

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829)

Profile of Friedrich Schlegel. Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) was a German poet, literary critic, and philosopher who was one of the principal creators of the concept of the Romantic, and inspirational in developing the new aesthetics of the Romantic Movement, especially as it was being formulated in the cultural seedbed of Jena. (Among the writers most directly influenced by him were Coleridge and Adam Mickiewicz.) He made his debut as a critic and essayist, but devoted the most concentrated part of his work life to his specialty, Indo European linguistics and comparative literature. He should be distinguished from his equally distinguished brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel, with whom Friedrich collaborated on the Athenaeum journal in Jena, and who also contributed to the initial impulses of Romanticism.

The Life of Friedrich Schlegel. Friedrich Schlegel was born in Hanover, son of the Lutheran pastor of the Hanover Marktkirche. Still a young man he went for the study of law at the universities of both Goettingen and Leipzig, but soon tired of that study, and turned toward an exclusive concern with literary matters, especially in the context of the Athenaeum journal, on which he worked at the turn of the century with Tieck, Fichte, and Novalis. In his work for that journal, especially in the Athenaeumsfragmente and in his novel *Lucinde*, he worked through the basic principle of the idea of Romanticism, in forms which—say in his definition of the Romantic, or of the fragment or the ironic—would be major legacies for early 19th century thinkers, across Europe, as they attempted to characterize the new cultural/literary world they found themselves in. The years subsequent to *The Athenaeum* work, the last twenty years of his life, were devoted to a vast array of literary studies, the most fruitful of which were in Indo European culture and linguistics.

The works. As a youth Schlegel was thought a wild card revolutionary and atheist, but in 1818, when he converted to Roman Catholicism, he moved into a late phase, as a representative of the arch conservative Metternich, in which his political and social views were unrecognizably different from those of his youth, and in which, for example, he found no more disgusting example of political structure than Anglo-American parliamentarianism, with its openness to the voice of the people. What transpired between these two intellectual postures of Friedrich Schlegel? Perhaps the key lies in the notion of the Romantic, which as Schlegel first forged it served as a conceptual bridge toward fresh new perceptions of what a literary text (especially Poetry) is, while later in his thinking life Schlegel found that this Romantic notion, which for him fundamentally connoted moods and tones of the Middle Ages (the Romantic embedded in the roots of the inheritance from Rome), became the enveloping mantle for an archaizing thinker whose fascinations were all in the past.

Schlegel as Scholar. With Friedrich Schlegel we truly find the blend of serious and seminal scholar with lyric poet with literary critical intelligence capable of intuiting the richest formulations of the entire birthing Romantic movement. The masterpiece of his rich scholarly poetic achievement is *On the Language and Wisdom of India* (1818). In that work he draws on his own intensive study of Indo European linguistics, which began in 1803, and his acceptance of the position, then coming into first prominence, that there were remarkable similarities among Sanskrit, Latin, Greek and Persian. From this observation, which was claiming scholarly attention, Schlegel developed his own version of an Aryanist theory, that the 'noble people,' the Aryans, made their ways west from India, where they deposited their distinctive and exceptionally valuable culture.

Reading

Primary source reading

Forster, M.N., *German Philosophy of Language from Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond*, 2011.

Secondary source reading

Beiser, F., *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism 1781-1801*, 2002.

Further reading

Chaouli, M. *The Laboratory of Poetry; Chemistry and Poetics in the work of Friedrich Schlegel*, 2002.

Original language reading

Zovko, Jure, *Verstehen und Nichtverstehen bei Friedrich Schlegel. Zur Entstehung und Bedeutung seiner hermeneutischen Kritik*, 1990.

Suggested paper topics

What is the relation of Friedrich Schlegel the scholar to Schlegel the ideologist of the Romantic poetic? Does the Schlegel for whom Aryan poetics are defining for western culture, support his notions of irony, the fragmentary, and visionary on his discoveries as a scholar?

What are the principal ways that Friedrich Schlegel begins to distance himself—say in the *Athenaumsfragmente*—from the thinking of the Weimar classicists like Goethe and Schiller? What role does the notion of the fragment play in that distancing? How about the notion of irony? Why are these such influential wedge concepts into the new Romantic world?

Excerpt http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Karl_Wilhelm_Friedrich_Schlegel

The romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry.

Irony is a form of paradox. Paradox is what is good and great at the same time.

Wit is the appearance, the external flash of imagination. Thus its divinity, and the witty character of mysticism.

Honour is the mysticism of legality.

It is equally fatal for the spirit to have a system and to have none. One must thus decide to join the two.

It is equally fatal for the spirit to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two.