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Andrea Wulf. *Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self*

Wolfram Eilenberger. *Time of the Magicians: The Great Decade of Philosophy 1919-1929*

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Andrea Wulf. *Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self*. Knopf 2022. 512 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover 9780525657118); \$20.00 USD (Paperback 9781984897992).

Wolfram Eilenberger. *Time of the Magicians: The Great Decade of Philosophy 1919-1929*. Allen Lane 2020. 432 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover 9780525657118); \$20.00 USD (Paperback 9781984897992).

Philosophers seek to indicate how things stand on fundamental questions (e.g., Immanuel Kant's question, 'What is a human being?') (Eilenberger, 12). As analytic philosophy has, over the last century, gained currency, the range of these questions has tended to narrow. This reflects the emphasis that analytic philosophy places on accurate description (e.g., of concepts that undergo rigorous analysis) (see A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Duckworth, 2007, 2nd ed). But as the Enlightenment reached its highpoint in Kant's writings, philosophy was a more accommodating discipline. Andrea Wulf makes this clear in *Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self*. For she brings into focus 'the Jena set' (whose members included Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Johan von Goethe, Novalis (Georg von Hardenberg), G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, and Caroline Böhmer-Schlegel-Schelling (a writer and translator 'who ... refused to be restricted by the role that society ... intended for women')) (5-10). In the 1790s and early 1800s, this group gave impetus to the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. According to Wulf, the Jena set's efforts 'changed our world' (350). A century-and-a-quarter later, philosophy remained an accommodating discipline. Wolfram Eilenberger shows this to be the case in *The Time of the Magicians: Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Cassirer, Heidegger and the Great Decade of Philosophy*. The four philosophers who feature in Eilenberger's exposition shared (in the 1920s) a commitment to the analysis of language. However, they went about their business in significantly different ways. Moreover, they, like their predecessors in Jena, said things relevant to the question of how people should respond to their situatedness.

Martin Heidegger's writings on the topic of 'Being' (*Dasein* or existence) provide a helpful entry point into the concerns that have a central place in Eilenberger's book. People are, according to Heidegger, 'thrown' into contexts that typically render them forgetful of the possibilities that are the stuff of an authentic (self-authored) life (16). At this point in the development of his philosophy, Heidegger places an onerous existential burden on individuals. If they are to live authentically, they must recognize that Being is 'something individual' (190). The circumstances



into which individuals are thrown are, ‘in each case’, their own (*‘Jemeiniges’*) (190). Heidegger thus embeds individuals in very particular contexts. While this is the case, all individuals face a common threat. This is the quotidian force to which he applies the label ‘everydayness’ (53). On his account, this force overwhelms those who fail to make authentic responses to their circumstances. To make such responses, individuals must be attentive to Being as a guide to action. This is because it shapes and illuminates the contexts in which opportunities for authenticity (a bounded form of freedom) exist. Here, detailed discussion of Heidegger’s account of language as ‘the House of Being’ would have been useful (M. Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 254). This is because he identifies language as a pathway towards fulfilling courses of action that lie open to individuals in particular settings.

As with Heidegger, Eilenberger offers an account of Walter Benjamin’s thinking in which language and embeddedness bulk large. On his account, Benjamin took the view that ‘[w]e don’t express ourselves through language’ (213). Rather ‘language expresses itself through us’ (213). Eilenberger adds that, according to Benjamin, ‘the philosophy of language’ goes awry when it identifies language’s purpose as ‘communication’ (213). Here, he explains that Benjamin saw in language a ‘medium’ in which we ‘become aware of ... all the things that surround us’ and of ‘ourselves’ as situated beings (213). But just as Heidegger both embeds individuals in particular contexts and identifies ways in which they can engage in valuable (authentic) rather than hackneyed (everyday) activity, so too does Benjamin. Eilenberger drives this point home when he discusses the idea of ‘porosity’ (as Benjamin elaborated it in collaboration with Asja Lācis) (202). Porosity refers to spaces that make it possible for people to put in place ‘new and unforeseen configurations’ of the things that surround and shape them (202). Porosity thus makes ‘improvisation’ possible (202). Moreover, where it exists, it provides a point of resistance against ‘the definitive, the fully formed’ by encouraging us to see ‘nothing’ as ‘finished and concluded’ (202).

