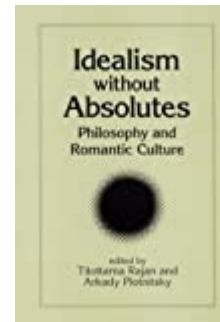


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Tilottama Rajan, Arkady Plotnitsky, eds. *Idealism without Absolutes: Philosophy and Romantic Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. vii + 262 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-6001-6.



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This volume of essays, as Tilottama Rajan tells us in the introduction, attempts to “rethink the conceptuality and disciplinarity of Post-Kantian philosophy across the full range of the long romantic period” (p. 1). The authors suggest that academics should think seriously about idealism without totalizing formulas and without the foreclosure of the Absolute. They also suggest that the entwinement of philosophy with other disciplines, such as psychology, literature, the nascent natural sciences, anthropology, and history, from roughly 1795 to 1850, justifies such a conceptual move because these disciplines were in fact instrumental in reconfiguring and questioning the very project of pure philosophy in the wake of Immanuel Kant. All in all, this volume does a good job in making the case for rethinking idealism and offers several very compelling and provocative readings.

Romanticism in particular is placed as a unique contribution to such a move because it already questioned the seemingly unproblematic relation of philosophy to the Absolute and injected a stark materiality into the discourse of philosophy. According to Rajan, “idealism is not only reconfigured by materiality but also itself reconstitutes the material; both materiality as a concept and the material with which philosophy deals” (p. 2). Thus a number of issues are on the table here: Romanticism’s

reconfiguration of idealistic philosophy, idealism’s own re-appropriation of materiality and contemporary theoretical interest in teasing out the sometimes latent materiality of idealist texts in the service of a cultural assessment that seeks to circumvent the traditional critiques of idealist philosophy as being inseparable from an unproblematic theory of the Absolute. Of the eleven essays presented, the majority deal explicitly with G. W. F. Hegel and the others with A.W. and Friedrich Schlegel, F. W. J. Schelling, Friedrich Hölderlin, Novalis, Arthur Schopenhauer and Søren Kierkegaard.

Jan Plug’s essay “Romanticism and the Invention of Literature” takes its point of departure from Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s statement that Romanticism should be read as “the inaugural moment of literature as the production of its own theory.” The “literary absolute,” as they term it, forges a “mode of commentary that would establish itself as critical to the extent that it does *not* submit to the rule of poetry” (p. 18). Plug then engages in an interesting re-reading of Kant’s third critique, in particular Kant’s turn toward the symbol and thus toward poetry. From there, Plug states that “philosophy’s relation to materiality will have to be rethought in terms of a particular understanding of poetry and language” (p. 19). Rhetoric therefore provides a figurative

or linguistic materiality essential to spirit, without which spirit cannot exist. He continues on this analytical track carefully interpreting both A.W. Schlegel and Schelling. A.W. Schlegel's notion of "style" is quite interesting in this regard, as is Schelling's theory of a philosophy of art in which the chasm between the two "becomes objective in speech and language" (p. 26). Literature and art refuse to submit to the metaphysical and ontological claims of philosophy, so that, specifically in the writing of the young Friedrich Schlegel, literature can emerge as a process "always organizing and disorganizing itself anew" (p. 33).

Andrzej Warminski begins his "Allegories of Symbol: On Hegel's Aesthetics" with a provocative proposition, very much in the discourse of De Man's "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics" from *Aesthetic Ideology* (1996), concerning Hegel's "double, ambiguous and ambivalent if not downright duplicitous attitude towards art" (p. 39). The classic and romantic forms of art compete, but only one form can actually attain the more perfect fusion, coalescence and adequation of "sensuous form and spiritual content" (p. 41). Classical art is of course most adequate to the spirit of art itself, yet romantic art is more appropriate for the striving of "absolute spirit." Warminski then turns to the "ends of art." Classical art had to disappear and yet romantic art also has its end or ends. Because it supersedes representation, it is also doomed. Here we find the basis of Hegel's denunciation of romantic poetry as a pure medium or vehicle of the externality of expression, which operates as a mere sign in which the audible and the visible have "sunken down" into being a mere indication (p. 45). He finally points out the split life of the symbol itself, as simple sign and actual symbol, and the necessity of this difference for the sign to become or be a symbol.

