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# *The Problem of Artistic Style: Conceiving the Particular Forms of Art*

## CONTROVERSIES IN MOVING BEYOND THE UNIVERSAL FEATURES OF ART

If aesthetics is to avoid presupposing its subject matter, it must begin by determining the universal features of the work of art, artistic creation, and the reception of art. As such, these features are ingredient in all further forms of art and every individual art. Yet, as merely universal determinations of art, they themselves do not differentiate whatever particular artforms and individual arts there may be. Indeed, if any candidate for a universal constituent of art were peculiar to a particular form or individual branch of art, it would disqualify itself as an element in the account of art in general. Conversely, a particular mode of artistic creation may necessarily incorporate those general desiderata that make something an object of art, but an artform's particularity must reside in something more, just as what distinguishes one individual art from another must lie beyond the constitutive elements common to every work of art, every artistic creation, and every aesthetic awareness.

Consequently, once the determination of art in general has been achieved, the question arises as to whether aesthetics has exhausted its enterprise, and if not, with what further dimensions of art it can and must next proceed.

If the account of the universal features of art comprised all that aesthetics could address, this would signify that everything pertaining to particular forms of art and the individual arts as such would be beyond a

*priori* conceptual analysis. In that case, all examination of such themes as classical and romantic modes of art and the distinctive features of music, painting, literature and the like, would be relegated to the empirical, doxological labors of art criticism. The only conceptual resources available would be the categories determining art in general, and all art critics could do would be to apply these given concepts to the perceived reality of different historical styles and branches of art, exercising a form of judgment that could never overcome the uncertainties of interpretation.

If, however, aesthetics does not exhaust its labors in determining the reality of beauty in general, but can conceptually determine the necessary features of particular artforms and of the individual arts, how are these domains to be addressed? Should one begin with the particular forms of art or with the individual arts, and what mandates the order of treatment or the differentiation of either level of determination?

Given the immanent character of systematic argument, where any conceptual advance must rely on nothing but the terms already established, the ordering of topics will reside in their own content. Whether the determination of art in its universality is followed by the particular forms of art or the individual arts is decided by their internal relation to one another. What follows the account of art in general must be a domain that incorporates the universal features of art without already incorporating the elements specific to the domain that follows its treatment. If the particular artforms are determined prior to the individual arts, this will signify that the forms of art are distinguishable without introducing any features specific to an individual art, whereas the individual arts incorporate in their own reality the different artforms. If, conversely, the individual arts come first, this means that what differentiates individual arts from one another plays a constitutive role in defining the particular forms of art.

Hegel, for one, upholds the former ordering, proceeding from an account of what is constitutive of artistic beauty in general to the determination of the particular forms of art before addressing the individual arts. Granted that the artforms are particular, and the different artistic media are individual, this order of treatment accords with the logical analysis of universality, particularity, and individuality provided by Hegel's *Logic*. There individuality comes last since its specification rests upon the unity of universality and particularity. Although Hegel is duly aware that these categories are determined in respect to one another, he recognizes that a particular, being an undifferentiated member of a class, presupposes the universal of the class, whereas an individual, being a differentiated member of a class, presupposes both that universal and the particularity of class membership. The same ordering of internal consti-

tution seems eminently plausible in regard to the reality of artistic beauty. Before particular forms of art, such as the classical and the romantic, can be determined, the general features of art must be ascertained that permit either the classical or the romantic to possess the common character of being forms of art. Similarly, before the individual arts, such as architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and literature, can be determined in their own right, both the general features of art, and the differentia of the particular modes of art, must be at hand. Otherwise, no individual art can qualify as a case of art, nor as a case that can exhibit a particular mode of artistic creation.

Nevertheless, the logic behind treating the particular prior to the individual dimension of art is obscured by the fact that Hegel tends to conflate the conceptualization of the particular forms of art with descriptions of their historical exemplifications. This gives the impression that the differentiation of artforms is a necessary sequence of epochs in the history of art. If, however, the particular forms of art are characterized in terms of the historical facticity of certain modes of artistic beauty, then they cannot fail to incorporate the individual arts, independently of which art cannot actually exist. For although, in the order of conception, the universal features of beauty may precede the particular forms of art and the individual arts, in the order of phenomenal existence, no aspect of artistic beauty can appear other than in unique creations of architecture, sculpture, painting, music, literature, or some other individual art.

An example of how understanding the particular forms of art as historical formations entails treating them not before, but after the individual arts is provided by Stephen Bungay in his study of Hegel's *Aesthetics, Beauty and Truth*.<sup>1</sup> Bungay differentiates the particular artforms from the individual arts by maintaining that the former constitute the "*forms of the form of art*," whereas the latter comprise the "*forms of the content of art*."<sup>2</sup> So differentiated, it indeed seems perplexing why the differences in form of the artforms should be considered particular, whereas the differences in content of the individual arts should be considered individual.<sup>3</sup> Both differences seem to be on a par, as particular differentia characterizing the existence of individual works of art. However, such a differentiation of artforms and art media in terms of form and content is itself suspect. Due to the interrelation of meaning and shape basic to art, any particular forms of art and any individual arts will equally be defined by their own constellations of both form and content. Indeed, as will be seen, the philosophical treatment of these concrete dimensions of art will focus upon how they further particularize and individuate the aesthetic relation of meaning and configuration.

