

Fred Rush

Irony and Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard

Fred Rush. *Irony and Idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 272 pp. US\$ 85.00 ISBN 978-0199688227

Reviewed by Kristin Gjesdal, Temple University

Fred Rush's *Irony and Idealism* is a study of the romantic notion of irony as it weaves through and shapes the works of Friedrich Schlegel, G. W. F. Hegel, and Søren Kierkegaard. It deepens our understanding of philosophical romanticism as a historical movement, and, equally importantly, suggests how best to make good use of its insights today. As such, it is a timely and important complement to the existing scholarship in the field.

Rush's overarching argument is that Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, different as they are, pursue a philosophy of human finitude and seek to develop forms of philosophizing that reflect the experience of a deep, historical contingency pertaining to all things human. While Kantian idealism is central to Rush's story, his focus also allows him to place the romantic program(s) in dialogue with Critical Theory, pragmatism, hermeneutics, and literary aesthetics.

To the extent that Rush's study offers a historical reconstruction of romanticism and idealism, it is mostly as a backdrop to his larger agenda: he does not endeavor to trace the details of what, in effect, appears to be a series of non-encounters (Hegel and Schlegel probably had little to do with each other the ten months they overlapped in Jena; Kierkegaard and Hegel never met). Instead, Rush seeks to show that as far as the concepts of irony and idealism go, the story of Hegel's reading of Schlegel and Kierkegaard's reading of Hegel is not only one of misunderstandings and polemics, but also of quite powerful, but not fully acknowledged, influences: Hegel is more of a Schlegelian than he is prepared to admit and Kierkegaard, likewise, is more of a Hegelian *and* a Schlegelian than he would ever be comfortable granting. While Rush does not underplay the differences between the three philosophers at stake – and the

differences *are* significant – he makes a solid case for (1) a fairly continual effort, in the first half of the 1800s, to explore the philosophical resources of irony, (2) the notion that these resources cannot be fully grasped without taking into account the movements of romanticism, idealism, and, for lack of a better word, existentialism (Kierkegaard), and (3) the view that none of the three philosophies in question—idealism, romanticism and early existentialism—can be fully understood without a grasp of their respective approaches to human historicity.

While the Schlegel-Hegel relationship, the Hegel-Kierkegaard relationship, *and* the Schlegel-Kierkegaard relationship have all been subjects of high-quality studies, what is new, in Rush's work, is his willingness to follow the vicissitudes of philosophical irony all the way from Schlegel, via Hegel's criticism, to Kierkegaard's work and, in so doing, focus on the interrelation between irony and idealism or, more precisely, irony and dialectics.

The book is divided into three parts, covering, respectively, Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard. With its focus on Schlegel, the first part is no less than an effort to offer a new reading of romanticism – or at least to position the book's approach to romanticism in such a way as to make plausible the move, later on, to Hegel and Kierkegaard. Two standard claims in the literature are being questioned: first, that romanticism is best understood as a prolongation of Fichte's (rather than Kant's) contribution and, second, that it is Novalis, and not Schlegel, who is its (romanticism's) most important advocate. The second point follows from the first: Rush proposes we read romanticism as Kantianism pushed beyond the framework of Kant's own philosophy. He also suggests that we approach Kant's philosophy through the lens of the constitutive modesty of the Kantian distinction between reason and understanding. When romanticism is read in this way, it is not Novalis, but Friedrich Schlegel, and especially his turn to irony, that represents the intellectual *Schwerpunkt* of romanticism. In this context, I will bracket the comparative claim (though beside being inclined to give Novalis a more favorable review than Rush does, I would like to mention the importance of *Symphilosophie* for the Jena group). What matters more is Rush's reading of Schlegel's maneuvering of his "with Kant beyond Kant"-position. The idea, in short, is that if we want to take seriously Kant's warnings about the limits of human knowledge, then we need to acknowledge, in a proto-Gadamerian fashion, that our interpretations are culturally coined. In the name of self-determination, we

ought, further, to own up to their contingency, which, in turn, is but another way of questioning the claim that self-determination can ever be absolute.

Novalis is taken to respond to the Kantian challenges by way of an appeal to an *Urgrund* (or original *Seyn*). Schlegel, by contrast, realizes that the philosophical territory that opens up in the wake of Kant's philosophy does not require yet another appeal to a (pre-reflective) ground (this would be but a failure to heed Kant's warning). Instead he calls for a new form of philosophizing. This is the space inhabited by romantic irony. Understood in this way, irony does not give rise to the negative and potentially empty kind of philosophizing of which Hegel accuses it. Irony, rather, is a positive, philosophical gesture of a historical-hermeneutic kind.

