

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03984-1 - The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought: Volume III:

Aesthetics and Literature

General Editors Nicholas Boyle and Liz Disley Edited by Christoph Jamme and Ian Cooper

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Idealism in aesthetics and literature*

IAN COOPER

Two events occurring in the year 1916 might serve briefly to encapsulate the far-reaching and international bequest of German Idealism to aesthetics and literature. It was a year in which the work of writers and artists distilled an apocalyptic world-historical sense, and in Dublin Yeats saw a ‘terrible beauty’ born. A cabaret hall in Zurich gave birth to the artistic movement known as Dada, which sought to respond to the horrors of the First World War by tearing down the illusion of the unified ego that contemporary art – for all its cataclysmic expressionism – seemed to maintain. It did this by meeting negation, the desolate experience of history, with negation.<sup>1</sup> Dada issued from presuppositions that foretold its own ephemerality; but some of its more notorious products have not escaped a certain canonicity and, together with other subsequent movements and developments, it represents an apparent collapse of the distinction between art and non-art in the historical conditions of the twentieth century, which has seemed to call repeatedly for the application of philosophical terms formulated around a hundred years earlier.<sup>2</sup> Whether such manifestations are indeed the fulfilment of Hegel’s prophecy for modern art is doubtful: they seem rather to express an ‘indeterminate’, or speculatively deficient, negation,<sup>3</sup> and the nature of such negations is the question pursued by one contributor to this volume. It is, however, beyond doubt that Idealist aesthetics continue to be an inescapable point of reference for addressing the meaning of art, and that – in common with all aspects of the German Idealist inheritance, as the other volumes comprising *The Impact of Idealism* show – the accounts of aesthetics present in German post-Kantian philosophy seem to supply an idiom for thinking about these matters that has not been surpassed in its conceptual power by the advent of postmodernity. The Idealist understanding of art as the sensuous appearance of freedom (that is, the substance of spirit) as beauty generates

## 2 Ian Cooper

a set of tensions that continue to define theoretical engagement with art. These include the Hegelian question of the ‘end of art’ as a mode of Absolute Spirit and the requirement for a philosophical, rather than a sensuous, grasp of freedom in the modern era; the relationship between (beautiful or ethically substantial) art, even when in Hegel’s terms it is no longer the fully adequate expression of spirit, and kitsch: this question is a direct bequest of Idealism to Modernism and postmodernism which recurs in different forms from Dada to Adorno and subsequently in contemporary philosophers of culture moulded by German Idealism; the notion of art as appearance or disclosure – which is to say, with the most important philosophical heir to Idealism in the twentieth century, as a form of ‘unconcealment’.

Also in 1916, T. S. Eliot, recently returned from the University of Marburg – which was shortly to contribute decisively to the impact of Idealism by appointing both Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger – completed his doctoral dissertation on a figure who, even then, was recognised as central to the variant of German Idealism that had grown up in Britain in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Its subject was ‘Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley’, and the conception of subjectivity it put forward – relational, dynamic, implicitly historical – underlies the shifting modes of Eliot’s lyric sensibility from *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*. Eliot’s work, with its philosophical foundations in a modified Hegelianism, is a major example of the transmission of conceptual structures originating in the German post-Kantian context to a much wider, and non-German, world of literature and ideas. These contemporaneous but rather different moments in the development of European Modernism – Dada, Eliot’s encounter with Bradley – lay out between them two intersecting perspectives on the impact of German Idealism in aesthetics and literature, differing emphases of which the contributions to this volume share. One of these perspectives concerns the inheritance from German Idealism that allows us to place a figure such as Eliot in a direct line of descent from the original post-Kantian moment, and to examine that connection not primarily as one of influence but in terms of the way it opens our understanding of him to ideas and possibilities of interpretation that are foreclosed when the original moment is not considered seriously and on its own terms. The intersecting perspective, exemplified above with reference to the question of art, concerns the conceptual import of those possibilities of interpretation themselves: the ineluctable idiom of German Idealism as it inflects the way we speak about aesthetic questions, and as it repeatedly confronts us, in our encounter with aesthetic phenomena, with the entire array of themes to which Idealism

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03984-1 - The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought: Volume III:  
Aesthetics and Literature

General Editors Nicholas Boyle and Liz Disley Edited by Christoph Jamme and Ian Cooper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction: Idealism in aesthetics and literature 3

addressed itself in its attempt to give philosophical formulation to the character of modern life. The essays in this volume bear witness both to the historical vitality of the connections between German post-Kantian thinkers and major developments in the arts, and to the power of the internal dialectic of Idealist thought that unfolds as we reflect on what art is.

