PHILOSOPHY AND JENA ROMANTICISM

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Romanticism was born in Jena in the 1790s when a group of philosophers, poets and literary critics formed around the brothers Friedrich and August Schlegel and their partners Dorothea and Caroline Schlegel; this short-lived group, which had largely dispersed by the end of the decade, included Novalis, Friedrich Hölderlin, Ludwig and Sophie Tieck, F.W.J. Schelling and Friedrich Schleiermacher. The attraction of Jena was the university’s pioneering focus on the philosophy of Kant, with Karl Leonhard Reinhold occupying the first chair of Critical Philosophy in 1787 until his replacement by J.G. Fichte in 1794. The Jena Romantics took a keen interest in developments in Kantian philosophy, especially the radical new emphasis on freedom which Fichte offered, although this interest was so far from uncritical that it sometimes bordered on hostility, as they experimented with more aesthetic and system-defying approaches to philosophical ideas in their poems, novels, aphorisms and plays.

2022 saw a noteworthy resurgence of public interest in this group through the publication of two popular books, Peter Neumann’s *Jena 1800* and Andrea Wulf’s *Magnificent Rebels*, which are discussed in the review essay by Azade Seyhan with which we open this issue. Although appreciative of these popularising efforts, Seyhan finds that Wulf’s book concentrates on personal relationships at the cost of the protagonists’ ideas, and that although Neumann’s book has somewhat more to say about the ideas, neither says much about their contemporary relevance. Seyhan’s own view on this matter is indicated when she writes that, “The extent of the influence of Romanticism’s critical legacy and cultural ethics in our modernity may be disputed. However, without their conviction of the power of language, poiesis, and art, social imagery might now be limited to what really exists or to what is merely instrumental.”

This question of contemporary significance is enthusiastically and compellingly taken up in Andrew Bowie in ‘The Contemporary Significance of Early German Romantic Philosophy’, who sees the Jena Romantics as offering a powerful critique of, and alternative to, what has remained the mainstream, epistemic approach to philosophy, one which focuses on arguments for and against philosophical claims, and to which aesthetic considerations concerning the modes in which these claims are framed are considered more or less irrelevant. In reaction to this dominant approach – dominant both then and now – the Jena Romantics saw that there are other ways of relating to the world which are important to people, especially artistic ones, and that the ideal of discovering the absolute truth is not only an unrealistic goal but one of dubious desirability. This perspective made them willing to experiment with different forms of philosophy, without assuming that any one of them might be more effective than any other, and they were even prepared to use irony to undermine any undue weight that might be attached to their work. In this way, they aimed not so much to defeat epistemological system-building as to move beyond it. Similarly, they wanted not to pontificate about art, making it the topic of a supposedly disinterested study, but rather to learn from it while using it and feeling it.

Moving now into more specific issues concerning philosophy and the Jena Romantics, Kienhow Goh’s essay is concerned with Friedrich Schlegel’s relationship to Fichte’s philosophy. Although Fichte claimed that the first principle of any philosophical system is ultimately a matter of faith or temperament, his system was still too rigid and restrictive for Schlegel. In Schlegel’s view, “It is equally deadly for spirit to have a system and to have none,” continuing paradoxically that, “It will simply have to decide to combine the two.” As such, Schlegel tried to develop the idea that philosophy can alternate between unrelated first principles.

Martina Barnaba argues that Hegel is the author of ‘Das Alteste System programm’; that this short document is in Hegel’s handwriting is undisputed but whether Hegel was the author remains a subject of debate. It expresses ideas that are typical of the Jena Romantics but that are not usually associated with Hegel, for example that art and myth can be vehicles for rational ideas, that poetry can help philosophy reach a wider audience, and that “the philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet.” Nonetheless, Barnaba argues that in its attitude to myth there is some discernible common ground with Hegel’s later work.

James Clow notes that irony is associated with the early romantics, and most especially with Friedrich Schlegel; his early work, in particular, is full of humour, playfulness and irony. The reader is never quite clear where the irony begins and ends, which is an obvious problem for any commentator, but Clow thinks that it is at least clear that Schlegel is gesturing towards the insufficiencies of the systems of Kant and Fichte – so in that respect, his jokes are entirely serious.

Katia Hay Rodgers (‘On the Pleasure of Being Misunderstood’) also writes about Friedrich Schlegel’s use of irony, as well as his attitudes towards pleasure and joy. According to Schlegel: “Joy is good in itself [. . .] it is the specific, natural and original state of man’s higher nature” – it points towards the absolute. Like Nietzsche, Schlegel was inspired by Aristophanes, and Rodgers points out some curious parallels between Schlegel’s ‘On the Aesthetic Value of Greek Comedy’ and Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche is sometimes dismissive of the early Romantics but Rodgers thinks he was positively influenced by Schlegel.

Michael Vater provides an exposition of Schelling’s unfinished novel *Clara* in which characters representing “nature” and “mind” seek to persuade Clara, who is grieving over the death of her husband, of personal immortality. Vater suggests that the novel is necessarily unfinished because Schelling is unconvinced of the unity of the self.

Arnold Farr thinks Schleiermacher may be a more helpful guide to contemporary ethical problems than Kant. For Schleiermacher the final goal of human life is the promotion of humanity and, since we are inherently social and political creatures, when we work as individuals towards our self-fulfilment we also work towards the fulfilment of humanity. There is no conflict between these goals, for ethics and politics cannot be separated. Schleiermacher also rejected the view that a harmony of happiness and virtue can only be achieved in the next life. Farr suggests that these ideas counter the atomistic individualism that prevails today, a legacy of the social contract theory.

Matteo Cherubini discusses Novalis’ response to one of the main problems that the early romantics inherited from Kant, the relationship between the human subject and nature. Cherubini explains how, in response to this problem, and to Fichte’s response to it, Novalis conceives of the human subject as an incomplete being that must build itself through art.

Marizio Maria Malimpensa also discusses Novalis’ conception of the human subject as an incomplete being. He explores how this leads Novalis to write in fragments, a presentational format in which philosophy is very closely allied with poetry, since, as Novalis memorably put it, “Poetry is the true absolute real. This is the heart of my philosophy. The more poetic the more true.”

Giulia Valpione provides a useful counterpoint to the articles of Cherubini and Malimpensa in that she reminds us that Novalis was not only interested in poetry but also in chemistry, geology, mathematics, physics and, above all, in physiology and digestion. He even sought to interpret knowledge in physiological terms. This was consistent with the importance that Novalis, and the Jena Romantics in general, attached to the fact that we are ourselves part of Nature. As such, we both influence nature and are in turn influenced by it. In this respect they might be considered to have written the first chapter of environmental thought.