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ART'S PASSING FOR HEGEL, LACOUE-LABARTHE, AND NANCY

> The works of the muse lack the force of the spirit which, from out of the crushing of the gods and of man, has engendered its certainty of itself. They are now what they are for us – beautiful fruit broken off from the tree, a friendly fate passing those works on to us as a gift, in the way a young girl might present that fruit; the actual life in which that fruit existed no longer exists, nor does the tree that bore them, nor the earth and the elements that constituted their substance, nor the climate that constituted their determinateness, nor the alternation of the seasons that governed the process of their coming-to-be.[1]

1 introduction

For long-time collaborators Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, the question underpinning aesthetic philosophy is less *what is art?* than *what was art?* This apparently simple shift creates a narrative centred on the scene of art's dissolution or passing. Of course, such a narrative predates these two thinkers, notably in the work of G.W.F. Hegel, and it is by engaging with this philosopher that they develop their views on the issue.[2] The broader Hegelian or post-Hegelian frame is the way in which the different periods of history are interpreted as the phased march of spirit realizing or fulfilling itself. But Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy devote particular efforts to understanding what effect the scene of art's disappearance has, both within this frame, and insofar as art's disappearance allows such framing to be overspilled. As these two thinkers assess Hegel's claims about one phase of the historical dialectic passing to the next, therefore, it is crucial to understand what we might call the passing presence of art, the presence of art as it passes or passes away.

What might it mean to claim that art *was*, but *is* not? Hegel's claim looks to ancient Greek culture and the sense of oneness uniting art, religion, and society that it allegedly enjoyed. Hegel's term "æsthetic religion," cited by Nancy, refers precisely to this oneness.[3] And if ancient art is thus defined as a central vector of ancient society, modern art

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by extension is thought to have lost this role, having become fragmentary and marginal rather than plenary and unifying. Early German Romanticism, on which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy wrote extensively (not least in *The Literary Absolute*), reacts to these characterizations of ancient and modern art by a nostalgia for the former state of affairs, but also by a desire to forge art anew, re-founding its importance.[4] Thus Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write about the Jena Romantics' philological backgrounds and Friedrich Hölderlin's work on the Greeks, but also about Romanticism's programmatic element, its desire to found a new mythology, to reunite art, religion, and politics under the ægis of an infinitized or absolutized Subject. It is thus possible to see a common thesis in both Hegel and the German Romantics: art *was*, but *is* not. The difference, however, comes with the question of whether art's passing must be seen as definitive or not. For Hegel, it is definitive, and art – having reached its apogee with the Greeks – has been replaced by other manifestations of spirit: either revealed religion or philosophy (depending on where he makes the claim, as we shall see). For the Romantics, art may yet be refounded, and creating the conditions for this to occur is a task that artistic movements and groups must pursue.

This initial difference between Hegel and the Romantics, regarding the future of thought, also led to a second difference, this time found in (even) murkier waters. For where the Romantics' fusionalism led them to advocate something like a practice of life-as-art, involving collaborative, anonymous writing and the explosion of the traditional sexual order, Hegel disapproved of their activities. Lacoue-Labarthe describes him as critiquing the Romantics' "æsthetic and moral […] 'nihilism,'" which, he tells us in French, "ne 'passe' pas – ou *passe trop*."[5] In using the verb *passer*, Lacoue-Labarthe thus indicates that for Hegel such alleged aesthetic and moral nihilism, first, must not be accepted (*passe*), but second, that this is the case precisely because it *passe trop*, i.e., it "escapes and evades being mastered by the dialectic," is too much inclined towards movement and flightiness.[6] Romanticism for Hegel represented liberality, dissolution or dissoluteness, or what Nancy names in an eponymous essay *menstruum* (letting-go or discharge).[7] On this view, Romantic promises of re-founding a mythology are pie-in-the-sky, and it is better, faced with art's passing, to work with and through the more solid categories of revealed religion and/or philosophy.

In attempting to unpack these notions more fully, we shall begin with a Nancy text named "The Young Girl who Succeeds the Muses (the Hegelian Birth of the Arts)," which deals with the Hegelian thesis of art's passing and presents us with the enigmatic figure in which the thesis is incarnated: a young girl offering up a fruit. We will then move on to Lacoue-Labarthe's oeuvre, reading his long early essay "The Unpresentable," which addresses Hegel and Romanticism, the ancient (complete) and modern (incomplete) instantiations of art, and the question of veils, revelation, and presentation in and through both artistic form and worldliness in general.[8]

2 nancy, "the young girl who succeeds the muses (the hegelian birth of the arts)"

