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Of Spiritual Failure: The Matter of Hegel's Pyramids

... the whole thing is surveyed and grasped in a few minutes.

G. W. F. Hegel

In his *Logic*, Hegel famously chooses the circle as the symbol *for* philosophy.¹ However, within his philosophical system as a whole, the possibility of symbolism *as such* arises through his analysis of the figure of the pyramid. To begin to understand such a strange geometry, one might recall that the function of the (Egyptian) pyramid in Hegel's *Aesthetics* constitutes an important transition in the historical development of the symbol in general: specifically, its transition out of a symbolism that he calls 'unconscious'.² This movement, from unconscious to conscious symbolism, or 'Symbolism Proper', for Hegel

marks a crucial moment wherein a proto-spiritual form of representation begins to wrest itself from purely natural immediacy.³ This is to say that the type of symbolism associated with the pyramids marks, within the historico-aesthetic narrative that Hegel develops in his work, a threshold through which humanity begins to ‘transcend’ its unconscious, material conditions, and to move toward a position from which it can consciously represent itself to itself, free from its immediate, natural, and mortal situation. This in turn gives rise to the possibility of monumentalising and representing human action at an historical and trans-historical level (as ‘spirit’ or *Geist*). But how does the pyramids’ symbolism succeed in forging this spiritual consciousness out of natural unconsciousness? How, in other words, does Hegel move from the simple materiality of the quarry to the pharaonic grandeur of history? Does or can this movement succeed at all? In its position in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, the pyramid is located at the threshold of symbolic representation, as triumph over death, and as the sublime precondition of history and philosophy, a pivotal point out of which his notion of spirit is born; but, as we will see, it is also bleak, dumb stone.

Along these lines, this article will argue for a failure of the pyramid to function correctly within Hegel’s historical aesthetics and his aesthetics of history, by tracing the persistence of a mute geological materiality that subtends the construction of the pyramids, and that, when accounted for, subverts Hegel’s attempts to articulate them in his philosophical system. In more general terms, this article will be implicitly concerned with describing how aesthetics fails when it attempts to situate art in a purely historical narrative, without remainder.⁴ As such the figure of the pyramid will be in this sense a privileged case, since it also constitutes, within the strictures of Hegel’s thought, one of the primary conditions for historical-spiritual representation in the first place.

To organise this complication of Hegel’s treatment of the pyramids, this article will be subdivided into six sections. In the first and second sections, I will briefly contextualise Hegel’s notions of ‘symbolic art’ and

‘unconscious symbolism’, and use them to point to a structural contradiction already within his aesthetic project as a whole, which the figure of the pyramid will further develop, namely: Hegel’s aesthetics fails to progress beyond and is haunted by its inarticulate material beginnings. The third and fourth sections will discuss this problem specifically in terms of the pyramids and their signifying function, reading Hegel vis-à-vis Jacques Derrida’s essay, ‘The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology’ (1982). Finally, the last two sections will explore what is left behind by and what simultaneously exceeds Hegel’s reinscription of the pyramids within his philosophical system: the stone itself. Thus, in privileging the seemingly unimportant position of rocks within Hegelian idealism, and in reading these rocks against its teleological structure, this article will show how the figure of the pyramid, while giving rise to the possibility of symbolisation, also entombs this symbolisation in aporia, preventing the closure of aesthetics within philosophy.

i. Symbolic Art

Pyramids are situated by Hegel in the earliest moments of his *Aesthetics*, in what he calls the ‘symbolic’ stage of art. Art in general is situated among the earliest moments of the final development of spirit (what he calls ‘Absolute Spirit’), which is itself outlined only in the third and final volume of his *Encyclopaedia* (1991). Thus art, and especially the pyramid, marks the beginning of the end of Hegel’s system. But as the beginning of the end, it is also the beginning of spirit’s independence from the simple immediacy of humanity’s natural existence, and in this sense art is the beginning and the possibility of the highest forms of thought.

