

## BOOK REVIEW

### From Jena to Freiburg, via Asia Minor

*Hakhamanesh Zangeneh*

Pol Vandavelde. *Heidegger and the Romantics: The Literary Invention of Meaning*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 202 pp.

The Romantic estimation of Plato within the history of philosophy sees precisely not what is actually positive in him: that which is not well-rounded, is fragmentary, what remains underway. That is the genuinely positive element in all research. Of course, this does not mean that every imperfection would as such already be positive, but only that it harbors the possibility of growth.

– Heidegger, *Platon: Sophistes*, GA 19: 412/285.

Pol Vandavelde's *Heidegger and the Romantics* is an important and, in many ways, pioneering study. While many noted scholars have made remarks in passing on the relations between Heidegger's philosophy and that of early German Romanticism (Pöggeler, Frank, Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy – all of whom are referenced in Vandavelde's book), we still lack thematic, systematic studies of these matters. But the book before us is groundbreaking not just by virtue of its topics but also in its

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approach. As Vandavelde explains at the outset of his inquiry, his goal is not philologico-genealogical. This is to say that the goal of this book is not to establish that the Romantics were a source for Heidegger. Rather, the focus is on showing the argumentative compatibility of two projects. The essential contention of the book is that while the Romantics staked out an original philosophical position, they failed to deliver on the conceptual infrastructure that would undergird and sustain that position; they lacked an ontology. To address that lacuna, Vandavelde examines Heidegger's texts, mainly from the 1930s and early 1940s. Herein lies another salient point of interest of this book, namely, its interpretation of Heidegger's texts from the period known for *Seinsgeschichte*. Before turning to an engagement with this project, however, it may be useful first to delineate what this book is not.

The subtitle of the book, "The Literary Invention of Meaning," might make the reader expect a study fitting within the genre of deconstruction as practiced by North American literary theorists in the 1980s. A substantial amount of writing coming from the de Man school turned to Romanticism to examine the relation between philosophy and literature, in order to break down that distinction.<sup>1</sup> Vandavelde neither shares this goal, nor engages that distinction at any length – though we might pose the question to him critically, and especially with respect to his reading of Heidegger. While his earlier work has been directed specifically to the theory of interpretation both conceptually and practically,<sup>2</sup> in the present study he does not interrogate the general category of literature as such. The "literary" in his subtitle is a narrow reference to *Dichtung*, both in the Early German Romantics and Heidegger, and there, the term is essentially understood as "configuration." The deconstructionist project is referenced in this book (though one might read those references as a bit too cursory), but it falls outside the contours of Vandavelde's argument.

The scope of this book is also narrow in its construal of Romanticism. The authors discussed are Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and Schleiermacher. While it is standard practice to group these authors (all tied to the *Athenaeum*) as constituting "Early German Romanticism,"

German philosophy in those years was (to use Walter Jaeschke's term) highly "dialogical."<sup>3</sup> Schelling's *Philosophy of Art*, for example, borrows entire texts from Schlegel without citation. Hölderlin's relations to Hegel and Schelling are well known. And arguably the most seminal text of this period, the *Ältestes Systemprogramm*, left out of consideration by Vandavelde, was born of collaborations of Schelling, Hegel and Hölderlin, and perhaps Schlegel too. Here again, Vandavelde has structured his argument in a compact manner for his own purposes. But his justification – based upon Manfred Frank's contention that the Jena group was not connected to Hölderlin and the Homburg circle (19)<sup>4</sup> – might leave some readers dissatisfied. The absent author whose basic moves most resonate with Vandavelde's own reading of Early German Romanticism is arguably the early Schelling. The point of noting this absence should be obvious: if the argument of this book is that Schlegel, Novalis and Schleiermacher do not elaborate an ontology of Early German Romanticism, if that is their failure, would it not be obvious to search for that system in Schelling up to 1800?

#### FRAGMENT AND FLUX

To sketch the philosophical position of Early German Romanticism that Heidegger buttresses according to Vandavelde's argument, we must begin with the Romantic theory of the fragment. The crucial insight is to distinguish between a "fragment" as a description of the state of a work (unfinished, lacunary, etc.) and a "fragment" as a manner of treating a work in general (32). Foreshadowing what would later become reader-response theory (Wolfgang Iser), Schlegel and Novalis took the meaning of the literary work to be co-constituted by the text and its reader (the critic). In this view, the work is treated by the critic as a fragment of the meaning which the critic creates. This act of creation is termed by Schlegel "divination" and its object, an "ideal" (32). This divination is, of course, not arbitrary and contingent but resides, as Vandavelde helpfully points out, between fabrication and discovery, between interpretative idealism and realism. It is this "divination" that the subtitle of the book renders as the "invention of meaning." But is

this doctrine of invention limited to the interpretation of poetry or is it to be generalized to philosophical texts as well, as Vandavelde seems to suggest (22)? To what extent would a generalized fragmentarity still be “literary”?

