The legacy of Hegel’s and Jean Paul’s aesthetics: The idyllic in seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting

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The idyllic may be one of the concepts of everyday life one trusts least today and the same may be said about the idyll as a genre of writing and of painting. Within a primarily German cultural context, the best formulation of such scepticism may be Theodor W. Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory, in which the author argues the impossibility of any resting place in art. Good and important art may exist, yet it must come to an end in itself, must be prepared to silence itself through its own self-critical negation. Such negation means risk-taking: productive within the work of art, it leaves its mark on it. What is particularly challenging in Adorno’s view is his scepticism of irony as well. With regard to the idyllic this means that even the ironical dwelling at a resting place might be a dubious practice. As we shall see, there is a strong link between the discussion of irony, humour and the idyll in the German tradition of aesthetics. In this chapter I intend to demonstrate that this link plays an important role in the German reception of Dutch genre painting.

Let me begin my discussion in early nineteenth-century Dresden, that is, with a remarkable passage in Wilhelm von Kügelgen’s memoirs.

Father moved with us to this lovely paradise in order to finish here at leisure [some] as yet unfinished Berlin paintings. He painted coats, medals, shawls and rural background, and Mother . . . often read to him aloud, spiritual and worldly literature, and among it the ‘Flegeljahre’ by Jean Paul, which so highly amused Father that he had to rest his brush, in order to finish laughing.
This passage interestingly describes an artist’s family life by taking up the *topos*, associated in modern times for example with Rubens, of the learned artist who engages his mind intellectually by listening to a reader while working on a mere commission or on the less demanding parts of a picture. Here these are referred to as so many ‘coats, medals, shawls and rural backgrounds’ with a slightly comical, slightly resigned tone, a tone which anticipates, through the emulation of his style, the novelist Jean Paul mentioned in the following sentence. The humour of his *Flegeljahre* effectively disrupts the painter’s enactment of the *topos*, rendering its later remembrance ironic. While this irony serves to enhance the pleasurable informality of the summery family idyll, it also frames this idyll in a specific way. Kügelgen Jr’s placement of it in his memoirs means to represent as well as extend the reconciliation of the Kügelgen family with an all but idyllic life situation in the preceding years, when the Kügelgens had lost their security and prosperity to the Napoleonic era. As a consequence of this period of hardship the family was broken up; the summer of 1816 reunited most of the dispersed Kügelgens in a summer cottage in the vineyards just outside of Dresden. By having them read Jean Paul’s *Flegeljahre* and letting the novel’s humour enter this first and still shaky scene of wellbeing, Kügelgen Jr implies yet another meaning here, namely that of limited freedom, the pleasure taken in the idyllic situation as a means of private resistance and recuperation.

It is this last meaning, then, which points to a relation between the well-known account of Dutch scenes of social life in Hegel’s *Aesthetics* of 1827/9 as the ‘Sunday of Life’ and the less known account of the ‘Dutch style of writing’ and of the idyll as ‘the epic representation of complete happiness in limitation’ given in Jean Paul’s (Johannes Paul Richter, 1763–1825) *Kleine Vorschule der Aesthetik/Preschool of Aesthetics* of 1812. In my discussion of this relation I shall concentrate on what I consider to be a critical dimension in both accounts, namely their polarization of naivety and the comical on the one hand and of sentimentality, detachment and irony on the other.

