

After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Visual Modernism

I

In 1863, the French painter Édouard Manet caused a public scandal when he exhibited his large painting, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in the Salon des Refusés. He caused an ever greater scandal two years later when he exhibited the startling Olympia in the Paris Salon. (Slides 2,3) The nature of and the reasons for the controversy have been told several times from a number of points of view by distinguished art historians. In hindsight, it has seemed to many of these commentators (though certainly not all) that something unprecedented and revolutionary in the history of painting began with Manet, a development that would eventually coalesce into what came to be characterized as a movement or epoch in virtually all the arts: “modernism.” Whether there is anything to such a categorization or not, the *mise-en-scène*, the technique, and something like the mood or tonality in each painting is so odd that something uncanny and unprecedented is clearly going on; something that seems to be about and a challenge to painting itself, to the conventions of meaning in easel painting. Normal perceptual apprehension and representational understanding is not so much intensified, as we might expect in a great work of art, as it is rather in some way interrupted and challenged, for reasons that were clear to almost no one at the time.¹

I am neither an art historian nor an art critic and will not pretend to be, but I am interested in a kind of philosophical attention to art works, especially to visual art work and the meaning of normative change in visual art. This interest is very closely associated with the approach taken in a series of lectures on fine art given four different times by

Hegel in Berlin during the 1820's. Very roughly, Hegel's view was that the production or "externalization" of our ideas in art works represent a distinct and indispensable form of self-knowledge. (His unusual phrase is that human being, understood as *Geist*, must "double itself," in order to be able to experience and understand itself in its deeds and objects.) And this occurs within an ongoing collective, continuous attempt at self-knowledge over historical time, a project one had to understand in the light of interconnected attempts at such knowledge in religion, philosophy and even in the social and political practices of an age.²

Although Hegel was very clear about the differences between the conceptual articulation of this self-knowledge at some level of achievement in philosophy and the intuitive (*anschaulich*) representations of such self-knowledge in art, his position also had as its consequence a consideration of art works, and not just epics and great tragedies, but visual and plastic and musical art works as well, as limited forms of, and deeply continuous with, philosophy; it was historically inflected "philosophy by other means," let us say.³ *Although primarily a sensible mode of intelligibility, art was not, could not be, given Hegel's understanding of intuition and concept, an incommensurably distinct mode of experience. So, compared with his predecessors, to some extent Hegel de-aestheticized the experience of fine art and this meant that art for Hegel could have a kind of philosophic work to do;* in his language, that work was a particular way of what he called "working out" (*herausarbeiten*) modes of self-understanding with respect to the basic problem the German Idealists took to calling the issue of "the Absolute," the "subject-object" problem. Acknowledging this great difference (between subjects and objects, Geist and Natur) while denying any metaphysical dualism was the Holy Grail of

the period, and the problem encompassed everything from how subjects can know objects, how material states and events, especially art objects and bodily movements, could be said to bear meaning, to how reason-responsive subjects could also be material objects in space and time.

Hence the obvious Hegelian question for Manet and for the entire epoch he seems to have had an early role in helping to initiate: is there anything in the spirit of Hegel that one can say about the sort of self-knowledge realized (*verwirklicht*) in the modernist art produced a generation after Hegel died in 1831, anything consistent at least with the broad spirit if not the letter of Hegel's own account of "the Absolute"? If, for example, the classical Attic tragedies *meant* what Hegel says they meant - that a great crisis in the basic institutions of that society had arisen and could not be resolved, that contradictory justifications for actions had somehow *both become right* - what, if anything, is revealed in some corresponding way about societies whose painters begin to make paintings where objects seem to be de-materializing over historical time in succeeding generations,⁴ first as sensory impressions, then as occasions for artistic and often elaborate geometric reconstruction and finally as absent in wholly non-representational experiments; a society that also makes self-referential and ironic literary works, and that makes art music without conventional harmony, and, eventually, architecture in which architecture is, simply, "structure"?⁵

II

There are many reasons to be skeptical that anything of value can result from trying to project Hegel into the future like this.⁶ After all, anyone who has heard anything

about Hegel has probably heard that he said two things: that philosophy was its own time understood in thought, and some summary of the following remarks. (H1)

In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place. What is now aroused in us by works of art is not just immediate enjoyment but our judgment also, since we subject to our intellectual consideration (i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of both to one another. The *philosophy* of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in days when art by itself as art yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is. (A 11)⁷

If one considers the history of modernist art after Hegel, there is something both ominously prophetic and yet clearly hasty about Hegel's remarks. It is prophetic because the form of life coming into view in the early nineteenth century does seem to be one with no significant role for fine art with respect to questions of the highest significance for human beings. (Perhaps this fact alone can be understood as the main subject of post-Hegelian fine art; perhaps, as T.J. Clark argues, the ending of this role required a century long exploration of its implications, culminating finally in the end of abstract expressionism, the end of modernism, and the transformation of now moribund visual art

into something else; into conceptual experimentation, political theater, spectacle.) And Hegel had not even anticipated two other threats to the vitality and autonomy of art: that an art-buying leisure class of the bourgeoisie would become the principal patrons of the arts, nor did he anticipate how mass consumer societies would radically alter the conditions for art's production and appreciation. Yet, on the other hand, the revolutionary vitality of the modernist moment and the continuing vitality of art forms like film and photography seem evidence enough that art has not become a thing of the past, and it seems too one-dimensional and too sweeping to regard all of modernism as its own eulogy, as essentially mourning work, Trauerarbeit.

