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### Review of Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zeibert.

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**Manfred Frank, The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zeibert.**

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. 286 pp. ISBN 0791459470.

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*The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* is the third part of a series of lectures by Manfred Frank that were originally published as *Unendliche Annäherung: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik*. Frank, professor of philosophy at the University of Tübingen, has published extensively on the philosophical genesis of early German romanticism, known as the *Frühromantik*. This English translation by Elizabeth Millán-Zeibert comprises the final twelve of Frank's thirty-six lectures. In the "Introduction," Millán-Zeibert writes that the first part of the lectures treats the critique of Immanuel Kant's legacy by Johann Gottlieb Fichte and other philosophers whose Kant reception set the stage for the critical work of the *Frühromantiker*. The second part of the German version profiled a group of philosophers, largely unknown even in Germany, who provided a productive critique of Carl Leonhard Reinhold's solution to Kant's doctrine of the unknowability of things in themselves. Since this final installment of Frank's lectures assumes a prior and rather extensive knowledge of early German Romanticism, its appeal is likely to be limited to the specialist. Frank's aim here is twofold: to debunk the clichés that portray Romanticism as solely a literary movement and to ascertain that the *Frühromantik* is not another articulation of absolute idealism but rather its overcoming. Since the "Introduction" reads more like a hagiography of Frank than an introduction to the historical and philosophical coordinates of early German Romanticism, some context to the latter would provide a road map for reading this last set of Frank's lectures that are most closely related to recent critical research on the *Frühromantik*.

The coincidence of the rise of Romanticism with the rapid expansion of the European reading public and the efflorescence of German culture at the close of the eighteenth century calls for a historico-philosophical approach to a critical understanding of the Romantic movement. As Friedrich Schlegel famously remarked, the French revolution, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and Goethe's *Meister* constituted the three major trends of the age. In Schlegel's view, whoever rejected the logic of this juxtaposition or the idea of a revolution that was not loud and physical had not achieved a broad perspective on the history of humanity. As historical phenomenon, German Romanticism postdates the French Revolution. In 1789, ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity resounded beyond the borders of France and were warmly received by German intellectuals who yearned for a consolidation of

Germany's discontinuous and fragmented political landscape. However, the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars that brought all of Germany west of the Rhine under French rule by 1794 turned their enthusiasm for the revolution into an extended meditation on the cultural and moral crises coextensive with the political turmoil of the age. The ascendancy of early German Romanticism's critical paradigm needs to be understood as a rigorous response both to a perceived moral failure on a universal scale and to the crisis of absolute idealism which had established self-consciousness as the grounding principle of all philosophy. However, in the German context, Romanticism cannot be seen as a reaction to the Enlightenment. Rather, the intellectual thrust of the Romantic movement in Germany arose from the critical practice instituted by the Enlightenment itself.

Romanticism's critical anxiety was largely prompted by the radical eruptions in the political and intellectual landscape of the times. The chaos that threatened to erase the pillars of reason necessitated new paradigms of understanding. Kant's transcendental idealism was both daunting and liberating but offered no possibility for reflexive praxis. It was, in the first instance, purely epistemological and could not transcend the historical reality of political and moral deliquescence. Also known as formal or critical idealism, this position maintains that all theoretical knowledge is restricted to the world of experience via appearances and refutes claims to knowledge of anything beyond this realm. At the same time, although the form of experience is subjective (relative to the subject), it corresponds to a reality independent of this form. Therefore, the laws of nature are universally applicable, as they are located in the subject. The moral law is also *a priori* given to the subject and legislated by the faculty of reason.

While Kant rescued science from epistemological skepticism and secured the status of idealism, he did not account for an understanding of the "real" world, of an independent and totally unknowable thing-in-itself and, thus, thwarted the desire for a unity of knowledge. Johann Gottlieb Fichte set out to overcome the duality of Kantian philosophy by positing an absolute consciousness that would guarantee a systematic unity of conception from which a multiplicity of experience could be deduced. For Fichte, the major weakness of Kantian philosophy lay in its lack of self-representation. In other words, it failed to posit an absolute first principle from which self-consciousness could be deduced. This first principle in Fichte's transcendental system is the absolute *Ich* (I/self) that posits itself as an object of cognition. This act of positing is not directed at any object, as Fichte claims, but represents the self to itself by limiting the infinity of the self. Thus, reflection, which is a mode of cognition in Fichte, is rendered possible in the condition of a self-limiting self. This absolute *Ich* bridges the duality of theoretical and practical reason and becomes the ground where the subject is only one manifestation of the Absolute whose history subsumed all modes

of human cognitive and moral activity. Because of the inherent self-representation (and thus self-critique) of the *Ich*, forms of cognition and moral consciousness are informed by an infinite progression. Picking up the thread of Kantian-Fichtean idealisms, Schelling further erases all forms of discontinuity between the conscious mind and objective nature by setting up a dialectic wherein nature becomes the objectified self and the self reflected nature. His *Identitätsphilosophie* renders subject and object identical in the Absolute. As this Absolute manifests itself in human consciousness, the harmony of mind and nature gives rise to aesthetic contemplation. Ultimately, for Schelling the path of absolute idealism leads to art where human consciousness finds expression in sensuous form.

