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ARTICLE

THE ROMANTIC ABSOLUTE

Alison Stone

In this article I argue that the Early German Romantics understand the absolute, or being, to be an infinite whole encompassing all the things of the world and all their causal relations. The Romantics argue that we strive endlessly to know this whole but only acquire an expanding, increasingly systematic body of knowledge about finite things, a system of knowledge which can never be completed. We strive to know the whole, the Romantics claim, because we have an original feeling of it that motivates our striving. I then examine two different Romantic accounts of this feeling. The first, given by Novalis, is that feeling gives us a kind of access to the absolute which logically precedes any conceptualisation. I argue that this account is problematic and that a second account, offered by Friedrich Schlegel, is preferable. On this account, we feel the absolute in that we intuit it aesthetically in certain natural phenomena. This form of intuition is partly cognitive and partly non-cognitive, and therefore it motivates us to strive to convert our intuition into full knowledge.

KEYWORDS: absolute; being; knowledge; nature; Novalis; Romanticism; Schlegel

INTRODUCTION

Recent work on the philosophy of the Early German Romantics has established that the aesthetic and literary-theoretical views for which they are best known are entwined with their views in metaphysics and epistemology.¹ In metaphysics, their central concept is that of the absolute (*das Absolute*) – or, what they take to be synonymous with the absolute, being (*Sein*). What do they understand by the absolute, or being? I will argue in this article that the Romantics understand the absolute to be an infinite whole encompassing all the things of the world and all the causal relations between these things.²

¹A good review of this literature is Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, 'The Revival of *Frühromantik* in the Anglophone World', *Philosophy Today* (Spring 2005): 96–117.

²I will argue against interpretations on which Romantic being is merely 'the Being of the I'; for example Charles Larmore, 'Hölderlin and Novalis', in the *Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, edited by Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 154.

Do the Romantics believe that we can have knowledge of the absolute? This is a contested issue among scholars. According to Frederick Beiser, they think we can know the absolute through a form of aesthetic intuition which transcends merely discursive knowledge. In contrast, for Manfred Frank, the Romantics equate knowledge with discursive knowledge and so conclude that we cannot know but only feel being. Based on this feeling we strive to know being, but we never achieve this goal. Instead, our striving results in our systematizing our knowledge of the finite things that are amenable to discursive knowledge.³

In this article I shall re-examine the Romantics' accounts of our supposed original feeling or intuition of the absolute, based on which we strive endlessly to know the absolute discursively.⁴ Actually, we find in their writings at least two divergent accounts. These are suggested in the writings of Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) and of Friedrich Schlegel, who, together, are the main philosophers of early German Romanticism and whose ideas will be my focus. The first account, which Novalis suggests in his 1795–6 *Fichte Studies*, is that feeling gives us a kind of access to being which logically precedes any conceptualization, judgement or understanding. I will argue that this appeal to feeling is problematic, above all because Novalis conceives of feeling as wholly antithetical to conceptualization and understanding, such that the deliverances of feeling cannot give us any rational justification for striving to know being.

The second account of our feeling of the absolute, outlined by Schlegel, is that we feel the absolute in the sense that we aesthetically intuit it in certain natural phenomena. Drawing on but extensively modifying Kant's aesthetics of natural beauty, Schlegel holds that certain natural features – such as a skyscape, the atmosphere of a season, or a complicated natural scene – are infinitely complex, yet that we intuitively apprehend them as wholes. However, given their complexity we apprehend their wholeness as lying beyond these phenomena. We glimpse this wholeness through the phenomena, rather than grasping them as completed wholes. Thus, we intuit that there is an infinitely complex whole that surpasses yet also animates all particular objects – an absolute, in fact.

What epistemological status does this form of aesthetic intuition have? It is not full knowledge, since it is not articulated discursively; but neither is it

³Beiser speaks of the *absolute* to bring out that his view that the whole is knowable, amenable to reason (albeit a higher, aesthetic form of reason), so that Romanticism anticipates Hegel's 'absolute idealism' on which reality is intelligible to reason. See Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism 1781–1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) 349–74. In contrast Frank speaks of *being* to bring out his view that the 'ground of unity of mental and physical reality' is not discursively knowable but just *is* in a way transcending explanation and understanding; Frank, *Unendliche Annäherung: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997) 27. I will explain presently why I think that for the Romantics 'being' and 'the absolute' are actually synonymous.

⁴This claim that we originally feel the absolute does not conflict with the Romantics' anti-foundationalism, because for the Romantics this feeling is not fully cognitive and so cannot provide the first principle of a philosophical system.

totally non-cognitive: it gives us not merely the idea that the absolute may possibly exist, but a more definite apprehension of the absolute glimmering through nature before us. This form of intuition occupies a curious middle ground between knowledge and non-knowledge. Since this is an uneasy status, we become rationally compelled to try to convert our intuition into full knowledge; hence our endless striving to know the absolute. Regarding the Beiser/Frank controversy, then, I will argue that our aesthetic intuition of the absolute is neither fully cognitive as Beiser claims, nor fully non-cognitive as Frank claims. Moreover, Schlegel's account of aesthetic intuition is preferable to Novalis's account of the feeling of being, since our aesthetic intuition of the absolute at least approximates to cognition and so can give us rational justification for striving to know the absolute.

It may be objected that this approach to the Romantics exaggerates the extent to which epistemological issues preoccupied them. Arguably, one of their aims was to set aside philosophers' widespread preoccupation with knowledge so as to explore aesthetic (including literary) and religious (including mythological) experiences in their own right, as alternative ways of relating to the world. Nevertheless, the Romantics see aesthetic and religious experience – at least the particular modalities of these that most interest them – as forms of experience of the absolute. Consequently, their interest in these forms of experience does extend, although it is not confined, to an interest in whether they give us any kind of knowledge of the absolute – and this issue will be my focus here.

1. ROMANTIC ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE ABSOLUTE

As scholars of Early German Romanticism have established, Schlegel and Novalis defined their philosophical position in opposition to the foundationalist and systematic programs pursued by their erstwhile mentors Reinhold and Fichte. For Reinhold, Kant's account of mind was insufficiently systematic because it relied on the idea of discrete faculties (sensibility, understanding, reason), all of which Reinhold instead sought to deduce from one single 'fact of consciousness'. This 'fact' is that in consciousness the subject relates to and differentiates itself from its representations and their objects. From his description of this fact, Reinhold aimed to derive systematically a series of claims about our mode of representation, all inheriting (what he saw as) the certainty of that original description. Fichte continued Reinhold's program in so far as he put forward his description of the self-positing self as a new first principle designed to overcome problems that he found in Reinhold's principle of consciousness.⁵ Fichte's 1794 *Foundation of the Entire*

⁵See K. L. Reinhold, 'The Foundation of Philosophical Knowledge' (1794) in *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, translated by George di Giovanni

Wissenschaftslehre ('theory of knowledge' or of 'science') thus purported to be 'scientific' in that all its elements were systematically derived from its first principle.