In his *Aesthetics* Hegel expresses a high esteem for the ‘romantic’ and ‘subjective’ Dutch school of painting which he recognizes at once as an art reflective of its own historical present. Within the practice of pictorial representation he distinguished between the activities of a creating and a beholding subjectivity (between ‘Darstellung’ and ‘Vorstellung’) while also pointing to their conceptual interdependence. To describe the dialectics of representation he uses the terms ‘appearance’ (‘Schein’) and ‘inwardness’ or ‘interiority’ (‘Innerlichkeit’). ‘Appearance’ extends both temporally and spatially without determinable limits. The value
associated with it is freedom. The term is used throughout Hegel’s *Aesthetics*; here I will focus on its function in his section on painting and in the three passages devoted to Dutch painting of the seventeenth century. In these it is clear that Hegel recognizes and esteems in Dutch painting the artistic mastery of a tension between individual and world, between internal and external existence. In the paintings this tension appears as the mediation between their realistic subject matter and their ideal representational appearance. By representational appearance Hegel means not only the virtuosity of Dutch painting, as such its capacity for producing illusionistic deception by capturing the most fleeting phenomena, but also the self-absorption of representation. He calls this self-absorption ‘pure appearance which is wholly without the sort of interest the subject matter has’. The key phrase here is, literally, ‘disinterested appearance’ (*interesseloses Scheinen*). In his reference to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, Hegel shifts Kant’s ‘disinterested pleasure’ (*interesseloses Wohlgefallen*) from the judgement of beauty in art to the nature of art in general, and of Dutch painting in particular, and at the same time to the nature of representational practice. In doing so, he echoes classical French art theory. In general, one might say that Hegel makes much use of a French art-critical terminology which he interprets in such a way that the polarity of affect and reason becomes dialectically mediated. In the case of his use of the phrase ‘disinterested appearance’, this mediation pertains to his view that while in Dutch painting representation is apparently solely absorbed in its subject matter, in fact it is primarily absorbed in the act of representation as such without knowing it. ‘Disinterest’, then, corresponds to the content of painting which is ‘subjectivity aware of itself’. It is precisely Netherlandish painting which receives the highest marks from Hegel with respect to realizing this content. As Netherlandish, Protestant painting no longer requires either Christian iconography or doctrine – this central, objective reference ‘now falls away’ – genre painting in the sense of ‘Gattungsmalerei’ takes their place. Far from diminishing the spirituality and reflexivity of painting, this process liberates it in Hegel’s eyes. It is in the ordinary subject matter, in the insignificant detail of empirical reality that the artist makes perceptible and transparent his own inner relationship to the world. Hegel’s primary interest is clearly in depictions of social life, and explicitly in scenes with lively and active figures. He names ‘peasant life and the down-to-earth life of the lower classes’, with their ‘naive cheerfulness and jollity’. It is with reference to the appearance of ‘utterly living absorption in the world and its daily life’ in these scenes that Hegel ends with his famous phrase: ‘It is the Sunday of life which equalizes everything and
removes all evil.\textsuperscript{13} As examples for the art he has in mind, we might think of Jan Steen’s \textit{The Dancing Couple} (1663) and \textit{Card Players Quarrelling} (1664).

Inseparable from this understanding of painting are its material means: paint and its inherent capacity for representation, for ‘Farbenschein’, ‘Farbenmagie’, for colouristic appearance and magic. These are the terms Hegel borrows from Diderot, whose \textit{Essays on Painting} of 1765/95 he quotes from Goethe’s fragmentary translation into German of 1799.\textsuperscript{14} In his essay on colour, Diderot uses the word ‘magic’ in the context of discussing ‘clair-obscur’ to describe the irresistible affective power of colour over the beholder.\textsuperscript{15} The term ‘Farbenmagie’ reinforces Hegel’s understanding of appearance, as it is also the term by which he links the materiality of painting to its spiritual content.\textsuperscript{16} The technical quality in Dutch painting is thus directly and positively related to its subjectivity and to the freedom achieved by an artist’s absorption in his representational practice.\textsuperscript{17} Achievement of ‘Farbenmagie’ – and according to Hegel, here ‘the Dutch too were the greatest masters’ – is the achievement of ‘pure appearance of animation; and this is what constitutes the magic of colouring and is properly due to the spirit of the artist who is the magician’.

