

German Classical Aesthetics: The Debate between Poetry and Philosophy

Xingjie Li

Beijing Yiyou Zhongcheng Technology Development Co., LTD, Beijing, China

Abstract: The debate between poetry and philosophy is an important part of the German classical aesthetics debate. Kant not only emphasizes that aesthetic judgment is not cognitive judgment, but also regards the judgment on which aesthetic judgment depends as one of human cognitive ability. It not only emphasizes the distinction between beauty and goodness, but also thinks that it can transition from natural beauty to morality. Schiller broke Kant's compromise position and argued that beauty not only does not corrupt morality, but is the foundation of freedom. Under the guidance of rational spirit and dialectic spirit, Hegel reconciled the conflict between poetry and philosophy. The debate between poetry and philosophy has long been a normal part of European classical aesthetics, so this paper makes a deep exploration of this topic from the perspective of German classical aesthetics, and tries to find a foothold for the debate from the ideological viewpoints of many philosophers.

Keywords: German classical aesthetic, poetry and philosophy, aesthetic judgment; freedom.

1. Introduction

The debate between poetry and philosophy, as a profound and lasting topic in German classical aesthetics, not only reflects the spiritual outlook of German society at that time and the depth of philosophical exploration, but also reveals the internal logic and conflict of human's unremitting pursuit of beauty, truth and goodness. Since Kant, German classical aesthetics, with its unique idealist perspective, has left a rich ideological heritage for the later generations. In this era, although Germany was slightly backward in economy and politics, its ideology and culture were flourishing, especially in the field of aesthetics, which became an important position for the bourgeoisie to seek the harmonious unity of sensibility and reason and explore the true meaning of freedom (Mikki,2021). As the founder of German classical aesthetics, Kant not only emphasized the independence of aesthetic judgment in his aesthetic thought, but also tried to find a place for aesthetic judgment under the framework of epistemology. On the one hand, he clearly distinguishes the boundary between beauty and goodness, on the other hand, he tries to build a bridge between sensibility and reason through the transition from natural beauty to moral beauty. However, Kant's compromise position did not completely resolve the fundamental conflict between poetry and philosophy, but foreshadowed the subsequent debate. Schiller took over the torch of Kant and further promoted the discussion of this thesis. He broke the confines of Kantian reconciliation and explicitly argued that beauty is not only a supplement to morality, but also the basis of freedom. In Schiller's opinion, art (especially poetry), with its unique charm, inspires people's yearning and pursuit of freedom, and becomes an indispensable force in the human spiritual world. Dating back to Plato, his critical attitude towards poetry pushed the antagonism between poetry and philosophy to the extreme. Plato believed that poetry not only failed to convey the truth, but misled people with false appearances and even posed a threat to morality. This point of view undoubtedly foreshadowed the controversy between poetry and philosophy in later generations, and also prompted the pioneers of German classical aesthetics to launch a deeper

exploration and reflection on this issue.

From the perspective of German classical aesthetics, this paper aims to deeply analyze the origin, development and influence of the dispute between poetry and philosophy, and try to find the light of truth in the collision of many philosophers' thoughts, and reveal the complexity and diversity of the human spiritual world

2. Historical Background and Characteristics of German Classical Aesthetics

German classical aesthetics emerged from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century. During this period, German society was undergoing profound changes. Its rise was closely related to the historical background at that time, and it also showed unique core characteristics. From the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century in Germany, social unrest, political fragmentation, economic backwardness, and the increasing need for ideological liberation provided a unique historical background for the rise of German classical aesthetics. During this period, Germany had not yet been unified, the contradiction between the feudal aristocracy and the bourgeoisie was increasingly intensified, and the influence of the Enlightenment and the religious reform prompted Germans to pursue freedom and liberation of thought. Aesthetics, as an important way to express the pursuit of freedom and an ideal society, developed rapidly during this period(Samadov,2021).

The rise of German philosophy, especially Kant's philosophy, laid a solid foundation for the rise of German classical aesthetics. The concept of "aesthetic judgment" put forward by Kant emphasizes aesthetics as an independent perceptual ability, which goes hand in hand with morality and reason. This view not only provided theoretical support for German classical aesthetics, but also promoted the systematization and scientific research of aesthetics. Subsequently, philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel further developed German classical philosophy, making it the center of European philosophy and providing more abundant theoretical resources for the development of

aesthetics.

