
REVIEWS

David Farrell Krell. *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease, and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. 243p.

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Krell's study examines in admirable detail what he repeatedly refers to as the "dire" forces in the nature philosophies of Novalis, Schelling, and Hegel. His discussion clearly demonstrates what Krell sees as connecting these three thinkers: namely, the acknowledgment of these dire forces and the relation of them to the body's "intercourse" or interaction with the natural world outside itself. At the same time, the thoughtful conceptual rubrics used in his presentation of these writers also highlight a development, from Novalis through Schelling to Hegel, in how each thinker's work reflects his awareness of these forces.

Krell's examination of Novalis' nature philosophy centers on the mouth as a point of exchange or interaction, one that he shows to function for Novalis on both a sexual and a physiological level. Krell locates the mouth as the focal point of Novalis' philosophical yearning for a miraculous reunion of body and nature containing all the purity of a pre-individuated nature. This impossible reunion Krell terms "thaumaturgic" or "magic" idealism, and he demonstrates how Novalis' longing for it is wracked by an awareness of the fact that, as Krell puts it, "The first kiss is always a kiss of death — and the first thing to die is the concept of 'firstness'" (21).

Krell goes on to characterize Schelling's philosophy as a "tormented idealism," one that revolves around the awareness of an irresolvable natural bifurcation. This division manifests itself not only in the differentiation of the sexes, but again, as with Novalis, in the irresolvable ironic duplicity of their interaction with each other and with nature: the natural physical interaction of the body that supports life — be it breathing, eating, or sexual intercourse — is also the conduit of disease and death. As was the case in Novalis' writings, this awareness is apparent in the system in the aberrant, the diseased, the malformed exceptions that always accompany the natural rules. Hegel's philosophy of nature, finally, is for Krell a "triumphant idealism" not because it resolves the duplicity or "contagion" inherent and inevitable in the body's physical existence, but because it refuses to let it-

self be overcome by it. The “contagion” (Krell borrows the term from Schelling) remains in Hegel’s system even as the system moves on toward its triumphant conclusion, one which, given Krell’s interest in the moments of “contagion,” Krell aptly describes in his conclusion as a “triumph of ashes” (161).

Krell readily acknowledges the debt his study owes to Derrida and the critical tenets of deconstruction throughout his notes (see particularly note 10, 170-1), and this dependence on deconstruction proves to be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, this approach encourages what is ultimately the book’s strength: it permits Krell to delve into otherwise overlooked or underappreciated aspects and passages of these three philosophers. His study is most impressive in its revelation of Hegel’s “dire romantic” side, in its attention to the sense of failure that inhabits Hegel’s “triumphant idealism.” On the other hand and at the same time, however, Krell’s deconstructive framework implicitly claims more than his study can deliver. In his opening lines, Krell presents a notion of German Romanticism that is nothing more than a straw man, a target to allow him to set his deconstruction into motion. This only distracts the reader away from the material Krell presents. “Word is,” Krell writes, “that the German Idealists and Romantics were dreamy folk whose hearts leapt up when they beheld a rainbow in the sky. So they were.... Yet ... for the so-called Romantics and Idealists ... *all* the forces of nature were *dire* forces” (1).

Certainly no one at all familiar with German Romanticism (with Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann*, for example, which Krell also discusses briefly) could possibly hold the one-sided view that Krell posits here as his initial “word” on the German Idealists and Romantics. If anything, the “word” on the German Romantics, at least in German-language literature, has always featured a strong tendency toward gloom and doom, toward darkness and sickness and death. In any case, no modern scholar of German-language Romanticism needs the considerable amount of careful primary and secondary reading and scholarly analysis that Krell expends on aspects of disease, sexuality, and death to be convinced that, as Krell puts it, “The Romantic concept of nature is anything but romantic” (24). Nor does Krell’s detailed discussion of these elements in the nature philosophies of Novalis, Schelling, and Hegel establish in itself the basis for a general reevaluation of these and other German Idealists and Romantics.

Krell himself concedes as much in his study’s conclusion, professing finally only the hope that his work has shown Hegel’s system to be a “privileged place for learning this new kind of reading,” one that he admits here is not really new at all (164). It is in pursuit of this goal, as mentioned earlier, that *Contagion* proves quite persuasive and is most interesting. Thus, the value of Krell’s study can perhaps best

be summarized using his own conclusion about Hegel: namely, that “The larger picture ... is never as rewarding as the bits and scraps, nooks and crannies, accidents and windfalls of the text” (165). In Krell’s case, these “nooks and crannies” need not undermine an established larger picture to be significant. On the contrary, coupled with the structural clarity of Krell’s argument and his choice of lesser-known texts, Krell’s illumination of “dire” forces lurking within the natural philosophies of German Idealism and Romanticism makes his work an interesting and useful contribution to our understanding of these thinkers and the period. ✱