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Hegel's "characteristic" (*die Charakteristik*) in 1828-29

Abstract

In his 1828 Aesthetics, Hegel cites his Berlin colleague Aloys Hirt's equating of art-beauty (das Kunstschöne) with "the characteristic", for Friedrich Schlegel a mark of the modern. Why did Hegel do that? First, it allowed him to position himself in relation both to Romanticism and to Weimar Classicism. Second, he could use Hirt's polemic against the art historian K.F. Rumohr to contrast the latter's naturalism with an Idealism open to depiction of everyday life, as in Dutch genre painting.

Keywords

Characteristic, Ideal, Hirt.

Received: 26/02/2020

Approved: 21/03/2020

Editing by: Danilo Manca

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Hegel's Introduction to what proved to be his last lecture series on philosophy of art (1828-29) takes a direction and shape quite different from other years (1820-21, 1823, 1826). I wish to focus especially on one aspect of Hegel's procedure: his surprising advocacy of a term (borrowed from his Berlin colleague, Aloys Hirt), namely, the "characteristic" (*die Charakteristik*) in art generally. It functions here in a manner unlike his own previous use of the term. I argue that "the characteristic" allows Hegel to take an intricately defined position with respect to Friedrich Schlegel's "Romanticism", Weimar classicism, and – not least – the materialist challenge represented by Carl Friedrich von Rumohr, founder of the discipline of art history and author of the pioneering *Geist der Kochkunst* (1822: the very title a gibe at Hegel)¹. The lability of the term – ambiguous as between universal and particular/singular, meaning and shape – opens up dialectical possibilities for the philosopher of art, although this might also explain why it has received comparatively scant attention². In this regard, I'd argue, it resembles another key concept (if we may call it that) in Hegel's overall approach: *Individualität*. Both terms apply equally to the classical Ideal and to the modern world, including modern art (late-"romantic", in Hegel's contemporary parlance). Both require a certain discrimination by the observing or thinking subject, a melding of subjectivity and objectivity.

Let me begin by sketching how Hegel arrives at the "characteristic", taking my cue from Heimann's arrangement of topics. I shall then ask how the term might bear on Hegel's general conception of art.

1.

Hegel's 1828 Introduction surveys various perspectives on art. It considers art with respect to nature, to morality, and to scientific method

¹ Carl Friedrich von Rumohr (1785-1843). Published under the name of his personal chef, Joseph König, *Geist der Kochkunst* (1822) was translated into English by Barbara Yeomans as *The essence of cookery*. Most importantly Rumohr was a critic of Winckelmann's "idealist" approach to art. For an amusing and instructive angle on his and Hirt's roles in the founding of the Altes Museum, it is still worth consulting Crimp 1993: 44-64.

² See Bremer 2005: 785 ff., and also Dönike 2005: esp. chapter 1 on Aloys Hirt. Dönike cites (p. 22) Oskar Walzel on the equivocality of "charakteristisch" and the attendant problems with such a "schwankender Begriff", forever shifting between general type and particular trait.

(*Wissenschaft*), the latter understood first as art history and art scholarship (*Gelehrsamkeit*), then as “theoretical reflection” on art (Hegel 2017)³. But in Germany – so Hegel continues – the ambition of abstract theory to lay down rules for poetic practice have been “violently rejected” (*verworfen*). A “living poetry” had arisen and the superiority of genius over taste had been affirmed, both in reaction to “the watery wastes [*die breiten Wasserströme*] of theories” (Hegel 1969a: 37 = Hegel 1975: 20, amended). “Romantic art” came thus into its own, in short, along with a much broadened standard of taste. Nevertheless an older mode of historical scholarship retained a measure of value, indeed, finding novel use in the new cultural climate. Goethe is singled out as having taken advantage of innovative directions for interpreting “individual” artworks, his criticism informed both historically and theoretically.

As mentioned, Hotho absorbs much of this wholesale into his official edition, considerably elaborated. He also replicates the next topic discussed in Hegel’s lectures, the a priori reflexion on, or metaphysical theory of, beauty (modelled on Plato), whereas the first type of theory had by contrast anchored itself “empirically” in individual artworks. Hegel argues – in the third place (II γ) – that the one-sidedness of each perspective (empirical particulars vs abstract Idea) is relieved or sublated in the concept (*der Begriff*). This promises on the one hand to establish true principles for concrete artworks, and on the other to render the metaphysical Idea “fruitful in its own right (*wird fruchtbar für sich selbst sein*)”⁴. Hegel turns then (III a) to the concept of beauty: an assumed beginning much in need of philosophical justification (Hegel 2017: 10, H: 5; compare Hegel 1969a: 40-1 = Hegel 1975: 22-3). The following passage (III b) addresses the reality or “being” of beauty, and asks in what way its existence (objective or subjective) may be proven necessary. Hegel concludes that the concept must be taken up “lemmatically” (Hotho’s edition follows suit), that is to say, from a prior en-

³ Hegel lists the several approaches as II: a (*nature*), b (*morality*), and c (*systematic study* – comprising α . history of art, and β . scholarship or erudition). After the pagination of the different editions of Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics I will report the pages of the transcriptions abbreviated as follows: A: Ascheberg; H = Heumann; K = Kehler; L = Libelt. I cite Hotho’s 1835 edition from Hegel’s *Werke* = Hegel 1969a and in T.M. Knox’s English translation sometimes amended.