The core features of German classical aesthetics lie in its idealist tendency, the combination of sensibility and reason, and the exploration of freedom and beauty. The tendency of idealism makes German classical aesthetics pay more attention to the pursuit of the spiritual level and emphasize the spirituality and transcendence of art. At the same time, German classical aesthetics also pursues the harmonious unity of sensibility and reason, and holds that aesthetic judgment is the perfect combination of sensibility and reason. In addition, the exploration of freedom and beauty is another important theme of German classical aesthetics, which emphasizes art as the highest expression of human spiritual freedom, and through artistic creation and appreciation, human beings can feel spiritual freedom and liberation.

The rise and development of German classical aesthetics are closely related to the historical background at that time, and its core features reflect the profound influence of German philosophy and the unremitting pursuit of freedom and beauty. It not only laid a solid foundation for the aesthetic development of Germany and even Europe, but also provided valuable theoretical resources for the aesthetic research of later generations. The study of German classical aesthetics not only helps to deeply understand the development of aesthetics, but also provides useful inspiration and reference for contemporary aesthetic research.

3. Development of the Debate between Poetry and Philosophy

3.1. The Origin of the Dispute between Plato and Poetic Philosophy

The dispute between Plato and poetry and philosophy is an important topic in the history of western philosophy, which can be traced back to ancient Greece. Plato's understanding and criticism of poetry are mainly reflected in his work *The Republic*. He believes that poetry, as the embodiment of art, is essentially a kind of imitation. In the metaphor of the "three beds," Plato points out that God creates the bed of ideas, the craftsman creates the bed of reality, and the poet is an imitation of the craftsman's bed, which is far from the truth. Plato further argues that poetry has a negative effect on the mind. Poetry stimulates people's emotions through imitation, but these emotions are often irrational, and it is easy for people to indulge in sensibility, thus corrupting young people's morality and making them far away from reason and truth. In the *Republic*, Plato argued that poets should be expelled from the Republic because they could not bring true knowledge and truth to the city. Plato's denial of art does not completely deny the value of art, but emphasizes that art must accept the review and transformation of philosophy. He believes that art can only have the rationality of existence if it can serve truth and morality. It not only laid the foundation for the discussion of the relationship between reason and sensibility, truth and art in Western philosophy, but also triggered the continuous reflection and discussion of the relationship between poetry and philosophy in later generations(Sun& Wang,2023).

3.2. Kant: The Initial Reconciliation of Poetry and Philosophy

Kant initially reconciles the relationship between poetry and philosophy in his *Critique of Judgment*. By analyzing aesthetic judgment, he distinguishes aesthetic judgment from

cognitive judgment and emphasizes the independence of aesthetic judgment. Kant believes that aesthetic judgment does not depend on the concept, but is based on the subjective feelings of the subject, which has universality and necessity. This kind of judgment is one of the cognitive abilities of human beings, which produces the perception of beauty through the free activity and harmonious cooperation of imagination and understanding.

Kant further distinguishes between the beautiful and the good. Beauty is pleasure that does not involve concepts and interests, while goodness is related to morality and interests. He put forward the important proposition that "beauty is the symbol of morality" and believed that the transition from natural beauty to moral beauty was possible. This transition provided a theoretical basis for reconciling poetry and philosophy, since poetry, as a form of art, could be seen as the embodiment of beauty, while philosophy was concerned with morality and good(Vaccarino Bremner,2022).

However, Kant's harmony of poetry and philosophy has its limitations. He defined aesthetic activities in "purposiveness without purpose" and emphasized the separation of aesthetic and moral. Although this compromise position has reconciled the contradiction between poetry and philosophy to a certain extent, it has not completely solved the tension between them. Kant's theory laid an important foundation for the subsequent debate on the relationship between poetry and philosophy, and inspired the future generations to explore the relationship between aesthetics and morality, art and philosophy.



Figure 1. Kant's Critique of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft)

3.3. Schiller: The Division of the Boundary between Poetry and Philosophy

Schiller's core thoughts on poetry and philosophy are embodied in his masterpieces "Aesthetic Education Book" and "On Simple Poetry and Sentimental Poetry". He advocated the unification of freedom and morality by reconciling people's sensibility and reason through aesthetic education. Schiller believes that poetry, as the highest form of art, can stimulate people's yearning for freedom and promote

the improvement of morality. He emphasized that "only when man plays, he is fully human", and this "game" is not a simple entertainment, but through the aesthetic experience of art, to achieve the harmony of emotion and reason (Leontiev, 2023).

In "On Simple Poetry and Sentimental Poetry", Schiller further explores the relationship between poetry and philosophy. He believes that simple poems reflect the harmonious unity of man and nature, while sentimental poems reflect the spiritual pursuit of modern people under the division of reason and sensibility. Through poetry, human beings can transcend the shackles of reality and return to an idealized state of freedom, so as to realize the deep integration of poetry and philosophy.

