

Symphilosophie

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Michael N. Forster, Lina Steiner (eds.), *Romanticism, Philosophy, and Literature*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, xviii + 374 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-40873-2.

This volume is another milestone achievement by the dynamic duo who, since arriving under the aegis of Michael Forster's Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung professorship at the Institut für Philosophie in Bonn University, have organized numerous international symposia and publications and thereby brought to new life the global study of the history of philosophy in general, and galvanized the study of philosophy and literature in particular. In creating and curating this forum they rival their Jena Romantic forebears, the primary subject of the present volume, which contains several papers from a 2015 conference that the editors organized.

As stated in the introduction, the volume pursues two aims: first, to examine and increase awareness in the Anglophone world of German Romanticism's ideas about philosophy and literature, and especially during its immensely important initial phase (1796-1801); second, to explore selectively the prehistory and influence of those ideas on later thinkers inside and outside Germany. The introduction succinctly and lucidly highlights the project of the book by situating Romanticism – represented by Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel, and Novalis – historically and intellectually with respect to some of its recognizably 'modern' theoretical achievements: historicism in the human sciences, the primacy of language for thought (linguistic holism, use-theory of meaning), historical and comparative linguistics, hermeneutics as a science, translation theory, and a liberal tradition in political and moral philosophy. Likewise, Romanticism revived the "ancient quarrel" by theorizing the synthesis between philosophy and literature, science and art, fundamentally developed the disciplines of the history of literature, genre-theory and 'world literature,' and concomitantly produced literary works that concretized these theoretical innovations. The collection is divided into two sections, one devoted to philosophy proper in Romanticism (five essays) and the second to the relationship between philosophy and literature, within and as influenced by Romanticism (nine

essays). The overall quality of the essays is very high, and several make seminal contributions to scholarship.

Opening the “Philosophy” section is Manfred Frank’s extended essay and commentary on Novalis’s infamously obscure *Fichte-Studien*, the set of notes from 1795-96 that were collected under that title only when they were posthumously published in 1965. Frank terms his approach “constellational,” in that it combines historical, biographical, and conceptual elements in order to illuminate the genesis and significance of the text. While this approach is similar to Dieter Henrich’s “Jena Project” in its careful and detailed unfolding of the characters and complexities of those formative years of post-Kantian philosophical idealism, Frank also has a polemical intent: while Henrich’s project argues for the central importance of Hölderlin within the emergence of “absolute idealism,” Frank promotes Novalis for that privileged status. In Jena at the time, the academic philosopher Reinhold was endeavoring to find a first principle that could resolve Kantian dualisms without losing mind’s objective purport on an independent reality. When Fichte arrived in Jena to take over Reinhold’s chair, his *Wissenschaftslehre* (Science of Knowledge) seemed to risk just such a loss, and Novalis, affiliated with Reinhold’s students, recorded his critical sketches of the implicit dangers of an “absolute I” or subjective idealism that – so Frank – “exhibit far more analytical and argumentative agility than does Hölderlin” and likely predate the latter’s relevant writings (31). Both Novalis and Hölderlin argue for a primordial Ur-connection between being, identity and judgment, and confront the task of how such a connection can be recognized. Here Frank’s essay shifts from historical biography to conceptual analysis, as he discusses various contenders for the epistemic means to secure the primacy of ‘being’ before or alongside consciousness: the ontological presuppositions implied within the form of judgment (viewed as anterior to the distinction between predicative, existential, and identity forms of judgment), intellectual intuition, feeling, and second-order reflection. Frank brings much illumination to the proliferation of terms and argument fragments one encounters in Novalis’s notes, and helpfully juxtaposes them with Hölderlin’s reflections (e.g., in his essay “Urteil und Seyn”). While one might wish for even more use by Frank of current philosophical concepts in his glosses of Novalis’s terms, his essay is an outstanding hermeneutical work that scholars of German Idealism cannot afford to ignore.

