

ART, COGNITIVE VALUE AND HISTORY: EVALUATING ART WITH HEGEL AND WALLACE STEVENS

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Philosophy's repeated attempts to deduce art's cognitive value have produced a plethora of conflicting conclusions. Jerome Stolnitz's paper 'On the Cognitive Triviality of Art'¹ is a prime example of the sceptical position within this debate. In his study, Stolnitz claims to prove the absolute cognitive triviality of art by demonstrating that there is no exclusively *artistic* form of propositional truth. There are two aspects of this argument that I find fundamentally misguided and unhelpful to our ongoing endeavour to gauge the value of art. Firstly, that it attempts to evaluate art using the truth standards of philosophy, and, secondly, that it views art's value and function as fixed. I intend to show how such universalising conclusions are an impediment to our discovering the hidden wealth that art has endowed *particular* cultures with.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate two key points: a) that art *is* capable of providing a form of cognitive value that is distinct from that of philosophy; and b) that the criteria by which art is assessed for cognitive value should be viewed as historically determined.

To evidence these claims I adduce the aesthetic theory of both Hegel and Wallace Stevens. The first section of this paper examines their arguments as to how art *does* provide cognitive value that is *sui generis*. The following section argues that art's

¹ Stolnitz (2004).

ability to fulfil these ideals and its hierarchical relation to both philosophy and religion are historically determined. Here I examine Hegel's historical account of the development of fine art and Wallace Stevens' thesis that poetry has compensated for the waning relevance of religion in the modern world. In the final section I argue that Hegel's and Stevens' conflicting ideals can be reconciled if they are understood as separated by what I call a 'criterial shift.'

I. EMBODIMENT AND ILLUMINATION - TWO AESTHETIC IDEALS

In the *Encyclopaedia* Hegel describes what he calls the "Idea itself" – the divine *logos* that governs the universe. It can also be understood in teleological terms as the telos implicit within all determinate being (e.g. the oak tree in the acorn). Governing all matter internally and externally, the Idea is thus also the determining factor of both the collective and individual being of humans. Indeed, by revealing and understanding this universal rationality, humans allow the Absolute Idea to "return to itself" and are able to become fully self-conscious by rendering explicit the telos implicit in their existence (*EL*, §1782).

As philosophy deals solely with concepts, Hegel asserts that only through *it* can self-consciousness attain complete union with the Absolute Idea (as it is itself conceptual) (*SL*, 824). Nonetheless, art and religion also play pivotal roles in the realization of Absolute Spirit – the former revealing the Idea "in the form of sensuous artistic configuration" (*LFA*, 1:55) and the latter representing it by means of "myths, ideas, imaginations and [...] histories" (*HP*, 1:64). Though the two are similar in nature, Hegel adds that what ultimately differentiates religion from art is that the former combines pictorial thinking with worship (*LFA*, 1:104).

He continues, describing beautiful art as that which resolves the antithesis between man in his "spiritual universality" and man "enmeshed in matter". Importantly, Hegel also states that the "truth lies only in the reconciliation and mediation of [these antitheses]" (*LFA*, 1:54–5). Ideal art is humankind's expression of universality and freedom (the Idea) in determinate sensuous form – that is, Hegel's unification of form and content, and universal and particular. The criterion of beautiful or ideal art, therefore, is that it concretizes the Idea, unifies these antitheses and renders sensible humankind's self-knowledge. For Hegel, art fulfils its highest purpose when working in tandem with religion – the former *embodying* the Idea as it is *represented* by the latter.

This brings us to Stevens' dichotomous view of reality, which consists of, on the one hand, the imaginatively *enlarged*, value laden conception of reality (signified in his poetry by the season of summer), and, on the other, the *contracted* conception of reality – the world as it exists devoid of any imaginative input (signified by the season of winter). The difference between these two realities is exemplified in Stevens' poem 'Pieces' in which a piece of tinsel experienced in February is a valueless, tautological thing in itself ("crystal on crystal"), whereas in August it is saturated with value and, as the repeated use of simile denotes, brimming with connection to the point that the thing in itself almost vanishes. Here the piece of tinsel is described as "like a flame" or "a member of the family, a tie" (*CPP*, 306–7). Since humankind requires a world which can exhibit value without descending into a mere subjective hallucination, clearly it cannot live in either of these "realities". As will be shown below, the inhabitable world is, for Stevens, a synthesis of these two extremes.