However, we can begin to see the opening to answer our Hegelian question about modernism if we recall that this claim is not an isolated one in Hegel's books and lectures. After all, Hegel also does not believe that there is any world-historical work left for philosophy to do; its content is also its past, now understood in the right way within a comprehensive philosophical system. And there are to be no world-historical developments in religion either, beyond the doctrinally thin, humanist Protestantism Hegel preferred. And the institutions of modern *Sittlichkeit*, the distinction between the State and Civil Society and the basic structures of modern civil society, all also represent for him the achievement of reconciled relations of genuinely mutual recognitional status.⁸ That is Hegel believes what he does about the finality of the achievement of romantic art because he is convinced of all these other claims as well. Paradigmatically he believes that the basic structure of modern society has become at least incipiently rational. Romantic art had already embodied the fact that we had "liberated" ourselves from our natural home and had created another. That modern shape of spirit (*Gestalt des Geistes*)

was a world of freedom realized, or reconciled social relations of persons who are free because they actually stand in relations of at least institutionally secured mutuality of recognition. We have reached a form of self- and other-understanding where there is nothing substantial left to be “worked out,” no fundamental residual irrationality in the way we make claims on each other and about the world.

(This is all so, even though, as Henrich among others has pointed out, there is something quite unusual, discontinuous, in Hegel’s treatment of art. On his own terms, it does not follow that, because art is no longer a primary vehicle of human self-understanding, that it has “ceased” to be one at all. In general, when a position or even a form of life is “aufgehoben” in Hegel’s treatment, it is not “indeterminately” negated or rejected, but incorporated in a later position or form of life and experienced differently. Religion has also been transcended by philosophical understanding, but a representational form of self-knowledge is still a component of absolute knowledge, and in modern ethical life, people still go to church. Again in Hegel’s terms, we still respond to epic and tragic literature because its mode of self-understanding is not wholly foreign to us, however much transcended. It has been incorporated into a form in which it still resonates)

In a word – and I will simply assume that this does not need to be argued – Hegel’s sweeping claim about modern ethical life is clearly false as a claim about European modernity in the first third of the nineteenth century, and its being false means that the particular failure and partial success of the modern attempt at the realization of freedom would *still* require, in Hegel’s own terms, a continuing attempt at the sort of understanding just referred to: an objective embodiment and self-recognition, one that has

to include, as it always has, the world of art. This would be an embodiment both of still unresolved dualities (*required but incompatible commitments*, let us say as a kind of shorthand) and some presentiment of their overcoming, but in an aesthetic “form” responsive to a historical situation Hegel had not properly conceptualized. It should not be surprising, in other words, if there is a connection between Hegel’s account of our sense-making practices with respect to the products of Geist (human doings and makings) and his account of the distinct sort of intelligibility required by aesthetic objects. And since the core of that general account involves a social theory of meaning (the meaning of intentional action, for example), it will not be surprising if that account is also relevant to the social dimensions of aesthetic meaning, especially with respect to *the relation to the beholder* presumed in different ways at different times in visual art; with respect to the interpretability of *the human actions depicted in paintings*; and with respect to the art work itself understood as the result of the intentional action of the painter. And all of this is of relevance only as historically inflected, for a community at a time. So my hypothesis is: if one can understand the persistence of the kind of conflicting commitments in intellectual, cultural and political life required by rapidly modernizing European societies, the kind Hegel thought had been overcome, one will be in a better position to begin to understand the aesthetic experimentation that seemed to begin with Manet and its continual relevance to the realization of human freedom, as Hegel understood it.

(Since the sensible dimension of aesthetic intelligibility is at the heart of Hegel’s story, we should look to an art form that might seem to most difficult to accommodate to a Hegelian perspective about post-romantic art, visual art.) Hegel, in other words, may have provided the resources for an approach to modernism, and a way of understanding

its relation to the self-knowledge problem, without having understood the potential (and limitations) of his own approach. He may be the theorist of modernism, *avant la lettre* and *malgré lui*.

III

So let us return to the striking claim that art has become for us “a thing of the past,” not capable of functioning for us as with the power and importance it once had. Of course, by claiming this, Hegel did not mean that art will not be produced, or that it will somehow be discredited, like astrology or alchemy, or that it will come to seem a primitive version of philosophy.⁹ To understand what he does mean, we have to recall that Hegel’s treatment of art itself, in whatever period, had already throughout all the *Lectures* steered fairly clear of many of the traditional aesthetic categories. When he is discussing the notion of “true beauty,” for example, he says such unusual things as, “Works of art are all the more excellent in expressing true beauty, the deeper is the inner truth of their content and thought.” (74) This is not a form of “classicism” because Hegel does not consider art works to be representations of an independent, objective Ideal, “the” truth, in the normal sense, but as vehicles for the practical realization of the relevant speculative truth. Partly this is because of what he believes about the unique logical status of self-knowledge, even at the collective or civilizational level. Whether as collective or individual such self-knowledge does not take an object in the usual intentional sense. What we take ourselves to be is as much an avowal or commitment, a pledge about what we will keep faith with, and is not a simple self-acknowledgement. Or self-knowledge is self-constituting in Hegel, as we collectively struggle actually to become who we take ourselves to be.¹⁰

This feature of self-knowledge has an even more important implication. Here is the passage where Hegel distinguishes himself from traditional classicism in the clearest terms. He is discussing classical art, naturally the favorite period for classicist theories, and he notes something about the way classical art should be said to reveal the truth. What he says here is extremely important, for it not only distinguishes his position from traditional classicism, but he is relying on the same logical structure in understanding the expressive and “actualizing” function of art works as he does in understanding the relation between subjective mindedness and deed, a connection, we will soon see, crucial to his approach and connected to the problem described above as the Idealist problem of “the Absolute.” (H2)

And it was not as if these ideas and doctrines were already there, *in advance* of poetry, in an abstract mode of consciousness as general religious propositions and categories of thought, and then later were only clothed in imagery by artists and given an external adornment in poetry; on the contrary, the mode of artistic production was such that what fermented in these poets they could work out *only* in this form of art and poetry. (A 102)