Hegel’s conception of art moves through three different, ostensibly hierarchical stages: what he calls the ‘symbolic’, the ‘classical’, and finally the ‘romantic’. After passing through its romantic form, the special kind of knowledge associated with art is no longer related to its concept, and so, for Hegel, knowledge leaves art behind and transitions into religion

and finally into philosophy. However, curiously, the best expression of art as such for Hegel is not its final stage (the romantic) but its middle stage (the classical). That is, the only form of art that really accomplishes its goal—the goal of Hegelian beauty: the concordance of ‘the idea’ and its material expression—is art in its classical moment (Hegel, 2004a, pp.84–85). It is in this sense that he writes, ‘[t]he classical type attained the highest excellence, of which the sensuous embodiment of art is capable; and if it is any way defective, the defect is in art as a whole, i.e. in the limitation of its sphere’ (2004a, p.85).⁵ Take, for instance, the classical beauty of the ‘ideal’ human form embodied by ancient Greek sculpture. In it there is, for Hegel, a perfect correspondence, or adequation between interiority (the idea) and exteriority (the art work). And for this reason, in many ways there is nothing more to be said about the classical, since it adequately expresses itself. By contrast, symbolic art for Hegel is only a kind of proto-art, and the romantic is already on its way beyond art as such. This is to say that the Hegelian conception of a symbolic aesthetic is that of an indeterminate art, the idea of which is still mired in and distorted by the material that expresses it. On the other hand, romantic art is supposedly liberated from its materiality: it is also indeterminate, but this time because it involves a spiritual freedom that expresses a pure interiority, which, as such, is especially caught up with language and thought (as opposed to the crudity of matter). Each is opposed to the determinate exactitude of the classical, where the inner and the outer match. But for this reason—that each expresses an indefinite relation—both the first and the last manifestations of Hegel’s aesthetic consciousness depart from the ideal of precise artistic expression that qualifies them as aesthetic in the first place. Pointing out this regression, Tilottama Rajan writes, ‘[t]o be sure, Hegel sees the symbolic as inferior to the classical, not least because it is oriental. But then he also finds the classical a disappointment, which must be superseded by what is less adequate, as if what is less adequate is in some way more adequate’ (2011, p.127). The inadequation of the romantic, which inversely corresponds

with that of the symbolic, is thus somehow more necessary to the idea than the perfect correspondences of the classical. This inversion of the importance of determinacy therefore ‘repeats and reverses the problems of the symbolic’ (Rajan, 2011, p.126). If this is the case, then the mutual—albeit different—respective ambiguities of the symbolic and romantic, the first and the last stages of art, link them in a way that seems to stunt, or at least to impede, the possibility of developing the latter entirely beyond the former.⁶ In this sense, there is a failure to progress already embedded in the structure of the *Aesthetics* as a whole. The symbolic would seem to infect the vehicle of its sublation, reappearing in it covertly as the very condition by which romantic art is able to move beyond aesthetics in general, which means that Hegel’s move beyond the (classical) ideal of aesthetics is only an echo of a move previous to it. Rajan adroitly observes that ‘Hegel gets out of this problem through the deus ex machina of the end of art. But this liquidation of a cultural form that has preoccupied him for a thousand pages can be no more than an imaginary resolution of underlying contradictions’ (2004, p.66).⁷ Symbolic art then really marks the beginning of the end, the end of art already re-marked in its beginning. For our purposes, it will be important to show how this problem of stagnation is figured in the pyramids, which constitute, within Hegel’s writings on symbolic art, the movement out of what he calls ‘Unconscious Symbolism’.

ii. ‘Unconscious Symbolism’

The section in the *Aesthetics* that deals with the first symbolic art, ‘Unconscious Symbolism’, begins with Zoroastrianism (which ironically is not art per se, but already religion).⁸ What is characteristic of this kind of symbolism is its immediacy:

The religion of Zoroaster, namely, takes *light* as it exists in nature—the sun, the stars, fire in its luminosity and flames—to be the Absolute, without explicitly separating this divinity from light, as if light were a

mere expression and image or symbol. The Divine, the meaning, is not severed from its existence, from the lights (Hegel, 1975a, p.325).