Already, the reader of Heidegger profits from this investigation inasmuch as such an invention, between fabrication and discovery, sheds some light on what Heidegger calls an *Erdenken* of the other inception that is not merely a *sich etwas ausdenken* (78). Indeed, we can now begin to compare the mode of writing of Heidegger’s treatises of *Seinsgeschichte*, or the mode of *reading* that they beckon us to, with the task of the fragment-critic in Early German Romanticism. While Vandavelde does not build this bridge, perhaps this line of thought can help elucidate what Heidegger is after when, for example, he writes: “Zuspiel ist geschichtlichen Wesens und ein erstes Brückenschlagen des Übergangs, eine Brücke aber, die ausschwingt in ein erst zu entscheidendes Ufer“ (GA 65: 169/119). If passage is a bridging over to an as yet to be decided shore, a bridging-over which departs from this shore, from this first inception of philosophy that we are still in, but swings out over to a place which is not given, if such a passage is the task of the *Zuspiel* of the *Beiträge*, then perhaps articulating the relation between the first and the other inception of thinking operates on a logic similar to that of the fragment.

Now, the term “fragment” cannot help but evoke its counterpart, the whole or totality. One way to elaborate the topic consists in reading the “ideal” object, constituted by the critic, akin to an Idea in the Kantian sense, as necessarily unrepresentable. The fragment would then turn into a presentation of the unrepresentable.<sup>5</sup> But the question of representation seems to be absent from Vandavelde’s analyses. Perhaps the overall arc of his study renders that topic less fruitful to his purposes. But it remains the case that Early German Romanticism is premised on a theory of precisely the fragment, and not, say, the index, the sign, the hint, the trace and so on. The question of the mereology of the fragment (the interpretation of the part/whole relation in Early German Romanticism) is unfortunately not elaborated at length. At first, Vandavelde

seems to deny any necessary reference of fragment to whole, but then he endorses references to Blanchot and Benjamin, to the effect that the whole is suspended or fragmented in its very invention (29–32). Strictly speaking, these two views are not identical. One might say that the difference is between a thinking that abandons the mereological dialectic altogether, and one that enacts it as a “negative dialectic” (a term which Hegel uses in this very same period). The second view, i.e. the Blanchot/Benjamin approach, would seem to require some conception of speculative negativity, a metaphysical, self-referential negation.

What Vandavelde gains by circumventing the above topoi is crucial and noteworthy. Suspending a relation to a final whole, he is able to underline the “progressive” nature of invention. The fragment occasions an endless becoming. The actualization of meaning is not terminal but a stage in a process, a raising of the work to a higher degree, a higher potency.<sup>6</sup> This infinite potentialization extends not only “forward” from the work to its interpretations, but also “backwards,” behind the work so to speak, and towards nature. Fully within the framework of German philosophy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (but at odds with Vandavelde’s depiction of Early German Romanticism as “anti-mimetic”), art – here poetry – is thought in a relationship to nature. That relation is, of course, not one of reproduction but potentialization, invention.

The ontological picture that is thus sketched is a remarkable one. It is only *sketched* in the Romantics, and not argued conceptually. In contemporary parlance, we would call this “a process ontology.” Nature, art and meaning are instantiations of a monistic becoming, a continuous flux, the phases of which are different potencies. This formal framework is fleshed out by Vandavelde in the examination of three doctrines in Early German Romanticism: translation, poetry, and interpretation. In this review I can only very schematically report on these rich analyses. Translation as a process of carrying-over is both a potentialization from one language to another (not arbitrarily transforming but inventing under a constraint, creating novelty) and also qua abstract translatability, a passage from the physical to the mental, from things to spirit (39).

Poetry, for its part, in response to a disenchantment with the everyday, is a higher power or potency of the world. Its task is to bring out the becoming, enunciate the flux (55). In the process, this practice avoids an idealism, according to Vandavelde, by virtue of its concomitant critique of the Subject (52). The potentialization is also a union of subject and object, of potentiality and actuality, and is thereby genuinely productive (64). Interpretation, here focused on Schleiermacherian hermeneutics, continues this invention when it follows the (Kantian) directive to understand an author “better” than the author him/herself.