There is a great deal more to say about this very interesting phrase, “herauszuarbeiten.” For one thing, this way of talking makes clear why Hegel might think that the externalization of our ideas about ourselves in art works is essential, not merely exemplifying. We don’t know in any determinate or “living” detail whom we take ourselves to be except in such externalization. As he says, there are no “ideas” or “doctrines” before art, but only (first) in art. As just noted, in the case of individual self-

knowledge, this knowledge is inherently first and not third personal and it is self-constituting; cannot be a mere self-discovery or self-report. In any significant sense of self-knowledge beyond a report of empirical facts, the sense relevant to our practical identity (“what I am” is a practicing Christian, atheist, political liberal, devoted father) we are, at least provisionally, what we take ourselves to be. I say “provisionally” because Hegel adds to this self-constitution notion the claim that such avowals are real (*wirklich*) only as realized (*verwirklicht*) in a world at a time. He agrees with Goethe that “*Im Anfang war die Tat*,” that the deed is the measure of the genuineness and indeed the true content of a subject’s commitments. Hegel also adds to this picture of self-knowledge the controversial notion that something like our *collective* identity, Geist, is distinct from the mere sum of, or is not some function of, such individual avowals. The common or the social and the individual are famously for him dialectically intertwined and that common project is subject to the same logic. That is, any such individually self-constituting identity is not possible except within a continuing effort at a commonly achieved self-knowledge and so self-realization. It is the very broadest of such projects at commonly realized self-knowledge that we are asking about: modern. There is much more to say about this point, but it is the most important Hegelian contribution and we shall be returning to it frequently.¹¹

Secondly, when Hegel notes that in our age, “Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is” (11) he is not only already *complicating* his own *apparent* account of art appreciation as essentially intuitive and affective, he could easily be taken to be introducing the possibility of a different sort of art, up to this new

expectation, not just cataloguing our different expectations and needs, an art of the explicitly self-reflexive sort one begins to see with Manet, an art requiring from the beholder *interpretive interrogation of a new sort*. (Such an “interrogation of a new sort” required by Manet, say, is the target of our inquiry, now framed more determinately by these notions of provisional self-avowals, externalization and realization. Understood within these terms, what is going on in Manet?) This is suggested in many rich, but not well worked out claims by Hegel, all of which sound to me like prophecies of Manet and his aftermath: “In this way romantic art is the self-transcendence of art but within its own sphere and in the form of art itself” (A, 80), as well as in his claim that “for us” now, art provokes a philosophy of art, a “scientific treatment” and not so much a distinct aesthetic, sensual pleasure.

Moreover, Hegel also notes that the situation of the modern artist (by which he means basically late romantic art) has liberated the artist from the burden of any dependence on a received national or artistic tradition. There is nothing any longer that the artist is bound to take up, on pain of falling outside what is recognized as conforming to the norm, art. As Hegel says frequently in the lectures (in ways that almost sound like a celebration of postmodernism), for the contemporary artist, anything from the past is available, any style, tradition, technique, any theme or topic.

IV

Admittedly, these suggestions about Hegel’s relevance come at the price of reconfiguring some of Hegel’s own formulations. There are two serious divergences and both have to do with inherent, finally irresolvable tensions in Hegel’s account. The first concerns something I want to count as a great virtue of his approach: the absence of an

essentialist, and the promotion of a historicist approach. Art, in other words, is not a natural human kind, no more than opera or film is. It is a practice invented under certain conditions, sharing properties with other similar practices, like decoration, political self-glorification, religious rituals and so forth, but Hegel wants to count it as a distinctive practice. Its norms are collectively self-legislated over time, in other words, in the same basic way that the rules for a game could be formulated collectively over changes in time. (For example, one of Hegel's most intriguing claims in his Lectures is that painting, as we understand it, a fine art, not decorative, not a work of craft nor a religious enhancement of worship, is possible only in a Christian culture.) Such rules are not arbitrarily formulated, and even can be said to have a kind of internal necessity, given the large scale project of self-knowledge attributed to Hegel earlier and the indispensability of some form of "*anschauliche*" understanding (or perhaps, an intuitively oriented conceptual interpretation). That is, Hegel may think that there are a priori reasons for there being art; the reason just cited: any adequate understanding of the Absolute must include an intuitive understanding. But the spirit of his enterprise should mean that there cannot be any a priori reason to exclude post-romantic art from the tradition of art. It would obviously be more consistent to say that art can come to be something quite novel under the novel historical conditions of modernity, perhaps so novel perhaps as not to be recognizable to anyone in the prior tradition as art (the frequent accusation against Manet by his contemporaries). The fact that Hegel thinks that any art that does not conform to what had been understood as the task of an intuitive manifestation of the Absolute should no longer be counted as art not only betrays an odd essentialism, but it blocks a consideration of the fairly natural way that his remarks about the fate of romantic art

open up onto the distinctive features of modernist art, as his own remarks about a new “philosophical treatment” suggested.¹² (The extraordinary difficulty of this position, the more historicist one, is that we still want to be able to retain the ability to say that something can “pose” as art and not be art, that it can be produced and viewed as art, be treated as art by the relevant authorities, and yet still not be art. For some, doubts about whether we can make such a claim begin long before Duchamp or Warhol. The question arises for some already with Kandinsky, Malevitch and Mondrian. And it is a fair question.)¹³

The second revision required to make Hegel more Hegelian involves passages like the following. (H3)

Art by means of its representations, while remaining within the sensuous sphere, liberates man at the same time from the power of sensuousness. Of course we may often hear favorite phraseology about man's duty to remain in immediate unity with nature; but such unity, in its abstraction, is purely and simply rudeness and ferocity, and by dissolving this unity for man, art lifts him with gentle hands out of and above imprisonment in nature. A, 49

