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Prose and Life. A Comparison between Hegel's Aesthetics and Romantic's Poetics

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ABSTRACT. This paper will elucidate and expose two different concepts of prose and to compare them. The first concept is the one that Hegel provides in the *Aesthetics*. The second is the concept that can be extracted from the Early German Romanticism, especially from their reflections upon the nature of novel. My aim is to lay the basis for further analysis on the strong relations between life and art, especially literature, in the German Idealism.

1. Introduction

The following paper will show the fundamental connection between a historical concept of life (i.e. the modern social life determined in a broad sense by economical drive) and the concept of prose. Specifically, I will compare the different perspectives on prose in Early German Romanticism (i.e. the Romanticism of Jena, reunited around the Schlegel brothers) and Hegel's *Aesthetics*.

Before I begin, at least two considerations are to be made:

- a) The first consideration is related to the object of the paper. One could ask: "Why would a concept of life be theoretically important for the modern theory of literature?". An exhaustive

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answer to this question would be too long for the limit of a talk². So, I would like to just say two brief and far from conclusive words about this issue. Early German Romanticism brings about the first modern literary theory, a theory freed from the mimetic prejudice and canonical judgment of Aristotle's *Poetics*. One of the strongest impulses of this revolutionary process comes from a development of the Kantian system. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant seeks to bridge the strong division between epistemological knowledge and practical action that he had previously sharpened. The third *Critique* is devoted to aesthetic and teleological judgment. The work of art is here conceived as a production, an action guided by concepts and rules, but, at the same time, it camouflages this production, presenting itself as a free and spontaneous natural product. The work of art inverts the terms and blurs the division between the necessity of knowledge and the possibility of freedom. The active moment of artistic creation follows a conceptual rule, nonetheless the work of art appears as a free play for our reflexive judgment. The stage for this inversion is set by the existence of "genius". Genius creates genuine works of art by adding, somewhat magically, spirit to its product. Now, Kant defines the spirit as the harmonious interplay between imagination and understanding (an interplay that can invert the schematic separation constructed by the first and the second *Critiques*). This interplay is said to animate the product of

²For an introduction to this topic, see: Campe, 2011, pp. 53-66.

genius and to exhibit what is a priori inexpressible, i.e. the idea. The spirit makes the work of genius a work of art: "Spirit, in an aesthetic significance, means the animating principle in the mind [...]. Now, I maintain that this principle is nothing other than the faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas; by an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible" (Kant, 2001, p. 192). Presentation and animation (I wish to underline this last feature, as it has always been the first attribute of life) become the specific difference that helps distinguish a mechanical work of repetition from the free and creative work of art. Imagination has put a sparkle of life and freedom in the mechanical logic of intellectual rules. Art and life do not simply share some analogies, they present the same teleological inner structure. The presentation of the aesthetic ideas is proportional to an intensification of the spirit intended as the animating principle in the mind or, as we could more easily say, an intensification of its vitality. For Kant, the most communicative form is language and thus poetry becomes the model for each vital work of art. Kant leaves the younger generation of thinkers a concept of poetry in which they will find a secret place to overturn the rigid limit of his system and give birth to ideas in the liveliest manner.

b) The second consideration that I would like to make before getting to the heart of the matter is a methodological one. Usually, comparisons between Hegel and Early Romanticism discuss Hegel's strong criticism of Schlegel's concept of irony. The development of an analysis from that standpoint has strong philological reasons, but it will almost necessarily lead to a theoretical *cul de sac*. Irony is related to knowledge, but the logical form of knowledge plays different roles in the Romantic's theories and Hegel's Idealism, because they solve the problems raised by the Kantian systems in opposite way. While the Romantics strive to increase indefinitely the subjective power of the productive imagination and the reflexive intellectual consciousness at the same time, Hegel undermines the intellectual faculty of the empirical subject and poses the ground of his system in the historical and dialectical movement of Spirit which fulfills reason's Idea. Commenting on the relations between these two positions, one faces a choice: either one recognizes the flaw of subjectivity still present in the pseudo-dialectical thinking of romantic irony as a pioneer for the full-grown dialectic of Hegel – which is what Szondi holds (Szondi, 1974) – or, in opposition to the Hegelian dialectic, one considers it as a pure linguistic rhetorical device without any possible connections with a reflexively epistemological mind – i.e. the solution of deconstruction theorists like De Man (De Man, 1996).

