

## ***How Hegel was influenced by Schiller, Goethe, and Hermeticism***

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In my lecture on Hegel's *Aesthetics*, given at the Philosophical Society's meeting in Oxford in June this year, I mentioned these influences but had no time to elaborate upon them. Here I spell them out a bit more. This might be more interesting to the Journal's readers than a summary of my lecture. Anyone wishing to know my views about Hegel as an aesthetician could read my article 'On the Continuing Significance of Hegel's *Aesthetics*' in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* for 1981.

### **(1) Schiller (1759-1805)**

Hegel knew practically all Schiller's works of course and had admired him from an early age. But it was Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) that affected Hegel's *philosophical* outlook most of all. The effect was quite considerable. Early on in his *Aesthetics* Hegel pays a most significant tribute to Schiller. In effect, he says, it was Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* that made him understand what the essential task of the philosopher must be.

Schiller saw aesthetic education as a great civilising force that mediates between and reconciles man's sensuous and intellectual sides by 'so developing inclination, sensuousness, impulse and heart that they become rational in themselves. The beautiful is... the mutual formation of the rational and the sensuous...' As Schiller famously put it in his 23rd *Letter*: 'there is no other way of making sensuous man rational except by first making him aesthetic' (p. 161 in the Wilkinson and Willoughby bilingual edn. of the *Aesthetic Letters* [Oxford, 1967]). But, having read Schiller on aesthetic education, Hegel came to think that this kind of dialectical unity of opposites is precisely what *philosophy* should be concerned with, on a wider scale. 'This *unity* of the universal and particular, freedom and necessity, spirit and nature, which Schiller grasped scientifically (*wissenschaftlich*) as the principle and essence of art', Hegel wrote in his *Aesthetics*, 'has now, as the *Idea itself*, been made the principle of knowledge and existence, and the Idea has become recognized as that which alone is true and actual. Thereby philosophy has attained ... its absolute standpoint...'

So it seems it was at least partly through the decisive insights of Schiller, a Kantian who became dissatisfied with Kant's 'two worlds' and generally with unresolved dichotomous thinking, that German idealism came to see its task as the revelation that the world is an arena of strife yet one happily blessed by an ultimate reconciliation. Philosophy's aim was then perceived to be 'to supersede oppositions', to show 'that truth lies only in reconciliation and mediation', and to provide 'a reflective insight' into this dialectical process of cosmic development towards 'unity in difference' (K, 55; B, I, 64).

But, as many scholars have noted, Hegel derived some more specific things from Schiller. Parts of Hegel's technical language seem very likely to have been adapted from locutions first used in the *Aesthetic Letters*. An important example occurs in *Letter 18* which opens with the assertion: 'By means of beauty sensuous man is led to form and

thought; by means of beauty spiritual man is brought back to matter and restored to the world of sense.’ But, asks Schiller, how can this occur? How can beauty unite two supposedly irreconcilable conditions? And his answer is: ‘Since... both conditions remain everlastingly opposed to each other, there is no other way of uniting them except by destroying (*aufgehoben*) them.’ (*Aesthetic Letters*, pp. 123-125). Here Schiller uses the verb *aufheben* in that strange double sense implying preservation as well as abolition, a usage Hegel borrowed and was to later employ systematically.

A more general comment by T. J. Reed helps us to realise that Hegel’s dialectics were to a large extent a (not always very successful) formalization of a way of thinking which Schiller had earlier made very much his own:

Schiller may not be the only begetter of that German tradition of thinking in opposites, but he is surely its decisive exponent, the one who handles it with the most dazzling virtuosity... the one who confirmed it... as *the* mode of truly radical analysis.

