

## PART ONE

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# HEGEL'S LAST WALK THROUGH HIS MUSEUM

*When philosophy paints itself in grisaille, it means that a form of life has become old, as grey on grey only distinguishes and cannot rejuvenate. Not until dusk will the owl of Minerva spread its wings.<sup>1</sup>*

Hegel advised art historians not to theorise about beauty. Only the scholarship of art history had lasting value: it was the business of this subsidiary branch of learning to provide 'visible evidence'<sup>2</sup> for the benefit of philosophical aesthetics. Art history certainly originated in the empirical practice of collecting. However, if in these pages I tend to ignore Hegel's warning, it is not because I arrogantly imagine myself to be slipping into systematic philosophy; this study sees itself merely as a revision of philosophical book-keeping in matters of art. A re-examination is necessary, as the conclusion Hegel draws from his *Aesthetics* holds little of promise for the art lover. The necessity of art, he maintains, is approaching its end: to the philosopher's self-confident mind it has nothing further to offer.

Is Hegel right? Supposing his philosophy simply degraded generations of art-historical hiving into games of speculation? It was questions such as these that gave rise to this book. We will now take the liberty of stepping into the trademen's entrance of philosophy, whence if we stand on tiptoe we may catch a glimpse of the shadowy interior where the 'visible evidence' is assessed.

## MORNING: EASTERN SYMBOLISM

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Hegel thought that the time in which he was living was bathed in the glow of sunset. Humankind had grown old along with its own history, and was now in a position to look back over its long day's work. In the gloaming lay – spread over a distance spanning millennia – a complete collection of the world's greatest art. Each work represented in fossilised form the conscious thought left behind by humanity on the long road it had travelled to meet itself. The art of all times and peoples was in the process of rounding itself off into the concrete expression of the self-aware spirit. This spirit had last been resident at the address Am Kupfergraben 4 in Berlin: here, in Hegel's study, the history of the world finished its procession. Was it by chance that Schinkel's new museum was

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in the immediate vicinity? Just as the owl began flying at the onset of darkness,<sup>1</sup> so Hegel's thoughts lifted themselves above the roofs of Dorotheenstadt at this moment before nightfall. Below, Humboldt University and the royal palace on the River Spree sank into a panorama that became ever wider, taking in, to the west, the fortress of Spandau, and opening still farther until this too diminished to an insignificant brown speck on the broad plain of the Mark. There were moments when the prose of the present time disappeared while the philosopher's mind flew back down the road taken. What had blindly driven the process of history had to be preserved as a comprehensive scholarly review. Beneath the wings of Minerva's emblematic owl the cultural landscapes sank into the darkness, one by one: the West, the classical world, the Orient. The aerial path led eastward, retracing the journey, since it was in the place of daybreak that humanity too had its beginning. Man had followed the course of the sun westward; Hölderlin described the path of the world spirit through history as a walk from morning to evening.<sup>2</sup> It was along this path that Hegel retraced his thoughts, starting at the beginning in order to clarify to himself the many stages through which history had come. He preserved the ephemeral process of 'remembering back' in his lectures on aesthetics and on the philosophy of history; the philosophical model he developed here was the imaginary museum of the *Weltgeist*. Constructed of pure thought, it contained the most important works of art ever created. It was organised chronologically. While following the dance of history, the visitor to this museum became aware of an inherent law in the gradual changes of art form, and this was the spirit's growing awareness of freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Hegel's imaginary museum was composed of a single suite of three immense galleries, the first of which was dedicated to the Orient, the second to ancient Greece, and the last to Western Christianity. To visit this museum ourselves, we will have to rely on Hegel's guidance. Picturing for ourselves the works on display, we set out – obediently at first – along the predestined path.