There is nothing problematic or in tension with other things central to Hegel's project to say that art is one of the ways in which the hold of any notion of being in some way nothing but natural creatures, burdened by a biological destiny, or, as he says, “befangen” by a fixed species essence, is transcended. But in these and many other contexts, he does not clearly qualify his remarks this way and seems to speak instead of a liberation from our sensible embodiment altogether. The idea of being liberated from a nature-prison is obviously quite a non-dialectical notion, and would make understandable, but not

persuasive, some sort of claim that we have reached a kind of self-understanding that transcends our need to understand ourselves “aesthetically,” or sensorily, as corporeally embodied.¹⁴ *On the other hand, Hegel being Hegel, he also says that the liberation from the power of sensuousness occurs, “while remaining within the sensuous sphere,” so there is something on which one might hang a theory of post-Hegelian art in Hegel’s terms.*

But this is not much of an opening and his “liberationist” talk is an indication of a blind spot in his treatment of modernity, his failure to anticipate the unique dissatisfactions that this “prosaic” modern world (his word) would generate, or his failure to appreciate that there might be a basic form of *Entzweiung* or *Zerrissenheit* that his project could not account for, for which there was no *Aufhebung* yet on the horizon. The duality is basically the same one he has been worried about since his Jena period and the *Differenzschrift*. (H4)

Spiritual culture, the modern intellect, produces this opposition in man which makes him an amphibious animal, because he now has to live in two worlds which contradict one another. The result is that now consciousness wanders about in this contradiction, and, driven from one side to the other, cannot find satisfaction for itself in either the one or the other. (54)

It is striking to note that Hegel does not say here that human beings have been and always will be such an “amphibious” animal, but that “spiritual culture, the modern intellect” (*(D)ie geistige Bildung, der moderne Verstand*) has “produced” this wandering soul. This claim returns us yet again to a decisive aspect of Hegel’s treatment of “the

problem of the Absolute” that we have been stressing. The problem our amphibian faces is not a metaphysical problem about substance, how immaterial and material could interact. We have produced such a being (*der ihn zur Amphibie macht*) and so the problem our subject faces is not the proper philosophical account of interacting substances, hylomorphism, emergent properties or anomalous monism, but a problem of “satisfaction” (*Befriedigung*). This in effect redefines the problem rather than addresses it in its conventional form. How can a subject of thought and deeds which always experiences itself as beyond or more than its material states come to any resolution about who or what it actually “is,” how can it find satisfaction in the absence of any such resting place?

The premises for this sort of treatment by Hegel are quite complicated, both historically and systematically. Basically, Hegel is not treating the German Idealist problem of the Absolute – the account of a possible subject-object identity - as a problem of some prior ground to be recovered in some intellectual intuition or aesthetic experience. He follows Schiller instead in “reversing” the direction of the question, forward, not backwards, where subjectivity is understood as a status, a mode of comportment towards each other and the natural world “to be achieved,” that such a status and practice reconciles and integrates our experience of ourselves as sensible, material creatures as well as minded and active beings. Schiller’s useful example is one Hegel also occasionally uses: romantic love, and especially romantic love in the family, which is neither the mere imposing of an ethical form onto recalcitrant sexual need, nor a merely instrumental strategy for the satisfaction of such a need. Everything in this tradition of philosophical value comes down to the proper understanding of such a

formality-materiality relation, but what we need now is a general sense of this notion of a reconciled “*Geist*” as an accomplishment. Or, as Hegel says frequently, *Geist* is “a product of itself.”

But Hegel also, repeating in a different register what I am saying is his cardinal error, now insists, in spite of these “amphibian” remarks, that philosophy (and only philosophy) has succeeded in overcoming this tension and it is under that assumption that he ascribes to art the task that leaves so little room for much with any life or interest in it. (H5)

Against this we must maintain that art's vocation is to unveil the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, to set forth the reconciled opposition just mentioned, and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling. (55)

If we change the key word in the quotation to “unreconciled,” as, by any reasonable account of modernity, we must, a different picture of a possibly modern art opens up.¹⁵

V

But to appreciate Hegel's relevance, consider again the “Manet moment,” first in the light of traditional accounts of the beautiful and of art prior to Hegel, and then consider Hegel's very different suggestion.

It is immediately apparent that philosophical aesthetics from Plato to Burke and Hume to Kant and Schiller is pretty much helpless with paintings like those by Manet, and eventually by Cézanne and Miró and Picasso and Pollock. Clearly the tone of both of Manet's original, revolutionary paintings is far from idealizing; if anything, it is anti-

idealizing, even ironic. There is no serious attempt at verisimilitude in the depiction of the sensual properties (Olympia's skin has nothing of Titian's lush, pink, living quality; it even seems a bit dirty, almost dead)¹⁶ and so no invitation to any experience of sensual-intellectual harmony. As we shall see with more examples in a moment, its effect is rather something like cognitive or musical dissonance, almost as if both paintings were intended as a kind of affront or at least challenge, "turned" *in toto* toward the beholder with a strange, flamboyant indifference to that beholder.¹⁷ In a striking departure from what Fried has called the absorptive tradition of the 18th and early 19th century, the principal subjects in Manet's paintings often look out of the picture frame towards the beholder, inviting what would have been a kind of "theatricality." But the uncanny effect of this "facingness" as Fried calls it, is that such beholders – *us, standing right there* – are as if invisible or at the least irrelevant, occupying no important presence in the subject's vacant or bemused look. This suggested absence of even the possibility of mutuality (between the subject of painting and the beholder) suggested by this invisibility or irrelevance – not its simple failure, not just misrecognition – and the air of unmistakable unease that this creates is what helps to suggest the incomplete and fragmentary atmosphere in many of the paintings. And while there are elements of great beauty in Manet's work (Slides 6, 7), and a kind of pleasure in the sheer boldness of the painting, the romantic categories, even the whole notion of the beautiful, all seem simply beside the point.

But what would be, then, the point?

