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IMAGES OF EUROPE PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

ISSEI 2014 – Conference Proceedings
Porto, Portugal

Edited by
Yolanda Espiña

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YOLANDA ESPIÑA [EDIÇÃO]

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Symbol and Art in Mediterranean Cultures
A Hegelian Point of View

Mario Farina

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to define the relationship between art and religion within the context of the three Mediterranean Monotheisms. In order to accomplish this task, I will follow Hegel's precious input, in particular his theoretical explanation of the artistic effort towards the elaboration of an image of the divinity. First, I will briefly study Hegel's description of Islamic and Jewish poetry as the paradigm of the monotheistic impossibility to accomplish an artistic and symbolic representation of God; secondly, I will linger on Hegel's description of symbol as artistic instrument of signification; finally, I will follow the line of Hegel's understanding of Christian art as a demonstration of the necessary failure of any temptation towards a sensible representation of the monotheistic divinity.

Keywords

Symbol, Mediterranean Cultures, Religious Art, Representation, Hegel.

Throughout this paper, I wish to support the following claim: any attempt to artistically present a monotheistic concept of God is bound to fail, and such a failure shows the image's inability to fully expose spiritual content; the dynamics of the "resuscitation of the symbolic" into Christian or Romantic art is a result of this process.[1]

1. In order to account for Hegel's description of Islamic and Jewish poetry, I shall mainly refer to Hegel's *Lessons of Aesthetics*, and especially to the 1823 and 1826 lectures. In the first lecture on fine art (Berlin, 1820/21) Hegel classifies holy poetry as a distinctive form of classicism, that is to say as "Classic Sublimity," and he subdivides therefore classic art in two parts: on the one hand there is monotheistic classicism, on the other hand there is the Greek and accomplished classicism. This partition disappears however already in the second series of lessons, and in 1823 Hegel includes holy poetry in the symbolic form of art.

In 1823, Jewish and Islamic poetry are no longer part of Classic art, but they are still described by a proper and distinctive aesthetic category: that of

sublime. "On the one hand there is the poetry of sublime, on the other hand there is the poetry of finiteness,"[2] writes Hegel in his *Lectures of aesthetics*. As is well known, that of sublime was maybe the ruling and surely the most original aesthetic category of the 18th Century aesthetics. Kant, in his third *Critique*, had defined the sublime as something that "is to be found in a formless object insofar as *limitlessness* is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality."[3] Thus Kant described the sublime as a sensation resulting from something enormous, something limitless, something infinite. This definition had been spreading between the 18th and 19th Centuries and many authors oriented their aesthetic position according to Kant's determination of the sublime (one may think for example about Schiller's essay *Of the Sublime*, or the early Romantic debate about sense and sensibility).

For that reason it may be surprising that Hegel, the most influential post-Kantian philosopher, limits the function of sublime to such a restricted form of art. His position becomes however consistent if the function of the aesthetic judgment in Hegel's aesthetics is also taken into account. The beauty as ideal, that is as the realization of the idea of reason, is not the result of an aesthetic judgment, but rather the concretization of the idea of *Geist*. The "beauty" is therefore more similar to a practically demonstrable effect, than to the result of some judgment. The concept of beauty characterizes, then, any successful attempt to realize the idea of reason, and any form of this realization may somehow be said "beautiful". According to Hegel, the sublime is precisely such an attempt to realize beauty. This attempt clearly echoes Kant's account, which defines sublime as enormous, infinite and disproportionate. Therefore, Hegel's conception of sublime should be considered in this specific context, that is as a non-technical use of Kant's category. Whenever describing the historical development of artistic forms, Hegel always runs into the same issue when it comes to Jewish and Islamic poetry: the position of this kind of poetry violates the chronological advancement of art. Symbolic art complies, in its progression, to the historical development of cultures: it begins with the religion of light in Persia, then it passes to the Indian cults, and finally it culminates with the Egyptian architecture. The transition between symbolic and classic is always determined by Oedipus's explanation of the Egyptian enigma of the Sphinx. The Jewish and Islamic poetries are then always placed together after this section. Such a positioning of Islamic and Jewish monotheisms triggers the following question: are they actually part of symbolic art? Or, in other words:

the relation between meaning and image as established in that kind of poetry is actually a symbolic relation? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to better describe these kind of artistic phenomena.

