

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION
THE AGE OF ROMANTICISM: SCHLEGEL FROM
ANTIQUITY TO MODERNITY

Friedrich Schlegel often remained
incomprehensible even to his friends.
—Walter Benjamin

It often comes as a surprise to learn that Friedrich Schlegel—who is widely understood to have been not only at the forefront of European Romanticism as one of its earliest practitioners but also at the forefront of the effort to provide Romanticism with its own aesthetics—was an ardent enthusiast of the classics. Indeed, his enthusiasm was such that even that representative of what came to be called German Classicism, Friedrich Schiller, was prompted to characterize it—albeit unfairly—as indicative of a “Graecomania.”¹ The association at first seems so odd and uncharacteristic that it is very tempting to dismiss it as mere apprenticeship work on the part of a budding critic and artist. To do this, however, would be a grave mistake. For the mature work of Schlegel must remain to a great extent inexplicable if it is not foregrounded in this earlier period. This is because, simply put, the writings of the “classicist” Schlegel pose the question to which the writings of the Romantic Schlegel attempt to provide the answer.

In order to understand this seeming paradox, it is helpful to contextualize it with some brief biographical considerations. Schlegel was born on March 10, 1772 in Hannover. He was the youngest son in a family of seven children. Schlegel was a difficult, brooding child; yet he was fortunate to have had August Wilhelm for an older brother. Throughout his life, August Wilhelm served as both friend and mentor. At the age of fifteen, Schlegel was apprenticed to a banker in Leipzig. This soon proved to be thoroughly unsuitable for Schlegel and so, two years later in 1790, he joined August Wilhelm in Göttingen to study law. He moved a year later, however, to continue his study of

the law in Leipzig. There he began the important friendship with Novalis. It did not take long for Schlegel to realize that literature was of far greater interest to him than the law. In 1794 he moved to Dresden, where he began to study the literature and culture of antiquity with incredible zeal. Dresden was the natural place to undertake this venture for it had one of the best collections of plaster casts of antiquities north of the Alps. In fact, it had been in Dresden that Winckelmann—who was very much an inspiration for Schlegel—began to lay the groundwork for his study of Greek art. What Winckelmann accomplished in the study of the plastic arts of antiquity, Schlegel hoped to accomplish in the study of literature of antiquity. In the years 1794–1795—at the advanced age of twenty-two and twenty-three—he wrote numerous essays on Greek literature. Among these is the essay *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, which was intended to serve as the introduction to a larger study entitled *The Greeks and Romans*. The study, however, was never completed. Schlegel sent *On the Study of Greek Poetry* to his publisher in 1795, where it languished for some time and was finally published two years later in 1797. By an unfortunate coincidence, Schiller's *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*—which addresses many of the same issues as Schlegel's study—was published shortly before his own study appeared. Schlegel took care later to point out that he had no knowledge of this work during the composition of his essay. Indeed, he notes that if he had had knowledge of it, he might have been able to spare himself several infelicities.²

It is within this context, then, that the Romantic Schlegel took shape. A year after the publication of *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, Schlegel moved to Jena, where he made several important friendships, including those with Tieck and Schleiermacher. By the time the essay was actually published, Schlegel was concerning himself more and more with modern literature, with what he termed “Romantic” literature. Indeed, a year after its publication, Schlegel was publishing the *Athenäum*, the signal document and organ of the early Romantic movement. It was during this time—and by means of the *Athenäum*—that much of what came to define the Romantic sensibility was mapped out. Virtually all of the texts for which Schlegel is justly famous appeared in the *Athenäum*—a journal that lasted only two years.

