

Introduction

The emergence of the early Romantic theory of literature in Germany towards the end of the eighteenth century constitutes a decisive turning-point in the history of criticism. Incited by Lessing, Herder, and Schiller, and stimulated by Goethe's poetic creations, a new view of the literary work and the artistic process developed that differed sharply from the dominant classicist understanding of aesthetics and poetics. The European classicist tradition had stressed unchangeable norms for art, codified a hierarchical system of immutable genres, bound artistic production to an imitation of nature and an adherence to verisimilitude, and defined poetic unity according to strict rules. The early Romantic critics made decisive inroads into this classicist view of poetry by recognizing the infinite changeability of genres, their constant mixing and mingling, as well as the frequent emergence of new literary forms. They saw the poetic unity of a literary work as an inner conformity with itself, connecting a multiplicity of phenomena to a unity of its own. This task of redefinition, however, could not be accomplished by applying external rules, but was instead to be carried out by the shaping power of the imagination.

Given these features, early Romantic literary theory seems to be closely related to transcendental idealism, the prevailing philosophy of the time. In his *Critique of Judgment* of 1790 Kant laid the foundations for the autonomy of art, and for the uniqueness and distinctiveness of aesthetic, as opposed to scientific and moral judgments, thus decisively changing the ground rules in the debate about art and the beautiful that had prevailed in European criticism for centuries.¹ Other decisive

impulses came from Fichte and Schelling. Fichte inspired the intellectual life of his time with his reflective and self-reflective manner of thinking in terms of thought and counterthought – as evidenced by Novalis' shifts between introspection into the nature of the self on the one hand and observation of external nature on the other, as well as by Friedrich Schlegel's theory of irony, described by its author as a 'constant alternation between self-creation and self-destruction' (*KFSA* 2, 151, 172). Whereas in these early forms of transcendental idealism an antagonism between the human being and nature exists, Schelling raised this philosophy to the level of absolute idealism, achieving a complete identification of spirit and nature. This step is clearly in keeping with the new notions of symbolic and allegorical poetry in the criticism and poetic practice of the time, which led to a more profound understanding of the creative process and culminated in a striving for 'absolute poetry'.

Another important feature of early Romanticism in Germany lies in its close association with the so-called 'classicism' of Weimar, the intellectual world of Goethe and Schiller. The parallels between these two groups of authors, classicists and romanticists, seem obvious and have been the subject of many studies, which usually maintain that Romantic theory took certain positions of Goethe and Schiller to an extreme, giving a more youthful or extravagant twist to their poetic views while still basically agreeing with the classicism of Weimar.² One favourite formula for seeing this relationship as one of complementarity was that of 'limitation' (Weimar classicism) and 'infinity' (Jena Romanticism).³ Outside of Germany, the antagonism between Jena, the seat of the Romantics, and Weimar, the residence of Goethe and Schiller, appears so minor as virtually to disappear, the name 'romantic' emerging as a common denominator for both groups.

These are the common views of early German Romanticism in literary history. Both of them – the assumptions of a positive relationship on the part of the Romantics to the philosophy of transcendental idealism and the poetic world of Goethe and Schiller – emphasize important features in the new theory. Upon closer consideration, however, this firm location of early

Romanticism in the intellectual landscape of the time dissolves, and a phenomenon much more complicated emerges which escapes final definition and location. This can already be seen in the attitude of the early Romantics toward the classicist and classical traditions. The prime target of the Romantic assault was not classicism as such, but the aesthetic system of the *ars poetica* and neoclassicism – in general, the view of literature as representation of reality, as imitation, as *mimesis*. In its basic attitude, early Romanticism in Germany reveals a strong affinity to classical antiquity. At best, one can speak of a shifting emphasis in the relationship to classicism, of a departure from the dominant Roman and Aristotelian influence during the classicist period in exchange for a closer bond with the Greeks, particularly the Platonic tradition. Perhaps no other literary period had a deeper impact upon early Romantic theory, at least initially, than classical antiquity, especially Greek literature. In this regard, early Romanticism is an apparent expression of the ‘tyranny of Greece over the German mind’.⁴

