

The Devil and the Beautiful Soul
or
On Hegel's Critique of Romanticism

George di GIOVANNI

The Romantic temptation

One must distinguish between Romanticism as the cultural/artistic phenomenon that grew out of the late German enlightenment and defined Hegel's own social world, and Romanticism as denoting a particular art form. Hegel had a very broad conception of the latter, which he tended to identify with Christian art in general and also considered to be the product of a highly developed sense of freedom. As for the Romanticism understood in the narrower sense just defined, Hegel (or, at least, the mature Hegel) objected to it because of its aestheticism which ended up undermining both morality and religion. This aestheticism was enshrined, in Hegel's view, in the irony which the Romantics understood, not just as a rhetorical device, but as a fundamental human attitude toward reality. The beautiful soul, a figure that was the stock of the Romantic literature of the time, personified the attitude. Hegel thought of it as demonic, indeed as an illustration of evil. His most scathing criticisms were directed at Friedrich Schlegel, whom he considered as the propagandist of irony, but they extended to others as well, notably Tieck, Kleist, and Solger.¹ They also extended to Fichte. He could hardly have been thought as an aesthete, but Hegel believed that his subjective idealism was at the root of the Romantic mistake.²

I shall say more about this mistake. I must stress now that in this paper I abstract from Hegel's treatment of Romantic art in general, even though it was the spiritual freedom that Hegel attributed to it which also made the mistake he condemned possible. I equally abstract from the religion of art which, in Hegel's view, characterized classical Greek culture, even though there are interesting parallels between this culture's elevation of art to religion and the Romantic conflation of aesthetic and moral attitudes, and why Hegel would admire the one but condemn the other is itself an interesting question. I am restricting myself to Romanticism as a social phenomenon of Hegel's time. In this, I am still operating within the limits of Hegel's interest in art in general. H. G. Hotho, in his edition of Hegel's posthumously published Lectures on Art, conveyed the impression that Hegel was intent on defining norms of artistic perfection.³ Recent scholarship has demonstrated that this is misleading. Hegel himself was interested in art primarily as a cultural product.⁴ It is in this spirit that I consider his criticism of Romanticism.

I have been speaking of "aesthetic attitude" and of "art." The two go naturally together.

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- ¹ Hegel, however, had great respect for Solger. He thought that Solger had escaped the worse of Schlegel's irony.
 - ² I list in Appendix 1 the texts on which my presentation is based, and indicate the abbreviation with which I shall refer to them. In Appendix 2 I list recent relevant literature on the subject.
 - ³ This was in fact Hotho's own agenda, as his own lectures on art make clear. Gethmann-Siefert, lxxvii-ix. Cf. H. G. Hotho, *Öffentliche Vorlesungen über Gegenstände der Litteratur und Kunst*, Vols. 1-2 (Berlin, 1842-43).
 - ⁴ Gethmann-Siefert, lxxxvii; also, cxxxix-xxl.

Nonetheless, “aesthetics” as the science of a special kind of experience was an Enlightenment’s concern. The Romantics, on the contrary, and also Hegel, were interested in art. How aesthetic theory gave place to philosophy of art must be our first consideration. It is important for defining the aestheticism for which Hegel condemned Romanticism. For this, we first turn to Kant.

From aesthetic theory to philosophy of art

Enlightenment aesthetic theory was a dimension of psychology. Moses Mendelssohn’s *Letters on Sentiments* is representative of the form that the theory assumed in late 18th century Germany.⁵

The *Letters* offered a synthesis of elements drawn from the British moral sentiment tradition and the more indigenous rationalism of Leibniz and Wolff. The basic assumption was that feeling, or sentiment, is a physiologically determined representation of the state of the body which substitutes in certain areas of experience for the representation that the intellect otherwise provides conceptually. As contrasted with this intellect’s representation, which is clear and distinct, feeling is obscure. Yet feeling is a necessary contribution to the economy of experience, for one thing, because a complete conceptual analysis of the body’s organism would exceed the power of the intellect, and, for another, if the intellect were capable of such a complete analysis, the labour required for the task would pre-empt the possibility of the immediate gratification (*Befriedigung*) which accompanies the natural feeling of organic perfection. For this gratification, the distinct, but necessarily incomplete, details of the intellect’s reflective representation must give place to the *con-fused*, yet complete, immediate apprehension of feeling. It is in this way that, according to Mendelssohn, the æsthetic realm of the beautiful is generated.

This is hardly even a sketch of an otherwise very sophisticated theory. But it highlights the two points at which Kant breaks away from it and sets the stage for the subsequent philosophy of art. On Mendelssohn’s theory, the language of aesthetic experience consists essentially in a report on one’s private feeling of sense-gratification (or of lack thereof). Moreover, the difference between feeling and concept, although real, remains nonetheless only one of degree. Although in different ways and with different results,⁶ both are representations, and, *as representations*, each is complete in its own right. In the case of aesthetic experience, feeling simply replaces conceptual representation.

Kant’s theory⁷ differs on precisely these two points. For one thing, aesthetic experience is for Kant object-directed, that is to say, it is realized in a judgment which, like any other judgment in critical doctrine, entails a moment of reflective recognition. Just as in the realm of theoretical experience we recognize an object as meeting assumed criteria of intelligible presence, and are therefore satisfied in judging the object to be truly given in experience,⁸ so, too, in aesthetic judgement we recognize an object as satisfying norms of pleasing presence. In other words, we speak of things being beautiful or ugly in the same way as we speak of them as being red or blue: in both cases, the

⁵ *Briefen über die Empfindungen*, Briefe 4 and 5 in *Gesammelte Werke, Jubiläumsausgabe*, Vol. 1. Also, *Rhapsodie oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen*, Vol. 1, 392-294.

⁶ Either immediately or reflectively, the results being either gratification or clarity of apprehension.

⁷ As developed in the *Critique of Judgement*.