I am tempted to rest my whole case for the relevance of Hegel to these questions on one passage from the lectures. (H6)

...so, conversely, art makes every one of its productions into a thousand-eyed Argus, whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point. And it is not only the bodily form, the look of the eyes, the countenance and posture, but also actions and events, speech and tones of voice, and the series of their course through all conditions of appearance that art has everywhere to make into an eye, in which the free soul is revealed in its inner infinity. (154-5)

The idea that visual art can be said to transform the surface of every object, even the appearance of actions, events, speeches and so forth into a thousand eyed creature is also a claim that the reception and appreciation of the work should be understood not as an inspiring intimation of the ideal nor as the occasion of an inner harmony or unusual, disinterested pleasure. After all, even when confronted by a two-eyed creature, the task of figuring out what is revealed in someone's eyes is obviously not straightforward. It can be much more difficult, even, than understanding what they say. A response appropriate to the ambition of the work thus must be an interpretive accomplishment of sorts, one that begins in some interrogative, not merely receptive or contemplative relation to the object, a feature of the aesthetic experience Hegel suggests is spectacularly more difficult than often appreciated by imagining that any art work as a thousand eyed Argus. (Early on Hegel had characterized all of art in a way that can sound like boilerplate unless we note how unusual the formulation is: "it [the work] is essentially a question, an address to the responsive breast, a call to the mind and the spirit." (A 71) Such an attempt must be responsive to evidence, but seems always to remain open, and contentious. (What is like to live in a world where this is also true is clearly the parallel questions; see James,

Proust, Musil, Joyce, Beckett, et al.)

* That is, as Hegel understands it, the making and especially the displaying of art works cannot but express or even allegorize an underlying assumption about the possibility of some public meaning, and so involves the status and role of the beholder, any putative addressee of such an expression of meaning. (The satisfaction of these conditions would form the basis of any criterion of aesthetic success.) This assumption would have to be congruent with assumptions about agency (a possibly public meaning embodied in bodily movements) and about those for whom such a “display” is intended, at least on the assumption that such a performative and public dimension is at the heart of Hegel’s account of subjectivity in agency and in art.¹⁸ And given the way Hegel approaches such questions, we have to say that he means the satisfaction of these aesthetic and performative conditions at a time; that is in our time, under the conditions of modernity.¹⁹

If this is a feature of art as such, then it might also be said that under some historical conditions the capacity to fulfill these requirements, in both its manifestations (social and aesthetic), could come to be experienced as deeply problematic or at least a great deal more difficult, requiring a different sort of relation between beholder and beheld, agent and others, than ever before, a new relation that is more an aspiration than a presentiment. Then, something like the resistance of much modernist work to conventional appreciation and interpretation, the unfamiliarity and opacity we often see in its thousand “eyes,” can be understood as something like the culmination of this difficulty, now made much more explicitly self-conscious and insistent, and so is responsive to altered conditions of such public intelligibility. The same could be said,

mutatis mutandis, for the aspirations of much of modernism to forge a new and revolutionary understanding of these conditions, to demand that we understand each other, and thereby understand and appreciate art, in a new way. This is the Hegelian link I want to insist we should retain in an aesthetic theory, even if we abandon Hegel's apparent and quite untypical triumphalism.

And, to make the point in a more literal rather than figurative sense, where else is the beholder's eyes drawn in the two Manet paintings than to the face and expression of the two naked women? Both expressions seem opaque to and even somewhat contemptuous of the beholder's own gaze, raising the stakes considerably in trying to answer what point is served by addressing the beholder in such a dramatic way. (See Slides 8, 9) This sort of question is particularly important in Manet because there is so often an air of opacity in the expressions of his subjects in several different contexts and in the unusual settings, a challenge that resists direct, immediate understanding, as if designed to prevent both now inappropriate conventional pictorial "readings," and any working out of conventional act descriptions, ascription of motives, etc. These expressions, which Fried calls a "direct but uncommunicative confrontation of the beholder," require a much fuller discussion of what Fried calls Manet's "facingness" strategy to be properly understood within the history of French painting. And there are socio-historical readings of these strange looks by Herbert and Clark among others. But just at a first glance, they are striking simply in their unsettling resistance to a clear reading. This alone suggests that the issue being raised is not so much the psychological or social meaning of such gazes so often discussed. (I mean claims that the vacancy and melancholy of these looks suggests the declining credibility of any internal, vigorous

subjectivity in this new age, an indifference to the difference between human and nonhuman subjects, the dehumanizing results of class exploitation, the gap between inner and outer in available expression in modern societies, etc.) Rather, virtually all of these paintings by Manet immediately allegorize the problem of the painting's relation to the beholder, and do so by also challenging directly established norms of pictorial success, casting any possible response to such allegorized questions into doubt. The drama of such expressions thus draws together the connection between the painting's intelligibility in its relation to the beholder and the entire inner-outer relationship at the heart of Hegel's understanding of the intelligibility of bodily movements and so his whole account of the logic of social subjectivity. Something in that logic has been severely disrupted.

We can see already in Manet's 1862 Old Musician just how deliberate and ambitious is this "facing" strategy, how clearly the musician's gaze can be said to suspend the possibility of conventional appreciation of the painting, and how clearly interrogative and unresolved the expression has to remain. (Slides 10, 11)

Some of these "eyes" are quite famous, of course, and much commented on, like the apparent indifference, fatigue, and studied neutrality in the expression of the girl in the Bar at the Folies-Bergère (Slides 12, 13), or in the Argenteuil, les canotiers, (14 and 15), but these "eyes" are everywhere in Manet (Slides 16-30)²⁰ (I don't mean to suggest that Manet has any copyright on such looks. See Whistler's "White Woman," and later Degas's "Le café, ou l'absinthe." (31, 32, 33), where the issue can raise quite different sorts of questions. It is the extraordinary repetition of the theme in Manet that makes it almost a mythological *donnée*.)²¹ Once that issue is dramatically in play, every other aspect of the paintings becomes a question in the same sense; raised inevitably but

strangely resistant; in Hegel's terms, "an eye," a face, in the same way: why naked at a picnic, why are the men talking to each other and why do they seem to ignore her, what does the position and gesture of Olympia's left hand mean, why is it, as everyone noticed, "tensed" in such obvious contrast with the predecessor painting Manet is calling to mind, Titian's *Venus d'Urbino*, (34, 35, 36) why a black cat, the flowers?²² And finally: under what historical conditions would this aspect of the painting's meaning (a kind of puzzled resistance to direct appreciation, even a somewhat contemptuous challenge to the beholder's expectation of meaning) become so thematized and problematic?