It is difficult to set limits on any discussion of æsthetics in Nancy's oeuvre. There is little clear boundary between his æsthetics, his phenomenology, and his philosophy of religion, for instance, in *Visitation: Of Christian Painting*, *Noli me tangere*, *The Pleasure of Drawing*, or elsewhere.[9] Similarly, where might we even attempt to draw a line between Nancy's thinking of æsthetics and the entire line of thinking around touching, sensation, and sense? And which of the philosophers he has written on, from Kant to Nietzsche to Heidegger, is not also a major aesthetician in his own right?[10]

But in *The Muses* he does discuss one particularly beguiling figure: that of a young girl who is presented as the successor to the

Muses who held sway over ancient conceptions of art.[11] This young girl is thereby associated with the ending of that ancient dispensation, and with the onset of a modern appreciation of the arts (or of modernity's non-appreciation of the arts). Her arrival or appearance on the scene therefore intervenes at a critical juncture as we follow Hegel's narrative of art's role in the historical dialectic and the eventual self-realization of spirit. In other words, the scene on which she arrives is the Hegelian one of art's passing, constituted by the claim that *art was*, rather than *is*. In introducing the topic, Nancy is careful to distinguish what Hegel states and does not state, as well as drawing a distinction between the statements made in two different works:

> It is now well established that what is attributed to Hegel as the declaration of the "end of art" is only the declaration of an ending to what he called "æsthetic religion," which is to say art as the site for the appearance of the divine. Doubtless, the religion that is abandoned in this way is the Greek religion, and the one that succeeds it (notwithstanding the episode of Rome, to which we shall return), "revealed" or Christian religion, is *de jure* beyond art. However, things are far from being this simple in Hegel himself. Indeed, whilst he does not mention Christian art in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (in which, by contrast, we find the episode of the "young girl" we will be discussing), the importance of art in the *Æsthetics* is well known, indeed art represents its central moment (the centre of this centre in turn being painting). But in the *Æsthetics*, it is not revealed religion that succeeds art, but philosophy or the element of pure thought. (M 75–76)

Here Nancy begins by stating that Hegel's thesis of the passing of art does not in fact exclude the continued existence or practice of art, but merely strips it of any religious status, notably the unified, plenary status that art enjoyed in ancient Greece. This is to say that after this key scene of its passing, art can very well carry on de facto but it will not exist *de jure*. Nancy then distinguishes the two mutually exclusive narrative developments provided by Hegel: according to the first, revealed religion will be what succeeds this aesthetic religion, with art now only having a subsidiary or illustrative role, rather than being a true manifestation of spirit. According to Hegel's second narrative, philosophy or pure thought is what takes up the baton from aesthetic religion. It seems likely that this can be taken to mean philosophy not as our contemporary academic discipline, but as the broader search for truth, incorporating natural science as well as humanistic thought, as it did for any number of figures from Pythagoras to Pascal.

Having established this general account of Hegel's views, and thereby of the founding principles of the modern science of æsthetics, Nancy zooms in on the figure of the young girl carrying the fruit. She succeeds the Muses, meaning that she represents the closure or the passing of the ancient understanding of art as falling under their powers. But what might she instead represent, what alternative way of relating to art? Does she allow for any relation to art at all, or instead symbolize the passing of art's relevance to spirit: art's passing? Glossing her appearance, Nancy writes as follows:

> The young girl who is at once the infinitely fragile extremity of art and the infinitely sustained passage of beautiful form as form is transformed into truth – this young girl has no existence other than that of the fruits that she presents. (M 96)

The notion of art being at once fragile and extreme, either in its thematic content or in the sense of operating or occurring whenever there are extremities or endings, is reasonably well-established within the alternative canon that we can imagine Nancy reading (Sade, Nietzsche, Bataille, Blanchot). The statement on the young girl representing "the infinitely sustained passage of beautiful form as form is transformed into truth" is slightly more complex: it is tempting to focus on the transformation into truth, which would place us firmly back into the former, ancient aesthetic religion (with artistic form communicating

directly with truth, the girl being an allegory and as such enjoying epistemic privileges). However, the words "the infinitely sustained passage" undermine this reading. They suggest that, whilst the destiny or purpose of form might well be to transform into truth, this passing or passage is in fact stretched out infinitely, never completed. In other words, "beautiful form" must always remain at a distance from truth, unable to unite with it. Even though "beautiful form" may seem to be a classicizing rather than radically modern category, Nancy identifies it as a surplus or remainder, forever excluded from its purpose.

