

August Wilhem Schlegel's Concept of Calderón as a Romantic Playwright

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Wir können gern zugeben, die meisten dramatischen Werke der englishen und spanischen Dichter seien im Sinne der Alten weder Tragödien noch Komödien; es sind eben romantische Schauspiele.¹

The above lines, taken from the *Zwölfte Vorlesung* of Schlegel's 1808 Vienna lectures *Ueber dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, illustrate not only the German critic's attitude regarding the Spanish theater, but also provide the key to his particular view of romanticism. Seen in this light, the dramatist had an obligation toward original expression which, reflecting the culture and the aspirations of his own people and *Zeitgeist*, should stamp the resultant work as a unique literary creation, free of servile imitation. Schlegel saw the great virtue and strength of the English and Spanish theater in their total originality and close identification with their respective backgrounds. The common factor in both national dramas was the pervasive spirit of romantic poetry, independent of time and external form.

Spain was to become the most representative land for Schlegel's literary theories, and Calderón his romantic dramatist *par excellence*. Despite the enthusiasm aroused by Schlegel, none of the leading German romanticists was ever to set foot in Spain. Thus the espousal of these new ideas in the peninsula was left to Böhl von Faber by default, and Schlegel himself seemed largely unaware of the literary controversy that was being waged in his name. Spanish authors such as Alcalá Galiano never became fully cognizant of the original content of Schlegel's lectures, none of which was faithfully translated into Spanish; the Böhl von Faber version is more of an edited commentary and arbitrary selection rather than an attempt at a definitive edition or translation.² Mme Albertine Neckar de Saussure translated the 1808 Vienna lectures into French in 1813 as *Cours de littérature dramatique*, but by then Böhl had already established himself in Spain as Schlegel's champion and interpreter.³

Schlegel essentially viewed Spain as a country which had freed itself from the Moors in a religious war, thus saving Christianity from the infidel. During this stirring period the individual nature and heroism of the people had found true expression in the **romance** and later in the national poetic drama of Lope and Calderón. These elements could not be grafted on from without; the essential factor in Schlegel's view is that they well up from within, that the **Volk** projects itself into its own literary creation. This "brennende Nationalität" is the crux of his concept of romanticism; limited neither by epoch nor geography, it is rather the vital expression of a people's inner self. These ideal conditions had been found in Spain during the **Siglo de Oro**, the nation's greatest romantic period:

Heir war alles günstig gewesen. Religion und Mythos, Geschichte und Legende, ritterliche Tapferkeit und edle Liebe zu den Frauen, echt romantische Motive, waren lebendig und mitwirkend bei der Geburt der Nationalpoesie. Und das spanische Theater, von Ursprung an modern und romantisch, hat alle diese Elemente in sich. So ist Calderón (und mit ihm die anderen spanischen Dramatiker) neben Shakespeare und Dante einer der Väter der modernen Poesie, speziell der modernen Dramatik.⁴

Schlegel, in fact, regarded the Spanish drama as a continuous unity, romantic in concept until its decline at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Calderonian drama was seen as a vast canvas which not only depicted the form and movements of individuals and groups, but also attempted to portray the milieu by creating an impression of depth and distance and by bathing the environment "unter einer magischen Beleuchtung."

The greatest achievement of Schlegel—apart from the translation of Shakespeare—was his synthesis of the "antique" (classical) literature with the "modern" (romantic). Aynard has pointed out that, because of the lack of a lengthy tradition in their own literature, the German critics at the beginning of the nineteenth century were in an especially favorable position to bring about such a union:

La littérature allemande venait seulement de décourir l'antiquité, elle n'a pas donc à lutter contre le classicisme antique, elle l'absorbe au contraire, et nous voyons quelquesuns de théoriciens du romantisme allemand passionnément admirateurs de l'antiquité. Du reste, au lieu de se séparer de la littérature classique de l'âge précédent, le romantisme allemand cherche aussi à l'absorber; au lieu de contredire le XVIIIe siècle, il le suit.⁵

As in the case of his own play **Jon**, Schlegel saw no insuperable conflict between classicism and romanticism. Previously, it had been generally held that classical drama sought the rigid avoidance of conflicting elements, whereas the new romantic drama reveled in contrasts and antithesis. Schlegel seized upon this imagined dichotomy, finding in the plays of Calderón the finest example of the union of what were supposed to be mutually hostile approaches to drama. Further, he advocated a reconciliation between the ancient "heathen" world and Christian literature, though a revival of the classical theater would of necessity be imitative and thus the antithesis of spontaneously creative work stemming from the writer's own background.