⁸ Or, in the realm of moral experience, when contemplating an action we must consider whether we would recognize it, upon being realized, as meeting assumed criteria of lawfulness.

intention is not to report a subjective feeling but to say something about objects which stand before us as “other” than us, and independent of us. In this sense, an aesthetic judgement is *not unlike* a theoretical judgement. What makes it nonetheless different is that the conceptual norms governing it do not have the precision of theoretical norms. As a consequence, although the language of the beautiful is not random—on the contrary, it always strives for consistency and evidence—it lacks the strict determining power by which, in the domain of theoretical experience, one can come down with such a firm judgement as “This rose is red.”

The reason for this lack of determining power is of crucial importance. One cannot pass judgement without thereby assenting to an individually determined object, by virtue of a determination of the object that ultimately depends on the imagination. This, broadly speaking, is true of all judgement according to Kant. In the case of theoretical judgement, the contribution of the imagination consists in providing a schema by virtue of which a sense-given phenomenon is recognized as an *instance* of some kind of object, where the “kind” in question is defined according to established theoretical assumptions.⁹ (“Red,” for example, is an instance of “colour”—“colour,” for its part, requiring the whole language of “quality.”) The situation of the aesthetic judgement is different. In its case the presence of the object engages the experiencing subject, not indeed as a detached observer intent on theoretical explanation, but precisely as itself an individual affected by sensibility. At issue is how the subject stands with respect to the object, both as *individuals*. And, although the factor of recognition (hence of *a priori* conceptualization) must still be present in the judgement, there simply cannot be a system of categories that would even only in principle comprehend all the possible variations that that engagement of individual with individual might entail. The final judgement must ultimately depend, therefore, on the creative resources of the imagination itself,¹⁰ on its playing with one or another of the possible determinations of an object until it comes down with the one presentation before which the apprehending subject, because of circumstances that ultimately have to do with personal history, feels particularly at home.

The expression “to feel at home before an object” to describe the aesthetic experience is mine, not Kant's. It *does*, however, convey the sense of freedom before a beautiful object, and the gratification that flows from that freedom, yet at the same time also the feeling of being bound to the decided judgement about it (as if any other would be wrong) that, according to Kant, defines the aesthetic experience. Feeling is essential to this experience, even though the total experience remains conceptual. This is the second point on which Kant radically breaks from Enlightenment theory. Feeling is not, as for Mendelssohn, a confused representation that differs from a concept only by degree of distinctness. Indeed, although it requires representation, it is not itself a representation at all (which would have to be exclusively object-directed). It is rather a subject's taking of position on how it existentially stands with respect to a given object:¹¹ whether, for instance, it is in dread of it,

⁹ This is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for moral judgement also. In its case, Kant has a ‘typic of the imagination’, as contrasted with a ‘schematism’.

¹⁰ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1793), Akademie-Ausgabe, Vol. 5, 211-212. In a larger study, the theme of ‘genius’ would have to be introduced at this point. Hegel says of the genius that he suffers his creative freedom, for he cannot see it realized except in something made, that is, already at a distance from himself. *Enz.* § 560.

¹¹ It follows that feeling is reflective from the beginning; in fact, a highly individualized, even bodily, form of

or alienated from it, or, as we have just said, at home with it. Both, feeling *and* concept, are necessary to the aesthetic experience. Together, the two make it the objectively governed, yet ultimately subjectively determined, experience that it is.

Kant sums up his position on the subject with admirable clarity. The language surrounding aesthetic judgement always takes on the form of a discussion which would, if it just could, come down with an irrefutable judgement. In fact, however, it cannot; hence the discussion remains open-ended: the assent given to any judgement is ultimately dependent on historical circumstances, and the judgement itself, therefore, always reformable.¹² This note of historical dependency is important, because it opens up the way for Hegel's phenomenological treatment of art, and for his criticism of Romanticism in particular. Accepted norms of artistic perfection do not alter in history on the basis of conceptual clarification alone, as in scientific judgement. They alter, rather, according as they reflect the altered subjective positions that history-bound individuals assume with respect to their perceived world. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel documented these positions in the context of Spirit's process of self-realization in general. In his *Lectures on Art*, he did the same—taking art, however, as reflecting the different stages in this self-realization. Kant himself never made this move to art as a historical reflection of the life of spirit; he was still too bound to Enlightenment's modes of thought. Yet, in the *Critique of Judgement* the crucial transition from Enlightenment aesthetic psychology to aesthetic phenomenology was already made: the further move to philosophy of art was implicitly already at hand.

To make this point, I must leave Kant behind, and join Hegel. I must drop Kant's "unknown thing in itself" and replace it with Hegel's nature, the latter conceived as the antecedent of Spirit's reflectively conscious life. Nature acquires meaning only inasmuch as it is made to re-exist in the medium of this conscious life; inasmuch, in other words, as, already physically present, it is made present again as an object of experience. In Spirit nature is *re-born*, to use Hegel's expression that plays on the Latin for "being born" (*nascor*).¹³ In this sense, all of experience is a work in progress: it is the product of Spirit. In the case of the aesthetic experience, however, this is true in a special sense. For, precisely on Kant's account of it, *that its object is a product* is what makes the experience specifically aesthetic. At issue is not just the representation of nature, but its representation *as representation: as work of Spirit*. In theoretical experience, Spirit relates to nature by reflectively standing at a distance from it, thereby rendering it present for intelligent observation. In moral experience, it relates to it by ideally recreating it as if *ex nihilo* according to norms of pure rationality, thereby committing itself to it, so recreated, as something worthy to exist in its own right. In aesthetic experience, Spirit does both, but only in appearance. It stands at distance from nature, as if to discover it for what it is; in fact, however, shaping its objective presence through the free work of the

judgement. Without the presupposition of "feeling," saying "I" would not have meaning. In the 1787 first edition of his *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism*, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi had developed a theory of experience loosely based on precisely this conception of "feeling," inspired, paradoxically, by both Hume and Spinoza. But he never developed the theory, I suspect because he realized the naturalism which it implied. Cf. *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allvill*, [henceforth, *Main Philosophical Writings*] tr. ed. G. di Giovanni (Montréal/Kingston, 2009, 1985'), pp. 293ff.

