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2
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Hegel. The death of art and the tragedy of living

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“Was, am Tod entzündet mir
das Leben sich zuletzt?”¹

In Hegel’s writings and in the lectures published by his students, including the recently published *Mitschriften* of the lectures on aesthetics,² the expressions “end” and “death of art” are nowhere to be found. Nevertheless, in a way consistent with the system’s force of gravity – whether overall or whether, in particular, in its aesthetic theory – the discourse on dissolution, or, more precisely, on art’s belonging to the past, is clearly present. With the passage of tragedy to comedy, in fact, the classical age experiences a double-death while, thanks to the knowledge of the death of God, the liberty of self-knowledge centered on the negative power of the intellect begins to grow. At the same time, and in order to stem the chaos that the sunset of the world of ethics had left in its wake, the modern State with its abstract, alienating, and terrifying private rights appears, atomizing collectivity and reducing human beings to single individuals: “The body politic is a cadaver in putrefaction, full of stinking worms, and these worms are private persons.”³ In this portrait, art belongs to the classical past, while in the modern age, Christian and romantic, the

¹ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Der Tod des Empedokles*, in *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe und Dokumente*, edited by Dietrich E. Sattler (Munich: Luchterhand, 2004), vol. 7, p. 74.

² Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesung über Ästhetik*, Berlin 1820-21, *Mitschrift* from Ascheberg, edited by Helmut Schneider (Frankfurt: Lang, 1995); *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst [Hotho 1823]*, Berlin 1823, *Mitschrift* by Hotho, edited by Annemarie Gehrmann-Siefert (Hamburg: Meiner, 2003); *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik*, Berlin 1826, *Mitschrift* by Herrmann and Kehler, edited by Annemarie Gehrmann-Siefert and Bernadette Collenberg-Plotnikov in collaboration with F. Iannelli and K. Berr (Munich: Fink, 2004); *Philosophie der Kunst*, Berlin 1826, *Mitschrift* by von der Pfordten, edited by Annemarie Gehrmann-Siefert, Jeong-Im Kwon and Karsten Berr (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005); an edition from the last course in Berlin 1828-29, *Mitschrift* by Libelt, Heimann and others, is currently being prepared by A. P. Oliver.

³ G. W. Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen zur Philosophie der Weltgeschichte [VPbWG]* in *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by Georg Lasson (Leipzig: Meiner, 1923), vol. 9, p. 716.



spirit interiorizes itself. Nothing more beautiful can now ever be born – Hegel, referring to the end of classical art, maintains – only higher things. The ambiguity of this statement pervades the Hegelian reflections on aesthetics and there is not a single moment where its traces are not to be found. As regards the hierarchy of single artistic genres, in the articulation of their relationships within the three great cultural epochs, for example, one can identify moments of consistent systematic inconsistency. Furthermore, Hegelian philosophy is pervaded by the profound awareness of finding itself confronted by the end and, after Kantian *Critiques*, consists of the attempt to re-establish for the last time a primary philosophy out of metaphysics. One can do nothing but append a firm base to the end of all that culture and human history had produced up until that time – Hegel maintains with a mixture of extreme humility, not a little *hybris*, and not without tragic resignation; however, this attitude reveals itself to be, in its turn, strongly ambiguous when compared to the nostalgic judgments of ancient art, with its clear opposition to 18th and 19th century neo-classical attempts, and even more so with the steps that describe the classical and modern world from the ethical and political point of view.

One would not be adequately evaluating the problem of the death of art nor Hegelian aesthetics on a whole if the content of experience at bottom, which – from the widely discussed *Oldest System-Program* and from the youthful fragments – inspire Hegel's every reflexive and conceptual effort. At heart that effort aims to save political ideals – and therefore the most profound collective experience of his generation – in the face of looming barbarism. Still in 1820 Hegel continued to toast the fourteenth of July:⁴ if it is true that there is no revolution without reform,⁵ without any doubt the con-

⁴ Cf. Günther Nicolin, *Hegel in Berichten seiner Zeitgenossen* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1970), pp. 213-214; Dieter Henrich, *Aufklärung der Herkunft des Manuskripts 'Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus'*, in *Mythologie der Vernunft*, edited by Christoph Jamme and Helmut Schneider (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), p. 167; Otto Pöggeler, *Das Menschenwerk des Staates*, in *ibid.*, p. 189.

⁵ Cf. G. W. Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830) [E 1830]*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Hans-Christian Lucas (Hamburg: Meiner, 1992), vol. 21, pp. 536-537.



trary is also true⁶ in as much as political changes and the transformation of individual consciousness must develop simultaneously. Hegel's growing interest in aesthetics – departing from 1817 and therefore just a short time after the Congress of Vienna – in fact is not turned so much toward art in itself as much as it is toward the capacity of art to create a collective consciousness and thus concrete and organic forms of peaceful human cohabitation. From the *Phenomenology of Spirit* onward, ethical-political reflection develops from tragedy which, in the Hegelian philosophical system, occupies a very complex position that is impossible to reduce *ad unum*: it is in fact to be found beyond the aesthetic-artistic sphere.⁷ Precisely because tragedy situates itself, in as much as it is both art and meta-art, on the border between art and life, it represents the most consistently inconsistent and infinitely finite moment, there where the so-called “death of art” begins its long and quite possibly interminable path and where philosophical theory, artistic poetics, and political praxis find themselves inextricably bound in the face of the problem of a collective life worth being experienced.

Consistent inconsistencies (Gregor Samsa)

“He who firstly envisioned the end of art also indicated the most valid reason for its survival: the survival of the same needs that attend that expression that works of art realize in their place, that are without words.”⁸ Artistic beauty – this is how the lectures on aes-

⁶ Cf. Hauke Brunkhorst, *Hegel und die Französische Revolution. Die Verzichtbarkeit der Restauration und die Unverzichtbarkeit der Revolution*, in *Die Ideen von 1789 in der deutschen Rezeption*, edited by the Forum für Philosophie (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), p. 172.

⁷ In relation to this see also Alberto L. Siani, *Il destino della modernità. Arte e politica in Hegel* (Pisa: ETS, 2010), p. 53, in which the author treats a border-function of tragedy and maintains that the theory of civil society is strongly indebted to theoretical motions of an aesthetic derivation (p. 174), so much that “the destiny of antiquity, of which tragedy speaks as if a mysterious force [...], is the rational and judicial vision of the world and of ethics: in a single word, it is modernity itself” (p. 195).

