DPhil Philosophy

The Good Infinite in Early German Romanticism

Jacob Burda
The Queen's College, Oxford

Abstract.
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In this dissertation I challenge the 'standard' reading of early German romanticism, according to which the movement is most fundamentally characterized by unfulfilled longing, infinite approximation and nostalgic despair. Against this 'defeatist reading' I put forward a 'conciliatory reading' according to which the romantics advocate a harmonious relationship between ourselves and the world. The reading I offer is centred on the idea of 'good infinity', an idea long associated with Hegel but one which I argue the romantics (especially Schlegel) anticipated. A good infinity is united with, rather than opposed to, finitude. This dissertation sets out to show how this romantic conception of infinity underlies major aspects of romanticism such as 'incomprehensibility', 'irony', and the method of 'Wechselerweis'.

In chapter 1, I argue that the romantics are neither pre-critical idealists continuing the Spinozistic heritage (the view of Frederick Beiser), nor Kantian skeptics replacing the 'thing-in-itself' with the Absolute (the view of Manfred Frank). On the reading I advance, the romantics are forbears to the phenomenological tradition. In chapter 2, I argue that Schlegel's recurring references to 'incomprehensibility', or Novalis' appraisal of 'the night' in his Hymns, are intended as 'positive' contributions in that they ask us to acknowledge and accept, rather than commiserate and reject, an incomprehensible dimension to the world. In chapter 3, I argue that 'good infinity' is implied in the method of 'Wechselerweis' because of its emphasis on a reciprocal relationship. I survey various philosophical attempts to classify romanticism and show how I take my reading to preserve the various truths contained in each. In chapter 4, I distinguish the romantics' version of 'good infinity' from that of Hegel. I use various examples to motivate and describe a first personal sense of commitment that romantic irony, understood as feeling at the same time 'finite and infinite', makes available.

Together these chapters support my claim that interpreting infinity to entail unreachability amounts to a limited and ultimately unfaithful reading of the early German romanticist project. With 'good infinity' I offer a way out of those limitations.

The Good Infinite in Early German Romanticism

[Words: 60718]

An meine Familie, im Gefühl der Ironie der Liebe.

Alles ist austragen und dann gebären. Jeden Eindruck und jeden Keim eines Gefühls ganz in sich, im Dunkel, im Unsagbaren, Unbewußten, dem eigenen Verstande Unerreichbaren sich vollenden lassen und mit tiefer Demut und Geduld die Stunde der Niederkunft einer neuen Klarheit abwarten: das allein heißt künstlerisch leben: im Verstehen wie im Schaffen.
Da gibt es kein Messen mit der Zeit, da gilt kein Jahr, und zehn Jahre sind nichts, Künstler sein heißt: nicht rechnen und zählen; reifen wie der Baum, der seine Säfte nicht drängt und getrost in den Stürmen des Frühlings steht ohne die Angst, daß dahinter kein Sommer kommen könnte. Er kommt doch. Aber er kommt nur zu den Geduldigen, die da sind, als ob die Ewigkeit vor ihnen läge, so sorglos still und weit. Ich lerne es täglich, lerne es unter Schmerzen, denen ich dankbar bin: Geduld ist alles!

- Rilke, *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*

CONTENTS

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Writing this thesis has often been very challenging, but I am immensely grateful for the path that it has set me on, for I feel it to be the right one.

Oxford, December 1, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Early German romanticism has overwhelmingly been understood as a movement that posits a realm, 'the romantic Absolute', to lie *beyond* our reality. The *beyond* is key, for the relationship between our (finite) reality and the (infinite) Absolute is supposedly one of mutual exclusivity. Being finite, we are *constitutionally* inapt to get in touch with the infinite. This wouldn't be such a disaster – after all, there are many things we are constitutionally unable to do – if it wasn't for our very peculiar predicament to be longing for what we cannot reach. We *desire* the Absolute, we *strive* towards it, we *long for* it: but all in vain. It must forever elude our grasp, and we must forever fall short of what it is that we most deeply want. Our fate is to be approximating the ideal forever, seemingly progressing towards, but never reaching, the infinite.

This picture has reigned supreme for a very long time. Even if most commentators have disagreed amongst themselves about the exact workings of this, they have, with a few notable exceptions, largely agreed about this being the essential characteristic of the early German romantic movement. In this thesis I want to challenge this state of affairs, showing how, and why, we are missing something rather large if we take the above to give us an adequate sense of the nature of German romanticism. Hence I aim to provide an alternative conception of what the German romantic project was about. Rather than making recourse to two distinct realms, I want to argue that for the romantics there only is *one* world. To the extent that the romantics talk about *romanticizing* the world,

what they are interested in is how to transform *this reality*, not how to establish an unreachable beyond.[1]

By *early German romanticism* I first and foremost have in mind the writings of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, and, to some extent, those of Friedrich Hölderlin. Schlegel is the most systematic and philosophical of the three, and this dissertation will rely most heavily on his works. Novalis, while a philosophical thinker in his own right, gives beautiful poetic expression to the philosophical ideas of Schlegel. With Hölderlin we tilt more and more towards the picture that I would like to challenge. Nevertheless, I believe that we can try to understand important parts of his writings as being more in line with the account I would like to put forward than is commonly assumed.

What distinguishes the two-world account that I would like to question from the one-world account that I would like to propose is a much-overlooked desire for, as well as achievement of, unity and harmony amongst the romantics: 'Der Gedanke des Universums und seiner Harmonie ist mir Eins und Alles',[2] as Schlegel writes. [The thought of the universe and its harmony is everything to me.] While on the 'defeatist' picture romanticism is essentially about positing two realms that cannot be brought into agreement, the 'conciliatory' approach proposed here tries to bring out the way in which any apparent opposition can be overcome. This doesn't just come out of a psychological preference for harmony over discordance, but rather is the result of a careful phenomenological study of our experience by the romantics. Put very bluntly, romantic phenomenology reveals two basic drives at the bottom of our existence – the drive to be infinite, unbounded and endless, and the drive to be finite, bounded and contained. The romantic oeuvre, as I see it, is essentially about articulating a response

[1] This 'one-world' account of romanticism is inspired by Charles Larmore's interpretation of the movement in his *The Romantic Legacy*

[2] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Über die Philosophie', in *Schriften zur Kritischen Philosophie,* p. 80

to this finding. And the response that I want to bring out here is not the negative, nostalgic and defeatist one, but rather the positive, conciliatory and unifying kind.

First and foremost, this means that we have to reconceive our view of *the romantic infinite*. We are well acquainted with the infinite as the unreachable and unattainable object of our longings. This kind of infinity, which lies forever beyond our grasp, has overwhelmingly been assumed to be intended by commentators whenever we hear the romantics refer to it in their writings. Yet I submit that there is present a second kind, 'good infinity', whose structure is different to that of the unreachable infinite in that in it the finite and the infinite are united, rather than opposed. Schlegel makes this very clear: 'Das Verhältnis des Endlichen zum Unendlichen kann nämlich zweifach sein: das Endliche sucht sich entweder mit dem Goettlichen zu vereinigen, oder sich von demselben zu trennen.'[3] [The relationship between the finite and the infinite can be twofold: the finite either looks to unite itself with the divine, or to separate itself from the latter.] It is this former kind of infinity, the 'united kind', that I take to be of great interest to the romantics, and that I want to give expression to in this thesis.

Understanding the infinite in this different sense also raises anew questions around the validity of the prevailing ways to read terms like 'incomprehensibility, inexhaustibility or incompleteness'. On the standard defeatist picture of romanticism we can understand them quite straightforwardly as the expected results of the glaring gap between us mortals and the Absolute. Yet on my conciliatory reading a new understanding must be put forward: rather than associating those terms with a sense of nostalgia and despair at our inability to be whole, I want to show how they motivate a notion of *eternal becoming* that is indispensable for the finite and the infinite to unite.

In his recent book *Nach Gott,* the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has aptly characterized this sense of becoming as the distinguishing element between 'classical metaphysics'

[3] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 400

and 'the modern world': 'Sollte man mit einem Satz sagen, was die klassische Metaphysik im Sinn hatte, er würde lauten: Sie wollte die Welt dazu bekehren, am Stillstand in der Allwissenheit Gottes teilzunehmen… Weil dieser Bekehrungsversuch gescheitert ist, gibt es die moderne Welt. Der Moderne ist zuzurechnen, wer die Idee einer restlosen Entleerung der Zukunft in die Vergangenheit verwirft und für die Unerschöpflichkeit der Zukunft votiert.'[4] [If we were to state in one sentence what it was that classical metaphysics intended, it would be: to convert the world to participate in the standstill of god's omniscience… because this conversion attempt has failed, the modern world exists. We should count as a modern anyone who does away with this idea of a full-fledged depletion of the future, voting for the inexhaustibility of the future instead.] The romantics were absolutely essential to this 'beginning of modernity' in the sense described by Sloterdijk. 'Voting for the inexhaustibility of the future' is what distinguishes the romantics from Hegel, who remains with 'classical metaphysics' because of his idea that history comes to an end.

Schlegel himself was well aware that the romantics were standing right at this crucial juncture that marked 'the elastic point of progressive civilization and the beginning of modern history.'[5] The term 'modern' he used almost interchangeably with the notion of 'romantic', juxtaposing it to that of the 'ancient', or 'classical'. Contrary to Winckelmann, whose aesthetics is characterized by an admiration and subsequent call to 'imitate the ancients',[6] the romantics argued that even the great form of classical art is finite and fleeting: 'Selbst die griechische Kunst, welche die Vollkommenheit erreichte, endigte in sich selbst, und beweiset die Hinfaelligkeit der alten Groesse.'[7] [Even Greek art, which reached perfection, ended in itself, and thus proves the fugacity of former greatness.]

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[4] Peter Sloterdijk, *Nach Gott,* p. 11
[5] Athenaeum Fragments 222. In *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments,* p. 192
[6] Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*
[7] Friedrich Schlegel, Über die Grenzen des Schönen, p. 269, in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*

Being romantic thus means 'to accept the openness of the future in principal',[8] not thereby rejecting 'the classical' as the other side of some insurmountable dichotomy, but rather including it in the unfolding of history as an important part of the whole. Accepting this character of existence, and hence this sense of becoming, points to a way to be in the world that gets its full expression in the attitude known as 'romantic irony'. Rather than thinking of irony as a joke-like attitude towards life in which everything gets ridiculed, irony properly understood turns out to involve an unwavering commitment towards the human condition in the face of infinity - an approach to irony that runs completely counter to what Hegel takes the essence of romantic irony to be.

This leads us into the contents of the **first chapter**, wherein I open with Hegel's understanding of romanticism as he expresses it in his *Lectures on Aesthetics.* Hegel's (mis)reading of irony is exactly the kind of interpretation that needs to be corrected. For Hegel, the romantic subject appears to be on an ironic ego-trip, fully consumed by his own genius and with no care for anything outside of itself. Larmore perceptively observes the relative oddity of Hegel's rather unflattering reading of romantic irony:

'In general, Hegel is the anti-Mephistopheles, "der Geist, der nie verneint". He never entirely repudiates a contrary philosophical position; rather he incorporates it, transformed, into a subsidiary element of his own system. Romantic irony is one of the few exceptions to this Hegelian strategy. It must have touched a nerve.'[9]

It did touch a nerve. Romantic philosophy as I define it, in its desire for harmony, unity and good infinity, turns out to be much closer to parts of Hegel's system than Hegel

[8] see Peter Sloterdijk, *Nach Gott,* p. 12: 'Die prinzipielle Offenheit der Zukunft wurde im philosophischen Denken der Moderne erstmals angemessen erfasst.' [The openness of the future in principal was adequately captured in the philosophical thought of modernity for the first time.]

[9] Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy,* p. 80

seems to want to admit. Rather than emphasizing those affinities, Hegel instead focused on a highly selective (and crude) account of irony itself. Regardless, his account has since accrued a great many followers who have joined Hegel in relegating romanticism to being a mere 'poetic exaggeration of Fichtean idealism'[10] as Dalia Nassar (whose book on *The Romantic Absolute* is an important recent contribution) puts it.

Frederick Beiser and Manfred Frank are not two such unreflective 'followers', it must clearly be said. Both approach romanticism with much more respect and appreciation than Hegel ever did. Beiser too, in fact, observes what I take to be undeniable affinities between the romantics and Hegel when he claims, quite ambitiously, that 'there is not a single Hegelian theme that cannot be traced back to his predecessors in Jena.'[11] Subsequently, however, he tries to ascribe to the romantics a brand of 'objective idealism', the overtones of which plunge the romantics back into 'pre-critical' times, where 'everything is the appearance, manifestation, or embodiment of some archetype or ideal.'[12]

However, doing so somewhat disregards the clear inheritance that the romantics have to the Kantian project. Manfred Frank skillfully brings out this inheritance in his numerous accounts on the theme. For Frank, romanticism retains the Kantian dichotomy between appearances and things in themselves, and so the Absolute turns out to be constitutionally beyond us, setting up the well-known metaphors of infinite approximation and progression. And yet, while the romantics are indeed concerned with being critical, I take it that for them this results in something different than a mere continuation of the Kantian world-view.

[10] Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute,* p. 8.
[11] Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism,* p.10
[12] Frederick Beiser, Romanticism and Idealism, in *The Relevance of Romanticism*

Contrary to Frank's beliefs, I take it that romanticism is not a timid, skeptical movement that characterises us mortals groping in the dark, so to speak, and only ever encountering occasional, fleeting apprehensions of the elusive Absolute.[13] Romanticism is neither pre-critical, as Beiser wants to claim, nor critical in the Kantian sense, as Frank believes. Rather, I take it that for the romantics an inquiry into 'the Absolute' most essentially involves an inquiry into the 'structures of meaning'. The romantics sometimes refer to the Absolute as a 'self-feeling' (*Selbstgefühl),* and claim, with Novalis, that 'the borders of that feeling are the borders of philosophy.'[14] This motivates, I think, a kind of philosophy that takes this 'feeling' as its starting point, constructing its picture out of a sense of lived experience: phenomenology.

Hence I claim that the romantics are forbears to the transcendental phenomenological project, and the last part of the first chapter is concerned with an elaboration of the kind of transcendental phenomenology that the romantics are interested in pursuing. Within all the recent commentary on romanticism, Fred Rush seems to me to follow this line of argumentation most closely, as when he writes, in his *Irony and Idealism*, that 'Schlegel's main philosophical and literary project in the years of 1796 to 1801, as I understand it, is to express his first-personal sense of lived regulative cognitive and cultural orientation. This may sound phenomenological or existential in spirit, and so it is.'[15]

In the **second chapter** I want to show how placing the romantics at the beginning of the transcendental phenomenological project changes our understanding of some of the key notions of the romantic corpus. Here I am most closely concerned with the notion of 'incomprehensibility', which Schlegel directly addresses in his *Über die*

[13] Manfred Frank's reading of romanticism is of course very complex and wide-ranging, and when I subsequently go on to challenge his views my challenge is limited to this particular strand of his interpretation
[14] Novalis*, Fichte Studies*, p. 15
[15] Fred Rush, *Irony and Idealism*, p. 9

Unverständlichkeit [On Incomprehensibility], the last essay that would fittingly round off the infamous *Athenaeum* journal forever. The view of incomprehensibility that Schlegel propagates in this essay doesn't seem to me to sit well with the standard reading that sees it arise from the gap between consciousness and the Absolute.

Rather, Schlegel very interestingly claims towards the end of the piece that accepting the incomprehensible character of the world can lead us towards 'inner happiness', an existentialist sounding claim that I will develop further in the fourth chapter when we explore the concept of irony. In this second chapter I aim to attune us to reading the romantics as existential phenomenologists concerned with uncovering the fundamental phenomena of our existence. To this end, I discuss Novalis' *Hymns to the Night* to show how Novalis there aims at motivating a novel relationship to themes such as darkness and loss. For Novalis it is the night that is the 'queen of the world'. This stands in marked contrast of course to the enlightenment, which praises the metaphor of 'light' above all else: light signifies distinctions, reason, clarity and comprehension. Darkness signifies chaos, confusion and despair. This kind of reading is well-known, and my interpretation of the romantic project aims at uncovering the simplicity and shallowness of such a view. By elevating darkness to be the new 'queen', the romantics don't mean to prefer one side of the duality to the other. Rather, the romantics are simply attempting to rebalance and correct the enlightenment attitude that takes itself to offer the last word on things by shining the light of reason into the darkest holes. Being human encompasses more than just our rational side, and if we block out other aspects of existence we threaten to deny integral parts of ourselves.

This leads us into the **third chapter** where I continue with this idea that romanticism isn't a movement that sides with unreason as opposed to reason. True, romanticism implies stressing elements that don't feature prominently in the standard enlightenment account of things. This has prompted some to suggest that in fact it acts as something of a precursor to the deconstructionist accounts of the 20th century. I

consider this idea in some detail but argue that the desire for systematicity shows that for the romantics there are terms that occupy a more privileged position within a language, ruling out the radicalness of claims like those by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, according to which 'romantic thought involves literature as the Absolute.'[16]

Disassociating romanticism from deconstructionism means opening up questions around its relationship to German idealism. Schlegel in particular was adamant about expressing his phenomenological findings in the form of a *Wechselerweis,* according to which the relationship between finitude and infinity could be perceived as something like a grounding principle. This sends alarm bells ringing in those camps that try to emphasise the distance that the romantics have to any kind of 'first-principle philosophy' of the German idealist kind. I evaluate the underlying motives of both romanticism and idealism to suggest that while the idealists needed a philosophy of first principles to defend themselves against the challenge of the (Aggripan) skeptic, the romantics' motive for a search for grounds has a rather different origin.

I present passages from both Höderlin and Novalis that bring out the idea that the romantics' striving for the foundations of meaning originate from the loss of the ability to attach themselves to a belief in the divine story. This means that the kind of thing the romantics are after is something that allows us to continue life in the aftermath of the 'death of god', not an abstract 'first-principle' to reply to the worries of the Aggripan skeptic. With this in mind I briefly exhibit Fichte's philosophy, whose contribution could be conceived as something like a suggestion to make the ego center stage so as to fill the void left after the gods have departed. If this were indeed the route chosen by the romantics, this would be something of a vindication of Hegel's suspicions who had accused the romantics of elevating the egotistic ironist to previously unknown heights.

[16] Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute,* p. 12

This is, of course, not the direction that I think the romantics choose, and so in the **fourth chapter** I look for the positive romantic solution to their phenomenological insights. The fourth chapter is, in many ways, the heart of this dissertation, and the three chapters preceding it can be seen as preparing us for the main interpretative claims made here: the particular romantic (as opposed to Hegelian) conception of the good infinite; a more 'concrete' rendering of the manifestations of good infinity in Beethoven's *Hammerklaviersonate*; the role played by 'incomprehensibility' in enabling the 'unity' of finitude and infinity; 'romantic irony' as harbouring the possibility of *committing* to the existential tension of feeling both finite and infinite. All of these claims are directly or indirectly addressed in the previous three chapters, but it is in chapter four that I make their case most forcefully, presenting them as the results of the previous interpretative work of chapters one to three.

I begin the fourth chapter by following along Hegel's account of infinity, making reference to the interpretations of Ernst Behler and Stephen Houlgate, to find the point of departure of the romantic and Hegelian projects. It comes when we exhibit that for Hegel 'becoming' is being 'sublated' in favour of a 'quiet unity' of the finite and the infinite. This stands in full contrast to the romantic notion of *becoming* which doesn't get sublated but rather remains the constant that generates the frequent romantic allusions to themes such as openness, unfinishedness and fragmentariness. In fact, the romantics elevate becoming to be the key driving force behind romantic literature and thought, evidenced by the well-known *Athenaeum-Fragment* 116, which reads: 'The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected.'[17] This particular notion of becoming is what Schlegel takes to be necessary 'to mediate the finite and the infinite', as he writes in a central quote: 'The assumption of an eternal becoming, that all things are only a becoming, is necessary to unify our thinking, and to mediate [*vermitteln*] the

[17] *Athenaeum Fragment* 116

finite and the infinite.'[18] It is this that most clearly sets the good infinite of romanticism apart from the Hegelian good infinite.

This difference also explains the drastic divergence in the role assigned to art by both Hegel and the romantics. I briefly go through Hegel's arguments in his *Lectures on Fine Art* to show that for Hegel art is of merely 'transitional value' in the progression towards philosophy, the only science able to fulfil the task of revealing absolute spirit. To be sure, the arts offer us a certain insight that Hegel's all-encompassing perspective kindly 'integrates and retains'. But once that insight is presented they have 'done their job', so to speak, and Hegelian philosophy can emerge to proclaim the final truth on things. This is not what the romantics value art for. Rather, they believe that art offers us a possibility not to try and 'grasp the transcendental', as do all accounts that falsely 'objectify' the Absolute, but rather to allow it to 'shine through'. This is because in art the character of becoming assumes center stage, and through an appreciation of art we can thus attune ourselves to an appreciation of the truths of existence that are revealed by phenomenology.

Hence I go on to discuss the third movement of Beethoven's *Hammerklaviersonate* in which we find a wonderful example of exactly this kind of approach. Beethoven includes, rather than excludes, his search for the right kind of direction of the piece as we listen to a movement that often appears to be unsure where to go next. Beethoven's willingness to let us in on this sense of searching for a direction is what makes this piece truly romantic. He accepts that this is what it means to compose a piece of music, and doesn't just present us with what seems to be a polished and finished piece in line with compositions from the *Wiener Klassik.* Beethoven includes the truth of formlessness in the quest for form.

[18] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 410–11

This provides the segway into the final part of the chapter, where we discuss the concept of 'irony'. Irony is such a central term for the romantics because it denotes the condition of feeling 'at the same time finite and infinite': 'irony is the form of paradox',[19] as Schlegel writes. As I see it, the romantics take there to be at least two responses to this condition. The first is the one suggested by Manfred Frank, which seems perhaps more closely connected with today's meaning of the term, in that Frank thinks that irony prompts a 'ridiculing of the finite' in the face of infinity. But I take it that there is present another option in the writings of the romantics, in which irony turns out to be 'the most holy seriousness', as Schlegel proclaims in his reflections on Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. By affirming the limitations of one's position, irony can involve a *commitment* to life, rather than a detached ridiculing stance towards it.

The chapter ends with an appendix on Heidegger's concept of *earth.* The earth, as Heidegger observes in his essay on *The Origin of the Work of Art,* plays a peculiar *world-disclosive* role that is hard to articulate conceptually precisely because of how the earth withdraws when we attempt to grasp it in that way. This is related to the romantics' admonitions to not *objectify the Absolute.* In line with Heidegger, a large part of the romantic contribution can be understood to reside in the fact that it compels us to look at the integral role played by what we take to be elements that elude our conceptual grasp.

[19] Friedrich Schlegel, *Critical Fragments,* #48

1

Romanticism as a Form of Phenomenology

Das Dasein ist ihm selbst überantwortetes Möglichsein, durch und durch geworfene Möglichkeit.

- Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*

Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, in 1835, in his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*:

'This *unity* of universal and particular, freedom and necessity, spirit and nature… as the *Idea itself*, has been made the principle of knowledge and existence, and the Idea has become recognized as that which alone is true and actual… A. W. and Friedrich von Schlegel, greedy for novelty in the search for the distinctive and extraordinary, appropriated from the philosophical Idea as much as their completely non-philosophical, but essentially critical natures were capable of accepting. For neither of them can claim a reputation for speculative thought. Nevertheless, it was they who, with their critical talent, put themselves near the standpoint of the Idea, and with great freedom of speech and boldness of innovation, even if with miserable philosophical ingredients, directed a spirited polemic against the views of their predecessors… From the convictions and doctrines of F. von Schlegel, there was thus developed in diverse shapes the so-called 'irony'. This had its deeper root, in one of its aspects, in Fichte's philosophy, in so far as the principles of this philosophy were applied to art. F. von Schlegel, like Schelling, started from Fichte's standpoint, Schelling to go beyond it altogether, Schlegel to develop it in his own way and to tear himself loose from it… We need in this respect emphasize only the following points about this irony, namely that [*first*] the *ego* is the absolute principle of all knowing, reason, and cognition, and at that the *ego* remains throughout abstract and formal. *Secondly*, this *ego* is in itself just simple, and, on the one hand, every particularity, every characteristic, every content is negated in it, since everything is submerged in this abstract freedom and unity, while, on the other hand, every content which is to have value for the *ego* is only put and recognized by the *ego* itself. Whatever is, is only by the instrumentality of the *ego*, and what exists by my instrumentality I can equally well annihilate again…
[There is also] the negativity of irony which is, on the one hand, the vanity of everything factual, moral, and of intrinsic worth, the nullity of everything objective and absolutely valid. If the *ego* remains at this standpoint, everything appears to it as null and vain, except its own subjectivity which therefore becomes hollow and empty and itself mere

vanity. But, on the other hand, the *ego* may, contrariwise, fail to find satisfaction in this self-enjoyment and instead become inadequate to itself, so that it now feels a craving for the solid and the substantial, for specific and essential interests. Out of this comes misfortune, and the contradiction that, on the one hand, the subject does want to penetrate into truth and longs for objectivity, but, on the other hand, cannot renounce his isolation and withdrawal into himself or tear himself free from this unsatisfied abstract inwardness. Now he is attacked by the yearning which also we have seen proceeding from Fichtean philosophy. The dissatisfaction of this quiescence and impotence—which may not do or touch anything for fear of losing its inner harmony and which, even if pure in itself, is still unreal and empty despite its desire for reality and what is absolute—is the source of yearning and a *morbid* beautiful soul [krankhafte Schönseeligkeit]. For a *truly* beautiful soul acts and is actual. That longing, however, is only the empty vain subject's sense of nullity, and he lacks the strength to escape from this vanity and fill himself with a content of substance.'[20]

This passage is a slightly cut down and purified version of the six pages that Hegel allotted to the philosophy of Friedrich Schlegel, who, along with Novalis, is generally considered to be one of the two main proponents of early German romanticism. Hegel expresses these views in the Introduction to his *Lectures on Fine Art,* where he attempts to survey the main contributions that have shaped the field of the philosophy of art. The context within which Hegel places Schlegel, and by extension early German romanticism, reveals a frequent understanding of the movement: to the extent that romanticism does add something new to the history of ideas, its novelty lies not in an enhanced illumination of our general philosophical understanding, but rather is 'merely' a contribution to the subcategory of aesthetics. Dalia Nassar fittingly refers to this particular conception of romanticism as 'largely a poetic exaggeration of Fichtean

[20] G.W.F. Hegel, Introduction to *Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1, p. 62-68

idealism.'[21]

Before evaluating the substance of the Hegelian view, it is worth flagging a rival interpretation to Hegel's only to illustrate the wide range in the possible approaches to romanticism. A more recent interpreter, Frederick Beiser, makes the following claims with regards to Hegel's conception; Beiser not only violently disagrees with Hegel ('there is not a single Hegelian theme that cannot be traced back to his predecessors in Jena'), but also takes the 'Jena romantics' to be the rightful 'fathers' of Hegel's overall philosophical system:

'It is not that Hegel had a bad methodology; like any good historicist he insisted that each philosophy should be interpreted from within and taken on its own terms. The problem is that Hegel did not follow his own method, he did not practice what he preached. Instead, he expropriated the past, exaggerating his own originality and individuality. What Hegel portrayed as his own characteristic doctrine, what he regarded as his unique achievement, was all too often said years before him. There is not a single Hegelian theme that cannot be traced back to his predecessors in Jena, to many earlier thinkers whom Hegel and the Hegelian school either belittled or ignored. The fathers of absolute idealism were Hölderlin, Schlegel, and Schelling – though the first would find no mention in Hegel's history, the second would be trivialized and dismissed, and the third treated as a mere footstool.'[22]

Decidedly the aim of this dissertation is not to assess the importance of romantic thought in the formation of Hegel's philosophy. Rather, it is to understand and assess the different views that interpreters (since Hegel) have had of romanticism, and to add one such interpretation to the field as a whole. Comparisons of the German romantics to other philosophers of the time, be they Kant, Fichte or Hegel, will be made only to

[21] Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute,* p. 8. It must be said that Nassar herself doesn't embrace that kind of reading.
[22] Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism,* p.10

further our understanding of what we should take romantic philosophy to be; they are not claiming to add something substantive to the interpretation of the 'big three', or indeed any other philosophy since. The reading of romanticism thus advanced may or may not shed light on the work of philosophers before or after. Either way, the aim here is not to exhibit the influence of romanticism in the history of thought, but rather to 'interpret romanticism from within, taking it on its own terms', as Beiser aptly puts it above.

With this in mind we can reappraise Hegel's quote. Its content can be summarized in the following 10 points:

(1) Schlegel was essentially 'non-philosophical', equipped with 'miserable philosophical ingredients'.
(2) Schlegel's overall contribution amounts to something like 'Fichte's philosophy applied to art'.
(3) Yet Schlegel also broke free from Fichte, he was 'essentially a critical nature' that showed a certain 'boldness of innovation'.
(4) For Schlegel, as for Fichte, the 'Ego is the principle of all knowing, reason and cognition'.
(5) Schlegel's Ego is 'abstract, formal and simple'.
(6) Every content is negated in it [the Ego], everything is submerged in this abstract freedom and unity so that 'everything except its own subjectivity appears to the ego null and vain'.
(7) The Ego may become inadequate to itself and then feel a craving for the solid and substantial.
(8) Out of this 'yearning' comes the Ego's misfortune once it longs for 'reality and what is absolute'.
(9) This longing remains unanswered, however, as the Ego cannot renounce its isolation.

(10) This produces a 'morbid beautiful soul' that lacks the strength to escape from this vanity. It remains 'empty despite its desire for reality', characterised by an 'unsatisfied abstract inwardness'.

Despite - or rather, because of - their staggering inaccuracy, these points provide a valuable framework of references through which to clarify the central issues in need of discussion. I submit that, with the exception of point (3), all of Hegel's remaining suggestions are deeply problematic. They more likely stem from Hegel's desire to fit the romantics into a particular place within his overall system than from an honest engagement with the actual texts.[23]

Though Hegel fails to accurately depict romantic thought, he nevertheless succeeds in touching on some of the relevant topics. More precisely, these are (1) the interpretation of romanticism as a form of subjectivism, (2) the status and nature of the Romantic Absolute (a term Hegel seemed to have reserved for himself, and thus replaced it with 'Ego' in the passage above) and (3) romanticism as a form of defeatism, as an 'unsatisfied and unanswered longing'.

Of these three points, the second is perhaps the most fundamental. In fact, I aim to demonstrate that once we achieve a proper understanding of the nature of the romantic Absolute, differing interpretations of points (1) and (3) will begin to suggest themselves quite naturally. Yet, since the charge of subjectivism is so overpowering in Hegel's interpretation, whereby Hegel is essentially regarding Schlegel as an 'ironical egotistic aesthetician', we would do well to begin with an inquiry into the history of the subjectivist interpretation. This will allow us to understand the conditions to which the

[23] In *The Romantic Legacy*, Charles Larmore, too, sees his work as partly an attempt to rectify some of the Hegelian charges: 'In Hegel's critique of Romantic irony we find a first expression of that perennial, aestheticist misconception about the Romantic imagination that I have been attacking.' (Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy,* p.81)

Hegelian interpretation is referring, leading us through Kant and Fichte towards the origins of romantic philosophy.

A natural starting point for this kind of inquiry is of course Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason (CPR)*. There exists a reading of the *Critique* that regards Kant as inaugurating the 'subjective idealist' tradition. The most frequently invoked part in favour of this subjectivist interpretation can be found in the 'Transcendental Deduction' of the categories in the *CPR*. There Kant tells us about the work done by 'the understanding', which is to be ordering sensations by bringing them under concepts: 'The combination of a manifold in general can never come to us through the senses… for it is an act of the spontaneity of the power of representation … which is an act of the understanding, which we would designate with the general title synthesis.'[24] This 'combination' (or synthesis) of the understanding, however, requires a *prior unity* of the manifold given to us in intuition. This 'prior unity' cannot, Kant argues, originate 'from combination, but rather, by being added to the representation of the manifold, it first makes the concept of combination possible. It is therefore not the category of unity, because it makes this category possible in the first place.'[25]

What we must therefore do, Kant claims, is 'to seek this unity someplace higher.'[26] And what we discover, once we do this, is that 'the transcendental unity of self-consciousness', or 'pure apperception' (the term is taken from Leibniz), is what constitutes that 'highest' transcendental order. It is the condition for the possibility of the unity of the manifold of representations: it makes my representations *mine,* for they wouldn't be '*my* representations if they did not all together belong to one self-consciousness.'[27] Kant reemphasizes this crucial point most forcefully when he states, famously, that 'the I think must be able to accompany all my representations; for

[24] Immanuel Kant, *CPR,* B 129/130
[25] ibid., B 131
[26] ibid., B 131
[27] ibid., B 131

otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me.'[28] This 'I think', or 'self-consciousness', is of course not 'the empirical consciousness that accompanies different representations', as this one 'is by itself dispersed and without relation to the identity of the subject.'[29] Rather, it is the unity of apperception, *transcendental self-consciousness*. Through placing 'self-consciousness' at this critical point in his system, Kant thus assigns the crucial role to the 'transcendental self' in the process of sense-making.

This only raises the notorious further question, however, of just what the 'transcendental self' of the *CPR* is supposed to be. As the condition for the possibility of objective knowledge, the transcendental self refuses any attempt to be turned into an object of knowledge itself by forgoing its transcendental status – and it is precisely the nature of this status that we wish to clarify - when intuited as the object of an empirical representation. As such Kant claims at B157 of the *CPR* that we can only say about transcendental self-consciousness *that* it must be, since it must be given for any experience to occur, but not how or what it is supposed to be: 'In the transcendental synthesis of the manifold of representations in general, on the contrary, hence in the synthetic original unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only *that* I am.'[30]

Is it then altogether untenable to classify the *CPR* as a particular version of 'subjective idealism'? This route has been taken by several interpreters, and can certainly be defended in light of certain passages in the *Critique*. However I would contend that the advocate of the subjectivist interpretation needn't go so far as trying to 'objectify the transcendental self' – trying to infer 'how' or 'what' it is – thereby overstepping the

[28] ibid., B 132
[29] ibid., B 133
[30] ibid., B 157

limits of what can be thought. Rather, she can simply infer a fairly robust sense of subjectivity from the 'capacities' with which Kant endows the transcendental self. This is what Frederick Beiser seems to suggest too, and I follow him when he writes: 'This "I" cannot ascribe personality or substantiality to itself, to be sure, but it can regard itself as subjective because both self-consciousness and spontaneity are necessary conditions of possible experience. If we view these conditions purely transcendentally, as necessary conditions of possible experience, then ascribing them to the subject does not make any transcendent metaphysical claims about noumena.'[31]

Keeping in mind the possibility of such a 'subjectivist reading of the *CPR'*, we are in a position to appreciate the particular kind of spirit extant in the philosophical aftermath that immediately followed Kant. And it was this spirit, combined with a certain kind of 'foundationalism', that came to constitute the building blocks of Fichtean philosophy that - according to Hegel at least - also constitute the building blocks of romanticism.

In the preface to his 'Beyträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Missverständnisse der Philosophen', which was published in 1790, Karl Leonhard Reinhold, one of the most prominent popularisers of Kant's philosophy, states the following: 'The plan of my future endeavors now has two main parts, one of which I take up in my letters on the Kantian philosophy [i.e., the *Briefe*], the other in these contributions [i.e., the *Beyträge*]. In the former I seek to develop the consequences, the applicability and the influence of the critical philosophy; in the latter its grounds, elements and particular principles.'[32] It was in particular the second of Reinhold's plans that came to influence the development of German idealism. For Reinhold's 'Elementarphilosophie' was one of the decisive factors of the 'foundationalist' strand that came to play a large role in the philosophies of Fichte and Hegel.

[31] Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism – The Struggle against Subjectivism*, p. 156
[32] K. L. Reinhold, *Beyträge I*, iv.

Reinhold believed that Kant had supplied all the necessary elements required to turn philosophy into a 'strict science', but had left too many dualisms at its foundations that didn't allow for a rigorous deductive system of propositions based on a single self-evident first principle or *Grundsatz*.[33] What was required was thus to find a single principle on which sensibility and understanding, and the separate faculties of knowledge, will, and judgement, could all be grounded. This principle, Reinhold argued, was 'the faculty of representation'. All consciousness turns out to involve three components - a representation, a subject who represents, and an object represented[34] – a state of affairs which he summed up in his 'proposition of consciousness' [Satz des Bewusstseins]: 'In consciousness, the representation is distinguished from, and related to, the subject and object, by the subject.'[35] 'Representation' was thus supposed to be the single root underlying – and thus unifying - all of the separate elements at the heart of Kant's critical philosophy.