At first glance, this period of transition would seem to constitute a remarkable about-face. Indeed, values, orientations, and goals would appear to be completely altered. Schlegel is usually characterized as a thinker of absolute self-reflexivity. Romanticism in turn is characterized as a completely new and radically distinct brand of literature. Schlegel's earlier work seems so markedly different from the common understanding of Schlegel that it is often simply ignored. Given the general impulse to present Schlegel as the embodiment and representative of Romanticism, the very question of a classicist Schlegel is a critical complication that many would prefer to avoid.³ One must also consider

the effect of the range of texts available in English by Schlegel. Despite the staggering array of studies Schlegel authored—the *Critical Friedrich Schlegel Edition* [*Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*] runs to thirty-five volumes—only two slim volumes of Schlegel’s work are available in English. The contents of these volumes are drawn exclusively from Schlegel’s Romanticist phase. As a result, a rather distorted and somewhat simplified understanding of both Schlegel and Romanticism has been made possible.⁴ Nonetheless, the relation between the classical and Romantic writings constitutes a dimension to Schlegel’s oeuvre that must be born in mind.⁵ Not only must the existence of these “classicist” writings be acknowledged, but their relation to early Romanticism must also be studied.⁶

As a preliminary observation, it should be noted that even a superficial perusal of Schlegel’s work suggests that a strictly “Romantic” assessment of Schlegel misses the mark. A remarkable number of the writings of the *Athenäum* period, for instance, deal directly with classical antiquity—and not in disparaging terms either.⁷ For instance, Schlegel notes in one of the *Ideas*: “All the classical poems of the ancients are coherent, inseparable; they form an organic whole, they constitute, properly viewed, only a single poem, the only one in which poetry itself appears in perfection” (p. 102). Statements such as these are no doubt glossed over in the rush to make Schlegel conform to a preexistent understanding of Romanticism. Yet they are by no means anomalous and are evidence of not only an often neglected dimension but also a surprising continuity in Schlegel’s work. Indeed, throughout the writings of the Romantic period, classical antiquity remains a persistent point of reference. Nor does this interest stop here. In the lectures on the history of European literature of 1803–1804, Schlegel devoted more than half of his time to considering Greek and Roman literature.⁸ And in the *History of Ancient and Modern Literature* of 1812, the literature of antiquity still holds a prominent place. As Schlegel notes there: “Our intellectual development is so utterly based in that of the ancients that it is indeed incredibly difficult to discuss literature without beginning at this point.”⁹ It is not simply that Schlegel never lost his love of ancient literature. Rather, antiquity remained an integral part of Schlegel’s understanding of literature. Moreover, antiquity was not something to be transcended and cast aside. Antiquity continued to define the parameters and standards according to which the achievement of modern literature was to be measured. In fact, modern literature was only truly modern in as much as it stood in relation to antiquity.¹⁰

The question of the relation of modernity to antiquity, of course, did not originate with Schlegel.¹¹ The so-called *querelle des anciens et des modernes* had been a focal point of critical concern for some time in Europe. It first took shape in the seventeenth century in the efforts of Descartes and Bacon and

their followers to outline and defend a new experimental science. In order to do so, it was necessary to challenge and dispute the enormous authority of Aristotle. This quickly assumed the form of a debate on the relative superiority of the ancients versus the moderns. The essence of this debate was soon transferred to the literary realm, where it was bruted that the ancients could no longer serve as absolute standards of artistic production. For instance, Charles Perrault—whose reading of *The Century of Louis XIV* [*Le siècle de Louis le Grand*] in 1687 before the French academy is considered one of the major skirmishes in the *querelle*—argued that the ancient writers were full of errors that later ages had rendered obvious.¹² Fontenelle argued that not only were the ancients essentially no different than the moderns, and hence not unsurpassable, but that they suffered from the lack of accumulated wisdom and knowledge that the moderns possess. Despite such attacks, the ancients had a formidable defender in Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, who emphasized the constant exemplary role the ancients played for various cultures throughout history.

A similar debate took place in England, beginning with writers such as Sir William Temple and William Wotton, who debated the ability of the moderns to improve upon the ancients. The debate reached its literary apogee in Swift's *An Account of the Battle between the Antient and Modern Books in St. James's Library* (1704), in which the books of the two camps literally do battle. Swift also addressed the topic in his *A Tale of the Tub* (1704), which ridiculed the pedantic pretensions of modern critics. More temperate writers such as Pope attempted to reconcile the two poles of the debate by suggesting in *An Essay in Criticism* that, as the ancients were exemplary imitators of nature, to imitate them would be to be faithful to nature.

