

Criticizing by Creating: Friedrich Schlegel's Early Romantic Idea of "Criticism"

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Abstract:

Friedrich Schlegel is the main representative of early German Romanticism. His romantic poetics are not only important for the development of German poetry, but also for the change from Classic to Modern in European intellectual life. And at the center of his theory is the term "criticism" (Kritik). There is already a lot of research on this term, including Walter Benjamin's doctoral thesis *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*. Most of them put this term in the Cartesian and Kantian tradition and see it as an artistic expression of philosophical "reflection". This is indeed one of the most important perspectives to view this term, but in Schlegel's case this is only the first step. In addition, most of these studies are limited to works from his romantic period only, and his earlier works on classical studies are usually not included, which makes the analysis of this term incomplete. Accordingly, this essay attempts to advance the discussion of Schlegel's romantic "Criticism" in two directions. First, apart from the traditional reflective dimension, this term will further be explored in a skeptical, phenomenological and existential dimension respectively. Second, his classical studies, especially the studies of Greek poetry, will also be included in the discussion because they have also played an important role in the shaping of this term. Through these efforts, this essay intends to prove that literary criticism is actually another name for poetic creation in Schlegel's romantic poetics, and more importantly, it also reflects the transformation from Classic to Modern in European intellectual life.

Keywords: Criticism, Creation, Romanticism, Idealism, Existentialism

The poetic theory of Friedrich Schlegel, the main representative of early German Romanticism, is significant not only for German poetry or art criticism in general, but also marks the transition from the Classic to the Modern in European intellectual life. At the center of his argument is the term “critique” (Kritik), which has already been discussed by many other researchers. Schlegel views criticism as a fundamental element of poetic creation rather than just a review of artistic works because, in his words, “poetry can only be criticized by poetry” (Schlegel, 1967), which makes his conception of “critique” truly unique. This article represents a new attempt to analyze Schlegel’s romantic idea of criticism with a comparative approach, not only examining his concept of “critique” from literary texts and contexts, but also returning it to its philosophical basis. This new interpretation of Schlegel’s criticism illuminates not only the aesthetics of early German Romanticism, but also the intellectual history of modern Europe.

1. Reflection as the Fundament of Schlegel’s Romantic Poetics

We must first look at the philosophical underpinnings of Schlegel’s poetics to comprehend his romantic understanding of criticism. Among all the philosophers of his time, he particularly admires Fichte, and his entire poetic system is based on Fichte’s “Science of Knowledge” (“Wissenschaftslehre”).

Fichte’s “Science of Knowledge” is a modification and further development of the Critical Philosophy of Kant: While Kant maintains that “things-in-themselves” (“Ding an sich”) are incomprehensible to human beings, Fichte disagrees with Kant’s agnosticism and attempts to bring the “things-in-themselves” within the realm of human comprehension by moving the first principle of philosophy entirely inside. The absolute “I” now plays the only important role in Fichte’s philosophy, which is also why his theory has been referred to as “the philosophy of Ego” (“Ich-Philosophie”). This

means that for Fichte, Kantian ideas of God or the World no longer serve as the pivot of philosophy.¹

The philosophical roots of both Kant and Fichte can be found in Descartes, whose famous dictum “cogito, ergo sum” turns out to be the cornerstone of modern European metaphysics. In Descartes’ philosophy, people are seen as the objects of thought, and as such, they provide the only unquestionable basis for philosophical inquiry and all knowledge. This foundation stems from the human being reflecting, which means perceiving himself thinking. Given that, in Fichte’s opinion, this is the only reality left and cannot be further abstracted from the empirical; he concurs with Descartes’ philosophy at this precise point.

However, Fichte has developed an original interpretation of this Cartesian principle in his “Science of Knowledge”. The formula $I=I$ (Ego=Ego) serves as Fichte’s first philosophical tenet, which is unconditionally and absolutely valid in Fichte’s eyes. First, it is unquestionably valid in FORM because the components on either side of the equal sign are, in fact, the same (I/Ego). Second, it is valid in CONTENT because the Ego is posited “absolutely, with the predicate of self-equality”, that is, it is posited without any conditions. It is an act of Ego setting himself without any further empirical conditions, and therefore this equation also means: *I am* (Fichte, 1889).

We can all see that this is just another way of saying what Descartes said: “Cogito, ergo sum”, because, by making this equation the first tenet of his philosophy, Fichte is attempting to say that “the ground of explanation of all facts of empirical consciousness is this: before all positing, the Ego must be posited through itself”. To explain it in Fichte’s own words:

¹ It’s important to remember that, despite Fichte’s philosophy initially appearing to be solipsism, which rejects any claims of ultimate knowledge, it is de facto the exact opposite of solipsism. The fundamental tenet of Fichte’s “science of knowledge” is that humans are capable of knowing all concepts.

