

**Language and German Idealism, Fichte's Linguistic Philosophy,
by Jere Paul Surber, Englewood Cliffs, N.Y.: Humanities Press,
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ACHIM KÖDDERMANN*

Jere Paul Surber's book consists of a section giving a philosophical reconstruction of Fichte's philosophy of language in the context of German Idealism and a second section providing translations of some relevant texts from Fichte's works. The first part of the volume offers a new interpretation of Fichte's work on language. In ten chapters, Surber examines the content and results of Fichtean Semiotics and Linguistics. The second part offers translations that will enable the reader to judge the adequacy of this interpretation for him-/herself. The book examines a period in Germany philosophy that has not only remained largely unknown in the English-speaking world but has also been greatly neglected even by those concerned with German Idealism or Romanticism. The book covers the last two decades of the eighteenth century and deals with the time between Kant and Hegel. Commonly, this period is explained either in terms of Kant's Critical or Hegel's Dialectical Philosophy.¹ However, since neither of these thinkers emphasized linguistic issues, it was thought that Idealism did not have a philosophy of language. The traditional understanding of the matter was that there were pre-Idealist philosophical discussions of the origin and nature of languages in the works of Rousseau,² Condillac and, most important of all, Herder. These developments in the philosophy of language were only revived in the first decades of the nineteenth century with Wilhelm von Humboldt's «Comparative Linguistics,» which in fact contains many elements of Kant's Critical Philosophy. Surber's book promises, through his analysis and translation of Fichte, to offer the «first 'dedicated' study of linguistic issues in the German idealist tradition.»

In the context of the on-going debate about German Idealism in the Anglo-American context,³ the emphasis on Fichte's Linguistic Philosophy could help close a gap in an important academic field. Fichte's philosophy in general is even now often seen merely as a step on the way from Kant

* State University of New York. Philosophy Department. Oneonta, New York 13820-4015. USA.

1 See Hermann J. Cloeren, «The Neglected Analytical Heritage», in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36 (1975), pp. 513-529.

2 Crucial are both the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755) and the posthumously published (1781) *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, both written around the year 1755. Surber's book establishes both the earlier context and the later results of Fichte's work.

3 See for example the collection by Joachim Gessinger and Wolfert von Rahde, *Theorien vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Berlin/New York, 1989, which gives a decent amount of space to Fichte's essay. Typical in its neglect of Fichte is Hermann J. Cloeren's otherwise recommendable book, *Language and Thought German Approaches to Analytic Philosophy in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Berlin/New York, 1988). This neglect is so typical that analytical philosophy is dedicated mainly to science and technique, and Fichte, as a non-empiricist philosopher, is simply fit neither to serve as its predecessor nor its antagonist. «The Refutation of Idealism» in 1903 by G. E. Moore was directed against Hegel and left Fichte aside.

to Hegel. Fichte's philosophy of language, which is still crucial for an understanding of current trends such as semiotics and deconstruction, in particular lacks the wide recognition it deserves. The focus on Fichte and his central place in the development of both German Idealism and Romanticism is important for two reasons: first, because the Romanticism/Idealism distinction appears in a new light, and second because it is henceforth possible to understand the Fichtean roots of parts of contemporary and modern philosophy. Major recent publications in the field of the «origin of language», conducted mainly in the German context, have shed a new light on the debate about the origin of language. However, they still lack wide recognition in the Anglo-American context. Whereas Hegel and Kant became an integral part of non-continental philosophy, Fichte's studies, against which Hegel wrote his «Differenzschrift», are still widely underestimated. New efforts by the Fichte society —and, especially Daniel Breazeale's edition and translation of *Fichte: Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy* (Cornell U.P. 1992)— could help to place Fichte's contribution to philosophy in its proper place. The present, well-documented publication by Surber is well-timed to join this general trend toward the appreciation of the contributions of Fichte. The strength of Surber's study is that it demonstrates that Fichte's point that thought is basically linguistic is important not just to Fichte's time. Indeed, Surber successfully places Fichte's work into the complex context of German Idealism and relates it to questions of contemporary relevance. As happened with the re-discovery of Dilthey through Rudolf A. Makkreel's holistic re-interpretation of his work, this book too could give new impulses to international discussions on the philosophy of language.⁴