For the reasons I've tried to briefly explain with this consideration, I hope that comparing these two different perspectives, not from a logical point of view, but from the less severe regions of literature will avoid that strong opposition between these two interpretations and may establish a shared ground on which they can converge. That's why I will focus the comparison on the concept of prose. Now, this hope appears to be a false one. The romantic manifesto affirms the reunion of poetry and prose in the yet to-come progressive poetry. It aims "to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical" (Schlegel, 1971, p. 175). On the contrary, Hegel strikes this movement of fusion by putting, at the beginning of his consideration of poetry, a strong line of argument in order to distinguish the poetic from the prosaic treatment of the linguistic material, and then to separate poetry, as an authentic form of art, from prose, that could be only partially and reluctantly considered as an artistic product (Hegel, 1975, pp.973-978). Nonetheless, in this particular case, the contradiction doesn't emerge on the epistemological level, but rather the aesthetic one. It could be defined as the opposition between a romantic vision of art versus a classicist one. Yet, Hegel's view of poetry as the spiritual synthesis of the partitions between different arts and different ages, as "*universal art*" (Hegel, 1975, p. 967), does not permit an historical evaluation, and, for this reason, the concept of prose is not limited to the decadence of beauty in the romantic age, but it menaces the true art of poetry in each stage of its dialectical development. Within Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* (to be sure, as we can

read it from Hotho's edition), in its final recapitulation through poetry and through its prosaic leftover, there is a glimmer of possibility to move over the contradiction between Hegel and the Romantics.

2. Hegel's Concept of Prose

In light of these considerations, it is worth scrutinizing the Hegelian concept of prose. Hegel uses the term prose and its derivation in two different ways:

a) The first one is the common use of the word "prose" as the antonym of poetry. Ultimately, prose is defined as the form of writing and speech that doesn't employ verse, and in which language is not used in a figurative manner. (Etymologically speaking, "prose" comes from the Latin "*prorsus*", an adjective that means "straight ahead", something without the possibility of turning back, and, for sure, not capable of going *a capo*). In that sense, for Hegel prosaic language touches the superior limit of Art and achieves to become the spiritual vehicle of spirit. "Prose of thought" becomes the linguistic means for the spiritual end, superior to art, of total knowledge (Hegel, 1975, p.89).

b) The second way in which Hegel uses the term defines the historical situation of the development of the spirit in the world, that situation in which the spirit is alienated from its natural and unmediated existence. Some references for that usage are the well-known expressions "prose of the world",

“prose of human existence”, “prose of life”, “prose of actual nature”, “poverty of nature and prose”.

The alienation of the spirit, as always in Hegel, gains a natural aspect, the appearance of a being that is not yet fully realized in its concept. This naturalness and this separation from the spiritual movement is relevant here because it introduces us to the common feature that grants his Hegelian usage. In Hegel's philosophy, “Prose” and “prosaic” defines something that always lacks autonomy and which is always the means for something else. Their meaning is a concept which needs a relation to something else to be defined; which is not real because it misses the act of being realized, i.e. an intellectual abstraction in Hegel's view. Indeed, Hegel conceives the understanding³ as the abstract distinction between the knowing limited subject and the known object. The aim of the dialectical logic is precisely to surpass this distinction. Prose is the language form in which understanding speaks, it is the expression of the “isolated living” of the abstract individuality (Hegel, 1975, p. 150). (That's the standpoint from which to see the coherence of the attack that Hegel moves against Schlegel. According to him, Schlegel's “‘poetry of poetry’ proved itself to be the flattest prose” (Hegel, 1975, p. 296), as an intellectualism which shows the imperfect subjective-oriented idealism of Romanticism. Romantics can't see reality as it really is, but only understand it as void reflection, unrelated objectivity that could only be treated ironically). As it comes from the work of mere

³ For the use of the English term “Understanding” for “*Verstand*” I refer myself to the clear and explicative argument given by Pinkard in his ‘Translator's note’ to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 2018, pp. xlii-xliv).