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973-1997), vol. 7, p. 512.



thetics begin – is beauty born but, even more so, born once more of spirit.⁹ This statement could seem paradoxical and, nevertheless, similar ambiguities of consistency are by no means lacking and are indeed structural. Both a birth within beauty and a higher rebirth indicate a process through which the human being, from necessity and nature, moves toward the spiritual; or rather, toward that sphere in which ideality and freedom are completely realized. This constellation structures both aesthetics and the Hegelian system in its complexity. Hegel, however, is silent about the fact that, in order to be reborn, one first needs to die and in this way the principle that keeps the dialectic alive, which is to say death as such, is cancelled out. There is no statement in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel claims, that does not have Heraclitus in mind: just like the latter's fire so too Hegelian theory constructs by destroying. As one reads in the *Phenomenology*, the dialectical intellect seeks to confront itself and look that which is dead in the face in order to find itself strengthened. Hegel rewrites the entire history of not only western philosophy and culture in order to find the still point of a definitive and conclusive conciliation. He aims to think of the paradoxical bond between life and death, becoming and passing away, affixing accents to make it accessible to the dynamic approach of the dialectic; in aesthetics, to make art's real historical development interact with a logical, organic and philosophically systematic conception. The effort is enormous. Yet Hegel is not interested in saving a past, and therefore classical, world and culture before the eruption of barbarism; rather, his fearlessness consists in the extreme attempt to make the ideal interact with the real present, and to save both.

At times this effort creates ambiguity and inconsistent consistencies, above all at a systematic level. The artistic genre of poetry indeed is no longer art, even though it is not yet philosophy; within it the development of the classical – the objective and sculptural that characterize the epic – through the romantic – the subjective and pictorial-musical that characterize the lyric – is repeated up until it

⁹ Cf. G. W. Friedrich Hegel, *Ästhetik [A]* in *Werke*, edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), vol. 13, p. 14.



reaches drama which contains in itself, by transcending them, all the other arts. Through this systematization of art within the *medium* of the drama, Hegel recovers, at the apex of spiritualization, the substance of the ideal of beauty: the highest expression of spirit has grown simultaneously with the highest expression of material and aesthetic substance; the tragic character represents a sculpture that is able to move itself and react because of its own freedom.¹⁰ Thanks to drama's sublime synthesis, Hegel's aesthetics is saved from the accusation of classicism because the contradiction between the historicization of the epochs and the system of the arts is reduced at least in part,¹¹ even though, on a complex systematic level, poetry and above all tragedy find themselves *de facto* in a position suspended between art and philosophy. Similar inconsistent consistencies concerning metaphor, allegory, and the sublime Hegel, so to speak, hides in an extemporaneous space within the symbolic art, and thereby evades confronting those expressive forms developed in the Romantic art of his contemporaries, including Hölderlin, Schlegel, and Novalis. In the end, from the moment the material of poetry is no longer understood to be constituted by language but by the representations of fantasy, Hegel returns to the invention of a sixth sense or rather the interior intuition that takes advantage of memory and, above all, the imagination. It is not, however, only about an aesthetic problem in a broad sense, because the sixth sense is the most theoretical, able to contemplate the object itself from a distance – as hearing and sight, the other two theoretical senses, moreover, do – and allowing it to be free in its autonomy. And this autonomy is new-

¹⁰ Cf. *Hotho 1823*, p. 83 and p. 302. One notes that Hegel describes in almost the same manner the State of the *polis*: cf. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in *Werke*, cit., vol. 12, p. 306ss.; he also describes great figures like statues: cf. G. W. Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie [VGPh]*, in *Vorlesungen. Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte. Vorlesungen Bände 6-9* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2011), vol. 2, p. 133; and men in flesh and blood as the artists of themselves: cf. *A*, vol. 14, p. 374. In addition, cf. G. W. Friedrich Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann (Hamburg: Meiner, 1976), vol. 8, pp. 263-264.

¹¹ Cf. Peter Szondi, *Hegels Lehre von der Dichtung*, in *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 492-93.



ly reflected on the user subject who in that way fulfills his or her own autonomy and freedom. Without that aesthetic liberty, the ethical and political freedom of self-knowledge is impossible because in this first connection of freedom the split between the human being and nature is recast; and, successively, that bond is repeated in every new form of liberty, no less than within the absolute identity of the subject-object. Indeed, freedom does not exist without reciprocal reflection and recognition among diverse individualities; the ancient Greeks used the term *idiotes* to indicate the person who believed that freedom and autonomy were synonyms for self-sufficiency and independence, a term that Hegel translates as “private person”.

Tragedy constitutes the high-point of poetry as it is an art that is beautiful to the degree it historically belongs to classical art; at the same time, however, it is more elevated because, from the systematic point of view, it is a romantic art, or rather, the most spiritualized of all the arts and therefore also the most secularized. From antiquity onwards, and at least until Brecht, tragedy could with good reason be considered a secular art in the broadest sense. It is about an art, therefore, of the present, not only because of its highly reflective constructive logic which comes close to philosophy, but also in the historical sense because the historical now is tragic with its atomization of individuals unable to construct a new unity. Tragedy's particular position transcends the artistic sphere not only because it is no longer art or because on the stage vital forces and ethical and political substances meet; but because tragic death for Hegel is extremely vital and creative beyond the artistic sphere as well. Socrates and Jesus represent tragic figures very similar to Hölderlin's Empedocles; they combine ethical-political passion, self-reflexive clarity, the profound will to realize the ideal of freedom, and a death that creates life, collective life. It is inherent in the logic of the *Aufhebung* (surpassing, surmounting, superseding or overcoming) that all that helps the spirit to mediate itself and grow together with itself falls victim to its sovereign ingratitude in order to conserve itself *in spiritu*. And this is how tragic death, too, in as much as it is an artistic form, at least at the systematic level, was to have been superseded. Nevertheless, as regards Socrates and Jesus – real, historical individ-



uals already connected in the philosophical and religious sphere – tragedy signals a difference. Their death, in as much as it actually occurred, is unrepeatable and cannot, strictly speaking, be the object of tragic representation. In this regard it is important to mention that, as regards epic songs or rites, prior to the death of Aeschylus tragic representations could not be performed a second time. In this circumstance Hegel consistently seizes how, in the collective life of the Greeks, tragedy occupied a unique position, and was not merely reducible to the artistic sphere. Tragedy is certainly a representation, whether individual or collective, of life, and of free life; and, precisely because it is free, it similarly falls victim to constraint and need. The difference between a tragic death and a real one consists in the fact that the aesthetic field and the two fundamental characteristics of the drama, appearance and play, guarantee a greater contemplative as well as theoretical and reflexive freedom and distance. This is what characterizes tragedy as an artistic space of philosophical reflection that is not surmountable in the concept.¹² Its constructive moments, above all else its *mythos*, the web of actions, possess the same characteristics as the philosophical concepts already identified by Aristotle: unity, necessity, causality, totality, and ideality. Tragedy is thus the space of wisdom; yet in addition to reflection and contemplation, tragic wisdom is born of *pathos*, suffering, and pain. Perhaps that wisdom, in spite of its systematic belonging to absolute spirit, is not absolute; but perhaps, as regards its real history and the philosophical concept that reflects on it, possesses greater depth. Paradoxically, the tragic death of drama survives the death of art.