Hegel’s passage on the ‘Sunday of Life’ in Dutch painting makes a clear association of tolerance and conciliation. This tolerance is historicized in two ways. First, it is seen to evolve from the ‘civil and religious independence’ of the Dutch nation and, second, it is seen as something entirely different and missing from the cultural products of Hegel’s own times. Hegel’s simplification of the Dutch historical and cultural situation allows him to address the historical difference between his present and the Dutch past. Thus he believes that it is the role of the comical to express the tolerance and openness of Dutch culture in the shared practice of painterly representation:

In the Dutch painters the comical aspect of the situation cancels what is bad in it, and it is at once clear to us that the characters can still be something different from what they are as they confront us in this moment. Such cheerfulness and comicality is intrinsic to the inestimable worth of these pictures. When on the other hand in modern pictures a painter tries to be piquant in the same way, what he usually presents to us is something inherently vulgar, bad, and evil without any reconciling comicality. For example, a bad wife scolds her drunken husband in the tavern and really snarls at him;
but then there is nothing to see, as I have said once before, except that he is a dissolute chap and his wife a drivelling old woman.\footnote{18}

To illustrate Hegel’s judgement, we might compare ter Borch’s so-called \textit{Paternal Admonition} of 1654–5 with Theodor Hosemann’s \textit{The Caretaker as Father} of 1847, evidently modelled after the ter Borch, with a supposedly amusing shift in social class.\footnote{19} Hegel’s point applies to the modern beholders of such works as well. Lacking the dimension of ‘Schein’, these beholders too cannot ‘still be something different from what they are as they confront’ the painting. By contrast, the ‘Schein’ character of Dutch seventeenth-century painting is its true character. It is an ideality with a material basis, an ideality earned through real historical and cultural accomplishments, above all the Dutch war of independence. If simulated, as happens in the nineteenth-century German genre painting of the Düsseldorf Academy, the result is nothing at all, because just such unity of art and political culture is lacking.\footnote{20} At the same time that he rejects German neo-Dutch painting, Hegel is rather confident that he can enter and partake of the subjectivity of seventeenth-century Dutch painting and its humour.

Nonetheless, the role of humour is not throughout a positive one in Hegel’s account. He ends his second passage on Dutch painting with the observation that if ‘it is the stark subjectivity of the artist himself which intends to display itself’, then ‘art … becomes the art of caprice and humour’.\footnote{21} This ending turns out to be a negative judgement on his part. No longer the result of an at once naive, absorptive and tolerant immersion in the world, with ‘the later Dutch painters’ humour serves to dissociate them from that world. ‘Disinterested appearance’ turns into apparent self-interest. This loss of naivety, then, is the subject of the following discussion of ‘Subjective Humour’, in which Hegel briefly accounts for the phenomenon of Jean Paul:

So with us Jean Paul, for example, is a favourite humourist, and yet he is astonishing, beyond everyone else, precisely in the baroque mustering of things objectively furthest removed from one another and in the most confused disorderly jumbling of topics related only in his own subjective imagination. The story, the subject-matter and course of events in his novels, is what is of the least interest. The main thing remains the hither and thither course of the humour which uses every topic only to emphasize the subjective wit of the author.\footnote{22}
The distinction between the earlier naively humorous and the later self-indulgently humorous Dutch painter, or the neo-Dutch author Jean Paul, is that

true humour . . . requires great depth and wealth of spirit in order to raise the purely subjective appearance into what is actually expressive, and to make what is substantial emerge out of contingency, out of mere notions.23

Thus Hegel distinguishes between true and false appearance, between true and false humour, and between true and false affirmation of the present in art. Recognizing that it would be wrong to align Jean Paul with the modern genre painter he rejects, Hegel assigns him to a place nearer to those unnamed ‘later Dutch painters’ whom I take to be mainly painters of the second half of the seventeenth century.

In his Preschool of Aesthetics of 1812 (1804), Jean Paul makes several references to Dutch art. His account of the three schools of the novel (§ 72), the Italian, the German and the Dutch school, distinguishes the first by an elevated style, the second by an intermediate style and then focuses on the third, the Dutch school of the novel. Hegel’s connection of the ‘naive’ with the ‘true’ was indebted to Diderot, who furthermore called the naive the ‘voisin du sublime’.24 But while Hegel further related the true and naive to the comical and applied these terms to Dutch low-life painting, he did not take up Diderot’s suggestion of the proximity of the naive to the sublime, and thus of the comical to the sublime. This is precisely what Jean Paul does. He proceeds to define ‘the low as the inverted high (altitudo)’, considering both the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ equally poetic and attributing to the Dutch style of writing a ‘comical, or even serious depth’.25 In terms of Hegel’s distinctions between true, naive humour on the one hand and destructive, self-indulgent humour on the other, Jean Paul here explicitly aligns himself with the former. In the long run, however, he will adopt a merger of the two, called ‘humorous contempt of the world’ (‘humoristische Weltverachtung’).

