

## Book Review | *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*

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***The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*. Manfred Frank. Translated by Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. x + 286 pages + glossary, bibliography and index. \$55 (cloth), ISBN: 0-7914-5947-0**

Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert does English speaking students of early German Romanticism and German Idealism a great service by translating these lectures by Manfred Frank, one of the field's most prominent scholars. The translation is based on a manuscript, restructured in minor ways, of the third part of Frank's *Unendliche Annäherung: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997). Frank is a student of Dieter Henrich's, and in these lectures he supplements, refines and in some places corrects his mentor's "constellation research," which attempts to reconstruct, in fine detail, the philosophical conversations occurring in what is now Germany in the productive years between the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), and, even more narrowly, in Jena in the early 1790s, when Reinhold and then Fichte made Jena the epicenter of German Idealism.

In the first two parts of *Unendliche Annäherung*, Frank explains the early critical reception of Kant's transcendental philosophy by Jacobi, Aenesidemus, Maimon, and Fichte; Reinhold's foundationalist *Elementarphilosophie* as a response to these criticisms; and the critical response to this foundationalism by Reinhold's contemporaries and students. In the third part, translated in *Philosophical Foundations*, Frank explains how the early German Romantics, especially Hölderlin and Novalis, were influenced by this critique of Reinhold, and how they used it, around 1795, to formulate a realist and anti-foundationalist alternative to the idealism being developed at the same time by Fichte and Schelling.

In addition to Frank's chief aim of establishing the early German Romantics' independence from and critical stance towards the idealism of Fichte and Schelling, there are several subordinate aims. Among them, Frank's primary subordinate aim is to correct Henrich's underestimation of Novalis' significance. Whereas Hölderlin is the hero of Henrich's narrative, Frank gathers plausible circumstantial evidence to show that Novalis is a figure of equal stature, who likely arrived at his principal arguments independently of and perhaps even earlier than Hölderlin.

Each of Frank's lectures repeats with only minor variations the basic Romantic argument, which is put forward first in a nascent form by Jacobi, and then in its mature form by Hölderlin, Schelling, Isaac von Sinclair, Novalis, and Friedrich Schlegel. (Lecture Eight on Jakob Zwilling is the curious exception, in which Zwilling ultimately takes an Idealist rather than a Romantic position.) According to the Romantic argument, the "Absolute" or "original Being" must be a single, seamless Parmenidean unity or Spinozistic substance. As such, however, Being must escape all knowledge or conscious reflection, since (at least finite human) consciousness inherently divides Being into subject and predicate before recombining these relata in a judgment. "Judgment" (according to a popular but false etymology) is an original dividing (*Urteilen*). Being, however, is not this divided thing, but rather the ground of the identity of subject and predicate, which is prior to and escapes all judgment. Kant argues that all analysis presupposes synthesis. But the Romantics argue that all synthesis is justified only by appeal to a prior, seamless identity or "indifference" (in Schelling's words) of the relata. Since this prior unity cannot be given as such to consciousness, yet is the foundation of all objective consciousness, the unity of Being must manifest itself as "feeling," "longing," "belief," "faith," "intuition," or, in the Kantian terms preferred by Frank, as a postulate or regulative idea.

This argument results in realism and anti-foundationalism in opposition to Reinhold and Fichte's idealism and foundationalism. Being is not the product of (unconscious) self-reflection of the I, but rather precedes and makes possible any self-reflection. Likewise, because Being escapes all reflection, it cannot serve as a foundational first principle from which a system of principles could be derived with geometrical rigor. It has no content from which anything follows and thus, true to Kant's strictures, cannot serve as a foundation for metaphysical speculation. Although as the ground of the possibility of reflection it is empty, Being is at the same time the postulated object of our striving, the infinitely distant perfection of our knowledge.

Frank is right to identify this basic argument as part of the philosophical foundation of early German Romanticism, but it cannot be the complete foundation. As another reviewer has pointed out (Gottlieb, *The Owl of Minerva* 38:1-2, 194-203), there were other realist and anti-foundationalist critics of Reinhold and Fichte, most notably Novalis' tutor, Carl Christian Erhard Schmid, as well as Johann Benjamin Erhard, but we do not consider either of them Romantics. Even Fichte, who serves as Frank's arch-

idealist whipping boy, can be read (if not already in 1794, then at least in the course of the 1790s) as conceding many of the Romantics' objections, but no one thinks that he thereby became more Romantic. Frank himself admits throughout his lectures (pp. 45, 97, 120, 182) that Fichte eventually understands his first principle as a postulate or regulative idea, rather than as a constitutive principle of knowledge. This leaves only Fichte's idealism in conflict with the Romantics' realism. This is an important difference, but it is much too broad to be a plausible dividing line between German Idealism and early German Romanticism.

Of course, what Frank's thesis about the philosophical foundation of early German Romanticism leaves out is the importance of art and aesthetics, and the view that philosophy must become and be completed in poetry. Frank mentions this occasionally, and finally addresses it at some length in the final lectures on Friedrich Schlegel, but it is not allowed to be part of the philosophical foundation. This narrow circumscription of the foundation of Romanticism cannot but strike one as arbitrary. In his Preface to *Unendliche Annäherung*, Frank explains that his account is intentionally one-sided, because he is combating a mainstream view that has conflated early German Romanticism with German Idealism. He then stipulates that the foundation of Romanticism consists in its realism and anti-foundationalism, and uses this to justify restricting his focus to the period (1795-7) and the writings (unpublished notes, drafts and correspondence) in which this foundation is developed. As a result, not only is the Romantics' theory of art and aesthetics neglected, but so is Schlegel and Novalis' early interest in Platonism, as well as the published works between 1798 and 1800, a period which is usually considered the full flowering of early German Romanticism.

