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Review of Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*.

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Frederick C. Beiser, The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003. 243 pp. (+ xiii) ISBN 06740011805.

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Die ganze Geschichte der modernen Poesie ist ein fortlaufender
Kommentar zu dem kurzen Text der Philosophie: Alle Kunst
soll Wissenschaft, und alle Wissenschaft soll Kunst werden;
Poesie und Philosophie sollen vereinigt sein. (Friedrich
Schlegel, *Kritische Fragmente*, 1797)

[The entire history of modern poetry is a running commentary
on the short text of philosophy: all art should become science and all
science should become art; poetry and philosophy should be made
unified.]

What would it mean to take seriously the task Friedrich Schlegel's fragment sets for the future of art and science? What would a unified poetry-philosophy be? What kind of practice would it entail? What kind of texts would it produce?

That we ought indeed to take this demand seriously is the argument of Frederick Beiser's *The Romantic Imperative*, a collection of ten essays about the late eighteenth-century intellectual movement known in German as *Frühromantik* and commonly associated with the early writings of Novalis, Friedrich Schelling, August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, and Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher, among others. Beiser argues that the ideas of these thinkers amount to nothing less than a political, ethical, and philosophical program for changing the world. Because Schlegel's call for an art that would become science and a science that would become art -- what in another fragment he calls the "romantic imperative" -- encapsulates, for Beiser, the romantics' program for change, it is worth dwelling a little longer on the above fragment before returning to his book.

If the first part of the fragment is any indication, in a unified poetry-philosophy, poetry would no longer serve merely as "commentary" on philosophy; rather, poetry would presumably be part of the "text" of philosophy, and philosophy would be part of the "commentary" of poetry. If poetry, in other words, is that which comments on philosophy, and philosophy is the text upon which poetry reflects, then a unification of poetry and philosophy would also mean a unification of commentary and text as integral parts of each other. In fact, it would render the distinction between a

text and its interpretation or commentary antiquated, a relic of a divided intellectual age before art became science and science art.

It is not modern poetry itself that comments on philosophy in Schlegel's fragment, but modern poetry's *history*. This poetic history, however, is not solely of the past, for it also constitutes the present as a "running commentary." Philosophy, in turn, is represented by a short text. This text of philosophy, however, is not about the present; rather, it makes a demand for the future. It is, we might say, an imperative.

What must actually be unified here, then, is a philosophical imperative with its poetic-historical commentary. The paradox involved in such an endeavor ought to be apparent. What Schlegel's fragment demands is nothing less than the unification of the history of poetry with the future of philosophy. It calls for a poetry-philosophy in which the imperative for the future is inseparable from the poetic-historical commentary upon it. It calls, in other words, for a philosophy that must ultimately be realized in the history of poetry and a poetic history that aspires to the demand of philosophy. To write poetic-historical commentary, then, would be to issue an imperative for the future, and to issue an imperative for the future would be to write poetic-historical commentary.

Before we settle on just any form of writing for this circular task, we would do well to consider the form in which Schlegel issues his challenge: the fragment. The audacity of Schlegel's demand -- its prophetic claim about the entire history of modern poetry, the content of philosophy, and the future of art and science -- is, after all, counteracted by the modesty of the concise, unassuming form in which it is written. This fragment is simply one among many others; its extravagant claims are not matched by any privileged position or emphasis. Its effectiveness, we might say, derives precisely from its modesty. Indeed, we might even go so far as to suggest that its demand is modesty itself. We should understand the unification of poetry and philosophy, in other words, as a modest goal, something we achieve not on a grand scale but in the minutest level of detail. The precondition for the true unification of two intellectual endeavors, the fragment implies, is modesty -- the ability to think the grandeur of the whole microcosmically.

In this respect, *The Romantic Imperative* is at once too modest and not modest enough. The book is Beiser's attempt to rectify what he perceives as the failure of recent scholarship to address the philosophy of early German Romanticism: "its epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and politics" (ix). Recent scholars, Beiser argues, have not heeded Schlegel's call for the unification of poetry and philosophy; they have focused on literature at the expense of philosophy and so have created the impression that philosophy was unimportant, even contradictory to the aims of the *Frühromantik*.

