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Excerpt

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I

The poet in the age of prose  
reflections on Hegel's *Aesthetics* and  
Rilke's *Duino Elegies*

WITH Hegel's observations in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, on the difference between the *epic* poetry of the ancients and the *novel* as the dominant literary form of the present, we are at the centre of these meditations. The great epic poems of antiquity, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for instance, or Virgil's *Aeneid*, not only reflect the minds of certain poets; they are, at the same time, as are all great literary works, recognizable as the product of an age; and the age of Homer, the age of epic poetry, Hegel characterizes as a 'fundamentally poetic state of the world', that is, a world in which poetry is not merely written, but, as it were, lived. The active intervention and participation of gods in the lives of mortals; groves and springs and hills as the habitats of nymphs and fauns; the poetic comprehension of life was at that time not a matter of the poetic imagination at work in the minds of a few chosen individuals, of artists whose successors, much later in history, more often than not lamented their separation from their contemporary surroundings, but was 'natural', a matter of fact, of ways of thinking and feeling shared by the whole community. It is not absurd to say that in such a world *our* distinctions between imagination and fact were of little importance, if not unknown. It is this that led the young Nietzsche to accuse the first great analytical rationalist of Greece, Socrates, the indefatigable questioner, of having destroyed mythology (or what now goes by that name), of having helped to bring about the end of tragedy, indeed, of Greek art.

But back to Hegel: of his own epoch he said that it was the age of prose, and in this respect it certainly is still ours. The age of prose: this meant for him that prose had become the ruling mode of perception. Understanding is prosaic understanding. Our science is, or course, written in prose, and this implies not merely a manner of writing, but a style of comprehension, and prose is our psychology, our economics, our sociology – all our efforts intelligently to grasp the nature of the world.

For Hegel all articulate religious beliefs of the past, Greek mythology, for instance, are part and parcel of a poetic understanding of the world although the purified religion of the future would be, he asserted, beyond any kind of truth that can manifest

*In the age of prose*

itself entirely in images, or in works of art. Still, with regard to the past and the present he distinguishes between 'two spheres of human consciousness: Poetry and Prose'. Yes, of course, he was what Jacob Burckhardt called him, a '*terrible simplificateur*' of history: the world of the ancients was 'poetic', the modern world is 'prosaic'. Clearly, it would be pointless even to try to prove that there was a great deal of prose in the 'age of poetry' and that there is a great deal of poetry in the 'age of prose'. For Hegel's distinction is not a technical one: it is concerned with modes of perception, universes of understanding. It is not a question of more or better poetry being written in an age of poetry; what Hegel means are different coinages of the mind, different currencies by which we pay for our attempts to understand the world. It is, therefore, an understatement within his incomparably more comprehensive historical statement when he says of poetry as an art that, in the poetic age, it has 'an easier life' than in the age of prose. An easier life? Only because Hegel speaks at this point of poetry in a technical sense. Obviously, the poems of Archilochus or Sappho differed from the talk of ordinary Greek people as they conversed on the agora, the market-place; and yet the poetry of the poets was, according to Hegel, merely a more glorious flower of the common soil, related to it as the sunflower is mysteriously related to what looks prosaic enough: the seeds, the roots, the ground from which it grows. An easier life? It is the least that can be said when it comes to distinguishing the nature of Homeric poetry from literature written at a time when, in Hegel's words, 'prose has appropriated to itself everything that is of the mind, and has impressed the stamp of prose upon it'. Once this has happened, poetry, if it survives at all, 'must melt and pour into a fundamentally other mould' the material supplied by reality, in the end even language itself. No wonder that, with such resistance of the prosaic, 'poetry finds itself involved everywhere in manifold difficulties'.

Never mind the intelligently informed or pedantic arguments that can be raised against any such grand historical categorizing: there is no doubt – to choose an activity of the mind other than poetry – that the philosophy of Anaxagoras or Heraclitus is closer to the poetic mode than to the philosophizing of Kant or Locke; and no doubt whatever that the novels of Stendhal are not only

*The poet in the age of prose*

written in prose, but are, *therefore*, representative of the nineteenth century just as the epic poetry of Homer stands for a form of writing irrevocably of an age long past.