And Reed goes on to remind us that all those well-known antitheses employed by Hegel, Heine, Schopenhauer, Jung, Mann and so many other writers in German were usually directly inspired by Schiller, perhaps above all by his distinction between the ‘form’ impulse and the ‘material’ impulse (in the *Aesthetic Letters*) and that between ‘naive’ and ‘reflective’ (*sentimentalische*) poetry. ‘Thinking in opposites’ in this Schillerian sense always involved, moreover, an attempt to reach a ‘higher unity’. (See Reed’s *Schiller* [London, 1991], p. 111.)

## **(2) Goethe (1749-1832)**

Here is the famous passage from Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols* (‘Skirmishes of an Untimely Man’, sect. 49) which will always serve as the best reminder of what Goethe came to mean (even earlier, during his lifetime) to German intellectuals:

*Goethe* – not a German event but a European one: a magnificent attempt to overcome the eighteenth century by a return to nature, by an *ascent* to the naturalness of the Renaissance – a kind of self-overcoming on the part of that century. He bore its strongest instincts within himself: the sensibility, the idolatry of nature, the anti-historic, the idealistic, the unreal and revolutionary... He sought help from history, natural science, antiquity, and also Spinoza, but, above all from practical activity; he surrounded himself with limited horizons; he did not retire from life but put himself into the midst of it; he was not fainthearted but took as much as possible upon himself, over himself, into himself. What he wanted was *totality*; he fought the mutual extraneousness of reason, senses, feeling, and will preached with the most abhorrent scholasticism by *Kant*, the antipode of Goethe); he disciplined himself to wholeness, he *created* himself.

One notices that Nietzsche hardly distinguishes Goethe the writer from Goethe the man – in fact he is scarcely talking about Goethe’s *writings* – about *Werther*, the poetry, *Wilhelm Meister*, *Faust*, *The Morphology of Plants*, and so forth, at all. It is, supposedly,

Goethe *the man*, that uniquely creative personality, we are being told about. Goethe's works are seen as just one of the means by which this exceptional individual attained wholeness, by which he indeed *created himself*. Hegel's attitude to Goethe was not very different to Nietzsche's.

Goethe was, of course, unique amongst German writers in having, at an early stage in his career, by a chance encounter with a head of state, acquired his very special official position. This took up a great deal of his time; and yet, on the positive side, put him into direct contact with many aspects of social reality few other imaginative writers experienced. It led him to meet many celebrated rulers, politicians, generals, et al., of the day – including Napoleon and Metternich. He also got to know many scientists and became only too aware of the practical complexities of administering a small state at a time of unprecedented social change in Europe. Apart from his almost incomparable genius as a poet and dramatist, by all accounts Goethe was a man of great personal charm, wide ability and generosity. Few writers have been so successful with women as he was (one can't help thinking of the more typically pathetic attempts in this direction by, say, Heine or Schopenhauer or indeed Nietzsche himself). Perhaps this latter success was not entirely independent of the fact that hardly any other writer had managed to achieve such a satisfactory social status and assured income (Voltaire being Goethe's only contemporary competitor in this last respect). His output of works, in so many areas, was prodigious; his health, on the whole, good; and he lived to enjoy all these advantages until the age of 83! No wonder Goethe was literally idolized by (especially but not exclusively) German writers and thinkers on a vast scale, from Schiller to Ernst Cassirer, from Albert Schweitzer to Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse, and still by many today. Freud's view of the artist scarcely applied to Goethe. Goethe's fictions were hardly compensations for an unglamorous existence. He actually lived a life quite as fulfilling as that of any of his imaginary characters, even including, one might surmise, Dr Faust. For Goethe also believed in what he called 'the demonic'.

As far as Hegel was concerned – and this is more than hinted at in Hegel's letter to Goethe I quoted from in my lecture – Goethe was a phenomenon larger than life itself: his achievements and personal development, as a man as well as an artist, were indeed reminiscent of the World Spirit's own quest for wholeness via self-consciousness. Goethe's opinion of Hegel was inevitably far less dramatic but he always thought highly of him and helped Hegel at various points in his career. In a letter dated 5 January, 1832 to Varnhagen von Ense, who had informed him of Hegel's premature death, Goethe spoke of his 'profound regret' at the loss 'of this highly gifted, eminent leader, this man of such learning and so many activities. The basis of his teaching', Goethe went on, 'lay outside my more immediate interests, but I have always derived a real spiritual advantage from it, whenever what he did touched on my endeavours or when he sometimes even took an active interest in them...'

