

interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

May & Sept. 1987 Volume 15 Numbers 2 & 3

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------|--|
| 157 | K. L. Yeager | Man and Nature in Plato's <i>Phaedo</i> |
| 179 | David Bolotin | The <i>Theaetetus</i> and the Possibility of False Opinion |
| 195 | James C. Leake | Tacitus' Teaching and the Decline of Liberty at Rome (Chapters 3 to 7) |
| 309 | Richard Burrow | Credulity and Curiosity in <i>A Tale of a Tub</i> |
| 323 | Kenneth L. Grasso | Pluralism, the Public Good and the Problem of Self-Government in <i>The Federalist</i> |
| 347 | Chaninah Maschler | On the Wisdom of Nathan |
| 367 | Will Morrisey | Robert H. Horwitz, 1923–1987 |
| 373 | Will Morrisey | Review of <i>The Fate of the Self</i> by Stanley Corngold |

interpretation

Volume 15 numbers 2 & 3

Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin

Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth • Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz • Howard B. White (d. 1974)

Consulting Editors Joseph Cropsey • John Hallowell • Wilhelm Hennis • Erich Hula • Harry V. Jaffa • David Lowenthal • Arnaldo Momigliano • Michael Oakeshott • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Kenneth W. Thompson

Associate Editors Wayne Ambler • Maurice Auerbach • Fred Bauman • Michael Blaustein • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo • Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Pamela K. Jensen • Grant B. Mindle • James W. Morris • Will Morrissey • Gerald Proietti • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie Rubin • John A. Wettergreen • Bradford P. Wilson • Hossein Ziai • Michael Zuckert • Catherine Zuckert

Manuscript Editor Laurette G. Hupman

Design & Production Martyn Hitchcock

Annual
subscription rates individual \$15; institutional \$18; student (3-year limit) \$7.50. There are three issues of INTERPRETATION a year.

Address
for correspondence INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y. 11367, U.S.A.

Authors submitting manuscripts for publication in INTERPRETATION are requested to follow the *MLA Style Sheet* and to send clear and readable copies of their work.

Copyright 1987 • Interpretation

Book Review

The Fate of the Self: German Writers and French Theory. By Stanley Corngold. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. xiv + 279 pp.: \$28.50.)

WILL MORRISEY

German writers seldom efface themselves. Contemporary French literary critics assert 'the death of the self.' North American literary academics assert the apotheosis of the French critics.

How long can this go on? Pessimists say, 'Indefinitely,' but Stanley Corngold is no pessimist. A professor of comparative literature at Princeton, a former student of Paul de Man, and a native of Brooklyn, he comes well positioned and equipped to arraign 'deconstructionism' before the bar of common sense. His departure from or overcoming of Brooklyn did not include any foolish attempt to jettison every ounce of Brooklyn baggage. But he knows that Brooklynite common sense will not by itself convince academics, who remain genteel even while assaulting Western civilization and the bourgeoisie—that is to say, themselves. So he writes his critique in 'Eighties-academic prose. ("My purpose is to institute the modern self as the copresence ['structure'] of various narratives ['effects'] of the self which earlier writers have produced.") He also gives every sign of actually having read most of what the 'deconstructionists' and their academic publicists have written—an ascesis more to be admired than emulated.

Each reader will find his favorite example of this happy conjunction of style and substance, but your reviewer recommends footnote 35, page 244. There Corngold quotes an as-they-say *dense* passage by Professor Victor Lange on Heidegger ("Historical concretizations of life," "methodological access," "suprapersonal presence," "hermeneutical phenomenology"); with that convincing poker face you perfect only in the old neighborhood, he comments, "It is hard to say this any better." Truly, Corngold attacks 'deconstructionism' with its own heavy instruments. It is inconceivable that even his most insensible targets will not flinch.

The poet's self is Corngold's topic—"a paradoxical being that must 'disown' itself in order to exist." "Disown" is Hölderlin's word; he likens poetic self-assertion to the "feeling of the sacred" in ancient tragedies, a feeling that can no longer find immediate recognition, but to which modern readers can carry over their own "spirit" (*Geist*) and experience. This carrying-over works both ways; the poet's self carries over into "foreign analogous material," into what T. S. Eliot calls its "objective correlative," and the reader's self carries over, away from itself, to perceive the poet's intention. Hölderlin is the first of seven German writers Corngold presents, all of whom insist that this carrying-over, though

problematic, does occur. The 'deconstructionists' claim that the self loses its way ('shattering' and 'diffraction' are the usual metaphors) among outside 'structures.' Attacking the notion of the Cartesian subject, *res cogitans*, the 'deconstructionists' deny the existence of self-knowledge, reject the self as a "coercive authority" and as the basis of autonomous individuality. The self "as the agent of its own development" and the source of poetic making, amounts to little more than a myth.