Opposing Reinhold and Fichte, Schlegel and Novalis deny that we can ever find any certain first principle. 'Why do we need a *beginning* at all? This unphilosophical . . . goal is the source of all error' (AB #634,115), Novalis writes.⁶ Instead of having a beginning, Schlegel affirms, philosophy 'always begins *in medias res*' (AF #84, 28) – with whatever fallible knowledge-claims lie to hand.

The Romantics take it (for reasons that I will examine shortly) that any such first principle, were we *per impossibile* to have one, would give us certain knowledge of 'the absolute' (which they also call 'being', 'the infinite' and 'the unconditioned'). Lacking such a first principle, we instead *strive* to know the absolute. But, they think, we cannot attain, any more than we can commence inquiry from, knowledge of the absolute. This is because our striving only ever results in us acquiring knowledge about what is finite, that is, about 'things' (*Dinge*) that are finite in the sense that they are each different from and limited and conditioned by one another. 'Everywhere we *seek* the unconditioned and only ever *find* things', Novalis famously writes.⁷ Our striving to know the absolute remains ever unsatisfied, but rather than abandoning it as futile, we continue to strive endlessly and acquire ever more knowledge concerning finite things.

Based on these claims, Schlegel and Novalis retain a notion of systematicity despite rejecting Reinhold's and Fichte's foundationalism.

and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, revised edition, 2000) 67, 70. The key problem, for Fichte, is that the representing subject must already be self-conscious to be able to ascribe its representations to itself, but to be self-*conscious* the subject must – on Reinhold's account of consciousness – have a representation of itself which it ascribes to itself, requiring a prior level of self-consciousness, and so on in an infinite regress. Fichte's solution is that the self-consciousness that precedes and enables consciousness must consist not in the self's representation of itself as an object but rather in an immediate, intuitive self-acquaintance. See Fichte, 'Review of *Aenesidemus*' in *Early Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 63; and Dieter Henrich, 'Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht' in *Subjektivität und Metaphysik*, edited by Dieter Henrich and Hans Wagner (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1966).

⁶The following abbreviations for repeatedly cited works are used: AB=Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, translated by David W. Wood (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007); AF=Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' in *Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); DP=Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, translated by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968); FS=Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, translated by Jane Kneller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); GS=Schlegel, 'Über die Grenzen des Schönen' in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, edited by Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh Verlag, 1958–) vol. 1. Translations are sometimes modified without special notice in light of Novalis, *Schriften*, edited by Richard Samuel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–75) and Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*. Citations are to fragment number (#) where applicable then page number.

⁷Novalis, *Schriften* vol. 2, #1, 412.

As we learn more about finite things, we also gain increasing knowledge of both the causal relations between these various things and the logical relations between our items of knowledge; we thus progressively systematize our knowledge. Novalis contributes to this systematization with his *Allgemeine Brouillon* (1798–9), his draft encyclopedia mapping how various kinds of natural and mental phenomena are constituted by their differences from and similarities to one another, and concurrently how the findings of the different empirical sciences parallel one another. But for the Romantics our knowledge can never be completely systematized, because there is an infinite variety of finite things and of causal relations between them. ‘Every cause gives rise to causes . . . however, this chain is infinite both forward and backward’ (AB #615, 110). Since, then, we cannot complete the system of knowledge, no element within that system ever gives us certainty. The justification for each element increases the more it proves inferentially supported by other elements, but each element always remains liable to be falsified as the system-in-progress unfolds.⁸

This idea of a system-in-progress informs the Romantics’s fragmentary, literary, often cryptic writing style. The model of interconnected fragments corresponds to the notion of a system-in-progress. Literary devices of allusion, irony, wordplay, dialogue and self-reference are intended to expose how knowledge is always limited, never complete. Deliberate obscurity is meant to show that individual knowledge-claims can be understood only in relation to the whole system of knowledge – and that, because this system is incomplete, these claims can never be definitively understood, so that their meanings always remain subject to reinterpretation.

Why, though, do the Romantics deny that we can commence inquiry from knowledge of the absolute, and what do they mean by ‘the absolute’ here? And *why* do they also deny that we can attain knowledge of the absolute? We can infer the answer to the second question from the Romantic approach to systematicity. *If* we could completely systematize our knowledge, then we would have attained knowledge of the absolute; but we cannot. That is, if we had a complete knowledge of all the world’s causal interconnections and all the relations among our beliefs, then we would know the absolute. Thus the Romantics understand the absolute to be the universe as a whole, a totality that encompasses all finite things and beliefs and all their interrelations (akin to Spinoza’s substance). Indeed Novalis is explicit on this: ‘*Only the All is absolute*’ (AB #454, 145). ‘In every moment, in every appearance, the whole is operating. . . . It is all, it is *over all*; In whom we live, breathe and have our being’ (FS #462, 147). He adds: ‘The universe is the absolute subject, or the totality of all predicates’ (AB #633, 113). Novalis takes this whole to be synthetic, not merely the sum of all finite things. For him each finite thing is the way it is only because of its

⁸Frank, *Philosophical Foundations*, translated by Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004) 175.

causal relations with other things: intended in Novalis's talk of 'things' (*Dinge*) is the idea that each thing's causal relations condition (*bedingen*) it to be as it is. Ultimately, therefore, each thing is as it is only because of its place within the complete web of causal relations obtaining amongst all things. Each thing is as it is because it is part of the whole. Therefore, the whole is not the sum of independently existing things but constitutes these things, its parts; the whole is synthetic, not composite.

We can now see why the Romantics use a cluster of interchangeable terms for the absolute. The absolute is 'the infinite' (*das Unendliche*) because it is not a finite thing but the non-finite whole encompassing all finite things. The absolute is 'being' because all finite things contain negation in that they differ from and so are-not one another, whereas the absolute encompasses everything so that there is nothing outside it for it to not-be: it entirely is. The absolute is 'the unconditioned' (*das Unbedingte*) because, as the whole, there is nothing outside it to causally condition it.