In his long poem, 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction', Stevens refers to what he calls the "first idea":

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
Belief in an immaculate beginning (*CPP*, 348)

This notion of the "first idea" can, up to a point, be fruitfully interpreted through a Hegelian framework since it underpins what Stevens sees as the unifying function of art. Nevertheless, one must exercise caution in doing so as Stevens appears to go beyond Hegel in positing the existence of an *a priori* "immaculate beginning" – a pure union of the subjective and objective worlds that exists prior to our fabrication of the contracted world and thus also our perceived separation from reality.² Later in the same canto, Stevens speaks of how poetry "gives a candid kind to everything", and then, in the poem's epigram, he also refers to the "transparency" it generates. Stevens' emphasis on the candour and transparency of ideal poetry highlights his view that art's function is to allow us to *see through* the apparent bifurcation of the subjective imagination and objective reality and thereby rekindle our *implicit* harmony with the objective world (the "first idea"). But, unlike Hegel, the superior means of penetrating

² Cf. Bloom (1977), p.49.

through to this idea is not through the abstract concepts of philosophy but by forging what Stevens refers to as a “supreme fiction”.

The artist should work towards producing fully believable imaginative transfigurations of the objective world. These “supreme fictions” show humankind how it can illuminate the reality of the external world and endow it with value in a way that does not slip into the subjective extremities of summer. Thus, these fictions – “without which we are unable to conceive of [the world]” (NA, 31) – enable humans to live. Critchley succinctly captures Stevens’ view that art “is like the light that illuminates objects in the world [...] add[ing] nothing but itself. Close to the heat of that light, we can be said to live more intensely.”³

So, for both Stevens and Hegel, the ideal goal of art is to reveal the true being of reality by reconciling the dialectical conflict between the infinite “light” of humankind’s free subjectivity and the particular, contingent and independent object; thus, art plays the indispensable role of mediating man with, and thereby liberating man from, the inflexible external world.

Critchley’s gloss rightly emphasizes how art provides cognitive value by directly “illuminating” the truth of reality. As Stevens sees reality proper existing where the expanding light of the imagination meets the contracted, objective world, neither antipode on its own constitutes true reality. Nevertheless, true reality *appears* to be the contracted, objective world of science and rationalism. Supreme fictions allow us to *see through* this erroneous conception to the fact that the world – as the “immaculate” synthesis or union of the subject and object – has all along been more than it appears. This does not mean that these fictions give us a fuller view of the *objective* world because, as soon as the objective world is illuminated by the imagination, it becomes the objective-subjective world – i.e., reality proper. Here it is helpful to think of colour as a metaphor for the values and meaning that make life liveable. Just as colour is not a property of objects or white light, value and meaning do not objectively pre-exist the light of the imagination nor are they completely added by it, but, rather, emerge from the interaction of light and object. This interpretation illustrates how art’s fictions (like light) *illuminate* the meaningfulness of reality that lies *latent* within our conception of the objective world.

³ Critchley (2005), p.55.

Moreover, art provides a community with cognitive value by highlighting the ways in which this synthesis can be effected. This epistemic role of the supreme fiction can be seen in Steven's description of God as the "supreme poetic idea" (*NA*, 51). The idea of God can be viewed as such because it provides a model imaginative framework that can be employed by a community to illuminate, and thus overcome, the meaninglessness of the objective world – facilitating existence in a way that the scientific disciplines are unable to. As the next section illustrates, religion and art are far more similar in function for Stevens than they are for Hegel. Conversely, the respective roles of art and philosophy are most definitely *not* conflated by Stevens:

[P]oetry has to do with reality in that concrete and individual aspect of it which the mind can never tackle altogether on its own terms, with matter that is foreign and alien in a way which abstract systems [...] can never be. (*OP*, 236)

The abstractness of conceptual thinking is not able to produce the "agreement with reality" that constitutes *poetic* truth (*NA*, 54). Accordingly, Stevens sees poetry as "at least the equal of philosophy, may be [even] its superior" (*Ibid.* See also *OP*, 199).

What this opening exposition reveals is that judging, as Stolnitz does,⁴ the cognitive value of art on its ability to provide universal propositional truths is essentially *not* to attempt to look for a form of truth that is *sui generis*. Performing this style of analysis upon the aesthetic realm is, to use the terminology of Lamarque and Olsen, philosophy *through* art where artistic works are "subordinated to the function and purpose of philosophical argument."⁵ Since Stolnitz has made no effort to look for a form of truth that *is* peculiar to art, it is unsurprising that he arrives at the misleading conclusion that "none of [art's] truths are peculiar to art" and that, "so considered, there are no artistic truths".⁶

Both Hegel and Stevens similarly describe aesthetic truth as an ontological status emerging from the unification of the infinite autonomy of subjectivity with the particularity of the external world – a model of aesthetic truth that is not even mentioned by Stolnitz, let alone invalidated. In spite of any similarity, there are also striking differences in their aesthetic theories. For Hegel, the cognitive value of Ideal art lies in its ability to endow us spiritual self-understanding and aid our *development*

⁴ Stolnitz (2004).

