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## ASSOCIATIONS OF THE HEGELIAN PHILOSOPHY OF ART WITH THE TRADITION OF THE METAPHYSICS OF LIGHT

### ABSTRACT

In this article I would like to present three main areas of my interest in the aesthetics of Georg F. W. Hegel which are associated, directly or indirectly, with the philosophical tradition of the metaphysics of light. First, I will introduce my interpretation of the concept, used by Hegel, of luminosity in art (here I present my own understanding of this phenomenon, as I refer it to all of the three types of art we can speak of within the framework of *Lectures on Aesthetics*;<sup>1</sup> meanwhile, the traditional approach has been to apply this concept exclusively to romantic art, which, while correct, is only justified by the examination of art as a whole). Thus I propose here to examine the phenomenon of the luminosity of truth in symbolic, classical and romantic art. Next, I will present an understanding of the aesthetic experience of romantic works of art, an understanding which emerges from the concept of a work as a physical object of luminous truth<sup>2</sup> and is

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<sup>1</sup> A schema of the luminosity of truth in works of art after the so-called end of art would have to be presented as a separate issue, because – although Hegel himself wrote about this phenomenon – it would have to account for specific phenomena of the art world (and therefore work that Hegel never saw) and to modernise Hegel's language in regard to such phenomena and objects, enriching it on the example of the criticism of C. Danto or G. Dickie.

<sup>2</sup> I maintain this understanding of a work of art (namely, as philosophical and spiritual content mediated through material things) equally in the areas of symbolic, classical and romantic art. This justification addresses exclusively painting in the romantic sphere. While I agree that romanticism is also expressed in poetry and music, I believe that the ideals of romantic art emerged in painting, and that poetry and music are very late forms of romantic expression which actually hint at the approaching end of art.

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fixed in the Platonic *claritas* theory of light, closely associated with the metaphysics of light. I will illustrate my reflections with several examples of romantic painting. Then, I will move on to the search for the meaning of the development of art. I see this meaning in the realisation of the principle of the luminosity of truth in art, and, in turn, this realisation in a specific element of representation in painting, namely that of the human eye, which Hegel defined as ‘the light of the eye’. This theme takes us back to the tradition of Platonic philosophy, in both its ancient and its mediaeval Christian forms, and acknowledges a close relationship with the aesthetics of Hegel and the European tradition of the metaphysics of light.

It is worth establishing, before proceeding to Hegel’s aesthetics *per se*, the sense in which we understand the metaphysics of light here. Above all, the metaphysics of light is a narrower concept than the philosophy of light, because in actuality it is exclusively a metaphysical ontology. Light (usually *claritas*, sometimes *lux*) is understood here as divine light or light derived from first principles, e.g. from Plotinus’s concept of the One, and partakes of an intellectual rather than a sensual character; thus it actually has little in common, for example, with physical light. Consequently, observations on light in extra-ontological terms, such as goodness, (axiological) grace, knowledge, or (epistemological) enlightenment, are here secondary for us, since they concern not light itself, but the consequences of its existence (e.g. grace is a consequence of the existence of *claritas*). The primary issue is, however, to assume that *claritas* substantially derives from God, the Absolute, the Hegelian absolute spirit; its existence depends, therefore, on co-participation (*methexis*), and not on its conformity with or resemblance (*mimesis*) to the first cause, e.g. within the meaning of St. Thomas Aquinas.

#### KEYWORDS

light, Hegel, aesthetics, romantic art, painting

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## Schemata of the ‘luminosity of truth’ in symbolic, classical and romantic works of art

Each of the three types of art presented by Hegel in the pages of *Lectures on Aesthetics*<sup>3</sup> has its characteristic relationship to the truth, indicating the type of aesthetic experience which can potentially be associated with a given work.

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<sup>3</sup> I cite the Polish edition: G. W. F. Hegel, *Wykłady o estetyce* [Lectures on Aesthetics], tłum. J. Grabowski, A. Landman, Warszawa 1964–1967.

Each piece, in the context of the opportunities with which its era provides it, shows a selected aspect of truth. I use here the concept of truth in the Platonic sense, not relativised to particular historical epochs – in other words, the objective truth which constitutes the basis of all historical changes, the proper object of philosophical knowledge, and, at the same time, the purpose of history. Thus understood, truth is the subject of philosophy, religion and art, but not all domains of self-realisation of the spirit meet the criterion of full recognition of the truth; therefore, in the context of Hegelianism, we also speak of the truth of every age, that is, an aspect of the concept of general truth. Each of the following schemata recognises spirit in its own way, but spirit is neither subjective, nor objective, nor absolute, as these three terms indicate certain historical circumstances and therefore the relationship between the sensual (the ‘opposite’ of the spirit) and intellectual worlds.<sup>4</sup>

### Symbolic art

In the case of symbolic art, in which we deal with the awareness of a subjective spirit, the experience of a work of art is not directly linked with the truth in the Platonic sense but rather with the content of a spirit of limited awareness. Symbolic art arose during a period of Eastern despotism and is associated with a religious cult, which Hegel considered primitive on account of its polytheism and conception of God in the image of man, as well as its mixture of animal and human elements. Symbolic art, typical of India, Egypt, Persia and Mesopotamia, is associated with cults of death and rites of passage; examples might include images of the Sphinx, Memnon, Isis or Osiris.<sup>5</sup> Hegel criticises subjective art on the basis of its secrecy, behind which no truth is hidden. I conclude from this that such art does not present beauty in the strict metaphysical sense. In my view, the relationship of the world of the senses (comprising the subject<sup>6</sup> and works of art) to the truth in the case of symbolic art can be visualised as follows:

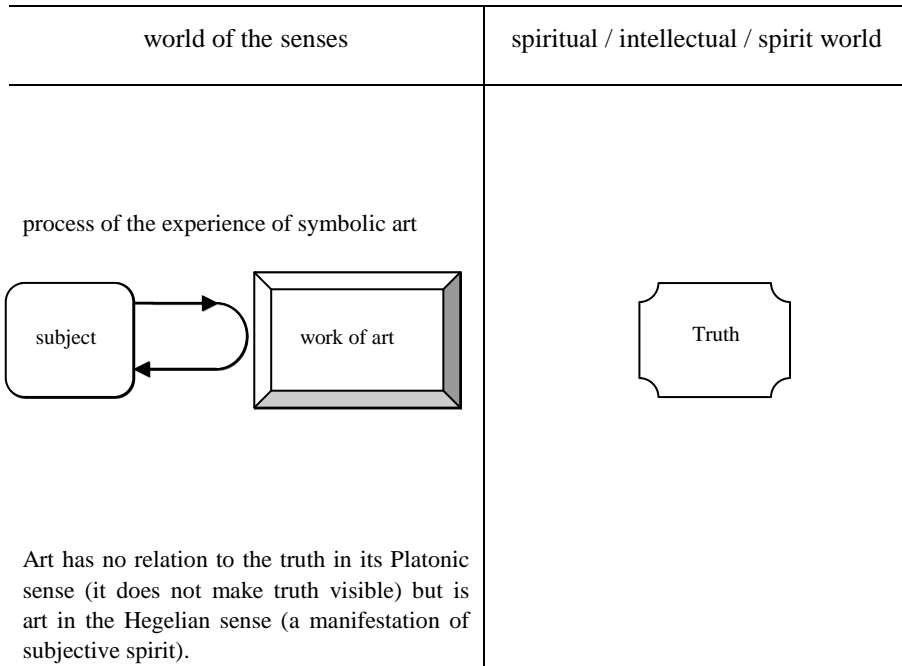
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<sup>4</sup> ‘Forms of spirit manifest themselves in time; the history of the world is the manifestation of spirit over time’. Quoted from: H. Marcuse, *Rozum i rewolucja. Hegel a powstanie teorii społecznej* [Reason and Revolution. Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory], tłum. D. Petsch, Łódź 1966, p. 212.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. Bènard, *Hegel on Symbolic Art*, “The Journal of Speculative Philosophy”, Vol. 11, No. 4 (October 1877), p. 349.

<sup>6</sup> The subject, in the Hegelian sense, may also be placed beyond the material and sensual worlds, thus emphasising his value as a perceptor of spiritual content. However, this is not necessary. Here we maintain the presence of the subject primarily in the world of the senses with regard to the object of aesthetic experience, which is sensual beauty.

## The subjective spirit: symbolic art



Source: Own elaboration.

Symbolic art cannot be described in the language of the metaphysics of light and its symbolic significance, because in this art there is no correspondence between the sensual and the spiritual worlds and thus no basis for the luminosity of truth. It should be stressed, however, that associations between the metaphor of light and symbolic art exist and may constitute the subject of philosophical analysis, albeit against the background of a philosophical tradition other than Platonism. Hegel uses the metaphor of light in writing about Persia and the first national system in which light is associated with the intellectual development of its citizens,<sup>7</sup> but (and this is worth noting for methodological reasons) the metaphor of light is not an element of the metaphysics of light, but only a poetic

<sup>7</sup> Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Wykłady o filozofii dziejów* [Lectures on the History of Philosophy], tłum. A. Zieleńczyk, Warszawa 2011, p. 196.

statement, a simile. As far as the metaphysics of light is concerned, apart from strictly philosophical statements originating from the field of ontology, only symbols play a part. A symbol, though multi-layered and despite the huge role it plays in culture, is not of the same quality as a metaphor; however, this is not the place to analyse these differences.

## Classical art

Unlike symbolic art, presented above, classical works of art present the relationship between the truth and the world of the senses. The principles of classical art were realised, in Hegel's opinion, in ancient Greek sculpture. It is paradoxical that the Greeks knew the concept of truth very well and used it in philosophy, yet their art, according to Hegel, realises only sensual beauty,<sup>8</sup> which is based on the Pythagorean harmony of elements, but does not penetrate to or reveal the essence of a human being. In other words, classical art realises the ideal of sensual beauty,<sup>9</sup> but expresses no internal content. In examples of ancient art, one can see the basis for the relationship between beauty and Platonic truth and for the separation of beauty and truth in classical art, as well as where their connection with romanticism comes in. Truth should be beauty – but intellectual beauty. Beauty should be truth – but truth incarnate. Ancient art lacks this dependence, even if Greek artists made significant progress relative to the creators of symbolic art by explicitly separating the human world from the world of nature.<sup>10</sup> The chart below demonstrates how aesthetic experience associated with interaction with an ancient work of art is mediated by and intertwined with its material, allowing no direct approach to spiritual truth:

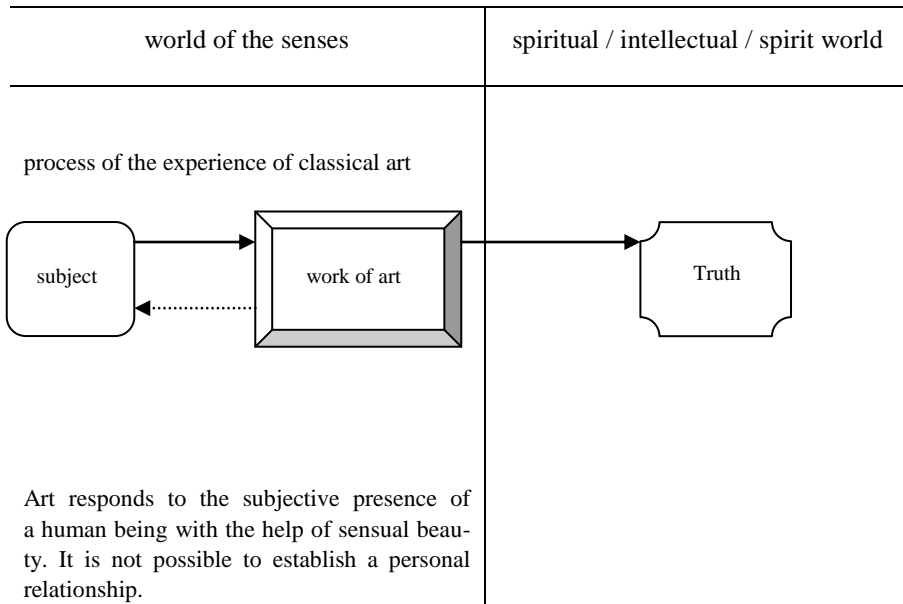
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<sup>8</sup> The postulate of the realisation of bodily beauty, based on the canon of harmony and proportion, also influenced the religious sphere of the ancient Greeks. With regard to the representation of the gods created by the Greeks, Hegel called their religion the 'religion of beauty'. Cf. A. Alexandrakis, *Neoplatonism and Western Aesthetics*, New York 2002, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. C. Bénard, *Hegel on Classic Art*, "The Journal of Speculative Philosophy", Vol. 12, No. 2 (Apr. 1878), p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 153.

## Objective spirit: classical art



Source: Own elaboration.

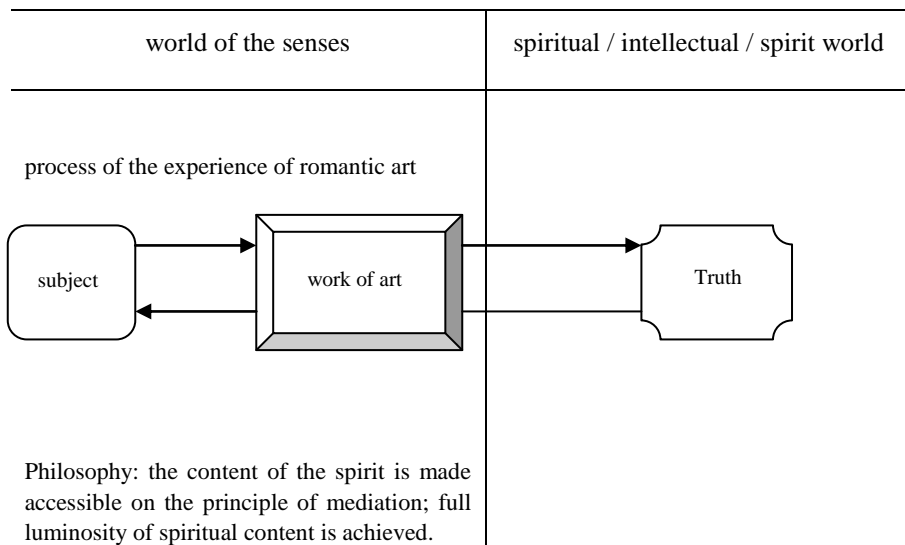
As with symbolic art, so with classical art: a full and comprehensive description falls outside the scope of this article; moreover, it does not attain full luminosity of truth in a work of art. It is worth noting, however, that: a) the viewer and the artist become conscious of the existence of this truth (as evidenced by the philosophical consciousness of ancient thinkers) and b) in the context of experience of a work of art, a relationship that might be called the ‘pre-aesthetic experience’ (I use here a concept taken from phenomenological aesthetics) comes into play: sensual beauty hides a secret truth existing somehow ‘behind the work’, which is realised by the viewer, but not yet (in classical art) extracted.

## Romantic art

Romantic art supplements the deficiencies of classical art. This is not without prejudice as to the material side of art. The work is not as beautiful as in classical art; its beauty requires intellectual engagement in order to be read and extracted. Romantic artists strive to present human spirituality, thus moving away

from the traditional values of Greek aesthetics. Romanticism reveals new elements of human nature: its dynamism, emotionality, drama and mysteriousness. The work's material side is determined by the idea the work is supposed to illustrate.<sup>11</sup> Beauty, understood as a glimmer of truth, rather than as the outer harmony of individual elements of the work, is not a feature of the subject material, but is embodied in the experience mediated by the work of art. This experience is made up of subjective consciousness entering into a relationship with the truth. Subjectivity experiences a beautiful work of art which, by virtue of philosophical reflection, is converted back into intellectual content (beauty becomes truth). In a romantic work we do not see truth itself; it is revealed through the work. A necessary condition for the 'correctness' of the aesthetic experience is that the viewer belong to the same Christian community (commune) as the artist, thanks to which he understands the symbols and content presented in a given work. The aesthetic experience, in the case of romantic art – that is, all the works created within the framework of Christian tradition up to the collapse of mimetic art – are presented as follows:

Absolute spirit: romantic art



Source: Own elaboration.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. idem, *Hegel on Romantic Art*, "The Journal of Speculative Philosophy", Vol. 12, No. 4 (October 1878), p. 403.