Christoph Jamme's opening essay on 'The Legacy of Idealism and the Rise of Academic Aesthetics' reconstructs the social, cultural and institutional dimension of Idealist aesthetics on the basis of an investigation into the ways in which the historical development of Idealism contributed to a new relationship between academic disciplines and indeed to a new understanding of cultural life. Hegel's notion of *Sittlichkeit*, or of the historical forms of life in which spirit is revealed at a particular moment of its self-realisation, shaped a variety of disciplines throughout the nineteenth century, and in the case of the developing area of art history this led to an institutionalisation of the Idealist 'cause of Art'. This process, which translated Hegel's speculative analysis of art as the sensuous manifestation of freedom into a template for cultural politics, certainly represents a diminishment of the conceptual sophistication with which Hegel treats art. But it also demonstrates the inextricable connection between the place of art in speculative philosophy – sensuous and immediate, and yet requiring sublation into realms of interiority – and the self-image of the nineteenth-century German public sphere as overseen by the *Bildungsbürger*. But it was Schelling, Jamme shows, who put forward a view of 'Art' as disclosing something to be presupposed by philosophy – namely, an absolute identity of freedom and nature – and therefore by all adequately grounded knowledge, and it was thus through Schelling that Idealist aesthetics became a foundational aspect of the modern German university.

The world of institutions, or of objective spirit, receives a different type of analysis in Klaus Vieweg's wide-ranging contribution. Here Hegel's aesthetics are illuminated by reference to his philosophical concept of action (*Handlung*). In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel characterises action in terms of the movement of the idea through particularity and self-difference and thence to self-resolution. Because this implies a relationship between the sociopolitical world and art as the sensuous manifestation of freedom, Hegel's philosophy of action is rooted in the relation of Objective and Absolute Spirit. Art – especially poetry and literature – provides figures within whom freedom is internally present as universality, even as their actions are particular and externally defined. Vieweg uses this insight, which is developed by Hegel not only in the *Aesthetics* but also in the *Philosophy of Right*, as a means of

## 4 Ian Cooper

discussing also the Hegelian conception of punishment in terms of a redress to heteronomous action that is immanently called for by heteronomy itself. The philosophy of action that is central to Hegel's aesthetics lays the basis, in Vieweg's analysis, for a powerfully contemporary theory of legal punishment grounded in speculative negation and a transformation of the oppositional workings of the understanding (*Verstand*). Vieweg examines the full implications of such a theory by returning to Hegel's account of punishment in ancient tragedy.

Tragedy is at the centre of Allen Speight's essay on 'The human image'. Speight is concerned with the legacy of German Idealism for understandings of the theory and practice of art, and here drama has an essential place: in Schelling's terms because it distils the essence of all art, and in Hegel's because drama has the unique ability, among the arts, to represent action or to instantiate art as an embodied practice. In pursuing these questions, Speight goes considerably beyond conventional analyses of the place of drama in Idealist aesthetics. He shows how for Hegel drama is 'presentational', which is to say it gives us the corporeal human form as the 'centre and content of true beauty and art'; there is, underlying the Hegelian account of drama, a theory of embodiment as the inalienable core of freedom's sensuous manifestation. Schelling shares this emphasis, but internalises it in his tragic understanding of the human being as capable of freedom and yet subject to necessity. This simultaneous connection and divergence in the views of Hegel and Schelling contributes to the related but differing ways in which they conceive the import of the human image in dramatic art. Speight goes on to analyze this philosophical relationship with reference to Idealist conceptions of genre and, finally, to the intertwined significance of the tragic and the comic: the real legacy of the Idealist – especially the Hegelian, performative – view of drama may reside in its furnishing a concept of the human as both genuinely tragic and self-veiling, barred from all forms of recognition that are not retrospective and fateful, and as an embodied acting subject whose modern fate is to exist as dynamic, ironic and unmasked.

