

Chapter Fifteen  
Romantic Thinking  
Nicholas Halmi

### **Abstract**

The German ‘early Romantic’ thinkers—Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich von Hardenberg (‘Novalis’), and Friedrich Schlegel—rejected the Cartesian legacy, which persisted through Kant and Fichte, of regarding reflective self-consciousness as the first principle of philosophy. Encountering Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* in the late 1790s, all three objected to his argument that the thinking subject posits itself in an empirically inaccessible act of ‘intellectual intuition’. The shared characteristics of their rethinking of thought included (1) anti-foundationalism, (2) an objection to subject–object dualism, (3) an assertion of the unknowability of the absolute, (4) an emphasis on unconsciousness, feeling, and aesthetic experience as integral components of thought, and (5) an insistence that philosophy requires poetry (broadly defined) as its complement. Hölderlin postulated the grounding of self-consciousness in an unconditioned state of Being which, being inaccessible to discursive reason, intimates itself to consciousness aesthetically—in beauty—and through self-negating metaphorical substitution. Novalis interpreted being as a constant oscillation between opposites and truth as an illusion projected by thought as its goal. For him, art, as self-consciously illusory, represents the illusoriness inherent in thought and thus achieves the self-transparency and wholeness that eludes reflective consciousness. Schlegel sought to incorporate groundlessness into philosophy itself with a ‘reciprocal proof’ (*Wechselerweis*), or constant alternation between opposing principles. The dynamic nature of thought and relational nature of truth requires historical self-awareness, which reveals philosophy’s perpetual incompleteness. Schlegel advocated a self-reflexivity he called ‘irony’, which manifests itself formally in prose fragments and poetic allegory, the latter representing the elusiveness of the absolute.

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### **1. Introduction**

In *The Life of the Mind* Hannah Arendt argued that although Kant, in distinguishing reason (*Vernunft*) from intellect or understanding (*Verstand*), had separated thinking from knowing and thereby liberated reason to think beyond the limits of the world given to the senses, he and subsequent German philosophers did not fully appreciate the implications of this

separation. Constrained by the philosophical tradition, Kant and his successors, Arendt maintained, demanded of reason the kind of results and evidence appropriate to cognition. Consequently they paid little ‘attention to thinking as an activity and even less to the experiences of [the] thinking ego’ (Arendt 1978: 15). Applied to the German early Romantic thinkers, however, this argument does not stand up. For early Romantic thought was nothing if not, as Walter Benjamin phrased it, ‘the thinking of thinking’ (2008: 29-30).<sup>1</sup>

Who were these ‘early Romantic thinkers’? Because *Romantic* and *Romanticism* have remained contested terms since their introduction at the beginning of the nineteenth century (see Halmi 2019), serving equally as typological and chronological designations, their use here calls for explanation. I use the terms narrowly, but with the sanction of custom, to refer to a philosophical tendency developed—largely in response to the teachings of Johann Gottlieb Fichte from 1794 to 1799—and represented principally by Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), Friedrich von Hardenberg (‘Novalis’, 1772–1801), and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829). For the purposes of the present chapter, the most salient characteristics of this Romantic tendency are (1) its anti-foundationalism, in particular its rejection of both Karl Leonhard Reinhold’s Kantian grounding of knowledge in the ‘fact of consciousness’ and Fichte’s grounding of knowledge in the subjective act of self-positing; (2) its desire to overcome the idealist legacy of the dualism of subject and object; (3) its recognition of the limits of discursive reason within the context of philosophical thought; (4) an emphasis on unconsciousness, feeling, and aesthetic experience as integral components of thought, and (5) its insistence that philosophy requires art as its complement.

Whether F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854), who taught philosophy at Jena from 1798 to 1803, should be included under the rubric of *Frühromantik*, early Romanticism, is a subject of debate (for example, Manfred Frank excludes him while Frederick Beiser admits him). I omit him from consideration both for lack of space and because he differed from the three Romantics discussed below in adhering to the aims and methods of systematic philosophy. Although, in his *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* (*System of Transcendental Idealism*, 1800), Schelling assigned uniquely to art the role of revealing the original identity and the constitutive interaction of consciousness and unconsciousness in human thought (1856-61: 3.619, 3.627–8), he conceived this function as fulfilling an essentially philosophical goal. Hence his description of art as ‘at once the only true and eternal instrument [*Organon*] and document of philosophy’, externalizing empirically what would otherwise remain confined to thought (1856-61: 3.627–8), and thereby effectively confirming philosophy’s indemonstrable first principle. Schelling thus instrumentalized art in a way that Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel did not, or would have not recognized themselves as doing, even as he insisted that it has no ulterior purpose (1856-61: 3.622). Moreover, while Schelling continued to occupy himself with aesthetics and art for several years after 1800, art lost in the new phase of his intellectual development the exalted position that it had occupied in the *System* (see Hammermeister 2002: 77–82).

## 2. Reflective Consciousness

First, some context for Romantic thinking about thinking. One might say, *pace* Arendt, that from Descartes to Kant philosophy was preoccupied precisely with the experiences of the thinking ego, insofar as self-consciousness was accepted to be the first principle of philosophy. Understood as reflection, thinking—prior to any any engagement with specific objects—is supposed to be grounded in a self-objectification whereby the self knows itself as a unity. This theory of self-consciousness, shared in its basics by otherwise diverse philosophers, assumes a thinking subject that ‘stands in a constant relationship to itself’ as a result of ‘the subject’s making itself into its own object’ (Henrich 1982: 19). But apart from its circularity, since the subject cannot claim to recognize itself in reflection without having a pre-reflective knowledge of itself (see Henrich 1982: 18–21), reflective self-consciousness entails a radical solipsism. Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum*, whereby the thinking self deduces its existence from the consciousness of its very act of thinking, answered his need for a principle beyond all epistemological doubt. But the existence thus affirmed, consisting purely in thinking (*res cogitans*) provided no foundation for a knowledge of anything outside the self (*res extensa*). Thus Descartes could guarantee the possibility of a knowledge of the world only by appealing to something transcending both the self and the world, a beneficent God, and this appeal depended on first demonstrating God’s existence. Kant criticized Descartes for confusing with the actual empirical self a possible self abstracted from the former (1900-97: 3.426-7, B423n), but he himself resolved the fundamental epistemological problem only to the extent of accepting its insolubility and asserting an even more uncompromising dualism between self and world than Descartes had. Because, he argued, objects of knowledge must conform to the conditions of knowledge—the forms of sensory representation and conceptual organization inherent to the human mind—we cannot claim to know objects as they are in themselves. So while the Cartesian subject is ‘a thinking substance isolated from the world’ (Kaulbach 1969: 159), the Kantian subject, as the transcendental unity of apperception, is confined to the world that it itself creates in thought.

