

Idealism and Hermeneutics
Festschrift in Honour of István M. Fehér*
– Review –

Cecília LIPPAI
Central European University, Budapest

Keywords: Festschrift – István M. Fehér, Idealism, Hermeneutics, Hungarian Philosophy

E-mail: lippai_cecilia@yahoo.com

*

István M. Fehér is one of the leading figures of Hungarian philosophy who has had a great influence on a number of philosophers – this volume honours his philosophical accomplishments on his 60th birthday.

István M. Fehér was born in 1950 in Budapest; he studied English, Italian and philosophy at Eötvös Loránd University Budapest, Faculty of Humanities. He has been teaching at the same university since 1977, but also at Miskolc University, József Attila University Szeged, Pázmány Péter Catholic University and the prestigious Humboldt University in Berlin. He has done research and given lectures in Rome, Messina, Bologna, Sienna, Naples, Bochum, München, and Virginia. His field of interest and research includes German Idealism, existentialism, hermeneutics and phenomenology, the philosophies of Lukács, Schelling, Kant, Sartre, Heidegger and Gadamer, and many others. He has written and edited a great number of books in Hungarian and German (including two books and one translation with commentary on Heidegger, books on Sartre, Husserl, and Hungarian philosophy), participated in more than 150 conferences and published an impressive amount of studies, articles and commentaries in several languages. He is a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the president of the Hermeneutical Section of the Hungarian Philosophical Association, and the editor of several philosophical journals. In 2000 he received Széchenyi Award for his scientific activities.

The editor, Csaba Olay, who was himself a student of Fehér's, chose to include in this volume a list of Fehér's publications, with topics ranging from the history of philosophy to the history of culture, from metaphysics to hermeneutics, from positivism to fundamental ontology, and so on, which makes it much easier to understand why the volume contains such an assortment of articles dealing with topics from German Idealism to Orthodox iconography. In his introduction, Olay emphasizes the importance of István M. Fehér's place in Hungarian culture and philosophy, and that the volume is not supposed to be a presentation of Fehér's work, but a reflection on his influence and a friendly honouring from those who believe that their own philosophical thinking was inspired by him. To this point he also provides the reader with an important note on the

* *Idealizmus és hermeneutika – Tanulmányok Fehér M. István hatvanadik születésnapjára*, szerk. Olay Csaba, Budapest. L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2010, 448 pp. ISBN 978-963-236-314-1

selection of contributors, which was in part made by consulting the man that they honour with this collection.

Consequently, although there are only six direct references to Fehér's texts in the entire volume, the contributors to this Festschrift testify to the far-reaching and thematically varied effects of Fehér's work and, I think it is important to note in this case, charisma as a teacher. One can tell just by reading these essays that it is not only his intellectual erudition, but also his overall attitude and commitment to philosophy and teaching that has proved to be an inspiration for his students and colleagues. To understand what this means, one can go to an interview published on the official website of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, to find Fehér quoting both from letters of Gadamer addressed to him, as well as from a student who appreciated his university lectures on German Idealism, considering the latter as one of his main accomplishments as a philosopher.¹

Reviewing a Festschrift is never an easy task. As usual in such a volume, contributions are quite diversified regarding the content of their papers, which makes it difficult for a reviewer to produce a balanced and appropriate account for all of them. But although the essays included here display large thematic variations, it would nevertheless be possible to approach them from one particular point of view, namely István M. Fehér's often stressed contention that philosophy has undergone a hermeneutic turn in the 20th century. This implies that "interpretation is no more seen as an auxiliary discipline of human sciences as the rules of interpretation of classical texts, (...) rather, it emerges as an autonomous philosophical stance" which leads to "an overall hermeneutic reconception of philosophy."² Surely, this does not mean that all of the authors and papers in this volume deal with specific hermeneutical topics or texts, or that they all reflect on the hermeneutic tradition, but that the conceptual strategies and linguistic devices employed show that philosophy itself has gained a hermeneutical self-awareness. As Fehér puts it: "The hermeneutical reflection has nowadays become, in a very broad sense, a kind of *medium*, or element, of philosophy – an analytical device, as it were – which has a diffuse presence permeating the most various branches and fields of philosophical activity."³ This means that even texts that are not straight-forwardly hermeneutical are nevertheless hermeneutical in "spirit" and overall attitude to the topics they approach.