The notion that antiquity provided the prototype for contemporary literary production became an increasingly vexed issue. With the collapse of mythology and the gradual erosion of Christianity's ability to substitute for a mythology, it became clear that the gap between antiquity and modernity was unbridgeable. Indeed, the insistence on the adherence to a classical background and context seemed to propel literature unavoidably toward the mock-heroic and satiric. To many this seemed the most straightforward way to acknowledge the incommensurability between these two cultural domains. Even Swift, in his defense of the ancients, assumed the mock heroic form. Thus, far from establishing the superiority of either, the debates in France and England confirmed the thoroughgoing distinctiveness of ancient and modern culture.

In Germany the *querelle* took a slightly different turn. Undergirding the debate in England and France were certain assumptions about the ease of accessibility and translatability that obtained between modernity and antiquity. In Germany, however, antiquity and modernity came to be seen as irrevocably

distinct from one another. The work of Herder did much to facilitate this development as he emphasized that a radical cultural relativism was at work throughout history. As each culture was unique and operated according to its own specific rules, it was pointless to turn to another culture for models to be imitated. What was to be imitated was the inimitable. This position ironically secured the status of the ancients to a considerable extent, for the ancients were inimitable. Thus, for instance, Homer can figure as an Ossian-like writer worthy of adulation in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Winckelmann likewise served to strengthen the position of the ancients as a paradoxically inimitable model. Hence the ancients were secured in their status to such an extent that it seemed to amount to—as E. M. Butler memorably phrased it—the tyranny of Greece over Germany. The *querelle* in Germany culminated in Schiller's *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795–1976). Yet, while Schiller accorded exemplarity to the ancients, his discussion was predicated upon the thoroughgoing distinctness of antiquity and modernity. Modernity was conditioned by an utterly unique set of circumstances; it could not simply imitate nature because it had entered the philosophically inaugurated era of self-reflexivity. Moreover, these traits are not to be wished away; they comprise the very task of modernity—to account for the self-reflexivity of consciousness. While Schiller did much to justify a post-Kantian aesthetic theory vis-à-vis the ancients, he did not draw out the radical implications it contained for the understanding of modernity. Schiller could not resolve the antinomy between antiquity and modernity. It was Schlegel who assessed this large-scale historical dilemma and drew from it radical conclusions about literary and cultural production.¹³

This search for a modern culture, however, should not blind us to the fact that no theory emerges *de novo*. Modernity could only be conceptualized within the vocabulary of antiquity; it could only be articulated *in relation to* antiquity. Even writings that seem to focus exclusively on antiquity or modernity often have the relation between the two—and thus both antiquity and modernity—as their founding premise. This relation must be born in mind when considering Schlegel's early work. It is indeed tempting to assume that, because he relentlessly focused on the literature of antiquity in his early writings, modernity is simply not a matter of concern. If modernity is alluded to it is usually in the most disparaging and dismissive of tones.¹⁴ According to this logic, then, Schlegel sided entirely with the ancients in this debate and then for some reason made a complete about-face, rejected antiquity, and embraced modernity.¹⁵ If this assessment were accurate, it would certainly relegate the early writings to the status of muddled juvenalia. It would also tend to simplify Romanticism itself. Yet any careful consideration of these early writings of Schlegel must come to the conclusion that they derive their full meaning from

this larger debate about modernity—to which Romanticism itself was one response.¹⁶ As Richard Brinkmann notes of *On the Study of Greek Poetry*: “From the outset this text is very decidedly concerned with modern literature and nothing else right up until the end.”¹⁷ This subtextual and contextual perspective must be taken into account in any consideration of Schlegel’s writings from his “classicist” phase.¹⁸