It is in the section (§ 73) on ‘The Idyll’ that Jean Paul tries to come to terms with this merger. He defines the idyll as ‘the epic representation of complete happiness in limitation’ (‘epische Darstellung des Vollglücks in der Beschränkung’).26 This limitation may regard material goods, social rank and horizon of insight. Its site may be the Alps, Tahiti, the rectory, the fishing boat, the fenced-in garden, in short, anywhere. But the size of the idyll, on all levels – extent, number of inhabitants, implied larger world – must be contained and rather small. This condition is
comparable to Hegel’s condition for the spirituality of seventeenth-century Dutch art, namely, that the paintings be very small. Jean Paul mentions his own short novels in the Dutch style as ‘indisputably’ belonging to the genre of the idyll. Literary critics have confirmed Jean Paul in this, albeit with the persuasive qualification that his idylls are ‘gestörte Idyllen’ – ‘disturbed idylls’. What disturbs his idylls is the presence of the social and historical conditions from which they are wrested and which they comically reflect, i.e. the German ‘Duodezstaat’ of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In short, what disturbs them is their own critical dimension, something Hegel evidently did not perceive in Jean Paul’s writings. In turn, the term ‘disturbed idyll’ may be productively applied to some Biedermeier painting, such as Ludwig Deppe’s *Houses on the Mühlengraben Berlin* of 1820 with its emblematic juxtaposition of idyllic ‘Hinterhof’ details like the neatly hung laundry beyond the canal with the bones and skull on this, i.e. the beholder’s, side of the canal, and Friedrich Göser’s *Self-Portrait in the Studio* of 1835 with its odd dynamics of direct and indirect gazes, mirror images and shielded or hidden identities of figures.

In his autobiography (*Selberlebensbeschreibung*) of 1818–19, Jean Paul analyses his own preference for the idyll as indicative of his ‘own inclination towards the homely, the still life, and spiritual nestbuilding’, an inclination captured by his contemporaries in images of Jean Paul at work in a gazebo and honoured at a picnic. Jean Paul’s confessed taste for bourgeois privacy was widespread in the Biedermeier era after the Vienna Congress, as we also saw earlier in the example of the Kügelgen family. Yet his understanding of the idyllic and the Dutch style in his fiction and in his earlier *Preschool* differs significantly from the Kügelgens’ renewed self-confidence. The restlessness noticeable even in Jean Paul’s idylls, along with their critical dimension, seems to be missing from Hegel’s notion of Dutch art. Thus the most fundamental difference between the two authors is that of temporal sequence. In Hegel’s account the Dutch style of ‘satisfaction in present-day life’ is literally conservative, albeit a conservatism justified by the Dutch people’s hard and successful struggles for freedom which preceded this artistic practice and in fact made it a practice of conciliation. Such a struggle had obviously not taken place in the German states by 1812, nor was it completed in any comparable way after the Liberation Wars until the revolution in 1848. Jean Paul tried to integrate a satirical critique of the state of affairs with a humorous reconciliation to it. In contrast to Hegel’s emphasis on the preservation of the ‘high’ (the historical struggle) in the ‘low’ (the genre painting) through ‘true humour’ is Jean
Paul’s definition of the ‘low as the inverted high’, which might bear a promised hope for a historical struggle yet to come (§ 32): ‘Humour, as the inverted sublime, does not annihilate the individual, but rather the finite through the contrast with the idea.’ The difference between Hegel and Jean Paul is expressed most clearly in the word ‘annihilate’ (‘vernichten’), a word Hegel uses in the context of discussing irony, not humour. Irony, for Hegel, is associated in particular with Friedrich Schlegel’s philosophy. It is synonymous with the latter’s attitude, seen also in his art, of total negativity and destructive individual consciousness, not with freedom.  