In his exposition of Kant’s critical philosophy, Reinhold (1757-1823) argued that consciousness necessarily involves representations (*Vorstellungen*), and that in consciousness the thinking subject distinguishes representations both from the subject itself and from the objects represented (2007—: 1.128, 4.50). Fichte (1762-1814), who succeeded Reinhold as professor of philosophy at Jena in 1794, rejected this ‘principle of consciousness’ (*Satz des Bewußtseins*) as entailing an infinite regress, since the subject’s self-awareness of its representation would itself be a representation, which would presuppose yet another subject cognizant of *that* representation. He proposed to resolve the Kantian dualism of subject and object—the problem of unknowable things-in-themselves—firmly on the side of subjectivity, avoiding the regress he identified in Reinhold by postulating two kinds of consciousness: although self-consciousness remains for Fichte the condition on which the possibility of knowledge depends, the subject’s awareness of itself must be different in kind from its consciousness of objects. In other words, self-consciousness cannot be representational. Arguing that the self is not a ‘thing’ but an ‘act’

(*Thathandlung*), constituting itself by positing itself—that is, by thinking—Fichte interpreted self-consciousness, or ‘intellectual intuition’ (*intellektuelle Anschauung*), as inherent to thought, identifiable theoretically but not accessible experientially: ‘the philosopher finds this intellectual intuition not directly, as an isolated fact [*Factum*] of consciousness [...], but by distinguishing among what in ordinary consciousness occurs as unified and by reducing the whole to its component parts’ (1962-2012: 1/4.216–7; see also Neuhouser 79–86). Fichte remained within the Cartesian tradition insofar as his account of knowledge, like Kant’s, maintained the primacy of the mind itself. And his first principle of the self-positing subject, a principle elaborated in lectures and multiple published versions of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, or theory of knowledge, did not satisfy the early Romantics.

### 3. Hölderlin

Writing to his friend and former classmate Hegel in January 1795, having attended Fichte’s lectures the preceding November, Hölderlin accused Fichte of dogmatically reifying the self-positing subject, thus making it equivalent to Spinoza’s monistic concept of substance:

his absolute I [*absolutes Ich*] (= Spinoza’s substance) contains all reality; it is everything, and outside it is nothing; hence there is no object for this absolute I, for otherwise all reality would not be within it; however, a consciousness without an object is not conceivable, and if I myself am this object, then I am as such necessarily restricted, even if it were only in time, hence not absolute; thus no consciousness is conceivable within the absolute I; as absolute I I have no consciousness, and insofar as I have no consciousness I am (for myself) nothing, hence the absolute I is (for me) Nothing [*Nichts*] (Hölderlin 1942–88: 6/1.155)

In fact Hölderlin here misrepresented Fichte, who explicitly denied Spinoza’s grounding of ‘the unity of consciousness in a substance in which both the matter [...] and the form of the unity is necessarily determined’ (Fichte 1964-2012: 1/2.280-1, also 1/2.263-4). Although Fichte did not deny the existence of a world independent of thought, he maintained that there is no reality *for us* but that accessible to consciousness; and he rejected the Kantian thing-in-itself as a nonsense because to think of something at all it is to make it an object of consciousness (1964-2012: 1/2.368, 1/2.414-16). To that extent, Fichte was a more rigorous Kantian than Kant himself.

Nonetheless, Hölderlin’s letter to Hegel expressed what was to be one of the early Romantics’ central contentions with Fichte’s ‘critical idealism’: the impossibility of identifying consciousness with the absolute. Although the Romantics agreed with Fichte that the possibility of self-consciousness requires the primordial identity of subject and object, they argued against him that this identity cannot obtain within self-consciousness itself since all consciousness implies a distinction between subject and object: in consciousness one is always conscious *of* something. Thus self-consciousness cannot be self-grounding—i.e., a first principle—but must be grounded in something transcending it. To be

absolute, the subject can have no consciousness; to have consciousness, the subject cannot be absolute. But Fichte, Hölderlin objected to Hegel, wanted it both ways.

In the early 1790s Hölderlin recorded in notes on F. H. Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinoza (On Spinoza's Doctrine, 1785)* an observation made by G. E. Lessing, an exemplary figure of the German Enlightenment, to Jacobi: 'Lessing objects that it is among human prejudices to consider thought [*Gedanken*] the first and noblest thing and to want to derive everything from it, given that everything, including representations [*Vorstellungen*] depends on higher principles' (1943–85: 4/1.208). It was exactly this prejudice—what Wilhelm Dilthey called the 'absolutism of thought' (1914: 227)—to which Hölderlin himself would object in Fichte's critical idealism in 1795, both explicitly in his letter to Hegel and implicitly in a fragmentary essay written on a blank leaf possibly detached from his copy of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In the latter, which his editor titled 'Urtheil und Seyn' ('Judgement and Being'), Hölderlin identified intellectual intuition not with self-consciousness but with 'Being' (*Seyn*) as the only condition in which subject and object are 'united in such a way that no separation can be performed without violating the essence of what is to be separated' (1943–85: 4/1.216). The identity of subject with object in the subject's self-positing, to which Fichte gave the formal expression 'I am I', is merely a qualified identity, according to Hölderlin, because it presupposes a prior distinction between subject and object: 'How is self-conscious possible? By opposing myself to myself, separating myself from myself, yet recognizing myself as the same in the opposed [*im entgegengesetzten als dasselbe*] regardless of this separation' (1943–85: 4/1.217). There is no absolute subject, therefore, only absolute Being.