Rajan's "Toward a Cultural Idealism: Negativity and Freedom in Hegel and Kant" first points out how Hegel uses and transfers Kant's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime and historicizes the two, rendering them the scene of an historical-cultural competition. In the sublime, judgment faces its most difficult test; the sublime is not, and cannot be, domesticated. Rajan reminds us that judgment for Kant exceeds the limits set by the aesthetic. Whereas Kant's relational ideas *cannot* be given sensuous representation, Hegel's *idea* presses on to its realization, to representation and further to reality. The sublime is thus transferred in Hegel to a "scene of history" (p. 59). Kant's critique of taste only contained the pure "conditions of the possibility" of such a critique, whereas in the "space between Kant and Hegel" the ge-

nealogy of a historical and cultural criticism begins to unfold (p. 59). In Hegel's historicized aesthetic, the symbol becomes the earliest form of art and the allegorical-conceptual belongs to later art and modern art in particular (pp. 64-66). The difficulty of Romanticism for Hegel is precisely that "infinite subjectivity" is incapable of achieving any objectivity.

In his suggestive essay, "Mediality in Hegel," Jochen Schulte-Sasse discusses texts as an indispensable element of "cultural development" (p. 74). Schulte-Sasse brings Hegel much closer to the Romantics in this essay. The development of self-forming, self-directed and self-directing human individuals is distinctly dependent on texts as objectifications of the human spirit. *Arbeit* for Hegel shapes the thing and renders it an object. Schulte-Sasse makes excellent use of Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death" (1948) and its textualization of Hegel's concept of work to make the case that texts, as culturally formed objects, and their reading are "culturally developed formations of consciousness," constituting forces that energize the dialectic between readable objects and reading subjects (p. 87).

In his essay "Beyond Beginnings: Schlegel and Romantic Historiography," Gary Handwerk turns our attention the work of Schlegel after 1800. Handwerk sees Schlegel as the "heir to the Enlightenment endeavor to render history philosophical" (p. 95). However, despite his historicist sensibility, Schlegel's deeper allegiance is with pre-Enlightenment thought, his real interest more in the vein of *historia magistra vitae*. He examines the notion of the *Urbild* in Kant and Schlegel, and shows how Schlegel's earlier attempts at philosophical history hover between individual and collective embodiment. Schlegel argues in the Cologne and Paris lectures that there is no guarantee that the past will connect with the present and, if such a connection does occur, the circuit will provoke a leap beyond the present. Philosophy in this phase of Schlegel's career was an incomplete process; the historical sensibility of the Cologne lectures breaches the model of ancient Greece as a self-sufficient and closed totality; the exemplarity of classical *Bildung*, so crucial to the early Schlegel, is shown to be conditional. According to Handwerk, Schlegel's attempt to do philosophical history without absolutes and without absolute beginnings remains "determinately vague," but at the same time, Schlegel did not seek refuge from meta-narratives "in the chaos of merely local histories" (p. 110).

Arkady Plotnitsky employs above all Gilles Deleuze to unfold the topology of the fold and the manifold in

Hegel. The Hegelian concept exhibits a “complex architecture of unity and multiplicity” (p. 123) and Hegel’s conceptual topology is defined “by the reciprocal unfolding of materiality and phenomenality” (p. 123). Although clearly within the DeManian tradition of reading, Plotnitsky’s essay does not confine Hegel’s dialectic to an allegory of radical discontinuity or an interminable oscillation, “hovering on madness,” as in Paul De Man, but he does discover discontinuity in Hegel and particularly in Hegel’s notion of chance or *Zufall*. The allegorical economy of the fold allows us, according to Plotnitsky’s argument, “new ways of folding and unfolding everything” (p. 133) without any absolute that would be able to contain all of the folds, their unfolding and resultant manifolds. (p. 133)

David Farrell Krell opposes Schelling, H lderlin and Novalis to Hegel in his essay “Three Ends of the Absolute: Schelling, H lderlin, and Novalis.” He makes the interesting distinction in Novalis between the Absolute as static and stable and the performance of absolutizing or the process of making something absolute. With the primordial sundering of consciousness in H lderlin, (p. 141) we have another key instance of the impossibility of absolute separation and individuation. At the furthest advance of his thought, Krell argues, “H lderlin envisages something like the end of the absolute” (p. 147). Novalis’s critique and resistance to the Fichtean absolute points towards a thaumaturgic idealism beginning in wonder, “condemned to a kind of hovering between extremes” (p. 149). The voluntary renunciation of the absolute, indicative of the “infinitely free activity that originates in us” (p.150), reminds us of our incapacity to achieve or recognize the absolute. Krell’s reading of “Novalis’s ”Bl thenstaub“ (1798) is particularly powerful here: we might search for the absolute, but we find only things.