Schiller's views on poetry and philosophy greatly promoted German classical aesthetics. He tried to break the boundary between poetry and philosophy and emphasized the inner connection between them in spiritual pursuit. His thought not only provided theoretical support for the development of German classical aesthetics, but also provided profound enlightenment for the integration of aesthetics and philosophy in later generations.

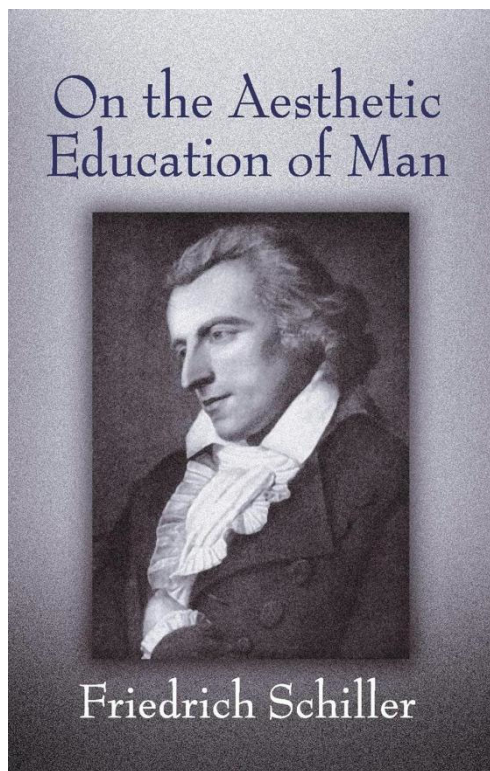


Figure 2. Schiller's on the Aesthetic Education of Man (Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen)

3.4. Hegel: The Reconciliation of Poetry and Philosophy

Hegel realizes the reconciliation of poetry and philosophy in his philosophical system, which is embodied in his masterpiece Aesthetics and the Complete Book of Philosophy. Hegel's rational spirit and dialectic spirit are the core of his theory. He emphasizes the guiding role of reason to the spiritual world of human beings, and reveals the internal logic of the development of things through dialectics. Hegel reinterprets the relationship between poetry and philosophy. He believes that poetry and philosophy are both forms of expression of absolute spirit, and there is an internal connection between them. Poetry unifies truth and reality in

perceptual images through image thinking and creative imagination, while philosophy reveals the essence of truth through conceptual thinking (Peters, 2024). Hegel pointed out that although there are differences between the imagination of poetry and the rational thinking of philosophy, they are both committed to revealing the essence and the inner connection of things. Under the guidance of rational spirit, poetry and philosophy achieve reconciliation, poetry becomes the emotional expression of philosophy, and philosophy is the rational sublimation of poetry. Hegel's poetic philosophy summarized and sublimated the German classical aesthetics. He not only inherited the aesthetic thought of Kant, Schiller and others, but also raised the relationship between poetry and philosophy to a new height through dialectics. His theory had a profound influence on later generations, and provided an important theoretical basis for later philosophical and aesthetic research. Hegel's thought of reconciliation between poetry and philosophy not only promoted the development of classical German aesthetics, but also laid a solid foundation for the development of modern aesthetics and art theory.

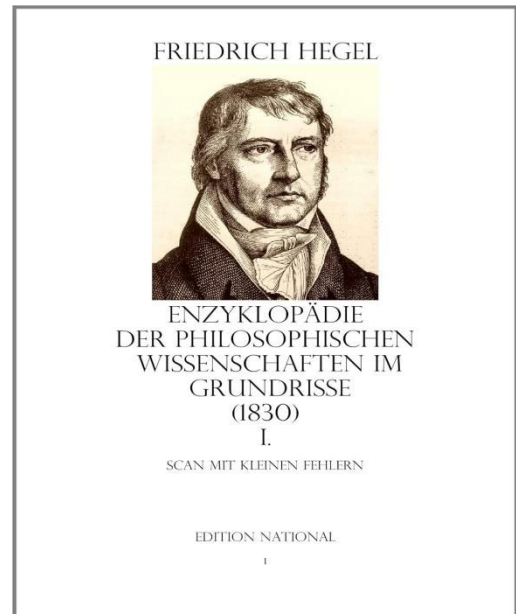


Figure 3. Hegel's Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences (Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse)

4. The Deep Reasons for the Dispute between Poetry and Philosophy in German Classical Aesthetics

The deep reason of the dispute between poetry and philosophy in German classical aesthetics can be analyzed from three aspects: the difference of philosophical ideas, the difference of artistic ideas and the influence of social and historical background.

