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Hegel and the Matter of Poetry

This essay addresses a simply stated question: What is poetry made from? That question may seem an unpromisingly straightforward one if we assume that the material bases of art forms are readily identifiable. The very name of painting tells us that it is made from paint, and it needn't take extensive investigation to determine that it is also made from canvas or other suchlike substrate; even though sculpture doesn't announce its material in its name, we may nonetheless forthrightly declare that sculpture is made of stone, wood, or other materials with comparable properties of malleability.

To be sure, answering the question 'what is painting, or what is sculpture made from?' need not lead to such statements of the obvious as this somewhat truncated overview might be taken to suggest. But all the same, the matter of poetry's material does appear to be somewhat distinct. Even if an apparently direct answer to the question 'what is poetry made from?' is forthcoming, such as that poetry is made of language or of words – and it is striking, by the way, that such answers rarely are straightforwardly forthcoming – it would seem necessary to acknowledge that 'language' is not a material directly comparable to paint or stone. I want to pursue the question of what poetry is made from by means of examining some revealing moments in the thinking of G.W.F. Hegel, especially in his philosophy of art as it is presented in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, and in some of the ways that these moments have been interpreted. Although this essay is not intended as a systematic commentary on Hegel's theory of poetry, nor, indeed, as a defence of Hegel's 'position' on poetry, these moments in his aesthetics are nevertheless shown to be revealing about the precise contours of Hegel's conception of the relation between matter and spirit in art, as well as about the material of poetry more particularly.

In turning to Hegel to think about the materiality of poetry, this essay follows a number of recent attempts to understand the materiality of painting – in particular, the significance of the materiality of painting to the emergence and development of Modernism – which have discovered in Hegel's aesthetics fertile ground on which to explore this question. In *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, J.M. Bernstein's wide-ranging discussion of Modernist painterly practice from

(surprisingly) Pieter de Hooch to Cindy Sherman, Bernstein takes Hegel's aesthetics as offering – somewhat against the grain of their explicitly stated intention – a set of insights into the uncanny reliance of ostensibly living artworks on dead matter.¹ More recently, in *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*, Robert B. Pippin wishes to recruit a distinctively Hegelian account of the history of art to an explanation of pictorial modernism in the wake of, above all, Manet (the other pictorial examples he discusses extensively are Cézanne and Picasso).² Pippin's account of art's relation to material differs from Bernstein's emphasis on Modernist painting's problematizing of its own sensuous medium. Advancing, at least for the sake of argument, Hegel's reading of Attic tragedy as having revealed a crisis in the structures of moral and ethical judgement in Ancient Greek society, Pippin asks how Hegel might correspondingly have interpreted the distinctive characteristics of pictorial Modernism. Modernist painters, according to Pippin, 'make paintings where objects seem to be dematerializing over historical time in succeeding generations', a process culminating in 'wholly nonrepresentational experiments'.³ Pippin's account, therefore, focuses on the prehistory, as it were, to Bernstein's more particular focus on painterly material. Pippin emphasises the steady waning of the materiality of represented objects, to the point where represented material objects disappear from painting altogether; Bernstein's concern is rather with the reflection on its own materiality into which painting is forced as a result of the withdrawal of represented material.

In relation to his account of Modernist art, Pippin quotes Schelling's 'prescient' statement from *The Philosophy of Art*: 'Matter gradually dematerializes into the ideal; in painting as far as the relative ideal, through light; then, in music and even more so in speech and poesy; into the genuinely ideal, the most complete manifestation of the absolute cognitive act.'⁴ The striking difference between Pippin's narrative of the dematerialization of represented objects in painting, on the one hand, and Schelling's account of the transition of matter into the ideal, on the other, lies in Schelling's sense that different art forms occupy different stages of this process: while painting may begin the process of dematerialization, it is, for Schelling, poetry that most completes it. In focusing on the case of poetry, the present essay asks, by way of Hegel, quite how