This volume contains three essays that seek to define the significance of German Idealism in relation to a broad literary-historical context. The first of these is Stefan Matuschek's contribution on 'Romanticism as literary Idealism', which addresses some of the major precursors of post-Kantian aesthetics (especially Schiller, and Kant himself), as well as conceptions of art (such as Friedrich Schlegel's) which have traditionally been called 'Romantic', but which were developed in reaction to Idealist impulses (particularly from Fichte and Schelling) and continue to be seen as offering insightful,

## Introduction: Idealism in aesthetics and literature 5

and critical, perspectives on the Idealists' central claims. Matuschek shares with Allen Speight an interest in exploring his subject matter with reference to theories of genre, and shows how notions of the poetic developed around this time echo both in modern – especially post-structuralist – philosophy and in contemporary German literature. The next essay, by Ian Cooper, addresses the German literary tradition in order to trace the significance of the Idealist inheritance from the post-Kantian period to 1900. Cooper argues that German prose fiction (Georg Büchner, Thomas Mann), drama (Goethe, Friedrich Hebbel, Richard Wagner) and poetry (Hölderlin, Eduard Mörike) of the nineteenth century repeatedly intersect with the philosophical lineage inaugurated by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and extending from David Friedrich Strauss, via Feuerbach, to Nietzsche.

The theme of Idealism in nineteenth-century literature is continued in Richard Eldridge's contribution, which shifts perspective to Britain and America. Eldridge's essay exemplifies the two approaches to Idealism's impact that were identified at the beginning of this introduction: he addresses both direct engagement, on the part of English-language writers, with German Idealist thinkers (Coleridge's reading of Kant, Fichte and Schelling; George Eliot's immersion in the thought of Strauss and Feuerbach; Carlyle's reading of Fichte) and the less tractable question of what he terms 'indirect engagement', or the presence in British and American literature of ideas definitively formulated by the German Idealists. This latter approach amounts to understanding German Idealism as articulating with unique and inescapable force the tensions of modern life (modern *Sittlichkeit*) as expressed in phenomena such as secularisation, urbanisation and commercialisation. In short, German Idealism is seen as providing the conceptual framework for what Charles Taylor terms the modern 'social imaginary'.<sup>4</sup> Eldridge unfolds this problematic through interpretations of major nineteenth-century authors who do not usually fall within the purview of scholars investigating Idealism. Jane Austen, Wordsworth, Dickens, Melville and Virginia Woolf, together with figures whose Idealist inheritance is more historically obvious – such as Emerson – are adduced in an argument that proceeds from Fichte and Hegel in order to discern in these literary writers an articulation of human values that cannot be conceived adequately without reference to the Idealist achievement.

Following these three essays treating the range of Idealism's significance for literary history, Ulrich Pothast focuses on the inheritance of Idealism in one of the twentieth-century's major writers, as manifest in their relation to a thinker who contributed to post-Kantian philosophy a metaphysics of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03984-1 - The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought: Volume III:  
Aesthetics and Literature

General Editors Nicholas Boyle and Liz Disley Edited by Christoph Jamme and Ian Cooper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Ian Cooper

willing. Pothast examines the relevance of Schopenhauer for Samuel Beckett and demonstrates that this goes far beyond the matter of Beckett's (extensive and admiring) reception of Schopenhauer's thought. Reconstructing the central elements of Schopenhauer's philosophy and their importance for existentialist writing – the distinction between a phenomenal world and the underlying reality of the relentlessly striving will; the metaphysical primacy of art – Pothast elaborates a reading of Beckett's essay on Marcel Proust that draws out a Schopenhauerian ethic of suffering as a means of gaining access to the supremely non-individuated 'Idea' that is the true object of art. Beckett takes up Schopenhauer's emphasis on the idea, but replaces his metaphysical conception of timeless, abstract form with an account of the idea as manifesting instead the true and undistorted reality of a person's lived experience. Beckett, Pothast explains, proceeds analogously with Schopenhauer's general will, which is rendered non-transcendent. But despite Beckett's divergences from Schopenhauer, the Schopenhauerian account of human beings' earthly fate remains the most powerful means of conceiving the existential situation of Beckett's dramas, as Pothast shows with reference to *Endgame*. And the dramatic significance of Schopenhauer's implicitly absurdist variant on German Idealism may not, we may think, end with Beckett. Pothast's essay allows us to envisage the contours of an inheritance affecting Beckett's own heirs; this inheritance includes, for example, the violent and darkly comic aggression of the will characterising the theatre of Pinter.

