Magnificent Rebels by Andrea Wulf
review — meet the first Romantics

This delightful history captures the “vibe” of 1790s Jena where parties, feuds and gossip fuelled a great intellectual flowering, says James Marriott

The history of ideas is a cosier and more sociable discipline than is often remembered. Its proper subject is not lonely, liberated, outcast genius — the friendless, tousle-haired fanatic; the austere wanderer of mountain altitudes; the mouldering, library-sequestered grand theorist — but the milieu, the set, the clique, the vibe. Rarely in history were the vibes as tinglingly propitious as in the German university town of Jena in the late-18th century.

In 1796 it was possible to saunter the breadth of Jena in ten minutes. On a lucky morning, that brief excursion might feasibly afford you more glimpses of world-class genius than larger cities could muster in a century: the broad-bellied, extravagantly waistcoated form of Germany’s greatest poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; the taller, bonier figure of its greatest playwright, Friedrich Schiller; plus Germany’s greatest scientist, Alexander von Humboldt; its greatest translators of Shakespeare, August Wilhelm Schlegel and his wife Caroline; its greatest philosopher (in his own opinion at least), the dwarfish and bellicose Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Take the same route a few years later and you’d be in with a chance of catching Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Andrea Wulf’s delightful and invigorating book

*Magnificent Rebels*
— a worthy successor to her acclaimed study of Von Humboldt,

*The Invention of Nature*
— is attentive to Jena’s social as well as its intellectual glitter. It is as much a novelettish portrait of disappointing soups, foundering marriages and professorial
concert going as it is a panorama of what the poet Novalis described as the set’s ambition “to romanticise the entire world”. Its implicit thesis is that philosophy’s sublime abstractions are irretrievably tangled up with the sexual high jinks and socio-culinary disasters of philosophers.

Goethe, curiously, sits at the book’s centre, although he was almost a generation older than the ardent protagonists of “Jena Romanticism” and was not even a full-time resident of the town, only an eager visitor to what he called “this lovely, crazy little corner of the world” — the vagaries of translation rendering his speech disconcertingly groovy.

By the 1790s Goethe was the presiding egoist of German letters, the “cold monosyllabic God” from whom tongue-tied student admirers burblingly fled; his country’s only Shakespearean genius; the man of whom Schiller said that where all other poets were condemned to toil at their verses, “he has only to shake the tree gently and the most beautiful fruits, ripe and heavy, fall into his hands”. For Jena’s poets and philosophers, the great man’s novel of love-lorn suicide and sentimental introspection, 

*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, had sounded as the first John the Baptist cry of the Romantic spirit in the Enlightenment desert of 18th-century Europe.

Goethe was more indulgent of the literary puppies tumbling at his heels than many middle-aged authors have been. His willingness to meet, greet and gossip makes him a handy narrative safety-pin. Schiller was his soulmate.

*Magnificent Rebels* is tricked out with winning vignettes: squat, excitable Goethe sketching botanical forms in the air with his hands as the pair walk in Jena’s marketplace; Schiller bent in candlelit concentration over the manuscript of his friend’s novel, *Wilhelm Meister*.

They learnt to forgive in each other all the bewildering eccentricities that so often attend poetic genius: the drawer full of rotting apples Schiller kept in his study so the odour would stimulate his brain; Goethe’s collection of 18,000 rocks, his bright yellow dining room (the garish domestic application of his dubious but keenly pursued investigations into colour theory), and the mutating butterfly pupae he kept in his parlour for scientific observation. Both men’s vigorous later-life creative fertility — Goethe’s *Faust*, Schiller’s *Wallenstein* — can be attributed to this unusually potent friendship.
To the turbulent Fichte, Goethe extended humorous toleration and wary curiosity. Fichte — a prodigy and intellectual brawler whose anonymously published first book was mistaken for the work of Kant — ate his tobacco rather than inhaled it and announced to lecture halls overflowing with besotted disciples that: “My will alone . . . shall float audaciously and boldly over the wreckage of the universe.” Students, who have always been luridly susceptible to this sort of thing, propped ladders against the windows to hear him speak.