¹² *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 22.

¹³ The play on the Latin words, *natura / nascor*, is lost in both German and English.

imagination. And it commits itself to it as if valuable *per se*; in fact, however, valuable for spirit only because subjectively gratifying. In aesthetic experience, Spirit literally disports itself with nature; and the point of the play, although apparently nature, is in fact the disporting itself. "Celebrating nature," rather than "disporting oneself with it," might be a better expression in this context. But then, there is no celebration which is not at the same time a playing, and no playing which is not also a celebration.

Kant still thought of beauty as applying first to nature, and of art as imitating nature. On his own principles, however, nature is beautiful only when re-born as a work of art, in the medium of the aesthetic experience itself: it is up to nature, therefore, to imitate art.¹⁴ When the idealists recognized this, philosophy of art had come to its own. This was a great spiritual achievement, but it came at a price. It did so because of the ambiguity inherent in the aesthetic experience which could elicit the wrong moral response. One admires the art-work, and can even venerate it. But admiration is not contemplation, and veneration is not love. The problem is that they might be taken to be the same. To confuse the two was, according to Hegel, the Romantic temptation.

Hegel's criticism of Romanticism

Hegel—I said in my opening remarks—saw in Fichte's subjectivism¹⁵ the source of this temptation; and in Friedrich Schlegel the most obvious illustration of one who had fallen victim to it. To explain how Hegel could connect a supposed faulty philosophical position with an artistic and ethical flaw; indeed, to understand the nature of the irony which Schlegel practiced and Hegel condemned, more must be said about Hegel's position on art. "Appearance" is the extra concept that provides the required link.

Hegel also describes the art-experience as of one who lives in a dream state¹⁶—in a state, in other words, in which reality, although still present and commanding, is nonetheless present *in itself* only as a distant background; *in the dream*, its presence is subject to a logic (be it emotional or imaginative) which is the dream's own. This is another way of stating what follows on Kant's premises. Since art is the representation of reality *as represented*—the place, in other words, where the representation of reality, rather than reality itself, is the object—the representation in question is thereby released from the reality it represents.¹⁷ It is endowed with a presence all its own. In art, in another of Hegel's images, nature (i.e. the original reality) is re-born, and re-born again: re-born once in representation, and re-born again in the representation of this representation which is the art product.¹⁸

Here is where the concept of 'appearance' comes into play. The fact that reality is made to re-exist in representation implies that *it appears to someone*, in the medium of an appearance which is as much of this 'someone' as of 'reality', for it is according to the limits of the 'someone' that the appearance is realized. This is true, of course, of all representations, and it holds at every level of

¹⁴ Cf. *Enz.* § 558. For the objectivity of the work of art, cf. *Enz.* § 556.

¹⁵ *GW* 16, pp. 97-98, 111, 114, 287-288, 304.

¹⁶ Gethmann-Siefert, lxii; Hotho's manuscript, 4b. Like Hegel, I am conflating the mind-set of the productive artist and the contemplator of the product.

¹⁷ Cf. Gethmann-Siefert, cxxiii; Hotho's manuscript, 198.

¹⁸ *Knox*, p. 2.

experience. In the case of the art work, since this work is the representation of a representation, it can just as well be said to be the appearance of an appearance: it is Spirit's celebration of reality's appearing precisely *as an appearing*. This specifically artistic appearing is still dependent, however, on the original appearing—on the appearance of reality which has not been released from the limits of the latter and is the object of both theoretical observation and moral action. And if, as Hegel claimed of Fichte, one misconceives the relation to reality in this original appearing, the substance of the subsequent art production suffers accordingly. Hegel's claim was that, on Fichte's conception of our relation to the Absolute (Fichte's, not Hegel's, name for "reality in itself"), the very first appearance of reality in experience would have to be of the same dream-like quality which is typical of the art-experience. This circumstance had disastrous consequences, for science and morality in the first place, but also for the art-culture that followed from it. It did away with precisely the factor—namely, the limits of nature 'in itself', as the historical antecedent of Spirit—which prevented the blurring of the line separating theory and morality, on the one side, and art on the other. The net result was each side merged with the other. At the root of Romantic aestheticism there lay Fichte's Idealism.

But how could Hegel connect irony, the expression of that aestheticism, with this Idealism? Hegel criticized the latter, as I have said, because of its subjectivity.¹⁹ The criticism was based on Fichte's Jena writings, where Fichte had given voice to his philosophical position in the idiom of the "I" borrowed from Kant. In this context, however, "subjectivity" must be understood in a technical sense which has little, if anything, to do with the highly individualized subject of experience to which the ordinary language of "subject" and "subjectivity" normally applies. Fichte's "I" was *ex hypothesi* intended as an infinite act which, like Spinoza's *causa sui*, was directed exclusively at itself. Inasmuch, therefore, as, *per impossibile*, it attained a determinedly recognizable product, this product would no longer be attributable to it as *its* product, because of the infinite disproportion separating the two.²⁰ Even more to the point, the positing of any such product would indeed have to be *per impossibile*, for the original act, because of its supposed infinitude, preempted *ex hypothesi* the possibility of anything existing on its own distinct from it. This was also the problem that Spinoza's 'substance' presented, and, it must be said, Jacobi had recognized Fichte's underlying Spinozism from the beginning.²¹ Hegel's criticism, although couched in Fichte's Jena language of the "I" and

¹⁹ Hegel's criticism of Fichte is directed at his Jena works, that is to say, at the pre-1800 Fichte. The criticism reflects the idiom of the "I" and the "self" which was typical of that period of Fichte's production. At least as of 1804, however, Fichte dropped this idiom, and replaced the "I" with the Absolute as the starting point of his system, thereby making more obvious the Spinozism which in fact underlay his Idealism from the start. This is an important historical circumstance, because, if Hegel had been in a position to address these at the time unpublished later works of Fichte, he could have made even more articulate the objection that he had against his Idealism and the Romanticism that was its by-product, namely, that, in their different styles, they both pre-empted the possibility of serious subjectivity (I mean: serious existential commitment). The problem with Fichte's Idealism is not its subjectivity (unless one understands "subjectivity" in a derogatory sense) but its lack of it. This is a point which is missing in Pöggeler's otherwise very instructive series of lectures.