In the 1826 *Lessons,* Islamic and Jewish art are placed together in the fourth section on symbolic art, entitled *The become free of the spiritual and the sensible.* This part, besides the holy poetry, also contains the section on the technical aspects of poetry: parable, metaphor and so on. This fourth part is described as "the fall apart of both parts" of the symbol in general.[4] The two sides of the symbol are the sensible image and the spiritual meaning, and their reciprocal collapse is nothing but their division into two separate areas, originally united in the symbolic intuition. This fourth part is subdivided into three steps, which correspond to: the Jewish intuition; the new oriental pantheism (that is, the Islamic poetry); and the full becoming free of spirit and sensibility.

1) "In the Jewish intuition we meet a become free of the interior, of the meaning, toward the exteriority." This is the relationship where the spiritual has a leading role, as it dominates in itself the natural, that is to say the finite. The finite, which is also the exterior, is instead just an accident of the spiritual, and the spiritual is what gives sense and meaning to the particular. This understanding of the Jewish relation between universal and particular mirrors a general idea of the German Enlightenment, expressed also in Hegel's early writings. According to this perspective, the Jewish religion is a religion of domination, in which an abstract concept of God dominates the people with law and power. In his *Lessons*, Hegel expresses this idea within an aesthetic framework: "this relation gives us what in its determinate freer form is called sublimity." The first stage of this kind of relation is therefore as follows: the spiritual, the God, in its relation with the natural, is the power on this, so that the natural is placed as a negative; and furthermore Hegel adds: "this relation in its determinate freer form gives us what is called sublimity."[5]

From this determination three consequences ensue: *first*, the world of Jewish intuition is *entgöttert*, that is to say God cannot be present in the exterior and finite stuff of the world; *secondly*, the word becomes nothing but a mere prose, something prosaic, without an independent meaning; *and finally*, precisely for this reasons, miracles can appear in the world. Differently, in other worlds, such as for instance the world of India, that is a fully divinized world, there are no miracles, because the word itself is entirely a miracle. But this is not yet the true sublime: "the actu-

ally sublime is included just in the relation of spirit with this prosaic, finite, worldly thing, that is present."[6] The sublimity is therefore neither the simple prosaic world, nor the infinity of the one God, but rather the distinctive relation between God and world, between finite and infinite. Sublime in this sense is nothing but a relation, a connection, that is impossible to be accomplished. On the one hand there is the abstract infinity and on the other hand there is the merely finite, and the sublime is the unbridgeable hiatus between these determinations. As an example of this kind of sublime, Hegel mentions the Jewish hymns and in particular the psalms, especially psalms 90 and 104. Another example is *Genesis* 1, 3: "and God said, let there be light and there was light," and other examples are also taken from Pseudo-Longinus. What is specifically interesting for our position is the determination of the value of this position: this big number of hymns, of odes of God, [realizes] the classic sublimity – a model for all the times, where are brilliantly presented the sensations of men toward God. Whenever man needs to present his sensation toward the one God, he has to make appeal to the dynamics of symbolic sublimity.

2) The second accounted relation between God and the world is that of Islamic poetry: "the brilliant pantheism is at home in Orient; Arabs, Persians and Turks." Based on this kind of pantheism the relation between meaning and figure is however different from the Jewish one, actually it is the very opposite: here the substance, the One God, is placed everywhere in the objects.[7] In this regard, Hegel shows some penchant for Islamic poetry, probably at least partially influenced by the cultural context of those year (one may think in particular about Goethe's collection entitled *West-Östlicher Diwan*, inspired precisely by Arabian classic poetry).