But what has happened to the fruits? Both in this text and in another collected in *The Muses* ("Why are there Several Arts and not Just One?"), Nancy interprets these as representing art in the modern rather than ancient dispensation. This is to say that the plural fruits represent the plural arts in the modern (i.e., not ancient) age, over and against the unified aesthetic religion of Athens.[12] The bucolic image of the young girl bearing fruit is turned to Nancy's purpose: the descriptive detail of the fruits underlines the sheer *thereness*, patency or worldly existence that these fruits share with the arts (we can read: "that there should be *several arts*, that is something that is exposed as patency" (M 62; original emphasis)). These fruits/arts just *are*, they are in the world, without any connection to the gods that is directly understood, felt, or culturally sanctioned. As such the bucolic or painterly qualities of the figure of the young girl serve to subtract her from Hegel's dialectic as it remorselessly motors on to the next stage in the development of spirit (and it seems possible that his depiction of this figure as a young girl served to underline the lack of significance in his eyes). In any case, Nancy will confirm the fruits' (i.e., the arts') connection with mortality – rather than with immortal divinity – when he writes that "the 'fine fruits' are detached from the tree, and the fact of their presentation consents to this being-detached, this being mortally immortal." This leads him to ask: "And if art was only ever the art, necessarily plural, and singular, of consenting to death, of consenting to existence?" (M 97). In other words, the fruits' separation from the plant tells us not only that they are ripe for eating, but that at this very moment of ripeness or perfect culmination, decay and death are setting in. The fruits are delicious, but they are time-limited pleasures for now, rather than something stored for later (one meaning of the classically Hegelian term *aufgehoben*). They exist fully in the here and now, thus representing a sort of finitude or worklessness, rather than any dialectical carrying-over or afterlife. Nancy's formulation is instead a Heideggerian one, insisting in its double shape on the co-extensiveness of existence and mortality: "the art […] of consenting to death, of consenting to existence."[13]

In sum, whilst the move away from aesthetic religion could be understood as a loss, with the attendant nostalgia for lost unity, it can also be seen as a gain: we gain an understanding of our being-in-the-world, a relationship to finitude and mortality that the Greeks always already sublated into a religious system. But this modern understanding is difficult to hold on to, and the dual temptations of nostalgia and refoundation are strong. The Romantics bear testament to that, with their dream of a generalized or infinitized art that would unify not only the separate modern arts, but also domains including religion and politics. Let us now turn to Lacoue-Labarthe to explore this aspect in greater detail.

3 lacoue-labarthe, "the unpresentable"

Published as forty large-format, small-type pages in 1975, this piece shows a strikingly mature level of reflection not only on the topics of Romanticism and æsthetics on which Lacoue-Labarthe would later publish much, but also on the (post-)Heideggerian notions of appearance, coming-to-presence, and being-in-the-world that are more easily associated with his collaborator Nancy. Let us begin by looking at the article's characterization of modern art (via the question of whether art's

connection to its epoch is direct or indirect). We can then explore what is said about the ancient art of statuary, which allows Lacoue-Labarthe to interrogate Hegel on his understanding of art's passing.

The article is constructed around various references by Hegel to Schlegel's unfinished free-love novel *Lucinde*, which he takes to reveal a deep-seated frustration with – or fear of – the Romantics' lifestyle and ambitions. Lacoue-Labarthe's sympathies clearly lie with the Romantics, with their project of realization of spirit in and through poetry, rather than with Hegel's sublation of that sensible art-form into a metaphysical system. Nonetheless he is clear-eyed about which side of the debate went on to have the greater recognition in the history of thought, and the terms he uses to describe Hegel's victory are brutal ones. Lacoue-Labarthe writes: "let us say, between Hegel and alchemy, that the (silent, clandestine) dissolution, the *Auflösung* of literature left a remainder, a residue, – a stunted specimen: Hegel's *text* […]" (IMP 55; original emphasis). This victory was Hegel's, with literature driven from the field in disarray, although an implicit trace of it remains with Hegel's text being seen – in the melancholy light of what literature could have been – as a "remainder, residue, – a stunted specimen."

It is against such a backdrop that he will later continue:

> Hegel's *question* is the following: can what is to be thought, whatever it might be (Being, truth, thought itself), be presented *as such*, can it appear *in its own element*? For what is to be thought, might being presented as such and appearing in one's own element – ultimately – come down to *not being presented or appearing at all*? (Lacoue-Labarthe, IMP 75; original emphases)

These rhetorical questions imply that Hegel would prefer "what is to be thought" to find a form proper to it, without having to deal with the external possibilities afforded by art and/or worldly reality (or art as worldly reality). The questions then go on to imply that to keep its hands clean in such a way would be to pursue an unrealistic quest for purity, because by definition all presentation must include an element of alienation – or dirtying – of whatever is being presented. For Lacoue-Labarthe, the rivalrous other informing Hegel's intervention in this debate is Romanticism: the Jena Romantics' projects such as the *Athenaeum* review, the mode of collective, fragmentary writing they explored, and the model of community that briefly underpinned it. Let us move to see how this rivalry played out, with particular reference to the question of art's passing.

