Introduction: Idealism

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Raymond Williams ends his *Keywords* entry on “idealism” with a cautionary note: “idealism is obviously a word which needs the closest scrutiny whenever it is used” (107). A brief introduction like this one cannot offer the scrutiny necessary to disentangle the various meanings of such a broad and contested term, but in the following sketch I want to suggest that idealism, in its philosophical sense, has profoundly shaped (and been shaped by) the development of Western literature and literary criticism over the past two hundred-plus years in ways that are still only dimly recognized. Since the late nineteenth century, “idealism” has acquired a simplistic meaning that makes it a convenient foil for discourses—from analytic philosophy to new materialism—that want to assert their distinction from the apparently biased and outmoded conventions of the past. When we restore the rich variety of idealist perspectives on the world, as this issue attempts to do, we find idealism in several unexpected places, acting not only as an argumentative expedient but as the unacknowledged basis of the very discourses that dismiss it.

First, a consideration of the simplistic interpretation of idealism may release its tenacious hold. The straw man version of “idealism,” a kind of vulgarization of Plato, is the argument that there are two distinct orders of reality—the immaterial and the material—that are hierarchically arranged, with the immaterial taking precedence in all ways over the material: mind, reason, subjectivity, and abstract generalities are more real, truer, better, and more beautiful than body, sense perception, and particular objects. Thomas Hardy provides a devastating critique of such “idealism” in *Jude the

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1 Of course, philosophical idealism extends much further back in history than two hundred years, but as Williams notes, the English word “idealism” crystallized in the late eighteenth century in response to the rise of classical German philosophy. Philosophical idealism obviously also extends beyond the confines of Western philosophy and literature; the futility of trying to corral idealism within distinct temporal or spatial boundaries becomes apparent when we reflect on the powerful influence newly translated ancient Eastern philosophies had on the (re)emergence and development of Western idealism since the late eighteenth century.
Obscure (1895). Jude Hawley and Sue Bridehead are respectively blind to and disgusted by material reality, and their dreamy, disembodied mode of life brings them nothing but alienation and misery. Jude’s son, Father Time, is “idealism” personified: he “seemed to have begun with the generals of life, and never to have concerned himself with the particulars”; his eyes always “resting on things they did not see in the substantial world” (218, 220). An utterly depressed and detached child, Father Time murders his siblings and hangs himself. The bleak anti-idealism of Jude the Obscure reflects an argumentative template we find repeated in other works of literature, literary criticism, and philosophy throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It has been repeated so widely because it compellingly refutes a position worthy of refutation, a position that exalts airy abstractions and totalities over everything from bodies and sexuality to ecology and cultural specificity. This position, however, has no resemblance to idealism as it was actually articulated by the German and British philosophers of the long nineteenth century (or by Plato, for that matter).

Genuine explorations of idealism usually begin with a series of negative definitions in order to neutralize the most common misapprehensions. Thus, in Idealism: The History of a Philosophy, Jeremy Dunham, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Sean Watson begin by insisting that idealism is “not anti-realist” (4), is “far from being anti-science,” and is “not . . . the two-worlds idealism beloved of interpretations of Plato” (6). Such ground-clearing makes space for a positive definition of idealism, which we could say is a realist, naturalist (even “materialist”), monist account of reality that gives equal precedence to its immaterial and material aspects. This definition—obviously a minimalist one that is fleshed out in various ways—adequately captures the idealism espoused by Hölderlin, Friedrich Schlegel, and other German Romantics; Schelling, Hegel, and other post-Kantian German Idealists; Coleridge and other British Romantics; Carlyle; Emerson and the American Transcendentalists; Josiah Royce and the St. Louis Hegelians; T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and other British Idealists in the late nineteenth century; May Sinclair, Alfred North Whitehead, and advocates of Advaita Vedānta at the turn of the twentieth; and, more recently, Gilles Deleuze, Timothy Sprigge, Thomas Nagel, and various advocates of new materialism, new formalism, speculative realism, and panpsychism. Yet even this capacious definition leaves out other strands of idealism, most notably Kant’s transcendental idealism, which is realist but disallows any definitive claims about the nature of reality, since we can only grasp it through the filter of human cognition. Indeed, a considerable (Kantian or post-Kantian) problem for thinkers as disparate as Bradley and Quentin Meillassoux is the extent to which “the Absolute” (the universe, reality) can be grasped—as it actually exists—by or
beyond the human.