If Being is necessarily unconditioned and undivided, and consciousness is necessarily conditioned and involves division—as Hölderlin emphasizes in his fragment by breaking the word *Urtheil*, 'judgement', down into its constituent parts, *Ur* ('original') and *Theilung* ('division'), and explicating it as 'that separation through which object and subject first become possible' (1943–85: 4/1.216)—then on what basis can Being be postulated? By definition it cannot, as the ground of the possibility of consciousness, be directly known. If Being's status is merely regulative, a necessary assumption like the thing-in-itself for Kant, philosophy remains trapped within subjectivism. If its status is constitutive, granted reality like the monistic substance for Spinoza, philosophy risks succumbing to metaphysical dogmatism. Hölderlin's response to this dilemma—which in my view did not avoid dogmatic claims for Being—was twofold. First, he reinterpreted intellectual intuition to be not only the primordial unity of subject and object but, as he explained in February 1796 to his friend Friedrich Niethammer, the capacity somehow to apprehend that unity, thus making 'the conflict between subject and object, between our self [*unserem Selbst*] and the world, even indeed between reason and revelation disappear' (1943–85: 6/1.203). Second, he transferred the question of Being from the philosophical to the aesthetic arena: envisioning a series of 'philosophical letters' on the model of Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen (On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 1795)*, Hölderlin insisted to Niethammer that this aspect of intellectual intuition required of us an 'aesthetic sense' (*ästhetischer*

*Sinn*), and that his letters would accordingly ‘move from philosophy to poetry and religion’ (1943–85: 6/1.203).

Terry Pinkard summarizes well the implied argument behind Hölderlin’s conception of the restorative power of intellectual intuition: ‘Since all consciousness requires a judgmental articulation of this pre-reflexive unity of “being” [...] we are, as it were, intuitively aware of this unity of “being” in our consciousness of the world, and it remains a presence in our conscious lives, holding out the promise of a restored unity of the divisions that occur as necessary conditions of our leading self-conscious lives at all’ (2002: 142). But it is significant that Hölderlin chose to pursue this line of thought literarily rather than philosophically—the letters proposed in the letter to Niethammer never materialized—representing the human relation to Being figuratively in his poetry and his epistolary novel *Hyperion*. Dieter Henrich has argued that ‘philosophy was crucial for [Hölderlin], but did not hold out the promise of fulfilling his own nature, which was bound up with the vocation of a poet’ (1997: 69). This is doubtless true, but I would add that poetry offered him what philosophy could not, the prospect of articulating a conscious, albeit indirect, access to Being.

Whereas the intermediate metrical version of *Hyperion*, composed in Jena in November 1794 to January 1795, centres on the Fichtean themes of self-consciousness and the opposition of the self to the non-self of nature, the penultimate and final prose versions, composed between August 1795 and January 1797, represent the eponymous narrator’s ‘eccentric’ life as a succession of losses—of friends and his beloved Diotima, of his hopes for the liberation of Greece from Ottoman rule. Standing on Acrocorinth, overlooking the isthmus that connects the Peloponnese to mainland Greece—an isthmus symbolizing the divisions, ‘with the tantalizing possibility of reintegration, that characterize human experience’ (Davis 2018: 16)—Hyperion sees in the landscape an intimation of that oneness which eludes him in life: ‘My whole being [*Wesen*] falls silent and listens when the gentle ripple of the breeze plays about my breast. Lost in the wide blueness, I often look up into the aether and out into the blessed sea, and it’s as if a kindred spirit opened its arms to me, as if the pain of solitude were dissolved into the life of the godhead [*Gottheit*]. To be one with all, that is the life of the godhead, that is the heaven of man’ (Hölderlin 1943-85: 3.8-9). In the preface to the penultimate version, omitted from the published version, Hölderlin stated explicitly this conception of life as a necessary fall into strife—self-consciousness and the division between subject and object—and an endless striving to ‘restore the peace of all peace that surpasses all reason, to unite ourselves with nature in a single infinite whole’ (1943-85: 3.236). While conceding that ‘neither our knowledge nor our action’ can ever attain to that point ‘where all strife ceases’—‘Being in the exclusive sense of the word’ (a phrase used three times in the preface)—Hölderlin nonetheless insisted that we would have no premonition of it, and hence no self-consciousness and no goal to our striving, if it were not already present (1943-85: 3.237). How is this so? Possibly encouraged by Kant’s argument in the third *Critique* that beauty can symbolize morality through ‘aesthetic ideas’, in which the ideas of practical reason are presented sensuously ‘with the appearance of an

objective reality' (1900-97: 5.314, §49), Hölderlin concluded his preface with the lapidary formulation that Being 'is present—as beauty'.

Several implications of this conclusion should be noted. First, although the *concept* of intellectual intuition is accessible to discursive reason, the *experience* of it is not. Second, because that experience is necessarily unconscious and non-temporal, it can accommodate itself to consciousness only aesthetically, by negating itself through metaphorical substitution—spatially as symbol, temporally as absence. (In Hölderlin's novel one of these symbols is an idealized ancient Greece whose ruins, the testament to a lost wholeness, mark the landscape that Hyperion contemplates from the height of Acrocorinth [Davis 2018: 33].) Third, an innate human capacity to appreciate beauty is the very confirmation of that unified Being which discloses its presence through beauty. The circularity of this thought is evident, although Hölderlin sought to elide it by suggesting 'that aesthetic sense is immune from doubt because the skeptic himself presupposes it' (Beiser 2002: 386): 'Believe me', Hyperion writes, 'the sceptic finds contradictions and flaws in all that is thought only because he knows the harmony of the flawless beauty that is never thought' (1943-85: 3.81). What is at issue here, however, is not the validity of Hölderlin's position but its challenge to a philosophical tradition predicated on the primacy of reflective self-consciousness. Philosophy must negate itself in a sense, by incorporating the aesthetic and accommodating the unconscious, if it is to come to terms with Being. Asked what philosophy has to do with poetry, Hyperion answers, 'Poetry [*Dichtung*] [...] is the beginning and end of this science. Like Minerva from Jupiter's head, it springs from the poetry of an infinite divine Being' (1943-85: 3.81).

