

Comparative Literature doctoral student

Application essay written fall 2006

The Romantic Roots of Cultural Critique in German and Russian Literary Traditions

Statement of Problem

The *Frühromantik* (early German Romanticism) movement that peaked in Germany between the years of 1794 and 1801 defies easy classification and, partly for that reason, has been at best misunderstood since its inception, and at worst simply ignored. Outside of Germany, particularly noticeable is the neglect of the philosophical dimensions of *Frühromantik*, which has taken place for two main reasons. The first one is the language barrier: many of the primary works by the leading figures of the movement—Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Schlegel—were not translated into English until quite recently¹ and still remain untranslated into Russian.² Moreover, even critical editions of their work in German were not available until the 1960s, which significantly hampered the scholarship.

¹ Recent translations into English include: 1) F. Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, ed. and trans. Stuart Barnett (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); 2) Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, ed. and trans. Jane Kneller (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003); 3) F. Schleiermacher, *Lectures on Philosophical Ethics*, ed. Robert Loudon, trans. Louise Huish (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002); 4) F. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, ed. and trans. Keith Peterson (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004). Unfortunately, translations tend to have a short life-span on the market, making it difficult to teach courses to Anglophone students. For example, *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. and trans. Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) is already out of print.

² From the earliest contacts with Germany, Russian thought has been highly susceptible to the impact of its intellectual tradition. There indeed exists a certain amount of publications mirroring the literary and cultural interaction between the two countries in 17-18th centuries, emphasizing the reception of German thought in Russia. Even in the Soviet Union, despite ideological limitations and dominating marxist clichés, some works were published (e.g. by Zhirmunskiy, Berkovskiy) that analyzed this organic connection. Yet these works were hardly available and there exists a very limited number of publications mirroring the reception of German thought in Russia. The only widely available

The second reason for this neglect is a generally dismissive view of *Frühromantik* that typically sees it as a mere appendage to the broader movement of German Idealism, which, due to its domineering tradition of abstract rationalism and the Enlightenment, pushed the ideas of *Frühromantik* into the periphery. Thus, in trying to rethink the fundamental principles of Western culture as a whole and in bearing the crucial potential of a critique of rationalism, *Frühromantik* was a literary movement that remained on the *edges* of the dominant thought of the time and was not heard even at home.

It did, however, receive unprecedented resonance in Russia, which was at that time not immersed in the Enlightenment tradition.³ It was largely the association of the Enlightenment with a ‚Procrustean‘ attempt to understand all human experience systematically from a single perspective that fostered the involvement of Russian heirs of German Romanticism with a radical critique of Western civilization. In their work it led to a cardinaly different understanding of the human. Most importantly, the climax of intensive reception of German romanticism by Russian intellectuals has reached such level of its reflexive intensity that it influenced German intellectual development, culminating in radicalism of Nietzsche’s revaluation of values and nihilism. Such writers as Gogol, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and Tolstoy developed ideas that were in turn productive for German thinkers at a later date. Their radicalization found extremely responsive ground in Nietzsche, Rilke, Hesse, Kafka, T.Mann, Celan and many others. Despite the crucial differences between these thinkers and writers, they all directly responded to the Russian tradition and were significantly influenced by it. Therefore, it is instructive to trace how early German Romanticism’s intellectual, cultural, and

work was *Estetika Nemetskikh Romantikov (Aesthetics of German Romantics)*, Moscow, *Iskusstvo*, 1987. Hölderlin, for example, was discovered by the Russian audience only in 1961.

³ While travelling and studying in Germany, many members of Russian intelligentsia (e.g. the seminal Russian thinker Gustav Shpet was an intern with Husserl; Chaadaev and Bakunin lived in Germany; Fyodor Stepun studied at the University of Heidelberg, etc.) thoroughly studied and took their inspiration from romantic tradition bringing their engagement back home.

political thought was transformed, intensified, and radicalized on Russian intellectual soil. This will allow us to see how the Russian tradition anticipates many revolutionary reconceptualizations in a radical form surpassing the critique of Western culture by the German Romantics.

Current Research

After long neglect, the early German Romantic period has recently been receiving much-needed attention. The renewed interest in *Frühromantik* is shown by several excellent translations into English of both primary and secondary works, along with some original studies that shed new light on the period.⁴ Such renewed interest towards the early German Romantics is particularly heartening because, akin to the Russian thinkers on whom they exerted such immense influence, they traditionally have not been considered to be philosophers at all. However, a careful survey of the scholarship still reveals a surprising gap in the exploration of the radicalization of the German literary tradition on Russian soil, and of how these transformations later influenced German thought in return. It remains necessary to carve out a space for these thinkers, who often do not even appear on the radar screen of contemporary Anglophone and Russian academic philosophical discourse, stemming from the fact that a *uniquely* Russian thought does not exist except as part of the general nineteenth-century Romantic critique of modernization, which it directly inherited from the early German Romanticism. In this light, it is particularly disheartening that the present state of research is characterized mainly by analysis of separate traditions, e.g. either German or Russian. Moreover, Russian scholarship remains largely under the influence of the Soviet paradigm that steadily moved

⁴ Cf. I. Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006. I. Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*. Stanford: Stanford UP 2002. F. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.

away from the myriad strains of German intellectual, aesthetic, and philosophical history in which, ironically, most Russian intellectuals were intrinsically embedded.⁵

Justification of Research

The reasons and the history of the neglect of this radical transformation stem from a combination of political, social and cultural developments at the beginning of the twentieth century which heightened the national consciousness and altered Russia's appraisal of her indebtedness to the West. The search for indigenous roots of a distinctive folk culture, which would legitimize a sense of nationhood, engaged her just as it did Europe. At the same time, the beginning of the twentieth century heralded the sharpened interest towards Russian-German literary connections *outside* of Russia. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 initiated not only many political and social changes in Russia, but had had a profound impact on Russian culture. The Russian intelligentsia emigrated to the West (particularly to Germany and France) and was attempting to come to terms with the tragic events.