The positing of the Ego through itself is, therefore, the pure activity of the Ego. The Ego *posits itself*; and the Ego is by virtue of this its mere selfpositing. Again, *vice versa*: the Ego *is* and *posits* its being, by virtue of its mere being. It is both the acting and the product of the act; the active and the result of the activity; deed and act in one; and hence the *I am* is expressive of a deed-act; and of the *only possible* deed-act, as our science of knowledge must show (Fichte, 1889).

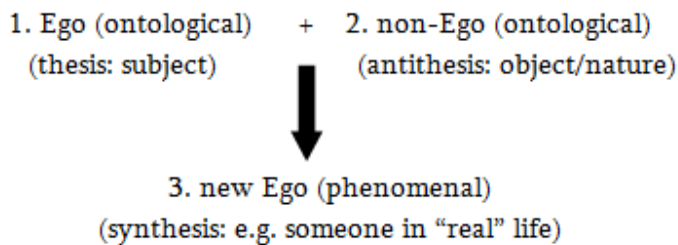
The first tenet forms the basis of Fichte's idealism, but this equation only represents the beginning of his theory. While the first step is a "positing", the second one is an "oppositing": non-Ego \neq Ego, which means, "a non-Ego is absolutely opposed to the Ego" (Fichte, 1889). Since the second principle, like the first, is an act of the absolute Ego and has no higher ground above it, it is also unconditionally possible. As to why the Ego should set a non-Ego as its opposite, Fichte answers: the Ego is an absolutely free acting, which would not be limited to itself; by setting a non-Ego, the Ego is able to unfold itself in all the experiences of itself and of others, thus making itself complete.

The confrontation between Ego and non-Ego also can be seen as a variation of Kant's dialectics, to be exact his antinomies in the *Critique of Pure Reason (Kritik der reinen Vernunft)*. In this work, Kant lists four antinomies to demonstrate the false application of human reason. Every antinomy contains both a thesis that can be supported from a platonic viewpoint, which sees ideas as the only source of reality, and an antithesis that can only be supported from an Epicurean viewpoint, which only considers the physical, empirical aspects of reality. Kant argues that in order to resolve these antinomies, human reason must be constrained. By limiting all platonic concepts to the ontological domain and attaching the law of causality only to the phenomenal world, the problem is resolved.

Fichte draws on Kant's idea and takes it a step further: Based on the antinomy, he proposes a synthesis of both to unite the ontological and the phenomenal realms. He introduces a new "Ego"

into his system, but it is not the original absolute Ego, but an empirical Ego in the realm of phenomena, such as an individual in the so-called “real” life. The original absolute Ego, or the thesis, and the equally absolute non-Ego, or the antithesis, combine in this new empirical Ego by giving up part of themselves and thus limiting each other. The third equation is therefore stated by Fichte as follows: “*The Ego opposes in the Ego a divisible Non-Ego to a divisible Ego*” (Fichte, 1889).

Fichte’s “Philosophy of Ego”



Now the entire process is complete, and each step in this process is necessary: **Benjamin Walter’s** SHOULD be changed to: **Walter Benjamin’s**

It’s necessary to have an absolute Ego that can reflect on itself, serving as the starting point of the entire system; besides, it is necessary to set an absolute non-Ego, which allows the absolute Ego to manifest itself in all areas of experience or in nature; and finally, it is necessary to combine both on an empirical individual, because it is the only way to bring the ideas into the physical world, and hence be productive. This “philosophy of Ego” is the theoretical foundation of Friedrich Schlegel’s romantic criticism¹, which can be further subdivided into two dimensions, namely metaphysical and existential, the latter of which results from the former.

¹ One of the most well-known concepts in Schlegel’s romantic poetics, namely “irony”, is not only a product of classic western poetry, but also an application of this “philosophy of Ego”: The subject (Ego) creates via his imagination an object (non-Ego); with the aid of the worldly-wise “wit” (Witz), the subject is able to unite himself with the object into an individual (the empirical Ego), and the outcome is exactly the “irony”.

2. Criticism Within Metaphysics: “Sympoetry” of Poet and Critic

The first dimension of Schlegel’s criticism is still constrained by the metaphysical frameworks, which means, Schlegel insists that a metaphysical idea, namely the Ego a priori, should stay in the center and serve as the starting point; all the other elements, including non-Ego and the empirical Ego, should lie under this concept. This idea inspired Schlegel to develop the so-called “Sympoetry” (Sym-oesie), which is a form of poetry in which the poet and the critic alternately play the part of the absolute “Ego”.

