

# **A Revision of Paul de Man's Reading of *Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics***

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*ABSTRACT: In this paper, I would like to explore the position of the concepts sign and symbol in Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of art. After a brief introduction to Hegel's Kunstformenlehre, with particular emphasis on the symbolic – the first of the three art forms – I will critically examine Paul de Man's understanding of sign and symbol in Hegel. I will continue by mapping de Man's understanding of both terms onto Hegel's corresponding definitions in Enzyklopädie III. The knowledge gained in this process will be applied to a renewed reading of the passages on the symbolic in various lecture notes and transcripts from the semesters 1820–1829. It will be shown that the symbolic indicates a far-reaching relevance of the concept of the sign in Hegel's philosophy of art. My approach aims to support and supplement de Man's reading.*

## **Prelude**

The true protagonists of this story are two closely intertwined concepts – that of the sign and that of the symbol. We will take more than just one step back from the linguistic and semiotic developments and definitions in 20th and 21st century philosophies, as well as from the discourses on symbolic forms in the tradition of Ernst Cassirer, and take a closer look at what

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Peter Szondi called a “great disappointment” (c. f. Szondi 1974, p. 390, translation L.v.L.) – namely Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s examination of the symbolic in his philosophy of art.

However, the plot of this story is not carried forward by Hegel and Szondi, but by Hegel and Paul de Man – the latter of whom questions Szondi’s aforementioned statement in his own examination of Hegel’s philosophy of art (c. f. de Man 1997, pp. 94 ff.). It is a story full of detours, of which only a brief summary can be given here, yet at whose edges abysses will open up. Sign and symbol will appear in different guises and lights, and the course of events will at times be violent. Let us embark on a search for unification and differentiation, and hope that we do not stray too far from the path...

## **1. Act one: the Starting Point: the three Artforms in Hegel’s Philosophy of Art<sup>2</sup>**

Before proceeding down this path, for those who have not yet ventured into the realm of Hegel’s philosophy of art, some of its areas should be outlined. This is a daring undertaking, because, indeed, it seems that Hegel’s philosophy of art is full of contingencies, nearly uncontrollable and simply *überkomplex* (c. f. Hilmer 1997, p. 3; Horstmann 1984, p. 253; Luhmann 1994, p. 45 f.). However, the question of the position of the sign and the symbol in Hegel’s philosophy of art favours a narrowing of the scope of consideration: namely, to those passages that are probably most relevant to current attempts to update Hegel’s philosophy of art: Hegel’s *Kunstformenlehre*, which Hegel, throughout the years of lecturing, assigns to different sections of his philosophy of art (Hilmer 1997, pp. 124 f.), which is only one example of the various changes, reconceptualisations and shifts that Hegel conducted over the course of his lectures.

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<sup>2</sup> Over the past decades, the Hegel Archive at Ruhr University Bochum has initiated a series of editions that supplement the widely acclaimed three-volume edition of Hegel’s lectures on philosophy of art by Hegel’s student Heinrich Gustav Hotho (published in Germany by Suhrkamp as *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I – III*). Those editions document post- and transcripts by Hegel’s students during the semesters of 1821–1829 – amongst them also one by Hotho. Partly fragmentary, these documents of Hegel’s lectures form an open text corpus that encourages new approaches to Hegel’s aesthetics. Quotations in this paper are mainly taken from these lecture documents of the semesters 1821–1829. In order to make the semester cited and the author of the transcript visible in the references within the main text, I have decided not to cite the lecture documents in the form (*author, year of publication, page*), instead of (*authors, year of lecture, page*). For example, in the case of Karl Gustav Julius von Griesheim’s transcript from 1826 and published in 2018, the reference will not be cited in the form corresponding to the publication date (*Hegel 2018, page*) but as (*Hegel/Griesheim 1826, page*). When referring to the entire text corpus composed of the various trans- and postscripts, I will speak, for instance, of *Hegel’s aesthetics*, *Hegel’s philosophy of art* or simply *Hegel’s lectures*. The Hotho-edition will be cited in the form (*VÄ I – III, page*) and referred to as *Hotho’s edition* in the main text. All Hegel-quotations will be in German.