It is this large-scale, historical perspective that characterizes Schlegel’s approach to questions of literature from his “classicist” phase to his Romantic phase and on through his so-called Catholic-Conservative phase.¹⁹ It would be easy to conclude from much of the secondary literature in English that Schlegel, when he was not thinking obsessively about irony, only considered literature in a vacuum. Yet, despite what some critics have implied, Schlegel did not think of literature in purely abstract terms. As Schlegel commented to his brother, August Wilhelm, he found any theory not founded in history to be ridiculous.²⁰ Schlegel’s conception of literature was, from beginning to end, profoundly historical. Whatever pronouncements Schlegel did make about literature as such were always based upon detailed and rigorous historical study.²¹ Hence it is not just that the literature of antiquity consistently played a role in Schlegel’s thought. Rather, it is that Schlegel’s notion of Romanticism was from the outset predicated upon a broad, historical study of literature. Romanticism, accordingly, was not seen simply as a moment within which literature became conscious of itself; it was also seen as the fruition of the history of Western literature itself. Indeed, the very impetus for the conceptualization of the Romantic—which *On the Study of Greek Poetry* articulates—was the search for a resolution to a cultural dilemma of massive historical proportions between classical and postclassical literature. It is tempting to think of Romanticism as a complete departure from the past, as a “new class of poetry,” as Wordsworth termed it in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Yet one should recall that, for many artists (such as Hölderlin, Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Shelley, and Keats among others), antiquity often provided the medium within which to articulate a literature that would be truly modern.²² Thus Romanticism—precisely because of its ambition to define modernity—is predicated on an exegetical reading of the past. *On the Study of Greek Poetry* was part of this larger struggle to recast classical literature to such a radical extent that modernity would thereby be made possible.

As many have noted, *On the Study of Greek Poetry* is an essay at odds with itself. The essay seeks to defend antiquity at the same time that it seeks to offer a corrective to the development of contemporary literature. It argues that the crisis of modernity begins already with the collapse of classical culture. With the disintegration of the Roman Empire and the abandonment of Latin as a lingua franca, European culture began to fragment into more and more partic-

ular and idiosyncratic forms. While it initially seemed that Christianity might be able to provide a unifying medium, eventually particularity won out. Before the implications of the historical contours of the essay can be teased out, it is necessary to clarify what may appear to be some of the conceptual idiosyncrasies intrinsic to this essay. Romanticism, for instance, here designates not a literary movement that came to prominence at the end of the eighteenth century; rather, it designates a large historical period—essentially, postantiquity. In this sense, the term derives from the conceptual link to the breakdown of Latin into various vernacular languages, that is, the Romance languages.²³

The difficulty inherent in the relation between classical and postclassical culture according to Schlegel is that it is not characterized by a break or rupture in development. Rather, both antiquity and modernity are governed by two distinct and incommensurable principles of development (or *Bildung*).²⁴ What Schlegel presents is the conflict between two different types of *Bildung*. Antiquity is governed by a natural *Bildung*. It is characterized by a consistent fidelity to nature itself. This fidelity, however, is tempered by a commitment to the characteristic as opposed to the idiosyncratic. In the process of its development, natural *Bildung* is oriented therefore to what is essential to nature. The culture that thereby results is as authentic and true to nature as it is possible for culture to be. Indeed, it may bring to presence what is only implicit within nature itself. While natural *Bildung* does achieve a perfection, it follows an organicist logic that dictates that such perfection can only be fleeting. A natural decay and decline necessarily follow perfection. Accordingly, antiquity is a closed and completed cycle, an evolutionary process come to full fruition.

Modernity is characterized by an artificial *Bildung*, which is led by concepts and not nature. To a great extent, modernity has been dominated by a sterile neoclassicism that attempted to dictate terms to culture on the basis of an inaccurately interpreted antiquity. When modernity does turn to consider nature, it focuses on the individual and idiosyncratic and thus deviates more and more from nature. As a result, much of modern culture is anarchic, incapable of establishing a modern form of art that could become the basis for a broad-based culture in general. Despite these apparent limitations, however, modernity is capable of endless progress. Thus Schlegel remains optimistic in the essay that this is just a passing crisis even though he himself concedes that it is an apparently hopeless imbroglio.²⁵ Indeed, Schlegel pins great hopes on a coming aesthetic revolution that will transform modern culture.²⁶

Interestingly, one of the main factors in this revolution is criticism. Criticism is one of the defining features of modern culture and it does not necessarily have to produce false concepts to guide artistic production—as it does in neoclassicism. In fact, criticism could produce correct concepts for artistic production. Criticism then offers itself as a third term, a point of

possible synthesis. This possibility is not fully explored in this essay, but the foundation for a solution to the dilemma between antiquity and modernity is outlined. Criticism thus is a possible way to resolve the deadlock between antiquity and modernity; it also proposes the way to establish an aesthetically valid culture. Criticism, moreover, should not be the distilled abstraction of this dilemma. Rather, criticism should be the historically informed comprehension of this dilemma. The difficulty within the essay is that the solution is sought for within one of the constituent elements of the debate. Whereas the only solution is to be found within the process of the study and critique of the issues.