What compounds Bungay's oversight is that he interprets the particular forms of art as historical cultural unities comprising the forms in which different world views gain artistic expression in the historical development of humanity.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, he criticizes Hegel for treating these forms prior to the individual arts, maintaining that the whole doctrine of particular artforms is a heterogeneous pastiche best dismembered into one remain falling within the universal dimension of art and another falling into the system of arts. For, on the one hand, the differentiation of artforms revolves around the purely universal issue of the logical relation between form and content, whose possibilities fall within the account of artistic beauty in general. And, on the other hand, besides the truism that art embodies beliefs that vary through time, everything else attaching to the *historical* reality of artforms falls into the cornucopia of given facticity better left to historians and critics.<sup>5</sup> Since this eliminates any mediating particular dimension between the universal features of art and the individual arts, Bungay concludes that the arts are particular, whereas the individual domain of art consists in actual works of art as they are sociologically and historically given. The individual dimension of art thereby falls beyond the reach of systematic philosophy into the hands of critical interpretation and historical scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

Admittedly, works of art are concrete instances, realizing as individuals the conceptual determinations that aesthetics establishes as constitutive for art. Granted, too, that the particular artforms can come into existence as historical periods of artistic style. However, that art works are individuals does not preclude the different arts from exhibiting individuality in themselves. To be individual, the different arts must incorporate universal and particular factors, for, as the logic of individuality teaches, the unique class membership constitutive of the individual is parasitic upon the universality of the class and the particularity of undifferentiated class membership. In the case of the arts, the universal factors are already provided by the account of artistic beauty in general. If the artforms are conceived not as given cultural phenomenon, infested with the individuality of historical existence, but as particular modes of artistic reality, whose actual realization entails additional features, the artforms can possess their identifying character without reference to any specific artistic media. Then they can supply particular factors helping enable the different arts to be individual. Together, the features making something a work of art in general and those making it a particular form of art supply everything needed for an art to qualify as an undifferentiated member of the class of arts. The further determination of what is peculiar to one medium in contrast to another will provide the additional individuating factor,

marking off one media as a unique member of the class of arts, granted the concomitant contribution of the general and particular features that make such class membership possible in the first place.

Moreover, to claim that the only individuality of art lies in actual singular works is at odds with the universal determination of beauty. For, as we have seen, the category of individuality is basic to every aspect of art in general.

All these reasons underscore how the forms of art are determinable as particular modes of artistic creation, independently of the individual arts. However, it still seems possible that the individual arts, for their part, are determinable without reference to the particular artforms. To distinguish painting from architecture, for instance, does not involve the forms of art, especially when, as particular, the artforms can inhere in each and every individual art. Since painting and architecture can presumably both be classical or romantic in form, what differentiates one artistic medium from the other must be sought elsewhere.

Why not then follow Bungay and treat the different arts as particular types of art, differentiated according to their media, without, on the other hand, following his lead of dismissing the artforms as particular modes in their own right? In that case, the different arts and the different artforms would appear to be equiprimordial, with each set able to qualify the other. An art, such as music, could be further qualified by being subsumed under the classical or romantic forms, just as an artform, such as the symbolic, could be further qualified according to the art in which it inheres. On this understanding, the individual arts would comprise particular modes of the artforms just as the forms of art would comprise particular modes of the individual arts. It would then be a matter of indifference whether aesthetics addressed the artforms before the individual arts. If the artforms came first, then the specification of the individual arts would proceed by conceiving each art in general and then in terms of the different forms by which it brings the artistic modes to existence. If the individual arts were considered to be prior, then the account of the artforms would proceed by examining each form of art per se and then in respect to its embodiment in every type of media. In each case, the artforms and arts would be considered in their own right and then they would be addressed in their interaction, where artforms are modified in respect to their embodiment in the different arts and the different arts get differentiated according to their realizations of each of the artforms. Then, artforms and art would each figure as particular and individual. The artforms would be particular in respect to their individuated realization in each art (e.g., as musical as opposed to literary realizations of the classi-

cal), just as each art would be particular in respect to its different artform embodiments (e.g., as classical in distinction from romantic music). Alternately, each artform would be individual as a unique member of the class of artforms, just as each art would be an individuated instance of an art medium.