The god of light and the good—Ormuzd—is not represented *by* light, but exists *as* light. There is no mediation: where light is, the Zoroastrian god of goodness and light also is. And the same goes for Ahriman, the god of evil, in relation to darkness. In either case, the symbolism is immediate and because it is immediate for Hegel it is unconscious: ‘the symbolic form of art in its still immediate shape, a shape not yet known and made a mere image and simile—unconscious symbolism’ (1975a, p.322). Thus there cannot yet be a question of the adequation of the distinctly spiritual and material aspects of the symbol. As such ‘[t]he symbol on the one hand has its basis in the immediate unification of the universal and therefore spiritual meaning with the sensuous shape which is just as adequate as inadequate; but as yet there is no consciousness of their incongruity’ (1975a, p.322). In other words, Zoroastrianism’s relation to matter cannot be adequately mediated, since it does not yet exist in any way apart from this matter, and so Hegel represses this immediate, immediate Zoroastrian symbolism as ‘unconscious’ and therefore pre-historical.

Having dispensed with Zoroaster, Hegel confronts the ‘fantastical’ Hindu representations of deities, which begin to subl(im)ate and give form to the Zoroastrian problem of immediacy.⁹ In response to this problem, Hinduism (in Hegel’s view) proliferates many different representations of the infinite, in a vast number of gods, goddesses, and supernatural beings. As an example, Hegel mentions in passing those that populate the thousands of pages of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. But he is all too ready to pass over Hinduism (which he often wrongly conflates with India). Indeed, in what is perhaps an interesting intertextual parapraxis, if one references the early section on symbolic architecture in the second volume of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, where one might expect to find a discussion of this difference between unconscious symbolism and the Hindu subl(im)ation of it, one finds instead a mere

page or two on Indian phallic columns. Thus finishing prematurely with Hinduism, Hegel arrives at Egypt, 'the country of symbols' (1975a, p.352).

iii. The Pyramids

With Egypt, Hegel describes the height of the struggle for spiritual 'inwardness' to arise out of the indeterminate material representations of symbolic art heretofore. The Egyptians, for Hegel, wanted to unshackle themselves from matter more than anyone before them, even if they could not entirely succeed in doing so:

Their works remain mysterious and dumb, mute and motionless, because here spirit itself has still not really found its own inner life and still cannot speak the clear and distinct language of spirit. Spirit's unsatisfied urge and pressure to bring this wrestling with itself before perception by means of art in so mute a way, to give shape to the inner life, and to attain knowledge of its own inner life, as of inner life in general, only through external cognate shapes, is characteristic of Egypt (Hegel, 1975a, p.354).

If, however, Egyptian art remains 'mysterious and dumb, mute and motionless', for Hegel it also accomplishes a great deal for the development of spirit in its Westward journey. This is particularly true in the case of the pyramids, which he calls 'prodigious crystals which conceal in themselves an inner meaning' (1975a, p.356).

For Hegel, the proto-spiritual construction of this 'inner meaning' of the Egyptian pyramids is predicated on their dual structure. He writes that 'we have before us a double architecture, one above ground, the other subterranean' (p.356). Below ground is the tomb itself, and visible above ground is the sublime, towering monument to the death that the tomb is meant to contain. And yet Hegel seems rather indifferent to the sublimity of the pyramids, as if he has seen them once and for all, or more correctly, never seen them:

What at the first sight of these amazing constructions may arouse our wonder is their colossal size which at once prompts reflection on the

length of time and the variety, abundance, and persistence of human powers required for the completion of such immense buildings. In their form, however, they present nothing else to arrest our attention; the whole thing is surveyed and grasped in a few minutes (1975b, pp.651–652).

If it is not their form, then, what seems to interest Hegel most about the pyramids is their partitioning function. In his view, the pyramid is the quintessential tomb, which—unlike traditional burial, for instance—provides an immense barrier between life and death; and in doing so, it gives a certain life to death, by insulating the matter of the body against its decomposition and subsumption back into nature. The pyramid, in other words, is a fortification of life against death that in fact sublates death into life, by preserving for life an inner meaning that survives natural death, and which is expressed in the grandeur of the aboveground monument. In this way the pyramids prefigure spirit, since they preserve meaning beyond natural (Zoroastrian) immediacy:

In the case of the Egyptians the opposition between the living and the dead is strongly emphasized; the spiritual begins in itself to be separated from the non-spiritual. It is the rise of the individual concrete spirit which is beginning. The dead are therefore preserved as something individual and in this way are fortified and preserved against the idea of absorption into nature, i.e. against dissolution, against being swept away by a universal tide (Hegel, 1975b, p.650).