As Kant lays much of the foundation for Schlegel's thought, it is worthwhile to consider briefly his aesthetics.²⁷ In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant argued that the judgment involved in the assessment of beauty was of a distinct order. Although it took the form of a judgment, it did not lead to knowledge. Unlike epistemologically motivated judgments, which proceed by means of determinative judgment, that is, the application of an existing concept to a particular instance, aesthetic judgments proceed by means of reflective judgment. Reflective judgment begins with a particular instance—an instance of beauty—and searches for an appropriate concept, which it does not find. As a result, the imagination—which usually renders an image to which the understanding can apply a concept—is put into a state of free play. In this state of free play the mind is made aware of the constitutive role it plays in the production of knowledge. More important, because this judgment is based on disinterested pleasure, it allows mind to become aware of itself as a subjective universality. That is, mind becomes aware of the universal aspect of mind. It is this dimension of aesthetic judgment that allows it to become the bridge between epistemology and ethics. Aesthetic judgment is the propaedeutic for the universalist thinking necessary for ethical action. This is because, for Kant, ethical action is dependent upon the reflection as to whether a particular action would make the basis for a valid, universal law for all of humanity. Aesthetic judgment thus assumes the form and structure of ethics. While many aspects of Kant's aesthetics were recast, the notion of the aesthetic being the philosophical bridge to ethics was widely taken up by many writers. Indeed, even twentieth-century critics, who inaccurately accused Kant of being the progenitor of a formalist and apolitical aesthetics, accepted this notion without reservation.

Kant's notion of aesthetics rested upon the Enlightenment assumption of a universal reason. Two distinct reinterpretations were made of this assumption during the eighteenth century. The first emerged out of the counter-Enlightenment current prevalent in many of the German-speaking parts of Europe, which introduced the notion of the nonuniversal character of reason.

That is, reason was characterized as being fragmented into distinct historical periods and cultures. Accordingly, reason was not universal but contingent and relative. Once these notions were incorporated into a historically informed aesthetic theory, contemplating Greek culture became a more complicated affair. It no longer seemed that the Greeks established a cultural standard that could simply be replicated by another culture. Thus, even though the Greeks remained a cultural ideal, they essentially became a frustratingly unattainable ideal. The problem then became how to redirect modern culture using Greek culture as a point of orientation. This accounts for the supposition of two incommensurable cultural realms present in many treatises on aesthetics at this time. Schiller's *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* and Schlegel's *On the Study of Greek Poetry* are perhaps the most well-known instances of this predicament. This explains the perhaps confusing presence of an almost neoclassical yearning for antiquity together with the firm conviction that contemporary culture is irrevocably distinct from antiquity.

The second reinterpretation emerged out of the transformation of Kant's philosophy at the hands of such thinkers as Fichte and Schelling. It soon came to be seen as intolerable that Kant had banished elements that normally were an integral part of philosophy to the realm of the unknowable. Two elements in particular—God and the world—were reduced by Kant to mere regulative ideas. They were forever closed off from philosophy and served merely a heuristic function. An effort was thus undertaken to reintegrate these elements into philosophy. Fichte found a compromise that granted reality to the world but made it merely the externalization of a transcendental ego. Soon this seemed to grant only an intangible reality to the natural world. Schelling responded with a philosophy of nature that granted much more autonomy to the natural world. These reformulations within German Idealism were to have an impact on the aesthetic theories of the time. Indeed, as Schelling suggested in the final chapter of his *System of Transcendental Idealism*, art constituted not simply an element but the full realization of idealism. This is because art comes closest to the world-producing activity of the Absolute.²⁸

