



PROJECT MUSE®

---

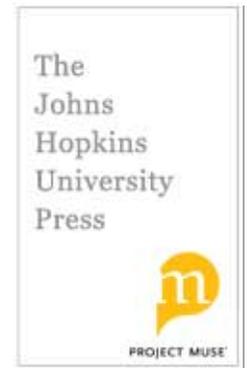
Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency (review)

Michael Baur

Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 41, Number 1, January 2003,  
pp. 134-135 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2002.0092>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/37603>

These remarks only scratch the surface of this interesting debate and the valuable contributions that are included in this volume. The editors have done an excellent job of choosing and presenting some of the more important papers on this subject. The volume contains a useful bibliography and a citation index. (The bibliography is fairly comprehensive, although there are a few gaps, such as Robert F. Anderson's *Hume's First Principles* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966], a study that anticipates some important aspects of the "new Hume" doctrine.) There is also a helpful introduction, written by Richman, which provides a synopsis of the individual papers in this volume. A few important contributions are not included in the collection itself: papers by Justin Broackes, Janet Broughton, and Michael Costa would be high on my list. Nevertheless, all the papers that are included are well worthwhile and serve the editors' stated aim in their Preface, which is to offer "insights not only into the most difficult issues of the interpretation of some of Western philosophy's most vital texts, but also into an absolutely central example of the relevance of the philosophical history of philosophy to contemporary philosophy, in . . . accessible form."

PAUL RUSSELL

*University of British Columbia*

Allen Speight. *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xii + 154. Cloth, \$54.95. Paper, \$18.95.

Hegel's notorious use of literary references in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* has been a source of numerous interpretive difficulties, sparking disagreements not only about the actual referents of Hegel's literary allusions, but also—and more importantly—about the meaning and purpose of such allusions. In this insightful, highly readable new book, Allen Speight challenges the stale orthodoxies that have pitted the *Phenomenology's* systematic/philosophical readers against its literary/historical ones, and offers an innovative interpretation that takes seriously the work's literary structure and allusions, while also giving due consideration to its systematic philosophical aims. Combining the rich sensibility of a literary mind with the careful rigor of a philosophical mind, Speight deftly shows how Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a work whose very aim, in part, is to transcend the traditional, but often limiting, dichotomy between philosophy and literature.

As Speight explains it, the general purpose of this book is to make "a contribution to understanding the philosophical project of the *Phenomenology* and why that project requires Hegel's appropriation of literary works and forms as it does" (9–10). The book's philosophical point of departure is the critical mass of recent scholarship that sees Hegel's epistemological task in the *Phenomenology* as essentially Sellarsian in its critique of the "Myth of the Given." For Speight, the Hegelian critique of the myth of the given implies that all knowledge claims are essentially corrigible and socially mediated, and this implies—in turn—that any attempt to draw rigid lines of demarcation between a purely "systematic" and a purely "historical" or "anthropological" approach to philosophy and its problems must ultimately fail. From this interpretive vantage point, Speight holds, a strong case can be made for the essentially *literary* character of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and the essentially *philosophical* purpose of his literary allusions. As Speight is careful to acknowledge, his own distinctive approach to the *Phenomenology* is not meant to rule out other, divergent emphases or interpretations, but only to provide "a way of better understanding the role that literature plays within the philosophical enterprise of the work as a whole" (18).

Speight begins to deliver the details of his promised "better way" by investigating what he calls the "literary turn" or the seemingly sudden "eruption of the literary" that starts to motivate the *Phenomenology's* transition from the section on "Reason" to the section on "Spirit." For Speight, the shapes of Active Reason that are crucial in this transition begin to raise a new set of problems concerning human agency. Furthermore, it is not at all a coincidence that Hegel's heightened concern with agency at this juncture of the *Phenomenology*

is accompanied by an unmistakable burst of literary references. Rather, it is an indicator of Hegel's careful, deliberate, and self-conscious strategy of using literature to make a *philosophical* point about agency, since it is *literature*—according to Speight's Hegel—that gives us privileged access to the philosophical problems of agency and their potential resolution.

For Speight, Hegel's use of tragedy gives us special insight into the *retrospectivity* of all human action; his use of comedy points to the *theatricality* (or what we might call the socially mediated expressivity) of all human action; and his use of the romantic novel points to the necessity (and eventually opens up the possibility) of the *forgiveness* implied by all human action. While Hegel had already made use of both tragedy and comedy in the Reason section of the *Phenomenology*, it is only in the Spirit section, Speight argues, that these literary-philosophical shapes are taken up (e.g., in *Antigone* and *Rameau's Nephew*) in a historically self-conscious way that can lead (via the "beautiful soul" novel) to the possibility of forgiveness and thereby instigate the transition to the Religion section.

Speight's "better way" allows him to make better sense (and in many cases, make sense where none has been made before) of the seemingly strange, strained literary references that abound in the *Phenomenology*. In particular, it leads him to some groundbreaking exegetical work on Hegel's often-misunderstood references to Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* and the beautiful soul novels of the period. Some more system-minded Hegelians may fault Speight for presupposing—but not explicitly arguing for—an approach that regards the *Phenomenology* as an extended critique of the myth of the given. Conversely, some deconstructive readers may criticize Speight for assuring us—but not actually showing us—how his *Phenomenology* interpretation is genuinely open to divergent approaches. But such criticisms would be unfair, for Speight has successfully delivered on all that he has promised in this relatively compact volume. Furthermore, these two opposing criticisms point to a positive observation that many of this book's readers will surely endorse: namely, that it will be rewarding to hear more from Speight in the future about the presuppositions and implications of the rich and suggestive perspective he has opened up for us.

MICHAEL BAUR

Fordham University

Alastair Hannay. *Kierkegaard: A Biography*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xvi + 496. Cloth, \$39.95.

In the opening pages of this carefully crafted biography, Hannay states that he has no intention of making matters easy for his reader. By this, he means that "final judgments" will not be forthcoming on a number of key issues surrounding Kierkegaard and his works: the nature of his relation to Christianity, the motives leading him to collide with *The Corsair*, and the meaning and wisdom of his final attack on Bishop Jakob Mynster and the established Danish Church. This is not to say that Hannay presents Kierkegaard either through rose-colored lenses or through narrowly intellectualist ones. Indeed, one of the book's central virtues is that it combines a philosopher's long-standing interest in Kierkegaard's writings with other guiding passions: a fascination with the sources of human creativity, the twists and turns of nineteenth-century European intellectual history, and the drama of one man's sustained grappling with the meaning of (his) life and the degree to which this meaning could be forged and sustained in his own writing.

Hannay raises the curtain on Kierkegaard's life at the intellectual debut of the latter. In his first public appearance before the Student Union at the University of Copenhagen, Kierkegaard took issue with a student colleague's espousal of liberal reform. Hannay sees in Kierkegaard's performance signs of things to come: (1) the attempt to gain the notice and approval of the leading cultural lights, such as Danish literary icon Johan Ludvig Heiberg, and (2) a habit of seeking unity and definition through opposition and controversy. In his subsequent discussion of *Fear and Trembling*, Hannay notes the inescapable fact that Kierkegaard's philosophic positions are often tailor-made justifications for his private