

# *Art and Knowledge in Classical German Philosophy. An Introduction*

di Francesco Campana e Gabriele Tomasi

There is probably no period in the history of modern and contemporary thought in which the relationship between philosophy and art in general – and literature, in particular – has been so central to the debate as in the period between Kant and Hegel. Consider, for instance, Kant’s cautious claim that the poet, while aiming at “a mere play with ideas”, provides “nourishment to the understanding” and gives life to its concepts through the imagination;<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schlegel’s bold statement that poetry and philosophy should become one;<sup>2</sup> Schelling’s placement of art as the “keystone” of his system of transcendental idealism capable of achieving the highest degree of knowledge; and the late Hegel who, while not considering the art of modernity as the center of knowledge, places it alongside philosophy as a distinct form of absolute spirit. There is also Hölderlin’s attempt to conceive of a scale of “tones” through which to think about literature and history; Schleiermacher’s theory of expressive knowledge that fits in as a way of understanding individuality from a metaphysical as much as anthropological point of view; and the proposals of later Romanticism to think politics through aesthetic concepts. In general, the main positions in the debate on the cognitive value of art were explored, the motif of poetry as both the origin and consummation of science included. For anyone interested in both the theoretical question of the cognitive value of art and in the main themes concerning the aesthetics of this historical-philosophical period, this is *per se* a sufficient reason for devoting a volume to the topic of art and knowledge in classical German philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by the Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 5, W. de Gruyter, Berlin 1968, § 51, AA 05: 321; Eng. trans. by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by P. Guyer, Cambridge University Press, New York 2000, p. 199.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. F. Schlegel, *Die Lyceums-Fragmente*, in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 2.1, *Charakteristiken und Kritiken I (1796-1801)*, ed. by H. Eichner, Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, München-Paderborn-Wien, Thomas Verlag, Zürich, 1967, Fr. 115, p. 161; Eng. trans. by P. Firchow, *Critical Fragments*, in *Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde and the Fragments*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1971, p. 157.

The topic of “art and knowledge” can be unpacked along the lines of the following three central questions.

First is the question of the role and cognitive achievements of imagination: how can the creative role of art and imagination be compatible with the claim that art reveals truth? According to Kant, works of art give the imagination “an impetus to think”,<sup>3</sup> they occasion processes of thought, but these do not result in determinate knowledge. On the other hand, for example, in his *Fichte-Studien* Novalis, somehow echoing Fichte, claims that the productive imagination “is the source, the mother of all reality, [is] reality itself”.<sup>4</sup> What, then, is the role of imagination in making sense of the world? Does the artistic use of imagination emphasize a function that it (already) sustains in constructing and conferring meaning to ordinary experience?

Second is the question of whether a feeling could constitute an experience in which the world reveals itself to us. This question intertwines with that of the meaning of beauty. Regarding it, Kant’s stance is intriguing: while he denies cognitive content to feeling and therefore to the experience of beauty, he hints at the “cipher by means of which nature figuratively speaks to us in its beautiful forms”.<sup>5</sup> Theoretically charged is also Hölderlin’s conception, according to which what is present as beauty is that being in virtue of which we are, think and act. Can beauty or the feeling that constitutes or reveals it offer any kind of access to this being? As for (primordial) feeling as a candidate for subjective access to the absolute, Novalis’ view is highly interesting. Though he glosses feeling as “not-knowledge”, it is doubtful that he attributes it a theoretical role as an immediate non-cognitive access to the absolute. According to Novalis, as a passive state, feeling is brought into being by the absolute. However, more than a mode of access, he considers it an orientation toward the absolute, which at the same time expresses a limitation: the denial that a finite being has access to the infinite. Significantly, the limits or borders of feeling are, for Novalis, the limits or borders of philosophy itself. If feeling has a power of revelation, it is a negative one, as a feeling of lack. But how does this surface to consciousness, if not through some kind of conceptualization?

Third is the issue of the possible extension of the idea of “truth”

<sup>3</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, cit., AA 05: 315; Eng. trans., p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> Novalis, *Philosophische Studien der Jahre 1795-96 (Fichte-Studien)*, in Novalis, *Schriften*, vol. 2, *Das philosophische Werk I*, ed. by R. Samuel with H.-J. Mähl and G. Schulz, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1981, p. 266; Eng. trans. by J. Kneller, *Fichte Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, cit., § 42; AA 05: 301; Eng. trans., p. 180.

beyond propositional knowledge. Alternatively, if one wants to give up the vocabulary of truth, the question becomes whether the sphere of cognition should be defined solely by truth or whether rational discourse is confined to the propositionally “sayable”.