It becomes at once apparent that Schlegel's concept of what constitutes "modern" or "romantic" (virtually synonymous in his classification) spans the centuries, and that the description "modern" is entirely relative. Under the heading of "spontaneous" (i.e., "modern" or "romantic") writers he includes Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare and Calderón, whereas Virgil (and nearly all the Roman writers), Racine and Molière are relegated to the second rank for having imitated past models which no longer were valid or which had spent their creative force.

In contrast to the imitative "heathen" French stood Calderón, the very embodiment of Christian expression and the aspiration of his people. Schlegel's praise was ecstatic and verged for a time on the idolatrous:

Calderón...ein Dichter, wenn je einer den Namen verdient hat. In weit höherem Grade erneute sich das Wunder der Natur, der enthusiastische Beifall und die Beherrschung der Bühne...in ihm hat das romantische Schauspiel der Spanier den Gipfel der Vollendung erreicht.⁶

With the advantage of the passing of time one gains a more accurate perspective of Schlegel's final relationship to Calderón. Despite his translations—none of which bears comparison with those of the Shakespeare plays—and several critical essays, most of which are contained in **Ueber das spanische Theater**,⁷ at no time did he really penetrate to the heart of Calderón's theater. To Schlegel, what particularly distinguished the Spanish stage was the treatment of miraculous fables, often dealing with mythological and courtly themes. It is true that in his **Spanisches Theater** (1807) he recognized the importance of symbolism and allegory in Spanish drama, stating that "dichten ist nicht anders als ein ewiges Symbolisieren;"⁸ nevertheless, the over-all impression is that Schlegel failed to grasp the inner spirit of Calderón's work.

Ueber das spanische Theater, published in 1803, is a disappointment in that it contains more uneven translations than sound criticism. The plays chosen for the first volume were **La devoción de la cruz**, **El mayor encanto**

amor, and *La banda y la flor*, translated respectively as *Die Andacht zum Kreuze*, *Ueber allen Zauber Liebe* and *Die Schärpe und die Blume*. The first of these, *La devoción de la cruz*, was to remain extremely popular in Germany throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, especially in Catholic centers such as Bamberg where E.T.A. Hoffmann produced the play with great success.⁹ At the height of the German wave of enthusiasm for Calderón, even Goethe allowed himself to be carried away, declaring *La devoción de la cruz* to be superior to any of Shakespeare's plays.¹⁰ It was not long, however, before Goethe reconsidered his hasty encomium and placed matters in truer perspective. The second work, *El mayor encanto amor*, has its origins in Homer and Greek mythology, to which Calderón added a symbolic magical background. In this poetic fantasy Ulysses is finally brought back to his senses and restored to reality. The third drama, *La banda y la flor*, was included as a representative play of intrigue rather than for any intrinsic value. The second volume contained translations of *El príncipe constante* (translated as *Der standhafte Prinz*) and *La puente de Mantible*, the latter taken from a popular historical incident that had already been ridiculed in the *Quijote*. The first performance of the *Príncipe constante* took place in Weimar on January 30, 1811, and was a resounding success, causing Goethe to be moved to tears.