Hegel was always very sympathetic towards Goethe's anti-Newtonian theory of colour and agreed with him about the undesirability of the excessive mathematicization of physics generally. These are probably the things Goethe is referring to when he talks of Hegel's 'touching on my endeavours.'

For the most part, although many German philosophers professed their great debts to Goethe, he himself felt that he had not usually gained much from contact with them. One exception was the Romantic thinker Friedrich Jacobi (a disciple of J. G. Hamann, a Kabbalist and Boehmean, greatly admired by Goethe). ‘You can easily surmise what my attitude towards philosophy is’, Goethe wrote to Jacobi on 23 November 1801, having just perused Jacobi’s latest book.

When it [philosophy] specializes in separating, I do not get along with it; and it has harmed me at times, I daresay, by interfering with the natural course of my development. But when it is bent on uniting, or, I should rather say, when it intensifies our original feeling that we are one with nature; when it secures this feeling and transforms it into a deep, steady intuition of the divine life in its ceaseless ebb and flow, even if such is not for us mortals to lead – then I welcome philosophy, and you can gauge my interest in your work accordingly.

But generally Goethe could find little use for large, especially comprehensive, world visions. ‘There is no sadder sight than a person directly striving after the unconditional in this thoroughly conditioned world; this, in the year 1830, is perhaps more out of place than ever’, he wrote in his *Maxims and Reflections (Criticisms, Reflections, and Maxims of Goethe)* [London, n.d.] trans. by W. B. Ronnfeldt, p. 230). Much earlier he had made the same point quite succinctly in a letter to Heinrich Meyer, on 8 February, 1796: ‘The purpose of life’, he wrote, ‘is life itself.’

Still, Goethe’s influence on philosophers always remained strong. Quite apart from a common understanding about mathematics and colour theory, the impact of Goethe’s general outlook affected Hegel deeply.

The correspondence between Goethe and Hegel goes back to around the time Hegel was appointed to a position at the University of Jena where he taught from 1801 to 1806 (This last date incidentally was when, with the manuscript of the *Phenomenology of Mind* in his suitcase, Hegel had to flee Jena – both from Napoleon’s fast-approaching army and from the difficulties presented by the fact that his landlord’s wife was expecting his [Hegel’s] child!).

Only a short distance from Weimar itself, the University of Jena was under the jurisdiction of the duchy of Saxe-Weimar where Goethe, through his youthful friendship with the Duke, Karl August, had been installed as an advisor and minister since 1775. Staffing the University was one of Goethe’s manifold responsibilities. Partly through his influence, many important German philosophers of the time taught there for a while, notably, apart from Hegel himself, Fichte from 1794-1799 and Schelling from 1798-1803. Schiller was professor of history at Jena from 1789, again partly because of Goethe’s efforts on his behalf. Hegel and Goethe not only corresponded but had a number of conversations, not least later in the 1820s when Hegel had moved to Berlin and become the most respected philosopher in Germany. He visited Goethe in Weimar when he could.

As with Schiller, there were a number of what I might best call conceptual orientations

in Goethe's outlook that Hegel certainly shared and probably partly borrowed. It was not so much a matter of Goethe propounding specific *doctrines* that Hegel then took over. More loosely and intuitively, what happened was that Hegel adopted for his own purposes certain pervasive directions of thought he found in Goethe's writings and indeed, as he imagined, in Goethe's personal outlook and way of life. I can give a brief indication of this by considering a passage from the *Phenomenology*.