²⁰ Fichte indirectly admits this much in a letter to Jacobi. He pointed out that the concept can comprehend everything except itself, and that the "we" or the "I" are bound (*gefesselt*) to a form (a determination) which it cannot transcend. *J. G. Fichte, Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhart Lauth, et al. 42 vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1962—), Series III, Vol. 5, Letter # 716, 8 May, 1806. [Henceforth GA, followed by series and volume number.]

²¹ As he declared in his open *Letter to Fichte* (1799), *Main Philosophical Writings*, 501-503.

“subjectivity,” was addressed at precisely this essentially Spinozistic problem: the problem, namely of how to Fichte's posited ‘I’ there could ever stand opposed an ‘other’ truly distinct from it and claiming for itself an existence of its own. To revert to the ordinary meaning of “subjectivity,” Fichte's Idealism made this kind of subjectivity at best only an illusionary presence.²²

It is surely a sign of Fichte's philosophical brilliance that, at least as of 1804, when in Berlin, in the several revised versions of his Science²³ which he delivered at the time in lecture form, and were only posthumously published,²⁴ he dropped the earlier misleading language of subjectivity, and, in more Spinozistic fashion, replaced his earlier ‘I’ with the idea of an all-encompassing One, the source of all reality and truth. He made the task of his Science one of articulating the transition from this One to the manifold of the objects of experience. Equally a sign of his brilliance is that he did not try to resolve the task conceptually, as any Enlightenment metaphysician might have tried (and Moses Mendelssohn actually did).²⁵ Any conceptual resolution would have been impossible, since conceptualization presupposes the distinction between subject and object: it already presupposes, in other words, the transition from the One to the multiplicity of experience which is what needs explaining. This transition, to use Fichte's image, must be represented, rather, as a projection *per hiatus irrationalem*; that is to say, as occurring across an ontic²⁶ gap at which rationality has indeed its origin, but where it also comes to nought if it tries to bridge the gap by explaining the transition.²⁷ Fichte's brilliant move was that he refrained from explanation but gave, rather, a phenomenological account of what it is like to exist in a world on the belief that such a world, if measured against the absolute One which is the only true reality, would reveal itself to be a mere nothing. On this belief, to which, according to Fichte, we are all instinctively bound, the objects of experience are perceived as the appearance of a transcendent reality (the One), the presence of which is necessarily always intended, yet at the time also suspended, for whatever determination the perceived appearance might bring to the intended One (even that this One is *per se* inconceivable) would be *ex hypothesi* a negation of it, and, therefore, a falsification. In fact, therefore, the appearance only manifests itself *as appearance*: it is the appearance of an appearance, a ‘seeming’ with no determined reality of its own. Any would-be positive determination attributed to it would in turn have to be reduced to a mere appearing, *ad infinitum*.

Fichte's several late presentations of his Science develop the logic of a language that expresses precisely this shifting play of appearances. It is a language that annuls itself in the very act of saying anything determinate. In the Science, Fichte methodically sets up categories, each defining a type of determinate discourse,²⁸ and then deconstructs²⁹ them just as methodically, in each case bringing to

²² As Jacobi also said in his *Letter to Fichte*, *ibid.* 507.

²³ I refer to Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* simply as Science.

²⁴ How much, if anything, Hegel knew of these lectures is an issue all by itself.

²⁵ In *Morgenstunden, oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes* (Berlin, 1785).

²⁶ The image is Fichte's, but “ontic” is my gloss.

²⁷ Fichte's expression is “*per hiatus irrationalem*,” cf. WL 1804, GA II/8, 225.6-11. For another text, WL 184, GA, II/8, 293.34-295.2. Fichte also calls this gap (*hiatus*) “*der Lage des Todes*,” “the place of death,” i.e. the place where all conceptual distinctions and determinations come to naught. WL 1804, GA II/8, 121(line 7)-123(line 10). Also, WL 1804, GA II/8, 217(line 26)-220(line 32).

²⁸ In effect, each the basis of a historical philosophical position.

²⁹ The expression that Fichte uses in 1804 is “strike down” (*erschlagen*).

light the contradiction inherent in the determination which each posits as principle. In the course of this process, the whole range of possible language is displayed, until, at the end, consistent with itself, the Science negates itself: it recognizes, in other words, that its attempt at reflectively articulating the presence in experience of the Absolute must end in silence.³⁰ The philosopher has no choice at the end but to immerse himself in lived experiences, accepting them as just unexplainable *facts*, committed nonetheless (but only in faith) to impose on them a moral meaning, by interpreting them as expressions of freedom.

The Romantics, to one person, rejected Fichte's prioritizing of morality in experience. But they all accepted his monism, all of them inspired by Spinoza. They all saw nature, in the divinity of which they revelled, as a riotous play of appearances of the Absolute in which each determination merges with every other, and where, as Novalis beautifully expressed in his poetry, Life is in Death and Death in Life. To Fichte's moral commitment, as a way to cope existentially with the mere facticity³¹ of experience, they opposed their irony. In general, irony is a rhetorical device in which, while ostensibly saying one thing, one in fact means the opposite. For the Romantics, however, it came to signify a special kind of discourse in which, while holding on to a position seriously, one does it nonetheless with the detachment that allows for the possibility of another.³² One plays with it, in other words—with all the seriousness, however, that play nonetheless commands. For this reason the aphorism was the Romantics's favourite literary device: it defied systematization, and thus left their discourse methodically open-ended, as indeed all discourse, according to them, had to be. The important point is that this kind of irony was more than just a literary style: it reflected an existential attitude toward reality. It was the Romantics's alternative to Fichte's morality: their existential taking of position regarding the world and one's place in it.

