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Pompous, unworldly conduit to Nazism?

German philosophers get a bad press, but the Jena set were as engagingly scandalous as Bloomsbury

By Rupert CHRISTIANSEN

MAGNIFICENT REBELS
by Andrea Wulf

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★★★★★

German philosophy gets a bad press in this country. Polysyllabically pompous, conceptually convoluted, transcendentally up itself, it is regarded as lacking in common sense and a sinister conduit to Nazi fanaticism. Yet we are more shaped by it than is commonly realised: mediated though the writings of Coleridge and Carlyle, its most productive phase, between 1780 and 1830, filtered deep into our culture. Everything we now loosely think of as "Romantic" – all those vague ideas about the self, imagination and nature, bound together by intensity of personal feeling – has German roots.

With narrative verve buttressed by scrupulous research, Andrea Wulf has tracked this history in unfailingly lucid fashion, focusing on a circle of writers and academics based in the small university town of Jena. Their ideas, initially sparked by Kant and ultimately doused by Hegel, evolved amid the turmoil of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Avoiding metaphysical warrens and blind alleys, Wulf keeps a firm grasp on this broader historical context as well as the narrower intellectual controversies, but her primary interest is the personal interaction of a set of supremely intelligent men and women whose intense friendships and feuds, collaborations and affairs, can aptly be compared to that of the Bloomsbury Group or the Parisian modernists.

Why Jena? Situated at a crossroads in the middle of a Germany that was then an undefined confederation of duchies and principalities, it anomalously fell between four different jurisdictions, meaning that "no one was truly in charge" and leaving both thought and speech splendidly free to roam. The scope of a German university education was also far broader than elsewhere in Europe, underpinned by a high rate of literacy and a thriving book trade. Such an atmosphere – later celebrated by Madame de Stael in her 1813 travelogue *De l'Allemagne* – nurtured the most radically adventurous minds of the era.

At the centre of things was the author JW von Goethe – resident in Weimar, 15 miles away, but a constant visitor to Jena, where his great friend Friedrich Schiller lived. Goethe, often caricatured as a pompous bore, emerges here in a warmly sympathetic light, devoted to his working-class mistress Christiane, affectionately playful with children, an enthusiast for the fun and glamour of the theatre and a keen researcher into the sciences of botany and optics in particular. For all his fervent republican and democratic ideals, Schiller, in contrast, was tetchy, anxious, sickly and strait-laced. Goethe would spend a disproportionate amount of time and energy mollifying him.

Schiller, however, was a literary magnet, and it was through *Horen*, the journal that the playwright-philosopher edited from 1795, that the Jena set first coalesced. Schiller contributed his aesthetic credo, Goethe offered up his erotic elegies, and the university's leading philosopher, JG Fichte, proclaimed his influential injunction to "turn your eye away from all that surrounds you and in towards your inner self". The great naturalist Alexander von Humboldt and his philologist brother Wilhelm also appeared in *Horen's* pages.

Then there was the literary critic and Shakespeare translator August Wilhelm Schlegel, living in an open sexless marriage with his forceful, resourceful and attractive wife Caroline. He did as much as anyone to define Romanticism as something "wild, raw, mysterious, chaotic and alive". Caroline nursed tender and reciprocated feelings for her husband's more mercurial brother Friedrich – but these turned sour when she fell more violently in love with a younger philosopher, the dashingly handsome Friedrich Schelling, and scandalously divorced her husband in order to marry him. Thin-skinned Schiller came to loathe the Schlegels, who had snubbed him. Nobody much liked Friedrich's Schlegel's Jewish wife Dorothea. Fichte quarrelled with just about everyone.

A further associate of the Jena clan was the mystic Novalis, pen-name of Friedrich von Hardenberg (and the subject of Penelope Fitzgerald's masterly novel *The Blue Flower*). Everyone agreed there was, in Wulf's words, "something magical, intense, almost hypnotic about him". Obsessed in his poetry with night and death in a way that would later colour Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, he was almost absurdly erudite and had ambitions

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to create a romanticised version of the French Enlightenment's *Encyclopèdie*.

Novalis's infatuation with barely adolescent girls would not be acceptable today; more prosaically, he efficiently managed his family's salt mines. He died of tuberculosis at 28, his literary legacy rich but tantalisingly fragmentary, his promise unfulfilled – the Keats of his moment.

After Schiller's demise in 1804, the Jena set imploded in rifts and premature deaths, capped by the bloody battle with Napoleon in 1806, which effectively destroyed the town and disillusioned those who had venerated him as a liberator. Fichte moved to Berlin, Schelling to Munich, while August Schlegel joined Madame de Stael's retinue. Goethe survived the longest, ever more sceptical of Jena's susceptibility to Romantic excess.

Wulf occasionally sinks to cliché (calling Goethe "a literary superstar", Novalis "a man of contradictions") and sharper editing could have reduced some of the text's repetitions. But her book has an irresistible panache marvellously appropriate to the story of these high-pitched personalities, and it is rich in telling anecdotes and intriguing footnotes: how one would love to know more, for instance, about Jena's physician CW Hufeland, who not only ministered to the physical aches and neurotic pains of genius but also wrote the pioneering monograph *Macrobiotics: The Art of Prolonging Life*, published in 1797 – a huge international bestseller that kickstarted our obsession with the chimerical idea of a healthy diet.

Jena fell between four jurisdictions, which left 'no one in charge' and speech was free

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Literary superstar: *Goethe in the Roman Campagna* by Johann Tischbein (1786-1787)