It is because the Romantics take the absolute to be the universe as a whole, and because they also believe that we can never know everything about finite things, that they maintain that we cannot know the absolute. Again, because the Romantics understand the absolute to be the universe as a synthetic whole, this explains why they think that (*per impossibile*) any first principle would have to describe this absolute. Since, as Reinhold had argued, consciousness is only intelligible in contrast to the objects towards which it is directed, any putatively 'first' principle describing the basic structure of consciousness (such as Reinhold's fact of consciousness) would actually require an accompanying principle describing the nature of objects. But then we would have two principles, not one first principle. To reintroduce a first principle, we would need one describing that which overarches and includes both subject and object as aspects, from which one could derive knowledge of these subject and object poles and of the many finite beliefs and things. Or, as Novalis puts it: 'The act by which the I posits itself as I must be connected with the antithesis of an independent Not-I and of the relationship to a sphere that encompasses them' (FS #8, 7). This encompassing sphere is the absolute; but why cannot we construct a first principle describing this sphere?

The Romantics have at least two reasons for denying that this is possible. First, because the absolute just is the synthetic web of all interrelated things and ideas, we cannot know the whole in advance of knowing about these things/ideas and their relations (and our knowledge of the latter can never be completed).⁹ Second, and more importantly, the Romantics are

⁹In claiming that for the Romantics 'the absolute' is a real synthetic whole akin to Spinoza's substance I disagree with Charles Larmore's and Fred Rush's view that, for Novalis at least, 'the absolute' or 'being' only denotes immediate pre-reflective self-acquaintance (Larmore, 'Hölderlin and Novalis', 154; Rush, 'Irony and Romantic Subjectivity' in *Philosophical Romanticism*, edited by Kompridis, 176–7). Fichte made knowledge of our immediate

convinced by Kant that to know anything we must conceptualize it, and that (as Beiser puts it) ‘all conceptualisation is determination, involving some form of negation where one predicate is contrasted against another’.¹⁰ We can only conceptualize and know anything in so far as we pick it out as different from other entities – that is, in so far as we delimit the object of our knowledge as a finite thing. Since the whole is *ex hypothesi* not a finite thing but the synthetic totality of all finite things and ideas, it follows that we cannot conceptualize or know the whole. Even if we try to know the whole under the concept of the whole *as* that which differs from finite things/ideas, we still fail to know the whole, because in fact, rather than differing from finite things/ideas, the whole encompasses and includes them. As Novalis cryptically puts this: ‘The expression “absolute” is in turn relative’ (AB #10, 195). Consequently, the ‘concept’ of the ‘absolute ground’ – the universe as a whole – ‘contain[s] an impossibility’ (FS #566, 167); to conceptualize the whole is inescapably to distort its non-finite character – hence, ‘The essence of identity [of the whole which is absolutely one] can only be presented in an *illusory* [distorting] proposition’ (FS #1, 3). To try to know the whole in conceptual, propositional, form is necessarily to distort it.

To sum up so far: for the Romantics we cannot know the whole at the start of inquiry (1) because of the discriminating character of our concepts, (2) because we could not know the whole prior to knowing all about its parts since it is not separate from these, and (3) we cannot attain knowledge of the whole by knowing all about these parts because they and their relations are infinite. These arguments raise some questions. Firstly, why cannot we conceptualize the absolute as, precisely, the universe as a whole that encompasses and constitutes its parts? The answer is that for the Romantics, simply conceiving of the absolute as a synthetic whole would not suffice for

self-acquaintance the first principle of his 1794 system. Novalis objects that this self-acquaintance cannot be known. If knowledge (*Wissen*) is necessarily conscious (*bewusst*) and if, following Reinhold, consciousness involves a subject/object distinction, then any attempt to know immediate self-acquaintance must falsely describe it in terms of subject and object poles, even if these are described as united. If we cannot know our self-acquaintance, then we cannot derive a system from any knowledge thereof. We can only *feel* self-acquainted, Novalis concludes. Now for Rush and Larmore Novalis understands our original pre-reflective selfhood to be our ultimate ground and so to be ‘the absolute’, and the goal of our striving in so far as we seek endlessly to ‘invert’ ourselves back into self-feeling out of reflection. Novalis does sometimes use ‘the absolute’ in that way, speaking of the ‘absolute I’. But he *also* uses ‘the absolute’ to refer to the whole of the universe, as we have seen. Moreover, this latter usage has a more central place in Novalis’s (and Schlegel’s) thought as a whole, for it explains why they think that we seek systematic knowledge of the connections between natural and mental phenomena, and why they try to contribute to providing this knowledge (e.g. with Novalis’s *Brouillon*).

¹⁰Beiser, *German Idealism*, 372. For Beiser the Romantics believe in aesthetic intuitive knowledge as well as discursive knowledge and hence do think we can know the absolute. Yet Schlegel is emphatic: ‘Knowing already means a *conditioned* knowing. The unknowability of the absolute is therefore an identical triviality’ (*Philosophische Lehrjahre, Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, vol. 18, #64, 511). Still, the Romantics do not see our feeling of the absolute as *entirely* non-cognitive, as we will see.

knowledge that it exists. For knowledge, (following Kant, again) we require sensory material to which our concepts find application (conceptualization is a necessary but not sufficient condition of knowledge). The epistemic condition that concepts find application is met for finite things but not for the absolute: we can know only what we can sense under our spatial and temporal forms of intuition, but if there were an absolute whole it could not be in time or space, for it would then be conditioned either by something preceding it in time or by its own spatial constituents. (On the same grounds, Kant concludes that even if there were an unconditioned whole we could not know of it.)¹¹

Second, if we cannot know that there is an absolute, then why do we strive to know it and thereby come to acquire a systematic body of knowledge? Surely we must have some kind of notion of the absolute to justify us in engaging in this striving. We might wonder whether there is a relevant distinction between knowing *that* the absolute exists and knowing *about* the absolute – so that we cannot know about the absolute but we have some initial knowledge *that* it exists, which motivates us to strive to know about it. Novalis indeed does stipulate that only knowing about – having predicative knowledge of what properties things have – counts as knowledge. ‘One knows nothing of a thing if one knows only that it *is* – in actual understanding. Being in the ordinary sense expresses the properties and relations . . . of an object’ (FS #454, 145). It is not clear how helpful this distinction between knowing that and knowing what is here, since our presumed original notion of the absolute surely includes some notion of *what* the absolute is: that it is an unconditioned whole encompassing all objects. On Novalis’s own terms, then, this initial notion of the absolute seems to count as knowledge – and yet this is just what he, and the other Romantics, wish to deny. For them, our original notion of the absolute, which gives us reasons to try to know the absolute, cannot count as knowledge, given that the absolute is unknowable. What, then, *is* the epistemic (or other than epistemic) status of this original notion of the absolute such that it can justify us in striving to know the absolute?