On these questions, we find an array of conceptions in classical German philosophy that extend from a reception of epistemological concepts in the artistic domain to a fracture between art and knowledge, passing through a view of complementarity between poetry and science, which emphasizes poetry’s priority over propositional knowledge and its role as the cognitive fulfillment of such knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

This makes the conceptions of these philosophers and/or poets not only historically interesting, but also relevant to the contemporary debate on aesthetic cognitivism. Only contemporary philosophy of art has responded with such a variety of insights to the question of the relationship between art and knowledge,<sup>7</sup> and it is essential to show how most of the proposals in vogue today have their origins, or at least already considerable articulation, in these decades.

We hope this will emerge from the essays collected in this volume, which offer a series of perspectives on aspects of these complex issues.

What emerges in this series of contributions is a composite picture of the period, both in terms of the views concerning the specific topic of the relationship between art and knowledge, and in terms of the general philosophical perspectives taken by classical German philosophy. As we see in these essays, reasoning on the relationship between art and knowledge has implications that extend beyond the aesthetic realm, involving areas such as epistemology, the philosophy of history, the philosophy of nature, and political philosophy.

The first two essays of the volume look at Kant, who initiates this historical-philosophical period. *Kant and the cognitive value of poetry* by Gabriele Tomasi shows that we can attribute to Kant a moderate aesthetic cognitivism on the basis of the *experience* triggered by artworks, even though he seems to draw a clear dis-

<sup>6</sup> We owe this formulation to B. Bowman, ‘On the Defense of Literary Value: From Early German Romanticism to Analytic Philosophy of Literature’, in D. Nassar (ed.), *The Relevance of Romanticism. Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014, pp. 151-155.

<sup>7</sup> For some particularly representative recent studies, see, among others, J. Gibson, W. Huemer and L. Pocci (eds.), *A Sense of the World. Essays on fiction, narrative, and knowledge*, Routledge, New York 2007; J. Mikkonen, *The cognitive value of philosophical fiction*, Bloomsbury, London et al. 2014; G. Currie, *Imagining and Knowing. The Shape of Fiction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020.

inction between aesthetic value and other kinds of value, such as cognitive and moral value. There is no doubt that, according to Kant, artists aim to create beautiful representations of things and that the audience seeks a distinctive kind of pleasure from artworks. However, artists achieve this aim only if their works embody those representations of the imagination that he calls aesthetic ideas. Assuming that the audience's expectations when approaching an artwork are not cognitive, it therefore seems that the appreciation of form cannot be isolated from significance, that is, expression. The author points out that this suggests that works of art may also have cognitive value and that this value contributes to their overall artistic value. More precisely, his claim is that in (good) artworks, both aesthetic and cognitive value interact, since both depend on aesthetic ideas, that is, representations of the imagination that, according to Kant, are embodied and expressed by them.

Andy Hamilton, in his contribution *Kant's Concept of Genius: A Defense, Against Romanticism and Scepticism*, traces different approaches to the concept of genius. The author situates Kant's view as a halfway position between the Romantic view on genius and the skeptical approach to it. The Romantic position identifies genius as something innate and divine while the skeptical position (e.g., Nietzsche and his postmodern successors) devalues genius as inauthentic, reducing it to the result of hard work. Kant, by contrast, combines innate and acquired dimensions of genius. Kant's conception of genius helps resolve one of the biggest issues in his aesthetics, namely, the tense relationship between aesthetic judgment as an appreciation of purpose without a purpose and the recognition that the artwork is created with a purpose. Kant sees in the personality of genius a talent that is original in the moment that she gives the rule to what she does; at the same time, genius is exemplary, that is, goes on to be imitated by the school it produces and eventually inspires subsequent artists to create their own exemplary artworks. Genius is an innate talent that is mediated and disciplined by taste, unlike what the *Sturm und Drang* movement thought. Hamilton discusses the Kantian standpoint, dwelling on the question of genius in science and arguing that the concept does not itself have ethnocentric, patriarchal, elitist, or mystifying implications. He identifies in Kant's proposal the conception most capable of bringing together talent, ability and exemplarity in a holistic explanation that is still valid today.