When Eilenberger turns to Ludwig Wittgenstein, he makes apparent the astringent aims that found expression in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1918). In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein’s aim was to ‘map the limit of sense’ (251). The upshot was an analysis according to which meaningful propositions present us with ‘pictures’ of ‘facts’ or ‘what we really know, namely phenomena’ (72, 354). When Wittgenstein staked out this position, he assumed that he had solved the problems of philosophy (a discipline concerned with ‘precision ... in thought’) ‘on all essential

points' (4, 276). After a hiatus (during which he worked as a schoolteacher), Wittgenstein returned to philosophy in 1929. He now began to argue that philosophers should devote close attention to 'ordinary language' (354). While this emphasis on ordinary language marked a significant shift in his thinking, Eilenberger alerts us to a point of intersection with the *Tractatus*. This is the '[t]he conviction that language ... bears within itself ... the forces needed to heal [the] ... misunderstandings and misinterpretations [it] constantly provokes' (252). In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein embeds language-users in particular 'forms of life' (contexts shaped by regular activities). In these forms of life, we can grasp a term's meaning by noting the way(s) in which people use it. Moreover, when people fall into uncertainties on how to use a term, they find guidance in past practice (a 'grammar' that throws light on the apt use of terms in particular situations). Thus, they can 'go on' in the language games they play (H. Fenichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice*, University of California Press, 1972, chs 3 and 6).

Eilenberger identifies Wittgenstein, Benjamin, and Heidegger as sharing with Ernst Cassirer the 'conviction' that '[t]he human form of life is one of speech' (113). In Cassirer, this conviction found expression in his account of the 'logic' of 'symbolic forms' (108-09, 113). This account involves Cassirer in unfolding a narrative of progress that runs on the theme that, along an extended timeline, people have moved from less sophisticated (*e.g.*, mythical) to more sophisticated (*e.g.*, scientific) modes of expression. As Cassirer delivers this narrative, he provides support for the conclusion that more sophisticated modes of expression make 'progressive liberation' possible (332). More particularly, Cassirer saw in the Renaissance a hinge-moment in the developmental (or 'civilizing') process he described (17). For 'the Renaissance individual' could draw on expressive resources that made it possible to grasp that 'individuality consists and persists in a capacity for, or openness to, active and undogmatic self-fashioning' (246). Eilenberger notes that Cassirer offers a number of variations on this progressive theme. For example, he argued that Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's analysis of the rights of slaves and serfs was a spur to reflection on what we now call human rights. Here, Eilenberger identifies Cassirer as a 'magician of sources' (302). This is because he was able to trace a pattern of influence from Leibniz, through Christian Wolff and William Blackstone, and on to the American Declaration of Independence and Kant on 'the perfect state constitution' (302).

Kant was one of two thinkers in whom Cassirer found a 'philosophical lodestar' (56). The other was Goethe. In the 1790s, Goethe was 'Germany's most celebrated poet' who, as well as being a

man of letters, pursued an eclectic range of interests (*e.g.*, in botany and optics) (Wulf, 10). He occupies a central place in Andrea Wulf's book. This is because he 'became something of a stern and benevolent godfather' to the Jena set (10). Wulf tells us that, for this 'Alliance of Minds', poetry was a central concern (338). For this reason, Goethe was their 'true regent' (165). For he grasped that the creative and productive impulses at work in poetry have relevance not just to other literary genres but to other disciplines (including philosophy). More generally, Goethe encouraged the Jena set to poeticize the world around them. Wulf argues that, as they sought to do this, they gave the word 'romantic' literary and philosophical resonances that it had not previously possessed and breathed life into what we now call the Romantic Movement. More particularly, they gave currency to a complex of ideas that rapidly won adherents (*e.g.*, the English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who 'lived and breathed the ideas that came out of Jena') (169). These ideas included the practical significance of the imagination and reason's limitations as a basis on which to 'grasp the world' (165).

