

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute*. Trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988. Pp. xxii+169. \$39.50 cloth/\$12.95 paper.

Thus far a review was supposed to be a complete condensation and extract of all that can be written and said about a book—even a methodical and systematic one. We are not yet nearly that advanced. If only a review was something of a satire. (Novalis)¹

Novalis' provocative remark has a twofold application for a review of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's and Jean-Luc Nancy's analysis of "The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism." Most important, the philosophical tone of this important study—whose translation lags fully ten years behind the publication of the original French text—must not be misconstrued as yet another attempt to understand romanticism "in philosophy's terms." At the same time, the continually "satiric" or "ironic" relation between philosophy and "Literature" which *The Literary Absolute* traces in German romanticism, may well draw some criticisms from scholars for whom romanticism can acquire meaning only if situated within some autonomous conceptual framework. For the present review, the satiric mode proposed by Novalis thus also implies the necessity of "saving" (in the complex sense of Schlegel and Benjamin) Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's argument from a very likely misconstrual of its own rhetoric and terminology.

The Literary Absolute examines some central texts by F. Schlegel (and two shorter texts by Schelling) that were written during the brief but intensely productive period of the *Athenaeum* (1798–1800). In opting for such a rather narrow textual basis, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy seem to expose their argument to a host of potential criticisms as they venture back and forth between Schlegel's unique contributions to the *Athenaeum* and the highly general concept of "Romanticism" and "Literature" with the inauguration of which F. Schlegel is credited almost exclusively. Yet while no attempt is made to relate the insights into the nature of romanticism and literature to other romantic movements (e.g., English or French romanticism), and while the authors surprise with their rigid exclusion of other German romantics (e.g., Novalis, Jean Paul, Hölderlin, Tieck, Fichte, Schleiermacher, etc.) from this "invention" of "Literature," they must be credited for the consistency with which they

1. Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher, und Briefe*, ed. R. Samuel and H. J. Mähli (Munich: Hanser, 1978) 2: 356. (trans. mine—[TP])

themselves refrain from positing any *a priori* concept of literature and romanticism as such.

As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy state with provocative though compelling generality, "romanticism does not lead us to anything that one might imitate or that one might be 'inspired by' . . . [but] it 'leads' us first of all to ourselves" (2). Thus "we still belong to the era that [romanticism] opened up," and it is the presence of "a veritable romantic *unconscious* . . . in most of the central motifs of our 'modernity'" (15) that, according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, causes contemporary thinkers to be "repeating Jena today—because they have not been able to read it" (13). This extensive blindspot in our critical understanding of romanticism is rooted in the naive *application* of historical and philosophical paradigms to this epoch, thus "explaining" romanticism as a gradual transformation of inherited codes of sensibility and of the heroic. Yet according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, "early romanticism represents the sudden appearance of a *crisis* that romanesque romanticism . . . would only have hidden" (5).

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy identify this crisis as that of the transcendental subject, which, in the critical philosophy of Kant, begins to exhibit an erosion of its own foundation and thus becomes "unpresentable to itself" (30). That the productive nature of romantic literature originates in response to a loss of self-presence and unity on the part of the subject in general is an insight of tremendous consequence both for the philosophical and literary idiom of romanticism and for our contemporary study of this epoch. Regrettably, though, the authors do not elaborate any further the exact nature of this crisis in Kant and his philosophical heirs. No less significant, though, is their recognition of how "this weakening of the subject is accompanied by an apparently compensatory promotion of the *moral subject*" (31) and by "an entirely new and unforeseeable relation between aesthetics and philosophy" (29). Not only does the loss of the subject's self-presence result in a profound "crisis" of philosophy's idea of the subject and of its own self-conception as a "system," but this very crisis also prevents contemporary romantic studies from accounting for its "subject" once again in "simply philosophical" terms. As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy note, this crisis is "philosophical through and through" while, at the same time, "it is not entirely or simply philosophical" (29). As the book's "Overture: The System-Subject" convincingly shows, it is precisely the event of this crisis of philosophy which sets the stage for romanticism and for an entirely new understanding of literature.

According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the Kantian "deduction" of the subject is suspended as romanticism now recasts the notions

subject and system within a frame of (auto-)production, “presentation” [*Darstellung*], or “creative reflection” (Hölderlin). For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the consequences of this “primal scene” of romanticism still await their full understanding. Most important, the development of early romanticism [*Frühromantik*] at Jena inaugurates a conception of “*theory itself as literature* or, in other words, literature producing itself as it produces its own theory” (12). Thus romanticism (for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy virtually coterminous with F. Schlegel’s thought between 1798 and 1805) resists being confined to the rigid boundaries of a “literary movement,” of “a new sensibility” and to the always implicit “model of seamless evolution or progress . . . or a model of organic maturation” (29). That is, by originating in an intrinsically “philosophical” crisis, romanticism reconceives the relation between literature and theory as one of consubstantiality, thereby effectively forestalling its remission into or identification with a “proper” philosophical context. What *The Literary Absolute* refers to as the “work” or “literature” thus remains always in an asymptotic relation to the competing idealisms of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.