It all starts from the poet. The poet is compared by Schlegel to the unconditional Ego a priori in Fichte’s philosophy because he strives “only for the infinite” and detests “earthly utility” (Schlegel, 1967). Similar to this, the poet should also necessarily set a non-Ego, which in Schlegel’s romantic poetics is exactly the reader, or the critic (these two terms are basically synonymous in his poetics). This non-Ego is equally unconditional and absolute, because it is actually “a thought, a postulate” from the poet, and the poet “constructs and creates for himself a reader as he SHOULD BE”, but not as HE IS (Schlegel, 1967).

As in Fichte’s philosophy, the final task of a romantic poet is to incorporate the non-Ego into the Ego, which means for the poet:

he does not think of him [the critic] as dormant and dead, but as alive and counteracting (entgegenwirkend) [...] He does not want to make a certain effect on him, but he enters into the sacred relationship of the most intimate [...] sympoetry with him (Schlegel, 1967).

The result of this “sacred relationship” is precisely the “Sym-poetry”, which corresponds to the final empirical Ego in Fichte’s theory. “Sympoetry” requires the poet to engage himself in “dialogue” with the critic (Schlegel, 1967). In this dialogue, the poet should not “merely express [himself]”, imagining that he may touch his audience without being affected, but he should consider incor-

3. Criticism Beyond Metaphysics: “Love” Between Poet and Critic

This interaction between creation and criticism, which is based on the Fichtian dichotomy of Ego and non-Ego, should never end, because the longer this interaction lasts, the more poetic works can be produced, and the more poetic works this interaction brings forth, the closer we get to our full humanity. It is noteworthy that during the endless (re-)cycle, the initial metaphysical frameworks slowly break down, and a new, existential perspective emerges. Since the poet and the critic alternately play the role of the Ego/subject, it gradually develops into a kind of “intersubjectivity” that excludes any metaphysical substance, be it external (e.g. “God”) or internal (e.g. “Humanity”); the absolute Ego lies no longer at the center of the process, but the interaction itself, or rather the creation per se that takes place in the form of interaction between poet and critic, becomes the “tenet”, which is the very key to existential philosophy.¹

Goethe’s comment on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to be genuine poetry, and vice versa, in his study of Lessing, he considers Lessing’s poetic works such as *Nathan the Wise* (*Nathan der Weise*) to be excellent critiques.

¹ Clear as it may sound, it can be challenging to distinguish between “subject a priori” and “intersubjectivity”. An example of this would be Husserl’s transcendental-phenomenological explanation of “intersubjectivity”: Based on his concept of “intentionality” and “epoché”, Husserl introduces an “ego” that is “not as I myself, but as something *reflecting* in my own Ego i.e. my monad” constituted; A second “ego” is then created, actually as an “alter ego”, which is “a reflection of myself, and yet not actually a reflection”, since the “sense of being” is fundamentally “a priori” and has actually no “you” in itself; so Husserl attempts to introduce the “alter ego” through analogizing appresentation, i.e. through the analogy of “my” body and “your” body, but this is precisely where the problem arises: By fantasizing, one has only doubled one’s own “Ego” and he does not really acquired an external “alter ego”, and so his “intersubjectivity” is de facto still problematic. (Husserl, 1950; Schloßberger, 2005) This article does not delve further into this problem, instead adhering to the distinction that has already been outlined: Whereas in metaphysics everything still revolves around the substance, there is no longer such a center in existential theory - the creation per se alone plays now the core role.

This seemingly subtle but in fact revolutionary transition is described by Schlegel using a seemingly trivial but perfectly appropriate word: “love”. This makes perfect sense because, as Schlegel stated, “the first thing in love is the sense of each other”. He contends that all genuine “romantic” love acts exactly as an “interaction”, which calls for the constant presence of both love (Liebe) and counter-love (Gegenliebe). The most remarkable aspect of this mutual love is that it is productive, as this interactive bond between the two lovers would necessarily result in the birth of a child, literally or figuratively, which represents something new and original – a work of art. The more the lovers interact with each other, the more artistic works come into being, and only in such abundance can love manifest itself as everything:

There is everything in love: friendship, beautiful company, sensuality and passion; there must be everything in it, and people must strengthen and alleviate, enliven and elevate each other.

To summarize, both components of this shared love are dependent upon one another, and their interaction leads to everyone’s “highest enjoyment” and improves their knowledge of the outside world as well as of themselves. This romantic mode of love actually has two dimensions, the metaphysical and the existential, and the shift from the former to the latter also signifies a fundamental change in the intellectual history of modern Europe (Schlegel, 1962-1979).

