THE ROMANTIC THEORY OF UNDERSTANDING AND THE AESTHETICS OF FRAGMENTARY WRITING

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Abstract: Despite its short life in Jena, Early German Romanticism provided a productive theory of Aesthetics, which still remains a subject of discussion and even controversy in contemporary thought. What is most remarkable about these young thinkers is their radical attitude toward crucial problems such as the role of language in human knowledge, limits of understanding and also the form of philosophical writing. By discussing the problem of language and its position in romantic philosophical aesthetics, this article emphasizes the important role of "incomprehensibility" as a crucial concept in early German romantics view, which besides their Anti-foundationalist philosophy, provides the basis of their fragmentary writing as a new manner of reflection. Drawing on Blanchot and Critchley, it will be argued that the self-consciousness of fragmentary text of its own failure and unworking is the very key to its infinity, and positive reaction toward the existence.

Keywords: Incomprehensibility, Fragmentary writing, Negativity and positivity, Irony, unworking

Introduction

The romantic viewpoint regarding the theory of understanding plays a crucial role in their worldview and especially in relation to their philosophy and aesthetics. Before setting out toward the main discussion of this article a few points should be taken into consideration. First of all, according to the studies of contemporary philosophy the romantic theory of understanding could be divided into two basic branches regarding hermeneutics. The romantic hermeneutics _ which is mainly recognized by the name of Freidrich Schleiermacher_ takes a different shape in Freidrich Schlegel and Novalis's view. While Schleiermacher emphasizes on comprehensibility and better understanding as the goals of hermeneutics, Novalis and especially Schlegel reveal a more hidden aspect of romantic hermeneutics in which they highlight the dark side of words and acknowledge the limits of understanding. Another important point is that we should not pursue the results of the romantic theory of understanding merely in relation to hermeneutics. The romantic theory of understanding also plays an important role in the aesthetic tradition of early German romanticism. This is especially evident in the style of fragmentary writing as a kind of non-systematic thinking emerged in a philosophico-literary form.
In his treatise with its persuasive title, namely "On Incomprehensibility" Freidrich Schlegel deals with the concept of understanding and in the meantime takes a deep look on several topics such as the nature of reading and interpreting texts. Incomprehensibility, which according to Schlegel, signifies the natural incompleteness of human experience and the impossibility of perfect communication, manifests itself in a genre called fragment. For romantic thinkers, fragmentary writing is a medium for thinking philosophically, which by applying irony, represents the text's self-consciousness of its own incompleteness and shows the constant rupture in the totality of cognitive perception.

However, this element of negativity in Schlegel's thought does not turn to be an absolute moment. In fact Schlegel believed that the acceptance of these very limits will itself leads to open a space for the possibility of productive creation. Romantic fragment has a sign of what they called "the process of infinite becoming" within itself, and although signifies the lack of final synthesis, at the same time it is a perpetual creation which rises from the heart of ruins.

The Nature of Language

More than other representatives of early German romanticism, Freidrich Schlegel and Novalis emphasize on the limits and chaotic nature of language. Novalis shows the way that language prevents us from achieving a complete and ordered idea, in one of his remarkable monologues:

"It is a strange thing about speaking and writing; a real conversation is just a game of words. One can only be amazed at the ridiculous mistake that people think they speak for the sake of things. Of the fact that language is peculiar because it only concerns itself with itself, nobody is aware. That is why it is a wonderful and fruitful secret, —that precisely when someone speaks just in order to speak he pronounces the most splendid and original truths. But if he wishes to speak of something determinate, temperamental old language makes him say the most ridiculous and mistaken things. That is also the source of the hatred which so many serious people have for language. They notice its mischief but do not notice that wretched chattering is the infinitely serious side of language. If one could only make people understand that with language it is as with mathematical formulae—they constitute their own world—they only play with themselves, express nothing but their wonderful nature." (qtd. In. Bowie 2002 pp. 65-66)