After the mythological crystallizations of ancient art – or, for that matter, the art of the Middle Ages – the modern novel is abundantly more ‘interesting’ because it has discovered the ‘interestingness’ of things that apparently were of no interest to the ancient poet or, it is to be assumed, his public: the nuances of love or love-making, the shades of greed or jealousy or envy that determine human relationships, the subtle subterfuges and self-deceptions, the infinite variety of objects with which man has surrounded himself. It is, then, in radical opposition to the Homeric epic that Hegel judges the modern novel: it is often superbly successful in revealing an entire world through many details of individual characters and their interactions, through their varied responses to the events they bring about or to which they become victims, through the fine delineations of things and the manifold impressions they make on different kinds of people. Yet, because the novel presupposes, as Hegel puts it, a ‘prosaic world order’, it unavoidably lacks the poetic condition that could only be supplied by a world that is, or that is felt to be, poetic at its very core. And if the novel, nonetheless, is successful in occasionally creating *poetic* effects, this is due, as Hegel says, above all to the collisions between ‘the poetry of the heart’ and the inexorable prose of the external sphere. No doubt, in saying this, Hegel, like the early German Romantics, for instance Novalis, thought of Goethe’s great prose works, his novels, above all his *Wilhelm Meister*. Still, it is amazing how far this conflict between ‘the heart’ and ‘the circumstances’, between ‘within’ and ‘without’ will take us – as far as Rilke’s radical withdrawal, in the *Duino Elegies*, from the external sphere: ‘Nowhere will world exist but within.’ Rilke did not know Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* but he knew or divined the character of the world in which he lived and in which, sometimes desperately, his poetry strove to assert itself as a valid aspect of truth.

The sense of having been born into a wrong age – a sense that, in one form or another, has been uttered by poets writing in the high season of what Hegel called Romanticism, the mode of poetry trying to survive, to assert itself even in the age of prose – has

*In the age of prose*

been most succinctly conveyed by Goethe. During his second sojourn in Rome in September 1787, beholding works of Greek sculpture, he wrote: 'Those superlative works of art are superlative works of nature, brought forth by human beings in accordance with true and natural laws. Chance and fancy are gone. What is there, is there of necessity: God wanted it to be like this.' It was, at that time, Goethe's ambition to pursue as an *ideal* what he saw as *nature* in those human creations; and when he denounced most of the artistic productions of his own age as lawless, forced, 'unnatural', he appeared to have done so because they defied what in that passage he called, with rare directness, the will of God. And indeed it would take up more time than we can afford to spend if we were to cite, from the Goethean and post-Goethean epoch, only a select few of the poets' sublime lamentations about the pathology of their spiritual existences in the age of prose. We might begin, perhaps, with Schiller's poem 'The Gods of Greece' that views anything beautiful in the poet's own time as nothing but the dead monument to what was once a *living* truth; or Hölderlin's elegy 'Bread and Wine' that mourns the absence of the gods from the poets' lives – 'But we, my friend, are too late', the gods 'are far above ourselves, away in a different world'; or Keats's 'Sylvan historian' who records a time of poetic beauty that is irremediably lost; or Yeats's forms created by 'Grecian goldsmiths', forms in whose company he desired to be once he was 'out of nature', or what was looked upon as nature in the age of prose; or Rilke's 'Who, if I cried, would hear me among the orders of Angels?'

This is the beginning of the First of the *Duino Elegies*, the cry – in the conditional – of one who indeed felt that he was a native of the age of the novel, that literary form that Hegel had defined as being the representative genre of the prosaic epoch; the cry of a poet who had himself just essayed his only major prose work, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*; the cry that seemed to fall in with Hölderlin's lament, much later than Hölderlin and, therefore, more timidly and insecurely. Never before has so ambitious, so successful and partly even so great a series of poems about the spiritual condition of man so openly revealed its tentativeness, the helplessness that its author carried into his most audacious assertions by such an abundance of conditionals and subjunctives:

*The poet in the age of prose*

‘Who would, if I cried’,

... And even if one of the Angels suddenly  
pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his  
stronger existence ...

We shall be staying for a while with Rilke’s Angel, but not without first briefly recapitulating the strange history of those Rilkean lines, and not only because they are a kind of climax to the long history of the increasing spiritual uncertainty of the arts.

