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[Philosophy-of-life-aspects of an early romantic:
 a reconstruction of Friedrich Schlegel's early romantic ethics]

By Andreas Hjort Møller
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Andreas Hjort Møller argues for the unity of Friedrich Schlegel's thought. Apparent differences between the author's early and later writings are identified as a change of expression rather than intention. Møller emphasises the permanent presence of what he calls an early-romantic ethics in Schlegel, which remains unaltered in Schlegel's later works. Ethics is here understood in the vague sense of a 'normative theory of how to live' (p. 18; all translations from Møller's book are due to the reviewer). Morality and life are connected in a sort of early romantic existentialism (p. 258). Møller finds the ethical meaning sufficiently determined to free Schlegel from the charge of having been an 'anarchist [Chaot], fragment-maker, hedonist or ironist' (p. 18). What Schlegel discarded was a priggish moralism which only allowed for the articulation of the virtuous side of human nature. In addition, Møller attacks an understanding of the young Schlegel as an adorer of the French Revolution and

of democracy, and as such opposed to the later Schlegel, often depicted as a Metternich-loyal reactionary thinker. Indeed, Møller presents the young Schlegel as a conscious and conscientious, moral, Protestant Christian, as a non-revolutionary author, who, without greater disruption, developed into a moral, Catholic Christian spiritualist, and a moderate conservative. Within this analysis, early romanticism is considered not as a *political*, but rather as a purely *spiritual* phenomenon (p. 112).

Møller refers extensively to modern critical debates about the uniformity of Schlegel's thought, with scholars like Ernst Behler arguing for continuity whilst others, like Hans Eichner and Arnim Erlinghagen, argue for discontinuity. But the interpretation which Møller wishes to challenge is the late nineteenth-century, ideologically-motivated interpretation of Schlegel's development formulated by authors like Rudolf Haym (1870) and Georg Brandes (1873). Møller

also confronts poststructuralist revisions of the same negative picture into a positive, ‘ironic nihilism’, as defended by Paul de Man and many others. Haym and Brandes continued an influential tradition of ridiculing Schlegel as an egotistical and immoral author and as an incompetent philosopher, a tradition going back to Hegel’s personal impressions of Schlegel in Jena 1801. They favoured the Schlegel of the *Athenäum* (1797–1800) and the scandalous *Lucinde* (1799) rather than the later Schlegel. In fact, *Lucinde* had a few contemporary defenders. One of them, Schlegel’s close friend Friedrich Schleiermacher, praised in the anonymous *Vertraute Briefe über Friedrich Schlegels Lucinde* (1800) the book’s unity of sensuality and spirituality and its artistic rigour and strength. Schleiermacher held *Liebe* [love] to be its *Mitte* [centre] and the appearance of love the developing motor in the life of the main character, Julius, both in his relation to other persons and as an artist (he is a painter). The book is held by Schleiermacher to be a *complete* exposition of love, unrivalled by any other novel. As a standard of *morality* for a work of art, Schleiermacher’s first person narrator, *Friedrich*, only accepted *artistic quality*. Møller, however, in his analysis, abstains from referring to Schleiermacher’s interpretation, which could have supplemented his own – apparently because he suspects some disturbing theological bias (p. 99, n. 2), although the reasons for this are not altogether clear to me.

Opposing *deconstructive* interpretations (i.e. de Man et al.), Møller points to the demands made by Schlegel and

other early romantics for veracity. Both the *subjectivist* interpretation of Schlegel’s work and the poststructuralist critique of it are answered by a conception that does not embrace *irony* as an isolated, negativistic peak in Schlegel’s poetics. Instead, Møller presents irony as a constructive means to come nearer to a truth that defies an adequate communication because it is infinite and unreachable, and thus demands paradoxical strategies, e.g. a hermeneutics of fragments. The *moralist* objection is met by an ethical reading of *Lucinde*. The larger task of harmonising Schlegel’s early and later authorship exhibits how important terms from the early romantic vocabulary in Schlegel’s use of language can have double meanings. Terms like purposelessness, liberty, wit, chaos, capriciousness, fantasy, and ludicrousness, for example, have negative penumbras, or anti-theses.

Møller approaches his subject with care. In four studies, he attempts to bridge the gap between a central, early text and a later text by Schlegel. To do so, he invokes a multitude of lesser-known early, later or very late texts, mainly with the aim of tracing the connotations of the *words* used by Schlegel. This scheme is the basis for some fine observations in support of the idea of the coherence of Schlegel’s thought.

Although Møller rejects poststructuralist and deconstructive readings of Schlegel, he seems to accept the notion that Schlegel was a sort of anti-philosopher, being against systems and *-isms*. For an attempt to ‘reconstruct’ Schlegel’s ethics, this might be an unfortunate assumption. The

task of reconstruction, mentioned in the book's subtitle, is never in fact fulfilled, at least not in the systematic sense usually indicated by the term 'reconstruction'. In the end it seems abandoned by Møller, although the interpretation of *Lucinde* does present the outlines of an ethics.

