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Religion and the Problem of Subjectivity in the reception of Early German Romanticism

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Abstract: This examination provides a history of the problematic characterisation of Early German Romanticism (or *Frühromantik*) as subjectivist, and challenges this characterisation in light of recent scholarship. From its earliest critical reception in the early nineteenth century, the movement suffered from a set of problematic characterisations made by popular philosophical figures. Goethe, Hegel, Heine, Kierkegaard and others all criticised the movement for holding a dangerous subjective egoism. This characterisation remained with the *Frühromantik* throughout the twentieth century until it was challenged by recent re-evaluations offered by figures such as Dieter Henrich, Manfred Frank, Friedrich Beiser and Andrew Bowie. Their work has opened new possibilities for the re-interpretation of *Frühromantik* and our understanding of the movement's religious thought.

Keywords: Romanticism, Frühromantik, Subjectivity, Religious Thought, Goethe, Hegel, Heine, Kierkegaard, Dieter Henrich, Manfred Frank, Friedrich Beiser, Andrew Bowie

Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.
Goethe, *Faust I*

To address the question of religion in Early German Romanticism, it is essential that certain assumptions that have been at play since the movement's inception are called into question. Foremost among these is the 'subjectivity' of *Frühro-*

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mantik, which arises in the wake of Kant's Copernican revolution. This characterisation, to borrow from *Faust*, has cloaked the green life of the Romantic movement in grey theory, obscuring its golden tree. From Kantian idealism to post-structuralism, the reception history of modern philosophy has been overwhelmingly concerned with the question of how the mind structures experience.[1] In the case of *Frühromantik* this has specifically taken the form of the movement's characterisation as a form of ironic aesthetic subjectivism grounded in a Fichtian absolute ego. Recent scholarship has, however, shown the opposite to be the case. Rather than arguing from a Fichtian position, Early German Romanticism instead sought to develop an alternative to the threat of pure subjectivity.[2] Instead, we can increasingly see the *Frühromantik* as fundamentally concerned with the question of absolute Being, and the problem of its representation. The movement's development of an aesthetic mode of expression aims to illustrate that the Absolute, though conceptually inarticulable, was not beyond intelligibility. In this regard, Early German Romanticism's concern with aesthetics is not an illustration of the power of the absolute ego, but an expression and acknowledgement of the contingent nature of the finite ego's utterances *vis-à-vis* absolute Being.

The end of this examination is foremost to provide a history of the characterisation of Early German Romanticism as subjectivist, and to offer an outline of how recent scholarship has challenged this. Such a history will help us to understand why the religious thought of Early German Romanticism has been overlooked for so long, and hopefully spur us to take further account of it. We see that from its earliest critical reception in the nineteenth century, the movement has suffered from a problematic reading that does little justice to its true end. Until very recently the accusation against Early German Romanticism of holding a dangerous subjective egoism continued throughout the twentieth century. Yet even with this development the recent re-evaluation of *Frühromantik*, whilst rejecting the characterisation of the movement as subjective, has itself

1 Robert B. Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*. Paris: Seuil, 2006; Lee Braver, *A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007; Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman, "Towards a Speculative Philosophy." In *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant et al. Melbourne: Re.press, 2011, 1–18.

2 Whether Fichte's philosophy was foundationalist or not, or whether it evolved from the former to the latter in its character is beyond the scope of this examiniation. For differing opinions see Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism*. Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 116, n. 18; and Daniel Breazeale, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Breazeale. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994, viii.

been dominated by the accusation. Accordingly, the movement's true end of finding a unity between realism and idealism, between the subjective and the objective, and in so doing develop a new language for absolute Being, remains to be fully explicated and appreciated. It is here where the movement's religious dimension emerges, as it takes on the fundamentally religious task of developing a finite idiom for absolute Being.

1 Which Romanticism?

Before we begin to look at the reception of Early German Romanticism, it is necessary to define the movement itself. Not unlike any other movement, but perhaps to a greater degree, Romanticism has a certain notoriety when it comes to its definition. Early in the twentieth century, the intellectual historian A. O. Lovejoy suggested it was impossible to define the wider movement, and began to write of 'Romanticisms' instead.[3] In response, Isaiah Berlin objected to this abandonment, but equally conceded that the task of defining Romanticism 'is like that dark cave described by Virgil, where all footsteps lead in one direction [...] those who enter it seem never to emerge again'.[4] Despite, or perhaps because of these problems, Early German Romanticism offers an ideal starting place, as it is the original self-described Romantic movement.[5] It was from its inception in *Mitteleuropa* that Romantic movements at all points of the compass, in Europe and beyond, would develop.

German Romanticism has traditionally been divided into three periods: *Frühromantik*, *Hochromantik* and *Spätromantik*. Though not unproblematic, this division remains useful, as each period has differing fundamental concerns, and often different actors. The *Frühromantik* is characterised by the community that formed around the brothers Friedrich and August Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder. In addition to these figures Friedrich Hölderlin, and Friedrich Schelling are also often numbered among the Romantics. More recently this list has grown to include Dorothea Veit Schlegel, and Caroline Schlegel Schelling. The group is defined by its own particular response to a set of philosophical and theological problems arising from reactions to both the Pantheism Controversy,

3 Arthur O. Lovejoy, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms." *PMLA* 39 (1924): 229–253.
4 Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1965, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC*, ed. Henry Hardy. London: Pimlico, 2000, 1.
5 Cf. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler and others. Munich: Schöningh, 1958–2002, vol. II, 183.

as found in the work of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Johann Gottfied Herder and Karl Philipp Moritz, and to the Critical philosophy, as developed by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Karl Leonhard Reinhold and Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, as well as the social and national concerns that grew out of the Revolutionary period. With Early German Romanticism defined, it is now possible to take up the history of its reception.