#### 4. Novalis

In the autumn of 1795 another friend of Niethammer, Friedrich von Hardenberg, began to formulate his own critique of Fichte's critical idealism in a series of notes to which his twentieth-century editors gave the title *Fichte-Studien*. Hardenberg, who was to adopt the pseudonym Novalis, had studied under Reinhold in Jena in 1790-91 and had been introduced to Fichte and Hölderlin while visiting Niethammer, who taught philosophy at Jena, in May 1795. But nothing of that meeting—the only one between the two poets—is known except from Niethammer's laconic diary entry: 'much spoken about religion and revelation and that for philosophy many questions remain open' (Novalis 1975-88: 4.588). Because his philosophical reflections took the form primarily of aphorisms and fragments, Novalis's texts 'belong to the most difficult of German philosophy' (Frank 1989: 248); and constructions of a systematic programme out of them are as misguided as dismissals of them as the disconnected ruminations of an essentially mystical poet. His various manuscript collections of notes, posthumously reassembled and edited, represent not failed attempts at systematicity but appropriate expressions of his rejection of the possibility of systematicity, in the sense of a complete and self-consistent discursive exposition of reality. If in the *Fichte-Studien* his concerns were fundamentally epistemological, in that he did not attribute to the absolute the ontological status that Hölderlin did—or at least did not do so

unambiguously—Novalis’s critique of the *Wissenschaftslehre* nonetheless developed along lines similar to Hölderlin’s, both in asserting the cognitive limits of reflective consciousness and in assigning poetry (broadly conceived) a crucial function in relation to philosophy.

Novalis shared with Hölderlin an understanding of consciousness as necessarily involving division. Because, he argued, the ‘absolute I’ (*absolutes Ich*) or ‘pure I’ (*reines Ich*) becomes an empirical subject only in relation to an object (Novalis 1975-88: 2.131, no. 41), it must oppose itself in order to become conscious of itself: ‘The I is conceivable only through a *Not-I* [*Nichtich*]. An I is indeed an I only insofar as it is a Not-I—it could be whatever else it wanted, but it wouldn’t be an I’ (1975-88: 2.268, no. 562). Self-consciousness therefore presupposes the separation of the self into subject and object: ‘The I must be divided to become itself’ (1975-88: 2.127, no. 32). Thought can never be fully transparent to itself, as in the Fichtean model of intellectual intuition, because the subject, being constitutionally self-opposing, can never coincide with itself. This disjunction betrays itself in Fichte’s very statement of identity, ‘A is A’, which as the *representation* of the absolute necessarily divides the undivided into two: ‘The essence of identity can be presented only in an *illusory proposition* [*Scheinsatz*]. We abandon the *identical* in order to present it [*um es darzustellen*]’ (1975-88: 2.104, no. 1). Novalis thus not only rejected Fichte’s self-positing absolute subject as infinitely regressive—‘Has Fichte not too arbitrarily packed everything into the I? with what warrant? Can an I posit itself as I without another I or Not-I’ (1975-88: 2.107, no. 5)—but proclaimed the very hope of identifying an absolute grounding of philosophy, a self-evident first principle, to be futile: ‘All seeking after a *single principle* [*nach Einem Princip*] would be like an attempt to find the square of a circle’ (1975-88: 2.270, no. 566).

Interpreting Novalis’s assessment of the role of philosophy is complicated by the fact that he defined it, in the much-cited entry 566 of the *Fichte-Studien*, by a task that he considered unachievable:

Philosophy must be a unique kind of thinking. What do I do by philosophizing? I reflect upon a ground. Philosophizing is thus grounded in a striving for the thought of a ground [*liegt also ein Streben nach dem Denken eines Grundes zu Grunde*]. [...] All philosophizing must therefore culminate with an absolute ground. Now if this were not given [*nicht gegeben wäre*], if this concept contained an impossibility—then the drive to philosophize would be an unending activity—and hence without end, because there would be an eternal need for an absolute ground, a need that could be satisfied only relatively—and hence would never cease. (1975-88: 2.269)

Although the conditional mood of the verbs in the last sentence quoted suggests that Novalis at least entertained the possibility that an undivided, prereflective state of being was not merely a regulative idea—‘a *necessary fiction*’ (1975-88: 2.179: no. 234)—but, as for Hölderlin, an ontological reality, the succeeding sentences of entry 566, as well as statements elsewhere in the *Fichte-Studien*, emphasize the inaccessibility of this absolute to

consciousness. To the extent that the absolute is thought of as a ‘pure’ state, ‘what is neither related nor relatable’, it is an ‘an empty concept—i.e., a concept to which no intuition corresponds—neither possible nor real nor necessary’, and therefore ‘a deception [*Täuschung*] of the imagination’ (1975-88: 2.179, no. 234). Shifting from the conditional to the indicative mood in entry 566, Novalis redefined philosophical striving in positive terms, consonant with human reality: ‘Through the voluntary renunciation of the absolute arises unending free activity [*unendliche freye Thätigkeit*] in us—the only possible absolute that can be given to us and that we find only through our inability to attain and know an absolute’ (1975-88: 2.269-70). Striving in thought itself becomes the manifestation of the absolute to thought.

In a formulation that was to be echoed by his friend Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis asserted that ‘the authentic philosophical system’, by virtue of its free and endless activity, ‘must systematize systemlessness [*Systemlosigkeit, in ein System gebracht, seyn*]’ (1975-88: 2.289, no. 648; c.f. Schlegel 1958-: 2.173, fr. 53). Dispensing with the Fichtean first principle of intellectual intuition as the primordial identity of subject and object, Novalis thematized instead unresolvable opposition itself. Rather as Hölderlin’s Hyperion interpreted the course of his life, Novalis interpreted being, at least as far as human experience was concerned, not as stasis but as constant movement between opposites. But for him, unlike for Hölderlin, this was not a cause for lament. Hence his paradoxical definitions of freedom and harmony: ‘All being, being in general is nothing but being free [*Freyseyn*]—oscillation [*Schweben*] between extremes, which are necessarily to be united and necessarily to be separated. All reality streams from this point of light of oscillation—everything is contained in it [...] for oscillation [...] is the source, the mother of all reality, [is] reality itself’ (1975-88: 2.266, no. 555). Just as unconscious feeling and conscious reflection are at once opposed and mutually dependent, since the former gives form to the latter and the latter gives content to the former (1975-88: 2.113-14, no. 15), so are truth and illusion, for exactly the same reason: ‘Illusion gets its material [*Stoff*] from truth, truth its form from illusion’ (1975-88: 2.181, no. 234). As Alexander Schlutz summarizes Novalis’s argument, ‘We can only have access to truth—the pure a priori form of absolute self-consciousness—in the form of an illusion, the incomplete half (“das Halbe”) or fracture (“der Bruch”) that constitutes our empirical consciousness’ (2009: 166). Because the absolute or ‘pure I’ is only an object of longing for us—a projection of the imagination—and never an object of experience, it is not the whole from which subject and object are divided, but on the contrary is itself ‘only a part’. Its very ‘self-sufficiency’, as a regulative idea, prevents it from being a whole with respect to the empirical subject (1975-88: 2.138: no. 49).

