist] Jean Paul looked into books of the most varied kind, botanical, legal, philosophical, descriptive of travel, noted at once what struck him and wrote down the passing fancies it suggested.” In general, “he brought together the most heterogeneous material – Brazilian plants and the old Supreme Court of the Empire.”⁶

A third correspondence concerns the figure known to the German aesthetic tradition as the “beautiful soul.” Franzen arrives in his essay at the conclusion that the dream of the social novel must be abandoned and that the modern writer’s project will devolve upon the integrity of her creations: “To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: isn’t this enough? Isn’t it a lot?”⁷ Wood is sympathetic, he allows, to this “aesthetic” solution to the problem of the novel, and Hegel would be as well – particularly where the pursuit of style assumes the form of a commitment to an artistic project, however minor, that might win the writer a measure of trust from her public and distance her from the ironist, with his eye for the main chance. (The problem of authenticity, as we will see, is central to Hegel’s account of the modern condition of the arts.) But Wood now registers a worry that finds a deep echo in Hegel. In rejecting the project of the social novel, Franzen seems to have rejected the very idea of distinction in the arts. “I resist, finally, the notion of literature as a noble higher calling,” he writes; “my belief in manners would make it difficult for me to explain to my brother, who is a fan of Michael Crichton, that the work I’m doing is simply *better* than Crichton’s.” But having reduced his theory of the novel to the pursuit of style, and then having disclaimed the value of that style itself, Franzen is left with very little – with a view, as Wood puts it, “starved down precisely to the ‘refuge’ of a few authentic ‘sentences.’”⁸ Refuge, authenticity, starvation: Wood’s account reprises the dialectic of the beautiful soul, the figure embodied for Hegel in the tender but listless beauty of Novalis’s poetry and in the poet’s death, at an early age, from consumption. Convinced of his own goodness and intelligence, but afraid to sully

6 LFA 297, 295–6.

7 *Irresponsible Self*, 197.

8 *Ibid.*, 200.

this by asserting it in the marketplace – by claiming his superiority to Michael Crichton or accepting Oprah’s endorsement – the beautiful soul retires and retreats.

The correspondences are not exact, but we can recognize in Wood’s reply to Franzen several of the same basic possibilities Hegel presents in his account of “The Dissolution of Romantic Art”: the ironist in DeLillo and Schlegel; the humorist in Pynchon and Jean Paul; the beautiful soul in Franzen and Novalis; and finally the possibility of a “novel of character” grounded in the fact that “consciousness is the true Stendhalian mirror, reflecting helplessly the random angles of the age.”⁹ Whether or not we can find an analogue to that latter view in the *Aesthetics* and its account of post-romantic lyric poetry remains an open question. Still, the sense of affinity between Wood and Hegel is difficult to resist. And what are we to make of that? A modest claim to the relevance of Hegel’s philosophy of art.

9 Ibid., 201.

THE PROBLEM OF A MODERN ART

That Hegel bears witness in his lectures on aesthetics not to a cessation of artistic activity but to a decline in its significance for human self-understanding is quite certain. Less evident is the extent and nature of this decline. The debate over the proper interpretation of the “end of art,” in other words, centers not on the likelihood that plays and paintings will cease to be produced (or even, in some narrow sense, enjoyed) but on the possibility that their production will largely cease to matter to their intended audience, the cultivated European publics of the nineteenth century. Interested non-specialists have often subscribed to this pessimistic view.¹ Scholars of the *Aesthetics*, meanwhile, have long divided on the issue, some defending the pessimistic account, others retrieving from the half-dozen editions and several thousand pages of the lectures the sense of some enduring role for art.² If the idea that art has no real place in Hegel’s mature system is still defended,³ the balance of opinion has shifted in the past decade in favor of a more optimistic

1 Most prominently, Arthur Danto; see below. Also, Anthony Cascardi: “Hegel says that art is no longer possible in the present age,” *Consequences of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 117.
 2 Stephen Bungay, *Beauty and Truth: A Study of Hegel’s Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), and Dieter Henrich, “Kunst und Kunst Philosophie der Gegenwart” in H.R. Jauss, ed., *Poetik und Hermeneutik 1* (Munich: Eidos Verlag, 1964; translated as “Art and Philosophy of Art Today: Reflections with Reference to Hegel” in Richard E. Amacher and Victor Lange, eds., *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism: A Collection of Essays* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979]), take the dim view, as does Rüdiger Bubner, *Innovations of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 [1995]), 254. H.S. Harris was an early optimist, “The Resurrection of Art,” *Owl of Minerva*, 16, 1 (1984), as was William Desmond, *Art and the Absolute* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 75.
 3 Martin Donougho, “Art and History: Hegel on the End, the Beginning, and the Future of Art” in S. Houlgate, ed., *Hegel and the Arts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007). Donougho’s nuanced, interesting article entertains a range of positions,

appraisal.⁴ More than one commentator has recently asserted the ongoing indispensability of the arts on a properly Hegelian conception of the modern world, and the prospect of some rough convergence of opinion on such an old question is encouraging.⁵