Hegel had no patience for any of this.³³ He thought of the Romantics—Schlegel, “the father of irony,” in particular—as philosophical dilettantes who disparaged serious conceptual work as if they stood enthroned above it, but in fact simply failed to understand it. On the one hand, they dealt in abstractions, assuming categories such as subjectivity and objectivity, reflection and immediacy, without ever specifying their precise meaning; on the other hand, they celebrated the concrete and immediate, without realizing that the work of the concept consists precisely in mediating the two. This is a work which they eschewed, on the one hand oscillating between the two, holding them

³⁰ In 1804 Fichte proclaimed, “Away with all words and signs!” And he continued, “Nothing remains except our living thinking and insight which can't be shown on a blackboard nor be represented in any way but can only be surrendered to nature.” WL 1804, GA II/8, 95 (lines 30-33).

³¹ *Fakticität* is Fichte's word.

³² I present here Hegel's interpretation of Schlegel's irony. Literary critics would very likely challenge Hegel's reading. For a few illustrative texts from Schlegel, cf:

“Die Philosophie ist die eigentliche Heimat der Ironie, welche man logische Schönheit definieren möchte.” *Lyceum Fragmente*, # 42, in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. E. Behler, Vol. 2 (München, 1958—).

“Eine Idee ist ein bis zu Ironie vollen in Kritische dete Begriff, eine absolute Synthesis absoluter Antithesen, der stete sich selbst erzeugende Wechsel zwei streitender Gedfanken.” *Athenäum Fragmente*, # 121, *ibid.*

“Ironie ist klares Bewußtsein der ewigen Agilität, des unendlichen vollen Chaos.” *Athäneum Ideen*, # 69, *ibid.*

“*Agilität*” is a word that Fichte also uses to denote thought's reflective freedom.

For alternative interpretations of Romantic irony, see Appendix II, notably Rebentisch

³³ For some representative quotations, all drawn from Hegel's Review of Tieck's edition of Solger's works, see Appendix III.

together in ironical equivocation; on the other hand, elevating themselves *tout court* above both by giving themselves over to a supposed mystical experience of the Divine that brought all things together. The religion of devotion was, according to Hegel, only the vacuous emotional counterpart of the Romantic more cerebral ironic attitude. In either case, to use Hegel's expression, the Romantics celebrated the Sunday of life without having first subjected themselves to the quotidian work of conceptual mediation of the rest of the week.³⁴ This was the work of law, morality, and love which the Romantics in fact undermined.

This celebration of the Sunday of life might have been all right for art. Schlegel's alternation between abstract universals and immediate experiences, his momentary resolution of the disproportion between the two in the medium of feelings, perfectly fit Kant's description of the aesthetic experience—except, of course, that Kant's universals were more serious than Schlegel's, and his feelings had nothing mystifying about them as Schlegel's did. But the Romantics made of the aesthetic experience the human being's fundamental attitude toward reality. In that consisted their aestheticism, and the disastrous consequences that befell them when the rest of the week intruded on them, and they were forced to action, was illustrated by the fate of the beautiful soul, the figure of one who tries to live that aestheticism throughout the week. Hegel condemns this figure. As we must see, however, his condemnation took a turn at one point which, if one is not adept to Hegel's dialectic, would be surprising indeed.

The devil and the beautiful soul

The issue is that one cannot act except *determinedly*. One cannot play at acting: either one does something, thereby committing oneself to the reality of this "something," or one does not. One might not approve, no more than the Romantics did, of Fichte's moral stand. Yet, the moral commitment that Fichte demanded of his auditors was directed at imposing an element of strict determination, as if *ex nihilo*, on a world of otherwise only seeming reality. Fichte recognized the problem that this world posed. His moral commitment was meant to save the possibility of action. But how would this action be possible on Schlegel's irony? The simple answer, of course, is that it is not possible. Hegel's interest lay in the consequences of this impotence. He saw them illustrated by such fictional characters as he found in Schlegel's unfinished romance *Lucinde*, characters which he accused of moral frivolity; or illustrated by such real individuals as Novalis, whose death by consumption he thought the poetically fitting conclusion of a life lived in the belief that nature, which Novalis worshipped, was but the phantasmagoric appearance of a transcendent Absolute; or Kleist, whose death by suicide Hegel directly related to the scattering of spiritual resources due to irony.³⁵ All these characters, whether fictional or real, were beautiful souls. Yet, the most incisive portrayal of a beautiful soul, and the consequences of its impotence when action is at issue,³⁶ is the one which Hegel himself sketched at the conclusion of Part VI of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*,³⁷ apparently taking a page from Jacobi's

³⁴ GW 16, p. 307.

³⁵ Of course, these were totally unfair historical judgements on Hegel's part.

³⁶ The artistically and psychologically most successful is, of course, Kierkegaard's "Seducer" in his *Either/Or*.

³⁷ In the section of Part VI entitled "Das Gewissen, die schöne Seele, das Böse und seine Verzeyhung." GW 9, pp. 340ff.

novel *Woldemar*, itself a story about beautiful souls.³⁸ In this portrayal Hegel, like Jacobi, tests the capacity of the beautiful soul to act at the point where it counts most, namely, where the action is directed at other “beautiful souls”; where action, in other words, is first and foremost an issue of communication.