Schopenhauer’s symptomology of the trauma produced by idealism is the subject of Joel Faflak’s contribution, “Schopenhauer’s Telling Body of Philosophy.” The subject, having been denied access to what for Schopenhauer is the very ground of representation, namely willing, is also caught up with the “strangled effect associated with its traumatic experience of the will” (p. 163). In this, Faflak sees the collapse of philosophy into psychoanalysis; Schopenhauer’s text thus repeats philosophy’s encounter with its own failed idealism, philosophy itself a failed repetition of this impossibility “to know, perceive, apprehend immediately and absolutely” (p. 173).

John Smyth’s essay “Sacrificial and Erotic Materi-

alism in Kierkegaard and Adorno” confronts Theodor Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard and offers an interesting alternative to that reading. For Adorno, Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel remained incomplete insofar as the three spheres of his critique, the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious, remained totally unmediated (p. 184). Adorno’s “solution” to Kierkegaard’s idealism is therefore to fulfill it: “to achieve the self-expression of the material” (p. 185). Smyth uses Kierkegaard’s texts against the tendency to overstep the bounds of his idealism without absolutes. While Kierkegaard seeks to affirm the absolute paradox philosophically, and not just as a matter of *faith*, he essentially smuggles it into the self. While Adorno views in Kierkegaard a cessation of the dialectic, the Adorno of the *Aesthetic Theory* (1969) emphasizes precisely Kierkegaard’s relation of sacrifice and mimesis. The mimetic requirement so forcefully set forth by Adorno falls squarely on the side of Kierkegaard’s claims. That a certain mimetic claim must paradoxically exist in judgment is seen to be Kierkegaard’s, and Adorno’s, shared legacy.

Rebecca Gagan suggests in her “Absolute Failures: Hegel’s *Bildung* and the Earliest System-Program” that we read the “Earliest System Program” (1796), which has been attributed to Schelling and H lderlin as well as Hegel, precisely in its unfinished, fragmentary form, as the founding document of German Idealism and argues that this un- or deprogrammed beginning tells us something about Idealism more generally. As a kind of performance of a New Mythology, championed by the Romantics, Gagan takes us on an interesting journey into the tentacles of this unhinged and unanchored text from notions of habit to hypochondria. The title is a bit misleading here, for Gagan’s real interest lies not in the “Earliest System-Program” itself, but in the erroneous and failed paths of *Bildung*.

In an essay that attempts to recuperate critical reason and critical philosophy after the “fall” inaugurated by post-modern theory, Richard Beardsworth concentrates on the development of Hegel’s notion of Spirit and argues that Nietzsche’s notion of Spirit deepens Hegel’s insight into the fundamental activity of philosophy. Beardsworth concludes with a *pladoyer* for a speculative materialism engaged with the world, a “critical intervention in the world” as the urgent need of contemporary philosophy. Beardsworth reclaims Marx’s historical materialism as a critical project that seeks to articulate economic rationality, as well as irrationality, across the entire spectrum of the human, social and natural world. Secondly, he argues that we should seek to trace such

economic laws so that those who suffer from their lack of articulation are empowered with new knowledge. Finally, Beardsworth argues that we hold on to the Marxian value of social democracy as a horizon of sociality and spirit and pursue a rethinking of the relation between philosophy and economy (p. 237).

All in all, this is an extremely valuable volume of essays. Rather than offering an overall thesis of "Idealism without Absolutes," it offers specific readings of individual texts or clusters of texts meant to incite conversation and provoke thought. What emerges as an open question is precisely the subtitle of this book: "Philosophy and Romantic Culture." The individual readings only rub up against the boundaries of Romanticism. Handwerk's reading of the later Friedrich Schlegel deals with the post-romantic theorist and Krell's Novalis reading focuses on the philosophical Novalis. So "Romantic Culture," romantic literature, theory, criticism and poetry, here get less focused consideration than if the volume had been more evenly divided between philosophical, literary and cultural texts. In providing a first push in the direction of rethinking Idealism, as emancipated from the traditional story of absolute positing and absolute under-

standing, the authors succeed in opening up new avenues for further thought and writing. The volume is an excellent complement to other new work in this area, such as Paul W. Franks's recent work, which argues a very different thesis concerning the holism and naturalism of German Idealism from an analytical standpoint.[1] Given that perhaps the most powerful contribution to analytical philosophy in recent years also claims Hegel as its precursor,[2] this return to Hegel and German Idealism must be considered a cultural force in its own right worthy of reflection.

Notes

[1]. Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[2]. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) and Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). For the best analysis of this recent reappropriation of Hegel by contemporary analytic philosophy, see Tom Rockmore, *Hegel, Idealism, and Analytic Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

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