

Source: The Oldie
Date: 01/12/2022
Page: 8
Reach: 44721
Value: 814.8500

MAGNIFICENT REBELS
THE FIRST ROMANTICS AND
THE INVENTION OF THE SELF
ANDREA WULF

John Murray, 494pp, £25

'This is indeed an electrifying book, in its illuminated portraits, its dynamic narrative and its sparkling ideas,' Adam Sisman wrote rapturously in the *Guardian*. Andrea Wulf tells the story of 'the Jena set', a group of writers, philosophers, poets and translators who, ignited by the cries of liberty, equality and fraternity coming from Paris in the 1790s, turned Jena into a hub of revolutionary thinking. One of the most prominent of their group was the young professor, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who declared that 'the source of all reality is the Ich', placing the self at the centre of everything.

'For all their progressive politics, it was the male self that the Jena Romantics mostly wanted to liberate,' Ben Hutchinson noted in the *TLS*, a woman had to submit her own 'Ich' to her husband's. The group's clever and charismatic Caroline Böhmer-Schlegel-Schelling was having none of that, changing her husband three times.

'*Magnificent Rebels* is a thrilling intellectual history that reads more like a racy but intelligent novel or even a very superior soap opera where characters are almost all oddballs, but geniuses,' Christopher Hart enthused in the *Sunday Times*. In the *New York Times* Jennifer Szalai noted 'the book's exuberant narrative happens to recount plenty of unmagnificent squabbling among a coterie of extremely fallible humans.'

'The secret of Wulf's achievement is in the "notes" at the end, a great wedge of a section,' James Marriott noted in the *Times*, 'the book is a triumph of unseen toil ... the reader is simply presented with the bright

jewels of anecdote.'

'*Magnificent Rebels* is a magnificent book,' Frances Wilson concluded in the *Spectator*. 'The Jena set invented the self, and in doing so invented us all ... Jena was the birthplace of self-consciousness, selfishness and selfies — the whole business of me, me, me and me too.'



The pre-Romantic Goethe, contemporary of the Jena set, by Tischbein, 1787