The experience illustrated above is applicable to art from the Byzantine and early Christian periods until the nineteenth century. Reducing so many diverse trends and concepts of art to a single principle is justified through the common subject of aesthetic experience, which is identified with the truth in the objective, Platonic and Christian senses. It is the luminosity of *claritas* on the material aspect of a work of art. Of course, in the context of a single historical-artistic system, i.e. the context of romantic art, internal changes of form occur in relation to the dynamics of history and the desire to realise the spiritual and intellectual potential of humanity. Differences in forms of artistic expression have no essential connection to the occurrence of *claritas*, which, perhaps, illuminates Byzantine mosaics, icons, and representational painting equally. It should rather be noted that *claritas* does not occur in every work of art, but only in the so-called ideals of romantic art, or works of exceptionally great merit.

### The philosophy of light in romantic art: the luminosity of truth

According to Hegel, the function of art – symbolic and classical as well as romantic – is to make mankind conscious of the truth about itself and the outside world, as well as to reveal religious content. This function is performed gradually and partially through history; Hegel calls it, as already noted above, the luminosity of truth. The same goal was assigned to religion and philosophy (apart from the so-called ‘philosophy of the spirit’, which recognises the Absolute in an unmediated, complete sense; i.e. the truth does not shine through it, but rather it gives us the truth directly). Interestingly, despite the fact that Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is considered his most important work, there are interpretations that speak of the primacy of the principles of aesthetics over other areas of his philosophy. One example of such an approach is a book representing the so-called Hegelian left, by Rudolf Haym,<sup>12</sup> entitled *Hegel und Seine Zeit*.<sup>13</sup> Haym specifically claims that Hegel subordinated science, knowledge and logic to aesthetic principles and sacrificed truth to taste. Regardless of which position we

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. T. Mróz, A. Janszyc, *Rudolf Haym (1821–1901) i jego zielonogórskie korzenie* [Rudolf Haym and his Roots in Zielona Góra], “Studia Zachodnie”, nr 11, Zielona Góra 2009, pp. 71–87.

<sup>13</sup> The first edition of Haym’s book, entitled *Hegel und seine Zeit* [Hegel and his Times] (Berlin 1857), is available in its entirety in an electronic version: <http://www.archive.org/details/hegelund-seinezeit00hegegoog> (referenced 26 April 2011).



believe is right, it is worth remembering that Hegel was among the first to establish aesthetics as an independent philosophical discipline.<sup>14</sup>

Let us repeat here that Hegelian symbolic art, by virtue of the applied forms of expression, cannot be reconciled with the true ultimate aim of art,<sup>15</sup> even if it did express the truth appropriate to its time. Classical art, on the other hand, corresponds to spiritual content primarily through the perfection of forms and proportions, and thus to external and sensual elements. Only the youngest art – romantic art, established along with the Christian religion – is capable of fully illuminating spiritual content, and, consequently, of making it visible to the viewer. A viewer from the same cultural and religious background as the artist is capable of interpreting the symbolic layer of a work of art. Only the act of visualising the truth, carried out through the contemplation of a work of art, can become an aesthetic experience in the romantic sense. In the momentary aesthetic experience we become participants in a process whereby spirit recognises itself in each individual object of the world of art, so as to finally be reunited with itself. Hegel stated that beauty is the sensual luminosity of the idea itself<sup>16</sup> which occurs in a work of art. Whenever we experience this luminosity, we realise some element of truth about the nature of the spiritual world, the essence of humanity, the nature of values, and so on.

A good example illustrating the luminosity of truth in romantic works of art is the paintings of Rembrandt, especially those from the later part of his life.<sup>17</sup> These works include *The blinding of Samson* (1636), in which the striking play of light and shade adds to the dramatic presentation. The viewer sees how ‘the ray, which barely outlines the grim darkness of the interior of the tent, is brutally cut in two by the figure of the soldier with a spear; this almost hysterical contrast of light and shadow interacts with the violent blow of another soldier gouging out the eyes of Samson, writhing in pain, for whom the light was cut off forever’.<sup>18</sup> The light presented in the picture symbolises the destiny fulfilled in the act of blinding, as well as the presence of God, who witnesses human suffering, even if He does not react to it.

In the work of Rembrandt, light also acquires a symbolic dimension in numerous personal portraits and representations of saints. One example is an image of St Paul. In artistic terms, the picture is a composition of the interplay of light and shadow, building an atmosphere filled with mysticism; a full aesthetic expe-

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. G. E. Mueller, *The Function of Aesthetics in Hegel's Philosophy*, “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Sept. 1946), p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. also: Hegel, *Wykłady z filozofii dziejów*, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 35–39.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. M. Mankiewicz, *Sztuka świata* [Art of the World], vol. 7, Warszawa 1994, p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 146.

rience of this work has a religious basis and ultimately touches the subject of metaphysics: being. The symbolic significance of light was also included in the picture *The Jewish bride*, in which Rembrandt gave the impression of an intimate relationship between two people. The man places his hand under the breast of the woman, who timidly raises her own hand to arrest his. The performance is dominated by spiritual light (*claritas*) originating in a pair of loving people, with no external source of light. The substantial presence of spiritual light was also included in a self-portrait by Rembrandt from 1668. This is a special painting. The artist presented himself here as a smiling old man; the brilliance (*claritas*) radiating from his form is a symbol of goodness or of the truth about the artist.<sup>19</sup> The image is not clear, the contours of the figure are blurred and assumed by the viewer; we find ourselves looking for the correct point of view... The light shining from within the figure makes us see a spiritually fulfilled entity in this self-portrait.<sup>20</sup>