At the entrance to the first gallery, the Orient, stood a black doorway: *The Beginning*. It was here that the visitor came upon the spirit's consciousness and found it asleep. Francisco Goya captured this moment in a violent pen-and-ink study that shows the figure of a man who has fallen asleep at his desk. His body has collapsed forward, his head rests on clasped hands. Above him float dreams in a confusion of light and dark. The deepest darkness is concentrated behind his back, out of reach of possible commanding glances that might take control of the situation. Here it is as if giant bats were flapping their wings. Above the sleeper's head is an interplay of grotesques that vanish where it becomes brighter: a pale horse's head, the snout of a panting animal, and at the very top – much too large – two hooped forelegs crossed like the front paws of a sleeping dog. One would be tempted to smile at such a practical joke, but for the fact that the surrounding darkness makes the joke nonsensical. Out of this formless dark centre peers a face. Unrecognisable at first, a cloud with piercing eyes, it floats in the air defying gravity. Its features become distinct, and it gazes out of the picture with steady seriousness: it is the artist's own reflection. But already it appears less sure of

itself; the shadows pressing in upon it send a spasm of laughter over its features that at first appears merely humorous, then becomes daemonic. Suddenly the face is distorted in horror to a hideous mask. Its scream blazes like lightning through the forehead of the sleeper. But with the shock of this scream, the light area becomes itself again and separates itself from the darkness; this sketch relieves the excruciating tension of the nightmare. At this signal the man will wake and find himself still seated at his desk.

'The sleep of Reason engenders monsters' was Goya's title for his drawing. This statement would be perfectly placed above the entrance to the gallery of Oriental culture as Hegel described it. The spirit began as an oscillation between being and nothingness, a vague becoming; it was without form and void, like the chaos that had existed for eternity before God stepped in as the creator. The first thing He did was to separate light from darkness. This intervention produced a rift in the fermenting void that sent the two parts in different directions:

one to the starry sky, the natural domain of the spirit, and the other into the earth, the realm of physical gravity. Hegel deliberately used clear allusion to the biblical creation story; just as the universe came into being with the first separation of light and darkness, so too did culture begin with its division of itself into Ormuzd and Ahriman, the lords of light and darkness. The two were engaged in a perpetual struggle for supremacy, visible in the constant alternation between night and day, each of which banished the other without gaining the upper hand for very long. This religion of light was founded by Zoroaster, before the great empire of the Achaemenidean Persians in which historical tradition faded into myth. To Hegel this represented the most ancient manifestation of the spirit. According to Zoroaster's prophecy, at the end of the world light would conquer darkness and break the power of evil.

The beginnings of spiritual self-awareness formed a division that was art-less and



Figure 1. Francisco Goya: *The Sleep of Reason Engenders Monsters*. Pen and ink, 1792. Prado, Madrid.

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abstract. Two hostile principles were constantly challenging one another – light and darkness, mind and matter, good and evil – without comprehending one another. For images to materialise, light had to penetrate the darkness. It was only when the two were combined that artistic symbols could be generated at all. The luminous form of spirit only became visible in the domain of its opposite. This was why God created the world in the first place: in order to be reflected in it. By creating the universe He became aware of His omnipotence. The created, physical world was as it were the matrix in which God planted His own consciousness. The same applied to art: it was the locus where the human spirit denied its intellectual properties and mingled with its opposite – with the artistic raw material. Natural forms were symbols for the spirit that wanted to become manifest to the senses. Both the creation of the universe and the making of art were messages of spiritual self-reflection. The history of culture was the reiteration of cosmogony in humankind. This was why Hegel also called art ‘the spirit’s act of reproduction’.<sup>4</sup> Where there was a spiritual model for the natural created world, human art refined its sensual elements still further and made them more spiritual. The work of art was inspired by the pathos of God that was the catalyst of creation in the first place: the desire to see Himself reflected in His creatures.