The *Kunstformenlehre* contains the conceptual differentiation of art into three distinct forms: the symbolic, the classic and the Romantic.<sup>3</sup> The three art forms represent three different “Weisen der Kunst” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, 34). Each of these art forms is based on a specific “Verhältnis des Begriffs in betreff seines In-die-Realität-Eingebildetwerdens” (ibid.). It becomes clear how closely the three art forms are linked to Hegel’s concept of art itself, since Hegel defines the aesthetic *Ideal* (*das kunstphilosophische Ideal*) as the complete “Einheit des Begriffs und der Realität” – and exactly this *Einheit* is then again “der Begriff der Kunst selbst” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 202). This coincides with Hegel’s definition of art as the first form of *absolute spirit* in the last section of the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* – and the related formulation of the artwork as the concrete “Gestalt der Schönheit” (Enz III, §556, p. 367).

Whereas for Kant, *Ideal* remains an object of imagination, a “Richtmaß der Vernunft” (KrV II, B 598, 599) *that exists only in thought* (c. f. also KdU, B 55), Hegel responds: “Man muß vom Idealen nicht glauben, das [sic!] es ein bloßes Jenseits sey” (Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1820/21, p. 38). Rather, according to Hegel, *Ideal* is “aus dem subjektiven Geist geborene[] konkrete[] Gestalt” (Enz III, § 556, p. 367) – the *convergence* of *Begriff* and *Realität*, of *Sinnliches* and *Allgemeines*, brought about in the artistic process. *Ideal* turns out to be the realisation and embodiment of *Idee* in the sensory reality of the artwork.

Let us now take a detour into the three *Kunstformen* to discover the respective relations between *Begriff* and *Realität* in each form to gain a better understanding of the status of the symbolic.

### 1.1. The Symbolic

The symbolic, as the first of the three forms, is a complicated and contradictory and inadequate constellation of *Begriff* and *Realität* (c. f. Hilmer 1997, p. 146). This inadequacy appears as an aporia, which consists in a radical difference between an indeterminate content to be represented and a particular sensory shape in which this content is supposed to manifest (c. f.

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<sup>3</sup> The Romantic refers in Hegel’s lectures to post-Hellenian, Roman, Christian art (c. f. de Man 1997, 93; Stekeler 2023, 102).

Rinaldi 2023, 87). We note that in this context, *content* and *Begriff* overlap just as much as *sensory shape* and *Realität*.

In all semesters, the *content* in the symbolic is described as infinite, *unbestimmt*, immeasurable, boundless or abstract (c. f. Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1820/21, p. 18; Hegel/Hotho 1823, pp. 34 f.; Hegel/Griesheim 1826, pp. 556 f.; Hegel/Pfordten 1826, p. 67; Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 938). However, the sensory appearance of an artwork – the artwork as a *Gestalt* – generally implies finiteness, determination and limitation (c.f. Rinaldi 2023, p. 87).<sup>4</sup> And a *Gestalt* that would be appropriate, adequate and corresponding to an infinite content/*Begriff* would itself have to be infinite, *unbestimmt* and *maßlos*: “[D]ieses Äußerliche [the sensory shape] soll dem Unbestimmten angemessen sein, und zum Maaßlosen und Unermeßlichen gesteigert sein” (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 938, addition L.v.L.). However, such a sensory shape does not exist: “Dies Unendliche ist hier aber das Abstrakte, dem angemessen keine sinnliche Gestalt ist” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 35). A specific striving (c. f. Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 938) determines the symbolic: symbolic art performs the search for *Werkeinheit*. However, this search remains unfulfilled: “Die Idee sucht sich erst ihre Gestaltung und Form – die Gestalt ist noch außer ihr, der sinnliche Stoff überhaupt ihr noch nicht adäquat” (Hegel/Pfordten 1826, 67; c. f. Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 35).<sup>5</sup> We see how the symbolic differs from the convergence of *Begriff*/content and *Realität*/shape typical of the aesthetic *Ideal* (c. f. chapter 1). In contrast to this, the classic is defined as “völlige[s] Adäquatseyn des Begriffs und der Realität” (Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1820/21, p. 19).