⁴ Hotho’s edition takes over some of the vagueness of this too. See Hegel 2017: 10; H: 5, and cf. Hegel 1969a: 39-40 = Hegel 1975: 22. Central to the Logic of the “Idea” is that it comprises the “reality” of the concept, its “fulfilment”, although this falsely renders it a bare result. See Hegel: 1969d: 474 = Hegel 2010: 679.

cyclopedic presentation of the particular sciences (Hegel 2017: 11, H: 6; cf. Hegel 1969a: 42 = Hegel 1975: 24)⁵. The next section (III c) considers a different approach, via “representations” (*Vorstellungen*) of the beautiful with an eye to laying down its definition; an arbitrary procedure which might nevertheless, when subjected to critique (presumably a Kantian sorting of validity), attain systemic form.

We shift to III d, a “critique of declarations/explanations” (*Erklärungen*) concerning the concept of beauty, as offered by some of Hegel’s contemporaries, namely, Hirt, Meyer and Goethe⁶. Hotho’s edition follows a quite different order. It relegates to a prior section – on “systematic [*wissenschaftliche*] ways of treating the beautiful and art” – the discussion of such general definitions, with the implication that they fall under those theories discredited by a *Genieästhetik* and the shift to autonomous *Poesie* or literature⁷. Hotho’s rearrangement belies the importance Hegel attaches to the definitions he wants now to discuss, ideas that he suggests supersede the old Wolffian ones in circulation hitherto. Although they are in turn contextualized and mediated, we must not underestimate their salience to the ultimate aim: an adequate conceptualizing of the normative Ideal of art.

⁵ Kehler’s transcript (1826) formulates a similar thought. Cf. Hegel 2004a: 6 (K ms. 9: 6): “Hier gehörte lemmatisch anzuführen...”, that is, from the universal Idea. Cf. Hegel 2018: 525, which makes Griesheim’s transcript the textual basis, alongside variants (including Kehler). The 1827 *Encyclopedia* first argued for the status of art as absolute spirit.

⁶ Aloys Hirt (1759-1832), professor of archaeology at the University of Berlin. Goethe knew him in Rome, enjoying his help as guide and advisor. Hegel cites his studies of ancient architecture several times. Hirt was instrumental in the founding of the Altes Museum in 1828, and his gilt inscription above Schinkel’s portico may be read still today (this proved controversial because it embodied his own pedagogic ideals rather than the more aesthetic principles endorsed by Waagen and Rumohr, and because Hirt had it installed while his rivals were away over the summer). One word in the inscription proved especially influential however: “museum”. See Crimp 1993 for amusing details. Johann Heinrich Meyer (1760-1832), critic, art historian, and a close associate of Goethe’s in Italy and Weimar.

⁷ Schönwälder 1995: 160-1 analyzes the cultural/intellectual context in detail. Relying here on Hotho’s edition he suggests that Hegel’s positive mention of Hirt nonetheless is overtaken by the proto-Romantic assault on all theoretical authority over art. Heimann points us instead to the following dialectical sequence: i) “empirical” theories undermined by Romanticism, ii) metaphysical theories considered over abstract, iii) the two sides unified in a concept of beauty-in-being, iv) critique of concepts of Hirt and Meyer/Goethe, and v) Hirt’s survival after the critique.

Hegel starts out by citing his Berlin colleague, Aloys Hirt, specifically for his identification of “the beautiful in art” (*das Kunstschöne*) with “the characteristic” (*die Charakteristik*) (Hegel 2017: 12-3, H: 6-7)⁸. Hegel even supplies the reference: *Horen* 97, 7. Heft (1797). In his edition of the *Aesthetics*, Hotho repeats the passage. It marks incidentally almost the first appearance there of the important term “individuality”, pivotal to Hegel’s conception of the classical Ideal (Hegel 1969a: 34 = Hegel 1975: 17)⁹. Both concepts enjoy the uncertain “advantage” of indeterminacy as between singular instance and universal type, as Alessandro Costazza (1997: 1-2; see note 3 for a helpful and comprehensive bibliography) observes in his nuanced essay, accounting perhaps for their receiving less attention than other aesthetic categories). Even though they are not his own words, Hegel seems here to endorse Hirt’s usage: “By ‘characteristic’ [*Charakteristik*] I understand the distinct individuality through which forms, movement and gesture, features and expression – local colour, light and shade, chiaroscuro and posture – are distinguished, as the object may require” (Hirt 1797: 37).

Hirt continues: “Only by observing this individuality can the work of art become a true type, a genuine reproduction of nature. Only in this way does artistic work become interesting, only in this regard can we admire the artist’s talent” (Hirt 1797: 34-5 = Robertson: 267-8)¹⁰.

Hegel calls it a “fruitful” definition, presumably on the grounds that it promises to engage constructively with empirical reality (drawing distinctions, passing judgements, etc.). He declares it “interesting” and goes on to praise Hirt’s acuity and good judgement as critic (Hegel 2017: 12, H: 6: “Das ist interessant, weil Hirt gesehen und Scharfsinn und Urteil hat”; cf. Hegel 1969a: 33 = Hegel 1975: 17: “Hirt, one of the greatest genuine con-

⁸ Cf. Hegel 2017: 24, H: 14: “So daß wir den Ausdruck [of content in form] als bedeutend und charakteristischen sehen”. In Hotho’s edition Hegel speaks of “der Begriff des Charakteristischen” (Hegel 1969a: 33 = Hegel 1975: 17), of “das Charakteristische” and “das Kunstgesetz des Charakteristischen” (Hegel 1969a: 34 = Hegel 1975: 17-8). This only obscures the crucial difference between Hirt and Schlegel, who does employ “das Charakteristische”. See Salvo 2015: esp. chapter 2, Part II, pp. 103 ff.

