

**Elizabeth Millán Brusslan (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of German Romantic Philosophy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 721 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-53567-4.**

Perhaps no other current in the broader stream of what we generally think of as philosophy has proven so adept at disseminating itself and fostering new insight within old modes of thought, while at the same time remaining so little valued and studied itself, as Early German Romanticism. The reason for this is not hard to find. Seemingly short-lived and self-professedly dispossessed of fixed identity, the meaning of Romanticism has historically confounded scholars. More so because, in coming to terms with what the romantic in Romanticism may be, essentialist and nominalist approaches alike have proven of little avail. Indeed, though we do find telling clues as to what romanticizing means in several of the fragments put forth by the two thinkers who arguably stand as the foci of the movement's orbit—the friends Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich von Hardenberg, *dit* Novalis—, the last thing these clues were meant to do is add up to a definition. And were we, on the other hand, to harbor the hope of rounding up all romantic thinkers in order to distill what is common to their works, we would inevitably come up against the problem that there is no clear-cut consensus of who even counts as a romantic: with an arguably qualifying disposition being showcased by thinkers who would wince at the label, and would-be members at times having their credentials vacated the very instant the latter are too confidently arrogated. That there was—and is—something like philosophical Romanticism; that its inception is to be sought in the ideas and philosophical practices of a set of thinkers who were active in what is now Germany in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; and that these ideas and their unfolding since offer the playing field for the pursuit of its meaning—these are all things which, as Elizabeth Millán Brusslan reminds us in her editor's introduction, are well beyond doubt. But what the ultimate meaning of this indubitable constellation of facts may be and how exactly its pursuit must be mapped is something for which no final decision may as yet be offered.

This indecision on the one hand makes the appearance of a volume dedicated entirely to “a careful investigation of the meaning of Early German Romanticism/*Frühromantik* for philosophers...” all the more welcome. On the other hand, it could be submitted that the nature of the indecision is by no means such a superficial one as to be *handled* by what, with an arguably infelicitous choice of words, calls itself a *Handbook of German Romantic Philosophy*. In fairness, the present one is the latest in a long—and highly worthwhile—series of offerings going under the umbrella name of Palgrave

Handbooks of German Idealism; and one can sympathize with the editors of this series in their preference to stand out from the long list of available “companions” on this and other philosophical epochs and currents. Still, a companion evokes a certain Virgilian voice in the descent to the depths, whereas a handbook—even in cases where it makes no explicit claim to that end—inevitably suggests the more technical promise of an instruction manual, capable of readily outputting information upon its user’s command. If the eventual reader of this volume on German Romanticism were to expect the latter, they would surely be setting themselves up for disappointment. Standing on the other side of this hefty handbook, they will likely—hopefully—not feel that they have definitively secured a handle on philosophical Romanticism. Yet this seeming failing—that despite its title and its seven hundred plus pages the handbook feels less like an explanation of what Romanticism is and more like an exposure to what it may deliver—is without a doubt also the source of its most significant achievement. For in staying true to the methodological conviction lying dormant in Millán Brusslan’s promise of an ‘investigation’, what the handbook offers its reader is not the transmission of a content, but a very enlightening and very enriching immersion into the vestigial life of Romanticism. Awakening and following the traces of that philosophical disposition throughout the many fields in which it has made itself at home, what the handbook does is situate us squarely in its midst: a sort of textual exponentiation whereby we do not additively traverse the steps towards our destination, but are rather transposed to its center by a qualitative leap, all the while coming to realize that the meaning of something need not be the closure of its definition, but only the seminal enclosure from which it grows. And dare we say that this is at least consonant with that hint Novalis once put forth, that philosophy was akin to the task of squaring the circle (*Das allgemeine Brouillon*, n. 640)?

In achieving that act of qualitative exponentiation, Millán Brusslan is true to the spirit of *symphilosophy*—or collaborative philosophizing—and interdisciplinarity, having enlisted the voices of a diverse group of leading scholars in the fields of philosophy, German studies, literature, art criticism, and the history of science. After an all-too protocolary Introduction, what ensues is a meticulously curated collection of twenty-eight high quality contributions. Those contributions are helpfully organized—though thanks to constant thematic crossover not fatally dissected—into four parts which respectively deal with the historical context of philosophical Romanticism, its aesthetic and artistic contributions, the relationship it maintained with the sciences of its day, and the legacy or—if one will—ongoing life of Romanticism. Detailed individual commentary is regrettably precluded in

the present review by such a considerable number of entries. In lieu of that, the only way to do justice to each of the entries the handbook offers is by earnestly recommending the reader to go to their encounter, assuring them that the reward of doing so will be worth their effort each and every time. It is likewise worth emphasizing that thanks to Millán Brusslan's good editorial choices, as well as to the diversity and richness of its offer, the handbook is as capable of initiating the novice to Romanticism as it is of meeting the seasoned student with previously unconsidered aspects of it, assuredly renewing the interest for further engagement.