2 The nineteenth century accusation and its legacy

Early German Romanticism has long been perceived in a negative light, characterised as sickly and naïve, relativistic and destructive. These characteristics arose from what was perceived as the subjective indulgence and egoism of *Frühromantik* aesthetics. This portrayal has its origin with a number of influential figures, including Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Heinrich Heine, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Søren Kierkegaard. Their critical portrayal of the movement has perpetuated a series of misreadings, clichés and distorted caricatures that have continued to this day. While some of their comments may be excused in the context of polemics or rhetorical playfulness, due to the cultural influence of these authors, the afterlife of their characterisations has been long. Perhaps one of the best examples is Goethe's famous remark: 'I call the classical the healthy, and the Romantic the sick', further characterising the former as 'strong, sanguine, happy and healthy', and the latter as 'weak, sickly and ill'.[6]

One of the most popular treatments of the Romantics may be found in Heinrich Heine's influential *Die romantische Schule* (1835), which criticised the positive portrayal found in Madame de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* (1813). Heine, echoing Goethe's anti-Romantic rhetoric, accused the movement of reactionary conservatism and esotericism. To exemplify this he pointed to the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich turning to Roman Catholicism and August to orientalism: 'Friedrich Schlegel went to Vienna where he daily attended Mass and ate roast chicken. Mr. August Wilhelm Schlegel retired into the pagoda of Brahma.'[7] Heine described the writing of the Romantics as 'colossal products of madness'.[8] Of the

6 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens* (Münchner Ausgabe), ed. Karl Richter, vol. 19. Munich: Carl Hanser, 1986, 300. Cf. Arnd Bohn, "Goethe and the Romantics." In *The Literature of German Romanticism*, ed. Dennis F. Mahoney. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004, 35–60.

7 Heinrich Heine, *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings*, ed. Terry Pinkard, trans. by Howard Pollack-Milgate. Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 152.

8 Ibid., 141.

work of Hoffman and Novalis he wrote that 'their poetry was actually a disease [...] the rosy shine in the literary works of Novalis is not the colour of health, but of consumption; the purple glow in Hoffmann's *Fantasy Pieces* is not the flame of genius, but of fever'.[9]

The sickness that Heine and Goethe described had its source in the Romantic's perceived relativism, self-indulgence and creative caprice. This characterisation may be largely traced back to Hegel's vociferous attack on the subjectivity of Romantic irony in the *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*.[10] Hegel wrote of how Romantics claimed to have 'reached the standpoint of divine genius'.[11] In his lectures he argued that the Romantics, 'proceeding from Fichtean philosophy',[12] maintained 'the absoluteness of the abstract *ego*',[13] which 'sets up and dissolves everything out of its own caprice'.[14] All this left the Romantic, according to Hegel, longing for objectivity, unable to 'tear himself free from this unsatisfied abstract inwardness'.[15] For Hegel, the result was quiescence, impotence and the 'yearning of a morbid beautiful soul'.[16] In the end this made the Romantics, particularly Friedrich Schlegel, 'bad, useless people who cannot stick to their fixed and important aim but abandon it again and let it be destroyed in themselves.'[17] When Hegel wrote of how 'irony was invented by Friedrich von Schlegel',[18] he was accusing him of the very Fichtean egoism which recent scholarship (as outlined below) has shown Early German Romanticism to be opposed to.

Under Hegel's influence, Kierkegaard adopted a similar concern, going so far as to say there was no difference between 'irony' and the 'romantic'.[19] The Romantic ironist, explains Kierkegaard, enjoyed 'divine freedom that knows no bonds, no chains, but plays with abandon and unrestraint, [and] gambols like a leviathan in the sea'.[20] According to Kierkegaard, this 'power to bind and

9 Ibid. 191.

10 Cf. Otto Pöggeler, *Hegels Kritik der Romantik*. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1999.

11 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, I, 65.

12 Ibid. I, 67.

13 Ibid. I, 64.

14 Ibid. I, 65.

15 Ibid. I, 66 f.

16 Ibid. I, 67.

17 Ibid. I, 67.

18 Ibid. I, 66.

19 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, 279.

20 Ibid., 275.

unbind',[21] defeated historical actuality by suspending it.[22] Such an embrace of relativism appreciated every standpoint, valuing even the abhorrent, leaving the ironic subjectivity of Early German Romanticism without an absolute, and rendering it ultimately empty and nihilistic.[23]

Hegel's characterisation of the movement easily led to the perception of Early German Romanticism as naïve, dilettantish and destructive. Heine wrote of how Tieck 'drank the mediaeval elixir of youth too deftly' and became a child,[24] whilst Kierkegaard, citing Heine, expanded this characterisation to the movement in general.[25] Some of these reflections may be more fairly applied to later forms of Romanticism. as it began exploring the unconscious, and unravelling Enligthenment assumptions of human rationality and the nature of progress.[26] These explorations of the complex, and sometimes disturbing aspects of humanity, were expressed in the works of Heinrich von Kleist, Adelbert von Chamisso, Marquis de Sade and Joseph de Maistre. However, when used to characterise the *Frühromantik*, the accusation of subjective egoism is simply incorrect.

The problematic association of Early German Romanticism with Fichtean Egoism is repeated and perpetuated in some of the most important early studies of the *Frühromantik* by influential figures such as Rudolf Haym, Nicolai Hartmann and Hermann August Korff.[27] It further recurs in the work of influential English critics such as Geoffrey Hartman, who emphasised the movement's concern with naïvety, and Northrop Frye, who wrote of Romanticism's transference of superior reality from external reality to the depths of consciousness.[28] However, we must not be too severe in our criticism of this early work. These early

21 Ibid., 275.

22 Ibid., 279.

23 K. Brian Sönderquist, "On Ironic Communication, Subjectivity and Selfhood." In *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries: Literature and Aesthetics*, ed. Jon Stewart. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, 185–234.

24 Heine, *On the History of Religion*, 148.

25 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 304.

26 A genealogy of the development of Romantic literature may be found in Margarete Kohlenbach, "Transformations of German Romanticism 1830–2000." In *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism*, ed. Nicholas Saul. Cambridge et al.: University Press, 2006, 257–280. Cf. Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic and Modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

27 Rudolf Haym, *Die Romantische Schule: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Geistes*. Berlin: R. Gaertner, 1870; Nicolai Hartmann, *Die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1929; Hermann August Korff, *Geist der Goethezeit, Teil 3: Frühromantik*. Leipzig: Hirzel, 1940. One major exception to this was Oskar Walzel's *Deutsche Romantik*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1908, which stressed the Platonic realism present in Romantic thought.

28 Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness." In id., *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958–1970*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970, 298–310; Northrop Frye,

commentators did not have the benefit of the critical editions of the major Romantics which we possess today.[29] These have made some of the most important philosophical writing of Early German Romanticism widely available for the first time. Indeed, the literature-focused approach of much of the twentieth century should not be dismissed, as many of these classical treatments still constitute valuable resources.[30]

There are, however, aspects of twentieth century literary scholarship on Romanticism that may be more easily discounted. In particular, those readings which attempt to negatively portray the movement's concern with preserving and developing national literatures, its emphasis on artistic genius, and the conversion of a number of its members to Catholicism. These developments led some critics to label the movement to be reactionary, anti-democratic, and even led them to accuse it of giving rise to the irrational *völkish* nationalism that culminated in National Socialism.