Such a consensus, should it appear, would require reinforcement along two lines. Commentators interested in sparing Hegel the infamy of declaring an end to art have amassed a good deal of textual evidence that contravenes the pessimistic reading, but there has been no concerted effort to rebut the apparently, and not implausibly, Hegelian arguments on which that view is founded. Second, there has been a general reluctance to put forth a positive account of art's ongoing value: to identify the distinctive contributions in virtue of which the creation of and engagement with original works of art (not just museum pieces) remains on Hegel's view an essential activity. I explore these distinctive contributions in the cases of painting and literature in chapters 2–5.⁶ The

eventually settling on a fairly pessimistic view. Allen Speight, "Hegel and Aesthetics: The Practice and 'Pastness' of Art" in F.C. Beiser, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), likewise offers tentative suggestions but is sympathetic to Donougho's account.

4 Among commentators who have argued recently (on widely varying grounds) that art remains vital are Robert Wicks, "Hegel's Aesthetics: An Overview" in F.C. Beiser, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); S. Houlgate, "Hegel and the 'End' of Art," *Owl of Minerva*, 29, 1 (1997); A. Gethmann-Siefert, "Einleitung: Gestalt und Wirkung von Hegels Ästhetik" in A. Gethmann-Siefert, ed., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst: Berlin 1823* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), xxiv, clxxxvi–ccxv, and "Einleitung" in A. Gethmann-Siefert and B. Collenberg-Plotnikov, eds., *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik: nach Hegel, im Sommer 1826* (Munich: Fink, 2004), xi–xlix; K.D. Magnus, "Spirit's Symbolic Self-Presentation in Art: A Reading of Hegel's Aesthetics," *Owl of Minerva* 30, 2 (1998), 155–207; K. Berger, *A Theory of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 89; Brian Etter, "Hegel's Aesthetic and the Possibility of Art Criticism" in William Maker, ed., *Hegel and Aesthetics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 40; Kirk Pillow, *Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Robert Pippin, "What Was Abstract Art?," *Critical Inquiry*, 29 (2002), 1–24, and "The Absence of Aesthetics in Hegel's Aesthetics" in Beiser, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*; Ido Geiger, "Is Art a Thing of the Past? The Political Work of Art between Hegel and Schiller," *Idealistic Studies*, 35 (2–3) (Summer/Fall 2005), 173–97; and Terry Pinkard, "Symbolic, Classical and Romantic Art" in Houlgate, ed., *Hegel and the Arts*.

5 Pippin: an "indispensable elemen[t] of modern life" ("What Was Abstract Art?", 2032); Pinkard: "crucial and irreplaceable" ("Symbolic, Classical and Romantic Art," 20); Gethmann-Siefert: art retains "ihre unverzichtbare kulturelle Funktion" ("Einleitung [1826]," xlvii–lii); Geiger: "an essential human need in modernity" ("Is Art a Thing of the Past?", 174).

6 Unfortunately, I have neither the space nor the education to offer an appraisal of Hegel's theory of music, the third of the romantic arts. For an excellent treatment of the subject, see R.T. Eldridge, "Hegel on Music" in Houlgate, ed., *Hegel and the Arts*.

present chapter is first critical, taking up and responding to variations of the pessimistic reading, and then constructive, laying the ground for a defense of art by establishing the sense in which it remains subordinate to philosophy (“Art and philosophy”); pausing to account for Hegel’s often valedictory tone (“Hegel’s pessimism”); and finally proceeding to outline art’s distinctive value (“Building the case for indispensability”). In closing, I consider the charge that Hotho’s editing distorts Hegel’s view (“Does Hegel change his mind?”) and the objection that modern art is, in Hegel’s view, necessarily exhausted, or “post historical” (“post-romantic art”).

The pessimistic reading

That the lectures on aesthetics have given rise to debate among interpreters is hardly surprising when we consider how conflicted is the view of modern art which they project.⁷ To judge from the Introduction, art’s loss of authority in an age of reflection is of interest for primarily “phenomenological” reasons, that is, insofar as the age of art prepares for and effects the transition to philosophical forms of thought. The fact that Hegel fails even to consider, much less resolve, the issue of art’s ongoing relevance certainly encourages the notion that it has become a “thing of the past” (LFA 11, XIII:25). Five hundred pages later, in the opening remarks on the romantic artform,⁸ the sentiment is substantially unchanged: “the culmination of the romantic in general,” Hegel announces, is the final uncoupling of content and form, “the divergence . . . whereby art sublates itself and brings home to our minds that we must acquire higher forms for the apprehension of truth than those which art is in a position to supply” (LFA 529, XIV:142). It is certainly puzzling, given this programmatic statement, to find Hegel praising Goethe’s *West-östliche Divan* as “the highest that poetry can accomplish” (1826a, Ms. 376) and pointing to it as the bellwether of a new and vital literary humanism (LFA 606–11, XIV:237–42). Our question

7 Though I will occasionally use the term “modern art” to refer to post-Reformation art in general (e.g. in the chapter on painting) I will generally have in mind the Goethezeit (1770–1830), the period which saw “the appearance of genuinely living literature [*lebendiger Poesie*]” (LFA 20, XIII:37) in the *Sturm und Drang*, and was then shaped by revolution and Romanticism. The term “post-romantic” will refer to the art of the first decades of the nineteenth century.

