

Symphilosophie

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BOOK REVIEWS

Karolin Mirzakhani, *An Ironic Approach to the Absolute: Schlegel's Poetic Mysticism*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020, xix, 120 pp. ISBN 978-1-4985-7891-2.

What is the Absolute? To define it would be to neutralise it as an Absolute, to demarcate and circumscribe it in words, reason and concepts. The German word “concept” (*Begriff*), argues Karolin Mirzakhani (76), is derived from the verb “to grasp” (*begreifen*): attempting to know the Absolute rationally and epistemologically, i.e. to grab it linguistically, means reifying it and thus betraying it. To avoid objectifying the unconditioned, the non-relational, non-relative and not dependent Absolute (*ab-solutus*) it is necessary to follow a different approach from that of a systematic and comprehensive analysis. In her agile, lucid and brilliant book, Karolin Mirzakhani primarily identifies the ironic character of Friedrich Schlegel's romantic fragments as a path to this Absolute. Paradoxically, the open and non-all-inclusive form of the fragment, apparently destined to the utmost particularity and limitation, can condense the great Whole and open up to the unsayable, indicating it without wanting to exhaust it through intellectual understanding.

In the introduction, the author shows the affinity between the aporetic and unresolved character of the Socratic question and the ironic approach to the Absolute of Schlegel's fragments. How is it possible to define virtue, the interlocutor asks Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Meno*, if we do not know what it is? “Searching for what we already know is futile, and searching for what we do not know is impossible” (xi). Starting from this paradox, in the first chapter of her book Mirzakhani provides a careful analysis of irony as a “form of paradox” in the *Athenaeum* journal fragments, which were published in Berlin from 1798 to 1800. If Socrates, with his irony (*eironeia*), dissimulates himself, i.e. shows himself as ignorant on every issue, in order to reveal the ignorance of his interlocutor, this “disingenuous self-deprecation” is echoed Schlegel's irony, which is itself a form of self-creation (*Selbstschöpfung*), but also a form of self-destruction (*Selbstvernichtung*) and of self-restriction

(*Selbstbeschränkung*). Paradoxically, it is precisely through this ironic practice of underestimation, self-limitation and self-criticism that the artist – and the philosopher – can approach the Absolute, the “essence” in the infinite plenitude of its meanings. As a form of paradox, irony affirms by denying and creates by destroying. The infinite and formless richness of the Absolute emerges from the limited and ironic form of the fragment.

As dissimulation of the truth, irony says one thing by meaning another: in this way it creates a distance, a gap between the spoken and the reality. By asking: “Isn’t the weather beautiful?” while a thunderstorm is raging (5), we interrupt our usual way of understanding the world, we deviate from the literal meaning of events. From this point of view, irony seems to Schlegel to be a “permanent parabasis”: a disruptive interruption in the linear narrative similar to the moment in Attic comedy, when all of the actors leave the stage and the chorus is left to address the audience directly. In this case too, claims Mirzakhani, irony takes the paradoxical form of an interruption (temporary by its nature), which occurs permanently (7).

Moreover, irony, both in the sphere of writing and in the dialectical sphere of oral discourse, is a collective practice. Very appropriately, the author emphasises the importance of a *Symphilosophie* that develops in the relationship with the other. Socrates seeks a definition of virtue *with* Meno, just as Schlegel does not consider himself a solitary thinker, but writes his fragments in order to keep a constant dialogue with his friends of the Romantic circle – his brother August Wilhelm, Caroline Schlegel, Dorothea Veit, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), Ludwig Tieck and Friedrich Schleiermacher. The idea of an ironic philosophy that is practised together, is taken up in the second chapter of the book, which considers Hegel’s critique of Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel’s fragments. According to Hegel, Schlegel is “a divine ironic genius perched atop a high peak above the rest of the citizens” (35). Hegel therefore regards the “ironic genius” as an exceptional, solitary-subject, free from constraints, who “creates and destroys meaning at his whim and does not regard anything as independently solid or good” (*ibid*). Understood in this way, the romantic “divine” genius no longer has anything to do with the “sacred relation” of *Symphilosophie*, but she/he becomes a dangerous advocate of arbitrariness. Irony, instead of being a fruitful practice that allows an approach to the Absolute by holding together presence and absence, the said and unsaid, openness and concealment, seriousness and playfulness, becomes “a threat to the objectivity of truth” (37).

The boundless ego of genius, “lord and master of everything”, establishes itself as the universal norm and as “the source of all meaning”

denying any stability, any fixity, any internal legality, any objective truth. The author contrasts effectively the sharp critique of Hegel with the image of Schlegel as a philosopher of relations and not of solipsism and arbitrariness. To communicate with the Absolute does not require an equally absolute ego, but rather an (ironic) discipline of distance and an emphasis on self-restraint. Schlegel's own writing is not intended to exhaust the Absolute "analytically", but to hint at it "synthetically". Hence, the stylistic importance of short, self-contained fragments, which through the pause and the unspoken generate an "anti-foundationalist thought", which "does not aim at closure, but rather views philosophizing as an infinite, communal activity" (46). It is very interesting that Mirzakhani shows how the fragments "are not only in dialogue with the reader, but also in a conversation amongst themselves" (47).

The fluid, open and undefined character of Schlegel's ironic writings is related, in chapter three, to the ancient Chinese text of *Dao De Jing*. This is probably the most theoretically stimulating but also the most problematic section of the book. Mirzakhani argues that "these texts are co-illuminating: Both emphasize the role of that which cannot be known and exceeds the realm of the human, but which is necessary for knowing to happen at all" (XVII).