As whole, the determination of the artforms and arts would thereby advance in two major stages. First, they would each be determined in general as coeval particularizations of art, where it would be a matter of indifference which would be conceived before the other. Secondly, they would then be determined in terms of how they individuate one another, whereby what is generic to the artforms would be combined with what is generic to each art to differentiate every art in respect to its realizations of each artform and to differentiate every artform in respect to its realization in each art. Again, it would make no difference which differentiation is pursued first, since, in effect, each is equivalent to the other.

Yet, on closer examination, does the presumed reciprocity sustain itself? Whereas the different artforms can inhere in different artistic media, can the different arts inhere in the forms of art? It may be that an art, such as music, cannot exist without taking the form of a unique composition exhibiting one of the artforms, such as classical or romantic, that other works of this and other arts will share. And, by the same token, an artform, such as the classical, admittedly cannot exist without being embodied in a creation of a specific artistic medium. Nevertheless, can the arts be features of the artforms? Do they not rather comprise real media, not devoid of character in the way in which matter could be considered only potential in respect to the form that gives it determinate actuality, but already formed in terms of their own material way of joining meaning and configuration? This would reflect how, in relation to the artforms, the arts are individual, whereas, in relation to the individual arts, the forms of art represent particular modes of their existence.

Important methodological ramifications would follow from this ordering. The determination of the artforms would, to begin with, depend upon a differentiation of particular modes by means of factors constitutive of art in general. Then, each particular artform would be determinable in virtue of how its differentiating factors further qualify the way in which each universal feature of art is realized in that form. Accordingly, all the basic themes of the conception of art in general would reintroduce themselves so that the reality of the work of art, artistic creation, and aesthetic appreciation would be conceived as they are transfigured in this or that artform.

When, finally, the individual arts are determined, the process would take on a double complication. In accord with systematic immanence, the

factors minimally distinguishing one art from another would have to be found in prior determinations. Yet, once these factors have been identified, the determination of each art would proceed in a twofold manner. On the one hand, each art would be determined in incorporating the general features of artistic beauty in respect to its specific medium. This would identify what is peculiar to a certain medium of the reality of the work of art, its artistic creation, and its appreciation. On the other hand, each art would be further internally differentiated in view of incorporating the particular artforms as they are modified in attaining realization in the medium in question. In this way, how a specific art takes on, for the sake of argument, a symbolic, classical, or romantic form, would be determined. At each juncture, the necessary resources would have to be provided not by appeals to observed phenomena of art history, but by integrating conceptual determinations of art that have already been established.

These observations are all anticipatory judgments that take for granted the differentiations of artforms and art media. From a systematic point of view, only the subsequent account can certify that they are conceivable and that they conform to the ordering that has been suggested by their putative characterizations.

In line with that further development, what first must be established are the factors ingredient in artistic beauty in general that allow for further particularization.

### **THE ARTFORMS AS MINIMAL PARTICULARIZATIONS OF ART**

Given how art constitutively involves a unity of meaning and configuration, manifesting in sensuous and imaginative form truths providing a fundamental self-understanding to a rational audience, two parallel avenues present themselves for particularizing the reality of artistic beauty.

At first glance, it would appear that these paths consist in differentiating, on the one hand, types of self-understanding or world view that comprise the component of meaning in artistic beauty, and on the other hand, types of configuration that shape these contents. These dual differentiations could only be carried out as discrete operations if the kinds of world views were determined independently of the types of configuration. In that case, the typology of outlooks would have no specific relation to problems of artistic configuration, whereas the sorting of configurations would proceed in terms of purely formal considerations without regard for the content of art.



Such formal taxonomies of content, on the one hand, and of configuration, on the other, have, of course, frequently been pursued by historians of art, as well as by aesthetic thinkers. Art has been typed as bourgeois or proletarian, for example, by many Marxist critics in virtue of the economic interests art allegedly expresses, just as art has been differentiated as Christian, Islamic, Judaic, Hindu, and so forth according to the religious doctrine art portrays. Analogously, figures such as Heinrich Wölfflin have differentiated art into linear versus painterly, closed versus open, composite versus fused, and other such polar types, building a morphology of style developed in indifference to the content of artistic configuration.<sup>7</sup>

Hegel himself engages in such formal taxonomy when he distinguishes between the so-called severe, ideal, and pleasing styles of art in his introduction to the analysis of the individual arts.<sup>8</sup> These styles are distinguished by the degree of freedom they exhibit in mastering the external form of the work of art, in express abstraction from the specific meaning of the work or the particular artform or individual art to which it belongs.<sup>9</sup> Allegedly, the severe style expresses its content with a minimum of ornament and expression, the ideal style treats its content with a grace and liveliness in which the external form is not dominated by its meaning, but freely and harmoniously expressive of it, and the pleasing style goes to the extreme of setting the detail of configuration free of its meaning in appeal to the subjective gratification of the audience.<sup>10</sup>