This view was soon criticised by Fichte's former schoolmate, G.E. Schulze, who, writing under the penname 'Aenesidemus',[36] challenged some of the critical assumptions of Reinhold's (as well as of Kant's) philosophy. The text owes much of its fame to the fact that it decisively influenced the intellectual development of Fichte, who was tasked with reviewing it for the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung.* Fichte agreed with Schulze that 'Reinholdian Representationalism' could not be upheld because 'representation' could not perform the role that Reinhold had assigned to it. 'Representation', Fichte writes, 'is not the highest concept for every act of our mind',[37] because, as he argues in proper transcendental fashion, it presupposes the subject-object distinction that makes

[33] Wayne Martin, From Kant to Fichte, in *The Cambridge Companion to Fichte*
[34] Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism*, p. 227
[35] K. L. Reinhold, *Beyträge I*
[36] Anonymous [G.E. Schulze]; *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie: Nebst einer Vertheidigung des Skepticismus gegen die Anmaaßungen der Vernunftkritik*
[37] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 'Aenesidemus Review', in *EPW*, p. 63

possible the conception of the world as distinct from me, on which the possibility of representation rests.

Additionally, Fichte believes, Schulze is right to point us towards an even deeper and more profound fault within the Kantian system: its reliance on 'entities' which exceed the 'critical boundaries' established by Kant's very own philosophy. Transcendental philosophy, Fichte believes, must strictly remain within the limits of possible experience, and must for this reason abolish all transcendent entities, most notably the 'thing-in-itself', which blatantly oversteps these limits. Kant could be saved from criticisms such as those coming from Schulze, Fichte believed, only if the critical insight that Kant had provided – that we are to take for granted nothing other than that which can be exhibited in experience - was brought to its full conclusion. Equipped with these beliefs, but crucially upholding Reinhold's conviction that an unambiguous foundation for Kantian philosophy ought to be supplied, Fichte set out to deliver his first attempt at this improved critical version of philosophy in his *Wissenschaftslehre*, published in 1794.

What was required was a fundamental principle that can be presented positively - 'a principle that one does know and can know', as Fichte puts it in the *Wissenschaftslehre* - that would allow us to move beyond the Kantian dualisms. This fundamental principle could not be, as we just saw, a thing-in-itself (the noumenal self), as Kant proposed, nor could it be 'the faculty of representation', as Reinhold believed. Rather, Fichte argued, we are to regard as our foundation that element that Kant was gesturing at all along when he called the 'transcendental unity of apperception' the highest transcendental order: self-consciousness.

Yet, as we just saw above, 'transcendental self-consciousness' notoriously eludes any proper definition, a fact that came to dominate Fichte's life and work: he determined to pursue what he thought of as the absolutely necessary task of establishing a clear foundation for his system. Hence Fichte set out to advance a plethora of views on the

essence of self-consciousness that he repeatedly sought to improve in the revised editions of his *Wissenschaftslehre*. We will look more closely at the relationship between Fichte and the romantics at the end of chapter 3. For now, it is simply important to stress that Fichte's (re)placement of self-consciousness at the heart of Kant's critical system was a decisive step in favour of the 'subjective idealist' interpretation of transcendental philosophy. Making self-consciousness the condition for the possibility of our experience - even when construed not theoretically but as a 'deed' [Tathandlung] – has the effect of moving any idealist system closer to the 'subject': the foundations of reality are uncovered only if we uncover the fundamental structures of the subject.

What are we to make of Hegel's charge that Schlegel's philosophy is to be placed amongst this kind of Fichtean subjectivism, wherein, as Hegel puts it, 'the *Ego* is the absolute principle of all knowing', such that 'every content which is to have value for the *Ego* is only put and recognized by the *Ego* itself'? Manfred Frank has occupied himself with this question to a great extent, producing results that have been influential in the context of a faithful reconstruction of early German romanticism as well as in recent contributions to debates about 'self-consciousness'.[38] The key text employed by Frank in challenging the subjective idealist narrative of romanticism is Novalis' *Fichte Studies.* There we find passages such as these: *'*Has Fichte not too arbitrarily packed everything into the I? With what warrant?';[39] 'The I is basically nothing – everything has to be given to it.';[40] 'What reflection finds, seems already to have been there.'[41]

There are many more such ideas and formulations that Frank explores in much detail in order to come up with a conclusion that radically challenges Hegel's suggested solution

[38] Manfred Frank, *Selbstbewußtseinstheorien von Fichte bis Sartre* and *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik*
[39] Novalis, *Fichte Studies,* #5
[40] ibid., #15
[41] ibid., #14

of grouping romanticism together with 'subjective idealism', according to which the structure of the world can be 'reduced down' to the structure of the ego.[42] As Frank writes, it is of course not the case that 'self-consciousness' doesn't play an important role in romanticism. Yet, what has been overlooked is that there is something more fundamental for the romantics, namely 'Being', which is their 'primary theme', such that consciousness is relegated to occupy a 'secondary status'. In Frank's own words: 'Early Philosophical romanticism [doesn't imply] the dismissal of the theme of consciousness, but rather its relegation to a status secondary to that of Being. That is, self-consciousness is still an eminent theme of philosophy, but is no longer, as it was for Reinhold and for Fichte, a principle of philosophy.'[43]

Frank deserves much credit for rectifying a misinterpretation which has lasted for well over a decade. By focusing on the relationship between 'self-consciousness' and 'Being', he has freed romanticism from the unjust place assigned to it in Hegel's system. And yet, even Frank's interpretation - while it plays a crucial role in enabling us to see romanticism in this new light - has its limits. Frank's inquiry into 'Being' leads him to conclude that 'Early Romanticism is convinced that self-being owes its existence to a transcendent foundation.'[44] According to this view, the romantic Absolute becomes the successor notion to the Kantian 'thing-in-itself', the notorious 'transcendent' entity from the *CPR*. This would explain why 'we cannot seize the Absolute immediately and completely and must make reference to an infinite progress',[45] as Frank puts it. The Absolute is, quite simply, outside of our reach by definition.

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[42] Schlegel, too, appears more concerned with keeping loyal to 'the universe' rather than to 'his ego'. He writes, in a letter to his wife Dorothea, that he came to publish under the name '*Über die Philosophie/ An Dorothea'*, that he takes his work to arise out of a 'loyalty to the universe.' (KFSA, II, 164) 'What counts', Schlegel claims, is to be apprehending 'the spirit of the universe' (*An Dorothea/ Über die Philosophie*, p.92), also: 'Das Universum ist und bleibt meine Losung' [The universe is and remains my destiny.] (ibid., p.80)

[43] Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, p.107

[44] ibid., p. 178

[45] ibid., p. 179

This line of reasoning leads us to Frank's conviction that the romantics are 'ontological realists' who maintain that 'there are things existing independent of consciousness and whose independence is denoted by the term Being.'[46] As Frank writes: 'In contrast to Fichte, and in agreement with Kant, Novalis professes an ontological realism.'[47] Frederick Beiser has criticized Manfred Frank at just this point. Beiser argues that the realism that Frank is ascribing to the romantics misconstrues the fact that the romantics were idealists after all. He writes:

'There is idealism in the subjective sense, according to which 'the ideal' denotes the realm of consciousness of the self-conscious subject (whether the subject is empirical or transcendental, individual or universal). There is also 'idealism' in the objective sense, according to which the ideal denotes the realm of the archetypical or intelligible. The subjective idealist holds that everything within our experience – though not necessarily everything that exists – is only for some self-conscious subject. The objective idealist maintains that everything within our experience – and indeed everything that exists – is the appearance, manifestation, or embodiment of some archetype or ideal.'[48]

Beiser then follows this definition with the claim that 'while [Frank's romantic] realism is indeed incompatible with subjective idealism, it is perfectly compatible with objective idealism, and the whole point of objective idealism is to accommodate that realism.'[49] I take it that Beiser is onto something when he writes that the romantic realism that Frank favours can indeed be accommodated within a particular version of idealism. But I don't think it is the version that Beiser has in mind. For at the end of the quote Beiser claims that the 'objective idealism' that characterises the romantics 'maintains that

[46] Manfred Frank, *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus*, p.21
[47] Manfred Frank, What is early German Romantic Philosophy?*,* in *The Relevance of Romanticism*, p. 27
[48] Frederick Beiser, Romanticism and Idealism, in *The Relevance of Romanticism*, p. 33
[49] Frederick Beiser, ibid., p. 36

everything within our experience – and indeed everything that exists – *is the appearance, manifestation, or embodiment of some archetype or ideal*.' And this way of putting it sounds very much like Beiser takes romanticism to be a return to 'precritical' times in which metaphysicians would philosophize about the world without reflecting upon our mode of access to reality. In fact, as he makes it clear in his *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism,* he takes the romantic Absolute to contain 'obvious allusions to Spinoza's definition of substance in the Ethica',[50] and to be 'continuing the Platonic heritage… by claiming an insight into the forms that transcends discursive elaboration.'[51]

I here concur with Frank, who aligns the romantic project much closer to Kant than Beiser does, contending that romanticism is not a revival of pre-critical dogmatic metaphysics. Rather, the challenge is to see that the romantics were idealists in the critical sense without abandoning metaphysics and confining themselves to epistemology, as Frank sometimes appears to believe. In this sense, early German romanticism can be said to be continuous with aspects of a plausible interpretation of the works of Fichte and Hegel, who both raised the question of what the difference between epistemology and metaphysics really amounts to if the Kantian 'ground of experience' were to become the 'ground of reality' following the abolition of the thing-in-itself. Reflecting on the structure of thought and experience can be metaphysical in a non-dogmatic sense, and one could characterize work conducted under the guise of either epistemology or metaphysics as work conducted on two sides of the same coin. Robert Stern aptly summarises this view in his book on Hegel:

'For this approach [Hegel's] still differs from traditional metaphysics, because when it seeks to conduct its investigation, it does not go *directly* into speculating about the fundamental nature of being, and what its necessary structures might be, but instead

[50] Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism – The Struggle against Subjectivism*., p. 351
[51] ibid., p. 355

turns to an investigation of the fundamental nature of our thought and experience, using this as a key to any claims about being it might subsequently make—so that it is the structure of thought and experience around which our inquiries turn, thereby avoiding problematic claims about a priori insight into being as such... *In the end*, therefore, on this view Hegel is indeed seen as giving us an ontology rather than a 'mere Analytic of pure understanding', but in a way that still respects the fundamentally Kantian proviso that the former can only proceed via the latter.'[52]

This does not, of course, mean that the romantics and Hegel end up holding the same position. However one of the contentions of this thesis is that romanticism and Hegel can be said to be closer together than is generally assumed, and than Hegel would like us to believe. As I will go on to show, there are aspects of romanticism according to which 'the highest can indeed be reached', as Schlegel puts it in his crucial text *On Incomprehenensibility [Über die Unverständlichkeit],* which will be discussed at length in chapter 2.

One clear difference between Hegel and the romantics, however, underlies frequent passages from the romantics like 'The Absolute transcends reflection';[53] 'The Absolute is itself indemonstrable, not knowable';[54] or 'The unknowability of the Absolute is an identical triviality.'[55] These are all quotes that show the romantics' indubitable rejection of the idea that 'reflection', or 'discursive reason', can provide any insight into the Absolute. Dalia Nassar, in her recent study *The Romantic Absolute,* rightly observes this feature of the movement, when she writes: 'For the romantics, one of the basic and continuing problems in the history of philosophy is the objectification of the Absolute… the discursive intellect fails to grasp the unconditioned.'[56]

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[52] Robert Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics*, p. 19
[53] Friedrich Schlegel, KFSA XVIII
[54] ibid., nr. 71
[55] ibid., nr. 64
[56] Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute,* p. 5/7

It is for this reason that Nassar suggests that 'in order to gain insight into the Absolute another capacity must be posited, which, in contrast, is able to grasp a unified and integral whole.'[57] Unfortunately Nassar remains silent about what this 'capacity' might be, suggesting instead that the romantics combine aspects of the works of Fichte and Spinoza, a strategy already expounded by Beiser[58] in his aforementioned work: 'While Fichte offered the romantics insight into the active nature of intuition—self-intuition as an *act*—Spinoza elaborated a way by which to perceive unity in difference, the one in the many.'[59]

What Nassar is right about is that 'the objectification of the absolute', in the sense of constituting a relationship between the knowing subject and the known object, misinterprets the structural picture that the romantics are operating with. However I posit that both Beiser and Nassar fail to grasp the essence of romanticism if they take it to partly belong to the Spinozistic project. The romantics are critical idealists who remain faithful to Kant's 'critical turn'. Thus, if we are to criticize Manfred Frank, I think that the criticism must be motivated by something other than the view inherent in the works of Beiser and Nassar of romanticism as a 'pre-critical' project.

Frank rightly rescues romanticism from the charge of 'subjective idealism', but in doing so he overshoots in another direction. Frank is broadly right to point out that the romantics distinguish themselves from the two most prominent and immediate successors to Kant – Fichte and Hegel – in that their philosophy is (partly) characterised by a version of 'non-foundationalism', the conception that a system based upon a fundamental grounding principle is untenable. As he writes in his *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus:* 'Die Suche nach einem Ausweg aus der Grundsatzphilosophie –

[57] ibid., p. 9
[58] Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism*
[59] Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute,* p. 7

gleich ob das Prinzip an den Anfang oder, wie bei Hegel, an den Schluss gesetzt wird – charakterisiert das frühromantische Denken insgesamt und unterscheidet es wesentlich von der Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus. Die Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen, nicht sein Besitz, beflügelt die Fruehromantiker.'[60] [The quest for a way out of first-principle philosophy – regardless of whether this principle is placed at the beginning, or, like in Hegel, at the end – characterises early romantic thought as a whole and distinguishes it essentially from the philosophy of German idealism. The longing for infinity, not its possession, quickens the early romantics.]

And yet, the end of that quote highlights a focal point of disagreement between this thesis and the work of Manfred Frank. For Frank, it is the 'longing for', rather than the 'possession of', that most essentially defines the early German romantics' relationship towards the Absolute. 'Better to fail with Kant, than to win with Fichte',[61] as Frank writes at one point. This part of his view quite easily fits with what one might call the 'standard picture' of romanticism. According to this picture, which has broadly been espoused by numerous philosophers[62] and historians[63] since, romanticism is about

[60] Manfred Frank, *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus*, p.11
[61] Manfred Frank, What is early German Romantic Philosophy?, in *The Relevance of Romanticism,* p. 27
[62] Quite forcefully, for example, by Friedrich Nietzsche in the preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* that he added 15 years after its initial publication, in 1887. He there writes, reflecting on his former self in a section entitled *Attempt at a Self-Criticism:* 'But, my dear sir, what in the earth is Romantic if your book is not? Can the deep hatred against modernism, reality, and modern ideas go any further than it does in your artists' metaphysics, which would sooner believe in nothingness or the devil than in the here and now? … Listen to yourself, my pessimistic gentleman and worshipper of art … What? Is your book not a true and justified Romantic declaration of 1830, under the mask of the pessimism of 1850, behind which is already playing the prelude to the usual Romantic finale—break, collapse, return, and prostration before an ancient belief, before the old gods. . . . What? Isn't your book of pessimism itself an anti-Greek and Romantic piece, even something "as intoxicating as it is befuddling," in any event, a narcotic, even a piece of music, German music?'
[63] Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism,* is a classic example of such a reading. Berlin here says that romanticism is most essentially a 'loser movement'.

positing a reality that can never be attained. This picture of the 'transcendent Absolute' about which nothing can be said other than that it is 'transcendent', perhaps at best described as some kind of 'primordial unified whole', has been ridiculed by Hegel as the 'night in which all cows are black' in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[64]

Before outlining what I think is deeply flawed about this position, we must add that there is an alternative to reading the Absolute as something 'transcendent' that comes out of Frank's writings. On this reading, the Absolute is not modeled on the 'thing-in-itself', but rather on Kant's concept of a 'regulative ideal'. The thought here is that the Absolute plays something like the role played by 'systematicity' in the Kantian system. It is something epistemological rather than metaphysical, more about the particular operations of our mind than about the world outside of it. This kind of view seems to be implied by statements like 'The Absolute has the status of a regulative idea (as in Kant)',[65] or, '[the Absolute] is thought to be an unreachable target, or even rational projection, much like an idea in the Kantian sense.'[66]

I think that this version is stronger than the notion of the 'transcendent' Absolute, for here it is acknowledged that the Absolute plays a role in the constitution of our experience (by regulating it), which is different from conceiving of it as an unreachable object. Nevertheless I think that both versions - the Absolute conceived as something transcendent that essentially inherits the role of the thing-in-itself, or the conception of the Absolute as something regulative that pertains solely to the operations of our mind - misconstrue what the romantics took to be the nature of the Absolute.

It is at this point important to stress that when I subsequently refer to 'Manfred Frank' in this thesis, it is particularly this strand of his interpretation that I am questioning.

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[64] Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit, p.* 94
[65] Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism,* p. 179
[66] Manfred Frank, What is early German Romantic Philosophy?, in *The Relevance of Romanticism*, p. 23

Frank's writings on romanticism are of course extremely wide-ranging, sophisticated and complex, so it is necessary for me to clarify that the challenge I wish to pose to Frank's work is limited to this particular aspect of his interpretation.

Keeping this in mind, what I propose is this: Frank's position needs to be corrected because it sets up a picture of two worlds which are incompatible with one another. On the one side we have 'the Absolute', 'the infinite', or the transcendent 'Being' that Frank claims to excavate from Novalis' *Fichte Studies* or Hölderlin's *Urtheil und Seyn* fragment. On the other side, we have 'self-consciousness', 'finitude' and 'subjectivity'. The relation between the two realms is one of fundamental opposition. 'Being always surpasses the understanding that we can gain of it',[67] as Frank writes. This is worrisome because it sets up the picture of 'infinite approximation', 'endless progression', etc. expounded by Frank in most of his books.

It is this picture that I want to challenge in this dissertation. What I think we need to develop is an understanding that the romantics tried to articulate a relationship between finitude and infinity that pays attention to the *continuity* between the two, rather than their opposition. Assuming the two to be continuous means doing away with the need for two worlds and an infinite approximation. There is one world, and the romantics were interested in how to be able to integrate experiences of 'the Absolute' or 'the infinite' into daily life. This means that the human sensibility for the infinite *does not* lead to a nostalgic resignation because we encounter something that we can never meet or match. Rather, the infinite is affirmed through an attempt to integrate these intimations into daily reality.

This is what I think is meant by the urge to 'make the world romantic' and the desire for a form of 'Universalpoesie', according to which poetry should penetrate into all forms of life. It is an attempt to articulate the insight that we can indeed bring the divine and the

[67] Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism,* p. 108

mundane, the infinite and the finite, into a relationship with one another: 'Bilde, erfinde, verwandle und erhalte die Welt und ihre ewigen Gestalten im steten Wechsel neuer Trennungen und Vermaehlungen.'[68] [Build, invent, transform and sustain the world and its eternal figures in a constant change of new divisions and connections], as Schlegel writes in his *Lucinde*.

In his text *Die Entwicklung des inneren Lebens*, Schlegel gives us a very clear account of the kind of picture that he is espousing, and that the Frankian reading has been neglectful of for too long. The text begins with the following remarks about the limitations of 'thinking': 'thinking', or 'reflection', will only be able to capture the part of us that is the part that 'thinks', or 'reflects'. But this is only *one* part, maybe not even the most important part:

'Wenn wir ueber uns selbst und unsere Bestimmung nachdenken, und das Wesen des Menschen durch Denken zu erforschen suchen; so liegt der Fehler, welcher Ursache ist, dass dies mit so wenigem Erfolge geschieht, und zu keiner vollen Befriedigung fuehrt, schon darin, dass wir im Denken eben auch nur die denkende Seite unseres Wesens, also auf jedenfall nur eine Seite, vielleicht nicht einmal die reichhatligste oder wichtigste unsers inner Seins erfassen.'[69] [If we think about ourselves and our destiny, and are looking to discover the essence of man through thought; then the mistake, which is the reason that this happens with so little success, and leads to no real satisfaction, is that in

[68] Friedrich Schlegel, Lucinde, In *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, p. 30

[69] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Die Entwicklung des inneren Lebens', in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, p. 520. This same idea is echoed throughout the first pages: 'Es enflieht dem Denker das Leben, was er gern in seiner Vollstaendigkeit erfassen, und in seiner innersten Wurzel ergreifen moechte, und wenn er hinsieht, so findet er nur sich selbst wieder, und vermag durch das Denken nichts anderes zu finden, als nur Gedanken.' [The life that the thinker wants to grasp in its completeness and innermost constitution disappears when he glances at it; he thus only finds himself and can, in his activity of thinking, only come across thoughts], Ibid., p.520

thinking we will only capture the thinking side of our being, so only one side, and maybe not even the richest or most important side of our being.]

It is thus not surprising that we see Schlegel exclaim, at numerous points, that 'The unknowability of the Absolute is an identical triviality',[70] or that 'The Absolute is itself indemonstrable, not knowable.'[71] What is surprising, however, is that we take this to imply, *à la* Frank, that we must therefore conclude that the essential picture of German romanticism is one of infinite approximation. It does not follow from the claim that language or thought cannot 'exhaust' the Absolute, that we therefore can have no experience or sense of the Absolute. Schlegel has a lot to say about 'the other side', 'the non-thinking side of our being', and the phenomena we encounter there:

'Wenn wir aber mit einemmale diese ganze Welt der Begriffe, und das abgesonderte einseitige Denken nach Begriffen verlassen… so ist es ein Gefuehl, was aus Allem hervorgeht, was immer bleibt und ueberall wiederkehrt, man mag ausgehen von welchem Standpunkte und Gesichtspunkte man will.'[72] [But if we for once leave this whole world of concepts, and the one-sided thinking along those concepts… {we see} that it is a feeling which emanates out of everything, which always remains and returns everywhere, regardless of where one started from.]

So when we distance ourselves from the 'thinking side' of our being, we find there to be 'a feeling'. What kind of feeling, we now ask? One that is totally 'beyond us' ('mere being'), as Frank has it? Not at all:

'Dieses, jedem der ueber das Leben denkt, gleicherweise sich aufdringende Gefuehl aber, sei es nun, dass es blos als Gefuehl in der unmittlebaren Wahrnehmung stehen

[70] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, nr. 64
[71] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, nr. 71
[72] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Die Entwicklung des inneren Lebens', in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, p. 520/21

bleibt, oder als Gedanke fuer die Betrachtung dasteht, ist folgendes: ein tiefer innerer Zwiespalt des Lebens, der immer wiederkehrt in unserem Gefuehl, und ueberall gefunden wird, ist nun auch die Ursache, warum das Leben durch das blose Denken nicht verstanden werden kann, und wenigstens auf diesem Wege ein unverstandenes und ungeloestes Raetsel bleiben muss, wenn nicht etwa die Aufloesung dieses Raetsels auf einem anderen Wege gesucht und gefunden werden kann. Diesen anderen Weg kann ich hier teils nur andeuten, teils darf und werde ich ihn unter Gleichgesinnten mit Zuversicht voraussetzen.'[73] [This feeling, which imposes itself on anyone who thinks about life, whether it remains a 'mere feeling' in the immediate perception, or as a thought for reflection, is the following: a deep inner division of life, which always returns in our feeling, and is to be found everywhere; this is also the reason why life cannot be understood through mere thinking, and thus has to remain a misunderstood and unsolved mystery for this kind of approach. Yet the solution to this mystery can be looked for and discovered on a different path. This different path I can here only hint at, partly allowing myself to confidently presuppose it amongst like-minded spirits.]

Much is contained in this passage. Firstly, it states that this feeling articulates itself as a *divide* in our inner life, one that is 'found everywhere'. Secondly, that this feeling is *the reason* that life cannot be understood through thought alone, why it must forever remain a mystery to those who take this to be the only possibility. And thirdly, that the 'mystery of this feeling' *can* indeed be solved through some other path. This path Schlegel can only 'hint at', or even must 'presuppose' amongst a certain few who 'get' what he is talking about. By picking up on the 'hints' that Schlegel and the romantics left for us, this dissertation aims to locate, explore and define this 'other path' – that which *can* elaborate the mystery of this feeling.

This idea of the 'divide' present in our inner life must immediately be addressed, however, so as to avoid misunderstanding. Yes, we can indeed feel ourselves *divided*,

[73] ibid., p. 521

we can feel ourselves to have *lost* a sense of unity with ourselves.[74] This feeling of a divide is *possible* in all free spirits, Schlegel asserts. And yet, it only actualizes itself in those who have 'turned back' from their origin. In those who remain true to it, 'harmony' and 'oneness' can be attained: 'Moeglich ist dieser Zwiespalt allen frei erschaffenen Geistern, wirklich aber wird er nur in denjenigen, die sich selbst verkehrt und von ihrem Ursprunge abgewandt haben; in denen, die ihm treu geblieben, ist Wille und Verstand in Harmonie und unzertrennlich Eins.'[75] [This divide is possible for all freely created spirits, but it only becomes actual in those that have inverted themselves and turned away from their origin; in those that remain true to it, will and understanding are harmonious and indivisibly one.]

What does 'remaining true', or 'faithful to this divide', mean? This question will occupy us at length throughout this dissertation. One very important theme will revolve around the need for developing a different relationship to those bits of the world that aren't able to be comprehended by 'thought alone', as Schlegel writes above. He further elaborates what this means: 'Es zieht sich noch ein ganz verschiedener Faden eines anderen dunklen Bewusstseins, eines nicht nach der logischen Ordnung, nicht in Begriffen, noch auch jederzeit in deutlichen Worten dahin wandelnden und sich fortbewegenden bildlichen Denkens, welches scheinbar im regellosen Spiel umherirrt, eigentlich aber nur einem andern und eignen Gesetz der bildlichen Ähnlichkeit oder der Wahlverwandschaft des innern Gefuehls folgt.'[76] [There exists a very different thread of a distinct dark consciousness, one that doesn't obey a logical order, nor concepts, nor clear words of a changing and continuously image-based form of thinking. It only appears as if it strays in a ruleless game, but actually it follows a different law, its own law of visual resemblance that follows the elective affinities of the inner feeling.]

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[74] I will elaborate on the theological implications of this 'feeling of loss' in the third chapter.
[75] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Die Entwicklung des inneren Lebens', in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, p. 525
[76] ibid., p. 526

There is a part of us that isn't susceptible to being comprehended in terms of a 'logical order', because it isn't structured in a 'logic of concepts'. Only on the surface however does this part of us consist in a 'game without any discernible rules.' Only on the surface does it resemble the 'chaos of mere being' that Frank equates with the 'thing-in-itself'. 'In reality', however, this part of us simply follows 'different rules' and 'different patterns', that can in fact be discerned and worked out.

In a nutshell, I think that a suitable term for this new romantic order is the 'good infinite'. Schlegel makes it clear that the relationship between the finite and the infinite, the relationship that constitutes the existential structure of being a person, can be twofold. The image of division and opposition is by no means the only option: 'Das Verhältnis des Endlichen zum Unendlichen kann nämlich zweifach sein: das Endliche sucht sich entweder mit dem Goettlichen zu vereinigen, oder sich von demselben zu trennen.'[77] [The relationship between the finite and the infinite can be twofold: the finite either looks to unite itself with the divine, or to separate itself from the latter.]

The kind of infinity that results when the finite unites with 'the infinite', 'the divine', is a 'good infinity'. It is 'good' because it reconciles its seeming opposite, the finite, thereby making itself *truly infinite* because it isn't limited by something that it is not: the finite. This would make it a 'finite infinite', and thus 'bad' in the logical sense, because it wouldn't satisfy its own standards of infinity, which demand for it to be all-encompassing. These distinctions between good and bad infinity come out of Hegel's *Logic,* and I will provide a much more detailed account of them in the fourth chapter. Schlegel does talk about 'the good infinite' once in his *Philosophische Vorlesungen,* when he urges us to see that the 'good' shouldn't just apply to the infinite, but rather to the relation between the finite and the infinite: 'Das Gute in bloser Beziehung auf das Unendliche allein gedacht, ist also ganz falsch, es soll vielmehr auf das Verhältnis des

[77] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 400

Endlichen zum Unendlichen bezogen werden.'[78] [To think of the good only in relation to infinity alone is totally wrong; *we have to relate it to the relationship between then finite and the infinite*.][79] And yet, it is also clear that neither Schlegel nor any of the other romantics offer us a fully exhaustive account of the good infinite of the kind that Hegel gives us in the *Logic*. We must therefore undertake some of the necessary reconstruction ourselves.

One way to begin is simply by exhibiting the presence of the good infinite in other key romantic themes, for example the theme of an essential 'openness'[80] and 'unfinishedness'. These themes constitute the essence of the romantic 'fragment' which, unlike the 'ancient fragment', is intentionally left unfinished, so that 'its incompleteness can take us further',[81] as Novalis writes. 'Incompleteness and openness' imply *an eternal becoming*, which is what allows for the finite and the infinite to merge, as Schlegel writes in a crucial quote: 'The assumption of an eternal becoming, that all things are only a becoming, is necessary to unify our thinking, and to mediate [*vermitteln*] the finite and the infinite. All conflict between the two is overcome, insofar as the finite, which is a becoming, contains within itself an infinite fullness, and the infinite fullness [*unendliche Fülle*] is proper [*eigen*] to the finite insofar as it is considered as becoming and active.'[82] Again, the importance of 'becoming' will be discussed at length in the fourth chapter.

In what follows I want to show how this good infinite can be employed to make sense of much in the romantics that has so far only been looked at under the light of 'bad infinity'. The following chapters will discuss new ways of understanding romantic

[78] *ibid.,* p. 400
[79] my italics
[80] cf. Schlegel's *Theorie des offenen* Kunstwerks [Theory of the open Artwork]
[81] Novalis, *Logological Fragments I,* #86
[82] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 410–11

systematicity - in particular *the Wechselerweis* - as well as crucial concepts such as 'romantic irony'.

However we must first better understand what is involved in the claim that 'the infinite', or 'Absolute', can be encountered in experience. As I said above, on a very broad level the romantics are indeed to be placed within the German idealist tradition, if by idealism we understand a movement that extends Kant's insight that reality exhibits 'meaningful structures', the constitution of which philosophy should be spelling out. This is the sense in which both Kant and Heidegger, for instance, can be said to be 'idealists'. The romantics are not idealists in the Platonic sense, however, for this would mean upholding the reality of ideal forms. The sense of idealism that is upheld is the one opened up by Kant's critical philosophy in that it distances itself from metaphysical speculations that don't take into account our mode of access to reality.

And yet there are clear differences between the transcendental idealist projects of Kant and the romantics. For one I do not think that the romantics retain the concept of the thing-in-itself, as does Frank. A second is that, for the romantics, 'feeling' - and in particular 'self-feeling' - plays a much greater role than it does for Kant. To signal this departure from a kind of philosophy that isn't concerned with feeling, Novalis even proclaims at one point that 'the borders of feeling are the borders of philosophy.'[83] But I don't think we should read this as a fully-fledged turn away from philosophy by the romantics. Rather, I think we should take it as a sign that they were interested in a kind of philosophy that would be suited to an elaboration of that feeling.

Schlegel leaves us with no doubt that this is what his philosophy is intended to do: 'Diese verschiedenen Richtungen und Gegensaetze nun des in unserm Innern sich durchkreuzenden allgemeinen und tiefen Zwiespalts, wie ich sie hier versuchen werde anzudeuten, sind keineswegs dunkel und schwer zu begreifen; sondern sie leuchten

[83] Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, # 12

jedem, als von selbst klar, aus seinem eignen Leben und Bewusstsein deutlich und leicht hervor.'[84] [These different directions and contradictions of this deep division in our inner life, that I will hint at here, are not at all dark and hard to comprehend; rather, they self-evidently radiate out to anybody from out of his own life and consciousness clearly and simply.]

The phenomena we should be interested in suggest themselves 'quite simply and clearly' from one's own life and consciousness. In this sense, I think that the romantics are forbears to a tradition imbued with a much greater sensibility for these phenomena than either Kant or Hegel were: the transcendental phenomenological tradition. In his recent book *Irony and Idealism,* Fred Rush comes to a similar conclusion: 'Schlegel's main philosophical and literary project in the years of 1796 to 1801, as I understand it, is to express his first-personal sense of lived regulative cognitive and cultural orientation. This may sound phenomenological or existential in spirit, and so it is.'[85]

With this in mind we can begin to turn from our discussion of transcendental philosophy in Kant towards a discussion of transcendental philosophy as understood by the phenomenological tradition. As Steven Crowell writes in his *Phenomenology and Transcendental Philosophy,*[86] the aim of the phenomenological tradition 'is to make meaning thematic'. This change of terms means that the transcendental conditions uncovered by either tradition will differ quite substantially. Kant's transcendental conditions – his 'table of categories' and 'forms of intuition' - are perceived to be too limited to 'make meaning thematic' in the phenomenological sense.[87]

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[84] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Die Entwicklung des inneren Lebens', in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, p. 524

[85] Fred Rush, *Irony and Idealism*, p.9

[86] Steven Crowell, 'Phenomenology and Transcendental Philosophy', in *The Transcendental Turn*

[87] The history of the transition from Kant to phenomenology is of course extremely rich and we cannot hope to go into it here.

Making meaning thematic requires expanding the scope of inquiry beyond our cognitive experience to all forms of intentionality. A conception of the world as a subject standing over against objects is indeed one way to experience the world, but it is by no means the only one: the romantics, and Hölderlin in particular, regarded the subject-object split as a particularly modern predicament, but not as a necessary state of affairs. In fact, they strove towards - and sometimes reached - structures of meaning that didn't exhibit this kind of separation from the world at all. Thus, so far as it is right to claim that the romantic project was indeed concerned with transcendental philosophy, it seems like understanding it along the lines of the phenomenological tradition would get us closer to its core.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger, continuing the groundbreaking work undertaken by Edmund Husserl before him, made the following crucial remarks regarding the characterization of the 'phenomena' of 'phenomenology'. According to the ancient Greek, Heidegger shows, a phenomenon (φαινόμενον) is simply understood to be 'that which shows itself.'[88] But things can show themselves in more ways than one, Heidegger argued: 'If by 'that which shows itself' we understand those entities which are accessible through the empirical intuition in, let us say, Kant's sense, then the formal conception of 'phenomenon' will indeed be legitimately employed. In this usage 'phenomenon' has the signification of the *ordinary* conception of phenomenon. But this ordinary conception is not the phenomenological conception.'[89]

This 'ordinary conception' of phenomenon Heidegger terms 'appearance', much in line with the Kantian terminology. However Heidegger is not interested in 'appearances', but rather in 'phenomena':

[88] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 51
[89] ibid., p.54

'If we keep within the horizon of the Kantian problematic, we can give an illustration of what is conceived phenomenologically as a phenomenon, with reservations as to other differences; for we may then say that that which already shows itself in the appearance prior to the 'phenomenon' as ordinarily understood and as accompanying it in every case, can, even though it thus shows itself unthematically, be brought thematically to show itself.'[90] Thus, Heidegger concludes: 'What shows itself in itself (the ''forms of the intuition'') will be the ''phenomena'' of phenomenology. For manifestly space and time must be able to show themselves in this way – they must be able to become phenomena – if Kant is claiming to make a transcendental assertion grounded in the facts when he says that space is the *a priori* ''inside which'' of an ordering.'[91]

Hence phenomenology is about 'bringing what shows itself unthematically to thematically show itself', i.e. uncovering the 'phenomena' that 'show themselves in the appearance'. This uncovering is the work that the phenomenologist has to do. She has to be able to look past the appearances to the phenomena that are constitutive of the appearances. The 'phenomena' thus uncovered will have the 'status of the [Kantian] forms of the intuition',[92] as Heidegger writes, but their content will markedly differ from the 'transcendental conditions' that Kant uncovered.

The basic 'structure of meaning' – the basic 'phenomenon' in the Heideggerian sense - that I take romantic phenomenology to be concerned with, is the *strife between the finite and the infinite*: 'The actual contradiction of our I is that we feel at the same time finite and infinite',[93] as Schlegel writes. There is, at the bottom of our self, a longing to go beyond whatever the world offers; a sense of restlessness that is hard to locate, hard to describe, but nevertheless fully real. Hölderlin puts this beautifully: 'There is in man a striving towards the infinite, an activity for which absolutely no barrier is

[90] ibid., p.54-5
[91] ibid., p. 55
[92] ibid., p. 55
[93] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 334

insurmountable, which makes absolutely no rest possible, but aspires to become ever more expansive, ever freer, ever more independent.'[94]

This 'striving' the romantics take seriously, engage and grapple with - and remain true to like no other philosophy before or after. They inherit this theme not from some previous philosophy, there is nothing 'pre-critical' or 'Kantian' about it. Rather, it comes to define their work so heavily because for the romantics philosophy is phenomenology, an explication and elaboration of our actual lived experience.