understanding, and not from the pure immanent presence of the absolute Spirit, prose is not to be considered as a genuine form of art in Hegel's system. When we search for the role of the understanding within the whole system, we find that it's always characterized as the provisional knowledge of finitude that mostly pertains to Kantian philosophy. In the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel says:

It is first with Kant that the difference between the understanding and reason has been emphasized in a definite way and set down in such manner that the former has the finite and the conditioned as an object and the latter the infinite and the unconditioned. [...] Still, we should not stop short at this negative result and reduce the unconditioned nature of reason to the merely abstract identity with itself that excludes difference. Insofar as reason is regarded in this way merely as stepping out beyond the finite and conditioned character of the understanding, by this means it is in fact itself downgraded to something finite and conditioned, for the true infinite is not merely on the far side of the finite, but instead contains the finite as sublated within it. (Hegel, 2010, pp. 89-90)

The systematic collocation of the understanding is the last section of the chapter on consciousness within the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and, albeit with some relevant cuts, this position is kept in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, too. The section of the *Phenomenology* dedicated to understanding contains the passage between the consciousness and the self-consciousness. In some particularly complex reflections, Hegel shows how the understanding, knowing the finite differences of the phenomenal world

from the universal point of view of the law, presupposes a concept of infinity. The understanding doesn't recognize the contradiction between finite and infinite, but an absolute concept of infinity contradicts its epistemological structure. This still partial and insufficient concept – because still determined through the empirical experience – is “to be called the simple essence of life” (Hegel, 2018, pp. 96-100) from a philosophical point of view. Here we don't have time for a detailed analysis, but, simplifying a bit, we can state that the concept of prose is connected to that impossible intuition of unmediated life through the faculty of understanding. This partial concept of life allows the transition from the static and positive knowledge of the consciousness, to the active and negative one of the self-consciousness. At this point, the unity of life is not yet conceived in the dialectical movement of the absolute spirit, in which art found its place in Hegel's system, but rather it is being experienced as something naturally given in the abstract isolation of a primitive empirical subject.

As an additional evidence to this line of argument we could make this remark: in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* the subject, that works as the means for others, is the servant. Some years later in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, talking about the fables and Aesop, Hegel affirms: “In the slave, prose begins, and so this entire species is prosaic too” (Hegel, 1975, 387). To be sure, the referent for “slave” is here Aesop and for “entire species” is “fables”, but still there's a hint of the condition of the servant. In the reign of art, Hegel banishes the labour of work. Art cannot speak about the inevitable economic nature of the empiric human relationship and that could explain why he speaks of the romance as a “modern popular epic” (Hegel, 1975, 1092), a prosaic form that signs the limit where art continues beyond

its conceptual end: a form of art that doesn't correspond to its concept anymore. We could say: novel, as intellectual and abstract art, is a form of art born dead, if we hazard modifying a bit the well-known adagio. This could even clarify why some Marxist authors, as Lukács or Benjamin, focus their aesthetic reflections on the problem raised by the novel and literature in its truly prosaic form. In fact, the way we think the relationship between life, work and art, could define a paradigm that exemplify the way we had thought modern social life in its entirety.

3. Romantic's Concept of Prose

Now we must briefly elucidate why both Lukács and Benjamin have reconsidered the Romanticism's heritage to improve a concept of prosaic literature that is able to criticize the aesthetic theory of Hegel. Twenty years before Hegel's *Aesthetics*, Romanticism has assigned a major role to the novel in its theory of literature. Here, putting aside all other enriching interpretations that this movement provokes, we must address two questions: a) What is the concept of prose developed by the Early German Romanticism; b) What are the connections between this concept and the concept of life.