⁵ Lamarque and Olsen (1994), p.391.

⁶ Stolnitz (2004), 198.

by sensuously *embodying* the Idea. Conversely, for Stevens, the cognitive value of Ideal art is not determined by an implicit telos but in its ability to *illuminate* the value and meaning of reality by synthesising subjectivity and the external world in a way that “enables us to *live*” (NA, 150; my emphasis). Therefore, whereas for Hegel ideal art is founded upon a theory of *embodiment* and *development*, for Stevens it is founded upon a theory of *illumination* and *living*. We must now examine the way in which art’s ability to *fulfil* these ideal roles is historically determined.

II. IDEALITY IN HISTORY

For Hegel, the Idea, understood in its most primitive form, is abstract and obscure. The ancient Egyptians, for example had a “completely indeterminate” conception of the Divine (LFA, 1:335) – one that thereby defied concretization. As the form of the artwork could not fully embody its content (merely pointing symbolically toward a meaning *beyond itself*), true beauty was beyond the grasp of art in what Hegel labels its *symbolic* stage.

This led to the birth of the *classical* stage. The art of this stage – epitomized by the figurative sculpture of the ancient Greeks – could give full sensuous embodiment to the Idea since the Divine was now understood as pantheon of anthropomorphic gods. Ideality could be *manifested in* (as opposed to *represented through*) art. Now true beauty *was* attainable since the Idea, in this particular stage of its conception, could attain complete harmony with objective reality. But, though art *had* reached the acme of its capabilities, religion had not (LFA, 1:515). The gods’ anthropomorphic qualities may have allowed the Idea to be endowed with individuality, but these also caused the Idea to become dissociable from other finite human characteristics (e.g. corporeality) (LFA, 1:504). It was these inadequacies that led to the collapse of the classical stage and genesis of the *romantic* stage.

With the emergence of Christianity and the notion of the Holy Spirit, the romantic stage overcame these inconsistencies by *internalizing* the Idea (IL, 87). Since the Idea was no longer understood as exterior in any way, art was once again unable to *embody* it. Conversely, religion, by promoting “worship [...] by the inner self”, and religious introspection, *could* unfold this aspect of spirit to the individual. Hegel then goes on to argue that philosophy, by supplanting the picture-thinking of religion with *conceptual* thinking, allowed for a more complete revelation of inward, intellectual spirit – thereby subsuming both religion and art.

As spirit came to be conceived of as absolutely inward, it also became profoundly separated from what was now perceived as the contingent external world. Hegel believed this meant romantic art evolved so that “interest was exclusively centred on contingent aspects of externality, or the equally capricious activities of the soul” (*PFA*, 2:397); thus, the romantic stage dissolved. The artwork itself became divorced from the Idea in its specific religious form. Now without a specified form or content, art became further removed from both philosophy and religion, and could no longer be a provider of the highest cognitive value. Having lost the “truth and life” it used to afford alongside philosophy and religion, art has been “transferred to our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place” (*LFA*, 1:11). As far as its teleological, revelatory role is concerned, art has now come to an end. Consequently, we leave the romantic stage and enter that of the *modern*.

Stevens, neglecting the aspect of worship that Hegel believes differentiates religion and art, sees both spheres sharing the role of creating “supreme fictions”; indeed, both are described as mediators of “a reality not ourselves” (*OP*, 238). As Section One mentioned, Stevens sees the idea of God as the “supreme poetic idea”. Both religion and art achieve ideality when mediating the world of subjectivity with the objective world. But Stevens sees religion as failing to provide a convincing, utilizable imaginative framework in the modern age. Leon Surette, after Eliot, fittingly calls Stevens’ need to overcome the void left by religion “the modern dilemma.”⁷

The paramount relation between [...] modern man and modern art is simply this: that in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, [...] the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. (*NA*, 171)

In the modern age, religion, no longer able to provide “supreme fictions” and transfigure the world for the community, is consequently superseded by art. So, for Stevens art only began to fulfil its highest vocation – imaginatively *illuminating* reality for humankind and thus enabling it to *live* in the world – with the onset of the modern age, when it had to “take the place” of religion (see *CPP*, 137). Although, for Hegel, postclassical art still serves an important purpose, it can only fulfil its highest

⁷ Surette (2008), p.4.

vocation – *embodying* logos and *developing* humankind’s self-knowledge – when the Idea is conceived of in the very particular way that is found in the classical stage. Thus, for both Hegel and Stevens, art’s ability to fulfil its role as a provider of cognitive value is historically determined – for the former it is restricted to the classical stage, and for the latter it is restricted to the modern stage. What is argued below is that their opposing evaluative criteria can be reconciled if we understand them as sitting either side of a criterial shift that occurred in the romantic stage.