Rush's turn from Fichte to Kant as a predecessor of romanticism is pretty much *comme il faut* these days. However, Rush's contribution is original in that it couples Kantianism and historicity, on the one hand, with romantic irony, on the other. Irony has gone from being an expression of cold negligence of a reasonably well-tempered world (as a Hegelian would argue), to representing a human (and, as such, warm) response to a somewhat colder world, or at least a world that is no longer tempered by references to metanarratives that appeal to an absolute or a transcendent guarantee of meaning.

At this point, a historically minded reader might ask if Rush's focus on the Kantian background ends up being somewhat limiting: if it, for all it reveals, also conceals a historically and philosophically speaking more complicated and less clean-cut story. In my view, this is clearly a risk. For the hermeneutic perspectives of the kind that Rush is interested in are not simply *results* of Kantianism, but also part of the philosophical currents *shaping* the intellectual horizon out of which Kantianism originated. We find such insights articulated – very clearly articulated! – by Herder, but also by other members of the philosophical literati of the 1750s and 1760s. Would it be too much to suggest that in responding to Kant, Friedrich Schlegel, just like his brother August Wilhelm, is not simply utilizing the resources intrinsic to Kantianism, but also drawing on the wider poetical, anthropological, and historical discourse of which the pre-critical Kant had been a part? This question is particularly relevant because Herder and his allies do indeed have a clear hermeneutic and historicist model. Moreover, they directly influence both A. W. Schlegel and Schleiermacher, the former being Friedrich's brother, the latter a close friend.

Precisely by making clear these historical, philosophical, and conceptual preconditions for Schlegel's work, would it be possible not only to promote Schlegel as a defender of a loosely hermeneutic position (there were several such positions at the time, and this hardly sets him apart), but also to ask, as Hegel did, what is actually *special* about Schlegel's particular version of this more general orientation in philosophy. And as Rush points out, here irony is indeed the key. My point is, in other words, that a more historical and constellation-oriented approach could have strengthened Rush's intuitions and arguments and explained not only what is unique (uniquely attractive?) about Schlegel's position, but also why Hegel ends up entangled in such a difficult relationship with it: clearly borrowing from Schlegel, yet stubbornly resistant to acknowledge his indebtedness.

In spite of the interesting and provocative claims in the book's first part – of Kant as a philosopher of finitude and Schlegel as a philosopher who, with his turn towards irony, gives this Kantian project a historical twist – I am not sure if I have fully understood how the notion of romantic irony can be conceived as hermeneutic, pragmatic, or, as we sometimes find it in Rush's study, a combination of the two. Schlegel's position is described, for instance, as “a more contingent, historical, and pragmatic approach” (7) and as “an early historicizing and hermeneutic form of pragmatism” (9, see also 96). Does this simply amount to a position that delivers “an inventory of practices for life under the conditions of the absence from experience of the absolute” (39), or a claim that “where there is interpretation there can always be reinterpretation” (56)? If so, many positions qualify, including some that we tend to associate neither with romanticism nor with irony. Thus, we are left to ask in exactly what sense the romantic turn to irony is hermeneutic. And, to the extent that it is described in this way: what kind of hermeneutics is at stake and how does it stand vis-à-vis the other, more well-known hermeneutic or pragmatic models of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century? These, to be sure, are not simple questions to answer and might well be questions that call for a broader study of the hermeneutic potentials of romantic philosophy, especially Schlegel's contribution.

Hegel is at the center of the book's Part Two. The few places Hegel directly tackles romanticism –Rush discusses the implicit references in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the discussion of romantic arts and aesthetics in the lectures on fine arts, and the review of the

posthumously published Solger edition – he is overtly critical. Rush’s suggestion, though, is that this criticism covers a more complex and complicated relationship, whose scope will only become clear if we see (as Solger saw) that irony is itself a kind of dialectic. Now remember that on Rush’s reading, Schlegel, with his irony, had already conducted a historical-hermeneutic turn, i.e., the kind of turn that we typically associate with Hegel. However, what Rush does not mention – but what should, in my view, have been mentioned – is, again, that Hegel knew quite well that he could get the hermeneutic-historical sensitivity (since this is something Schlegel shared with philosophers such as Herder and Schleiermacher) without necessarily subscribing to Schlegel’s theory of irony. For Hegel, the historical-hermeneutical turn and irony do not, as Rush at times presents it, come as a “two for the price of one”-deal. One can perfectly well ascribe to the first half of the equation (historicity, contingency, sensitivity to the perils and pressures of modern life) without buying into the irony bit of it. From this point of view, it actually makes good sense for Hegel – somewhat contra Rush’s position – to focus on (and worry about) the subjectivism of Schlegel’s romanticism. The point is not only, as it is often held, that Hegel, as a systematic thinker, is prone to be critical of the insistence on finitude and contingency in romantic thought (in a wide sense, i.e., as it includes figures like Herder and Schleiermacher). The question that will really matter to Hegel is, rather, to what extent it makes sense to formulate these insights within the vocabulary of irony. And once *this* question is out in the open, we need to ask if philosophy, after the historical turn, can itself be fully historical or if we need, as Hegel will argue, an absolute, philosophical system as it is derived from self-consciousness’ reaching full clarity about its own development in and through history.