The world spirit overcame the cultural wilderness of primitive times by crossing the mountains of Baluchistan and descending to the Indus. Here the spirit assumed its first artistic form. It expressed itself in the Sanskrit of the Upanishads and the Brahmans’ various sacrificial rites. The Persian religion had until that time been unsymbolic; the sun had no divine meaning, it was God itself. However, art could not come into being unless there was a distinction between meaning and form. This occurred in Indian culture. Here, the spirit used its opposing principle to reflect back upon itself; the apparently natural was only a symbol, an expression of the thing it was not. Admittedly, the spirit’s first steps in this foreign environment took it to some strange places. It plunged into the ocean of sensuality and tried its strength there. The natural shapes in which it saw itself reflected were inventions that had run riot. Human and animal forms were arbitrarily flung together and ‘pulled apart to form colossal grotesques’. Indian mythology was dominated by ‘the wildest exaggeration of dimensions which showed neither spacial nor temporal restraint’; divine omnipotence was circumscribed by ‘the diversity of one and the same entity, with multiple heads, arms, and so forth.’<sup>5</sup> There could be no doubt about it: the *Weltgeist*’s perfectly honest attempt to reveal itself in nature had overshot the mark here. It was confused by the unfamiliar, heady brew of sensualism. Hegel himself often found it difficult to follow the frivolous exuberance of Indian thinking. Once he even expressed mild disapproval of such levity. To a decent nineteenth-century German the constantly recurring descriptions of human procreation were hard to take. Everything in Oriental culture was positively bursting with it: the victory columns, the pagodas, the obelisks were all interpreted by Hegel as phallic symbols. It was in these that the *Weltgeist* celebrated its creative energy, for which – in an onrush of adolescence, so to speak – it could think of no other suitable analogy

than the sexual act. All bounds of tolerance were broken, however, with the episode in the Ramajana that describes the thousand-year embrace of Uma and Shiva. Before his appalled audience in the Berlin auditorium Hegel sketched out the scene in which Shiva, in answer to the gods' prayers, turns his procreative powers earthwards: 'The English translator refused to interpret this passage, as it all too completely dispenses with modesty and shame.'<sup>6</sup>

The *Weltgeist* could only express its power through the figures of Indian mythology by devaluing their sensual excesses. That was why Hegel described this culture as 'fantastical symbolism'. The search for clear subject matter in these undefined forms was fruitless. The indeterminate nature of these religious ideas was made up for with bombastic invention. The less distinct the spirit became, the more the gods resembled caricatures: their monstrous aspect corresponded to the spirit that had blundered into the labyrinth of sensual experience. Indian culture was at the point of becoming 'eccentric or insane': nature as it was perceived was being ceaselessly pushed to and fro; its manifestations were piled on top of one another and were then cast down again. The spirit was in search of its reflection, but before it could come closer to its true self, it first had to work off the intoxicating effect of the sensual world. This occurred on its journey to Egypt. Eastern culture reached its zenith on the banks of the Nile. The change that took place here, in contrast to the wild practices of India, consisted in removing the senses from the objects of contemplation. Hegel compared this transition to the phoenix that rises from its own ashes. The cult of death was a central theme in Egyptian religion. Dying was understood as a passage to the purified state of spirituality in the Beyond. This was the message of the pyramids, 'gigantic crystals with a hidden centre'.<sup>7</sup> This centre was the mummified corpse: the remains of a finite life suspended in a monument that pointed to eternity. It was not the overflowing spring of regenerative life that was the proper symbol for the spirit, but Death. It was Egyptian culture, therefore, that first created true symbolism; Hegel called this the 'symbolism of the sublime'. The true symbol turned the disparity between meaning and form into an existential statement: 'I am not what I mean,' says the sign; 'I can only indicate the divine as its unworthy opposite.'