In other words, we must think in terms of idealisms: various ontological, epistemological, aesthetic, ethical, and other idealisms that do not always coincide. Moreover, idealism often overlaps its supposed opposite, “materialism.” Is quantum mechanics a materialist or idealist scientific theory? Are Slavoj Žižek and Elizabeth Grosz materialists or idealists? (Two essays and an interview in this issue take up these questions.) I propose a simple scatter plot as a useful heuristic for clarifying these differences and involutions. If we imagine the x-axis charting various degrees of “antirealism-realism” and the y-axis various degrees of “subjectivity-objectivity,” we could place “solipsism” (nothing is real except myself) at the origin and “radical materialism” (nothing is real except matter) in the upper-right corner. A vertical dotted line in the center of the plot (arbitrarily) divides “idealists” on the left from “materialists” on the right. We immediately notice that very few philosophers occupy the endpoints of solipsism and radical materialism, although we could place infants and certain politicians in the former category and behaviorists like John B. Watson in the latter. Along the diagonal line between these extremes, we find the vast majority of philosophical positions. First, moving toward the upper right from the origin, we could place “subjective idealism,” a position associated with Berkeley in which the subject confers reality on that which is perceived. A bit further on—slightly more realist and objective—Kant and Fichte appear. Even further, clustered in the middle of the plot, we find the vast majority of idealist positions as I have defined it above, which we could term “objective idealist” or “absolute idealist,” as well as several “materialist” positions, like the empiricism of George Henry Lewes and George Eliot, or the “dialectical materialism” of Žižek, that attend to the ways in which the material and the ideal mutually constitute (our interaction with and understanding of) reality. Finally, approaching “radical materialism” but never quite arriving, we could locate the various sciences, which tend to minimize the ideal as epiphenomenal or irrelevant, reduce causal explanations to the mechanical and material, and take an “objective” view of reality. This heuristic suggests two important points: first, idealism-materialism is a spectrum not a binary, and while some approach reality from the “idealist” side and others from the “materialist” side, these are differences of emphasis rather than incommensurable perspectives; second, despite many genuine differences, there is a broad consensus that both ideal and material aspects of reality are integrated and must be thought together.²

² The broad consensus itself creates another terminological problem because it is hard to see why any philosophy that balances the ideal and material should be called either “idealism” or “materialism”; perhaps a less partisan term along the lines of “neutral monism” would be more
Literary criticism has always been shaped by these differences of emphasis. Whether or not we agree with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s claim in *The Literary Absolute* that literature and/as literary criticism was formed in the crucible of German Romanticism and absolute idealism, it is hard to deny that the epistemological and ontological tensions between idealism and materialism have structured and continue to structure literary criticism as a mode of inquiry. The dialectical unfolding of various “turns” throughout the history of literary criticism seems to mark the demise of one or the other approach, but because even the most ardent idealist refuses to completely disavow the material (and vice versa), the turns are hairpin and dizzying. For instance, if we begin, as is often done, with the rise of New Criticism, we run up against the perennial problem. On the one hand, as Joshua Gang argues in “Behaviorism and the Beginnings of Close Reading,” the quintessential New Critical method of close reading, which is still ubiquitous among literary critics today, has its roots in the behaviorist-materialist emphasis on the “body” (of the text), which also accounts for the New Critical dismissal of biographical-psychological readings as enshrined in the intentional fallacy. On the other hand, because of their emphasis on holistic form and seeming disregard for social and material context, the New Critics appear incorrigibly “idealist.” Indeed, the turn against New Criticism—which stressed the analysis of all the material contexts left out by its formalism, including racial, gendered, sexual, economic, geographical, and other realities—(re)asserted a materialist approach to the interpretation of literature that opened up productive new strands of analysis. And yet this turn, too, bleeds into the idealist: the Foucauldian emphasis on intangible power, the Derridean emphasis on language and texts, the Butlerian emphasis on the social construction of gender, and, more generally, the antirealist emphasis of poststructuralism, have all been accused by adherents of the subsequent turn of being too disembodied and “idealist.” For example, with new materialism, which tosses aside the “idealist assumptions” that have led to an “eclipse of materialism” since the 1970s (Coole and Frost 2, 3), we seem to have arrived at a proper materialism. But as I have argued elsewhere, the

appropriate. The confusing overlap of these terms explains the contradiction that sometimes accompanies their use, as shown in the following two passages from Thomas Nagel’s *Mind and Cosmos*, in which he rejects and then embraces idealism: “I believe the weight of evidence favors some form of neutral monism over the traditional alternatives of materialism, idealism, and dualism”; “The view that rational intelligibility is at the root of the natural order makes me, in a broad sense, an idealist—not a subjective idealist, since it doesn’t amount to the claim that all reality is ultimately appearance—but an objective idealist in the tradition of Plato and perhaps also of certain post-Kantians, such as Schelling and Hegel, who are usually called absolute idealists” (4-5, 17).
ontological assumptions of new materialism are much the same as those of Bradley, Samuel Butler, and the “old idealism” of the Victorian era. Meanwhile, a recently resurgent “new formalism,” which swings us back toward New Criticism, is careful to attend, in Platonic fashion, to the reality and materiality of forms. From all of this one could conclude that, despite the various names on the road signs, we are turning in a circle, revolving around the same problematic. This is not to say that we are going nowhere—one can ascend in a spiral—but perhaps it would be more correct and helpful to chart our critical journey in genealogical or dialectical rather than oppositional or polemical terms.