In his translation of the five "romantic" Calderón plays (all of which were written in their original form before 1637) Schlegel attempted to reproduce the verse variations with meticulous accuracy. This meant, of course, the introduction into German literature of such typical Spanish verse forms as the *romance* (with assonance), the *redondilla*, the *quintilla*, and the *décima* (in the five plays selected there were no *liras* or *endechas*). In the sonnets and *silvas* the traditional iambic rhythm was used. The radical innovation was Schlegel's imitation of Spanish assonance which Tieck was to take a step further in *Kaiser Oktavian*. Schlegel further attempted to retain the original vowel structure in his translation, though occasionally he substituted the Umlaut form (ü for u, or ä for the Spanish e, etc.). In a letter to Tieck, he gives some interesting observations concerning his method of retaining the original sound patterns, stressing the fact that he had tried to retain Calderón's variety and even syllable count in his translation.¹¹ Generally speaking, however, assonance in German is less effective than in Spanish. It is significant that after the enthusiasm for Calderón had run its course, assonance failed to establish itself to any large degree in the German theater.

Schlegel's translations on the whole were warmly received (except by Kotzebue, who cited several infelicities such as "en árbol convertido" becoming "zum Baum versteinert")¹² and for the most part he managed to strike a compromise between the later rigid versions of Gries and the freer adaptations of Schreyvogel. While the Schlegel version is a *tour de force*, it is hardly a creative masterpiece, despite his having insisted that any translation must contain poetic qualities of its own. This did not prevent the Conde Casa

Valencia, the Spanish ambassador in Berlin and a close friend of Schlegel, from praising his work in the following extravagant terms:

Con un placer sin igual
Oí tu bella versión
Que más que una traducción
Parece un original

En dos lenguas tan distintas
Son tan unas las ideas
Que parece las procreas
Al mirar cómo las pintas.

Y en mi extraña confusión
No sé (como soy Cristiano!)
Si Schlegel es Castellano
O es Tedesco Calderón.¹³

In his pioneering work Schlegel had no previous model upon which to base his translations or serve as a comparison. Although there are certain literary lapses of taste, such as the occasional use of the vernacular--which might perhaps be justified as spontaneous romantic outpourings--the *Spanisches Theater* resulted in Calderón's name becoming familiar in Germany.

The impact of Calderón's theater in Schlegel's homeland was considerable. For the majority of romantics the world to come was a vague concept, intangible and incomprehensible. No such uncertainty as to the nature of the life hereafter can be detected in Calderón: Heaven is viewed as a safe harbor, an unassailable reality. It is precisely this unquestioning religious faith which appealed to the conservative Schlegel, who linked the Church with Spain's heroic past in an indissoluble union, the very epitome of his "romantic" theories:

Wenn Religionsgefühl, biederer Heldenmut, Ehre und
Liebe die Grundlagen der romantischen Poesie sind, so
musste sie in Spanien, unter solchen Auspizien geboren
und herangewachsen, wohl de höchsten Schwung
nehmen.¹⁴

If one is prepared to set aside Schlegel's personal prejudices, such as his francophobe biases, the reader today is still amazed at his wealth of knowledge in so many diverse spheres. Even more surprising is his enthusiastic and often quite subjective praise lavished on Calderón, in many cases forsaking his own critical standards. The following stanza composed by

Schlegel (classical in its form and conceits) is but one of the more effusive paeans poured forth in praise of his "romantic" ideal:

In deiner Dichtung Labyrinth versunken
 Wo in des ew'gen Frühlings, Jugendflöre
 Die Schönheit Himmel wird, die Lieb' Aurore,
 Und alle Blumen lichte Sternenfunken:
 O Calderón, du hier schon Gottheit, trunken
 Herold der Wonne, Cherub nun im Chore!
 Sei dir mein Gruss gesandt zum sel'gen Ohre,
 Und hohes Heil unde Glorie zugetrunken.¹⁵

Schlegel's interests tended to be transitory. The truth of the matter is that his devotion to Shakespeare and to Eastern philosophy far outweighed his enthusiasm for Calderón which, though more intense, was of far briefer duration. Schlegel himself admitted in 1824:

Calderón fut autrefois mon poète préféré, que j'ai tellement perdu de vue depuis longtemps que je n'ai même pas lu les traductions de mes successeurs, MM Gries et von Malsburg. Le public semble être d'avis qu'ils s'en tirent au moins aussi bien que moi, et je n'ai rien à y objecter.¹⁶

Schlegel's unrestrained advocacy of the Spanish dramatist does little to enhance the favorable reputation that he enjoyed as a discerning critic during his lifetime. He allowed himself to be swayed by highly subjective considerations, seizing upon Calderón as the ideal to suit his theories of romanticism, themselves often of doubtful validity. Thus, he was able to declare that in the Spanish language he could still detect "die rauhe Kraft und Treuherzigkeit der Goten"¹⁷ which bound it to the German language. A partial defense of his position can be found in the inaccessibility of Spanish books at that time, and in a letter to Mme de Staël in 1813 Schlegel readily admits:

Ce que j'ai écrit sur la poésie et le théâtre de l'Espagne réclame l'indulgence, Madame; je manquais de livres et mes connaissances étaient fort imparfaites.¹⁸

With the advantage of hindsight and the perspective of a century and a half it is easy to smile at or even to deride much of Schlegel's work. Perhaps the most valid appraisal of Schlegel's assessment of Calderón as a romantic playwright is that of J.J. Bertrand:

[Pour Schlegel] ce qui caractérise Calderón c'est, non la finesse de l'analyse psychologique, mais une passion dévorante, une imagination exaltée, la poésie fantastique,

la lutte des sentiments plus proprement espagnols: honneur, amour et jalousie, bref, une inspiration magnifiquement nationale et méridionale.¹⁹

Later critics, such as Solger, helped prepare the way toward a better balanced appraisal of Calderón's true worth. The subsequent waning of interest was to a large extent inevitable, even though both Tieck and Grillparzer continued to show enthusiasm for the Spanish dramatist. Thus, Schlegel's stature as a critic with regard to Calderón remains that of innovator rather than dispassionate observer, but to have opened his countrymen's eyes to a world hitherto but dimly perceived is achievement enough.

¹August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, (Bonn and Leipzig: Kurt Schroeder Verlag, 1923). In two volumes with an Introductory Essay by Giovanni Vittorio Amoretti. 12. *Vorlesung*, p. 112.

²Camille Pitollet, *La Querelle Caldéronienne de Johann Nikolas Böhl von Faber et José Joaquín de Mora*, (Paris: Felix Alcan, Editeur, 1909), p. 76. Pitollet's work is by far the most comprehensive account of the famous Böhl von Faber - Mora controversy, and I am greatly indebted to his detailed study.

³Wilhelm Schwartz, *August Wilhelm Schlegels Verhältnis zur spanischen und portugiesischen Literatur*, (Halle a.S.: Verlag von Max Niemeyer, 1914), p. 62.

⁴Schlegel, p. 42. This is part of the very detailed and informative Introduction by Amoretti.

⁵Joseph Aynard, "Comment définir le romantisme," *Revue de littérature comparée*, (1925), p. 649.

⁶Schlegel, p. 272, 275.

⁷Friedrich Schlegel, "Ueber das spanische Theater," *Europa*, Vol. I, pp. 72-87. —

⁸A.W. Schlegel, p. 62.

⁹Werner Brüggemann, *Spanisches Theater und Deutsche Romantik*, (Münster, Westfalen: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964) I, p. 181.

¹⁰Herman Tiemann, *Das spanische Schrifttum in Deutschland* (Hamburg: Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, 1936), pp. 170-78.

¹¹Brüggemann, p. 179

¹²Schwartz, p. 90.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁴A.W. Schlegel, p. 278.

¹⁵J.J. Bertrand, *L. Tieck et le théâtre espagnol* (Paris: F. Rieder et Cie., Editeurs, 1914), p. 35.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁷Tiemann, p. 98.

¹⁸Arturo Farinelli, *Lope de Vega en Alemania* (Barcelona: Bosch, Casa Editorial, 1936), p. 44.

¹⁹Bertrand, p. 27.