complete that transition can be. Neither Bernstein nor Pippin comments substantially on Hegel's account of poetry (nor do they, for that matter, comment on his account of art forms other than painting). Of course, there have been many discussions elsewhere of Hegel's theory of poetry, but neither have these focused in detail on what I wish to argue is in fact the most suggestive aspect of Hegel's conception of what poetry is made from – a conception that is distinctive, moreover, both in relation to Hegel's own consideration of the matters of other art forms and in relation to attempts by other thinkers to grasp the materiality of poetry. For example, Frank Dietrich Wagner's *Hegels Philosophie der Dichtung* dispatches the question of the materiality of art in general in Hegel's thinking with remarkable alacrity: for Hegel, 'its material underpinning is only an external and thereby inessential aspect of the artwork', which explains why Hegel, according to Wagner, pays comparatively scant attention to the materials of the art forms, even though an artwork is first of all defined as an object through its materiality.⁵ Likewise, Gary Shapiro's chief concern is to offer a sympathetic appraisal of what he takes to be Hegel's assimilation of poetry to philosophy. In particular, Shapiro emphasises that Hegel has little time for the indefiniteness of meaning or the ineffability of experience that is apparently the frequent recourse of poetry, but instead views poetry as 'the speculative comprehension of the dialectical nature of spirit.'⁶ Shapiro does briefly discuss the materiality of poetry in Hegel's aesthetics, emphasising what Hegel himself presents as the nearly perfected diminution of matter in poetry, since, in Shapiro's words, poetry's 'imaginative medium is the finest attenuation of the sensory forms of the other arts'; 'there is a progressive liberation from material and sensuous constraints [...] Poetry is an art in the process of dissolution, for its external and objective aspect is, paradoxically, "the inner imagination and intuition itself"'.⁷

The emphasis on poetry's radical attenuation of sensuousness is echoed by other commentators on Hegel's theory of poetry. In the course of his thoroughgoing discussion of the interpretation of language across Hegel's oeuvre, Theodor Bodammer argues that, for Hegel, poetry departs from music since poetry's specifically linguistic material is essentially spiritual and not merely, as in the case of music, sound (*Ton*).⁸ Thus poetry takes up 'a transitional position between the other sensible art forms and the other kinds of

presentation of the absolute in religion and philosophy.’⁹ Significantly, however, Bodammer qualifies his preliminary focus on Hegel’s insistence on the spiritual character of poetry by stating that, in the final analysis, ‘insofar as art has to do with the reconciliation of spirit with the sensible, poetry must also, if it wants to be art, still have a sensible moment within itself.’¹⁰

The difficulty of the question of poetry’s materiality, implicitly posed by Bodammer, is clearly recognised in one of the most important contributions to the interpretation of Hegel’s aesthetics as a whole in the twentieth century, Peter Szondi’s lectures on ‘Hegels Lehre der Dichtung’. Szondi insists early in his commentary on the significance of materiality to Hegel’s aesthetics in general, emphasising that this entails not merely a focus on the individual art forms and genres, but on media such as ‘stone, sound, and speech’ themselves.¹¹ However, Szondi views significant aspects of Hegel’s differentiation between sound in music, on the one hand, and in poetry, on the other, to be mistaken. Insofar as Hegel realises the fundamental distinction between sound in music and in poetry as predicated on the signifying function (*Bedeutungsfunktion*) that sound has in the latter case, but not in the former, then Hegel is correct. Szondi implies that Hegel nevertheless fundamentally overlooks the fact that ‘poetry [*Dichtung*] does not use speech merely as a medium of expression or signification, but rather poetry at the same time begins in its musical qualities.’¹²

As we will see, Szondi is certainly right about the letter of Hegel’s statement concerning poetry’s inessential relation to its linguistic medium and also right, in my view, that such a view is erroneous. Yet Hegel’s account of poetry cannot but return, at the most crucial moments of its articulation, to speech as more than ‘a medium of expression or signification’, to what Szondi calls the ‘musical qualities’ in which poetry ‘begins’. Partly in response to the readings of Hegel’s theory of poetry that I have briefly outlined, I want in what follows, first, to deepen the intractability that attaches to the question of what, as it were, a poem’s paint, canvas, wood, or stone, is, according to Hegel. As we have already seen, Bodammer intimates an important further question here: ‘poetry must also, if it wants to be art, still have a sensible moment within itself’.¹³ But does poetry want to be art? While I do not directly answer that question (much more discussion would be required to do that than I have space for here), I do

emphasise that Hegel's definition of poetry reveals it to be an art form dynamically poised against itself. Above all, I show that it is just at the moment of the ostensible diminution of materiality in art – a moment that occurs, according to Hegel's explicit avowal, in poetry – that the materiality of art is the most emphatically announced, for it is at this moment that the spiritual is shown to be inextricably interwoven with matter in art.