In the corruption of death the natural creature bore the most penetrating witness to the power of the spirit. The symbol was a brittle larva which hid the imago inside itself and had to be broken in order for the promised entelechy to occur. The silent symbol expressed what the spirit was still unable to utter. The art of the Egyptians was a memorial in stone whose silent aspect was intended to arouse in the spectator a sense of unfathomable mystery. That was at least how Hegel interpreted the hieroglyphs. He read the same language in the pyramids, those immense stereometric shapes of hardest rock, forbidding in their simplicity and their perfect symmetry, with neither doors nor windows that might admit entry into some inner life. Their four triangular sides pointed to heaven. The base of the pyramid was massively constructed and had tremendous weight; as it rose, what it lost in material substance it seemed to gain in significance.



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Where the edges of the giant crystal met in one point – although it had to be said that they had not risen infinitely enough to touch the blue ether, and the upward movement ended in a point too obtuse to pierce the heavenly dome – here the symbol had achieved its redemptive meaning and had frozen in the process. All attempts to make the pyramids so finely pointed that they could become united with the spirit of God proved to be in vain. The symbol remained earthbound, a heavy lump incapable even of expressing longing.

This untiring but finally useless chasing after meaning characterised for Hegel the Egyptian way of life altogether. It produced a bee-like industry in the construction of huge architectural projects. It tried to decipher the truth in the labyrinth of dark temple passages. Stones were ceaselessly piled one upon another in the search for life's divine meaning. These edifices had no practical purpose; they were erected as human riddles whose solution was only to be given in a later age. Inhabitable as they were, they received human beings only as priests or as the dead. Their outward appearance was something between architecture and plastic art. Often there was no inner area at all; the building was closed up and became pure sculpture. Hegel cited as an example the Memnon colossi, the two seated statues that can be seen in Thebes. These sculptures, each about twenty metres high, originally stood at the entrance to the tomb of Amenophis III (1403–1364 B.C.). Even in the time of the pharaoh's successors, the temple-tomb was demolished and the stones removed. Only these two stone figures remain, like foundlings silhouetted against the Theban plain. Once their faces had shown the features of the ruler whose sepulchre they were supposed to guard forever; no more remains of this likeness today than remains of their ability to carry out their duty. The ravages of time have transformed them from human shapes back into the lichen-covered rock of Heliopolis, where the slaves had originally quarried them. The memory of the ruler who had commanded this memorial weathered as did the rocks, and Amenophis' sobriquet of Nimmuarria became reduced in the Greek to Memnon. The colossae were thought to be statues of the legendary King of Ethiopia. The destructive effects of the weather were also the cause of a phenomenon reported first by Herodotus: at sunrise the pillars of Memnon were heard to emit a murmuring sound. Other sources date this marvel to the year 27 B.C. at the earliest, when an earthquake created deep rifts in the more northerly statue. Ever since, the heat of the morning sun on the stone was said to cause fragments to splinter off, making a musical sound in the process. The Greeks interpreted the phenomenon with the myth of Memnon, the son of Eos, goddess of the Dawn. Every morning, when the Rose-fingered One appeared on the horizon, Memnon called out to his mother. Every morning he lamented his fate to have been cut down before the gates of Troy at the hand of Achilles. During the Roman empire this curiosity was a focus for many travellers; even Hadrian and his wife Sabina made sure they did not miss it when they visited Egypt on one occasion. Its growing fame finally resulted in the mythic presence being dispelled. In 199 A.D., under Septimius Severus, repairs were undertaken on the statues. After this act of con-

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Excerpt

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Figure 2. *The Memnon Colossae of Thebes*. Etching by Baltard after a drawing by Dutertre, in *Monuments de l'Égypte* (Vol. II, Plate 20), 1809.

servation Memnon fell silent forever, as if in protest at such measures being taken in the interests of tourism.

