Published: December 15, 2003
Last Updated: June 7, 2013

HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH

HEGEL, GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH, eminent German idealist philosopher (b. Stuttgart, 1770; d. Berlin, 1831). Hegel belongs to the tradition of the German Romantic thinkers who revolutionized German thought and literature, and he depicts his position as the dialectical climax of the intellectual endeavors of civilized humanity. The influence of Iranian civilization is apparent in two of Hegel's major works. In his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Berlin, 1837; tr. J. Sibree, as *The Philosophy of History*, New York, 1956), there is an extensive treatment of the Zoroastrian Iranian civilization, with a focus on Achaemenid Iran, while his *Vorlesungen über die Äesthetik* (Berlin, 1835-38; tr. T. M. Knox as *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols., Oxford, 1975) devotes a large space to Islamic Persian culture, as reflected in Classical Persian poetry. Accordingly, the two periods, that of Zoroastrian Persia and that of Islamic Persia, will be treated separately, and the question of continuity will be considered in the second half.

Zoroastrian Persia. Hegel based his discussion of pre-Islamic Persia on two main sources: 1. Ancient Greek sources on Persia, such as Herodotus's *Histories*; 2. Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron's (q.v.) pioneering work, *Le Zend-Avesta* (3 vols., Paris, 1771). This, as the only systematic study of Zoroastrianism available to Hegel, strongly influenced his philosophy of history.

In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel identifies the active (creative) reason (*Vernunft*) as spirit (*Geist*), and maintains that the world is the intersection of spirit and matter (*The Philosophy of History*, pp. 15-16). What distinguishes the spirit from matter is the idea of freedom. Freedom or self-contained existence is the essence of spirit, and matter is marked by its dependence on something external to it (p. 17). The history of the world (*Weltgeschichte*) is the result of the immersion of spirit in matter (p. 70). At first, this immersion manifests itself in natural regularity, but, through man's historical development, it culminates in the self-consciousness of spirit (p. 71). This historical process of freedom's self-consciousness begins with the Persians, and, according to Hegel, the history of Zoroastrian Achaemenid Persia "constitutes strictly the beginning of world history" (p. 174).

The significance of Achaemenid Persians as the "first Historical People" (*The Philosophy of History*, p. 173) is expressed in the Zoroastrian religious system. Hegel interprets "Zoroaster's Light" as the first objectification of the spirit: "We see in the Persian World a pure exalted Unity, as the essence which leaves the special existences that inhere in it, free; as the Light, which only manifests what bodies are in themselves" (p. 174). Zoroaster's light is contrasted with darkness, as its antithesis, and in this contradiction Hegel sees the beginning of the separation of the immersed spirit from matter (in nature) and its consciousness of its freedom through the individual human being (p. 174). The Mazdean light enables the individual human being, together with other beings, to achieve freedom to act in as many ways as their natural propensities allow. Hegel traces a replication of the Zoroastrian space opened up by the antithesis between light and darkness in the political organization of the Persian empire: "We find . . . [the Persian empire] consisting of a number of states, which are indeed dependent, but which have retained their own individuality, their manners, and laws . . . As Light illuminates everything—imparting to each object its peculiar vitality—so the Persian Empire extends over a multitude of nations, and leaves to each one its particular character" (p. 187).

In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel ends his reflections on Persia with the demise of the Achaemenids and does not consider the civilization of Islamic Persia. With Alexander' s conquest of the Persian Empire, the torch of spiritual development is passed to the Greek World, then to the Romans, and finally to the Germans. The Greeks, according to Hegel, give a spiritual content to the (spiritual) form introduced by the Persians (*The Philosophy of History*, p. 222).

The Romans politicize the Greek content and institute a tyranny of the spirit, which stifles the natural side of spirit, the side that had found its fulfillment in Persian pluralism (p. 278). From the Roman world, Hegel posits the emergence of self-conscious freedom in the Christian German world. The latter sponsors the plurality of spiritual forms of life, free human activities, that are no longer "the substratum of their religious conceptions," but of "free and spontaneous developments from their subjective self-consciousness" (p. 341). The Islamic world is reduced to a mere episode in the development of the spirit in the German world (pp. 355-60).