The book offers to the reader the possibility for further independent research. First, it provides an overview of the philosophical situation of the time and helps to establish the context by showing personal and theoretical links between the philosophical currents and personalities that influenced or were influenced by Fichte. The personal relationships between Bernhardt, W. v. Humboldt, Platner, and others are successfully described and contribute to a better understanding of Fichte and his context. From a somewhat broader perspective, the «excursus on writing», which leads from Rousseau to Herder and then to modern linguistics, may help to reopen the discussion about the «Ursprache» in a modern semiotical context. Fichte's merit was to have pointed out the importance of language as a necessary medium of thought, to have investigated how texts (re)produce alleged meanings, and to have examined the role of the written text as a carrier of meaning. It helps to place Fichte's work in its proper historical and contemporary context.

Second, it provides the English reader with an excellent translation of crucial texts. These include Fichte's, (in Surber's word) «strange» new essay, «Concerning the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language» («Von der Sprachfähigkeit und dem Ursprung der Sprache,» 1795) and F. K. Forberg's review of this article, which appeared in a later issue of the same journal. It also includes a selection of relevant passages from the *Handwritten Manuscripts Concerning Language* as well as selections from Ernst Platner's *Philosophical Aphorisms*, which might have directed Fichte's interests toward linguistic issues.

Throughout the book, the education of the author at the hands of one of the last neo-Kantian, Gottfried Martin, can be felt. Although the author wrote his dissertation on Hegel, he successfully resists the temptation to adopt the latter's views. The common Hegelian approach, however valuable, omits the fact that the Fichtean philosophy is more than a mere stepping stone on the way from Kant to Hegel. Surber interprets Fichte's philosophy of language as a necessary predecessor for

4 Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 1975 (German transl. Frankfurt, 1991).

both the Romantic Philosophy of the «Jena Circle»,⁵ as well as for the more «scientifically»-orientated linguistics for which Wilhelm von Humboldt is known. Furthermore, the book suggests that only the direct contacts of the latter with Fichte's Jena philosophical circles led to Humboldt's elaborate philosophical position, which included an emphasis on the role of language as an *a priori* form of knowledge and upon the primacy of a methodological orientation. Surber tries to place Humboldt's later formulation of the «scientific comparative methods» in the realm of Fichte's project of a foundation of linguistics on a «systematic» or even «scientific» philosophical basis.

One special benefit to be derived from this study is to be found in its genuinely «American» scholarly character—the book dares to go beyond the limits of a mere historical analysis. Without lowering its scholarly standards, this work successfully establishes a link between German Idealism and the contemporary post-structuralist discussion of language. Not all readers, however, will be willing to follow the author when he tries to depict Fichte as anticipating not only Saussure but also the later Wittgenstein. Yet the essay never succumbs to the temptation to see Fichte only through modern eyes. It allows the reader to see for him-/herself that Fichte's grammatical reflections are «by no means very sophisticated». The current study, which knows how to distinguish between historical textual analysis and commentary would allow one to penetrate more into the «spirit» of the work than the mere letters would. Thus, he shows us a reinterpreted Fichte who is able to reinforce and defend given grammatical patterns that can be maintained even in the face of «metacritical» attacks.

The work is both a philological contribution to a area in the history of philosophy that has been undeservedly neglected and an original contribution to the progress of philosophy. The book emphasizes aspects which seem to shed a new light on modernism. A bridge is built even to modern thinkers such as Habermas/Apel/Husserl.

Surber's book is directed toward a wide audience, which could range from those with a general interest in the history of philosophy to the advanced graduate student and the research-oriented philosophers, linguists, and semioticians who need a good translation of Fichte's works. These excellent translations at the end of the volume will enable American universities to incorporate Fichte's philosophy of language into their curricula. Translations and commentary together can help to form an essential contribution to the future studies of German Idealism and Romanticism.

5 Especially interesting in this field is the author's research on the direct links from Fichte's work to that of Novalis and the attempt to determine its significance for the development of Romanticism. In this context, the examination of August Ferdinand Bernhardt's importance as a link between the idealist and the romantic circles is especially noteworthy.