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Hegel on the Meanings of Poetry

Gary Shapiro

Since Socrates' attack on poetry, philosophers and critics have been faced with the problem of reconciling two convictions which seem equally pressing. While poetry (or imaginative literature) is and has been valued as a source of insight and knowledge, it also seems clear that poetic meaning is of a rather different sort than that found in science, ordinary language, or (to introduce the classical contrast) prose. Philosophical theories of poetry, then, take one of two forms: either they deny one of these two beliefs, implying perhaps that poetry has only nonsensical or literal meaning, or they provide a cognitive analysis of poetry which differentiates its meaning from that of prose. Hegel took the second alternative, maintaining both that poetry "has been the most universal and cosmopolitan instructor of the human race" and that the logic or meaning of poetry is radically unprosaic.¹ Poetry's cognitive value, like that of philosophy, religion, and the other forms of art, can be expressed most generally by saying that it is a form of absolute spirit in which knowledge is thorough self-knowledge; the mode or form of this knowledge is reason or dialectic as opposed to the rigid categories of the understanding. These formulas by themselves are not illuminating, being in Hegel's terms mere abstract universals; they take on concrete meaning only when we see them functioning in their capacity of actually explaining the essential forms, aspects, expressions, and historical varieties of poetry.

What is interesting about Hegel's analysis of poetry, then, is his attempt to show that it is not only a form of knowledge, but a form which is quite distinct from that of prosaic thought. Both features follow from the claim that the content of poetic knowledge is dialectical, as is the content of all art, religion, and philosophy for Hegel; all are concerned with comprehending the contradictions, movements, and resolutions of Spirit (*Geist*) which is the fullest expression of a dialectical activity. Hegel's conception of poetry could be approached simply within the context of his own system by following his exposition of the idea, means of expression,

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and realized varieties of poetry, or regressing further, by examining poetry's place among the arts or by considering the general notion of dialectic or spirit. While all of these aspects of Hegel's thought need to be understood in order to comprehend his theory of poetry, it may clarify things to see how his analysis handles a difficulty which has been encountered in the philosophical and critical analysis of poetic meaning. After suggesting the force of Hegel's analysis in this way I will examine it in some detail; and since the theory offers a cognitive defense of poetry by assimilating poetic to philosophical meaning, it will be necessary to raise some questions about the relationship of philosophy and poetry which pose difficulties for Hegel's account.

I

One might begin by questioning one or both of the claims mentioned earlier: that poetry is a form of knowledge and that it is to be clearly distinguished from a conventional or literalistic type of knowledge (traditionally called prose). Yet a denial of either runs against the firm convictions of most of those who have taken poetry at all seriously. A philosopher might very well hold a theory, like the positivist criterion of meaning, which had the consequence that poetry was either meaningless or had merely emotive meaning. But the conflict of such a theory with both common and uncommon sense concerning poetry would itself be a good reason for doubting it. It is, of course, conceivable that we might be led to give up either or both of these claims by some very convincing philosophical system or theory. In the absence of such a theory, however, what is needed is to understand what is already believed, following Anselm's example in regard to the existence of God.

There is a popular cognitive conception of poetry which sees the need for a non-prosaic analysis of poetic meaning. The conception is not only popular among critics and aestheticians, but can make some claim to being the dominant poetics of our time. It is general enough to be found among literary critics, analytic philosophers, and existentialists who are otherwise of markedly diverse persuasions. Since it is an approach which Hegel was aware of and consciously rejected it offers us a point of access to his own thought about poetry. The conception I have in mind will be called the theory of implicit meaning. (This follows a suggestion by Monroe Beardsley, although the theory itself is a set of claims which cannot as a whole be attributed with ease to any specific person, although many share them in large part.)² The theory begins with the realization

that poetry is meaningful rather than nonsensical although its deviation from science, semantically and syntactically correct language (or, pejoratively, "steno-language" or "*Gerede*" — idle chatter) is clearly seen. Poetic meaning is said to be implicit because it is suggested, referred to, or symbolized rather than being actually present in the literary work. Moreover the meanings in question are intrinsically and not accidentally implicit; they are not literal meanings which could be directly stated, for which poetic expressions would in that case simply be a code, but they remain implicit because of some special characteristic. The nature of this characteristic is variously understood in theories of metaphorical, symbolical, mythical, and imagistic meaning. The central point of the theory from which these competing versions derive, however, is the insistence that the meaning in question is not and cannot be fully presented in the poem. In a theory of poetic ambiguity like William Empson's, for example, poetic significance is understood as the ability to suggest a wealth of possible meanings which are interrelated in a complex fashion. Such ambiguity cannot be explicit because it involves a continuum of possibilities which no actual linguistic structure can include or contain, and so it can only be evoked. When questions of poetic value arise it is natural that such theories find the higher forms of poetry to be those which not only maximize the element of implicit or suggested meaning but show an awareness of the tension between what is (or can be) actually said and what is evoked or symbolized. It is in this perspective that we can make some sense of Heidegger's puzzling claim that "in the familiar appearances, the poet calls the alien as that to which the invisible imparts itself in order to remain what it is—unknown."³ Although those who are given to close analyses of the nature of metaphor or symbol might protest rather vigorously at being associated with apocalyptic utterances of this sort, the common element in the many theories of implicit meaning is precisely the insistence on a tension between the limited actuality of the poem and the indefinite possibility of the poetic meaning.