The problem with all such typologies is not just that they are at a loss to distinguish themselves from ad hoc accommodations to contingent historical phenomena, but that they proceed in indifference and even in contradiction to the fundamental unity of the work of art. Precisely because artistic beauty lies in the wedding of form and content, any analysis that sorts the configurations of art or the meanings of art in independence from one another ignores the specifically aesthetic element of each. Instead, the differentiation of artistically conveyed outlooks needs to proceed in conjunction with a differentiation of the configurations that are specifically linked to each world view. Their differentiation cannot comprise two separate taxonomies, but rather a single specification where what is actually at issue are kinds of unity of the meaning and shape of art, where each type involves the particular relation of its own specific world view and corresponding form of configuration.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, the particularization of art can proceed, at least in one regard, as a differentiation of the unity of meaning and configuration into possible types. Since, however, this differentiation determines its modes of configuration without regard for the particular type of material that they employ, the sensuous character of the art object provides a basis



for a correlative avenue of particularization. Namely, the external medium by which the unity of meaning and shape is made manifest can itself be differentiated into possible types. The former alternative of distinguishing modes of aesthetic unity would correspond to a taxonomy of artforms, whereas the latter differentiation of media would correspond to a typology of arts.

Significantly, distinguishing different types of aesthetic unity requires no other resources than the concepts of meaning and shape already at hand in the determination of artistic beauty and the work of art. By contrast, distinguishing different arts requires introducing physical and spiritual differences such as those between visibility and audibility, between fixity and change in time and space, and between mute sensations and language. Admittedly, all of these factors are implied by the basic reality of artistic beauty to the extent that it involves tangible creations of and for sentient rational individuals. However, these factors still have not yet figured in their distinctive differences as determining elements of aesthetic reality. Hence, there is a divergence in what artforms and arts require for their specification. Owing to this divergence, the differentiation of types of aesthetic unity (i.e., of artforms) can be incorporated within the differentiation of media (i.e., the arts) without further additions, whereas the differentiation of media cannot be incorporated within the differentiation of types of aesthetic unity without introducing the physical and spiritual factors cited earlier. In this respect, types of aesthetic unity are more rudimentary than types of artistic media and thus provide a more minimal particularization of artistic beauty. On this account, the artforms can precede the individual arts as a topic of systematic aesthetics, even though the differentiation of artistic media per se does not depend on that of the forms of art.

How then can types of aesthetic unity be determined in any *a priori* and complete manner? As we have seen, the individuality of artistic beauty entails that the meaning of a work of art be uniquely connected to the shape by which it appears. Can there still be particular modes of this connection, modes that can be distinguished according to some principle certifying the necessity and exhaustive character of their specification? Although the content and form of art must always stand wedded to one another, their relation can take three conceivable forms. The content may

- (1) contain a meaning too abstract to be directly manifest in any sensuous configuration, or
- (2) it may mean something that can be exhaustively presented in sensuous form, or
- (3) it may convey a truth too concrete to be limited to any particular shape.

These options have a logical completeness in that meaning and shape can fit or diverge, and if they do diverge, they can do so in either of two directions, where, in one case, meaning falls short of shape, and, in the other, shape falls short of meaning.

Nevertheless, this differentiation might appear suspect in two respects. First, the case where meaning and shape are congruent seems to represent the general unity of form and content intrinsic to artistic beauty, whereas the two cases of a discrepancy between meaning and configuration seem to violate the individuality of art, disrupting the wedding of universal significance and its particularization. In other words, the supposed differentiation of artforms is no differentiation at all, since only one "form" qualifies as art and does so by being what is generic to art rather than by being a particular species of artistic beauty.

On the other hand, the distinction between the two forms of discrepancy does not seem to rest on differences in the relation between meaning and shape. As Bungay maintains in critiquing Hegel's differentiation of artforms, the same relation of non-identity is present in both cases; what distinguishes them is not the form-content relation, but rather differences in the meaning present in each. And since such differences in content can be indeterminately manifold, all that properly can be said is that there can be at least two different artforms, one in which form and content are in identity, and one in which they are not. That there be only two types of non-identity is an arbitrary restriction blind to the heterogeneous possibilities of content.<sup>12</sup>

Do these two objections really hold? As Hegel's entire accounts of symbolic and romantic artforms are at pains to substantiate, it is far from self-evident that an incongruence in meaning and shape undermines the individuality and unity of form and content constitutive of aesthetic worth. The truth that a work of art expresses may well be so abstract in character that the configuration that conveys it must point beyond itself in order to make it manifest. Nonetheless, the configuration that achieves this self-transcending service may still be uniquely suited to do so, providing a novel image that imaginatively intimates a humane truth too devoid of particular content to be given an immediate shape. In the converse case, which Hegel ascribes to the romantic artform, where the self-understanding to be conveyed is too concrete to be confined to the particular limits of any specific configuration, there may equally be a unique shape that does specifically point to such a meaning, retaining the aesthetic connection of form and content. These options need to be spelled out, as does the option of simple congruence, but their conceivability at least suggests that the artistic unity of meaning and shape might take on a variety of forms.