As regards the experience of death, in temporal terms tragedy constructs the present while the very real fear of one's own individual death is always projected into the future, and mourning for the other always faces the past. In this sense it is significant that, in

¹² It does not concern, in fact, the surpassing of beautiful art on philosophy's behalf, in as much as it is a more elevated grade of spirit. Art is born *and* reborn of spirit and this coordinates philosophy and art as two independent forms. The end of art is already inherent in the same process of being born, becoming, dying and being reborn. This process does not progressively bring art closer to philosophy, but represents the dynamic tension between these two forms of spirit.



Hegel's opinion, dramas, even modern dramas, were not to be printed; rather, they were to be circulated only in the form of written outlines for actors and directors. Tragic wisdom, in fact, takes away at least in part from the written word, in as much as it is always in movement, present in every single instant of the scene, in the play of recitation, and the spectators' consciousness. It concerns a knowledge that has not completely lost its own character of orality, of its being play, recitation, and thus appearance; its profundity is not only reflexive but also pathetic and empathetic. Tragic wisdom involves the entire human being, past and present: in alienating and abstract modernity, tragedy cannot depart from the stage. If its appearance is really that, then it is also eternal: "an arising and a passing that neither arises nor passes, but that exists within itself".¹³ In as much as action, that eternity is both presence and present and combines within itself the past, of which it is the result, and the future with which it is pregnant.¹⁴ This, in the end, is precisely the essential characteristic of both tragic and political actions: with the consciousness of freedom it creates its own eternity. Nevertheless, the freedom of spirit does not consist in the sculptural fixity or in the timeless interiority of the beautiful soul, it "does not consist in a motionless being, but in a continual negation of that which threatens to suppress freedom itself".¹⁵ *Les extremes se touchent* and tragedy is a present in eternal motion because, like tragic irony, its foundation is eternally instantaneous;¹⁶ like political action, tragedy's deepest intention is to stop the flow of time at its most beautiful and truest instant. In this way, like politics, art too, which manifests itself in tragedy in its entirety and in its purest form, primarily tends to interrupt the persistence of needs to realize, through its effect in

¹³ G. W. Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [PbG], in *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede (Hamburg: Meiner, 1980), vol. 9, p. 35.

¹⁴ Cf. G. W. Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie 1830*, in *Werke*, cit., vol. 9, p. 55, § 259 Z as well as *VPhWG*, p. 165.

¹⁵ *VPhWG*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁶ Cf. in relation to tragic irony, Christoph Menke, *Gegenwart der Tragödie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005) and Markus Ophälders, *Romantische Ironie* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2004).



time, something that time is not. In this sense art notably represents the secularization of death; it is a timeless time that hastens into the present not only the end of all times but also the beginning of the only real time: eternity. In art eternity is concentrated in the ironic instant, which is intimately tragic in as much as it is aware of the fact that, here and now, it cannot last. In fact, only at the moment need and pain have disappeared will real life come into being and will art have the possibility of having the plurality of all its forms and contents at hand, as Hegel maintains occurred already beginning with the Renaissance;¹⁷ the undifferentiated whole of history would only be available to redeemed humanity because, having transcended the passing of time, all would be found to be equally close to the present center.¹⁸ Identity – or rather, the subject that, according to Hegel, would be unable to find anything foreign or hostile in the object – constructs the horizon of the artistic as well as that of the philosophical and political fields. Nevertheless, in the modern age, with its abstract and alienating plurality, reason's monotheism cannot ignore, not even for Hegel, the imagination's polytheism.¹⁹ From the political point of view, freedom is not self-sufficient and, if understood in a uniquely negative fashion as the freedom from something, it becomes dangerous to collectivity. Freedom is for the encounter with the other; or rather, it is fraternity – forever neutralized by reforms and revolutions – that constitutes the true, unique, and effectively real identity.

Only at the moment when a truly rational politics could really have substituted tragic destiny, tragedy and art on a whole would have been able to give way to the philosophical concept become po-

¹⁷ Cf. *Hotho 1823*, p. 194 as well as *Ä*, vol. 14, p. 234; cf. in this sense also Giovanna Pinna, *Formalismus und Geschichtlichkeit. Zur Pluralität der modernen Kunst in Hegels Ästhetik*, in *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*, edited by Sabine Schneider and Heinz Brüggemann (Munich: Fink, 2010), pp. 79-81.

¹⁸ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), vol. I.2, p. 694.

¹⁹ Cf. *Ä*, vol. 14, p. 236; in addition cf. Giovanna Pinna, *Formalismus und Geschichtlichkeit*, cit., p. 88.



litycally real. However, the real is not rational²⁰ and true freedom does not represent the solution, but the permanent problem; the same freedom without which there is no tragedy, let alone politics; the freedom that is the substance and subject of idealism. Departing from freedom, for Hegel, history moves and progresses; the substantial and collective freedom and the subjective and individual one together represent the heart of the dialectic of idealism. But that dialectic, and with it historical movement, are fixed by Hegel in an inconsistent way; and yet – as regards the system’s needs –, consistently. He stops the course of history almost as if he could scent the catastrophe which, more than one hundred years later, would bring Benjamin to liken the revolution not, like Marx, to the locomotive of history, but to the emergency brake that humanity, in this out-of-control train, is desperately trying to grab hold of.²¹ As regards the system’s logic, Hegel, in any event, was able to stop the course of history; however, he places tragedy in a position that takes it away from the death of art, as if in that way, through tragic contemplation and self-reflection, history would have been able to begin its course once again, but in a slightly different manner.²² “Ideality consists in the fact that man is at home in this world, he freely moves within it”²³ and this ideal remains valid even in the face of an adult sobriety with which in other passages Hegel judges the actual course of history. If facts do not correspond to the idea, Hegel maintains – both as a bit of a stubborn student at his thesis defense and as a wise and knowledgeable philosopher –, well then *tant pis pour les faits*. At almost two hundred years of distance, that attempt to save the ideals, in their entirety, from the barbarity to come can, at times, seem paradoxical; just as the voluntary involuntary death of Gregor Samsa

²⁰ Cf. *Enzyklopädie 1827*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, cit., vol. 19, p. 32, § 6 Z: “That which exists is in part appearance, and only in part reality”.