This did not interfere with the premise, however, that eventually all classicism was to be overcome, including not only the classicistic programmes of Boileau, Batteux, Dryden, and Gottsched, but also ‘classical’ forms of the Greek authors themselves. Classicism as such, especially in its orientation toward perfection, everlasting value, and models for imitation, did not correspond to the early Romantic understanding of human nature and the Romantic desire for free expression of the imagination. After all, Goethe had already maintained, in his essay entitled *Literary Sans-Culottism* of 1791, that no author could possibly consider himself classical, because the claim which this implied would be so elevated as to give an impression of self-acclamation.⁵ Friedrich Schlegel went further still and denied the desirability of classical works in general when he said: ‘Absolutely unsurpassable models constitute insurmountable barriers to perfectibility. In this respect one might very well say: Heaven preserve us from eternal works’ (*KFSA* 2, 79–80). This attitude included Greek literature and became possible because classical Greek poetry was not considered as an objective form, an ‘ideal’ incarnation, a prototype or model for

the modern author, but rather as something one should compete and interact with, something human and natural that one should incorporate into oneself. The implications of this attitude are of special importance for the modernist character of early Romantic theory. On this premise one could indeed claim, in a paradoxical manner, that the most advanced type of modernity consists in that mentality which has the liveliest relationship with the Greeks. It also follows from this way of thinking that classicism and modernism lose their usual historical and categorical character, and become principles of a more fundamental reflection, assuming the character of ideal types in a process of intellectual interaction.

Another aspect sharply distinguishing the early Romantic mentality from every form of European classicism is its extremely favourable attitude towards revolution in general, and even to a certain degree towards the French Revolution. Contemporaries readily characterized the new critical endeavours of the early Romantics as a 'revolution', meaning of course a 'critical' or an 'aesthetic' revolution.⁶ These assessments coincided with the opinions of the early Romantics about their own enterprise. The particular historical self-understanding of the Romantic critics is best illustrated, however, by the futuristic idea of infinite perfectibility.⁷ Whereas during the Enlightenment the contemporary age was taken as a standard for previous epochs, the Romantics regarded their own time as part of an all-pervasive moment of becoming, and saw themselves moving towards ever new possibilities in the future. They viewed poetry as an absolutely 'progressive' realm involved in a process of endless development. The idea of infinite perfectibility also applies to their own criticism and theory of literature, and corresponds to the inexhaustibility of interpretation, to the infinite potentialities in the understanding of literary works that yield new meanings from ever new modes of historical consciousness.

Similar observations can be made about early Romantic theory from the point of view of idealistic, transcendental philosophy. Here the Romantic theory is usually regarded as an application of doctrines developed by Kant, Fichte, and

Schelling to the realm of poetry. Hegel attempted to impress this interpretation upon our understanding of Romanticism, insisting that the early Romantic form of subjectivity, with its 'non-philosophically executed turn', was nothing but an extravagant offshoot of Fichtean philosophy (*HEG* 20, 415). In a less polemical fashion, this view of early Romantic theory can be described as an extension of a larger philosophical process of that time, namely, the aesthetic formulation of subjective idealism, the elaboration of the poetic side of transcendental idealism. Yet, in the end, early Romanticism is just as little an extension of the idealism of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling as it is a mere offshoot of classicism and the classicist theory. Here again, the early Romantic mentality adopted an attitude that showed little interest in historical frameworks of philosophy, the content of philosophical knowledge, the results of philosophizing, or systems of thought. Instead, it departed from these reference points and arrived at its own medium of reflection, that is, at art, poetry, and literature, independent of historical relationships. This invasion of reflection, theory, and philosophy into the territory of art, poetry, and literature can be interpreted as another feature of the modern aspect of Romantic theory, the consciousness of literary modernism, as a process best described as a 'poetry of poetry' that blends critical, reflective discourse with its own creative invention. One could also describe the intrusion of reflection into the realm of the aesthetic and the imaginative as a combination or junction of poetry and philosophy. This is a model of interplay which regards the two poles, poetry and philosophy, spontaneity and reflection – like the former model of classicism and modernism – as interdependent and complementary, as ideal types of intellectual interaction. If we adopt this model, we transcend the dominance of one single principle (reason or imagination, theory or creation, classicism or romanticism) in favour of a pluralistic movement of counteractive and interactive principles that seem to oppose, but in their interaction actually generate and maintain each other.