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One of the first tasks Hegel sets out to perform in his *Aesthetics* is to differentiate works of art from natural objects. This is surely a significant differentiation in any account of artworks, but it is a particularly important early step in Hegel's argument because he wishes to refute the 'ordinary way of looking at things' and its alleged preference for natural objects over art objects. That preference is predicated on the assessment that the former are living, the latter, dead, and we are wont to value, so Hegel claims (and so likewise would proponents of the ordinary view claim), the living more highly than the dead – although, of course, the opposition between life and death is a frequently revisited and structuring concern of Hegel's philosophy, rather than a merely common-sense assumption as it is on the ordinary view of things. Hegel argues that while it is unproblematic to concede that, understood from the point of view of verisimilitude, artworks are only superficially and, furthermore, apparently living, they are nevertheless alive in a more substantial way thanks to the spiritualizing effects of the artist's making. This is how he puts his case:

That the work of art has no life and movement in itself is readily granted. What is alive in nature is, within and without, an organism purposefully elaborated into all its tiniest parts, while the work of art attains the appearance of life only on its surface; inside it is ordinary stone, or wood and canvas, or, as in poetry, an idea expressed in speech and letters [*oder, wie in der Poesie, Vorstellung ist, die in Rede und Buchstaben sich äußert*]. But this aspect—external existence—is not what makes a work into a product of fine art; a work of art is such only because, originating from the spirit, it now belongs to the territory of the spirit; it has received the baptism of the spiritual and sets forth only what has been formed in harmony with the spirit.¹⁴

As will no doubt immediately be realised, the fairly unproblematic précis of this argument that I gave in prefacing this quotation fails to take account of the many problematic intricacies in it. We ought first of all to notice how difficult it is here

to determine precisely what is the inside, and what the outside, of an artwork. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel had made clear that there is a crucial difference between living and non-living insides and outsides:

The inorganic inner is a simple inner which presents itself to perception as a property that merely is; its determinateness is therefore essentially magnitude, and, as a property that merely is, it appears indifferent towards the outer, or the various sensuous properties. But the being-for-self of the living organism does not stand on one side in this way over against its outer; on the contrary, it has in its own self the principle of otherness.¹⁵

The indifference on the part of the inorganic simple inner to what it would be an exaggeration to call *its* outer could equally well entail the former's mere identity with the latter. The distinction between inner and outer in the inorganic is, basically, nugatory. This crucial moment in Hegel's developing sense of the difference between the living and the dead is clearly behind the above passage in the *Aesthetics*. Moreover, philosophical considerations of the proper definitions of entities frequently deploy the terminology of inside and outside in a metaphorical – or at least potentially metaphorical – fashion. In the passage from the *Aesthetics*, however, such metaphorical usage exists side-by-side with an interest in what is literally beneath the verisimilar appearance of life on the surface of artworks. We may take a sculpture to look like a man and his sons being attacked by a snake, but the sceptical will find by means of the application of a chisel that, inside, it is just stone. We can see this clash of metaphorical and literal insides and outsides when, having described the mere materiality of the 'inside' of artworks, Hegel goes on to dismiss this as belonging, along with the mere appearance of animation, to the 'aspect [of] external existence' of artworks. The stony inside of the Laocoön Group is, actually, part of its outside. Something similar seems to happen in the account-in-miniature of the origin of artworks and the process of their making. They at once originate in the spirit and only 'now', having 'received the baptism of the spirit', belong to it – perhaps as if there had been a time when they didn't. Both of these wrinkles in the texture of Hegel's statement about the relation between natural material and artistic production are important because they show, even if implicitly, that what is material and what is spiritual in Hegel's philosophy of art is not as finally settled as may initially appear to be the case.

Notably, the appearance of life presented by works of art plays no substantial role in Hegel's account of the way in which artworks ought, in fact, to be considered as living. Artworks, that is, live not because they appear to do so, but because they have received the baptism of the spirit through the mediation of the artist. There is a subsidiary question here as to why some artworks want to appear, verisimilarly, to be alive, if that appearance of life is at once only illusory and, moreover, a distraction from the real life that they do, in Hegel's account, have; but this is a question that we must leave to one side here. We must not be tempted, however, to leave to one side Hegel's deployment of the term 'baptism' here, to categorise it as just a manner of speaking, since what he seeks to emphasise by using it is the expiation of materiality's corruption performed exclusively by the artist's activity: matter is incapable of achieving its own redemption to which task spiritual agency alone is sufficient.

