



THE CONCEPT OF  
EARLY GERMAN  
ROMANTICISM

THE ROMANTIC IMPERATIVE

F R E D E R I C K C . B E I S E R

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FREDERICK C. BEISER

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# **The Romantic Imperative**

The Concept of Early  
German Romanticism

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**THE ROMANTIC IMPERATIVE**

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*For Julie Ann Beiser*

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## PREFACE

These essays are attempts to define and explain aspects of early German romanticism, the period known as *Frühromantik*, which flourished from 1797 to 1802. They are essentially introductory, an attempt to guide the anglophone reader through unfamiliar territory. More specifically, my aim is to introduce the *philosophy* behind early German romanticism—its epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and politics—and to show its relevance for the period’s literature, criticism, and aesthetics. While the literature, criticism, and aesthetics of *Frühromantik* have always attracted interest and attention, the same cannot be said for its metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics; yet the former can be understood only through the latter.

Since my aim is introductory, the first four essays attempt to identify the characteristic goals and ideals of *Frühromantik*. Attempts to determine the “essence” of the movement—what the Germans called *Wesensbestimmung* or *Begriffsbestimmung der Romantik*—were once very common, especially in the German tradition of scholarship. Because of a growing historical nominalism, such studies are considered very unfashionable today. My aim in these essays, however, is not to determine the “concept” or “essence” of *Frühromantik*, still less of *Romantik* in general, as if these terms denote some kind of archetype or eternal intellectual pattern beneath or behind the phenomena. My only task has been to find *some* common goals and traits among a specific group of thinkers at a specific time and place. Even the most skeptical nominalist cannot banish such empirical generalizations. We need to have some survey of the forest, no matter how unique its individual trees.

The main critical thrust of these essays is directed against postmodernist interpretations of *Frühromantik*, especially the works of Paul de Man, Manfred Frank, Isaiah Berlin, Ernst Behler, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy. While I have learned much from these scholars, I believe

their interpretation of *Frühromantik* is one-sided and anachronistic. It understands that period essentially as an anticipation of postmodernism and imposes contemporary concerns upon it. For all its affinities with postmodernism, *Frühromantik* remains a unique historical phenomena, still very much part of the eighteenth century. Several of the essays (Chapters 2–5) therefore attempt to right the balance of postmodernist interpretations and to reinstate the rationalist dimension of *Frühromantik*.

A crucial issue in understanding *Frühromantik* is its complicated ambivalent relation to the German Enlightenment, or *Aufklärung*. Although this appears to be a purely historiographical issue, it is crucial in determining the very identity of *Frühromantik*. It is indeed the underlying issue behind postmodernist interpretations, which, sometimes unwittingly, revive the old interpretation of *Frühromantik* as a reaction against the *Aufklärung*. For these reasons, several essays are devoted to this issue (Chapters 3–5).

Some essays, especially the first and second, were written in reaction against the still predominant literary approach to *Frühromantik*, which sees it as an essentially literary, critical, and aesthetic movement. For much too long this approach has let a literary tail wag a cultural and philosophical dog. Yet romantic literature was only one part of a broader intellectual and cultural movement, and it is intelligible only in the light of romantic philosophy, especially its epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and politics. If the romantics gave pride of place to the aesthetic, giving it superiority to philosophy as a guide to truth, that was only for all too epistemological and metaphysical reasons. Powerful voices have protested against the narrowness of the literary approach—among them Rudolf Haym, Walter Benjamin, Oskar Walzel, and Paul Kluckhohn—but their protests have rarely affected dominant practice. No one should think that the days of literary scholasticism are over. The literary approach has been reasserted very recently by one of the foremost scholars of *Frühromantik*, Ernst Behler. Scholars continue to attempt to get to the essence of *Romantik* by analyzing the use and origins of a mere phrase (namely, *romantische Poesie*) (see Chapter 1). Worst of all, the practice of postmodernist scholars has been to make vast generalizations about *Frühromantik* from features of its literary style (see Chapter 2).