²¹ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, cit., vol. I.3, p. 1232.

²² Cf. Hauke Brunkhorst, *Hegel und die Französische Revolution*, cit., p. 159: “What one immediately recognized in 1789 was the devaluation of every progress of civilization which had been reached by that point in the face of the new principle of a self-reflective freedom which makes laws itself”.

²³ *Hotho 1823*, p. 106.



does. And nevertheless, with these inconsistent consistencies, Hegel proves himself to be unafraid of tragedy, a fear that – according to Heiner Müller, one of the most Hegelian of contemporary dramaturges – is the fear of the revolution’s permanence.²⁴ It is easier to build the temple than to make the deity appear in it, one reads in Beckett’s *L’Innommable*, which tellingly concludes with the words “il faut continuer, je vais continuer”.²⁵

An end without end or the end of ending (Hamm)

The permanent revolution is certainly not a conception of Hegel’s, who thematizes the permanent process of art’s dissolution connected to the permanence of death. The so-called “death of art”, attributed to the period that began with the death of Christ, would in fact be at least four times longer than the temporal arc in which the classical idea of art is present. In the published version of the *Aesthetics* prepared by Hotho, the reflection dedicated to romantic art is three times longer than the rest of the text. Hegel continues in the continuous attempt to end; not only is the end within the beginning, but the end of ending signifies a new beginning precisely because the conception of an end is possible only when there is a beginning and therefore in some manner is bound to be repetitive.²⁶ Both the construction of a tradition’s authenticity with respect to the inauthentic present and the break with tradition follow the same logic. Like all of the profoundest dialectical movements, the dialectic of art and, even more so of aesthetics, develops in the presence of death and in particular the death of art. That ending without end is the precise result of the complex construction of the “death of art” that involves historization, criticism, museumization, and repetition; as well as free will in the choice of the past and tradition. In the impossibility of finding the end, Hegel paradoxically establishes

²⁴ Cf. Heiner Müller, *Fatzer ± Keuner*, in *Heiner Müller Material. Texte und Kommentare*, edited by Frank Hörnigk (Leipzig: Reclam, 1990), p. 31.

²⁵ Samuel Beckett, *L’Innommable* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1965), p. 262.

²⁶ Cf. Eva Geulen, *Das Ende der Kunst*, cit., p. 113, and p. 180ss.



the basis for modern art and its successive path.²⁷ It is about a particular dialectic that moves between conservation and restoration, on the one hand, and modernization and rupture with the past on the other, which sets creativity free. Today “every artist whose talent and genius have liberated themselves from previous limitations to a determined form of art has every form and every material at his disposal. [...] That art which goes beyond itself is likewise man’s return to himself, a descent into his own chest, with which art cancels out every fixed limitation to a determined chain of contents [...] art no longer needs to represent only that which is absolutely at ease in one of its determinant phases, but everything in which man in general is capable of feeling at ease”.²⁸

In the dialectical construction of tradition Hegel identifies a parallelism between the ancient and the modern, between beautiful art and spiritualized and secularized art: “In ancient art as in modern art the world in which ideals were connected belongs to a remote epoch.”²⁹ This parallelism concerns the historization of the present and the capacity of idealization of an epoch; above all, however, it permits modernity to repeat antiquity, recreating it by departing from the present, which is thus historically justified. Beauty born and re-born of the spirit is the modern beauty that, through the conception of that classical one, creates a museum for itself; an ideal *alter ego*, traditional, and, above all, strongly dialectical. That past, in fact, becomes quotable and, thus, as in every quotation, sees old and new enter into a constellation in which they are equals. The same style with which Hegel quotes other authors is a testimony to that approach: not even where quotation marks appear do the words correspond to the original; in fact, Hegel rewrites the text, interprets it, and almost invents it. In an analogous manner, he gathers and reunites past historical moments within his system. That dialectic combines, as in the Heraclitean fire, salvation and destruction, and is very similar to the appearance of the Messiah, another eminent figure of the end. Nev-

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

²⁸ G. W. Friedrich Hegel, *A*, vol. 14, pp. 235-237.

²⁹ *Hotho 1823*, p. 87.



ertheless, in this way the past's quotability is not without aesthetic traces, nor is it totally correct from a scientific and historical point of view. In fact, the entire operation at the basis of aesthetics hides a political desire behind a scientific approach. The political ideals of the present are transformed and thus saved by Hegel through the construction of classical art, in as much as it is quotable and therefore able to be actualized within modernity. In this manner – confronted with scientific, systematic, and historical closure and through the *medium* of potentiality in which art operates – the historical horizons can open up once again. Scientific order and progressive historicism, at least in aesthetics, demonstrate their differences: the first remains profoundly aesthetic and the second, together with the past character of art, transforms into the semblance because only in the messianic world can there be a real universal history; only in that world could a reality of universal and complete actuality be represented,³⁰ or rather, that eternal metaphysical present Hegel conceived of that is uniquely realized in the ironic instant of tragedy.

Wherever metaphysics reigns there is no place for art; for, to it, art is such only in as much as it is surpassed by the concept. Yet Hegelian metaphysics is itself a work of art and aesthetics, in the same way that aesthetics is metaphysics: almost the myth of the end of art included in concepts, like the record of his own death that Proust wanted to insert at the end of his *Recherche*. In the Hegelian reconstruction of metaphysics, art, as a consequence, occupies an empty space;³¹ Hegel recasts art, and classical art in particular, as so many godless temples. The road from this empty space to non-space to utopia – the modern *topos* par excellence – is, after Hegel and after the failure of the metaphysical system, extremely short. Travelling that road – departing from the first season of Romanticism twenty years prior to Hegelian aesthetics – is the responsibility that art willingly assumes. It is no accident that the temporal rhythm announced by that path is that of happiness; or rather, that of the again and again as if for the first time. Forever and again humanity must rewrite

³⁰ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, cit., vol. I.3, p. 1235.