Schlegel for his part historicizes Kantian aesthetic theory by means of antiquity.²⁹ For Kant, disinterested pleasure was to allow apprehension of the formal purposeless purposiveness of a work of art. This state—which is essentially transhistorical in nature—permits the free play that the suspension of determinative judgment allows. Schlegel projects this state into antiquity, where a disinterested pleasure supposedly ruled. Such a move allows Schlegel to historicize what is otherwise just a subjective state. It also allows Schlegel to render this Kantian aesthetic ideal unattainable because it has been situated within an irrecoverable past. For Schlegel it is not a matter of reinstating a transhistorical aesthetic disposition. The only way to this state is by means of

the *study* of antiquity. For the study of antiquity—the study of that phase of culture in which culture was characterized by disinterested pleasure—provides the historical content for aesthetic contemplation. Thus not only is Kantian aesthetics historicized but the Fichtean notion of the formal reflexivity of the transcendental subject is given a concrete ground in something truly beyond it. What Schlegel adds here is that self-reflexivity is a difficult venture in that the transcendental subject does not externalize itself in a not-I that can be dispensed with once its provenance is realized. The externalized other to the transcendental subject remains resistant because it forms a complex historical web that does not yield to a purely formal analysis.³⁰

Modernity also has an impact on this historico-philosophical vision of literature. For modernity becomes characterized by the subject's awareness of its fall from a harmonious—albeit deluded—conjunction with an objective world. Modernity is thus the endless self-reflection upon the unattainable.³¹ Much like Schelling, Schlegel was clearly dissatisfied with the notion of nature, the empirical, being simply the empty negation of the subject that has been posited by the subject itself so that it might come to know its own transcendental activity. Schlegel did not conceive of the empirical as an objective externalization of a transcendental subjectivity. Rather, in Schlegel's thought the empirical acquires its own relative autonomy; it acquires a distinct history. In fact, as Ernst Behler has persuasively argued, Schlegel anticipates Hegel's resolutions to the dilemmas of Fichtean idealism. Like Hegel, Schlegel injects a profoundly historical dimension into German Idealism.³² If a transcendental subject has externalized itself into the empirical, resolution cannot be accomplished by means of a contentless, formalistic analysis such as Fichte's.³³ Instead, it is the content, nature, and evolution of the empirical that must be accounted for. It is precisely by means of a philosophy that embraces and accounts for the empirical that the consciousness of the empirical comes into being, or, rather, that an objectified subjectivity reclaims its status as subjectivity. Culture, accordingly, acquires a historico-philosophical dimension; it is the temporally contoured intersubjective expression and manifestation of subjectivity in general.³⁴ Yet the culture of antiquity—by being so historically distant—has assumed the status of nature. Despite being the product of subjectivity, it stands opposed to subjectivity as something distant, external, and objective.³⁵ This is why too much emphasis cannot be made on the “study” in *On the Study of Greek Poetry*.³⁶ For this essay truly turns on the notion of the *study* of antiquity. It is the study of antiquity—which is only possible in modernity—that truly brings antiquity to completion.³⁷

While *On the Study of Greek Poetry* may seem to be a conflicted and self-contradictory essay—which in fact it is—it is so for compelling and logical

reasons. Schlegel attempts to think through to the necessarily contradictory conclusion the contemporary understanding of antiquity and modernity.³⁸ Schlegel's treatment of antiquity does indeed take part in the cultural nostalgia of the time. Yet, in Schlegel's case, this nostalgia is tempered by a historical and theoretical perspicacity. It is this awareness that leads to the realization that antiquity cannot be re-created. Schlegel consistently argues against a neoclassicism as it was practiced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Instead, Schlegel attempts to reconceptualize modernity via antiquity. Modernity is predicated upon a reevaluation of antiquity. This is an important perspective to bear in mind for the relation to antiquity in the essay can easily be confusing. Any text so strongly in favor of the culture of antiquity and so despairing of the culture of modernity would seem to be culturally reactionary. At the same time, however, the essay laments the destructive influence of the culture of antiquity on modernity and retains hope for a culture yet to come. According to the essay, modernity is predicated upon a reinterpretation, a redescription of antiquity. A valid modernity requires the reassessment of the past. Indeed, the future can only come to be if the past was altered.