For Hegel, what counts in the pyramid is thus not what it is externally, but the secret mystery that it hides—death—and the way in which it converts this secret death into an immortal symbol.

In this way the pyramids though astonishing in themselves *are just simple crystals*, shells enclosing a kernel, a departed spirit, and serve to preserve its enduring body and form. Therefore in this deceased person, thus acquiring presentation on his own account, the entire meaning is concentrated; but architecture, which previously had its meaning independently in itself as architecture, now becomes separated from the meaning and, in this cleavage, subservient to something else (1975b, p.653, emphasis my own).

The pyramids become ‘shells’, ‘crystals’ that conceal an inner meaning, a ‘kernel’ that they buffer against any forgetting or return to immediacy, thus giving rise to the possibility of enduring spiritual meaning. But, contradictorily, it is ‘a departed spirit’, leaving the pyramids hollow, attempting to preserve what is already gone, which gives this symbolic kernel of meaning.

iv. The Pyramid as Sign

Hegel’s emphasis on this dual structure of the pyramid—which is supposed to maintain meaning even in the face of death—makes it strangely analogous to the linguistic sign.¹⁰ This observation is where Jacques Derrida begins his essay ‘The Pit and the Pyramid’ (1982), which, within the parameters of this argument, will allow us to consider how the pyramids themselves complicate the signifying function they are assigned within the historical framework of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*.

In his essay, noting the paradoxical task of the pyramid to memorialise and symbolically preserve life in death, Derrida observes that Hegel elsewhere¹¹ uses the pyramid as a metaphor for the relation between materiality and signification in general—the *sōma* and the *sēma*, the body and the sign (which is also a tomb).¹² Along these lines, he quotes Hegel’s claim that ‘[t]he sign is some immediate intuition, representing a totally different import from what naturally belongs to it; it is the *pyramid* into which a foreign soul (*eine fremde Seele*) has been conveyed ... and where it is conserved’ (Hegel, quoted in Derrida, 1982, pp.83–84). The pyramid as sign, or the sign as pyramid, then—each of which is identifiable as the other, because the sign (*sēma*) is already a tomb (*sēma*)—both literally and figuratively embodies the movement of interiorisation (*Erinnerung*) characteristic of Hegelian philosophy: ‘This activity, which consists in animating the intuitive (spatial and temporal) content, of breathing a ‘soul,’ a ‘signification,’ into it, produces the sign by *Erinnerung*—memory and interiorization’ (Derrida, 1982, p.87).

However, Derrida's point is that this interiorisation is founded on a formal irreconcilability, inasmuch as the presumed content hidden within the pyramid is in fact radically foreign to it, since what it attempts to preserve is precisely a departed soul:

The soul consigned to the pyramid is foreign (*fremd*). If it is transposed, transplanted into the monument like an immigrant, it is that it is not made of the stone of the signifier; neither in its origin nor its destination does it belong to the matter of the intuitive given (Derrida, 1982, p.84).¹³

In other words, the soul (the meaning) that the pyramid allegedly contains cannot be reconciled with or *adequately* expressed by the stone of the pyramid itself. Derrida is therefore able to reevaluate the productivity of Hegel's spiritual language through this formal problem of life and death in Egyptian symbolism, since Hegel situates the pyramid as the basis of his own conception of symbolisation, and, by extension, of signification in general. He writes:

The preface to the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* [sic] had posited the equivalence of understanding, formality, the mathematical, the negative, exteriority, and death. It had also posited the necessity of their work, which must be looked at in the face. ... [But] If the investment in death cannot be integrally amortized (even in the case of a profit, of an excess of revenue), can one still speak of a work of the negative? What might be a 'negative' that could not be *relevé* [sublated]? (Derrida, 1982, pp.106–107).

This is to say, through a paradox of representation in Hegel's understanding of the symbolic function of the pyramids, his philosophy, which requires that (the) negativity (of death) be put to work in the service of signification, that it turn a *determinate* epistemological profit, cannot function—since, again, the irreconcilability of the pyramids with what they are meant to contain leaves them without positive content.