Hegel reawakened the memory of the singing statues of Memnon. To him they were a metaphor for the way meaning and form related to one another in Oriental symbolism. The sign itself was dead, like the seated statues, 'resting, motionless, the arms close to the body, the feet touching: stiff and lifeless.'<sup>8</sup> The art of Egypt was without a soul to vivify the forms from within. The warmth of the sun was necessary before Memnon could speak. In the face of nature's lack of inwardness,<sup>9</sup> the spirit had to impose meaning from without. It was in architecture that it began to structure the raw material significantly. Architecture was 'exterior art', since it constructed the shell that was to contain an inner substance. So far the Egyptians had only managed to design exteriors; their sculptural edifices were puzzles for puzzles' sake, which remained uninhabitable. Meaning had yet to suffuse the form with its commensurate image. There was an 'iron band' fastened across the brow of the Egyptian spirit, which prevented it from developing a free expression of itself with its artistic raw material. It was the Greeks who were first able to free themselves from this bondage. All the same, nature was tamed for the first time by architecture. Stones were placed together according to the lucid laws of gravity. The wild excesses of the imagination seen in Indian art were forbidden entry into these severe constructions. Only the dimensions of symbolic architecture were still un-

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Figure 3. Gustave Moreau: *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1864. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

bounded. 'Unformed universal ideas'<sup>10</sup> sought to make themselves visible in monumental dimensions. The very act of building sacred edifices served a religious purpose. The Weltgeist brought together whole tribes and armies of slaves to perform this task; a tremendous squandering of human labour and human life which all paid tribute to its greatness. 'With the harshness of Africa'<sup>11</sup> it had bent sensual nature to its own will. It captured the daemons of daybreak in the rigid lines of its sculpture. The spirit had still not yet come to an understanding of itself; the culture of Egypt translated the objective enigma into symbols by which the riddle was perhaps posed, but not solved. So the Oriental spirit moved among inexplicable images that bombarded it with questions.

The archetype of the Egyptian symbol was the Sphinx, 'the symbol, as it were, of symbolism itself. Innumerable Sphinx figures are found in Egypt, sometimes by the hundred, sometimes fashioned in the hardest granite, polished, covered in hieroglyphs – the one near Cairo is so colossal that a grown man comes only up to the top of the lion's claws. All have the bodies of resting animals, from the fore-



parts of which emerges a human torso, sometimes bearing the head of a ram, most frequently that of a woman. From base strength and animal energy, the human being seeks to emerge – without however coming to a complete realisation of its own freedom of mind or of movement, as it remains perforce physically and figuratively attached to its counterpart. This urge toward a self-aware spirituality which comprehends itself not by its own efforts alone nor from its own personal reality, but by the contemplation of things related to or other than itself, and by making these things conscious, is the essence of the symbol – the symbol that becomes a riddle when taken to this extreme.<sup>12</sup>

The sleep of Reason had engendered monsters: the works of art in Oriental culture were the progeny of an evil dream

that had troubled humanity shortly before humanity's awakening. Undecided as the Sphinx, the combination of human head and animal body, the images in the dream of sleeping Reason flowed into one another and became confused. Every so often Reason glimpsed its own bright countenance hovering like a good omen, but this was always put to flight by the daemonic spectre. Last monument to the spirit of the Orient, the Sphinx crouched at the exit to the gallery; all who sought entry to the brighter hall beyond had to pass her. The Sphinx blocked the way into the classical age with her riddling questions. Hegel made Oedipus the pioneer and his journey to Thebes the transition from Oriental symbolism to Greece. Shortly before his arrival in the city, he encountered the Sphinx in the mountains. Gustave Moreau captured in a painting the moment in which the riddle-poser has leapt upon the traveller. She sits on the man's chest like a tormenting nightmare. 'What creature walks on four legs in the morning,