The other possible melting point of the essays is the central principle in all of István M. Fehér's work: openness of thought and the ever-sustained effort towards fusing our horizons, i.e. understanding differences. In this context, the collection can be read as a philosophical dialogue of thinkers preoccupied with many different questions, coming from sometimes very varied philosophical backgrounds but with an openness that makes it possible for the different themes to come into play.

The first chapter of the volume is entitled *Idealism – and Its Catchment Area* and it includes four essays. The first one, Erzsébet Rózsa's *The Mediocre as a Tragic Element. Hegel's Antique and Modern Antigone in The Phenomenology of Spirit*, sets out to reconstruct and analyze the development of gender roles in Hegel's thought, as

¹http://www.mta.hu/index.php?id=634&no_cache=1&backPid=645&begin_at=10&swords=ny%E9dr&tt_news=5286&cHash=045d342a41

² Fehér M. István, "Heidegger and the Hermeneutic Turn of Philosophy", *Kellék* 11–12 (1998): 7–22, 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

represented by two possible interpretations of Antigone's emblematic figure. The world in which Antigone lived is one of a pure morality (this is the source of tragedy) which is destined to fail. In opposition, the new, modern world of a more realistic morality seems to become the ground of such mediocrity of character that results in another kind of tragic element, one that Hegel coins almost exclusively in negative terms. Antigone represents precisely this shift, the loss of pure morality and emergence of modern mediocrity, which, for Hegel, is also a shift in the role of women in the moral order. Some of Hegel's views might seem sexist for the contemporary reader, but the author argues that his views on womanhood and the role of women in society shows a growth in the positive direction and a progress from *The Phenomenology of Spirit* towards *Philosophy of Law*.

The next author, János Weiss, focuses on Schelling, analyzing how he reformulated and re-interpreted the notion of theosophy. The main argument of the essay is that the leading thread of this reformulation was based on a pluralistic meaning of the concept of will, and also, the importance of Spinoza's influence on the overall theosophical stance adopted by Schelling. (János Weiss: *The Concept of Will in Schelling's Theosophical Program*)

Zoltán Gyenge, in his *Forms and Possibilities of Expression in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard* brings attention once more to the innovative form of Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's writings (basing his analysis mainly on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Either/Or*). Gyenge argues that their style can be linked back to the sophists (through the recognition of the importance of the spoken word and the attempt to capture it in writing) and considered a rhetorical form which Gyenge calls a "mono-dialogue." However, he insists, the aim of using a dialogical form is not to simulate a real dialogue, but to be able to put into play many different points of view within the same text, to confront arguments, and in general, to provide as much openness and freedom of thought as possible. So the goal of both authors analyzed in this essay was to capture the plurality of aspects inherent in any philosophical topic, to urge openness and promote playfulness of thought.

The last essay in this chapter also deals with Nietzsche, more precisely with the question of whether or why the genealogical analysis of morality is developed by Nietzsche within the frame provided by two other questions: the problem of self-identity and that of the ultimate meaning of man's existence. In spite of the fact that some of Nietzsche's arguments are put forward from a biological, psychological and/or sociological point of view, the author of this essay argues that it is the metaphysical-historical perspective and reading that would bring us closer to understand how for Nietzsche the question of morality is ultimately linked to that of the overall meaning of human existence. This "metaphysical" reading is opposed to those considering Nietzsche's genealogy as lacking internal consistency (Foucault). The two possible readings result in two alternative "stories": one naturalist, biological and psychological, in which the animal called man was sickened by morality and is in need of therapy, and the other metaphysical-historical in which all life is determined by the will to power, and genealogy of morals builds an utopia in which *Übermensch* shall rise above fake morality. In the last part of the paper we are faced with the possibility of re-telling Nietzsche's "stories" from the point of view of hermeneutical phenomenology. (Tibor Schwendtner: *Nietzsche's genealogy*)