From Hegel's point of view, the difficulty with such a theory is not so much in working out the details of the analysis of implicit meaning but with the assumption that such meaning is paradigmatically poetic. There is indeed a variety of poetry which can be properly called symbolical and the metaphor is a conscious comparison of an indefinite sort; yet these are the absolutely minimal forms of poetry and its language rather than its exemplars. The fact of poetic tension and symbolism derives on Hegel's account

from the general conditions of art: it seeks to express a spiritual content within a sensuous form. Simply as art, poetry, whose imaginative medium is the finest attenuation of the sensory forms of the other arts, will exhibit a symbolical aspect. Symbolical poetry proper, however, is that which does not go beyond this sense of disparity or opposition.⁴ In certain forms of religious poetry, for example, God is conceived as utterly sublime and unknowable and yet a wealth of specific things and properties of the world are mentioned simply in order to emphasize the contrast of the finite and the infinite. Metaphorical language is a conscious development of the same tendency to make meaning merely symbolical or implicit, although it generally reflects a more conscious artistry than the poetry of the sublime. A metaphor has both primary and secondary subjects which are juxtaposed in such a way as to create a novel spectrum of possible meanings which could not be expressed by a literal comparison. Such forms, however, testify to their own incompleteness, for they point to a fulfilled meaning which, by hypothesis, can never be made present. The symbolical or metaphorical poet, like the religious man of the unhappy consciousness, is acutely aware of the opposition between what he actually does and says and what he wants to mean and enjoy; and while he may succeed in showing the limits of the former he is prevented by his own methods from making the latter manifest. The symbolic poet may also appear in the form of the oracle whose utterances are deliberately vague and open to endless interpretation.

At this point it may seem as if Hegel's objections to the theory of implicit meaning hold only for those varieties of it which agree with him that poetry is intentional. Suppose, however, that one regards such things as metaphors and symbols as simply part of the texture or surface of a poem, which can be recognized and understood without any reference to the poet's intentions. Still, insofar as one holds that these aspects of poetry are to be analyzed as implicit meanings, Hegel's criticism applies equally; for it is not the meaning which is supposed to be manifest here but simply the reference to it.

Hegel's own conception of poetry is based not on the minimal characteristics of the art but on its realization in those works of the imagination whose meaning is luminous and compelling. Along with the advocates of implicit meaning he realizes that poetry is not propositional or prosaic. For Hegel, however, the poetic alternative to the prose of the understanding is not an indefinite meaning or an ineffable experience, but the speculative comprehension of the dialectical nature of spirit. The tension which the theory of implicit

meaning detects between the actual and the possible in a poem is a kind of image of this dialectic of spirit but one that turns out to be ultimately inadequate in the same way that symbolism generally fails to fulfill its promise. It is true that the symbolical or metaphorical tension itself must be exhibited or presented, rather than merely described, and to this extent it is radically other than what can be communicated through prosaic propositions. Yet there is a tendency to equate the non-propositional with the ineffable or the non-conceptual in this account which Hegel strongly resists. As in philosophy, the propositional form is inadequate in poetry not because its content is available only through an esoteric intuition of some sort, but on account of the spiritual content being itself dialectical. Hegel's arguments against romantic intuitionism in philosophy (as in the "Preface" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) find a parallel in his characterization of symbolic poetry as an indefinite groping toward an indefinite content.

II

The theory of implicit meaning requires us to suppose that poems have purposes or intentions, although some of its proponents are skeptical in various degrees about the possibility of discerning any such purposes which are not immanent and manifest in the text of the poem. Hegel's conception of poetry's dialectical meaning also depends upon noticing this purposive feature; but Hegel differs from the theory of implicit meaning in his claim that in the paradigmatic cases of poetry such purposes are actually fulfilled in the poem. As in his analyses of other phenomena of spirit, like history and religion, Hegel's interest is to show just *how* the purpose of the activity in question is fulfilled. Since the subject matter (spirit) is dialectical, the study of the purpose and its realization will exhibit the tensions and contradictions which are appropriate to that particular form of activity. It is not that Hegel applies a "dialectical method" to a subject matter in order to deduce its necessary characteristics; it is the subject matter itself which has a dialectical character. In his *Encyclopedia* he emphasizes that dialectic is primarily a feature of the world:

It is customary to treat Dialectic as an adventitious art, which for very wantonness introduces confusion and a mere semblance of contradiction into definite notions. . . . But in its true and proper character, Dialectic is the very nature and

essence of everything predicated by the mere understanding . . . by Dialectic is meant the indwelling tendency outwards by which the one-sidedness and limitation of the predicates of understanding is seen in its true light, and shown to be the negation of them.⁵