This reevaluation was made possible by the ongoing work of reception as well as continuing archaeological discoveries. The discovery of Herculaneum, for instance, stimulated a renewed interest in the art of antiquity in the eighteenth century.³⁹ Most important, however, antiquity began to be examined with a greater attention to historical and artifactual detail. This necessitated the conceptualization of Greek art as a distinct entity within antiquity. To discuss Greek art in terms more appropriate for the culture of antiquity as a whole was increasingly seen to falsify Greek art. As Ernst Behler points out:

This reevaluation also brought about a decisive change in the prevalent relationship to classical antiquity, which can be described as a departure from the dominant Roman and Aristotelian influence upon European criticism in exchange for a closer bond with the Greeks and especially with the Platonic tradition. Previously, the Greeks had maintained their impact on the history of aesthetics chiefly through the Romans as well as through various adaptations of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Following Winckelmann and the tradition of German humanism, the Schlegels attempted to terminate this form of classicism by establishing a close connection with the aesthetic world of the Greeks and by referring directly to pronouncements on poetry by Plato and the Greek rhetoricians.⁴⁰

Behler's observations go a long way to explain the often confusing alternating praise and condemnation of both antiquity and modernity in Schlegel's essay. Terms are not being confused; rather, they are being differentiated beyond their traditional definitions.

As Behler notes, inspiring Schlegel in this avenue of thought was the work of Winckelmann. While it is impossible to do Winckelmann justice in the context of these introductory remarks, it is necessary to consider briefly his significance in light of Schlegel's early work. For, as Schlegel himself claimed, he wanted to be the Winckelmann of Greek poetry. Not only did Winckelmann help to establish standards in the study of art history, but he helped to define the specific interest in Greek art in the eighteenth century.⁴¹ He worked to isolate an antiquity proper from later Hellenistic and Roman imitations. Accordingly, it was this later and debased form of antiquity that was the basis for the sterile neoclassicism of the eighteenth century. Winckelmann thus opened the way for a seemingly contradictory anti-neo-classicist classicism. Yet Winckelmann's aim was not simply to awaken an appreciation of Greek art. Rather, Winckelmann was presenting an aesthetic theory as well. He forged a path out of the strictures of the baroque and rococo styles, the neoclassical style, and the incipient realism of the modern style. The question at stake in all of these styles concerns the issue of imitation. What exactly is to be imitated? Should it be the exempla of artistic style to be found in Greek art? Or should one imitate nature itself directly? It is in these terms, after all, that the *querelle* articulated itself. Winckelmann considered this a false dichotomy. What the Greeks offered were not works of art to be slavishly imitated; rather, the Greeks offered works that were evidence of a certain artistic methodology. For what the Greeks did was to study nature, distilling from it a beauty that nature itself could only articulate in a piecemeal fashion. Thus an ideal was to be abstracted from the real. It is not imitation in any real sense of the term. What one learns from the Greeks is the process of an idealizing imitation—or potentiation—of nature. Yet this is a process of idealization that is not a work of fantasy but a realization of what is yet to be expressed by nature.

Winckelmann also articulated a historically informed view of art that saw a time period as possessing a structural evolution that manifested itself throughout all the art works of a specific field. Winckelmann thereby endowed the study of culture with a much richer dimensionality. It was not merely that the Greeks were a distinct and autonomous culture, but that Greek culture had a coherent and integral history that unfolded itself through the developmental stages of various artistic forms. Winckelmann's work had great implications for the study of literature, as Schlegel quickly realized. On the one hand, it called for a far more rigorous examination of individual works. On the other hand, it also called for a careful study of the entire cultural context within which a work finds itself. This is precisely the perspective Schlegel draws in to the study of literature. Schlegel sought to join together a critical interpretation of individual works with a historical understanding of literature in general.

All these elements came together to form a historico-philosophical liter-

ary theory. Indeed, one could term it a philosophy that was articulating itself by means of literary criticism. If the Absolute does externalize itself into the empirical, then it was not adequate to view this externalization as an essentially repetitive and atemporal act. There was a logic and a reason to this externalization. It was necessary to examine this articulation of the Absolute as a historical process. Thus the study of Greek culture as a coherent whole is part of the study of the Absolute itself. Moreover, the study itself becomes thereby part of the articulation of the Absolute. The historical understanding of the past becomes part of the historical unfolding of the Absolute. This is a crucial aspect of Schlegel's work, the importance of which it is impossible to overestimate. It is the conscious apprehension of the past articulations of the Absolute that comprises the full articulation of the Absolute. It is in the consciousness—that is, the philosophy—of past material externalizations of the Absolute that the gap between the Absolute and finitude begins to be bridged. Thus the title, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, is at once precise and deceptive.