⁹ The very first appearance of “individuality” (Hegel 1969a: 23 = Hegel 1975: 9) proves anomalous, aligning “individualities” with contingent happenstance – the inverse of Hegel’s usual practice. The word features over three hundred times in Hotho’s edition; even more if one counts variants such as “individuelle”.

¹⁰ Robertson’s translation illuminates the particular as well as general context of Hirt’s provocation. The essay – never translated into English – is conveniently reproduced in Kang, Schönwälder 2008: 15-33, along with several other contributions to the debate.

noisseurs of our time..."). Having echoed Hirt's definition, Hegel adds that the "essence" of the beautiful supplies the "aim" of art (by which he means perhaps that the artist should form his material aesthetically, individually; compare Hegel 2004-05: 63, L: 12). The characteristic encompasses a content, which might be an occurrence in history or some "individual characteristic," and which is then to be "presented" as such – that is, formulated by art (Hegel 2017: 12, H: 6): "Enthalten ist im Charakteristischen ein Inhalt, [in] dem [eine] geschichtliche Begebenheit oder individuelle Charakteristik enthalten kann und wie eine solche darzustellen ist" (cf. Hegel: 2004-05: 63, L: 12: "Darin ist enthalten ein Inhalt als solcher *individueller* Charakter selbst 2) wie solcher Inhalt dargestellt ist, und darauf geht die bezeichnende Bestimmung"). As the extra citation from Hirt shows, what counts as "characteristic" involves both content and (artistic) form, the latter being what Hotho's edition calls "the mode and manner" (*die Art und Weise*) of its presentation (Hegel 1969a: 34, H: 17-8). Later in the Introduction Hegel says that artistic form must correspond to and express its content (truth), "so that we see the expression as significant and characteristic" (Hegel 2017: 24, H: 14: "Die Form muß nun dem Inhalt entsprechen und ihn ausdrücken, so daß wir den Ausdruck als bedeutenden and charakteristischen sehen". Cf. L: 30: "Wie die Gestalten dem Inhalte angemessen gemacht wird, darin scheint die Vortrefflichkeit der Kunst zu bestehen"). The artist reveals the universal beauty in the particulars of nature and human affairs, as we might put it, but in discriminating what is characteristic or individual, the artist or critic appeals to no rule or abstract explanation. The following section then offers an example from drama, to make the point that the isolated particulars of human actions acquire coherence from their connection to the whole, the theme of the action we might say; nothing remains insignificant with respect to the content (*Inhalt*). The unity of the particulars emerges in the action represented in dramatic form. Art, we might say, discerns the characteristically significant.

Hegel now turns to defend Hirt against the strictures found in Meyer's 1824 *History* (however, Hegel gave Meyer a positive mention in the 1826 series: Hegel 2004a: 181, K: 341). Meyer supposes the author's views wholly superseded (Heimann: "spürlos vorübergegangen") – and a good thing too, since they readily "lead to" caricature, having nothing to do with beauty. Hotho's edition in fact incorporates and elaborates on much of this (see Hegel 1969a: 34-6 = Hegel 1975: 18-9), including Hegel's suggestion that while Meyer focuses on ancient art, implicitly he deals with the beautiful without restriction. Meyer is said by Hegel to adopt Goe-

the's idea that the highest principle of ancient art was the *significant*, but the supreme result of a successful *treatment* (*Behandlung*) was the beautiful¹¹. Hegel counters that the duality inherent to the artwork as between inner meaning on the one hand, and external manner, appearance or semblance (*Schein*) on the other, functions in exactly the same manner as Hirt's "characteristic". For both, the inner can become characterized only in and as the outer, just as the soul can express itself in and through bodily features. The beautiful *is* the significant, hence is the same as the characteristic: "Das Schöne ist Bedeutendes, ist dasselbe als Charakteristisches" (Hegel 2017: 13, H: 7). Later in the 1828 Introduction Hegel will turn specifically to the human and its "liveliness" (*Lebendigkeit*), considered as union of subjective and objective, free and material. Whereas animals remain basically satisfied with their lot, humanity is – in Hegel's striking epithet – "an amphibian", inhabiting both spiritual and natural realms (Hegel 2017: 19, H: 11: "Ein Amphibium is der Mensch, einer Zweiheit gehört er an und ist nicht fähig, in einem oder anderem sich zu befriedigen." Pippin 2013 makes a good deal of this duality in art). We might take the work of art similarly: it inhabits two realms, the ideal and the sensuous.

2.

But why should Hegel seek to shine a spotlight on "the characteristic" in the first place? After all it had constituted a pretty minor category in Hegel's aesthetic approach hitherto, featured more in relation to modern (sc., "romantic") painting (e.g., portraiture) and literature. Hotho's 1823 transcript rarely mentions "characteristic", and when it does so the word has the sense of "typical" trait or peculiarity, etc. (see Hegel 1998: 43, 203, 220, 256)¹². In 1826 it again plays just a marginal role,

¹¹ Heimann misquotes Goethe (Hegel 2017: 13, H: 7), or perhaps Meyer: "Der höchste Grundsatz der Alten in [der] Kunst war, daß das Bedeutende das höchste Resultat einer glücklichen Behandlung des Schönen". Cf. Goethe 1831: 67: "Der höchste Grundsatz der Alten war das Bedeutende, das höchste Resultat aber einer glücklichen Behandlung des Schönen". Hotho's edition corrects the error. L: 13 has "der höchste Grundsatz der Alten über Kunst, wäre das Bedeutende, das höchste Resultat einer glücklichen Behandlung des Schönen".