So far there may not appear to be any decisive difference between Hegel's conception and that of the theory of implicit meaning. For the latter insists, as does Hegel, on the *limited* character of the images, figures, and symbols actually presented in a poem, contrasting it with the many possible meanings which are implicitly referred to. Poetry of the symbolic type, which is paradigmatic for the theory of implicit meaning, could be viewed as a way of demonstrating the mere finitude of that which is finite. Now Hegel himself describes symbolic poetry in just this way. The difference between the two perspectives has to do with Hegel's analysis of *how* dialectical meanings are realized in poetry. Typically, Hegel analyzes spiritual activities in terms of three aspects: the general idea or purpose, abstractly considered; the medium or means in which or by which the purpose is carried out; and the concrete or realized end of the activity. In understanding history as the development of freedom, for example, we must inquire into the general idea of freedom (rational conscious self-determination), the means by which freedom is actualized in the world (the passions and interests of human beings), and the end or realization of freedom (concrete ethical life having its goal in the state). The corresponding aspects of poetry are the idea of a comprehension of the dialectical nature of spirit, the medium and means of poetic expression, and the actual poetic genres (the epic, lyric, and drama).

The purpose or idea of poetry sets it apart from prose both because its object is explicitly taken to be spirit and because it comprehends this object through a dialectical transformation of the categories of the understanding. In this respect, poetry is simply one form of art which, along with religion and philosophy, are the three modes of spirit's knowledge of itself. A more definite notion of the idea of poetry in particular and of its medium emerges when poetry is located within the general context of art. According to Hegel, art is spirit's knowledge of itself in a sensuous form. Philosophy and religion are also modes of spiritual self-knowledge; while religion can dispense with sensuous representations (although it employs figures and myths), philosophy reaches its goal through the medium of thought itself without limitation by either sense or story. The

various arts can be understood in terms of the relation in each between sensuous form and spiritual content: there is a progressive liberation from material and sensuous constraints in the series which begins with architecture and sculpture and passes through painting (the art of color) and music (the art of tone) to poetry which employs language simply as an external sign of the imaginative life of spirit. In contrast to all other arts "what the end is now is to express immediately for spirit [*Geist*] the manifestations of spirit with all its ideas of imagination and art, without setting forth their visible and bodily presence."⁶ Poetry is an art in the process of dissolution, for its external and objective aspect is, paradoxically, "the inner imagination and intuition itself" [*das innere Vorstellen und Anschauen selbst*].⁷ Hegel conceives of the imagination as thought in a concrete form or aspect: it is not the images of Plato's painters or the faculty of recalling or reproducing such images which is at stake here, but a creative power of thought which nevertheless retains some of the specificity and particularity of the sensuous world. The distinction is close to that which English critics, especially of the romantic period, have drawn between fancy and imagination, or the primary and secondary imagination.⁸ The poetic comprehension of the hero differs from the philosophical because it imagines him as Achilles or Oedipus, a man of a particular nationality, character, and individuality rather than analyzing in what heroism of this or that type consists. Poetry and speculative thought are alike in considering the hero dialectically, but it is only poetry which is constrained to do so imaginatively. Hegel's conception of poetry can be briefly characterized as imaginative dialectic, if we remember that imagination is not reducible to static images. It is a striking fact, for both Plato and Hegel, that poetry not only employs or conjures up such images but that they are often unnatural and even internally inconsistent or incongruously connected with one another from a naturalistic point of view; while Plato takes this as evidence for assimilating poetry to mere opinion and illusion, Hegel detects a power and structure in the play of images which is fundamentally analogous to the dialectical structure which philosophy finds in things generally. It is worth noting that it is imagination, not language, which is the medium of poetry. Language is simply a sign of the imaginative idea.

Accordingly Hegel claims that a great poem is in principle translatable not only from one language to another, but from verse to prose.⁹ Although many modern critics might dispute this, it seems to be empirically confirmed in addition to following from Hegel's

views. Certainly it is less strange to suggest that a poem can be translated than to claim that a building or a painting could be translated into a different material medium or colors. Paradigmatic works of the literary imagination — Homer, Sophocles, Cervantes, Shakespeare — are translated and read in translation incessantly. Those aspects which seem to escape translation are either specific associations of the original language which have no equivalent in the translator's, or the effects of tone, meter, and rhythm. Yet to some extent these are not difficulties in principle, but only in practice; explanations or metaphors may elucidate a strange meaning where there is no single literal equivalent and foreign meters may be approximated by a skilled poet. Where the claim of untranslatability is most plausible—in respect to a short lyric poem—it is usually because we are concerned with a work which lies somewhere on the boundary of poetry and music.