These claims and associations influenced generations of scholars. In the first part of the twentieth century we can observe literary critics such as Pierre Lasserre and Irving Babbitt respectively referring to the destructive Romantic search for a primitive unity without reality, and its supposed irrational and sick nature.[31] Both appealed to a classical tradition against Romanticism, and the influence of this call may be seen in the work of T. S. Elliot, Babbitt's most famous student.[32] The work of these scholars served to enforce the negative

"The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism." In *Romanticism Reconsidered: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Northrop Frye. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, 1–12.

29 E. g. Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs (Historische-kritische Ausgabe)*, 6 vols., ed. Paul Kluckhohn, Richard Samuel, Gerhard Schulz, Hans-Joachim Mähl. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–2006; Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke (Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe)*, 6 vols., ed. Friedrich Beißner, Adolf Beck. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1946–1985; Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, 35 vols., ed. Ernst Behler and others. Munich: Schöningh, 1958–2002.

30 E. g. Haym, *Die Romantische Schule*; Ricarda Huch, *Blütezeit der Romantik*. Leipzig: Haessel, 1899; ead., *Ausbreitung und Verfall der Romantik*. Leipzig: Haessel, 1902; Oskar Walzel, *Deutsche Romantik. Eine Skizze*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1908; id., *German Romanticism*, trans. by Alma Elsie Lussky. New York: Putnam, 1932; Paul Kluckhohn, *Das Ideengut der deutschen Romantik*. Bielefeld: Velhagen & Klasing, 1924; Myer H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953; id., *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York et al.: Norton, 1973.

31 Pierre Lasserre, *Le romantisme français. Essai sur la révolution dans les sentiments et dans les idées au XIXe siècle*. Paris: Société du Mercvre de France, 1907; Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919.

32 E. g. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*. London: Methuen, 1920; id., *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. London: Faber, 1933.

readings for a post Second World War environment that was understandably grasping for a way to make sense of the horrors of that conflict. F. L. Lucas, described Romantic narcissism, and called Hitler a 'perverted romantic', and an example of 'the destructiveness of a romanticism gone rotten'.[33] Others such as Peter Viereck, Paul Roubiczek, Isaiah Berlin and György Lukács, levelled similar accusations.[34] René Girard further developed the Hegelian misdiagnoses of egotistical subjectivity with his notion of the 'romantic lie', which he argues over-emphasises autonomy, obscuring the mediated nature of human desire.[35]

It is true that many Romantics did see their work as part of a project to establish a national literature, and as part of an attempt to recover aspects of medieval religiosity. However, they did this whilst also championing a broad canon of vernacular national literatures, and equally without appealing to ecclesial authority. Heine's argument that the Romantic 'no longer wants to be a citizen of the world or a European',[36] cannot hold against the near universal *Frühromantik* veneration towards pan-European figures such as William Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri, the Italian Renaissance or classical literature. Nor can it apply when we consider the interest the Romantics expressed in Oriental religions. This is also the case with Hegel's accusation of Romantic elitism. He claimed that the movement promoted an egotistical standpoint that valued the power of the individual artist's own caprice over the dignity of humankind.[37] Yet many of the philosophical arguments of the Romantics sought to defend the dignity of the individual, particularly against reductionist rational, utilitarian, or materialist arguments. Despite this, influential claims by those such as Nietzsche, who declared in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* that Schopenhauer and Wagner, respectively

33 Frank Laurence Lucas, *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936.

34 Cf. Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics. From the Romantics to Hitler*. New York: Knopf, 1941; Paul Roubiczek, *The Misinterpretation of Man. Studies in European Thought in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Routledge, 1949, 59–81; Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy. London: Pimlico, 2000; György Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason. The Way of Irrationalism from Schelling to Hitler*, trans. by Peter Palmer. London: Merlin Press, 1980. For an opposing view cf. Manfred Frank, "Wie reaktionär war eigentlich die Frühromantik? (Elemente zur Aufstörung der Meinungsbildung)." In *Athenäum. Jahrbuch für Romantik*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997, 141–166; Ralf Klausnitzer, *Blaue Blume unterm Hakenkreuz. Die Rezeption der deutschen literarischen Romantik im Dritten Reich*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1999.

35 René Gerard, *Mensonge romantique et verité romanesque*. Paris: Grasset, 1961; id., *Deceit, Desire and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966.

36 Heine, *On the History of Religion*, 150.

37 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, I, 66 f.

associated with pessimism and anti-Semitism, were the 'most celebrated and decided Romantics', further damaged the movement's reputation.[38]

During this period, however, Romanticism was not without its defenders. Benedetto Croce put forth a more nuanced consideration of the movement, seeing both classical and romantic as essential elements of the poetic synthesis of the ideal and real.[39] Similarly, Jacques Barzun attacked the contemptuous clichés that had been directed against the movement, pointing out Romanticism's expanded understanding of reason, and its founding importance for modern art.[40] The reception of Romanticism changed further with its dissociation from conservatism and proto-fascism when, beginning in the 1960s, members of the Frankfurt School took up its thought. The progressive and utopian potentialities of the movement are recovered in the work of Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Above all, it was Walter Benjamin, considered in greater detail below, who played a central role in this recovery.

The legacy of this history of misreading allowed for the academic compartmentalisation of Romanticism. The portrayal of the movement as advocating pure subjectivity, expressed in ironic caprice and poetic agony, had the two-fold effect of denying Romanticism its philosophical legitimacy, and portraying it as a literary expression of the age's anxieties. Accordingly, language and literature departments focused primarily on the supposed subjective pangs and chimerical fantasies of the movement's poetical works, while the philosophy of the period was often considered under the rubric of German Idealism, defined by its struggle against subjectivism. Furthermore, the taxonomies often applied to the literary landscape of the period, with titles such as *Gefühlphilosophie*, *Sturm und Drang* and *Klassik*, and between geographical divisions, such as Berlin, Jena and Weimar, whilst at times helpful, have often made the divisions between these overlapping movements appear too neat. Added to this is one of the primary goals of the *Frühromantik*, which was to seek a unity among the increasingly divergent disciplines. Schlegel famously wrote: 'All art should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be united'.[41] Within their circle, the early Romantics sought to practice *Sympoesie*, *Symkritik* and *Symphilosophie*,

38 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag and Walter de Gruyter, 1988, III, 116.
39 Benedetto Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*. Bari: Laterza, 1932; id., *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by H. Furst. London: Allen & Unwin, 1934.
40 Jacques Barzun, "To the Rescue of Romanticism." *The American Scholar* 9 (1940), 147–158; id., *Classic, Romantic and Modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.
41 Schlegel, *Ausgabe*, II, 161, no. 115.