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<sup>4</sup> According to Hegel, the “fundamentum distinctionis” is to be found “in the sensual, i. e. empirical material of the artwork” (Rinaldi 2023, p. 61, translation L.v.L.). However, *Sinnlichkeit* is defined sufficiently broadly here, which is particularly relevant for the Romantic. The materiality of artworks is not limited to visual arts: elements such as immaterial, imaginative images, for example, are understood as artistic and creative material as well. On this subject, Hegel states: “Die Kunst bedarf zu den von ihr zu produzierenden Anschauungen [...] eines äußerlichen und gegebenen Materials, worunter auch die subjektiven Bilder und Vorstellungen gehören” (Enz III, § 558, p. 368).

<sup>5</sup> A problem we have to contend with here is the terminological ambiguity that arises in the corpus of texts surrounding Hegel’s lectures, due to the fact that in the various texts, sometimes the term “Begriff” and sometimes the term “Idee” is used to indicate the specific *Versinnlichung* which is typical of the aesthetic *Ideal* – sometimes even in one and the same sentence: “Die zweite Form der Kunst: die klassische, [wird] so bestimmt, daß sie die adäquate Einbildung der Idee oder des Begriffs in die Äußerung, Erscheinung, Manifestation [ist]” (Hegel/Pfordten 1826, p. 67). However, this issue must be discussed elsewhere.

## 1.2. The Classic

In the vocabulary of the 1823 transcript, the convergence of the classic artwork with the aesthetic Ideal reads as follows: “Form [Realität/shape] und Inhalt [Begriff/content] sind absolut ein und dasselbe, keine Seite überwiegend, der Inhalt die Form, die Form den Inhalt bestimmend; die Einheit in reiner Allgemeinheit” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, pp. 38 f., additions L.v.L.). Pfordten’s 1826 transcript also emphasises this correspondence: “Die zweite Form der Kunst: die klassische, [wird] so bestimmt, daß sie die adäquate Einbildung der Idee oder des Begriffs in die Äußerung, Erscheinung, Manifestation [ist]” (Hegel/Pfordten 1826, p. 67). And Heimann notes as “Bestimmung des Klassischen, daß das Innere [Begriff/content] dem Äußern [Realität/shape] gleichkomme” (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 939, additions L.v.L.). This specific self-identity of the classic artwork (c. f. Hilmer 1997, p. 160; Over 2013, p. 162) is condensed in the formula “Einheit in der Selbstbedeutung” (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 1032). Within the classic, Gestalt and Bedeutung (which equals content/Begriff) of the artwork are one and the same. Therefore, within the classic, complete *Werkeinheit* is achieved. Here, the artwork is “als solches für sich”, “Ausdruck seiner selbst” (ibid., p. 940).

In the third art form, the Romantic, Begriff/content and Realität/shape diverge once again, just as in the symbolic – albeit this time as independent domains.

## 1.3. The Romantic

The Romantic is described as “ein Fortschreiten [der Kunst] über sich selbst hinaus” (Hegel/Hotho 1826, p. 36). The Romantic consists in “Hinausgehen über” the aesthetic *Ideal*; it is in fact “die Entzweiung des Begriffs und der Realität” (Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1828/29, p. 115), and processes of delimiting the unity of the artwork are set in motion: „Im Romantischen geht es bis ins Formelle, bis in die Auflösung des Gegenständlichen fort“ (Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1820/21, p. 113) The *Werkeinheit* as “Einheit in der Selbstbedeutung” (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 1032), characteristic of the classic and of the aesthetic *Ideal*, is overcome.

