

William Desmond, *Hegel's antiquity*. Classical presences. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 416 p. ISBN 9780198839064. \$115.00.

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Hegel's Antiquity comes at a moment when interest in Hegel's relation to the ancient world is once again gathering pace, bucking a trend that saw Hegel scholars channel research into Hegel primarily as a thinker of modernity, whose most persistent interlocutors were his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, especially Kant and Fichte. Although important studies on Hegel and ancient philosophy continued to be published during this period (for example, by Allegra de Laurentiis, Gary Browning, and Alfredo Ferrarin), Hegel's reception of classical philosophy and culture took a back seat. However, things have recently begun to change. The publication in 2015 of Günter Zöllner's *Res Publica: Plato's Republic in Classical German Philosophy*, which examined the influence of Plato's *Republic* on Kant, Fichte and Hegel, marked a shift in Hegel studies. This book was followed by the publication in 2018 of *Hegel and Ancient Philosophy: A Re-Examination* (a substantial collection of papers first presented at the 2016 conference of the Hegel Society of America), whose express aim was to address the scholarly neglect of Hegel's relation to ancient philosophy. Other books have followed suit: *Brill's Companion to German Platonism*, which examines the pervasive influence of Platonism on, among others, Kant, Hegel and Schleiermacher, and my own *Articulations of Nature and Politics in Plato and Hegel*.¹ In this climate, Will Desmond's new book is a very welcome addition to a trend that shows no signs of abating.

Desmond's offering differs from those other books in one important respect: as the author explains in the introductory chapter, instead of focussing on a single philosopher or school of thought (e.g. Plato, Aristotle or the Sceptics), the book examines Hegel's relation to the ancient world more generally, including its poets, artists and historians, as well as Roman law and religion. The scope of the book, therefore, is both ambitious and broad. Its aim is to stage an encounter between Hegel and the ancient world in its various aspects. Of course, Hegel did not re-discover antiquity all of his own; instead, he belonged to a generation of thinkers who were fascinated by the ancients and sought to find in them resources for understanding and transforming their own social reality. Hegel comes on the heels of Goethe, the Schlegel brothers, Schleiermacher, Hölderlin, and a whole literary, artistic, scholarly and philosophical movement that forms itself in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and whose connection with the ancients is not only cerebral but also a matter of sensibility and imagination.

Chapter 1 situates Hegel within this broader movement and sets the scene for his reception of antiquity. As a thinker of modernity, Desmond points out, 'Hegel is peculiar, for to the revolutionary's zeal for novelty he adds an abiding reverence for the past' (p. 3). This is of note because Hegel's peculiarity reflected an entire era that looked forwards at renewal through the resources of old. Desmond's analysis takes us back to the historic links between Germany and Italy – links that were accentuated by the Romans' perception of the *Germani* as 'noble savages whose indomitable freedom shamed the decadence of Rome' (p. 5). Any reader of Hegel will recognise in this Hegel's later appraisal of the Germanic Spirit as the soil where consciousness of freedom could take root, but the fascination with Italy dates back to 1776. Desmond uses the word "intoxication" to describe the intensity of this peculiar malady, '*Italiensehnsucht*' or 'ache for Italy' (p.7), affecting figures ranging from Winckelmann,

author of the extremely influential *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, through to Goethe and Schiller. And of course it was not just Italy that drew the hearts and minds of the Germanic travellers (some of whom only travelled in imagination), but also Greece, whose perceived ‘harmony with nature, the divine, and, most of all, itself’ – another distinctively Hegelian theme – would persist right down to the twentieth century. How the ancient world captivated the intellectual heavy-weights of eighteenth-century Germany and how this view came to shape Hegel’s own perception of modern Germany as a synthesis of Rome and Greece is the topic of this chapter.

Interestingly, Desmond’s research is not channelled primarily towards the young Hegel’s appropriation of antiquity. In a sense, that would have been too easy as the yearning for the ‘beautiful ethical life of the Greeks’ is most apparent in Hegel’s early writings: the ‘Tübingen Fragment’ (1793), the Hölderlin-inspired poem ‘Eleusis’ (1796), *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* (1798-9). Instead, the book concentrates on the mature Hegel and especially the Berlin lectures on art, religion, philosophy and world history, as well as the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. The book is organised thematically, following Hegel’s own division of ‘objective spirit’ and ‘absolute spirit’, culminating with the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.

In line with this thematic development, Chapter 2 focusses on Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and the articulation of what Hegel calls the ‘moments’ of the modern state: abstract right, morality, and ethical life. This chapter traces out the ancient sources of Hegel’s political thought, but also highlights areas where Hegel distances himself from classical conceptions and practices, such as Plato’s and Epicurus’ proposals for communism over private property, and ancient slavery. Similarly, the section on morality brings together Hegel’s critique of the

Kantian notion of *moralität* with the classical paradigm of ‘virtue’, which Hegel integrates into his broader theory of ethical duty.