in what Novalis called a 'Geisterfamilie' that ignored the boundaries of both discipline and authorship.[42]

Yet if Romanticism suffered from the criticism of literary studies, it was largely dismissed outright by philosophical scholarship. For the most part, the movement was philosophically ignored, and considered as a literary appendage of German Romanticism. While of the one side this may be traced to its characterisation as a subjective movement, it is also the consequence of the shape of much philosophical discourse through the twentieth century. In part, the failure to appreciate the philosophical project of Romanticism can be traced to movements in twentieth century philosophy, which, in addition to adopting the nineteenth century caricature of Romanticism already considered, aimed to model the philosophical on the mathematical and natural sciences in distinction from the literary. Logical Positivism, which in many ways was the forerunner of the Analytic tradition, aimed to arrive at an objective set of verifiable propositions of an independent reality. Such a philosophical project could offer little sympathy to the Romantic, whose fundamental metaphysical concern with the Absolute led its members to develop a position which stressed the contingency of explanation, and the poetical understanding of philosophy. On the other hand both Continental and pragmatic schools have tended to see philosophy as a kind of literary genera, which is less an attempt to understand reality, than it is an expression of the subjective self. In such readings there is no reality independent of the text. Conversely, at the centre of Romantic discourse, is absolute Being, the fundamental reality which all narratives, philosophical or otherwise, participate in disclosing. Consequently, one tradition has dismissed the Romantic project outright, while the other has subsumed it into its own narrative, mistaking the Romantic use of the fragment and its stress on the incompletion of systems as a kind of proto-postmodernity. The analytic approach resists the Romantic claim that all discourse is ultimately poetic in its representation of rational truth. The Continental tradition resists the realist claims of the Romantics, seeing behind their imaginative methodology not the Absolute, but the subjective self. Despite this, as we shall see, recent scholarship on Early German Romanticism has seen the movement's thought as a way to solve the false dichotomy between analytic reductionism and Continental relativism.

42 Schlegel, *Ausgabe*, XXIV, 22; Novalis, *Schriften*, I, 686.

3 Recent Scholarship on Early German Romanticism

What Early German Romanticism has required is an approach that overcomes both the problematic readings of the movement's detractors and the divisions that developed through various academic approaches. In part, this has been made possible by the increased ability to return to sources with the publication of the critical editions of the works of major Romantic thinkers, such as Schlegel and Novalis. In the last two decades scholarship on Early German Romanticism has seen a number of important developments. This work has overcome the problematic readings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, even while these considerations have worked to overcome the characterisation of subjectivity, they have nonetheless been structured by this accusation.

The recent reconsideration of the movement can be divided into three broad categories. First, there is the re-reading of the movement within literary studies itself, where the post-structuralist reading of Romantic aesthetics has considered the movement to be a reflection of the fragmentation of the subject both in language and history. Second, is the reconstruction of *Frühromantik* through its context within the history of philosophy, where the issue at stake is to demonstrate the Romantic project's aim of overcoming the problem of subjectivity arising within post-Kantian philosophy. Finally, there is constructive philosophy, which has attempted to employ Romantic philosophy to counter contemporary physicalist and deconstructive threats to the self. Each of these considerations shares a subject-focused approach to the period. Indeed, two of the major figures in the re-assessment of Early German Romanticism have said precisely this. Manfred Frank considers the problem of subjectivity to be '*the* basic interest that has gripped modern philosophy from Descartes to Husserl (and Sartre)'.[43] Similarly, Dieter Henrich writes: 'If any basic concept has played the leading role in the history of Western Philosophy, it is that of self-consciousness'.[44] While in many ways true, it is precisely the persistent concern with subjectivity that has been largely responsible for obscuring the *Frühromantik* concern with philosophical realism.

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43 Manfred Frank, "Is subjectivity a Non-Thing, and Absurdity [Unding]? On Some Difficulties in Naturalistic Reductions of Self-Consciousness." In *The Project of The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. Karl Ameriks, Dieter Sturma. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, 177–197, here 177. Frank edited a collection of original materials on the topic in *Selbstbewußtseinstheorien von Fichte bis Sartre*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991.

44 See also Dieter Henrich, "Selbstbewußtsein, kritische Einleitung in eine Theorie." In *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*, ed. R. Bubner, K. Cramer, R. Wiehl. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1970, 257–284; english trans. "Self-Consciousness, A Critical Introduction to a Theory." *Man and World* 4 (1971), 3–28, here 3.

3.1 Literary Theory

Whilst Early German Romanticism has always been the concern of literary theory, recent scholarship has largely focused upon the movement's critique of the system and its use of the fragment, casting these concerns as prefiguring the postmodern linguistic and historical fragmentation of the subject. Under this reading, the literary form itself is considered to be the Absolute, a problematic conclusion that does not reflect the ontological primacy of Being in Romantic philosophy, in effect mistaking the medium for the subject.

Before examining this reading, however, it is incumbent upon us to take note of two important exceptions to this problematic treatment. One may be found in the work of Benjamin, in his doctoral dissertation *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1920), where he makes an important break from the Hegelian interpretation of Romanticism. Benjamin takes note of the Romantic position, held in opposition to Fichte, that the intuition of the 'I' is impossible without the world.[45] In early Romanticism, Benjamin maintains that the centre of reflection is not found in the 'I', but in art.[46] Benjamin characterised the interplay between the object of art criticism and critical activity as one where 'perfecting, positive criticism' comes to participate in the quasi-mystical disclosure of the Absolute.[47] He goes on to characterise this Romantic Absolute as 'substantial and filled', and art criticism as essential to the process of it unfolding.[48] Criticism lifts the artwork out of the particular, connecting it with the absolute ideal of art, a process reflecting the 'messianic' nature of Romanticism.[49] This notion of artistic reflection breaks from the Hegelian reading of Romanticism as a reflection of Fichtian ego based subjectivity. Unfortunately, as Andrew Bowie has pointed out, Benjamin's insightful reading of Romanticism has been either underestimated or neglected because of a lack of serious theoretical attention amongst English-language Germanists.[50] In addition to Benjamin, the work of Ernst Behler must not go unmentioned. Behler was concerned with Romantic

45 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991, I.1, 32, cited in Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory. The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*. London: Routledge, 1997, 210.

46 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 39.

47 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991–1999, I, 154.

48 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 129.

49 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 116 f., n. 3, 185. As Benjamin's thought develops, however, Romantic criticism becomes for him a 'lesser factor in the continued life of literary works' (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 258).