An objection to Møller's method could be that the permanent focus on what he calls 'intratextuality' (p. 36) confines the scope of his references too much to Schlegel himself. An in-depth investigation of the intellectual context, and most importantly Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace*, would have turned the discussion of Schlegel's ethics and politics in a less 'spiritual' direction. Furthermore, the difference between comparing the meaning of entire texts comparing similar elements of different texts seems to be vital. In the last two studies, the hunt for connotations seems to overrule a holistic focus on the selected texts.

The *first* study examines the essay *Vom ästhetischen Werth der Griechischen Komödie* [On the aesthetic value of the Greek comedy] (1794) and a minor newspaper article, *Über die neue Wiener Preßfreiheit* [On the new Viennese freedom of the press] (1809). Møller exposes the many (minor) moral and political reservations against Aristophanes' comedies already present in the comedy-essay of 1794 that can be read as general warnings against political misuse of poetic autonomy. This anticipates Schlegel's defence, in 1809, of censorship as a protection against rationalistic, Enlightenment authors and immoralists like Voltaire and Aloys J. Blumauer, both propagated in Austria by Napoleonic 'free-

dom of the press'. In the apology for Aristophanes, Schlegel uses a vitalistic terminology [*Leben, Lebenskraft*] that anticipates the 'Philosophy of life', developed in depth after 1810.

In the *second* study, the novel *Lucinde* (1799) is read alongside Schlegel's second Lecture on the '*Lebensphilosophie*' [Philosophy of life] (1827). The publication of *Lucinde* was seen as a provocation because of the very direct sexual dialogue and the alleged indecency. Conversely, according to Møller, *Lucinde* is a highly moral work. Schlegel underlines the existential and educational necessity for a young man to develop from chaotic, liberal experiences into the mature ethical order of matrimony. Real morality – in a work of art – is namely to be faithful towards the wide totality of human life and not to withdraw from what is against conventional decorum (p. 186). Another highly important issue for Møller (here, and throughout his book) is to argue against the die-hard view of Schlegel's conception of love as subjectivist and egotistical. Møller argues the opposite: in *love*, the '*thou*' and the '*we*' are primary to the '*I*'. His aim is to read *Lucinde* as a 'tractatum Christianum', not as a 'tractatum eroticum' (p. 99). Thus, he traces references to Madonna (Julius, the principal character, calls his beloved Lucinde 'Madonna') and allusions to Christian imagery in the novel back to Christian paintings known by Schlegel. In addition, some (early) hints about a religious interpretation and a Christian continuation of the book in Schlegel's manuscripts are investigated.

The *third* study concerns Schlegel's

praxis of re-editing his own texts. The original edition (1800) of *Gespräch über die Poesie* [Conversation on poetry] is compared with the second edition, of 1823. Schlegel's praxis of reediting is shown to contain some significant, recurrent elements. Expressions such as 'the highest holy' are revised as 'the life of the soul', the 'revolution' to the 'great intellectual rebirth', the 'certainty of the holiest mysteries' to 'certainty of this wonderful apparition'. The connotations of terms like 'republic' and 'mythology' are restricted by adding 'state and republic' or 'mythology and the symbolic world of ideas' (pp. 204ff.). Religious issues are abandoned. According to Møller, Schlegel seems loyal to his earlier intentions. Møller does not attempt an overall interpretation of the *Conversation*, with its conception of a general history of canonical literature, of mythology as the stuff of ancient and new literature, of the modern romantic novel, and of Goethe's work as exemplary for future 'romantic' literature. However, he finds that Schlegel at the end of the revision of the *Conversation* presents a new understanding of poetics based on Christian Trinity, without making any sense – 'grundsätzlich sinnlos' – for literature (p. 233).

Møller's *fourth* study concerns the political conceptions of the younger and the older Schlegel. Central to this discussion is *Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus* [Essay on the concept of republicanism] (1796), specifically the young Schlegel's discussion of some elements of Kant's treatise *Toward Perpetual Peace* from 1795. In the essay from 1796, Schlegel points

to the various different incarnations of republicanism, and to moral and political formation ('politische Bildung'), an aspect neglected by Kant although immensely important, in Schlegel's view, for the development of mankind, as a condition for development of full republicanism. Again, Møller does not aim at an interpretation of the Essay as a whole. Instead, some of its salient features are brought into constellation with the third part of *Signatur des Zeitalters* [Signature of the age] (1823).