It is at this point, though, that we must begin to question whether the corrupt body of the artwork has, as it were, been finally divested, and it is here that I want to consider a bit more fully those contributions to the recent reception of Hegel's aesthetics that I touched on above. This is necessary because it may well appear that the recently renewed focus on the treatment of artistic material in Hegel's aesthetics must come to an abrupt halt in the case, specifically, of poetry. In the course of his elaboration of Hegel's aesthetics in relation to Modernist artistic practice, Bernstein questions the degree to which Hegel's relegation of matter relative to the spirit of the artist in her or his creative activity can be read as finally decisive. In particular, Bernstein expressly doubts the ultimate superiority of artworks over their materials that Hegel appears to insist upon in the passage from the *Aesthetics* that I quoted above:

What is ominous in Hegel's statement is the idea that it is a condition for nature to become a pure vehicle of mindedness that it be dead (stone, wood, canvas, sounds and words), as if spirit could only assure itself of its ultimate and unsurpassable authority through the slaughter of nature. What is eerie here is the way in which the metaphorical murder of nature as authority converges with the mediums [*sic*] of art being dead nature. Only if nature is really dead, so to speak, can the material basis of art that founds its sensuous character be an empty husk, a corpse, leaving only the mindedness of works as demanding attention, so that in works, finally, it is an issue of the mind knowing itself, and with that recognition the claim of art to be divine is forever surpassed. [...] [But] if the authority of spirit reveals itself only in relation to that which it departs from, then the authority of spirit will depend on the presentation of the site of slaughter. In this [...] way, then, might dead

nature belong to art's animation? Might not the role of dead nature in art strike us, on a second reading, as not only ominous but also riven with ambiguity?¹⁶

It might be objected to this statement that it histrionically overplays the antagonism between nature and artistic agency.¹⁷ After all, nobody has ever had to slaughter a block of marble prior to making a sculpture from it. We might point out that such an objection ought itself to be troubled by the fact that some of the materials, at least, of some artworks were indeed living before they were, if not slaughtered, then, at the euphemistic least, harvested before their formation into artworks. But more important still, what Bernstein is arguing here is that it is nature-as-authority that has been 'metaphorical[ly]' murdered – a metaphorical murder, nevertheless, that while it may not involve the slaughter of blocks of marble, does come to have really deleterious consequences for living nature. The overthrow of nature as authority, moreover, aligns in Hegel's thinking with the insistence that art's natural materials are dead, enlivened only by the artist's manipulation of them. Bernstein's point, however, and the point I wish to take from his exposition, is that repressed sensuous materiality returns to haunt the spirit that would animate it.

I want to pursue this insight in connection with poetry because, first, its material does not seem directly congruent with the material of the other arts and, second, there is an important flattening out of significant differences between different artistic materials in Bernstein's account. Hegel's argument that the animation of artworks is dependent upon spirit, not matter, is implicitly bolstered by the fact that the first item in his list of artistic materials – stone – is presented elsewhere in his work as the archetypal material and, *as such*, dead.¹⁸ Hence stone's deathliness sets the tone for the following listed materials. But it quickly becomes clear that not all of the materials listed are as straightforward, so to speak, as one another. Bernstein may speak in the above quotation of '(stone, wood, canvas, sounds and words)', and later of '(sound, color, line, paint, word, space, movement)', but Hegel speaks not of sounds or words but instead rather more precisely of 'an idea expressed in speech and letters', or as Bernard Bosanquet's earlier translation has it, an 'idea, uttering itself in speech and letters'.¹⁹ The differing translations of Hegel's actual description of the materials of poetry already suggest a significant difficulty with extending stone's

deathliness to apply to poetic material. Bosanquet's quite justifiable – even preferable – translation draws out the fact that the material of poetry is already active – it is an idea *expressing itself* – before the artist's activity is brought to bear on it.²⁰ Significantly, Bernstein is quite frank about the fact that modernist painting serves, in his book, 'as a stand-in for modernist art generally'.²¹ Nevertheless, both his reductive redaction of 'an idea expressed in speech and letters' to 'sounds and words' or just 'words', and his willingness to allow one materially specific art form to stand in for 'art generally', entails that there are aspects of the material specificity of artworks that are not confronted in this otherwise impressively rich work.

Having thus opened the possibility that the different materials of different art forms might repay particular scrutiny, the specific question that we must now ask concerns what significance the difference between 'stone and wood', on the one hand, and 'an idea expressed in speech and letters', on the other, might have. Taking the lead from Bernstein's extremely suggestive reading, we might further ask if 'an idea expressed in speech and letters' is 'slaughtered' in the same way as stone, wood, canvas are slaughtered, since the former, as we have just seen, remains active even at the moment that it is made the substrate of art.