50 Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, 193, n. 2, 205 f.

literature, but he was also one of the first commentators to challenge the solely literary reading of the *Frühromantik*, particularly in relation to Schlegel. In his own work, by virtue of his editorship of the *Friedrich Schlegel Kritische Ausgabe*, Behler cultivates an appreciation of Schlegel that goes beyond the literary. In his influential *German Romantic Literary Theory*, he argues for the movements' independence from Weimar Classicism, Transcendental Idealism, and Enlightenment encyclopaedism.[51]

Turning now to the recent proto-postmodern reading of Early German Romanticism, it is best to begin with the influential text *L'Absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (1978), by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy.[52] In this work they claim that in the tension between production and reflection, Romantic art constitutes a 'genre beyond all genres […] containing the theory of this 'beyond' within itself'.[53] They specifically single out the fragment as one of the greatest representations of this '*work in progress*',[54] as it manifests the 'operative status of the subject'.[55] Furthermore the fragment also represents the post-Critical loss of self-presence. Kant's Critical philosophy, in preventing the self from having an adequate self-presentation of the self, instead constitutes the self as a regulatory idea in the unity of apperception.[56] Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy aim to overcome this representational difficulty through what *The Literary Absolute* calls 'eidaesthetics', in which an ideal is presented through art.[57] The fragment displays the productive capacity of poesis, manifesting the synthetic totality behind each particular manifestation.[58] As such, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy maintain that Romantic literature 'is thus less concerned with the production of the literary thing than with *production*, absolutely speaking. Romantic poetry sets out to penetrate the essence of poiesy, in which the literary thing produces the truth of production in itself, and thus […] the truth of the production *of itself*'.[59] Consequently, 'romantic thought involves

51 Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 2, 3, 5, 11.

52 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978. Translated as *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, 2, 15.

53 Ibid., 86.

54 Ibid., 48.

55 Ibid., 52.

56 Ibid., 30 f.

57 Ibid., 35, 53, 105.

58 Ibid., xvi.

59 Ibid., 12.

not only the absolute of literature, but literature as the absolute. *Frühromantik* is the inauguration of the *literary absolute*'.[60]

The strength of *The Literary Absolute* is the focus it provides upon the philosophical nature of the movement's aesthetics. However, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy present not so much an historical analysis, as a selective appropriation of certain elements of Romantic thought that suit more contemporary deconstructive concerns. This is particularly evident with their focus upon the fragment, which they claim is for Romanticism 'the most distinctive mark of its originality, or the sign of its radical modernity'.[61] This position, however, does not account for the myriad other genres the Romantics employed, and furthermore it does not consider the Romantic aim of synthesising these genres. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy describe Early German Romanticism as characterised by an 'uncontrollable incompletion' or an 'incompletable incompletion',[62] yet the Romantics were not concerned with the innovation of an absolute idiom. Instead, their aim was to develop an idiom that expressed absolute Being as articulated in the irreducibility of art.

Despite these problems, *The Literary Absolute* has established its own position in the reception of Romanticism. If the work is considered a creative appropriation of certain aspects of the movement, then there need be no objection to it. A number of contemporary philosophers and literary theorists have sought to use it as a model to explore the literary and philosophical possibilities of the fragment.[63] However, problems arise when its assumptions are anachronistically applied to a reading of Romanticism. To emphasise the fragment alone makes the movement appear far more opposed to the Enlightenment in character than it actually was, while a failure to take account of the central role of absolute Being makes Romantic concerns with anti-foundationalism, as well as its systematic scepticism, appear more reflective of the later twentieth century linguistic turn than they truly are. Such difficulties may be observed, for example, in Azade Seyhan's *Representation and its Discontents: The Legacy of German Romanticism* (1992). This text argues that the 'literary absolute' of Romanticism is indeed even more ambiguous than that put forward by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy.[64] The Romantic work of art, claims Seyhan 'constitutes

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 40.

62 Ibid., 59.

63 E. g. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson and Wittgenstein*. Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989, 8 f.; Jay Bernstein, *The Fate of Art. Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1992, 60 f.; Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990, 173–195.

64 Cf. Alice Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings. Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin*. Athens: University of

the very space where the problem of representation as mediation of presence becomes most visible in its irremediable ambiguity [...] After all, the dominant figural forms [...] of Romanticism are characterised by discontinuity, rupture, and indirect reference.'[65] In the end, the line of inquiry established by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy incorrectly portrays the Romantics as irrational, 'clearly positioning themselves against the representational conceit of philosophy', and in their literary production, 'thriv[ing] on moments of discontinuity, rapture, and reversal'.[66]

3.2 Reconstructive historical philosophy

The re-assessment of Early German Romanticism within the context of the history of philosophy has been a far more fruitful enterprise. This work has been dominated by the work of three scholars: Dieter Henrich, Manfred Frank and Fredrick Beiser. Beyond these three, many others have made significant contributions to our philosophical understanding of Romanticism.[67] Yet as we shall see, for each of these three thinkers the central concern of Romanticism is construed foremost as the attempt to overcome the threat of subjectivity arising from Cartesian and Kantian dualism.

Henrich adopted an approach to the study of Early German Romanticism that aims to provide a holistic view by moving away from the production of

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Georgia Press, 1978; William O'Brien, *Novalis. Signs of Revolution*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995; Martha Heifer, *The Retreat of Representation. The Concept of Darstellung in German Critical Discourse*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996. Alternately, Behler offered a measured comparative examination of Romanticism and postmodernism in *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990; id., *German Romantic Literary Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 299–305.

65 Azade Seyhan, *Representation and its Discontents: The Legacy of German Romanticism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, 8 f.