Intriguing aspects of the relationship between Friedrich Schlegel and Hegel are explored in two essays. According to Andreas Arndt, Schlegel was the first thinker to generate an affirmative understanding of post-Kantian dialectic. While Fichte and early Schelling in response to Jacobi’s skepticism

sought to ground knowledge and action in the unconditioned as reason's point of departure (in effect inverting Kant's approach), Schlegel's theory of Romantic irony as the recognition of the limit of knowledge with the intimation of its transcendence, together with his theory of imagination as a faculty of such pre-conceptual transcendence, anticipate Hegel's theory of dialectical synthesis as progressive totalization. Johannes Korngiebel concretizes some of these claims by suggesting, with considerable circumstantial evidence, that Hegel attended Schlegel's lectures on transcendental philosophy in Jena in 1801, several years after Schlegel had already set himself the task of unifying Fichte's subjective idealism and Spinoza's objective realism. Like Hegel later, Schlegel's lectures emphasized the historical dimension of philosophy and the infinite process for consciousness to approach the unconditioned in what he called "absolute idealism." Korngiebel concludes by identifying Hegel's implicit early critique of Schlegel in the *Differenzschrift* and a lesser-known essay likely co-authored with Schelling, where he brands Schlegel a mere "beautiful soul" for denying philosophy its native realm of truth. Both Arndt's and Korngiebel's tightly argued essays convey the impression that much more work is required to fully fathom the influence of Schlegel's writings on German Idealist thinkers.

By contrast, François Thomas's essay on Schleiermacher's reflections on translation are suggestively capacious. Taking as its point of departure Schleiermacher's claim that a translator must always "maintain the tone of his language foreign," that is, render his own native tongue partly foreign, other, or alienated, with a deft touch Thomas finds this motif of the self-othering of language, knowledge and mind in several other German Romantic and Idealist thinkers, indicative for him of a tacit pluralist cosmopolitanism.

Thomas's cosmopolitan claim, however, is directly challenged by Frederick Beiser's essay exploring the Romantic antisemitism that accompanied Germans' nascent nationalism and which he documents in the writings and practices of the Berlin *Tischgesellschaft*, founded by leading Romantic figures von Arnim, Brentano, and Müller. Beiser also perspicuously reconstructs their thinking: a German state requires political allegiance, which can best be sustained not by external coercion but rather by internal motivation; the strongest form of such motivation is not moral rationalism, but rather religious faith; the strongest faith for securing a community is Christianity, because it is based on love, whereas Judaism is a religion of law; therefore, Germany must be a Christian state. Beiser then uncovers echoes of this thinking in the reputedly liberal Schleiermacher's ambivalence towards Jewish emancipation. With exemplary concision and substantiation

the essay constitutes an indictment of German High Romanticism and sets an agenda for future research.

The “Philosophy and Literature” section includes essays devoted to both Romantic and post-Romantic writers, several of which are broadly oriented around tensions between antiquity and modernity, classicism and romanticism. Helmut Hühn’s essay first traces the genealogy of the Romantics’ vision of a “new mythology” – in the oldest *Systemprogramm* (1796/7, here attributed to Hegel) and Schlegel’s “Dialogue on Poetry” (1800) – as a utopian answer to Schiller’s elegiac view of a de-mythologized modernity, to then argue that this vision failed to describe how a binding collective *mythos* could be produced and sustained under conditions of modern liberal individualism.

Schlegel’s ideal of a “unification of the ancient and the modern” in the form of a modern mythology also animated Nietzsche’s 1872 *Birth of Tragedy*, the Romantics’ influence upon which Michael Forster reveals in his judiciously argued essay. In its general philological-philosophical commitments, for instance to the historicization of genre, but more astonishingly in its reliance on the specific literary histories published by the Schlegel brothers, who introduced the distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian, Nietzsche’s treatise according to Forster “for all practical intents and purposes ... simply is a Romantic work” (288). This stark claim will elicit critical responses no doubt, one of which Forster himself anticipates, namely that the liberal-republican thrust of the Schlegels’ view of tragedy is blunted in Nietzsche’s interpretation, which complicates the role he claims for myth in nation-building.