One can also view the self-reflective style of early Romantic theory in terms of its historical consciousness and thereby return

to the topic of classicism. From this point of view, the absolute has vanished and the classical structures of complete identity and full self-possession are no longer regarded as valid. Here, too, there is no utopian promise, and the absolute expectations of the future are no longer valid. What we have instead is a universally progressive poetry, the 'real essence' of which is 'that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected' (*KFSA* 2, 183; *LF*, 175). This is not to be interpreted as a loss, however, but rather as the actual human condition and as an enormous source of creativity. If total communication is impossible, if language provides no direct path to reality, then we are left with indirect communication, figurative language, metaphor, allegory. What matters even more is not to spoil this delicate position of the in-between that typifies the truly modern attitude by coarsely constructing an absolute past, a golden age, as the classicists have done, or, conversely, by upholding an absolute future, a utopia, as certain philosophers of the time attempted to do. Similar observations could be made in the field of hermeneutics. The early Romantic theory of understanding should not be regarded as a historical phase or a step into a generally developing history of hermeneutics, as has often been maintained,⁸ but as a much more radical reflection upon the possibility of understanding which takes into account the amount of incomprehensibility, indeed, of not-understanding, constituted in every act of understanding.

If one pursues this line of thought, one soon realizes that early German Romanticism also has few links with the classicism of Schiller and Goethe. From the beginning, the early Romantic reflection upon poetry transcends the scope of any national literature and extends to the broad field of world literature or, more precisely, to Western literature as demarcated by names such as Pindar, Sophocles, Dante, Calderón, and Shakespeare. Conversely, the category of modern or Romantic literature as established in the new theory is one that a whole generation of European authors in the Mediterranean, northern, and Slavic countries of Europe adopted for their own endeavours, and in which they recognized themselves.⁹ As far as the direct relationship of the early Romantic theory to Goethe and Schiller

is concerned, one soon realizes that a reflective critique was at work here that did not cease to 'annihilate' certain authors of the Enlightenment (Nicolai, Kotzebue, Merkel) or representatives of the classicist and sentimental tradition (Jacobi, Wieland, Herder). Indeed, this critique soon extended to Schiller, and then to Goethe himself, and finally established a notion of absolute poetry that no Romantic work could possibly equal. At this point, we again notice a movement away from any historical relationship and reference, towards a transcendental or anthropological realm of more general significance, although the discourse continues to be organized in terms of historical names and historical references. In other words, we encounter in these instances the absolutely progressive and exponential character of early Romantic theory.

A further attempt to classify early Romantic theory has occasionally been made from the point of view of the encyclopaedia,¹⁰ a predominant theme of the time which is usually combined with the function of education, as in the old notion of cyclical education, *enkyklios paideia*. Yet here again, we encounter the typical attitude of early Romanticism in the sense of suspending firm reference points and regarding the principles of such an encyclopedia as in a peculiar state of oscillation, of hovering. The most impressive development of this theme in terms of a literary encyclopaedia is certainly the famous discussion of Shakespeare in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, where it is argued that Shakespeare, in whom nature and art are one, seems to have a special connection to the creative world spirit.¹¹ Consequently, the modern human being can find no better path to an encyclopaedic education than through this poet, who, having special access to the structure of the world, functions as its interpreter. Hegel, in contrast, promulgated the idea of a philosophical encyclopaedia. Inasmuch as philosophy, as a fundamental science, contains the principles of all other sciences within itself, he argues that philosophy is the true encyclopaedia and doctrine of education, and he consequently regards the literary encyclopaedia as empty and useless for the young mind.¹² In contrast to these poetic or philosophical encyclopaedias, the early Romantic

theory can be described as an interaction of the literary and the philosophical encyclopaedias – not as their synthesis, to be sure, but as an attempt to think philosophy from the point of view of poetry and poetry from the point of view of philosophy. Similar interactive relationships exist in this theory between poetry and prose, genial inspiration and criticism, understanding and incomprehensibility, truth and error, the inner and the outer world, this life and the beyond. By operating in this manner, early Romantic theory manifests itself as a basic reflection upon poetry and literature that eludes any final formulation and does not result in an ultimate doctrine.