By the same token, there is no reason to assume that the dichotomy of identity and non-identity exhausts the *a priori* options for connecting form and content in art. The polar discrepancies of shape and meaning may both exhibit non-identity, but that does not signify that their common non-identity cannot be further distinguished into two very different form-content relationships. Moreover, the connection of meaning and shape is hardly indifferent to their content, since the nature of the relation rests precisely upon the respective character of these relata.

On both accounts, then, the road remains open for addressing the possible modes of aesthetic unity.

### THE ORDERING OF THE ARTFORMS

Granted that there be a plurality of artforms, how should their conception be ordered and what significance does their sequence have?

Historically speaking, the few thinkers who have addressed particular forms of art as topics of aesthetics have tended to portray them as modes of artistic expression that dominate the entire artistic production of a particular culture at one period of its development, and that succeed one another in an irreversible order as historical cultural formations.<sup>13</sup> Hegel does this in describing the symbolic form as the governing mode of Oriental art, the classical form as the defining unity of ancient Greek art, and the romantic form as the pervading artistic mode of modern Western civilization. In so doing, he appears to presume that these artforms cannot coexist within a single culture, and that their historical sequence is both non-arbitrary and irreversible. In line with these presumptions, Hegel presents his successive treatment of the symbolic, classical, and romantic forms as a necessary progression in which the order of conception and the order of existence coincide.<sup>14</sup>

Something similar is at hand in Schiller's differentiation of naive and sentimental art, and in Schelling's appropriation of this categorization of artforms.<sup>15</sup> In both their cases, the succession of naive and sentimental forms of art is portrayed as a historical sequence, where naive art characterizes ancient culture and sentimental art typifies the productions of modernity.<sup>16</sup>

However, if, systematically speaking, the resources for an *a priori* differentiation of forms of art must be found in factors ingredient in art in general, and more specifically, in the relation between meaning and configuration in the work of art, can any of these assumptions be upheld?

To begin with, is there any compelling reason why a form of art should exclusively dominate the contemporaneous artistic creations of a

culture, or, for that matter, even the production of a single artist? The content of art may indeed involve a world view framing the ethical conflict given exemplary shape in the art object. Moreover, there may be general types of world views that are inherently expressible in certain kinds of artistic configuration. Yet these points do not mandate that all artists of a certain culture must share the same world view, nor that an individual artist cannot experience shifts of world-view that gain expression in a body of work exhibiting different artforms. A culture may have its identity in common religious and ethical beliefs, shared customs, and accepted conventions of artistic production, just as belonging to a culture may involve an exposure and participation in such common affairs. Still, no such unities can preclude the possibility that not all arts will equally reflect the dominant outlook of their time,<sup>17</sup> or that artists be able and willing to choose novel or departed modes of expression and break the prevailing mold, or that each and every culture contain its artistic dissidents, or that artists change their style during their career, or that even single works of art possess parts in different styles.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the degree of constancy in artistic production presupposed by any talk of forms of art does not prevent world views and corresponding styles from undergoing continuous variation, not only rendering meaningless the historical question of when one period ends and another begins,<sup>19</sup> but allowing for the coexistence of clashing forms representing old and new. And nothing in the conditions of artistic creation prevents artists from working in isolation, oblivious to or ignorant or forgetful of current and past traditions, or for whole cultures to develop in varying disregard for their predecessors' and contemporaries' world views and artistic achievements.

If this is the case, and no other factors intervene, then the different artforms remain contemporary possibilities at all times and places, even when one variety may dominate the others. Accordingly, the modes of unifying artistic form and content cannot masquerade as historical formations, connected in any necessary temporal sequence. They may be exemplified historically in a succession of cultural periods, but that fact will be a contingent matter that cannot dictate where, when, and how they must arise. All that can be said is that *if* an artist gives artistic expression to a certain type of world view, a certain type of configuration in a certain type of relation to the meaning it conveys will be most aesthetically appropriate.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, if the artforms are rooted in the logical possibilities of relating the meaning and shape of artistic beauty, and on that basis lack exclusive sovereignty over the art works of a particular cultural age, as well as over the corpus of an individual artist, are they stripped of all necessary suc-

cession? Although no artform can be guaranteed personal or communal hegemony, could there still not be a relation among them where one form constitutively incorporates elements of or refers to another and thereby presupposes its presence? Then, the appearance of one form could require the concurrent or past existence of another and, in that respect, manifest a necessary ordering. This would be true even if individual artists and cultures practiced more than one artform in the same epoch, or switched from one to another in varying directions. Certain artforms would then still be predicated upon others, whereas one would be prior to all in the order of constitution.

Some such relation could provide grounds for conceiving the artforms in a non-arbitrary order. Without such constitutive connections, the different artforms would appear to be coeval possibilities of artistic expression, whose order of conception and order of realization would be equally contingent.