While Hegel himself might have been content to ignore such a critique,¹⁴ Derrida's emphasis on the irreducibility of the inner and outer aspects of the pyramids (as signs) nonetheless fairly convincingly points

to a blind spot in Hegel's historico-aesthetic interpretation of them (as signifying structures). This blind spot is in fact the pyramids themselves. For Hegel, since the pyramids are 'just simple crystals' that can be 'surveyed and grasped in just a few minutes', they are dismissed in favour of their role as a symbolic medium. However, if Derrida is right, and the pyramids cannot complete their symbolic work of transubstantiating death, then naturally, all that remains of them are these 'simple crystals', to be considered without deriving their meaning from what they contain. In this sense, one might take seriously Hegel's offhanded remark that 'the pyramid has a character of its own which is not subservient to any mere purpose' (1975b, p.654)—a character of its own that, in other words, resists appropriation by spirit. The fact of such a resistance allows one to think the pyramid outside its role as spiritual mediator, without its hidden interiority—neither as an inhabited tomb (sign) *nor* as an empty one—once again along the lines of the unconscious symbolism that it is supposed to transcend.¹⁵ And, admittedly, before it is made a transcendent tomb, the pyramid is made of rocks.

v. Hegel as Geologist

In order to understand what Hegel thinks about rocks, it is necessary to take a brief detour through his *Philosophy of Nature*. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, the 'geological organism' (i.e. the earth, understood geologically) constitutes the interiorisation, the *Erinnerung*, of the idea of nature (Hegel, 2004b, p.277). But at first, it merely harbours the possibility for life. It begins, not unlike the pyramid, as a simple 'crystal' (p.293), but ultimately it becomes the site of all the processes necessary for life, and therefore takes on a kind of life of its own: it is 'fructified into vitality' (p.294) by meteorological and chemical processes. For Hegel, however, these processes are not contained within the earth as a unity, but are rather produced as the results of its disunity, its perpetual falling apart. He writes, 'The physical organization of the earth, as immediate,

does not begin with the simple, enveloped form of the germ, but with a beginning (*Ausgang*) which has fallen apart ...' (p.285). This constant self-externality, or inability to stabilise itself, is what makes the earth fertile:

Since this is in itself the negativity of itself, is the sublation of its immediacy, it posits the inwardness of itself but as a being which is the other of it: that is, the earth is fertile—fertile simply as the ground and basis (*Boden*) of the individual vitality upon it. But the earth is vitality only in an indeterminate mode; true, this vitality erupts at all points, but only feebly (Hegel, 2004b, p.294).

This is to say that feeble, 'transient' (p.294) manifestations of the life of the earth arise from it only to eventually fall back. The earth is thus the crystallisation of the same unstable and dissolute 'universal tide' (Hegel, 1975b, p.650) against which the pyramids are supposed to buttress the human. This means that, for Hegel, the art of pyramid-building creates out of stone a monument to guard the human against exactly what the stone embodies elsewhere in his thought: the emergence from and cold return to universality.

But even before the earth is gathered up in this way as a wall against itself, there is already a strange artistic impulse to be found in Hegel's representation of the earth's productivity. In the addenda to the *Philosophy of Nature*, he describes the earth as engaging in 'playful essays in organic formation' (2004b, p.293). And shortly after, in a fantastic analogy, he symbolises this creativity of the geological organism as that of an almost violent artist:

It is organoplastic Nature which generates the organic in the element of immediate being and therefore as a dead shape, crystallized through and through, like the artist who represents human and other forms in stone or on flat canvas. He does not kill people, dry them out and pour stony material into them, or press them into stone (he can do this too, for he pours models into moulds); what he does is to produce in accordance with his idea and by means of tools, forms which represent life but are not themselves living: Nature, however, does this directly, without needing

such mediation. That is, the Notion is not present as something conceived or imagined, while the thing stands over against the thinker and is fashioned by him; the Notion has not the form of consciousness but is immediately in the element of being, not detached from it (Hegel, 2004b, p.293).

Hegel here admits a creativity of the earth, but one that is not detached from it like the ‘idea’ is separate from art; it is, rather like unconscious symbolism, inherent within its material. As opposed to the pyramid’s form, which is imposed on the rock from the outside, the geological creativity that Hegel describes has its ‘Notion’ immediately in the earth. Importantly, Hegel here does not describe the earth as notionless, but instead as possessing a notion that ‘has not the form of consciousness’—which, again, is to say that Hegel insinuates that the ‘geological organism’ participates in its own sort of unconscious symbolising.