As imaginative dialectic, poetry does what philosophy does but in a more immediate form. In the following contrast which Hegel draws between the comprehension of the dialectic of things in pure thought and in poetry, there are grounds for doubting that he takes philosophy to be capable of doing poetry's job better than poetry does:

reason. . . does not rest satisfied with the differentiations and external relations proper to the conceptions and distinctions of the understanding; it unites them in a free totality, which in the apprehension of our finite faculty fails to prove its self-consistency. . . although it grasps and comprehends actual things in their essential separation and their actual existence, it does also nevertheless translate this particularity into the ideal element of the universal, in which alone thought is at home with itself. Consequently there arises, in contrast to the world of phenomena, a world that is new in this sense, that though the truth of the actual [*Wirklichen*] is present, it is not displayed in actuality itself as the formative power and very own soul of the same. Thinking is only a reconciliation of truth with reality in *thought*; poetic creation and construction, however, is a reconciliation in the mode of *real appearance* itself, although merely in a spiritually imaginative form [*geistig vorgestellten Form*].¹⁰

The realization of this imaginative dialectic occurs in the actual poems which carry out this program of overcoming the fixed op-

positions of the understanding. The sequence of these forms is not so much chronological as logical; they form a series in which the purpose of poetry is actualized more and more fully. That is, they show a progressive overcoming of the usual categories of the understanding, in particular cause and effect and subject and object.

The epic is appropriately the simplest form of major poetry because its approach resembles the impersonal, spectatorial attitude of history. The epic poet seems simply to describe a world in his song as the naive historian or chronicler narrates a series of events. So far the usual distinction of subject and object is observed, but an analysis of the world and action of the epic discloses a different conception. The hero's career itself can be understood neither as a direct effect of the social world from which it arises nor, alternatively, as the cause of that world. Using the categories of the understanding we might view society as composed of independent units, externally related either by voluntary acts or contingent circumstances, or as a cultural unit whose holistic properties determine the characteristics of its members. The epic offers (at least in imagination) an alternative to these one-sided views. The hero emerges out of his world, and to that extent he is an expression of it; yet at the same time he is a distinctive individual with a remarkable character who undertakes unusual actions. Achilles is not simply a paradigm of what the Greek warrior should be, but in his demand for honor from Zeus and his consuming wrath his individuality transcends its origins. The world of the epic, in order to make such figures and actions possible, must itself be a poetic world. Socially, it is one in which loose relations of allegiance based mainly on personal quality and achievement have not yet been superseded by law and order. It is even poetic in its attitude toward objects of daily use; a division has not yet been made between the fine and the useful arts, so that a door, a tripod, or a knife are as worthy of description as the battles of the heroes. Here Hegel uses "poetic" in his own systematic sense: it is a world which is not yet ruled by the prosaic categories of the understanding but is imaginatively conceived. The epic poet is a kind of primitive phenomenologist who observes the dialectical patterns of the heroic world.¹¹

The lyric poem is an individual, subjective expression which lacks the compass of the epic; yet its imaginative structure is a variation on the same theme. The lyric attitude is that of a reflective mind which has withdrawn from a highly regularized external world, and now assimilates that world through the power of its own expression. The lyric itself involves a clash between this individual expression

and the subject matter (whose variety is infinite) which is to be assimilated. Here again the division is not a fixed one:

It is above all the stress of this opposition, which renders inevitable the swing and the boldness of utterance and image, the apparent absence of order in the ideal construction and course of the poem, its digressions, lacunae, and sudden transitions, and which preserves the ideal elevation of the poet, by means of the mastery with which he is enabled, through the artistic perfection of his work, to overcome this disunion, and to produce an essentially harmonious whole, which places him, as *his* work, in relief above the greatness of his subject.¹²

The burden of the lyric is the clash between "the compelling force of the subject matter" and the "independent freedom of the poet"; since it occurs in the imagination it requires a feeling of shock or randomness in the texture of the poem itself. Not only does Hegel make no effort to deduce or justify the specific nature of this clash, it is a consequence of his theory that such characteristics are necessarily contingent. Hegel's theory is deductive here not in its attempt to determine concrete details but only in its insistence that it is part of the idea of the poem that there be striking features of it which present themselves as random, indeterminate, or chaotic.

The drama is not only dialectical in its structure but represents a dialectical combination of the epic and the lyric. While it presents characters before us in their objectivity, like the epic, these characters have the self-expressive power of the lyric poet. The dialectical relationship between the individual and his world is roughly similar to that in the epic; but in this context the "world" is nothing but similarly situated individuals. In the drama subjective spirit arises out of a world, becomes individual, determinate, and constitutive of the world. In this process it can be said with equal justification that the subjective becomes objective and the objective becomes subjective. The dramatic careers of the various characters are what they are only through conflict, collision, and resolution; the appearance of self-subsistency is pushed to the extreme by the dramatic mode of presentation but dissolved or mediated in another perspective by the dramatic action. Insofar as a resolution or reconciliation is offered in the drama, it cannot have its source in the individual characters, but to accomplish this the drama itself "will have to propound to us the vital energy of a principle of necessity which is essentially self-

supporting, and capable of resolving every conflict and contradiction."¹³ In dramatic poetry the metaphor finds one of its true artistic functions, for in modern drama (and Hegel is thinking of Shakespeare in particular here) the richly metaphorical speech of the characters does not point to an indefinite meaning but, as an action of their own, shows an ability to transcend and dissolve the objective situation, even at the height of danger or despair. Metaphor is poetic just to the extent that it is *aufgehoben*.