### THE HIERARCHY OF ARTFORMS AND THE END OF ART

As is well known, Hegel not only suggests that the artforms exclusively define different cultural epochs in a necessary historical succession, but that they stand in a normative hierarchy of a twofold character. On the one hand, Hegel maintains that since the ideal of artistic beauty resides in the unity of meaning and shape, the one artform that brings these sides into a perfect congruence, the classical, is the most beautiful. On the other hand, Hegel equally argues that romantic art is most satisfactory in its revelation of truth, since the truest world view recognizes that humanity cannot be fully exhibited in any particular form and romantic art gives shape to just such an outlook.<sup>21</sup>

Since Hegel interprets modernity to contain the very outlook in which humanity is recognized in its universality, he is brought to a twofold conclusion regarding the historical fate of art. On the one hand, the modern age has brought the development of artforms to an end by fostering the last of the three possible forms of art. This does not preclude that artists will continue to produce works in all the different media. It means instead that no new work of art can introduce a fundamentally novel artform since the basic variations in the relation of meaning and shape have been exhausted. On the other hand, modernity has displaced art from the center of culture because the modern outlook construes the truths of humanity such that only the universal element of philosophical

thought can adequately lay hold of their content. Consequently, although romantic art may be a superior artform in respect to the truth of the outlook to which it gives artistic shape, it renders art itself less significant than does the classical form, whose world view remains attached to given particulars whose exemplary stature can be most adequately captured in a work of art.

The hierarchy in Hegel's proposals raises several problems. To begin with, Hegel's elegizing of classical art as the acme of the ideal of artistic beauty seems to undermine the relation between the features of art in general and those of the artforms, as well as threaten the standing of the symbolic and romantic forms of art. The privileging of the classical form does both by suggesting that the unity of meaning and shape is only fully at hand in classical art. This undercuts the universality of the ideal of artistic beauty by identifying it with the distinguishing features of a particular artform. It equally undermines the aesthetic character of the symbolic and romantic forms by implying that they lack the thoroughgoing correlation of content and configuration generic to artistic beauty.

These problems can readily be avoided by simply refraining from treating the immediate correspondence of meaning and shape allegedly peculiar to classical art as possessing any normative primacy in relation to beauty in general. Since all artforms must, as such, share in everything generic to artistic beauty, the differences in how they connect form and content may define distinct *types* of beauty, but not a scale of different *degrees* of beauty.

Hegel, himself, acknowledges the consequences of these difficulties. He admits that a normative ranking of artforms that deems some inadequate in comparison with the true ideal of artistic beauty cannot involve any condemnation of artistic failure, as when unsuccessful works of art fail to express anything of significance, or fail to supply a configuration corresponding to what they are supposed to represent. As art, Hegel recognizes, each particular form is always adequate to the content it gives itself. If any deficiency can be spoken of at all, it must refer only to how a particular artform presents a relatively untrue determinacy in which humanity encounters itself.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, eliminating the misguided hierarchy in beauty still allows for a hierarchy in truth, which, in Hegel's case, reaches its climax in the dual claim that romantic art, by its specific constellation of meaning and shape, diminishes its own cultural role in its very attainment of the valid truth of humanity. Romantic art may be just as beautiful as classical art. Yet romantic art may configure a fully adequate self-conception of humanity that is best articulated in the prose of philosophical thought, whereas an

outlook that views the good as inherently exemplary can encounter that truth no more completely than in classical art.

However, to sustain this hierarchy of cultural importance and truth, certain underlying assumptions must be upheld. To begin with, it must be established that there are basic types of world view that can be specified by reason for subsequent incorporation in the differentiation of artforms. Secondly, it must be demonstrated that these outlooks can be ranked according to their truth.<sup>23</sup> These tasks fall outside aesthetic inquiry proper into the philosophy of mind and ethics. However, if aesthetics is to be able to categorize the forms of art by particularizing the meaning and shape of artistic beauty, it must draw upon these antecedent investigations just as proved necessary in determining the content of artistic beauty.<sup>24</sup>

The notion of the end of art can be sustained with or without the affirmation of this latter hierarchy of artforms. So long as the constellations of the meaning and shape of artistic beauty fall into certain *a priori* forms, art can be said to have come to an end whenever all of these forms have come to be in history. This end of art will then simply signify that artistic creation has already produced every conceivable type of artform and that new works will only follow in the paths that have been tread before. If, in addition, the artforms do fall into a hierarchy with respect to the truth of the outlooks they configure, and to their corresponding cultural importance, the end of art will further signify that art has become a secondary vehicle of self-understanding where those artforms are practiced that undercut their own importance. Given how the differentiation of artforms is not an ordering of a necessary historical sequence, there can be no assurance that the "end of art" will have the final word.<sup>25</sup> It may just as well be followed by historical periods where forms of art resurface that command the highest esteem as revelations of humane truth.