2. THE ABSOLUTE: IDEA OR FEELING?

The Romantics sometimes say that in any inquiry we must *postulate* the absolute. Novalis writes that ‘all quest for the first is nonsense – it is a *regulative idea*’ (FS #472, 152). ‘The whole of philosophy is . . . only of

¹¹See James Kreines, ‘Between the Bounds of Experience and Divine Intuition: Kant’s Epistemic Limits and Hegel’s Ambitions’, *Inquiry*, 50 (2007) no. 3: 306–34. Frank and Jane Kneller argue that the Romantics agree with Kant that our form of sensibility precludes our knowing the absolute (Frank, *Philosophical Foundations*, 29; Kneller, ‘Novalis’ Other Way Out’ in *Philosophical Romanticism*, edited by Kompridis, 201–2).

regulative use – exclusively ideal – without the slightest reality in the actual sense’, he adds (FS #479, 154; as here, he often uses ‘philosophy’ to mean intellectual inquiry in general). As Frank has shown, there is a strong Kantian influence on the Romantic position here. For Kant, whenever we discover any fact we necessarily seek to explain it, to identify its condition (*Grund*: its cause or reason). Since by the same requirement we must seek to explain the *explanans* too, we ultimately seek to complete the chain of conditions, either by finding a first condition or by identifying the total web of conditions – a ‘totality [that] is [an] absolutely unconditioned whole’,¹² like the Romantic absolute. Thus, for Kant, any theoretical inquiry into the world must proceed under the goal of knowing the ‘unconditioned’ (as either first cause or totality), a legitimate goal in so far as it guides us to systematize our knowledge, although we can never reach the point of knowing anything about the unconditioned, not even whether it exists.¹³

Evidently, these Kantian claims resemble the Romantic theses that we cannot know the absolute but that we unceasingly strive to do so and thereby progressively systematize our knowledge. Perhaps, then, the Romantics do not think that we have any kind of original apprehension that the absolute exists, but rather – with Kant – that we as inquirers must initially assume the idea of the absolute as the (in fact unattainable) goal of our inquiry. However, there is a crucial difference between the Romantics and Kant. They repeatedly claim that we do *sense* or *feel* the absolute. Schlegel refers to our ‘sense for the infinite’ (*Sinn fürs Unendliche*; AF #412, 83), our ‘intuiting [*Anschauung*] the whole’ (DP 89), and to his being ‘infatuated with the absolute’.¹⁴ Novalis holds that philosophy begins with the ‘feeling’ (*Gefühl*) of ‘mere-being’ (FS #3, 6). For Kant, though, (as we saw) our form of sensibility precludes our knowing the absolute by ensuring that we can know only things subject to the conditions of space and time. Moreover, the Romantics had seemed to agree that our spatio-temporal form of sensibility is one of the factors prohibiting us from knowing the absolute. They appear, then, to be distinguishing between our usual spatio-temporal form of intuition and a different kind of sensibility that is unrestricted by space and time and thus permits us some kind of apprehension of the absolute. Indeed, Novalis in the *Fichte Studies* explores the possibility that what we sense is only ordinarily spatio-temporally conditioned because we organize the sensible manifold into a form, the form of discrete combinable elements, which permits concepts to be applied to it.¹⁵ In other words, for Novalis our ordinary form of intuition is

¹²Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1929) A417/B445, 391.

¹³Ibid., A645/B673, 533–4.

¹⁴Schlegel, ‘Blütenstaub’ in *Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Firchow, #3, 17.

¹⁵At FS #211, 65, Novalis suggests that (spatio-temporal) intuition results from the organisation of feeling (or sense) under the imagination (and by implication, the latter being organised in conformity to the understanding).

spatio-temporal only because it operates under the tutelage of our discursive understanding or power of 'reflection' (our faculty of imposing concepts). Another kind of intuition, or feeling, is also possible. This Kant denies. He thinks that an intuitive understanding (as he calls it), which would grasp objects and ultimately nature as a whole as synthetic unities instead of ascending from finite particulars towards unity, is available only to God, not to finite human minds whose intellects can proceed only analytically.¹⁶ The Romantics are proposing to bring Kant's intuitive intellect down to earth (in precisely what way remains to be seen). Consequently, whereas for Kant reason is the faculty that drives us to seek completeness of explanation and ultimately to form the idea of the unconditioned, the Romantic view is that we develop a 'longing' (*Sehnsucht*) to know the absolute because of our *sensible* or felt awareness of it.

Does the Romantic appeal to an initial feeling of the absolute entail that, after all, we *do* at the outset of inquiry have knowledge – perhaps certainty – of the absolute, in the form of feeling? Not necessarily: because for the Romantics we can only know what we conceptualize, they deny that feeling in itself gives us knowledge, certain or otherwise. Instead, they hold that feeling gives us *non-cognitive* awareness of the absolute and that this motivates us to try to convert our non-cognitive awareness into knowledge. Is this initial non-cognitive awareness certainty in all but name? Have the Romantics effectively reverted to the foundationalism they sought to reject?

This depends on what is meant by 'feeling' the absolute. A vague notion, 'feeling' could mean any or all of sensation, intuition, perception, emotion, or passion. The Romantics offer at least two more precise accounts of this feeling. For Novalis, feeling gives us immediate pre-conceptual access to the absolute. For Schlegel, feeling the absolute consists in intuiting it aesthetically. I will look at these accounts in turn.

3. THE FEELING OF MERE BEING

Novalis's *Fichte Studies* is concerned with many matters besides epistemology. However, one prominent theme within it is that we immediately apprehend the absolute in the form of feeling. For this thesis Novalis is indebted to Heinrich Jacobi.¹⁷ Jacobi himself draws on Kant's distinction between predicative judgements, which 'posit' their subjects '*in . . . relation to*' their predicates, and existential judgements which 'posit' their subjects '*in themselves*', without relation to any predicates. For Kant we may only posit something in this latter way if that thing is given to us in

¹⁶Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) §77, 274–7.