Let me turn now from Frank's argument to the translator's. In her introduction, Millán-Zaibert argues that Frank's lectures both show that the early German Romantics had explicitly philosophical concerns (and were not merely poets or literary figures), and rebut the widespread view that Romanticism is a reactionary, anti-Enlightenment movement that glorifies feeling at the expense of reason and culminates in pernicious nationalistic mythology. However, these arguments aim alternately too low and too high. The first aims too low, because (thanks to the work of scholars like Henrich, Frank, and Frederick Beiser) there is no longer any doubt that the early German Romantics had philosophical *concerns*. Today we must ask a more difficult question: What is the *value* of the Romantic legacy? There is no question about where Frank stands on the issue. To him the Romantic critique of idealism is "ingenious." Yet one must say that the soundness of the Romantics' arguments is not really probed in these lectures.

Millán-Zaibert's second argument aims too high, because Frank's focus is too narrow to rebut the charges of reactionary nationalism. Hostility to reason and nationalistic mythology are *compatible with* the transcendence of Being that Frank takes to be foundational for early German Romanticism. In fact, Frank's account may support

those charges. The Romantic argument, as Frank presents it, claims that feeling, belief, faith, or aesthetic experience acquaints us (if only in a negative way) with original Being, which is inaccessible to rational reflection. When Novalis says, “I am *not* insofar as I posit myself but insofar as I suspend myself,” Frank concludes: “Thus, a negation of reflection opens the path to Being—the dream of the sovereign self-origination of the subject is ended” (173). Someone with a broader view might see a connection between this “negation of reflection” and works that seem more explicitly anti-Enlightenment such as Novalis’ “Christendom or Europe?” (written in 1799, but published posthumously), which criticizes the unpoetic and irreligious spirit of the Enlightenment and looks forward to the impending rebirth of a universal religious faith, and “Hymns to the Night” (published in 1800), which contrasts the superficial light of day (and of reason) with the dark mysteries of intoxication, love, and death. These are precisely the themes that gave middle- and high-Romanticism its bad reputation, but they are present already in the early period.

If one wanted to rehabilitate the reputation of the Romantics, one would do better to emphasize the Romantics’ debt to the Enlightenment and to the Greeks, as Frederick Beiser does in *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), rather than emphasize their debt to Jacobi, as Frank does. In Frank’s account, the theses of the transcendence of Being, the limitations of rational reflection, and the necessity of feeling or faith, derive ultimately from Jacobi (and his selective reading of the pre-Critical Kant). But Jacobi is arguably *the* reactionary, anti-Enlightenment figure of this period. Friends of the early German Romantics ought to be *distancing* them from Jacobi, rather than bringing them closer together.

I did not check Millán-Zaibert’s translation word for word against the original German. But where passages seemed confused, the cause could be traced to mistranslation. There are three such passages. I give the corresponding pages in Frank’s *Unendliche Annäherung* in square brackets.

For Hölderlin and Sinclair one would have **to deny** the first part of the alternative, for how should an infinite striving of reflection for a reappropriation of the lost One (*verlorenen Einen*) be made comprehensible if reflection could completely dissolve Being within it [...]? (146 [776], my bold)

The German says (and the context requires) that one would have *to incline or lean (neigen)* towards the first alternative rather than deny it.

In the autumn of 1796 [Schlegel] notes laconically: “Knowing (*Erkennen*) already indicates some conditioned knowledge (*bedingtes Wissen*). The unknowability of the Absolute is therefore an identical triviality” (KA XVIII: 511, Nr. 64; cf. 512, Nr. 71: [“The Absolute is itself undemonstrable.”]). In

these claims, whose obvious reference to Jacobi is in no need of any further commentary, absolute idealism is radically **refuted**. (180 [866], my bold)

“Refuted” means that proof has been given sufficient to demonstrate the falsity of the view. But it is laughable to suggest that Schlegel’s two sentences might have refuted absolute idealism. Rather, the German says that absolute idealism is hereby “*widersprochen*,” which is not “refuted” but “contradicted.” A view can be contradicted without any proof at all.

The idea of the Absolute, which remains inadequate to all single positions, moves these into an ironic light. (214 [944])

In this last passage, the German says (and the context requires) not that *the Absolute* is inadequate to the single positions, but rather that *the single positions* are inadequate to the Absolute: “*Die Idee des Absoluten, dem alle Einzelpositionen unangemessen bleiben, rückt diese in ein ironisches Licht.*”

Despite these minor errors, Millán-Zaibert’s translation is a valuable addition to English language scholarship on early German Romanticism and is essential reading for anyone interested in Romanticism for its own sake or as an integral part of the development of German Idealism in the 1790s. Indeed, an alternative title might well be, “The Genesis of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*” (though Frank would shudder at the thought), for these lectures help explain the pressures under which Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* was modified even as it was created in 1794-95 and then revised throughout the decade. As I have mentioned, Frank’s portrait of the early German Romantics is somewhat idiosyncratic and one-sided, and it cannot do all the work that advocates of early German Romanticism would have it do. It is nonetheless a very helpful guide to a very important period by one of its foremost scholars.