Infectious Humours: David Krell’s *Contagion*


In this wonderful book, David Farrell Krell traces a certain obsession with the theme of “contagion” among the German Romantics and Idealists. In so doing, he covers three very disparate and intriguing thinkers: Novalis, Schelling, and Hegel.

Novalis thinks of illness and sexuality within what he hardly seems to recognize is a single common space, that of the beginning of philosophy: “the first kiss is the principle of philosophy,” he writes, but also, later, “suicide is the real beginning of all philosophy” (quoted on 36 and 45 respectively). The reason for the association of philosophy with the kiss is partly that, for Novalis as for Hegel, thought is a kind of assimilation and digestion (33f.) and hence has to do with the mouth, and partly that a kiss is a sort of touching. “Touching” (berühren) is, for Novalis, the way that not only bodies but also the parts of the soul relate to each other—fancy and judgment “touch” each other, as do reason and the arbitrary. So also do the soul itself and the body, whose relation is a kind of primal self-touching or self-kissing that (in the way that my lips must press together, kiss each other, before I can kiss anyone else) is necessary before I can love another or even, perhaps, know anything.

Such internal, nonphysical self-kissing can never go so far as to annihilate the difference between what touches and what is being touched. It is what Krell calls a “contact without contact,” or (in a first meaning) “contagion.” And as long as that difference between toucher and touched, kisser and kissed, is not annihilated, there will be an imbalance of the two parties—of body and soul, reason and the arbitrary, or of external (stimulus) and internal (irritability); for the complete balancing of any two things would cancel any distinction between them.

But the imbalance between what is internal and what is external is, finally, disease; and disease leads to death (63). The soul itself is the cause of illness, the most potent poison (49); and it is impossible to distinguish illness from life itself: Novalis, like Schelling and Hegel, discovers malgré lui “the imbrication of illness with all the positive traits of organic life as such” (65). Illness is not an anomaly. All contact, be it of faculties within the soul, of the soul with the body, or of two bodies with each other, is contagion: contact that is to the detriment of what is contacted (a second, fuller meaning of “contagion”). And all forces of nature are dire forces, fearsome ones.

Novalis thus opens up a terrain on which illness, sexuality, and death all come together. But he does not, as far as I could find Krell presenting him,
explicitly address that terrain: he does not pose explicitly the question of the relation of sexuality and death, or relate the dire imbalance between inside and outside with the duality of sexuality.

Schelling, in the “First Projection for a Philosophy of Nature,” takes this terrain (to continue my Hegelian story) and throws it up against its contrasting background. He is, therefore, able to see it better. His name for it is not “the beginning of philosophy,” but “life”; for all life, in Schelling’s view, is sexual (95). That is, life is doubled at its core, and the two halves of it—male and female—must develop separately in order to come together again at . . . the end: in spite of the duality of life, “nature is monistic, even as it kills the monad” (96).

The death of the individual living thing, of the “product” of life (cf. 96), is its return (or its body’s return) to a normal, general—perhaps we may even say, “elemental”—state, from an enhanced one. And in what does that enhancement consist? In the enhancement of excitability, the capacity of a living thing to respond to a stimulus. As enhanced, the excitability of a living thing is inevitably out of balance with the stimulus, i.e., with what is given the organism in sensibility; and so the enhanced state that constitutes life is nothing other than illness. Hence, for Schelling the conditions of disease are explicitly stated to be the same as the conditions of life (110f.). For life relies, once again, upon a dualism in the heart of the individual—or, more exactly, “a constant restoration of the original duplicity in it” (quoted on 111).

Schelling thus sees both sexuality and illness as dualities within the living individual. He explicates their common terrain—life as duality—with more philosophical consistency than does Novalis, who did not (still on my account of Krell’s account) bring the imbalance of illness into direct connection with the duality of touch. But having identified the dualities of sexuality and illness as dualities, Schelling is unable to bring them any closer together:

What Schelling is searching for is one opposition, one pair, one relation of the twofold into which all other dualities will be absorbed, as though by infection. What he is missing are those links that would show how every oppositional pair can be subordinated to some original pair. (98)

Wouldn’t it be nice, then, if the pair sensible-irritable could be shown to be derived from the pair male-female? Or vice versa? The person who did that would complete the articulation of the connection between disease, death, and sexuality, and would bring clarity to the nature of contagion. And that would be a triumph.

Hegel, in his Jena writings, views the organism as comprising two aspects: that part of it which is turned towards the inner, which exhibits immanent development or systematicity and is not involved with the external world; and that which is so involved, i.e., is turned to the outside (127). The fundamental opposition here is thus between activity, which is turned to an outside on