Continuing the series of thinkers of the period, Elisa Ronzheimer, in her *Hölderlin as Reader of Poetry: Notes on the "Wechsel der Töne"*, proposes an accurate analysis of Hölderlin's enigmatic text. Rather than follow the standard interpretation of the poem as an example of how Hölderlin conceives poetic production, the author proposes to see in the text an expression of his own practice of reading literature. More than a closed and positive system, and characterized by attention to moments of transition, Hölderlin's sketches represent a way of thinking about a literature – modern but also ancient – constituted by the hybridization of genres. The author dwells on the genesis and various versions of the text, analyzes the polysemy that characterized the term "tone" in the context of the time, and emphasizes Hölderlin's experience as a translator in its constitution. Conceiving the *Variation of Tones* as a reading practice that perceives the literary text as a processual unfolding in time, Ronzheimer discusses the positions of critical literature (first of all that of Peter Szondi), shows how Hölderlin's text contains both an essentialist and relational conception of literature and literary genres, and describes it as a proto-structuralist example that presents, at the same time, a real philosophy of history.

Johannes Korngiebel's *Zwischen Systemanspruch und Systemkritik. Friedrich Schlegels 'Offenes System im Werden'* explores the issue of the system in Schlegel's thought. In the critical literature, the prevailing view has been that Schlegel was not a systematic thinker and that he fundamentally rejected the system as a possible form of philosophy. Only recently has it emerged that this view does not fully correspond to Schlegel's self-understanding. For him, the rigid aspects of the system are to be questioned, but this does not invalidate the systematic claim of his thought in general. This contribution deepens both Schlegel's critique of rigid philosophical systems and his own claim to a system, showing how he comes, unlike Fichte and Spinoza, to develop the idea of a connection between system and the absence of system. Moreover, the contribution illustrates how Schlegel, in his *Lectures on Transcendental Philosophy* of 1800-01, for the first time develops the concept of a system in progress, open to development, incomplete, and consequently relative. Such a system can encompass a plurality of historical systems, which can only be adequately represented by the relationship between philosophy and poetry. This type of system connects the attempt to achieve a systematic configuration and a critique of a fixed concept of system.

Paul Hamilton addresses the relationship between aesthetics and political philosophy in his *The Romantic development of classical German philosophy: from post-Kantianism to Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière*. He analyzes the possibility of conceiving a new politics through Agamben's and Rancière's discussion of post-Kantian aesthetics, with particular reference to Romanticism. Unlike Lyotard, who developed the Kantian idea of the "sublime", and through a critique of Schmitt's interpretation of Romanticism, they focus on the idea of aesthetic difference. The author analyzes the views of Agamben and Rancière as part of the tradition that stems from Kantian aesthetics to its political development in Romanticism and that finds in Benjamin and Adorno two of its greatest interpreters. Following this tradition, they translate aesthetic conceptions into political ways of thinking. The concepts of "dissensus" and "bare life" are presented as central categories that, coming in the first instance from the aesthetic sphere, facilitate a sort of suspension of law and model a new kind of political community.

*Anthropoaesthetics of Expression. Art and Knowledge in Friedrich Schleiermacher* by Gregorio Tenti deals with the relationship between art and knowledge in Schleiermacher's philosophy of individuality. The concept of expression is central in all his work and is elaborated in an original way, starting from Spinoza and differing from his contemporaries. On the basis of this concept, a type of expressive knowledge is developed that is proper to art and religion. The author considers this to be a knowledge whose content evokes an irreducibly singular way of communicating that is capable, at the same time, of universality. Addressing Schleiermacher's thought both from an ontological-metaphysical perspective and an aesthetic-anthropological perspective, the author shows how Schleiermacher's epistemology of individuality, his aesthetics of expression and his anthropology are intertwined. In this context, the concept of *Trieb* (impulse) is fundamental as a bridge between different dimensions, because it abolishes a clear distinction between reason and sensitivity and encourages a virtuous relationship between ideality and reality.