The second chapter of the volume, *Arts and Culture* also includes four papers: one overarching and detailed study on the history of the science of culture, one focused analysis on an early Ortega y Gasset text, and two very different papers relating to Dante. Ernő Kulcsár Szabó's *Culture-Myth-Language. On the Origin of the Science of Culture* offers an interesting overview of the emergence and development of cultural studies, starting from the initial, grounding realization of the 18th century that the world surrounding us is not entirely a result of "nature" or "creation", but includes a dimension created by man himself and this latter is in many senses the "real" place or world of humans. Kulcsár Szabó goes on to reconstruct and reflect on the main stations of the development of cultural studies, from Vico through Herder and Kant to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Gadamer. The study is clearly situated within the horizon of Fehér's contention about the so called hermeneutical turn of thought, as it analyzes the importance of this turn in the history of cultural studies, offering, all in all, a brief but comprehensive history of this science, which will undeniably be seen as both a powerful tool for research scholars interested in cultural studies, as well as a pleasant and interesting introduction for anybody interested in the topic.

The next essay starts with a wonderful poem-dedication to Fehér by one of the authors, Anikó Juhász, who together with Dezső Csejtei will go on to analyze Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Don Quixote* from a hermeneutical point of view (and thus intentionally going against the established, rather one-sided phenomenological reading) and argue that it anticipated the strong connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics later formulated by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, namely that hermeneutics is not an exterior factor linked to phenomenology as it were from the outside, but that the meaning which we aim for with the phenomenological method is such that it always already carries within an interpretative dimension. The methodological tool of phenomenological description is interpretation, says Heidegger, and the two authors of this essay argue that this idea is, although not explicitly, but somewhat „instinctively”, present in Ortega y Gasset's thought thirteen years before the publication of *Being and Time*. (Dezső Csejtei – Anikó Juhász: *The Cloth of the World and the Hermeneutical Parcae. Hermeneutical Elements in One of Ortega Y Gasset's Early Aesthetic Writings*)

In the first of two essays dedicated to Dante, János Kelemen thoroughly analyses the relationships and possible interplays of Dante the character, Dante the storyteller (within the *Divine Comedy*) and Dante the empirical author, arguing that Dante's multiple incarnations represent a turn in the history of Western theories of personality. It is the first time that the author-storyteller becomes a character in his own right, whose inner state reflects all that is happening in the story. This was not only a poetic innovation, but an important moment in the history of personality, as it documents the first emergence of the question concerning self-identity, and exemplifies the continuity of personality throughout important changes, some even considered essential by later theorists, such as the complete loss of memory. The main thesis of this essay is that the identity of the character Dante and the storyteller Dante, the Dante travelling through the world of the dead and the living Dante is provided by a *normative continuity*, i.e. the didactic task of handing down the story as a means of teaching others through re-telling one's own experiences. (János Kelemen: *The Implicit Author's Incarnations in the Divine Comedy*).

Next, Judit Bárdos's *Dante on Film* is a brief consideration of Dante's influence (to be more precise, the influence of Dante's *Hell*) in film history, from the early 1911 film of Giuseppe de Liguoro (*L'inferno*), to Peter Greenaway's multimedia TV series (*A TV Dante*), and also, in a Polish film which is not an adaptation, but one of the works clearly inspired by Dante's visions of hell: Andrzej Wajda's 1957 film, *Kanal*.

The theology-chapter of the volume is the shortest, as it includes only two essays: Kristóf Nyíri J.'s *Images in Natural Theology* and Csaba László Gáspár's *Icon and Image. A Philosophical-Theological Outline*. The first one is an attempt to give a schematic overview of the ways in which images function in natural religion, and also, a reaction to George Pattison's *Art, Modernity and Faith* and a tackle on Étienne Gilson's claim that raised a few eyebrows, namely that all truly creative art is religious. The second essay analyzes the particular ways in which icons fulfil their pious purpose by contrasting seemingly static and austere eastern orthodox icons and western (Catholic) images in churches, to conclude that icons are more than images, they are the testimonies of the saint and of the event of incarnation.

The next chapter is called *Hermeneutics* and starts with a touching personal dedication and expression of gratitude towards Fehér, in which Gábor Boros credits him for his own philosophical formation. In his essay, *Building a Bridge. Gadamer, Caputo, and de Sousa*, Boros offers a detailed and "sensitive" insight into the possible connections between traditional philosophical ethics, hermeneutical practical philosophy and contemporary Anglo-American ethics, from the point of view of the role and importance of emotions in the development of one's personality and in the motivations of one's actions. The tentative conclusion of the paper is that an adequately interpreted notion of *phronesis* could be considered as the correct rational attitude of dealing with shifting and changing emotions in an ethical context.