Wulf is a keener advocate of Fichte’s philosophy than previous cartographers of this rugged and chasmal intellectual terrain have been. The central thrust of Fichte — set forth here in crystalline summary — was a development of Kantian idealism which taught that, contrary to Kant’s belief, there was no objective reality external to human consciousness: “The only certainty . . . was the world experienced by the self”, or what Fichte called the “Ich”. To understand the concepts of “Ich” and “non-Ich” (the external world), Fichte enjoined his students to gaze upon a blank wall. When university jocks smashed his windows in furious, bamboozled protest, Goethe wrote that it “must have been a most disagreeable way” for Fichte “to have the existence of the non-Ich proven to him”.

Fichte’s “new focus on the self and on the self being aware of itself”, Wulf writes, “fundamentally re-centred the way we understand the world”. You may decide this puts things too forcefully but Fichte’s thought is at least one trailing root of our self-oriented modern culture with its fetish for the individual, its belief in a “personal truth” that trumps objective facts (if such things exist). Approving nods on modern campuses for the Fichtean notion that “there were no absolute truths or laws created by God that shaped our understanding of the world. There was only the self.”

Columnists frothingly deplore the modern decline of “Enlightenment values”. But the theme is an old one. Jena was the scene of the first victorious skirmish in the anti-Enlightenment rebellion that has been lighting fires and hauling down idols in western thought for two centuries. Utility and reason were the obsessions of the age, Schiller complained. But “beauty transports us towards ethical principles and makes us better people” and “imagination was the most important faculty of mind”.

The chief god of the German cult of imagination was Shakespeare; his prophets were Schlegel and his wife whose classic translations were produced in Jena, “August Wilhelm translating the text and Caroline scanning the verses in a kind of chant”. This method took hours to produce “just one line” but it made Shakespeare immortal in Germany: he is performed there more frequently than in England.

The philosophical was the poetic, was the social, was the sexual. Liberal, libidinous Jena birthed a surplus of controversial journals and books but also a surplus of illegitimate children. It was a haven for both the ideas and the morals of Caroline Schlegel (later Schelling) whose reputation as a “revolutionary whore” — earned through an un-Teutonic enthusiasm for the radical ideas and carnal embraces of Frenchmen — had made most of her own land unwelcoming to her. Caroline’s open marriage to Schlegel was not unique in Jena.
The journalistic efficiency of Wulf’s prose makes her a pleasingly downmarket chronicler of sexual adventure (“she lay with her hair loose, long dark curls tumbling over her voluptuous chest . . .”) but also a sprightly exponent of, say, Kant’s categorical imperative, (“unless you want litter-dropping to become a law you shouldn’t drop it yourself”). On literary matters . . . well, there is mention on one occasion of Goethe’s “creative output”. Whenever a novel or a poem appears our guide breaks into a brisk trot of paraphrase. Schiller’s Wallenstein is hurried past with the observation that it “is a cynical and pessimistic play about the tension between personal interest and political allegiance”.

The secret of Wulf’s achievement is in the “notes” at the end of Magnificent Rebels, a great wedge of a section so thick it brings the reader to an unexpected halt two thirds of the way through the book’s bulk.

Magnificent Rebels is a triumph of unseen toil, hardly suspected by the reader, in the midst of the sociable whirl of the main narrative. But all the time you realise Wulf has been sweating away out of sight, in the dim caverns of archives and the flickering, unvisited galleries of notes and appendices.

Triumphantly, the book is not touched with one speck of archival dust, nor does it sag with any sign of exhaustion in the academic salt mines. The reader is simply presented with bright jewels of anecdote: Goethe lowering a piece of cake on a string from his study window to children playing below; Hegel dodging Napoleon’s invading soldiers to get the manuscript of The Phenomenology of the Spirit out of town. But above all the glitter of the parties, feuds and gossip that are so frequently inseparable from intellectual life. Ironically this book shows that philosophy is about more than the Ich, it is also about the “we”.

Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self by Andrea Wulf, John Murray, 494pp; £25

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Goethe in the Roman Campagna by Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, 1787
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Johann Friedrich August Tischbein's portrait of Caroline Schlegel (later Schelling)

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