Beiser's essays, originally written at various points over the last decade, are thus intended to expose the reader to the neglected philosophical aspects of early German romanticism. Although the essays do not present a continuous argument, they do proceed with increasing complexity and detail from an overview of the general background and aims of the *Frühromantik* (Chapters One-Six) to a more specific consideration of its attempts to resolve the philosophical problems it inherited from Leibniz, Spinoza, Fichte, and Kant (Chapters Eight-Ten). In the middle stands the only chapter (Chapter Seven) that focuses specifically on a particular representative of the *Frühromantik*, in this case, Friedrich Schlegel.

Beiser labels the essays "introductory, an attempt to guide the anglophone reader through unfamiliar territory" (ix). But here he is overly modest; for his book is aimed as much at the expert as it is at the amateur. He wants not only to introduce the philosophy of early German romanticism to an unfamiliar audience but also to rethink its legacy in current scholarship, which, for him, means counteracting, if not invalidating, the understanding of German romanticism we have inherited from Paul de Man, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Manfred Frank, and Isaiah Berlin, among others. That Beiser lumps these scholars together under the rubric of "postmodern," a term he leaves undefined but that seems to stand for anything having to do with literary theory, is puzzling, to say the least. In attempting to recuperate a role for philosophy in what he characterizes as a predominantly literary understanding of *Frühromantik*, Beiser reinscribes the very division between philosophy and literature that the romantics, in his view, were trying to overcome. His attempt to reconstruct the philosophy of early German romanticism, in other words, is premised upon the bracketing of literary concerns from philosophical ones. When he characterizes the "literary approach" of de Man or Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy as "one-sided," he forecloses the possibility, envisioned by Schlegel above, that what is literary (or poetic) must also be philosophical.

If Beiser's characterization of his essays as introductory is too modest, then his claim to "reconstruct the individuality of *Frühromantik*" via a broad philosophical-historical overview is not modest enough. I do not mean here that it suffers from a lack of humility. Rather, I mean that its overarching argument does not pay enough attention to the minute, even modest details of the texts from which it draws its support. For the sake of a coherent philosophical argument it sacrifices attention to the individual texts of individual German romantic authors. An attention to the general over the specific is, one might argue, necessary for an introductory account that attempts to convey unfamiliar ideas to its readers. But in the case of the *Frühromantik* such a necessity is more problematic. What seems to me crucial about the *Frühromantik* -- what I have attempted to convey in my opening analysis of Schlegel's fragment -- is that its struggle to convey ideas is bound up with its struggle to find the appropriate form in which to convey

them. Those who turn to Beiser's account for an introduction to early German romanticism will be exposed neither to its struggles with language and form nor to the wonderful playfulness that such struggles bring to its approach to philosophy. Nor will they be in a position to appreciate the monumentality of the task Beiser attempts by isolating a coherent philosophical argument from this vast array of texts. By contrast, those who are already familiar with *Frühromantik* and who turn to Beiser's account for a deeper understanding of its philosophical underpinning will likely be put off by its lack of attention to specific texts. There are very few direct citations from German romantic writings anywhere in these essays, and those that are provided are often cited as an afterthought to support a general point rather than as the basis for further close reading.

In a sense, then, Beiser has written himself out of a potential audience, which is a shame, because he thereby undercuts the much-needed philosophical exploration of *Frühromantik* that he attempts. Although he overstates his case against the "literary approach," he rightly recognizes a need to focus on what J.M. Bernstein has called the "philosophical weightiness" of some of the works of the *Frühromantik*. According to Beiser, the young romantics' concern with politics and ethics is manifest not only in the importance they attributed to *Bildung* -- "the fundamental political problem facing the young romantics was therefore . . . to prepare the German people for the high ideals of a republic by giving them a moral, political, and aesthetic education" (49) -- but also, more provocatively perhaps, in their ideal of a regulative system of reason. Beiser acknowledges that the romantics found philosophical systems restrictive; nonetheless, he argues, they still "adamantly affirmed the *esprit systematique* because a complete system is a necessary, if unattainable, regulative ideal of reason" (34). His first six essays are devoted to these twin claims about the pragmatic and theoretical aspects of the *Frühromantik*.