In chapter 4 we will encounter the concept of 'irony' at length. Here I want to end with a quote from Schlegel on irony that shows the style in which the romantics philosophized. Again, irony isn't some theoretical position that the romantics arrived at after long philosophical fine-tuning. It is rather a 'phenomenon' in the Heideggerian sense elaborated above, something that 'shows itself'. In reference to his then lover and later wife Dorothea, for example, Schlegel writes that 'Die wahre Ironie ist die Ironie der Liebe. Sie entsteht aus dem Gefuehl der Endlichkeit und der eignen Beschraenkung, und dem scheinbaren Widesrpuch dieses Gefuehls mit der in jeder wahren Liebe mit eingeschlossenen Idee eines Unendlichen.'[95] [True irony is the irony of love. It arises out of the feeling of one's own finitude and limitation, and the apparent contradiction of this feeling with the idea of the infinite contained in every true love.] This quote undoubtedly speaks of something that Schlegel has felt, something that he has experienced himself. And this is what is particular about the romantics: that they take as their starting point the meaning that they encounter in the world, and build their philosophy from there.

[94] Friedrich Hölderlin, *StA* VI: 164
[95] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA X*, p. 357. This quote will be discussed and explicated more fully in the discussion of irony at the end of the fourth chapter.

2

Embracing the Incomprehensible

Gib mir noch eine kleine Weile Zeit: ich will die Dinge so wie keiner lieben
Bis sie dir alle würdig sind und weit.
- Rilke, *Stundenbuch*

The concept of 'incomprehensibility' in early German romanticism presents one of the most tantalising, but also difficult, interpretative tasks. A certain reading of it is, for example, one of the key constituents of Manfred Frank's very influential interpretation of the romantics. As Frank sees it, for the romantics 'mere being' – the term employed by Novalis in his Fichte Studies – 'cannot be exhausted by consciousness', in such a way that it lies 'outside the realm of consciousness', remaining forever and in principle unknowable and incomprehensible: 'Being precedes consciousness so that no understanding can exhaust the content of what is meant by Being.'[96] This fundamental insight then makes the romantics both 'realists' and 'skeptics', according to Frank, because they affirm the existence of an external reality independent of the mind that is, just like the Kantian thing-in-itself, beyond our grasp. On this reading, then, the 'Absolute' is construed as a broadly epistemological notion, as it ultimately isn't intended as a claim about reality (for that is unknowable), but rather becomes a 'regulative ideal' informing our strivings and projects in this world.

This reading is in line with Frank's view that German romanticism constitutes a very strong reaction against the works of Fichte, who had followed Reinhold's 'first-principle' philosophy and abolished the thing-in-itself. Contrary to Fichte, romanticism is a return to Kantian humility and skepticism, well aware of the borders of our world. The Absolute, as that which exists beyond these borders, can only be approximated, perhaps glimpsed at in a moment of aesthetic – non-discursive – insight, but its real constitution is forever beyond our comprehension. This reading pervades two of Frank's most influential books on the topic, his *Unendliche Annäherung*, and his *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus*.[97] I want to show in what follows that Friedrich Schlegel's essay 'On incomprehensibility' ['Über die Unverständlichkeit'], in which he directly addresses

[96] Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, p. 56
[97] Manfred Frank, *Unendliche Annäherung: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik*. Manfred Frank, *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus*.

the nature of 'incomprehensibility', leaves us with a different understanding of incomprehensibility to the one we find in Frank.

But before we turn to a close textual analysis of Schlegel's piece, it seems worthwhile to point out that the view proposed by Frank makes romanticism appear rather inconsistent. Frank rejects any reading of the romantic project that aligns it with Fichte's enterprise of 'critical metaphysics'. We must recall that, in the *Wissenschaftlsehre,* Fichte had argued for the unity of thought and being, exemplified by claims like 'What is logically true for any intellect… is at the same time true in reality and there is no truth other than this.'[98] Instead, Frank advocates reading the romantics along Kantian epistemological lines, upholding the distinction between 'the world of appearances' and 'the world in itself'. Yet, according to Frank's account, the romantics' motivation for this epistemological position – their 'crucial' insight that consciousness does not exhaust Being (or the Absolute) – stems from a metaphysical conviction about the fundamental nature of reality. This intricacy would seem to parallel Kant's struggles with the status of the thing-in-itself in the *CPR*. Either its existence is posited, in which case Kant seems to transgress the critical 'bounds of sense' he had established of his own accord; or its existence is neither affirmed nor denied in an agnostic manner, in which case it mustn't be invoked to explain the order of appearances (or to impose limitations on our comprehension).

Similarly, in the case of the relationship between consciousness and the Absolute, it appears as if the romantics need to be able to posit the existence of the Absolute (a metaphysical position) in order to then make claims about consciousness' inability to grasp or exhaust it. In this way, what Frank takes to be a humble epistemological position would be rooted in a fully-fledged metaphysical stance, a state of affairs which I think is neither true nor desirable from the point of view of early German romanticism. Novalis made a related point, it seems to me, when he talked about the mistake being

[98] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *SW I*, p. 20

made in positing something 'in complete isolation to everything else' in his notes on Physics: 'The thing in itself as an isolated entity is nothing but an abstraction of thought. Reality is never in isolation.'[99]

If we conceive of 'reality' as having its roots in our experience of it, as does the 'critical turn' in its most critical, undogmatic form, then we will have to dispense with positing an entity that exists 'in complete isolation' to any other entity, for there simply is no such entity to be found in our experience, Novalis believes. As such I would advocate that Novalis' reference to the 'thing-in-itself' as nothing but 'an abstraction of thought' should be understood to disqualify it from having its origin in experience, where 'everything is related to everything else'. Rather, the 'thing-in-itself' is the product of an intellect overstepping its own critical limits, 'an abstraction' relating to nothing but itself, and therefore 'nothing real' in the critical sense.

The key influence on the romantics in this regard was the philosophy of Fichte. It was Fichte who, like no other philosopher at the time, tirelessly pointed out the dogmatic nature of the 'thing in itself'. Fichte thought that the notion of a thing-in-itself existing for itself was deeply uncritical. In his view, once we would investigate thought we would find that what is taken by Kant as the thing-in-itself doesn't exist 'as a thing-in-itself, but always for the I.'[100] Thus the 'dogmatic' concept of the thing-in-itself breaks down, and for Fichte, we must dispense with it altogether. While the romantics didn't follow Fichte's methodological need to relate everything back to the 'I', their disagreement about the fundamental place of self-consciousness should not subtract from their shared concern to remain true to a version of critical metaphysics that disavows the thing-in-itself.

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[99] Novalis, *Novalis Schriften 3*, p. 56

[100] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *SW I,* p. 62. For a good account of Fichte's rejection of the thing in itself, see: Wayne Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project*, ch. 3, "Pipedreams and Non-thoughts: The problems with things in themselves".

In my submission therefore, the romantic Absolute must not be understood as an 'isolated principle' lying outside the sphere of human comprehension. Schlegel vehemently criticised Plato's philosophy – towards which he was otherwise very favourably inclined – for the related distinction between an 'unreachable ideal' (the Absolute on Frank's view) and the 'less than perfect' realm to which we are confined:

'Geht man wie Plato aus von einem höchsten Verstande, und denkt sich die Herrschaft dieses Verstandes über den Stoff, wie das Verhältnis des Urbildes zum Nachgebildeten, so wird der praktische Theil einer solchen Philosophie nothwendig sehr unvollkommen seyn. Das Gute erscheint dann als Forderung, als Pflicht, als Gesetz, mit einem Worte, als Ideal; gleich von vorne wird dann schon zugegeben, das wirkliche Leben werde diesem nie entsprechen; und demnach ist das Ideal ewig schön, die Pflicht ewig geboten; so wie die Wirklichkeit ewig unbesiegbar widerstrebt, - so wird nun der Mensch mit sich selbst in Zwiespalt gesetzt, denn wer diesen trostlosen Glauben hat, wird sich bald der Wirklichkeit hingeben, bald mit furchtsamem, unthätigem Bewundern das Ideal anstaunen, und sich mit dem Gedanken trösten, dass man es nie erreichen, ihm nie in der Wirklichkeit entsprechen könne.'[101] [If, like Plato, one assumes a highest form of understanding, and thinks of the dominion of this understanding over matter along the lines of the relationship between the original image and its copy, then the practical part of such a philosophy will necessarily be very incomplete. The good will now appear as a demand, as a duty, or as a law, in one word, as an ideal; right from the beginning one thus admits that the real life can never match this; thus the ideal is eternally beautiful, the duty always to be obeyed; just as reality resists invincibly into eternity – thus man enters into discrepancy with himself, for he who carries such a miserable faith will soon submit to reality, will soon gaze at the ideal in frightened and

[101] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Die Philosophie des Plato', in *Schriften zur Kritischen Philosophie*, p. 221 – 222. Also: ‚Der bedeutende Fehler der zu großen Entgegensetzung von Idee und Wirklichkeit.' [The grave mistake of positing an opposition between idea and reality that is too large.] (ibid, p. 222)

idle admiration, finding solace in the thought that it can never be reached, that one can never match it in reality.]

As we can see, Schlegel calls this kind of philosophy a 'miserable faith' and mocks those who 'idly gaze at the ideal, finding solace at the thought of its unreachability, its unattainability in reality.' This criticism of Plato's distinction between the ideal world of the forms and our less than perfect attempt at an imitation of it does not translate seamlessly into the criticism of the concept of the Absolute or thing-in-itself as a reality 'in complete isolation from anything else'. For there is a sense in which it would be wrong to assert that the forms, despite their existence in a separate metaphysical 'form-heaven' (as the caricature has it), 'exist' in a manner analogous to the thing-in-itself. And yet, the analogy between Schlegel's critique of Plato and Novalis' critique of Kant seems to me to be important because they are both designed to counteract what Frank takes to be one of the central tenets of romanticism: the unreachability or unattainability of the Absolute.

The challenge is therefore to provide a reading of romanticism that explains the notion of 'incomprehensibility', which is undoubtedly a key feature of the movement, without recourse to the standard Frankian reading by which it is characterized as the gap or gulf between consciousness and the Absolute. As Frank so often puts it: 'For the romantics, Being precedes consciousness so that no understanding can exhaust the content of what is meant by being.'[102] What needs to be shown, in contrast to the standard reading, is how incomprehensibility is a feature of the world, something to come across in our experience rather than the result of theoretical considerations about our position in relation to the Absolute – or so I shall argue in this chapter.

Such a reading can, I think, be advanced on the basis of Schlegel's illuminating (but rather neglected) essay 'On Incomprehensibility'. As the title indicates, the essay was

[102] Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, p. 56

written with the specific ambition of making the incomprehensible nature of the journal 'Athenaeum' comprehensible, a task which, as Schlegel reminds us at numerous points, carries 'a great deal of irony' with it.[103] It was written in 1800, the year marking the end of the *Athenaeum*. The date is important if we consider the chronological development of Schlegel's philosophy. Schlegel was an initial supporter of Fichte's first edition of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, published in 1794, but then slowly but surely began to turn against it over the course of his prolonged engagement with the Niethammer circle in 1796.[104] By the end of that year, he had come round to the view that Reinhold's emphasis on first-principle philosophy, which Fichte took over not in content but in form, 'had caused all misunderstanding by initiating the search for grounds.'[105] [habe das Missverstehen gestiftet, indem es die Grundsucherei aufbrachte.]

Thus, so Frank claims, began Schlegel's, and by extension the early German Romantics', 'anti-fundamentalist and skeptical convictions',[106] which led to the romantics' supposed 'clear break' with Fichtean philosophy. In the 1800 text 'On Incomprehensibility', however, Schlegel requotes the famous *Athenaeum Fragment 216* (written in 1798), that begins: 'The French Revolution, Fichte's philosophy, and Goethe's Meister are the greatest tendencies of the age',[107] and states that he believes the quote captures a significant amount of what the *Athenaeum* was about. For Fichte's philosophy, whilst indeed non-romantic in its 'first-principle foundationalism', still provides the background to a large part of romantic philosophy. This is because the romantics, who

[103] I will discuss irony and its relation to humour at the end of the fourth chapter.
[104] Manfred Frank makes this point in his *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus*, p. 92: 'Von diesem grundsatzphilosophischen Fichteanismus beziehungsweise Reinholdianismus hat sich Schlegel nun im August oder September 1796 – unter dem Einfluss Niethammers und seines Freundes Novalis – jäh abgewandt.' [From this Fichtean- or Reinholdian- philosophy of first principles Schlegel – under the influence of Niethammer and his friend Novalis – clearly turned away in August or September of 1796.]
[105] Manfred Frank, *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus,* p.92
[106] ibid., p. 92
[107] *Athenaeum Fragment 216*

often refer to themselves and their philosophy as 'critical', regard Fichte as the role model for their own aspirations to devise a philosophy that is more critical than the Kantian one. In a letter from 1795, we find Friedrich Schlegel announce to his brother August Wilhelm that he intends 'eine Ergaenzung, Berichtigung und Vollendung der Kantischen Philosophie.'[108] [an addition, correction and completion of Kantian philosophy.] And in a much later note from 1818, in his 'Remarks on Theology and Philosophy', we find Friedrich reflecting on his earlier romantic self: 'Wenn ich in der ersten Epoche meiner Philosophie davon durchdrungen war, die Philosophie müsse kritisch seyn, - aber in einem ganz anderen und viel höheren Sinne als bei Kant…'[109] [If, in the first epoch of my philosophising, I was convinced that philosophy ought to be critical, but in a very different, much higher sense than in Kant…]

Schlegel begins the essay in characteristic Kantian spirit when he writes, in the opening lines: 'Of all things that have to do with communicating ideas, what could be more fascinating than the question of whether such communication is actually possible? And where could one find a better opportunity for carrying out a variety of experiments to test this possibility or impossibility than in either writing a journal like the *Athenaeum* oneself or else taking part in it as a reader?'[110] While the piece very much continues in this critical spirit, Schlegel makes it clear that he wants to achieve a move 'beyond' Kant. He remarks that we should not be fooled into believing that the end of all criticism has been achieved in and through Kant's *Critique*: 'We have the honour to live in that age which has, in a word, earned the modest but highly suggestive name of the Critical Age, so that soon everything will have been criticized – except the age itself.'[111] He is even more clear about his desire to exceed Kant at other places in his writings: Consider

[108] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XXIII*, p. 226
[109] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XIX*, p. 346
[110] Friedrich Schlegel, 'On incomprehensibility', in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, p. 259
[111] ibid, p.261

claims like 'Kant is in principle highly uncritical',[112] or 'philosophy must be critical but in a much higher sense than in Kant.'[113]

Schlegel, who prefers the word 'tendencies' to the more fundamentalist talk of 'elements', or 'principles', makes a very revealing remark in favour of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* over Kant's *CPR*, and his own aspirations to exceed Kant's critical findings, when he writes: 'To be sure there is something else in the fragment [Athenaeum 216] that might in fact be misunderstood. This lies in the word 'tendencies' and this is where the irony begins. For this word can be understood to mean that I consider the Theory of Knowledge [Wissenschaftslehre], for example, to be 'merely' a tendency, a temporary venture like Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* which I myself might perhaps have a mind to continue rather better and then bring to completion.'[114] Thus, when Schlegel talks of Fichte's philosophy as being a 'tendency' in the Athenaeum fragment, we are to understand this as an endorsement of sorts, as an emphasis on the importance that he assigns to it. This sense of tendency is importantly different from the other sense of tendency which the quote refers to, namely the notion of something gesturing in the right direction whilst still incomplete and faulty in some regards - the view that Schlegel has of Kant's *CPR* when he calls it 'merely a tendency, a temporary venture'. In Fichte's case, the word 'tendency' is supposed to designate the *Wissenschaftslehre's* focal importance for the general direction of the age, while Kant's 'merely temporary venture, the *Critique of Pure Reason*', is understood to be more of a fashionable fad. This different way of reading 'tendency' is thus 'where the irony begins'.

Part of the reason why the *Wissenschaftslehre* is more than what Schlegel calls a 'temporary venture like Kant's CPR', I suggest, is that it is more critical than Kant in its

[112] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 21, Nr. 35
[113] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XIX*, p. 346, Nr. 296
[114] Friedrich Schlegel, 'On incomprehensibility', in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, p. 264

abolition of the thing-in-itself. The philosophical desire to do metaphysics that Kant purportedly wished to abolish through his emphasis on epistemology – at least on Frank's reading - returns in what Schlegel tantalisingly refers to as 'real language': 'I wanted to focus attention [in the Athenaeum] on what the greatest thinkers of every age have divined (only very darkly, to be sure) until Kant discovered the table of categories and there was light in the spirit of man: I mean by this a real language, so that we can stop rummaging about for words and pay attention to the power and source of all activity.'[115] Again, this reference to Kant as bringing 'light in the spirit of man' by 'discovering the table of categories' is to be understood as an ironic statement: there is a clear sense in which the image of Kant as the great and overarching philosophical genius of the age is the common and accepted view of the 'self-proclaimed critical age'. Yet through his ironising figure of speech Schlegel wants to suggest that there is something 'real' that Kant's philosophy misses, which 'the greatest thinkers of every age have divined': 'I mean by this a real language, so that we can stop rummaging about for words and pay attention to the power and source of all activity.'

What does this 'real language', this romantic alternative to Kant, look like? Schlegel refers to it at the very end of the piece, and it there looks to me to be rather different from the notion that Frank endorses. For in Schlegel's writings incomprehensibility is not something that exists because of consciousness' inability to grasp the Absolute, so much as that which exists outside the realm of consciousness. Rather, Schlegel here claims that our whole world is 'constructed out of it', that incomprehensibility sits at the 'root of our existence' and supplies our lives with meaning, with man's 'most precious possession':

'Even man's most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis, as anybody can easily verify, on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would

[115] ibid., p. 260

crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis. Verily, it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest. And isn't this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos?'[116]

This is a crucial passage, which needs careful unpacking. I contend that Schlegel's reference to 'incomprehensibility or chaos' at the end of the quote should not be understood as an allusion to the realm of the 'world-in-itself', since they are not, it is worth repeating, the product of the gap between consciousness and Being, or between consciousness and the Absolute - the gap that acts as a limit to our comprehension. This view Schlegel dismisses at the beginning of the piece as the 'common sense' view: 'Common sense which is so fond of navigating by the compass of etymologies – so long as they are very close by – probably did not have a difficult time in arriving at the conclusion that the basis of the incomprehensible is to be found in incomprehension.'[117]

According to the Frankian view, there is incomprehensibility because the sphere of the Absolute exceeds the sphere of the conscious mind. But this picture of unattainability, or ungraspability, is, I submit, a far too theoretical construction of incomprehensibility. When we 'understand understanding', Schlegel writes at the end, we will come to see that there is nothing that is in principle unreachable, some element 'in-itself' that lies outside the limits of human comprehension. Rather, we are in a sense already and always in possession of it. It constructs our world, lies at the bottom of our experience. That is why we can 'reach the highest': 'Understanding itself will be understood, and people will at last see and admit that everyone can achieve the highest degree [das Höchste].'[118]

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[116] ibid., p. 268
[117] ibid., p. 260
[118] ibid., p. 269, also: 'Alle Mühe und Kunst ist fruchtlos, wenn wir nicht so glücklich waren, uns selbst kennen zu lernen und das Höchste zu finden.' [Every effort and art is

How could we hope to 'reach the highest', as Schlegel puts it? One very clear suggestion Schlegel gives is that 'incomprehensibility', the great archfoe of the enlightenment, is to be *accepted* as a fundamental constituent of our experience, as 'that point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis.' 'Das Verstehen des Chaos besteht im Anerkennen'[119] [Understanding chaos means accepting it], as Schlegel puts it at one point.

The world contains at bottom an element of incomprehensibility, not because 'the basis of incomprehensibility lies in incomprehension' (the common sense view, according to Schlegel) as consciousness cannot reach out to the Absolute (the Kantian in-itself), but rather because it is a transcendental condition for our experience, for 'man's most precious possession, his inner happiness'. Why would such an 'acceptance' mean that we would thereby 'reach the highest'? The piece ends at this point, so we can only speculate: but if I am right in assuming there to be something incomprehensible at the depth of our being, then the understanding and acceptance of this fact would mean that we gain a 'higher' sense of self-understanding. 'Reaching the highest' would thus mean understanding, and accepting, oneself. This might lead to 'inner happiness' in the same way in which Heidegger takes the acceptance of 'anxiety' – anticipatory resoluteness – to go hand in hand with 'an unshakable joy' in a passage in *Being and Time*.[120] And it would be very much in Schlegel's 'ironic' spirit: acceptance that there are some things we cannot conceptualize or comprehend would give us, in some sense, a greater understanding of ourselves. I will say more about how I take this to be the case after the discussion of Novalis' 'Hymns to the Night' below. And we will encounter the theme again at length in the fourth chapter.

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in vain if we weren't so lucky as to have come to know ourselves and find the highest.] (Friedrich Schlegel, Über die Philosophie, in *Kritische Schriften zur Philosophie*, p. 87)

[119] Friedrich Schlegel*, KA XVIII*, 227, nr. 396

[120] Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 310

Leaving such speculations aside for the moment, I think the passage also makes clearer why Fichte remains such a pivotal figure for the early German romantics, despite their emphasis on anti-foundationalism. For it is Fichte's brand of absolute - or objective - idealism that can, at least in form, make sense of that particular interpretation of 'incomprehensibility' as a transcendental element. For although the romantics disagree about Fichte's monistic foundation that places 'self-consciousness' as the first principle of his idealist system, they concur, I would argue, with the concept that there isn't such a thing as an independently existing reality that compels us to adopt a skeptical or realist position. This would be highly 'uncritical', as Fichte saw. In line with this framework, incomprehensibility ought to be understood differently - as a feature of our experience - rather than the result of the gulf between the world of appearances and the world in itself.

But more needs to be said at this point about the exact nature of 'incomprehensibility'. The closest description is perhaps the one that Schlegel gives to us at the very end of 'On Incomprehensibility'. He there refers to it as 'a point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis.'

We can get a fuller idea of what Schlegel means when we turn to his 'Lectures on Transcendental Philosophy' (KSFA XII, p. 1 – 91), delivered at the university of Jena in the academic year 1800/1801. Schlegel's own manuscripts of the lectures have been lost, but there remain the detailed notes belonging to one of his students. The lectures are important because they mark the only place and time when Schlegel was somewhat forced to clarify his philosophy to the outside world, a task that compelled him to collect

his ideas in a somewhat systematic manner so as to allow others to understand his views.[121]

In these lectures, Schlegel provides an unusually firm definition of what he takes philosophy to be: 'Das Bewusstsein des Unendlichen; dies ists, aus dem alle Philosophie hervorgeht.'[122] [The consciousness of the infinite; this is where all philosophy emerges from.] This definition provides us with the cue [Leitfaden] from which to make sense of his notion of the 'point of strength' that he referred to in the crucial passage quoted above.

We can begin to deepen our understanding of the Romantic conception of 'incomprehensibility' when we look at the cluster of terms that are frequently used alongside it, most importantly the notion of 'the infinite'. At innumerable points throughout the lectures, Schlegel refers to the infinite as 'the highest principle', e.g. 'Dies [die Philosophie] ist ein Sehnen, die Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen. Etwas Höheres giebt es im Menschen nicht.'[123] [This [philosophy] is a striving, the striving for the infinite. There is nothing higher in man.] This is, as we have just seen, the same phrase he uses to refer to incomprehensibility, 'that point of strength that is left in the dark.' Schlegel explains further: 'Das Bewusstsein des Unendlichen… ist das Letzte, Urspruengliche, was nicht erklaert werden kann. Es ist das was den Menschen von dem Thier unterscheidet. Es liegt nicht in dem Gegenstand. Der Gegenstand mag seyn, welcher er will. Das Gefuehl ist einzig; es ist das Urspruengliche des Menschen.'[124] [The consciousness of the infinite… is the last, most originary [entity], that cannot be

[121] Beiser takes them to be 'Schlegel's most serious and sustained attempt to explain his new idealism… they are invaluable, providing the only insight into the details of Schlegel's thinking about absolute idealism around 1800.' (Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism – The Struggle against Subjectivism*, p. 445)
[122] KFSA XII, p. 7
[123] ibid., p. 7
[124] ibid., p. 7

explained. It distinguishes the human being from the animal. It doesn't lie in any entity. For that can be anything. It is the feeling that is unique: it is the most originary of man.]

'The consciousness of the infinite is that last, most originary [entity][125] that cannot be explained'. But what exactly is it that cannot be explained? Here we again encounter one of the key beliefs of early German romanticism: the 'unrepresentability of the Absolute.'[126] 'The Absolute', that highest principle of romanticism, cannot be comprehended – or made sense of – in the way that Kant claimed all 'proper' knowledge, knowledge within the bounds of sense, is to be arrived at. When we try to 'represent' the Absolute, by turning it into an object of knowledge, the phenomenon we aim to comprehend appears to disappear. This is a recurring theme that Novalis aptly summarised in the first of the *Bluethenstaub-Fragmente*, when he exclaimed: 'Everywhere we seek the unconditioned, but only find things.'[127]

The unconditioned, German 'Unbedingte', is literally that which is 'un', i.e. 'not', a 'Ding', a 'thing'. Hence the effect of the quote: we are looking for that which is not a thing, but only find things. According to Kant, this is because there is no such 'thing' as 'unconditioned knowledge', for all knowledge is 'conditional' (German 'be*dingt'*) upon the faculties and the categories, our transcendental conditions for making sense of things. Therein began the German idealists' quest for an 'intuition' that is not 'sensible', for that might provide the 'desired key' into the possibility of 'unconditioned knowledge'. This is where the concept of 'intellectual intuition' comes in – as that which

[125] This added substantive is non-existent in the German as the predicate (last, most originary) can be turned into a noun. 'Entity' is in some sense a very unhelpful addition as it threatens to misinterpret the nature of the infinite by 'objectifying' it.
[126] Textual evidence abounds, e.g: Schlegel in *Philosophie des Plato: '*Das reine Denken und Erkennen des Hoechsten, Unendlichen, kann nie adäquat dargestellt werden.' [Pure thinking and cognition of the highest, the infinite, can never be represented adequately.] (KFSA XII, p.214); also: 'The principle of the relative unrepresentability of the highest.' (KFSA XII, p. 214)
[127] Novalis, 'Bluethenstaub Fragmente' #1 in *Novalis – Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk*

somehow affords us insight without the introduction of concepts and distinctions, as these 'separate' or 'condition' that which is by nature 'unconditioned': the Absolute. This was what Hölderlin had in mind in his short but epoch-defining piece 'Urtheil und Seyn', when he claimed that in 'intellectual intuition' subject and object - which is to say the minimum result of any conceptual distinction (the 'Urtheilung) - are still united: 'Judgement is in the highest and strictest sense the original sundering of Subject and Object most intimately united in intellectual intuition, the very sundering which first makes Object and Subject possible, the Ur-Theilung.'[128]

We need to inquire further into this notion of 'intellectual intuition' to understand what was important in it for the romantics. As we just saw, Hölderlin defines it as the 'innigste' (innermost) unity of subject and object. The concept appears to stand in marked contrast with that of 'sensible intuition', the idea that 'all our cognition commences with experience', as Kant puts it in B1 of the *CPR*. The notion of intellectual intuition thus forces us to confront the question of what an intuition that doesn't have its origin in sensory experience might look like. More precisely, it invites us to confront the question of whether an intellect can create its own objects as well as whether there are forms of apprehension that are not conceptual. Kant seems to have ruled out both, arguing that the former are cases of reason overstepping its limits – which are given by experience – and the latter would mean the ability to cognize objects as they are in themselves, something which our very constitution rules out.

These two notions are conceptually distinct, and it is the possibility of the latter that particularly interests the romantics. Kant talks about the former case, the case of the productive, godlike intellect that actively creates its own objects rather than passively receiving them through sensibility, in his *Inaugural Dissertation*: 'Thus, in our minds intuition is always passive, and so is possible only so far as something is able to affect our senses. But the divine intuition, which is the ground of its objects, not consequent

[128] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Urtheil und Seyn*

on them, is, owing to its independence, archetypal, and so is completely intellectual.'[129] Kant of course rejects the idea that we possess such a 'divine intuition', and the romantics are likewise averse to what Kant would have dismissed as dogmatic (pre-critical) metaphysical speculations.

What matters for the romantics is the question whether we can have an unmediated, non-conceptual form of intuition, not whether the intellect can create its own objects. For why would it only be an object 'created' by the intellect that would be eligible to be the object of an intellectual intuition? Assume such a 'creation of the intellect' to have occurred: wouldn't we run into the same 'dilemma' of being able to distinguish the object of thought from the thinker, and thus have the 'subject-object split' – which we were trying to avoid – all over again? In which case, the question would arise of how such a creation of the intellect's would be more desirable than if the object or matter of thought was 'supplied' to us by sensibility?

What is at issue seems not to be the origin of the object of thought, but rather the process of 'thinking' itself: It is the faculty of the understanding - through its introduction of concepts - that is the source of the distinction between the knower and its objects, and thus the 'source' of the predicament. The 'origin' of an intuition appears far less problematic than the necessity of it being ordered by the understanding: in this way, even the matter supplied in 'sensible intuition' could become the 'object' of what Hölderlin seemed to be concerned with in his idea of a form of apprehension that is not structured by the separation of subject and object.

Therefore I am not sure I agree with Moltke Gram when he states that 'intellectual intuition… creating its objects destroys the distinction between subject and object in knowing.'[130] It is not clear to me why the exact origin of the matter of thought would

[129] Immanuel Kant, *Inaugural Dissertation*, §10
[130] Moltke Gram, *Intellectual intuition: The Continuity Thesis*

necessarily 'destroy' the distinction between thought and thinker. For distinctions like 'from the outside', 'not by the mind', 'the object of knowing', are all only possible once the manifold has been brought under concepts. We only 'know' about the origin once the understanding has passed its judgement. What is at stake in the case of the romantics' recurring reference to intellectual intuition is thus the desire for a form of knowledge that doesn't separate the object from the subject or from other objects through conceptual distinctions. What is grasped by concepts is only ever grasped mediately, and thus won't get us closer to the 'immediate apprehension' we desire. This is what Schlegel seemed to have in mind when he remarked that 'that point of strength that must be left in the dark… would crumble once subjected to rational analysis', and it is a big inspiration for Novalis' fascination with the 'night' as that space within which distinctions, which are associated with the 'light', must not be drawn, as we will see in the discussion of his 'Hymns to the Night', below.

The important theme that emerges out of this discussion on 'intellectual intuition' concerns, once more, the limits that are inherent in our attempts to exhaust the complexity of the world through concepts alone.
Yet, where does such a rejection of concepts, such a prospect to 'circumvene' the operations of the understanding - as that faculty which is to 'blame' for this separation - leave us with regards to our desire to gain greater clarity about 'the incomprehensible' and 'the infinite'? What can we 'say' about the kind of 'state' we are in when we are 'conscious of the infinite'? Given what we have just seen about 'intellectual intuition', to be 'conscious of the infinite' does not yet tell us anything about where the 'object' of our 'consciousness' originates from: it can either come from 'inside' (the intellect), or 'outside' (the senses), or rather, it doesn't really come from the 'inside' or 'outside' at all, as that would mean that we would already have drawn a distinction, precisely the kind of maneuver that is to be avoided since it would 'condition the unconditioned'.

'Consciousness of the infinite', therefore, does not designate a particular epistemic state, one in which we have gained insight into the 'object of knowledge' (in the Kantian sense), 'the infinite' or the 'Absolute'. Rather, this consciousness is that which comes 'before the act of reflection', as Novalis puts it in the *Fichte Studies*.

'The object of philosophy is not a thing' [Die Philosophie handelt… von gar keinem Gegenstande], reads fragment 15 of the *Fichte Studies*. Rather, 'philosophy is in its most originary form a feeling.' [Die Filosofie ist urspruenglich ein Gefuehl.][131] This evokes the familiar distinction between:

Idee, Begriff	and	Gefuehl, Empfindung
Denken		Fuehlen,

that Novalis charts in fragment 503. The consciousness of the infinite is a 'feeling': 'Philosophy is in its most originary form a feeling.'[132] Novalis echoes Schlegel in this regard.

What can be 'said' about this 'feeling', however, if, as just discussed, talking about the feeling (by introducing concepts) conditions the unconditioned? If it is just a 'feeling' about which nothing can positively be asserted, since doing so would compel us to introduce concepts, which as we have just seen would destroy the phenomenon, then how can we ever 'make sense' of the Absolute? Where does this sense, this insight, derive from? Doesn't 'making sense' presuppose a way of 'defining the Absolute', which would mean that we would have needed to introduce concepts and distinctions: that between 'the finite and the infinite', and that between 'the comprehensible and the incomprehensible', say? And if so, then wouldn't that mean that we have 'separated'

[131] Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, #15
[132] Novalis, Bluethenstaub-Fragment #3, in *Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk*

(distinguished) the object of knowledge, and so have failed to gain real insight into the unconditioned?

This point is particularly important to the claims I want to advance in this thesis, because the notion of 'infinity' or 'incomprehensibility' that I want to bring out is a 'positive one' in the sense that it plays an important role in our sense-making. The kind of picture that I want to distance myself from is one that takes 'incomprehensibility' or 'infinity' to be terms inserted to signify something that lies *beyond the bounds of sense*. For on such a view, these terms effectively become place holders for 'that which cannot ever be understood', along the lines of the 'thing-in-itself'. Decidedly I do not think that this is what these terms signify for the romantics.

Yet, this leaves me with the issue of having to account for something that we cannot make sense of *within the bounds of sense*. Much easier, surely, to posit two realms, 'the intelligible and the unintelligible', and to solve the issue by saying that whatever discursive reason cannot grasp we are to place in the incomprehensible beyond? There is no doubt that such an undertaking would be an easier one, but it would not be an undertaking faithful to the phenomenological descriptions of the romantics. For in the works of the romantics *this-worldly experience* is described as containing something ungraspable, and so we need to make sense of the fact that when we relate to the world there is something incomprehensible built into that very act of relating to it.

The romantics provide us with unmistakeable indications that they view discursive reason to be limited, such that it is incapable of exhausting the complexity of the world. The preceding discussion about 'intellectual intuition', as a way to 'access the phenomenon' without introducing concepts, is a way to see whether there is something other than a 'discursive access' available to us. Often, some version of an 'aesthetic intuition' (that is presumably 'non-discursive') is posited as an alternative way to

'access' the Absolute.[133] But it is important to keep in mind that the whole issue concerning the question of 'how to grasp or access the Absolute' is potentially misleading if it suggests that we are trying to get in touch with 'some object' that we have no real sense of yet.

What I think the romantics are trying to show is that it is always already there in our dealings, that we always do engage with it in a certain way (even if we are 'turning away from it', which is also a form of engaging). In a way, I think the solution will involve a form of *acceptance* that some things cannot be made sense of in the way that most things can. Trying to figure out how to 'access the Absolute' is indicative of the drive that *cannot accept* this state of affairs. And I think that one of the key lessons to be absorbed from the romantics is the suggestion that this kind of drive needs to be tamed.

The issue is a potentially awkward one, no doubt. As philosophers we want to make sense of things, and nothing is more frustrating than being told that there may be a limit to this kind of activity. But I think that if we take these lessons seriously we can nevertheless use them to establish concepts that reflect these limitations. The key concept that I think we need to introduce and employ is *the good infinite*. Let us therefore return to the task of making the distinction between good and bad infinity more clear. As previously stated, this distinction is derived from Hegel's *Logic*, but it is evidently present in the work of the romantics prior to Hegel's subsequent formalisation of the idea a decade later.

In his *Logic* Hegel defines 'bad infinity' thus: 'This infinity which is perpetually determined as the beyond of the finite is to be described as the bad qualitative

[133] E.g. by Frederick Beiser: 'While the romantics certainly did not hold that we can have a perfect knowledge of being, they did think that we can know it a little, through a glass darkly. The medium by which we know it would be aesthetic intuition, the vision of the forms in Plato's Phaedrus.' Frederick Beiser, Romanticism and Idealism in *The Relevance of Romanticism*, p. 37

infinite.'[134] What does it mean to say of bad infinity that it is that which is 'beyond of the finite'? Isn't any infinity necessarily 'beyond of the finite'? To see what Hegel has in mind we can take a case of mathematical infinity in the number series, say the set of positive integers <0,1,2…>. About this kind of infinity it can rightly be said that it never comes to an end. For any number, 'n', we will always be able to find yet another number, 'n+1', which will be larger than the previous one and still be a member of the set.[135] All finite integers are thus in some sense unable to 'reach infinity'. One might, of course, advance the rebuttal that this is exactly the point of infinite sets. After all, if there was an integer that could 'reach infinity', so to speak, the set would after all be finite, not infinite.