Most importantly, in the twenty-first century the peculiarity of what originated in *Frühromantik* and transformed the Russian literary tradition is not of mere theoretical interest. The political implications of my project are of special relevance since we live and work at the start of a period of reassessment and rereading of the German influence in the aftermath of totalitarian regimes in both countries. Especially important is the fact that the world is today involved with new attempts to establish a productive dialogue with the Russian culture that survived the horrific period of

⁵ Here the single well known work by Walter Kaufman "Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre" is of major importance, for it reveals the degree of Dostoevsky's influence on the Western thought. However, one should trace existentialist beginnings not from Dostoevsky, who is certainly more famous, but from Gogol who predetermined Dostoevsky's thought. Likewise, it should not cause much surprise to find so much of modern anti-intellectualism and existentialism not merely in Kierkegaard or Nietzsche or Bergson, but in the writings of Fichte and in overlooked treatises by Schelling.

totalitarian Communist ideology, where the stereotypical critical rejection of Western values still persists today, along with a revival of the Slavophile-Westernizer controversy. What form will the nationalism of oppressed people take? One could neglect these radical fundamentalist frames of mind if it were not for their consonance with the critique of fundamental values of Western civilization voiced in the culture of the twentieth century.

Relevance and Cross-disciplinary Concern

Just as early German Romanticism as a movement was, until quite recently, completely subsumed under the philosophical projects of the German Idealists, so Russian thinkers on whom they exerted influence were not completely understood in their own philosophical right. An unfortunate consequence of this way of classifying them is that they were read not as “philosophers” but rather merely as “philosophical writers,” thus dismissing them as serious thinkers. However, the literary involvement of the early German Romantics and the Russian thinkers, on whom they exerted immense influence, is part of their value; it did not relegate them to a lower status but rather enabled them to provide new solutions to classic philosophical problems and to introduce a new understanding of the human. Therefore, I would like to explore how the “lack of philosophy” of *Frühromantik* and of Russian writers and literary critics was thoroughly compensated for by the spiritual depth and ontological insights of their literature, which was made possible precisely by the absence of a domineering rationality.

Only the dramatic experience of unprecedented social upheavals and tragedies of the twentieth century reveals the tremendous depth of those insights which were not properly appreciated by their contemporaries mainly due to the overwhelming mode of confidence in

inevitable societal progress. Only now we can understand that these dramatic developments have their roots in ideas that were articulated much earlier. It is particularly in this sphere of peculiar affinity and interrelationship between early German Romanticism and Russian intellectual thought that the extremely widespread critical attitude toward culture values was stimulated.

Therefore, the main aim of my project will be to provide a detailed account of the influence of the early German Romantics on Russian writers of the nineteenth century. This rich and unjustly neglected history needs to be reinvigorated, and not only to bring to light what has been suppressed by Soviet "scholarship" and lack of attention in the Anglophone world. Rather, what is most important is the task of highlighting the German-Russian connection as not just one of the many instances of mutual inter-influences, but as an essential opening of intellectual thought in directions that continue to simultaneously shape and challenge the traditions of modernity. With the help of this research, I hope to provide an opportunity of fully understanding their articulated revolt against the cult of reason (closely identified with the Age of Enlightenment), which stimulated the formation of an existential world outlook not only in literature but also in the culture as a whole. Without clear insight into these transformations, it would be difficult to understand the preconditions of the crisis of Western cultural values that came to centerstage after Nietzsche and affected philosophy, art, and social thought.⁶

Workplan

If awarded the research grant, I plan to spend the 2007-2008 academic year at the University of X, where my research will be split into two phases. During the first semester, I will conduct research and study with Dr Y at the University of X. Professor Y, a well-known scholar in German philosophy and literature, has special interests in the German Romantic tradition,

⁶ There are more than enough examples attesting to this, including Kafka, Camus, Ionesco, Beckett, Proust, Musil, and Ortega y Gasset that all expressed the leitmotiv of the loss of the essential.

hermeneutics, and continental philosophy, and will be an essential resource for me on my project. His invitation to work with him has already been very helpful and encouraging to me.

During the second semester, I will refine and develop my research work into the basis of my Ph.D. dissertation by visiting the University of A, where I will work under the guidance of Dr. B, a scholar of Slavic literature and culture and Dr. C, a scholar in German literature. With their invitation, I plan to participate in conferences, seminars, and other academic events sponsored by the Department of D, as well as to make contact with leading scholars in the E Department, particularly Dr. F (specialist on hermeneutics and metaphysics) and Dr. G (scholar in political philosophy and phenomenology). While there, I also expect to attend the annual meeting of Forschungsgruppe "H."

The ability to work with the above-mentioned scholars, as well as to have access to archives and libraries in Germany (especially at the Universitätsarchiv B, Literaturarchiv at Marbach and Goethe-und-Schiller-Archiv at Weimar) will provide me with necessary resources unavailable during my current study at SUNY-Buffalo. This year in Germany will significantly enhance my graduate research and enable me to prepare my dissertation. Upon my return, I plan to complete my dissertation and to continue to work on translating important archival documents of the *Frühromantik* into Russian, as well as to translate the fragmentary pieces of the Russian emigration into English, also publishing and presenting my findings at academic conferences. I believe my DAAD experience will provide me with the necessary professional background to achieve these goals and to further prepare me for my intellectual career.

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