Since the poet is a person who "speaks just in order to speak", his truths are more splendid and original than those "serious people" and especially philosophers who apply a conceptual non-ironic language for thinking and limit themselves to the borders of finite reflection. In a close relation to Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel also recognizes a negative element in language and turns it to an exigency of the possibility of knowledge. As Behler puts it, their main concern was rather a "joyful acceptance" of the limited character of our language and at the same time an affirmation for a space for possibility. (Behler 1993 p. 273) Schlegel suggests that we cannot ignore the words or just casually use them, instead we should encounter with their otherness and darkness. He links the problem of language directly to the category of understanding. He takes a stand against the concept of language as mere tool of communicating reflective ideas and instead emphasizes on the inevitability of words, regarding the notion of understanding. He ridicules the idea of "philosophical language", or language as a mere tool for expressing clear concepts. But as Strathman says, "words just get in the way of rational understanding. The basic tendency of words, left to themselves, is
always toward chaos rather than order, or toward an order that is not quite recognizable as such." (A.Strathman 2006, p.50)

Thus, Schlegel believed that listening to language's demands, and acknowledging its struggle against giving up to conceptual control, is precisely what makes understanding as thinking possible. What is important about Schlegel's approach toward language could be noted within his viewpoint about fragment as a philosophico-literary genre. By adopting a critical attitude, Schlegel believes that it is exactly the language's strange humor which philosophy, with all its seriousness could not "take serious". "To retain its seriousness and respectability, philosophy has to maintain control over words, has to get words straight, get their sense out in the open, so it can begin to think clearly."(ibid, p.55) But fragment, with its playful irony tends to refuse the inefficient seriousness of philosophy which imposes barriers against the very process of infinite longing for truth; in other words, fragmentary writing, by reminding the barriers of philosophical language and proposing the linguistic possibilities of poetry to philosophy, helps philosophy raise to a higher position and keep it alive to fulfill its promises. Now it is time for us to take a crucial step to discuss the notion of "incomprehensibility".

The Philosophy of Incomprehensibility

The romantic theory of understanding represents their radical attitude toward the possibility of understanding, which takes into account the importance of incomprehensibility in the field of philosophy and aesthetics. The philosophical reflections of romantic thinkers regarding the notion of incomprehensibility, along with their anti-foundationalist attitude toward systematic thinking, could be considered as influential factors which lead them to adopt a new style of philosophizing. As Behler points out: "[they] considered a fully accomplished system of knowledge and understanding as the real prison of the human race". As Schlegel writes:

"Verily, you would take fright if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become totally and really comprehensible". (F.Schlegel 1971 p.268)

As we can see, Schlegel, with a clear irony aiming toward systematic philosophers, and because of his fear of falling into the abyss of nihilism, embraces the incomprehensibility wholeheartedly, and explains this reaction as an acceptance of the space of possibility and a chance to find "the meaning" in the midst of ruins.

In his treatise, "On Incomprehensibility", Schlegel deals with the subject of understanding. In fact this was a fragment which appeared at the end of Athenaeum fragments, and as the last fragment of their publication. Prima facie he intended to write this text as response to the readers of Athenaeum who had found the fragments "incomprehensible". In one of the most important parts of this fragment we read:

"Now, it is a peculiarity of mine that I absolutely detest incomprehension, not only the incomprehension of the uncomprehending but even more the incomprehension of the comprehending. For this reason, I made a resolution quite some time ago to have a talk about this matter with my reader, and then create before his eyes—in spite of him as it were—another new reader to my own liking: yes, even to deduce him if need be . . . I wanted for once to be really thorough and go through the whole series of my essays, admit their frequent lack of success and complete frankness, and so
gradually lead the reader to being similarly frank and straightforward with himself. . . . I wanted to show that the purest and most genuine incomprehension emanates precisely from science and the arts—which by their very nature aim at comprehension and at making comprehensible—and from philosophy and philology.” (Schlegel 1991 p.298)

In fact for Schlegel, incomprehension, misunderstanding, chaos and bewilderment are just natural human moods in oppose to positive values; so in another fragment he says:

“If in communicating a thought, one fluctuates between absolute comprehension and absolute incomprehension, then this process might already be termed a philosophical friendship”. (Schlegel 1971 p.160)

Therefore a complete understanding leaves nothing for further searching; thereby it merely ends the relationship. It is necessary to admit: We never have the last word. As Behler quotes a crucial statement from Schlegel:

"Even man's most precious possession, his own inner happiness, ultimately depends on some point of strength that must be left in the dark, but nonetheless supports the whole burden, although it would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis"(ibid p.268)

For Schlegel, a real understanding never happens, or to put it better, it is Inexhaustible and never will be fully occur. According to Schlegel, our knowledge claims are never rooted in a higher absolute principle. Insofar as we lack self-consciousness of our limits of understanding, we cannot stand on a positive land of knowledge; and certainly the grand systems of philosophy, will reach to a seemingly secure land, which actually turns out to be a dream; a dream aiming at a positive experience but ends in a negative one. Therefore Schlegel believed that it is precisely the incomprehensibility that makes comprehension possible. In this regard, Strathman beautifully points out: "The way to enlightenment passes through darkness."(A.Strathman 2006 p.50)

Chaos is rooted in the origin of human experience. Schlegel was well aware of this fact and by applying the genre of fragment intended to break down the excessive subjectivism of his age. Explaining Schlegel's understanding of the notion of Irony, as the most crucial inner force of fragment, will help us understand his quasi-dialectical attitude toward reality, as an alternation of self-creation and self-destruction.

Ironic and Fragment

"Philosophy is the real homeland of irony, which one would like to define as logical beauty"; (Schlegel 1971, p.143) this is the first statement of critical fragment no.42, in which Schlegel explicitly relates his understanding of irony to the realm of philosophy rather than dealing with its rhetorical meaning. As we now, Schlegel formulates his notion of irony in a close relation to what we see in a typical platonic dialogue, in which the character of Socrates with a manner of dissimulation tries to motivate his interlocutor to find the truth. In Lyceum Fragment no.108, Schlegel claims that Socratic irony “contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication”. (qtd. In. Millan-Zaibert 2007 p.171)

Schlegel describes the work of irony in a rather metaphorical manner as a clown. In German Romantic Literary Theory, Behler provides us a clear picture of the way it works:" The fragment, however, like all complex and condensed statements, has also an afterthought, which consists in the words 'transcendental buffoonery'. A buffoon is a clown, and after irony
has been introduced in elevated fashion as Platonic discourse and Socratic incompletion, it appears appropriate to remind the reader of the human character of limitation and confinement, a feature which is also apparent in the outer appearance of Socrates". (Behler 1993 p.148) in fact irony implies the philosophy's lack of ability to present the Absolute. In order to understand this better we should just recall the general romantic attitude toward reality as "constant approximation to a truth which could not be fully grasped by human beings".

In another formulation of Schlegel's notion of romantic irony, Manfred Frank links the concept of irony to the notion of imagination as meant by Fichte. Fichte defines imagination as a hovering between irreconcilables. As Frank points out, for Fichte, "the irreconcilable entities are the two conflicting activities of the "I": It's expanding (determinable) activity, the "I" moving towards the infinite and its limitative (determining) activity."(Frank 2004 p.221) therefore imagination is a faculty which hovers between determination and non-determination, between the finite and the infinite; In order to become comprehensible, that which is pure must limit itself; any border contradicts the essential infinity of that which is pure, however; therefore it must always overstep the limits which it sets to itself, and then limit itself again, and then overstep these limits, and so on and on. (Ibid. pp.221-222)

This has a close relation to what Schlegel meant by irony. In his critical fragments written in 1797 he explains irony as a response to two kinds of predicament encountered in the attempt to know the truth. As Schlegel says, the first kind consists in "the feeling of the irresolvable conflict between the unconditioned and conditioned". Beiser explains this situation in his German Idealism. I quote at length:

"The ironist feels a conflict between the unconditioned and conditioned because any attempt to know the unconditioned would falsify it and make it conditioned. The whole truth is the unconditioned, because it completes the entire series of conditions; but any form of conceptualizing and explaining the unconditioned makes it conditioned...The second kind of predicament consists in “the impossibility and necessity of a complete communication.” The ironist feels that complete communication is impossible because any perspective is partial; any concept is limited, and any statement perfectible; the truth is intrinsically inexhaustible, defying any single perspective, concept, or statement of it. But he also sees that complete communication is necessary because it is only by postulating the ideal of the whole, which guides and organizes our otherwise blind and scattered efforts, that we approach the truth. We must never cease to strive after completion because we can always achieve a deeper perspective, a richer concept, and clearer statement of the truth, which is more adequate to the wholeness, richness, and depth of experience."(Beiser 2002 p.448)