Like the romantic fragments, the language of the *Dao De Jing* does not produce a complete, totalizing and all-embracing system. Rather than offering a definition of the *Dao*, the *Dao De Jing* deals with a series of metaphors that can be read in multiple, open, and paradoxical ways. Naming is never univocal and definitive, but always introduces additional and equally plausible meanings. This linguistic affinity between Schlegel's work and the book of Laozi highlighted by the author can certainly be shared, but from an ethical and metaphysical point of view the analogy between the romantic Absolute and *Dao* becomes problematic. Mirzakhani often refers to the action of "striving" in her text: this action denotes an effort, a struggle, a search, a tension whose aim is to get as close as possible to the Absolute. Despite being an infinite immanent to reality, and not a transcendent one, the romantic Absolute is an object of desire and yearning, which is expressed by the famous German notions of *Sehnsucht* (longing, craving, yearning) and *Streben* (striving, aspiration, effort). With all due historical distinctions, both Socrates and Schlegel are subjects who tend and "strive" towards truth, essence and the Absolute, even if they are (ironically) aware of the constitutive exceeding of this Absolute with respect to the means of language and reason.

Taoist ethics, on the other hand, is not about "striving" at all, but about not-acting. The issue of non-action (*wu wei*, 無爲) addressed in the *Dao de Jing* reveals the *Dao* as spontaneity. *Dao* is therefore not really the Absolute

as a “goal” to be approximated or a “task” to be pursued, but rather the active quality of all spontaneous action, which unfolds from the absence of intervention by the subject. If from a stylistic and linguistic point of view the *Dao De Jing* is “a rich resource of how poetic writing can convey a non-linear striving to know the Absolute” (60), the virtue of the Taoist sage is inactive and without any intention. Appropriately the author states: “True oneness implies a situation where there is no division between an ‘I’ and oneness” (71), but as this division disappears, then any form of tension towards the Absolute and any desire to strive for the Absolute also disappears.

Precisely because of its indifference and lack (or emptiness) of intention, motives and purpose, the Daoist sage-ruler cannot be consciously ironic, because she/he is unable to distance herself/himself from the dynamic and spontaneous set of natural and human processes of Dao. The Daoist sage, as Hans-Georg Moeller claims, “simply does not operate in a mode of knowing.”¹ Unlike Socratic and romantic irony, the “idiotic irony” of the Daoist does not have any particular mental content or plan. Taoist texts (both *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi*) seem not to teach the ironic practice of self-restriction and dissimulation, but to point toward the path of naturalness.

Through several metaphors of the *Dao* (the “uncarved wood”, “the path that is formed in the walking of it”, “the clay pot”, “the empty hub of a wheel”, the Cook Ding and the “cutting up oxen”), Mirzakhani highlights the importance of emptiness not as mere absence or “nothingness”, but as a condition of “transcendental” possibility for any particular thing. As a whole, the *Dao* condenses within itself the unity of opposites: *yin* (陰, black, night, darkness, feminine) and *yang* (陽, white, day, light, masculine). This polar, dynamic and dialectical relationship between opposites is at the same time paradoxical. In the *Dao De Jing* we read: “Presence (*you*, 有) is generated from non-presence” (*wu* 無): this logical contradiction works on the practical level of the “dark efficacy”, where only absence and emptiness make presence and fullness possible. The roots of the plant remain hidden in the darkness, yet without them the plant would not come to presence (see 75).

This “dark efficacy” (74) is also characteristic of Schlegel’s ironic fragments, which emphasise the role of silence, gaps and empty spaces in the intuition of the Absolute. This element of affinity, as we have argued, should be juxtaposed with a couple of points of divergence: the lack of striving in the sage approach to the *Dao* and the absence of irony as a subjective and conscious distancing from the *Dao*. Other elements complicating

¹ Hans-Georg Moeller, “Idiotic Irony in the *Zhuangzi*”, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews [CLEAR]* 30 (2008): 118.

Mirzakhani's cross-cultural comparison could be developed: is it possible to speak of "poetic mysticism" (81) in relation to *Dao De Jing*? Is the same ethical and political attention paid to the figure of the sage in the Romantic context as in the Daoist context? These questions do not seem to be answered in the book. Another issue not taken into consideration is the notion of corporeality, which is essential in Daoism for getting in touch with the unity of the whole (through concentration on deep breathing, suspension of sensory input, dynamic meditation, etc.).

In the last chapter of the book, the author examines John Ashbery's poem *Flow Chart* (1991). According to Mirzakhani, the open and relational character of this famous American contemporary work shares with the *Dao De Jing* and with Schlegel's fragments a structure marked by emptiness, by absence of a linear plot and by a lack of strict internal coherence. The chaotic, fuzzy, faded and surrealistic development of the poem seems in particular to indirectly recall the arguments discussed by Schlegel in the fragment "On Incomprehensibility" (1800): "the incomprehensibility of the *Athenaeum* fragments is due to the irony [...]. The desire for complete comprehension destroys the possibility of comprehending the whole" (92-93).

The reference to *Flow Chart*, certainly suggestive, convincing and well-argued, stimulates some questions in turn: might John Ashbery's poem not be, rather than a conscious attempt to approach the Absolute, an art form that just wishes to remain faithful to the dynamic and often irrational flow of life? Is it enough for a text to be cryptic to be assimilated with the *Dao De Jing* or with the Romantic fragments? Could Mirzakhani's choice have fallen on other works of an enigmatic, inexplicable, disconnected and surreal character (such as some poems by Mallarmé, Lautréamont, André Breton, Joyce or Kerouac)? Can the absence of specific content to be grasped and understood and the use of extra-experiences into the poems (see 99) be considered an *unicum* of Ashbery's work?

Perhaps it is precisely because of its ironic vocation that this clever book leaves open some of the questions it raises, inviting the reader to always be "alive and critical" towards *Symphilosophy* or *sympoetry* (102).

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