Wulf also identifies the Jena set as 'bound by an obsession with the free self' (4). Nowhere was this more apparent than in the writings and lectures of Fichte. Wulf notes that a mistaken attribution of identity played a part in Fichte's rise to prominence as a philosopher. In 1792, he published his *Critique of All Revelation* anonymously. The *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* and eight professors in Jena drew the conclusion that this was Kant's Fourth Critique. Subsequently, Kant put the record straight. In the pages of the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, he made it clear that he had not written the book and declared that 'honour' was due to its author (46). With this declaration, Kant made Fichte 'instantly famous' (46). His 'tedious life as a tutor' came to an end and (in 1794) he took up a professorship in Jena (46). In his first lecture, Fichte set the tone for the five years he spent in Jena. 'A person', he bellowed from the lectern, 'should be self-determined' (4). He thus began to elaborate his 'Ich-philosophy' (according to which we should treat 'the self and ... individual experience' as our guiding lights on practical matters) (4). Fichte also argued that 'only those who tried to make others free were free themselves' (50). This strand of argument (which stands in a relationship of tension with the emphasis on the individual in his Ich-philosophy), led Fichte to make a highly positive response to the French Revolution. For he saw in the Revolution 'an end to the imprisonment of the mind' (53-54).

In Fichte, Wulf finds a 'precarious balancing act' between 'radical demands for an equal society' and 'the boldly empowered self' (who may exhibit tendencies towards 'self-absorption')

and ‘narcissism’) (52). This is a point to which Novalis’s writings are relevant. Wulf tells us that, for Novalis, ‘philosophy was not an academic subject but a path into himself’ (99). Moreover, she forges a tight link between Novalis’s approach to philosophy and the influence of Fichte. While in Jena, Novalis ‘embarked on an intense study of Fichte’s Ich-philosophy’ (93). When he reflected on Fichte’s influence, he described him as ‘the one who woke me up’ and as ‘a second Copernicus’ who had ‘invented a completely new way of thinking’ (93). Novalis also found in Fichte support for the conclusion that ‘I am for myself the ground of all thoughts’ (94). Here, Wulf traces Novalis’s journey ‘inward’ (152). Novalis declared that ‘inwards runs [a] mysterious path’ and indicated that it leads those who take it towards ‘a higher existence’ (152-53). To the extent that philosophy seeks to furnish us with an accurate account of how things stand in practical and other contexts, the subjectivism on display in this statement invites criticism. Moreover, it lurches in the direction of self-absorption when Novalis states that ‘the world becomes a dream’ and ‘the dream becomes the world’ (153). Wulf, however, offers a defence of Novalis’s subjectivism. She argues that, in his efforts to ‘romanticize the world’, he aimed to make a constructive response to an industrial revolution that had begun to turn Europe into ‘a clanking machine’ (153).

Just as Novalis sought to make a constructive response to the Europe of his day, so too (and with greater plausibility) did G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel’s interest in matters of pressing practical concern predated his arrival in Jena. Wulf makes this clear when she discusses ‘The Oldest System Programme of German Idealism’, a short ‘manifesto’ that Hegel worked up (in conjunction with Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich Schelling) while studying in the Tübingen Stift (seminary) in Württemberg) (180). This manifesto spoke of the individual as ‘an absolutely free entity’ and ‘creative spirit’ (S. Holgate, ed, *The Hegel Reader*, Blackwell Publishing, 1998, 28). Moreover, it argued for ‘general freedom and equality’ and was emphatic on the point that the state should not treat people as ‘machinery’. Hegel thus arrived in Jena with an egalitarian outlook that was to find expression in the first of his mature works, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Wulf offers a sketchy account of the historical narrative Hegel unfolds in this book. We learn that, according to Hegel, ‘humanity’ arrives at ‘the end of history’ (an ideal end-state) having ‘progressed through a series of stages, moving from feudal systems to democratic societies’ (326). Wulf does, however, note that Hegel was a proponent of absolute idealism (and not the subjective variant that found expression in Fichte’s writings). Hegel thus indicated that the end-state he described would be a context in which people would give expression to their freedom in ways attuned to others’ interests.