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-portrait* (1668)  
<http://www.wga.hu/>

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the description in: J. Krupiński, *Obraz a malowidło. Rembrandt contra Ingarden* [Painting and Painter Canvas. Rembrandt vs Ingarden], "Estetyka i Krytyka", No. 11 (2/2006), p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> More about the interpretation of the images from the point of view of traditional of metaphysics of light can be found in my article, P. Tendera, *Elementy metafizyki światła w filozofii G. W. F. Hegla* [Elements of the Metaphysics of Light in the Philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel], "Hybris. Internetowy Magazyn Filozoficzny", No. 11, passim.

As well, Rembrandt used the traditional and conventional approaches to light, which I would not associate precisely with the metaphysics of light. Many of these presentations transform the symbol of light into a metaphor, a poetic statement of less significance for the philosophy of light. One example here might be the light in the image *The Holy Family with angels* from 1645. The light is focussed on the significant elements of the presentation; its source is the person of Jesus, the Bible and the angels in the top part of the picture. The interplay of these three light sources emphasises the order of the composition and creates an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity.

### The philosophy of light in romantic art: ‘the light of the eye’

In artistic and painting terms, the Platonic ‘light of the eyes’ of which Hegel writes in *Lectures on Aesthetics* is a white spot on the pupil of the eye. It is most frequently oval in shape, and, in combination with a perfect representation of the physiognomy of the eye, demonstrates mastery of mimetic art and constitutes an important symbol-bearing element in painting presentation.<sup>21</sup> Not only portraits and human representations, but also (although in a strictly metaphorical sense) a romantic painting conceived as a compositional whole, possess, according to Hegel, ‘the light of the eye’. The relationship that links the viewer with a romantic painting is a subjective one, referring to an overwhelming impression of interaction with another human being. Each of these relationships is unique and one of a kind, and, for Hegel, a painting is like the mythological Argus,<sup>22</sup> since art, like Argus, should ‘at every point endow’ its works ‘with the properties of the eye, in which one may come to know the free soul in its inner infinity.’<sup>23</sup>

The concept of ‘the light of the eye’ possesses multi-layered artistic significance, both symbolic and philosophical. Above all, it is the criterion that separates romantic from classical and symbolic art. Hegel maintains that, when experiencing a sculptural work devoid of polychrome, only the viewer possesses ‘the light of the eye’<sup>24</sup> (let us add: possesses it in the literal, strictly Platonic, sense, as we read e.g. in *Timaeus*); the viewer, however, cannot look at any statue, to

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. P. Tendera, *Uwagi o celu sztuki romantycznej* [Notes on the Aim of Romantic Art], “Studia Humanistyczne AGH”, Vol. 9 (2010), pp. 73–85, cf. <https://depot.ceon.pl/handle/123456789/2930?locale-attribute=en> [accessed 18 December 2014].

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 253.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 253.

<sup>24</sup> The results of archaeological research describing the use of polychrome by Greek artists were not published until after Hegel’s death.

quote Hegel, ‘soul to soul, eye to eye,’<sup>25</sup> since sculpture does not reflect the gleam of the human eye. The philosopher writes that ‘the most perfect statues of beautiful Greek sculpture are unable to look at anything’,<sup>26</sup> as their eyes lack pupils, a fact which might also be suggestive in regard to their spiritual life, in which there is nothing that might replace this lack. A different relationship exists between the viewer and the painted image: in a portrait, truth reveals itself to the viewers as ‘an entity viewing, conscious of itself, internally subjective and opening its soul before the soul’<sup>27</sup> of the viewer, although it is still not an actual person, but only a representation. The experience of the image of another person is connected with the contemplation of beauty and becoming aware of the truth; it is communion with the Absolute, the source of *claritas*. Hegel associated the light of the human eye with the search for the truth about mankind; he wrote: ‘subjectivity is spiritual light directing its brightness toward itself, to a place that was dark before [i.e. in classical art – P. T.]’.<sup>28</sup>

Examples of works featuring a clear presentation of the light of the eye include the portraits and self-portraits of Albrecht Dürer. Particularly noteworthy is the portrait of Michael Wolgemut, in which a gaunt elderly man has the sparkling eyes of a youngster.<sup>29</sup> The clear, strong ‘light of the eye’ indicates vitality and clarity of mind. Dürer presented here not a pathetic man, but the wonder of his unyielding spirit.<sup>30</sup> Among the important self-portraits of the artist work is a work from 1550 whose composition was incorporated into the iconographic schema of *Salvador Mundi*,<sup>31</sup> as well as a 1522 sketch called *Vir Dolorum*. In comparing himself with Christ, the artist bestows sacred significance on the light in his eye. In interpreting this presentation, Jan Białostocki<sup>32</sup> rightly points out that the variety of shapes of white and yellowish spots painted on the surface of the eye bears a symbolic meaning. In the eyes of the figure one can discern the reflections of a frame dividing a window into four parts. According to Białystok, the reflection of the window frame on the surface of the eye also evokes an association with the symbolism of the Cross and Passion.

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<sup>25</sup> Hegel, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 154.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the description of this picture at [www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the description of this picture at [www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu) [author’s translation].