We now see our second plotter entering the stage. In his 1990s essay on ‘Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*’, Paul de Man claims that Hegel’s philosophy of art was “traditionally enough, a theory of symbolic form” (de Man 1997, p. 93). Given what has just been said about the three art forms, this sounds rather surprising to us, since the classic – as the region where the aesthetic *Ideal* is fully realised – and not the symbolic, seems to be the center of Hegel’s philosophy of art. Let us take a closer look at how de Man arrives at his assumption.

## 2. Act Two: Paul de Man’s Concept of the symbol(ic) in his Essay ‘On Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*’

De Man demonstrates his answer to our question *what the traditional definition of symbolic form was* that Hegel reproduced in his philosophy of art, by pointing to what he sees as a congruence between Hegel’s concepts of the *beautiful* and of the *symbolic* (c. f. *ibid.*). He therefore refers to Hegel’s frequently quoted phrase *sensory appearance of the idea* (*sinnliches Scheinen der Idee*), which is generally understood as Hegel’s definition of the beautiful (even though this phrase was never used directly by Hegel himself). According to Paul de Man, the respective phrase – *the sensory appearance of the idea* – translates the term “Aesthetics” (*ibid.*). We have no objection to this, because

1. we have seen in the former section that the aesthetic *Ideal* is the fusion of that which is particular (*Realität/Sinnliches*/shape/sensory appearance) and that which is universal (*Begriff/Allgemeines*/content/idea) and
2. we know that Hegel states that the classic – which is the region where the aesthetic *Ideal* manifests in the classic *Werkeinheit* – is simply that which coincides with his concept of art (c. f. Hegel/Griesheim 1826, p. 711). The classic artworks are “*sinnliche Allgemeine*” (Zimmer 2014, p. 142) in the full sense of the term
3. we see that Hegel leaves no doubt that the beautiful within the scope of his aesthetics always means artistic beauty (*das Kunstschöne*): “Diese Vorlesung ist der Aesthetik gewidmet d.h. der Philosophie der Wissenschaft des Schönen und zwar des Kunstschönen und nur des Kunstschönen” (Hegel/Griesheim 1826, p. 519; c. f. also e. g. Hegel/Pfordten 1826, p. 51).

But, going far beyond this, de Man suggests that the definition in question – the sensory appearance of the idea –, “could itself best be translated by the statement: the beautiful is symbolic” (de Man 1997, p. 93). This conceptual transfer is made possible by a specific concept of the symbol, which Paul de Man claims to have extracted from his reading of Hegel’s aesthetics. It is a notion of the symbol as “mediation between the mind and the physical world of which art manifestly partakes” (ibid.).

De Man’s consideration seems to be as follows: the sensory appearance of the idea (Hegel’s definition of artistic beauty, *Kunstschönes*) establishes a mediation between *Begriff/Allgemeines/content/idea* and *Realität/Sinnliches/shape/sensory appearance* just like the symbol establishes a mediation between “mind” and “physical world”. It follows that the definition of the beautiful – as the mediator of these two “poles” – is analogous to the definition of the symbol. However, the careful reader will have noticed that de Man makes another transfer, which he himself does not mention – namely from symbol to the symbolic. It will become apparent that this difference is crucial in the context of Hegel’s philosophy of art. We will come back to that in a few paragraphs.

### **2.1. Goethe’s notion of the symbol**

For the time being, we notice that de Man’s concept of the symbol as “mediation between the mind and the physical world” (ibid.) corresponds almost literally to Goethe’s *Aperçu* as a sudden, holistic insight into the universal – an experience that Goethe also describes as “*Synthese von Welt und Geist*” (Goethe 1870, no. 903). Closely related to this is Goethe’s notion of the symbol, to which he also attributes a revealing power, since, according to him, the symbol shows the universal in and through the particular (Goethe 1833, no. 955; c. f. also ibid., no. 952). Most essential to our considerations of Hegel’s aesthetics is Goethe’s statement: “das Symbol [verwandelt] das Erscheinende [the appearing] unmittelbar in die Idee” (Goethe 1897, p. 172, addition L.v.L.) – a formula which is quite close to Hegel’s aesthetic Ideal.