66 Ibid., 3.

67 Cf. Jürgen Stolzenberg, *Fichtes Begriff der intellektuellen Anschauung. Die Entwicklung in den Wissenschaftslehren von 1793/94 bis 1801/02*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986; Theodore Ziolkowski, *Das Wunderjahr in Jena. Geist und Gesellschaft 1794/95*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotca, 1998; id., *German Romanticism and its Institutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990; id., *Clio, the Romantic Muse. Historicizing the Faculties in Germany*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004; Violetta Waibel, *Hölderlin und Fichte. 1794–1800*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000; Bärbel Frischmann, *Vom transzendentalen zum frühromantischen Idealismus. J. G. Fichte und Fr. Schlegel*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005; id., "Der philosophische Beitrag der deutschen Frühromantik und Hölderlins." In *Handbuch Deutscher Idealismus*, ed. Hans Jörg Sandkühler. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005, 326–354.

monographs on individual thinkers, set texts and main protagonists. Instead, his intention has been to reconstruct the *Denkraum* of a particular period. To do so means to understand its problems, the way they unfolded and were answered, and what potentialities were (and were not) developed within its context. This is the source of his notion of the *Konstellation*, which takes together a number of thinkers, both major and minor. These figures interact over a period of time on a set of issues, influencing the development of one another. Therefore, *Konstellationsforschung* reconstructs both the theoretical and personal relations between thinkers in order to grasp the reason and motivations behind their work. The level of apprehension achieved by these methods is able to reveal the potentialities a text presented in its specific historical setting, even beyond those known to the author.[68]

In 1985 Henrich applied this methodology to research into the Jena circle, or constellation, of Romantic thinkers examining the period between 1789 and 1795.[69] Around this and other constellations, Henrich's approach has described the fecund ground from which the movement sprang, and illustrated its complex development. This work has brought to light important but hitherto obscure figures such as Issac von Sinclair and Jacob Zwilling, and provided a detailed account of the philosophical growth of the young Hölderlin, which has become a standard reference work.[70] Throughout his work, Henrich's starting point has continued to be Kant. His own constructive philosophy has developed with his historical research, evolving out of neglected alternatives in the development of Critical philosophy.[71] We see this in the attention he has brought to Immanuel Carl Diez, a *Repetent* (or fellow) at the *Stift* in Tübingen, who along with Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer and Johann Benjamin Erhard, developed Critical philosophy along more measured lines than the radical and better known innovations proposed by Reinhold and Fichte.[72] These examinations have helped to initiate a reassessment of post-Kantian philosophy, revealing a landscape that

68 Dieter Freundlieb, *Dieter Henrich and Contemporary Philosophy. The Return to Subjectivity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, 16–18.

69 Dieter Henrich, *Konstellationen. Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789–1795)*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991.

70 Dieter Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein. Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794–1795)*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992.

71 Dieter Henrich, *Denken und Selbstsein. Vorlesungen über Subjektivität*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2007.

72 *Immanuel Carl Diez, Briefwechsel und Kantische Schriften. Wissensbegründung in der Glaubenskrise Tübingen-Jena (1790–1792)*, ed. Dieter Henrich. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1997; id., *Grundlegung aus dem Ich. Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte des Idealismus: Tübingen-Jena (1790–1794)*, 2 vols. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2004.

is far more complex than one populated simply by idealist system-builders and literary Romantics.[73]

Henrich's Kant-centred approach, however, has meant that his project is driven by a concern with epistemological issues arising out of the reception of Critical philosophy. In turn, his has caused him to make some problematic claims. For example, he maintains that the Romantic theory of art and poetry originated in Fichte's *Wiessenshaftslehre*. Such statements, while not incorrect, are errors by the omission of other fundamentally important motivations, particularly those concerning religion, and the role of Platonic realism.[74]

Manfred Frank carries out a similar reconstructive historical examination of the period. Like Henrich, Frank's work has played an essential role in distinguishing the thought of Early German Romanticism from idealism, demonstrating how it developed its own unique response to the challenges of Kant's philosophy. According to Frank, the Romantics were not idealists at all, but advocated a position of philosophical realism.[75] He explains how the idealists, and Hegel in particular, held that consciousness was a self-sufficient phenomenon, capable of comprehending its existence by its own means. Alternately, the Romantics held that consciousness of Being was grounded in the transcendent.[76] The ontological priority of Being is, according to Frank, the 'first complete expression' of early German Romanticism.[77] Through this position the foundation of consciousness becomes non-transparent; that is, it cannot be an object of reflection as we are unable to access it.

The consequence of holding this position for Romanticism is that it comes to develop a strong scepticism toward philosophical foundationalism and systematicity. We can observe this in the Romantic reaction toward the philosophies of Reinhold and Fichte, by Hölderlin, Novalis and Schlegel. More importantly, this allows us to account for the movement's embrace of the aesthetic, a form of expression which articulates Being through feeling and intuition, expressed in

73 This effect has been limited in English as little is translated, excepting *The Course of Remembrance and Other Essays on Hölderlin*, ed. Eckart Förster. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. Alternatively, two of Henrich's texts on Kant have been translated: *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral image of the World: Studies in Kant*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991; *The Unity of Reason. Essays on Kant's Philosophy*, ed. Richard Velkley. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

74 Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel. Lectures on German Idealism*, ed. David S. Pacini. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, 3.

75 Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. by Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004, 28.

76 Ibid., 863.

77 Ibid., 729.

irony, fragment and poetry. This means that, for the Romantics, philosophy as a discursive reflective process has limited purchase on fundamental questions, and the aesthetic has increased legitimacy as a mode for the consideration of the Absolute. Whilst Frank has argued for the primacy of Being in Romantic thought, he does not acknowledge the religious dimension of this position. Instead, he maintains that this absolute Being was akin to a sense of existence, something with religious potential, but one that does not extend beyond the limits of reason.

Friedrick Beiser, is the third of the three major historical scholars. His work has played an important role in explaining the thought of Early German Romanticism to the Anglophone world, by offering a detailed treatment of the period, and by taking on thorny issues such as the authority of reason, and the problem of subjectivity.[78] In the process of doing so, his work has provided us with some of the first substantive philosophical treatments in English of Hölderlin, Novalis and Schlegel.[79] Like his two predecessors, Beiser is concerned with philosophical issues, particularly as defined by Kant, having to do with the authority of reason and the problem of subjectivity.

Like Frank, Beiser sees the *Frühromantik* as defined by the notion of the ontological priority of the Absolute and the consequent anti-foundationalism which arises from this position, both of which lead to the development of fragmentary, non-systematic and aesthetic approaches that differ from the idealists. However, unlike Frank, Beiser defines the Romantics, along with Hegel and Schelling, as 'absolute idealists', whereas Frank argues that epistemological and ontological realism is the defining factor of Romanticism exclusively.[80] This apparent difference can be explained through Beiser's assessment of Romantic Spinozism, as modified by Herder, and the role of Platonic influences in the thought of the Romantics. According to Beiser, these influences lead the absolute idealists to develop a vitalist view wherein the Absolute is 'nothing less than the whole of nature'.[81] Under this reasoning, it follows that both subject and object have their source in an Absolute realist ground. This is the key to Beiser's central thesis that absolute idealism is defined by a struggle against the subjectivism that follows from critical idealism. According to Beiser, Frank and Henrich focus

78 Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987; id., *The Romantic Imperative. The Concept of Early German Romanticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003; id., *German Idealism. The Struggle Against Subjectivism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

79 Beiser, *German Idealism*, 349–464.

80 Cf. Frederick Beiser, "Romanticism and Idealism." In *The Relevance of Romanticism*, ed. Dalia Nassar. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 30–45.