Within the wide trajectory of German Idealist aesthetics, music has a special place by virtue of its being the art form that is non-representational: this is the reason both for its subordinate place in Hegel's analysis of the various arts, and for its subsequent elevation, in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche respectively, to expression of the universal will and origin of tragic drama. This volume contains two philosophical essays on the role of music in German Idealism. Both go beyond conventional patterns of genre analysis, including those bequeathed by the Idealists themselves, to uncover a deeper significance. In the first essay, Roger Scruton begins his account of music by examining the question of the subject as it is bequeathed by Kant. The human subject is not to be seen as just a privileged member of the world of objects, as it was by Descartes, but as a – 'transcendental' – point of view upon that world and, therefore, as existing on the edge of it. Scruton develops from this an ethical insight that he sees as underlying both post-Kantian philosophy and the experiential import of music. Each human object is also a subject addressing us from the transcendental horizon of the 'I', and in Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer there is increasing awareness that this is connected

to the power of music – all of subjectivity's relations to the other can be seen as a quest for the unattainable horizon from which the address of the other issues, and music expresses, for all these thinkers and in different ways, the yearning search for that transcendental origin. Infinite yearning is an intrinsic element of Schelling's thought as it was of Fichte's before him, and music in particular among the arts is seen as a potential way of repairing the primordial rupture of the integral subject. Hegel understands music as articulating the pure inwardness of subjectivity, but also as capturing the interrelation that characterises a world of persons even as it does not represent that world. Schopenhauer, in turn, makes music and its attendant yearning essential parts of his metaphysics of will. Through discussions of Beethoven, Schubert and Schoenberg, Scruton argues that German Idealism – when detached from some of its more overweening metaphysical ambitions – gives conceptual voice to the elusive complexity of inter-subjective encounter and affective life that music embodies. This voice, he suggests, has resonance for any contemporary attempt to understand what music does.

In the next essay, Andrew Bowie proceeds from the co-emergence of the work of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert with Kantian and post-Kantian thought, and asks whether German Idealism should be conceived of musically, which is to say as sharing with modern (post-1800) music a specific attempt to make sense of the world, and to 'make sense of making sense'. In both Romantic and Hegelian responses to Kant, reflection on language is introduced as a way of constituting freedom as essentially social. At the same time, reflection on language unleashes its own dialectic whereby what is lacking in verbal language also comes to the fore as an absence to be overcome; this is linked to a sense, expressed by Schelling, that language cannot be demarcated sufficiently from its own natural origins. The pre-eminence attained at this time by 'absolute' music – definitively that of Beethoven – lies for Bowie in its addressing this problem as articulated in the post-Kantian philosophical formulation of modern life. Bowie therefore understands music as woven into the self-understanding of Idealist thought, and he discusses the implications of a non-verbal, or pre-propositional, relation of self and world with reference both to the development of music since the Idealist period and to the claims of an analytic approach to music that, he argues, still has to grasp the insights of post-Kantianism adequately.

The essays on music are followed by another pairing, in which architecture is examined. These two contributions, by Felix Saure and Petra Lohmann, look at the historical relationship between Idealist thought and

## 8 Ian Cooper

architectural theory and practice. Saure's essay presents the Prussian architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel – whose work included the *Altes Museum* in Berlin – in the context of Idealist conceptions of architecture. He shows how Schinkel responded to ideas formulated by Fichte, sharing both Fichte's critique of, and vision for, the 'German nation'. For Schinkel as for Fichte, the Germans bear a task of renewal, and this task is world-historical rather than just German. Such renewal must be animated by the attempt to fuse one's own cultural sphere with what is other to it and to grasp this other in its authentic strangeness. Saure concludes his essay with an account of how these ideas and aims are reflected in Schinkel's design for the *Altes Museum*. The case of Fichte and Schinkel is then complemented in Lohmann's contribution by consideration of the intellectual relationship between Schelling and Leo von Klenze, whose prominence as an architect was equal in Bavaria to Schinkel's in Prussia. Lohmann shows how Klenze's architectural theory made extensive use of a concept of the organism derived from Schelling. In Klenze's sacral understanding of architecture, this meant relating the moments of autonomy, wholeness, permanence, truth and vitality to a concept of the Absolute, and Lohmann goes on to examine how, in the person of Klenze, nineteenth-century German architectural theory is based on a strong bequest from Idealist philosophy of religion. But Klenze was also concerned to modify a claim in aesthetics from Karl Philipp Moritz to Friedrich Schlegel, where 'organic' – or autonomous – status was generally ascribed to sculpture rather than to architecture. Klenze's engagement with Schelling, Lohmann shows, is part of an attempt to redefine the position of architecture within aesthetics.