Jean Paul, by comparison, discusses both internal and external freedom in the context of ‘Humorous Subjectivity’ (§ 34), associating the one with the idyllic, the other with what is great or sublime and both with ‘the spirit of the artist as well as the reader’. Among other places he finds humorous subjectivity ‘in the Netherlands;’ and in order to explain the relationship between these two kinds of freedom (§ 28) he uses a Dutchman in a situation which becomes comical only because of one’s knowing or imaginative insight into his Dutchman’s inner life. As might be expected, in this example the presumed internal and external freedom of the Dutchman becomes linked with the idyllic:

For instance, a Dutchman stands in a beautiful garden at a wall and looks through a window in it at the scenery beyond: so far there is nothing about this man . . . that could be called comical in any preschool of aesthetics.

But soon this innocent Dutchman is transferred to the realm of the comical, if one adds to the story that he, who saw all his neighbouring Dutchmen enjoying villas or cottages with splendid views, did what he could, and since he could not afford an entire villa, had built for himself at least a short wall with a window, from which, when he leaned into it, he could view very freely and without obstacle the scenery before him. However, if we wish to pass by his head in the window and laugh in his face, then we need to impute something to him, and that is that he simultaneousely wished to wall up his view and to open it to himself.

The comical Dutch character is naive and idyllic inasmuch as he is aware of the strategic role of self-limitation, yet unaware of the limitations of self-limitation. To him his practice is a satisfying mediation of internal wishes (‘owning’ a view in a country of ideally equal citizens) and external conditions (limited financial means). Thus, what he lacks is
irony and its critical dimension, the two things his observers are all the more conscious of.31

Returning now to Adorno’s profound scepticism of art as a resting place we might contrast Jan Steen’s scene of a pious family, Prayer before the Meal (1660s), with two political images made in the German historical context from which Adorno’s argument derives its urgency. They are Adolf Wissel’s painting Kalenberg Farm Family of 1939, exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in the show ‘German Romantic Art from 1790 to 1990’) and John Heartfield’s satirical photomontage Hurrah! the Butter Is All Gone of 1935. Wissel’s painting may be seen as an attempt in the idyllic mode meaning to present the exemplary Aryan farm family around the table outside their home: a prosperous middle-class family, the children blond, all six figures healthy, strong, self-conscious and yet earnestly immersed in a world supposedly within their grasp.32 The style of the painting is a mode of ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’, emphasizing an unsmiling rigidity which we may read as symptomatic of something unseen in the image. With reference to Adorno one might speak of a latent, but not a consciously critical negativity. Heartfield assembles another exemplary contemporary family in their home, emphasizing their togetherness during a meal. Yet by substituting metalware for food Heartfield exposes the anticipated misery of hunger and food shortage and the economic primacy of the war industry. Heartfield’s distribution of ‘food’ among the family members emphasizes their potential brutalization through the nutrition of propaganda. The family’s youngest member feeds on an axe, a motif associated in Heartfield’s iconography with National Socialism and with Göring.33 The wallpaper’s swastika pattern, a framed motto: ‘Lieb Vaterland magst ruhig sein!’ and the caption, ‘Hurrah, die Butter ist alle!’, dramatically underscore Heartfield’s point in suggesting the family’s crazed, whole-hearted participation in this false idyll. Heartfield’s image is a critical image, but how can one describe its mode? One possibility is to call it a satirical treatment of the idyll. Such a description implies humour at the expense of the represented family as well as, perhaps, of artists like Wissel who were painting such families at the time. This is not to suggest that Heartfield explicitly employed older aesthetic traditions of conceptualizing the idyllic, and yet it appears that he was keenly aware of the critical dimension of the ‘disturbed idyll’ in a way forgotten by most and suppressed by others.