Thus according to Schlegel, the ironist's reaction to this situation consists in a constant alteration between self-creation and self-destruction. Romantic irony, hints at the infinite by interpreting all finite things as incomplete and impermanent. In fact irony is constantly hovering between a proposition and its negation. The result of such a double negation is not a form of synthesis in which both proposition evolve into a higher level (contrary to Hegel). Rather it involves a kind of inconstancy and eternal shift between chaos and order. Irony is the main motive force of fragment, and the aesthetics of fragmentary writing depends completely on this notion. Fragmentary writing is the result of the romantic anti-foundationalist approach and their frustration of systematic epistemology; and this is precisely the ironic attitude which by imposing constant interruption on the process of
thinking, forever puts off the final word. Millan-Zaibert puts it in this way: "Irony is a tool that lifts the rigid confines of language." (Millan-Zaibert 2007 p.168)

We should also consider another significant factor of Schlegel's turn toward fragmentary writing, namely his conviction regarding the failure of philosophies that begin with a first principle (such as Descartes, Kant and Fichte). He believed that such philosophies will end in one-sidedness and finitude, and these very first principles will provide the basis for their ultimate collapse. As Manfred Frank suggests, "The beginning of philosophy is therefore not a positive principle grasped by knowledge, but rather the feeling of a lack of knowledge." (qtd. In. Corby 2010 p.754) Thus Frank justifies fragment in this way: "From the fragmentary universe there results no system but "asystasy,” “instability”, “disharmony"." (Frank 2004 p.211)

Schlegel, however, was not looking merely after recognizing the finitude of human consciousness as a negative feeling and stopping at this point. Rather, he intended to revive a positive attitude too. Of course he believed that this could not be fulfilled in philosophy. Therefore he suggests, "Whatever can be done while poetry and philosophy are separated has been done and accomplished. So the time has come to unite the two"; or in Fragment 48 of Ideas, he writes: "Where philosophy ends, poetry must begin". As Corby comments, "For Schlegel then, there is a clear need for philosophy to embrace literary form". (Corby 2010 p.755) This is precisely the poetic aspect of romantic fragment that suspends the determinate and definite moment of text by its non-determining character.

Therefore Schlegel paradoxically, brings an objective and real element into philosophy of idealism, for he believed that idealism extends to where we behold our lack of success in determining the world. Years before romanticism's reviving back to philosophical focus, Walter Benjamin recognized the same point. He writes: "Under the name of criticism, the Romantics at the same time confessed this inescapable insufficiency as necessary". Schlegel holds that, despite the rising of negativity from philosophy, we could have a positive experience of the Absolute, although it could not be grasped by human knowledge.

**Fragment: Incompleteness – Unworking**

Although the romantic fragmentary writing is rooted in their reaction against systematic thought, and despite they acknowledge the incompleteness as the true nature of human consciousness, we could not take this as their mere giving up to these barriers. The romantics accepted the "ideal" of a system, or system as a mere regulative idea in a Kantian sense. They regarded philosophy as an infinite longing and approximation to truth. Thus, the romantic fragment in its constant process of self-creation and self-destruction, while having self-awareness of its incompleteness, must not ever stop without getting close to its ideals, and in this way prevent us from falling into the abyss of nihilism. Therefore, the inherent incompleteness of fragment turns into an exigency which lead the work to an unending becoming. Maurice Blanchot believed that "the romantic work remains workless, unworked [desoeuvre]" (qtd. In. A.Strathman p.29); it exhibits a certain self-withdrawal or self-reserve. (Ibid. p. 29)