III. THE CRITERIAL SHIFT⁸

Although Hegel maintains that religious introspection and conceptual thinking are the most proficient ways by which we can gain knowledge of ourselves (as spirit), he also stresses the fact that “our physical life, and still more the world of our spiritual aims and interests, rests on the demand to carry through into objectivity what at first was there only subjectively and inwardly, and then alone to find itself satisfied in this existence” (*LFA*, 1:96). The human need to particularize the Idea, and thus overcome reality in its inflexibility, was something that Christianity once achieved through the sacrament of the Eucharist but, with the advent of Protestantism, the bread and wine were no longer seen as the *embodiment* or transubstantiation of the Divine (as in Catholicism) but the *representation* or consubstantiation of the Divine. With the apotheosis of subjectivity came the corollary spiritual separation of subjectivity and divinity from objective reality. Furthermore, religion’s quality of representativeness became subordinated to its quality of inwardness. Thus, through religion and philosophy, “the modern subject knows abstractly [...] but not yet concretely.”⁹

Hegel indicates that modern art now has a new role to fulfil, stating that it should be “an inexhaustible self-yielding of imagination” which can “lift the soul high above all *painful entanglement in the restrictions of the real world*” (*LFA*, 1:611; my emphasis). Far from ending, art seems to have instead been allocated the new, non-teleological function of assuaging this “painful entanglement.” Coupling this with the shift in religion’s function, it seems perfectly sound of John Walker to read the *Aesthetics* as implying that, in the postclassical stages, the need for art to unify the self and the external world becomes “more, not less, culturally important” (*LFA*, 1:288).¹⁰

⁸ The first part of this section is indebted to the interpretation of Walker (2007).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.278.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.288.

Indeed, it is important not to confuse the *end* of art with its death. Nonetheless, Hegel's account of art's new mollifying role does not register the profound cognitive value that art *can* endow independent of any teleological function.

Building upon Walker's exegesis, my contention is that, with the collapse of the classical stage, it appears that the ideal function of art should no longer be thought of in terms of *development* and *embodiment* but, rather, in Stevens' terms of *living* and *illumination* which give meaning and validity to an otherwise abstract comprehension of truth and freedom. Here a criterial shift has occurred. Since art's function is now *not* a developmental one, it is invalid to employ the criteria fulfilled by the classical ideal; hence, Hegel is unjustified in evaluating the cognitive value of postclassical art against preromantic criteria.

Therefore, it is after this criterial shift that Stevens' ideal should be situated. It could be postulated that religion can no longer provide supreme fictions due to the aforementioned "turn inwards." In any case, by emphasising the primacy of this need for *illumination*, Stevens' work stands as an example of the shift away from what Hegel saw as its role of *developing* and *embodying* the Idea. As Section Two demonstrated, Stevens clearly identifies how the cognitive value of art has increased as religion's role as a mediator has diminished.

Hegel claims in his introduction to the *Aesthetics* that "truth lies only in the reconciliation and mediation of both" the subjective and objective world (*LFA*, 1:54–5). I would agree this encapsulates a core role that art should fulfil, but, as Hegel and Stevens make evident, the primary goal this reconciliation and mediation is directed towards defines the way in which the resultant artworks should be judged. If it is primarily directed toward *development*, as it is for Hegel, then art's ideality should be judged against the classical criterion of *embodiment*. If, on the other hand, the primary goal is that of creating a world in which humankind can *live*, as it is for Stevens, then art's ideality should be judged against the postromantic criterion of *illumination*. Donougho, referring to Hegel in a way that accentuates the implications of my argument, asserts that, "while art may have an essential function, [...] it has no substantive essence, telos or inner nature which it 'has' to express." Consequently, beyond the essential function of mediation and self-revelation, there is no fixed supra-historical term 'art' in Hegel's or Stevens' aesthetics.¹¹ Indeed, Stevens does not think

¹¹ Donougho (2007), p.191.

that art has created the *absolute* “supreme fiction” – such a thing is not possible. Rather, he thinks art has to continually adapt to meet the requirements of humankind:

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.

It has to face the men of the time and to meet

The women of the time. [...]