The portrayal comes after Hegel has unmasked the dissemblance, even hypocrisy, to which anyone living a moral life on Fichte’s principles would be exposed.³⁹ This need not concern us, since, as we have just said, Schlegel’s irony is only the counterpart of Fichte’s moral standpoint. The problem is how to reconnect with reality when, for ideological reasons, one has existentially disconnected from it. The only possible solution is to cut through the ambiguities with which reality’s appearance is consequently fraught on the assumed premises: to cut through them as if violently, by simply falling back upon oneself, upon one’s individuality as a world unto oneself, thus assuming as norm for right action precisely one’s self-assured subjective belief in what is right. This subjective self-assurance is what we call conscience (*Gewiß*). The beautiful soul, according to Hegel, is one who, when it acts, acts on the strength of conscience alone. In this sense, it takes itself to be a moral genius,⁴⁰ for, like an artistic genius, it is the creator of norms.

Here, however, is the further problem. In posing as a genius, the beautiful soul invests its singular determination as individual with universal value: holds out its private conscience as the norm for a universally binding judgement. But it could not consistently do as much without at the same time allowing for everybody else to do the same. The net result is a potential conflict of universal claims, for each claim would be based on a determination of conscience which is *ex hypothesi* unique. One way of coping with the situation is for the beautiful soul to restrict itself to mere posturing, absorbed in what it takes to be its inner transcendent beauty, and careful not to be defiled by external challenge.⁴¹ This, in Hegel’s portrayal, is the type of beautiful soul that pines for an unattainable Absolute, and is finally consumed by its own sense of transcendence. This soul’s language (and we must remember that language is for Hegel where Spirit is realized) is one of declamation, and the only community possible on its basis is one that Hegel calls of mutual assurance:⁴² an association of such who rejoice in their mutual purity; who cherish and foster their inner beauty; but, in fact, do not

³⁸ The very end of this part contains lines which clearly allude to passage in *Woldemar*. [Cf. GW 9, 360-361, and *Woldemar*, in *Jacobi’s Werke*, eds. F. Roth and F. Köppen (Leipzig, 1812-1825), Vol. 5, pp. 461, 476.] Both *Woldemar*, the central character of *Woldemar*, and Allwill, the central character of Jacobi’s other novel *Allwill*, are not quite “beautiful souls” of Schlegel’s vintage. They are rather typical *Herzensemenschen* of the *Sturm und Drang* period: they are “men of feeling.” [Cf. *Woldemar*, pp. 114-115.] Yet they too, in Jacobi’s novels, suffer from the malady that afflict the beautiful soul, namely the difficulty of coping with the requirements of a real world that differ from those of the world of the imagination in which they live. Kierkegaard’s *Seducer (Diary of a Seducer, in Either/Or)*, perhaps the most demonic, even satanic portrait of a beautiful soul in the literature, has many features resembling Allwill’s. Both characters are described as somehow escaping the determinations of time: they are like disembodied spirits. Kierkegaard borrowed more than one page from both Jacobi and Hegel. For this, see Section 3 of my *The Unfinished Philosophy of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, the monograph introducing *Main Philosophical Writings*.

³⁹ The criticism is normally seen as directed at Kant. I suspect that Fichte is a more appropriate target, but there need not be any controversy. Fichte simply brought Kant’s moral principles to their logical conclusions.

⁴⁰ GW 9, p. 382 (line 37).

⁴¹ GW 9, pp. 354-355.

⁴² GW 9, p. 353 (line 13).

truly ever communicate with one another. There were plenty of such associations of the elect in Hegel's time.

But such beautiful souls have no historical significance. They simply pine away. More to the point is the beautiful soul who takes up the challenge of communicating with others on the basis of its own and the others's conscience. This soul understands that for its claims to be effective, they need the validation that comes only from the recognition of "others," despite the fact that, since the claims are exclusively based on the testimony of its eminently individual conscience, they necessarily put it at odds with these "others." Hegel deploys the best of his dialectical skills on this point.⁴³ The first thing that transpires is that to invest one's singularity with universal value is pride. It is to want to be a creator like God, and this is the devil's proto-sin.⁴⁴ The beautiful soul is satanic. But the devil is the father of all lies, as we know from the Bible; and this, too, transpires from Hegel's phenomenological enactment of beautiful souls in conversation.⁴⁵ As one soul engages another seeking approval, it presents itself to this other on the basis of its singular natural determination, the only one which is visible to the other. But what it promises on this basis is a pretended wisdom which far transcends that determination, and is inherently ineffable because indeterminate. The soul presents itself in one visible place, with all apparent honesty, while in fact making its stand somewhere else which is not visible. As for the other soul whose recognition is being sought, it has indeed a reasonable right to reject the testimony being offered to it. But the problem is that it, too, is a beautiful soul, and, as such, its rejection is based on the testimony of its conscience. And this testimony, because of its singularity, could just as well come down in favour of the claim being rejected. The judgement condemning the claim, while advanced as having universal validity, is in fact just as much a contingent claim as the one it condemns. Again, this is a matter of presenting oneself in one visible place, while making one's stand in another which is invisible.

All this could be taken as a case of dissemblance, of scrambled communication. There is a comic side to the beautiful soul. But the point is that the beautiful soul believes in its testimony—believes in its moral genius. The dissemblance it plays before the other it plays, first of all, before itself. This is not a case of straightforward deception, which can always be externally unmasked, but a case of self-deception. The lie is to oneself. To use Jacobi's imagery, the beautiful soul behaves before the other as if carrying a secret within it which is as much a secret to it as to the other. It does not *mislead* the other (where "to lead" in Latin is *ducere*). It asks the other, rather, to collude with it in a grand ineffable project—at the same time, however, entangling it in its own singularity. For this reason, Kierkegaard, who borrowed more than one page from both Jacobi and Hegel, portrayed his beautiful soul as essentially seductive. It lures the other into its personal sway while distracting it with the intimation of infinite possibilities that mask, because of their indefiniteness, the otherwise humdrum character of its visible body. But the best characterization of a beautiful soul is still Hegel's. Its speech, its testimony, is, Hegel says,⁴⁶ like a sound which never turns back upon itself saying

⁴³ I only give a sketch of what is a very extensive and complicated piece of conceptual analysis.