‘Illusion [*Der Schein*] in our knowledge’, Novalis insisted, ‘consists in the elevation of the half to the whole—or in the halving of the indivisible’. To that extent ‘all thinking is an art of illusion [*eine Kunst des Scheins*]’ (1975-88: 2.180-1, no. 234). But in contrast to the philosopher’s dream of the absolute, a whole that is accessible to the empirical subject is the work of deliberately created illusion: art. Novalis’s remarks on art in the *Fichte-Studien* are mostly brief and cryptic, but in one passage he strikingly appropriates Fichte’s concept

of the subject's self-positing and combines it with his own concept of philosophical striving in order to characterize the artist's creative activity:

If there is a particular presentational power [*darstellende Kraft*]*—*which presents merely for the sake of presenting*—*then presenting for the sake of presenting is a *free* presenting [*ein Freyes Darstellen*]. This is only to suggest that not the object as such but *the I*, as the cause [*Grund*] of the activity, should determine the activity. The work of art thereby acquires a free, autonomous, ideal character*—*an imposing spirit*—*for it is a *visible* product of an I*—*the I however posits itself specifically in this way because it posits itself as an infinite I [*ein unendliches Ich*]*—*because it must posit itself as an infinitely presenting I [*ein unendlich darstellendes Ich*], it posits itself as a specifically presenting I (1975-88: 2.282-3, no. 633, Novalis's emphases).

The implication is that artistic creation, as the voluntary and unmotivated act of the subject's presentational faculty, serves as an empirical model of that self-positing which, in the Fichtean account of intellectual intuition, remains a philosophical fiction. Art is the illusion that knows itself to be such and presents the illusoriness inherent in all thought to the empirical subject, thus achieving a self-transparency that necessarily eludes reflective consciousness. Novalis accordingly underscored the subjective contribution to art. The totality embodied in the artwork is due not to its content but to the very act of its creation: 'The object ought to be only the seed, the type, the anchor*—*the formative power [*bildende Kraft*] creatively develops the beautiful whole [*das schöne Gantze*] with, in, and through it' (1975-88: 2.282, no. 633). Art's acceptance of its groundlessness in a philosophical sense is precisely what enables it to form a totality.

Novalis's sense of what he called *Poësie*, referring to all kinds of art, as a complement to philosophy, offering an empirical representation of thought itself, was to be expressed more explicitly in notes of 1799-1800. Here he defined poetry on the one hand as 'true idealism*—*contemplation of the world, as contemplation of a *vast mind—*self-consciousness of the universe', and on the other hand as the '*presentation of the mind—*of the *inner world in its totality*', something already intimated for him in the fact that poetry's medium of words 'are the external revelation of this internal faculty [*Kraftreich*]' (1975-88: 3.640, 3.650, nos. 513, 553). If poetry is externalized thought, then thought in its turn is internalized poetry, the mind's formative power connecting things in unexpected ways to create new wholes, as Novalis elaborated in a later note, from the autumn of 1800, within the same collection: 'curious unities and peculiar connections emerge*—*and one thing [*Eins*] reminds us of everything*—*becomes the sign of many things and is itself signified and summoned up by many things. Intellect [*Verstand*] and imagination [*Fantasie*] are united through time and space in the strangest way and one can say that each thought, each phenomenon of our mind is the most individual [*individuellste*] part of a thoroughly individual [*eigenthümlichen*] whole' (1975-88: 3.650-1, no. 559). Like Hölderlin, Novalis conceived poetry and philosophy as reciprocally and productively related, poetry offering

the empirical presentation of an ideal unity through which philosophy's 'goal and meaning' are realized aesthetically (1975-88: 3.533, no. 31), and philosophy providing the '*theory of poetry*' through which poetry's achievement and value are comprehended conceptually (1975-88: 3.590-1, no. 280, Novalis's emphasis). For that reason he regarded the separation between the poet and the thinker to be, as he put it in a note of November or December 1798, 'only apparent [*nur scheinbar*]'—and to the disadvantage of both' (1975-88: 3.406, no. 717; see also 2.531, no. 29).

### 5. Friedrich Schlegel

In a letter of June 1797, Novalis thanked Friedrich Schlegel for assisting him to find his way through Fichte's abstractions and to resist the 'magic' of that 'most dangerous of thinkers' (1975-88: 4.230). It is likely, however, that Novalis himself had helped stimulate Schlegel's criticisms, which were formulated in 1796-98 after a year of publicly expressed admiration for Fichte's foundationalist philosophy and republican politics (Beiser 2002: 437-39). That in 1798, in his periodical *Athenaeum*, Schlegel could still proclaim the *Wissenschaftslehre* one of three 'greatest tendencies of the age' (along with the French Revolution and Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*) should not be mistaken as specific endorsement of its content: as he explained in the periodical's final issue, he meant simply that idealism is a focal point of German culture (1958-: 2.198, 2.366). Although Schlegel's philosophical development cannot be reconstructed fully since six of his notebooks from this period are lost (1958-: 18.XLIV), it is evident from his surviving writings that, like Novalis, he came to criticize a reliance on a first principle and to recognize in poetry (very broadly understood) a necessary counterpart to philosophy. Already on 30 January 1797 Schlegel remarked in a letter that he had 'decisively separated himself' from the *Wissenschaftslehre*, although his personal friendship with Fichte remained strong (1958-: 23.343). Manfred Frank credits Hölderlin and Schlegel with being among 'the first to draw aesthetic consequences from the fact that the Absolute transcended reflection' (2004: 177); but Schlegel also sought, in a more radically sceptical manner than Hölderlin or Novalis, to accommodate philosophy to this condition by incorporating groundlessness into its very methodology.

