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The Early Political Writings of
the German Romantics
CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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The Early Political Writings of The German Romantics

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Preface

The political thought of the German romantics covers a long period, beginning in the 1790s and extending into the 1830s. Since the most important and interesting texts from this period could not all be included in one volume, I have chosen material from a single phase of romantic thought. This is the period from 1797 to 1802, the most fertile and formative period of Romanticism, which is generally known as Früromantik. Even within this period, it has been necessary to be selective because of the wealth of material. I have therefore concentrated upon the most important writings of three leading figures of the early romantic circle: Novalis, Schleiermacher and Friedrich Schlegel. Selecting texts from this period alone, and from these thinkers alone, provides a coherence and unity that would be impossible to achieve in a more comprehensive anthology.

Within my chosen parameters I have attempted to be as exhaustive and thorough as possible. I have included all kinds of writings relevant to the early political thought of Novalis, Schleiermacher and Schlegel: fragments, lectures, essays and treatises. No claim is made, however, to provide all the early political writings of the German romantics. I have had to exclude two major works from the early period: Schelling’s Deduktion des Naturrechts (1796–7) and Schleiermacher’s incomplete manuscript Versuch einer Theorie des geselligen Betragens (1799). Though these works are interesting and important, they are not suitable for an introductory edition. Schelling’s Deduktion is comprehensible only to someone who has a good grasp of Fichte’s early philosophy; and Schleiermacher’s Versuch
is best understood after reading the Monologen, which have been translated in part here.

Although Fichte was a crucial influence upon the early romantics, I have not included any of his writings in this volume. This is partly because they are available elsewhere in a very reliable recent edition, Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: New York: Cornell University Press, 1988). It is also a mistake to regard Fichte as a romantic in any strict sense of the term. He was not a regular participant in the meetings of the romantic circle; and some of the central ideas of the early romantics — the role of art in society, the organic concept of nature, the place of individuality in ethics — were formulated in reaction to him.

Since the young romantics stressed the unity of politics, aesthetics and religion, any edition of their political writings should not construe the term ‘political’ in a narrow sense. I have included, therefore, fragments on metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics when they are essential to understand the context of early romantic political thought. For this reason I have added the whole texts of Novalis’ Pollen and Schlegel’s Ideas.

The early German romantics never provided a systematic exposition of their political thought; it is is scattered throughout many fragments, aphorisms, essays and lectures. Its most condensed expression, and indeed its locus classicus, is Novalis’ Faith and Love and Political Aphorisms. A reader who wants to proceed direct to the core of their thought is best advised to begin with these works.

Many of the texts have been translated for the first time. Those that have been translated before have been translated anew for this edition. Like most translations, mine have attempted to steer a middle path between the conflicting ideals of accuracy and readability. I have usually aimed at an accurate rather than a literary translation; but in many cases I have had to sacrifice accuracy for more readable English. I have often altered punctuation, divided lengthy paragraphs and eliminated redundancies. In the case of Novalis’ and Schlegel’s unpublished manuscripts I have sometimes deleted phrases or words when they were incidental to the main thought. In most cases, however, the original emphasis has been retained.

The translations are based upon the latest critical editions: the Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe (Munich: Schöningh, 1966), ed.
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The texts of the young romantics present formidable challenges to the commentator as well as translator. They rely much upon allusion and nuance, and they adopt the technical vocabulary of Kant, Fichte and Schiller while often altering its meaning. Even worse, they are sometimes deliberately obscure, ambiguous and mystifying. Schlegel and Novalis chose to write in a Rätselsprache or Bildersprache, whose meaning would be apparent only to the initiated. To make their texts more accessible to the modern reader, I have added many notes. In writing these, I have been especially indebted to three Novalis commentaries: that of Richard Samuel and Hans Joachim Mähl in the Hanser edition of the Werke (Munich, 1978); that of Gerhard Schulz in the Studienausgabe (Munich: Beck, 1969); and that of Hans Dietrich Dahmke and Rudolf Walbiner in Novalis, Werke in Einem Band (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1983).

In preparing this volume, I have been aided by several colleagues and friends. Christiane Goldmann, Michael Halberstam and Martin Schönfeld have advised me on questions of translation. Raymond Geuss, Quentin Skinner and two anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press gave me valuable comments on earlier drafts. The idea for a volume devoted entirely to the political writings of the early romantics came originally from Raymond Geuss.
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Romantic aesthetics and politics

