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The Laboratory of Poetry: Chemistry and Poetics in the Work of Friedrich Schlegel (Parallax: Re-visions of Culture and Society)

Michel Chaouli

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Bringing to light an unexpected encounter between the natural sciences and the theory of poetry at the end of the eighteenth century, this book argues that some of romanticism's most daring and enduring innovations owe their form and substance to the subject of chemistry. By focusing on the work of Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), *The Laboratory of Poetry* demonstrates the degree to which romantic poetics, in its language and concepts, relies on the chemistry of its day. This argument revises our very understanding of the period, for rather than taking romanticism to assume a hostile stance toward science, we can now see how it works to embrace fundamental scientific concepts (for example, the experiment, the element, and the combinatorial method). Because our own historical moment continues to be indebted to romanticism, such a shift in understanding prompts a rethinking in our ideas of the interrelation of literature, philosophy, and science.

Chemistry around 1800 was a science in upheaval, situated somewhere between modern chemistry and alchemy, between a mechanistic and an organic view of the world. In its concepts and images, as Michel Chaouli demonstrates, Schlegel found the means to imagine the production and reception of verbal artifacts in entirely new ways. In finely detailed close readings, Chaouli shows us Schlegel developing and practicing a highly experimental form of writing in which the elements of language?words, syllables, letters, graphic marks?are subjected to "eternally dividing and mixing forces."

This idea, so machinelike in its combinations, represents a sharp departure from the traditional idea of romantic artwork-as-organism. Rather, chemistry opens a space between the organic and the mechanical?a space that turns out to be highly productive for a novel theory of literature. Reconsidering Schlegel in this light, Chaouli shows how the chemical can also be understood as a contribution to the history and theory of media: it registers the disquieting contact of human wants and nonhuman systems of archiving, the intersection of intentions and feelings with material systems such as language and writing?the very intersection that interests and involves us in literature.

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