The tension between ancient and modern also informs Rainer Schäfer’s essay, which takes up the old chestnut that has bedeviled scholarship on Hölderlin (as it has on Jean Paul and Kleist): does he belong to Classicism or Romanticism? Rather than proffering either a monolithic view or an analysis differentiated by temporalization (early vs late), genre (classical vs romantic forms) or reception history, for instance, Schäfer distinguishes recognizably Romantic themes (Christian love, yearning for the infinite, monistic nature) entwined with Classical themes (most importantly an existential commitment to the ancient divinities). While the essay very helpfully identifies varying and vying features of Hölderlin’s work, this uneasy combination of radically different worldviews requires further argumentation to clarify Schäfer’s suggestion that the poet “unites” them (236).

In a rich and compact essay, Giulia Valpione provides a conspectus of Friedrich Schlegel’s concept of life around 1804, indicating its vitalist aspects and the incorporation of the notion of ‘vital force’ (*lebendige Kraft*, also at

times troped as “love”) within his organicist aesthetics, which entails that works of art – like life itself – are inexhaustible and unsusceptible to rational comprehensibility and universal, formal lawfulness. She further shows how for Schlegel vitality was a mediating element between art and society, for a culture’s relative freedom enabled or obstructed the vital growth of its characteristic artforms and *Bildung*, hence Schlegel maintained an organicist conception of a politico-ethical community. It struck this reader that, like the topic it explores, this essay can easily and expansively grow by reconstructing and evaluating further the implicit arguments at work in its source texts.

Kierkegaard’s critical appropriation and systemically precise use of Schlegel’s concept of irony is admirably illuminated in Fred Rush’s exegetical essay. Kierkegaard’s aesthetic, ethical and religious spheres constitute radically different “forms of life” characterized by different comportments (distanciation and suspension of commitment, acting on universal reason, and creaturely suffering indicative of alienation from God), whereby a subject’s self-transformation is conceived as moving from one sphere to another. Since the modes of comportment are non-commensurable, the transition from one sphere to another is discontinuous, and in that sense non-dialectical. In response Kierkegaard invokes Socratic and Romantic irony as the means to effectuate a “shift” from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere: Schlegel’s perpetual, even self-reflexive, suspension of commitment entails the subject’s entertaining a manifold of possible perspectives that in turn allows the subject to imagine the “sway” of an alternative form of life as precondition for her falling into it. Likewise, humor can enable the shift from the ethical to the religious sphere because it, like irony, leavens the self-awareness of human suffering and finitude before the absolute with “knowing kindness,” precisely the quality that Rush finds lacking in Schlegel’s concept of irony.

Two essays in the volume uncover new pathways of German thought in British Romanticism. James Vigus shows how in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge implicitly draws on Kant to invoke a transcendental critique of Hartley’s empiricist associationism as a principle of lyrical composition, which ignores the role of creativity in mental activity. Coleridge finds the same creative, formative spontaneity in his account of the role of “primary imagination” in perception, which in turn motivates his criticism of Wordsworth’s attributing special significance to the experience and language of rustic characters: for Coleridge, quotidian experience in general is shaped by creative mind, and so available to everyone and expressible in ordinary, universal language (for him, Biblical language), exemplars of which Coleridge found in his study of the “mystics” George Fox and Jakob Böhme.

Paul Hamilton argues that post-Kantian aesthetics ramifies further into British Romanticism than scholarship hitherto recognizes, by showing how Byron's *Don Juan*, through its capacious prosody, manifold genre forms, modes (e.g., comic, sublime, irony, bawdy) and styles, and even narrated geographical peregrinations (likened by Hamilton to writings by Schlegel and Novalis), strives to expand the purview of aesthetic experience beyond implicitly Kantian strictures; and by claiming that in Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, by its adopting a reflective stance upon life's immediacy, "Kant's apperceptive category, the condition of perception which is never a perception itself, is revived, but turned into an experience" (328). Unfortunately, the essay amasses references to historical and current thinkers and theorists, schools, positions, slogans, as though performatively imitating what it claims of Byron and Shelley, viz., that they turn "insolvable philosophical positions into the experience of them," a vertiginous experience for this reader.