What about idealism and literature? Setting aside the question of the literariness of philosophical treatises, it would be an interesting exercise to think about how to superimpose particular literary writers, genres, and periods onto our scatter plot. Does the diagonal from subjective antirealism to objective realism trace the familiar dichotomy between romance and realism? Where do the constellations of modernism, postmodernism, science fiction, and other periods and genres emerge? Are they nebulous or distinct? Do historical patterns become discernible? We obviously need more than a scatter plot to articulate such vast complications, although this (ideal) image is a suggestive one. Back on the ground, specific connections between idealism and literature have been receiving more scholarly attention, although here, too, the pejorative connotations of idealism have left a lot of unexplored territory. Perhaps because of the relative ease with which one can draw lines of direct influence (we know that Coleridge read Kant and Hegel, for instance), the British Romantics have long been read in the context of idealism. But idealism did not end with Romanticism. As Adela Pinch demonstrates in *Thinking about Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing*, idealism and literature continue to be entangled across the Victorian period, not only through the continuing influence of Coleridge and Carlyle, but through lesser-known figures like James Frederick Ferrier in the early Victorian period and J. M. E. McTaggart in the late. In *Realism, Form, and Representation in the Edwardian Novel: Synthetic Realism*, Charlotte Jones extends our understanding of idealism and literature into the early twentieth century, arguing that “The enduring philosophical unfashionability of a metaphysics of abstractions, universals, and absolute forms should not obscure the extent to which realist writers often had recourse to its terminology, aspirations, and quandaries” (xxiii-xxiv). What Jones calls “synthetic realism”—absolute idealism in a specifically literary register—is not confined to the Edwardian period; as I have suggested above, it appears throughout the long nineteenth century and survived the “refutations” of early analytic philosophy to act as a continuing influence up to the present day. Nor is idealism
found only in the past two hundred years of Western philosophy and literature; although my introduction has focused on this period, the essays in this issue suggest that it is transcultural and tranhistorical. Indeed, most scholars speculate that prehistoric humans were animist (Harari 53-58), which means that idealism is probably the original belief system of our species, while the narrator of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72) makes the unassailable observation that we all begin life as solipsists: “We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves” (211). In these sequential senses, if in no other, idealism takes precedence over materialism.

It is clear that an intellectual culture evacuated of idealism would be an etiolated, unrecognizable, unthinkable one. The essays in this issue therefore reassert the need to take idealism seriously, revealing how it helps us to better understand everything from the *Rig Veda* to *Malone Dies*, from rhetoric to semiotics. After an interview with Elizabeth Grosz on idealism and her most recent book *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*, we turn to a consideration of the *Rig Veda* in Justin M. Hewitson’s “Tantric Metaseity in the *Rig Veda*’s ‘Creation Hymn’: A Sarkarian Reading and New Translation of X.129.” Drawing on his new translation of the famous hymn and the theories of Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, Hewitson argues that the *Rig Veda* contains the oldest written expression of monistic idealism, likely influenced by Tantric beliefs and practices. Benjamin B. Olshin offers a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western idealisms in “Holism as Idealism: The Zhuangzi and the Concept of the ‘Understanding of the Men of Ancient Times.’” Using the *Zhuangzi* and Plato as exemplars of these traditions, he contends that the former is characterized by ontological holism, whereas the latter conceives of the ideal as separate and external. Next, in “The Rhetoric of Idealism in Tagore’s Pan-Asianism,” Seong-Woo Choi analyzes the universalist and anti-nationalist rhetoric in Rabindranath Tagore’s political writing, revealing how Tagore’s rhetorical strategies—and rhetoric itself—can be understood in idealistic terms. Lei Han, in “The Idealistic Elements in Modern Semiotic Studies: With Particular Recourse to the *Umwelt* Theory,” points out the idealistic basis of all three modern semiotic theories (those of Saussure, Peirce, and biosemiotics). More specifically, Han demonstrates the ways in which Jakob von Uexküll’s *Umwelt* theory, an important forerunner of biosemiotics, draws on Kantian transcendental idealism in its formulation of how humans (and other animals) make their environments intelligible. In “The abnihilisation of the etym: *Finnegans Wake*’s Entanglement in Quantum Ideality,” Pingta Ku uses the Sokal hoax as a springboard for investigating the uncanny idealism of quantum physics, arguing that James Joyce’s novel offers a
powerful literary exploration of subatomic reality. Finally, Will Greenshields examines the Möbius-like involution of idealism and materialism in Slavoj Žižek’s philosophy. Through a Žižekian reading of Samuel Beckett, he suggests that an emphasis on abstraction—especially the abstract Subject and its relation to the Absolute—provides a compelling way to reorient literary studies. It is my hope that this interdisciplinary and international collection of essays inspires others to pursue research into the rich variety of the world’s idealisms.

Works Cited


About the Author

Justin Prystash is Professor in the Department of English at National Taiwan Normal University. He has published several articles on Victorian literature and culture, science and animal studies, and idealism, and he is currently writing a book on British idealism in the long nineteenth century.