³¹ Cf. Eva Geulen, *Das Ende der Kunst*, cit., p. 167.



its own text in a sort of interpretive repetition compulsion; with that, the revolution is transformed into a permanent return to an origin, which in a rather continuous manner removes itself. That origin constructs itself as a target and, in permanent repetition, is strong enough to confront death, well aware of the fact that it is an imminent fact of life and that only through oblique ways can possible escape routes open up. In this sense the “death of art” can be interpreted as a primary phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) in the Benjaminian sense: “The origin is within the flow of becoming like a vortex, and the material of its birth is attracted into its rhythm. [...] It desires to be understood as a restoration, as a reactivation on the one hand, and, on the other, and precisely for this reason, as something imperfect and unfinished. In every original phenomenon the form is determined beneath which an idea continues to confront the historical world, until it is not there, finished, in the totality of its history”.³²

Curiously, the very same Hegelian aesthetics are structured according to similar relationships: the various available texts likewise represent quotations and reproductions of an absent original; it is about different versions that quote and construct while actualizing a substantially inexistent and, to a large degree, oral text. The construction of a quotable and thus repeatable tradition, which Hegel worked towards during these lectures on aesthetics, is reconstructed through an interpretive process that involves restoration as much as destruction. Hegel collected his conceptions himself, as did his students when they rewrote the courses they had attended. In this way actual memory within the present is created. In as much as the present is only based on memory, it has always already arrived at the end, if criticism does not intervene;³³ or rather, the same selective intervention with which Hegel created classical art. It is not by chance

³² Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. I.1, p. 226.

³³ Here the reference is obviously to Friederich Nietzsche's three forms of considering history, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), vol. 1, pp. 243-334.



that memory, as a *medium* of use, is not present in this latter artistic epoch but only in the one following where the little girl in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* – the muse that here marks the beginning of museumization – grants the works by that point fallen from the tree and therefore from the life of the epoch.³⁴ That life by now has been interiorized and, as such, become the object of memory (*Er-Innerung*) departing from which it can be reborn and repeated in the *medium* of quotation. It is about the most systematic of the versions of the relationship between beauty and something higher, also because in the *Phenomenology* classical art is religion and does not recognize a symbolic past nor a romantic future. The moment in which, however, memory is established, the consciousness of the end and of death is also affirmed; just as in the epic cantos in comparison with the myths or in the institution of the museum that canonizes a past as tradition and creates the conventions and rules, in truth always anachronistic, of contemporary art.³⁵ This, in any case, is the dialectic between the classical historically arranged as a museum and the modern which ever again relates it as if for the first time. In Hegel's system the philosophical concept becomes totalizing, while the construction of classical art remains bound by determinant limits. However, whoever establishes limits is aware of that which transcends them and in this way the limits of classical art also include that which should be excluded. In this way they are transformed from stable and definitive limits into dialectically dy-

³⁴ Cf. *PbG*, pp. 401-402; Geulen believes that with the concrete historical end of classical art Hegel has put an end to the ending without an end, which, instead, characterizes romantic art. Historically therefore classical art truly belongs to the past. However, in a theoretical sense, the relationship of the classical ideal with its own pre-artistic and symbolic past invalidates its conclusive and perfect character and that classical art, in truth, constructs a virtual threshold that may be shifted within time. Although, therefore, from the historical point of view the ideal of classical art seems to connect itself within definitive limits, it transcends them from a theoretical point of view. As a consequence classical art is precisely the place where modernity was invented (*erfinden*) and found (*finden*) and where one can also rediscover it in a different way every time. Cf. Eva Geulen, *Das Ende der Kunst*, cit., pp. 48-49; cf. also Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le muse*, trans. by Chiara Tartarini (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2006), pp. 65-80.

³⁵ Cf. Eva Geulen, *Das Ende der Kunst*, cit., pp. 58-59. In the 1820s from his window Hegel could observe the construction of the first official museum of Berlin.



namic limits to which modern art constructs its own relationships in the form of a determinant negation (*bestimmte Negation*). The discourse of classical art thus not only denies Hegel's presumed classicism in as much as it constructs a corrective to classical ideology, but it is also a counter to the closures of the rational system.

Significantly, in fact, within the artistic genre of poetry it is once again tragedy that does not systematically adhere to this scheme. Tragedy remains a threshold, it divides as much as it unites and actualizes the classical past in the present – that which also emerges in the refinement of the style of Hegelian exposition. In as much as it is a poetic genre, tragedy represents the critical motion with which Hegel produces the objective representation³⁶ of both the ethical Greek world and that of the contemporary present. The end of ending, like classical art, based on memory and the consciousness of death, thus capsizes in a modern ending without end within a process, that is, in which the content of memory, the past, can be remodeled and actualized to ensure that the present – once again and as if for the first time – can find itself at home. The artistic and political ideal of that process follows the rhythm of happiness that is identified in eternal repetition and the absolutely new; and, in an ironically tragic manner, the very goal that is, at the same time, the origin of art, whatever the temporarily recomposed fractures may be. The dialectical potential of memory in as much as *Er-Innerung* is thereby deployed in an operation that, in as much as it finds (*finden*), also invents (*erfinden*) the past and transforms it into the tradition of the present, and of no one else. If that operation, on the one hand, establishes rebirth and parousia as possible, or rather, the presence of the essence of classical beauty, in as much as dialectically mediated with the present; on the other it reveals how history is always written by the victors, who in their triumphal marches display cultural and artistic goods as spoils.³⁷

The dialectic of happiness, individual and collective, is also inextricably bound to the historical tragedy of living; in ancient and mod-

³⁶ Cf. *PbG*, p. 11.

³⁷ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, cit., vol. I.2, p. 696.



ern tragedy that dialectic reflects itself in order to look into its own eyes. And it is precisely from a modern tragedy, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – whose importance, other than Sophocles', for Hegel can never be underestimated, both for its tragic vision of history and for its exquisitely dialectic and self-reflective theatrical thought –, that Hegel takes a metaphor in order to allude to history. It concerns the mole that works under the earth but that produces effects above ground; as it is blind, it needs the gaze of Minerva's noctule who the darker it is the better it sees. Political-historical steps and theoretical-philosophical reflection for Hegel meet in both ancient and modern tragedy. The contemporary heir to Hamlet, also divided in name, is *Endgame's* Hamm. Like him, Hegel seems to want things to end, but not just yet. "It will be the end and there I'll be [...] in the old refuge, alone against the silence and ... (he hesitates) ... the stillness. If I can hold my peace, and sit quiet, it will be all over with sound, and motion [...] And then? (Pause. Very agitated.) All kinds of fantasies! [...] and then... (he breathes out.) Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark. (Pause)".³⁸

Tragic action – political action (Oedipus)

In the coming night political action was revealed in all of its tragedy in spite of, or maybe precisely because of, that general who substituted politics for fate and who, on horseback, triumphantly crossed the city of Jena clothed in the world's soul. For Hegel, as for many other German intellectuals – not least Goethe – the question would remain problematic and complex; while already in 1804 Beethoven had erased the dedication to Bonaparte in his score to *Eroica* – already in the process of being printed – because, in his eyes, he had betrayed the revolutionary ideals. The reflections of German philosophy and literature upon the problems of the French Revolution and its failures are developed in the *medium* of the tragic; in

³⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 126.