However, based on what we know about the art forms, such a notion of the symbol would merely correspond to the classic. The symbolic, as the unfulfilled search for the intersection of *Begriff* and *Realität*, seems far too messy a matter to represent a model for the perfect unity of

Allgemeines and Besonderes. But if that is the case, how do the symbol and the symbolic relate to each other in Hegel's aesthetics?

To avoid getting stuck here, it is time to take a look at the passages that contain Hegel's own definition of the symbol – and we will find them in the Psychologie-section of Hegel's *Encyclopädie* (a section that Jacques Derrida subjected to a thorough reading in a seminar held by Jean Hyppolite in 1968 [Derrida 2023], which Paul de Man, in turn, took very careful note of.)

### **3. Act Three: Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Enzyklopädie III***

In the study of the Psychologie des subjektiven Geistes, Hegel distinguishes “symbolisierende” (Enz III, § 457, ad., p. 269) and “Zeichen machende Phantasie” (ibid., § 457, p. 268). Despite the distinction that Hegel introduces here between symbol and sign, both are included in the third stage of development of Einbildungskraft, namely produktive Einbildungskraft (c. f. ibid., § 455, ad., p. 264). Produktive Einbildungskraft merges universal notions (“allgemeine Vorstellungen”) with the particular of the image (“das Besondere des Bildes”) (ibid.). The result is said to have the double form of the symbol and the sign (“doppelte Form des Symbols und des Zeichens”) (ibid., § 454, p. 261). This identification of the universality of notions with the particularity of images is not only conceptually close to de Man's and Goethe's notion of symbol, but, considering Hegel's aesthetic Ideal, opens up the space for a far-reaching analogy:

Since produktive Einbildungskraft achieves a mutual convergence of idea and image, “die Verbildlichung des Allgemeinen und [...] Verallgemeinerung des Bildes” (ibid., § 456, ad., p. 267), its activities are comparable to the artistic process that produces the aesthetic Ideal. Consequently, Hegel says that this imaginative activity represents “das Formelle der Kunst; denn die Kunst stellt das wahrhaft Allgemeine oder die Idee in der Form des sinnlichen Daseins, des Bildes, dar” (ibid.). In this context, Jacques Derrida describes Hegel's productive Einbildungskraft as “a kind of natural art” (Derrida 2023, p. 103).<sup>6</sup> However, as already noted,

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida thus refers to Hegel's exceptionally comprehensive affirmation of Immanuel Kant's vocabulary of productive imagination, which Kant describes as “eine verborgene Kunst in den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele” (KrV I, B 181, 182). On the relationship between Kant and Hegel with regard to the concept of *Einbildungskraft*, see also Fulda & Horstmann (1990).

produktive Einbildungskraft is also divided into symbolising and sign-creating activities. This difference should now be examined.

### 3.1. The symbol

In the *Psychologie*-section, the symbol is defined as an “Anschauung [intuition], deren eigene Bestimmtheit ihrem Wesen und Begriffe nach mehr oder weniger der Inhalt ist, den sie als Symbol ausdrückt” (Enz III, § 458, p. 270, addition L.v.L.). It thus ought to respect that which naturally accrues to the natural shapes and materials which are to become symbols (c. f. Enz III, § 457, ad., p. 269). Hegel refers to *independent meanings* of those shapes and materials:

[Die symbolisierende Phantasie] wählt zum Ausdruck ihrer allgemeinen Vorstellungen [Begriff/Allgemeines] keinen anderen sinnlichen Stoff [Realität/Besonderes] als denjenigen, dessen selbständige Bedeutung dem bestimmten Inhalt des zu verbildlichenden Allgemeinen entspricht. (Ibid., additions L.v.L.)