The characterization of this concept of Literature shapes the four central chapters of the book, with Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy concentrating on the status of the fragment, on Schlegel’s aesthetic reappraisal of religion, on the ideal of the romantic work—“poiesy” and the novel-as-poiesy—and on the function of “criticism.” The authors discuss with great lucidity the relation between fragmentation and system (43–48), between fragment and *Witz* (50–56), and how the fragment is conceived of not as the outgrowth of a transcendental subjectivity but, in displaying the “operative status of the subject” (52), as a “work in progress.”

As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy note, the Jena romantics were the first to experience the “dissatisfaction” with the work or poem that only ever appears as prospective semantic field whose contours alone are delineated by what Schlegel called a “garland of fragments.” However, the Jena romantics’ eventual turn toward the idea and toward religion—a turn that does not necessarily imply an organic historical itinerary of romanticism (60)—is not merely “regressive gesture” as one might suspect. While their lucid discussion of *Darstellung*, *Mimesis*, and of romantic religion in Schlegel’s *Ideas* convinces once again, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy appear to endorse somewhat too readily Schlegel’s own “misprision” of Novalis as an increasingly regressive, religious mystic. Yet Novalis’ highly differentiating marginal comments to Schlegel’s *Ideas*, his correspondence, as well as Ayrault’s comprehensive study of German romanticism (frequently invoked by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy) suggest that the discussion of the complex relation between romantic theory

and romantic religion requires a considerably larger text-basis than the one chosen.²

The remaining two chapters examine Schlegel's theory of the work ("the poem") and of criticism as the two consubstantial forms of romantic auto-production. With his imperative of an absolute creative gesture, both as the form *and* content of the work, Schlegel established a paradox that not only kept the literary (traditionally speaking) production of the Jena romantics to a minimum but also set the stage for a romantic theory of criticism (what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call *eidaesthetics*) that aimed at the "presentation" [*Darstellung*] of this very creative, auto-productive or formative process itself: "Criticism at the origin is also the *construction* of the work at the origin, for art itself must always be—how could it be otherwise?—the construction of its work" (110). In this sense romantic criticism is said to return "to the interior of that for which it is the surrogate" (111).

It may be the consistent avoidance of any contextualization which renders Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's exposition of Schlegel somewhat too air-tight and hermetic. To explain the paradox of a poetry that is "formative not in the pedagogical sense of the term" but in the sense of a "formation of character" (114) on the basis of Schlegel's rather restricted verbal economy results in numerous reformulations and paraphrases. The reader is left wondering why the *Bildung* or "auto-constitution of the subject" is nowhere set in relation to the romantic concept of the "imagination" (which the authors do not even mention in their all too brief discussion of Kant's "schematism," where they had convincingly located the origins of the "philosophical crisis" that produced romanticism and literature). Furthermore, it is a surprisingly reductive understanding of, for example, English romanticism ("Romantic—especially in its English provenance—is the landscape before which one feels the sentiment of nature" [4]), which causes the authors to overlook some concrete instances (e.g., the imaginative or ironic "formation of character" in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Byron's *Don Juan*, respectively) of the very Work that, in the theoretical idiom of Schlegel, remains forever absent or incomplete. Nevertheless, *The Literary Absolute*, in its highly readable and consistent translation by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, will prove indispensable for romantic studies by showing how the erosion of the romantic subject initiates a radically new, formative

2. For Novalis' Schlegel *marginalia*, see *Werke, Tagebucher, Briefe*, ed. R. Samuel and H. J. Mähl (Munich: Hanser, 1978) 2: 721 ff., and for an example of Novalis' theoretical subtlety, rather than nebulous mysticism, see his letter to Caroline Schlegel, 1: 684 ff.

paradigm of the subject-as-work, a process that also results in the decisive undoing of the boundaries between romanticism's aesthetic productions (*Poesie*) and our own contemporary reflection (*Kritik*) on the romantic heritage.

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Frederick Burwick. *The Damnation of Newton: Goethe's Color Theory and Romantic Perception*. Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte der germanischen Völker, n. F., Bd. 86 (210). Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986. Pp. 308.

The *Damnation of Newton* is not simply another explanation of Goethe's color theory. Rather than presenting the reader with a detailed account of the *Farbenlehre* Burwick focuses on particular aspects of Goethe's theory, namely its epistemological and methodological premises as well as its treatment of polarization, and uses them to illuminate Goethe's poetic creations. Goethe is the central figure in *The Damnation of Newton*, but Burwick also manages to discuss problems of color and perception in the works of a number of German and English romantics. Burwick's aim is to show us how and why scientific problems informed romantic literature and thus his book will be of interest to both historians of science and literary historians.

Burwick takes the scientific work of the romantics as seriously as he does their literature, which means *The Damnation of Newton* can be heavy going, especially for those who are not acquainted with the science of the romantic era. (It will also be difficult for those who do not read German as it is filled with quotations from German sources.) Burwick's task would have been much easier if Novalis, Coleridge and the other figures he considers simply adopted the *Farbenlehre* as Goethe presented it, but they did not—far from it. Thus Coleridge claimed he found Newton's theory to consist of "monstrous FICTIONS!" before he had ever heard of Goethe (54). Novalis died before the publication of the *Farbenlehre* but he knew of Goethe's early work on optics and felt that it had not gone far enough (106–7). Achim von Arnim, who also said that he had "never believed" Newton's theory nonetheless felt that Goethe had gone too far in his denunciations of Newton (139). It is all too easy to slip into generalizations when discussing romantic science, but Burwick has avoided temptation and attended to the subtleties that

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