As with Novalis, Schlegel's engagement with Fichte's thought presents interpretive challenges because it takes the form primarily of fragmentary notes. But these notes, begun after Schlegel's arrival in Jena in August 1796 and continued after his relocation to Berlin the following July, taken together with two published reviews from the period, allow at least the outline of a consistent critique of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to be discerned. Schlegel accepted that 'the specific form of our thinking is *reflection*', and that the essence of a critical philosophy like Fichte's is 'reflection on reflection' (1958-: 18.179, no. 643; 18.320, no. 1541). But the *Wissenschaftslehre*, he insisted, is insufficiently critical (1958-: 18.8-9, no. 52; 18.31, no. 134; 18.47, no. 288), for it falls into dogmatism or 'mysticism' by reifying the transcendental subject and asserting a first principle—the unity of subject and object in the act of self-positing—that is incompatible with the conditions of knowledge (18.12, no. 52; 18.31, no. 135; 18.511, no. 64; 18.512, no. 71). Fichte's concept of intellectual intuition

assumes what Schlegel described in a notebook of 1800 as ‘potentialized reflection—a consciousness in consciousness, as it were residing one floor below’ (1958-: 18.414, no. 1116), and in a review of Niethammer’s *Philosophisches Journal* of 1797 as ‘the totalization of reflexive abstraction [*reflexen Abstraktion*], a self-construction bound up with observation, the inner free intuition of selfhood [*Ichheit*], of self-positing, of the identity of subject and object’ (1958-: 8.28). The *Wissenschaftslehre* is thus ‘religion in the form of philosophy’, conferring on reflection the power ‘to go in all directions to the infinite’ (1958-: 18.250, nos. 679, 682; c.f. 18.39, nos. 224-25).

From Schlegel’s perspective, then, Fichte’s critical idealism rests on two fundamental and closely related errors. First, it confuses the transcendental, in Kant’s sense of a concern with the conditions rather than the objects of knowledge (see Kant 1900-97: 3.25, B27), with the transcendent, and thus substitutes for the empirical subject an ideal one that must be accepted on faith. Secondly, it postulates an unconditioned absolute in defiance of the fact that our knowledge is always conditioned: ‘Knowing [*Erkennen*] designates a *conditioned* knowledge [*Wissen*]. The unknowability of the absolute is therefore a tautological triviality [*identische Trivialität*’ (1958-: 18.511, no. 64). Since Fichte’s unconditioned first principle is the basis of his explanation of consciousness, it is not susceptible of explanation within the terms of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Despite being more thoroughly idealist than previous philosophical systems, by virtue of trying to derive everything from the thinking subject, Fichte’s compromises its claims to knowledge by dogmatically objectifying its ground—that is, by treating an epistemologically necessary assumption as an ontological reality. Like the child pointing out the emperor’s nakedness, Schlegel, in a lecture series given in Cologne in 1804-5, declared Fichte’s ‘absolute I’ to be no more than an ‘empty illusion’ (*leerer Schein*) (1958-: 12.147-49). From his formula ‘A = A’ one could just as easily conclude that the Not-I posits itself (1958-: 18.510, no. 51).

The essential issue, as Schlegel explained in the Cologne lectures, is that no philosophy can attain a positive knowledge of the absolute or infinite: ‘The cognition [*Erkenntnis*] of an infinite object is, *like the object itself, infinite*, and can never be completed, never be fully expressed in precise terms, never enclosed and comprehended within the narrow boundaries of a system’. Insofar as philosophy, in contrast to poetry, seeks to define and explain the infinite, its task is necessarily interminable: ‘it is actually more a *seeking, striving* towards a science [*Wissenschaft*] than a science itself; (1958-: 12.165-6; Schlegel’s emphases). In a completed philosophy all concepts would be transcendent and all propositions identical (1958-: 18.420, no. 1199), hence inexpressible. For Schlegel, the unattainability of its goal was not an obstacle but the very condition of the possibility of philosophy: ‘we do not want and are not able to absolutely to complete philosophy’ (1958-: 12.104). But how can philosophy proceed if it can neither begin from nor end at the unconditioned?

In his Spinoza book Jacobi had argued that philosophy, if consistently rationalistic (in assuming the universal applicability of the principle of sufficient reason), must be fatalistic and atheistic, and if inconsistently rationalistic (in assuming an unprovable first principle),

must subordinate itself to religious faith. Schlegel addressed the second of these points towards the end of his review of Jacobi's philosophical novel *Woldemar* (1796). While conceding with Jacobi that a philosophy founded on a first principle is infinitely regressive because 'every proof presupposes something already proved', Schlegel added that this is true of those thinkers who begin with a *single* proof. But there is, he suggested, another way of proceeding: 'what if an externally unconditioned but mutually conditioned and self-conditioning reciprocal proof [*Wechselerweis*] were the ground of philosophy?' (1958: 2.72).<sup>2</sup>

Developed most likely out of the concept of 'reciprocal interaction' (*Wechselwirkung*) or reciprocal determination in Kant, who applied it to the relationship between members of a community (1900-97: 3.100, 106, 111, B100, 106, 111; also 5.66), and in Fichte himself, who applied it to the relationship between the I and the not-I (1962-2012: 1/2.290-314), the *Wechselerweis* was meant not as a formal proof but as a plurality of principles replacing a first principle. (In notes on Fichte from 1797-98, Schlegel also used the term *Wechselgrundsatz*, 'reciprocal principle' [1958-: 18.36, no. 193].) Whereas the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Schlegel maintained, is defined by its object, namely the relation between I and Not-I in the self-positing subject, 'philosophy in the true sense has neither a first principle [*Grundsatz*] nor an object [*Gegenstand*] nor a determinate task' (1958-: 18.7, no. 36). On this basis, then, he differentiated his thought from Fichte's: 'In my system the ultimate ground is really a *Wechselerweis*. In Fichte's a postulate [*Postulat*] and an unconditioned proposition [*unbedingter Satz*]' (1958-: 18.521, no. 22). Philosophy was to be understood as consisting not in a linear series of deductions from an original principle, but as a circle in which all propositions are connected to one another (1958-: 18.518, no. 16). In the absence of a fixed originary principle, philosophical thought could begin with any proposition, for which reason Schlegel compared it (in a notebook and again in the *Athenaeum*) to epic poetry, beginning *in medias res* (1958-: 18.518, no. 16; 2.178, fr. 84).