¹² "Character" occurs more frequently in 1823, though not yet as an independent category. "Character" features also under "Natural Soul" in Hegel's Anthropology: Hegel 1986: 73 (§ 395 *Zusatz*) = Hegel 2007: 51-2. There it mediates between natural predisposition and (more or less individually) cultivated temperament, and it com-

even as “character” now becomes a category in its own right, standing second only to “action” (as with Aristotle’s *Poetics*). Kehler 1826 does report on physiognomic “characteristics” in portraiture, and also on how “ideally” the “forms of the face [may] correspond to the character they express”; Hegel instances a Raphael Madonna – probably the famous *Sistine Madonna* in Dresden. Only in Ascheberg (1820-21) had “characteristic” come to the fore, yet under “Painting”, which has a whole section on *Das Charakteristische überhaupt* (see Stemmrich 1994: 151). There Hegel notes in passing that “characteristic” has been made to distinguish modern from ancient – a clear allusion to Friedrich Schlegel – commenting that “it is also correct”. “Drawing” becomes influential (Hegel mentions Dürer), but as a feature to be completed by the Renaissance painter, who uses colour to fill out design. Hegel calls the ancient Ideal essentially characterless: Zeus himself is no character, even though in a broad sense one might allow that he appears characteristic so far as he remains true to his “individuality”¹³. Hegel locates the passage from ancient to modern in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement*, which he says combines the “ideal individuality” of the ancients with a modern emphasis on the “Maß der Menschen,” a human measure. Painters of the Italian Renaissance lie midway between ancient norm and the modern world of Netherlandish and German artists (see Hegel 2015: vol. 28/1, 211, A: 207). In short, in 1820-21 Hegel aligns himself with Schlegel’s essentially historical division of ancient and modern.

This restricted sense of “characteristic” recurs in 1828-29 too, for instance, with reference to Dutch painting, “in which the characteristic is extraordinarily developed” and daily life is suffused with light, joyfulness and ideality: “Es ist der Sonntag des Lebens, der dort herrscht”, enabling Ideality to show through (Hegel 2017: 174, H: 114; Cf. Hegel 1969c: 129-30 = Hegel 1975: 886-7, adopting several phrases from 1828). Where the “plastic” is exemplified in sculpture, “the characteristic, depth” (*Tiefe*) finds its place in painting, the “melodic” in music (Hegel 2017: 182, H: 122; presumably emotional or subjective “depth” is meant here). Treating “characteristic” as a major aesthetic category peculiarly suited to

bines formal energy with substantive content (willed norms). The colloquial senses of “character” or “characteristic” (as a thing’s nature, or typical of it) occur throughout.
¹³ Cf. Hegel 2015: 28/1, 169; A: 206: “Es hat also der Charakteristische nicht nötig, die im Idealen aufgenommene Individualität zu seyn”; “Wenn man Charakter nennt, seine Individualität treu bleiben, so kann man wohl sagen, daß Zeus Charakter hat”. Modern art allows character its full variety and subjectivity, Hegel maintains, including ugly physiognomies or even images of the devil.

contemporary debates seems quite new to this last series of lectures, however. The pressing question is why Hegel's Introduction makes it so central.

Let me step back to consider contemporary employment of the category, especially with regard to Weimar (neo-)classicism and its focus on "beauty" or the "Ideal" (notice that all classicism is in a sense neo-classicism, a retrospective stance).

3.

Hegel draws on Hirt's notion of "das Kunstschöne" in developing his own ideas (he had hitherto cited Hirt when discussing architectural history, especially in ancient Egypt). What were the circumstances under which Hirt's essays appeared, not just the piece on "das Kunstschöne" but also a yet more controversial critique of the Laocoon group? And how might that bear on Hegel's citation over thirty years later? Hirt had come to know Goethe in Rome, proving himself a useful cicerone to its artistic attractions. He later paid a visit Goethe and Schiller in Weimar, thereafter sending Goethe the two essays. Without Hirt's permission Goethe handed them over to Schiller, who in turn saw to their (anonymous) publication in *Die Horen* – not out of admiration, it seems, but because he wished to offer Goethe's essay *On Laocoon* in rejoinder!¹⁴ More to the point though, publication of Hirt's piece played a part in Weimar classicism's tacit quarrel with Friedrich Schlegel, whose notions of the "interesting" and the "characteristic" served above all to distinguish *modern* from *ancient* art and literature. The "modern" constituted a wholesale shift of cultural perspective, both normative and historical in significance. In addition, Schlegel's turn towards the modern reflected a crisis in the status of beauty, which was in danger of being consigned to the past, quite left behind by the "no longer fine" arts, or even by a new conception of Art (in the singular, expressive, original and creative in nature).

Schlegel's *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (1797) portrays that shift even while it was happening to his own thinking¹⁵. The main text argues

¹⁴ According to Robertson 2017: 267 (and Salvo 2015: below). Hegel doesn't comment on this last, but he does mention some of the controversy about Laocoon's physiognomy: is the mouth grimacing in pain or exhibiting stoic self-control?