Therefore the uniqueness of fragment is that it is a genre which is both complete and incomplete or according to Critchley "It is a form that embodies interruption within itself" (Critchley 2004 p.124). August Schlegel formulates this idea in another way; in the Athenaeum fragment no.214 he writes: "No matter how good a lecture delivered from the height of the podium might be, the greatest joy is gone because one can’t interrupt the speaker; so too with the didactic writer." (qtd. In A.Strathman 2006 pp.40-41) and this is the
exact thing which occurs by itself in every fragment. Interruption turns into a ground that enables an inter-textual dialogue and takes the process of think a step forward. So as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy suggest, the romantic work of art does not serve as a mirror to nature so much as a mirror to a self-cultivating and self-questioning subject. The subject imagines itself in terms of the working and unworking of the work of art; and the work becomes a record of the subject’s struggle for identity against the relentless external pressure of necessity. The romantic fragment represents its failure within itself and through this self-awareness, indicates itself a complete work. This enables the work to progress infinitely by its perpetual self-reflection. So the concept of incomprehensibility shows up again, but not as a negative moment in the process of thinking. So as Corby says, the negation is positively motivated. As Schlegel points out, a negative feeling . . . is much better . . . than an absence of feeling’; because "Even a decided incapacity of which one is completely aware, or else a strong antipathy . . . presupposes at least a partial capacity and sympathy" (qtd. In Corby 2010 pp.757-758).

Through a certain self-negation, the romantic work opens up a space for absence and possibility, and by setting itself free from individuality and one-sidedness, turns itself to be a universal work: "the romantic poetry is a progressive and universal poetry". In a paradoxical manner, the work becomes universal, exactly within its individuality. Although the romantic work isolates itself from the surrounding world (according to Schlegel's metaphor) as a hedgehog, and thereby makes itself, self-sufficient and independent, but on the other hand as Critchley puts it, the fragment is like a project, which is still in a process of becoming and this is the exact thing that throw the work into the realm of future (Critchley 2004 p.128). "But as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and content", adds Schlegel and Critchley aptly comments: "That is, the kind of fragment that would reconcile form and content or subject and object does not exist."(Critchley 2004 p.129) Thus, the ‘Athenäum Fragments’ are not themselves fragments, they should not be fragments, they are merely indications or forewords for future fragments, promissory notes for an infinite work yet to be written.(Ibid p.129) this shows that the romantic fragment is the self-consciousness of the lack of final synthesis and indicates the absent unity. This is because sometimes the creative element overcomes, and sometimes the destructive one wins, but none of them can ultimately conquer the other, and this is precisely the secret of romantic fragment or "poetry"; and since "romantic" is itself an element of poetry, it never will be fully absent. Thus, the romantic work would be "neutral" in terms of its "working", which this very "neutral" element becomes the work of the work. Schlegel writes: "It is equally false for the spirit to have a system, and not to have one. It therefore must decide to unite them both". (qtd. in. Beiser 2003 p.126) as Critchley reminds, this is exactly what Blanchot calls "the work of the absence of work". The romantic work by acknowledging its own incompleteness indicates its work as a work. Once again we hear the ironic voice of Friedrich Schlegel, murmuring these words for future: "Verily, you would take fright if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become totally and really comprehensible". The romantic fragment or what Schlegel calls "a hedgehog", attempts to create meaning in the possibility of its absence.

Conclusion

As we saw throughout this article, the German romantics, by acknowledging the barriers of language, and regarding its limits as the natural character of human experience, emphasize on man's seeking infinity. By adopting a radical attitude toward language and resisting to the current ideas of their age regarding the existence of "real language", they
revealed the unstable nature of language and linked this fact directly to the finitude of human consciousness. The Jena romantics and especially Friedrich Schlegel, by emphasizing the limits of understanding took an account of incomprehensibility and investigated about the element of non-understanding which occurs in every act of understanding.

Such convictions along with their anti-foundationalism led them to indorse the fragmentary characteristic of human consciousness and secure their turn toward a new style of philosophical writing. Thus, the romantic fragment was born as an ironic genre that contains a combination of poetry and philosophy. The aesthetics of fragmentary writing indicates an internal alteration which hovers between self-creation and self-destruction. Therefore the romantic work challenges the idea of totality and embraces its own imperfection. Although this attitude will lead to the work's unworking, by ignoring the "final word", it leaves the work open to future. This is the work of romantic work.

References