Although it seems hopelessly abstract and vague, the term ‘German Romanticism’ has been given a definite historical meaning by generations of scholars. It denotes a loosely organized and vaguely self-conscious intellectual movement that began in Germany toward the close of the eighteenth century. It is even possible to identify specific times and places as the beginning of German Romanticism. The crucial period would be from 1797 to 1802, and the pivotal places would be Jena and Berlin. During this time, a group of writers met in the home of A. W. Schlegel in Jena, and in the literary salons of Henriette Herz and Rahel Levin in Berlin. There they held frank and free discussions about philosophy, poetry, politics and religion. The leading members of this circle were Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (1773–1801), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), the brothers August Wilhelm (1767–1845) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Ernst Daniel Schleiermacher (1767–1834), and Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), who was known by his pen name Novalis. The members of this group called themselves ‘the new school’, ‘the new sect’ and, later and more famously, ‘the romantic school’. Though their meetings were charmed, they were also short lived. Their circle suffered some severe blows with the deaths of Novalis and Wackenroder in 1801; and it disbanded when the Schlegel brothers left Jena in 1802.
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German Romanticism did not, of course, disappear with the demise of this early circle. Its legacy lived on, and it eventually became one of the most influential movements in modern intellectual history. German Romanticism proved to be very protean, evolving into distinct periods which are in some respects even contradictory to one another. Customarily, it is divided into three phases: early Romanticism or Frühromantik from 1797 to 1802, whose chief members have already been mentioned; high Romanticism or Hochromantik from 1803 to 1815, whose main representatives are Achim von Arnim, Joseph Görres, Adam Mueller, Caspar David Friedrich, Zacharias Werner, Clemens Brentano and Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert; and finally late Romanticism or Späromantik from 1816 to 1830, whose leading figures are Franz Baader, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Johann von Eichendorff and the elder Friedrich Schlegel and Schelling. Of course, there are continuities and family resemblances between these periods; but since they also have differing, even opposing, characteristics, it is important to distinguish between them. It is a common error to interpret early Romanticism in the light of later Romanticism, as if the later philosophy and politics of the movement are true without qualification for its earlier phase.

German Romanticism began as a literary movement. In its early period, its goals and interests were primarily aesthetic, preoccupied with the need to determine the standards of good taste and literature. The young romantics made art their highest value, their raison d'être, their be all and end all. They attributed great powers to art: it was the criterion of absolute knowledge, the means of unifying the personality, the mediator between man and nature, and the source of social harmony.

Although German Romanticism was essentially an aesthetic movement, it also deserves a prominent place in any history of modern political thought. In its formative period, it developed political ideas of the first historical importance. Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel and Schleiermacher developed a concept of community to counter the atomism and anomie of modern society; they formulated an ethic of love and self-realization in reaction to the formalism of Kant's ethics; they questioned some of the main pre-suppositions of the liberal tradition, especially its individualism; they criticized the inhumanity and 'philistinism' of civil society; and
they championed many modern social values, such as the emancipation of women, sexual freedom and the right of divorce. The political thought of the young romantics remains of great interest today for its attempt to synthesize, and to avoid the troublesome extremes of, liberalism and conservatism. Their attempt to synthesize these traditions is apparent in several respects: although the young romantics stressed the value of community, they also insisted upon the need for individual liberty; while they emphasized the value of organic growth, continuity and tradition, they also championed progress, development and reform; and if they pointed out the dangers of a narrow rationalism, they also recognized the value of reason and defended the rights of free enquiry.

What is the connection between romantic aesthetics and politics? Prima facie there is none at all. It was a cardinal tenet of the young romantics that art is an end in itself, and that it should not be subordinated to social, moral and political goals. They reaffirmed the Kantian doctrine of the autonomy of art, the idea that art has its own *sui generis* rules and values, independent of science, religion and morality. For just this reason, they have often been accused of political indifference, of escaping the social and political world and taking refuge in the ideal world of art.

One cannot, however, take the romantics’ aestheticism entirely at face value. We must place it in the context of their moral, social and political concerns. For, although they insisted upon the autonomy of art, the romantics also stressed that art should be subordinate to the interests of humanity. The value of beauty, Novalis and Schlegel sometimes said, is that it serves as a symbol of the good. Paradoxically, they emphasized the autonomy of art because this made art a symbol of freedom. Art represents freedom, they argued, only if it is completely autonomous, not subordinate to any social or political ends.

The more we examine the context of early German Romanticism the more it becomes clear that its aesthetics and politics are inseparable. If its politics conforms to aesthetic ideals, its aesthetics fits its political ends. This interconnection becomes especially apparent from one of the central themes of early romantic political thought: ‘the poetic state’. Novalis and Schlegel held that the perfect state is created and organized according to the ideal of beauty. The ruler of the poetic state is ‘the artist of artists’, ‘the poet of poets’, the

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director of a vast public stage where all citizens are actors. Seen from a broader historical perspective, their poetic state is the very antithesis of Plato’s republic. Here artists are not banished: they are enthroned. The romantics constantly invite us to reconsider Plato’s famous question: what is the role of art in the state?

What drove the romantics to their poetic conception of the state? Why did they give such social and political importance to art? And what social and political purpose did their art serve? To answer these questions, we need to examine the romantics’ reaction to two major developments of their time: the French Revolution, and the crisis of the German Enlightenment or Aufklärung.

The political ideals of the young romantics were formed in the 1790s, the decade in which all the problems and consequences of the Revolution became clear. Almost all of the romantics cheered the storming of the Bastille and celebrated the end of the ancien régime. They embraced the grand ideals of liberté, égalité et fraternité, defended the rights of man, and looked forward to the creation of a republic, ‘the kingdom of God on earth’. Such enthusiasm was typical, of course, of most German intellectuals in the early 1790s. What is so striking about the romantics is the persistence of their optimism, which lasts into the late 1790s. Unlike so many of their contemporaries, they did not renounce the Revolution because of the September Massacres, the execution of Louis XVI, the invasion of the Rhineland or even the Terror. It is only around 1797 that they began to have deep reservations about the Revolution. Now they feared the social vacuum resulting from the wholesale destruction of traditional social institutions; they attacked the growing materialism and atheism in France; and they disapproved of the worst excesses of the mob. They started to recognize the need for some form of elite rule, and argued that the true republic should be a mixture of democracy, aristocracy and monarchy. Nevertheless, their increasing caution did not involve any abandonment of their basic political ideals. As late as 1800, Schlegel, Schleiermacher and Novalis continue to express republic sympathies. Indeed, their growing moderation was not especially conservative when measured by contemporary standards. Rather, it was typical of most German public opinion in the late 1790s; and it even mirrored the trend of opinion in France itself, where the most recent elections returned royalist majorities in the legislative councils.