⁴⁴ Hegel always used Biblical imagery extensively. In this section it is especially instructive, and I deliberately elaborate on it.

⁴⁵ Of which I am giving hardly even a sketch here.

⁴⁶ I am glossing, but the "echo" image is Hegel's own. GW 9, p. 354 (line 26).

anything determinate: it dissipates as it sounds, and what remains of it is but an echo.

Hegel would not be Hegel, however, if the lie were not unmasked—*internally* unmasked, as it only can. The power of Spirit, which lies in language, *will* triumph. By the very fact of confronting the other in speech, the beautiful soul becomes aware of what it is doing: it recognizes that it is lying. In giving testimony, therefore, it acknowledges its evil before the other: it confesses. And, while condemning the other in judgement, it also forgives it.⁴⁷ This is the move to which I have earlier alluded and which is surprising indeed (a sort of *deus ex machina*) unless we recognize that with the move Hegel has removed the figure of the beautiful soul from the Kantian/Fichtean moral context which has so far shaped it, and has made it a moment, rather, of the process by which spirit becomes explicitly aware of itself which is the theme of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The beautiful soul's conversion in Hegel's work is not moral, but, to speak loosely, metaphysical. There is a sense in which the beautiful soul illustrates the human situation in general. For the human being is bound to the singularity of nature; yet its vocation is to creatively invest this singularity with infinite value. This is pride: the beautiful soul's sin is everybody's sin. We are all born in sin. But the sin's consequences are reaped at the level of nature. Nature has a way all its own to exact revenge when it is made to act out moral visions that trespass its limits. Just as the battle of prestige, which in Hegel's *Phenomenology* figuratively sets human history in motion, is fought in dread of death, so, too, the battle of conflicting moral visions that figuratively concludes that history is fought with nature as the speechless arbiter in the background.⁴⁸ It is the awareness of this fact that motivates the conversion of Hegel's beautiful souls: they cease to be "beautiful."

The "Yea of reconciliation" (a figure which Hegel takes from Jacobi)⁴⁹ with which the battle of conflicting moral visions concludes binds the re-born souls in a religious community that has nothing to do with the beautiful souls's earlier association of mutual assurance—nothing to do with pining after God or some transcendent state of purity. The strength of this community is that it acknowledges its inherent evil, but also knows how to contain it in a bond of confession and forgiveness. It is also in a position, therefore, to recognize the importance of moral discipline to constrain it externally. All this escapes the spiritual reach of souls that remain just "beautiful." Their problem is that they look for an Absolute beyond the appearances of nature without realizing that nature *is* the Absolute, their physical maker: there is nothing to nature's phenomena but nature itself. In their aesthetic enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*), they transform such phenomena into mere appearances of appearances. And, therefore, there is nothing left for them but to play with nature, thereby also disconnecting themselves from their own feelings, including the feeling of pain. They turn such feelings into vacuous sentiments—like Novalis, who proclaimed death to be life, whereas it definitely is not. That might make for beautiful poetry, but not for real life. The importance of Schlegel for Hegel is that his irony unmasked the fundamental weakness of Fichte's moral theory, in that it made of nature only an idea.

Let me cite: "Nature is so exact, it hurts exactly as much as it is worth, so in a way one relishes

⁴⁷ All this imagery is Hegel's. Cf. GW 9, 357ff.

⁴⁸ The connection between the two battles is made by Hegel, but only implicitly by referring to the moment of "recognition" and "acknowledgment" by other, a moment which is essential to the original battle for prestige. Cf. GW 9, p. 344 (line 35).

⁴⁹ See above, Note 38.

the pain. . . If it didn't matter, it wouldn't matter." These are not Hegel's words. They are of a contemporary writer who hardly had Hegel in mind.⁵⁰ Yet they could be Hegel's. The Romantics did not take nature seriously enough despite their talking so much about it: therefore, they could not be in the clear about their spiritual values either. This, in a word, was Hegel's critique of Romanticism.

Appendix 1

These are the relevant texts on which my interpretation is based:

G. W. F. Hegel, "Solger's nachgelassene Schriften und Briefwechsel", in *Schriften und Entwürfe II (1826-1831), Gesammelte Werke*, Vol.16 (Hamburg,, 2001), pp. 77-129. This is the most important text for the present paper. There is an English translation which is, however, very inaccurate, and often outright wrong (this applies to all of Behler's edited translations): G. W. F. Hegel, "Solger's Posthumous Writings and Correspondence", trans. Diana I. Behler, in *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline and Critical Writings* (The German Library: Vol. 24), ed. Ernst Behler (New York: Continuum, 1990), pp. 265-319. I refer to Hegel's *Gesammelte Werke* as GW, followed by volume and page numbers.

G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. M. Knox, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1975), pp. 64-69 for Solger and the "beautiful soul." I refer to this volume as *Knox*.

G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, footnote to §140.

G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), GW, 9 (1980).

G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830), GW, 20 (1992), §§ 447, 553-563. I refer to this work as *Enz*.

G. W. F. Hegel, Review of Carl Friedrich Göschel's *Aphorismen über Nichtwissen und absolutes Wissen im Verhältnis zur christlichen Glaubenserkenntnis*, GW 11, 324 (a brief criticism of Schlegel).

G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (1823): Nachgeschriben von H. G. Hotho*, ed. Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert (Hamburg, 1998). The Introduction by the editor is very instructive, pp. xv-cxxiv. I shall refer to it as Gethmann-Siefert. An abridged version of the Introduction can be found in the paper-back edition of the *Vorlesungen*, Philosophische Bibliothek, Vol. 550 (Hamburg, 2003).

Appendix 2

Selected recent relevant secondary literature on Hegel's criticism of of Romantic irony:

Christoph Menke, *Trägödie im Sittlichem: Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit in Hegel* (Frankfurt/Main, 1996), ch. 4.

