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Review

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BOOK REVIEWS

I. LITERARY THEORY AND COLLECTIONS

DESMOND, WILLIAM. *Art and the Absolute: A Study of Hegel's Aesthetics*. Albany: SUNY, 1986. xx + 222 pp. \$34.50, cloth; \$10.95, paper.

This is a timely book, in particular for literary critics. Desmond's text, a volume in the SUNY series in Hegelian studies, is not an encyclopedic introduction to Hegel's *Aesthetics* but rather a discussion of a few limited but central aesthetic questions. Desmond answers these questions from the standpoint of Hegel's *Aesthetics* and in the process draws comparisons with traditional philosophers and contemporary movements in literary theory.

Desmond's main interest lies with the absolute dimension of art. Desmond agrees with Hegel that art is subordinate to philosophy, but he also asserts that there is in Hegel a "*complementarity* of art and philosophy" (p. xv). Unusual is the combination of an (albeit somewhat undeveloped) account of the ways in which art may contribute to philosophy and a reading of Hegel that is not — as is now common — a Hegelianism without the absolute.

The first chapter successfully describes Hegel's view of art as a synthesis of the seemingly opposed views of art as imitation or creation. For Hegel true art both embodies and articulates the universal; it is as much subject as it is substance. In his second chapter Desmond considers art's affinity with philosophy. Like the philosophical concept, as defined by Hegel, the art work is a concrete universal. The proximity to religion is the theme of Chapter 3. Here Desmond returns to his discussion of art as (aesthetic) creation and (religious) participation in the absolute. Desmond rebukes the Left- and Right-Hegelians for their one-sidedness: the former reduce absolute spirit to objective spirit, the latter remove man from the center of artistic creation. In chapter 4 Desmond continues to pursue Hegel's transcendence of one-sidedness. Here he focuses on the wholeness of the art work as a wholeness that includes struggle, complexity, and openness.

Chapter 5 is a lucid account of affinities and differences between the Hegelian dialectic and the contemporary practice of deconstruction. For Desmond the deconstructionists fall into an exclusionary either-or mentality, what Hegel calls the level of *Verstand*. Here Desmond launches not a rigorous logical argument against the

deconstructionist elevation of negativity, but perhaps a more effective experiential one: the deconstructionist experience of art is at odds with what one might call the experience of artistic fullness. There is something about the art work that remains “*recalcitrant* to deconstruction as critical analysis” (p. 98).

The final chapter reflects on Hegel’s awareness of the complexities of harmonizing classical beauty with modern subjectivity. Desmond comments on the limits of each in its separateness and suggests that they can be united, much as art harmonizes imitation and creation.

Some weaknesses in the text might be noted. Desmond tends to paraphrase and describe a modified Hegelian position rather than argue for it. The book doesn’t really address any detailed aesthetic questions, an area in which Hegel excelled, yet one in which many refinements could be made. Moreover, reflection on a few such issues would likely have created support for some of Desmond’s more overarching claims. The discussion of art and religion has little to do with what Hegel considers the distinguishing features of religion, and it is somewhat confusing insofar as what Desmond defines as “aesthetic” in the first chapter is split in chapter 3 into the “aesthetic” and the “religious.” In his stress on synthesis one gets the sense that Desmond surveys a series of questions for which there are positions *a* and *non-a*; neither is preferable or sufficient in itself so we move on to unity. Hegel’s rhetoric, however, is not one of preference; Hegel attempts to demonstrate the *logical untenability* of the various positions. Desmond fails to spell out the precise relationship of art’s subordination to and elevation over philosophy: it would seem that art is deficient, for, unlike philosophy, it cannot ground itself; art, however, is superior insofar as it can anticipate as yet unarticulated philosophical positions and insofar as it moves philosophy beyond mere theory (art symbolizes in its wholistic unity of thought and sense the realization of philosophy in history). The discussion of the transformation of the ugly in the constitution of the beautiful (pp. 150-59) is coherent but imprecise. Indeed, some of the earliest Hegelians, Christian Weiße, Arnold Ruge, and Karl Rosenkranz, commented at length on this issue and did so with more exactitude than Desmond; they are not considered. Finally, Desmond’s critique of deconstruction would have been tactically strengthened had he engaged some of their writings head-on; Desmond presents a summary of common deconstructionist elements, but his opponents may be said to inhabit an antithetical stance, the essence of which is multiplicity and difference. The deconstructionist would likely argue that Desmond has not captured him/her in his/her uniqueness.