The major aspiration of Manfred Frank's lectures in *Philosophical Foundations* focuses on reinscribing the philosophical muscle of German idealism into early Romanticism, which had been underrated in most traditional scholarship as a kind of light opera, while making sure that it is not seen as part of absolute idealism. Most critical scholarship of recent years had made major strides along the lines of Frank's claims. Major studies in English alone, such as Alice Kuzniar's *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin* (1987), Géza von Molnár's *Romantic Vision, Ethical Context: Novalis and Artistic Autonomy* (1987), Rodolphe Gasché's critically astute "Foreword" to Friedrich Schlegel's *Philosophical Fragments* (1991), Kenneth Calhoun's *Fatherland: Novalis, Freud, and the Discipline of Romance* (1992), and, most importantly, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (1988) and Ernst Behler's *German Romantic Literary Theory* (1993) have convincingly and eloquently portrayed the *Frühromantiker* as "initiators of discursive practices" (Foucault) who not only introduced models that could be adopted by future texts but also created a space for the introduction of differences with respect to their writings, concepts, and hypotheses. Although some of the above studies are listed in the "Bibliography," Frank does not engage them in any way in his lectures. In fact, the most readable and relevant chapters of *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* are about Friedrich Schlegel's role in the genesis of Romantic aesthetics. Yet the chapters on Schlegel do not offer any new insights but rather synthesize the fruitful investigations of the aforementioned recent scholarship. So, wherein lies the real contribution of this book? Not so much in the novelty of its critical analyses as in the positivistic thrust that aims to reconstruct in minute detail the genesis of early Romantic thought through the recently published correspondence of Carl Leonard Reinhold's students, among them Novalis.

In the first lecture, Frank provides the background for the rediscovery of these sources during a major research project whose initiator Dieter Henrich called it "constellation research" (26). For Frank, the reconstruction of the discussions between Reinhold's students (virtually unknown to most readers,

German or otherwise) is of utmost importance, as it provides for a wide-ranging investigation of the thought of early Romantic thinkers and a verifiable study of influences. Frank maintains that a genuine understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of early German Romanticism needs to take into account the reactions of the Jena circle *Frühromantiker* (whose most illustrious figures were Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel) to the absolute idealism of Fichte and Reinhold.

The overarching critical argument of Frank's lectures states that whereas absolute idealism à la Fichte (and Reinhold) posits self-consciousness as the grounding principle of philosophy, the early Romantics establish the primacy of Being over self-consciousness or reflection. The transcendence of Being urges philosophy to take the path of infinite progression, and the search for the Unknowable unfolds in aesthetic experience. In Friedrich Schlegel's famous formulation in *Athäneum* fragment 116, this quest represents the very essence of romantic poesy (*romantische Poesie*), which is a progressive universal poesy (*progressive Universalpoesie*). Another claim that Frank forcefully articulates in the first lecture is that the Jena thinkers shared the same skepticism toward the possibility of a first principle of philosophy, as did the members of the Homburg Circle whose most prominent figure was Hölderlin. Whereas Henrich maintains that the Homburg Circle played a much more prominent role than did the Jena Circle in overcoming the philosophy of reflection, Frank sets out to demonstrate that the latter was just as forceful in its attempts to establish the priority of Being over consciousness. Along these lines, Frank also demonstrates that Novalis's *Fichte-Studien* were by no means a tribute to Fichtean idealism but rather a further break from the idea of some absolute principle that is epistemically an end in itself. Here Frank confirms Novalis's status as a major philosophical mind, as opposed to Henrich's claims that he was a minor philosopher, overshadowed by Hölderlin's towering talent.

Frank shows how Novalis ingeniously reveals the idea of an absolute foundation to be an invention (*Erfindung*). With the establishment of the search for foundations as a fiction, art is given the mandate to represent the absolute allegorically. Although this view is shared by many other contemporary Novalis scholars, Frank stresses the importance of "constellation research" in proving his hypothesis and assembles data from letters and smaller and hitherto ignored publications unearthed by Henrich's project. An extensive use of this newly available archival material also allows Frank to discuss the work of Schelling and Hölderlin in terms of both the relation of the two thinkers and their mutual intellectual indebtedness to Fichte. In the final analysis, Frank's deployment of the new archival documents and his meticulous reconstruction of the relations between the major figures of early Romanticism and their forgotten contemporaries lead to further clarification of the fundamental ideas, motives, and influences that shaped the intellectual legacy of early German Romanticism. Arguably,

Frank's best lectures are those that elaborate on how the early Romantics exploited the failure of philosophical reflection to epistemologically secure the absolute in order to credit art with the power to represent the unrepresentable; in other words, to intimate the Absolute that eluded all reason. Here the figure of Friedrich Schlegel looms large, and Frank devotes three lectures to a detailed analysis of Schlegel's aesthetic theories, most of which were fruits of an intense intellectual cooperation between him and Novalis.

The importance of the concept of form in early German Romanticism had been extensively and eloquently analyzed by Walter Benjamin in his doctoral dissertation, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik (The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism)*. Although numerous modern scholars of early German Romanticism have variously elaborated on Benjamin's views, Frank does put a few irresistible finishing touches on previous scholarship. The lectures on Schlegel illustrate how all articulations of Romantic idealism are registered at the level of form -- romantic irony, allegory, *Witz* -- which, in turn, is reflected at the level of idea. Among Schlegel's vast oeuvre -- his letters, essays, lectures, and fiction -- Frank locates choice fragments to show how Schlegel's theoretical imagination employed irony in a reciprocal play between the finite and the infinite and destruction and creation (217), where one thing cleaves to its opposite. For Schlegel, irony is dialectical and reveals "the authentic contradiction of our I" (218). In representing the fragmented and contradictory nature of life, the aesthetic tropes and forms, in effect, reveal the infinite in a negative dialectic. Schlegel argues that the symbolic import of poetry speaks where philosophy falls silent. Philosophy can explain the infinite but not represent it. Thus, the burden of representing the unrepresentable, a burden that "emerges from the imperfection of philosophy," (Schlegel) falls on art. And Frank leaves the last word to Schlegel, as he ends the lectures with Schlegel's comment, "Where philosophy ends, poetry must begin" (219)