¹⁷On Novalis's familiarity with Jacobi, see Frank, *Philosophical Foundations*, chs 4 and 9.

sense-experience.¹⁸ Jacobi takes over this distinction – ‘The “is” of the exclusively *reflective* understanding is equally an exclusively *relative* “is” . . . not the *substantial* “is” or “being”’¹⁹, but he holds the ‘substantial’ kind of positing to be more basic, on the grounds that relative positing contains substantial positing, to which it merely adds an act of relating. But, from Kant, substantial positing is only valid if it presupposes a feeling or sensation of the things whose existence is affirmed. Thus, by pushing certain Kantian claims in an empiricist direction, Jacobi concludes that sensation is the basis of all knowledge.²⁰

For Kant, though, as for the Romantics, sensation on its own is not cognitive: knowledge requires the conceptualization of what is given in sensation. Jacobi agrees, but turns this point to sensation’s advantage by arguing that sensation has a certainty unavailable to any item of knowledge. Whereas judgements attain the status of knowledge in proportion as they are warranted either within the network of other judgements or by sensations, doubts may always arise regarding either the supporting judgements or the inference relations, whereas sensation, being basic, has

immediate certainty, which not only needs no proof, but excludes all proofs absolutely . . . Conviction by proofs is certainty at second hand . . . [which] can never be quite secure and perfect . . . [So] conviction based on rational grounds must itself derive from faith, and must receive its force from faith alone.²¹

By ‘faith’ (*Glaube*) Jacobi partly means simply the immediate sensation of some object. In immediately sensing or feeling an object we apprehend it as a particular individual, since we are not yet judging it to fall under any general concept.

However, Jacobi also intends ‘faith’ in a religious sense. He suggests that because in sensing we are not yet applying concepts, we do not make any discriminations regarding what we sense, which we therefore sense not only as some unique object but equally as the simple, indeterminate fact that there is something rather than nothing – that anything exists at all. What we feel ‘cannot be apprehended by us in any way except as it is given to us, namely, *as fact – IT IS!*’ He equates this fact of existence with God.²²

¹⁸Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A598–9/B626–7, 504–5.

¹⁹Jacobi, ‘David Hume on Faith (Preface, 1815)’, in Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, edited by George di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994) 582.

²⁰For a different reconstruction of Jacobi’s use of Kant, see Frank, *Philosophical Foundations*, ch. 3.

²¹Jacobi, ‘Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn’ (1785) in *Main Philosophical Writings*, 230.

²²‘Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza’, second (1789) edition in *Main Philosophical Writings*, 376.

Building on Jacobi, Novalis in the *Fichte Studies* claims that knowledge is about things – or ‘determined beings’ (FS #2, 5) – which we discriminate from one another using concepts, but that (for Jacobi’s reasons) knowledge presupposes feeling. ‘Philosophy [i.e. theoretical inquiry] is originally a feeling ... philosophy always needs *something given*’ (#15, 13). Since in feeling as such we are not applying concepts, we make no discriminations with respect to what we feel. Consequently, in feeling as such, rather than feeling any particular things, what we feel is just undifferentiated being. ‘No modification – no concept – clings to mere-being ... Reference occurs through differentiation – Both [are possible only] through the thesis [i.e. the prior positing] of an absolute sphere of existence. This is mere-being’ (#3, 6), being as such, ‘in opposition to ... determined-being’. Thus, all knowledge derives from our original feeling of being: ‘Knowledge comes from something. It always refers to a something – It is a reference to Being’ (#2, 5).

Essentially, this argument is the same as Jacobi’s argument for how feeling acquaints us with being in the sense of the bare fact that there is any existence at all. Novalis, however, wants to establish that feeling acquaints us with being in the more substantial sense of the whole encompassing all existents. Discussing how we ‘limit’ – introduce distinctions into – what we feel when we reflect upon it (i.e. when we conceptualize it), he describes that which we initially feel as unlimited and as ‘the absolute, as I want to call the original ideal-real or real-ideal’ (FS #17, 13). ‘Real-ideal’ signifies that the absolute contains objects (real) and subjects (ideal) – or as Novalis also has it, both nature and persons. The being with which feeling acquaints us, then, is the absolute in the familiar Romantic sense of the whole encompassing all existents. Thus, Novalis refers to ‘The material of all [conceptual] form, of which nothing more or less can be said than that it *Is*, that is, is its whole’ (#228, 70).

Unlike Jacobi, though, Novalis denies that feeling gives us certainty of the absolute: this would resurrect the sort of foundationalism he wishes to avoid. He maintains that feeling is non-cognitive: it is prior to knowledge, which is only ever of determined beings. Being non-cognitive, feeling cannot have the certainty Jacobi claims for it.²³ Being non-cognitive, feeling motivates us to engage in the striving to know being: ‘Reflection finds the need of philosophy ... – because the need is in feeling’ (FS #19, 14). We strive to convert our non-cognitive apprehension into knowledge, although the only knowledge that ever results from this striving is of finite things.

²³In *David Hume* Jacobi concedes that certainty must be certain *knowledge*, contrary to the first edition of the *Spinoza-Letters* which opposed faith to knowledge as feeling/sensation to reason/concepts/judgement. In *David Hume* he says that faith gives us certain ‘*knowledge of actual existence*’ (‘David Hume on Faith’, in *Main Philosophical Writings*, 255). He now claims that he always believed in immediate perceptual knowledge of real things, but did not previously call this immediate perception knowledge in deference to the *doxa* that knowledge must be judgemental and conceptual.

However, at least three problems damage Novalis's thesis that feeling acquaints us immediately with being. These are problems specifically with his appeal to feeling as the source of our immediate apprehension of being, not necessarily with his notion of feeling *per se*, which plays various roles in the *Fichte Studies*. (Most generally, it is central to Novalis's attempt to re-emphasize the importance of relating to the world feelingly as well as cognitively in the narrower sense.)

First, then, Novalis seems to assume – perhaps owing to the direct realism implicit in Jacobi's conception of feeling – that in feeling we apprehend the real nature of what we are feeling. Novalis conveys this by stressing that in feeling something is *given* to us (e.g. FS #15, 13). Specifically, he appears to think that in feeling we apprehend the absolute as it really is – a synthetic whole. Yet the fact that we feel the absolute *qua* whole seems to be merely a consequence of the structure of feeling – the fact that when we feel we do not discriminate as we do when we conceptualize ('the pure form of feeling', Novalis says, 'is merely unity'; FS #19, 15). This suggests that what we feel appears to us to be a whole because we are operating in the mode of feeling, but that we are not necessarily apprehending what we feel as it really is. Novalis might reply that rather than imposing certain constraints (of distinctionlessness rather than conceptual distinction) under which reality appears to us, feeling is the state in which our mind imposes no constraints, and so in which we apprehend reality as it is in itself, not as it appears. But his reference to the 'form' of feeling belies this.