3.1 modern art: out of time

Hegel as he is glossed by Lacoue-Labarthe in "The Unpresentable" is highly sceptical about the Romantics' claim to make a return to ancient religion, and thereby to do no less than found a new mode of existence (both epistemic and communitarian). If Hegel also believes that "art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth procures existence for itself," i.e., that modern art is not the equal of its ancient predecessor, then his view of Romanticism plants it firmly within that modern category, denying the claim that it is any different.

Although he is not directly associated with the Jena group usually taken as Hegel's interlocutor by Lacoue-Labarthe, Friedrich Schiller is mentioned at various points in the article in a way that makes clear the role modern art plays in Hegel's claim about art's passing. Ventriloquizing Hegel's view of Schiller's book *The Gods of Greece*, Lacoue-Labarthe writes that:

> *The Gods of Greece* […] *does not mark any epoch* […] it can even be understood, in a certain way, as illustrating this "absence of epoch" that characterizes all the art of the Moderns (as well as its unseasonal nostalgia for its bygone age). (IMP 59; original emphasis)

Although the Schiller work mentioned addresses the Greek gods, it nonetheless forms an example of modern art's predicament, namely, that it is no longer aligned with the movement of spirit in its age (whether that

means in terms of religion, politics, or other domains). This means that, paradoxically, art from the modern age ultimately belongs to no age: it is cosmopolitan, rootless, liberal, not significant in any terms beyond its own. Shortly afterwards, Lacoue-Labarthe expands on his theme, again mentioning – in opposition to Hegel – Schiller, but now bringing in the Jena Romantics too. In Hegel's view, we read,

> Schiller de-limits the pre-speculative moment which precedes philosophy's *uplift* [*levée*] (the philosophical *relève* of philosophy itself), this fringe (less undecided than contradictory, and therefore "fecund") in which a certain poetic truth of philosophy (and a philosophical truth of poetry), insofar as it takes itself for its own object, *summons* the absolute Idea, the truth represented by *the identity of identity and difference*, the identity of the sensible and the intelligible. It is still too early to clarify what this truth, which we can call *poïetic*, actually is. What is important is that nothing in Romanticism has ever been able to gain access to it – and least of all, let us come back to this point, the Schlegels. The reason for this is, quite simply, that Romanticism is *more* than Schiller's negative: it is the corrosive "milieu" in which, indistinctly but irreversibly, the possibility of philosophy recognizing its own and "conserving" anything at all is dissolved, art having (finally) understood, even whilst continuing its stubborn denials, that *as such* it is no longer *of its epoch*, and has not been so for a long time. (Lacoue-Labarthe, IMP 60; original emphases)

In other words, the object of Hegel's search, the identity of identity and difference, that which he believes allows him to rise above the relativistic mess of history, is only referred to indirectly in Schiller's work. Any allusion to it remains debatable, poetic, a second-hand glimpse of the significance of philosophy, rather than a full self-realization. Schiller's claim thus having been rejected in a measured way, Lacoue-Labarthe then depicts how Hegel deals with Romanticism – this time, the rejection is more brutal. Rather than not fully stating or realizing a goal that nonetheless is also shared by Hegel, the Romantics' activities are said to actively militate against this goal. These activities are corrosive and dissolute, both epistemically and, it is implied by the strength of the terms being used, morally as well. The end result is that modern art, to which the Romantics for Hegel belong, "is no longer of its epoch, and has not been so for a long time." The modernity to which this art belongs is therefore not a category simply mirroring the ancient era; instead, it is a paradoxical epoch where time is out of joint, whose artistic productions only belong to the age insofar as they do not belong to it, which is to say loosely, without direction, by default. Art in its ancient role having passed away, modern art is the art of passing, leaving us only with passing thoughts, with the anonymity and superficiality of passers-by.

3.2 ancient art: statuary

If early German Romanticism looks nostalgically towards ancient Greek art, this does not mean that its rival, Hegel, underestimated the importance of this art. For him, it presented a full realization of everything that art was capable of (even as some tasks or roles remained impossible for art, which is one of his points of disagreement with the Romantics). In Hegel's *Æsthetics*, Greek aesthetic religion is primarily identified with statuary and its celebration of the (athletic) human form as divine or quasi-divine. Lacoue-Labarthe discusses this in terms of the questions of gender, sexuality, and the moral scandal (for Hegel) raised by the Romantic Friedrich Schlegel's novel *Lucinde* which, Lacoue-Labarthe ventriloquizes, is "an *affront to modesty* [*pudeur*]" (IMP 70; original emphasis).[14] We have already seen that the article focuses on the notions of arrival, presentation, and ultimately on Hegel's claim that "what is to be thought" might be "unpresentable." Ancient statuary intervenes at a particular moment in these debates, with the nudity of Greek male statues being contrasted by Hegel with the robed or veiled female statues. If, under the sway of the aesthetic religion then in force, art represented the actions

of spirit in the historical world, then nudity in art presents a tendency towards revelation, whilst modesty or pudeur in art displays the opposite tendency, towards withdrawal and secrecy (but also, paradoxically, the exhibition of that secrecy itself).