Beiser argues that in order to appreciate the young romantics' interest in *Bildung* and reason, we must reassess its relationship to the Enlightenment. Far from signaling the end of the German Enlightenment, *Frühromantik* represents, in Beiser's view, the reworking and continuation of its goals, especially with respect to the "right of the individual to think for himself" and the importance of *Bildung*. What the *Frühromantik* brought to bear upon the Enlightenment, according to Beiser, was a Platonic emphasis on "*holistic* explanation" or, more specifically, a Platonic reading of Kant's view of the relationship between reason and truth. When viewed from this perspective, Beiser suggests, the young romantics' idea of aesthetic experience is not so much a kind of "suprarationalism" that claims an obscure awareness of the "mystery of being" as it is a form of *Naturphilosophie*, an attempt to provide a holistic explanation of nature through an understanding of reason's own reproductive capacity (65-6). We will never gain transparent access to the working of

reason -- reason can never absolutely know itself -- but its attempt to do so serves as a "regulative goal, which we can approach but never attain through infinite striving" (67).

Beiser, in other words, reads the aestheticism of the *Frühromantik* as "itself a form of rationalism." He concludes, therefore, that "the distinction between *Frühromantik* and *Aufklärung* [enlightenment] is at best between two forms of rationalism; but it cannot be between aestheticism and rationalism *per se*" (60). But in elaborating this distinction he does not go far enough; his argument is weakened by the professed modesty of his aims. For instance, in Chapter Three, "Early Romanticism and the *Aufklärung*," he concludes that "the problem of determining the young romantics' relationship to the *Aufklärung* depends on precisely ascertaining their attitude toward reason. But it is just here that the texts of the young romantics prove to be very elusive, vague, and at best, ambivalent" (55).

But it is precisely just here, at the point where the texts become ambivalent, that interpretation ought to begin. What Beiser needs, in other words, is a close reading and an in-depth account of how certain texts or certain thinkers deal with the issue of reason. This need for further textual attention does not mean that he ought to have adopted the literary approach he rejects; rather, it means he ought to have marshaled the insights that can be gained from a close reading to strengthen and support his philosophical conclusions.

At stake is the very basis of Beiser's endeavor. Because for the most part he only references rather than cites the texts under discussion (often, individual thinkers within the movement are not differentiated), the *Frühromantik*, in his account, is always on the verge of losing the very individuality he is attempting to give it. At some points, especially when Beiser discusses its desire for a regulative system, *Frühromantik* seems nothing more than reworked Kantianism. At the other end of the spectrum, when he emphasizes the ideals toward which that system aspires, *Frühromantik* verges on Hegelianism, a point Beiser himself anticipates. This slippage raises again the issue of literary form that Beiser sidelines; for, is not the experimentation with, and even insistence on, a diversity of literary forms precisely what distinguishes *Frühromantik* philosophy from its predecessors and successors?

When Beiser writes that the young romantics were "simply reformers, moderates in the classical tradition of Schiller, Herder . . . and a whole host of *Aufklärer*" and argues that "they gave such enormous importance to art mainly because they saw it as the chief instrument of *Bildung*, and hence as the key to social and political reform," he misses the crucial point (49). If the *Frühromantik* attention to art was as instrumental as Beiser believes, then there would be no reason to distinguish it at all. He misses the opportunity, especially in the chapter on Schlegel, to synthesize the "philosophical

weightiness" of his insights with the actual texts themselves -- to explain how these texts in their various forms constitute a philosophical practice distinct from the practices that preceded and followed it. Beiser's version of *Frühromantik* risks becoming crushed by the philosophical weight he wants it to bear.