For Vandavelde, this entire conception is based on a “fluid ontology” (36). There needs to be an ontological account arguing that in place of fixed, static, determinate entities, what we have to do with are instances of an infinite becoming, eschewing determinacies. Placing nature, art and thought on one ontological level as processes will remind Heidegger’s readers of the broad outlines of statements from, for example, “The Origin of the Work of Art” or the *Beiträge*, where philosophy and art (as well as political action and essential sacrifice) are each deemed to be different modes of the same *Ins-Werk-setzen der Wahrheit* (36) – whereby *Wahrheit* is also described seemingly processually, as the originary disputing (*Streit*) of clearing and concealment. The *Wahrheitsgeschehen* behind artworks, political activity and ontologico-historical thinking is the “same” *Geschehen*; that is to say, there is one *physis*. It is also intrinsically described, starting in the 1930s, as *Geschehen*, happening, event, unfolding. If Heidegger is able to deliver on such an “ontology” – or really *genetology* – of flux, then he will have made viable the Romantic vision of a world without stable, fixed and determinate things, having replaced them with a becoming of unconcealment not finished but inceptual, unfolding in concretizations.

#### HEIDEGGER THE IONIAN

The path to Heidegger as thinker of flux is presented developmentally. Before the texts of the 1930s, Vandavelde reviews Heidegger’s doctrine of λόγος in the 1920s, in order to bring out the familiar contrast between the meaning of being and the truth of being. He traces Heidegger’s

first step into flux to lectures published as GA 38. In these lectures Heidegger thematizes a conception of history through its affinities with language. Notably, we find here a distinction between history thought from being and history thought from facts, a “thinking in terms of centuries” (116). Distinguishing between occurrences that are *geschichtlich* and occurrences that are world-historical enables the author to point to places in Heidegger’s corpus where, he claims, Heidegger himself slips from one to the other. Thus Heidegger’s various references to European history and politics are interpreted as instances of Heidegger failing his own standard. So, too, Vandavelde interprets connections between Heidegger’s philosophy and his political involvement as failing to live up to his own thinking of history and as slipping into the “thinking in terms of centuries” (117). One might compare this contention to Lacoue-Labarthe’s approach, which essentially claims that it is precisely *as* an inheritor of Early German Romanticism that Heidegger incorporates the politics of his Germany into an “aesthetic” ontological project.<sup>7</sup>

Vandavelde next turns to GA 39 (1934) and the artwork essay to explicate other characteristics of Heidegger’s thinking of the period. The 1934 course shows a clear shift from the earlier positioning of *Stimmung* in *Dasein* to its positioning in history, emanating from an inception and determining a *Grund*. The 1936 essay describes the clearing intrinsically as a *Geschehen*, a process or happening. All this gives a different status to things and to works whose mission it is to articulate, through world and earth, the happening of things (139). It is here that the “literary” resurfaces, but now qua *Dichtung*, generalized as a “configuring” which can take various examples as outlets – *one* of which will be poetry (137). (And here the connection to the book’s subtitle, “The Literary Invention of Meaning,” becomes tenuous.) The constitution of the clearing is what can make history, *Geschichte*, and it requires the sought-after “fluid ontology.” Thus, the truth-event does not create the thing, but “configures” it, and in order for there to be such configurables for *Dichtung* to instantiate, then things, peoples, etc., cannot have fixed and determinate identities but a fluctuating status. This finally

brings Vandavelde to what I take to be the most interesting section of the Heidegger part of his book.

According to our author, texts such as the *Beiträge* articulate Heidegger's "new ontology," one which is not relative to Dasein, depending on it as sole condition, but which is nonetheless "in some ways idealistic" (141). Things are related to human beings via the process of unconcealment, but human beings are themselves who they are through that same process. While the latter is an uncontroversial characterization, it is premised on a noteworthy hypothesis. The hypothesis is that in the *Beiträge*, we must distinguish truth from being and then understand being *adjectivally* – not verbally. "To be" now means to enter a state, one called being. Truth is here an independent variable, thus a thing can be unconcealed (in truth) without entering into that state (being). "Entering into" is of course a circumlocution for "becoming," and this is how Vandavelde understands formulations such as becoming being, "*seiend werden*" (GA 65: 293/207). What this articulation opens up for us, is the possibility to address that which has not yet become being (adj.), or is no longer being (adj.), is *unseiend* or *seinlos*, but is disclosed. Many insights, but many questions too, arise with this characterization.

On the one hand, the distinction between being (adj.) and non-being (adj.) means that "[we] can reach a level of description that is not bound to the level of well-delineated entities like things and plunge deeper into the process of becoming by showing that things... are one stage in their unfolding..." (144). And yet this characterization seems to risk returning to a metaphysical sense of being as fixity, in contrast to a dynamic, fluctuating non-being behind the fixed. This new depth-dimension, insofar as it is thinkable, is for Vandavelde a departure from a Platonist dualism that would find no *λόγος* in the sensible flux. Thus he claims that Heidegger's new ontology is distinct from the metaphysical tradition of being/becoming since it opens becoming to discursivity. He elaborates this by reflecting on a distinction in Plato between *οὐκ ὄν* and *μὴ ὄν*. The new unbeing is of the order of the not completely being (*μὴ ὄν*) as opposed to the utterly not being (*οὐκ ὄν*). This "scale" of beingness thus allows of gradations (151) – though not from the sensible to