If we make a distinction between form and content in poetry, metaphoric tension or implicit meaning arises out of the formal contradiction which poetry exhibits between its imaginative medium and spirit; while the content of poetry has to do with spirit's contradictions with itself. The converse of Shakespearean drama, in which metaphorical form is transmuted into spiritual content, is that type of modern poetry in which the poet takes the poetic activity itself as a subject for metaphorical or symbolic exploration. As in Hölderlin's poetry, which Heidegger so admires, spiritual content becomes the vehicle of implicit meaning. Of course, poetry which is conscious of itself as poetry illustrates Hegel's own categories of analysis as well as providing a parallel to his conception of philosophy as the conscious knowledge of its own history. However, by inverting the relationship between form and content, romantic symbolism finds its appropriate theme in the prophetic anticipation of an unknown god, falling back into another variation of the unhappy consciousness.

By insisting on the dialectical nature of poetic meaning Hegel makes a cognitive defense of poetry which allies it with philosophy. The analogy between the two is not their shared deviation from tautology or empirical verifiability, as the positivists suggested, but their possession of a common object and mode of thought, each of which is highly articulated. One way of approaching this structure, which presents another contrast with the theory of implicit meaning, is to attend to Hegel's conception of organic unity. The first image in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is that of the growing plant whose fruit is not the refutation but the truth of the stem and blossom; in his lectures on the fine arts Hegel insists that poetry also aims at organic unity. What must be noted here is that the notion of organic unity is not a mere metaphor for Hegel in either of these contexts, but is drawn from his analysis of life. As analyzed in the *Phenomenology*, for example, life is the entire process by which particular living forms attain independent status, contribute through reproduction or sustenance to the herd or tribe and then by their death reveal their

partiality and testify to the strength of the whole. Organic unity, then, is not simple interrelation or harmony, but involves a conceptualizable dialectic of the one and the many which includes negativity, opposition, and contradiction. While critics and aestheticians sometimes interpret organic unity as if it were a seamless whole which could tolerate no contradiction, it is part of Hegel's conception that distinction, separation, and contingency are necessary aspects of a genuine organic unity. In this respect his approach is more responsive to poetic experience than is the dogmatic assertion that every poetic part must be necessary and make a difference to the whole. In each of the major genres of poetry it is even necessary that the poem contain contingent elements; the epic, for example, must generate a sense of facticity and inexhaustibility by focusing on a multitude of details which might very well have been otherwise. The theorists of implicit meaning often treat organic unity as an ideal by which critical evaluations are to be guided. Insofar as they have in mind the notion of the seamless whole, they falsify that aspect of poetic experience which corresponds to the disunities, death, and struggle which Hegel recognizes in his idea of life; and one wonders, in any case, how such a whole could be based on the irreducible tension involved in implicit meaning without appealing to something like Hegel's notion of infinity or totality.

For Hegel, poetry and philosophy are different modes in which consciousness recreates for itself the dialectical pattern which it finds in life (remembering that life has a specific meaning here). The point of reference to the notion of life is not to endorse a vague conception of poetry as vivid or emotional, but to stress the fact that the way in which poetry does what the abstract understanding cannot do, is by presenting the conceptualizable and the determinate—although in an imaginative form. Poetry does not simply reduplicate the tensions and resolutions of life, however; the poem is not simply a quasi-organic object, as it is in Kant's aesthetics. Poetry is the consciousness of life and its unity is not that of an abstract universal but of human action. Aristotle also had something like this in mind in defining poetry as the imitation of human life; for human life is a determinate subject matter in which universal principles are true only for the most part, thus setting up certain irreducible contradictions between the ideal as such and its instantiation. If Hegel extends this Aristotelian thought he does so because of a metaphysical analysis which sees the dialectical relations of human life as paradigms rather than anomalies. His defense of poetry meets

Socrates's critique by attempting to show that poetic knowledge is self-knowledge.

III

The problem with analogies is that they cut in more directions than is usually anticipated. As Hume observed, we attribute some form of rational design to the world only at the price of picturing the world's creator as a craftsman (or guild) of rather uncertain abilities. Since Hegel defends the cognitive value of poetry by emphasizing its ties to philosophy, it can very well be asked whether he views philosophy itself as a form of poetry or if his own philosophy is simply an esoteric poem of some sort. Hostile critics have suggested that philosophy of the Hegelian type is *merely* poetry, meaning, apparently, that it is (at best) a lyrical expression of an individual perspective with no more general validity than a sonnet by Wordsworth or a *Howl* by Ginsberg. More sympathetic readers have suggested that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in particular is an epic, drama, or *Bildungsroman* of the world-spirit, and that it offers insights into the history of human thought which are as profound and partial as those that we get from Shakespeare or Goethe.