Chapter 3 situates Hegel’s philosophy of art within the explosion of artistic and creative interest that marked the era. Central in this was the dominance of the classical ideal of beauty which, according to Desmond, Hegel echoed with his ‘near reverence for classical beauty’ (p. 112), but also with the logical organisation of his *Lectures on Fine Art*. We see here how the classical ideal underlies not only artistic creativity, but also, crucially, Hegel’s philosophical treatment of art as the sensuous manifestation of the Idea, the unity of form and matter, and the elevation of nature to Spirit. Desmond discusses Hegel’s treatment of individual arts (architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry) in line with an important Hegelian tenet that views individual arts and artistic forms as parts of a broader whole aesthetically, conceptually and philosophically, i.e. as expressions of the historical existence of a people.

Chapter 4 deals with the topic of religion, which – as would have been appropriate for a seminary student – interested Hegel from very early on. Here again Desmond’s focus is on Hegel’s mature works rather than the early *Über die Religion der Griechen und Römer*, *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* or *The Positivity of the Christian Religion*. Desmond’s in-depth knowledge of the relevant sources allows him to deliver interesting insights that complicate Hegel’s account. For example, he notes that although Hegel considered Christianity the ‘infinite religion’ and the culmination of previous religious systems, he spent considerable time and effort revising and further researching the topic, with a bibliography running to at least 240 works, two-thirds of which relate to ‘pre-Christian religions’ (p. 197). This ethnographic interest – evident in the rich detail with which Hegel discusses the Greek gods or the Roman pantheon – is subordinate to Hegel’s view of the historical evolution of

religion as a series of stages whose culmination is the human realisation of the true infinite. Thus, Roman religion is considered not only on its own terms but also as the logically and historically necessary precursor of Christianity, or the 'final, necessary matrix' without which Christianity could not have arisen (p. 197).

Philosophy is the topic of Chapter 5. The chapter begins with a discussion of Hegel's conception of the history of philosophy not as a plurality of competing theories superseded by other, more accurate, theories but as a dialectical and methodical history of thought whose aim is to reveal philosophy as the 'self-conscious, pre-suppositionless knowledge of the Absolute' (p. 243). Seen in this way, the history of philosophy displays an internal progression and necessity which it is the task of the philosopher to bring out. Ancient philosophy holds out a special place for Hegel as it is with the ancient Greeks that the most important concepts of philosophy were brought to consciousness, such as, for example, the identity of thought and being. The chapter follows the development of Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy from the Presocratics to the Sophists and Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the later schools, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Scepticism, and the Neoplatonists.

Finally, a shorter chapter on History, Cosmos and the Mind attempts a synthesis of the insights gained in previous chapters by focussing on the philosophy of history which Hegel saw as the 'development of Spirit' and a 'true theodicy' (p. 330). This is probably the area where Hegel diverges the most from the ancient philosophers who did not, on the whole, privilege history as a mode of knowledge. The focus of the chapter, therefore, is not so much on Hegel's affinities with the classics but on the place that Greece and Rome came to occupy in Hegel's philosophically-informed project of world history. Key to this is Hegel's view of a historical progression that starts from the Oriental world, passes through Greece and Rome,

and finally reaches its terminus in the Germanic world. This is also the chapter where Desmond addresses some of the thornier issues in Hegel scholarship, such as for example, Hegel's possible Eurocentrism, which denies Africa, Siberia, the Americas, Australia, and Polynesia any meaningful contribution to the development of world history, and Hegel's 'evolutionism', which affirms the principle of inner development and dynamism in human affairs but does not endorse an equally dynamic natural history.

Desmond uses his thorough knowledge of the ancient sources to provide a wealth of detail to his discussion of Hegel's complex relation to the ancient world. The book raises a host of issues concerning this relation, which Hegel epitomised, but which he was by no means the only one of his generation to carry forward. Some of these issues pertain to matters of textual and historical scholarship: how did nineteenth-century Germany become re-acquainted with ancient cultural and artistic products, and how did these products shape its self-perception and sense of historical destiny? Conversely, how did the substantial advances in philology and archaeology made in nineteenth-century Germany help shape contemporary classical studies and our own reception of antiquity? This is by no means a straightforward question; as Desmond points out, the fact that independent Greece was given a Bavarian as its first king highlights the sense that there existed a 'unique spiritual bond' between Germany and ancient Greece (p. 13). This bond may have been constructed or imagined, but there is no doubt that it propelled classical studies forward and influenced the way we approach antiquity today. Another set of issues concerns the broader impact of Hegel's interpretation of antiquity; as Desmond makes clear at various points in the book, Hegel's perception of the ancient world is integrated into a larger philosophical project that views Greece and Rome as stages in the development of world Spirit. It would be a shame, however, if this limited Hegel's appeal to a narrow readership, as Hegel made a substantial contribution to the study of the ancient

world in a number of fields, including in history of art and religion. It is hoped, therefore, that Desmond's very accessible and thoroughly researched volume will increase awareness of this contribution among wider audiences, and will signal a return to Hegel as a student of antiquity.

¹Günter Zöller, *Res Publica: Plato's Republic in Classical German Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015). Glenn Alexander Magee, ed., *Hegel and Ancient Philosophy: A Re-Examination* (New York: Routledge, 2018). Alan Kim, ed., *Brill's Companion to German Platonism* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). Vicky Roupa, *Articulations of Nature and Politics in Plato and Hegel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).