Corngold agrees that "the self as particular, the self as self is precisely what cannot be represented in the concept"; the self "cannot at once stand inside itself and give a full description of itself." The attempt to do so would yield an infinite regress (not knowing when you've reached the self's foundation) or an infinite 'progress' (selves followed by super-selves). "Can a self be itself and know that the act by which it is known 'disowns' it?" Corngold affirms that it can, thanks to "history," by which he means narrative. Narrative is an "effect" issuing from but not identical to the self, opposing but not obliterating other selves (including parts of the originative self that the dominant part of that self finds objectionable); the synthesis of these effects approximates "a third term, a projected totality" that objectively confirms the existence of both self and other-than-self. "The integrity of the self is established by a style open to the history [here, "history" also means experience] it suffers and perceives—and makes in the stories it tells, with others' collaboration." Corngold would defend Rousseau by means of a literary Hegelianism. Rousseau "figures in the carpet of almost everyone of these essays. . . . He is my eighth 'German writer.'" Corngold's German-language writers are Hölderlin, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Mann, Kafka, Freud, and Heidegger, many of whom find themselves subpoenaed by 'deconstructionists' as witnesses to the self's alleged decease.

Hölderlin teaches that the self's consciousness of its own mortality, of the most radical otherness, impels it to *Bildung*, development. This "divided self" does not merely contradict itself, as 'deconstructionists' assume. *Bildung* "turns toward historical and sacred objects and finally toward Nature as that generality enabling, sustaining, and enveloping . . . particular contacts and negations." Nature makes the self possible. It also makes self-knowledge possible by affording the self a perspective outside the self. Hölderlin's "Nature" has nothing to do with stable, Platonic forms; it is as mutable as the self—hence its affinity with the self. At the same time, both self and "Nature" do sustain themselves. Poetic, artful language "assures the permanence [perhaps too strong a word] of relations arresting an eternal 'slippage' between signifier and signified." Language mediates between self and other, thus imitating all-encompassing "Nature." Corngold does not attempt to prove Hölderlin's scheme to be rationally sustainable or coherent; a proof of this would require justifying the emphasis on the mutability of which death serves as the most striking example. But he does argue plausibly that Hölderlin makes more sense than the 'deconstructionists' do. Corngold

shows that Lacan, Leplanche, and Foucault unwittingly imply the existence of the self even in the formulations they use to deny it.

In Dilthey, nature, even nature conceived as mutable, gives way to social and political history. “What must a poetics be in order to sustain the view that the subjectivity of a poet may be authentic *and* representative of social forces?” Dilthey contends that historical activity includes the study of history, that study makes history, is a *praxis*. The self ‘objectifies’ itself by political activity, art, and scholarship. “Literature is an institution because it institutes relations of force between acts of creation, reception, and understanding whose thrust is to enter the public order.” But the notion of “force” implies much more than mere history-as-narrative. Predictably, Dilthey brings nature in under the cover of history, saying that statesmen, poets, and philosophers share a “powerful life force of soul,” “energy of experiences of the heart and of the world,” the capacity to generalize those experiences, and “the power of inspiring conviction.” The notion of “historical psychology” implies not only history but also *ψυχή*. Neither Dilthey nor Corngold entirely appreciates this, but the former does write, and the latter repeats, that literature’s “highest function” is “to represent the dignity of the *person* in the midst of its determination” by history.

In the argument between Rousseau and Hegel, Nietzsche incites to war. He rejects the understanding of art as a means of *Bildung*. If art is Dionysian, the poet’s self becomes more problematic, a field susceptible to possession. For Nietzsche, *questioning* distinguishes the self from merely determined phenomena. “The self *wants* itself as a question”; it “exists as the question of its being and to this extent is self-determined,” as no outside force causes it to question itself. Corngold finds Nietzsche’s conception of the self to be dubious, because Nietzsche appears nearly to identify the self with the body, whose many drives are merely asserted to have a rank. Disorder cannot be said to determine itself. But Corngold adds that Nietzsche’s will to power itself consists of contradictory forces; if the self produces language, an “enterprise of the will to power,” then language, *λόγος*, and therefore logic, are not oriented toward discovery but toward overcoming. The self’s self-questioning means not self-doubt but self-overcoming, *questioning*. “The question of the self must live as an openness, an unansweredness toward being, yet it must bend the world into virtual answers in order to preserve itself as a question.” Nietzsche’s will to power, one might observe, synthesizes part of Rousseauan nature with part of Hegelian history. Corngold dismisses the ‘deconstructionist’ contention that Nietzsche’s texts are “pan-ironic”—that Nietzsche’s strong assertion of self surreptitiously undercuts itself—by noting that “irony can take place only through punctual abrogations of irony”