The book’s strength is, first, its timely presentation of an alternative aesthetic model that integrates deconstructionist virtues without absolutizing negativity; second, its clear and consistent exposition of Hegel’s view of art as mediating between a series of extremes. Particularly successful analyses include: the dramatic component of Hegel’s logic (p. 31); Hegel’s reading of literary history as—in Nietzsche’s vocabulary—“monumental” (pp. 68, 112-14); the dangers of absolute subjectivity (pp. 114-20); the comparison of Hegel and Aquinas on radiance (pp. 134-36, 139-40); the dialectic of appearance, which was discovered by Hegel, not Nietzsche (pp. 140-41); and the sometimes submerged but everpresent note of wholeness in modern art (p. 187).

Theorists wondering what to assign their students after they have run up against the willfully self-contradictory nature of much of historicist and deconstructionist theory may want to have their students turn back to Hegel as a means of moving forward. The historical transcendence of a theory is, after all, not one and the same

with its logical refutation. Desmond's book, more timely than original, may reinforce the witticism, which is at least a half-truth, that when the train of postmodernism pulls into the next station Hegel will be there waiting.

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ADORNO, THEODOR W. *Gesammelte Schriften 20.1 und 2. Vermischte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann, unter Mitwirkung von Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss und Klaus Schultz. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986. 881 pp.

Mit dem beiden Halbbänden 20.1 und 2 liegt die Ausgabe der *Gesammelten Schriften* von Adorno nun abgeschlossen vor. Als erste Edition des Adorno-Archivs markiert sie zugleich den ersten Schritt zu einer auf nicht weniger als dreißig Bände angelegten Ausgabe der Vorlesungen, Tagebücher, Fragmente und Gespräche Adornos: gleichsam in dialektischer Gegenbewegung bildet so der Schlusstein der Ausgabe der Schriften Ausgangspunkt zur Adorno-Gesamtausgabe. Danach mögen wohl nur noch Materialienbändchen folgen. Wie der Herausgeber, Rolf Tiedemann, zurecht im Nachwort ausführt, drückt sich in der Idiosynkrasie der Ausgabe etwas von der Eigenart von Adornos Denken selbst aus. Und so führt das Zuendekommen der Ausgabe eines nicht zu Ende kommen dürfenden Gedankens die Problematik seiner Edition vor Augen.

Die Nachlese der *Vermischten Schriften* bietet dabei zugleich Gelegenheit eines Rückblicks aufs Werk. Texte aus Philosophie, Soziologie, Ästhetik, Musik dokumentieren noch einmal die außerordentliche Weite des Denkhorizonts, wie er sich in Adornos Werk entfaltet. Nebst manchen verstreut erschienenen und seither sonst kaum zugänglichen Schriften, wie beispielsweise der bereits erstaunlich durchdachten ersten des Sechzehnjährigen in der Schülerzeitung zum Thema Lehrer-Schüler, ist hier auch erstmals Adornos frühe Auseinandersetzung mit Husserl aus dem Jahre 1937 veröffentlicht: philosophisch bedeutendes, hier erstveröffentlichtes, Zeugnis des Abarbeitens von Adornos Denken an seinen Vorgängern. Aber auch Literarisches, kleine expressionistisch tastende Versuche aus der Frühzeit machen, ebenso wie die Auseinandersetzungen mit Husserl und Max Weber andererseits, die geistige Konstellation deutlich, in der sich Adornos Denken zu Beginn bewegte. So bildet der zwanzigste Band nichts weniger als redundante Nachlese, sondern bezeichnet gerade in seiner Vielgestaltigkeit die durchdringende Denkbemühung, die Adornos Werk im Kreisen ums eine Zentrum kennzeichnet. Die Erkenntnis, "daß kein Allgemeines mehr möglich ist, es sei denn inmitten des selbstvergessenen Besonderen" (pp. 490 f.), ist hier aufs eindrucklichste vorgeführt.

Weil so Adorno, ob er von Individuum, Familie, Gesellschaft, Technik, Wissenschaft, Literatur, Kunst oder Geschichte spricht, dies stets mit "intellektueller Zivilcourage" tut — er nennt sie einmal die oberste Tugend des Philosophen (p. 322) — und das heißt mit der unaufhörlichen Schärfe selbstreflexiver Kritik, deshalb demonstriert dieses Philosophieren, worum sich gängige Systemimitationen vergebens bemühen: die synthetische Einheit der Apperzeption. Dem nachhaltigsten Kritiker des Systemdenkens ist es vorbehalten geblieben, das Moment ihrer produktiven Wahrheit, wie sie im moralisch emphatischen Sinn Kant dachte, noch einmal aufscheinen zu lassen. In klassischer Einfachheit statuiert der kleine Essay "Zum Studium der