Miklós Nyíró's *Gadamer about Being and Time* reconstructs Gadamer's reading and interpretation of Heidegger's work, from a seemingly arbitrary theological perspective. The leading thread of interpretation is a Heidegger quote about serving faith through philosophy (expressed in a letter at a young age). Gadamer's main contention was that *Being and Time* failed as it still moved within the logic of transcendental foundationalism, while in his later works, with leaving behind the initial focus on *Dasein*, Heidegger gradually recognized and acknowledged the role of the concealment inherent in *Being*, which took him closer to his alleged aim to serve faith through philosophy.

The next essay is *Art and Hermeneutics in Gadamer's Thought* by Csaba Olay, a detailed reconstruction and commentary on Gadamer's complex view on art, with important focus on the references of this view to such Platonic and Aristotelian notions as *anamnesis* and *mimesis*. We also get a brief consideration of the shift from *Truth and Method*, where art is considered the representation of the world, to later writings, where art represents some kind of order, and, in the last part of the paper, a comprehensive analysis of the notion and role of reading in Gadamer's philosophy.

The last chapter of the volume includes three essays that did not and could not fit in any of the previous thematic categories. István Király V.'s *Illness as the Possibility of the Living. Prolegomena to the Philosophy of Human Illness* takes up the challenge of thinking about illness in a way committed to philosophical depth and with uncompromising radicalism that refuses any of the available and popular ways of explaining illness "away". Király argues that illness is the inherent possibility of the

being of all living creatures, and after a brief outlook and critique on the Christian view on illness and medicine, turns to Aristotle's accounts of possibility, which – when thoroughly understood – show that more than a mere non-actuality, possibility belongs to the essence of any being, and so illness as a possibility, although it can be said to be a privation of health, is never a mere privation. As a conclusion, illness emerges as our most personal possibility that re-organizes our way of life and thought, by bringing us face to face with our being as a whole, i.e. with our mortality.

Ildikó Veres's essay, *Deficiency and Fullness of Being. Dilemmas and Solutions in Hungarian Philosophical Thinking* sets out to present the concepts of deficiency, wholeness and "not true", as well as the problematic notions of the sings of the Absolute in the thought of recognized figures of Hungarian philosophy, such as Károly Böhm, Béla Hamvas, Béla Varga, Sándor Makkai, Béla Brandenstein and József Révay. In reality, the paper is an inventory of theories of deficiency of being confronted with theories of (mainly Christian) morality, presented in a loosely related manner.

The last essay of this volume, László Bognár's *The Beginning and the First (Aristotle, Physics, Book VI.). Meditation about a Natural Philosophical Text from the Point of View of the Philosophy of History and Narratology* aims to show the possibility of applying Aristotle's proof that there is no first or last moment of change (movement) to the hermeneutical contention that there never is a first or a last word.

In conclusion, for the variety of topics covered, as well as the quality of the papers, this volume can be recommended not only for those familiar with István M. Fehér's work, or, indeed, philosophy, but also as providing an interesting glance into current Hungarian philosophical thinking.

First and foremost, of course, this collection of essays is an excellent witness to the influence of István M. Fehér's thinking in Hungarian philosophy. Let's hope that we will have much more of his work in the future!

**A Crusade... With and Without a Cross
– A Review-like Essay on the Hungarian edition of Florina Ilis's Novel¹ –**

István KIRÁLY V.
Faculty of History and Philosophy
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj

Keywords: Contemporary Romanian Literature, Ilis, Florina – Romanian Novelist, translation

E-mail: philobib@bcucluj.ro

*

There might be some who find it "relaxing", or, what's more, even hopeful that in our shallow and uninspired age of philosophizing – as the "philosophy" increasingly cultivated nowadays as a "profession", a "craft" is nothing else than a dilettante **"professionalism" without a thinker** – well, in this age there might be some who find it relaxing that the arts and literature, at least at their best, keep on doing their respective

¹ Florina Ilis, *Gyerekek háborúja* (Children's War), (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2009), 566 pp.