

Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert

*Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence
of Romantic Philosophy.*

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This is an interesting account of one of the most important figures of early German romanticism. Millán-Zaibert presents Schlegel as a serious anti-foundationalist, keen to develop philosophy in more 'poetic' ways, but by no means as averse to reason as has sometimes been alleged.

Millán-Zaibert starts off by relating Schlegel to debates about the character of romanticism. She shares the reaction against Ernst Behler's portrayal of the movement as essentially literary; like Manfred Frank, Andrew Bowie and Frederick Beiser, she wants to emphasize its properly philosophical character. She goes on to agree with Frank and Bowie, as against Beiser, in denying that romantic philosophy should be seen as part of the broader current of German idealism. It all of course depends on what one takes German idealism to be. Millán-Zaibert sees it as exemplified by Hegel — 'the most typical German Idealist' (37) — and as such construes it in essentially rationalist terms. This then makes it easy to distinguish it from romanticism. This approach is questionable, not least because it seems to take Hegel's sense of himself as the culmination of the idealist current at face value, notwithstanding Millán-Zaibert's stated skepticism about the traditional 'Kant-to-Hegel' narrative (e.g., 28, 32, 44 and 51). It is striking that Schelling hardly features in this discussion; had he done so, different conclusions might have been drawn.

Most of the book is devoted to showing how Schlegel's philosophy emerged through a series of encounters with other thinkers. Millán-Zaibert gives thumbnail sketches of Kant, Jacobi, Reinhold, Fichte and Niethammer and considers how Schlegel reacted to their ideas and developed his own in his notebooks, published writings and lectures. This genetic approach is very helpful, but there are a number of problems with it.

First, many of the other thinkers discussed will most likely already be familiar to readers and Millán-Zaibert's treatment of them is somewhat too slight. She tells us enough to illuminate what Schlegel wrote about them (often in a very abbreviated style), but not enough to probe more deeply. This is particularly apparent in relation to Fichte: Schlegel's critique of Fichte is articulated clearly, but the issue of how indebted Schlegel might be to him does not really come sufficiently into view. (This criticism must be qualified by adding that the account of the least familiar figure in the list of thinkers mentioned above, Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, is very enlightening and will be of interest to English language students of German idealism generally.)

Second, Millán-Zaibert's approach of dealing with Schlegel's reaction to each thinker in turn makes for some degree of repetition in the presenta-

tion of his thought. We are rather too frequently told that he is a critic of philosophizing from first principles, an anti-foundationalist and so on, and it is only toward the end of the book that these programmatic claims start to be properly elaborated.

Third, tracking Schlegel's engagement with the Kant to Niethammer results in a narrative which presents him as a rather solitary protagonist. We get no real sense of his interaction with the romantic circle of which he was a key member, nor any sense of how his critique of Fichte compares with that of his friend Novalis. Given the importance the romantics put on 'symphilosophizing' (Schlegel's own term), this seems odd. Moreover, it means that the 'romantic philosophy' invoked in the title turns out to be just Schlegel's, which is disappointing.

In the last two chapters Millán-Zaibert discusses what she takes to be Schlegel's main philosophical ideas. First of all, she considers the key concept of the *Wechselerweis*. This term, which she chooses not to translate (but suggests could be rendered as reciprocal or alternating confirmation), is 'Schlegel's proposed alternative both to absolute first principles . . . and to appeals to common sense' (134). It designates the basic distinction which philosophy reveals between the principle of consciousness and the idea of the infinite (represented by Fichte and Spinoza respectively), which together constitute the poles of both experience and reality. For Schlegel, accordingly, philosophy finds itself 'in the middle', hovering and shuttling between the two poles. Millán-Zaibert subtly teases out the sense of Schlegel's suggestive metaphilosophical comments, but gives us insufficient information about how he himself developed these in practice, in particular in his various philosophy lectures from the early 1800s. One suspects that his striking programmatic statements did not easily translate into illuminating philosophical discussion. Other important themes considered by Millán-Zaibert are Schlegel's organic conception of objectivity, his coherentist account of understanding, and irony.

A few citations are incorrect: note 65 to Chapter 2 should refer to p. 93 of vol. 12 of the *Kritische Ausgabe* of Schlegel's works, not p. 232; note 67 should refer to p. 95, not p. 237; note 68 should also refer to p. 93. (All these endnotes are on 192).

One final point of criticism: the book is deceptively lengthy. Of the 267 pages, only 175 are taken up by the main text. There are nearly 60 pages of notes, mainly made up of the German originals of passages translated into English in the body of the text, with some appearing more than once. When combined with the repetitiousness noted earlier, this leaves one feeling that a shorter and sharper book is submerged within its pages. However notwithstanding these various quibbles, this book is a useful adjunct to the work of Beiser, Bowie and Frank.

Meade McCloughan
University College London