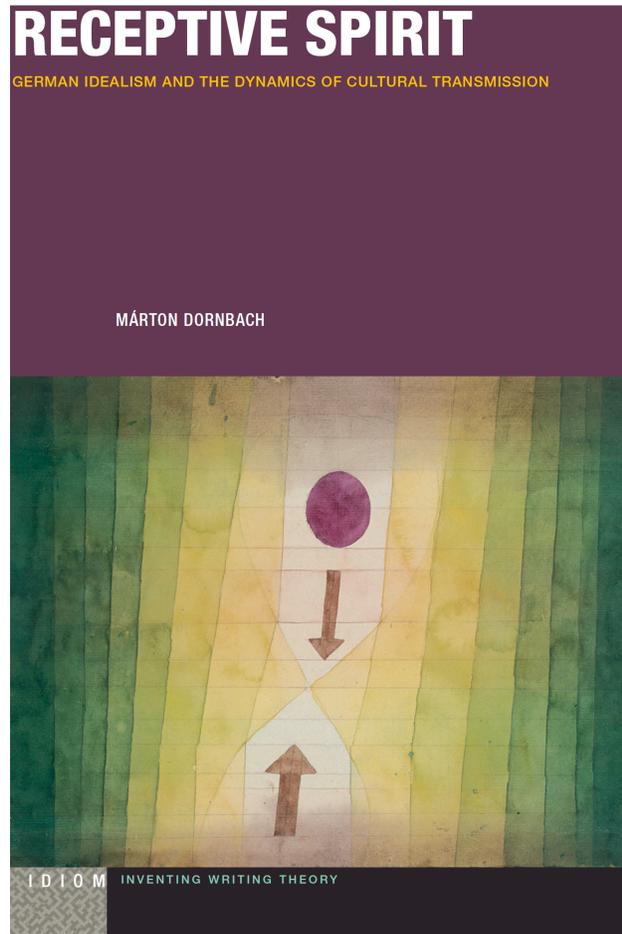


Synopsis of *Receptive Spirit: German Idealism and the Dynamics of Cultural Transmission*  
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## CONTENTS

Introduction: Idealism and Finitude	1
<i>Catching Then Becomes a Power, 1 • The Kantian Premises, 11 • Hegel's Critique of Kant, 20 • Gadamer's Reversal of Hegel, 24</i>	
1 Kant on the Formation of Taste	31
<i>The Quarrel Continued, 31 • Most in Need of Examples, 38 • The Ideal of Beauty, 49 • Exemplary Objects and the Artificiality of Taste, 59 • The Centrality of Art, 68 • Succession and Practical Criticism, 76</i>	
2 Kantian Revisionism and Revisionist Kantianism	90
<i>Kant on Better Understanding, 90 • Fichte as Explicator of Kant, 97 • Originality Disowned, 105</i>	
3 Esoteric Enlightenment in Fichte	110
<i>Choosing to Be Free, 110 • The Fichtean Experiment, 118 • Transcendental Pedagogy, 131</i>	
4 Friedrich Schlegel on Textual Communication	140
<i>Schlegel on the Spirit of Fichte's Philosophy, 140 • Constructed Readers, 149 • Confused Authors, 153 • Characterization, 161 • Between Inspired and Methodical Reading, 169</i>	
5 Exoteric Enlightenment in Hegel	173
<i>Dialogue and Dialectics, 173 • Language as Universal Infection, 176 • The Voices of the Phenomenology, 186</i>	
Conclusion: The Afterlife of a Distinction	191
<i>A Glance Back and a Question, 191 • McDowell On Second Nature, 193 • The Last Distinction, 200 • The Unavailability of Reconciliation, 209</i>	
Acknowledgments	213
Notes	215
Bibliography	271
Index	285

## Short Summary

*Receptive Spirit* develops the thesis that the notion of self-induced mental activity at the heart of German idealism necessitated a radical rethinking of humans' dependence on culturally transmitted models of thought, evaluation, and creativity. The chapters of the book examine paradigmatic attempts undertaken by German idealist thinkers to reconcile spontaneous mental activity with receptivity to culturally transmitted models. The book maps the ramifications of this problematic in Kant's theory of aesthetic experience, Fichte's and Hegel's views on the historical character of philosophy, the Fichtean model of philosophical communication, and Friedrich Schlegel's theory and practice of literary communication and criticism. Drawing on Gadamer and McDowell, I argue that the conceptual framework established by the Idealists remains indispensable for orientation in the contemporary intellectual landscape. (See below for chapter outline)

## **Introduction**

I outline the stakes of my argument by considering a little-discussed paratext in Hans-Georg Gadamer's influential grounding of philosophical hermeneutics: namely, the allegory of receptivity in the untitled poem by Rilke from which Gadamer borrows the epigraph to *Truth and Method*. Gadamer's tendentiously incomplete quotation of the poem dramatizes the tension between receptive openness towards an authoritative prior text and the principle of self-determining thought. Given that, as I argue, the central motif of the poem can be traced back to the Idealist context, Gadamer's truncated quotation of the poem highlights the tension between the Idealist legacy and the receptivity of hermeneutic experience. In order to delineate the conceptual space within which my chapters will move, I outline three paradigmatic positions: the Kantian account of knowledge as a conjunction of sensible receptivity and spontaneous thought, Hegel's critique of the presupposition of finitude underlying the Kantian model, and Gadamer's reversal of Hegel in the name of hermeneutic experience.