In the years 1907 and 1908 Rilke had published the two volumes of what he called *New Poems*. They were new, new in substance and tone and manner, much different from what he had written before, *The Book of Hours*, for instance, or that *Song of Love and Death* of the legendary cornet Christoph Rilke, who was a kind of lyrically and heroically exalted matinee idol of the belated muses of Romanticism. What, then, was new in the *New Poems*? That the poet, judging the poetry of individual emotion, of what went by the name of Neo-Romanticism, exhausted, determined to sing no longer the songs of his subjective experiences and feelings, but to try to express the essence of the things themselves, just as if the things themselves opened their mouths to say what they were: a panther in its cage, the wind of the nocturnal sea, a fig tree on a rocky height on Capri, a blue or pink hydrangea, Venice on a late autumn day. With extraordinary intensity and virtuosity he sought to carry out a poetic programme that, in 1908, he laid down in his ‘Requiem for a Young Poet’, a young man who had killed himself because of unhappy love. That desperate young poet had acted so desperately because he was not yet poet enough to have learned how to survive poetically what humanly had become unbearable: namely, as that ‘Requiem’ pronounced with the typically Rilkean mixture of humility and hubris, by no longer using words in order to say, like a sick man, where it hurts, but to build from them, as if from stone, an edifice, much as medieval stone-masons did, who sank their private selves into ‘the equanimity of stone’. That ‘Requiem’ is, perhaps, too impressive a poem simply to say of it that it anticipated by nine years the anti-Romantic dogma of T. S. Eliot’s most influential essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’; yet this is exactly what it did.

If Hegel had been as subtle a critic of individual poems as he was a grand metaphysical historian of the arts, he might have said

*In the age of prose*

of Rilke's *New Poems* that they abound in those paradoxical and superlative qualities that poetry can still achieve against the unrelenting defiance of the prosaic age: they are vigorously rarefied, energetically subtle, vitally decadent. If they were music, they would have to be intoned in sustained *forte dolce*. Achievements of such paradoxical kind, and only such achievements, are still possible after the 'death of art', that is, after it had passed the historical phase in which it had, according to Hegel, fulfilled its 'highest destiny'. The poet, in such a period, has to produce out of his own inner self, not only the poetry, but also, as it were, the climate, the temperature in which it can breathe. No wonder there is something febrile about such works, something terribly exhausting about the labour of producing them. Indeed, these were the conditions of his own self that Rilke, through his double, the young poet Malte Laurids Brigge, poignantly describes in Malte's *Notebooks*. Rilke transcended this situation by the 'violent' deeds, as he himself said, that he had perpetrated with his *New Poems*. He indulged the illusion that fresh poetic enterprises would *easily* succeed now that he had purged his soul and mind by making Malte Laurids Brigge suffer what he himself suffered. But his anxiety continued after the *Notebooks* were published in 1910. It lasted and certainly returned again during the years of the First World War and during the years that, with horrible explosions, followed upon the horrible explosion of 1914.

Yet there came that *dies mirabilis* in January 1912 when inspiration returned and 'the Voice' spoke to him out of the storm that blew from the Adriatic as he walked along the ramparts of Castle Duino, the Voice that, as was revealed ten years later, intended to teach him the great lesson of why such a violent effort had been needed to wrest, in the age of prose, from the 'things' of *New Poems*, from those blue or pink hydrangeas, or those rocks in the moonlight, their poetic essences. It was because the world outside was being progressively deprived of any meaning it had for the inner soul. Not even the apples – though Cézanne could still paint them strenuously with dedicated love – were lovable any more: they now looked and tasted as if they had been produced by machines. Where once there had been houses built to survive centuries, some flimsy structures were run up that seemed to be the embodiments of transience; excogitations of mechanical brains

*The poet in the age of prose*

formed avenues of soullessness, and silos, brimful of spiritual emptiness, rose into the sky. The Seventh of the *Duino Elegies*, written in 1922, deplores in this manner the state of the world: ‘Und immer geringer schwindet das Aussen’, ever more diminishes the substance of the external world, thus justifying to him the momentous insight: ‘Nowhere will world exist but within.’

This is what ‘the Voice’ finally intended to say when on that January day in 1912 it first spoke to the poet, who had spent many months of aridity and barely hopeful waiting. Only ten years after that extraordinary epiphany at Duino the cycle of the ten *Elegies* reached its conclusion. It was in that mysterious, lonely, little castle of Muzot in Switzerland, in the valley of the Rhône. Nothing like the immense productivity of those few February days in 1922 is known in literary history. Their result is not only the complete sequence of the *Elegies* that have retained the name of Duino, but also the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, with which he believed he celebrated the long-awaited rebirth of the god of song. (Although as the god of *music* he had been the only divinity who, in the age of prose, had not only remained alive but attained to unprecedented glory in the resounding articulations of pure human inwardness.) Nonetheless, the protagonist of the drama of Duino and Muzot is the Angel.