¹⁵ Composed in 1795, the book's publication was delayed, and Schiller's similar *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795-96) stole much of its thunder. The Preface, penned after the main text, makes reference to Schiller's essay.

for the normative primacy of antiquity, with its organicist or “natural” *Bildung*, over modernity’s “artificial formation” (*künstliche Bildung*), steered by concepts and tending towards sterility, even though a better future might be promised (on a Shakespearean model). Schlegel laments the “peculiarity” of modern literature, which permits no lasting progress, only confusion and skepticism. Paradoxically: “*Lack of character* seems to be the only characteristic of modern poetry” (sc., literature; Schlegel 2001: 20). Modern art displays “the total predominance of the characteristic, individual, and the interesting...” (Schlegel 2001: 24; cf. 30-1)¹⁶. It strives for “effect,” for a merely “interesting individuality,” although it may also hint (he allows) at a more “original” foundation and an integrated wholeness to come. “The wide compass of the characteristic evident throughout the aesthetic development [*Bildung*] of the moderns reveals itself also in the other arts” (Schlegel 2001: 31) – in painting, music, and the dramatic arts. While Schlegel’s tone remains critical of modernity, he allows that “even characteristic poetry can and should represent the general within the particular[...] yet generality is [here] not aesthetic but didactic” (Schlegel 2001: 32) – that is, “philosophical” (and Schlegel mentions tragedy, or the utmost disharmony).

Many have remarked on the equivocal tone in Schlegel’s polemic, at once critical of the characteristic while sympathetic to its revolutionary promise. Composed later, the *Preface* displays a more generous attitude towards the modern. Its distinction from the ancient is now rendered historical and relative: beauty as a *past* cultural regime, the interesting as *modern*. The characteristic – “that is, the presentation of the individual” – comes into its own. But this is not the world of the ancient Greek ideal, whose intrinsic limits now emerge. “Beauty is not the ideal of modern poetry; it is essentially distinct from the interesting” (Schlegel 2001: 99), which begins where natural *Bildung* (formation, culture) ends. Conversely, the *study* of Greek poetry is wholly removed from classicizing practice: modernity enacts an “anti-neoclassicist classicism,” in the words of Schlegel’s translator (Schlegel 2001: 11), putting it in the vicinity of Schiller’s “sentimental” poetry and Winckelmann’s “imitation”

¹⁶ For an original – indeed, *interesting* – perspective on “the interesting”, see Ngai 2012. Schlegel responds to the serial, homogenizing of culture of his own time, where the “interesting” stands out in and from the everyday: interesting is what I find interesting – don’t you? The “characteristic” and the “individual” follow a similar (non-)logic, or rather, “pragmatics”: what is claimed, in a singular situation, for a singular audience, without governing rules, yet with universal appeal (wouldn’t you agree?).

of the ancient Greeks (where *they* had imitated nature). The difference however is that Schiller and Goethe – along with Goethe's friend Meyer – sought to remain true to beauty and the Ideal, whereas Schlegel's "characteristic" claimed to *replace* the latter. Romantic *Poesie* – literature – is premised on historical knowledge.

By contrast Hirt applies "characteristic" (*Charakteristik*) to artistic beauty wherever it is to be found, so eliding classical and modern (admittedly his main interest lay in providing a fairer account of Greek and Roman art). His second essay, on the Laocoon group (Hirt 1797b), seeks to bring out the work's horrific realism; it is the complete opposite of Winckelmann's "edle Einfalt und stille Grösse"¹⁷ Goethe and Herder immediately took issue with Hirt's descriptions and judgements alike. In his fictive dialogue *The Collector and his Circle* (1799), Goethe has a guest (that is to say, Hirt) declare: "Only what is undeniably characteristic deserves to be called beautiful. Without character there is no beauty". Goethe's satirical intent is clear. The collector (stand-in for Goethe himself) replies: "Character is to beauty what the skeleton is to the living human being" (Goethe 1986: 138; as Robertson 2017: 139) observes, the guest repeats Hirt's own words about Laocoon's "choking agony, etc.", which had so scandalized Goethe and others). We've seen how Hegel exploits Goethe's aversion to indicate an alternative path, towards the colourful "filling in" by Italian Renaissance painters of an abstract design. But in the last lecture series Hegel goes further, to make "the characteristic" central to all art and all historical artforms. Why this change of perspective, and why revert to a thirty-year-old essay to make his argument?

The short answer is that in 1827 Hirt published a review of the first volume of Rumohr's *Italienische Forschungen* in the Hegelian house publication *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftlichen Kritik* (then in the 1831 issue Hirt published a review of Rumohr's third volume). There Hirt lays into Rumohr for his inadequate philosophical grasp of the "Ideal" promoted by Weimar classicism (Winckelmann, Herder, Goethe, Mengs, Schiller), as will Hegel in his own attack the following year. Hirt's polemic against Rumohr's polemic is admittedly tiresome. But he does reply to Meyer's

¹⁷ The phrase is usually rendered in English "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur", see Winckelmann 1987: 32-3. For helpful background on Hirt and Hegel, see Schönwälder 1995: 143-62. Another take is found in Salvo 2015: 67-8, 98, and especially 103-11. Salvo 2015: 111 highlights the contrast between Hirt's "die Charakteristik" and Schlegel's "das Charakteristische", and between Hirt's interest in reframing ancient sculpture and Schiller's focus on present-day aesthetic issues.