Second, since in feeling we draw no distinctions whatever, it seems that feeling must acquaint us with a kind of unity that is utterly distinctionless. The Romantic absolute, however, is not a totally distinctionless unity. Rather, the Romantic absolute *incorporates* differences between things. What we apprehend in feeling threatens not to be the Romantic absolute after all.

Even if Novalis can address this worry, a third problem concerns the way that he takes feeling to be wholly antithetical to conceptualization and judgement. This becomes a problem given that Novalis needs our feeling of the absolute to *justify* us in striving to know the absolute. He needs to show that our initial sense that there is an absolute is not merely silly or 'romantic' in the pejorative sense, but has some sort of rational necessity, such that our ensuing efforts to try to gain knowledge of this absolute are equally rational, not deluded and liable to mislead empirical research. Likewise, for Kant, the quest to unify our knowledge under the idea of the unconditioned is justified because it stems from reason. Novalis also needs to show that the striving to know the absolute is rational so that the system of knowledge that results from this striving can be warranted – as for Kant the hypotheses about systematic order which result from our rational striving for unity are (provisionally) warranted because this striving is itself rational. Novalis thus requires that feeling not only explain but also justify our efforts to know being.

However, following Jacobi, Novalis thinks that judgements form a fabric each thread of which derives warrant from its relations to the others, whereas feeling lies outside this justificatory order. Novalis considers feeling to be the faculty for receiving what is given to us, whereas the understanding actively imposes concepts on what is given and then connects concepts together in judgements. Novalis thus implicitly pictures feeling in antithesis (in John McDowell's parlance) to a 'space of reasons' comprised of judgements and their normative relations.²⁴ If feeling lies outside the 'space of reasons', then it cannot perform any justificatory function, and so cannot justify us in striving to know being.

To avoid this problem, Novalis might potentially give feeling a justificatory role by adopting some version of McDowell's proposal that in feeling our conceptual capacities are drawn on passively. No such solution is open to Novalis, since the idea that feeling involves the operation of conceptual capacities would contradict his aim of establishing that feeling gives us access to the absolute just because it does *not* involve the operation, even the passive operation, of any determinate and discrimination-imposing concepts. For feeling to give us access to *the absolute*, feeling may not involve conceptualization; but if feeling involves no conceptualization, then feeling cannot *justify* us in striving to know the absolute.

4. AESTHETIC INTUITION OF THE ABSOLUTE

Schlegel offers a more promising interpretation of our feeling of the absolute: as aesthetic and intuitive. This idea begins to emerge, without being fully worked out, in his 1794 essay 'On the Limits of the Beautiful'. The essay dates from his pre-Romantic, classicist, period, but versions of the idea that we aesthetically intuit the absolute persist in Schlegel's – and Novalis's – later writings.

'On the Limits of the Beautiful' is explicitly concerned with aesthetics, not epistemology. The essay identifies, compares, and ranks three types of beauty – the beauty of nature, of human beings, and of art works. Schlegel is primarily interested in beauty, and in natural beauty, in their own right, not in relation to epistemology. But because he identifies a form of aesthetic experience in which we directly apprehend the absolute to be present in nature, his analysis of natural beauty inescapably becomes entwined with epistemological issues.

Schlegel deems natural beauty to be the highest and most original type of beauty. The beauty of even the most beautiful art-works – those of ancient Greece, for Schlegel in this classicist phase – is incomplete, because the unity of these works is 'external' to their parts. That is, an art-work's unity is imposed on a relatively narrow set of particulars, narrow in that they have

²⁴John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

had to be isolated from the world's multiplicity so that they *can* be coherently unified in a single work. Consider Aristotle's formula that a tragedy must be whole and complete and so must deal with a range of events limited enough to permit the work to be whole and complete, and which therefore must be isolated from the indefinite range of surrounding events.²⁵ Schlegel sums up, '[any] single work of dramatic art admittedly unifies nature, but even it forcibly tears a particular individual out of the infinite richness' (GS 39).

These criticisms of art beauty have a Kantian background. For Kant an object is beautiful if its sensible form – its shape or play of shapes – is, considered in abstraction from whatever concepts the object may fall under, suitable to arouse pleasure in us. For this the form of the object must arouse the imagination (for Kant, the mental power of arranging sensory data) to combine its elements in the way that the imagination would if it were 'left to itself [and] free', constrained only to harmonize with 'the *lawfulness of the understanding* in general'.²⁶ In non-aesthetic perception the understanding imposes conceptual unity on the imagination's product. A form arouses the pleasure that sustains a judgement of beauty, then, if it permits the imagination to combine its elements into a unity spontaneously, without the imposition of determinate concepts. The object's form must thus be one in which 'variety ... is perfectly unified, the elements manifestly according with one another or belonging together ... a perfect combination of unity and heterogeneity',²⁷ whose unity allows full rein to, rather than restricts, heterogeneity. Presupposing this approach, Schlegel supposes that art-works as unified heterogeneities are beautiful – but defectively so because their unity curtails their heterogeneity.

For Schlegel, beautiful nature *does* have 'inner' unity that accommodates full heterogeneity. He focuses on natural phenomena of a rather intangible character, which have indefinite boundaries (they are *grenzenlos*) and contain a complicated multiplicity of elements. His examples are the 'friendly arch of the sky', 'the spring' with its 'most diverse life', and 'a [scene of] terrible-beautiful struggle in which the fullness of repressed force bursts forth in destruction', perhaps a waterfall gushing violently forth (GS 39). All of these phenomena are rather diffuse, atmospheric, and 'frameless'.²⁸ Schlegel calls them 'infinite'.

²⁵Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, translated by T. S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 41–2.

²⁶Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 'General Remark on the First Section of the Analytic', 125.

²⁷Malcolm Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) 33.

²⁸This term is Ronald Hepburn's in 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', in *British Analytical Philosophy*, edited by Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (London: Routledge, 1966) 290–1.

Some sinners . . . call nature an artist. As if all art were not limited and all nature were not infinite! Not only does the whole stretch out boundlessly [*grenzenlos*] on all sides; the smallest single thing is in itself doubly inexhaustible. The universal animation of the living is infinite . . . for every point of space, every moment of time (of which there are infinitely many) is filled.