Of the two twentieth-century literary men Corngold discusses, Mann does not much interest him whereas Kafka does. The latter’s novels contain “breaks” in perspective—as when Joseph K. is described in the third person, a violation of

the novel's otherwise non-"authorial" point-of-view. Such "breaks" appear to exemplify what 'deconstructionists' call the "undecidability" of a text, symptomatic of "the death of the Author." One might of course suggest that these "breaks" instead reveal the incompetence of the author, but Corngold has a better suggestion. Even *as* an author, Kafka has a horror of construction, which is one more instance of the mastery or control satirized in *The Trial*. Kafka objects to perfection of technique, on principle. Therefore, Kafka's narrator "is as much subject to inauthenticity and blindness as any character"; "like the loopholes in bureaucratic procedures which, as Adorno writes, are the institutional equivalent of mercy, random breaks in narrative consistency grant the hero a sort of merciful liberation from the schematism of 'character,' from the privations of an irremediably personal perspective." Of course, this can only go so far. Kafka is the one who lets the "random" breaks stand. In being allowed to stand, they are no longer random. Corngold does not quite say it, but Kafka cannot avoid presenting us with a coherent self even in his attempts to show mercy to his suffering characters. He cannot really relinquish control, only imitate such relinquishment. He approaches relinquishment of control *in fiction*.

Corngold attacks the 'deconstructionist' misreading of Freud, describing the interpretive method involved as "the disfigured expression of a will to power bent on masking its own contradiction." Freud's texts are not literary. The psychoanalyst attempts to "insert" the reality of biological life into fiction invented by a patient or a writer. To Kafka, such a "cure" would itself cause injury; like Rousseau, who deplores self-interest, "Kafka's self is defined not by particular interests but by its narrative attentiveness to the products of dream play," by "indifference to the practical concerns of an aimed empirical consciousness." 'Deconstructionists' call Freud's texts literary because they do not know what literature is, or perhaps are hostile to it. Although they claim to 'deconstruct' in order to liberate readers from authors' allegedly coercive grip, they in fact coerce texts into saying nothing, the better to fit them into the 'deconstructionist' construct.

Heidegger "joins a tradition subverting the western philosophy of language which normally founds meaning on, and subordinates rhetoric to, grammar and logic." The "most primordial" character of Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* is a resolute return to "one's ownmost Self." Whereas Nietzsche begins with self and sees his general principle, the will to power, in it, Heidegger begins with his general principle, *Dasein*, which "make[s] a resolute return to the Self." Wherever the emphasis falls, this antirational tradition attributes a cognitive significance to human "moods," beyond mere "sensation-bound feeling." From Rousseau to Heidegger, "mood stands for a disclosive power whose reach cognitive understanding cannot attain." The disclosive power of moods evidently has waned. Corngold's Germans increasingly perceive that moods are "fragile" and "strange" when one sees them in others, even if they appear strong and 'authentic' in oneself; one self/subject cannot often coincide with another if the means of

coincidence is mood. Corngold sees that historicism arises from this increased subjectivism, although he does not elaborate on this fact as much as he might—having availed himself of a sort of historicism.

Corngold would halt this waning of Rousseau's project before it slides into 'deconstructionism,' which he rightly considers an absurdity. "If a text were only a self-deconstructing motion, a play of ineffable differences, a representation of nothingness, it could not weigh heavily enough upon the reader to produce a mood." For all the formidable doctrine historicists have produced, the basis of their enterprise remains embarrassingly *natural*—even if so inchoate a naturalness as that seen in human moods. Corngold may concede too much to historicism and also to Rousseau, who at times has been credited with inventing an early form of historicism. When historicism, following subjectivism, eschews dialectic based on the principle of noncontradiction and asserts a "mood"-based dialectic of synthesizing opposites, an effort that eventually ranks rhetoric over logic, it finds such projects as 'deconstructionism' hard to resist.

A scholar might explore this matter by examining Rousseau, Hegel, and Nietzsche with an eye toward the classical reason they attacked and the 'deconstructionism' they somehow fostered. Corngold's "postscript" and "prospect" bring to mind a less elephantine approach. Identifying his own book as a confession of sorts, a confession of the distance traveled between Brooklyn and 'Germany,' Corngold indicates a readiness to disown or overcome 'Germany,' too. One way of doing this would be to measure the language of Brooklyn against the language of 'Germany,' and vice-versa, in order to determine what common sense lacks that 'Germany' offers, and what 'Germany' offers that common sense can bring down to earth, or even falsify. (Socrates, for example, begins with the language of the marketplace, transcending it only when it deserves to be transcended). Despite the egalitarianism of many aspects of post-Rousseauan thought, this thought betrays a contempt for common sense that yields convolution in theory and extremism in practice. One way to get beyond 'Germany' is to return to 'Brooklyn.'