This concept of the symbol is also effective in Hegel’s philosophy of art: Hotho notes: “[Das Symbol enthält] in seiner Äußerlichkeit zugleich den Gehalt der Vorstellung [...], welchen es darstellen soll. Das Symbol also stellt sich zugleich selbst vor” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 119). And Kehler notes: “Das Symbol ist sinnliche Existenz, die selbst die Eigenschaften enthält, die sie bezeichnen soll” (Hegel/Kehler 1826, p. 70).

This affinity thus limits the freedom of the symbolising activity in its assignment and transformation of “sinnliche Stoffe” and their independent meanings (c. f. Enz III, § 457, ad., p. 269). In negative terms, this means that the symbolising activity, by remaining bound to the respective independent meanings in order to express its “allgemeine Vorstellungen”, is limited by the requirement of corresponding to the independent meanings of the natural shapes and materials that it deals with (c. f. *ibid.*, § 458, p. 270). The sign-creating activity in contrast has *any shape and material at its disposal* without having to worry about their independent meanings.

### 3.2. The Sign

Sign-creation expresses “eine freiere Willkür und Herrschaft im Gebrauch der Anschauung” (Enz III, § 458, *ibid.*, p. 270) than within the act of symbolising. As the term *Herrschaft* indicates, the arbitrary nature, typical of the *signifying* production of meaning, goes hand in hand with the *suppression of natural shapes and materials and their independent meanings*. Paul de Man has also read these passages, of course, and notes that “the sign illustrates the capacity of the intellect to *use* the perceived world for its own purposes, to efface [*tilgen*] its properties and to put others in their stead” (de Man 1997, p. 96, addition P.d.M.). Hence, according to de Man, the sign-creating activity “is both a freedom, since it is arbitrary, and a coercion, since it does violence, as it were, to the world” (*ibid.*).

We have seen that, according to Hegel, “das Formelle der Kunst” (Enz III, § 456, *add.*, p. 267) in consciousness – the activity of *produktive Einbildungskraft* – has the double form of the symbol and the sign (c. f. Enz III, § 454, p. 261). The relevance of the sign in Hegel’s philosophy of art is programmatically indicated in the encyclopaedia, where Hegel introduces artworks as “Zeichen der Idee” (*ibid.*, § 556, p. 367). But the meaning of this formula remains puzzling at first, since the arbitrary character of the sign seems to be opposed to the art-specific interpenetration of *Begriff* and *Realität*. At the same time, though, we recall the artistic striving for *Werkeinheit* in the symbolic that remains incomplete – and on closer inspection, this lack of interpenetration of *Begriff* and *Realität* within the symbolic turns out to be *a trace of the sign*.

## 4. Act Four: Sign and Symbol within the Symbolic

We slide a few more steps further and find that the symbolic in Hegel’s *Kunstformenlehre* appears to contain an equivalent to the violent dimension of the sign which we have just extracted from the *Enzyklopädie* with Paul de Man’s help.

It strikes us that the character of the symbolic striving and searching emerges as the negativity of artistic creation’s dependence on its proper sensory manifestation. We find that in the symbolic the material is held in tension, a conflict occurring between mind and nature, or, in

Paul de Man's words: "between the mind and the physical world" (de Man 1997, p. 93). The tensions escalate into conflict: "An ihnen [the symbolic artworks] selber ist der Zwist des Äußern und Innern sichtbar" (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 1001, addition L.v.L.). The conflict ultimately escalates into an open struggle, a "Kampf des Geistigen mit dem Sinnlichen [im] Kreis des Symbolischen" (Hegel/Pfordten 2005, 1826, p. 114; c. f. also Hegel/Griesheim 1826, p. 655). The drastic mode of this struggle is noted several times, for example in 1823:

In der symbolischen Kunst ist der Inhalt nicht frei und die Gestalt auch nicht [...]. Damit es bedeutend sei, muß es verzerrt werden; damit man dem Stoff ansehe, daß er bedeutend sei, muß ihm Gewalt angetan werden. (Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 154; c. f. also *ibid.*, p. 35)

In 1826, there is also mention of a violent appropriation of natural shapes: "es erscheint als ein Gewalt Anthon, Mishandeln, Verzerren der Gestaltung" (Hegel/Griesheim 1826, p. 556). In the Hotho edition, the same situation is described using different vocabulary (c. f. VÄ I, p. 108).