Andrew Norris, "Willing and Deciding: Hegel on Irony, Evil and the Sovereign Exception," *Diacritic*, vo. 37, nos. 2-3 (2007) 135-156.

Otto Pöggeler, *Hegels Kritik der Romantik* (München, 1999); a very instructive series of lectures.

Juliane Rebentisch, "The Morality of Irony: Hegel and Modernity," *Symposium*, vol. 17. No.1 (Spring/Ptintemps 2013); critical of Hegel's criticism.

Jeffrey Reid, *L'anti-romantique. Hegel contre le romantisme ironique* (Québec: Presses de

⁵⁰ Julian Barnes, as cited in the *Times Literary Supplement* of May 3, 2013, page 5.

l'Université Laval, 2007).

Appendix III

Relevant texts of Hegel criticizing Romantic irony, drawn from GW, Vol 16:

“So hätte es wohl auch für die philosophischen Unterhaltungen der beiden Freude [i.e. Tieck and Solger] mehr Gedeihen gebracht, wenn die Ausdrücke von Mysticismus, innerem Leben, Poesie, insbesondere Ironie, ja auch von Religion und Philosophie selbst aus dem Spiele geblieben wären; denn alsdann hätte von der Sache und vom Inhalt gesprochen werden müssen. Diese Art zu urtheilen ist eine entschieden negative Richtung gegen Objectivität - eine der Richtungen, welche von der Fichte'schen Philosophie der Subjectivität ausgegangen. Solches Urtheilen handelt nicht vom Inhalte, sondern dreht sich um verblasene Vorstellungen, welche die Sache der Religionen und Philosophien, mit Abstractionen von innerem Leben, Mystik und Reflexionsbestimmungen von Identität, Dualismus, Pantheismus u.s.f. abthun. Diese Manier erscheint zugleich als eine vornehme Stellung, welche mit der Sache fertig ist und über ihr steht; sie ist in der That mit der Sache in dem Sinne fertig, daß sie dieselbe bei Seite gebracht hat; eine Stellung über ihr, denn sie ist in der That außerhalb derselben.”(97-98)

“Dieselbe Beziehung, die hier bemerkt ist, auf die Philosophie, hat sich dieser Vater der Ironie [i.e. Schlegel] seine ganze öffentliche Laufbahn hindurch gegeben. Er hat sich nämlich immer urtheilend gegen sie [i.e. Philosophy] verhalten, ohne je einen philosophischen Inhalt, philosophische Sätze, noch weniger eine entwickelte Folge von solchen auszusprechen, noch weniger, daß er dergleichen beweisen, eben so wenig und widerlegt hätte. Widerlegen fordert die Angabe eines Grundes, und hiemit ein Einlassen in die Sache; dieß hieße aber, von der vornehmen Stellung oder (um eine seiner vormaligen Erfindungen von Kategorien zu benutzen) - von der göttlichen Frechheit (und auf der Höhe der Ironie läßt sich wohl eben so gut sagen - von der satanischen oder diabolischen Frechheit) des Urtheilens und Absprechens, der Stellung über der Sache, auf den Boden des Philosophirens selbst und der Sache sich herablassen. Hr. Fr. v. Schlegel hat auf diese Art immerfort darauf hingewiesen, daß er auf dem höchsten Gipfel der Philosophie stehe, ohne jemals zu beweisen, daß er in diese Wissenschaft eingedrungen sei, und sie auf eine nur gewöhnliche Weise inne habe. Sein Scharfsinn und Lectüre hat ihn wohl mit Problemen, die der Philosophie mit der Religion gemeinsam sind, und welche selbst bei der philologischen Kritik und Literärgeschichte in Weg kommen, bekannt gemacht. Aber die Art der Lösung, die er allenthalben andeutet, auch nur prunkend zu verstehen gibt, statt sie schlicht auszusprechen oder gar philosophirend zu rechtfertigen, ist theils eine subjective Lösung, die ihm als Individuum so oder anders conveniren mag, theils aber beweist das ganze Benehmen seiner Aeußerungen, daß ihm das Bedürfniß der denkenden Vernunft, und damit das Grundproblem derselben und einer bewußten und gegen sich ehrlichen Wissenschaft der Philosophie, fremd geblieben ist. (98-99)

“Diese Gegenwart, Wirklichkeit des Wahren, die Unmöglichkeit, irgend etwas zu wissen und zu thun ohne diese Grundlage und Voraussetzung, ist der eine Fundamentalpunkt. [...] Der andere Fundamen-

talpunkt aber außer dem Verhältniß der Grundlage und Voraussetzung ist das Auseinanderhalten dessen, was die Erfahrung des Ewigen genannt wird, von diesem Wissen oder dem sich abschließenden Denken. Der Vortrag bleibt in dieser Behauptung bei den Kategorien von Wirklichkeit, Thatsache, Glauben, Erfahrung einerseits, und von Denken andererseits, und bei der Assertion ihres wesentlichen Getrenntbleibens stehen, ohne diese Kategorien weiter zu analysiren." (109-110)

“Für diesen Behuf unterscheiden wir das speculative Moment, welches in einer Seite der Ironie liegt, und sich allerdings in den betrachteten speculativen Bestimmungen findet. So ist es nämlich jene Negativität überhaupt, die in der Steigerung bis zu ihrer abstracten Spitze die Grundbestimmung der Fichte'schen Philosophie ausmacht; im Ich = Ich ist alle Endlichkeit nicht nur, sondern überhaupt aller Gehalt verschwunden. Der höchste Anfangspunkt für das Problem der Philosophie ist mit dieser Steigerung allerdings in seiner höchsten Reinheit zum Bewußtseyn gebracht worden, von dem Voraussetzunglosen, Allgemeinen aus das Besondere zu entwickeln - einem Princip, das die Möglichkeit dazu enthält, weil es selbst schlechthin der Drang der Entwicklung ist." (114)