Graphically, one can think of the kind of infinity sketched above as an 'infinite line' extending forever into the horizon.[136] There is yet another image of infinity, however, that pertains not to 'mathematical infinity' (the endless line), but to what one might call 'metaphysical infinity': the circle. What makes the circle infinite is the idea of its infinite (or 'eternal', as Nietzsche would have it) recurrence: one can always 'go on' at any point of the circle, which keeps repeating itself ad infinitum. And yet this kind of 'going on indefinitely' is different from the kind of 'going on indefinitely' that we encounter in the case of the line. In the case of a line we literally go on without end, whereas in the case of a circle we will at some point arrive back to where we started. This decisively alters the relationship between the finite and the infinite: in the case of mathematical infinity (represented by the line) the finite is that which is opposed to the infinite, in the sense that no finite set of numbers can ever 'reach' the infinity of the number series. In the case of metaphysical infinity however (represented by the circle), the finite is not

[134] G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic,* p. 228
[135] Strictly speaking, the set of integers belong to what came to be called the set of 'countable infinities', which are to be distinguished from the set of 'uncountable infinities', a distinction which makes no difference for our purposes though.
[136] This graphic contrast is made by Adrian Moore in his *The Infinite*

opposed to, but rather contained in, the infinite. The circle forms a 'totality', a 'unity', of the finite with the infinite.

Why is this 'better' than the infinite that sets itself up against the finite? Because, so Hegel believed, an infinity that would posit itself over against the finite would thereby limit itself, and thus become finite, hence foregoing its infinity. Wayne Martin has made this point in relation to the concept of god's infinity: 'God is thought to be infinite and so is defined in complete opposition to the forms of finitude found in creation. But this means in effect that god encounters his limit in finitude; yet to be limited is to be finite.'[137] The infinite cannot be limited by the finite, or encounter its opposite in the finite, for this would mean that as a concept it would become limited itself, for it could not encompass the finite, but only define itself against it. Thus for Hegel the bad infinite is bad because the type of infinity it represents does not fully satisfy the logic of the concept. The infinite must be something that defines itself in and through the finite, not over against it, so as to encompass finitude within infinity, and thus be 'truly' infinite. If it doesn't, as in the mathematical case, it is 'schlecht', 'bad', infinity: 'The infinite as thus posited over against the finite, in a relation wherein they are as qualitatively distinct others, is to be called the bad infinite.'[138]

To better understand what such a positive conception of infinity looks like in the case of the romantics we must turn back to Schlegel and his writings on the 'incomprehensible'. As in the case of good and bad infinity there exists both a 'positive' and a 'negative' form of incomprehensibility, as Schlegel writes: 'Es gibt ein bloß negatives und ein positives Nichtverstehen.'[139] [There exists a merely negative as well as a positive kind of incomprehensibility.] The negative kind is that which Manfred Frank frequently reiterates, the positive kind is that which I now wish to reconstruct.

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[137] Wayne Martin, *In Defense of Bad Infinity*, p. 5/6
[138] G.W.F Hegel, *Science of Logic,* p. 139
[139] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 129, Nr. 89

We know that Schlegel spent his early twenties as a philologist interpreting the works of antiquity with plans to write a history of classical poetry, the first volume of which was published under the name *Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer*. Schlegel conceived of philology not so much as a strict science but rather 'as an art': 'Im Begriff, Beweis, dass die Philologie eine Kunst sey.'[140] [In the concept, the proof, that philology is an art.] One had 'to be born' for this particular art, Schlegel believed: 'Zur Philologie bedarf es der kunstmässigen Ausbildung, man muss zu ihr geboren sein wie zur Poesie und Philosophie.'[141] [To do philology one requires an artistic education, one has to be born for it like for poetry and philosophy.] Why does Schlegel speak of philology in this way? Because he believed that the art of interpreting texts implied reconnecting with a profound truth about the world's infinity, or incomprehensibility.

Philology concerns the relationship between text [Wort, Buchstabe] and spirit [Geist]. As such, 'reading' was, for Schlegel, a 'magical deed', for it implied uncovering the spirit within a text: 'Buchstabe ist fixierter Geist. Lesen heißt, gebundenen Geist frei machen, also eine magische Handlung.'[142] [A letter is a fixed spirit. Reading means to set free a spirit that is tied up, thus a magical deed.] The relationship between 'Wort' and 'Geist' Schlegel summarises thus: 'Das Wort ist endlich und will unendlich werden – der Geist ist unendlich und will endlich werden.'[143] [The word is finite and wants to be infinite – the spirit is infinite and wants to be finite.] The infinite spirit enters a text, thereby making the words and letters 'infinite': 'Aller Buchstabe muss immer unvollendet sein, er muss unendlich sein.'[144] [Every letter always has to be unfinished, has to be infinite]. This now creates a challenge for the philologist: 'Ist es denn auch möglich, noch den

[140] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Roemer', in *Friedrich Schlegel Handbuch*
[141] Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeums-Fragmente,* #404
[142] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 297 Nr. 1229
[143] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII,* p. 310, nr. 1397
[144] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 363, Nr. 500

Geist zu erklären, den ganzen Geist einer Schrift zu erfassen? Ist welcher drin, so ist er unendlich.'[145] [Is it also possible to explain the spirit, to capture the whole spirit of a text? If there's one {spirit} inside, it will be infinite].

Yet if the spirit of a work is something infinite or 'unconditioned' - 'Der Geist eines Werkes ist immer etwas Unbestimmtes also Unbedingtes'[146] [the spirit of a work is always something indeterminate thus unconditioned] – then how can a particular interpreter ever hope to provide an adequate account of such a work? This question, Schlegel believes, cannot be answered conclusively: 'Die Frage was der Verfasser will, lässt sich beendigen, die was das Werk sei, nicht.'[147] [The question what the author wants can be resolved, the question what the work is, cannot.] We might be able to state what a particular author or intepreterer had intended, but we can never conclusively encapsulate the whole meaning of a text. We must, in this way, distinguish between an author's finitude and a text's infinity. The totality of a work, or a text, thus contains something 'incomprehensible'.

The crucial question now concerns the 'quality' of this incomprehensibility. Should we regard it as something 'positive' or 'negative'? We saw in our discussion about good or bad infinity above that an infinity is considered to be 'bad' if the finite is set up in opposition to the infinite. In our example above this would be the case if the relationship between a text and an interpreter was such that the infinite ways in which to interpret a text (the text's 'infinity') could not possibly be adequately accounted for by one finite interpretation. An infinite amount of readings cannot ever be achieved by a finite author who can only offer a limited amount of interpretations. But I don't think that this is the kind of (bad) infinity that Schlegel has in mind when he talks about the 'infinite spirit of a text'.

[145] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVII*, p. 115, Nr. 1044
[146] Friedrich Schlegel, *LNB 59,* NR. 441
[147] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 318, Nr. 1515

There are two issues here. One is the relationship between the author of a text and that text's 'infinity', the other is that between (finite) secondary interpretations and (infinite) primary texts. As an interpreter of the works of antiquity, Schlegel is of course himself involved in the second issue, for he tries to give an account of what he deems to be texts that carry 'the spirit of infinity' within them. But his quotes above are partly also about the first issue, concerning Schlegel's view on the relationship between the writer or author of 'an infinite text' and that very writer himself.

It will be helpful to use Schlegel's own example of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey myths to see what sense we can make of his notion of the 'positively incomprehensible'. We must remind ourselves of Schlegel's assertion that 'the question [of] what the author wants can be resolved, the question [of] what the work is, cannot.' So on the one hand we seem to have Homer's intentions for writing the myths, which are finite, since they 'can be resolved'. Yet on the other hand we have those finite intentions creating a work whose meaning cannot be conclusively resolved in the same way. This goes hand in hand with the obvious fact that although the actual person 'Homer' has long been deceased, his works and texts still pervade our world today. And I think that Schlegel wants to claim that in this apparent contrast we find the existence of the positively incomprehensible.

For how is it possible for a finite creature to create works that greatly outlast him or her? The Roman poet Horace seemed to know that his works possessed this feature as when he wrote, in one of his *Odes*, that:

> 'I have built a monument more lasting than bronze,
> higher than the Pyramids' regal structures,
> that no consuming rain, nor wild north wind
> can destroy…'[148]

[148] Horace*, Odes III: XXX*, lines 1-4

He supplemented this with the claim that 'not all of me will die; part of me will escape the goddess of death.'

I think that the kind of texts that have this feature are those in which the author affirms that part of what he is grappling with will necessarily 'elude his grasp'. This is, I think, what Novalis means when he says that 'a poem has to be inexhaustible, just like a human being.' Texts by a finite author become infinite, in other words, when their prose or poetry begin to resemble the sense of incomprehensibility that he or she always already had a sense of. When that sense is affirmed, rather than denied, 'the infinite spirit' withstands a chance 'to enter the text.' Novalis' *Bluethenstaub* Fragment 6 thus reads: 'Ganz begreifen werden wir uns nie, aber wir werden und koennen uns weit mehr, als begreifen'[149] [We will never completely comprehend ourselves, but we can and will do far more than comprehend.]

What now does this mean for the relationship between the interpreter and an 'infinite work'? Again, there are two kinds of ways in which interpretations of such works can lead to 'incomprehensibility'. The first kind Schlegel mentions in his account of the *Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer,* when he writes: 'Wie aber die Gefahr des Kranken mit der Zahl der Ärzte, so pflegt auch die Unverständlichkeit eines Gegenstandes mit der Menge der Erklärer zu wachsen.'[150] [Just as for a sick man the chances of ill-health increase with the number of doctors involved in his care, thus does the degree of incomprehensibility of a thing increase with the number of interpreters involved]. This is the 'bad kind', of course, as we just add one finite interpretation to another without paying attention to the particular character of the work we are trying to interpret.

[149] Novalis, *Bluethenstaub-Fragment, #6*
[150] Friedrich Schlegel, *Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer*, p. 66

Once we do pay attention to that particular character, however, the interpretation should reflect the fact that part of what it is trying to interpret will not be able to be exhausted by the necessarily finite nature of the interpretation. But paradoxically, recognizing this limit is what will give the interpretation itself a chance to differ from other, less 'critical' kinds. I think that the famous *Athenaeum*, which is itself a blend of interpretations of old texts and new writings, is written and envisaged in exactly that spirit. Herrman Patsch, an important interpreter of German romanticism, seems to agree when he writes, in his commentary on Schlegel's 'philosophy of philology': 'Der positiv Nichtverstehende – so wird man interpretieren dürfen – ist sich in allem Verstehen der Unverständlichkeit bewusst, er hat das Nichtverstehen in das Verstehen hineingenommen.'[151] [The one who is positively not comprehending – as one should interpret – is aware of incomprehensibility in all of his understanding, he has incorporated the incomprehensible into understanding]. Patsch also regards this as a 'transcendental deed': 'Das Verstehen der Unverständlichkeit ist eine transzendentale Tat.'[152] [Understanding incomprehensibility is a transcendental deed].

Creating and interpreting texts thus involves, as I have repeatedly mentioned above, an instance of grappling with something that one 'always already' has a sense of. It is partly because of this that the romantics are not that interested in how we can *know* the Absolute, if by 'knowing' we understand the attempt to get in touch with some external object that 'we do not know'. What matters is to pay attention to what one always already 'knows', in a way, but not to try and 'prove it' as if one were trying to secure the existence of a previously unknown object. It is in this sense that we should understand Schlegel when he writes that 'the reality of the infinite can only be perceived (recognised), not proven.'[153] [Die Realität des Unendlichen kann nur erkannt[154] werden, nicht bewiesen.]

[151] Herrmann Patsch, *Schlegels Philosophie der Philologie*, p. 459
[152] ibid. p. 460
[153] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 24
[154] We have to concede that Schlegel's use of 'erkennen' is ambiguous. He is quite inconsistent in his use of the word, sometimes claiming that the 'highest' cannot be

This point echoes his view on intellectual intuition, wherein he claims that 'its insight cannot be proven, because it contains its proof within itself.'[155]

The much cited Romantic 'journey inwards' thus contains the search for 'a good, a glory, that one has enjoyed before'. Schlegel points out how 'that longing for an indefinite something must be something that one has been acquainted with before': 'Das reine Sehnen ist immer ein Streben nach einem bekannten, aber unbestimmten Etwas, also nach einem Etwas, das man vorher schon gekannt, einem Gute, einer Herrlichkeit, die man schon einmal genossen hat; es ist ein dunkles Vorgefühl eines unbekannten Gegenstandes, das Streben in eine unermessliche, dunkle Ferne.'[156] [The pure longing is always a striving for something known but indeterminate, thus for something that one has been acquainted with before, a good, a glory, that one has enjoyed before; it is a dark intimation of an unknown entity, the striving into an immeasurable, dark distance.]

And Novalis' famous *Blüthenstaub-Fragment* 16 reads: 'We dream of travels throughout the universe: is not the universe within us? We do not know the depths of our spirit. The mysterious path leads within. In us, or nowhere, lies eternity with its worlds, the past and the future.'[157] Novalis travelled this 'mysterious path' most clearly in his *Hymns to the Night,* where the notion of the 'night' figures to signify the world's underlying incomprehensibility and infinity that the prose is supposed to attune us to. The six

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'erkannt', like in the quote we encountered above about the 'unrepresentability of the highest', but then again stating, like in this particular sentence, that the 'reality of the infinite' can be 'erkannt'.

[155] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 24

[156] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Philosophie des Plato', in *Schriften zur Kritischen Philosophie,* p. 216

[157] This is not to encourage too strong a 'subjectivist' reading of romanticism, of course. Recall that, for the romantics, 'Unser Selbst ist ein Widerschein des Unendlichen' [Our self is a reverberation of the infinite]. And that 'Aus dem Unendlichen entsteht das Bewusstsein' [consciousness arises out of the infinite]. (Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 24.)

'hymns', widely regarded as one of the greatest achievements of the period as a whole, were the result of Novalis' struggle with the death of his young fiancée 'Sophie von Kuehn', who tragically passed away at the age of 15. Her death led Novalis to give full expression to what has been called his 'magical idealism' – an approach imbued with an increased emphasis on the world's mysticism, infinity and incomprehensibility that typifies the 'late' phase of his writings, if such a phase can reasonably be identified (given Novalis' tragic early death). The first 'hymn' begins with the introduction of the concept of 'light' and its powers, which are then swiftly juxtaposed with the perspective of the world that flows from out of the force of the night. Throughout the first hymn, the emphasis is on how our experience of the world is deeply affected by the dark, inexpressible and infinite:

'What springs up all at once so sweetly boding in my heart, and stills the soft air of sadness? Dost thou also take a pleasure in us, dark Night? What holdest thou under thy mantle, that with hidden power affects my soul? Thou upliftest the heavy-laden wings of the soul. Darkly and inexpressibly are we moved.'[158]

The night 'affects our soul with its hidden power', and moves us 'darkly and inexpressibly'. Against this forcefulness 'the light appears a poor and childish thing', and 'More heavenly than those glittering stars [the symbols of light] we hold the eternal eyes which the Night hath opened within us. Farther they see than the palest of those countless hosts -- needing no aid from the light, they penetrate the depths of a loving soul -- that fills a loftier region with bliss ineffable.' Again, the night is said 'to fill the depths of a loving soul', 'filling a region with bliss ineffable'. As such, the night – 'that queen of the world' – has 'made me a man', Novalis claims. We interpret ourselves, in other words, in terms of the 'ineffable region' that the night opens up. It is within that space that we must understand ourselves, and the world around us.

[158] Novalis, *Hymns to the Night (1)*

The third hymn continues where the first one left off, with Novalis praising the 'everlasting and boundless dominion of the Night.'[159] Importantly, we here see the concept of infinity and its link to the night, when Novalis talks of the night's 'boundlessness': the absence of light removes the ability to distinguish between entities as it debars the introduction of concepts. As such the world appears 'boundless', or 'unconditioned', and we are in a position to appreciate the underlying force that the night had on us all along, even when we were struggling to discern its real influence during the reign of 'light'. Once we are attuned to this space of the night we begin to encounter its qualities in the entities of this world: Novalis describes how he 'feels the night in the golden flood of the grapes -- in the magic oil of the almond tree -- and the brown juice of the poppy.'[160] Importantly, here he uses the notion of 'feeling', and not that of 'comprehension' or 'reflection', a sign that our 'feeling' for and of the Absolute manifests itself night and day, informing our experience and interaction with the entities of the world.

The third hymn curiously ends in a rather similar fashion to that of Schlegel's piece 'On Incomprehensibility', where Schlegel had claimed: 'Even man's most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis, as anybody can easily verify, on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis.' In a similar vein to Schlegel's emphasis on our 'happiness' and its dependence on 'that point of strength left in the dark', Novalis there writes of 'the night… bearing the key to the dwellings of the blessed, [the] silent messenger of secrets infinite.'

The description of the night as 'the key to the dwellings of the blessed', and as the source of 'man's most precious possession, his inner happiness', once more makes clear

[159] Novalis, *Hymns to the Night (3)*
[160] ibid.

a key point about the Romantic concept of 'incomprehensibility'. It is not, as might perhaps be assumed, some kind of 'defeatist notion' that is to be blamed for the relative lack of success of the 'Athenaeum', or that stands for consciousness' inability to penetrate into the sphere of the Absolute. Rather, it is a positive and transcendental feature of our everyday world, one that informs our strivings, by making us reach towards the 'endless' and 'infinite', as Hölderlin puts it: 'There is in man a striving towards the infinite, an activity for which absolutely no barrier is insurmountable, which makes absolutely no rest possible, but aspires to become ever more expansive, ever freer, ever more independent.'[161] The 'night' is that time of day that allows us insight into what is always already there, but often remains covered up by the reign of the 'light'.

Given the romantics' constant mention of the existence of the infinite as being present in our daily experience, and their attempts to show us how and where we can best see this, we should end this chapter by asking how the romantics recommend we relate to this feeling?

One option constitutes an undeniably defining part of Hölderlin's works: the nostalgic acceptance of our apparent inability to be, or become, the infinite. The character of 'Adamas' in the 'Hyperion' best exemplifies this type: his attitude is one of regret and remorse towards the world, and life more generally. Adamas feels within him a deep longing for unity which seems infinitely far away, and unreachable. He strives for the infinite, the perfect unity, but his constitution is one of imperfection and finitude. He regrets having 'attended all those schools', and 'having trusted science', which has 'destroyed everything': 'Ach! Wäre ich nie in eure Schulen gegangen. Die Wissenschaft, der ich in den Schacht hinunterfolgte, von der ich, jugendlich töricht, die Bestätigung meiner reinen Freude erwartete, die hat mir alles verdorben.'[162] [O! had I never gone to

[161] Friedrich Hölderlin, *StA VI*, p. 164
[162] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems,* p. 4

your schools! The knowledge which I pursued down its tunnels and galleries,from which, in my youthful folly, I expected confirmation of all my pure joy—that knowledge has corrupted everything for me.]

It is 'reason', 'reflection' and 'distinctions' that have led to Adamas being 'alone' and 'deserted'. What Kant prescribed as the inevitable operation performed by the understanding upon the impressions received by sensibility is for Adamas the source of all of his sorrows. He longs for his childhood and the time in which he was 'one with everything', but he instead finds himself to have 'dried up underneath the sun': 'Ich bin bei euch so recht vernuenftig geworden, habe gruendlich mich unterscheiden gelernt von dem, was mich umgiebt, bin nun vereinzelt in der schoenen Welt, bin so ausgeworfen aus dem Garten der Natur, wo ich wuchs und bluete, und vertrockne an der Mittagssonne.'[163] [Among you I became so truly reasonable, learned so thoroughly to distinguish myself from what surrounds me, that now I am solitary in the beautiful world, an outcast from the garden of Nature, in which I grew and flowered, and am drying up under the noonday sun.] 'Man is a god when he dreams, a beggar when he reflects',[164] he exclaims in despair.

It is undeniable that this kind of attitude towards the human condition, with its unanswered longings and infinite strivings, is indeed a part or an aspect of romanticism. It fits quite well with Frank's view of romanticism as a kind of skeptic defeatist movement that 'infinitely approximates' the unreachable Absolute, never quite getting in touch with the object it really desires, and at best drying its tears in the nostalgic poetry we know from Hölderlin, some kind of temporary 'aesthetic escape', perhaps, from the inevitable character of life. But, while this is indeed one aspect of Hölderlin, it is by no means the only response that characterises his work. Compare, for example, this passage of Hölderlin from the preface to the penultimate draft of *Hyperion*, in which

[163] ibid. p. 4
[164] Friedrich Hölderlin, *StA III*, p. 18

he puts a clear emphasis on the importance of 'producing' and 'gaining back': 'The blessed unity, Being in the only sense of the word, is lost to us, and we had to lose it, if we were to strive for it, to gain it back. We tear ourselves loose from the peaceful *en kai pan* of the world, in order to produce it through our self.'[165]

Moreover - and what's even more important to the argument made in this chapter in particular - it is by no means what I think emerges from the works of either Novalis or Friedrich Schlegel. For in their work the feeling of the 'consciousness of the infinite' is being responded to very differently indeed. Rather than effecting a nostalgic acceptance, this feeling prompts a willingness to 'transform' the world, to 'make it romantic'. It doesn't separate us from the world, creating an unreachable beyond, but rather we are moved to create *one world* in which we take on board the feeling of the infinite to 'endow the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite.'[166] In so doing 'I am making it Romantic', as Novalis puts it in the *Bluethenstaub-Fragment* 105. Or as Schlegel has his Julius say in his novel *Lucinde*: 'Bilde, erfinde, verwandle und erhalte die Welt und ihre ewigen Gestalten im steten Wechsel neuer Trennungen und Vermaehlungen. Verhuelle und binde den Geist im Buchstaben.'[167] [Educate, invent, transform and preserve the world and its eternal creatures in the constant change of new divisions and marriages. Veil and fixate the spirit in the letter].

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[165] Friedrich Hölderlin, Preface to the penultimate draft of *Hyperion.* In *Hölderlin and Novalis,* Charles Larmore also points towards this strand in Hölderlin's writings: 'German romantic thought is often said to be … a nostalgic flight from modern man's alienation from the world. Yet Hölderlin offers a notable exception to this *idée reçue*.' (Charles Larmore, *Hölderlin and Novalis*, p. 152)

[166] Novalis, *Bluethenstaub-Fragmente,* #105

[167] Friedrich Schlegel, Lucinde, in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, p. 31

3

Romantic Methodology

Nichts würde ihn befremdet haben, am wenigsten sein eigner Untergang.

- Schlegel, *Lucinde*

In the last chapter I made the argument that romantic prose or poetry is meant to 'inject' the sense for the infinite or incomprehensible into the world so that it doesn't appear to stand in contrast to 'daily reality', but rather begins to fuse with it. In this chapter I want to take a closer look at the philosophical implications of this move.[168]

We thus begin this chapter with the most obvious and clear piece of philosophical reflection within German romanticism: Schlegel's concept of a 'Wechselerweis', or 'Wechselbegriff' [reciprocal proof]. In an article on 'Friedrich Schlegel's Theory of an Alternating Principle prior to his arrival in Jena (6 August 1796)',[169] Ernst Behler very helpfully shows how Schlegel's philosophical idea actually arises from out of his philological as well as poetic writings, some of which we have just been surveying in chapter 2. The idea of an alternation, of a constant *becoming*, was with Schlegel ever since he worked on 'ancient poetry, drama and literature', such that prior to its emergence as a 'philosophical theme', the 'Wechselerweis' can actually be seen as a 'poetic principle': 'The instances of the text on alternation which seem to be prior to and independent of a Fichtean impact develop this term as a poetic principle, independent of philosophical speculation and transcendental philosophy. They are descriptive and point out a poetic quality to a high degree. Alternation in a work of poetry, drama and literature, fuses two opposite elements on an equal level by combining and dissolving them.'[170]

The Wechselerweis is thus meant to capture the philosophical effect of what poetry is supposed to deliver: the 'fusing of two opposite elements on an equal level by combining and dissolving them', as Behler puts it. This way of talking should also make it

[168] The very assertion that the romantics even had some kind of philosophical programme is of course hotly contested, and so we will inquire about the different themes that this brings up: 'deconstructionism', 'first-principle philosophy' and 'systematicity', in this chapter.
[169] Ernst Behler, *Friedrich Schlegel's Theory of an Alternating Principle prior to his arrival in Jena (6 August 1796)*
[170] ibid., p.389

quite clear what these 'elements' are that underlie the 'Wechselerweis'. Schlegel leaves us in no doubt: 'And so we now have the elements which philosophy offers us; namely, consciousness and the infinite. These are the two poles around which all philosophy revolves.'[171] As we have seen at numerous points throughout, 'consciousness' stands for the finite, while the other pole is 'the infinite'.

Hence Schlegel proclaims that these 'two foundations and an alternating construction seem to suit systematic philosophy and absolute philosophy.'[172] Manfred Frank elaborates: 'Es handelt sich um Sätze, deren keiner als ein Grundsatz firmieren könnte, weil keiner aus sich heraus verständlich ist, sondern eines anderen Bedarf, für den das Gleiche gilt.'[173] [It concerns the kind of sentences that couldn't form a foundation in isolation since neither of them is comprehensible in its own right and thus needs another of which the same is true.] The 'Wechselerweis' is thus supposed to be a 'reciprocal proof': 'In my system the ultimate principle [*der letzte Grund*] is actually a reciprocal proof [*Wechselerweis*]',[174] as Schlegel proclaims.

I think that this constitutes another very clear case of an endorsement of the idea of the 'good infinite' by Schlegel. For as we well know by now, Manfred Frank's version of the 'infinite' could never be one of the two elements of the 'Wechselerweis', for it is very clearly *opposed to* the finite, and doesn't stand in any kind of 'reciprocal relation' to it. This is only the case with 'good infinity', for only here the finite and the infinite stand in just that kind of relation that Schlegel wants his Wechselerweis to resemble. There truly is reciprocity between the two as we cannot make sense of one without making sense of the other.

[171] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 5
[172] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 108, #942
[173] Manfred Frank, *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus*, p. 109
[174] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 521

The *Wechselerweis* also implies something rather obvious, which represents, however, an important step away from the idealist project by the German romantics: the conviction that we need *two* foundations, rather than just *one*: 'Principles are always in plural, they construct themselves together; there is never just one as the fanatics of first principles think.'[175] And furthermore: 'The basic science must be deduced from two ideas, principles, concepts, intuitions without any other matter.'[176] Novalis concurs with Schlegel at this point: 'A type of *Wechselbestimmungssatz*, a pure law of association, it seems to me, must be the highest principle, a hypothetical proposition.'[177]

This is important, of course, because it helps to differentiate the romantics from the systematic ideals of the German idealists, most notably Fichte and Reinhold, towards whom Schlegel's words about the 'fanatics of first principles' are clearly directed. Distinguishing the romantics from the idealists will enable us to sharpen the ideal of systematicity that I think the romantics are pursuing. An understanding of this ideal requires an understanding of romantic systematicity as a search for a system that is characterized by a certain kind of harmony. What the romantics are looking for - are longing for - is a an equilibrium point, a middle, a place where things are balanced out. Hence Schlegel states: 'Der dritte und hoechste Grad ist das bleibende Gefuehl von harmonischer Waerme… welcher Juengling das hat, hat den Gipfel des Lebens erstiegen.'[178] [The third and highest degree is the enduring feeling of harmonic warmth… once a young man has attained it, he has reached the pinnacle of life.]

In *Lucinde,* Schlegel has his Julius state that his activity consists in an attentive listening designed to ensure that there will be no missing piece in the harmony: 'Dennoch lauschte ich mit kuehler Besonnenheit auf jeden leisen Zug der Freude, damit mir auch

[175] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII, p.* 105, nr 910
[176] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 518, nr. 16
[177] Novalis, *NS II*, p. 177, lines 12 – 14
[178] Friedrich Schlegel, Lucinde, in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze,* p. 31

nicht einer entschluepfe und eine Luecke in der Harmonie bleibe.'[179] [Nevertheless I listened with deliberate considerateness to every small strain of joy so that there wouldn't be one that escaped me, thus leaving a gap in the harmony.] It is this desire for harmony, this longing for something balanced that I think most clearly drives romantic systematicity. It is also this desire for harmony that contributes to the romantics' preference for 'starting in the middle' over any adherence to a first principle - about which much more will be said in this chapter. Every part, large or small ('every small strain of joy'), finds a place in the whole for the romantics and must play its role in any successful establishment of harmony: 'Our philosophy does not begin like others with a first principle— where the first proposition is like the center or first ring of a comet— with the rest a long tail of mist— we depart from a small but living seed— our center lies in the middle.'[180]

'Our center lies in the middle.' Again, I take it that quotes like this hint at an espousal of the concept of good infinity, for there the finite and the infinite are actually *mediated*, such that 'reality' is neither 'consciousness' nor 'infinity' alone, but rather the result of the two. Hence Schlegel writes: 'These two elements [consciousness and the infinite] form a closed sphere in whose middle reality lies.'[181] And the picture of the 'closed sphere' also makes recourse to what I discussed in chapter 2, where I challenged the idea that the graphical representation of the relationship between finitude and infinity should amount to that between a finite number and the concept of infinity in a mathematical number series. For the resulting picture of the endless line stretching out into infinity does indeed capture the 'bad infinite', in which the finite never 'arrives at' the infinite, but it doesn't at all describe what Schlegel here calls for: 'a closed sphere'.

[179] Friedrich Schlegel, Lucinde, in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze,* p. 16
[180] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 328, #3
[181] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 9

Rather, this 'closed sphere' demands that we think of finitude and infinity graphically: as a circle. We can 'start in the middle' because if we look at the world 'piece by piece' we will find the finite and the infinite reflected in those pieces, and will not be in need of 'positing a first piece which is grounded and explained completely in and through itself': 'For this reason, philosophy, like an epic poem, must start in the middle, and it is impossible to pursue philosophy piece by piece starting from a first piece which is grounded and explained completely in and through itself. It is a whole, and thus the path to recognizing it is no straight line but a circle.'[182] Thus, the romantics urge us to build a philosophy that resembles the fact that philosophy 'is a whole', that it is 'a closed sphere', that 'it is no straight line but a circle'. It is for this reason that in the Wechselerweis Schlegel posits two reciprocal elements that form such a 'whole, sphere and circle' as they mediate rather than oppose each other. Thus I submit that we only appreciate what the Wechselerweis was designed to achieve when we appreciate the importance of the good infinite in German romanticism.

The Wechselerweis, it will become clear, belongs to the more 'systematic' bits of German romanticism. Hence this chapter will argue for the existence of such systematic ambitions on behalf of the romantics. Such a claim is by no means uncontentious as it threatens to turn the romantics into 'systematic German idealists'. Many commentators have argued that the romantics occupy a different position to the German idealists. I concur with this, but wish to demonstrate that this needn't make them abandon their desire for a certain type of systematicity. The alternative view – that the German romantics lack any kind of systematic ambition - has been a reasonably popular position in more recent secondary literature. To a considerable extent, this view underlies the readings of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy,[183] as well as that of Winfried Menninghaus,[184] for example.

[182] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 518
[183] Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*
[184] Winfried Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdopplung*

The above two works aim at placing early German romanticism within the canon of 'deconstruction'. The latter philosophical conviction has found its fullest expression in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Both readings – those of Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy and Menninghaus - claim that romanticism should be seen as a 'precursor' to deconstructionist philosophy.

The basic intuition behind this argument seems to be this: the German romantics have placed an unprecedented weight on the importance of poetry. They see its value as being in a certain sense above that of philosophy. This elevation of poetry above philosophy is taken to imply a break from the ideas of the more 'classical' philosophers, for whom language was considered to be something like 'the dress of thought', i.e. 'merely' a useful tool that allowed us to refer to the objective structures of thought. In romanticism, the deconstructivist argument goes, thought and language are coupled in such a way that it does not make sense to speak of one independently of the other, such that the characterization of language as 'referring to' an independently existing structure of thought begins to lose sense:

'Romantic thought involves literature as the absolute',[185] as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy put it, and Menninghaus observes that 'Die sprachtheoretischen Grundannahmen Derridas konvergieren weithin mit denen der Frühromantiker.'[186] [The speech-theoretical basic assumptions of Derrida largely converge with those of the early romantics.]

What is the corollary of the view that language and thought are inseparably connected? If one thinks of the romantic 'Absolute' in quite general terms, as a 'referent' whose validity is supposed to hold independently of, or outside of, the domains of a particular

[185] Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute,* p. 12
[186] Winfried Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdopplung*, p. 115

text, then supposedly this conception of the Absolute is refuted by the deconstructivist's discovery about the relationship between language and thought. The 'meaning' of the term 'the Absolute' derives from its relationships to other 'words', or 'signs', within a particular text, but isn't something 'fixed', some structure that would hold independently of the text. Christoph Bode puts this central point well: 'Meaning is the effect of an endless play of signifiers that refer not to signifieds but to other signifiers – the whole dynamic structure could only be arrested and meaning could only be fixed, if there was a stable centre whose meaning did not depend on its relationship to other signs, but originated from itself. Of course, argues Derrida, there is no such thing. There is no centre to language and thought that is unconditionally there, no "transcendental signifier" that stands *outside* the relativistic cosmos of language and is thereby the foundation and guarantor for stable meaning.'[187]

In line with this definition, Menninghaus writes that 'Lautbild und Vorstellung, Signifikant und Signifikat hat Saussure mit den beiden Seiten eines Blattes verglichen. Beide – und damit das Zeichen als ganzes – werden erst durch den Akt der Artikulation konstituiert... Es gibt für Saussure also kein Signifikat vor oder nach der sprachlichen Bezeichnung, sondern nur in ihr.'[188] [Saussure has compared sound and imagination, signifier and signified, with the two sides of one page. Both, and thus the sign as a whole, are only constituted by the act of articulation… There is thus, for Saussure, no signified before or after the linguistic relation, only within it.]

There are many things one might say in reply to this: for a start I believe that the deconstructionist captures an important element within romanticism - namely its break with pre-critical Kantian philosophy. The counter-argument - that advancing the affinity between romanticism and pre-critical philosophy - is evident in many places in the

[187] Christoph Bode, *Romanticism and Deconstruction: Distant Relations and Elective Affinities,* p. 144/145
[188] Winfried Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdopplung,* p. 115

secondary literature,[189] wherein it is claimed that the romantics are still asking the same questions that the rationalists preceding Kant were asking. Nassar, for example, writes that the 'key romantic questions were': 'What is the relation between the one and the many?', 'What is the relation between mind and nature?', and 'What is the relation between the finite and the infinite?'[190]

It is true, of course, that these issues were very much alive in the German romantics' time. Indeed, Nassar's last question I consider to be *the* romantic question. Yet what I think these commentators are missing is that the romantics took aboard Kant's crucial twist to questions of this kind, namely that we cannot really ask them without reflecting on the nature of the subject asking those questions.[191] The relations between the aforementioned terms can be treated in a more 'removed' rationalist fashion, akin to solving problems in mathematics or logic, perhaps. Figuring out such 'clever' solutions wasn't, however, what I think the romantics' contribution was – rather, as I see it, the romantics were trying to locate what used to be abstract problems in rationalist philosophy in everyday experience, showing how they arose out of transcendental structures at the root of our self-understanding.

And this is what I think the deconstructionist, very generally construed, is right to pick up on. Language isn't simply the 'dress of thought' in the sense that it can be employed to refer to abstract philosophical problems. Understood in this way, the importance of poetry is to lend a voice to this felt experience in a way that removed philosophical jargon simply can not. 'The meaning of Socratics is that philosophy is everywhere or nowhere',[192] as Novalis at one point puts it. And yet it is a very great step - too great, in

[189] e.g. in the readings of Frederick Beiser or Dalia Nassar
[190] Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, p. 2
[191] Larmore also observes that this feature of Kant's philosophy is what drew the romantics closer to Kant: 'Kant was so influential for romantic thought because of his view that the mind is essentially active, not merely registering but rather structuring what we call reality.' (Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy,* p. 22)
[192] Novalis, *Novalis Schriften 2*, p. 545

my opinion - to conclude from this that as a result of this importance of 'language' the idea of something 'outside of language' must be fully discarded. There is still something on which the philosopher, the poet and the artist can and indeed do converge, and the fact that this something appears as an object within these different domains of 'language' shows that it isn't indigenous to just one particular context, or domain.

This brings this discussion back to the question of systematicity. As I see it, deconstruction goes too far with respect to romanticism if it relegates the Absolute to being 'just another term' of a particular language, something that doesn't occupy a more privileged position within the language. On my view the romantic oeuvre is informed by the search for something absolute precisely in the sense that the deconstructionist denies: something that informs and guides our inquiries because it is constitutive of them, rather than just arising as a result of them. To employ the deconstructionist terms: the signifiers we use in our language do indeed point back to a 'signified' that in a certain sense precedes them. This is what the romantics believe in, and their search for this 'signified' is what I think makes their inquiries 'systematic' in the sense that they are all centered around this ambition.