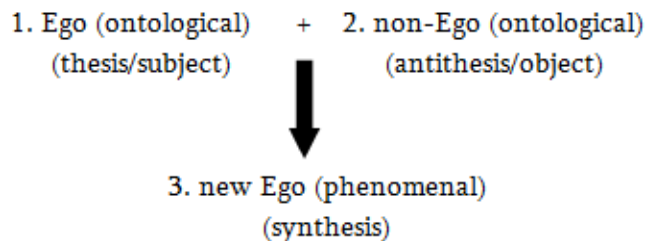
The ontological realm, also known as the world of ideas, and the phenomenal realm, also known as the world of appearances, make up the first dimension of this romantic love, which continues to be situated within the frameworks of European metaphysics (like “Sympoetry”). It all begins with the spirit (Geist) of the poet (Ego), which then encounters the spirit of the critic (non-Ego), and this spiritual union between them is finally realized in the phenomenal realm, giving birth to their figurative children, namely the literary

works and critiques; thus the combination of both gives rise to the colorfulness of the world, and the previously invisible spirit is now able to manifest itself in this spectrum.

Love in this sense serves as a bridge between the two realms, which also requires that it be a part of both. This definition of love predominates in Schlegel's early critiques, in both his studies of ancient poetry and in his comments on contemporary works. He contends in his study of Diotima, a character who appears as the "teacher of love" in Plato's well-known work, *The Symposium*, that Diotima, so perfect her teaching might seem, has only taught Socrates the "half-truth about love", because "love is not merely the silent desire for the infinite" (in the ontological realm), but also the "sacred enjoyment" of the present moment (in the phenomenal realm). On the other hand, he also criticizes many contemporary works of his time, claiming that they lack the true "spirit" and take unnatural debauchery mistakenly for love (Schlegel, 1962-1979).

"Love" as transcendental being

(based on Fichte's Idealism)



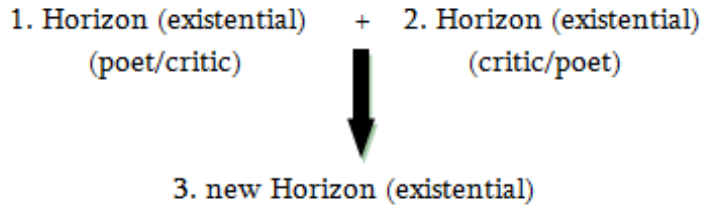
However, in Schlegel's romantic poetics, this metaphysical interpretation only serves as a preliminary form of "love" because, through the ongoing dialogue between poet and critic, the creation itself, instead of transcendent ideas, comes to represent the "being", and this creative "being" is precisely our existence:

As long as human nature exists, the drive for representation will stir and the demand for beauty will endure. The natural disposition of man, which, if allowed to evolve freely, would feel compelled to produce beautiful art, is *eternal*.

Love and life become synonymous with each other in existence, because they both embrace the whole spectrum of human experience, “from the most playful sensuality to the most spiritual spirituality”. The driving force behind both is the innate urge to create, or “genesis”, which excludes any metaphysical thinking centered on immovable transcendent ideas, and can only be understood and grasped through dynamics. (Schlegel, 1962-1979; Gadamer, 1990). The creation is no longer guaranteed by any transcendent ideas like “God”, instead it completely submerged in the ocean of existence and forgets about the kingdom above; it is not difficult to see that this is already a foreshadowing of Nietzsche’s famous statement, “God is dead” (Nietzsche, 1967-77/1988), which has ushered in a new era of European intellectual life (Schlegel, 1962-1979).

Since there is no longer an absolute substance (Ego), around which everything revolves, the so-called “intersubjectivity” now plays the dominant role, which means that the distinction between subject and object vanishes and both the poet and the critic are now equal subjects, or in the words of Gadamer, individual “horizons”. They are constantly ready to “fuse” with each other to establish a wider “horizon”, which again anticipates to “fuse” with another “horizon”, so that the restrictions in both poetry and critique can be gradually lifted and their horizons be steadily broadened (Gadamer, 1990). This now still half-hidden “intersubjectivity”, which is fundamentally connected to the shift in European intellectual history from metaphysics to existential philosophy, later emerged as a major trend in modern and postmodern art criticism. Such criticism rejects any transcendent aspect and tries to go “back to the things” (Husserl, 1984); the only issue that matters is the life itself, in which the “genesis” dominates all.

“Love” as existential desire
(based on intersubjectivity)



4. Conclusion

The foundation of Schlegel’s romantic theory of creation and criticism is the traditional European metaphysics promulgated by Plato, which divides everything into two worlds: the world of ideas and the world of appearances. In his “Sympoetry”, Schlegel brings the poet and the critic together with the aid of Fichte’s “Science of Knowledge”. This interactive “Sympoetry” values both the ego and the non-ego equally, which leads to a gradual development of intersubjectivity that rejects ontological ideas and serves as a precursor to modern and postmodern art criticism. Schlegel’s romantic theory of creation and criticism can therefore be viewed as both an advancement of his predecessors’ metaphysical notions and an inspiration for succeeding generations.

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- (The author has translated all the German text in this article into English).
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