## **Chapter One: Kant On the Formation of Taste**

Against the backdrop of 18th-century repercussions of the "Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns," the chapter clarifies the considerations motivating Kant's claim that of all faculties taste is most strongly dependent upon historically transmitted examples. Central to Kant's aesthetics is a dialectic of nature and culture that entails a complementarity between a model of taste rooted in nature, which Kant calls the "ideal of beauty," and classic works of art. Based on an analysis of Kant's understanding of the "exemplary" necessity of judgments of taste, I argue for the centrality of art to Kant's account of the formation of taste. On this basis, I claim that a rich conception of practical criticism can be recovered from Kant's aesthetics. My argument thus counters a scholarly tradition that takes Kant's claims about the primacy of natural beauty at face value. This alternative interpretation of Kant's aesthetics helps explain its impact on such successors as Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling and Hegel, and allows us to locate Kant's thinking at the juncture of Classicism and Romanticism.

## **Chapter Two: Kantian Revisionism and Revisionist Kantianism**

Although Kant often asserts that philosophy is ahistorical, his recourse in several key passages to the overlapping distinctions between letter and spirit and between imitation and emulation suggests otherwise. In fact, Kant's claim that one may understand an author better than he understood himself furnished Kant's successors with a hermeneutic justification for presenting genuinely new conceptions as explications of insights that had remained implicit in Kant's works. As a result, the idealist reception of Kant is characterized by a tension between indebtedness and departure.

## **Chapter Three: Esoteric Enlightenment in Fichte**

Endemic to the Enlightenment project is a pedagogical quandary identified by Rousseau, Diderot, and Hamann: how can independent thought be induced from outside, by another? This difficulty is exacerbated by the consequences of Kant's claim that insight into the metaphysical character of the subject requires an exercise of moral freedom. In the experiment of self-construction that Fichte's

readers are urged to perform, the foundational role of freedom opens up an abyss of incomprehension between the dogmatic standpoint of ordinary consciousness and the standpoint of transcendental idealism. By examining Fichte's reflections on his authorial stance, I argue that his understanding of philosophical practice results in a form of esotericism.

#### **Chapter Four: Friedrich Schlegel On Textual Communication**

The aspiration to avoid Fichtean esotericism was central to Friedrich Schlegel's work in his early Romantic period. Responding to Fichte, Schlegel outlines a dynamic model of interaction that affirms the indeterminacy of writing and moves between the extremes of transformative reception and free construction. In this model, the author aims at transforming his reader, who in her turn is invested with the freedom to understand the author better than he himself. Schlegel's vision of critical reading turns on the imperative of "constructing" the form of confusion peculiar to an author. The chapter argues that literary criticism as envisioned by Schlegel makes inferences regarding the author secondary to consideration of the work, yet remains sensitive to the author's individuality. The relevant dimension of individuality is, however, articulated in language and so not accessible through psychological conjectures.

#### **Chapter Five: Exoteric Enlightenment in Hegel**

Schlegel's response to Fichte decided the ancient contest between "Socratic" dialogism and a monological, "Platonic" dialectics in favor of the former. Countering the reductive view of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an instance of monological dialectics, I construe the *Phenomenology* as an attempt at avoiding both Fichtean esotericism and the Schlegelian celebration of dialogical openness. Crucial to Hegel's exoteric introduction to speculative insight is his conception of language as a medium of the dialectic of self-recognition and self-estrangement that drives the education of Spirit. The project of the *Phenomenology* is undoubtedly monological inasmuch as it is underwritten by the authoritative standpoint of absolute knowledge, which recognizes no external constraint on the activity of Spirit. The actualization of this project nevertheless requires Spirit to remain receptive towards the diverse linguistic forms characteristic of its earlier, alienated shapes.

#### **Conclusion: The Afterlife of a Distinction**

The preceding chapters have shown that the Kantian duality of receptivity and spontaneity recurs in post-Kantian idealists' reflections on cultural transmission. In view of this persistence, it is necessary to ask if the Kantian duality still remains relevant to the contemporary situation. I address this question by examining John McDowell's recent revival of Kantian and Hegelian insights, and in particular the idea of second nature that underwrites McDowell's attempted reconciliation of spontaneity with the culturally transmitted character of the norms constitutive of thought. This reconciliation raises the question of why McDowell stops short of doing away with the very distinction between spontaneity and receptivity. I argue that an abandonment of the Kantian distinction is precluded by the modern predicament, which is defined by an inevitably conflicted stance towards the cultural past.