<sup>31</sup> M. Machowski, N. Świdzińska, P. Trzeciak, *Sztuka świata* [Art of the World], vol. 4, Warszawa 1991, p. 296.

<sup>32</sup> J. Białostocki, *Obrazy światła* [Images of Light], [in:] idem, *Symbole i obrazy w świecie sztuki* [Symbols and Images in the World of Art], Warszawa 1982.



Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait as the Man of Sorrows* (1522)  
<http://www.wga.hu/>

The works of Dürer, like those of Rembrandt, are examples of mastery in which the subjective view of reality has been reconciled with the essence of things, the truth about the picture's subject. We need not emphasise individualism here, then; let us rather indicate that the artist is not, in a philosophical sense, fully aware of it. Let the artist be rather a Hegelian 'historical hero', realising himself and at the same time fulfilling a higher historical plan. At the time an image is completed, it discloses to each viewer its own individuality and beauty. The objective of the artists of the Romantic era was the extraction and presentation of the essence of things, and since visualisation of the truth is beauty, there remained only to create beautiful things in order to approach the truth. The Hegelian concept of 'the light of the eye' and the luminosity of truth derive from the tradition of the metaphysics of light and Platonic thought, without exhausting the issues of the philosophy of light. Here, *claritas* is a concept that develops and enriches itself within the historical process, fulfilling its historical role; even in the perspective of Hegel's philosophy, it possesses its own autonomous, ontological value.

Within romantic art, more examples of the combination of the symbol of light with the sphere of sanctity can be given; however, it must be noted that every work mentioned here should be the subject of a separate artistic-aesthetic analysis, and the examples I have given are only suggestions. Let us mention, for example, Giorgio Vasari and his work entitled *Birth of Christ* (1546), which presents Christ shining with an intense white light, or *The Adoration of the Shep-*

*herds* by Rubens (1608), where the effect of light is very subtle and gentle, without determining the composition of the image to the same degree as in Vasari. Light appears in scenes of ecstasy, spiritual enlightenment, stigmatisation, martyrdom (the death of a saint) and mystical experiences. Examples include *The Ecstasy of St Theresa* by Giuseppe Bazzani (1745), *The Ecstasy of St Paul* by Johann Liss (1628), and *St Francis in Ecstasy* (1582) by Paolo Veronese. In scenes of martyrdom, light is directed from the sky and illuminates the face of the dying saint, e.g. Jusepe de Ribera's painting *The Martyrdom of St Andrew* (1628), *The Martyrdom of St Stephen* (1616) by Rubens, and, among the works of Georges de La Tour, his painting *St Sebastian Tended by St Irene...*

### The specificity of the aesthetic experience

A romantic work of art forces the viewer to activate his feelings, which combine to create the mood of the work itself and bring the spiritual values contained therein closer.<sup>33</sup> The aesthetic experience refers to the value which the viewer has in himself, and which, in contact with art, is actualised and combined with the values embodied in the image.<sup>34</sup> The correct reception of a work of art is combined, in Hegel, with the common membership of the artist and the viewer in one national spirit (*Volkgeist*). The purpose of romantic art, therefore, is realised not only through the material side of the work, although there is interaction between the two.<sup>35</sup> Hegel writes that 'the elevation of the spirit is a fundamental principle of romantic art'.<sup>36</sup> Thus, this art contains a moment of self-realisation; its subject is not so much the sensual world as the truth concealed behind it.

Romantic art is Christian art, and thus it is religion which introduces (makes us aware of?) the internal conflict that is an inalienable human trait, understood as the bond between body and soul. Conflict becomes a principle of romantic

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<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 149.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. W. Tatarkiewicz, *Przeżycie estetyczne: dzieje pojęcia* [The Aesthetic Experience: History of the Concept], [in:] idem, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć* [The History of Six Concepts], Warszawa 2006, p. 381.

<sup>35</sup> In writing about the freedom that the spirit must achieve, and which can be gained through art, I have in mind those works where dominance over artistic content is assumed by interpretation, which therefore should not be confused with aestheticisation of life in the broader sense: '[Hegel] warned of the danger [to life] posed by (as we would say today) aestheticisation'. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, *Między melancholią a żałobą* [Between Melancholy and Mourning], Warszawa 1996, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Hegel, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 149.

art<sup>37</sup> and of the whole of reality. Interestingly, these theses are not accented by Hegel in *Philosophy of History* or *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but rather in *Lectures on Aesthetics*, where he points to the quarrel between spirituality and matter, as manifested in the impossibility of adequately expressing spiritual beauty even with the help of the most perfect corporeal beauty. Hegel declares that if 'beauty is to be recognised according to its essence and concept, then it can only happen through a thoughtful concept (*durch den denkenden Begriff*), through which the logical-metaphysical nature of both the idea as a whole and the idea of beauty in particular enters into the thinking consciousness'.<sup>38</sup> These words declare the objectivity of beauty. It is spiritual beauty that is made available to the human consciousness on the path of purely philosophical cognition. Hegel emphasises that 'the true content of romance is absolute inwardness, the form appropriate to spiritual subjectivity'.<sup>39</sup>

### The purpose of the development of art

I would like to respond to the question of the purpose of the development of art from the perspective of painting, the form discussed in this article. We recall here that in the romantic era creativity which is no longer tied to material, i.e. music and poetry, also comes into play. These forms constitute a special kind of art, eluding the mediation of spiritual content in sense objects. The question being analysed here does not apply to musical and poetic works; the following considerations apply to the painterly ideals of romantic art, and the problem of realising the potency inherent in the art of the beautiful is described based on the Hegelian definition of a work of art as truth made visible in a material object.