Hegel's case through the work of the philosophical concept; and in that of Hölderlin in the attempt to develop the dialectic between the aorgic and the organic in tragic form. The tragic dialectic and the philosophical dialectic, in fact, constitute *analogia*. Art is the deployment of truth and truth cannot be conceived as substance only but must also be conceived as a subject. The tragic hero deploys truth as a subjective character through which an objective ethical substance speaks and acts. Tragedy's goal is peace, and peace in art corresponds to reconciliation in philosophy. Similar analogies are to be found in the idea of a mythology of reason, but in the metaphor of the invisible church or in the concept of a popular religion as well. It does not concern a nostalgic restoration of the Greek ideal of the *polis* at all, but the extreme attempt to save actual revolutionary ideals from the historical and political course of time. For the same reason, on the eve of the Revolution's first day of battle in July of 1830, in Paris people shot out the clock-towers in an attempt to stop time.³⁹

From the *Phenomenology* up to the *Philosophy of Right* and including the lectures on aesthetics and the philosophy of history or the history of philosophy, Hegel continued to reflect upon the possibility and necessity of reconciling the absolute freedom of the individual with collective freedom, the freedom from something with the freedom of encountering the other; or rather, Christian and modern individual freedom with collective and ancient freedom. It is undeniable, as Horkheimer maintains, that Hegel can be recognized for a profoundly adult feature in his confrontation of the course of history that he often justified even in its most violent, brutal, and unjust moments. This could lead one to think that he had renounced his youthful ideals or that, at the very least, he had become resigned. Metaphorically speaking at that point he would indeed have become that "old one", as he was called in Jena while working on his *Phenomenology*, or rather, with his arrival at the system. Nevertheless, it is known that Hegel was already "the old one" to his peers at the Tübingen *Stift*. However, deep down, Hegel had never abandoned the

³⁹ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, cit., vol. I.2, pp. 701-702.



idea according to which it is necessary that philosophy, but art and religion too, determine reality;⁴⁰ Hegelian idealism has always remained objective and real in as much as it has always taken the responsibility upon itself, departing from one's freedom and autonomy, to give the law to reality: only a similar law can be rational. That the youthful Hegelian ideals were anything but dead was well known to Friedrich Wilhelm IV when, having only just ascended the throne in 1840, he attempted to call Schelling to Berlin in order to extirpate the "dragon's seed" that Hegel had left to posterity. In fact, Hegel had never forgotten the Platonic utopia; if for Plato the most beautiful tragedies were to have been laws drawn up by philosophy, then it is possible that on this political-philosophical altar Hegel had, in part, sacrificed art. He had not betrayed the political ideals of his youth, but had had to take note of the actual course of history. Here, maybe, one can glimpse a certain resignation that will give rise to the famous statement that maintains all that is real is rational; however, it is only a half-truth.

The political problems of justice and rights in the transition of beautiful morality to the modern State for Hegel are reflected in the themes of tragedy, so much so that for a Greek "going to the theatre meant, at the same time, participating in government".⁴¹ The ambiguous systematic status of tragedy reveals that tragedy is of the present and that, within it, the present is reflected. In form and content that reflection is as artistic as it is philosophical; in it the maximum breadth of the artistic sphere and the maximum profundity of philosophical reflection meet. It is known that Hegel favored *Antigone* due to the fact that its profound dialectic initiated the dissolution of the world of morality, and thus inserted a solutionless continuity into systematic logic. *Antigone* marks the arrival of an aporetic dialectic that, consequently, ends with the violent death of

⁴⁰ Cf. *VPhWG*, p. 51.

⁴¹ Christoph Menke, *Tragödie im Sittlichen. Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit nach Hegel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), p. 107; cf. also *ibid.*, p. 202ss. Just as they had introduced the diets, the Greeks had also instituted a special fund for performances, the so-called *theorikon*, which served to reimburse whoever, because of their presence in the theatre, could not work.



almost all of the characters. The incestuous father of Antigone as well as her brother Polyneices is Oedipus; Sophocles, however, treats of his tragedy only thirty years later and – not only in terms of rights or justice but also profound reflexivity – in so doing reveals very significant aspects regarding the relationship between art and philosophy as well. Hegel himself indicated *Oedipus at Colonus* as the tragedy closest to the modern age and poetic reflections, just as his contemporaries' most markedly ethical and political reflections were referred to *Oedipus Rex*. This latter tragedy in fact represents the moment in which that seemingly human institution of rights and justice established at the end of the *Oresteia* breaks down. In the development of *Oedipus Rex* knowledge, self-reflection and liberty of action make up the heart of the dramatic action that is almost entirely concentrated on the figure of the hero.⁴² Precisely because he acted without knowledge, Oedipus⁴³ fights against archaic, ritualized, and mythical forms of vindictive justice in the name of knowledge and rational justice founded upon facts and proof. Oedipus is at that point free and autonomous and can thus determine his own destiny: until he knows too much and condemns himself for his actions; he even knows how to take a position against rationality and the necessity of his own condemnation. Yet, in spite of those arguments to acquit him – he was not aware of what he was doing – he does not back away. His self-condemnation becomes excessive in relation to the crime; excessive, however, by necessity and by consequential and coherent rationality. The tragedy of *Oedipus Rex* thereby becomes ironic: the strenuous attempt to save (the city) ends in catastrophe (for the hero). In this tragedy liberty and destiny, *logos* and *mythos* become inextricably combined through the attempt to rationalize justice, law, and the State. For Oedipus, the attempt to achieve progress in the consciousness of freedom spills over into condemnation and a curse that involves a double exile: in blinding himself, as his eyes did not

⁴² Art in general, but even more so tragedy and that of Oedipus in particular, must be conceived not only as forms of knowledge, but forms of action as well (cf. *A*, vol. 13, pp. 51-52).