Hegel intimates an answer to this set of questions in his account of the development of the different arts in terms, specifically, of their different material constitutions. In an important respect, their development is their progressive dematerialisation. Of all the arts, poetry has the least to do with its own material, such that, Hegel claims, 'the material through which it manifests itself retains for it only the value of a *means* (even if an artistically treated means) for the expression of spirit to spirit, and it has not the value of being a sensuous existent in which the spiritual content can find a corresponding reality.' (A, II, 626) The means in question is sound, but unlike in music, Hegel continues, 'sound in poetry is entirely filled with the spiritual world and the specific objects of ideas and contemplation, and it appears as the mere external designation of this content.' (A, II, 627) This is certainly a loss, but it is one that is accompanied by a gain: 'what poetry loses in external objectivity by being able to set aside its sensuous medium (so far as that may be permitted to any art), it gains in the inner objectivity of the views and ideas which poetic language sets before our

apprehension.’ (A, II, 899) Furthermore, the sense that poetry does not quite lose the concreteness of the arts that deal in, as it were, heavier matter is stated slightly later: ‘in the very field of inner ideas, perceptions, and feelings it broadens out into an objective world which does not altogether lose the determinate character of sculpture and painting.’ (A, II, 960) What both of these statements make clear is that, for Hegel, whatever the extent of its dematerialisation, poetry does not altogether lose the ‘determinate character’ more readily recognisable as a feature of the other arts. At the very least, even in the apparent setting aside of its own sensuous medium and concomitant withdrawal into the ‘field of inner ideas’, poetry does not merely disavow those features of the other arts guaranteed them by virtue of their sensuous media. One way of reading this aspect of Hegel’s theory of poetry is to point out that, however much he stresses poetry’s dematerialisation, what it in fact performs is the infiltration of an ‘objective world’ into spirit itself.

The degree to which any art that wishes to remain art can slough off its sensuous medium is, therefore, the crucial question, however much it may seek to shelter in parenthesis: poetry is ‘able to set aside its sensuous medium (so far as that may be permitted to any art)’. For if poetry is to be an art at all, we need to know at what point it must reign in its tendency to supersede its sensuous medium and, as it were, reincorporate it. In Hegel’s description of ‘poetry proper’, for instance, it becomes clear that when poetry is, in Hegel’s terms, most properly self-identical, it may actually be in danger of ceasing to be poetry altogether:

[I]n the case of poetry proper it is a matter of indifference whether we read it or hear it read; it can even be translated into other languages without essential detriment to its value, and turned from poetry into prose, and in these cases it is related to quite different sounds from those of the original. (A, II, 964)

That first sentence invites reading somewhat against its grain, so that it be taken not to declare that we may encounter poetry in one of two equally valid ways – either by reading it to ourselves or by listening to it read out loud – but rather as tacitly admitting that it is strictly indifferent to poetry whether we read it, hear it, or actually encounter it at all in any imaginable way, since, no matter what is done to it, it will nonetheless remain poetry. But just as it may be disconcerting to be told that poetry may be turned into prose and yet remain poetry, so Hegel

acknowledges a significant doubt concerning whether what he here calls 'poetry proper' and elsewhere 'poetic conception' is really poetry *as art* at all: 'poetry destroys the fusion of spiritual inwardness with external existence to an extent that begins to be incompatible with the original conception of art, with the result that poetry runs the risk of losing itself in a transition from the region of sense into that of the spirit.' (A, II, 968) One way to read this is as an admission that poetry is not – or, at some as yet unspecified but distinctly reachable point, may cease to be – art. In the next paragraph, Hegel emphasises that even if poetry 'in its need for an artistic materialization makes straight for a strengthened sensuous impression' (969), it can achieve this materialization only through recourse to elements foreign to itself and borrowed from painting (insofar as it may aspire towards painting's depictive richness) or music (insofar as it may manipulate sounds), while at the same time it must continue to stress its spirituality if it is to remain 'genuine poetry'.

As Hegel makes clear, it is not, however, just its status as art that poetry, in its withdrawal from the sensuous, imperils, but itself: 'poetry,' Hegel clearly states above, 'runs the risk of losing itself'. Poetry's condition is one of internal antagonism, in the specific sense that it must borrow from what it is not in order to be itself. So as to sustain itself as poetry, and keep itself from tipping over into philosophy, it must embrace the possibility that it will relapse into music. Amongst other things, this internal division – queasy tight-rope-walk between rival extremes rather than elegant equipoise, whatever Hegel himself wishes to claim (for example, A, II, 1035) – is what makes it at once so easy and so difficult to be a poet in comparison with any other artist (A, II, 997). Moreover, poetry's reincorporation of the sensuous medium it had set aside can never be complete, since poetry's loss of sensuous particularity and gain of 'the proper objectivity of the inner life as inner' (A, II, 898) is mirrored by sound's loss of its connection to the spiritual content of ideas and its regaining of 'independence'. To describe sound in poetry in this way – as independent, as having been effectively let loose – is to make clear that Hegel's alternative description of sound as 'accidental' to poetry's spiritual content can hardly be taken to mean that it has been superseded as merely irrelevant or derisory.