Thus the pyramid is truly tautological. From crystal (earth) to crystal (pyramid), it is made to replace one symbolism with another, and it is supposed to leverage the latter against the former. Its magnitude is supposed to hide death and guard against natural decay; but as such an artificial mountain, does the pyramid not merely reiterate those ‘playful essays’ of the geological organism? Doesn’t the geological matter of the pyramid participate in the same general economy of natural dissolution that it is supposed to guard against? One might claim here that what distinguishes the pyramid from this economy is its geometric form; but in that case, according to Hegel, ‘the whole thing is surveyed and grasped in a few minutes’. In its simplicity, the geometry renders the geology unavoidable.

vi. Conclusion: The Quarry

After attempting to complicate the spiritual function (or at this point, one might say the aesthetic non-functioning) of Hegel’s pyramids in terms of both their inside and their outside, the last thing to consider here will be their material production, i.e. how their rocks are removed from the earth

and organised. It will therefore be necessary to return to the *Aesthetics* to examine what Hegel has to say about ‘excavation’. By examining Hegel’s thoughts on digging, it will become possible to show how the spiritual labour that is supposed to be contained in the pyramid in fact originates elsewhere. Spirit, in other words, is not prefigured in the pyramid at all, but in the quarry.

With reference to caves and subterranean architectures, Hegel writes:

In comparison with the buildings on the surface such excavations seem to be earlier, so that the enormous erections above ground may be regarded as imitations and above-ground blossomings of the subterranean. For in excavations there is no question of positive building but rather of the removal of a negative (1975b, p.649).

Aboveground buildings are, like the proto-artistic experiments of the geological organism, which in fact literally result in plant-life, blossoms. Hegel thus privileges excavation as an early attempt at the construction of self-subsistent works of architecture, and as such links digging and building historically in a somewhat artificial progression from the immediacy of cave dwelling to the mediacy of huts and houses. By doing so, he implies a fundamental relation of excavation to architecture (and therefore to the beginning of art, the beginning of absolute spirit) in general. In this sense, architecture begins as a negative rather than a positive project: ‘in excavations there is no question of positive building but rather of the removal of a negative’.¹⁶ This observation concerns the negative space of the cave, and how it is produced through the negation of the stone that is there to begin with. But such a negation is not only proper to caves. As Hegel implies, subsequent, more positive architecture is itself only a blossoming of the subterranean, which is to say that the negativity exemplified by excavation is a necessary precondition for all architecture. And this negativity is multiple: for example, with regard to the digging of caves, inasmuch as the earth and its processes are themselves already constituted by negativity, this negation is a negation

of what is already negative, a negation which only negates a negativity to create a further negative space (the cave).¹⁷ This is why, for Hegel, the cave is still natural (p.649): it never gets past the purely negative. The excavated material, however, takes on a positive valence once it becomes organised in a construction project. Excavation thus produces the first real ‘negation of negation’. As a positive work of architecture, the earth gets piled up on top of itself in order to create an edifice—a monument, a pyramid—to stand against nature. But in order to be built, it must first be mined.

For this reason, according to Hegel’s philosophy of digging, the possibility of the positive construction of a pyramid depends not just on its form, but especially on the slave labour that negates and quarries the rock from the earth (even if the folk knowledge that asserts slaves as the builders of the pyramids is likely inaccurate).¹⁸ In an interpretation that would more or less accord with the traditional Hegelian approach, the labour of the ‘slave’—a metaphor for the recuperation of labour by history—would be the *sine qua non* of the pyramid, the labour that both accomplishes its work and that is ‘liberated’ by it in spirit. But this means that the initial site of negativity that lends its import to spirit is not located inside the pyramid at all, but outside in the quarry. The pharaoh’s quarry is where slave labour is transformed into spirit, where an ‘Asiatic’ mode of production moves the unconscious to the conscious. The pyramid itself, then, as a product of this movement, is thereby rendered a hollow monument to such an expenditure, it is made ‘mute and motionless’ (Hegel, 1975a, p.354) before the pharaoh and the philosopher, the structural repetition of a negativity that has already been put to work in and by the digging. In other words, the monumentalisation of death against nature supposedly accomplished by the pyramid reveals itself to be in fact only the crystalline congealment of a labour that, in submitting itself to the construction of a monument, has *already* organised itself behind a spiritual principle.