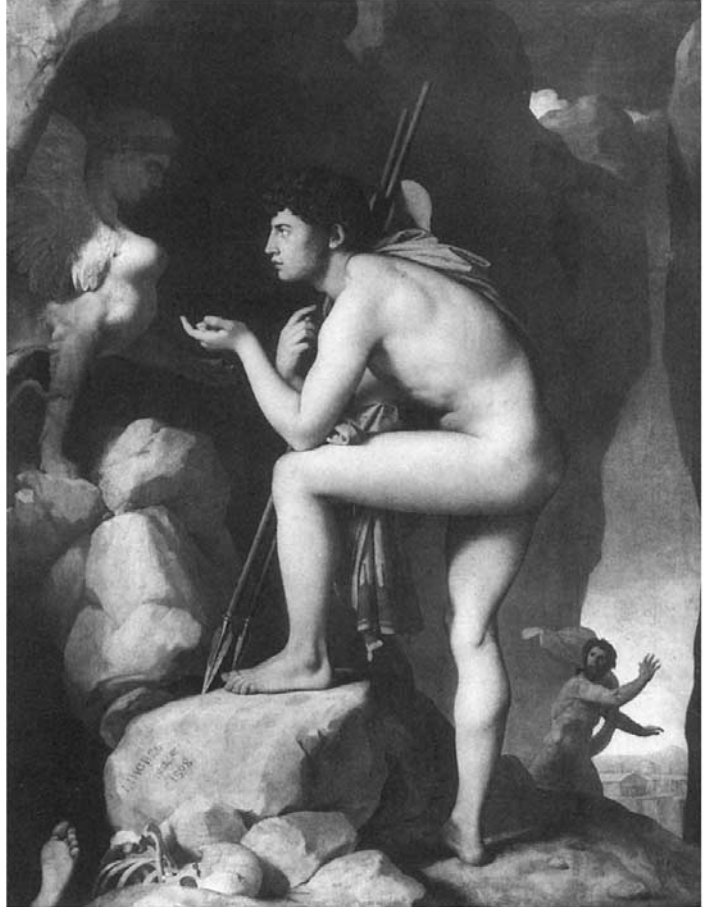


Figure 4. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres: *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1808. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

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Figure 5. Karl Friedrich Schinkel: *Sarastro's Garden: The Sphinx by Moonlight*. Stage set for Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. Altes Museum, Berlin.

on two legs at noon, and on three in the evening?' Even while she asks these questions, the Sphinx falters in the assurance of her magical powers; she reads in Oedipus' keen gaze that he will solve the riddle. Her limbs are already tensing for the leap into the stony abyss. As a nightmarish image dissolves when the sleeper awakes, the breathtaking daemon gives way before Oedipus. He stands unencumbered, his body only loosely covered with a cloak. His handsome figure indicates the solution to the riddle. The creature is man, who crawls on all fours in the morning of his infancy; on two

legs the grown man strides through the noonday of his life; in the evening the old man plods wearily toward death, leaning on a stick. Oedipus the man has banished the masks of subconscious half-light and has become fully aware of his humanity.

*Gnôthi seautón*: 'Know thyself' stood over the portal leading to the cultural sphere of the Greeks. Hegel lost no time in heeding the command and crossing the threshold of the solved riddle into the brightness of Greece. Let us, however, pause for just a moment before taking in that dazzling scene. The Sphinx's face has not yet faded in our memory. Hegel may have interpreted her expression as the terrible amazement of the daemonic creature on finding that the human being knew more than she had bargained for. The riddle-posing monster would then be defeated by her own ignorance of the purposeful traveller. But was it only the powerlessness of the mythic subworld that could be read from the Sphinx's features? Was her pallor not also due to her horrified insight into Oedipus' approaching doom? Was her feline body not coiled in supplication? Stay, wanderer! Do not solve the riddle! Her eyes convey an urgent appeal: 'If you obey me, you will soon forget that self-satisfied old man you got rid of just now; you will become King and marry a wonderful woman who will bear you children. Trust your blind destiny and question no further! But if you defeat me, you will become aware of the fact that your sexual partner is your mother and that you are your father's murderer, just as the oracle foretold.' Oedipus refuses to listen to her warning. He solves the riddle and in the quest for self-knowledge will plunge into tragedy himself. The Sphinx appears to guess what will happen; her gaze seems to be searching for the scars