My own approach to *Frühromantik* stresses the primacy of its moral and political values, and their dominant role in its aesthetics and religion. Some of the following essays (Chapters 2, 3, and 6) have therefore been written against the still common view that *Frühromantik* was essentially apolitical. In stressing the political dimension of romantic aesthetics, I do not mean to

claim that the romantics engaged overtly in political activity, still less that their politics came from retreating into a moral and aesthetic sphere that stood sovereign over the political realm. Neither of these views captures the uniqueness of the political situation of the romantics in the 1790s, when political views were more overt but organized political action from below was still prohibited. The primacy of the ethical and political in *Frühromantik* means that the romantics subordinated the aesthetic and religious to ethical and political ends. They defined the highest good not as aesthetic contemplation but as human self-realization, the development of humanity. No less than Plato and Aristotle, they insisted that this ideal is realizable only within society and the state. These ethical and political values played a decisive role in the romantic agenda: they are the ultimate purpose behind its aesthetics, its philosophy of history, and *Naturphilosophie*.

My method is basically hermeneutical and historical, an approach defended and practiced by the romantics themselves. This means that I attempt to interpret the romantics from within, according to their own goals and historical context. As far as possible, I have tried to bracket alien vocabulary and to reconstruct the romantics in their historical individuality. This is not because I see the romantics as a historical phenomenon of no contemporary relevance—the very opposite is the case—but because there are many ways of seeing their relevance to our contemporary interests, and as many ways as there are such interests. I do not think that it is the task of the philosophical historian to prejudge relevance by imposing one contemporary perspective on the past. The relevance of the romantics should not be read into their texts; rather, it should be inferred from them, *after* the work of historical reconstruction. My fundamental task here has been historical reconstruction.

My approach to *Frühromantik* has been chiefly inspired by Rudolf Haym's brilliant book *Die romantische Schule* (Berlin: Gaertner, 1870). I see my own work as a continuation of Haym's original project. It was Haym who first stressed the need for a detailed investigation into the origins of *Frühromantik*, who first insisted on bracketing political and cultural prejudices, and who first made it a subject of historical study. The earlier efforts of Heine, Hettner, and Gervinus were amateurish by comparison, and marred by the political prejudices Haym wanted to overcome. Haym fully appreciated the fundamental importance of philosophy for *Frühromantik*, and he had a holistic approach that did full justice to its multidisciplinary nature. While he never ceased to be critical of the romantics, his criticisms came after a sympathetic reconstruction of the material. To be sure, much in Haym is now



out of date; some of his interpretations are simplistic; and he never fully practiced the impartiality he demanded. Still, his concern for impartiality, historical depth, sympathetic reconstruction, and holism are as valid now as they were in 1870. In fundamental respects Haym set the standard that contemporary work has yet to match.

Some of my work on *Frühromantik* has appeared on previous occasions, more specifically, in the article “Romanticism” for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (vol. 8, 348–352); in chapters 9–11 of my book *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), which discuss romantic political theory; in the introduction to *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and finally in four chapters (Part III, 1–4) of *German Idealism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), which treat romantic metaphysics and epistemology. Although some of the essays here are based on my earlier work, they refine and improve it; the other essays cover new ground.

The ten essays were written on various occasions in the past ten years. Most of them appear for the first time in this book; a few have been published before, but almost all of these have been heavily revised for this volume. The first chapter was written for a lecture given in February 2000 at South Stockholm College, Stockholm, Sweden, for the inauguration of its comparative literature program. An early version of the second chapter was written for a lecture at the Fishbein Center for the History of Science at the University of Chicago. A revised version appeared in German as “Die deutsche Frühromantik,” in *Philosophie, Kunst, Wissenschaft. Gedenkschrift Heinrich Kutzner* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2001), pp. 38–52. This essay has been heavily revised since, and the version that appears here is virtually new. The third chapter, now heavily revised, was a contribution to James Schmidt’s *What Is Enlightenment?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 317–329. The fourth chapter was written for a Schleiermacher conference at Drew University in April 1999, and it has not appeared before. The fifth essay is new to this volume; it was accepted for publication in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* but never appeared. The sixth was originally published in *Philosophers on Education*, edited by Amélie Rorty (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 284–289, and it has been revised for this edition. The seventh essay appears here for the first time, though earlier versions of sections 5–8 appear in the Schlegel chapter of my *German Idealism*; this chapter is an attempt to rethink Schlegel’s philosophical development