Lacoue-Labarthe addresses these questions in the third section of his article, titled "Immodesty: The Veil and the Figure." Here he makes it clear that Hegel does not simply take the plastic arts (and in this case statuary) to straightforwardly represent the sensible, and as such as something to be simply overcome by moving towards the spiritual. Instead, art is of interest because it represents a conflict between the sensible and the spiritual. In the first of two Hegel quotations given by Lacoue-Labarthe that we shall look at, we can read:

> if it is true that from the point of view of sensible beauty, all our preferences must be for the nude, it is nonetheless the case that sensible beauty does not represent the ultimate goal that sculpture pursues; thus the Greeks were not wrong to (re)present the majority of feminine figures as wearing clothes, whilst the majority of masculine figures were (re)-presented nude. (IMP 71)

Secondly: "'art's task is precisely to make this opposition between matter and spirit disappear, to make the body beautiful, to make this form more perfect, to animate and spiritualize it'" (IMP 71). Taken together, these passages show that art cannot simply be identified with the sensible, but instead as something like the destination of the sensible, the way that it is given force or direction. The sensible body would thus be perfected, animated, or spiritualized by art, being both itself and responsive to something beyond itself, being leavened or seasoned, and ultimately finding self-fulfilment.

On Lacoue-Labarthe's reading, Hegel therefore is not guilty of any straightforwardly sexist preference for male form (e.g., that of a naked athlete) over female form. Instead, the sexism is of a second, quite possibly more pernicious kind, consisting in the praise given to the ancient Greek practice of producing robed or veiled statues of women. In Hegel's argument, according to Lacoue-Labarthe's account, "femininity is only beautiful, in an ideal sense, when clothed, veiled, partly withdrawn from the gaze" (IMP 71). This complex gesture – about which that other interpreter of the supposedly mysterious Sphinx, Freud, would doubtless have had much to say – is in fact classically dialectical.[15] The movement of *relève* or sublation is one that both suppresses and maintains its object, removing it from present circulation or use in order to store it for later (again: the lofty Hegelian *aufheben* is also what one does, in German, to pickles or preserves). This is what happens to female nudity on Hegel's reading: it is both stored away, given over to the cause of its own spiritualization, and seemingly destined to return to haunt Hegel despite or precisely due to this sublation. For Lacoue-Labarthe, Hegel's visceral reaction to the Romantic novel *Lucinde* was due to the fact that this work leaves this sublation radically incomplete, instead opting for sexual explicitness and revelation. The technical grounds for this disapproval – if indeed we want to accept that such things can be purely technical – are that due to its emphasis on the sensible, rather than as something working towards the spiritual-in-the-sensible, the novel simply does not qualify as art. As Lacoue-Labarthe sweepingly states (to summarize Hegel's view), "modesty [*pudeur*] is the essence of art" (IMP 70). This is expanded upon shortly afterwards: "Modesty figures the figure: it is a sensible veil cast over the sensible, a negation of the negation of the spiritual, through which the spiritual begins to appear. – It is art itself" (IMP 74). For Hegel, modesty or propriety – *la pudeur* – thus allows a way of understanding the role that is proper to art, insofar as it engages with the sensible without having it as its ultimate horizon, and allows for the figure to be figured in a self-referentiality or *mise-en-abyme*.

Whilst Lacoue-Labarthe, with his sympathies for the Romantics, certainly does much to suggest that Hegel's reaction to *Lucinde* might be reducible to a straightforward sense of moral disapproval, he also reaches for a more properly philosophical way of

understanding the episode. He rejects the notion of representation as a category based on metaphysical, binary logic, whereby there are some things that have form, and others that do not, with the latter being able to instantiate themselves in and through the former. Instead of such a view, Lacoue-Labarthe is sceptical regarding the existence of any pure thematic- or content-matter that, from the outside, could come to inhabit form. Picking up the terms of robing and veiling that he has been discussing with Hegel's account of statuary as part of Greek aesthetic religion, he writes that:

> The ethical scandal will always have been, in reality, an æsthetic scandal, *the scandal of æsthetics*, which like all scandals in the eyes of Knowledge and Spirit, unveiled that *there was nothing to unveil*. Or at least that it is possible that there might be nothing to unveil. In unveiling the figure in its self-sufficiency, in *showing* Venus, – in showing that Venus has nothing to hide, but that she is simply exhibiting herself (for the sake of doing so) and that that is enough for her beauty (that is enough in order for beauty to exist), æsthetics will have come close to definitively giving the figural over to immodesty. (Lacoue-Labarthe, IMP 86; original emphases)

On this view, there is nothing truly external to art or the world, and therefore nothing that can subsequently make an appearance in that art or world, and ultimately very little substance in the category of appearance itself. If there is anything to be found there, it doubtless lies in a secondary or zero-degree definition whereby any revelation is a revelation of nothing.[16] This is precisely what, he argues, so irked Hegel: the fact that this episode unveiled that "there was nothing to unveil." More than this, Lacoue-Labarthe states that this scandal is the scandal of æsthetics itself. This is to say that this entire area of philosophy (and the one that represented the day jobs of both Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, as professors of æsthetics) would be constructed without reference to any particular subject-matter that it would attempt to reveal (it would be, as it were, a theology with no creed). This is quite different to Hegel's view of æsthetics as the gradually unfolding drama of the self-realization or fulfilment of spirit. Because the alienation of spirit is ultimately overcome, this spirit can be classed as a sort of caffeine hit that the historical dialectic ultimately delivers. By contrast to this unfolding drama, Lacoue-Labarthe prefers to offer a freely associated series of female figures including Antigone, the Sphinx, and robed Greek statues, and ultimately concluding with the contented self-presence of Venus in her immodest beauty.[17] The claim made, over and against Hegel, by the Romantics and by Lacoue-Labarthe in their wake, is not simply that the sensible serves to slow or interrupt the dialectical realization of spirit, but instead that the sensible must play a full role in the new mythology, founded on beauty as truth and truth as beauty.

4 conclusion: "the gleam of her self-conscious eye"

We have sought to unpack two associated readings of Hegel's views on "æsthetic religion," having broadly summarized the latter with the phrase *art was, but is not*. The first reading was Nancy's, which focused on the mechanism by which art had been said to pass on the work of the spirit to other, better-equipped discourses. For Nancy, this linear temporality needs to be deconstructed, and this passing-on is in fact "infinitely sustained," constituting a middle or milieu in which we are still, and always, located. When taken together with the additional aspect of the fruits presented by the young girl representing mortality, this comes to resemble a (post-)Heideggerian, even existentialist reading: we are always already and always still dying, a situation in which art can help us "consen[t] to death, consent to existence."

The second reading of the view that *art was, but is not* is that of Lacoue-Labarthe. Dramatizing the interaction between Hegel and contemporary Romantic thinkers, he too presents art as associated with nothingness – a dissolution or lack of substantiality that Hegel was at pains

to cover up, but which the Romantics embraced in a more mindful way. For both the question of form was key, the disagreement arising over whether one emphasizes the march towards and into self-fulfilment in, through, and ultimately beyond form; or whether one instead remains haunted by the absurdity of creation *ex nihilo*, a haunting that nonetheless pushes Romanticism towards its programmatic aspect.[18]

As a final thought, let us return to the figure of the young girl bearing fruit as it is used by Hegel to characterize art's passing: the passage from a world in which art was governed by the Muses and (allegedly) played a plenary role in society. In the same section of the *Phenomenology* quoted in our epigraph, Hegel writes:

> the young girl who presents us the plucked fruits as a gift is more than the nature that immediately provided them, more than the nature that unfurls into their conditions and elements, into the trees, air, light, etc., while in a higher way she gathers all this together into the gleam of her self-conscious eye and her offertory gesture; just as she is more than that nature, so too the spirit of the fate that provides us with those works of art is more than the ethical life and actuality of that people, for it is the inwardizing-recollecting of the spirit in them that was still alienated.[19]

This seems in fact to contradict the gloss we saw Nancy giving to the figure of the girl – namely, that she "has no existence other than that of the fruits that she presents" (M 96). We can recall that this was Nancy's jumping-off point for his reflections on existence and mortality, with the detachment of the fruits from the tree – i.e., that of the arts from the civic life that nourished them – forming an irreversible step, quite possibly a tragic one. In Hegel's text, however, the fruits are detached from the tree only to be framed in an alternative setting: the girl "gathers all this together into the gleam of her self-conscious eye […] the spirit of the fate that provides us with those works of art […] is the inwardizing-recollecting of the spirit in them that was still alienated." In other words, the detachment of the fruits is no tragedy but instead a fitting end. The fruits want to be eaten and the æsthetic religion wants to be overcome: which is to say that ancient Greek æsthetic religion does not merely service the needs of its social setting, but by doing so, drives the spirit of history forwards, producing the dialectic.