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Although the romantics approved of the principles of the Revolution, they disapproved of its practice. Like so many German intellectuals in the 1790s, they did not believe that fundamental social and political change could be achieved through violence or mass action from below. Rather, they stressed the need for gradual reform from above, reform led by a wise and responsible elite and adapted to the special conditions of a country. The continuing chaos and strife in France only strengthened their conviction that the French people, and a fortiori the German, were not ready for the high moral ideals of a republic. The main precondition for fundamental social and political change, they believed, is the education and enlightenment of the people.

As intellectuals in post-revolutionary Europe, the task of the young romantics was now cut out for them: to educate and enlighten the people, and so to prepare them for the grand moral ideals of a republic. Such was the aim of their common journal, the Athenaeum, which appeared from 1798 to 1800. The young romantics felt that, as intellectuals, they had moral and political responsibilities, and they had a deep faith in the power of ideas to effect social and political change. They were deeply influenced by Fichte's view, as set forth in his 1793 Lectures on the Vocation of a Scholar, that the role of the intellectual is to guide the progress of humanity. They endorsed Kant's famous adage that, if philosophers could not be kings, then at least kings should listen to philosophers; the only qualification they make to it is that philosophers should become artists.

We should place the romantics' aestheticism in the context of their reaction to the Revolution. Following Schiller's lead in his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795), they gave primacy to art because it is the chief tool for the education and enlightenment of the public in the post-revolutionary age. They believed that art, and art alone, can inspire the people to act according to the principles of reason, the high moral ideals of a republic. Although they agreed with Kant and Fichte that reason has the power to know our moral principles, they insisted that it does not have the power to make us act by them. The main springs of human action are impulse, imagination and passion, which only art can arouse and direct. If the people only receive an aesthetic education, which paints the principles of reason in attractive colours, then they will
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feel motivated to act according to them. While reason is a harsh taskmaster, forcing us to repress our feelings and desires, art is an inspiring mistress, awakening our feelings and guiding them in a moral direction. If art only has its way, it will unify the two sides of our nature, reason and sensibility, so that we will then do our duty from and not against our inclinations. In sum, then, art became important for the young romantics because they saw it as the chief means of realizing their moral and political ideals: the liberty, equality and fraternity of a republic.

The romantics’ aestheticism grew out of not only their reaction to the Revolution, but also their response to the crisis of the Enlightenment or Aufklärung. The Aufklärung had made reason its highest authority, its final court of appeal. Nothing could escape the scrutiny of reason: all moral, religious and political beliefs were subject to criticism, and abruptly dismissed if they lacked sufficient evidence. By the late 1790s, however, some of the critics of the Aufklärung – J. G. Hamann, F. H. Jacobi and Justus Möser – had made clear some of the disturbing consequences of such a ruthless rationalism. If reason had shown itself to be an omnipotent negative force, capable of destroying everything, it had also proved itself to be an impotent positive force, incapable of creating anything. Where the state, the church, nature and the community once stood, there was now only a vacuum. If modern individuals were rational and free, they were also rootless, attached to nothing, and without faith or allegiance. They had lost their bonds with the community, since reason condemned all its laws and customs as antiquated and oppressive. They also had lost their feeling for nature, because reason had deprived it of all mystery, magic and beauty. Finally, they had lost their religious faith, since reason had declared it to be nothing more than mythology. Sensing this condition of loss and rootlessness, Novalis stated that philosophy originates in ‘homesickness’ (Heimweh), the urge to feel at home again in a demystified world.

Though worried by the negative consequences of the Aufklärung, the young romantics resisted irrationalism. Unlike Burke or de Maistre, they did not defend the value of ‘prejudice’, nor did they advocate any return to ‘the wisdom of our ancestors’. They valued the critical power of reason because it liberated the individual from all the fetters of custom and convention. Rather than laying down
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restraints on reason, they even advocated taking criticism to its limits, regardless of tender consciences and personal convictions. Nevertheless, their strong endorsement of reason was tempered by a clear recognition of its limits. Since the demand that we criticize all our beliefs is self-reflexive, applying to criticism itself, they stressed that a completely critical reason is self-conscious, aware of its limits. A fully self-conscious reason will acknowledge the vacuum it creates yet cannot fill.

The romantics’ ambivalent reaction to the crisis of the Aufklärung – their recognition of reason’s powers and limits – left them with a very disturbing dilemma. How is it possible to fill the vacuum left by reason without betraying reason? How is it possible to restore unity with nature and the community without forfeiting the freedom that comes with criticism? Their middle path between this dilemma was their aestheticism. They believed that art, and art alone, could fill the vacuum left by reason. If reason is essentially a negative power, art is basically a positive one. While reason can only criticize, art can create. For the instrument of art is the imagination, which has the power to produce an entire world. The romantics built upon one of Kant’s and Fichte’s fundamental insights: that we live in a world that we create; they add to it only that our creation should be a work of art. That is the sum and substance of their famous ‘magical idealism’.