Hegel's efforts to ensure that individuals could enjoy freedom on a mutually satisfactory basis calls to mind those made by Kant. But, unlike Kant, he staked out this position in a context that was, on Wulf's analysis, the birthplace of Romanticism. Wulf offers an explanation as to why Hegel was ready to take his cues from Kant. She notes that he was more 'level-headed' than the philosophical and literary luminaries around him in Jena (Wulf, 273). However, when we juxtapose Hegel's writings with those of Fichte and Novalis, the tensions that arise prompt the question as to whether people are equipped to sustain the end-state contemplated in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Subjectivism of the sort that Romanticism brings into focus yields a basis on which to explain these tensions. Subjectivity is a practical force that threatens to disrupt the institutions in which people think it apt to embed themselves. It is a force that lends plausibility to the declaration that 'there is more in us ... than there is in the institutional and discursive worlds we make and inhabit (R.M. Unger, *What Should Legal Analysis Become?* (Verso, 1996), 185). Moreover, it is a practical force that Wulf succeeds in bringing into focus. So too does Eilenberger. The four thinkers on whom he focuses share (as we have noted) the assumption that '[t]he human form of life is one of speech'. But their respective responses to the state of affairs they describe carry us in different directions. Thus they bring us face-to-face with subjective impulses that challenge the assumption that, if we dwell painstakingly on our circumstances, we can identify ways in which to understand and organize them on an enduring basis.

These points support the conclusion that Wulf and Eilenberger have in common an interest in something broader than German philosophical ideas at particular points in history. In their respective books, we encounter people who want to guide those around them on fundamental questions. But the upshot of their efforts is not stability in the form of settled views on how things stand fields of inquiry (*e.g.*, language and human agency). Rather, we see an incessant churn of ideas in these and other fields. Thus, we find in their books evidence of human restlessness (*e.g.*, 'nothing is finished and concluded' in the account of porosity offered by Benjamin and Lācis). Such restlessness should not surprise us if take the view that there is 'more in us' than in 'the institutional and discursive worlds we make and inhabit'. To the extent that such restlessness is at work in philosophers and people more generally, it may induce pessimism in us concerning our ability to organize practical life on an enduring basis. This is because it presents us with the prospect of chronic instability. But against this consideration we should set a point we noted earlier in our examination of Cassirer. When people become aware of the conditions that make it possible

for them to explore their potentialities, they have set the scene for the exercise of freedom.

This is a point to which Heidegger (notwithstanding his emphasis on embeddedness) lends support when he alerts people to the possibilities for authentic decision-making that exist in the contexts into which they are thrown. Like Cassirer, Heidegger finds in language a pathway to freedom. So too did the Jena set. Wulf makes this apparent when she relates how they invested the idea of ‘romanticism’ with resonances that would make it possible to poeticize the world. This is a point on which Wulf could usefully have said more. This is because philosophy takes a programmatic linguistic turn in the hands of the Jena set. As they work up their account of ‘romanticism’, they treat language as a ‘world-disclosing’ artefact that can propel people into new realms of valuable experience (see R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 314). This is not the linguistic turn that philosophy (under the influence of Gottlob Frege) was to take in the late-Nineteenth Century (and that encouraged analytic philosophy’s concern with accurate description). However, it does make apparent an attentiveness to the properties and potentialities of language that had intensified by the 1920s (when Heidegger, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, and Cassirer made the contributions on which Eilenberger dwells). With this in mind, those who traverse the ground mapped by Eilenberger might want to examine in detail the Jena set as a relevant historical reference point. Here, if anywhere, they may find support for Wulf’s claim that this group ‘changed our world’.

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