'The end' was applied to the category of *mimesis* to the same degree as to romantic art: 'the end of art' was also the end of its mimetic aspect. In keeping with Hegel's belief about the eschatological factor being realised in history, we can inquire about the point at which the history of art ends. We are inquiring, in other words, about the final work of romantic art (and thus not about modern contemporary art, as, for example, G. Dickie<sup>40</sup> or A. C. Danto<sup>41</sup> would wish!).

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<sup>37</sup> 'Even as early as in the first philosophical works devoted to art, there emerges a picture of the conflict ('war') between philosophy and art, from which philosophy emerged victorious, leading eventually to the particular enslavement and subordination of art'. L. Sosnowski, *Sztuka. Historia. Teoria. Światy Arthura C. Danto* [Art. History. Theory. The worlds of Arthur C. Danto], Kraków 2007, p. 127.

<sup>38</sup> Hegel, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Idem, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 151.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. G. Dickie, *Art and Value*, Wiley-Blackwell 2001 as well as G. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press 1974.

Hegel did not indicate such a point or work, because cultural changes were, for him, long processes, and moreover, he simply had no way of viewing modern works of art. In terms of the processuality of historical changes, it can be added that revolutions, wars and the periods of activity of national heroes constituted exceptions; however, on the universal level, humanistic and broad spiritual changes always occurred gradually.

The concept of the 'end of art' functions in the contemporary criticism and philosophy of art quite specifically; it was taken over by a critic from the field of philosophy, and was perpetuated, I believe, as the result of a misunderstanding. Most critics use this concept in discussions of modern and contemporary art (e.g. Danto). Meanwhile, I believe, the notion of 'the end of art' should be applied to the decline of romantic art. When speaking of the most recent art, we should specify art after 'the end of art',<sup>42</sup> regardless of whether we are talking about Duchamp's *Fountain* or about *Brillo Box*,<sup>43</sup> because none of these items answers the question of the essence of 'the end of art', which is not the end of anything, but rather the beginning of something new. Therefore, the basic question is: where did mimetic art meet its end? In what form did it achieve its goal?

At first glance, it seems that the philosophy of Hegel offers a clear answer to this question. A syllogistic approach to the changes in art explains through which forms art achieved its goal. If history itself was to end, the same end had to be suffered by the history of art, leading to the realisation of the same purpose pursued by history as a whole, but with the important difference that, as opposed to the histories of philosophy and religion, the goal of the fine arts was realised in the world of the senses (i.e. is visible).

Since I am dealing here with romantic painting, I repeat my claim that the content of the romantic spirit was expressed in painting.<sup>44</sup> There remains unresolved the question of where and when this occurred. We know that the subject of inquiries concerning the purpose of mimetic art ought to be the paintings

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. A. C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: a Philosophy of Art*, Harvard University Press 1981; A. C. Danto, *Świat sztuki: pisma z filozofii sztuki* [The World of Art: Writing from the Philosophy of Art], tłum. L. Sosnowski, Kraków 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. K. P. Liessmann, *Sztuka po końcu końca sztuki. Refleksje o czekaniu na estetyczne zbawienie* [Art after the End of the End of Art. Reflections about the Wait for Aesthetic Salvation], tłum. F. Chmielowski, "Estetyka i Krytyka", No. 11 (2/2006), pp. 57–72.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Sosnowski, op. cit., p. 138 et seq.

<sup>44</sup> According to Hegel's dialectical theory, each historical period can be divided into three parts, passing through the stages of growth, full bloom and fall. I repeat this once again, because the specifics of my argument are focussed here: that paintings represent the ideals of romanticism, whereas poetry and music are late, decadent forms of the movement, in which aesthetic and artistic values are already dominated by philosophical content; poetry and music are the end of romanticism.



created in the full bloom of the epoch, when artists realised its ideals in the most expressive way; we do not seek the ideals of art at the end of the era, when forms important in a given period degenerated, ceased to be readable to viewers, became mannered, or were transformed over time into kitsch. Hegel thoroughly describes this historical rule in the pages of *Lectures in the Philosophy of History*.<sup>45</sup>

Artists had to fulfil their responsibilities; had they not done so, art would not have ended.<sup>46</sup> Hegel, in trying to define the uniqueness of romantic art, writes that it distinguished itself above all through ‘new content’.<sup>47</sup> Thus, if every change in content expressed by artists is inseparably connected with a change in form, it is possible to hope for the identification of a certain element or detail of a work of art which has been developed specifically in order to render this ‘new content’ visible. This is difficult in romantic art, where the disparity of content and form must be dealt with.<sup>48</sup> In the pages of *Lectures on Aesthetics* we read that

[...] the form of romantic art derives its definition [...] from an internal notion of content whose presentation is the task of art; therefore, we must attempt to go above all in this direction to clearly grasp what the specific principle of the new content depends on [...] as the absolute content of truth and as the basis of a new world view and of a new method of artistic creativity’.<sup>49</sup>

Hegel speaks here of the expanding role of philosophy in art: what cannot be shown directly in a work of art will be concluded by philosophy. ‘The end of art’ is the point in history at which the form and content of works of art begin to be supplemented by philosophy.

Let us start, then, from the subject of painting, which has already been mentioned above. Hegel’s statements on romanticism are the basis for the elevation of depictions of the human being above other themes in art, since they refer the viewer directly to the experience of ‘spiritual subjectivity’. Human images are thus representative of romanticism. Hegel attributes to romantic art the right to

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Wykłady z filozofii dziejów*, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 10–11.