VI

One reads frequently that the issue in modernist painting has a great deal to do with "the problem of subjectivity," and this certainly seems connected with the problem crudely sketched before as the German problem with "the Absolute." Such a problem certainly has something to do (in painting after the Renaissance) with working out what it means "now" to paint easel paintings for beholders, what assumptions about the mindedness of beholder (their expectations about interpretability and meaning) and the portrayal of human mindedness in the painting are relevant, now that various institutional contexts and assumptions no longer inform the interaction between painting and beholder as they once did, and in the rapidly changing context also expressed in modern drama, poetry and philosophy.²³

In paintings we are restricted to the visible surfaces of things under certain conditions of light and shadow, or human faces and bodies, frozen in moments of time in action. If the tableau depicts people, then the question of the meaning of what they are doing, simply the right act description, arises immediately. We are usually aided by the

title, the names of the persons portrayed and perhaps some standard biblical or historical setting. But we must try to understand various gestural moments and something about the organization of the space within the picture frame. (Why just *that* way?) As was noted in discussing the Argus passage, to a certain, very general extent, we can say that the complex relation between the materiality of paint itself and painterly meaning mirrors or allegorizes the relationship between visible corporeal surface and human intentionality generally. (And it will give rise to the same skeptical problems.) We can say that we “take” the painted surfaces that we see to mean what they do in something like the way we comprehend the mindedness we take to be expressed in corporeal movement and visible facial surface. And again, the way we do so is not fixed as a kind of eternal Platonic problem. We ascribe intention, motive, reaction, and purpose in ways broadly governed by norms at a time. In the most obvious case, coming to see persons not as primarily instances of psychological types or representative of family destiny, or as exemplifications of a natural social class, but as absolutely distinct individuals first and foremost, is an ascription of meaning with a complex modern history.²⁴

This ascription of meaning is not an inferential or two-stage relation. We don’t see bodily movements and then infer intentions, any more than we see painted canvases and infer represented objects and intended meaning. But such intelligibility is a conceptual articulation that is an achievement of some sort; understanding what we see is always in some sense provisional and revisable (especially, contestable with others) and that characteristic is an aspect inherent in seeing or understanding itself. In the simplest sense, *not being able to do this with any confidence* is what it means for there not being what Hegel had proclaimed: the “reconciliation of *Geist* with itself”; no confident self-

understanding in the face of contesting claims, or in the face of a confusion about how, in such a world, even to begin to try to resolve such indeterminacy. So the puzzle of some less than animated subjectivity in those expressions is not a sign of some discovery about the absence of human subjectivity in favor of merely corporeal bodies. That would all be much too premature a judgment. What is so powerful about Manet's paintings and such a challenge to Hegel's claims about reconciliation is the aporetic character of what we see, what we are faced with, a somewhat stunned realization of being at a loss. In this sense, the direct challenge to illusionism in the paintings helps allegorize the absence of the kind of context that could begin to resolve such an aporia.

Summarized one last time, I am suggesting that Hegel is asking us to understand the social meaning of individual actions in the way he understands the historical and social dimensions of the production and appreciation of art works. (And, especially in this context, vice-versa.) I think it is clear that Hegel thinks of actions as having such a public, performative and so socio-historical dimension. (Something like the realization of this is what "turning" the painting plane and the expressions of the depicted subjects so confrontationally towards the beholder raises as a challenge.) This feature means that agents can sincerely avow intentions which are not "in" or are even contradicted by the deed (as that deed comes to mean what it does for others at a time) and that individual agents no more own the appropriate act-description for what they have done than artist's have such proprietary relations with the meaning of what they have produced. To be beset with such worries is to fail to achieve Hegel's "reconciliation with oneself."

In this context, we might say that just to the extent that under new, rapidly changing historical conditions we come to be more dubious, unsure, confused about *the*

sense we make in seeing intentions “in” deeds, the less confident we are that we know how to do this, the less stable we might also expect the conventions governing pictorial “success” might be. The mark of this challenge and this difficulty is captured the implicit paradox that, on the one hand, Manet’s subjects are looking at the beholder, but, on the other hand, they seem to have no hope in a beholder’s response; they “confront” the beholder but as if he or she were not there, as if they do not expect, could now not expect, anything satisfying in return. (By “success” in this gesture I mean that the modernist equivalent to beauty as the “promise of happiness” is this *promise of meaning*, perhaps under ever more intense pressure. In these paintings, it is a promise that frames the paintings, but is not, perhaps cannot be realized, within such a frame. That appears to be the point.²⁵

But Hegel himself, in his greatest failure, never seemed very concerned about this sort of potential instability in the modern world, about citizens of the same ethical commonwealth potentially losing so much common ground and common confidence that a general irresolvability in any of these possible conflicts becomes ever more apparent, the kind of huge challenge and low expectations we see in all those frontal looks.²⁶ As we have seen, he does not worry much because of his general theory about the gradual actual historical achievement of some mutual recognitive status, a historical claim that has come to look like the least plausible aspect of Hegel’s account, and that is connected with our resistance to his proclamations about art as a thing of the past.²⁷ But this sort of issue is beyond, even prior to, any resolution of a struggle for mutuality of recognition. The terms within which any such struggle could be conducted are now also in a kind of suspension; not even available as weapons of a sort.