a) Firstly, we must admit that speaking of a unitarian concept of prose for the Romantics is an act of interpretation. Even if we consider a strictly limited period, e.g. the last five years of 18th Century, each author has his or her personal view upon the question raised by a conceptualization of the novel as the paradigmatic romantic genre and its consequence for the

distinction between poetry and prose⁴. Furthermore, even these individual reflections are far from conclusive or steady. However, to ease the situation, we can refer to Novalis, the romantic writer who has the deepest concern with the questions posed by the concept of prose and take his thoughts as paradigmatic for all the romantic group. In discrepancy with Hegel, the Romantics do not conceive prose as the antonym of poetry, but rather as its hypernym. Prose is the substance, the idea (Benjamin, 1996, p. 173), from which poetry stems. In the most paradoxical formulation: "Poesy is prose among the arts" (Novalis, 2007, p.57). In the same way in which poetry sums up all the forms of art, prose contains poetry as the indifferent state from which the rhythm and the verse pour out. Nonetheless prose is still a concept and not a pure chaos in which everything gets lost in everything. We must not fall into the false belief, promoted by Hegelian criticism and by historical tradition, that Early Romanticism is sort of individualism or a pure form of nihilism (Norman, 2000, pp. 131-144). Early German Romanticism is neither defined by the abandon of reason to the pure sentiment of the undifferentiated unity. On the contrary, we can schematize Novalis conception of prose as a progress of artistic and historical consciousness. In that scheme prose acquires two different meanings: aa) Metaphorically speaking prose could be seen as the noise from where the chant of poetry emerges, as a negative concept of common prose, i.e. as an unmediated beginning; bb) but there's a higher concept of prose. It originates from such a mastering of poetry that reunites the first prose and poetry in a poetic-prose. The prose of the world can become poetic in so far as the penetration inside its nature is fulfilled with a balanced spirit of

poetry. The imperative of making the world romantic (Novalis, 1997, p.60) must be seen as the accomplishment of this higher concept of prose in its application to ordinary life, i.e. the first negative concept. In a letter to August Schlegel, Novalis writes: "If poetry wishes to extend itself, it can do so only by limiting itself ... It will acquire a prosaic look.' But, Novalis continues, 'it remains poetry and hence faithful to the essential laws of its nature ... Only the mixture of its elements is without rule; the order of these, their relation to the whole, is still the same [...] It becomes poetry of the infinite'" (Novalis in Benjamin, 1996, p. 174).

b) Let me now address the second question, i.e. the one concerning the connections between the concept of prose and the concept of life. While addressing the first question, we've already introduced a relationship between the concept of prose and the concept of life, since the higher stage of prose is a potential returning to the prose of life that defines the common prose. The reunion of poetry and prose in a multiplicity of rhythm that doesn't lose its unity in the infinite understanding of prose, means that every reality could blossom under the poetic eye, everything can be written in the Novel, in which all the genres become one in the romantic universal poetry of prose. But still it's impossible to tell whether this Novel could be realized or not. The model of the novel was *Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre* for the Romantics. But the Romantics found it difficult to converge in one judgement. While Schlegel salutes *Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre* as a novel of formation which has the aim to represent an education to the art of life (Schlegel, 1984a, p.61), Novalis, after a first enthusiasm, disdains it as a mere economic pedagogy, as prose that remains common prose. He even writes in a fragment around 1800 a defense of the novel against the terrible

consequence that Meister's analysis could have for the genre. Novalis and Schlegel diverge in judging Goethe's novel, but they converge in their ideal of the Novel. This ideal prose possesses an intensity that couldn't possibly be actualized in the real world. I quote from Schlegel *Letter about the Novel*: "Yet I appreciate all of the so-called novels to which my idea of romantic form is altogether inapplicable, according to the amount of self-reflection and represented life they contain" (Schlegel, 1984b, p. 79). And now I quote from Novalis: "Meister ends with the synthesis of antinomy – because it's written by and for the understanding. [...] Life must not be a novel that is given to us, but one that is made by us" (Novalis, 1997, p. 66). This impossibility to become actual of the art that consider life in its prosaic form, this permanent potentiality, that Hegel fiercely criticizes, may indicate that the solution would be impossible to find at the level of artistic production. Benjamin would say that the Idea of prose is to find in a redemptive history of the oppressed, in the attentive and rapid listening of the continued lament of the natural, prosaic life. That's radical, but possible. In any case, we should say that: if art cannot resolve the whole question of the prosaic within its proper limit, still it must dovetail with it and insist in representing it, until the real solution will be reached and there will be no need for a beautiful transfiguration of the world.

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