The spiritual principle of the pyramid is then petrified in its stonework, redundant outside of a certain relation between the worker

and the earth performed at the site of excavation. In this sense, the pyramids, like any monument or work of art, do metonymically point beyond themselves to a set of socio-political relations, but they cannot, in and of themselves, symbolically 'give shape to the inner life' of spirit (Hegel, 1975a, p.354). After the mining and the moving of the rock, the spiritual work is all done, and there is only a bare stony failure of explanation for it, a prodigious crystal for which only death suffices: that is, a vanishing point. At best, this implies that the pyramid itself is the representation of labour for the sake of labour: a tautological labour for the sake of death, the death of the head of state who returns in death to the anarchy of matter, which gets mined and re-mined in a monumental reminder of the structural failure of the sovereignty for which it was built.

Georges Bataille wrote, of humanity's relation to monuments, that '[e]ach individual is but one of the specks of dust that gravitate around this bitter existence' (1985, p.214). And indeed, one might more accurately locate spirit in the quarry's dust than in the pyramids, whose gigantic silence symbolises an irresolvable aesthetic problem at the root of history, an unconscious stone glinting in the Ormuzdian desert sunlight. Indifferent to Hegel's historical project, the pyramids have nothing to say (at least in his language). For them there is no signified, no signifier, no sign-tomb: only the immediate rock for which spirit is dust.¹⁹ Their secret is precisely that they have no secret. As Hegel noted, the pyramids are 'mute and motionless'; and in a sense, they are 'just simple crystals' that can be 'grasped in a few minutes'. But to grasp (*begreifen*) them is to misunderstand them.

In trying to mine a hidden interiority from the pyramids, and to make it signify, Hegelian philosophy will understandably find itself moving in *circles*, since it gets out of the pyramids only what it puts into them, which is to say an anachronistic form of spiritual representation, projected onto the surface of an object that resists such representation. It is in this sense that Hegel's historical aesthetics fails in its aim. In its haste to privilege the pyramids as the symbolic vehicles for historical consciousness, it

overlooks any engagement with the aesthetic material of its object, which would otherwise fail to symbolise anything beyond itself. It thus effaces its object in constituting it. However, such an omission is not strictly speaking the result of an error on Hegel's part, but rather a more general problem characterised by his approach: to use one of his own phrases, this problem of his historical aesthetics is produced not by a defect per se, but by 'the limitation of its sphere' (Hegel, 2004a, p.85). This is to say that it is necessary for Hegel's philosophy, in order to present a coherent theory of history, to articulate a function of the pyramids within a narrative that makes sense out of them, but that in doing so also neglects their materiality and speaks over their monumental silence. The aesthetic success of the pyramids themselves, however, was to make this silence visible.

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Paragraph 15 of Hegel's *Encyclopedia Logic* (1991), where he famously calls philosophy a 'circle of circles'.

² See Hegel's *Aesthetics*, Volume I (1975a), Part II, Section 1, Chapter 1. Additionally, in Volume II (1975b), Hegel's discussion of the pyramids ends his discussion of symbolic architecture in general.

³ See Hegel's *Aesthetics*, Volume I (1975a), Part II, Section 1, Chapter 3. 'Symbolism Proper' is the name of the chapter (in 'Unconscious Symbolism') in which Hegel privileges the pyramids as a way out of the problems raised by unconscious symbolism.

⁴ This is not to deny the interpretive value of history for aesthetics, but rather to critique its extreme application—a position that is perhaps best represented by Hegel—whereby historicity becomes the horizon through which the 'truth' of an artwork must articulate itself. Such a position leaves little room for considerations of what in the work of art exceeds its historically determined conditions of articulability. In other words, in addition to engaging with its historical context, a work of art can also engage with the interstices and failures of historical narrative. This is, as I will suggest, one of the aesthetic merits of the pyramids, which is largely ignored by Hegel, and which is illustrated in his inability to deal with their materiality.