criticisms (in his 1824 history), in effect to rejoin that Hirt's "characteristic" cannot be said to have "vanished without trace" when it tacitly invokes the very same "principle" Meyer had borrowed from Goethe (though Hirt's *das Charakteristische* substitutes for *das Bedeutende*)¹⁸. Against Rumohr and in defence of Winkelmann Hirt contends that true beauty is *das Kunstschöne*. Hegel takes up the same argument, but goes into more detail than Hirt when confronting Rumohr, in part because Rumohr's parody of Hegel in the very title of his *Geist der Kochen* (1823) must have touched a nerve, just as Section I of *Italienische Forschungen* is called "Haushalt" (housekeeping), as if to put discussion on the level of "natural" taste. Rumohr in some ways anticipates John Dewey's much later emphasis on nature-as-process, on intensive engagement with nature, with art and the artist seen as on the same continuum. Beauty is in *life*, not art (or art no more than secondarily).

Hegel replies on several counts to what he dubs Rumohr's "polemic" (Hotho absorbs the remarks into his edition, but distributed through the text). Rumohr is said to confuse "Idea" with "indeterminate representation [*Vorstellung*], and with the abstract Ideal without individuality [*individualitätslosen*] of familiar theories and schools" (Hegel 1969a: 145 = Hegel 1975: 106-7), which he contrasts with determinate natural forms.¹⁹ Such artists merely project their own abstractions into their works, Rumohr claims (he had sharply rebuked Winckelmann for his "Mannerism" as well as other allegorical artifice involving "type" or "style"); he implies that such attempts are simply unnatural. Hegel replies that there may indeed be "lifeless" art of this sort – he mentions early Italian or German art (Hegel 2017: 45, H: 25) – but that is not what "we" mean by "Idea" or "Ideal", which is instead concrete and realized. The two possibilities are separate. "The interest of theory lies rather in resolving these principles and misunderstandings. One can't give principles [*Grundsätze*] for praxis" (Hegel 2017, 45, H: 25. Cf. Hegel 1969: 213 = Hegel 1975: 161; unlike Heimann, Hotho doesn't mention Raphael here as someone whose achievements Winckelmann "recognized". Rumohr seems to have had in mind the lifeless results of applying abstract ideas; principles are of no help to mediocre talents). In other words, theory attempts to discern false

¹⁸ See Hirt 1827: 1534. Hirt even hints that Goethe (1818) and Meyer (1824) took the *Grundsatz* from him. Rumohr in turn had suggested that Hirt's use of "das Kunstschöne" was anticipated by one "Dr. Schorn". See Rumohr 1827: 101.

¹⁹ Rumohr alleges that "Ideal" is in fact newfangled, Mannerist, though now commonplace. He derives the word not from the Greek but from modern Italian "idea" – "Einfall" arbitrary representation. See Rumohr 1827: 41-2.

or abstract striving from the authentic achievements found in Raphael and his successors.

Whereas Rumohr attacks the artifice that derives beauty from the concept of beauty (he accuses Winkelmann of this), Hegel counters that ideality is *made*, from representations (in the case of poetry) – “ein Schein vom Geiste” – or from images (in the case of painting, no matter its content). He instances Dutch painters, who depict everyday objects and situations, while yet “die Hervorbringung ist etwas Ideals” (Hegel 2017: 45, H: 25. Cf. Hegel 1969a: 214-5 = Hegel 1975: 162-3). In their painterly treatment they freeze the flow of natural time, render it lasting and memorable (Hegel 2017: 46, H: 25. Cf. Hegel 1969a: 215-6 = Hegel 1975: 163-4). Besides such “formal ideality” – it’s not that objects are natural but that they are *made* to seem so – there is an incipient universality, beyond the mere “singularities” (*Einzelheiten*) found in nature which art has then to present; the inner ideality merges with the achieved outer form (Hegel 2017: 46-7, H: 26. Cf. Hegel 1969a: 216-8 = Hegel 1975: 164-6). Rumohr finds much art going astray when it seeks the Ideal, that is, seeks to fashion it from its own imagination: he advises artists to abandon the “titanic struggle” with nature, which consists in merely “adorning” or “transfiguring” its creations (Hegel 2017: 49, H: 28. Cf. Hegel 1969a: 225-6 = Hegel 1975: 171). He recommends reliance instead on non-arbitrary forms somehow rooted in nature, as Winckelmann himself had emphasized with the ancients, so attaining a “third beauty,” that of “symbolic form”, of “symbolic representation”. (On its face this seems puzzling. But the confusion clears up if we understand Hegel to be alluding to the third stage of sensuous discrimination promoted by Rumohr. His three-stage account of materialist art-making appears in Hotho’s edition [Hegel 1969a: 146 = Hegel 1975: 107], though not in Heimann. It runs [1] sensuous gratification, [2] a feeling for spatial form, and [3] a “spiritual” delight in natural symbolism)²⁰. Hegel counters – in Hotho’s edition – that we cannot reduce beauty to the arousal of mere delight or pleasure (which in fairness is hardly Rumohr’s position). In Heimann’s account Hegel argues that a “symbolic” resonance with our representations and feelings would bespeak instead an “Ideal, semblance, [or] sign of the inner; and that is the Ideal” (Hegel

²⁰ Rumohr’s *Italienische Forschungen* files the series under “Relation of art to beauty”: Rumohr 2012: 138-45. Podro 1982: 27-30 maintains that Rumohr has a subtler view of artistic taste than Hegel allows him. He cites a passage in Rumohr 1827: 18-9 purportedly showing how art engages with social life.