Hegel's dramatization of art's passing in the figure of the girl shows that he is not just a forger of concepts, someone deaf to the charms of literature.[20] Rather than a stiffly allegorical figure, the girl bearing fruit is a beguiling one. Her gleaming eye gives life to the dynamics of presentation themselves, drawing attention away from whatever the existence, properties or characteristics of the fruits (i.e., the arts) might be, and instead causes us to question what proto-psychoanalytical game of projection and transference, good objects and bad objects, we are playing when we discuss ancient art. This is to say that she causes the gaze we cast upon the fruit to become problematic: perhaps it is not always or not only the other who wallows in mythology while we rest assured of our logical objectivity.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy react to such epistemic unsettledness in different ways: for the former, it is not clear that we have ever fully purged our discourse of the patterns of piety and observance usually ascribed to religious thinking; he writes of modern literature's self-conceptualization as a "'new mythology,'" with its "endless procession of priests and sectaries, mystics and martyrs, clerics and inquisitors, accursed and apostates, soldier-monks and heretics, prophets, saints and schismatics, blasphemers and profanes."[21] In short, he writes, "the entire Church repeated itself in Literature, as well as all the ancient forms of worship."[22] Here we see the importance of Romanticism for him – ultimately, all modern literature, knowingly or not, falls into a paradigm seized on at Jena.

With Nancy, on the other hand, his work provides a formidable resource for rethinking the triad of tree, fruit, and girl (i.e., ancient society, its æsthetic religion, and the way it is presented or comes down to us). It is beyond

the capacities of this essay to say whether in sabotaging the transcendence of the spiritual he gives an outsized role to the materiality of the world and/or art, or whether he ultimately follows Hegel in seeing the entirety of modern (i.e., post-classical) art as a Christian phenomenon based on a structure of incarnation. It remains important to note that close readers of his work have found reason to suspect it of something like a new materialism.[23] Nonetheless, his insistence on a metaphorics of space – opening, stretching, folding, touching, moving – means that his work can be of great assistance as we attempt to think outside linearity and beyond the economy of ends.

echo by jean-luc nancy

With its often-refined language, it is rather difficult for me to find my way into this text – although I believe I can roughly follow the reading and analysis of Hegel's "young girl carrying fruit." I must say that, since the period in which I wrote the texts so well examined by John McKeane, this young girl has often continued to give me food for thought. I think I did not pay enough attention to the very gesture by which Hegel extracted a figure – very concretely – , from a book of engravings depicting the frescoes of Pompeii (a book I have seen a copy of). I commented on the figure itself without dwelling on the fact that Hegel spotted and retained it. Yet, it is a work of art in question (its exact historical and artistic connection with the great classical Greek art, especially sculpture). It is itself a work of the art, which it thus not merely presents as preservation of the past, but also as the very presence of the bearer of offerings. Priestess of a new cult – that of the museum, which is not described without irony, with its libation of dust – the young girl nevertheless fulfils a real office, and thus in some way a real presentation that is, together with that of the fruits, I repeat, that of the young girl herself. Undeniably, she finds a real presence there and her image in the museum animates a graceful movement that catches the eye of the philosopher. She catches it precisely by way of her own "self-conscious eye," making her a spiritual principle, as Hegel says. But what he does not say is that it is itself an artwork – an artwork of the past preserved and reproduced, much more so than a document, for it communicates to us an "interiorisation," Hegel says, of the art's spirit. This young girl forms a kind of intermediary between the sculptures of classical art and the person of Christ. This can be understood both as a succession in the surpassing of art and as the preservation (and the taking over?) by the memory of art right up to the edge of "revealed religion," in which – as we know from the *Aesthetics*, even if it is absent from the *Phenomenology* – art will be no less present.

This extension can only be made on the basis of Hegel's outlook on a bearer of offerings drawn after a fresco from Pompeii: on the basis of an aesthetic (and sentimental-erotic) emotion thus, experienced at the heart of thought busy overcoming the aesthetic. And in Hegel, much else bears witness to this emotion …

This is the extension I propose to John McKeane, or at least to his project, to thank him for having, in his turn, awakened the young girl in us.

disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 Hegel §753, 432.

2 The following statement can be found in Hegel's work: "For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth procures existence for itself" in *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 103.

3 Nancy, *Les Muses* 75 (trans. by Peggy Kamuf as *The Muses*). Future references to this French edition will be abbreviated M. Due to this piece

being finished during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020, this is my translation, as are all those that follow, unless stated otherwise.