Abandoning, by means of the *Wechselerweis*, the traditional standard of truth as correspondence to an external reality for one of internal coherence, 'the mutual support of propositions in a whole' (Beiser 2002: 446; c.f. Redding 2009: 122-4), permitted Schlegel to recuperate the absolute or infinite as a goal to which knowledge always strives, rather than an unknowable principle on which knowledge is assumed to depend. In his Cologne lectures Schlegel explained the relation between finite and finite as follows. Although philosophy may proceed from an intuition of the self, because that seems to be the one thing of which we can be certain, this intuition does not provide knowledge. When we try to fix the intuited self as an object of knowledge, it vanishes from view: 'soul, life disappears and leaves behind only the dead, empty husk; what is supposed to be intuited here is something infinitely fluid, moving' (1958-: 12.330). Thus self-consciousness or 'self-feeling' (*Selbstgefühl*)—Schlegel uses the terms synonymously—offers only 'the certainty of something *incomprehensible* [*eines Unbegreiflichen*]' (1958-: 12.333-4; Schlegel's emphasis). On account of its elusiveness, 'the entire self' (*das ganze Ich*) seems infinite to us, like the world, the heavens, and divinity—but this idea of infinity resides within us and

does not come from outside us. Human thought is accordingly conditioned by the contradiction between ‘this infiniteness that we find within ourselves’ and our sense of the finiteness of life (1958-: 12.334). Hence the *Wechselerweis* as alternating principles of finitude and infinitude. Although this so-called proof recalls Novalis’s conception of being as oscillation, and indeed Schlegel wrote the review of *Woldemar*, in which he first proposed the *Wechselerweis*, while visiting his friend from 29 July to 6 August 1796 (Behler 1996: 386), he rejected the gerund *Sein* in favour of *Werden*, ‘becoming’, to emphasize the constant movement of thought: ‘a developing [*werdendes*] finite, which lacks all being, is absolutely mobile and mutable and therefore, in its intensive activity and manifoldness, infinite’ (1958-: 12.335).

What followed for Schlegel from the dynamic nature of consciousness, as he elaborated in lectures of 1800-1 in Jena, where he briefly taught philosophy after Fichte’s departure, was that ‘truth is relative’ and philosophy is historical (1958-: 12.92–3). By the first claim he meant that because knowledge is always conditioned, and its pursuit can proceed ad infinitum, truth for us is necessarily *relational*. Truths are articulated, that is, in reference to a postulated whole—the infinite—which is itself inaccessible to consciousness: ‘One can understand everything only through and in the whole; this is only another expression of the statement, *all truth is relative*’ (1958-: 12.94). Thought consists in ceaseless activity precisely because it cannot attain to absolute truth, a state in which all propositions would coincide and nothing would be left to know or say. Thus, Schlegel exhorted his audience, ‘we can commit ourselves with boldness and hope to speculation’, for ‘every discovery [*Erfindung*] is a further development [*Entwicklung*] of a never completed truth’ (1958-: 12.93, 12.103).

Because truth is relational and its method of determination is combinatorial, thought occurs not in a transcendental vacuum but in an empirical context. To understand the dynamic process of thought, and its own place within that process, philosophy must be historical in a sense that Schlegel, in his review of the *Philosophisches Journal*, illustrated by analogy to the practice of natural historians, who seek to elucidate ‘the inner basis’ (*der innere Grund*)—that is, the organizational principles—of phenomena. Natural historians recognize that organisms do not merely exist as complete systems but develop in time and must therefore be studied diachronically as well as synchronically, so that ‘the tendency of their path and the indications of their striving’ can be grasped and described (1958: 8.31-32). Philosophical systems, too, are formed as parts of a larger process that is always developing—that is, even systematic thought occurs within an historical context—and in this respect philosophy is itself historical: ‘Every combinatorial and genetic method is also *historical*’ (1958-: 12.103; Schlegel’s emphasis). (In a letter of September 1796, Schlegel reported exasperatedly that Fichte had said ‘he would rather count peas than study history’ [1958-: 23.333].) In accordance with his insistence that philosophy must acknowledge its historicity, and hence the provisionality of any given system, Schlegel offered in his Jena lectures an outline of the history of philosophy as a series of epochs with dominant characteristics, from ‘sensation’, ‘intuition’, and ‘representation’ in the past to ‘insight’

(dogmatism) and ‘reason’ (idealism) in the present and an envisioned epoch of ‘understanding’ (1958-: 12.11–17). Later, in the Cologne lectures, he sought to explain in greater detail, under the rubric ‘Historical Character of Philosophy According to Its Successive Development’, ‘the emergence of different kinds of philosophy from the different *ways of thinking* [*Denkart*] that underlie them’ and the relations of one system to another (1958-: 12.163; Schlegel’s emphasis).

Schlegel’s contention that philosophy ‘should be thoroughly historical’, adopting an historical perspective in order to comprehend its own development, was consistent with the argument he had already advanced in an essay of 1795-96, ‘On the Value of Studying the Greeks and Romans’ (‘Vom Werth des Studiums der Griechen und Römer’), which was clearly influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder’s historicism (Behler 1990: 250-2). Characterizing the human condition as a product of the conflict between nature and freedom, the former always limiting the latter, Schlegel observed that previous attempts at general histories of the human species had lacked an organizational principle that would ‘satisfy theoretical reason no less than practical reason without offending the rights of the understanding or violating the facts of experience’ (1958: 1.626-27, 1.629). Our understanding of history must be beholden neither retrospectively to a ‘lofty prototype’ in the past nor teleologically to a ‘higher goal’ in the future, for each individual has his own purpose and each age its own value (1958-: 1.640).<sup>3</sup> Because systems of thought are always necessarily incomplete and continuously developing, there is no inherent conflict between the demands of systematicity and those of historical awareness. On the contrary, Schlegel stated in a note of 1797, ‘As soon as philosophy becomes a science [*Wissenschaft*], there is history. Every system is historical and vice versa’ (1958-: 18.85, no. 671; c.f. 18.7, no. 37). If philosophy’s goal is knowledge of the absolute, history’s is that of all individuals (1958-: 18.90, no. 728), and the perfect system would comprehend the absolute and the individual equally—but no system can be perfect under the conditions of life.