One reason the romantics were persuaded of the powers of art is that, unlike the old customs, laws and religion, it has the power to incorporate yet withstand criticism. Art stands on a higher plateau than reason because its products are the result of play, of self-conscious semblance, whereas reason takes every proposition literally and seriously, because it treats it as a claim to truth. Thanks to irony, the romantic artist can distance himself from his creations and free himself to create anew. Although any one of his creations is bound to be limited and flawed, none of them perfectly represents his powers and energy, which are unbounded and ready to create again. Thus the artist internalizes yet transcends rational criticism.

The task of romantic art, then, was to create on a sophisticated, self-conscious level that unity with nature and society that had once been given on a naive subconscious level to primitive man. If only we make nature, society and the state beautiful, magical and mysterious again, the young romantics believed, then we will restore
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our sense of belonging to them. Cured of our homesickness, we will finally feel at home again in our world.

Romantic religion and politics

By the early 1800s religion had replaced art at the pinnacle of the romantic hierarchy of values. Now it was religion that was the key to Bildung, the mainspring of cultural renewal, and the raison d’être of social and political life. In the spring of 1799 Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis all wrote of the need to create a new religion, or at least to go back to the roots of all religion. They demanded a new Bible, which would not give rise to the idolatry, prejudice and superstition of the past; and they called for a new church, whose sole foundation would be the brotherhood of the spirit rather than the coercion of the state. Such are the guiding ideals behind Schlegel’s Ideas, Schleiermacher’s Monologues and Novalis’ Christianity or Europe.

However, religion did not completely eclipse art as the source of romantic inspiration. The romantics did not abandon their aestheticism but simply transformed it. They now cast art in a new role as the handmaiden to religion. If they once made a religion out of art, they now made religion into an art. They stressed that poetry is the ‘organon’ of religion, the means of its expression and criterion of its inspiration. So, if art must be sacred, religion must be beautiful. Nevertheless, despite their abiding aestheticism, the romantics now gave pride of place to religion, because they saw it as the source of artistic inspiration. It is as if they now recognize that, in making the world divine, mysterious and beautiful again, the artist is reviving the age-old function of the priest.

Liberal and socialist critics of Romanticism have often contended that its religious revival was the basis for its conservative or reactionary politics. In attempting to revive religion, the romantics, it seems, were reacting against the ideals of the Revolution and the progressive tendencies of the Aufklärung. As evidence for this point, these critics cite the notorious sympathies for, or even conversions to, the Roman Catholic church among some of the romantics.

There is indeed some element of truth in this criticism. In their later years, Friedrich Schlegel, Franz Baader and Adam Mueller appealed to religion to defend the monarchy, aristocracy and
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curch. Nevertheless, we must be careful to avoid anachronism here. We must not judge the original inspiration and ideals of romantic religion in the light of the later beliefs of Schlegel, Baader and Mueller. That romantic religion, at least in the formative years of Frühromantik, was not reactionary can be seen from its origin and context.

The initial stimulus for the romantic religious revival came from one man and one book: Schleiermacher’s On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers, which appeared in the autumn of 1799. In this famous work, Schleiermacher put forward the thesis that the essence of religion consists in the ‘intuition of the universe’ (Anschauung des Universums), the feeling of dependence upon the infinite. The enlightened critics of religion had failed to understand its essence, he argued, because they reduced it to a mere support for morality or to a primitive cosmology or metaphysics. Religion, however, should not be confused with morality or metaphysics. Its purpose is not to guide conduct, still less to explain nature. Rather, its main aim is to cultivate our ‘spiritual sense’, to foster our experience of the infinite, to nurture our feeling of dependence upon the universe as a whole. Unashamedly admitting his Spinozist sympathies, Schleiermacher avowed a form of pantheism, a belief in God’s immanence and presence throughout nature. God is not a person existing in some supernatural heaven, he insisted, but the infinite whole of all nature. Such pantheism was attractive to Schleiermacher because it seemed to avoid the perennial conflict between religion and science. Since God exists within nature, and since nature consists in a system of laws, pantheism is the very faith of science itself. By thus defending religion against its enlightened detractors, Schleiermacher paved the way for a religious revival that would be intellectually respectable and not just a relapse into the discredited orthodox theism of the past.

But Schleiermacher’s book was only the immediate occasion for the romantic religious revival, which had much deeper roots in one of the more radical currents of the Reformation. Ever since the dawn of the Reformation in Germany, a religious movement arose that had remarkably progressive social and political goals, such as liberty of conscience, toleration, ecumenism, egalitarianism and activism. Among the leading thinkers of this tradition were Kaspar Schwenkfeld (1498–1561), Sebastian Franck (1499–1542), Valentin
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Weigel (1533–1588), Johann Arndt (1555–1621), Jakob Boehme (1675–1624), Conrad Dippel (1673–1734), Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714) and Johann Christian Edelmann (1698–1767). What these thinkers have in common is a loyalty to Luther’s original ideals and a belief that he betrayed them. They embraced Luther’s grand ideals of religious liberty and the priesthood of all believers; but they felt that Luther had compromised them, first by making the Bible the sole rule of faith, and second by giving the state authority over the church. If Luther’s ideals were to be realized, these radicals argued, then it would be necessary to separate the church and state. Since all genuine faith comes from the inner heart of the believer, the true church is ‘invisible’, a purely voluntary association of kindred spirits. For the same reason, these thinkers held that the rule of faith cannot be the Bible, for it is only the record of someone else’s beliefs and experience, and therefore should not be binding upon my belief and experience. Rather, the true rule of faith is inspiration, the possession of the spirit, which comes only from the depths of every individual soul.