Since freedom (also known as “self-reconciliation”) in Hegel’s expressive account has to do with an ability to “see myself in my own deeds,” experience them as legitimately mine, stand behind and defend them, a growing skepticism or uncertainty about being able to do this (even about the simplest self-understanding) might be expected to cast its skeptical shadow on various other forms of embodied expressions of human meaning. This what it is to see what Hegel missed, but see it in *his* terms, and make use of that to understand the conditions of modern painterly meaning.²⁸ Hegel’s sense of the successful resolution of the question raised by trying to understand someone’s deed or by the question posed by a thousand-eyed Argus has both a subjective and objective side, both a way of understanding the provisional and unstable subjective side, the intention, motive or reason, a meaning actual only in the deed (or the aesthetic object), and the objective social conditions of an age, especially the struggle for recognition inherent in social conflict and the ever more unstable interpretive conventions of modern societies. (That these interpretive conditions are understood as primary and irreducible is what it means to call Hegel an “idealist.”) His take on the latter, it is now generally acknowledged, was prematurely optimistic, but his account of *what we need to take account of* in the former, and his insistence on a link with the latter, remains a kind of modern fate, and one that needs to be set inside the later context of the fractured and prosaic character of the emerging, industrialized, bourgeois, eventually consumerist nation-state world coming into view in the nineteenth century.²⁹ We get an “intuitive view” of the result in different ways in different nineteenth century painters “after the beautiful.”

¹ See Gehlen's remark in *Zeitbilder* that artists seemed to be producing "intuitions" for which there were no "concepts," a link with the central issue in the Kant-Hegel relation that I will exploit to the fullest. (8) Gehlen's description of what he is after in his approach to modernism – Bildrationalität – also has a nice Hegelian echo. See also pp. 63-4 on the perception issue.

² The universal and absolute need from which art (on its formal side) springs has its origin in the fact that man is a *thinking* consciousness, i.e. that man draws out of himself and puts *before himself* what he is and whatever else is. And in general he must see himself, represent himself to himself, fix before himself what thinking finds as his essence, and recognize himself alone alike in what is summoned out of himself and in what is accepted from without. Man does this in order, as a free subject, to strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself. A30-31

³ A typical formulation:

Das allgemeine und absolute Bedürfnis, aus dem die Kunst (nach ihrer formellen Seite) quillt, findet seinen Ursprung darin, daß der Mensch *denkendes* Bewußtsein ist, d. h. daß er, was er ist und was überhaupt ist, aus sich selbst für sich macht... Der Mensch tut dies, um als freies Subjekt auch der Außenwelt ihre spröde Fremdheit zu nehmen und in der Gestalt der Dinge nur eine äußere Realität seiner selbst zu genießen. BD 13, 512

⁴ There is a prescient comment about this made in Schelling's 1802-3 lectures, The Philosophy of Art:

Matter gradually dematerializes into the ideal; in painting as far as the relative ideal, through light; then, in music and even more so in speech and poesy; into the genuinely ideal, the most complete manifestation of the absolute cognitive act." PA, p. 200.

⁵ Let us somewhat arbitrarily say that by this "modernism" label in the visual arts we mean to designate an epoch in painting stretching from Manet, advanced in a way by impressionism and decisively by postimpressionism, including geniuses like Cézanne and Matisse and Picasso and Miro and ending in some sense with Abstract Expressionism. Any narrative of modernism is bound to be extremely controversial. Indeed, the very idea of a narrative of an art historical movement is controversial, not to mention the details. I find very persuasive what Michael Fried has to say about the issue in Manet's Modernism. See pp. xx top xx. I will discuss aspects of Fried's interpretation in the next lecture. And I do not of course mean to ask: what would the historical person, Hegel, have actually said about the art of the nineteenth century? That is an unanswerable question, even though the odds are high that he would have been horrified. (His heroes in painting were Raphael, Titian and the modern Dutch painters.) I mean only to ask if there is anything of value in the approach Hegel pioneered in trying to understand this epoch.

⁶ Despite the heroic attempts of Dieter Henrich to do something like this. See, etc. etc. Rutter (2010) makes an interesting case that seventeenth century Dutch art, which Hegel admired so much, provides another example of a possibly post-romantic art that Hegel would recognize as art, and he tries to defend Hegel from Henrich's claim about Hegel's

“Biedermeier” taste. See p. 78 ff. But Rutter has Hegel saying that it is the painter who infuses or injects a kind of serious “liveliness” into the quotidian activities represented by such art. But it sounds artificial and a matter of mere amusement if the painter is responsible for this sense, if he is not conveying something “alive” in the world he depicts. And I am not sure this saves Hegel from Henrich’s charge. One could read what Rutter says as intensifying that charge; that Hegel is really enthusiastic about the banalities of domestic life.

⁷ Another often cited passage: Dadurch erhalten wir als Endpunkt des Romantischen überhaupt die Zufälligkeit des Äußeren wie des Inneren und ein Auseinanderfallen dieser Seiten, durch welches die Kunst selbst sich aufhebt und die Notwendigkeit für das Bewußtsein zeigt, sich höhere Formen, als die Kunst sie zu bieten imstande ist, für das Erfassen des Wahren zu erwerben. (VA 14, 142)

⁸ Hegel was also not the only important contemporary to hold that there is a connection between the kind of society one lives in and the kind and quality of art that could be produced, that the former is some sort of condition of the latter. The Schlegels were both pessimistic, and Friedrich wrote, speaking of the art of his day, “what has grown in such a sickly environment naturally cannot be anything else but sickly.” “Letter on the Novel” in Bernstein, p. 289.