The section on "Philosophy and Literature" and collection itself concludes with the scintillating, fast-paced essay by Lina Steiner on Dostoevsky as a Romantic novelist. First contextualizing Dostoevsky's literary career within the debates between Schiller's humanist ideal of a reflective, second-order "naiveté" and Schlegel's Romantic view of the perpetually destabilizing potential of self-consciousness, as those debates reverberated within the Russian literary movements of the 1840s and 1850s, Steiner then documents the recurring presence of Schiller's literary works within a constellation of Dostoevsky's writings, culminating in her interpretation of *Brothers Karamazov* as a transposed triangulation of figures from Schiller's drama "The Robbers" that nonetheless foregoes the conclusiveness of that play. Steiner convincingly shows how Dostoevsky and his most astute interpreter, Bakhtin, who characterized his novels as "polyphonic", "unfinalizable" and "dialogic," draw on and develop Schlegel's conception of the open-ended novel as the highest form of Romantic art.

To their great credit, the editors have consciously striven to include contributors from across nations, generations and genders, with leading scholars researching German Romanticism from Germany (Manfred Frank), France (Jean-Luc Nancy) and the Anglophone world (Frederick Beiser). The composition of the volume is puzzling in a few respects. While most of the contributions exhibit the length and scope of a conference presentation turned essay, Manfred Frank's essay of nearly 100 pages, which could stand as a small book itself, constitutes almost 30% of the volume, and Nancy's contribution is a short, reprinted section from his and Lacoue-Labarthe's coauthored *L'Absolu littéraire*, which is still in print and readily available. In its quirkiness the volume perhaps unconsciously emulates the compositional

principles of the Romantic writers themselves. For this reader, one surprising result of reading the collection in its entirety is the seemingly unbounded fecundity and subterranean reticulations of Friedrich Schlegel's thought as absolutely pivotal among other thinkers, both in Jena around 1800 and far into the future. Another is the recurrence of the concept of "love" in Romantic thought and aesthetics, with ambiguous significations and connotations, ambivalent valences and uses, and divergent political implications. This very rich collection thus promises to be a welcome signpost to future research.

Henry W. Pickford

Karolin Mirzakhkan, *An Ironic Approach to the Absolute: Schlegel's Poetic Mysticism*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020, xix + 120 pp. ISBN 978-1-4985-7891-2.

What is the Absolute? To define it would be to neutralise it as an Absolute, to demarcate and circumscribe it in words, reason and concepts. The German word "concept" (*Begriff*), argues Karolin Mirzakhkan (76), is derived from the verb "to grasp" (*begreifen*): attempting to know the Absolute rationally and epistemologically, i.e. to grab it linguistically, means reifying it and thus betraying it. To avoid objectifying the unconditioned, the non-relational, non-relative and not dependent Absolute (*ab-solutus*) it is necessary to follow a different approach from that of a systematic and comprehensive analysis. In her agile, lucid and brilliant book, Karolin Mirzakhkan primarily identifies the ironic character of Friedrich Schlegel's romantic fragments as a path to this Absolute. Paradoxically, the open and non-all-inclusive form of the fragment, apparently destined to the utmost particularity and limitation, can condense the great Whole and open up to the unsayable, indicating it without wanting to exhaust it through intellectual understanding.

In the introduction, the author shows the affinity between the aporetic and unresolved character of the Socratic question and the ironic approach to the Absolute of Schlegel's fragments. How is it possible to define virtue, the interlocutor asks Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Meno*, if we do not know what it is? "Searching for what we already know is futile, and searching for what we do not know is impossible" (xi). Starting from this paradox, in the first chapter of her book Mirzakhkan provides a careful analysis of irony as a "form of paradox" in the *Athenaeum* journal fragments, which were published in Berlin from 1798 to 1800. If Socrates, with his irony (*eironeia*), dissimulates