One of the leitmotifs of this tradition, which reappears later in Romanticism, is its activism and chiliasm, the convictions that the responsible Christian should strive to realize ‘the kingdom of God on earth’. The radicals believed that Luther’s ideals should be practised not only in the church, but also in social and political life. In other words, they held that liberty and equality should be valid not only for ‘the heavenly realm’ of the Christian, but also for ‘the earthly realm’ of the citizen.

Another leitmotif of this tradition, which also resurfaces in Romanticism, is its pantheism, its belief in the immanence and omnipresence of God. This doctrine provided the radicals with the metaphysical underpinning for their social and political ideals. If God is immanent in his creation, present equally within everyone alike, then we all have equal access to him, and there is no need for a religious or political elite to establish and confirm our relationship with him.

The culmination and triumph of the radical Reformation came in the late eighteenth century with the Spinoza revival and the ‘pantheism controversy’ between Jacobi and Mendelssohn. For more than a century, Spinoza had been a much maligned figure in Germany among the orthodox Lutherans, who condemned him for his
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‘atheism and fatalism’. But he was also much admired among the later generation of radical reformers, who embraced the pantheism of the Ethica and the egalitarianism and Biblical criticism of the Tractatus. Indeed, so widespread was the sympathy for Spinoza among the heterodox that Heine called Spinozism ‘the secret religion of Germany’. Among these admirers of Spinoza were no less than Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1801) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), who supported many of the ideals of the radical reformers.

The radicals’ hour of victory came in the spring of 1786 when Jacobi published his famous Letters on Spinoza, which revealed Lessing’s confession of Spinozism. Since Lessing was such a revered thinker, his confession gave the stamp of legitimacy to this hitherto proscribed doctrine. After Lessing’s confession was made public, other intellectuals came out of their closet to declare their Spinozism too. Among them were thinkers of the stature of Goethe and Herder. Growing up during the late 1780s and early 1790s, the young romantics soon added their names to the rolecall of Spinoza’s admirers. The early letters and notebooks of Schelling, Schleiermacher, Novalis and Schlegel reveal their sympathy with Spinozism.

It is indeed the legacy of Spinoza and the radical Reformation – rather than Catholicism, orthodox Lutheranism or pietism – that emerges time and again in the religious writings of the young romantics. Schlegel, Novalis and Schleiermacher swear their allegiance to the same ideals as the radical reformers: the invisible church, the kingdom of God on earth, ecumenism and tolerance. They, too, sympathize with Spinoza’s pantheism, biblical criticism and egalitarianism. Again like the radical reformers, they despise Luther’s bibliolatry and stress the need for the contemplation of the inner spirit. It is indeed telling that the religious thinker the young romantics revere most is Lessing.

It should now be clear that, in its original form, romantic religion was anything but reactionary. Rather, it was the final flowering of all the progressive social and political ideals of the radical Reformation. Romantic religion was not, then, simply a reassertion of the authority of the traditional church, whether Protestant or Catholic. For, throughout the 1790s and even after 1800, Schlegel, Schleiermacher and Novalis continued to uphold the liberal ideals of the radical
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reformers, such as freedom of conscience, toleration, and the separation of church and state. Rather than breaking with the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity because of religion, the romantics supported them by appealing to religion. After 1799 they saw religion, rather than art, as the chief instrument of Bildung, as the main means of educating the public to act according to the moral ideals of a republic. They were indeed fascinated by the various experiments with a civil religion in revolutionary France.

Whence, then, the sympathies for Catholicism among some of the romantics, sympathies that are apparent even in the late 1790s? Surely, there is a paradox here. If the romantics began as radical reformers, how did at least some of them end as Roman Catholics? Naturally, the answer to this question is involved and complicated, and so cannot be provided in the space available here. All that is at stake now, however, is simply the sympathy for Catholicism in Frühromantik. If we carefully examine the chief documents regarding the romantics’ early flirtation with the medieval church – Novalis’ Christianity or Europe, Schlegel’s Fragments and Wackenroder’s Effusions of an Artloving Monk – then we find many reasons for their sympathy for it. The medieval church gave people a sense of community; it represented the highest spiritual values; it taught, and to some extent even practised, an ethic of love, the noblest moral philosophy; and, above all, it inspired and gave pride of place to art. None of these reasons betray, however, the spirit of the radical Reformation. The early romantics’ sympathy for the Catholic Church was primarily a love for the medieval ideal, not an approval of, still less a conversion to, the actual historical institution. What they especially admire is the ideal of a single universal church, a cosmopolitan church that transcends all sectarian differences and unites all people in brotherhood. Such a church is no more Catholic than Protestant but the ecumenical ideal of the radical Reformation.

Romanticism and the German political tradition

Although the young romantics did not write systematic treatises on political philosophy, they were anything but ignorant of, or unresponsive to, the latest thinking. A careful reading of Novalis’ Faith and Love, or Schlegel’s Essay on Republicanism, shows that they
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knew contemporary doctrine all too well. Indeed, we can understand early romantic political thought only by placing it in the context of the two rival traditions of political thought: enlightened absolutism and liberalism.