from my earlier *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, pp. 245–263. The eighth essay was originally written for a volume titled *Philosophical Romanticism*, edited by Nikolas Kompridis, which is forthcoming from Routledge in 2004. Earlier versions of Chapter 9 were given as lectures in several places: at Sheffield University in May 1999, the University of Arizona in September 1999, the University of Stockholm in February 2000, the Dibner Institute for Science and Technology in November 2000, and the NEH conference on Early German Romanticism in July 2001. The essay will be published as part of the Dibner series on the History and Philosophy of Science, *Dibner Institute Studies in the History of Science and Technology*. Chapter 10 was written for a lecture series on the philosophy of religion held at Boston University in October 2001, and it has not appeared before.

Because the essays were written separately, there is some overlap and therefore repetition. Since I expect that many readers will want to read the essays independently, I have not removed all the repetitious passages. For those readers who wish to read the essays in sequence I can only beg their patience and indulgence.

My study of *Frühromantik* goes back to student days at Oxford, when I first fell under the spell of Schelling and Novalis, not really knowing that they were part of a broader intellectual movement called *Frühromantik*. For a philosopher in those days to study *Frühromantik* at Oxford was a strange and solitary affair. Oxford was then, and remains now, a bastion of scholasticism; and *Frühromantik*, if it is anything, is the negation of scholasticism. In one memorable meeting I was encouraged in my efforts by Isaiah Berlin; I only wish that I had more opportunity to benefit from his company.

Over the years my studies of *Frühromantik* have profited from the work of many individuals, only a few of whom I can mention here. I have learned much from Karl Ameriks, Michel Chaouli, Manfred Frank, Paul Franks, Micheal Friedman, Charles Lewis, Michael Morgan, Bill Rasch, Robert Richards, and Simon Shaffer. I am also grateful to the many participants at the Dibner Institute meetings in November 2000, and at the NEH Summer Institute at Fort Collins Colorado in the summer of 2001; their good spirits and sharp wits encouraged me to clarify many of my views about *Frühromantik*. Last but not least, I am especially grateful to Michel Chaouli, Ian Balfour, and an anonymous reviewer for comments on the final manuscript. I only hope I have done justice to their many suggestions and criticisms.

Der romantische Imperativ fordert die Mischung aller  
Dichtarten. All Natur und Wissenschaft soll Kunst  
werden—Kunst soll Natur werden und Wissenschaft.

Imperativ: die Poesie soll sittlich und die Sittlichkeit soll  
poetisch sein.

—From Friedrich Schlegel's *Notebooks*, 1797–1798

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## Introduction: Romanticism Now and Then

After more than a century of neglect in the English-speaking world, there are signs of a growing interest in the philosophy of early German romanticism.<sup>1</sup> Since 1990 several books in English have appeared on aspects of *Frühromantik*;<sup>2</sup> French and German works on the topic have been translated;<sup>3</sup> translations of romantic writings have appeared;<sup>4</sup> and, last but not least, in 2001 an NEH Summer Institute was devoted to philosophical aspects of *Frühromantik*.<sup>5</sup> Slowly but surely, the consensus is building that early German romanticism was not only a literary but also a philosophical movement.

The reasons for the neglect of early romantic philosophy have been various. There have been potent *political* reasons. Since World War II, romanticism has been discredited by both liberals and Marxists alike as the ideology of fascism, and not least because many Nazis embraced it as party ideology. There have also been *academic* reasons. Because romanticism is usually understood as a literary and critical movement, it has been made the special preserve of literary critics and historians. Not least, there have been *philosophical* reasons. The growth of analytic philosophy in the anglophone world has led to a skepticism and intolerance toward alternative ways of doing philosophy. Finally, there have been *scholarly* reasons. Some of the most important manuscript materials regarding the philosophy of the German romantics have been published only since World War II. The fragments of Novalis, Hölderlin, and Friedrich Schlegel have been published in critical editions only in the 1960s. While some of this material had been available before, it was not in reliable or critical editions.