Hegel himself clearly rejects such a view because of the distinction which he makes between the imaginative and the thinking comprehension of spirit's dialectic. All of the poetic genres are tied to the immediate and specific because they present dialectical ideas only in imaginative form. Neither the Hegelian system nor any of the particular works within it has the specific emotional unity of the reflective individual which characterizes the lyric. The breadth of the subject matters, the changes of perspective, and the aim at a universality which transcends such limited perspectives as the lyric offers, suggests that the affinity might be rather with one of the more objective literary genres, the epic or drama.

Hegel does indeed consider the question whether the history of the world, as an action of spirit, could be the subject of an epic. Since many have credited Hegel with composing just such a work, it is worth quoting his rejection of this possibility:

In this respect no doubt the most exalted action of Spirit would be the history of the world itself. We can conceive it possible that our poet might in this sense undertake to elaborate in what we may call the absolute Epos this universal achievement on the battlefield of the universal spirit.

whose hero would be the spirit of man, the *humanus*, who is drawn up and exalted from the clouded levels of conscious existence into the clearer region of universal history. But in virtue of the very fact of its universality a subject matter of this kind would so be quite unfitted for artistic treatment. It would not adapt itself sufficiently to individualization. For on the one hand we fail altogether to find in such a subject a clearly fixed background and world-condition, not merely in relation to external *locale*, but also in that of morality and custom. In other words, the only basis for all we could possibly presuppose would be the universal World-Spirit or intelligence, whom we are unable to bring visibly before us as a particular condition, and who is possessed of the entire Earth as his local environment.¹⁴

In general, Hegel continues, an epic of the world-spirit presents two possibilities: the absolute idea which governs history could be personified, embodied in a specific human form, or presented only as the necessity underlying the actions of specific nations and world-historical figures. The first alternative is not feasible because "the infinity of such a content must shatter the necessarily limited artistic vessel of determinate individuality," while the second would collapse into "a series of particular characters which emerged and again disappeared in a wholly external succession" because the world-spirit, unable to appear as an individual agent, would be relegated to a shadowy role behind the scenes.¹⁵

Hegel's objection to an epic of the world-spirit is equally applicable to a dramatic version of the same story because here, too, the specific characters could not embody a universal content. Yet there does seem to be a strong dramatic strain in Hegel's philosophy, although commentators have disagreed as to whether it is essentially tragic or comic.¹⁶ Usually the heart of this analogy is said to lie in the fact that drama raises up and examines an individual's career only to show his ultimate destruction simply because of his own finitude. In Hegel's view of comedy, in particular, the figure is one which falsely claims a universal importance and whose dissolution leaves the audience with a sense of the infinite power of spirit as opposed to all that which is finite. Now while this pattern is recognizable both in drama and in Hegel's philosophy itself, it manifests itself differently in the two modes of discourse. For the protagonists of drama are finite individuals, imaginatively conceived, while the actors in Hegel's philosophical "comedy" are the *ideas* of individuality as well

as all the major attitudes which spirit can assume in a collective fashion. Comedy is the imaginative version of what is thought universally in dialectical philosophy. The very analogies employed here come from Hegel's own philosophical analysis of the drama in which the forms of poetry themselves play a role analogous to (yet distinguishable from) Falstaff or Molière's misanthrope.

Even if these poetic interpretations of Hegel's philosophy are inconsistent, both in principle and in detail, with his own conception of philosophy, they suggest a criticism of Hegel's system which could be expressed in another way. The point of adopting a poetic view of a philosopher's work may be either to disparage what bills itself as high metaphysics as mere poetry, whose meaning is alleged to be emotive only, or to salvage the cognitive value of a system whose universal and literal truth we feel impelled to deny. The first approach is one which begs the question as to the relationship between philosophy and poetry; it represents, from Hegel's point of view, the dichotomous thought of the understanding which is unable to comprehend dialectic, whether in imaginative or purely speculative form except by noticing the bare feelings which accompany them. The second approach is more charitable but inconsistent with Hegel's view of philosophy. For in this context the object of comparing a philosophical with a poetic work is to suggest that it is one perspective among several, a story told in one way which is to be complemented by stories with a different imaginative coloring. The cognitive significance and value of the story is preserved insofar as it is taken to suggest an actual pattern or order which does obtain, even if it also attempts to include material which is properly extraneous or makes an exaggerated claim to be the exclusive version of the truth.