(1) Differences in philosophical ideas

The dispute between poetry and philosophy in German classical aesthetics originates from the fundamental difference of philosophical ideas. In his aesthetic theory, Kant emphasizes the subjectivity and non-utility of aesthetic judgment, and holds that aesthetic judgment is an emotional judgment independent of cognitive judgment. He distinguishes aesthetics from truth and morality, and holds that aesthetic activity does not involve the cognition of objective truth, nor does it directly relate to moral

behavior(Samadov,2021). This view weakens the connection between art and philosophy to a certain extent, placing art in a relatively independent field. Unlike Kant, Hegel tried to reunite art and philosophy. He thought art was a higher way for the spirit to know itself, but not the highest way. Hegel emphasized the dialectical relationship between art and philosophy, and believed that art revealed the essence of spirit through perceptual images, while philosophy grasped this essence more deeply through rational thinking. This difference in philosophical ideas leads to different understandings of the relationship between poetry and philosophy, and leads to disputes between them.

(2) Differences in artistic concepts

The difference of artistic concept is also an important reason for the dispute between poetry and philosophy. Kant regarded art as a pure aesthetic phenomenon, emphasizing the self-discipline of art and the purity of aesthetic experience. He believed that the value of art lies in its own aesthetic characteristics, not in its expression of truth or morality. This concept separates art from other fields such as philosophy and morality, and makes art an independent aesthetic object. Schiller believes that art has not only aesthetic value, but also moral and social functions. He argued that beauty is the foundation of freedom, and art can realize the liberation of human nature through aesthetic education. Schiller emphasizes the connection between art and social reality, and believes that art can promote individual moral development and social harmony. This concept of art is in sharp contrast to Kant's concept of aesthetic self-discipline, which further intensifies the debate between poetry and philosophy(Croci,,2024). Moreover, Schelling elevated art to the same level of importance as philosophy, going so far as to argue that art is God's creation and the embodiment of truth. He emphasized the mystery and transcendence of art and believed that art could reveal the truth that philosophy could not express. This concept placed art in a higher position, formed a competitive relationship with philosophy, and further intensified the contradiction between poetry and philosophy.

(3) The influence of social and historical background

The debate between poetry and philosophy in German classical aesthetics is also deeply influenced by the social and historical background of the time. From the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century, Germany was in a period of social transformation, the authority of traditional religion and metaphysics gradually declined, and the problem of modernity gradually became prominent. In this context, both art and philosophy have been given a new mission, not only to reflect the spirit of The Times, but also to provide theoretical support for social change. Kant's aesthetic theory reflected the German society's pursuit of rationality and freedom at that time. He emphasized the subjectivity and independence of aesthetic judgment and tried to realize individual freedom and liberation through aesthetic activities. This idea echoed the German society's desire for individual freedom and independence at the time, but it also led to a disconnect between art and social reality. Schiller's aesthetic education theory reflected the German society's desire for human liberation and social reform at that time. He advocated the realization of individual freedom and social harmony through art and aesthetic education, and tried to solve the

problem of alienation in modern society through the power of art. This concept was in line with the German society's pursuit of social reform and human emancipation at that time, but it also caused philosophers to question the function of art. Hegel's aesthetic theory tries to solve the contradiction between art and philosophy under the guidance of rational spirit. He emphasized the dialectical relationship between art and philosophy, and believed that art is a higher way for the spirit to know itself, but not the highest way. This concept reflects the German society's pursuit of rational spirit at that time, trying to solve various contradictions and problems in modern society through philosophical rational thinking.

5. Conclusion

The debate between poetry and philosophy in German classical aesthetics is an important issue in European classical aesthetics. Kant's aesthetic theory not only emphasizes the independence and non-utilitarianism of aesthetic judgment, but also includes aesthetic judgment into the category of human cognition ability, and tries to transition from natural beauty to morality. Schiller explicitly opposed Kant's compromise view, arguing that beauty is the foundation of freedom, which will not corrupt morality, but can promote moral development, thus breaking Kant's conciliatory position. Hegel, under the guidance of rational spirit and dialectics, put forward the dialectical relationship between art and philosophy, and believed that art was a high-level way for spirit to know itself, but philosophy grasped the essence of spirit more deeply through rational thinking, thus achieving the reconciliation between poetry and philosophy. This debate reflects the different understandings of the philosophers on the relationship between art and philosophy in German classical aesthetics, and also reflects the complex relationship between aesthetics and reason, sensibility and morality.

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