In my view... everything depends on grasping and expressing the ultimate truth not as substance but as subject as well... The truth is the whole. The whole, however, is merely the essential nature reaching its completeness through the process of its own development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only at the end is it what it is in very truth; and just in that consists its nature, which is to be actual, subject, or self-becoming, self-development. (Baillie's translation, pp. 80-82).

Placing this passage beside two, almost randomly chosen, passages from Goethe may help us to see certain connections. The first passage is from the Preface to Goethe's *Theory of Colour* (1810). It advises us not to look for 'essences' but to seek the nature of an entity through observing its behavioural characteristics and its line of development towards some end:

In reality, any attempt to express the inner nature of a thing is fruitless. What we perceive are effects (*Wirkungen*), and a complete record of these effects ought to encompass this inner nature. We labour in vain to describe a person's character, but when we draw together his actions, his deeds, a picture of his character will emerge. (*Scientific Studies*, vol. 12 of the Suhrkamp edn. of Goethe's *Collected Works* in translation (N.Y., 1988), p. 158).

The second passage is from Goethe's *On Morphology* (written c. 1795):

The Germans have a word for the complex of existence presented by a physical organism: *Gestalt* [structured form]. With this expression they exclude what is changeable and assume that an interrelated whole is identified, defined, and fixed in character.

But if we look at all these *Gestalten*, especially the organic ones, we will discover that nothing in them is permanent, nothing is at rest or defined – everything is in a flux of continual motion. This is why German frequently and fittingly makes use of the word *Bildung* [formation] to describe the end product as well as the activity that gives rise to it.

Thus in setting forth a morphology we should not speak of *Gestalt*... When something has acquired a form it metamorphoses immediately to a new one. If we wish to arrive at some living perception of nature we ourselves must remain as quick and flexible as nature and follow the example she gives. (*Collected Works*, vol. 12, pp. 63-4.)

'The end product as well as the activity that gives rise to it' – this seems pretty close to the

motif that runs through all Hegel's attempts to describe the Absolute, something that allegedly reaches completeness 'only through the process of its own development', which is not an already given 'substance' but a 'subject', a 'result', something that is fully itself only at the end.

The Goethe passages are taken, it will be noticed, from his scientific works and it is well-known that it was from biological studies in the 18th century that much of the 'organicist' imagery used by German thinkers derived. The effect of the Swedish taxonomist Linnaeus (1707-1778) on Goethe, especially as regards the notion of 'polarity' – as exemplified in the expansion and contraction of leaf forms, vertebrae metamorphosis, the diastole and systole of the heart, etc. – is an important instance of this. In Germany, Goethe's writings acted as a medium for the transmission of these ideas from scientists to philosophers. (See *Scientific Studies*, editor's Introduction, p. xiv.)

### **(3) Hermeticism**

There now exists a large literature on the effect of various sorts of mystical writers on classical German philosophy generally and on Hegel in particular. Elsewhere I have myself spoken about the effect of writers like Eckhart and Boehme on Hegel's use of language. More can be now found in Michael Inwood's splendid *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford, 1992). A recent study in English, G. A. Magee's, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca and London, 2001), goes into Hegel's connexion with mysticism in great detail. Here I will glance at just one theme that Hegel shares with many mystical writers: the notion that God is not yet fully Himself as He should, and will, be but is gradually coming to that desired state of self-consciousness and self-integration through human culture, especially through the development of art, religion, and philosophy. In other words, this is the extraordinary idea that our finite, human striving towards self-awareness (and, supposedly, 'freedom') is actually indistinguishable from the striving of the infinite world-spirit or God Himself towards that same goal!

It's a remarkable fact that a great European philosopher, admired not only by his academic disciples but even by hard-nosed government officials, men of the world, scientists (and, as we saw, by Goethe himself) could openly espouse such a view in 1830. The contrast has to be with the then contemporary leading thinkers in Britain. We can be sure that Bentham and the two Mills would have regarded a belief of this kind as scarcely intelligible, let alone as constituting a central philosophical insight.