Hegel does take up an attitude of this sort toward his philosophical predecessors, but he holds it to be an inadequate description of his own standpoint of absolute knowledge. Even if the way to truth necessarily involves the sympathetic comprehension of error, truth is one and error is manifold. At the end of his *Encyclopedia* Hegel makes this claim explicitly in considering the relationship of art and philosophy: "Whereas the vision-method of Art . . . shivers the substantial content into many separate shapes . . . Philosophy not merely keeps them together to make a totality, but even unifies them into the simple spiritual vision, and in that raises them to selfconscious thought."¹⁷ The basis of the contrast here is Hegel's logic of determinacy. Spirit, in its teleological drive towards self-knowledge, knows itself at first only vaguely and

indeterminately. Symbolic art is the poorest of artistic phases just because it involves a juxtaposition of abstract material forms, like the Egyptian pyramids, with a spiritual content which is merely indicated rather than manifested; it is not only that spirit in this stage of art is indeterminate in its substance, but that its connection with its external embodiment is subject to the radical indeterminateness which infects all reference of the pointing or indexical variety. As we have seen, Hegel argues that it is the purpose of poetry to overcome such indeterminateness and that this purpose does realize itself, at least within certain limitations. Philosophical knowledge, which dispenses with the imaginative and figurative limitations of art and religion, accomplishes the transition from the indeterminate to the determinate in the realm of thought in an apparently unrestricted fashion. The thoughts of Being and Nothing, with which Hegel begins his *Logic*, are as abstract and indeterminate as thoughts can be; an analysis of their deficiencies and contradictions eventually leads to the concrete and determinate Absolute Idea. Spirit exhibits a similar process, traced in the *Phenomenology*, in its development from undifferentiated subjective feeling to philosophical self-knowledge. In all such movements it is the dialectical contradictions of the subject matter which produce negations which are themselves determinations. Hegel always derides the interest in the possible (the "merely possible") for its indifference to attained actuality, whether in art or political life.

The logic of determinacy which governs Hegel's thought is in most cases presupposed; it is simply the form of the transition from a purpose or intention which is apprehended and adopted vaguely to the concrete realization of that purpose or intention. In any such teleological activity possibilities seem abundant at the beginning but are gradually narrowed down as irreversible decisions are made and we acquire a more determinate knowledge of our own purpose, which has itself become more determinate. In the last chapter of the *Science of Logic* Hegel discusses the process of determination more specifically. The absolute method, that is, his method of philosophical exposition is said to be both analytic because it is attuned to the structure of things themselves and synthetic because it observes the subject matter as tending to become other than itself. This analytic and synthetic moment of the judgment, "by which the universal of the beginning of its own accord determines itself as the other of itself is to be named the dialectical method."¹⁸ The progress of the method is from the bare or empty universal beginning to the more determinate conclusion. Although the method reveals that

even the beginning is not wholly or completely indeterminate (e.g., being, essence, and universality are determinately distinct forms of indeterminate beginnings), the movement which it traces is from the less to the more determinate, pursuing one determinate result on the basis of those already attained: "First of all, this advance is determined as beginning from simple determinatenesses, the succeeding ones becoming ever *richer and more concrete*."¹⁹ Hegel seems to deny in the case of the determinate and indeterminate (as he does explicitly in the case of the mediate and immediate) that there is anything at all which is solely one or the other. But the whole progress of his system requires that in all important or significant respects that which is always tends toward greater determinateness.

The theory of implicit meaning, although not elaborated with specific reference to Hegel, challenges this logic of determinacy insofar as it applies to poetry. It claims that ambiguity, metaphor, and symbolism are the heart of poetry just because they are surrounded by a halo consisting of an indefinite variety of possible meanings and interpretations. At this point the theory converges with a similar critique, this time explicitly addressed to Hegel, which bears on his conception of philosophical meaning and communication. Much of Kierkegaard's attack on Hegel, repeated with variations by Sartre and Heidegger, is based on the claim that Hegel supposes an impossibly determinate relationship, amounting to identity, between himself and his readers. According to this critique, a discursive communication, whether poetical or philosophical must exhibit a certain amount of indeterminateness simply in order to engage its readers. Since the reader as an actually existing person lives by continually projecting possibilities of action and understanding, communication is defeated by the assumption that he can coincide with the author in a determinate "we" which excludes further possibilities of interpretation. Such a completely determinate communication would mean the end of the reader's existence. What is required for philosophical communication, then, is an analogue of Socratic dialectic or Platonic dialogue which preserves the reader's possibilities and allows him to generate "fresh words" in his own soul. The existentialist critique of Hegel aims at demonstrating that in neglecting the Socratic problem of the written word he did not take a sufficiently dialectical attitude toward his own dialectic. Taking this line of criticism together with the previous one, they converge in the claim that the distinction between determinate and indeterminate meaning does not lead to an adequate account of the difference between poetic and philosophical discourse.