I believe there is a way – an interesting way – in which this point can be accommodated from within a perspective compatible with the one laid out in *Irony and Idealism*. For while both Hegel and his predecessors in the historically and poetically oriented camps of romanticism work from within philosophy of language, someone like Herder, for instance, insists on the interrelation between philosophy and ordinary language and he sees ordinary language as historically developed and developing. Even if Herder would never reduce philosophy of language to history of language, he would still claim that philosophy of language needs to pay attention to its historicity at every level. Schleiermacher, by contrast, does not grant to the history

of language such an important role. He thematizes, to be sure, historical development and challenges relating to the interpretation of historical texts (the Bible, ancient poetry, etc.), but he does not, in quite the same way, provide a narrative about a linguistic developments and phases.

While certainly a historian of language (languages), Schlegel also pursues Schleiermacher's more structural-systematic focus and his orientation, not only towards the reception of linguistic expressions across temporal and cultural distance, but also towards the conditions of possibility for their production, the creation of historical and cultural meaning. From this point of view, subjectivity is foregrounded, as is its boundless imaginative energy and synthesizing powers (and this, perhaps, is a reason that the story of romanticism is coined in the language of subjective idealism). Schlegel, if I am not wrong, seeks to take into account the receptive *and* productive dimensions of language and this is one of the reasons why the notion of irony is particularly attractive to him: it is a way of responding, subjectively and not without creativity and playfulness, to historical conditions in which subjectivity can no longer take for granted its home in a community of practice, thought, and meaning.

Rush's treatment of Kierkegaard is by far the shortest section of the book. I found the treatment of Kierkegaard helpful and well argued, although, again, I was somehow puzzled by the altitude from which the textual material is approached and the relative lack of a larger historical context. While there is, to be sure, more textual material available here than in the Hegel-Schlegel encounter (Kierkegaard frequently critiques Hegelian philosophy, and he does so in biting terms), there is still little or no evidence of direct contact between the two, and it is often unclear if Kierkegaard's comments on Hegel target Hegel or the Danish Hegelians who populated the intellectual scene in Copenhagen at the time. Further, Kierkegaard was heavily influenced by Schelling, whose lectures he attended Berlin. In Rush's study, Schelling's massive influence is generally toned down (a point that, somewhat unrelatedly, also makes Rush not only steer clear of, but also explicitly reject the importance of romantic philosophy of nature, thus making me wonder if his romanticism is not at times too heavily saturated by an idealist vocabulary).

As far as the Hegel-Kierkegaard relationship goes, it is worth noting that Hegel was introduced to a broader Danish audience by Johan Ludvig Heiberg, a man of the arts *and*

somebody who did not necessarily see romanticism and idealism as opposed or opposing forces. Thus, if you were to attack Heiberg (or Danish Hegelianism, more broadly), then you would need simultaneously to attack Hegelianism and romanticism – which is precisely what Kierkegaard is doing. Further, romanticism, in Kierkegaard's context, did not simply mean the Jena romantics, but also the lighthearted aesthetic paradigm of the idealist art scene in Copenhagen and beyond. (Art was meant to educate, delight, uplift and the stage arts, especially vaudeville, comedy, and didactic historical drama were the preferred genres in Heiberg's repertoire.) Again, a slightly broader focus – beyond the three figures of Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard – would have served Rush's argument well. The same, I think, goes for the narrow choice of Kierkegaard material and the relatively muted presence of a work such as *Fear and Trembling* (a work of dialectical lyrics, as the subtitle has it) that clearly brings to stage the author's complex relationship to Hegel, clearly draws on romantic philosophy, but, equally clearly, does so in a way that does not necessarily draw on irony (and thus could have served to question the orientation of Rush's interpretation). Yet, what Rush convincingly shows is how Kierkegaard, when placed in the lineage from Schlegel to Hegel, is and remains a philosopher of modernity – if not only or primarily because of the philosophical claims he makes, then definitely because of his (Jena-romantic) method of philosophizing. Irony is one way of characterizing that method, and Rush's book is a powerful reminder that here substance and style are inextricably linked.