Islamic Persia. It is in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*,that Hegel considers the civilization of Islamic Iran and the question of its continuity with its Zoroastrian past. He divides the various forms of art in a way that corresponds roughly to the different stages of the history of spirit, because, for him, art is an expression of the spirit's consciousness of itself (*Aesthetics*, p. 72; see also Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 465-66). The different forms of art are the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic (*Aesthetics*, pp. 300-302). The symbolic refers to the art of the Orient and includes Zoroastrian Persian art as the expression of the culmination of the contribution of that region to the development of spirit. To the classical corresponds the art of the Greek and Roman worlds, and the romantic is the artistic expression of the German world. For Hegel, the artistic value of each form of art is directly proportional to the level of spiritual self-consciousness attained by the civilization responsible for its production.

In *Aesthetics*, Hegel identifies Zoroastrian *Zend-Avesta* as a kind of symbolic art, the category that also includes what he calls the "Persian Mohammedan Poetry" (*Aesthetics*, p. 368). Hegel' s sources for Islamic Persian poetry were two influential books by Joseph Von Hammer-Purgstall (q.v.): *Der Diwan von Mohammed Schemsed-din Hafis* (Stuttgart, 1812-13) and *Geshichte der scöhnen Redekünste Persiens* (Vienna, 1818). He also read Friedrich Rückert's translations of Persian poetry (*Aesthetics*, p. 368) and was probably introduced to that tradition of Persian poetry by Goethe (see GOETHE AND ḤĀFEẒ), whose fascination with the poetry of the Persians is most apparent in his *West-östlicher Divan*.

Symbolic art, for Hegel, involves "a detachment of a universal meaning from what is immediately present in nature" (*Aesthetics*, p. 323), and *Zend-Avesta* is symbolic although only in a restricted sense. This is because the Mazdean light, as we have seen, does not draw us away from the concrete natural

objects towards the spirit as such; rather it lets natural objects show themselves as embodied spirit: "what is really present—the sun, the stars, actual plants, animals, men, existent fire—is apprehended as the Absolute's [i.e., the self-conscious spirit's] shape which is already in its *immediacy* adequate thereto" (*Aesthetics*, p. 331). Islamic Persian poetry, on the other hand, is a manifestation of the symbolism of the sublime: "Sublimity lifts the Absolute above every immediate existent and therefore brings about the liberation which, though abstract at first, is at least the foundation of the spirit" (p. 362). Yet, the sublimity of Persian poetry does not reduce the natural object—the rose, for instance—to an adornment or a mere symbol denoting the divine (p. 370). In a way reminiscent of *Zend-Avesta*, the rose "appears to the poet as ensouled, as an affianced beloved, and with his spirit he is engrossed in the soul of the rose" (p. 370; see also p. 1148). In the same vein, Hegel claims that Islamic Persian poetry is at one remove from symbolic art proper, since the latter annihilates the particular manifestations of the spirit for the sake of the independent and abstract spirit. According to Hegel, proper symbolic art is manifested in sacred Jewish poetry (p. 364). It could be maintained, however, that Islamic sacred poetry—as exemplified by the Qurʾān—is also an instance of symbolic art proper. In that case, Hegel's so-called Mohammedan Persian poetry is a synthesis of Islamic and Zoroastrian art, in that the Zoroastrian concern with the particularized spirit is conjoined with the transcendence of the particular in Judeo-Islamic art. Moreover, because of the Persian poet's surrender to God, his subjectivity becomes infused with spirit, and he "acquires the supreme enlargement of consciousness as well as the bliss of absorption into everything that is best and most splendid" (p. 371). This flowering of the subject (in its conjunction with the divine) suggests a strong affinity between later Persian art and romantic art: the art form which, according to Hegel, embraces and transcends the external realizations of the spirit owing to the freedom of the artist and his consciousness of himself as the spirit (p. 301).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

given in the text.