81 Beiser, *German Idealism*, 356.

too narrowly, and fail to give adequate attention to Platonism, leading them to overemphasise Romantic scepticism.[82] This has the effect, explains Beiser, of making Romanticism appear more obscurantist and therefore open to charges of anti-rationalism.[83]

The position which Beiser advances has both advantages and disadvantages. On the negative side, by treating Early German Romanticism and idealism together it can make the former seem merely as a stage on the way to culmination in the thought of Schelling.[84] The strong emphasis on the difference between Romantics and idealists in the work of Frank, avoids such difficulties, but in doing so fails to take account of the aspects of objective idealism which the movement shares with Schelling and Hegel.[85] Alternately, when Beiser directs our attention to the Platonic sources of Romantic realism this allows him to address some fundamental problems in the history of the movement's reception. In particular, he is able to debunk various readings of the Romantics as irrational or somehow proto-postmodern.[86] Here Beiser has in mind Paul de Man, Isaiah Berlin, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Ernst Behler, and Manfred Frank himself.[87]

3.3 Constructive subjective philosophy

Finally, the recent re-assessment of Early German Romanticism has seen a constructive philosophical engagement with the movement. Like the historical reconstruction, the so-called Heidelberg School of Henrich and Frank defines the assessment of Romanticism, and whilst their positions differ in some significant ways, for the purposes of this examination it is possible to treat them together.[88] The work of Andrew Bowie has equally played an important role, developing this reconsideration further, and exposing the work of the Heidelberg

82 Ibid., 354 f., 364 f.; Beiser, *Romantic Imperative*, 56–72. Cf. Rüdiger Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, trans. by Nicholas Walker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 3–46.

83 Beiser, *Romantic Imperative*, 63.

84 E. g. When considering Schelling in comparison to the Romantics, Beiser writes: 'What was merely fragmentary, inchoate and suggestive in Hölderlin, Novalis and Schlegel became systematic, organised and explicit in Schelling', *German Idealism*, 467.

85 Cf. Beiser, "Romanticism and Idealism".

86 Beiser, *Romantic Imperative*, 1–5.

87 Ibid., ix.

88 'Heidelberg School' is first adopted by Ernst Tugendhat, *Selbstbewubtsein und Selbstbestimmung*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1979, 10.

school to an Anglophone audience by both by describing its relation to analytic philosophy and to literary theory.[89]

Building upon historical scholarship, this reconstructive work sets out a subjective ontology that overcomes the dualism of the Cartesian and Kantian legacies.[90] This dualism is consequence of the reflection model of consciousness, wherein the self achieves self-consciousness by becoming an object to itself. The problem with this model arises from the fact that the self, as subject, must already know itself, as object, to recognise itself. Accordingly, a state of affairs is established which ultimately requires the establishment of a dogmatic presupposition. In the case of Descartes, the 'I' is secured through the assurance of a non-deceptive God. Alternately, in the case of Kant the transcendental 'I', while accompanying representation, is purely logical, and cannot be the object of knowledge or theory. Both post-Kantian idealism and Romanticism challenge these conclusions concerning the self, theorising the foundational 'I', or finding its ground in an Absolute beyond the self.

In more recent philosophical deliberations, the problem of subjectivity has led broadly to the development of two positions. On the one side the physicalist position maintains that consciousness can and must be accounted for within the scope of the natural sciences. Such a position has been proposed by W. V. O. Quine and Daniel Dennett. On the other side, the deconstructive approach of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida attacks the foundationalist

89 Cf. Andrew Bowie, "John McDowell's *Mind and World*, and Early Romantic Epistemology." *Revue internationale de philosophie* 50 (1996), 515–555; id., *Romanticism to Critical Theory. The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*. London: Routledge, 1997; id., "German Philosophy Today: Between Idealism, Romanticism and Pragmatism." In *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, German Philosophy After Kant*, ed. Anthony O'Hear. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 357–98; id., "Romantic Aesthetics and the Ends of Contemporary Philosophy." In *Das neue Licht der Frühromantik. Innovation und Aktualität frühromantischer Philosophie*, ed. Bärbel Frischmann, Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008, 213–224; id., "Nineteenth Century Philosophy in the Twentieth Century and Beyond." In *The Edinburgh Critical History of Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Alison Stone. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 314–329; Manfred Frank, *The Subject and the Text. Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Bowie, trans. by Helen Atkins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

90 Dieter Henrich, "Selbstbewußtsein und spekulatives Denken." In id., *Fluchtlinien. Philosophische Essays*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1982, 125–181; trans. in "Self-Consciousness and Speculative Thinking." In *Figuring the Self. Subject, Absolute, and Others in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. David E. Klemm, Günter Zöller. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997, 99–133; id., *Denken und Selbstsein. Vorlesungen über Subjektivität*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2007. For an assessment of Henrich's philosophy, see Freundlieb, *Dieter Henrich and Contemporary Philosophy*. Manfred Frank, "Is subjectivity a Non-Thing, and Absurdity [Unding]?, 177 f.; id., *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis. Essays zur analytischen Philosophie der Subjektivität*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991.

logocentrism of the subject. Opposing both of these, the constructive position of Henrich, Frank and Bowie maintain that the physicalist strictures of scientific discourse fail to do justice to the nature of subjectivity, while the post-structural death of the subject fails to account for the fact that self-consciousness is prior to language (or if it emerged with language, it is equally a precondition for language and not explained by language). The end of philosophy is therefore to offer an understanding of our place in the world. In the work of Early German Romanticism and idealism, Henrich and Frank see one of the most promising, if not entirely successful, attempts to set out an ontology that overcomes the dualist legacy, and the problematic responses of physicalist reductionism and post-structuralism.

In their work, Henrich, Frank and Bowie, each seek to deploy the fundamental Romantic insight, that Being exceeds consciousness. In the development of Romanticism itself, this position was advocated first by Jacobi, then by Hölderlin, Schlegel and Novalis, and was also adopted into the late work of Fichte and Schelling. Henrich, working from Fichte's later thought, considers self-consciousness to be irreducible. As such, its components cannot be separated into the stages that constitute reflection theory.[91] Similarly, Frank has shown corresponding insights in Jacobi and the earliest stages of Romanticism.[92] In their proposals, the constructive position situates itself between the analytical and continental traditions. A number of scholars including Peter Dews, John McDowell and Jürgen Habermas, have subsequently responded positively to this proposal.[93]

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91 Dieter Henrich, "Fichte's Original Insight." *Contemporary German Philosophy* 1 (1982), 15–53. Cf. id., "Die Anfäng der Theorie des Subjekts (1789)." In *Zwischenbetrachtung. Im Prozeß der Aufklärung, Festschrift für Jürgen Habermas*, ed. Axel Honneth et al. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1989, 106–170; transl. in "The Origins of the Theory of the Subject." In *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. Axel Honneth et al., trans. by William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992, 29–87.