The theory of enlightened absolutism had held sway in Germany ever since the beginning of the seventeenth century, and it continued to show signs of life even after the French Revolution. Among its chief advocates were V. L. Seckendorff, Samuel Pufendorf, Christian Wolff, Christian Garve, C. G. Swayne and J. A. Eberhard. According to enlightened absolutism, the purpose of the state is to ensure the happiness, morality and piety of its subjects through wise legislation and administration. Although the welfare of the people is the main rationale of the government, the people themselves are not the best judge of their interests, and so should not participate in the business of government. ‘All government for the people, but none by the people’, as Friedrich II of Prussia, the greatest practitioner of this theory, summarized it.

The liberal tradition was not so well established in Germany, and during the 1790s it was barely self-conscious. Indeed, the term ‘liberal’ would not come into common use until the 1830s. Nevertheless, many later liberal ideals were clearly anticipated by thinkers in the 1790s. Among the early defenders of liberal ideals in Germany were Kant, Schiller, Jacobi, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Christian Dohm and Georg Forster. Early liberal doctrine was a reaction against absolutism. According to the liberals, the purpose of the state is simply to protect the rights of its citizens, who should be left to pursue their own happiness as they see fit. The government should never interfere in the private life of its citizens, for liberty is the precondition not only of a prosperous economy, but also true morality and religion. All citizens should be given the maximum of liberty, the right to do anything as long as it does not interfere with a similar right of others. Unlike later liberal doctrine, which championed democracy, early liberalism usually kept a discreet silence about the best form of government; it could be a monarchy, aristocracy or democracy, provided that it had a constitution ensuring the maximal freedom for all.

By the late 1790s, when the romantics came of age, both these traditions seemed antiquated. They could not do justice to two recent developments: the Revolution and the growth of civil society.
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While enlightened absolutism clung to the last remnants of the ancien régime, liberalism turned a blind eye to all the problems arising from the growth of free trade, rural manufacturing and urbanization. Although Germany would not have an industrial economy until the late nineteenth century, many of the basic problems of civil society were already plain by the end of the eighteenth century: poverty, homelessness, unemployment and dehumanizing methods of production. The romantics were among the first to recognize these problems.

Spending some of their early days in Berlin, when memories of the reign of Friedrich II were still strong, Schlegel, Schleiermacher and Novalis grew to despise absolutism, which they associated with ‘the machine state’ of that monarch. They condemned absolutism first and foremost because its centralized administration and bureaucracy regulated and controlled every aspect of life, permitting no local self-government or initiative. All the power was in the hands of the central government, while the people were simply the passive recipients of any welfare that the ruler condescended to give them. The chief problem with absolutism, in the view of the young romantics, was that it failed to acknowledge the growing demands for more popular participation in government, which had become so vocal, urgent and widespread since the Revolution. Hence Novalis in his Fragments, and Schlegel in his Essay on Republicanism, would defend the demand for more popular government against the absolutist tradition.

Another serious problem with absolutism, according to the romantics, was that it did not provide any guarantee for individual liberty. In their early years, the romantics passionately declared the right of the individual to develop his or her personality, to realize all his or her capacities, free from the constraints of custom, convention and law. The young romantics revelled in the moral autonomy discovered by Kant, and they were determined to extend it to all aspects of social, political and cultural life. The ‘divine egoism’ proclaimed by Schlegel in the Athenaeum Fragments was the slogan for their campaign to liberate the individual from all the stifling conventions and repressive laws of the day.

In the eyes of the young romantics, the liberal tradition was guilty of the opposite failing from absolutism. While the absolutists underrated the demand for liberty, the liberals exaggerated it, pushing it...
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to extremes. The liberals made the pursuit of individual happiness and self-realization the sole purpose of life, so that there was no value in living for the sake of the community as a whole. Hence they severed all the individual’s ties to the community, leaving him or her bereft of any sense of allegiance or belonging. Against this growing social dislocation, the romantics would stress the need for, and value of, community. ‘Flight from the communal spirit is death’, as Novalis so dramatically put it in his Pol len.

The romantics maintained that there was a deeper reason for the liberals’ failure to stress the importance of community. This was their conception of an a-social human nature, according to which the individual is complete in all needs and desires apart from society, and self-interest is the basis for all social action. The romantics are among the first to question these endemic assumptions of the liberal tradition. From such premises, Novalis argues in his Political Fragments, it is impossible to derive any kind of social order. We cannot justify the state through the idea of a social contract between self-interested individuals – a true squaring of the circle – because the individual will then be able to quit the contract whenever it suits him. Hence, in the romantic view, liberalism is ultimately anarchic.

Although liberalism and absolutism have opposing problems, the romantics also argued that they have a common shortcoming: both reduce the state down to a direct relationship between the central government and people, whether that government consists in a representative assembly or the bureaucracy of the prince. In any case, neither give any place for intermediate groups between the government and people, for the various guilds, councils and corporations that had been the traditional source of self-government and personal affiliation in medieval society. The absolute princes of Germany, and the representative assemblies of France, were both eager to sweep away these institutions in their drive toward greater centralization and modernization. They both abolished the old guilds, estates and corporations on the grounds that they limited the sovereignty of the prince or the liberty of the citizen. But, to the romantics, the destruction of these traditional organizations posed a double danger: tyranny from the central government and anomie for the individual. With no centres of self-government to oppose them, the prince or assembly could do whatever it wished; and with no guilds
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to protect their employment or to represent their interests, the individual would be cut loose without any social mooring, left to compete against others in the fray of civil society. Hence, despite all their points of conflict, absolutism and liberalism were strange bedfellows in one dangerous respect: both undermined a differentiated society for the sake of centralized authority.