⁴³ Cf. the following, Christoph Menke, *Gegenwart der Tragödie*, cit., pp. 67-69.



see what they should have seen, he exiles himself from the real and perceivable world; in abandoning the city, he leaves the community of human beings. Plato defines that curse as belonging to the law itself (*nomos ara*).⁴⁴ The attempt to secularize the divine and mythical law connected to the Oracle and to the Erinyes, to blood and vendetta, turns into its opposite and now the same rational and self-reflective justice reproduces the selfsame archaic law.

Not only is Oedipus a character strongly reflected in himself, but that self-reflection regards tragedy as a genre in the widest sense as well: through the twists of single autonomous actions the author, or rather, the moment that transcends the characters' autonomy, is also represented. On the one hand, the hero acts on his or her own; but, on the other, he or she is the author's creation. Tragedy thus represents the truth not only as a subject agent but also as an authorial substance. In Oedipus's case, this concerns the character's ascent to the position of author and the author's subsequent fall into that of the character.⁴⁵ The irony of this tragedy consists in the fact that Oedipus is, on the one hand, himself author of his subject and author of his own condemnation; or rather, the substance of his character and his destiny. However, on the other hand, this momentary conciliation and its seemingly almost complete autonomy smash upon the shores of the archaic and mythical origins of the very same attempt to establish a justice based on rationality. *Oedipus Rex* thus denounces the failure of the institution of rights and justice based upon rationality and self-reflection apparently achieved in the *Oresteia*: progress is illusory because it is rendered possible only through Athena's divine intervention. Tragedy in general represents the struggle of the new against the old; it is a *medium* of dialectical overcoming as much as it is a denunciation of failure, and with that, in Hegel's teleological interpretation, the expression of a transitional age toward an as of yet unrealized freedom. That freedom was supposed to have found its full completion in Oedipus's autonomous capacity to act as a legislator and as a judge, and to be, in as much as sub-

⁴⁴ Cf. Plato, *Nomoi*, 817b.

⁴⁵ Cf. Christoph Menke, *Gegenwart der Tragödie*, cit., pp. 61.



ject, also the substance of rights. This is not how it was in antiquity, this is not how it is in the modern State born of the Revolution; neither the truth of the substance nor that of the subject have found realization. In fact, the abyss that separates the rational and the real, as regards antiquity, is now even greater. At this precise point the tragedy of the philosophical experience is situated, to which Hegel tries to oppose the conceptual imperatives of identity between substance and subject, real and rational, subject and object.

However, as opposed to philosophy, the tragic experience, precisely because of its intimate ironic twists, removes itself from the conceptual and affirmative approach which lacks, also in the case of Hegelian dialectic, the indirectness of the *focus imaginarius*. The tragic experience cannot be the object of rational and philosophical foundation, explication or justification; philosophy can only take note of it because tragic truth possesses a necessity that logic is unable to reach, truth that can be represented only in dramatic form. Although Hegel profoundly reconfigured philosophical practice – as the conceptual metaphors of the *Phenomenology*, so expressive and full and, at the same time, precise and profound in their gathering of historical reality, demonstrate – philosophy in any event has the character of justification of the existent, in as much as it first rationalizes tragic pain, and then the tragedy of political action. The fact that the substance of rights does not coincide with the autonomy of the subject can be reconstructed by philosophy, but not, however, captured in its truth. The inextricable tragic-ironic connection between judge and judged represents the subjective destiny of Oedipus, with consequences that begin with his blinding and end with his silent and solitary death at Colonus. The tragic truth of his destiny concerns obscure objective necessity and its overwhelming power over the subject; precisely in as much as it is a free and rational self-consciousness, it learns that to rationally judge means to lose the capacity to act and to live. The verdict is objective and therefore unassailable as it coherently and rationally considers the action as a unity of intention and result. Oedipus's actions do not correspond to such criteria, however, and therefore he lives and denounces the verdict's objectivity, its rationality, as a form of violence and as a



curse: the autonomous and free actions of the same rational subject lead to damnation.⁴⁶

Not only does justice not come through rights, but the promise of happiness, as well as faith in a just and human world and praxis, dissolves as well. The excess inherent in the law of vendetta not only has not been surpassed, but has been reproduced by those self-same rights. The second nature, in Hegel's philosophy of right and the State, entails the repetition compulsion as much as the first, but because of its origins in an autonomous rationality, it is more violent and painful. Oedipus's tragedy, in fact, does not end with a resolute death, but with the condemnation to live one's own death and to die one's own life.⁴⁷ There is no peace – contrary to what Hegel maintains is the end of every tragedy – and therefore no end to Oedipus's sufferings. Both Oedipus, a tragic figure, and Hegel, a real person, take refuge from the *dran* within *theoria*, from tragic action and from political action in withdrawn contemplation, a position both hold to be a shelter from destiny and from the historical catastrophes produced by humanity. For Oedipus, who in some way represents the *alter ego* of Sophocles the elderly strategist, it is about an interior contemplation after his blinding; for Hegel, the self-reflective contemplation of the spirit in itself, the pure gaze. Both contemplate the repetition of the same events, but now painlessly. Tragic truth, however, does not reveal itself to the philosophical concept because it is such only in as much as it remains veiled, just like the truth of every beauty. Perhaps that is what Oedipus's death at Colonus consists of: a death which allows no witnesses, but which is still an action, even if it excludes contemplation and reflection. To Theseus he entrusts a truth no longer revealable by the *logos*, an esoteric knowledge (*mathos*) no longer destined for the community.⁴⁸ Tragic wisdom returns to the origins that for Oedipus represent the goal;⁴⁹ and, in fact, everything occurs in a sacred place dedicated to

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴⁷ Cf. Sophocles, *Oidipou epi Kolono*, vv. 433-436.

⁴⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, vv. 1526-1529.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, vv. 84-93.



the Eumenides whose ambiguity does not hide the ancient essence of the Erinyes. Having reached complete negativity, the tragedy of the human rejoins its ritualistic and religious origins. The little wood sacred to the Eumenides is the same place where the divine light of unifying consciousness welcomes the exiled Oedipus and covers everything in silence. The mystery of this tragic death possesses its own particular dialectic. It returns to the archaic, but removes the most theatrical part: there is nothing more to see, not even in the story of the *anghelos*: it removes, moreover, the *sparagmos* too, because the death of Oedipus resembles a transfiguration. The particular form of that which one could also call a sacrifice renders even the irony tragic. In the face of this state of things, in the consciences of those who remain, like Antigone, beyond the nostalgia for suffering, only the conviction remains that, in this world, for life to be, one must pass through death.⁵⁰ Tragic wisdom and philosophical wisdom meet in death with the consequence that both are only possible as critiques, as constructive destruction, in antiquity as well as in modernity.