Møller quotes the passage in the essay of 1796 where Schlegel asserts that Kant's book 'contains an abundant wealth of fertile ideas and new views on politics, morality, and the history of mankind' (p. 235). Astonishingly, Møller understands Schlegel's assessment of Kant's text as an indication of non-political aims in his own. With reference to Nikolas Immer (p. 239), Schlegel's central modification of Kant's understanding of republicanism, *viz.* that republics in real life have to be ruled by a majority attempting to be in accordance with general will, is turned into a sort of utopianism, making Møller doubt 'whether Schlegel's republicanism is ever to be understood as "republican" in the strict sense' (p. 241), and to conclude that 'Schlegel's Republic is not Jacobin or democratic' (p. 245).

Møller considers Schlegel's very thoroughly-argued essay of 1796 immature and full of inept phrases (p. 238), seemingly because Schlegel uses the language developed by political philosophers such as Kant and Fichte. In my view, Schlegel's Essay also draws heavily on Rousseau's *Du*

Contrat Social. What is Schlegel's essay then about, in Møller's view? Møller reads the principles of the essay as analogous to an aesthetic theory of progression, similar to 'the hermeneutical theory of fragment' (p. 239). Møller concludes that Schlegel's essay subordinates politics to morality, which might be a misreading of the essay. Further, Møller claims that words like 'constitution', 'republican', or 'despotism' in Schlegel might have other meanings than the political: 'The political sense of such terms as "republic" and "revolution" can hardly be distinguished from the aesthetical' (p. 244). Hence, according to Møller, Schlegel was never a revolutionary in any political sense. Here, however, Møller ought to have considered Schlegel's use of the language of Rousseau's and Kant's political philosophy. Be that as it may, to conclude with Møller (who draws here on Peter D. Krause) that Schlegel's essay of 1796 is not democratic-minded at all, but that it contains, conversely, undemocratic aspects, is to strain the evidence. In fact, against Kant, Schlegel argued in 1796 that 'Republicanism is necessarily democratic': The *general will* as an *a priori* normative principle cannot be an empirical phenomenon. Being *the* warranty for republican freedom and equality, it needs the *fiction* of an empirical will that acts according to general will in order to perform the political imperative. Therefore, the *will of the majority* has to be considered as a surrogate for the general will.

Møller presents Kant and Schlegel's essay of 1796 as standing in the service of *peace* in a rather unспе-

cific way. The version of 1823 firmly demands the peace and the inner stability of a Christian state with multiple centres. Admittedly, the *Signatur des Zeitalters* has some *elements* reminiscent of the young Schlegel, as suggested by Møller (pp. 248–56). Nevertheless, it seems difficult to vindicate the essay of 1796 on republicanism for Schlegel's – in comparison with the 'Ultras' (de Maistre & co.) allegedly more moderate – Christian monarchism. The legitimacy of this Christian community does not depend on the normative *a priori* general will or on the empirical will of the many, i.e. the majority, but on its Christian spirit and foundation.

Møller's main thesis in the book is the continuity of Schlegel's thinking. In many respects the book succeeds in corroborating this. Møller argues for Schlegel's early awareness of the interaction between the freedom of literature and its political environment. He gives good reasons for reading *Lucinde* as a novel based on ethical intentions pointing to a broad conception of what matters in human life, although the insistence that it is a Christian book is less convincing. He shows the emphasis laid in *Lucinde* on an interpersonal point of view. In this context, Møller offers good counter-arguments to an interpretation of Schlegel as a subjectivist, although a more general discussion of the issue of subjectivism might turn out to be a challenge to his view. Møller argues plausibly against the view of Schlegel as an admirer of the French Revolution. He shows that Schlegel in many of his early-romantic fragments where he mentions 'revolution' is pleading

for an aesthetic and not a political revolution. However, it does not seem convincing that Schlegel in his essay of 1796 should not be a republican or a democrat at all, or that a political understanding of his authorship can be discarded. With his first study, Møller himself has elucidated the relations between aesthetics and politics in the very early Schlegel. The fourth study confirms that Schlegel remained highly political in his orientation, even in 1823, although he was now discussing from (what I consider to be) quite another political point of view. Why then interpret the authorship as unilateral 'spiritual', translating political conceptions into aesthetical stances?

Schlegel wrote recurrently about the *Zeitalter* [the age] in which he lived. In *Athenäum Fr.* 426, he called it 'chemical' (1798); in his *Reise nach*

Frankreich (1803), he called it an age of 'separation' (Trennung). His early reflections meditate the potential of the lost past for a better future and for an art that can be a remedy against the rationalism that ruins imagination. Perhaps Schlegel gradually and without great disruption, as Møller argues in his four studies, gave up central elements of this historico-philosophical structure and asked for a more fundamental 'Philosophy of life', for a political order that was not based on the achievements of humans, and for an aesthetical theory based on Trinity. Møller has not inquired into what *made* Schlegel develop his thought on these issues. Hopefully, he will do so in a future study.

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