The romantic critique of the liberal and absolutist traditions then left them with an apparently irresolvable problem. If the absolutist underestimated the value of liberty, and if the liberal underrated the need for community, then it was necessary to reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable ideals: individual liberty and community. This was indeed the central political problem for the entire post-revolutionary generation, which could not approve of the anomic, atomism and alienation of civil society, but which also could not abandon the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity of the Revolution.

The romantic solution to this problem was their concept of the organic state, which was sketched as early as 1800 by Novalis in Faith and Love, by Schlegel in his Lectures on Transcendental Philosophy, and by Schleiermacher in the third of his Monologues. The purpose of this model of the state was to ensure community and liberty, freedom and equality within a framework of continuity and tradition. There are two essential components to this model. First, like the complex, differentiated structure of a living being, the organic state will consist in many intermediate groups, such as guilds, councils and corporations. These groups will be a source of local self-government and popular representation. So rather than consisting of only a central government and a mass of isolated individuals, like the machine states of Prussia and France, the organic state will also comprise many autonomous groups. On the one hand, these will ensure the liberty of the people because they represent their interests and are independent of central control; on the other hand, they will provide for community because they will permit individuals to participate in, and belong to, them. Second, unlike the machine states, the organic state will not be designed according to some abstract plan or blueprint imposed from above, whether that is by a monarch or a revolutionary committee. Rather, like a living being, the organic state will adapt slowly to its local environment, evolving gradually from below according to the local tra-
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ditions, needs and beliefs of the people. Since it develops slowly by degrees, the organic state will preserve continuity and tradition, and so provide for an element of community, which had been lost by all the revolutionary upheaval and dislocation in France; but since it develops from below rather than above, according to the will of the people rather than some prince or directorate, it will also provide for an element of liberty.

The romantic emphasis upon gradual organic change is reminiscient of Burke, who was indeed an important influence upon Schlegel and Novalis. But the romantics’ organicism was much more progressive and populist than Burke’s. They defended organic growth not because it would preserve the old corporate order, but because it was much more democratic, responsive to the local needs and traditions of the people. This organic growth also had to be progressive, evolving towards the grand ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity promised by the Revolution. There was always an element of utopian republicanism in early romantic political thought, which is due to the influence of the early radical writings of Fichte.

The foundation of the concept of the organic state is the romantics’ philosophical anthropology, which Schlegel outlines in his Lectures, Schleiermacher in his Monologues, and Novalis in his Faith and Love. Contrary to the liberal tradition, this philosophical anthropology stresses the social nature of human beings: that values, needs and beliefs do not depend upon any fixed essence or universal nature, but a specific place in society and history. Armed with this social conception of human nature, the romantics think that they can reconcile the demands of liberty and community. They do not see any contradiction in affirming both the need for community and the right of the individual to develop his or her personality to the fullest. There is no contradiction, in their view, because people can discover and develop their individuality only through interaction with others. We realize our unique individuality, the romantics argue, only through mutual effort, through sharing ourselves with others and by participating in group life. To live in a group is perfectly natural for us, the romantics believe, because it springs from the deepest and most powerful impulse of our nature: the need for love, the desire to give and receive affection. Love is a much more powerful drive than self-interest, they argue, because
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the lover will gladly renounce all his interests for the sake of the beloved.

This concept of love plays a pivotal role in romantic political thought. It is indeed the leitmotif of Schlegel’s Lectures, Novalis’ Faith and Love and Schleiermacher’s Monologues. What self-interest is to the liberal tradition love is to the romantic tradition. The romantics believed that the foundation of all true community is an ethic of love, and that love should replace law as the chief bond of social life. It is a fundamental mistake of both the liberal and absolutist traditions, the romantics contended, that they see only the law as the basis of social and political life. That simply follows from their mistaken philosophical anthropology: if people are inherently self-interested, then only the force of law will make them social. Although the romantics sometimes took their ethic of love to its final anarchist conclusion, demanding the abolition of the state, they usually admitted that this was a utopian goal, a regulative ideal that could be approached though never attained.

This ethic of love with all its Christian connotations, and the organic state with all its guilds, corporations and estates, are both strongly reminiscent of the Middle Ages. For this reason too, as well as their revival of religion, the romantics have been dismissed by their liberal and socialist opponents as reactionaries, as defenders of the ancien régime and the Restauration. Here again, though, it would be anachronistic to extend these criticisms to the romantics in their earlier years. Although the romantics admired the Middle Ages even in their formative period, it would be wrong to interpret this as reactionary. Why? There are several reasons.

First, the young romantics admired the Middle Ages not because they were the antithesis of the ideals of the Revolution but because they were an illustration of them. As Schlegel put the point in his Apprenticeship: ‘there was never more liberty, equality and fraternity than in the Middle Ages’. To defend this view, the romantics pointed to the more popular institutions of the Middle Ages, such as the free cities, the assemblies, the local councils, guilds and corporations. If these could only be reformed and purged of their privileges, they argued, then they could also provide a source of popular representation in the modern state, and serve as a bulwark against the dangers of despotism and bureaucratization.
Chronology of early Romanticism

Second, such a reassessment of the Middle Ages was not characteristic of the romantics but the culmination of a long trend in historiography, which began in the Aufklärung itself. The reevaluation of the Middle Ages began in earnest in Germany since the 1770s with works like Herder’s Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit (1774), Johannes Müller’s Geschichte schweizerischer Eidgenossenschaft (1780), Ludwig Spittler’s Grundriss der christlichen Kirche (1782) and Justus Möser’s Osnabrückische Geschichte (1768).