It is necessary at this point to take account a bit more directly of the role of language in Hegel's theory of poetry. Language, that is to say, occupies the central position in the highly charged force field that constitutes poetry's identity. This essay started out by asking what it is that makes the material of poetry – 'an idea expressed in speech and letters' – distinct from the materials of the other arts. That statement is striking because it makes clear that ideas uttering themselves are the material of poetry and, in case we are tempted to think that 'material' in the designation 'the material of poetry' has become merely metaphorical, their expression occurs in 'speech and letters'. The ideal-material constitution of language is, of course, crucial here. For one thing, language is 'the most malleable of materials, the direct property of the spirit', which must nevertheless 'be used, like stone, colour, and sound in the other arts' (A, II, 972). A direct property of the spirit has, on this account, been materialised as what is to be used by the artist. Language is itself a twofold material, at once directly the possession of spirit and the exclusive basis of poetry's perceptible existence. Poetry subsists, Hegel says, in a passage that I quote at length,

not in wood, stone, or colour, but solely in language, where versification, accent, etc. are as it were the gestures of speech through which the spiritual subject-matter gains an external existence. Now if we ask where we are to look, so to say, for the *material* basis of this mode of expression, the answer is that, since speaking does not exist, like a work of visual art, on its own account apart from the artist, it is the living man himself, the individual speaker, who alone is the support for the perceptible presence and actuality of a poetic production. Poetic works must be spoken, sung, declaimed, presented by living persons themselves, just as musical works have to be performed. We are of course accustomed to read epic and lyric poetry, and it is only dramatic poetry that we are accustomed to hear spoken and to see accompanied by gestures; but poetry is by nature essentially musical, and if it is to emerge as fully art it must not lack this resonance, all the more because this is the one aspect in virtue of which it really comes into connection with external existence. For printed or written letters, it is true, are also existent externally but they are only arbitrary signs for sounds and words. [...] [But print], instead of actually giving us the sound and timing of the word, it leaves to our usual practice the transformation of what is seen into sound and temporal duration. Consequently, if we are satisfied with reading merely, this happens partly on account of the readiness with which we imagine as spoken what is seen, partly because poetry alone of all the arts is in its essential aspects already completely at home in the spiritual element and does not bring the chief thing to our minds through either ear or eye. But, precisely on account of this spirituality, poetry as art must not entirely strip itself of this aspect of actual external expression, at any rate if it wants to avoid the imperfection of e.g. a black and white sketch substituted for a painting produced by a master of colour. (A, II, 1036)

Before expounding the specific significance of this passage's discussion of language for poetry's subsistence as art, it should at least be acknowledged that, at first sight, Hegel seems to be giving an airing to Socrates' suspicion of writing as expressed by Plato in the *Phaedrus*: the written word, Socrates argues, is defenceless and thus impotently open to being exploited by anyone without the support of its author to explicate, defend, or, most controversially, withhold it when necessary.²² Hegel does think that, where poetry is concerned, written text is in an important sense deficient, but not for the same reasons that Socrates is wary of the invention of writing. For while Hegel begins from the premise that 'speaking does not exist, like a work of visual art, on its own account apart from the artist', he strikingly does not insist in what follows from this that it must be the artist who speaks, sings, or declaims poetry, but rather, simply, 'the living man himself' or, even more generally, 'living persons themselves'.

Then why, given the centrality of the declamation of living persons to Hegel's account of poetry above, are we at all content with 'reading merely', with, that is, silent reading? Discussing the last supper and the institution of the Eucharist in 'The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate', Hegel draws an analogy between the Eucharistic consumption of bread and wine – which returns what had been rendered objective (in the form of food and drink) to its subjective status (love amongst communicants) – and the understanding of what is written in reading – wherein a thought rendered objective in the printed word is re-intellectualised in comprehension. The analogy is imperfect, Hegel admits, because, in reading, the written word is not 'read away', a fact which, it is implied, entails the impurity of the process of intellectualisation in reading.²³ Hegel's account of poetry, however, construes quite differently this apparent imperfection of the reading process. The two reasons for our habitual contentment with silent reading are, as with poetry's own essential being as art, radically at odds. On the one hand, we are content to read poetry silently to ourselves because we readily 'imagine' as spoken what is seen in the act of reading. If the imagination of speech here is not to be illusory, then this must mean that we actually experience as inwardly spoken what we see written. To call this silent reading is to assume that there are no sounds in our heads, or that the only hearing that matters when we read is the hearing of other people, and

not our own. On the other hand, we are content with mere reading because poetry is, of all the arts, the most completely at home in spirit – but, as Hegel has repeatedly warned, if we allow it to settle down there, then it ceases altogether to be art.