Ivan Gaskell's contribution to the volume complements Saure and Lohmann by addressing the development of a particular cultural institution – the museum – in the context of Idealism's impact in the United States: this includes both the line of thought that entered American academic life through scientific followers of Schelling, and the role of transcendentalism. In the former category, Gaskell discusses primarily the work of Louis Agassiz, the Swiss natural scientist who came to Cambridge, Massachusetts via Munich – where he heard Schelling's lectures – and Paris. Agassiz's scientific approach was deeply influenced by Schelling, from whose thought he learned to apply precise observation of objects in a manner that is not detached from *a priori* principles – empirical data being reflective of ideal representations. Throughout his contribution, Gaskell is concerned with the development of an epistemology based on 'tangible things': physical objects that yield up a meaning – ultimately, a 'world' – rather than a dry



storehouse of paraphernalia that are available to our theoretical reflection but not disclosed in a context of felt involvement, or as what a later philosophical discourse, drawing on the same Idealist lineage as Agassiz, would call ‘ready to hand’. He shows how such an epistemology underlay Agassiz’s teaching and led to the founding of the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. In the second part of his essay, Gaskell examines the treatment of tangible things by Henry David Thoreau, who developed the notion of ‘world’ beyond its Emersonian sense of that which is unified by an ‘eternal law’, and insisted instead on the singularity of *worlds*. Gaskell argues that Thoreau’s conception of worlds as particular, non-encompassing constellations of meaningful objects, which points forward to twentieth-century philosophical ideas about ‘world-making’, rediscovered the Kantian core of transcendentalism, the insight that *the* world as a whole is not knowable by us. Furthermore, one expression of this insight is the prophetic subjective mode which characterises much of Thoreau’s writing, and which captures the aspiration to a unified picture of nature, and the world, that lies always ahead of us.

Appropriately, the final essay in this volume deals with Hegel’s theory of the ‘end of art’ with which this introduction began, and thus synthesises many of the conceptual questions addressed by the other contributors. Stephen Houlgate gives a full and suggestive account of Hegel’s thesis – exploring its place within Hegel’s understanding of art’s historical development and, centrally, the role of beauty in Hegel’s conception – before examining the influence of the theory on the work of a major twentieth-century philosopher of aesthetics, Arthur Danto. He shows how Danto’s philosophy of art was inspired in large part by the work of Andy Warhol, specifically Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* in which the distinction between art and everyday life breaks down. Danto accounts philosophically for such works by saying that art gives us ‘embodied meanings’ – it invites us to discern an idea in a way which objects of utility do not, or poses a question about what distinguishes an art work from something which is not an art work. Danto’s view of art, explicated in extensive analyses of Modernism, explicitly derives from Hegel the notion that art ends with the advent of its own philosophy, with conceptual reflection about the idea of art as produced in such works as Warhol’s, where art and non-art merge and the task of answering the question ‘what is art?’ passes to philosophy. But, in an argument that complements some of the insights of Klaus Vieweg’s contribution, Houlgate shows how Danto’s assumption of Hegelian ideas is susceptible to Hegelian critique, because in the terms laid out by Hegel it remains in the realm of the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03984-1 - The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought: Volume III:  
Aesthetics and Literature

General Editors Nicholas Boyle and Liz Disley Edited by Christoph Jamme and Ian Cooper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Ian Cooper

understanding (*Verstand*), where negation is merely ‘abstract’ or ‘external’, rather than progressing to a properly speculative grasping of opposition in unity. Houlgate develops the Hegelian implications of this with reference to the philosophical ‘essence’ of art – art’s essence being to *appear* or *show itself* – concluding that Hegel’s account does not sanction Danto’s view of art as no longer revealing itself, to the senses, as art. In arguing against reductive readings of Hegel’s thesis, this concluding essay makes a strong claim not only for the relevance of Idealist aesthetics for modern art, but also for the continuing role of art – as long as it concerns itself with the elevated and prosaic dignity of human life that Hegel identified with the beautiful – in manifesting what is really important in modern, self-conscious existence as German Idealism defined it.

### Notes

1. See Michael Minden, *Modern German Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 117.
2. See Robert B. Pippin, ‘What was Abstract Art? (From the point of view of Hegel)’, in R. B. Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: on the Kantian aftermath* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 279–306.
3. *Ibid.*, 283.
4. See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).