By historicizing itself, philosophy becomes conscious of the disjunction between the finiteness of what it can comprehend and the infiniteness what it seeks to comprehend. The paradox by which we strive to approach the truth that we recognize we cannot reach constitutes what Schlegel famously characterized as irony. In a ‘Critical Fragment’ he published in the journal *Lyceum* in 1797, Schlegel described irony as entailing ‘a feeling of an indissoluble conflict of the unconditioned and the conditioned, of the impossibility and necessity of a complete communication’ (1958-: 2.160, fr. 108; also 2.368). Exactly because it understands every perspective to be limited, every concept to be conditioned, and every system to be incomplete, philosophy requires the regulative ideal of complete communication. In that respect philosophy is, as Schlegel put it in another *Lyceum* fragment, ‘the true home of irony’ (1958-: 2.152, fr. 42). Formally, fragments that present themselves as such, as Schlegel’s in the *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* do, are an expression of irony: statements that simultaneously call attention to their incompleteness while implying the existence of a larger whole (see Behler 1993: 141-53). In the same fragment 42, however, Schlegel raised the issue of the relation of poetry to philosophy when, referring to discursive

manifestations of irony, he insisted that ‘poetry [*Poesie*] alone can also rise to the height of philosophy’ because its irony, unlike that of rhetoric, is pervasive rather than limited to isolated passages.

That Schlegel endorsed, under the name of irony, self-reflexiveness in poetry no less than in philosophy, so that poetry would be ‘the poetry of poetry’ just as philosophy would be (to recall Benjamin’s phrase) the thinking of thinking (Schlegel 1958-: 2.204, fr. 238), led Ernst Behler to declare flatly that the theorist ‘abolished the distinction between philosophy and poetry’ (1993: 139). To be sure, Schlegel envisioned an eventual fusion of the two and lamented that ‘even the most universal, accomplished [existing] works of isolated poetry and philosophy seem to lack this final synthesis’ (1958-: 2.255, fr. 451). But in *Athenaeum* fragment 238, which Behler adduced on account of its describing a ‘transcendental poetry’ (*Transzendentalpoesie*) whose essence consists in ‘the relation between the ideal and real’, Schlegel himself conceded only an *analogy* to philosophy: just as we would not much value a transcendental philosophy that did not reflect critically upon itself, so too we should expect modern poetry to incorporate ‘materials and preliminaries for a poetic theory of the poetic power [*einer poetischen Theorie des Dichtungsvermögens*]’. This is a fusion of poetry not with philosophy but with literary theory. Maïke Oergel’s argument that poetry was for Schlegel ‘the supreme medium of human understanding’, while philosophy was supposed to serve as ‘a theoretical preparation’ for the poet’s attainment of critical self-distance (2006: 80-1), seems to me correct. Such self-distance gives ‘romantic poetry’, as Schlegel famously defined it in *Athenaeum* fragment 116, its radical open-endedness, hovering ‘on the wings of poetic reflection ‘between the represented and the representing’, raising reflection continually to a higher power and multiplying ‘it as in an endless series of mirrors’ (1958-: 2.182-3). In its dynamic method poetic reflection certainly resembles the *Wechselerweis* of philosophical reflection, but its purpose is fundamentally different, even if it too must contend with the incomprehensibility of the absolute to the human mind.

Whereas philosophy seeks to know, poetry seeks to represent. But Schlegel was unequivocal that the need for the latter arises from the limitations of the former: ‘Where philosophy ceases, poetry must begin. [...] One should oppose to philosophy not merely unphilosophy [*Unphilosophie*] but poetry’ (1958-: 2.261, fr. 48). Like Hölderlin and Novalis, then, Schlegel conceived *Poesie* (i.e., art in general) as complementing philosophy. In a lecture of 1807 he emphasized that the necessity of poetry derived from philosophy’s inability to represent the infinite (1958-: 15/2.72). And in notes of 1804 he stated more specifically that ‘the impossibility of reaching the highest [*das Höchste*] positively through [philosophical] reflection leads to allegory’ (1958-: 19.25, no. 227). Why allegory? Because the absolute can no more be represented directly than it can be known: ‘all beauty is allegory. One can speak of the highest only allegorically precisely because it is inexpressible’ (1958-: 2.324). Irony manifests itself in art as allegory, a self-consciously disjunctive mode of representation that conveys a sense of something absent by means of something present, supersensible ideas by means of sensible images. Allegory is indirection.

For Schlegel, as for Hölderlin and Novalis but not Schelling (1856-61: 3.627), what art represents is not the absolute itself but its elusiveness: the predicament of our relation, as finite beings in historically specific conditions, to the infinite. The ‘progressive, universal poetry’ described in *Athenaeum* fragment 116 becomes inexhaustibly interpretable by acknowledging that, because it can never be completed and perfected, it is constantly developing—is developmental by nature. Thus it paradoxically ‘begins to represent reality once it refuses to speak about its totality’ (Bode 2015: 32). We approach the absolute only through the infinite variety of finite and conditioned means that we know will never lead us to it.

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## Notes

1. Unattributed translations throughout are mine.
2. Schlegel's relation to Jacobi is considered more extensively in Frank (1997: 925-33).
3. Schlegel's historical sense does not conflict with his concept of progress because the latter 'does not require progression to be judged in terms of approximation to ends and, in fact, forbids it'; nor does his concept of the *Wechselerweis* 'commit him to a teleological picture of human cognitive development' (Rush 2016: 47).