the intelligible. Herewith, Heidegger would be recuperating something from Plato that destabilizes Platonism. But is the sensible/intelligible the chief mark of metaphysics? Is being/becoming recuperable beyond metaphysics just because it has been freed of vulgar Platonism? How are we then to think the less vulgar Platonism of the Plotinian tradition, as, for example, in Albertus Magnus' theory of flux (Tractate 4 of *De Causis et Processu* . . .) or in the thoroughly metaphysical (though not by virtue of sensible/intelligible) ideas of Baader in *Über Starres und Fliessendes*? None of these thinkers identify becoming with οὐκ ὄν, nor do they think the flux as the sensible. At a first, formal level, the newness of the "new ontology" seems doubtful.

The familiar outlines of the formal account give way when the novel details rooted in Heidegger's conceptions of language, translation and poetry are brought in. But then, when the gradation in being (adj.) is parsed as stretching from machination to preservation (*Bewahrung*), some difficulties emerge. Correlating *seiend* and *unseiend*, or *Wesen* and *Unwesen*, to the degree of preservation is undoubtedly right, but is that not to collapse the degrees of being (adj.) onto degrees of disclosure? This would be the conventional construal of these texts, but then Vanderveelde's dissociation of truth and adjectival being becomes ambiguous, at least to this reader. It becomes harder to understand what is meant by a thing which is true but not yet become being (adj.) (144). Unbeing would seem to have to imply untruth. Nonetheless, it remains the case that Heidegger, in this period, does indeed often speak of beingness in comparatives. If we hold on to the doctrine of gradations of being, we find the missing ontology of Early German Romanticism. The poetic qua reconfiguration, *Dichtung*, with its concomitant structure of preservation, allows us to participate in the *Wahrheitsgeschehen*. The latter also opens a glimpse into the unbeing from which we will then have come, and this will be an insight into the fluidity of beings. What is unique in Heidegger's conception is that language here is not a neutral medium for that process but the unfolding itself (161). The power to configure, inherent in language, renders the unbeing unfamiliar, thus shaking our confidence in fixity and alerting us to the flux.

There is much rich detail in Vandavelde's exemplary book; it is based on solid scholarship and it is full of provocative implications – I have only scratched its surface here. The questions and suggestions that I have brought up are certainly not of the order of criticism, but rather a call for further elaboration. The path that Vandavelde has opened up now calls for being extended. Finally, I would like to underline an important methodological lesson taught to us by *Heidegger and the Romantics*. The predilection of English language Heidegger studies for some time has been overwhelmingly in the direction of what I call “philological positivism.” A philological positivist studies Heidegger's relations to a philosopher only if Heidegger explicitly writes about that philosopher, and only based on exactly those texts that Heidegger mentions and only in light of Heidegger's interpretation thereof. The scholarship thus takes as its point of departure, and as its destination, a positive philological *fact*. So it is that every study of Heidegger and Schelling that I know of in English focuses on the *Freiheitsschrift* – and none on the early Schelling. Every investigation of Heidegger's debt to Jaspers orbits around the former's early “Bemerkungen” (in *Holzwege*) and is limited to elaborating on themes criticized by Heidegger. But is this *Geschichte* or is it *Historie*? Should not *Seinsgeschichte* be capable of being augmented and amplified through reading say, Plotinus, Spinoza or Fichte? Do we not learn something when we relate Heidegger to authors on whose work he did *not* extensively comment?<sup>8</sup> Pol Vandavelde's book, for example, stages a productive philosophical encounter, between Heidegger and Romanticism, in a register other than that of *actual* historicist fact. We can be grateful to the author for having set an example, in English, of that which is *possible*.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 See, for example, Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and Andrzej Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation: Hölderlin, Hegel, Heidegger* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- 2 Vandavelde illustrates that confrontation and examines the question of translation by comparing 50 different translations of a passage of the *Odyssey* in his *The Task of the Interpreter: Text, Meaning and Negotiation* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 79–95.
- 3 See Walter Jaeschke's introduction to *Früher Idealismus und Frühromantik: der Streit um die Grundlagen der Ästhetik (1795–1805)*, two volumes (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990, 1995).
- 4 All numbers in parentheses refer to the pages of *Heidegger and the Romantics*, with references to any other literature confined to the notes.
- 5 See, for example, Rodolphe Gasché's foreword to Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), vii–xxxii.
- 6 Vandavelde notes marginally that this term is used in a different way by Schelling (35). But it would seem to us to be closer than he thinks, especially in the *Philosophy of Art*. There, the real and the ideal, philosophy and art are related as potencies of each other.
- 7 See Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger and The Politics of Poetry*, translated with an introduction by Jeff Fort (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
- 8 See, for example, Jean-Marc Narbonne, *Hénologie, Ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin, Proclus, Heidegger)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001).