2017: 50, H: 28. Cf. Hegel 1969a: 216-8 = Hegel 1975: 172-3). Such form is one not found ready-made in nature, but is created freely and with imagination – so we read in Heimann.

Hegel quotes Rumohr as complaining that “ordinary nature” – emotions, utility, and so on – has typically been disparaged in the aesthetic literature (it’s unclear whether he meant Kant or Hegel). But Hegel now turns the tables by appealing once again to Dutch genre painting, and this resort amounts to his subtlest, most convincing attempt to *integrate* the Ideal with the external (or nature), whether in depicted reality or as the artwork signifying that reality. His sharp angle on things amounts to a neat riposte – the Ideal *lives in* the ordinary, so to speak, as caviar for the general. Genre pictures perform or enact a popular taking-pleasure-in-life, where ordinary objects are spiritualized both by their *display* and by our *appreciation* of it: they regard us regarding them, you might say (in foregrounding Dutch consumerism, “liveliness” and love of “sheen” – *Schein* – Hegel appears to anticipate more recent accounts by Alpers or Schama)²¹. But the dialectical negotiation is still more complex, because it seeks to reveal a certain *otium* – play, leisure – *in* the art. Hegel surprises with his choice of what to praise: Murillo’s modest pictures of beggar boys, which he had recently seen in Munich. In one of them the mother picks lice out of a boy’s hair, while in the other the ragged (*zerlumpt*) boys consume grapes or melon slices. Hegel comments (in Hotho’s edition):

We see that they have no wider interests and aims, yet not at all because of stupidity; rather they squat on the ground content and serene, almost like the Olympian gods. They do nothing, they say nothing; but they are humans [*Menschen*] all of a piece, without surliness or discontent; and since they possess this foundation of all excellence, we have an idea that anything might become of these youths. (Hegel 1969a: 224 = Hegel 1975: 170)²²

Practically the inverse of Hippel’s *Humor*, these images display ordinary figures and situations, yet quite *unencumbered* and *carefree* (instead of awkward or cramped, as with Hippel’s characters): “Almost like the Olympian gods”! Jacques Rancière (2013: 21-37) advances a complex

²¹ Alpers 1983: 73 and note expressly aligns Hegel with Schapiro 1978: both emphasize the “crafting” of nature – including painterly representations – which Alpers calls “praxis”. Cf. Schama 1987: e.g. 297 ff., 391-5 on popular love of commodities including paintings.

²² Most of these words are missing in Heimann, though he does write “so daß man glaubt, aus solchen Jungen wird alles werden können” (Hegel 2017: 49, H: 28).

interpretation of Hegel's choice of examples, in an attempt to do justice to their *overdetermination* (that is, "for us"). It is one of Rancière's "Auerbachian" scenes (Cf. Auerbach 1959 and 1953). Very briefly, he finds Hegel taking note of Dutch genre art as symptomatic of national hard-working virtues, etc. At the same time, he adds, it has now become *art displayed in museums*, a historical legacy of factors like the French Revolution, the termination of the hierarchies of schools and genres, and the rise of the free market (including the market for Dutch genre scenes). Hegel picks up on the wonderful correspondence – or rather, the ineffable *gap* – between a free *Art* (in the singular) and a free *people* (the civic-minded Dutch). Murillo too bore a fraught relation to imperial power (Spain/Netherlands), but we catch his beggar boys in a precarious moment of freedom, in pictures we may now see to be about the very *conditions* of painting. But of course (Rancière comments, spoiling our fun) this moment or "scene" could not last.

Rancière understands how things stand (and fall) both with the "beautiful individuality" of the classical Ideal and with Romanticism. "Hegel transforms Romantic poetics into a *theory* of classicism", he writes (my emphasis); that is, he translates the Romantics' future-oriented programme into interpretation of the past²³. The classical Ideal comes to resemble Keats's "cold pastoral" – though we should remember that "pastoral" itself betrays a "sentimental" wish for utopia (See Empson 1966: 25: "The pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple"). It regards the artwork as presenting the observer's turning of Keats' well-wrought urn: truth is beauty, is truth, is beauty....

4.

Where then might Hegel position himself in the fraught, indeed overdetermined conversation between Weimar classicism, Schlegelian Romanticism, and Hirt's "characteristic"? On the one hand he stands squarely with

²³ Rancière 2011: 81, chapter 4: "From the Poetry of the Future to the Poetry of the Past". What Schelling and the Schlegel's promoted as the principle of "infinite poeiticity" Hegel interprets as a mark of historical closure. Epic was the poem of an "originally poetic state of the world", and the Romantics (following Goethe) see the novel as its modern equivalent. But once deprived of that vaunted unity and accord, the world can display only a comic aspect (Rancière 2011: 84). In effect, painting tends towards depicting the conditions of painting, now considered "autonomous" art (or Art).