8 I will use “romantic” to refer to the art of the Christian era (Hegel’s sense of the term) and “Romantic” to refer to the literary and philosophical output of German Romanticism.

cannot be resolved by direct appeal to what Hegel had (according to Hotho) said on the subject of post-romantic art. As we will see below, his views evolved somewhat over the course of the 1820s. In addition to reconstructing this evolution, our task is to clarify the apparent confusion by appeal to more general considerations.

An advantage of the articles on the *Aesthetics* that Dieter Henrich published in the late 1960s is that they openly address, as Bungay's and Danto's contributions do not, the discrepant evidence just mentioned. Henrich believes he can dismiss this enthusiasm as a failure of nerve, however, for on his reading, the ascendancy of philosophy since the Reformation not only suggests but requires, for Hegel, art's irrelevance.⁹ Part of his account relies on a philological claim to which we will return below, but the thrust of the argument is that the very idea of vitality in the modern arts should strike us as "strictly incompatible with the systematic structure of Hegel's aesthetics."¹⁰ On Henrich's view, modern art is both necessarily *partial* and necessarily *redundant*. Art's incompleteness, or partiality, derives from the fact that it can no longer display to us our "highest" concerns. This is certainly a fair presentation of Hegel's view. In particular, neither the basic metaphysical certainties nor the central social institutions that undergird our experience of the world can be comprehensively presented, he thinks, to sense and feeling. Greek sculptors and Christian painters managed the former by depicting the gods themselves; but the modern understanding of "the Divine," having centrally to do with human freedom, cannot have its portrait taken. Likewise tragedy, the art in which Greeks displayed to themselves the legitimacy of their founding social institutions, no longer plays a legitimizing role, having become in the romantic era an art devoted to the study of individual character in a world bereft of binding institutions. The point here is simply that modern art's partiality may be admitted without damage to its indispensability: the fact that painters and poets cannot address *all* our concerns does not imply that they can address *none* of them. In the final lecture series, Hegel acknowledges that the modern artist's treatment of "partial objects" means that the meaning his work conveys "can only be something partial." Nonetheless, "the satisfaction in such

9 Henrich, "The Contemporary Relevance of Hegel's Aesthetics" in M. Inwood, ed., *Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 201.

10 Henrich, "Kunst und Kunstphilosophie der Gegenwart," 16; my translation.

partial objects can go further, reach deeper; it can progress, in other words, toward a state of felt intimacy [*zur Innigkeit*]” (1828, Ms. 101a).

Henrich’s second and more damaging contention is that modern art is necessarily redundant, that it merely reiterates, accessibly and with local inflection, a body of speculative propositions expressed with greater clarity and rigor by the philosophers. (Art “playfully introduce[s] into the peripheral, into the incidental, the certainty that the world cannot ultimately be characterized by rupture and estrangement,” he writes; Goethe’s poetry secures for us a mere “confirmation” of the self-understanding secured by the professorate.¹¹) This is a much more serious challenge to the indispensability view; if modern artists are left simply to “confirm” or repeat the deliverances of theoretical philosophy in harmony and metaphor, it is hard to see why such a practice, whether or not it persists, is in any way meaningful or necessary. Can Hegel avoid Henrich’s conclusion? Given the many versions of his claim that art “falls apart” in the late romantic period, thereby “sublating itself” in favor of “higher forms for the apprehension of truth,” and that philosophy has come to stand “higher” than art and religion, there is reason to think that Henrich is right. A typical Prussian civil servant – someone who has been to university, maintains friendships with cultivated peers, and reads the paper – already holds the keys to his own freedom, on this reading of Hegel, and his engagement with works of art proceeds *from*, rather than aiming *toward*, a reflective satisfaction with the basic outlines of modern life.

In the end, however, Henrich’s article is more the expression of a worry than the elaboration of an argument. In particular, he does not show how the demand that works of art must be broadly consistent with Hegel’s philosophical position – must not, in other words, characterize the world as a place of “rupture and estrangement” – makes these works essentially unserious, i.e. “playful” and redundant. In fact, I want to suggest that the suggestion of such a redundancy would seem to rest upon a distinctly un-Hegelian conception of the relationship between the content and the form, the meaning (*Bedeutung*) and the sensuous embodiment (*Gestalt*), of a work of art. I shall then go on to argue that the sense of “sublation” at issue in the transition from art to religion and philosophy has little to do with the notion of redundancy.

In the passage cited above, Henrich suggests that post-romantic art will be left to “introduce” a given “certainty” (namely, the achievement

11 Henrich, “Contemporary Relevance,” 202.