Outlining early Romantic theory in these terms, we realize that we are dealing with a phenomenon that is hard to locate in a particular historical environment and has a future-oriented thrust in which features of our own modernity become obvious. As the examples of interpretation mentioned above have shown, there have always been attempts to limit early Romantic theory to some historical context and thereby enclose it in the past. But these attempts have always had a counterpart in so-called ‘actualizations’ of early Romantic theory in more recent and contemporary trends of criticism, such as new criticism, philosophical hermeneutics, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (especially that of Adorno), the critique of subject philosophy (Heidegger), and deconstruction in the writings of Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, and Paul de Man.¹³ In view of its actuality and modernistic character, early Romantic theory has also become, next to Nietzsche, the main target of any fundamentalist critique of modernity and postmodernity. In Germany the contemporary critique of ideology identifies early Romanticism as the first step into ‘aesthetic modernism’, an attitude marked by a loss of all bonds with communal rationality, communicative reasoning, consensus, and so forth.¹⁴

Another important aspect of the theory of literature in early German Romanticism is that it is not the completed product of one single mind, but an open, fragmentary, ever-changing thought process to which authors of the most diverse backgrounds made their contributions – authors who, in spite of their intellectual diversity, considered themselves at least for

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some period of time the originators of a 'new school' of literature and criticism. This 'school' comprised a variety of talents – from learned and scholarly critics like the Schlegel brothers to a mining engineer like Novalis, from a freelance writer like Tieck and a legal administrator like Wackenroder to a trained Protestant theologian like Schleiermacher. All were in their twenties when their theory of literature originated through mutual discussion and interaction. Depicting such a complex phenomenon poses a real challenge, one which is attempted in this text through a sequential examination of the main developments in the early Romantic theory of poetry. Hence the following chapters are arranged in accordance with the predominant themes of early Romantic reflection. We are dealing with a brief period of about six to seven years, from 1794 to around 1800. During these years, such vast domains as the literature of the Greeks and the Romans (Ch. 2, pp. 72–130, below), the period of the 'Romantic authors' (Dante, Boccaccio, Calderón, Shakespeare: Ch. 3, pp. 131–80, below), the new philosophy of transcendental idealism (Ch. 4, pp. 181–221, below), modern painting and music (Ch. 5, pp. 222–59 below), the theory of language and understanding (Ch. 6, pp. 260–305, below), and new possibilities for 'pure' and 'absolute' poetry were explored (Ch. 3, pp. 154–64, below and Ch. 4, pp. 201–11, below). Although these periods of literature and modern art formed the basis for reflection and research on the part of the Romantics, the chapters are not arranged solely in terms of these historical studies, but rather according to the themes which arise from them. As will be seen in the following discussion, history and theory are indeed inseparable in early Romantic discourse, since theory evolves directly from the study of historical phenomena and manifests itself in historical references and images.

The first chapter gives a brief portrayal of the intellectual environment in which early Romantic theory originated, focusing on the city of Jena and its university. This seat of philosophers of transcendental idealism lies only a few miles from Goethe's Weimar, which was also the residence of Wieland and Herder. Schiller, a professor of history at the university,

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lived in Jena until 1799 and then moved to Weimar to become more actively involved in Goethe's reforms of the court theatre. The formation of the Romantic school in Jena is the occasion for brief biographical introductions of its main representatives, including Caroline and Dorothea Schlegel, as well as for a discussion of the terms 'romantic' and 'romanticism'. The second chapter, based on the specific investigation of Greek literature by Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, particularly of lyric poetry, the epic, and drama, considers the theme of poetic unity as an important means of defining what is poetic. Such a study of Greek and Roman literature, however, inevitably raises questions about our own relationship to the Greeks and thereby approaches the theme of literary modernity in a way reminiscent of the famous debate between the ancients and the moderns during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The third chapter finds its historical bearings in the equally intense study of modern literature by the Schlegel brothers, which included writers neglected or even rejected by the classicist theory. In a decisive revision of the literary canon of the time, authors such as Dante, Boccaccio, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Calderón became the leading figures for the Romantic view of literature, while among contemporary authors only Goethe was considered worthy of inclusion. Yet this chapter primarily examines the type of literature and the mode of organization and construction that the Romantic critics found in these authors. Irony, in Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic understanding of the term, is one of the main themes of this chapter, which also covers the topic of 'transcendental poetry' and the theme of mythology in its relationship to literature. The fourth chapter expands upon these ideas and introduces Novalis, a writer through whom early Romantic theory gained a new and important dimension. Up to then, this theory had been one of the subject, of subjective idealism, and the potentialities of the human mind. But Novalis began to include not only the natural world surrounding us within his thought, but also the world beyond. By reflecting upon relationships between the inner and the outer world, the realms of this life and the hereafter, Romantic theory came to embrace