When Schlegel does affirm the value of 'poetry', as he indeed very often does, it is to show us why poetry can help us in this search for the Absolute; it is not because he wants to make the point that we should embrace poetry now that the philosophical ambition of achieving systematic clarity has ultimately failed. Poetry is meant to extend philosophy, not to replace it: 'It should be brought to mind that the necessity of poetry is based on the requirement to represent the infinite, which emerges from the imperfection of philosophy.'[193]

I have above alluded to the importance that Kant's critical turn plays for the romantics, and I want to here adduce a few more quotes that outline Kant's importance around the

[193] Friedrich Schlegel, Ideas, in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*

question of systematicity. For giving up the search for a system would also mean giving up an aspect of the Kantian heritage of the *Critique*. Kant had famously proclaimed on the last page of the *CPR*: 'As regards those who adopt a scientific method, they have the choice of proceeding either dogmatically or skeptically; but in any case they are under obligation to proceed systematically [...]. The critical path alone is still open.'[194]

Renouncing the 'critical path' by failing to 'proceed systematically' would be too high a price to pay. What the romantics desired was to reinterpret Kant's insights, not to completely reject them. Hence we find Schlegel defend the idea of a 'system' in a letter to his brother in 1793: 'I have come to the defense of two things which you have misjudged, the system and the ideal. I know that the damaging misuse by senseless and soulless rationalists has sullied this name for you. However, you look only at that and misjudge, unjustly hate, the exquisite certificates of our divine nobility. What we call souls in works, actions and artworks [and what we call] spirit and moral worth in humanity, God in creation – the most living nexus [lebendiger Zusammenhang] – that is system.'[195][196]

It is a common misperception that German romanticism was a violent reaction against 'reason' in favour of 'unreason', or 'irrationality', whereby the latter is understood to be some sort of elimination of any kind of order within writing and thought. It is true that the German romantics did stress the immense importance of 'incomprehensibility', but they did so out of an honest desire to understand the world, not as a passionate plea for irrationalism.[197] If the enlightenment, conceived along the lines of Kant's famous piece '*Was ist Aufklärung*?', was about a critical examination of the self and its place within

[194] Immanuel Kant, *CPR*, A 856/B884
[195] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XXIII*, p. 129 – 30
[196] Similarly, Schlegel describes his system as a 'system of fragments' and speaks of himself as a 'fragmentary systematician' (KFSA XVIII, p 100, no. 857; KFSA XVIII, p. 97, no. 815)
[197] Isaiah Berlin misreads the core of romanticism in just this way in his *The Roots of Romanticism*

the world, then it was very much in line with this tradition that the romantics believed their findings should fit.

In his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Novalis has the character of 'Klingsohr', the mentor to the hero figure of 'Heinrich', say: 'Begeisterung ohne Verstand ist unnütz und gefährlich.'[198] [inspiration without intellect is useless and dangerous.] And further: 'Der junge Dichter kann nicht kühl, nicht besonnen genug sein … Es wird ein verworrenes Geschwätz, wenn ein reißender Sturm in der Brust tobt, und die Aufmerksamkeit in eine zitternde Gedankenlosigkeit auflößt.'[199] [The young poet cannot be cool and circumspect enough … confused chatter ensues when a violent storm is raging in the breast and dissolves attentiveness into a quivering lack of thought.]

These quotes give us an initial idea, I think, of some basic aspects of a 'system' that appeared desirable to Schlegel. Making sense of things, and communicating this sense to other human beings, requires that we proceed 'systematically', by ordering our insights in a 'circumspect' way so as to avoid the 'useless and dangerous' employment of 'inspiration without intellect'.

And yet, despite such systematic impulses on behalf of the romantics, we must grapple with this well-known and difficult quote of Schlegel's: 'It is equally false for the spirit to have a system, and not to have one. It therefore must decide to unite them both.'[200] How should we understand this? This suggests the relationship of the romantics to the German idealists, which I have already frequently alluded to above, and which the first half of this quote is referring to. What is 'false' about the kind of system associated with idealism?

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[198] Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, p. 281
[199] Translations by Richard Littlejohns, 'Early Romanticism', in *The Literature of German Romanticism,* p. 61
[200] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA II*, p. 173, no. 52

This introduces the well-known resistance that the German romantics exhibit towards 'first-principle philosophy'. Novalis, for example, writes in his notebooks: 'Why do we need a beginning at all? This unphilosophical or semiphilosophical goal is the source of all error.'[201] And Schlegel claims that this kind of philosophy bears no fruit, as 'there are no first principles that are universally efficient companions and guides to truth.'[202] As a result 'philosophy [must], like the epic poem, begin in the middle, and it is impossible to present philosophy and to add to it piece by piece, so that the first piece would be in itself completely grounded and explained.'[203]

Furthermore, first principle philosophy could also imply 'an abstraction from all previous systems… a forgetting of what has been thought before'. As Schlegel remarks: 'To abstract entirely from all previous systems and throw all of this away as Descartes attempted to do is absolutely impossible. Such an entirely new creation from one's own mind, a complete forgetting of all which has been thought before, was also attempted by Fichte and he too failed in this.'[204]

Let us ignore, for the moment, the question of whether Schlegel's reading of Descartes and, more importantly, of Fichte, is indeed accurate here. Instead, we can observe that the romantics seem to object to 'first-principle philosophy' on what might be called 'Nietzschean' grounds, in the sense that they criticize the specific 'drive' behind 'first-principle philosophy'. Novalis seems to suggest as much when he remarks that 'an absolute drive towards perfection and completeness is an illness, as soon as it shows itself to be destructive and averse towards the imperfect, the incomplete…'[205]

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[201] Novalis, *Novalis Schriften* 3, p. 383, no. 634
[202] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 518, no. 13
[203] *ibid*. Similarly Schlegel further distinguishes himself from Fichte when he writes: 'In my system the ultimate principle [*der letzte Grund*] is actually a reciprocal proof [*Wechselerweis*]. In Fichte's [it is] a postulate and a conditional proposition" (KA XVIII, p. 521).
[204] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 111
[205] Novalis, 'Allgemeine Brouillon', in *Novalis Schriften II*, p. 384

The romantics believed that any kind of first principle, whether 'subjective' or 'objective', could not function as a ground when conceived of in isolation, because the true ground will involve a reciprocal relation, something which a solitary first principle can never offer. This does not mean that philosophy does not consist in the search for grounds, as is evidenced by Novalis' well-known quote from the *Blüthenstaub-Fragmente*: 'What do I do by philosophizing? I am searching for a foundation. At the basis of philosophizing there lies a striving towards the thought of a foundation.' [Was tu ich, indem ich philosophiere? Ich denke über einen Grund nach. Dem Philosophieren liegt also ein Streben nach dem Denken eines Grundes zu Grunde.][206] Rather, the 'search for grounds' that characterizes the romantics is decisively different from the search for grounds that lies at the heart of idealism.

Before paying closer attention to this important difference, let's take a moment to stress a possible point of agreement. For the romantics as well as for the idealists, a foundation must exhibit a 'connection to the whole'. Hence the Novalis quote continues: 'But foundation is not cause in the actual sense— but rather inner nature— connection with the whole.' Likewise, we saw Schlegel above claim that philosophy 'is a whole, and thus the path to recognizing it is no straight line but a circle.'

We must distinguish between the two differing conceptions of 'foundationalism' that are at issue in Novalis' remark: foundationalism in the sense of 'foundation as cause' and foundationalism in the sense of 'inner nature – connection with the whole'. The first kind is the one that the romantics, and the German idealists, will want to distance themselves from. Fichte's 'Science of Knowledge', in its attempt to positively spell out the nature of transcendental self-consciousness, is a sustained attack on the idea of foundationalism as cause. Such foundationalism Fichte equates with 'dogmatism', for it

[206] Novalis, *Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk,* p. 312, #61

bases its foundation not on something in thought (i.e. self-consciousness), but rather on something 'transcendent', a 'thing-in-itself' that stands in no relation to the intellect.

This 'thing-in-itself' – the successor notion to the uncritical idea of a monotheistic god that is the literal 'cause' of the universe's existence – is now supposed to be the 'cause' of thought: 'It is by the principle of causality that dogmatism wishes to explain the constitution of intellect in general.'[207] This dogmatism thus reaches its climax in a form of 'materialism' that only grants existence to that which is physically 'real'. This is diametrically opposed to the spirit of critical philosophy: 'The procedure of consistent dogmatism becomes materialism at once.'[208] Novalis himself mocks this idea in his 'Allgemeines Brouillon' when he warns of the mistake of reading Fichte's 'I' along these lines. The 'I' is not the foundation in the way that a father can (partly) be considered to be the actual cause of a child's existence. This would be a foundationalism in which 'Das Gehirn gleicht den Hoden.'[209] [the brain resembles the testicles.]

Thus, while the romantics and idealists share a rejection of a certain 'causal' kind of foundationalism, more important is their point of disagreement. To understand this point, we must begin by retracing the origins and motivations of the German idealists: what led the German idealists to adopt a 'first-principle philosophy' to begin with?

This of course raises the question of what it was about the Kantian project that the idealists thought needed to be reformulated. Reinhold's thoughts are important here. As I briefly touched on in the first chapter, Reinhold believed that his elucidation of the term 'representation' would place Kantian philosophy on a much firmer grounding. As Reinhold saw it, Kant was the first to realize that a range of terms, including the term 'representation', were ambiguous in ways that nobody prior to Kant had quite seen.[210]

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[207] J.G. Fichte, *SW I*, p. 436
[208] J.G. Fichte, *SW I*, p. 437
[209] Novalis, *Novalis Schriften 3*, p.444
[210] Paul Franks, *All or Nothing*, p. 216

The rationalists had emphasized the 'transcendental' (although they didn't yet refer to it as such) aspect of representation, according to which the 'form' of representations is something that the human understanding contributed; and the empiricists had emphasized that the 'matter' of representations was given to us by something other than ourselves.

In Kant these two senses now famously came together. Yet this meant that Kant's concept of 'representation' was resting on a 'dualistic' foundation that borrowed from both schools. It was this that Reinhold thought needed tinkering. And it was by articulating a single sense of representation, which was acceptable to both parties, that Reinhold hoped to eliminate that sense of dualism.[211] Thus, 'first-principle philosophy' was an attempt to reduce Kantian dualisms down to one clear and unambiguous foundation. Fichte echoes this sentiment about the need to provide for a 'foundation of all philosophy' that combined the 'theoretical and practical' aspects of ourselves, another 'dualist' ambiguity that was left open by Kant: 'Since Kant, we have all heard, surely, of the categorical imperative? Now what sort of consciousness is that? Kant forgot to ask himself this question, since he nowhere dealt with the foundation of *all* philosophy, but treated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* only of its theoretical aspect, in which the categorical imperative could make no appearance; and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, only of its practical side, in which the concern was solely with content, and questions about the type consciousness involved could not arise.'[212]

But what exactly was it about the notorious Kantian 'dualisms' that the idealists took to be unsatisfactory? To understand what seems to have been the main motivation behind first-principle philosophy, we must make recourse to a set of issues that have been with philosophy since antiquity, namely the issues surrounding 'Agrippan skepticism'.

[211] ibid.
[212] J.G. Fichte, *SW I*, p. 472

This kind of skepticism derives its attractiveness, or rather persistence, from the following possible scenario: suppose the Agrippan skeptic asks you to justify your reasons for holding certain beliefs (theoretical as well as practical). Then for any answer you might give, the skeptic would want to show you that:
1) your answer rests on another justification, and thus necessitates another why-question, e.g. 'so why this?', ad infinitum;
2) presupposes what it is supposed to establish, and is in that sense circular, e.g. 'Sleeping pills make you sleepy because they possess dormant properties';
3) is simply a brute assertion that lacks any justification.
If the skeptic succeeds in this, then, as Paul Franks puts it: 'Any response that you give to the why-question will either terminate arbitrarily, or lead to an infinite regress, or move in a circle.'[213]

How does this relate to the idealists' desire to overcome the Kantian dualisms? As the idealists saw it, Kant's dualism about the world of appearances and the noumenal world was problematic because it threatened to leave at least one of those worlds ungrounded in a way that left it open to a challenge by the Agrippan skeptic. Even if, as it was fairly uncontentious to assume, the physical world of appearances was indeed in some sense ungrounded (e.g. 'but where does gravity come from, why does that exist?'), it was the job of philosophy to show how the ungrounded physical world could be grounded by the metaphysical, in Kant's terminology 'noumenal', realm. This was the problem that Leibniz set himself to solve, and it was certainly still very much alive even after Kant's 'Copernican revolution'.

The question of whether, and how, Kant attempts to deal with Agrippan skepticism is much beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet, the fact that the idealists thought they needed to reinterpret Kant's philosophy in light of the threat of Agrippan skepticism shows that they took Kant to have failed to provide an adequate response to it. For

[213] Paul Franks, *All or Nothing*, p. 18

'first-principle philosophy', or 'derivation monism', is a type of philosophy that was specifically designed to establish itself as an option against the threat of groundlessness posed by the skeptic.

How so? The thought seems to be that a system in which every fact can be derived from one single foundation is best placed to halt the skeptic's infinite regress: rather than having to admit to a level of groundlessness, the one principle would ground the whole in a way that the axioms of mathematics ground certain proofs. In addition, a monistic system could also be holistic in the sense[214] that the properties of any of the items in the system are determinable only within the context of a totality composed of the other items and their properties. This was the Spinozistic heritage, and it again conflicted with Kant because it questioned the possibility of 'things in themselves', things that existed 'in isolation'. Novalis continues in that spirit when he writes: 'The thing in itself as an isolated entity is nothing but an abstraction of thought. Reality is never in isolation.'[215]

The idealist system, thus, was designed, first and foremost, as a way to respond to the skeptic's challenge about the justification of our knowledge claims. The idealists longed for the certainty that was characteristic of mathematical proofs. Hence their 'systems' were deductive in nature: the goal was to identify a 'first principle' from which 'all else' could be deduced in a way that wouldn't fall prey to Agrippan skepticism.

Now I have quoted Schlegel already in the last chapter with his important remark that 'the reality of the infinite can only be intuited, not proven.' [Die Realitaet des Unendlichen kann nur erkannt werden, nicht bewiesen.][216] This is important because it allows us to see that the romantics didn't share the German idealists' concern about devising first principles that would serve as indubitable grounds for our knowledge

[214] these distinctions are drawn by Paul Franks in his *All or Nothing*, p. 85
[215] Novalis, *Novalis Schriften 3*, p. 56
[216] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA, XII*, p. 24

claims. We could even go so far as to claim that the romantics in some sense agreed with the skeptics when they made their frequent remarks about the 'unprovability' or 'unrepresentability' of the Absolute: discursive reason has its limits. But once more this does not mean that as a consequence we must think of German romanticism as an essentially skeptical movement, as Manfred Frank does.

Rather, I think that Schlegel's remark implies that he who tries to 'prove' the Absolute is in some way missing the point altogether. For while the Absolute cannot be proven, Schlegel very clearly states that 'its reality can still be *erkannt*' [intuited]. And this sense of 'erkennen' underlies the quote about systematicity that we encountered earlier: 'I have come to the defense of two things which you have misjudged, the system and the ideal. I know that the damaging misuse by senseless and soulless rationalists has sullied this name for you. However, you look only at that and misjudge, unjustly hate, the exquisite certificates of our divine nobility. What we call souls in works, actions and artworks [and what we call] spirit and moral worth in humanity, God in creation – the most living nexus [lebendiger Zusammenhang] – that is system.'[217]

The unflattering referral to the 'systematicity of the soulless and senseless rationalists' appears directed at those who need to 'secure' the existence of the Absolute through some kind of proof. This is not what underlies romantic systematicity. Rather, for Schlegel, 'systematicity' is about capturing the 'living nexus' inherent in the 'soul of artworks' and the 'spirit of humanity'. The 'Wechselerweis' is then designed to capture this 'spirit' which reveals itself to the careful phenomenologist: the strife between the finite and the infinite.

But we must discuss more fully the issue we encountered above when I remarked that in some sense the romantics may agree with the skeptic challenge in their espousal of the 'unknowability of the Absolute'. To do this I want to refer to Hölderlin's seminal

[217] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XXIII*, p. 129 – 30

piece *Urtheil und Seyn* which, according to Manfred Frank, contains 'the essence of romanticism': 'According to this [Hölderlin's] view, Being precedes consciousness so that no understanding can exhaust the content of what is meant by Being. With this view, we find once again a space created for the notion of an infinite progression; but this notion has a decisively realistic foundation, which it did not have in the writings of the Kantians.'[218]

I want to ask whether Frank's way of reading Hölderlin is the only viable option, or whether there is something else in Hölderlin that lends itself to the kind of picture of romanticism that I want to draw in this thesis. For this we need to discuss the famous fragment, the main part of which I have reproduced below:

[218] Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, p. 56

Friedrich Hölderlin

Urtheil und Seyn (1795)[219]

'[1] ***Being*** *[Seyn] — expresses the joining [Verbindung] of Subject and Object.*

Where Subject and Object are absolutely, not just partially united [vereiniget], and hence so united that no division can be undertaken, without destroying the essence [Wesen] of the thing that is to be separated [getrennt], there and not otherwise can we talk of a ***mere Being****, as is the case in intellectual intuition.*

But this Being must not be equated [verwechselt] with Identity. When I say: I am I, the Subject (Ego) and the Object (Ego) are not so united that absolutely no separation can be undertaken, without destroying the essence of the thing that is to be separated; on the contrary the Ego is only possible through this separation of Ego from Ego. How can I say 'I' without self-consciousness? But how is self-consciousness possible? Precisely because I oppose myself to myself; I separate myself from myself, but in spite of this separation I recognize myself as the same in the opposites. But how far as the same? I can raise this question and I must; for in another respect [Rüksicht] it [i. e. the Ego] is opposed to itself. So identity is not a uniting of Subject and Object that takes place absolutely, and so Identity is not equal to mere Being.

[2] ***Judgment****: is in the highest and strictest sense the original separation of Subject and Object most intimately united in intellectual intuition, the very separation which first makes Object and Subject possible, the Ur-Theilung. In the concept of division [Theilung] there lies already the concept of the reciprocal relation [Beziehung] of Object and Subject to one another, and the necessary presupposition of a whole of which Object and Subject are the parts. 'I am I' is the most appropriate example for this concept of Urtheilung, it [the ego] posits itself as opposed to the Non-ego, not to itself.'*

[219] Friedrich Hölderlin, *Über Urtheil und Seyn*

One of the key terms of the fragment is the term 'mere being', the meaning of which I will try to bring out below. The question will then become one of whether there is a way of reading the fragment such that 'mere being' ends up referring to some kind of (idealist) 'first principle' in disguise'? And not just a positive first principle like Fichte's self-consciousness - positive in the sense that we can know it - but rather a negative first-principle in the sense that 'mere being' is posited as a first principle that is also in some sense unknowable, or unreachable.

Let us attempt a brief summary of Hölderlin's *Urtheil und Seyn* fragment, which, according to Dieter Henrich's reconstruction,[220] could have been written no later than the beginning of May 1795. As such it is the one text in which, as Frank likes to claim, 'we find the first consummate expression of what I call ''Early philosophical Romanticism'' – not the dismissal of the theme of consciousness, but rather its relegation to a status secondary to that of Being. That is, self-consciousness is still an eminent theme of philosophy, but is no longer, as it was for Reinhold and for Fichte, a principle of philosophy.'[221]

This is a helpful approximation with regards to the overall content of the fragment: a particular view of self-consciousness is indeed relegated, and it will become imperative to find out just what Hölderlin refers to with the term 'Being' in Manfred Frank's quote above. Let's summarise the main thrust of Hölderlin's famous one-page excerpt:

In the fragment Hölderlin demonstrates - quite successfully, many believe - that a particular view of self-consciousness, namely that of 'self-consciousness as reflection', is ill-suited to do two things: firstly, it is simply untenable in our search for an absolute foundation, for as absolute, the foundation cannot be relative. This is, however, exactly what self-consciousness on the reflective view is, since this kind of self-consciousness is

[220] Dieter Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewusstsein*
[221] Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, p.107

an objectivizing consciousness, and thus distinguishes that which is conscious from that which it is conscious of. Self-consciousness, thus conceived, 'is a judgement', and *qua* judgement relies on a prior unity, 'mere being [Seyn schlechthin]' as Hölderlin calls it, that 'makes possible the separation of subject and object' on which reflective self-consciousness depends.[222] Hence self-consciousness cannot be an absolute foundation, for it consists of two terms (subject and object) that are grounded in something more primordial (or 'higher') – the 'unity' of subject and 'object' in 'mere being'.

And secondly, even leaving aside the impossibility of reflective self-consciousness to occupy the role of a grounding first principle, the view also runs into the awkward problem of failing to capture the phenomenon which it set out to capture and explain. 'But how is self-consciousness possible?', Hölderlin asks again, after having already criticised it for its relational make-up whose possibility depends on a unified absolute. 'Precisely because I oppose myself to myself; I separate myself from myself', Hölderlin replies, to then deliver another blow to the argument's viability: 'But in spite of this separation I still recognize myself as the same in the opposites.' This point is absolutely crucial: I know that subject-me looking at object-me is one and the same person. But how do I know that? Well certainly not from this separation, for what the separation does is introduce the very possibility that the two terms might after all be referring to something different. For once I have separated the unity of subject and object and thereby 'destroyed the essence [of me as a person?]', as Hölderlin puts it, how can I be sure that my object self is not an other, but the same as my subject self?

I can quickly dismiss this possibility because I know that the two terms of reflective self-consciousness are part of one and the same unified self-consciousness. Yet this additional piece of information, Hölderlin argues, is not present in the reflective view of self-consciousness, but rather is presupposed in order for the latter to not grossly misconstrue the sense of self-consciousness, i.e. the very mundane and completely

[222] Hölderlin, *Über Urtheil und Seyn*

unquestionable (unified) state we are in when we say things like 'I'm hungry', or 'I'm fine'. This feeling of being one and the same underlies reflective self-consciousness; without it, the view would be an unsuccessful reconstruction of self-consciousness, as there would be a question about whether the two terms actually refer to one and the same person: 'Without some additional information, the objectivized intuition of himself must appear to the subject to be the intuition of an other, and precisely not of himself – as Fichte's critique of the reflective model of self-consciousness will demonstrate. An other is precisely an other and never oneself… the material unity of that as which we experience ourselves in self-consciousness is thus contradicted by the duality of the form of the judgement we use to express this unity',[223] as Frank summarises the worry well.

Given this brief description of the fragment, I want to juxtapose two ways in which it could be read. The first interpretation holds that one might very well read the fragment as in fact espousing some kind of first-principle philosophy. After all, Hölderlin criticizes reflective self-consciousness for the very fact that 'it is relational'. We cannot allow for anything thus composed, for it falls short of our desire to posit something absolute, and not relative, Hölderlin seems to argue. This could be understood along the lines of a monist criticizing a dualist foundation. And what 's more, although a first principle is posited, it is simultaneously denied to be accessible. For accessing means judging, and a judgement runs the risk of destroying the essence of that which cannot be judged. On this reading, then, we are left with 'mere Being' as an inaccessible first principle – something one-dimensional and transcendent, what Hegel mockingly referred to as 'the night in which all cows are black.'[224] This might then mean that romanticism is a movement that is either pre-critical and dogmatic (if we posit the existence of something transcendent beyond the limits of possible experience), or narrowly

[223] Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, p. 107
[224] Hegel, Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 92

epistemological (if we think of the Absolute as the unreachable negative limit to our experience).

We can see why Frank takes the fragment to represent what he takes to be 'the essence of romanticism'. For the majority of what is not even a page-long excerpt is indeed directed at telling us what the Absolute is not. As such its emphasis lies in a rather negative characterization of the movement, and it is this emphasis that Frank regards as the core of the position. Yet this fails to take in the positive aspects that Hölderlin hints at.

Hölderlin does mention 'the unity of subject and object' in 'mere being'. This means that Hölderlin seems to allow for the idea of at least a binary relationship that constitutes the Absolute, and so would distance himself from the conviction that the Absolute is a transcendent whole about which nothing can be said. This, however, is the positive limit of the fragment, and to find out what this 'binary unity' might look like, we have to look beyond the fragment towards the *Hyperion*.

There we find Hölderlin talking about 'the striving for the blessed unity that we have lost' that permeates both the world and the self in such a way that it is unclear whether it originates in one or the other. World and self feel intertwined, both structured by that longing for unity: 'This blessed unity, Being in the only sense of the word, is lost to us, and we had to lose it, if we were to strive for it, to gain it back… often it seems to us as if the world were all and we ourselves nothing, but often too as if we were all and the world nothing. Even Hyperion was split between these two extremes.'[225]

What are 'these two extremes' that we are split between? Hölderlin elucidates that he is referring to two drives, 'one that is striving for infinity' and another one 'that is limiting this striving': 'But just as necessary as the limitation … is the striving towards the

[225] Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, p. 162

infinite, an instinctively limitless activity'.[226] He further clarifies the relationship between the two when he states: 'But there is indeed something in us that prefers to keep the chains; for were the divine within us not constrained by any resistance, we would feel neither ourselves nor others. But not to feel oneself is death. To know nothing and to cease to be are, for us, the same – How could we disavow the drive for endless progress, the drive to purify, refine, and free ourselves? This would be bestial. But neither should we presume to deny the drive for constraint, for receptivity. This would not be human, but would be suicide. The opposition of these drives, both indispensable, is united by love.'[227]

We are 'striving for the infinite', for a 'free unity with ourselves', but find ourselves to be 'limited' in this striving: 'Were there nothing opposed to us, there would be no object for us. But just as necessary as the limitation, the resistance and the suffering caused by the resistance is for consciousness, equally necessary is the striving towards the infinite, an instinctively limitless activity in the being that has consciousness. For if we did not strive to be infinite, free from all limitations, then we would not feel that something opposes this striving; we would again feel nothing different from ourselves, we would know of nothing, and we would have no consciousness.'[228]

Hölderlin's description of this striving alleviates the charge that his 'mere being' is to be understood as a first principle which we can only refer to in the abstract, at best defining it negatively as that which is 'beyond our reach'. The struggle that Hölderlin is referring to seems to me to be a description of a fundamental dimension of experience: we find ourselves torn between the 'infinite', which articulates itself in 'the drive for endless progress, the drive to purify, refine, and free ourselves', and the 'finite', which

[226] ibid., p. 164
[227] ibid., p. 162. The theme of 'love' uniting the two drives, which Hölderlin touches upon here, will be discussed at the end of the fourth chapter when we explore Schlegel's thoughts on the 'irony of love'.
[228] ibid., p. 164

appears as ‘the drive for constraint, for receptivity’. These two ‘drives’, the two ‘elements’ of Schlegel’s *Wechselerweis*, are ‘necessarily limiting each other’. The interplay between these drives constitutes the ‘being that has consciousness’, the being that ‘feels itself’. This contains an implicit and important criticism of Fichte’s philosophy, as well as the Hegelian charge of ‘subjectivity’, both of which emphasise the privileged position that the subject occupies in transcendental philosophy. The ‘self’, or the ‘being that feels’, or ‘the being that has consciousness’, is secondary to the struggle between these two drives: it arises as a result of them, rather than being their originator. We will return to this point in the discussion of Novalis’ criticism of Fichte.

There is a second very important theme in Hölderlin’s writings which we will need to pay close attention to: it is the fact that this struggle is a struggle that is aiming towards something, namely ‘the blessed unity, Being in the only sense of the word, which is lost to us.’ The struggle is a struggle to unite something that has been lost: the blessed unity of the two drives. This sense of loss is a core feature of romanticism, and it plays a role in the romantic need for a system. For identifying a ‘grounding principle’ (understood in the non-idealist sense described above) like the ‘Wechselerweis’ is also designed to help restore a loss of direction and purpose that the romantics very clearly felt.

So what exactly is it that has been lost? What has caused the blessed unity of being to disappear? In Hölderlin’s writings we are being offered a fairly clear answer: ‘The gods have fled’, as Hölderlin remarks at one point. The ‘divine’ has become ‘utilized’, which means that ‘the powers of heaven’ have been ‘cheapened and wasted’:

Zu lang ist alles Göttliche dienstbar schon
Und alle Himmelskräfte verscherzt, verbraucht
Die Gütigen, zur Lust, danklos, ein
Schlaues Geschlecht[229]

[For too long all that was godly and all
The powers of heaven have been cheapened
And good things wasted by a thankless,
Lustful generation]

Hölderlin further expresses a sense that the people of his day and age 'have come too late', implying that perhaps the departure of the gods cannot really be reversed. The gods 'live in a sphere above', where they have no regard for us mere mortals:

Aber Freund! wir kommen zu spät. Zwar leben die Götter
Aber über dem Haupt droben in anderer Welt.
Endlos wirken sie da und scheinens wenig zu achten,
Ob wir leben, so sehr schonen die Himmlischen uns.[230]

[But friend, we come too late. It's true that the gods live,
But up over our heads, up in a different world.
They function endlessly up there, and seem to care little
If we live or die, so much do they avoid us.]

This sense of divine departure equally dominates one of Novalis' most well known texts, his *Christenheit oder Europa*.[231] Therein Novalis praises the Middle Ages as a period of 'fine, resplendent times when Europe was a Christian land, when one Christendom occupied this humanly constituted continent.' This was a time when, as he crucially writes, 'one great common interest united the remotest provinces of this broad spiritual realm.' There was a 'common interest' that acted as a force of 'unity'. There were 'experienced helmsmen' who ensured that man would not get lost in 'the great unknown sea', thus ensuring a 'sure attainment of the coast': 'How cheerfully every man

[229] Hölderlin, 'Dichterberuf'*, in Selected Poems of Friedrich Hoelderlin*
[230] Hölderlin, 'Brod und Wein', in *Poems of Friedrich Hoelderlin*
[231] Novalis, *Die Christenheit oder Europa [Christendom or Europe]*

could fulfill his earthly labors when, through the agency of these holy persons, a secure future was prepared for him and every misstep forgiven, when every discolored spot in life was obliterated by them and made clean. They were the experienced helmsmen upon the great unknown sea, in whose keeping one might disdain all storms and count on a sure attainment of the coast and a landing at the world of the true home.'[232]

The image is again that of a guiding force allowing us to 'disdain all storms'. This meant that, Novalis claims, humanity was able to 'harmoniously develop its capacities', attaining 'tremendous heights' in 'all departments of knowledge of life and of the arts'[233]: 'How beneficial this regimen, this arrangement was, how appropriate to the inner nature of man, was shown by the mighty upsurge of all the other human powers, the harmonious development of all capacities, the tremendous height to which individual men attained in all departments of knowledge of life and of the arts, and by the universally flourishing traffic in spiritual and earthly wares within the boundaries of Europe and outward to the most distant Indies.'[234]

And yet, as we well know, these 'fine, resplendent times' in which divine forces were guiding man were brought to an unfortunate end. Two main reasons for this can be discerned from Novalis' writings: one is the effect that the Newtonian world view, a 'dangerous discovery in the area of knowledge', had upon the role of religion in explaining the place of the earth in the universe. Scientific discoveries were suggesting that the earth was ultimately 'an insignificant planet' which meant that humans 'would lose respect for their heavenly home and for their race'.

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[232] ibid.

[233] Novalis' reading of the Middle Ages clearly goes against any of the 'standard' accounts of the time, perhaps best exemplified by Jacob Burckhardt's famous study of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. In this book Burckhardt advances the reading that the Renaissance led to a real flourishing of human capacities, pulling humanity out of the 'dark ages' that were the 'Middle Ages'. This is a striking contrast to what Novalis wants to claim here.

[234] Novalis, *Die Christenheit oder Europa [Christendom or Europe]*

As we know, the Church of course tried to counter these trends – to little avail: 'With good cause the wise Head of the Church countered insolent excrescences of human talents at the expense of the sacred sense, as well as untimely, dangerous discoveries in the area of knowledge. Thus he prevented bold thinkers from asserting publicly that the earth was an insignificant planet, for he realized that humans, together with respect for their dwelling place and their earthly homeland, would also lose respect for their heavenly home and for their race, would prefer circumscribed knowledge to infinite faith, and would become accustomed to scorning everything great and worthy of wonder and look upon these as dead legalisms.'[235]

Hand in hand with this rise of the sciences as an alternative model of explanation to the religious one came the rise of biblical scholarship, initiated, in large part, by Luther's Protestant Reformation. This 'philological' enterprise ended up doubting the validity of the providence of a significant amount of sources formerly regarded as having a 'divine origin'. This influence, that greatly undermined the authority of the church, Novalis describes as 'corrosive': 'Luther treated Christianity quite arbitrarily, misjudged its spirit, introduced another Letter and another religion, namely the holy universal validity of the Bible, and therewith unfortunately had injected into religious affairs a different, highly alien, worldly science – philology – whose corrosive influence becomes henceforth unmistakable.'[236]

Every man, Luther demanded, had to have the 'absolute accessibility of the Bible' which meant that 'the religious sense was crushed': 'This choice was highly injurious to the religious sense, for nothing so crushes its sensitivity as the Letter. In the previous situation this latter could never have become so harmful, considering the large compass, the flexibility, and the copious matter of the Catholic faith… But now these counterforces were abrogated, the absolute accessibility of the Bible to the people was

[235] ibid.
[236] ibid.

asserted, and now the inadequate contents, the rough, abstract sketch of religion in these books, became all the more obvious and for the spirit of holiness infinitely weighed down free animation, penetration, and revelation.'[237]

As a result of all this, the Protestants had brought about 'the inevitable result of their procedure, they separated the inseparable, divided the indivisible Church, and sacrilegiously wrenched themselves loose from the universal Christian community, through which and in which alone was possible the true, the enduring rebirth.'[238] The theme of 'dividing the indivisible' is of course well known from the Hölderlin passage we looked at above. The unity that the romantics aspired to was lost. This now meant that we were inhabiting a world in which 'the infinite creative music of the universe' was reduced to 'the monotonous clatter of a monstrous mill [das einförmige Klappern einer ungeheuren Mühle]',[239] as Novalis famously, and dramatically, puts it.

Towards the end of the piece, Novalis again draws our attention to what I consider to be a key takeaway from the text, namely that without some 'heavenly attraction', a 'mighty weight' would always roll down the other side of a 'summit of equilibrium', the well known 'Sisyphus' myth: 'Let the true beholder contemplate calmly and dispassionately the new state-toppling era. Will not the state-toppler seem to him like Sisyphus? Now he has attained the summit of equilibrium, and already the mighty weight is rolling down the other side again. It will never remain on high unless an attraction toward heaven holds it poised on the crest. All your props are too weak if your state retains its tendency toward the earth.'[240]

As we have just seen, for both Hölderlin and Novalis the 'attraction towards heaven', in the sense of a deity that can restore the desired harmony and unity for us, is the loss that we must deal with. At the 'summit of equilibrium', we do not get the luxury of

[237] ibid.
[238] ibid.
[239] ibid.
[240] ibid.

having a god to fixate this equilibrium point into all eternity, so that the mighty weight may never roll down again.

This raises the question of how else we might go about ensuring a sense of stability? We saw at the beginning of this thesis that Hegel blames Schlegel – and by extension romanticism – for being an 'aesthetic exaggeration of Fichte's idealism', as Dalia Nassar put it well. Now this charge, misguided though it may be, nevertheless hints at something important: it is true that for the romantics 'self-realization' became a much greater task than it would have been under the auspices of an omnipotent and harmony-affirming deity. The romantics explore the self and its conflicting feelings at great length because they understand that we have lost the luxury of 'outsourcing', so to speak, the challenges of life to god, so that He could take care of them for us. And it is this increased emphasis on exploring the subject that has led to the common charge of romanticism resembling a version of Fichtean subjectivity (with Hegel's reading of 'irony' as a prime example of this charge). This kind of reading is very important to address, and I want to end this chapter by briefly considering how and why the romantics, despite all their focus on 'the self', nevertheless still differ with Fichtean subjectivity.

In the above fragment of Hölderlin, the theory of self-consciousness that comes under great attack was known as the 'reflection theory of the self'. It was Fichte who had similarly understood the weakness of this reflection theory – namely that it conceived of self-consciousness as a conceptually mediated phenomenon in which the 'subject self' observes the 'object self'. This solution was inadequate, Fichte thought, both because the view cannot account for the 'unified' feeling of self-consciousness, but also because as a transcendental condition, self-consciousness mustn't be conceptually mediated. Self-consciousness is what enables such mediation, not what is itself thus mediated. Mediation has been supposed, Fichte argued, because we understand self-consciousness only theoretically, as an instance of reflection. Against this, Fichte now asserted that self-consciousness is to be understood practically, as an act: 'For the

philosopher, there is acting and nothing else but acting.'[241] Famously, Fichte thus states that 'the self posits itself… It is at once the agent and the product of action; the active, and what the activity brings about; action and deed are one and the same, and hence the 'I am' expresses and Act.'[242]

Fichte had thus placed the self, albeit an improved version to the one that was criticized by Hölderlin, at the center of philosophy, and meaning.