However, repeated references to *distortions* indicate that, despite the offenses, the natural shapes and materials resist the attempts to transform them. From this perspective, the striving for *Werkeinheit* in the symbolic remains unfulfilled due to the fact that the natural shapes and materials and their independent meanings resist the "foreign" artistic principle that attempts to efface those meanings and appropriate the natural shapes, materials and meanings.

It could be said then that, in the symbolic form, the *sign-like attempt to transform and appropriate the natural shapes and materials* fails because of the resistance of independent natural elements – a figure which is familiar to us from our study of Hegel's encyclopaedic concept of the symbol. Within the symbolic, the *Begriff* treats natural shapes and meanings negatively, indeed, just like the sign-creating activity – but, in fact, it fails "to efface (*tilgen*) its properties [and meanings] and to put others in their stead" (de Man 1997, p. 96, addition L.v.L.). However, we have seen that at the heart of Hegel's philosophy of art – within the classic – lies the perfect unity of *Begriff* and *Realität* (c. f. chapter 1.2). From our new perspective, we must regard this unity as the result of a successful transformation and appropriation of natural shapes and meanings. We therefore recognise the dominance of the sign in the center of Hegel's aesthetics.

## Fin de Partie

Paul de Man also explores the aesthetic relevance of the sign in his essay which was subject of our discussion. It has not been my aim to challenge his poetic suggestion that the sign should be considered a paradigm of Hegel's philosophy of art insofar as *the aesthetic ideal appears as the material inscription and yet memory-like and sign-like self-forgetting of spirit* (c. f. de Man 1997, p. 103). We are grateful to him for having undertaken a long and arduous journey through rough terrain, containing a detour into the *Gedächtnis*-section in the *Enzyklopädie* (de Man 1997, pp. 101 ff.; Enz III, §§ 461–464) and into the nimbus of the primordial foundations of Hegel's logic (de Man 1997, pp. 97 ff.; Enz I, § 20), in order to propose this reading to us. Our modest undertaking has aimed only to support de Man's interpretation by demonstrating the aesthetic relevance of the sign on a very basic ontological level. To do this, we no longer needed to venture *beyond* Hegel's philosophy of art, as de Man did, but rather followed the sign's traces in the midst of Hegel's theory of art forms. Time to present the pointe.

In the symbolic, sensory and natural elements oppose the artistic work process. However, each artistic process of creation is concerned exactly with the transformation of that which is naturally given (c.f. Hilmer 1997, p. 170): a productive negation takes place with the production of every artwork insofar as it is defined as being “distinguishable from mere facts, positive circumstances [*Gegebenheiten*] (that which exists in itself: the natural [*dem von sich her Daseienden: Natürlichen*]) (Hilmer 1997, p. 139, translation L.v.L.).

From this perspective, every artwork contains a trace of the sign, since it retains moments of negation towards that which is naturally given – since the process of its creation consists in transforming that which is simply given into something unnatural, artificial: into an artwork.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as every artwork is always preceded by the negation of the given, every artistic work process is, according to Hegel, a (material) re-enactment of semiosis.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This is also supported by the fact that, as mentioned in chapter 2, right at the beginning of his lectures, Hegel limits the scope of his philosophy of art to artistic beauty, excluding natural beauty.

<sup>8</sup> For a related reflection on the connection between death, semiosis, and the artistic creative process in Hegel, c. f. Hilmer 1997, p. 144 f.

## References

### 1. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

#### a) Lecture transcripts (chronologically)

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