Whatever the reasons for the neglect of early German romantic philosophy, the renewal of interest in it is long overdue. This revival stems partially from a growing—if sometimes begrudging—recognition of the historical im-

## 2 Introduction

portance of *Frühromantik*. Its historical significance rests on several factors. First, the early romantics broke with major aspects of the Cartesian legacy: its mechanical conception of nature, its dualism between mind and body, its foundationalist belief in certain first principles, and its belief in a self-illuminating subjectivity. Second, the young romantics also questioned some of the fundamental assumptions behind Enlightenment rationalism: the possibility of an ahistorical reason, of classical standards of criticism, and of self-evident first principles. Third, the early romantics were also innovators in virtually every field of philosophy. In metaphysics, they developed an organic concept of nature to compete with the mechanical paradigm of the Enlightenment. In ethics, they stressed the importance of love and individuality in reaction against the formalism of Kant's and Fichte's ethics. And, in aesthetics, they undermined the standards and values of classicism, developing instead new methods of criticism that respected the context and individuality of the text. Finally, in politics, the romantics questioned the individualism behind modern contract theory, reviving the classical communitarian tradition of Plato and Aristotle. It was indeed the romantics who first identified and addressed some of the fundamental problems of modern civil society: anomie, atomism, and alienation.

Quite apart from its historical importance, many of the aims and problems of romantic philosophy are still vital today. Like many contemporary philosophers, the young romantics sought an epistemology that valued criticism yet escaped skepticism, one that recognized the failures of foundationalism yet did not surrender to relativism. Their goals in the philosophy of mind have also lost none of their relevance: the romantics sought a naturalism that was not a reductionist materialism, a middle path between the extremes of dualism and mechanism. The chief problem of their political philosophy remains a central issue today: How is it possible to reconcile the demands of community and those of individual liberty? Finally, their aims in aesthetics are still a desideratum—how to avoid the extremes of a dictatorial classicism and an anarchic subjectivism? If these goals and problems sound familiar, that is in no small measure because we are the heirs of the romantic legacy.

All these are sufficient reasons for a close study of early German romantic philosophy. But they have not been the sole reason for the romantic renaissance. Perhaps its chief source lies in the increasing awareness of the affinity of *Frühromantik* with postmodernism. To many, the early romantics were postmodernists *avant la lettre*. Like the postmodernists, they were skeptical of the possibility of foundationalism, of universal standards of criticism, of

complete systems, and of self-illuminating subjects. Centuries before Foucault, they were apostles of sexual freedom, critics of sexual stereotypes, and defenders of personal liberty. They were also pioneers in the development of hermeneutics and founders of historicist literary criticism. Many scholars are beginning to recognize that antifoundationalism, historicism, and hermeneutics had their origins not in the twentieth century—in thinkers like Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Gadamer, or Dewey—but at the close of the eighteenth century in the reaction against the *Aufklärung* among the early romantic generation.

Nevertheless, despite the contemporary relevance of *Frühromantik*, we must be careful to avoid anachronism. We must strive to understand its historical individuality. For, if the early romantics are our contemporaries in some respects, they are not so in others. They were indeed still the children of the eighteenth century, *Kinder der Aufklärung*. In crucial respects they were very far from postmodernism. First, they differed in their Platonism, their belief in a single universal reason, in the archetypes, ideas, or forms that manifest themselves in nature and history. The claim that the young romantics insisted that truth and value is a matter for the individual to decide fails to come to terms with the profound influence of Platonism on Hölderlin, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel, and Novalis.<sup>6</sup> For all the importance that the romantics gave to individuality, they never ceased to hold that there are fundamental moral or natural laws that apply to everyone alike.<sup>7</sup> Second, the romantics were also far from postmodernism in their striving and longing for unity and wholeness, their demand that we overcome the fundamental divisions of modern life. While the romantics recognized difference, and indeed celebrated it, they also believed that we should strive to reintegrate it within the wider wholes of state, society, and nature. At least arguably, postmodernism begins with the claim that these divisions are a *fait accompli* and that there is no point striving to overcome them. Third, the romantics remained religious, and indeed even mystical. While their religion had a pantheistic rather than theistic or deistic foundation, they never lost some of the crucial aspects of the religious attitude toward the world. It was indeed the self-conscious goal of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Schelling, and Schleiermacher to revive this attitude, which is apparent in their call for a new religious mythology and bible for the modern world. But is there any place for the absolute in postmodernism?