But before we think that Hegel's account of the materials of poetry sits comfortably within his account of language, we must think again. The enunciated – declaimed, sung – speech of poetry is, from Hegel's point of view at another point in his work, language estranged and deformed. In the account of language in the *Encyclopaedia* Hegel deprecates just those features of poetry's linguistic character that he explicitly mentions in the passage from the *Aesthetics* quoted above – 'versification, accent, etc. [...] the gestures of speech through which the spiritual subject-matter gains an external existence'. These features are just those features of language whose importance to the Chinese language is bemoaned in the *Philosophy of Mind*:

The imperfection of the Chinese vocal language is notorious: numbers of its words possess utterly different meanings, as many as ten and twenty, so that, in speaking, the distinction is made perceptible merely by accent and intensity, by speaking low and soft or crying out. The European, learning to speak Chinese, falls into the most ridiculous blunders before he has mastered these absurd refinements of accentuation. Perfection here consists in the opposite of that *parler sans accent* which in Europe is justly required of an educated speaker.²⁴

The Chinese, speaking low, soft, or crying out, and in general with their routine manipulation of accent and intensity, seem here like they speak poetry all the time, whereas the apparently accentless European at least ought never to do so. What is here cast as linguistic excrescence, imperfection even, is, according to Hegel in the *Aesthetics*, essential to poetry's matter. Moreover, in his recourse to the French maxim of educated speaking – that one ought *parler sans accent* – Hegel inadvertently suggests that, in fact, the elimination of accent is far from desirable; what is required, rather, is the correct adoption of the right one.²⁵

Hegel's deployment of *parler sans accent* as the motto of educated speaking brings once again into view the potential for writing to appear as the perfected instantiation of accentlessness. Of course, this is only true insofar as writing is not at all read. And is there not also discernible here a particular delight in a specifically French phrase, just at the moment that the importance of accentlessness is proclaimed? There is certainly an illicit pleasure taken in the

French terms for what is being dismissed at one moment in the *Aesthetics* as the all-too-Gallic foppery of the character of Ahasuerus as portrayed by Racine in that playwright's *Esther*, '*en habit français*' and in 'hose of *drap d'or*' (A, I, 268). Although there is no trace of Hegel ever having seen *Esther* performed, we may speculate that he is nevertheless thinking of a particular performance here, since nowhere does Racine's text insist on *habit français* or hose of *drap d'or* (or of any other material, for that matter).²⁶ Or, perhaps, Hegel is just enjoying the act of enunciating these terms, even as he holds up their Gallicism to be mocked.²⁷

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Hegel's treatment of vocal quirks and, furthermore, the traces of them in the written record of his own lectures bring into view the insistence of utterance in his thinking about poetry. This essay has sought to show via its reading of Hegel that, first, there are significant, rather than merely ephemeral, differences between the materials of the different arts. Thanks to its basis in language, poetry is the most spiritual art of all, but it must nevertheless retain its material moment if it is to be art at all, which it does, according to Hegel, specifically in its repeated declamations by living people. In beginning its enquiry into Hegel's statements on the matter of poetry, this essay, moreover, took its lead from Bernstein's dark, trenchant reading of the materiality of art in Hegel's aesthetics. Bernstein shows that the baptism of spirit, administered by the artist, depends upon the assumption that the matter baptised is dead. But specifically poetic material is not construable as a site of slaughter, as the presentation of a mortified nature, however much Hegel's emphasis on the priority of spirit in art may be viewed as requiring it. On the contrary, both spirit and matter inseparably together – 'an idea expressed in speech and letters' – are the matter of the poet's spiritual working. What this must entail for poetics is the recognition that no poetry – if it is to be art or even, in fact, if it is to be poetry – is finally reducible to its ideational content, not least because its self-uttering ideas are already its material. It is, therefore, poetry, of all the arts, which shows that no cordon sanitaire can finally be erected between what is living and what is dead in the artwork.

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¹ *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006), especially pp. 223-26. See also the discussion of Hegel (upon which Bernstein draws) in Gregg M. Horowitz's *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 56-90. For an elaboration of Bernstein's thesis (which wants to go beyond it in the direction of a combination of Foucaultian biopolitics and psychoanalysis), see Eric L. Santner, 'Was Heisst Schauen? On the Vital Signs of Modernist Painting', *German Life and Letters*, 62 (2009), pp. 284-96; for a critique of Bernstein's 'affective formalism' see Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Manet, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

² Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

³ Pippin, p. 34.