However, both from the tragic point of view and in the historical and political sense, it seems that nothing at all has been learned, the repetition compulsion has infiltrated the logic of progress and the consciousness of freedom has become regressive, turning upon itself: "How terrible it is to know, when knowing helps not he who knows".⁵¹ The rational is real, Hegel, however, moralizes. This statement has been criticized for the ideological character of its possible justification of society and the Prussian State. It is important, however, to underline that in this extreme systematic synthesis a strong condemnation of the present, of the history that produced it and of its additional potential developments, lingers. Righteously understood, that is, taking note of the dialectic path that spirit and rationality must take, the statement would seem to suggest that only that which has been produced by the self-conscious spirit that has experienced the entire dialectic process, which has brought it to full

⁵⁰ Cf. Sophocles, *Antigone*, vv. 73-75, 461-470, 521, 523 and 555.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, vv. 316-317. These are the words that Theseus speaks to Oedipus.



awareness of itself, can be real; for only in that way is it real and not only spiritual. However, a historical present – which is *de facto* the unique result of natural processes of constraint, of coercion, and of the necessity of individual self-preservation and that, as a consequence, produces oppression, pain, suffering, and irrationality – cannot be rational and therefore, according to the full meaning of the Hegelian concept, not even real. Rational and consequently real for Hegel can uniquely be that which is completely realized, fully and perfectly in itself molding and constructing its own world as well.⁵² This seems in any case to be the most profound sense of youthful ambitions and of systematic elaborations, above all after the tragic political and ethical failure of the Revolution. The statement which holds the rational to be the real and the real the rational postulates an ideal reality that does not coincide with the present *status quo* but which constructs, instead, the stimulus to its being superseded. It is thus possible to interpret the state of things from the point of view of political action and philosophical reflection; simultaneously, and analogously to the artistic perspective, the tragic character acting from his or her own rationally self-conscious freedom runs into error (*hamartia*) and encounters hostile external factors (*dystychia*) which invalidate its attempts to realize itself. In the end, Hegel's immense effort to construct a concentric and hierarchical system, perfectly complete in itself, does not exclude, as has been noted,⁵³ aesthetic aspects. In fact, with art and with tragedy in particular, the Hegelian system shares more than a few similarities and, not least, that of a supposed final destiny. Philosophy, which seeks to understand and to interpret the natural and historical world, can achieve a perfectly

⁵² Cf. *VPhWG*, p. 51: “that the spirit must [...] make the world conform to itself” and p. 55: “only that which conforms to the idea possesses reality”; in addition p. 926: “man is based in his own head, that is, on thought and constructs reality accordingly” and p. 924: “the principles of reason must be understood in a concrete fashion: only then can true freedom triumph. The direction that keeps abstraction at bay is liberalism, over which the concrete always wins, while against this liberalism is everywhere bankrupt”.

⁵³ Cf. for example Theodor W. Adorno, *Drei Studien zu Hegel*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 5, p. 321ss. and p. 367ss.; see also Id., *Ästhetische Theorie*, cit., p. 511.



unique system only when it has managed to mold these worlds as well; this is what the wager of idealism consists in. In this sense Hegel's effort is heroic because it has sought to erect a bastion against barbarism's advance; but it is also tragic because it is destined to fail. That failure, however, is not due to blind fate, which as such is never tragic nor heroic; only the historically determined clash that follows the autonomy of self-consciousness, as in *Antigone*, is forever truly tragic, considered from Hegel onward, and thanks to the translation of Hölderlin, the tragedy by definition.

From tragic wisdom's point of view, hope can by no means be a principle but it has, according to Augustine, two beautiful children: disdain and courage. And, if irony is profoundly tragic, the tragedy of action and of living is profoundly ironic too and always refuses to degenerate into sarcasm or cynicism because of the incapacity to stand the pain and the suffering that living entails. Pain, in fact, pushes one to be above the contradictions that cause one to suffer and that, nevertheless, continue to tragically live from within; and to keep open the horizon of becoming, or rather, of the profound substance of Hegelian dialectical-historical logic, to this day in search of the absolute, of true identity and the reality of the rational. In the face of such a state of perennial non-conciliation, in just such a situation of pain and necessity, art not only maintains the right – certainly no longer exclusive – to contribute to the creation of collective consciousness; on the contrary, it is more strongly invested with the emergency that followed the failure of the Revolution and of philosophy, praxis, and theory. Precisely because it is born of rifts, necessity, and need⁵⁴ in order to bring the life of real, natural and actual constraint to the innate freedom present in the idea of a true life, art neither dies nor is surpassed by the philosophical concept; it, thanks to its forms and techniques connected to *mimesis*, keeps the horizons of individual and collective freedom open. Only of that which is free it is possible to conceive an idea: this is the profoundest truth of idealism. In fact, only he or she who is free can – reflecting, contemplating, and acting – make their own idea real, even

⁵⁴ Cf. *Ä*, vol. 13, pp. 20, 21 and 27.



if there are no guarantees. Perhaps from Hegel's time the pain of living has increased if, at the dawn of December 27, 1925, in Leningrad at the Hotel d'Angleterre, Sergei Esenin writes, with his own blood, his farewell poem that ends with the lines "in this life to die is not new/But to live, of course, is not newer".⁵⁵ Committing suicide is a free act, both tragic and political, and yet it does not constitute at all an escape route. Furthermore, it is an action relegated to the field of the subjective and the private, however meaningful and heroic it may be. True, objective freedom, the freedom of self-consciousness that has the courage to recognize itself in the other, breaks this solipsistically individualistic trap. And in a meaningful, angry, cadenced, and suffering way, but perfectly in line with Hegelian equanimity, Vladimir Mayakovsky responds: "Our planet is poorly equipped for delight./One must snatch gladness from the days that are./In this life/it's not difficult to die./To make life/is more difficult by far."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Sergei Esenin, "Goodbye, my friend, goodbye", trans. by Lyuba Coffey. <http://www.geocities.com/sulawesiprince/russpoets/yeseninpoetry2.html>, accessed March 21, 2013.

⁵⁶ Vladimir Mayakovsky, "To Sergei Esenin" trans. unlisted. http://allpoetry.com/poem/8531769-To_Sergei_Esenin-by-Vladimir_Mayakovsky, accessed March 21, 2013.