Winckelmann: the ancient Greeks were supreme, and the classical Ideal lays down the marker for authentic art. On the other hand, he speaks for the Ideal in general, for beauty ancient *and* modern, bridling at Schlegel's exclusive attention to modernity – to the interesting, the characteristic, the modern novel as the new aesthetic norm, and above all, to irony as at once content, critical attitude, and lifestyle (the critic as artist). Hegel wishes to *defend* the Ideal, and he expends much energy in attacking Rumohr's materialist account of taste and of art history. He resists any restriction of the Ideal to classical antiquity alone, even though the Greeks supplied the universal model for art. Nor does he follow common opinion on, say, the Apollo Belvedere, pointedly citing an English traveller's description of the piece as "a theatrical coxcomb" (Hegel 1969b: 431 = Hegel 1975: 766; the writer was none another than William Hazlitt in 1826, Hegel's reading was always impressively broad). Conversely – though I can hardly make the case here – his theoretical stance supposes (1) a post-Romantic perspective, and culturally (2) the inauguration of a modern institution of Art (rather than plural "fine arts"), in museum, concert hall, and as Literature (now framed as imaginative fiction).

There remains one puzzle needing resolution. If the "characteristic" proves key to Hegel's overall perspective on art, why does the category feature so little outside the 1828 Introduction, barely mentioned or even used elsewhere?²⁴ One partial explanation might be that its use tends to be tacit rather than explicit; rendering this non-concept (as we may call it) clear and distinct or treating it as a general rule would simply distort how it works. Still we might seek indirect hints in the text (which is only incidentally a *text*, filtered through student transcripts and some quirky editing). Inasmuch as it concerns the "significance" of *individuality* – as discerned by the artist, performed by the artwork, or interpreted by "us" – why doesn't Hegel expand on his comments concerning the "individual characteristic" then its individual "presentation" (Goethe's "happy treatment") in and as the artwork? After all, *Individualität* plays an indispensable role in the *Aesthetics*, appearing hundreds of times not just in Hotho's edition but in various student transcriptions as well. Like "the

²⁴ "Charakteristik" enters incidentally at Hegel 2017: 166, H: 108, to describe how with an historical arrangement of paintings (such as that proposed for the museum under construction) the observer would be better prepared to gauge development, just as "characteristics" in the individual emerge only later in fulfilled beauty. *Das Charakteristische* is found to be "extraordinarily advanced" in Dutch painting (Hegel 2017: 174, H: 114); it is to painting as "plastic" is to sculpture and "melody" is to music (Hegel 2017: 183, H: 122).

characteristic", "individuality" has a foot both in singular existence and in its universal significance, both in everyday life and in imputation or apprehension "for us", perhaps in distant retrospect²⁵. A conceptual link between the two categories would open up the text in surprising ways, conferring a certain "plasticity" on our interpretation of Hegel. But no such key seems on offer in the lecture material we have.

It is true that Hegel introduces the artwork as the manifesting of a dialectical relation of meaning (*Bedeutung*) and shape (*Gestalt*, *Gestaltung*), content and form(ing) or active configuration, a dialectic that extends also to reception (by spectators, audience or readers). In that perspective we might understand his theory of art and of artforms as an incipient semiotics and pragmatics of art. The symbolic worldview/artform would accordingly be understood as coming gradually to reflect first on its own semiotic and communicational structure, then further on the ultimate failure of sensuous shape to mean at all, when it is transformed into an insubstantial parade of tropes and figures of speech. Or again, consider the classical worldview/artform, paradoxically framed (in Hegel's words) as "the self-signifying and therewith the self-explanatory" (*das sich selbst Bedeutende und damit sich selbst Deutende*: Hegel 1969b: 13 = Hegel 1975: 427)²⁶. Such "tautological" meaning (as Coleridge/Schelling might put it) and self-evident status soon reveal cracks in the beautiful façade, blemishes that in turn may be self-reflexively signalled in artistic terms so as to yield the "romantic" worldview/artform. Late-romantic art comes then to reflect on its *own* semiotic structure, in parody, irony, or *Humor*. Art considered as individuality or characteristic would in such a perspective tend to shake up all fixed determinacy, con-

²⁵ Since the category emerged fully only in the late eighteenth century, having the classical Ideal exemplify individuality remains highly ironic – something more evident in the chapter on *Kunstreligion* of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (cf. Hegel 1989: 512-5 = Hegel 1977: 410-53) than in the *Aesthetics*. See above, § 3, for the pragmatics of actively *finding* a phenomenon interesting, individual, or characteristic. (I attempt a comprehensive treatment of the category in a manuscript provisionally called *Hegel's Individuality*).

²⁶ Hilmer 1997: 131-3, 155-70 comments insightfully on the semiotic status of Hegel's theory of the artform, especially that found in the classical Ideal, which as she points out falls short of tautology inasmuch as symbolism predetermines it. Relying on a syllogistic framing of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, Hilmer 1997: 238-45 files the classical under the syllogism of reflection: the human form mediates universal (god) and singular (animal body). We have circularity, yet not a closed circle but one in which each moment is also the whole; a dynamic of overgrasping or inclusion (*Übergreifung*), where each individual *is* and is *not* the whole.

tinually "overgrasping" first appearances. Rancière's exemplary "scene" of Hegelian aesthetics in 1828 takes matters further still, identifying some of the complex mediations at work either behind the philosopher's back or in historical retrospect. In sum, Hegel's "characteristic" remains – "for us" – a work-in-progress. It points both to an element of existence (the past, classical sculpture, external traits or acts, the world of epic) and also to its semiotic and interpretive mediation, now and in future. The primary mediation is to understand it as Art rather than the fine arts, and in cultural and political rather than religious context, particularly its institutional staging as the museum or its equivalent (literature, concert hall, and so on).

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