<sup>46</sup> ‘The principle of art, as it turns out’ (according to Hegel) ‘is disastrous for life, which requires a clearly defined purpose and a firm “male” character’, cf. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, *Moralne zaangażowanie lub/i estetyczna obojętność* [Moral Commitment and/or Aesthetic Indifference], [in:] *Estetyczne przestrzenie współczesności* [Contemporary Aesthetic Spaces], red. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Warszawa 1996, p. 110; cf. also: eadem, *Między melancholią a żalobą*, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> Hegel, *Wykłady z filozofii dziejów*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 189.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Thus it is fusion [namely, of content and form] which takes place in the element of externality and thereby makes sensual reality an entity adequate to the spirit, which is at the same time contrary to the true concept of the spirit’. Idem, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 148.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 147.

express spiritual and even divine content by means of human representation.<sup>50</sup> This is enabled by the relationship, instituted by Christ, between human and divine elements. The purpose of romantic painting is thus accomplished through human representations. Landscapes or still lifes, which, of course, functioned at all times in mimetic painting but lacked significance for spiritual development, were rejected.<sup>51</sup> A romantic painting shows a 'real, individual subject in his inner life';<sup>52</sup> the work attempts to reveal the essence of this man, and at the same time that of the whole of humanity. Among the random features of each person are elements of sensuality such as posture, physique, hands, and face, but 'when we ask [...], in which of these various organs the whole soul is revealed as a soul, we will immediately cite the human eye; because in the eye is focussed the soul that not only peers out through it, but also can be seen in it'.<sup>53</sup> All components and parts of the human body change and develop, with, of course, one exception: the eyes change to a negligible extent, thus constituting the key to the correct understanding of the essence of romanticism.

The adoption of the motif of the eye and its inner light constitutes a reference to the centuries-old tradition of the philosophy of light. Hegel believed that the soul of a human being was focussed in his eyes (an eminently Platonic theme), through which the individuality of each person, the so-called 'history of the soul',<sup>54</sup> becomes accessible to us. The sphere of the human spirit, which is the new content of art, does not deny the temporality of human existence; this is why Christian artists, accepting human corporeality, recognised it as the inert element of spiritual content.

The fusion of philosophy with art and religion which occurred in romanticism enabled the use of the Platonic category of the eye not only as a literal presentation in painting, but also as a supporting metaphor. These 'eyes' also enable the creation of a relationship of 'a subjective One'.<sup>55</sup>

The mimetically perfect representation of the human eye is the realisation of the purpose of romantic art. This achievement should be assessed here primarily from the point of view of philosophical values, and not of artistic works (outstanding as they may be), because philosophical values enable the artistic representation to transcend its literal sensual meaning. If the viewer does not experience the difference between the spiritual content and the literal representation, it means that the formation of 'a subjective One' with the work of art was not

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<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 152.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 160.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 153.

<sup>53</sup> Idem, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 253.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 161.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 259.

achieved and as a result the painting was not philosophically enriched with intellectual or religious content. In romantic painting we deal exclusively with mimetic works; nevertheless, we, as the viewers of a work of art, should approach it while maintaining a considerable distance from the principle of perfect presentation of sensuality. Even if all romantic painting is characterised by mimeticism, not all of its works are ideals of art. Hegel states that '[...] the real artistic method of shaping the outer aspect of a phenomenon does not emerge in romantic art to any significant degree beyond the borders of true, ordinary reality'.<sup>56</sup> Beyond the perfection of the mimetic representation of sensuality, the genius of the artist, the mood, the theme of the work and, finally, the idea to which it refers us – all must be considered.

In inquiring about a work that perfectly executes the ideas of romantic painting, we are seeking the moment between the period of full development of mimetic art and its collapse. The development of this art continues, independently of the even deeper influences of philosophy, until the Reformation, which defines, according to Hegel, the turning point, restoring the disrupted relationship between man and God. Hegel's lifespan is already the time of the fall of romantic art. It can be assumed that the great paintings of romanticism, that is, those in which a special relationship between artistic form and philosophical content is maintained, were created between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Such a wide interval should not be surprising. One should include here, for example, the works of Raphael Santi, whose representation of the Virgin Mary recalls Hegel in *Lectures on Aesthetics*.<sup>57</sup> Neither can we omit the portraits of Titian, who incorporated in them the beauty of 'the light of the eye'. Fitting here as well are the above-mentioned works by Dürer, as well as Hans Holbein's portrait of Richard Southwell, Bernini's self-portrait with its clear and conspicuous 'light of the eye', and finally, all of Rembrandt's self-portraits and (to end this summary, though without exhausting the catalogue by any means) Vermeer's beautiful presentations of women. The unity of beauty and truth has been confirmed in romantic art, though we may feel some dissatisfaction and regret because this harmonious relationship endured for a very brief time. In terms of art, most important is that the question posed by its creators about the nature of man has turned out to be a philosophical question. At the same time, great pains have been taken to obtain the answer to this philosophical question; philosophy has been invited to art. Thus, in history, art, and philosophy, the luminosity of truth (mediation), which was perhaps the only sign of the real presence of spirit in the world of the senses, fades out.

<sup>56</sup> Idem, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 163.

<sup>57</sup> Idem, *Wykłady o estetyce*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 257. More information on the figure and meaning of the Virgin Mary can be found in the same work, vol. 2, p. 186 and vol. 3, p. 143.

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