⁵ The full context of this quotation is: 'The romantic form of art destroys the completed union of the Idea and its reality, and recurs, though in a higher phase, to that difference and antagonism of two aspects which was left unvanquished by symbolic art. The classical type attained the highest excellence, of which the sensuous embodiment of art is capable; and if it is in any way defective, the defect is in art as a whole, i.e. in the limitation of its sphere. This limitation consists in the fact that art as such takes for its object Mind—the conception of which is *infinite* concrete universality—in the shape of *sensuous* concreteness' (Hegel, 2004a, p.85). This provides a good distillation of the contradiction inherent in Hegel's approach to aesthetics, which he attempts to move beyond by sublating the entire concept of art in general (Rajan, 2004, p.66), but which, I will argue, is frustrated by his inadequate treatment of the '*sensuous* concreteness' of the aesthetic material (of the pyramids, in this case).

⁶ Andrzej Warminski has even argued that 'romantic art is essentially the same as symbolic art' (2004, p.45).

⁷ Moreover, since the end of art gives way to religion, then this *deus ex machina* can be taken quite literally.

⁸ Art and religion are often intimately connected in Hegel's writings, and this might be seen as another case of Hegel placing the end in the beginning.

⁹ The section in which Hegel briefly discusses Hindu symbolism is called 'Fantastical Symbolism', and exists between the 'Unconscious Symbolism' of Zoroastrianism and the 'Symbolism Proper' of the Egyptians. This distribution is itself very interesting and much more could certainly be said about it.

¹⁰ By 'linguistic sign', I mean specifically the sign as outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure, as a combination of what he (and Derrida following him) called the 'signifier' and the 'signified'.

¹¹ See the *Philosophy of Mind*, Section 458.

¹² Derrida plays on the double signification of *sēma*, which can mean both ‘sign’ and ‘tomb’. He writes: ‘Hegel knew that this proper and animated body of the signifier was also a *tomb*. The association *soma/sēma* is also at work in this semiology, which is in no way surprising. The tomb is the life of the body as the sign of death, the body as the other of the soul, the other of the animate psyche, of the living breath. But the tomb also shelters, maintains in reserve, capitalizes on life by marking that life continues elsewhere’ (Derrida, 1982, p.82).

¹³ Derrida’s overall argument is significantly more complex than this. His essay deals more directly with language, and thus with Saussurean linguistics and Egyptian hieroglyphics, whereas the reason for discussing Derrida here is more to consider his observations in light of the pyramids themselves.

¹⁴ Derrida might say that the functioning of Hegel’s system in fact depends on him ignoring such a critique.

¹⁵ Alluding to both semiotics and Hegel’s notion of symbolic art in ‘The Pit and the Pyramid’, Derrida in fact suggests that ‘[t]he materiality of the signifier, it could be said, functions by itself as “unconscious symbolism”’ (1982, p.99).

¹⁶ ‘*Denn es ist da nicht positiv gebaut, sondern nur negativ weggenommen worden*’.

¹⁷ One will recall, from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature*: ‘Since this [the geological organism] is in itself the negativity of itself, is the sublating of its immediacy, it posits the inwardness of itself but as a being which is the other of it: that is, the earth is fertile’ (2004b, p.294).

¹⁸ One will recall Hegel’s observation (quoted above): ‘What at the first sight of these amazing constructions may arouse our wonder is their colossal size which at once prompts reflection on the length of time and the variety, abundance, and persistence of human powers required for the completion of such immense buildings’ (1975b, pp.651–652).

¹⁹ Considering dust, in another way that might be appropriate here, Geoffrey Benington writes, ‘In terms of a phenomenology of the imagination, dust ... is *essentially* scatter, matter with no inner principle of gathering or preservation, subject only to dispersion and loss, matter itself insofar as matter just is dispersion. Things may gather dust, but dust itself is not a principle of gathering at all’ (2012, p.26). Inasmuch, then, as the labour of the negative might be located in the dust of the quarry, and in the dust of human life, it presents a figuration (or disfiguration) of the problem of the identity of spirit. Also worth considering here would be Bataille’s entry on ‘dust’ in his *Critical Dictionary*.

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