By the 1790s and early 1800s it was virtually a commonplace for German intellectuals to look back upon the Middle Ages as a refuge against all the absolutist tendencies of modern politics. This theme can be found in thinkers like Möser, Müller and Hegel, who had little sympathy with the romantics. We tend to forget that medievalism was not a romantic invention but a commonplace of the Aufklärung itself. Originally, it was not a cult of the Restauration, but a protest against absolutism and centralization.

Third, the communitarian ideals of the romantics were antithetical to those of the German conservatives of the 1790s, to thinkers like Justus Möser and the Hanoverian school. While these writers also defended traditional pluralistic society against the dangers of centralized government, they were much more sceptical of the ideals of the Revolution. Unlike the romantics, their hope was more to limit than to realize popular participation in government. They have indeed no sympathy for the romantics’ idealism, utopianism and belief in progress, which distinguishes them from the German conservatives of the 1790s.

If the romantics’ medievalism is not reactionary, it does seem antiquated, even quaint. But to focus upon the historical illustration of their beliefs is to miss the point. Ultimately, romantic medievalism was an expression of much deeper political ideals, ideals that are all too contemporary: the demand for community, the need for social belonging, the insufficiency of civil society and ‘market forces’. When current political thought gives voice to these themes, it returns to forms of experience and expression typical of the early romantic generation. Perhaps, then, we have more to learn from the romantics than we thought. In any case, the time for a reexamination of romantic political thought is long overdue.
Chronology of early Romanticism

1767  Birth of A. W. Schlegel
1768  Birth of Schleiermacher
1772  Birth of F. Schlegel and Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg)
1773  Birth of Tieck and Wackenroder
1774  Birth of Holderlin
1775  Birth of Schelling
1780  Publication of the Lessing’s *Education of the Human Race*
1781  Publication of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*
1784  Publication of the first two parts of Herder’s *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*
1786  Publication of Jacobi’s *Letters on Spinoza*, beginning the pantheism controversy
       Death of Friedrich II and Accession of Friedrich Wilhelm II
1788  Publication of Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*
1789  Storming of the Bastille (July)
1790  Publication of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*
1792  F. Schlegel meets Novalis in Leipzig and Schiller in Dresden; France declares war on Austria (20 April)
1793  Execution of Louis XVI (21 January)
       Schiller writes *Aesthetic Letters*
       Convention begins government by terror (September 5)
       Execution of Girondins (October 31)
Chronology of early Romanticism

Publication of Gentz’s translation of Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France.
Publication of Kant’s Essay on Theory and Practice, and the beginning of his dispute with Gentz, Rehberg and Möser in the Berlinische Monatsschrift

1794
Fichte gives lectures On the Vocation of the Scholar
Festival of the Supreme Being (8 June)
Fall of Robespierre (28–29 July)
Jacobin Club closed (12 November)
Publication of Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre

1795
Publication of Schiller’s Aesthetic Letters and On Naive and Sentimental Poetry
Publication of Fichte’s Foundations of Natural Right
Publication of Kant’s Perpetual Peace

1796
Publication of Schelling’s New Deduction of Natural Right
Publication of Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister (October)

1797
First meeting of the Berlin circle: F. Schlegel meets Schleiermacher and Tieck at the salons of Henriette Herz and Rahel Levin
Publication of Schlegel’s Essay on the Concept of Republicanism
Publication of Schelling’s Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature
Peace of Campo Formio (18 October)
Publication of Wackenroder’s Effusions of an Art-loving Monk

1798
Death of Wackenroder (February)
Publication of first issue of Atheneum (May)
Publication of Novalis’ Faith and Love and Pollen The Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Fichte meet in Dresden (summer)
Accession of Friedrich Wilhelm III as King of Prussia

1799
Publication of Schleiermacher’s On Religion (October)
Publication of Schlegel’s Lucinde
Schelling, the Schlegel brothers, Novalis and Tieck meet in Jena (September)

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### Chronology of early Romanticism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>Novalis reads the manuscript of <em>Christianity or Europe</em> to the Jena circle</td>
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<td>1800</td>
<td>Pope Pius VI dies in French captivity (August)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>F. Schlegel gives his lectures <em>On Transcendental Philosophy</em> at the University of Jena (winter semester)</td>
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<td>1800</td>
<td>Appearance of the last issue of the <em>Athenaeum</em> (August)</td>
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<td>1800</td>
<td>Publication of Schleiermacher’s <em>Monologues</em></td>
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<td>1800</td>
<td>Bonaparte overthrows the Directory (November 9–10)</td>
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<td>1801</td>
<td>Publication of Schelling’s <em>System of Transcendental Idealism</em></td>
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<td>1801</td>
<td>Death of Novalis (March 25)</td>
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<td>1802</td>
<td>Friedrich Schlegel moves to Berlin</td>
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<tr>
<td>1802</td>
<td>Friedrich Schlegel in Paris (July)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Publication of Schelling's <em>Philosophy of Art</em></td>
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