Who is the Angel? If I may paraphrase Rilke’s epistolary statements – his letters, more often than not, are the bad prose side of his good poetry – the Angel has to be thought of as the being in whom is *realized* that which emerges from the *Elegies* as the *task* of man: to transform the doomed external world – doomed not merely through present technologies and future wars, but through the diminution of its spiritual status – into pure inwardness. And this is why the Angel is so terrifying to us: he deprives us of the hope of ever recovering what mistakenly we most desire: happiness within the sphere of the visible, and points to the kind of salvation that we most fear: the salvation that depends on an inner metamorphosis, ‘Herzwerk’, as Rilke called it in a poem he wrote between the time of Duino and the time of Muzot, ‘work of the heart’ that aims at the most radical renunciation, a more active renunciation than any monk had ever imposed upon himself.

Rilke’s Angel, then, is the last consistent poetic creation – if

*In the age of prose*

it can still be called by that term – through which he sought recklessly to transcend the conditions of the age of prose, or even to resurrect the true spirit of poetry after its demise threatened by the end of mythology. There can hardly be a more irrelevant or more trivial response to the *Duino Elegies* than: never mind their philosophy, or their theology, or their religion; what matters is their poetry. No. It would do more justice to their grand purpose to say, in the words of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: 'The poetry does not matter.'

Of course, this would be an exaggeration. For the poetry matters, and matters much: but it matters, above all, as a kind of vindication of the *Elegies*' ultimate purpose, as proof of the authenticity of their ambition. If the poetry were less successful, the ambition would be badly discredited. Yet there is an important connection between Rilke's *Elegies* and historico-philosophical beliefs or insights that were, a considerable time before Rilke (but without Rilke's knowing them), written in prose, and not even in the best prose imaginable. To be sure, I am thinking again of Hegel, the nineteenth-century diagnostician of the end of poetry, indeed of art; Hegel who, mind you, lived at a time when the German arts flourished as hardly ever before: suffice it to name only Goethe and Beethoven. Hegel did not ignore them; but like a prophet's or madman's, his intuition went beyond them; and his intuition went beyond them because history would; and history for him – modern historians may, please, turn their deafest ear to this – history for him had definite and recognizable intentions.

In the sphere of art, what he called Romantic Art had succeeded Classical Art of which he said, as a true representative of his Greece-enamoured age, that nothing more beautiful would or could ever exist. For the World-Spirit, in whom Hegel believed – just as his Protestant ancestors believed in God – had for an eternal moment been incarnate in the art of Greece. Yet its predestined voyaging compelled the Spirit to leave this unique incarnation again. All Romantic Art – and Hegel called Romantic all the arts that followed upon Classical Art – shows the striving of the Spirit to dissolve its classical oneness with the material in obedience to its true destiny: its ultimate self-realization through which the world, as it was known hitherto, would either end (as it would end on the Day of Judgment) or be relegated to spiritual irrele-

*The poet in the age of prose*

vance. Think of the Gothic cathedrals, of Chartres, for instance, the cathedral invoked in the *Duino Elegies*, where the stone itself seems impatiently to want to free itself of its own heavy materiality in order to set free the heaven-bound Spirit; remember Shakespeare's *Hamlet* where the poetry of heart and mind most formidably clash with the state of the external world, the corruption of the state of Denmark. What, according to Hegel, is bound to win, not only the day but the age, is 'absolute inwardness', that inner Spirit that all the time had been 'the true nature', that is, the ultimate aim of the Romantic: its victory over the material world. At this point Hegel sounds like Rilke's prompter: for this victory will do away with all gods and all their temples, 'the fire of inwardness has destroyed them'; only one god remains and he dwells within the ideal subjectivity of man. Thus Hegel. And Rilke: 'Nowhere will world exist but within.'

And the Angel? There is no reason *entirely* to doubt Rilke's own interpretation that the Angel has achieved what finally man will have to achieve in a meaningless external world: to kindle the fire of subjectivity, as Hegel puts it, that has to consume the Without. To the Angel 'externals' mean so little that he no longer even distinguishes between life and death while human beings still

make the mistake of drawing too sharp distinctions.  
Angels, it is said, are often unable to tell  
whether they move among living or dead . . .

This is what Rilke means when he says 'Angel'. Yet while his explanation need not be rejected, there is no necessity either why it should be accepted in its entirety. For is it not paradoxical that he gives an outward name to him, or endows him, in the Second Elegy, with most striking metaphors of appearance? And how not, after the poet's having chosen the name Angel, a name that the mind cannot help but associate with numberless images from religious memories, stories, pictures, and dreams? Whatever else the Angel may be, he is also the being with whom, for the last time with such persistent energy, a poet has striven to create a mythology, analogous, though by no means identical, with the great mythologies of the past, these condensations of the Spirit that pass from epoch to epoch: gods, devils, saviours, and, yes, angels. They are all certainly much superior to man and, although