Despite these disparities between *Frühromantik* and postmodernism, the predominate trend in recent interpretations of the philosophy of *Früh-*

*romantik* has been postmodernist. I have chiefly in mind the work of Paul de Man, Azade Seyhan, Alice Kuzniar, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Manfred Frank,<sup>8</sup> and Isaiah Berlin, who was something of a postmodernist *avant la lettre*.<sup>9</sup> With some qualifications, it is even necessary to add to this list Ernst Behler, the doyen of *Frühromantik* scholarship.<sup>10</sup> While these scholars often disagree with one another and are not always so explicit, they come together in two respects: in understanding *Frühromantik* as antirationalist, and in stressing its affinities with postmodern concerns. There is an important element of truth in these interpretations because, in *some* crucial respects, the early romantics did react against the legacy of the Enlightenment. It must be said, however, that the postmodernists have pushed their case too far, so that it has become one-sided and anachronistic. For in other important respects, the early romantics continued with, and indeed radicalized, the legacy of the Enlightenment. They never lost their beliefs in the need for and value of self-restraint, criticism, and systematicity. They continued to believe in the desirability of *Bildung*, the possibility of progress, the perfectability of the human race, and even the creation of the Kingdom of God on earth. While they were not so naive to believe that we would actually *achieve* these ideals, they did hold we could, through constant striving, *approach* them.

The need to find a middle path between the extremes of rationalist and irrationalist interpretations is clear from Friedrich Schlegel's famous dictum that philosophy both must have and cannot have a system.<sup>11</sup> Romantic irony begins with the attempt to straddle that dilemma, with the constant striving for a system combined with the self-critical awareness that it is unattainable. Postmodernists stress why the romantics think we cannot have a system; but they understate the romantic demand forever to strive for one.<sup>12</sup> It was indeed just this demand that drove Friedrich Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Schelling, and Novalis to construct systems of their own.<sup>13</sup> To be sure, their efforts were only sketches or drafts (*Entwürfe*), written in the realization that there could be no perfect exposition of *the* system; but they still show unmistakably that the romantics were not committed in principle to writing fragments forever.<sup>14</sup>

*Prima facie* it is difficult to understand how the romantics' skepticism about certain foundations, complete systems, and infallible standards of criticism went hand-in-hand with their Platonism and rationalism. But this difficulty only shows our own limited historical horizons. It comes from the legacy of early modern rationalism, more specifically the philosophies of



Descartes, Leibniz, Malebranche, and Spinoza, whose rationalism expressed itself in systems and first principles. In the Platonic tradition, however, skepticism sometimes went hand-in-hand with rationalism. While many Platonists believed that the world is in principle intelligible, they did not think that our own finite human intellects could grasp the eternal forms, except through a glass darkly. Like Socrates, they held both that there is a realm of pure being and that the wise man knows he knows nothing. It is a mistake to conflate their skepticism about our capacity to grasp this order with an affirmation of the irrationality of the world itself. The romantics were decidedly *not* the missionaries of Dionysus in the sense of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who affirmed the irrationality of reality.<sup>15</sup> When Friedrich Schlegel expressed his doubts about the complete comprehensibility of the world he was affirming not its intrinsic irrationality but simply its incomprehensibility *for us*, for our *finite human* reason.<sup>16</sup> Schlegel has been the central figure for postmodernist interpretations of *Frühromantik*; yet he confessed that Plato had been the chief inspiration behind his philosophy, and held that the true philosophy is idealism, which he defined in Platonic terms.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, the individuality of *Frühromantik*, its fundamental differences from postmodernism, should also not prohibit us from seeing some of its fundamental affinities. But the chief goal of the philosophical historian should first and foremost be to reconstruct the individuality of *Frühromantik*, to understand it from within according to its own context and characteristic ideals. To be sure, this goal too is only another infinite ideal that we can approach but never attain; but, for all the reasons stated above, I think the struggle toward it is eminently worthwhile. The ten essays here are efforts in that direction.