⁴ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, tr. and ed. by Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 200, quoted in Pippin, p.34, n.10.

⁵ *Hegels Philosophie der Dichtung*, Abhandlungen zur Philosophie, Psychologie und Pädagogik, 88 (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1974), p. 8. Translations from texts in German are my own, unless otherwise acknowledged.

⁶ 'Hegel on the Meanings of Poetry', *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 8 (1975), pp. 88-107 (p. 91).

⁷ Shapiro, p. 94.

⁸ *Hegels Deutung der Sprache: Interpretationen zu Hegels Äußerungen über die Sprache* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1969), p. 183-84.

⁹ Bodammer, p. 184

¹⁰ Bodammer, *ibid.*.

¹¹ 'Hegels Lehre von der Dichtung', in *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie I*, ed. by Senta Metz and Hans-Hagen Hildebrandt (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 269-533 (p. 358).

¹² Szondi, p. 473 (Szondi refers to *Poesie* at the beginning of the paragraph from which I quote above, but immediately switches to *Dichtung*). Szondi presents this aspect of Hegel's theory – especially the view that 'a poem can be translated into another language or into prose, without forfeiting its inherent qualities' (p. 474) – as having been outdated since Symbolism.

¹³ Bodammer, *ibid.*

¹⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. by T.M. Knox, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; repr. 1988), I, p. 29. References to this work (abbreviated as A) are hereafter given in the text. I have commented on this passage in a

different context elsewhere: see *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 86-90.

¹⁵ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.175. I have not reproduced above Miller's interpolated italicizations.

¹⁶ Bernstein, p. 225.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Barry Schwabsky for sharing with me his sense that Bernstein's rhetoric is 'falsely hyped-up' here.

¹⁸ Describing the exclusivity of the familial bond amongst 'the sons of Jacob' early in 'The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate' Hegel remarks that '[o]utside the infinite unity in which nothing but they, the favorites [sic], can share, everything is matter (the Gorgon's head turned everything to stone), a stuff, loveless, with no rights, something accursed which, as soon as they have power enough, they treat as accursed and then assign to its proper place if it attempts to stir.' In *Early Theological Writings*, trans. by T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), pp. 182-301 (p. 188). Though the context suggests that this view of matter is ascribable to Jacob's sons (and hence the Jewish people), it is not necessarily clear that Hegel dissents from it.

¹⁹ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, tr. by Bernard Bosanquet, ed. by Michael Inwood (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 33. Bosanquet's translation was first published in 1886.

²⁰ The difference in the translations hinges on how the reflexive construction, *sich äußert*, is interpreted: it is either that the idea expresses (*äußert*) itself (*sich*) (Bosanquet) or that the reflexive is here standing in for a properly passive construction, as is possible in German (Knox). The former seems to me the more likely.

²¹ Bernstein, p. 1.

²² Plato, *Phaedrus*, tr. by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John H. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), pp. 506-56 (p. 552).

²³ In *Early Theological Writings*, p. 251.

²⁴ *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind: Being Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, tr. by William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 216.

²⁵ Terry Pinkard notes Hegel's insistence (as a teacher at the Ägidien-Gymnasium in Nuremberg) on 'good, clear German', despite (or, no doubt, because) his own speech 'was itself thick with his Swabian accent and laden with Swabian expressions.' *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 281. Pinkard notes later that Hegel 'never lost' his Swabian accent (p. 528).

²⁶ Jean Racine, *Esther*, in *Théâtre Complet*, ed. by André Stegmann, 2 vols (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964-1965) II (1965), pp. 253-305.

²⁷ Rodolphe Gashé does assert that Hegel is thinking of a particular performance of Racine's play here, but offers no evidence for this assertion. See 'The Harmless Detail: On Hegel's *Aesthetics*', *Mosaic*, 41 (2008), pp. 41-59 (p. 59, n. 12). Gasché's fascinating article discusses the category of 'detail' in Hegel's thinking (despite the absence of any explicit conceptual articulation of this term in the *Aesthetics*), and argues that the depiction of feet in sculpture is especially significant given that, on the one hand, man's capacity to stand on his own feet betokens his freedom and independence – and hence feet are signs of spirit, whereas, on the

other hand, feet 'stand out' (p. 57: Gashé, the inveterate punster) as examples of parts of the human body whose beauty is only ever merely sensuous owing to the consistent association of feet with animal functions. It is in this context that Gasché is interested in Ahasuerus's leg- and footwear; he does not comment on the flaunting of French terms in Hegel's discussion at this point.