4 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy; amongst other texts, see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, "Noli me frangere" (1982) collected in Nancy, *Demande: Littérature et philosophie* (trans. by Robert Bononno as *Expectation: Philosophy, Literature*).

5 Lacoue-Labarthe, "L'imprésentable" 53–95 (63; future references will bear the abbreviation IMP). Lacoue-Labarthe also writes that:

> the "application" to art of the Fichtean principle of the absoluteness of the (abstract) self means that "nothing appears to have any proper value but only that imprinted on it by the subjectivity of the self." In the same way, the Romantic artist's transformation, setting-in-form, figuration, or even fictioning (*Gestaltung*, *Bildung*, etc.), of his life leads to something that cannot be "taken seriously." (IMP 62)

6 Ibid.

7 Nancy, "*Menstruum universale*: La dissolution littéraire" (1977), *Demande*, op. cit. (trans. by Robert Bononno as "*Menstruum universale*: Literary Dissolution," *Expectation*, op. cit.).

8 Nancy, "La jeune fille qui succède aux Muses (la naissance hégélienne des arts)," *Les Muses*; "The Young Girl who Succeeds the Muses (the Hegelian Birth of the Arts)," *The Muses*, op. cit., 41–55.

9 On the confluence of aesthetics and phenomenology, see Nancy, *The Pleasure of Drawing*:

> Drawing is not a given, available, formed form. On the contrary, it is the gift, invention, appearance, or birth of form. "That a form comes" is drawing's formula, and this formula implies at the same time the desire for and the anticipation of form. (3; trans. mod.)

10 Other discussions of the topic can be found in Heikkilä 26–28 and James 202–30.

11 See also James's discussion of "Le Portrait de l'art en jeune fille" ("Portrait of Art as a Young Girl"), in *The Fragmentary Demand* 206ff.

12 Such is the interpretation given of Nancy's (modern) aesthetics by Martta Heikkilä: "Just as there is no being in general but only the singular existence of existing things, there is no art 'in general' which would grant a uniqueness or a unity of origin to art" (26).

13 Jacques Rancière also mentions the fruits' detachment:

> The young girl of whom Hegel speaks, the one who succeeds the Muses, offers us the fruits picked from the tree, the veiled memory, "without effectiveness," of the life that carried the artworks. But, precisely, these works are such only because their world, the world of nature fulfilling itself in culture, *is* no longer, or perhaps never *was*, except in the retrospection of thought. (13; original emphasis)

14 He also contrasts the social experiments informing *Lucinde* with Hegel's view of marriage:

> We should not understand the "substantiality of marriage" to mean anything other, ultimately, than the "intellectual and moral" attribution, for the two sexes, of their respective roles, which is to say that these roles are subject to a *relève* – the suppression, retention, elevation, spiritualization and humanization within a living unity that actively produces meaning, of the natural difference of the sexes. (Lacoue-Labarthe, IMP 66)

15 Freud received for his fiftieth birthday a medallion with his own bust on one side, and on the other Œdipus and the Sphinx, with the legend in Sophocles's Greek "he who knew the famous riddles and was a most powerful man." See Armstrong 52.

16 See Nancy in *The Pleasure of Drawing*: "Beautiful form – that is, *drawing* […] [in the] sense of what *draws itself* – opens a revelation. Revelation is quite different from the appearance of something that was hidden. It is, rather, the appearance of what was never hidden" (105; original emphasis).

17 On Venus's unexpected appearance in Lacoue-Labarthe's text, Marta B. Helfer comments:

> is this Aphrodite, this tutelary goddess of aesthetics, the *necessary* figure for the scandal of the æsthetic? Does this figure perhaps repeat or mime a little too programmatically the Hegelian, "phallogocentric" identification of woman with the sensuous, the fictional, the

> narcissistic – that is, the hypersubjective, which is to say, the scandalous? (112)

18 See Antoine Berman's study of German Romantic thought through the lens of translation. He writes:

> through *Bildung* an individual, a people, a nation, but also a language, a literature, a work of art in general are formed and thus acquire a form, a *Bild*. *Bildung* is always a movement toward a form, *one's own form* – which is to say that, in the beginning, every being is deprived of *its* form. (Berman 43–44; original emphases)

19 Hegel §753.

20 The topos of finding one's argument against Hegel already legislated for in his works appears in Michel Foucault:

> to really escape Hegel presupposes […] taking the measure of how far the recourse we have against him is also, again, perhaps one more trick that he plays on us and which, after it has gone its course, we find him waiting, immobile and elsewhere. (75)

21 Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Agony of Religion" 66–67.

22 Ibid. 67.

23 See Derrida.

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