Also in this case, one can easily appreciate the relation and immense distance between nature and God, however according to this position the One substance has an affirmative relation with nature: pantheism claims the immanence of the divinity in the objects, and the dominion of God is transformed into some sort of spiritualization, inspiration, of the objects. Therefore the phantasy of the poet is itself grounded in the object. Hegel describes the character of the pantheist poet as follows: "it is the character of the cheerful, blessed interiority, that is typical in Orient; the western, romantic interiority is more deepen in itself. […] The happy, free interiority is at home in Orient."[8] The poet is a free, independent spirit, he maintains his nonchalance also in misery; his spirit is present in the objects and he uses the objects as images for poetry.

This kind of praise of the Arabian poetry in nonetheless clarified by the abstract determination of the Oriental pantheism: "the spirit exists for itself," and "the natural appears as an accident."[9]

According to this descriptions, the attempt to produce an artistic exposition of the relationship between nature and God, as a monotheistic God, always runs into the same kinds of problems. The One God, as the meaning of the natural, stands in any case at immeasurable distance from the particular. By the Jewish intuition, this distance is represented as the domination of the One God, while in the Arabian poetry it is exposed as the complete immanence of God in the whole nature. But according to both accounts, nature just functions as a mere decoration for the presentation of the spiritual. This is the destiny of any attempt to sensibly present an infinite God: to show the deficiency of the image and to expose nothing but an immeasurable distance between finite and infinite, that is to produce the symbolism of the sublime.

2. Based on Hegel's definition of Eastern poetry, our opening question was: are those kind of artistic phenomena actually symbolic? The answer should now be both positive and negative. Provided that the symbol is just a sensible image that necessarily alludes to a spiritual meaning, then the Oriental pantheism is actually a form of symbolism. However, the symbol is also a determinate moment of an historical and cultural development. It is something that culminates with the resolution of the Sphinx's enigma, and the resolution of the symbolic presentation consists in the overcoming of symbol through the pantheistic presentation of a multiplicity of Gods in the sensible image; that is to say, it is achieved by the rising of ancient Greek Classicism. According to such a restricted concept of symbol, the holy and sublime poetry is something different from the symbolic. However, if the symbol is taken in a larger sense, that is as dynamics of significance, as a semiotic instrument, then holy poetry is actually a model for a very distinctive symbolic relation: the relation resulting from the attempt to present a monotheistic conception of God to sensibility.

Based on the thorough study of Hegel's systematic determination of art, it may be argued that the model of symbolic art is not the accomplished symbolism of Egypt, but rather the sublime symbolism of Holy poetry: "On the further side of the perfection […] lies the art of sublimity – symbolic art, in which the figuration suitable to the Idea is not yet found."[10] The ground for this description is provided by Hegel's understanding of art in the *Encyclopedia*:

according to Theunissen's account, art in fact isn't considered as autonomous, but rather in its relation with religion[11]. As religious, the symbolic art is better explained as the temptation to present the infinite in the finite, whose model is traceable in the holy and sublime poetry.[12]

3. Now, by looking into Hegel's assessment of Christian and Romantic art, a perfectly analogous account can be found : as far as the relation with the divine is concerned, "romantic art gives up the task of showing him as such in external form."[13] As Hegel says in the Introduction to the 1826 *Lessons* : within the romantic form "art continues in the opposition of Symbolic, even though in a completely other manner."[14] The weakness of Romantic art consists in the impossibility to sensibly present its proper content, that is "the absolute idea" in its perfection. The idea must be considered as free from sensibility, but art is a structurally sensible manner to present a meaning. Therefore the Christian conception of religion must fall again into the dynamics of symbol. Accordingly, based on Christian art the exteriority "can appear here as a contingent toward the its significance."[15] The same contingency, the same accidental character, marks therefore the Jewish-Islamic art on the one hand, and Christian art on the other.