All these speculations can only be adjudicated by conceiving the artforms themselves and accounting for their differentiation. To this end, Hegel's analysis of symbolic, classical, and romantic art can serve as a heuristic guide to a rational reconstruction of the forms of art, provided his intimations of historical necessity and cultural univocity are called into question.

## THE LOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION OF THE FORMS OF ART

The aesthetic unity of meaning and configuration can take three general forms. The self-understanding of humanity<sup>26</sup> conveyed by art can match or not match the shape it is given, and if no match occurs, two



types of discrepancy are possible. On the one hand, the meaning can be too abstract to fit any imaginative configuration and, on the other hand, the meaning can be too concrete to be reducible to any particular shape. Hegel takes these exhaustive logical options as the basis for differentiating the forms of art, appealing to them to guarantee both the rational necessity and the completeness of his proposed division of symbolic, classical, and romantic types of art.

If we are to draw upon Hegel's conception of the particular artforms in order to reconstruct them in accord with the demands of systematic immanence, we must examine to what extent his description of artforms actually arises out of the possible options by which meaning and configuration are conjoined in the work of art.<sup>27</sup> This involves not only considering the identifying features ascribed to each artform, but also investigating the claims that Hegel makes concerning their order in conception as well as in reality. What complicates matters is that Hegel differentiates each form of art into a sequential system of shapes of its own.

Nevertheless, Hegel does provide us with a basic taxonomy distinguishing each artform in general that can be addressed, at least in a preliminary fashion, before considering the order of the forms of art or their internal division into further particular kinds.

### **THE BASIC TAXONOMY OF THE SYMBOLIC, CLASSICAL, AND ROMANTIC FORMS OF ART**

Hegel attempts to characterize the symbolic form of art in terms of the one extreme of a discrepancy between meaning and configuration where the meaning is too abstract to fit any sensuous image. His key claim is that such a discrepancy in shape and meaning entails a symbolic form of art where a self-understanding of humanity *seeks* to make itself artistically manifest, without being able to find an adequate display. The basic argument leading to this characterization runs as follows: Because the constitutive world view of symbolic art conceives what is of essential importance to humanity in universals of an abstract and indeterminate character, its truth cannot be found in the given reality of nature or in the actual affairs of rational agents. The appearance of these domains is fundamentally alien to such truth due to their ineradicable concreteness. Yet, since art involves the wedding of meaning and sensuous configuration, symbolic art must employ images in such a way as to convey the very incongruence that they possess as vehicles for manifesting the abstract and indeterminate truth of the "symbolic" world view. Symbolic art is

therefore characterized by an employment of images, which, when drawn from the given reality of natural and conventional life, can only be utilized in an arbitrary way that corrupts and distorts their given shapes.<sup>28</sup> As a particularization of art, the symbolic form must still, therein, achieve a conformity of meaning and shape, where the individual detail of a work's sensuous configuration is constitutively tied to the expression of its significance. However, because the shape conveys a self-understanding too abstract to have any corresponding sensuous embodiment, the accord between meaning and configuration is itself an abstract harmony in which their relation exhibits both an affinity and a mutual incompatibility. Because of this indwelling tension, the meaning of symbolic art appears as ever *seeking* its expression in the work of art, yet never finding a configuration in which it is at home.<sup>29</sup> This characterization has much in common with the traditional account of the sublime, and hence, it should not come as a surprise that Hegel will describe symbolic art, at least in certain of its forms, as an art of the sublime.<sup>30</sup>

Significantly, when Hegel identifies the abstract character of the world view generic to symbolic art, he generally describes it as an outlook that ties the "absolute" to natural entities lacking the full-fledged subjectivity of rational agency. Since such natural factors are too impoverished in "spiritual" resources to exhibit the truth of humanity that is conferred upon them, that truth is left underdetermined, and, indeed, indeterminate, insofar as the natural entities that should supply it with content cannot manifest what it should be. Hence, the meaning seeking expression in symbolic art is rendered ineffable in its own right, with none of its sensuous expressions sufficient to identify it unambiguously. When the symbolic form is addressed, it must be established whether the abstract character of its meaning is intrinsically wedded to such natural determination or whether it represents only one of its forms.

In contrast to the symbolic form, Hegel construes classical art as no longer merely seeking an expression for its meaning, but rather finding a perfectly adequate artistic shape for the world view it takes as essential. Determined as the artform embodying the logical possibility of a conformity in truth and configuration, classical art must satisfy a dual requirement. On the one hand, it must present a self-understanding of humanity that can be exhaustively manifest in a sensuous shape and, on the other hand, it must employ a configuration that immediately and completely exhibits that self-understanding. Accordingly, in the classical form, the topic of art, the valued strivings of rational agency, must be construed as fundamentally individual and not as a merely universal abstraction. However, the individuality essential to humanity must not be one that

has its identity in an inner life transcending any external entanglement. In that case, any congruence between meaning and shape would once more become problematic. Rather, rational agency must be construed as having an individuality tied to a particular sensible reality, from which nothing of significance remains concealed.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, since natural factors are insufficient to provide an adequate content for the self-understanding of humanity, the truth to be expressed must be freed of restrictions to natural forms lacking the capabilities of rational agency.