Essentially the same kind of contrast could still be drawn between the outlooks of differing major figures such as Heidegger and Russell in the 20th century. Broadly speaking, the fact that much German philosophy has retained certain aspects of pre-Enlightenment thought – aspects that had been deliberately excluded from British empiricism by the early 18th century – has been a major factor in the divide between Anglophone and 'continental' philosophy. This is why I felt the need to distance myself from Hegel's general mode of philosophizing in my lecture. Here I just want to illustrate the extent to which Hegel relied on esoteric sources using this one example.

The doctrine – which essentially seeks to obliterate any distinction between God’s mind and ours – seems to be of neo-Platonic origin, deriving from Proclus (rather than Plotinus) who believed that the One must emanate in order to be complete. The elaboration of this idea, into the belief that God is coming to self-consciousness, freedom, and manifold fulfilment through man’s cognitive endeavours, became central to hermeticism and is present in Eckhart, Boehme, Angelus Silesius, Bruno, and later German mystics such as Hegel’s contemporary Franz von Baader (1765-1841). We know Hegel read all these people and took them very seriously. Here are some typical mystical pronouncements along these lines:

I carry God’s image within me. If He desires to see Himself then He can do so only in me or in those like me. God is the fire within me and I am his reflection (*Schein*). Are we not then intimately one? (Angelus Silesius, quoted in L. S. Salzberger’s *Hölderlin* [Cambridge, 1952], pp.11-12.)

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, delivered in 1824, Hegel quotes Eckhart as follows:

The eye with which God sees me is the same eye by which I see Him, my eye and His eye are one and the same. In righteousness I am weighed in God and He in me. If God did not exist nor would I; if I did not exist nor would He. (Quoted in Magee, op. cit., p. 25.)

And near the very end of the *Phenomenology* Hegel tells us directly that

mysticism is not concealment of a secret, or ignorance; it consists in the self knowing itself to be one with absolute Being, and in this latter, therefore, becoming revealed. (Baillie, pp. 726-727.)

It is important to understand the mystical elements in Hegel for two reasons: (a) because they serve to explain the otherwise puzzling fact that so many later imaginative writers found reading him fascinating (for they too, many of them, were absorbed in pre-Enlightenment esoteric traditions); and (b) because it helps to explain Hegel’s appeal to so many revolutionaries and theorists of radical social change. I am thinking not only of the 19th century ‘hegelians of the left’, but also of later thinkers like Kojève, Sartre, and Charles Taylor, to mention only a few, whose interest in Hegel might at first seem strange, when we recall Hegel’s own political conservatism. Yet mysticism, whatever else it may be, often involves an expression of profound dissatisfaction, even contempt, for the seemingly banal processes of everyday life and of existing social conditions. It embraces an eschatology promising a blissful future, unsought after and probably undreamt of by relaxed liberals and empiricists, but earnestly longed for by men of a different temperament, and especially by those for whom all governments have seemed tyrannical.

In quoting from the *Aesthetics* I have usually given Knox’s rendering from *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art* by G. W. F. Hegel, trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1975). Since I have occasionally modified Knox’s translation using F. Bassenge’s edition of the original in 2 vols. (Frankfurt, 1965), my references for quotations from the *Aesthetics* give first the page number in Knox (K), and then the corresponding volume and page number in Bassenge (B). So the reference for this first

quotation becomes K, 62; B, I, 70-71.

In 1825, at the height of his own fame, Hegel wrote to Goethe as follows: 'When I survey the course of my spiritual development, I see you everywhere woven into it and would like to call myself one of your sons; my inward nature received from you nourishment and strength to resist abstraction and set its course by your images as by signal fires...'

For a summary account of Magee's views see his article 'Hegel and Mysticism' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Philosophy*, ed. F.C. Beiser (CUP, 2008).

PAGE

PAGE 2