Beiser's eighth and ninth essays -- "The Paradox of Romantic Metaphysics" (on the romantic attempt to unite the systems of Fichte and Spinoza) and "Kant and the *Naturphilosophen*" -- are perhaps the most important and certainly the most thorough and rigorous of the entire collection. Even they, however, only further rather than stem the slippage in the *Frühromantik*'s identity. In fact, it is telling that these essays are really more about Fichte, Spinoza, and Kant than they are about the early romantics. *Frühromantik*, in other words, serves here as a sophisticated commentary upon the Fichtean, Spinozan, and Kantian texts of philosophy, rather than as a philosophical text in its own right. Beiser himself admits as much in a footnote to his discussion of Kant's theory of teleological judgment:

Here one caveat is necessary. The romantics did not explicitly, self-consciously, and methodically reply point-for-point to Kant's arguments. It is therefore necessary for the historian to reconstruct their response, which means drawing out some of the implications of their general position. This requires considering what they would or could have said in response. My reconstruction is based on the texts cited in note 1 above and notes 17 and 19 below. (220-21, n. 16)

But only those with the requisite volumes from the complete works of Schelling, Schlegel, Novalis, and Hegel are likely to follow up. So that when Beiser asks us to take seriously the organic concept of nature that the romantics developed from their synthesis of Fichte and Spinoza and their study of Kant, we are unclear how much of the concept is from the early romantics and how much has been astutely put together by Beiser himself. Admittedly, he insists that his argument is not merely an historical reconstruction -- that it stems "more or less" from the early writings of Schelling and Hegel (167) -- but this does not explain how it relates, for instance, to Novalis and especially to Schlegel, to whom he devotes the previous chapter, and thus begs the question of whether *Naturphilosophie* is not, in fact, something other than *Frühromantik* and, if so, what exactly the relationship between the two might be.

Here again, Beiser does not go far enough. His discussion of *Naturphilosophie* ends with a fascinating dilemma that he ought to have explored further. The romantics, he argues, believed that "the artist's and philosopher's awareness of nature is nothing less than the *self*-awareness of nature through the artist and the philosopher" (148). They assume an organic concept of nature, in which the relationship between mind and nature,

between reason and the surrounding world, is not causal but "teleological in the sense that each term realizes its nature only through the other" (148). Whereas Kant held that such a teleological view of nature could only be regulative -- that is, only an idea of reason rather than a property of nature itself -- the romantic *Naturphilosophen*, according to Beiser, insisted that it was constitutive: only if we assume from the outset that nature has its own purpose can we begin to understand our interaction with it as something distinct from ourselves. In Beiser's view, in other words, the romantics were willing to go one step further than Kant in assuming that we can in fact attribute purposes to nature itself. This assumption, however, as Beiser explains, places the *Naturphilosophen* in an awkward position vis-à-vis the concept of freedom. For, if there is such a thing as natural purposes, purposes prior to our own existence, then our freedom to act on our own as moral agents is in jeopardy.

Having carefully set up this dilemma, however, Beiser lets it drop: "What the romantics have to say about freedom is another issue, which is far beyond the scope of this chapter to investigate . . . If I have shown that the organic concept is more than naïve speculation -- and if I have also shown that the Kantian critique is more than positivist dogmatism -- I will have achieved my purposes here" (170). Again Beiser is too modest in his aims. His book ought to have begun here, for the question of the early romantics' concept of freedom is merely the flip side of the question of their view of reason, the other significant issue Beiser ought to have addressed further.

The question of the extent to which the young romantics developed their own coherent theories of reason and freedom is, ultimately, a question of the status of early German romanticism itself -- whether we view *Frühromantik* as the commentary upon an existing set of philosophical texts or as constituting a philosophical text in its own right. Beiser's intent may be the latter, but he argues most convincingly for the former. *Pace* his own aims, his essays do not accomplish the rescue of a pre-existing collection of texts and thinkers, under the heading *Frühromantik*, from a literary approach that has misinterpreted them. Rather, they recreate *Frühromantik* as something else entirely: as one intellectual-historical movement that emerged, among others, in order to rethink the Enlightenment for the next generation. *Frühromantik*, as Beiser's essays present it, refers not so much to the particular texts of specific thinkers produced during a given period of time as it does to a particular current of intellectual response to the philosophical problems raised by the Enlightenment.

Beiser's book offers us, therefore, an historical reconstruction of *Frühromantik* as a running commentary on philosophy. In this respect, he would have done better to convert his separate essays into a continuous narrative. He provides a solid background for understanding the "romantic

imperative" Schlegel issues in the fragment I cited above. But he does not attempt to answer to that imperative. If we take that imperative and its philosophical implications seriously, as Beiser asks us to do, then we must also take seriously its call for a different kind of philosophical practice -- and for a different form of philosophical text.