The vision of humanity conforming to this mandate is one that construes the valid reality of rational agency to lie in the external appearance of humane conduct instead of in brute nature, transcendent ideals, or the hidden sanctum of inner life. For its part, the configuration that can transparently reveal this self-understanding will consist in the actual physical appearance of rational agents, imaginatively transfigured so that everything on the surface is invested with the appropriate meaning. Accordingly, classical art will focus upon the living, bodily reality of free individuals, whose activities are fundamentally imbued with a universality that is no less particularized and thereby wedded to its specific manifestation. This allows the external existence presented by art to shed any remaining independence over and against the meaning it conveys, just as it permits the expressed self-understanding to have only itself and all of itself manifest in the configuration at hand.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, classical art does not *re-present* a meaning that has some independently given shape. Rather, it *presents* that meaning in a configuration in which it originally and immediately dwells.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Hegel develops romantic art as the form defined by the remaining possible relation of meaning and shape, that where the self-understanding on display is too concrete to be limited to a particular sensuous configuration. Here the separation of content and form is reintroduced, but in a way that reverses the discrepancy putatively underlying symbolic art. Whereas the symbolic form of art configures a self-understanding of humanity that is too abstract to be univocally manifest in any sensuous configuration, the romantic form exhibits an outlook that can be partially exhibited in different shapes, but cannot be limited to any one sensuous realization. It presents a self-understanding that conceives the essence of rational agency to lie in an autonomy overcoming any restriction to specific external appearances while engrossed in determining itself. As such, the shapes employed by romantic art are rendered indifferent to the meaning they express. This indifference, however, is not a reversion to symbolic art's equivocal relation of appearances that point beyond themselves to an ineffable sublimity. It rather comprises a new

relation where sensuous configurations exhibit the soul-searching of an autonomous humanity, whose problems and strivings are never fully realized in any given shape.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, whereas symbolic art *seeks* an elusive unity of meaning and configuration, and classical art *finds* the perfect match in a sensuously defined individuality, romantic art *transcends* the unity of form and content, all the while from within the confine of artistic beauty.<sup>35</sup>

Such are the basic features that Hegel ascribes to the three artforms in function of the three alternative relations of meaning and configuration in the work of art.

The legitimacy of these differentiations has, of course, been called into question, starting with Hegel's younger contemporaries, Ch. H. Weisse, von Ulrici, and Friedrich Theodor Vischer, whose critiques have recently been given new life by Vittorio Hösle.<sup>36</sup> Their common objection is that Hegel offers a deficiently linear progression, ignoring the "dialectical" resolution an additional artform would achieve by uniting the subjective and objective elements of art still left unreconciled by the romantic form.<sup>7</sup> Hösle argues that only such a revision could comprehend Renaissance art, which otherwise, he maintains, falls outside the reach of the romantic art form.<sup>37</sup> However, if the allegedly missing artform is construed as unifying objectivity and subjectivity, how can it be distinguished from classical art, whose congruent unity of meaning and configuration permits a naturally determined self-understanding of humanity to be adequately objectified in a sensuous form? And if Renaissance art involves something more than the classical ideal, is it not a humanistic vision of rational agency, freeing the creative spirit to transcend any particular sensuous limitation, while ennobling the most mundane human pursuits? Far from challenging the boundaries of romantic construal, Renaissance art would then only fall within its borders.

A systematic critique of the artforms must turn away from such extraneous considerations of "dialectical" versus "linear" orderings and their nostalgia for classical harmonies. Instead, attention must focus upon the features constitutively particularizing artistic construal, examining in this light to what degree Hegel's taxonomy of symbolic, classical, and romantic art both exhausts and properly characterizes the possibilities.

To evaluate the characterizations of these putative artforms, it is difficult to avoid addressing the system of variations into which Hegel differentiates each one. These are presented not only as exhausting the possible options within the particular form of art to which they belong. They are equally conceived as progressively transforming their defining constellation of meaning and shape until it mutates into a new type of art,

or, in the case of romantic art, beyond art into prosaic modes of self-understanding. Systematically speaking, the relation between the artforms should be something internal to their own conceptual constitution, rather than something externally imposed. Hence, any analysis of the ordering and interconnection of Hegel's proposals for the forms of art can ill afford to ignore entirely his differentiations of each type.

As it turns out, each proposed form of art poses conceptual problems in regard to its relation to the determinations of art in general, as well as to its relation to the other artforms. Nevertheless, for the purpose of reconstructing systematic aesthetics, we can fruitfully draw upon the characterizations that Hegel has given these three forms of art, provided we subject them to a critique that always keeps in view the requirements of categorial immanence.