(GS 38–9)

Schlegel's relation to Kant creates a puzzle about his claim that these natural phenomena are beautiful. Since they lack circumscribed boundaries and have infinite parts, it would seem that they must defeat our imagination rather than lend themselves to imaginative unification in the pleasurable spontaneous way that for Kant characterizes the beautiful. Surely these phenomena have too much complexity, are too diffuse, for us to grasp them as unities. They might be closer to Kant's mathematical sublime. This for Kant arises when our repeated efforts to take something in with our imagination are painfully thwarted for reasons of the object's infinitude. Moreover, for Kant, the pleasure of the mathematical sublime is in our own status as rational beings, a pleasure that arises in so far as guiding our imaginative efforts is a rational *idea* of the infinite whole that in its magnitude or power defies, but equally arouses, our imaginative powers.²⁹ So perhaps Schlegel really believes that certain natural phenomena elicit a sublime response, in which we come to an idea of the unconditioned whole, which can then regulate our cognitive inquiries. If so, then our original aesthetic 'feeling' of the absolute is a rational idea after all, and Schlegel's difference from Kant vanishes: the Romantics would be a species of Kantians who see the absolute as a regulative idea.

However, this interpretation loses both the Romantic emphasis on feeling and the fact that Schlegel does describe the natural phenomena that interest him as beautiful, on grounds that reflect a general familiarity with Kant's aesthetics. He must think that we do imaginatively unify these phenomena despite their heterogeneity. Confronted with this heterogeneity, we endeavour to subsume it under unity; but as discursive intellects, we proceed from part to whole, which means that given the infinite complexity of these natural phenomena we could never come to perceive them as unified using discursive understanding (the limitations of which Schlegel stresses at the start of 'On the Limits of the Beautiful'). If we do grasp these phenomena as unities, then, we must do so in some way not subject to the conditions of discursive, conceptual knowledge; that is, we must *directly*, intuitively grasp a unity pervading all the parts of these phenomena. This for Schlegel does not require a divine mind, *pace* Kant; it is something that we, finite subjects, do in our aesthetic experience of nature. Thus, Schlegel says, we grasp all the parts of a landscape or a dramatic natural scene as 'filled':

²⁹Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 'General Remark on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments', 151.

filled by the unity of the whole landscape or scene. We directly see each part as pervaded by the whole and connected to all the other parts within this whole. We thus see the whole as alive: as animating and constituting all these parts and being immediately manifest in them (as the physiognomy of a face directly expresses emotions rather than the emotions needing to be inferred or reconstructed from a 'bare' physiognomy).

How, then, does Schlegel understand the beautiful/sublime distinction? For Kant, if a form is suitably unified then imagination and understanding harmonize and the object is beautiful; if the object is infinite and formless then imagination and reason are in tension and the experience is sublime. In supposing that we can directly intuit unity within infinite diversity, Schlegel is in effect suggesting that there is an alternative form of aesthetic experience, not countenanced by Kant, in which our imaginative activity spontaneously harmonizes with the rational activity of seeking unity in phenomena. It is because this form of experience is harmonious, and is of unity, that he calls it experience of beauty. But the experience also has features of the sublime: the expansion of the imagination towards an infinite whole. Consequently, Schlegel tends (across various works) to speak of the highest form of beauty as 'sublime beauty'.³⁰ For him, beautiful and sublime do not contrast; rather, beauty in its highest form includes the sublime.

How do we grasp unity in these cases of infinitely diverse natural phenomena, given the complexity of their parts? For we are trying to discern unity in phenomena so complex that they threaten to defy unification. As a result, we can only discern the unity as lying *beyond* these parts, as lying just outside the reach of our perception and imagination – hence as *in-finite*, beyond the finite that lies before us. We thereby come to an idea of the unity-in-infinite-complexity for which we seek, of an infinite unified whole, which we seem to glimpse beyond the natural phenomena that do not instantiate this whole, that lack its unity.³¹ But matters do not stop there. As infinite, the whole must after all encompass the natural phenomenon before us in all its diversity, which must be included within the whole. The highly complex phenomenon must be part of the whole, and constituted by that whole, thus a part in which the whole *is* embodied and manifested, a part that is 'filled' by the whole; so, after all, we can unify the phenomenon – by seeing it as partaking of the unity of the whole that we envision through it.³² How can the

³⁰The *sublime* ... is the appearance of the infinite – infinite abundance [*Fülle*] or infinite harmony ... Sublime beauty [*Erhabne Schönheit*] affords a complete pleasure'; *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (1797), translated by Stuart Barnett (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001) 69. 'Beautiful is what is at once charming and sublime' (AF #108, 30). And the 'highest beauty' is that of the 'infinite fullness of life [*Lebensfülle*]' as found in nature, in 'Ideas' (1800), in *Philosophical Fragments*, #86, 101.

³¹Novalis speaks of our *imagining* the absolute: 'the element of imagination – ... the one and only absolute anticipated – that is to be found through the negation of everything finite' (FS #567, 171).

³²'In the whole everything must be whole' (Novalis says; FS #646, 185).

whole be both beyond *and* embodied within its part? The whole is beyond its part in that the whole is more extensive and complex than any single one of its parts; the whole is embodied in the part in so far as the part is constituted by and manifests the constituting power of the whole. We grasp skylscapes, dynamic natural scenes, seasons, etc., as ‘partial totalities’: wholes inasmuch as they participate in a bigger whole, but only partially united in so far as their unity derives from this larger whole that lies beyond them.³³

For Schlegel, then, the importance of the aesthetic experience of these unbounded natural phenomena is that they provoke us to intuitively unify them in this peculiar way. We do not do so with the spontaneous ease characteristic of Kantian beauty. Instead, given the immense complexity of these phenomena, we unify them with reference to a whole that we place beyond as well as within them, a super-whole that coincides with the universe – the absolute. If natural beauty surpasses art beauty by fully accommodating heterogeneity, this is possible because the experience of natural beauty involves an intuition of this whole that lies beyond as well as within any and every natural object and scene. We do not merely form an idea of this super-whole (as in the Kantian sublime). We intuit the whole *within*, not only beyond, its parts. Thus the absolute does become present to our sensory apprehension, and so Schlegel justifiably categorizes our aesthetic intuition of it as a feeling, not an idea. (This categorization follows from his view that imagination and reason are in harmony here, not dissonant as in the Kantian sublime, so that our imagination does succeed in making the unity of the whole present to us.)