To the extent that Hegel is committed to a logic of determinateness, he sees the metaphorical character of poetry as a necessary defect and the philosophical appeal to possibility as a failure to achieve wisdom which shrouds itself in a mystery. The scorn which Hegel addresses to the appeal to the merely possible in the moral life has its counterpart here in his theory of discourse. In both areas it answers to a common and substantial intuitive preference for the articulate and developed as opposed to the incomplete and fragmentary. Nevertheless, the contrast between the concretely actual and the vaguely possible seems undialectical in its dualism. It appears to rest on the assumption that the determinate (or actual) and the indeterminate (or possible) are inversely related. Yet this seems to be one of those principles of the understanding which Hegel was so skillful at dissolving by an appeal to experience and dialectic. One who has a determinate situation in life and actual talents or skills certainly has more genuine possibilities of action than the man who refrains from any definite undertaking so as to remain free for all possibilities. In general, the actual must arise out of some set of possibilities, but once actual, it offers a new set of possibilities.²⁰ The principle is operative in both poetic and philosophical discourse. It is the complex and highly structured work, whether Shakespeare's plays or Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which is typically the ground of many interpretations. Here there is an observable reciprocity of the possible and the actual, for interpretation is a development of possibilities ingredient in the actual structure of a work. There is something puzzling about Hegel's failure to discern the dialectical relationship of the actual and the possible; if he had, the result might have been a recognition of the pluralism inherent in philosophical as well as poetic discourse. The germ of truth in the poetic interpretations of Hegel's philosophy, then, is the reintroduction of indeterminateness into a system which seeks to exclude it by comprehending it. Whether in regard to poetry or philosophy, however, the alternative to the priority of the actual need not be the priority of the possible, as the theorists of implicit meaning and the existentialists have supposed. To return to the question of poetic meaning, it should be possible to account both for the dialectic of spirit which Hegel recognizes in great poetry as well as those holistic patterns of metaphor and image to which modern criticism has drawn our attention. Fire in the *Iliad*, sight and blindness in *Oedipus*, or the storms in Shakespeare's plays tend to be neglected in Hegel's account of these poems just because of his unidirectional logic of determinateness. If modern critics have tend-

ed to give brilliant but one-sided accounts of such metaphors which omit the dialectic of spirit, Hegel sees the dialectic but omits the implicit dimension of the poem. What is needed is an analysis of poetic meaning which does some justice to the relations of the actual and the possible or of spiritual meaning and metaphorical tension.²¹

NOTES

¹ Hegel, *The Philosophy of the Fine Arts (PFA)*, translated by F. P. B. Osmaston (G. Bell: London, 1920), vol. 4, p. 21.

² For Beardsley's version of the theory see his *Aesthetics* (Harcourt, Brace and World: New York, 1958), pp. 114ff. Others who subscribe to the theory in one form or another are Philip Wheelwright and Max Black in their theories of metaphor, William Empson in his study of ambiguity, and Martin Heidegger in his conception (cited below) of the poetic image.

³ Martin Heidegger, ". . . Poetically man dwells" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 225.

⁴ Hegel discusses several forms of symbolic poetry in his *Lectures*. See especially vol. 2, pp. 110-168.

⁵ *Encyclopedia* SS81, translated by William Wallace.

⁶ *PFA*, vol. 4, p. 5.

⁷ *PFA*, vol. 4, p. 9.

⁸ *PFA*, vol. 1, p. 381.

⁹ *PFA*, vol. 4, p. 10. However, it should not be supposed that Hegel is indifferent to rhythm and rhyme in poetry. In his account of poetic expression he attempts to show that it is essential for poetry to mark itself off from other forms of discourse by the use of such modes; he also suggests some intriguing correlations between the "natural" principle of metrical order in ancient poetry and its more objective attitude toward language and between the modern system of rhyme and a greater emphasis on linguistic meaning. Hegel sees that the direction of modern poetry is to emancipate itself from all such constrictions of the medium but characteristically observes that the emancipation requires a development through the self-imposed discipline of versification.

¹⁰ *PFA*, vol. 4 pp. 25-26.

¹¹ *PFA*, vol. 4, pp. 106-192.

¹² *PFA*, vol. 4, p. 229. For Hegel's general analysis of the lyric see pp. 193-247.

¹³ *PFA*, vol. 4, p. 254. For the drama see pp. 248-350.

¹⁴ *PFA*, vol. 4, p. 136.

¹⁵ *PFA*, vol. 4, p. 137.

¹⁶ Josiah Royce suggests an analogy of the *Phenomenology* with *Faust* in his *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (Yale University Press, 1919). Walter Kaufmann disagrees in detail but offers his own version of the analogy in *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (Doubleday: New York, 1966, pp. 115ff). Jacob Loewenberg argues that the *Phenomenology* and Hegel's system as a whole can be best construed as a comedy in his introduction to *Hegel: Selections* (Scribner's: New York, 1929).

¹⁷ *Encyclopedia*, p. 572. A. V. Miller's translation.

¹⁸ *Hegel's Science of Logic*, translated by A. V. Miller (Humanities Press: New York, 1969), p. 831.

¹⁹ *Science of Logic*, p. 840.

²⁰ Justus Buchler defends an interesting version of such a theory of possibility and actuality, but without specific reference to Hegel in his *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1966).

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