And it has to find what will suffice. It has

To construct a new stage. [...] (CPP, 219)

A petrified religion such as modern Christianity just does not possess the malleability of art, and so it is no surprise that it has failed to maintain relevancy. Notwithstanding, Stevens does not rule out the possibility of religion once again superseding art: “men feel that the [artistic] imagination is the next greatest power to [religious] faith: the reigning prince” (NA, 171). The imagination is *not*, as Eleanor Cook astutely observes, the crown king – it is merely the temporarily *reigning* prince.¹² The way in which a place or culture conceives of itself and its freedom at a specific time determines art’s potential to provide cognitive value and thus also its hierarchical position with respect to philosophy and religion. Although Hegel seems to identify this dynamism when looking into the history of fine art, he fails to do so when looking into its future.

CONCLUSION

In looking towards the future we have digressed from the final aim of this paper: to reconcile the aesthetic ideals of Stevens and Hegel. Therefore, it should be briefly restated exactly how this has been achieved and how this synthesizes the precursory conclusions of the previous sections. By appreciating the criterial shift that occurred in the romantic stage the following can be posited: a) that, although not its sole purpose, pre-romantic art can be understood as in its highest vocation when *developing* humankind. It accomplishes this by sensuously *embodying* the level of self-knowledge humankind has attained. Here art’s cognitive value can be justifiably assessed according to the extent it sensuously reveals the Idea; b) that, as philosophy and religion turned inwards in the romantic stage, *they* (not art) became the most proficient means by which humankind could attain self-understanding and

¹² Cook (2007), p.21.

development; c) that this turn inwards meant religion could no longer mediate or unite humankind with the external world and that this necessitated a criterial shift in aesthetic evaluation; d) that, following this peripeteia, modern art should be understood as in its highest vocation when filling this void. Its cognitive value should therefore be judged according to the competency with which it confers knowledge regarding how the objective world can be imaginatively *illuminated* to reveal the value and meaning of reality in all its *liveability*. Both ideals are therefore valid only if applied to the relevant stage of history.

The criticism that has been levelled at Hegel is that he erroneously applies the classical criteria to post-classical art. Due to the lack of a supra-historical term ‘art’, we can, as Donougho reminds us, only define art in *retrospect* by looking at what has been accepted as art within a specific period.¹³ With there being no existing criteria, it is therefore understandable that Hegel attempted to map out his aesthetic present with standards that applied to the past.

In order to bring this investigation to a close, the critique of Stolnitz must now be made fully explicit. In the first place, as Section One of this paper established, to appraise art in terms of universal propositional truths is to misapply the epistemological criteria of philosophy; hence, Stolnitz’s methodology is destined to fail to identify the forms of cognitive value that are peculiar to art. As a result, it should be stressed that art must be evaluated against its own *idiosyncratic* criteria, *not* against those that are unjustifiably imported from other disciplines.

Despite this need to keep art discrete in terms of evaluative criteria, what both Stevens and Hegel also bring into relief is that, if art’s ability to purvey knowledge is to be seriously explored, it must be regarded as inextricably connected to the shifts in function exhibited by religion and philosophy. This foregrounds another serious weakness in Stolnitz’s methodology, *viz.* that it isolates art’s cognitive value from relevant and interconnected developments within these other disciplines.

Wallace Stevens illustrates how modern art – while retaining its core functions of mediation and self-revelation – has to continually “construct new stages” in order to provide people with believable imaginative frameworks. It is then the task of aesthetic philosophy to deduce the new criteria by which what has taken place on these new stages should be evaluated; accordingly, such criteria must be understood as

¹³ Donougho (2007), p.194.

historically determined. However, in contradistinction to this sound prescription, Stolnitz neglects the need for historical context when evaluating art and claims to ahistorically prove its lack of cognitive value.

At this point we should perhaps recall Åhlberg's description of "the best works of analytic aesthetics" as those which "increase our understanding of art and enhance our appreciation of works of art."¹⁴ Despite Stolnitz self-consciously working within the analytic tradition,¹⁵ I would argue that his paper, 'On the Cognitive Triviality of Art', does not fit this description since it propagates a universalising treatment of aesthetics that prevents us from understanding and appreciating the value of what takes place on the different *particular* stages to which Stevens refers. Thus, Stevens inadvertently highlights how Stolnitz's approach hinders what *should* be the clarifying function of analytic aesthetics. In light of the above findings, it seems reasonable to posit that if aesthetic understanding and appreciation are to be augmented, analytic aesthetics must necessarily be engaged in a perpetual process of criterial re-assessment – a process which should be married to the continual re-evaluation of individual artworks as they slip further into the past and allow us a clearer retrospective view.

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¹⁴ Åhlberg (1993), p.15.

¹⁵ See Stolnitz (1963).

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