⁹ For examples, “We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit.” A 103

¹⁰ The fact that Hegel speaks of the gradual “actualization” of truth is another book-length topic. A typical formulation: “For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself.” (A 103)

¹¹ See “The Absence of Aesthetics in Hegel’s Aesthetics.”

¹² I try to demonstrate these affinities in what can be taken to be extreme and, in all traditional views of Hegel, most implausible case, abstraction in modern painting. See “What Was Abstract Art?” etc. The premise for such a possibility remains the complex presuppositions of the 1000 eyed Argus passage. There can be no such linkage if we see painted geometrical forms simply as geometrical forms, as if the canvas, the fact of its being a painted canvas, did not mean that every spot on the painting has to be understood as an “eye.” Geometrical form itself is of little relevance to Geist, any more than landscapes themselves are. Painting such forms is another matter. For a response to (and criticism of) this suggestion, See Martin Donougho, “Must it Be Abstract...” etc. (This point has something to do with why, from this Hegelian perspective, Danto is wrong about the implications of Warhol, minimalist art, etc. But that is surely another and longer story.)

¹³ For evidence that Hegel wanted to maintain the art/non-art discussion, especially with regard to the novels of Jean Paul, see the manuscript citations by Rutter (2010), p. 20 ff. Rutter’s discussion of Hegel on bad art, pre-art, non-art and anti-art is also very helpful.

¹⁴ Just as conceding that we remain of course sensibly embodied creatures means that we continue to require an embodied modality of self-knowledge, or the aesthetic.

¹⁵ This is also connected with his apparent reluctance to consider any possible form of aesthetic expression of the realization of human freedom other than a figural painting of recognizably human figures and deeds; his reluctance, that is, to consider a possibly non-figurative “expression” of possibly new modes of the struggle for the realization of freedom in a natural or material world. Appreciating this, I want to suggest, will help at least a bit in trying to answer our Hegelian question about modernism.

¹⁶ Cf. Hegel’s remark:

“Thus the truth of art cannot be mere correctness, to which the so-called imitation of nature is restricted; on the contrary, the outer must harmonize with an inner which is harmonious in itself, and, just on that account, can reveal itself as itself in the outer. 155

¹⁷ This too is a point made by Fried, p. xx.

¹⁸ Hegel’s Practical Philosophy

¹⁹ The conditions of agency are thus understood as a social status instituted and sustained by a community at a time. These conditions –who can be counted an agent, what may be attributable to an agent, how far the scope of an agent’s responsibility extends and so forth – vary as much and in a way deeply connected way with the conditions of aesthetic success.

²⁰ To be sure, this characteristic, what the French critic Chesneau in an 1863 essay called “looking without seeing,” turns up in other French realists too. See Fried’s citation of the essay and discussion, p. 74ff.

²¹ Cf. Fried’s discussion of the anti-theatrical aspect of her look (somewhat mad, so not acknowledging a beholder) and the contrasting, aggressive confrontational look of the wolf’s head. MM, 222 ff.

²² We musn’t of course be too literal. Hegel’s claim is that painting turns every surface into an eye. As we shall see, sometimes a direct address to the beholder, by its attempt to direct and determine the beholder’s understanding, can obscure much more than reveal (it “theatricalizes” the encounter). More on this in the next chapter.

²³ None of these problems is merely a puzzle; the formulation of the problem and various of its dimensions have histories and contexts that implicate many other issues as well.

²⁴ Koerner on Self-portraiture.

²⁵ I have tried to show the link between this issue and literary modernism (and so a way of acknowledging and living out this situation without skepticism or despair) in studies of

Henry James (Henry James and Modern etc.), Proust (“On Becoming Who One is...”), and film (Fatalism in American Film Noir.)

²⁶ When he does discuss the issue, it seems to me that he always makes the same hasty inference. He thinks that any concession to the existence of potentially unresolvable inner conflicts in characters, or unavoidable indeterminacy in a form of life, amounts to a very slippery slope that will lead almost immediately to Schlegel, ironic unseriousness, and the worship of the ineffable. As a result he just doesn’t “get” Kleist for example. As if this is a helpful comment on the Prince von Homburg.

The Prince of Homburg is the most contemptible General; distracted in making his military dispositions, he pens his orders badly, in the night before action he agitates himself with morbid stuff, and on the day of battle he acts like a bungler. Despite such duality, disruption, and inner dissonance in their characters, these authors suppose themselves to be disciples of Shakespeare. But they are far from being so, for his characters are selfconsistent; they remain true to themselves and their passion, and in what they are and in what confronts them they beat about according only to their own fixed determinacy of character. 578-9

²⁷ In passages where one can see this assumption at work, like the transition from the hard heart of moralism in the Phenomenology to “forgiveness,” the transition seems more miraculous than explicable.

²⁸ I take this as a response to Donougho's criticism that "despite Fried-Pippin's situating of art in a historically contingent 'grammar', it remains obscure how that bears upon history in concrete and detailed fact (as opposed to generalized 'historicality.')." (xx) For that matter, Fried's own detailed narrative of the fate of the absorption episteme already seems to me a clear answer to such a question about "detail." Fried's "presentness is grace" is not a kind of transcendent moment outside of time, since the content and force and claim of presentness always has a particular historical shape. Everything about its achievement in Fried's account is deeply historically inflected and has quite a specific place in the narratives he provides. That said, I doubt any narrative is ever going to get us fine-grained answers to Donougho's question. Exactly what (in a significant Hegelian sense, not just an internal art historical sense) led from impressionism to a moment in post-impressionism, and why the Nabis or Blaue Reiter just then, does not seem in the cards. See Gehlen, Bildrationalität, etc. But the question being posed is a different and admittedly more general one. It is not fair to ask the answer to it to answer another one.

²⁹ Cf. Gehlen's remarks on this issue, p. 94ff.