92 Manfred Frank, "Philosophical Foundations of Early Romanticism." In *The Project of The Modern Subject. Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. Karl Ameriks, Dieter Sturma. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, 199–215.

93 Peter Dews, *The Limits of Disenchantment. Essays on Contemporary European Philosophy*. New York: Verso, 1995, 169–193; John McDowell, *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1994; Jürgen Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1989, 18–34. A transatlantic extension of this project may be found in *The Project of The Modern Subject. Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. Karl Ameriks, Dieter Sturma. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995; and *Figuring the Self. Subject, Absolute and Others in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. David E. Klemm, Günter Zöller. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. These two attempts often fail to retain the differentiation between the Romantics and Idealists, sometimes leading to problematic claims concerning the Romantics.

The constructive efforts of the Heidelberg school are notable for their insights, but also for illustrating to us how contemporary philosophical issues relating to subjectivity have constituted a major driving force behind the historical reconstruction of Early German Romanticism as produced by the same scholars. Their efforts to bring Romantic and idealist thought to bear on contemporary philosophical problems is by no means something to be objected to. In fact, it can also serve as a model, for when the look at Romanticism from the perspective of problems of religion, such as understanding the complexity of the secularisation process, or addressing issues of pluralism, the influence and insights of Romanticism have an important role to play.

4 From subjective egoism to the Absolute and Romantic religion

For much of its history, the reception of Early German Romanticism has suffered from the misconceptions of its early detractors. Recent scholarship, produced over the past twenty-five years, has opened up new possibilities for its reconsideration, definitively demonstrating how the Romantics were philosophical thinkers in their own right, actively developing an alternative to the subjectivism which they had been accused of promoting. However, this re-evaluation of the Romantics has focused primarily upon problems of epistemology as they arose from the challenge of subjectivity. In part, this was necessary, as it was incumbent upon this scholarship to address almost two hundred years of misinterpretation. What remains to be explored is the religious dimension of Romanticism, which comes into relief as the problem of subjectivity recedes. This allows us to see the movement's concern with the Absolute as far more than a regulative idea in the service of epistemological inquiry; rather, as a concept it had a real ontological status, bound up with a set of metaphysical concerns that relate directly to religion. While it is beyond the scope of this examination to offer an extended explication of Romantic religion, it is possible to conclude with a summary of the elements such a consideration would have to take into account.

Any account of Romantic religion must consider both the realist and idealist elements of the movement's thought. Though it is possible to characterise the concern of the *Frühromantiker* in many ways, the Absolute was the chief subject of their speculative endeavour and the object of their poetic striving. Their consideration of the Absolute arises from the *locus classicus* within the tradition of philosophical theology, that considers the problem of the relation between the finite and the infinite, or the transcendent and the immanent, and not just as an abstract regulative concept within the post-Kantian debate. Under the

influence of Platonism the Absolute participates in, and gives existence to, all finite reality, just as the Good does in Platonic thought. However, the Romantics were also aware of, and accepted, the idealist contention that the subject plays a fundamental role in the structuring of all experience. From this they developed their non-foundationalist commitments, wherein Being could only ever be infinitely approximated, and therefore never constitute a non-inferential foundation. It is between the two that the role of the aesthetic emerges. Since the Absolute, by nature, transcends any category or concept it requires an idiom that is neither closed nor complete. The aesthetic idiom, like the 'probable myth' of the *Timeaus*, aims to express truths that nevertheless cannot be exhausted by any particular articulation.[94]

If religion is that which is concerned with supreme Being, infinite nature, and the determinant feature of existence, then the Romantic endeavour, with the Absolute at its centre, is certainly religious in nature, if not conventionally so. In this regard Early German Romanticism has much to say to the academic study of religion. Romanticism may not conform to conventional categories of religion, but the categories that define religion itself are what the movement sought to challenge. The Romantics objected to an understanding of religion that was restricted to historically determined institutions, practices and symbols. Rather it sought to re-invent religion for its own radically changed age.

If we truly wish to hear what Early German Romanticism has to say of religion however, what we really ought to do is turn to what the Romantics themselves had to say. We may find an example in Novalis late poem, simply titled *Das Gedichte* (1799). It consists of eight strophes, with the initial four offering a description of the present. In the first strophe, nature longs for the recognition of its sublimity. In the second, what seems a great, empty, dimly lit church stands abandoned. Then, in the third and fourths strophes a silent text proclaims a renewed future, and the reader is asked to draw near, and await a promised prophecy. The final four strophes of the poem read:

> Himmlisches Leben im blauen Gewande
> Stiller Wunsch in blassem Schein –
> Flüchtig gräbt in bunten Sande
> Sie den Zug des Namens ein –
>
> Unter hohen festen Bogen
> Nur von Lampenlicht erhellt
> Liegt, seitdem der Geist entflogen
> Nun das Heiligste der Welt.

94 Plato, *Timaeus*, 29d, 68d, 69b.

Leise kündet beßre Tage
Ein verlornes Blatt uns an
Und wir sehn der alten Sage
Mächtige Augen aufgetan.

Naht euch stumm dem ernsten Tore,
Harrt auf seinen Flügelschlag
Und vernehmt herab vom Chore
Wo weissagend der Marmor lag.[95]

After the description of a pregnant present, the poem swiftly shifts to the past, recalling a time, either antique or medieval. Here, Novalis describes the colourful festival of the flower princess. However, almost as soon as she appears and is greeted, she disappears. Our poetic vocation, according to the poem, is to recover our ability to read, in our immanent present, these transcendent signs of the omnipresent Absolute. This divine Absolute speaks to us through ciphers in the sand and lost leaves that proclaim better days. It is poetry that frees us once again to read these leaves. With this new freedom, we may re-enter the empty churches and light therein their lamps. In them we will once again, through the power of poetry, approach the marble altar, and hear the choir sing. This vision of religion renewed is yet to come for Novalis, but its presence, as the Absolute, is already with us, and a renewed language, the language of poetry, will give it voice.

95 Novalis, *Schriften*, I, 409 f. (ll. 1–16).