According to Hegel's determination "the spiritual as spiritual becomes the meaning of the sensible; the figure becomes thus like that of symbolic. […] in the romantic art, the ruler is the spiritual in general […]. The sensible can be considered as randomness."[16]

But what is exactly the consequence of this description? My claim may be formulated as follows: the romantic, and therefore Christian art, must necessarily mirror the development of the fourth part of symbolism; such a part contains the determination of holy Jewish and Islamic poetry: it begins from the negative relation between meaning and sensible, it then goes through the affirmative and pantheistic relation, and it ends with the becoming free of the two sides. However, this mirroring acts no longer directly on the soil of objectivity, but it is rather mediated by subjectivity.

The first part of the romantic form of art is dedicated to *The religious as such*, that is to say to the *Spiritual for itself*. In this section, what is important is exactly the fate of the divine toward the sensible world. The history of Christ, his Calvary and his death are presented here; the pain of the body

and the suffering of Mary and finally the sacrifice of the flesh in the lives of martyrs are also included. This part is somehow the reproduction of the Jewish intuition: the infinite and divine is supposed to be what provides meaning to the sensible. However, this donation of meaning is accomplished by a negative evaluation of the mundane. The flesh must be sacrificed, and it is posited just in order to stand for the negative side of God. Furthermore, just as for the Jewish and sublime poetry, this is the part where miracles take place: God appears in the world and he states his power on everything particular, precisely by modifying it.

The second part of Christian art is, on the contrary, *The affirmative reflex* of the divinity in the world. As previously seen, the pantheistic position was some sort of divinization of the world through an affirmative presence of God in the object; now, in the second Christian section, some mirroring of that conception is presented, but the soil of the divine's affirmation is no longer the realm of the objects, but rather the subjectivity itself. For the infinite to act in the world, it needs the mediation of the subject, and therefore its achievement strongly shapes the personality. This part contains the description of chivalry, and the determination of its values: love, loyalty, honor and bravery. In this very section, Hegel makes an explicit allusion to the Islamic poetry and behavior, because of its capacity to explain this affirmative relation between sensible and divinity. The divinity tries to impress itself in the world through the divinization of actions, but what results is a distance between the infinite of God and the finite of the subject's action, which culminates with Cervantes's farce of all of chivalry's values: the *Don Quixote*.

Finally, the last romantic determination, precisely as the last determination of the symbol, is *The become free of material, of natural immediacy*. Here we can find "*die Entgötterung der Natur*," that is the banish of God from nature. The Holland painting and the humorist romantic poetry are then the exhibition of subjectivity itself without any sort of relation with the divine. The divine vanishes from the art's world, precisely because of the impossibility of art to present the infinite in the image. This is the well-known claim about the end of art, and it means that the art becomes aware of its inability to present directly and sensibly its proper meaning.

The end of symbolism replicates itself at the end of Christian art. The ground of this repetition is the very nature of the content of both kinds of art: the monotheistic and infinite God. Art is structurally image, sensibility an exteriority, and the monotheistic God is on the contrary meaning, immateriality and interiority. The resuscitation of the symbolic is therefore motivated by the content, which cannot find an adequate expression through images.

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Endnotes

1. See, Jeong-Im Kwon, *Hegels Bestimmung der Kunst* (München: Fink, 2001), 168.
2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst. Berlin 1823* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), 140.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Berlin: Reimer), § 23, 75.
4. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik. 1826* (München: Fink, 2004), 89.
5. Ibid, 90.
6. Ibid., 91.
7. Ibid., 93.
8. Ibid., 93-94.
9. Ibid., 90.
10. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1992), §561.
11. See, Michael Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologisch-politischer Traktat* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970), 190-200.
12. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, §561.
13. Ibid., § 562.
14. Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik. 1826*, 28.
15. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, §562
16. Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik. 1826*, 29.