

## The Book and the People

### *The Politics of Romantic Literature*

[Bogen og Folket. *Den Romantiske Litteraturs Politik*]

By Jakob Ladegaard.

Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013.

224 pp. DKK 249.95

'The French Revolution, Fichte's Theory of Knowledge, and Goethe's Wilhelm Meister are the three *greatest tendencies of the age*.' That phrase opens *Athenaeum* fragment 216, and it was not only Friedrich Schlegel and the circle around his *frühromantische* journal that associated the political revolution in France with German Romanticism and idealism. Even Fichte, as it were, regarded his own philosophical system as congenial to the revolutionary ideas, and many Romantic authors welcomed the French Revolution as a crucial turning point in history. But even if it is established that the Revolution was a decisive impulse for the Romantic movement, much remains unclear about the closer relationship between literary Romanticism and the French Revolution as well as the contemporary political thinking in general.

In *Bogen og Folket: Den Romantiske Litteraturs Politik*, Jakob Ladegaard, a literary historian at Aarhus University, contributes substantially to our understanding of the politics of Romantic literature. Ladegaard rejects the standard image of Romanticism as an entirely apolitical movement.

Although such a feature can be posited with regard to certain parts of the movement, namely those in which society and politics were rejected in favour of unworldly aesthetics of genius and private emotions, several Romantic literary works are more or less explicitly political.

The general political discussion during the Romantic period revolved largely around the classical ideologies, i.e. conservatism, liberalism, and socialism. All three were developed as answers to the political and social questions posed by the French Revolution. Among the Romantic authors, socialist ideas were unusual, and most of them associated the liberal ideology with utilitarian values and a materialistic world view. Partly for this reason, the Romantics have often been associated with the conservative ideology, with its belief that society must be developed carefully, slowly, and organically. The Romantics' enthusiasm for the French Revolution, however, does not fit well with Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and other conservative counter-attacks on the Revolution. Although many Romantic authors

gradually turned conservative, in Romanticism as such, and particularly in the *Frühromantik*, a more radical political strain was dominant, even if it is hard to identify and determine it with concepts from the classical ideologies.

In contemporary political theory it is a commonplace to distinguish between politics and the political. Theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, Pierre Rosanvallon, and Jacques Rancière handle the distinction in somewhat different ways, but they all regard the political as something more basic and fundamental than politics. If politics deals with conventional institutions, everyday practices and routine affairs, then the political is about the way in which society is constituted and raises questions about power and right, people and citizenship, equality and justice. These are the types of issues that interest the Romantic authors. To use Mouffe's Heideggerian terminology, their views on and ideas about society are relevant at the ontological level of the political rather than the ontic level of politics.

Ladegaard does not work systematically with such a distinction between the political and politics. Nonetheless, his major theoretical inspiration is Rancière, whose political and aesthetic theories turn out to be an excellent tool for approaching the questions of how Romantic authors deal with the relationship between the private and the public and between the intellectual elite and the people. Ladegaard investigates how these issues in addition to the concepts of people, freedom, equality, and democracy are addressed in Romantic literature.

In combining the political perspective with an aesthetic analysis, Ladegaard follows Rancière and his interpretation of how Kant with his three critiques, especially *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), laid the foundation for the so-called aesthetic regime of the arts. Until the late eighteenth century, two other regimes had been dominating in Western aesthetics, namely, on the one hand, the representative or mimetic-poetic regime founded by Aristotle, and, on the other, the ethical regime for which Plato was a precursor. When Kant established the aesthetic regime, he gave not only art and aesthetics a new kind of autonomy, he also formulated some fundamental paradoxes that many later authors and thinkers tried to sort out. In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Rancière writes, 'The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies species in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres. . . . The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of the art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity.' The Romantic literature explores these fundamental paradoxes of the aesthetic regime of the arts.

Ladegaard brings together the problem of the politics and the paradoxes of the aesthetic regime in an in-depth analysis of three central Romantic literary works: Friedrich Hölderlin's epistolary novel *Hyperion* (1797/1799), William Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude* (1805; first published posthumously 1850) and Victor Hugo's histori-

cal novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1832). Written in different languages and in different genres, these texts do not seem to have much in common except that they are usually regarded as the epitome of the Romantic. But Ladegaard shows that they are all concerned with the paradoxes of the aesthetic regime and that they in one way or another raise political questions about freedom, democracy, and the people. According to Ladegaard these literary works represent three main political tracks in Romanticism and together they offer a complex image of the breadth and the diversity of the politics of Romantic literature.

Although the study contains many elucidatory contextual sections, its greatest strength lies in the three close readings focusing on motive patterns, rhetorical figures, and intertextual relations. The arguments are particularly successful when Ladegaard elucidates the authors' – or rather their texts' – complex and ambivalent attitudes to different political issues. The most convincing case study is the one that deals with *Hyperion*. Following in Friedrich Schiller's footsteps, Hölderlin tries to find an alternative route to the disastrous development that saw Revolutionary France slide into the so-called Reign of Terror. In this alternative path the political struggle is subordinated to the individual's self-formation and aesthetic beauty. Whether this should be understood as a political solution, which Ladegaard argues, is, however, debatable. It seems that Ladegaard sometimes over-emphasizes the political radical elements in the Romantic literature.

There is a similar tendency of over-interpretation in the analysis of *The Prelude*. The usual understanding of the poem, in the 1850 version, is that Wordsworth is expressing a resigned, conservative position after the almost Jacobin revolutionary Romanticism of his youth. Ladegaard chooses instead to highlight what he considers the poem's republican ideals of liberty, but that interpretation seems rather dubious. Although the speaker in *The Prelude* exclaims 'Now I am free,' the true freedom turns out to be possible only amidst rural countryside far from urban life. If there is something that is idealised in *The Prelude*, it is the simple lifestyle of the people, not tropes of political action or deliberative communication between enlightened citizens that otherwise play such an important role in the republican tradition. Although some republican strains can certainly be discerned in Wordsworth's poem, they are hardly as prominent as the traditional conservative elements.

The political radicalism of Romanticism should not be exaggerated. It is, for instance, striking that none of the analysed literary works pay any tribute to democratic governance. Even Hugo, who politically was a liberal with some socialist sympathies, expresses a fear for the masses as well as for democracy. The people were not yet ready for the kind of political participation and responsibility that democracy involves, and this was a view also shared by Hölderlin and Wordsworth.

Nonetheless, it stands to reason that *Bogen og Folket* deepens our un-

derstanding of *Hyperion*, *The Prelude* and *Notre-Dame de Paris* while shedding new light on the problem of the political in the Romantic movement. Although not all Romantic literature deserves to be called political, there are indeed, as Ladegaard shows, some prominent works that portray the internal political tensions and conflicts in this Age of Revolution.

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