A cursory reading of Schlegel's essay could easily conclude that all of modern culture is to be abandoned in favor of a culture modeled on that of antiquity's. A good deal of attention is devoted to modernity in *On the Study of Greek Poetry*. It is often decried and shown in poor comparison with antiquity. Accordingly, modern literature seems to be catering increasingly to a jaded sensibility that requires ever more violent stimulants. To conclude, however, that this is the sum total of this essay's view of modernity does not do justice to the complexities of Schlegel's historico-philosophical vision. For not only does Schlegel disclose that the simple imitation of antiquity is pointless, but he clearly indicates that modern culture might be on the brink of a sudden transformation. Moreover, there are harbingers of what such a transformed culture might look like. Shakespeare, for instance, provides an indication of the possible vitality of modern culture.⁴² The essential task of modernity, therefore, is to diagnose and move beyond both antiquity and what has up until then defined modernity. Indeed, as Schlegel commented to his brother August in 1794, the fundamental task of modernity is to synthesize what is essentially classical and modern.

For the most part, however, *On the Study of Greek Poetry* does not successfully outline how a synthesis between antiquity and modernity might be achieved. It remains very much caught up in outlining the thesis and antithesis that antiquity and modernity present. Indeed, the antinomy between the two seems irreconcilable in the essay. It is not difficult to see Romanticism—as Schlegel was later to conceive it—as this synthesis.⁴³ In this sense Romanticism is to be seen as founded on the diagnosis and analysis of antiquity and modernity.⁴⁴ As such, it is not founded—as it is often assumed to be—upon

an empty and formal self-reflexivity but upon a critical history. Schlegel thereby expands and complicates the ambitions of post-Kantian thinkers to reconcile the Kantian *Ding-an-sich* with a transcendental subject by insisting upon the reinscription of the products of mind.⁴⁵

Romanticism, as literature's own production of a theory of itself, provides a resolution to the theoretical dilemma Schlegel outlines in *On the Study of Greek Poetry*. As Schlegel acknowledges in this essay, there is no real possibility of returning to a precritical state. There can be no direct and immediate relation to the world once the notion of phenomenality has taken root.⁴⁶ The only real relation possible is a mediate one, one that achieves awareness of the medium of its access. While the Kantian subject suffers an apparently permanent separation from the world, an isotropic affinity is created in post-Kantian thought between the mediated relation between the subject and world and the endless self-mediation of a transcendental subject and the material world. For Schlegel, this isotropic affinity is evidenced most clearly in the work of art. For the work of art—by means of criticism—reveals a structural relation to the infinitude of such transcendental activity. As Walter Benjamin phrases it: "Criticism is thus the medium in which the limitedness of the individual work relates itself methodically to the endlessness of art and into which it is ultimately transposed, for art—as it itself understands itself—is a medium of endless reflection."⁴⁷ The completion, the true realization of antiquity can only happen in modernity—more precisely, in the literary theory and literary history that is possible in modernity.⁴⁸ Accordingly, Romanticism itself—as a literally literary theory—is the realization of antiquity.

On the Study of Greek Poetry raises more issues and problems than it can possibly solve. It is a process of struggle, a conceptual Laocöon statuary. As Peter Szondi has suggested, the essay is the document not so much of a standpoint as of an evolution.⁴⁹ For this reason, it may seem to contradict not only the later Schlegel but its own argument as well. Nonetheless, the essay remains an incisive and penetrating examination of issues central to the aesthetic and philosophical debates at the turn of the nineteenth century. What the patient reader is rewarded with is a deeper understanding of the effort to define and elaborate a modern culture in the eighteenth century. The historical dimension is doubly important here in that one gains in the course of the essay a broader appreciation of the historical origins of Romanticism in addition to an appreciation of the importance of history for Romanticism. Indeed, what Schlegel presents here in crucible form is an etiology of the profound cultural transformation that was taking place at the end of the eighteenth century and that would culminate in Romanticism. It is, as Ernst Behler has justly suggested, the "Oldest System Program of Romanticism."⁵⁰