The topic of tragedy is at the heart of Giovanna Pinna's *Who's afraid of Seneca? Conflict and pathos in the romantic-idealistic theory of tragedy*. The author analyzes the choice, both theoretical and canonical, made by the thinkers of German aesthetics around 1800, to exclude a tragic representation of Senecan matrix and to privilege what, for them, is the "Attic" concept of tragedy. If the former, followed by a tradition culminating in French Classicism and in

authors such as Corneille and Racine, consists of a theater that sees the essence of tragedy in the mere exposure of suffering and conflict among the passions of individuals, the latter sees in tragedy the expression of an ethical or metaphysical conflict. For authors such as the Schlegel brothers, Schelling, Solger or Hegel, tragedy focuses on the dialectical struggle between opposing principles and not on the suffering caused by misfortune or the destructive emotional states of the characters. In antiquity, the tragic clash consists between pathos forms, i.e., individualities who recognize themselves in ethical-metaphysical principles, while in modernity the clash is internal to the characters. In addition to the exclusion of Seneca and the tradition that follows from him, this has also led to the devaluation of Euripides compared to Aeschylus and Sophocles. This conception of tragedy shows how between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a completely new aesthetics of tragedy developed, which philosophically rethought the theory and canon of the literary genre in question.

Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer in his *The absolute perspective of the personal subject. Hegel vs. Plato on social philosophy, art, and religion* addresses the question of the constitution of an individual as a member of humankind and shows how the Hegelian position is relevant to articulating its structure, even from a contemporary point of view. The opposition of “methodical individualism” in the social sciences to Hegelian “holism”, which sees in his thought a form of illiberal collectivism, does not consider how he elaborates the absolute status of the individual subject. The author makes it clear how Hegel’s position on religion and art as early versions of our insights into the overall condition of human wisdom must be brought into focus again. The author discusses Hegel’s reading of Plato’s pedagogical politics. He argues that while, on the one hand, Hegel defends the Greek thinker’s view on the relationship between personality and community, he points out – more clearly than Popper does – how, on the other hand, in the Greek world there was no real understanding of personal subjectivity as the foundation of human freedom and dignity. It is not a question of the superior existence of conceptual forms over empirical appearances, but of the fundamental facts of subjectivity, perspective, and temporal actuality in our relations with the world. Hegel identified not in the Greek world, but in Christian religion and medieval art, how the highest dignity of the human being and the absoluteness of subjectivity are produced by orientations to wisdom and subjected to perspective changes of objective reality.

Luca Illetterati's contribution, *Art is (not) knowledge. A question of Hegelian terminology*, offers some precious terminological and theoretical clarifications. He moves from a discussion of Albert Hofstadter's seminal paper on the cognitive value of art within Hegel's philosophy. While Hofstadter aimed at explaining in what sense we should understand the Hegelian idea that art is a deeper form of knowledge than the sciences, Illetterati shows that the question becomes clearer if we take into account the specific terminology that Hegel uses, and in particular the fundamental distinction between the German terms "*kennen*" and "*wissen*". In the English language, these terms tend to be conflated in the concept of "*knowledge*" in general, which blurs their conceptual distinction. Illetterati shows that if one thinks of knowledge as *Kenntnis* or the knowledge of objects, art is not knowledge; but if one thinks instead of knowledge as *Wissen*, or the fundamental experiences through which spirit knows itself by recognizing itself in the other, then one must say that art is knowledge.

In the contribution *From Poetry to Music. The Paradigms of Art in German Aesthetics of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* Francesco Campana deals with the transition from an aesthetics where poetry is at the apex of the system of the particular arts, as in the thoughts of Hegel, Solger, Schelling, to a vision where music is the central art, as in the views of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wagner. After considering the issue of the system of the particular arts as a philosophical problem and analyzing the theoretical positions in question, the author identifies the rationality proper to the two paradigms that emerge, the literary one and the musical one, investigating the aesthetic, philosophical, and socio-historical reasons behind this shift. The basic hypothesis is that the shift from an aesthetics with 'literary traction' to one with 'musical traction' is a first moment, a premise, of that conflagration of artistic genres that took place in the twentieth century mainly by Avant-garde and Neo-avant-garde movements and that is part of the epochal fracture in art history that has been interpreted as the 'end of art' in the contemporary world.

With this series of essays, we hope to offer a composite picture of the relationship between art and knowledge that can serve as a useful contribution not only to debates within classical German philosophy but to contemporary problems as well.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The authors of this text thank Anna Katsman for language editing.

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