The inclusion of scholarship across institutional and departmental divides is mirrored in the balanced and inclusive approach to the *dramatis personae* which are featured in the handbook. Staple figures of Romanticism such as the brothers August and Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hölderlin make the obligatory appearance. And as is to be expected, these figures are once again diligently studied against the backdrop of their reception and creative appropriation of canonical figures such as Kant, Fichte, Jacobi, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller, to name a few. Convincingly argued pieces by Jane Kneller and Andrew Mitchell, for example, not only situate the early romantics as inheritors of Kant's and Fichte's philosophical projects, respectively. They also succeed in painting that inheritance as a penetrative critique of their predecessors' tenets, and the transformation, unconditioning, and aesthetization of the latter as one guided by a serious confrontation with the problems they engendered, rather than as the purely capricious resistance to rigor, method, or structure—a mischaracterization of Romanticism which is nonetheless still operative in our time. Beyond this clique of familiar faces, however, attention is in like measure devoted to what are usually less heeded voices within this already little heeded tradition. Karoline von Gunderröde and Dorothea Veit, for example, are presented as revolutionary and self-standing thinkers who challenged gender roles and social conventions in Anna Ezekiel's poignant critique of the prevailing narrative of this period. And the emerging view of nature which Romanticism made possible is plotted by the articles of Robert Richards and Jocelyn Holland against the speculative approaches of Johann Wilhelm Ritter and the empirical investigations of Carl Gustav Carus, two nature-philosophers who are commonly passed over in favor of better known ones.

Much the same thing which was said with regard to figures chosen can be said in terms of the thematic scope of the handbook. Classically celebrated *topoi* of Romanticism such as the role of the fragment and of irony, the appeal for interdisciplinarity, the significance of categories such as genesis and

organicity, the (im)possibility of systematic closure, or the issue of an alleged (dis)continuity of the romantic exaltation of homeland and its abuse by later nationalistic movements are skillfully dealt with by many of the handbook's entries. But welcome attention is also devoted to themes that have rarely if ever been explored in their connection to philosophical Romanticism: the cinema, technology, media theory, university governance and curricular design, as well as a more positive social and political influence which includes a critical look at the assumed hegemony of the masculine, the traditional, and the European. To name just a couple of examples, Anne Pollock's lively tour of salon life invites us to envision this social space as a subversive platform of traditional structures thanks to which the intellectual empowerment of women was able to take important steps; while Leif Weatherby's reconception of life in semiotic terms takes us to the fringes of Romanticism's reach as it forces us to reconsider the divide between technology and the organism.

For the above reasons, Millán Brusslan's claim that the handbook offers "a comprehensive view of German Romanticism" is perhaps not unwarranted, even if we should not be too quick to read this comprehensiveness as synonymous with completeness, much less with exhaustion. While it would be unreasonable to expect that a single work (even one of length as considerable as the present's) touched on all the figures, themes, and veins of an entire tradition, there are certain omissions which it is nonetheless hard not to register. Hölderlin's importance for the development and, perhaps even more, for the ongoing influence of Romanticism arguably warranted more than the somewhat muted attention the handbook devotes to him. There is likewise virtually no account of the importance of Jakob Böhme's mysticism for the early romantics. Nor does Jaqueline Mariña's by itself very solid contribution feel like anything more than the first of many steps which would need to be taken in the direction of weighing the multifaceted importance of religion for thinkers whose conviction it was—to speak with Schlegel—that only religion would usher in a new humanity, and make possible the genuinely infinite poetry which might measure up to it (*Ideen*, n. 7). To this particular reader, however, the greatest untapped area of opportunity lies in the fact that nothing more than lip service is paid to the role which the proto-Romanticism that developed around the Freiberg Mining Academy played in the genesis of Jena Romanticism, and to the decisive influence that one particular figure of the former—to wit, Franz Baader—exercised on the proponents of the latter. To the extent that the satellite existence of a book review may enact the romantic gesture of fragmentarily complementing meaning from a dislocated position,

perhaps this would not be judged as too inappropriate an occasion to recommend the reader of the handbook not to omit a serious encounter with Baader in their search for the roots and the meaning of Romanticism. Baader's profundity goes well beyond that of the mines in connection to which he is passingly mentioned, and where many of the ideas which would become crucial to several romantics first began to crystallize. Much of the tincture of Novalis' understanding of magic and of exponentiation e.g. was drawn from Baader; as was—by his own admission—the ultimate inspiration for Schelling's ground *philosopheme* in both its nature-philosophical and properly ideal valances. Adding to this the fact that Baader's philosophical overhaul of the Newtonian-Kantian understanding of gravity would have momentous consequences for the development of contemporary physics, then his virtual absence from the handbook becomes more regrettable and more ironic still...

Yet even such would-be defects of the handbook can be easily transposed into virtues if one but thinks that this apparent oversight of some of the strands of Romanticism's past have in turn allowed it to sprint ahead into its future and come rushing to our encounter. One of the most rewarding aspects of this collection of essays, indeed, is that thanks to contributions like Laurie Johnson's montage of romantic themes in contemporary cinema, or to the those of Pol Vandavelde, Nathan Ross, and Elaine Miller, all of which establish connections between the early romantics and more recent thinkers such as Heidegger, Adorno, Benjamin, or Landauer, the handbook as a whole proves adept at creating new meaning in the merging of otherwise distant horizons. Thereby, it also succeeds in presenting philosophical Romanticism as a living intellectual disposition inhabiting contemporary preoccupations—an always timely vocation of thought, one could say—rather than as a superseded historical stage or an isolated set of ideas or doctrines. Unaware as some may be of it, one or another of the seeds which Romanticism sowed may well have germinated in each of us who are given to the practice of thought, or may be at the root of what problems demand our attention. Whoever may want to familiarize themselves better with such a dissemination will find the *Palgrave Handbook of German Romantic Philosophy* an invaluable companion.

*Carlos Zorrilla Piña*