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978-0-521-28087-7 - German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: The Romantic Ironists and Goethe

Edited by Kathleen M. Wheeler

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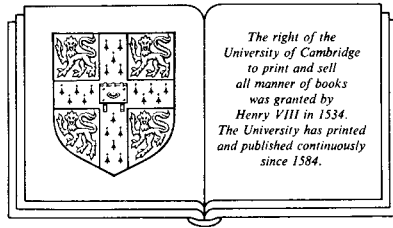
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Edited by Kathleen M. Wheeler

Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge
and University Assistant Lecturer



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Preface

This volume is one of three in a series of anthologies of German aesthetic writing (in English translation) from the second half of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. The choice of selections was extremely difficult to make given the scope, variety, and richness of the writings of the period covered by this volume, namely the 1790s to about 1820. In a sense, there was no question of making the 'right' choice, since the appropriateness would depend upon the various and of course often irreconcilable needs and demands of different readers. So much material of great value had to be excluded that one can hope not to justify the exclusions but only that the selections presented will be found to be of value both in themselves and as indications of the individual style and wide-ranging interests of the authors represented. Similarly, the second half of the bibliography on suggested further reading should be taken in the same spirit, as an aid to introducing the interested reader to the enormous field of research that might otherwise overwhelm. The inclusion of Goethe in this volume may strike most readers as odd until it is considered that because of his stature and uniqueness, his inclusion in any of the three volumes would have been odd, but his total exclusion would have been still more awkward. Nor is his inclusion with these German romantics meant to suggest an affinity in intellectual outlook, but only to express first, that Goethe was writing at the same time as the romantics and, second, that he was, like some of these others, a creative artist and writer of literary criticism rather than a systematic philosopher.

One of the main considerations in the selection of material was to provide extracts that would be of particular interest to an English-speaking readership. The tremendous impact that Shakespeare had upon German intellectual life in the latter part of the eighteenth century is directly reflected in the writings of several of the authors included here, and should add to the interest of these selections. But the indirect impact upon the theorizing and practical criticism was incalculable, especially as it was mediated through, for example, Lessing and Herder. Shakespeare proved to be, in both England and Germany, the liberating influence that freed literary theorists and creative artists alike from Neo-classicism. This in itself is so familiar a characterization of literary history as to seem no longer enlightening. What is not yet altogether appreciated, however, is the direct line between the theorizing inspired by Shakespeare's works that broke Neo-classical constraints and that of modern critical theory

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today. For, as will be evident from these selections, German romanticists and romantic ironists in particular found in Shakespeare the impetus for many of their best insights. Not surprisingly, many of these insights are well-developed ideas coincident with many of the most exciting concepts of modern criticism today.

For example, in Novalis' short piece, 'Monologue', can be found the idea, inspired by Shakespeare's (and Goethe's) use of language, of language as significant by convention and difference rather than by reference to an extra-linguistic reality. Next, the fragment genre and mode of publication of the Romantics' first fragments (mixed and unidentified authorship) as well as explicit statements in Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Jean Paul, and others, are a challenge to conventional notions of textual unity and authorship, and reveal how the 'Romantic' concept of organic unity has been misunderstood as suggesting an absolute unity, rather than being an indication of how relative parts can be said to be related to a relative and open-ended concept of a whole. Further anticipations and concerns of modern critical issues come in Jean Paul, Friedrich Schlegel, and Novalis where we find particularly stimulating references to reading as writing, and criticism as interminable decoding and creative play. Solger's, Tieck's, and Novalis' reflections on language as symbolic, allegorical, and mystical can be seen as yet further attempts to reveal how language does not necessarily depend upon reference to reality for its significance, whether conceived as material or transcendental. Rather, language depends upon highly sophisticated and cultivated conventions and differences which have a history, are subject to alteration, and do not enjoy any existence apart from the specific circumstances and concrete, lived experience in which they occur.

'Irony' in the German Romantic sense and the correlative concept of self-criticism, express concepts, first, of the work of art as a self-consuming artifact (one, that is, which protects itself from attempts to finalize its 'meaning') and, second, of criticism as creatively destructive in the sense of dismantling the preconceptions and received opinion (whether author's or readers' or tradition's) that block fresh response and pass for the work itself or characteristics of or facts about it. The concept of irony as evolved by the Romantics also helps us to understand better how deeply rooted these ideas are in a long tradition of 'alternative' interpretation of the major figures of Western culture, a tradition running side by side with the tradition of received opinion about them, and which sporadically and vigorously asserts itself as an alternative. The relation of poetry and 'creative' writing in general to philosophy and criticism is also explored, particularly by F. Schlegel, Novalis, and Solger, and the latter two fields are suggested to be as fictional and 'creative' as their so-called opposite, poetry. Nor is science allowed to retain a privileged position as certain and objective.

Finally, implicit in the philosophical orientation of not only the theoretical but also the practical criticism of many of the authors included here is the challenge to both the empirical and the idealist (as well as the absolutist)

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notions of truth, knowledge, and certainty, a challenge operative in their dynamic and sophisticated relativism whose modern-day counterpart is the pragmatic approach to art, language, truth, and knowledge characteristic of such writers as Wittgenstein in his late work, John Dewey, and Heidegger, to mention only a few. It would be too much to say that German Romanticism and the related English Romanticism of, for example, Blake, Shelley, and Coleridge was the *origin* of modern critical theory. German Romanticism, like modern criticism itself, was a stage in the reinterpretation of the past that constituted a rewriting of it, based upon the contention that in such central figures as Plato, Aristotle, and Shakespeare could be found the creative affirmation of the necessity for a continuous reanalysis of received opinion ('fact' or TRUTH) and of the necessity for new and more adequate linguistic descriptions not of reality or truth, but of previous descriptions – or, as John Dewey said, interpretations of other people's interpretations.

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K.M.W.
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