It was this that Novalis disagreed with in his *Fichte Studies: '*Has not Fichte too arbitrarily packed everything into the I? With what warrant?'[243] Novalis continues: 'The I is basically nothing – everything has to be given to it',[244] and 'what reflection finds, seems already to have been there.'[245] Fichte's illusion, according to Novalis, is to argue that what appears first to consciousness is also first in the order of Being. Reflection, as the quintessential operation of consciousness, has the tendency to create mirror images that invert the actual order of things. Just like in the mirror the right is reflected as the left and the left as the right, it now appears as if self-consciousness precedes being, a case of the so called 'ordo inversus'. This illusion can be corrected by reflection's reflection upon itself, however, which 'inverts the inversion', as Novalis puts it, so as to understand that being 'really' precedes self-consciousness.

We can thus begin to see the reason for the romantics' rejection of self-consciousness as first principle. Far from Hegel's claim that romanticism is characterised by 'ironic egotism', 'the subject', 'the I', turns out to be 'basically nothing', and 'has everything given to it'. This quite blatantly rules out any kind of subjective idealism along Fichtean

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[241] J.G. Fichte, *SW I*, p. 498, also: 'It is therefore not so trivial a matter as it seems to some, whether philosophy starts out from a fact or an Act (that it, from a pure activity which presupposes no object, but itself produces it, and in which the acting, therefore, immediately becomes the deed.)' (*I*, p. 468)
[242] J.G. Fichte, *SW I*, p. 96
[243] Novalis, *Fichte Studies,* #3
[244] ibid., #15
[245] ibid., # 14

lines. The question now is whether this means that we must therefore reject idealism altogether, as Manfred Frank believes, arguing for an 'epistemologically enlightened realism'[246]; or whether there is a kind of philosophy, 'transcendental phenomenology', that can accommodate the necessary receptivity of the self without committing itself to a full-blown realism, as I contend.

In my view, the real weakness of Frank's account is that he refuses to concede that what the 'I' receives ends up being structured in such a way that we must assume at least a partially idealist position: the Absolute reveals a world to the feeling self. Frank acknowledges this problem with his position: 'Der Realist muss dann freilich dem Idealisten erklaeren, welche Kenntnis er von einem bestimmungslosen oder reinen Stoff haben kann.'[247] [The realist thus has to explain to the idealist what kind of familiarity he could have with an indiscernible or pure substance.] The realist, in other words, wants to posit the Absolute as an 'unknowable x' about which nothing can positively be asserted. He then, however, also wants to claim that we strive for this 'unknowable x' when we are 'striving for the infinite'. But how can the realist (Frank) avail himself of the concept of the infinite if he takes self-feeling to be a transcendent event? How can we 'feel at the same time finite and infinite', as Schlegel writes, if this feeling is completely 'transcendent', 'purely real', in Frank's terminology?

Let us linger a bit longer on this Frankian sense of realism that he takes the romantics to endorse: 'Die Deutsche Romantik steht auf dem von Crusius und Kant bereiteten ontologischen Boden; sein Ausgangspunkt ist anti-idealistisch.'[248] [German Romanticism builds upon Kant's and Crusius' ontological foundations; its starting point is anti-idealist]. If this is the case, one wonders how Frank can then go on to make the following claim: 'The highest – unconscious – unity is not opaque, but is articulated. It

[246] Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, p. 171
[247] Manfred Frank, *Selbstgefühl*, p. 10
[248] ibid., p. 39

displays, in fact, two antagonistic drives, in which we recognize the precursor of Schelling's 'reciprocal play of hindrance and striving.'[249] As I see it, there is a clear contradiction between an 'anti-idealist starting point' and the notion of an 'articulated Absolute'. How can the Absolute be articulated if it is beyond the ideal borders of sense?

Frank's attribution of a certain kind of realism to the romantics is not entirely wrong either, but misses the fact that the romantics already went a step further than conceiving of themselves as either 'realist' or 'idealist'. In the *Fichte Studies,* Novalis talks of the Absolute thus: 'The Absolute, as I want to call the original ideal-real or real-ideal.'[250] And Schlegel talks of the unity of 'idealism and realism', rather than their opposition, at various points in his writings: 'Der Idealismus in jeder Form muss auf eine oder die andre Art herausgehn, um in sich zurueckkehren zu koennen, und zu bleiben was er ist. Deswegen muss und wird sich aus seinem Schoos ein neuer eben so graenzenloser Realismus erheben; und der Idealismus also nicht blos in seiner Entstehungsart ein Beispiel für die neue Mythologie, sondern selbst auf indirekte Art Quelle derselben werden.'[251] [Any idealism of any kind must in some form go out of itself so as to return to itself and thus remain what it is. Out of this womb there will thus rise a new and similarly limitless realism; idealism will thus not only be an example for a new mythology in its mode of originating, but will indirectly become the source of the latter.]

The unity of poetry and philosophy, which was a well-known ideal of the German romantics, would be achieved by overcoming the dichotomy between idealism and realism: 'All philosophy is idealism, and there is no true realism other than in poetry. But poetry and philosophy are only extremes. If one says that some are uncompromising

[249] ibid., p. 121
[250] Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, # 17
[251] Friedrich Schlegel, Rede ueber die Mythologie, in *Kritische Schriften zur Philosophie,* p. 98/99

idealists while others are determined realists, then that is a true remark. Put differently, it means that there are no completely cultivated human beings, that there is no religion.'[252]

Placing realism and idealism in such stark opposition to each other, as in fact Frank does, seems to me to misconstrue romantic philosophy. Overcoming this dichotomy is what Fichte understood, and a huge portion of the *Science of Knowledge* brands itself as being the sole and proper reading of Kant because it is the only reading that bases the foundations of idealism not on an uncritical 'thing-in-'itself', which is what the 'dogmatists' are attempting to do: 'I am well aware that all Kantians [Reinhold, Schulz] have understood Kant thus … that the objective ground of appearances lies in something that is the thing-in-itself…. It may appear arrogant and disparaging to others when a solitary person appears and says: Till this moment, among a crowd of worthy scholars who have devoted their time and energy to the exposition of a certain book, there is not one who has understood this book in anything but a completely distorted fashion; they have discovered in it the very opposite system to that which is propounded therein; dogmatism instead of transcendental idealism: I alone, however, understand it aright.'[253]

Against this Fichte advocates that 'the nature of intelligence consists in this immediate unity of being and seeing.'[254] And he adds to this by using exactly the same terms that

[252] Friedrich Schlegel, *Ideas*, p. 96. Consider also this passage: 'Auch ich trage schon lange das Ideal eines solchen Realismus in mir, und wenn es bisher nicht zur Mitteilung gekommen ist, so war es nur, weil ich das Organ dazu noch suche. Doch Weiss ich, dass ichs nur in der Poesie finden kann, den in der Gestalt der Philosophie oder gar eines Systems wird der Realismus nie wieder auftreten koennen.' [I have been carrying the ideal of such a realism within me as well, and if I haven't thus far expressed it, this is only because I am still looking for the right means to do so. Yet I know that I can only find those means in poetry, because in the shape of philosophy or even a system realism will never be able to appear again.] (F. Schlegel, *Rede über die Mythologie*, p. 99)
[253] J.G. Fichte, *SW I*, p. 481
[254] *ibid*., p. 435

Novalis uses in the Fichte Studies: 'In the intellect, therefore – to speak figuratively – there is a double series, of being and of seeing, of the real and of the ideal; and its essence consists in the inseparability of these two.'[255]

Novalis' disagreement with Fichte's system was not about Novalis' belief in the thing-in-itself. This would make him a dogmatist, and it is hard to believe that he really came away from reading Fichte still convinced about the reality of the thing-in-itself, given Fichte's relentless ridicule of the view. In fact, we already saw in an earlier quote that Novalis arrived at the view that 'the thing in itself as an isolated entity is nothing but an abstraction of thought. Reality is never in isolation.'[256]

The romantics thus did not part ways with Fichte because they were skeptical realists, as Frank believed. Rather, the German romantics' disagreement with Fichte was about Fichte's ascription of all of reality to the principle of 'self-consciousness'. Doing so meant that Fichte fell on the side of 'subjective idealism', according to which all reality can be explained with reference to an all-encompassing transcendental self. As I have argued above, this view was decisively rejected by the German romantics. What is important to understand is that the romantics aimed not to fall on either side of the divide, but rather to transcend that divide whilst retaining the truths contained in each of the sides. This brings us back to the claims I made in the first chapter, where I introduced the idea of considering the romantics a part of the transcendental phenomenological project partly because of that project's ability to transcend these terms.

The truth contained in realism is that we ourselves are part of a larger whole which affects us. The romantics express this by saying that we can, and indeed do, 'feel the whole', but that we cannot ever fully articulate it. This means that they deny our ability to posit any one entity which everything can be traced back to, as the Fichtean idealist

[255] *ibid*., p. 436
[256] Novalis, *Novalis Schriften 3*, p. 56

would like to do. And yet, the romantics are also very clear that a critical idealism captures a central truth of critical philosophy, which is that we cannot understand being independently of thought. But again, this doesn't mean that we are thereby compelled to 'reduce' all of reality to thought, which is what a critical realism serves to remind us of. The resulting picture, which I take the romantics to subscribe to, is a position that incorporates the truths of both, thereby surpassing the dichotomy requiring one to declare oneself either a realist or an idealist. Properly understood, those terms are not mutually exclusive.

4

The Good Infinite

Die Endlichkeit des Endlichen ist seine Unendlichkeit.

- Hegel, *Logik*

In the last chapter we saw the importance of the good infinite for romantic systematicity. In this chapter I want to begin by comparing romantic philosophy to that of one of the greatest system builders of all time: Hegel. In his insightful *Zum Verhältnis von Hegel und Friedrich Schlegel in der Theorie der Unendlichkeit*[257][On the relationship between Hegel and Friedrich Schlegel in the theory of infinity], Ernst Behler offers a version of the commonly espoused reading that places Hegel and Schlegel at opposite ends as regards their views on the nature of finitude and infinity. Hegel, who himself mainly distinguished what he termed 'good infinity' from the philosophies of Kant and Fichte, found his real antithesis in the philosophy of Friedrich Schlegel, Behler claims:

‚Es scheint aber, dass die wissenschaftstheoretischen, hermeneutischen und semiologischen Aspekte der Hegelschen Theorie des Unendlichen, in denen heute ihr vornehmstes Interesse besteht, viel profilierter in Erscheinung treten, wenn man sie statt mit Kant und Fichte zu konfrontieren, wie Hegel dies tat, vielmehr der von Friedrich Schlegel entwickelten Theorie des Unendlichen gegenüberstellt, in der sie ihren ausgeprägten Gegensatz zu finden scheinen.'[258] [It appears as if the theoretical, hermeneutical and semiological aspects of Hegel's theory of the infinite, in which there is the most interest today, come to the fore much more clearly when, instead of confronting them with Kant or Fichte, like Hegel did, one juxtaposes them with the theory of the infinite developed by Friedrich Schlegel, in which they find their pronounced opposite.]

Behler's goal in the paper is to outline this 'stark difference' between Hegel and Schlegel. Behler contends that Hegel was fully aware of 'the fundamental opposition' between Schlegel's account and his own: 'Hegel war sich dieses fundamentalen Gegensatzes der Position Friedrich Schlegels zu seiner eigenen voll bewusst.'[259] [Hegel

[257] Ernst Behler, *Zum Verhältnis von Hegel und Friedrich Schlegel in der Theorie der Unendlichkeit*
[258] ibid., p. 136
[259] ibid., p. 136

was fully aware of the fundamental opposition between his position and that of Friedrich Schlegel]. Yet Hegel chose to 'largely ignore' Schlegel, mainly referring to 'Schlegel's Theorie der romantischen Ironie, mit der zweifellos ebenfalls ein direkter Bezug zu der gegensätzlichen Bestimmung des Unendlichen durch diese beiden Denker besteht.'[260] [Schlegel's theory of romantic irony, with which there doubtlessly exists a direct relation to the opposing determination of the infinite by these two thinkers as well.] Behler argues that Hegel's exclusive focus on 'romantic irony' meant that he didn't bring out the difference between himself and Schlegel in their differing understanding of infinity in all its fullness – a task which Behler thus sets for himself.

What is it that, according to Behler, characterises this fundamentally different understanding of the nature of infinity?

Behler provides some helpful quotes from Hegel's own positive conception of the good infinite. As we saw in the previous chapters, what is crucial about the concept of the 'good infinite' is that it doesn't 'negate the finite'. Such a negation would make the infinite itself 'finite', as there would be something (the finite), that it wouldn't include. This also means, however, that the finite itself is a part of the infinite, rather than something opposed to it. Really, the finite and the infinite are not two contrasting concepts, but rather constitute two elements that form a relationship. Behler summarises this thus:

'Die Wechselbeziehung und Wechselbestimmung des Endlichen und Unendlichen ist vielmehr als ein Verhaeltnis zu denken, das zugleich die Einheit beider und die Negation beider ist, in dem keines gesetzt und gefasst werden kann ohne das andere und in dem sich beide ‚in der gegenseitigen Negation bestimmen.'[261] [The Wechselbeziehung and Wechselbestimmung of the finite and the infinite is much more to be thought of as a

[260] ibid., p. 136
[261] ibid., p. 129

relationship, which is at once the unity as well as the negation of the two terms, in which neither can be posited nor grasped without the other and in which both determine each other through this respective negation.]

Famously, Hegel writes that the 'affirmative element' of the concept, i.e. that which the concept designates, 'negates its own negation', which is to say that neither the finite nor the infinite 'negate' what is thought to be their opposite, i.e. the infinite or the finite, respectively:

'So ist Beides, das Endliche und das Unendliche, diese Bewegung, zu sich durch seine Negation zurückzukehren; sie sind nur als Vermittlung in sich, und das Affirmative beider enthält die Negation beider, und ist die Negation der Negation.'[262] ['Thus the finite and the infinite constitute this movement of each returning to itself through its negation; they are only as implicit *mediation,* and the affirmative of each contains the negative of each, and is the negation of the negation'.] Again, this means that the infinite and finite are not opposed, but rather that they are both 'moments' in a mutual determining of the other: 'Jene beide [das Endliche und das Unendliche], es selbst und sein Anderes, sind nur Momente.'[263]

This positive Hegelian conception of infinity is supposedly fundamentally different from that of Schlegel. How so? The romantics' infinite is, as the well-known view goes, 'the unreachable infinite', i.e. the beyond of the finite: 'Das Unendliche ist nicht da, präsent, gegenwärtig, sondern ein Jenseits, weil es nur die Negation des real gesetzten Endlichen ist.' [Only the bad infinite is the beyond, since it is only the negation of the finite posited as real.] [264] Rather than being the 'negation of its own negation', which is to say something that delimits its own limitations, the infinite 'negates the finite'. And whereas

[262] G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, p. 162, *Science of Logic,* p. 117
[263] G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, p. 172
[264] G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, p. 164, *Science of Logic,* p. 119

the 'double-negation' leads to a unity of the two concepts, the single negation leads to an opposition.

This then sets up the infamous picture of the 'infinite progression', in which the finite 'infinitely approximates the infinite', without ever getting closer. As Behler writes: 'Das Musterbeispiel der schlechten Unendlichkeit ist aber für Hegel der 'unendliche Progress'... Die schlechte Unendlichkeit kommt in vergeblicher Arbeit dem unendlichen Ziele nicht näher... Der unendliche Progress ist nur Ausdruck dieses Widerspruchs, nicht die Auflösung desselben, nur die Aufgabe des Unendlichen, nicht die Erreichung desselben.'[265] [The prime example for bad infinity for Hegel is the 'infinite progress'… bad infinity labours in futility to get closer to its infinite goal… The infinite progress is only the expression of this contradiction, not the resolution of it, only the task of the infinite, not the reaching of it.]

According to Behler, it is this picture of the 'bad infinite' that Hegel 'blames the romantics for': 'Gerade dies Sehnen und Streben nach dem Unendlichen aber hat Hegel den Romantikern bis in seine letzten Schriften hinein als eine in sich blose Möglichkeiten und leere Nichtigkeiten versteigende Gedankenbewegung vorgehalten.'[266] [Hegel blamed the romantics for just this longing and striving for the infinite in all his writings, seeing it as a movement of thought that gets lost amidst mere possibilites and empty nullities.] Hegel, on the other hand, 'hat seinerseits einen Unendlichkeitsbegriff entwickelt, der sich nicht auf eine ausserhalb der Welt liegende unerreichbare Wirklichkeit bezieht...'[267] [has developed a conception of infinity that doesnt refer to an unreachabe reality lying beyond this world…]

[265] Ernst Behler, *Zum Verhältnis von Hegel und Friedrich Schlegel in der Theorie der Unendlichkeit*, p. 134
[266] ibid., p. 127
[267] ibid., p. 127

Needless to say, I don't agree with the interpretation offered by Behler. The romantic infinite is much closer to Hegel's supposedly original insight than Hegel would have liked, or than Behler seems to believe.[268] The idea that the two are 'mutually determining', in the sense of only existing in relationship with the other, is evident in Schlegel's *Wechselerweis* long before Hegel writes the passages in the *Logik*, as we have seen in the last chapter.[269]

Behler praises Hegel for claims that the latter made in his *Religionsphilosophie,* which, again, the romantics had been speculating about long before Hegel detailed them: 'Wiederholt wendet sich Hegel in diesen Vorlesungen gegen Feststellungen wie ''Gott ist unendlich, ich endlich'' und empfiehlt, ''dass wir uns von dem Schreckenbild des Gegensatzes des Endlichen und Unendlichen losmachen muessen'', da weder das Unendliche noch das Endliche feststehende Seiende sind.'[270] [In these lectures Hegel repeatedly turns against claims like 'god is infinite, I'm finite', and suggests that we 'free ourselves from the horrific image of the opposition between finitude and infinity', because neither the infinite nor the finite are determinate entities.]

But rather than engaging in a philological exegesis of the claims made by either, and the dates in which those claims were made, I think that the most fruitful place to better understand the relationship of Hegel's and Schlegel's thought is to consider the

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[268] Fred Rush seems to agree when he writes: 'Once one sees clearly how close the positions of Schlegel and Hegel must be by Hegel's own lights, one is in a position to pose the further question: whence the uncharacteristic harshness and disdain for romanticism, which is after all a prior *essential* philosophical view according to Hegel?' (Rush, *Irony and Romantic Subjectivity*, p. 11)

[269] The need to rethink the nature of the finite and the infinite came partly out of the romantics' desire to 'found a new religion', as we saw in the last chapter that surveyed the 'fleeing of the gods'. Schleiermacher in particular stressed in his *Reden über die Religion* that we needed to overcome the former theological picture that placed god's infinity beyond the reach of the finite believer.

[270] Ernst Behler, *Zum Verhältnis von Hegel und Friedrich Schlegel in der Theorie der Unendlichkeit*, p. 131

examples either gave to illustrate what they meant by their respective claims about the nature of the infinite. For Behler is right that there indeed exists a difference between the two views. However the difference is not what Behler takes it to be.

To see this difference more fully, it is instructive to be clear about what the key 'ingredient' is that is supposed to 'unite' the infinite with the finite: this is *the transition* from one to the other. For Behler, this issue only applies to Hegel, for Hegel is the one who supposedly aims at a unity, while the romantics appear to be longing for an eternal opposition. I hope to have demonstrated in the above that this view is overly simplistic, and that there exists a real desire for unity amongst the romantics. Hence I think that the issue of 'how to' achieve the unity in question is of utmost importance for both sides, not just to the thought of Hegel.

According to Behler, however, this 'decisive transition' from the finite to the infinite doesn't occur in Schlegel's philosophy: 'Der für die affirmative Unendlichkeit entscheidende Übergang vom Endlichen ins Unendliche findet nicht statt...'[271] [The transition from the finite to the infinite, which is decisive for affirmative infinity, doesn't occur.] Before challenging that particular claim, I think it is helpful to see how exactly Behler believes that this transition is - successfully - achieved by Hegel. Why is a transition required to begin with? Because the two concepts, that of the finite and the infinite, are on the face of it fundamentally contradictory to one another. And it is the goal of Hegel's system 'to sublate' any such contradictions. In fact, doing so is 'the only interest' of reason: 'Solche festgewordene Gegensaetze aufzuheben, ist das einzige Interesse der Vernunft.'[272] [To sublate such solidified contradictions is the sole interest of reason.]

[271] ibid., p. 134
[272] G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke II,* p. 21

So that spirit can progress towards its final and absolute state, reason needs to unite contradictory terms so as to achieve a synthesis: the process sometimes known as the Hegelian dialectic. In our case, what needs to be sublated is the opposition between the finite and the infinite. This opposition exists because, in a less advanced state, reason has presumably been unable to see the underlying unity between the two concepts that the perspective of 'absolute spirit' will lay bare. Thus reason has (prematurely) defined the two in artificial opposition to one another: the finite is that which is bounded, which begins and ends somewhere, and whose limitations are final and necessary. The infinite is that which is unbounded, which has neither beginning nor end, and which is necessarily limitless. The contrast couldn't be more elf-evident.

How does Hegel supposedly achieve a unity? Through the very operation which established the opposition to begin with – 'thought itself': 'Dieser Uebergang vom Endlichen zum Unendlichen ist nach Hegels Meinung eigentlich ''das Denken selbst'', dessen Wesen im ''Hinausgehen, ueberhaupt Aufheben des Aeusserlichen, Einzelnen'' besteht und charakterisiert werden kann als ''im Endlichen das Unendliche, im Einzelnen das Allgemeine zu wissen''.'[273] [This transition from finitude to infinity is, according to Hegel, 'thinking itself', whose essence is to 'transgress, more so sublate the external, the particular', and can be characterised as 'knowing the finite in the infinite, the particular in the universal.']

As Behler sees it, 'thought itself' achieves the transition from finite into infinite by 'transcending the particular' to reveal how it is part of the whole. The finite only appears finite from the point of view of finitude, so to speak. Once we view it from the perspective of the whole, we see that the particular was only really an aspect of a much larger whole of which the finite itself is a part, in fact an 'infinite whole' of finite parts. Finitude is thus 'sublated' by thought when we abstract from the particular to reveal

[273] Ernst Behler, *Zum Verhältnis von Hegel und Friedrich Schlegel in der Theorie der Unendlichkeit*, p. 131

how the particular is itself part of a larger group of entities, which is again part of a larger group, and so on… until infinity? 'Yes', if the infinite is supposed to mean 'the whole', 'no' if the infinite is supposed to be the unreachable ideal that can only be 'approximated' by 'abstracting' to ever higher concepts which never reach the 'highest of them all': infinity.

Let us engage with the Hegelian version of good infinity more closely to see where it diverges from that of the romantics. Hegel famously writes that, in its eventual and necessary demise, the finite 'comes to unite with itself'. This unity with itself now sets into motion a kind of infinity that pertains solely to the singular finite thing. As such it appears to be static rather than dynamic, because once the finite thing reaches its non-being, it remains thus forever. And something else seems to happen once a finite thing's non-being passes over into infinity. Hegel writes: 'The immediate being of the infinite resuscitates the being of its negation, of the finite again which at first seemed to have vanished in the infinite.'[274]

How so? Because, as Stephen Houlgate explains in his illuminating account,[275] the understanding assumes that 'infinite being is explicitly infinite only insofar as it is related negatively to the finite.'[276] What it means to be infinite, in other words, is to be something that is not finite. But, by defining itself thus, the infinite ends up limiting itself, because it sets itself apart from that which it is not. Logically, therefore, the infinite, understood as something that is not finite, becomes finite by imposing a limit on itself, a point at which the infinite ceases to be. This is, as we know, the story of the bad infinite: 'The finite points beyond itself and passes over into infinite being, but the infinite into which it passes sets itself apart from that finite, thereby limiting it and being

[274] G.W.F. Hegel, The *Science of Logic I*
[275] Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic*
[276] ibid., p. 405

limited by it and so proving to be a new finite in its own right.'[277] As a result, Hegel writes, 'the infinite has vanished and its other, the finite, has entered.'[278]

This kind of infinity is the one we have encountered again and again throughout this thesis, most aptly discussed in books like Frank's *Infinite Approximation.*[279] Such accounts see the essence of romanticism as consisting in an infinite approximation towards an infinite that is an unreachable ideal, always lying beyond what can be grasped. Houlgate gives a concise summary of this from the point of view of the Hegelian *Logik:* 'The progress to the infinite is the endless reaching out to an 'infinite' that is necessarily endlessly deferred… we are restricted to this systematically elusive infinite – one that repeatedly proves to be finite and constantly relocates itself beyond its own finite incarnation – as long as we refuse to let go of the idea that the infinite is the simple negation of the finite. For it is the idea that the infinite is quite simply not the finite that places the infinite out of reach beyond the realm of the finite in which we live and so prevents infinity from ever being the infinite it promises to be.'[280]

There is an interesting challenge here for the Hegelian (and the romantic, as I define it), which is to ask whether the solution offered by Hegel – the unity of the finite and the infinite – doesn't eviscerate the whole meaning of the distinction? If we claim, as Hegel does, that the two are ultimately 'united', then does it not become unclear whether there remains a difference between the two after this unification? And if there is no difference left after the unification, then the unity would obliterate the elements so unified, effecting a return of 'the night in which all cows are black'. A unity of the finite and infinite is only achieved if subsequent to the unification we can still intelligibly hold both elements to be separate from one another. There needs to be a distinction in spite

[277] ibid., p. 410
[278] Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 154
[279] Manfred Frank, *Unendliche Annäherung – Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik*
[280] Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic,* p. 413

of the unity, for otherwise the cost of unification is clearly too high. If there is a difference, however, then in what sense can the two 'unify' without losing their identity? After all, at a first approximation, each receives at least part of its identity from the way in which the one is unlike the other: in order to understand what it means for something to be finite we conceive of it in opposition to whatever is infinite, and vice versa. In trying to 'sublate' this opposition, we risk challenging the core identity of either term. Hegel wants unity without indistinguishability, one would presume, but the exact mechanics of this require elucidation.

Houlgate attempts precisely this in his final and illuminating analysis of what is crucial about good infinity in Hegel: 'It is important to recognize that the true infinite is different from the finite. Hegel's point, however, is that the true infinite cannot be something other than the finite because it is the process generated by the finite in which the finite is a constitutive moment.'[281] But what exactly is this supposed to mean? How can something be different from, but not other than, something else? This is what is required to be possible, according to Houlgate, given that 'in Hegel's view we can understand the nature of the true infinity only when we give up the idea that 'differing from' always amounts to 'being other than'.'[282]

He elucidates: 'In order to comprehend true infinity, we thus need to develop an idea of difference that is different from 'being other than'. Precisely such an idea of difference is to be found in the relation between a process and its moments. A moment of a process is not the whole process itself and so can be distinguished from it. Such a moment is not other than the process, however, nor is the process other than it, since that moment is a moment of the process itself.'[283]

[281] ibid., p. 424
[282] ibid., p. 424
[283] ibid., p. 424

The finite and the infinite thus become the two moments of one and the same process. And it is within this process that the infinite can be said to be 'good', because it logically satisfies the criteria of infinity, unlike the 'bad infinite', which fails by its own standards, because it regards itself as opposed to, rather than intimately connected with (different from but not other than), the finite. Bearing this in mind, what can be said about the nature of the process? As we saw, the process is one wherein the finite and the infinite constantly turn towards and into each other. Thus, what characterizes the process most essentially is that each of the two moments of the process constantly and continuously *becomes* the other. What there is, then, most essentially, is an eternal state of *becoming.* This is why Hegel writes that 'Das wahrhaft Unendliche ist wesentlich nur als Werden'.[284] [The true infinite *is* rather essentially only as becoming.]

Hegel defines 'becoming' thus: 'Ihre [Endlichkeit und Unendlichkeit] Wahrheit ist also diese Bewegung des Unmittelbaren Verschwindens des einen in dem Anderen: *das Werden*; eine Bewegung, worin beide unterschieden sind, aber durch einen Unterschied, der sich ebenso unmittelbar aufgeloest hat.'[285] [Their truth is therefore this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other: becoming, a movement in which the two are distinguished, but by a distinction which has just as immediately dissolved itself.] Becoming is a 'movement' - the movement of 'the disappearing of one in the other'.

Here we now reach the central point of our comparison between the good infinity espoused by Hegel and the good infinity that I take to characterise romantic philosophy: for the question now is whether, for Hegel, this movement is itself ‚forever', or whether it comes to a rest at one point? In section C, c, entitled 'Aufheben des Werdens' [Sublation of becoming], Hegel offers the solution in the title: the movement of 'becoming' is being 'sublated'.

[284] G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, p. 164, *Science of Logic,* p. 118
[285] G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, p. 83, *Science of Logic,* p. 60

Hegel explicates: once the finite vanishes in the infinite and the infinite vanishes in the finite, the difference between the two, on which 'becoming' rested, vanishes as well. This vanishing of the two as distinct moments is therefore the vanishing of becoming itself: 'Ihr Verschwinden ist daher das Verschwinden des Werdens.'[286] [Their vanishing is therefore the vanishing of becoming.] As Hegel puts it: 'Das Werden widerspricht sich also in sich selbst, weil es solches in sich vereint, das sich entgegengesetzt ist; eine solche Vereinigung aber zerstoert sich.'[287] [Becoming therefore contradicts itself in itself, because what it unites within itself is self-opposed; but such a union destroys itself.] Becoming contradicts itself, and thus destroys itself: 'Das Werden ist eine haltungslose Unruhe, die in ein ruhiges Resultat zusammensackt.'[288] [Becoming is a ceaseless unrest that collapses into a quiescent result.] Thus becoming turns from restlessness towards a quiescent unity: 'Das Werden ist die zur ruhigen Einfachheit gewordene Einheit.'[289] [Becoming is the unity that has become quiescent simplicity.]

This is absolutely crucial, because at this point the romantic and Hegelian projects, for all the affinities they might have exhibited around the good infinite, very clearly part ways.

The romantic sense of becoming is one that never gets sublated. Rather, for the romantics, *becoming is eternal*. To begin with, it is important to see that the centrality of the notion of becoming, as that which allows the infinite to merge in a unity with the finite, was fully understood and appreciated by the romantics. Here is Schlegel: 'The assumption of an eternal becoming, that all things are only a becoming, is necessary to unify our thinking, and to mediate [*vermitteln*] the finite and the infinite. All conflict between the two is overcome, insofar as the finite, which is a becoming, contains within

[286] G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, p. 113, *Science of Logic,* p. 81
[287] ibid.
[288] ibid.
[289] ibid.

itself an infinite fullness, and the infinite fullness [*unendliche Fülle*] is proper [*eigen*] to the finite insofar as it is considered as becoming and active.'[290]

The difference now lies, however, in the fact that for the romantics, becoming doesn't vanish. Consider the famous Athenaeum Fragment 116, which reads: 'The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected.'[291] Despite all the affinities between Hegel and the romantics around the good infinite, there is, therefore, this vital difference: for the romantics, the essence of the world is its becoming, its incompleteness and openness. Hence, the romantic kind of unity is not 'eine ruhige Einfachheit', but rather characterized by a restless perfectibility. It is a fragile unity, whereas Hegel's is solid. Hegel's 'ruhige Einfachheit' ends in a static 'Sein',[292] the romantics' unity is an 'infinite becoming'. In exploring romantic systematicity in the last chapter we saw that Schlegel describes his system as a 'system of fragments' and speaks of himself as a 'fragmentary systematician'.[293] This kind of systematicity emerges from out of the romantics' deep commitment to becoming, which demands a system to be fragmentary in the sense of never being finished nor closed.

This finding also establishes a crucial difference in the romantics' attitude towards existence as a whole, often denoted by the famous concept of 'romantic irony', further discussed below. Fred Rush gets this exactly right: 'While it is true that irony does not involve a contradiction involving the content of two claims, an ironic work does contrast the apparent completeness of a work or fragment with its ''opposite'', i.e. with its ultimate incompleteness. Ironic dialectic is historical, contextual and open-ended; Hegelian dialectic is historical, teleological and closed.'[294]

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[290] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 410–11
[291] *Athenaeum Fragments,* #116
[292] G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, p. 113, *Science of Logic,* p. 81
[293] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XVIII*, p. 100, no. 857; *KFSA XVIII*, p. 97, no. 815
[294] Fred Rush, *Irony and Romantic Subjectivity*, p. 189

Hegel's 'becoming' leads to a 'quiescent unity' of the finite and the infinite, while the sense of becoming that the romantics espouse is restless, open-ended and inexhaustible. This difference in results can, at least in part, be traced back to a difference in style between the Hegelian and romantic projects: Hegel 'thinks through' the concepts of the finite and the infinite, while the romantics want to address the 'feeling' of being both finite and infinite that they encounter in experience. Ernst Behler hints at this idea when he writes: 'Die Hegelsche Art des Wissens beruht auf dem Anspruch einer völligen gedanklichen Durchdringung und strukturellen Erfassung der widersprüchlichen Beziehung von Endlichem und Unendlichem, wogegen Schlegel darauf besteht, dass sich dies Verhaeltniss auf keine vom endlichen Wissen je erfassbare Struktur oder Dialektik zurueckfuehren laesst, sondern einen unendlichen Werdensprozess darstellt.'[295] [The Hegelian type of knowledge rests on the claim to a full theoretical penetration and structural gathering of the conflicting relationship of the finite and the infinite, whereas Schlegel insists that this relationship cannot be traced back to any structure or dialectic graspable by finite knowledge, but that it represents an infinite process of becoming.]

What is important here is that Behler touches on a core tenet of romantic philosophy: casting doubt on the very potency of 'thought itself' to exhaust the whole meaning of the relationship between finitude and infinity. What Schlegel questions, Behler rightly argues, is the idea that thought alone can exhaust the complexity of the phenomenon. The 'conceptual distinction' between finitude and infinity only goes some way towards capturing the whole phenomenon that is the finite/infinite distinction, and the conceptual solution offered by Hegel doesn't address the totality that Schlegel would like to address. Thus, uniting the finite and infinite in thought, i.e. solely conceptually, is not as comprehensive a unity as the romantics desired. Behler makes this central point

[295] Ernst Behler, *Zum Verhältnis von Hegel und Friedrich Schlegel in der Theorie der Unendlichkeit*, p. 128

well: 'Schlegels Kritik an dem Wissensbegriff lässt sich damit zusammenfassen, dass es das reine Denken seiner Ansicht nach in unendlich in sich selbst kreisender Monotonie 'immer wieder nur mit Gedanken zu tun' hat und mit der Beschraenkung auf 'nur die denkende Seite unseres Wesens' im 'toten Denken eingeschlossen und befangen bleibt'.'[296] [Schlegel's critique of the concept of knowledge can be summarised thus: according to his view pure thought 'only has to do with thoughts again and again' in an infinite monotony circling in and around itself and thus remains 'enclosed and captured in inanimate thought' by limiting itself to 'only the thinking side of our being'.]

Hegel's solution first and foremost pays attention to the 'thinking side of our being', as Behler puts it, paraphrasing Schlegel. This means, however, that there is something that the Hegelian solution doesn't adequately bring to the fore: a sense for the *feeling* underlying the solution expressed in thought. This sense that the purely rational conception is somewhat bloodless in its depiction of reality is echoed by Schiller in his famous *Briefe über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*. Therein Schiller writes that 'man himself, eternally chained down to a little fragment of the whole, only forms a kind of fragment.'[297] If we restrict ourselves only to the thinking aspect of our existence, Schiller claims, we will not develop the totality of our being, forever remaining a mere 'fragment of the whole'. We must be able to hold on to 'thinking' as well as to 'immediate sensation', Schiller writes. For otherwise we are 'deprived of susceptibility':

'That which flatters our senses in immediate sensation opens our weak and volatile spirit to every impression, but makes us in the same degree less apt for exertion. That which stretches our thinking power and invites to abstract conceptions strengthens our mind for every kind of resistance, but hardens it also in the same proportion, and deprives us of susceptibility in the same ratio that it helps us to greater mental activity.

[296] *ibid*. This way of phrasing it also comes close to how Schlegel himself articulated the concern in his *Die Entwicklung des inneren Lebens*, as we saw in chapter 1.
[297] Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, Letter VI*

For this very reason, one as well as the other brings us at length to exhaustion, because matter cannot long do without the shaping, constructive force, and the force cannot do without the constructible material.'[298]

Because the romantics are interested in an approach that pays attention to all aspects of our existence (and not just our rational side), what reveals itself is a sense of becoming that is very different to that of Hegel. On the one side we have a 'becoming' that slowly comes to rest, befitting and reflective of Hegel's image as the archetypal proponent of the enlightenment tradition prone to profess the 'last word' on the ultimate state of all things; coming to 'complete' the history of philosophy, seeking to 'end' it. On the other side are the romantics, who emphasize that in truth all things are open-ended and the constant subject of reinterpretation (recall Schlegel's quote that speaks of the finite as 'containing an infinite fullness within itself'). And this phenomenological finding then motivates a phenomenological approach in return, because the task is to illuminate the ground of our being, elucidating how to come to terms with our nature, how to relate to it.