How plausible is this account of our aesthetic experience of nature? Certainly, Schlegel is neither the only person nor the only Romantic – viz. Wordsworth, Coleridge – to think that aesthetic appreciation of nature culminates in experience of nature’s unity (and of ourselves as parts of nature’s unity), and thus in accession to a metaphysical unity in the cosmos. Ronald Hepburn argues that such experiences of unity are one pole in the aesthetic appreciation of nature (the opposite pole being close attention to particular natural objects) and that, despite the ‘grandiose, speculative’ flavour of the former experiences, we cannot ignore them if we want to make sense of aesthetic experience of nature.³⁴ He suggests that there are actually several different kinds of experience of unity, including our tendency when we enjoy some natural feature to ‘move ... towards more and more complex and comprehensive synopses’ of the contexts shaping that feature, its similarities to other features, and the recurrent natural forms or patterns it embodies.³⁵ Schlegel’s account is not entirely different: we grasp

³³The phrase ‘partial totalities’ is Songsuk Susan Hahn’s, in *Contradiction in Motion: Hegel’s Organic Concept of Life and Value* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 95. I am influenced by Hahn’s account of how for Hegel the Idea of life is both beyond and within particular living organisms.

³⁴Hepburn, ‘Contemporary Aesthetics’, 294, 307–10.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 296.

a complex feature before us as (partially) unified by referring it to a larger whole of which it thereby comes to offer us a presentiment – a partial, anticipatory presentation. To be sure, Schlegel's is not a complete account of the varieties of aesthetic experience of nature. It is, however, not implausible as an account of the particular, unity-oriented, variety of this experience that arguably provides us with an apprehension of the unity of the cosmos (the absolute).

Novalis inadvertently made feeling incapable of providing rational justification for our cognitive inquiries. Schlegel avoids this problem. Firstly, he assumes (following Kant once more) that our activity of trying to grasp the unity of natural phenomena is rational. Secondly, Schlegel assumes that our intuition of the super-whole within nature gives us some level of knowledge of that whole. After all, we are not merely forming the idea that there may, possibly, be a whole. We perceive that whole as present – although we only see part of it, in a way that points us towards the remainder of the whole lying beyond the part that we see, a remainder at which we merely glimpse 'through a glass darkly'. Nonetheless, we *do* apprehend and not merely think of that whole; this apprehension is rationally grounded, grounded in our rational activity of seeking unity in nature. Our apprehension of the whole thus represents a level of knowledge, of rationally grounded apprehension: an approximation to, or harbinger of, justified true belief.

Yet this apprehension is not *fully* cognitive. For Schlegel, as we have seen, knowledge is necessarily discursive and conceptual. The aesthetic intuition of the absolute does not meet this condition. It involves no determinate concepts (to recall, it rather involves the co-operation of feeling with reason) and is not propositionally articulated. This does not mean that our aesthetic intuition of the absolute is not cognitive at all – as we have seen, it is a certain level of knowledge. Aesthetic intuition lies in a strange middle ground between knowledge and non-knowledge.

One might worry that since this kind of aesthetic intuition is both cognitive and non-cognitive, it violates the law of excluded middle. This problem will be addressed by Hegel, who inherits from the Romantics and from Goethe the view that we aesthetically intuit unity in living organisms. Hegel also takes this aesthetic intuition to fall in a grey area between knowledge and non-knowledge.³⁶ Hegel's solution to the affront to reason that this poses is that we are rationally compelled to resolve the contradiction of aesthetic intuition by progressing from intuition to conceptual knowledge. In the retrospective light of Hegel's solution, we see from the structure of Romantic philosophy that Novalis and Schlegel took a (partly) similar view. After all, they believe that based on our original feeling of the absolute we are driven to try to know the absolute fully – to gain discursive, conceptual knowledge about it, although this is an

³⁶See Hahn, *Contradiction in Motion*, chs 4 and 5.

unachievable goal fuelling an endless systematizing quest. This drive arises, presumably, *because* our original feeling of the absolute has an uneasy, liminal epistemological status between knowledge and non-knowledge, such that we are compelled to try to convert our feeling into full knowledge. But for the Romantics we can never succeed. Our rationality only ever exists as an unsatisfied striving to resolve the contradiction of feeling, never winning the exhaustive satisfaction that rationality does in Hegel, for whom a complete system of knowledge *is* possible.

Finally, one might suspect that Schlegel's post-1796 turn against classicism must surely affect and force revisions to his account of natural beauty and so, too, his suggestions regarding our aesthetic intuition of the absolute. But Schlegel continues to employ a notion of (aesthetic) intuition in subsequent works. In the *Dialogue on Poetry* he says that we 'intuit' the whole in nature (DP 89), and in the *Athenaeum Fragments* that one who had a sense for the infinite would 'conceive of ideals organically' (AF #412, 83) – that is, would see the whole as alive and animating its parts. Although Novalis does not seem to put as much weight on the notion of intuition, his notion that we *imagine* the absolute is similar, suggesting that we both think of the absolute as beyond particular material things and simultaneously see it as embodied within them. Moreover, the view that we aesthetically intuit the absolute in nature particularly persists in some of Schlegel's post-classicist writing.

The classicist Schlegel saw ancient Greek art-works as beautiful, unlike modern (i.e. post-medieval) art-works, because the former achieve unity whereas the latter are hopelessly fragmented. From 1797 onwards, Schlegel sets new value upon the fragmentation of modern (renamed Romantic) art-works, especially literary works. The interrelations between these works' parts, and between their parts and those of other literary works, are so many and so complex that these works cannot achieve unity. Indeed, so deeply constituted are these works by their intertextual relations to other literary works that they ultimately form parts of a single developing art-work comprised of all modern literature. Thus, for the Romantic Schlegel, modern literature as a whole displays the same unity-in-infinite-heterogeneity he previously attributed to beautiful nature. 'The world of poetry is as immeasurable and inexhaustible as the riches of animating nature with her plants, animals, and formations of every type, shape, and color' (DP 53). As such modern literary works not only may equal nature in beauty; we also intuit the absolute whole in them.

Nonetheless, Schlegel declares beautiful nature to be prior or more 'original': the 'poetry of nature' is 'the first, original poetry without which there would surely be no poetry of words' (DP 54). Nature has priority because, before Romantic literature can allow us an intuition of the absolute, artists must produce it, which they do by bringing together a vast wealth of subject-matters, *genres*, and inter-textual references, where artists are motivated to assemble and systematically interconnect these materials

because they are striving to know the absolute. Since any such striving logically postdates our having intuitively felt the existence of the absolute, we must be brought to intuit the absolute by our aesthetic experience of nature before we can (re-)intuit the absolute through literature. The aesthetic intuition of the absolute in natural beauty thus remains the original source of our striving to know it. For the Romantics, it is primarily our aesthetic experience of nature that gives us a 'sense for the infinite'.³⁷

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³⁷I thank Emily Brady, the anonymous referees and the editors for comments on earlier drafts.