Conceived thus, German romanticism *is essentially about concretely articulating the good infinite*. In this way it is not just an abstract conceptual account that leaves us wondering what exactly it might mean in real life and where exactly it applies. The *Logik*, after all, is about the shapes of thought of the things in this world. So what things come in the shape of 'the good infinite'? This question, I think, is the one that the romantics are addressing. Below I will provide a phenomenological account of a piece of music wherein I hope we can begin to make sense of the concept of the 'good infinite' in a more concrete way. The 'sensuality' of music, its 'concrete individuality', as Hegel terms it in his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, will be an indispensable element required to achieve the romantic version of the good infnite – and it is an appreciation for the focal importance of this 'concrete individuality' that will set apart Hegel's conception of

[298] Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, *Letter XXII*

the role of art from that of the romantics, as we will see through the development of this chapter.

What Schlegel and the romantics propose, I contend, is to alter our understanding of what a 'good infinity' really implies. Hegel's descriptions of the phenomenon in the *Logik* are largely accurate, and the romantic challenge to Hegel is not a rejection of the good infinite in favour of the 'bad' one. The romantics and Hegel coincide in their desire to 'achieve' a unity of the finite and the infinite, and thus a 'good infinity'. Both claim that the idea 'that all things are only a becoming is necessary to unify our thinking, and to mediate [*vermitteln*] the finite and the infinite', as Schlegel writes.

But the character of becoming ends up being very different indeed, and while for Hegel the case seems closed after he has offered his conceptual solution, the romantics engage in a potentially endless (fragmentary) phenomenology to demonstrate the concrete meaning of such abstract conceptual talk: while we can all largely agree on the conceptual solutions presented by Hegel,[299] the romantics explicate what such a 'unity of the finite and the infinite' - such a 'good infinity' - 'feels like' from the perspective of the person undergoing 'the experience'. The romantics try to show us what a good infinity could be like, not just what the conceptual analysis of it would uncover. They try to 'show', rather than just 'say'. They don't fully reject and oppose the Hegelian picture, but they get to it through a rather different avenue, and draw quite different lessons from it. For the romantics, there is more to the picture than just a conceptual solution as to how the finite and the infinite might unite. This 'more' is something that needs to be 'felt', and experienced, 'first personally'.[300] And it is here that their fascination with

[299] Keeping in mind that, very importantly, the romantics and Hegel part ways when Hegel claims that even becoming gets sublated.

[300] Fred Rush seems to agree with this view in his *Irony and Idealism* when he writes 'Schlegel's main philosophical and literary project in the years of 1796 to 1801, as I understand it, is to express his first-personal sense of lived regulative cognitive and cultural orientation. This may sound phenomenological or existential in spirit, and so it is.' (Rush, *Irony and Idealism*, p.9)

art comes into play. Not to replace philosophy, but rather to supplement it – to act as something that 'completes the picture'.

This is a good point at which to consider Hegel's writings on art, for doing so will give us a better understanding of the difference implicit in the two approaches. As we will see, for Hegel art is of 'merely' transitional value on the road towards the clarity achieved in and through philosophy. Once Hegelian philosophy finally arrives on the scene, art will be a 'thing of the past', as Larmore perceptively writes: 'If Schlegel's theory of irony fixes on art as its privileged site of expression, that is only because, Hegel famously announced, art itself is intellectually a 'thing of the past' for us moderns, who are able to express all truths without the sensuous images of art, in abstract and discursive prose.'[301] The romantics, on the other hand, don't think of art as philosophy's 'lesser cousin', so to speak. The artwork plays the role of giving us a sense for the feeling that underlies the phenomena discussed in philosophy. It is, as such, indispensable to achieving a full grip on the phenomenon. Without invoking a feeling for what is discussed, philosophy fails to meet its target.

But before we get to that, let us consider a rough summary of the views Hegel expresses in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, and the place that they assign to art. The important thing about art, Hegel believes, is that spirit manifests itself in the respective works of art: Hegel discusses architecture, sculpture, and what he terms 'the romantic arts', painting, music and poetry. The order in which I have just placed them is deliberate, for Hegel believes that, starting with architecture, a 'transition' occurs from one to the next such that every form of art that succeeds another incorporates and resolves some of the shortcomings of its preceding art form.

Architecture marks the beginning. It is 'the most incomplete art because we found it incapable… of portraying the spirit in a presence adequate to it, and we had to restrict

[301] Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy*, p. 81

it, from its own spiritual resources, to preparing for the spirit in its living and actual existence an artistically appropriate *external* environment.'[302] What places 'architecture' amongst the realm of the arts is that it gives expression to the activity of forming that which is without life or spirit, i.e. inorganic matter (literally the stone blocks used to build things), in such a way that it becomes apparent that there is something beyond unfree matter: free and evolving spirit.

However - and this is why Hegel takes it to be 'the most incomplete art' - architecture doesn't fully make spirit itself the subject. Rather it merely hints at that process which has spirit as its defining driving force: the process of 'forming the inorganic'. As such, architecture can only prepare 'an appropriate external environment' within which one can then 'portray spirit in a presence adequate to it'.

The actual and defining role of art, that which makes art come truly into its own, is first addressed by sculpture: 'Sculpture makes the spirit itself its subject',[303] Hegel writes. 'But', he continues, in sculpture 'spirit is still confronted only in its *bodily* organism and not in the element of its own *inner* life', which 'imposes on this art the task of still retaining heavy matter as its material.'[304] Sculpture is still bound to 'concrete materials' in this world to embody spirit. This means that sculpture does not get 'beyond pouring this spiritual content into the corporeal form as its animation and significance and therefore forming a new objective unification in that meaning of the word 'objective' which signifies external real existence, i.e. 'objective' contrasted with what is purely inner and 'subjective'.'[305] Sculpture's shortcoming is that it is bound to 'external' materials, which means that it cannot give an adequate representation of the 'inner' and 'subjective' life of spirit.

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[302] G.W.F. Hegel. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. 2*, p. 888
[303] ibid.
[304] ibid.
[305] ibid.

This 'inner and subjective life' needs a form of art that is, likewise, 'inner' in the sense of not being bound by inorganic matter as its actual form of representation. Painting is the form of art that signifies this transitory moment of a mode of expression which is not fully 'external' in the sense that sculpture or architecture are. As Hegel remarks: 'The general transition from sculpture to the other arts is produced, as we saw, by the principle of subjectivity which was breaking into the subject-matter and the artistic mode of its portrayal. Subjectivity is the essential nature of the spirit which is explicitly ideal in its own eyes and withdraws out of the external world into an existence within; and consequently it no longer coincides in indissoluble unity with its body.'[306]

This 'principle of subjectivity', this idea of 'withdrawing out of the external world into an existence within', is for the first time somewhat adequately captured by painting. 'For in painting' Hegel argues, 'the external shape is indeed still the means by which the inner life is revealed'[307] – i.e. we still need the brush strokes, the paint, the canvas etc. (the 'external' objects) to actually represent 'inner' spirit. 'But', Hegel proceeds, in painting 'the mind is turned into itself out of its corporeal existence, the subjective passion and feeling of character and heart, which are no longer totally effused in the external shape, but precisely in that shape mirror spirit's inner self-apprehension and its preoccupation with the sphere of its own circumstances, aims, and actions.'[308] Hence, in painting, for the first time, we have a form of art that is 'no longer totally effused in the external shape' – it can somehow 'mirror spirits inner self-apprehension' because of 'the inwardness of its content': 'On account of this inwardness of its content, painting cannot be satisfied with a material which can only be shaped with difficulty or which is unparticularized and can only be treated externally, but has to choose as a means of sensuous expression pure appearance and the pure appearance of colour.'[309]

[306] ibid., p. 889
[307] ibid.
[308] ibid.
[309] ibid.

While sculpture was considered by Hegel to be impersonal and not particular, painting moves closer to an actual apprehension of spirit because it is able to depict unique and individual subjects. And yet, as we would come to expect from Hegel at this point, the 'magic of colour' also has its shortcomings: 'However far painting develops to a more ideal liberation, i.e. to that pure appearance which is no longer tied to the figure as such but which has liberty to expatiate independently in its own element, in the play of appearance and reflection, in the enchantments of chiaroscuro, still this magic of colour is always of a spatial kind, and a pure appearance of *separated* things, which therefore *persists*.'[310]

The issue seems to be that colour still needs an actual objective part of space for its task of representing spirit. 'Objectivity' in this sense means that it will be 'separated' from spirit's 'inner' - and in that sense 'non-objective' - nature. Hence the step taken by the 'next' form of art will need to address this issue by removing the requirement of objective space altogether: 'This obliteration not of *one* dimension only [as in painting] but of the whole of space, purely and simply, this complete withdrawal, of both the inner life and its expression, into subjectivity, brings completely into being the *second* romantic art—music.'[311]

The argument towards music's perceived 'superiority' in relation to the arts discussed thus far is interesting because Hegel claims that it is precisely because of the necessary *absence* (*qua* the very constitution of music) of the 'spatial dimension' that music reaches beyond sculpture and painting towards a fuller expression of spirit: 'No matter how far we plunge or immerse ourselves in the subject-matter, in a situation, a character, the forms of a statue or a picture, no matter how much we may admire such a work of art, may be taken out of ourselves by it, may be satisfied by it—it is all in vain:

[310] ibid.
[311] ibid.

these works of art are and remain independently persistent objects and our relation to them can never get beyond a vision of them. But in music this distinction disappears.'[312]

Because music is not dependent on persistent material objects as a means of representation, it seems to open itself up to an appreciation of that which is distinct from such objects: 'Stone and colouring receive the forms of a broad and variegated world of objects and portray them as they actually exist; sounds cannot do this. On this account what alone is fitted for expression in music is the object-free inner life, abstract subjectivity as such. This is our entirely empty self, the self without any further content. Consequently, the chief task of music consists in making resound, not the objective world itself, but, on the contrary, the manner in which the inmost self is moved to the depths of its personality and conscious soul.'[313]

Does music succeed, then, in giving expression to this 'inmost self'? Not quite. Hegel claims that 'the note', taken by itself, is 'without content', and only gets its 'determinate character' from its relation to the other notes in a piece. This means then, however, that 'the qualitative character of the spiritual' *merely* corresponds 'in general to the quantitative relations'. This means that 'the inmost self' cannot 'be completely characterized qualitatively by a note': 'The note, taken by itself, is without content and has its determinate character only in virtue of numerical relations, so that although the qualitative character of the spiritual content does correspond in general to these quantitative relations which open out into essential differences, oppositions, and modulation, still it cannot be completely characterized qualitatively by a note.'[314] Notes, as the 'raw material' that make up music, 'cannot completely characterize the spiritual content' that Hegel would like it to.

[312] ibid., p. 891
[313] ibid.
[314] ibid., p. 959/960

Why? What exactly is it that Hegel perceives music to fall short of? Why is it unable to 'completely characterize' the 'qualitative character of the spiritual content'? Here we appear to encounter a key point of difference between the romantics and Hegel, a point which plays a large role in their differing conceptions of what 'achieving' the good infinite implies.

The very brief account that I have just given of Hegel's views on the arts is an account that strives towards a separation of the spiritual content conveyed to us on the one hand, and the form in which this conveying takes place on the other. This is why sculpture comes before painting, which comes before music. There is a gradual disassociation of the truth conveyed from the sensuous forms in which it is conveyed to us. The less sensuous and particular to the raw material of the actual work of art, the more desirable it is for Hegel. Spirit seeks emancipation from these sensuous forms so as to achieve full knowledge of itself as 'Idea'. And in art spirit never really achieves this full emancipation, but remains perpetually bound to the particular form in which every individual piece comes to us. This is what philosophy will come to rectify, by removing itself from the sensual realm once and for all.

But, as we have seen before, this realm of the purely conceptual, the place where the good infinite is a logical solution rather than an experiential reality, is the place where the romantics and Hegel part ways. Contrary to Hegel, the romantics provide us with a sense of what Hegel's conceptual solution, broadly construed, would concretely mean when applied to the actual piece of art. I intend to show that there is something inherent in the 'sensuous form' in which a piece comes to us that is indispensable for a unity of the finite and the infinite to obtain. We must recall Schlegel's quote from the second chapter, which reads: 'Even man's most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis, as anybody can easily verify, on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis.

Verily, it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest.'

It is this element, which seems 'incomprehensible' from the Hegelian point of view - in the sense that it resists 'being subjected to rational analysis' - that actually does part of the work of achieving the much desired unity between finitude and infinity. It is also in this vein that I read Novalis' fascination with darkness in his *Hymns to the Night*. There is something that resists all our attempts at a highly organized conceptual analysis, and precisely in doing so 'supports the whole burden', thus acting as a 'point of strength that must be left in the dark'. Judith Norman makes this point with respect to the literature of the German romantics, insisting that 'the literary form in which they expressed their ideas was vital to the ideas they were expressing': 'If we are to understand the romantics, it is vital to understand them on their own terms, which, at the end of the day, are critical ones. They proposed a new conception of the relationship between art and theory, insisting that theory cannot be divorced from art. This is why the reductive project of trying to distill philosophical commitments out of romantic literature is poorly conceived. They insisted that the literary form in which they expressed their ideas was vital to the ideas they were expressing. Their philosophy cannot be divorced from their literature without a definitive loss. (As Schlegel once said, "One of two things is usually lacking in the so-called Philosophy of Art: either philosophy or art"(KFSA II, LF #12).'[315]

Norman also anticipates that a Hegelian with a very particular vision of what philosophy should be would likely be unconvinced by the romantic findings: 'This argument is not likely to be particularly convincing to a committed Hegelian. To a Hegelian, it sounds like the romantics simply want to preserve the rational content of art without sublating the sensuous form. Hegel summed it up by saying that Schlegel's nature was "not philosophical but rather essentially *critical*" (HW, XII, p. 118). Critical natures fail to

[315] Judith Norman, *The Work of Art in German Romanticism,* p. 65

submit to the movement of the concept which would bring them out into philosophy proper. Rather, they irrationally cling to the sensuous.'[316][317]

Norman makes her point with respect to the 'irreducible sensuous content' inherent in literature, and I want to demonstrate that something similar can be said for the case of *music.* Here is Schlegel: 'Now if feeling is the root of all consciousness, then the direction of language [towards cognition] has the essential deficit that it does not grasp and comprehend feeling deeply enough, only touches its surface . . . However large the riches language offers us for our purpose, however much it can be developed and perfected as a means of representation and communication, this essential imperfection must be overcome in another manner, and communication and representation must be added to; and this happens through *music* which is, though, here to be regarded less as a representational art than as philosophical language, and really lies higher than mere art. Every effort to find a general philosophical language had to remain unsuccessful because one did not touch on the fundamental mistake of philosophical experiments with language. Feeling and wishing often go far beyond thinking; music as inspiration, as the language of feeling, which excites consciousness in its well-spring, is the only universal language.'[318]

What is required is something that 'comprehends feeling deeply enough' rather than merely 'scratching its surface'. This is the 'essential imperfection' in philosophical language that Schlegel thinks must be 'overcome'. And it is to be overcome in and through *music*, which is 'here to be regarded less as a representational art than as a philosophical language'. The fact that Schlegel speaks so highly of music here may raise

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[316] ibid, p. 65

[317] We will come back to this issue of the failure of the 'reductive Hegelian account' when we exhibit the work being done by the 'incomprehensible *earth*' in discussing Heidegger's views about *The Origin of the Work of Art* and the strife between earth and world in the appendix to this chapter.

[318] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 57

some eyebrows amongst those who took poetry to be the art of choice for the romantics. The point of using music as our example here is not, however, to involve us in somewhat futile (Hegelian style) arguments concerned with ranking the merits of music against those of poetry, or against those of any other art, for that matter. What the romantics thought differentiated music from poetry is an interesting question, but it is not a question that we will concern ourselves with here. The point of invoking music is to demonstrate that we do need to supplement philosophical language with 'the language of feeling', i.e. music. It is in this spirit that Schlegel even proclaims at some point that 'philosophy is founded on music, is therefore not completely independent.'[319]

It should also be noted, however, that there is an inherent difficulty in using words to describe 'the sense of feeling and wishing that goes far beyond thinking'. Any phenomenology that claims to be a 'phenomenology of' a particular art will inherently be limited by the fact that its descriptions may always fall short of the actual feeling conveyed through music. This brings to the fore the familiar worry all over again: concepts, even if they are intended to apprehend the sense of 'first-personal' experience, cannot fully exhaust the *feeling* that the romantics want to direct our attention to. To this I would reply that, although the phenomenologist may not be able to fully invoke the actual feeling, he or she can still point towards it. Furthermore, there seems to be room for a kind of language that is more genuinely interested in the 'what-it's-likeness' of the experience, rather than the more colourless rationalist account that Hegel offers us.

In this way, what I want to engage in is close to what Judith Norman conceives of in her interpretative role, when she writes: 'I want to argue that the romantic desire to synthesize poetry and philosophy (and indeed, Fichte and Goethe) should be taken seriously, which means that there is an irreducible element of the sensuous in them that gets lost if the romantics are treated simply as philosophers. Of course, on the face of it,

[319] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XIX*, p. 50

I seem susceptible to the sort of objection I have just been making: in giving a philosophical explanation of what the romantics are up to, am I not reducing the poetry to philosophy as well? What I propose to do in this piece is to offer something like a "user's guide" to romantic philosophy. This is similar to the situation in a gallery, where there are catalogues to guide you through the collection, or at a concert, where there are notes to alert you to various features of the music you might want to listen for. Actually, there is a literary equivalent. Commentary that aims at enlightening a text with no presumptions of replacing it, which the romantics did more than anyone else towards establishing in its modern form: and that is criticism.'[320]

With this in mind, let us now turn to an attempted phenomenology of an actual piece of music. The piece I want to discuss is the first half of the 3rd movement of Beethoven's *Hammerklaviersonate*, *opus 106, piano sonata 29 in B-Flat Major,* as it is performed by the young pianist 'Igor Levit'.[321] Why a piece from the late phase of Beethoven's works? For one, Beethoven's *Spätwerk* is largely considered by critics to have initiated 'romantic music', so seems particularly apt in this context. But it also is the piece through which I have most closely felt what the romantics must be referring to in their views on 'the good infinite', and since 'doing phenomenology' is necessarily first personal, it makes sense to select something that I feel a connection to. To justify this somewhat arbitrary choice, it might be worth recalling the romantics' advice to 'begin in the middle', rather than to search for (first) principles by which to identify an ideal piece of music. It is also worth pointing out, before subjecting the reader to this phenomenology, that I am not an expert on musicology or the terminology and structure of classical music. My interest solely resides in attempting to identify what it is that the romantics might have felt when saying the things they said about the importance of art and music.

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[320] Judith Norman, *The work of Art in German Romanticism*, p. 61

[321] **I have uploaded an unlisted link of this recording, which can be accessed by typing the following link into one's browser bar: www.tinyurl.com/levithammerklavier**

The Hammerklavier's third movement opens with two octaves that feel like the end of something that we have missed, or are taken out of a previous motif within which they had a place. They certainly don't strike one as an obvious beginning, except when, through the use of the pedal, the edges of the second octave are blurred in such a way that there is something on which the second bar can pick up. Up until minute 1:10 of the piece we face a struggle as we are trying to make sense of those somber and slightly dark opening chords, searching for some way out of it, or through it. The second bar and the ones thereafter have a slightly lighter, more innocent feel to them that gets increasingly more desperate and restless as any attempt 'out of' the difficult opening fails after a series of breathless attempts to inject some structure. We are exploring a range that feels as if we are considering both realms, those high and those low, and whenever it appears as if a resolution looks likely, a chord within the same bar is immediately added to suggest that no such concord will be achieved.

This search doesn't end, but is decisively altered, when the only real central and recurring 'motif' of the piece is introduced at 1:10. It breaks quite strikingly with the somber sense of the first minute of listening, as F-sharp minor switches to G major. All of a sudden we are presented with a vision of something higher, something that didn't quite fit with the sorrow of the opening. Light has been cast into a dark room, for a moment injecting clarity and gentle purpose into the scene. But this vision lasts only a few bars, and is immediately challenged again by doubts and hesitations about the motif. Once it is introduced, it is almost as if we are not sure what to do with this sense of a higher idea that we are confronted by; the quest continues, this time perhaps with a mood slightly heightened by the confrontation.

The motif recurs quite quickly again, given the length of the movement and the sparseness with which it appears at later parts. It is this time matched, however, by a reception that appears joyful at first but then very quickly turns dark and unsure. Most importantly, it unleashes a struggle that unfolds from 2:35 onwards, in which we feel

like we are being presented with the source of the beginning's sorrow. The tempo is heightened, and we come to face the outpouring of a series of instances of distress, none longer than perhaps 3 or 4 seconds. It appears as if whatever it was that we have been wanting to talk all of a sudden begins talking.

Against this increase in frequency, which feels like a stream gaining momentum, we begin to notice the 'silence' of the first two and a half minutes of the piece. The notes thus far were all played and placed very deliberately, allowed for by a space of quiet and calm that gave great clarity to what was expressed. The relative increase in tempo and the use of the pedal in the section thereafter create a background that is distinct from that of the opening. The landscape is slightly more blurred and schematic, more closely resembling a windy river in a forest, perhaps, than the clarity and silence of high mountain peaks.

Schlegel, who, as is well-known, was both an ardent admirer as well as critic of Plato's philosophy, found difficulties with the Platonic notion of an ideal reality that 'debases actuality' in such a way that 'a realization of the first in the second is inconceivable': 'if the ideal is so raised, and actuality so debased [*Wirklichkeit herabgesetzt*], then a realization of the first in the second is inconceivable.'[322] What we get in the opening of this piece is a different picture of the relationship between what one might call different 'backgrounds', the ideal and the real, or the possible and the actual.

Rather than being in some sense distinct or separate, the opening of the *Hammerklaviersonate* is remarkable in that the different states seem to be flowing in and out of each other. The border between them is actually fairly difficult to discern, and we don't get a sense of actual separation, or opposition, between them. They are certainly distinct, however. The quiet and calm of the opening, to which the piece returns again and again, is certainly not to be equated with the more intuitive,

[322] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XII*, p. 225

improvised and faster movements that occur throughout. Yet one gets the impression that the full force of the contrast between the slower, more silent and more static states is really a result of its juxtaposition with the more vibrant and dynamic outpourings.

Again, Schlegel thought that there was something problematic about Plato's idea that 'the *persistence* [Beharrlichkeit] assigned to the divine understanding is distant from any notion of a living divine…'[323] Something can be static as well as living. In fact, what essentially characterizes either of the two only comes out in comparison with the other. How would we know what it was for something to be static if we didn't have an understanding of what it was for something to be dynamic and alive? And how could we judge something to be moving and flowing if we didn't have a sense of stasis and calm? A rigid separation, as suggested in Plato, is troubling because it suggests that we could conceive of one or the other in isolation, which appears untrue.

Until about 5:30 there is a constant back and forth between calmer and more agitated periods. Once we enter a passage, usually lasting 10-15 seconds, that has a more adagio feel, say, there still remains an aspect of a previous allegro that gains force until it begins to dominate a whole new passage; and then, within that new allegro passage, the adagio is still very noticeable, as a sense of calm that persists even amongst a more restless kind of striving, finally asserting itself more fully until we return to the adagio that we began with.

Then, at minute 5:30, there is a period of calm and silence that is perhaps more 'purely adagio', in the sense that the allegro undertones are noticeably diminished. It is also at this point that we encounter the first 'tonic resolve', at 5:41, which we would expect from a more classically composed piece. Characteristically, though, this by no means constitutes Beethoven's prolonged return to a more classical style of composing, typified by his early piano sonatas. Rather, the tonic resolve is balanced by a string of

[323] ibid., p. 218

dissonant chords that have more in common with the emergence of atonal music in the centuries that followed than with the classical compositions of Mozart or Haydn. Dissonance and resolve, and allegro and adagio passages, continue their interplay until, at 7:28, a genuinely new motif is introduced into the piece. The introduction into the motif is truly striking, for a sense of order emerges out of a completely disorderly sounding succession of notes. What we took to be an element of something formless turns out to be the beginning of something more formed and structured.

We can pause our phenomenology of the third movement at this point to consider some important philosophical points in relation to it. One is the theme of how, through an exploration of a piece of music, we can begin to approximate the challenging notion of a 'unity of individuals'. This is because in music individual tones give rise to the harmonious unity of the piece as a whole. The notes are all finite, but give rise to the totality of the piece, which is a kind of infinite unity.[324] It would not make sense to speak of the finite notes and the infinite work as being separate in some regard. It is clear that the work as a whole is composed out of finite notes, but it is also clear that, considered solely in isolation, the finite note doesn't contain its full meaning. What the note means can only really be understood once we consider it in the space of the work as a whole.

[324] Apart from feeling like a unified whole, the piece also contains a dimension of infinity in the same way that Schlegel thought certain texts are infinite (as we saw in chapter 2), or that relationships between human beings can be 'infinite' (as we will see below): they are never finished, always subject to reinterpretation. In *Beethovens 32 Klaviersonaten und ihre Interpreten* (p. 511), Joachim Kaiser showed with regards to the 'first movement' of the *Hammerklaviersonate* just how differently it has been interpreted by different pianists. Kaiser explains that every of the great pianists have come to their own interpretation of what the *Hammerklaviersonate* means to them. This is most evident when we look at the range in the tempo that has been chosen. Solomon and Gulda have chosen to play it at 126 – 132 half notes per minute, which is very close to Beethoven's own suggestion (which is 138 half notes). Charles Rosen plays it at 120 per minute, and Claudio Arrau, Yves Nat and Egon Petri play it between 104 and 116. Barrenboim and Serkin diverge even more widely from Beethoven's prescription, playing it at below 100 half notes per minute. This means, of course, that the duration of the first movement differs very widely. While in Gulda it lasts for 9 minutes and 23 seconds, it takes Barenboim over 13 minutes to complete the same piece.

As Dalia Nassar aptly puts it: 'Musical unity exhibits the most immanent kind of unity: it exists only in and through the distinctive parts, but is not reducible to any one part.'[325] And yet, the finite note retains its individuality despite depending on the context of the work. Schlegel himself writes at one point that 'every organic tone, as general as it may be, nonetheless has something individual, which, like all individuality, is inexhaustible and infinite in the true sense'.[326] And Novalis writes that 'we feel ourselves as a part and precisely for that reason are the whole.'[327]

There is another important theme that emerges from the third movement of the *Hammerklaviersonate*. What we have here is something that feels whole and unified *even though* - and this is the decisive point - it includes within itself elements or passages that are, as I said above, *formless.* If we think of the idea of the formless as being close to the notion of the infinite, in that it doesn't really have any discernible direction, or melody, we can see that, despite such parts of the piece, the work as a whole doesn't seem to be compromised in its unity. If we wanted to express this using the part/whole analogy, we could say that a crucial insight of the romantics is that we can achieve a sense of totality, of unity, of a circular whole rather than an endless line (see chapter 2), not just *in spite of* 'infinite' (formless) elements, but rather and precisely *because of* them.

What is truly 'romantic' about this piece of Beethoven's, in the sense of 'romantic' that I espouse, is that the longing, the searching, the sense of uncertainty about how to continue, are *absolutely essential* to the movement. Every composer, one could reasonably assume, might tend to get lost at certain points in his or her piece, unsure about how to go on. Most music admits of no such uncertainty however, and seeks to leave us with the impression of something polished and structured that makes it seem

[325] Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, p. 125
[326] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XXIII*, p. 265
[327] Novalis, *Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk,* p. 44

like the composer had been in firm control all along. By contrast, how different is the approach taken by Beethoven, who positively demonstrates his quest for the way out of the formless towards form, and back again. This is why the third movement of the *Hammerklaviersonate* is such an excellent example of the kind of romanticism that I wish to draw attention to, because in the movement the relationship to the infinite is one of positive affirmation rather than denial.

This also resembles the idea we encountered in the second chapter, that for the romantics accepting 'the incomprehensible' represents a condition of achieving an inner unity. This seems at odds with Hegel. Both want to achieve a sense of unity between the finite and the infinite so that the infinite ends up being 'good'. And the romantics are claiming that the way to do so is to *accept* that some things must elude our grasp - a highly unappealing proposition for the Hegelian.

In his book *The Romantic Legacy,* Charles Larmore manages to capture the romantics' sense of being torn between retaining a sense of affinity for the Hegelian project while simultaneously feeling distanced from it. Larmore places the Romantics on the side of Hegel when he writes that 'In Hegel's view, philosophy aims to reconcile us to the world, to see 'the rose in the cross of the present'.'[328] This he opposes to the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer, for whom 'life swings back and forth like a pendulum between boredom and pain'. In his view the romantics are not on the side of the 'pessimistic' Schopenhauer because their project carries Hegel's reconciliatory spirit: 'In Hegel's view, philosophy aims to reconcile us to the world… For Schopenhauer, by contrast, philosophy is essentially the discipline of homelessness.'[329]

Larmore's main thesis comes out of this reconciliatory (rather than pessimist) reading of the German romantics. As Larmore sees it, the Romantic imagination has for too long

[328] Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy*, p. 72
[329] ibid., p. 71/72

been opposed to reality in a way that suggested that we are faced with a choice between imagination and reality. On such a reading, the infinite capacity of the imagination gave rise to the fabrication of Romantic 'imaginary realities' which were directly opposed to the actual reality that the Romantics found themselves in: as if the imagination was solely an escape from the present into a 'transcendent realm'. There is something partially right about this kind of view - the imagination, after all, doesn't just 'mirror' reality, but is the capacity to *transform* the reality in which we find ourselves: hence Novalis' call to 'make the world romantic'. But making the world romantic doesn't mean transcending it altogether by removing oneself in favour of an 'unreachable' realm.

Transforming reality, by 'romanticizing' it, means that the imagination clings to the things of this world whilst transforming them into something more potent. This is how Larmore reads the famous *Blüthenstaub-Fragment* #1, which expresses that 'everywhere we seek the unconditioned, but only find things.' [wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, aber finden immer nur Dinge.][330] It has traditionally been received as an espousal of the defeatist reading of romanticism, more along the lines of what Larmore identifies as the Schopenhauerian spirit, in that it was thought to lament our inability to transcend the finite realm of things towards that which is 'un-bedingt', meaning 'non thing like'. Larmore, however, sees in it ''Novalis' view that the things of this world are essential to our intimations of the infinite.''[331]

To highlight the wide range of approaches to romanticism it is illuminating to juxtapose Larmore's reading of romanticism with that of Nietzsche. In the preface to the *Birth of Tragedy*, entitled 'Attempt at a Self-criticism', which Nietzsche added 15 years after the initial publication of his first book, Nietzsche reflected back on what he then deemed to be his earlier 'romantic self', which he saw characterized by a 'deep hatred against

[330] Novalis, *Bluethenstaub-Fragmente*
[331] Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy*, p. 75

reality': 'But, my dear sir, what in the world is romantic if your book isn't? Can deep hatred against 'the Now', against 'reality' and 'modern ideas' be pushed further than you pushed it in your artists' metaphysics?'[332]

Again, romanticism is here associated with the kind of belief that posits 'artist metaphysics against reality'. It is this kind of romanticism that Nietzsche wants to distinguish himself from at all costs. He writes, for example, that 'it is a sign that one has turned out well when, like Goethe, one clings with ever-greater pleasure and warmth to the 'things of this world': for in this way he holds firmly to the great conception of man, that man becomes the transfigurer of existence when he learns to transfigure himself.'[333]

If the reading advanced in this dissertation is right, Nietzsche might have had fewer reasons for needing to distinguish between what he liked in Goethe and what he saw in the Romantics. There is a version of romanticism that, rather than defining itself against reality, 'clings to the things of this world', with the aim of 'transfiguring existence by transfiguring oneself'. But more on this 'self-transfiguration', which is 'romantic irony', below.

For now it is worth reemphasizing the kind of reading that, according to Larmore, belongs to the 'ruins of the romantic synthesis': 'The notion of the Romantic imagination that I have rejected – namely, the poetic transcendence of reality – properly belongs, therefore, among the ruins of the Romantic synthesis, a synthesis that tended from the outset towards collapse.'[334]

[332] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Preface to the Birth of Tragedy*, p. 25
[333] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power as Art*, p. 820
[334] Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy,* p. 16/17

I have, in the third chapter, mentioned Novalis' text on 'Christianity or Europe' to emphasize the messianic dimension of romanticism, the dimension that regards romanticism as 'the continuation of religion through aesthetic means',[335] as Ruediger Safranski perceptively puts it. It is important to qualify this in line with the discussion around the apparent opposition between imagination and reality. On one view, which I am not endorsing, romantic theology is the attempt to install romantic aesthetics in the place of the ideal and unreachable god that stands apart from earthly reality. Larmore notes that this 'definition of Romanticism as the secularization of traditional theology, the replacement of God by the poetic mind as the creator of the world, is but another set of words to describe what Bloom calls the strong poet, who redefines reality to suit the needs of the imagination.'[336]

The version of theology that I take to be present in romanticism, by contrast, has been articulated by Friedrich Schleiermacher in his *Reden ueber die Religion*. There we find Schleiermacher criticizing 'die Gebildeten' [the sophists] for the view that the essence of religion lies in a 'calculating towards another world': 'Die Furcht vor einem ewigen Wesen und das Rechnen auf eine andere Welt, das, meint Ihr, seien die Angel aller Religion.'[337] [The fear of an eternal being and the 'calculating' towards another world, this, you think, is the nexus of all religion.] Against this belief in an unreachable realm, Schleiermacher urges us to see 'the infinite in the conditioned', 'the whole in the part': 'Alles Einzelne als einen Teil des Ganzen, alles Beschränkte als eine Darstellung des Unendlichen hinnehmen, das ist Religion… Alle Begebenheiten in der Welt als Handlungen eines Gottes vorstellen, das ist Religion.'[338] [To take everything that is particular as a part of the whole, everything that is conditioned as an illustration of the

[335] Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantik – Eine deutsche Affäre*. 'Die deutsche Romantik ist die Fortsetzung der Religion mit ästhetischen Mitteln.'
[336] Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy,* p. 14
[337] Schleiermacher, *Reden ueber die Religion,* p. 204
[338] ibid., p. 214

infinite, that is religion… To imagine all events in this world as the deeds of a god, that is religion.]

Schlegel, in the *Athenaeum Fragments*, reaffirms Schleiermacher's beliefs. He speaks out against the 'sophists', which he terms 'the moderns', by criticizing this sense of positing 'more than one world': 'The moderns continually speak of the world of the present and the world of the hereafter, as if there were more than one world. But, of course, for them too most things are just as isolated and separated as their present and their hereafter.'[339] Hence Schlegel proclaims that 'the revolutionary desire to realize the kingdom of God on earth is the elastic point of progressive civilization and the beginning of modern history.'[340] This is the crucial romantic idea: to realize the kingdom of god on earth, and not to displace it into the realm beyond. There is, therefore, even a tendency for a human being to 'become god'. The radical opposition doesn't apply anymore: 'Every good human being is always progressively becoming God. To become God, to be human, to cultivate oneself are all expressions that mean the same thing.'[341]

This reading of Romantic theology, and Larmore's reading of the Romantic imagination, and the romantic/Hegelian reading of the finite/infinite dichotomy, are all characterized by their conciliatory nature. All three are essentially about reconceiving the notion of an unbridgeable opposition, showing the underlying connectedness between the terms of dualisms that appear diametrically opposed: god and humanity, reality and imagination, the finite and the infinite. Yet, this attempt at a reconciliation too often fails, and we are left with the ends of two extremes that appear entirely unconnected. This is one of the main tensions in the romantic corpus as a whole: not to get disheartened by the

[339] *Athenaeum Fragments, #55*
[340] *Athenaeum Fragments, #222*
[341] *Athenauem Fragments, #262*

difficulty of maintaining a sense of the connectedness of things, a theme which we encountered in Hölderlin's nostalgic poetry earlier.[342]

What can be done to avoid this sorry state of affairs, or rather, what is the cause of this malady of extremes? Larmore offers up a suggestion that leads us right back to the theme of incomprehensibility: 'Keats did not believe the proper response to the tragedy of life, 'where men sit and hear each other groan', lies in searching in it for some kind of certainty or solace. He looked rather to that character of mind he famously called 'Negative Capability', in which we are 'capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. This is a refusal of escapism.'[343]

The approach suggested here by Keats via his notion of 'negative capability' - of being able to endure 'uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without reaching after fact and reason' - seems to me to resemble the approach recommended by the romantics, a feature not present in the enlightenment philosophy of Kant and Hegel. Such an approach implies taking seriously the existence of the incomprehensible as an unalterable dimension of experience. Such an approach would also require us to stop short of insisting upon the omnipotence of reason as proclaimed by the enlightenment. According to Larmore, part of the 'Romantic legacy' is the 'recognition that our moral

[342] Larmore has an insightful passage about the course taken by art since the Romantic era in relation to this: 'The visionary power of the imagination can all too naturally expand to the point of seeking to rewrite the world in its own language. And those with a healthy sense of reality can all too understandably conclude from this that art is either a thing of the past, or a mere pastime, or at best a useful tool for social-political causes. With the death of the Romantic movement, announced by so many different writers by the mid-nineteenth century, precisely such a dissociation sets in. Romanticism splits asunder into aestheticism of *l'art pour l'art* and the realism of *il faut etre de son temps*, and all their various versions ever since. It cannot be said that the arts themselves have gone on to flourish under these ideological conditions.' (Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy*, p. 16)

[343] Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy,* p. 19/20

substance stems not from reason as such but from the form of life within which alone we can reflect critically about what to believe and do.'[344]

This also offers an interesting way of reappraising such claims of Schlegel's as 'philosophy must be critical but in a much higher sense than in Kant',[345] and 'we have the honour to live in that age which has, in a word, earned the modest but highly suggestive name of the Critical Age, so that soon everything will have been criticized – except the age itself',[346] which we came across in the second chapter.
I would suggest that the Romantic 'critique of the critical age' is about uncovering the *positive role* of incomprehensibility. As Larmore explains, this does not mean that we are thereby plunged back into 'the dark ages' where reason played a negligible role: 'Strange as this may sound to those who associate Romanticism with reaction and unreason, the Romantic philosophy of belonging represents a further step in intellectual clarity, shedding light where the enlightenment itself left darkness.'[347] What it does mean, however, is that we need to develop an attitude towards life that differs somewhat from the enlightenment attitude of relying on reason alone for the conduct of life: 'The real controversy between Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic communitarianism centers around the appeal to reason as a self-sufficient basis for the conduct of life.'[348]

This new attitude is 'romantic irony', which Schlegel describes as 'the form of paradox.'[349] The paradox arises because irony unfolds out of two seemingly opposing tendencies: the finite and the infinite. As Frank rightly puts it in his *Einfuehrung in die fruehromantische Aesthetik,* irony is 'the tendency towards the Absolute in the finite

[344] ibid., p. 82
[345] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA XIX*, p. 346, Nr. 296
[346] Friedrich Schlegel, 'On Incomprehensibility', in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments,* p.261
[347] Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy,* p. 48
[348] ibid., p. 44
[349] Friedrich Schlegel, *Critical Fragments, #*48

itself.'[350] And Larmore writes that 'at its most powerful, the Romantic disquiet with everything nailed down and finite gives rise to that attitude so important to the modern subject that is irony.'[351] The ironist is endowed with a permanend sense of the infinite, a sense which 'entlarvt die Vorlauefigkeit und Unvollstaendigkeit'[352] [uncovers the tentativeness and incompleteness] of the finite, if that was assumed to be all there is. Irony is the awareness that there exists a dimension beyond the finite, that the finite on its own is somewhat 'incomplete'.

This immediately raises the question, of course, of just what the relationship between the finite and the infinite is supposed to be. For Frank, the effect of irony is to 'annihilate the finite as that which was not intended.'[353] [welches das Endlich Dargestellte als das nicht Gemeinte ausloescht.] In this way 'irony is a *ridiculing* of the finite which is *embarrassed* by the thought of the Absolute as a whole.'[354] [Die Ironie ist ein Verlachen des Endlichen, weil es durch anderes Endliches dementiert und durch den Gedanken des Absoluten insgesamt beschämt wird.]

The finite is 'annihilated' by the infinite in such a way that the finite is 'ridiculed', ending up depleted and 'embarrassed', forever in awe of the glimpse of infinity which it can never attain. It is not hard to see how this leads one right back to the 'bad infinite', which is of course exactly the view of the infinite that Frank takes the romantics to have. I don't agree with this conception of irony, and think we need to have an account of irony that is compatible with the concept of good infinity. This kind of account needs to rethink the moment in which the finite being encounters infinity. For Frank, this moment is effectively a humbling and sobering affair, one that effects a nostalgic, depleted and 'ironic' (in the sense of embarrassed and ridiculising) stance towards one's

[350] Manfred Frank, *Einführung in die Fruehromantische Aesthetik*, p. 290
[351] Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy,* p. 71
[352] Manfred Frank, *Einführung in die Fruehromantische Aesthetik*, p. 288
[353] ibid., p. 293
[354] ibid., p. 301

own nature: we realize how small and pitiful we appear when compared to the Absolute.

The contrasting option which I advocate is this: the moment in which we become aware of our limitations is undoubtedly a moment that fosters a sense of 'incomprehensibility': something limited, like a human being, encounters the idea of something unlimited, of something which appears to be wholly other than it is itself. But importantly, in the works of the romantics we find the conviction that this moment can in fact be turned into something 'positive' in the way in which the *earth* plays a vital role in 'disclosing a world' in the Heidegger essay, as discussed in the appendix below. Infinity, understood in terms of the good infinite, is not something other than the finite. Thus, the awareness of the infinite needn't lead to a ridiculing of one's limited constitution, as Manfred Frank thinks. Rather, it can be the element that can lead to an 'inner happiness', because the finite there meets the piece that is required for the unity and wholeness for which it strives: the infinite. Feeling yourself infinite whilst being finite can be a moment of unity, of wholeness, of encountering one's true nature. It needn't at all be a moment of 'annihilation' or 'obliteration' of the finite by the infinite.

Fred Rush rightly observes that irony can in this way involve a commitment to what seems initially to be a paradoxical situation: 'The ability to detach (in part) from one's life involves at least an intimation that what transcends experience constrains experience in ways that cannot be exhaustively understood. In dialectical terms, subjects externalize themselves in the world, partly forming it, but likewise they ''come back to themselves'' from that world, internalizing it and coming to recognize limitation in virtue of that activity. Schlegel does not think that commitment is compromised by the recognition that it does not fully express the absolute – irony is a form of commitment, not its lack. Irony is just what it *is* to be a committed, finite being.'[355]

[355] Fred Rush, *Irony and Romantic Subjectivity*, p. 187

To keep with Schlegel's way of putting things, the 'real irony' in the concept of irony is that it can be sincere and grounding. This is the irony of irony that Frank seems to miss. Irony can prompt a 'form of commitment in the face of the Absolute': 'irony is a synthesis of antitheses in which the individual character of both constituents is preserved and, indeed, enhanced',[356] as Fred Rush writes.

Hence, for Schlegel irony is 'the most holy seriousness', as he writes in his discussion of Goethe's attitude in his *Wilhelm Meister*: 'Man lasse sich also dadurch, daß der Dichter selbst die Personen und die Begebenheiten so leicht und so launig zu nehmen, den Helden fast nie ohne Ironie zu erwähnen, und auf sein Meisterwerk selbst von der Höhe seines Geistes herabzulächeln scheint, nicht täuschen, als sei es ihm nicht *der heiligste Ernst.*'[357] [One shouldn't be fooled by the fact that the poet himself takes the people and events so lightly and humorously, hardly ever mentioning the hero without irony, and appearing to smile down upon his masterpiece from the height of his spirit, into thinking that it {irony} isn't *the holiest seriousness* to him.]

I will, at the end of this discussion on irony, try to say what I think the relationship between irony and humour, which Schlegel alludes to here, amounts to. We today tend to associate the term 'irony' with a sense of mocking which may stand in the way of our seeing that for Schlegel irony marks the 'holiest seriousness'. It is this 'most holy seriousness', I suggest, because the condition of irony signifies that we have been brought back before the utmost truth about our existence: feeling at the same time finite and infinite, desiring to be unbound whilst being bound. And at this point in time a decision has to be made about how we want to relate to this condition: ridiculing our finitude, as Frank believes, or committing to this particular nature of ours, as I think the romantics suggest. In this way, irony is anything but a joke for Schlegel. He warned about this kind of misunderstanding of irony when he wrote that commentators may be

[356] ibid., p. 189
[357] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Ueber Goethes Meister*',* in *Schriften zur Kritischen Philosophie*

'at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, and fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke.'[358]

To sharpen the picture of irony that I want to endorse here I think it is helpful, at this point, to juxtapose my reading of irony to that of Hegel's – which is the view that we started the first chapter with – so as to distance myself from it. I want to transition from Frank's reading to that of Hegel because I take there to be a commonality between both readings, a commonality which needs to be spelled out and whose limitations need to be demonstrated. Let us recall parts of the opening quote from chapter 1 where Hegel expressed what he took the essence of romantic irony to be:

'From the convictions and doctrines of F. von Schlegel, there was thus developed in diverse shapes the so-called 'irony'. This had its deeper root, in one of its aspects, in Fichte's philosophy, in so far as the principles of this philosophy were applied to art… We need in this respect emphasize only the following points about this irony, namely that [*first*] the *ego* is the absolute principle of all knowing, reason, and cognition, and at that the *ego* remains throughout abstract and formal. *Secondly*, this *ego* is in itself just simple, and, on the one hand, every particularity, every characteristic, every content is negated in it, since everything is submerged in this abstract freedom and unity, while, on the other hand, every content which is to have value for the *ego* is only put and recognized by the *ego* itself. Whatever is, is only by the instrumentality of the *ego*, and what exists by my instrumentality I can equally well annihilate again…'[359]

What we see here is Hegel's move to equate 'irony' with the 'ego'. This 'ego' then supposedly becomes the sole node in a web of things that depend on the ego for their existence: 'whatever is, is only by the instrumentality of the ego'. The ego dramatically

[358] Friedrich Schlegel, *Critical Fragments,* #108
[359] G.W.F. Hegel, Introduction to *Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1, p. 67

inflates to be the hallmark for both theoretical ('the ego is the absolute principle of all knowing, reason, cognition') as well as practical ('every content which is to have value for the ego is only put and recognized by the ego itself') knowledge. From Hegel's description we may infer that this ego appears to be the only stable entity in a sea of things which come and go at the ego's will. Remember that for Frank, what irony does is to leave behind an embarrassed and ridiculed subject that feels its hopeless inferiority in relation to the Absolute. To begin with, Hegel's picture of the 'inflated ego' seems to stand in contrast with Frank's 'deflated' kind: Hegel's ego is quite literally 'full of itself', as when Hegel writes that 'every content which is to have value for the *ego* is only put and recognized by the *ego* itself.'

But when we follow this thought through, we see that, as Hegel writes, 'what exists by my instrumentality I can equally well annihilate again.' Thus, what emerges is a sense that this seemingly omnipotent ego turns out to be a 'king without a castle'. Nothing makes a claim on this ego, as nothing seems to carry value independently of the ego's arbitrary inclinations. Thus, what looks on the surface to be a desirable position full of apparent potency turns out to be wholly empty on the inside. And it is here where we find the connection between Frank's views and those of Hegel. For Hegel's position can in a way be seen as a likely next step – a recoil – that follows from the Frankian analysis of feeling negligible in the face of infinity: the depleted ego tries to 'bounce back', attempting to fill the void into which it has plunged by arbitrarily 'creating and destroying value' to hide the painful fact of its inner emptiness. In this way, both positions are the result of a sense of worthlessness that irony appears to imply.[360] And it

[360] This is exactly what we saw Hegel claim in the long quote at the beginning of the first chapter, where he spoke of the 'romantic Ego' as being a 'morbid beautiful soul', writing about the 'empty vain subject's sense of nullity', a subject that 'lacks the strength to escape from this vanity and fill himself with a content of substance.' Compare Larmore's reading of Hegel's view of 'irony', which picks up on this same thread: 'Irony, Hegel smeered, is mere twaddle (Schwatz). It mocks all that is good and true and holy, and means only to parade its geniuslike superiority to the "deceived, poor borne creatures" who take things seriously.' (Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy,* p. 80)

is critical to stress that this is by no means the only option, as if irony inevitably means defeatism. There exists an alternative position of 'positive affirmation' in relation to irony in the romantics. And it is this position that is disregarded in both Frank and Hegel, and that I want to bring out here.

And something else is noteworthy: Hegel begins talking about romantic irony and then very quickly gives an account of 'the ego', without really elaborating, or attempting to elaborate, the relationship between the two. Are we to conclude that 'romantic irony' and 'the ego' end up being the same thing? It seems to follow from Hegel's account, but I clearly think that the answer should be 'no'. One reason this is the case goes back to the position that we saw Novalis take in his Fichte Studies. He there wrote that 'the I is basically nothing – everything has to be given to it'[361], and 'what reflection finds, seems already to have been there.'[362] 'Irony' is what has already 'been there', what has been 'given to it', once the self begins to feel itself. This means that the 'ego' that Hegel is talking about is itself the recipient of a more fundamental feeling which is not produced by the ego. Rather, the ego is produced by that feeling. Hence Hegel's reading of irony misses the mark quite drastically. This also implies that for all the talk of romantic subjectivity', 'unique individuality' etc., we should not get carried away to make the mistaken assumption that at the bottom of self-experience lies something so unique that in fact each 'self' is incommensurable to another. Rather, as I see it, the romantics want to claim that 'irony', understood as the struggle to unite what appear to be opposing drives, is what we all *share in common*. Irony provides the common ground for what it means to be a person.

Now this does not mean, of course, that every person ends up being 'the same'. The 'self-feeling' ('Selbstgefuehl') of the human condition is what is unique to each and every one of us. Only the unique self knows what it truly feels like to be that particular

[361] Novalis, *Fichte Studies,* #15
[362] ibid., #14

self. But when we start to share and express that self-feeling, we find that we all indeed encounter a common experience on which we can converge. And another thing is crucial here, and follows from the analysis of this chapter: if the self is characterized by this state of irony, understood as the seemingly paradoxical condition of feeling infinite whilst being finite, then the concept of good infinity can illuminate its structure. For recall that for the romantics good infinity is only possible through 'the assumption of an eternal becoming', as Schlegel writes. This now means, however, that the self is not some stable entity, something that is finished, complete, and forever set in stone. Rather, if the self is shaped by the feeling of irony, and if irony is the particular unity that we have described in this chapter, the self is never finished, but always in a state of *becoming*. This is another sense in which I think Hegel gets the romantic self wrong. He seems to think of it as this fix point that is the only thing that truly remains, exists, while it can annihilate or create any other content outside of itself at will. We saw the different senses between romantic and Hegelian becoming, and thus shouldn't be too surprised that Hegel failed to grasp the essence of it.

Rather, what this picture of the 'becoming self' brings up again is the relationship to Fichte. For the romantics did display some genuine affinity and proximity to Fichte, which I think was based on his understanding that the self is something 'dynamic', an 'act', a *Tathandlung*, as Fichte put it. This Fichtean conception has the capacity to include the sense of becoming in the notion of selfhood. And yet, as we just saw above, Fichte's idea that the 'self posits itself' fails to account for the sense of being the recipient of a feeling that the romantics emphasize. Thus irony turns out to be the term for the particular human condition of encountering what appear to be opposing drives at the bottom of our self-understanding. And the self of 'relative stability' turns out to be much closer to this truth than the self that regards itself as stable and fixed. Rush seems to make this point too: 'The self just is a self-understanding, a 'construct', so to speak, that has but relative stability.'[363]

[363] Fred Rush, *Irony and Idealism*, p. 68

While Fred Rush seems to me to pick up on a lot of important themes in his *Irony and Idealism*, there are still clear differences between my reading of irony and the one he is advancing. Consider this quote of his:

'The third way Schlegel expresses the same point is that irony allows 'intimation' (*Ahnung*) of the absolute. In saying this, Schlegel recapitulates points we have already considered: a thing intimates something else when it exhibits features of its own that indicate the other thing. As common usage has it, intimation is not intimacy: it is not a mode of immediate access. In this case the feature that irony exhibits is a plurality of possible ways one might be, and what that intimates is the absolute, a source of such forms not exhausted by any one set of them.'[364]

'Irony', Rush wants to say, allows us 'an intimation of', but not 'an immediate access to', the absolute. 'Irony' exhibits a 'plurality of possible ways one might be', which 'intimates but doesn't allow us immediate access to' the absolute, for the absolute is 'the source of such forms not exhausted by any set of them'. One may wonder, at this point, how exactly irony is supposed to 'exhibit a plurality of possible ways one might be.' But leaving this worry aside, two more things appear problematic here: the first is this belief that the Absolute is something 'outside' of ourselves which we somehow need to 'get access to': the unreachable, unattainable and unknowable object. This is the old and antiquated picture of Kantian cognition: 'how can the subject attain knowledge of the objective world'? I don't think we should take the romantics as continuing with that account as they didn't turn the absolute into the missing object of defeatist epistemology.

And the second problematic claim is the idea that 'the absolute is the source of all possible ways to be that is not exhausted by any set of them.' This is the picture of bad

[364] ibid., p. 69

infinity once more: the absolute represents the infinite amount of ways in which one may be, and no finite set of 'ways of being' could evidently hope to ever 'exhaust' such an infinity.[365] Furthermore, irony, for Rush, seems to be allowing us an 'intimation' of this state of affairs. His idea is supposedly that the apparent opposition between finitude and infinity contained in irony 'intimates' the opposition contained in the Absolute between infinite ways of being and finite sets thereof. In this way, what connects irony to the absolute would be the structure of bad infinity: we get a glimpse of bad infinity in irony, and this glimpse gives us a sense of what the absolute may be, because there supposedly is a structural resemblance between the two.

Needless to say, if this is indeed Rush's position, then this thesis and Rush's views very clearly part ways at this point. To conceive of irony in this way closes off the possibility of affirming what only at first glance appears to be an insurmountable opposition. Irony harbors the possibility of an affirmation. This is what Rush and Frank are missing when they operate with the picture of bad infinity in relation to irony.

We must at this point give an example to illustrate, once more, what irony represents for the romantics. The example will also help to show what I think the romantics have in mind when they ask us to affirm and accept, rather than commiserate and reject, what they take irony to be.

We already encountered the central idea of this example at the end of the first chapter, in a quote that was left somewhat underdiscussed, and that I want to requote here:

'Die wahre Ironie ist die Ironie der Liebe. Sie entsteht aus dem Gefuehl der Endlichkeit und der eignen Beschraenkung, und dem scheinbaren Widesrpuch dieses Gefuehls mit der in jeder wahren Liebe mit eingeschlossenen Idee eines Unendlichen.' [True irony is

[365] Rush's views here seem to mirror Schlegel's admonitions of the 'bad philological infinite', which we exhibited in chapter 2.

the irony of love. It arises out of the feeling of one's finitude and own limitation, and the apparent contradiction of this feeling with the idea of the infinite contained in every true love].[366]

'True irony', Schlegel tells us, is 'the irony of love'. It is in love that we are presented with the idea of the infinite, which we then compare and contrast with our finitude and limitations. In this way love perfectly illustrates what the romantics mean by irony. To understand why we must turn to Schlegel's *Lucinde*, and the example of the love between Julius and Lucinde that he there presents towards the end of the novella.

In the text Schlegel charts the emotional and intellectual journey of his alter ego, Julius, until his eventual encounter with 'Lucinde' (very clearly his later wife Dorothea). Until Julius and Lucinde meet, Julius is very much a confused and unhappy soul who seems to be wasting his youth, squandering the fullness of his talents by being overwhelmed at the demands and weight of the world. His relationships are unfulfilling and frequently end in disaster. Everything changes, however, when Julius meets Lucinde.

What's striking about the example, to begin with, is just how 'unromantic' the relationship is, if we take 'unromantic' to be the opposite of 'romantic', whereby the latter is understood as being a mere fiction of the imagination rather than a real relationship. There is also a modern sense of being in a 'romantic relationship', however, which this example could be an instance of: a relationship which is meaningful because it entails a deep commitment to what one is involved in. For what we get is not an unfulfilled love, a yearning and longing young soul commiserating the tragic nature of his existence. Rather, what we see is that through love, Julius now 'owns the highest':

'Er hatte Liebe und das Glueck ueberall gesucht, wo sie nicht zu finden waren, und nun da er das Hoechste besaß, hatte er nicht einmal gewusst oder gewagt, ihm den rechten

[366] Friedrich Schlegel, *KFSA X*, p. 357

Namen zu geben.'[367] [He had looked for love and happiness in all the places where they weren't to be found; and now that he possessed the highest he hadn't even known it or dared to give it its right name.]

Schlegel forcefully describes how through the uniting force of love the fullness of Julius' being comes to the fore: ‚Und in den Kämpfen der Liebe entwickelte sich mit einemmale der ganze Reichtum seiner kräftigen Bildung.'[368] [And in the struggles of love there at once developed the whole fullness of his forceful *Bildung*.] Now Julius' paintings 'came to life, a stream of inspiring light seemed to spill over them, and the real flesh glowed in living colors.'[369] In line with the spirit of our previously provided interpretation of Beethoven's piece of music, Schlegel remarks that 'The shapes themselves perhaps did not always conform to the conventional rules of artistic beauty, but they appealed to the eye because of a certain quiet grace, the deep expression of calm and happy life and the enjoyment of that life.'[370]

Moreover, Julius' life itself was becoming 'a work of art' as he now stood 'in the middle' of it:

'Wie seine Kunst sich vollendete und ihm von selbst in ihr gelang, was er zuvor durch kein Streben und Arbeiten erringen konnte: so ward ihm auch sein Leben zum Kunstwerk, ohne dass er eigentlich wahrnahm, wie es geschah. Es ward Licht in seinem Innern, er sah und übersah alle Massen seines Lebens und den Gliederbau des Ganzen klar und richtig, weil er in der Mitte stand.'[371] [Just as his artistic ability developed and he was able to achieve with ease what he had been unable to accomplish with all his powers of exertion and hard work before, so too his life now came to be a work of art

[367] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Lucinde', in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze,* p. 70
[368] ibid.
[369] Friedrich Schlegel, *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, p. 101
[370] ibid.
[371] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Lucinde', in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, p. 71

for him, imperceptibly, without his knowing how it happened. A light entered his soul: he saw and surveyed all the parts of his life and the structure of the whole clearly and truly because he stood in the middle.]

Now that Julius was at this stage of his life ,he felt that he would never lose this unity; the mystery of his life had been resolved and he had found the Word.'[372] Given this description of a unifying and fulfilled kind of love, a description which challenges anyone who believes that romanticism is essentially about unfulfilled longing, we must still ask how it is that such an event is possible for Julius. This brings us to the idea of 'committing to irony', which I have alluded to many times before. For I take this to be the crucial 'ingredient' that turns the 'irony of love' that Schlegel talks about here into such a glowing example of a life well lived.

The key passage comes when Schlegel reflects on the kind of approach that he took in relationship to this love:

'Wir sterblichen sind, so wie wir hier sind, nur die edelsten Gewächse dieser schönen Erde. Die Menschen vergessen das so leicht, höchlich missbilligen sie die ewigen Gesetze der Welt und wollen die geliebte Oberfläche durchaus im Mittelpunkte wiederfinden. Nicht also du und ich. Wir sind dankbar und zufrieden mit dem was die Götter wollen und was sie in der heiligen Schrift der Natur so klar angedeutet haben. Das bescheidene Gemüt erkennt es, dass es auch sein wie aller Dinge natürliche Bestimmung sei, zu blühen, zu reifen und zu welken.'[373] [While we live, we mortals are only the greatest creations of this beautiful earth. Man forgets that so easily: he disapproves highly of the eternal laws of the world and wants to find his beloved surface once again placed squarely in the center. Not so you and I. We are thankful for and satisfied with what the gods want and what they've written out so clearly in the holy scripture of nature's

[372] Friedrich Schlegel, *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, p. 102/103
[373] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Lucinde', in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, p. 73

beauty. The humble mind recognizes that its natural destiny, like that of all things, is to blossom, to ripen, and to wilt away.]

What we get here, in a nutshell, is Schlegel's unequivocal embrace of finitude. He makes it clear that he is 'thankful for and satisfied with what the gods want'. He is not, in other words, aiming at an unreachable ideal which would contradict the natural course of things. Rather, he recognizes that the 'natural destiny, like that of all things, is to blossom, to ripen, and to wilt away.' But, and this is the important point, to embrace finitude – to commit to *this* life, not to some unreachable beyond – is at the same time to embrace infinity. The infinite is contained in the finite, and vice versa. This too is what Hegel got right in his *Logic* when he arrived at infinity solely by thinking clearly through what it means to be finite.

Schlegel arrives at a similar conclusion, but stemming more from the actual experience of what is involved in the relationship that he is describing. He tells us: 'In jener tiefsten Mitte des Lebens treibt die schaffende Willkür ihr Zauberspiel. Da sind die Anfänge und Enden, wohin alle Fäden im Gewebe der geistigen Bildung sich verlieren.'[374] [In that deepest center of life, the creative will produces its magic. There are the beginnings and the ends where all the threads of the fabric of spiritual culture disappear.] In this way, for Julius to commit to his relationship with Lucinde means for him *to accept* the dimension of the infinite, the incomprehensible, 'the magical', as Schlegel writes here, as being implied in the act of commitment. 'The infinite' is contained in a loving relationship because the very being of that very relationship is always at issue. This is a similar point to the one we saw in chapter 2 when we explored the reason Schlegel takes certain texts to be 'infinite'. Such texts, as we saw, are always subject to reinterpretation. Likewise, a relationship is a dynamic and continuously evolving project that is never finished, fixed or complete. The structure of infinity is built into the finite. In this way, 'accepting one's limits' doesn't mean resigning oneself to the limitation of

[374] ibid., p. 73

having to side with the finite as opposed to the infinite. Rather, a commitment to one involves a commitment to the other. Thus good infinity and irony come together.

I want to conclude this chapter with a view to today's sense of the term 'irony'. We speak of something being 'ironic' when the particular term or phrase that we use harbours the possibility of being understood in the very opposite sense to that in which it was originally and literally expressed. When I reply 'how nice!' to your news that you have to work over the holidays, my reply is funny because both language speakers understand that I really mean to say the opposite of what I literally say.[375] The tension between the literal and actual meaning of my words makes us laugh. Likewise, we saw in the second chapter Schlegel's use of the term 'irony' in relation to his use of the word 'tendency', which as he there told us could either be understood as an endorsement of the importance of something, as when he speaks of the 'three great tendencies of the age' (amongst which he counted Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre)*, or as a belittling of something, as when he speaks of Kant's *CPR* as being a 'mere tendency'. What's 'ironic' about this is that the word 'tendency' can be understood in both of these contradicting ways, and we may end up being confused about which sense applies where: we may take Kant's *CPR* to be 'more important' than Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, when it is the opposite that is true for Schlegel.

What irony points towards, in other words, is the existence of a tension or a potentially conflicting state of affairs. Often something can get even more 'ironic' when it turns out that an eventual outcome is wholly opposite to that which a particular agent had intended. Consider the sentence: 'The irony is that the very weapons the country once produced are now being used against it'.[376] To the detriment of that country, this was a

[375] A more sophisticated exposition of irony would have to take into account the role played by the 'voice' in that particular utterance, but this is not needed for the basic points about the functionings of irony made here.
[376] Some of the examples and definitions here are loosely drawn from dictionary entries on irony online: 'www.dictionary.com' or 'www.dictionary.cambridge.org'

possibility all along, which the country failed to appreciate. But an 'ironic outcome' needn't always be a bad outcome, of course. Consider: 'It is ironic that the striker's missed penalty attempt has given his team a better overall chance of lifting the trophy.' Hence in all these modern senses of the term 'irony', we are brought back to the truth that a particular word, phrase or action can lend itself to contradicting ways of interpretation, ways which may or may not have been apparent to the agent at the time of the utterance or action.

And this returns us to the romantic sense of the term 'irony', which is of course the very profound truth that at the bottom of our self there lies such a tension, such a potential for conflict - we feel ourselves to be both: finite and infinite. This clear connection to the modern meaning of the term 'irony' is also evident when Schlegel writes of Julius that during his relationship with Lucinde he 'was almost always just as ready to take part in some childlike sport as he was to [appreciate] the most holy seriousness'. [Er war fast immer gleich gestimmt zum kindlichsten Scherz und zum heiligsten Ernst.][377] The mostly comical nature of modern day irony points to the deep truth about this tension produced by opposites.

But for all the 'fun' that modern day irony affords us, there is a danger that amidst all the mocking we tend to side with either 'pole' of a particular opposition and forget the connectedness of the two. This is Frank's understanding of irony, where the finite is 'mocked by' the infinite, an understanding which is clearly reflected in many of today's uses of the term. Yet if we can learn something from the romantics, it is to pay attention to how very often a seeming opposition between terms can be defused, thus revealing an intimate and underlying connection between the two. 'Life' can be said to be ironic in that it is both profound and absurd at the same time. Yet we don't necessarily have to resolve that tension by believing that the only solution is to embrace either one of those poles. Taking life 'only as a joke', or 'only as something extremely serious', misses the

[377] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Lucinde', in *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, p. 73

fact that the proper attitude to life probably lies somewhere in the middle. Truth is with he who can endure this tension of opposites, simultaneously holding on to both poles. In this way, truth is romantic.

Appendix: The Earth and the Good Infinite in Heidegger

There exists, between the later philosophy of Martin Heidegger, and the philosophy of the early German romantics, a very interesting affinity with regards to Heidegger's concept of 'earth'. This notion Heidegger explores in his essay *On the Origin of the Work of Art*, wherein Heidegger discusses the ontological, world-disclosive role of art. The idea of the earth carries connotations that I think are closely related to the 'incomprehensibility' contribution of the romantics, and a discussion of Heidegger's idea can shed additional light onto our question.

We can begin with an illuminating secondary source on the question: Hubert Dreyfus' *Heidegger's Ontology of* Art. As Dreyfus sees it, it is 'Heideggers basic insight that the work of art not only manifests the style of the culture; it articulates it.'[378] What Dreyfus means by this is that 'works of art, when performing this function, are not merely *representations* of a pre-existing state of affairs, but actually *produce* a shared understanding.'[379] A work of art articulates and produces a shared understanding. A shared understanding is something that orients us, that grounds us, something that is 'unifying' in the sense of providing us with a world that makes sense, that is inhabitable, intelligible, and bound. In his discussion of the Greek temple, Heidegger writes that 'Tree, grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter their distinctive shapes and thus come to appearance as what they are… It is the temple work that first fits together and

[378] Hubert Dreyfus, *Heidegger's Ontology of Art,* p.5
[379] ibid.

at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human beings.'[380]

The question now is: how does the artwork achieve this? This is where it gets interesting for our purposes. Just before the part on the 'tree, grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket coming to appear as what they are', Heidegger describes the Greek temple that he takes to be occupying this role of articulating a world in the following way: 'Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws out of the rock the darkness of its unstructured yet unforced support. Standing there, the building holds its place against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm visible in its violence. The gleam and luster of the stone, though apparently there only by the grace of the sun, in fact first brings forth the light of day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of the air. The steadfastness of the work stands out against the surge of the tide and, in its own repose, brings out the raging of the surf.'[381]

Why does Heidegger resort to describing the temple in this peculiar way? What is it that he wants to be drawing our attention to? It is the peculiar 'thinghood' of the temple, that which is so hard to articulate because it is occupies such a primordial and grounding role. Crucially, it is this 'thinghood' in the artwork that 'resists rationalization'. Hubert Dreyfus, in drawing an analogy between the kind of role played by the Greek temple and by a scientific paradigm, writes that 'the artwork, like the scientific paradigm, resists rationalization. Any paradigm could be paraphrased and rationalized only if the concrete thing, which served as an exemplar, symbolized or represented an underlying system of beliefs or values that could be abstracted from the particular exemplar. But the whole

[380] Martin Heidegger, *On the Origin of the Work of Art*
[381] ibid., p. 21

point of needing an exemplar is that there is no such system, there are only shared practices. Therefore the style resists rationalization and can only be displayed.'[382]

What resists rationalization is the *style,* an idea we already encountered above in reference to Judith Norman's views about the inability to reduce romantic literature to its purely philosophical content in a kind of Hegelian reduction. Whatever this something is that 'resists rationalization' Heidegger calls *the earth,* and defines it thus: 'Earth is that in which the arising of everything that is, is brought back – as, indeed, the very thing that it is – and sheltered. In the things that arise the earth 'presences' as the protecting one.'[383] *The earth* is that which 'shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained.'[384] *The earth* shatters any attempt to penetrate it. 'It is openly illuminated as itself only where it is apprehended and preserved as the essentially undis-closable, as that which withdraws from every disclosure, in other words, keeps itself constantly closed up.'[385] It is that which, in every attempt to make something explicit and comprehensible, resists any such attempt, that which is 'illuminated as the essentially undisclosable': 'The earth is the essentially self-secluding. To set forth the earth means: to bring it into the open as the self-secluding.'[386]

In line with what I think Schlegel is referring to in his essay *On Incomprehensibility*, Dreyfus writes that it is 'the earth that supplies mattering and thus grounds the seriousness of decisions… every decision, however, bases itself on something not mastered, something concealed, confusing; else it would never be a decision.'[387] Here we encounter, then, the peculiar and crucial function played by *the earth*. What is important is the idea that that which resists disclosure plays the role of adding weight,

[382] Hubert Dreyfus, *Heidegger's Ontology of Art,* p.5
[383] Martin Heidegger, *On the Origin of the Work of Art,* p. 24
[384] ibid., p. 25
[385] ibid., p. 25
[386] ibid., p. 25
[387] Hubert Dreyfus, *Heidegger's Ontology of Art,* p.5

decisiveness and seriousness to decisions. It does its job by 'being left in the dark'. This is the romantic sense of incomprehensibility which, in my submission, remains to be fully appreciated.

When Heidegger talks about the work of art, he talks about the two elements that fulfill the task of 'disclosing a world' to a historical people: world and earth. Now 'world', as Heidegger defines it, is 'the self-opening openness of the broad paths of simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people.'[388] World is that which 'opens broad paths', which is to say that it makes our ontological world make sense, allowing us to lead a life by giving us ways to understand ourselves, modes in which to comport ourselves. But very interestingly, 'world', as the term for this kind of sense-making, needs 'earth', that which 'resists disclosure', that which, on the face of it, seems to counter the kind of 'openness' that 'world' provides. Deeper insight and analysis reveals how the intelligible structures provided to us by 'world' depend on something that is 'self-sheltering, self-closing': 'The earth is the unforced coming forth of the continually self-closing, and in that way, self-sheltering. World and earth are essentially different and yet never separated from one another. World is grounded on earth, and earth rises up through world.'[389] The two are 'grounded on one another'. They are different and yet never separate, an idea that would not seem too dissimilar from Houlgate's analysis of 'being different from, but not other than' in the case of the finite and the infinite.

What is important is this idea that 'world cannot float away from the earth', as Heidegger metaphorically puts it, 'if, as the prevailing breadth and path of all essential destiny, it is to ground itself on something decisive': 'The earth cannot do without the openness of world if it is to appear in the liberating surge of its self-closedness. World, on the other hand, cannot float away from the earth if, as the prevailing breadth and

[388] Martin Heidegger, *On the Origin of the Work of Art,* p. 26
[389] ibid., p. 26

path of all essential destiny, it is to ground itself on something decisive.'[390] It is a paradoxical and unintuitive idea. For something to be experienced as bounded and unified, we require an element of disclosure which has the features of *the earth:* 'The setting up of a world and the setting forth of earth are two essential traits belonging to the work-being of the work. Within the unity of that work-being, however, they belong together.'[391] In the unity of the work of art, the two belong together. This was the kind of phenomenon I sought to emphasise in my previous discussion of Beethoven's music. For the more melodic and harmonious parts to work, we need the background of the searching and non-rhythmic passages – this is what separates romantic music from classical music, which is structured and melodic from beginning to end. 'Only what moves can rest. The mode of rest is determined by the mode of movement',[392] as Heidegger writes at one point.

How does this relate to our discussion of the good infinite and the distinction between the Hegelian and the romantic solution? I propose the following view: what Heidegger calls 'the earth', and what Schlegel calls 'the incomprehensible', and what Novalis alludes to in his glorification of 'darkness' in his *Hymns to the Night,* is the element that is neglected in Hegel's supposedly 'progressive' move from art to philosophy. In his desire to extract the knowledge contained in the sensuous forms of art, Hegel inevitably loses the element that cannot be 'extracted'. Hegel takes himself to give a full and comprehensive philosophical account that should presumably retain those insights contained within the sensuous forms of art, but because part of the content of any such insight is inextricably contained in the form of the artwork (the temple, the piece of music), his move must partly fail. Indeed, Schlegel even goes so far as to claim that 'it is

[390] ibid., p. 26
[391] ibid., p. 26
[392] ibid., p. 26

a thoughtless and immodest presumption to want to learn something about art from philosophy.'[393]

[393] Schlegel, *Critical Fragments, #123*

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Mit dem äußersten Unwillen dachte ich nun an die schlechten Menschen, welche den Schlaf vom Leben subtrahieren wollen. Sie haben wahrscheinlich nie geschlafen, und auch nie gelebt. Warum sind denn die Götter Götter, als weil sie mit Bewusstsein und Absicht nichts tun, weil sie das verstehen und Meister darin sind?

- Schlegel, *Lucinde*