

The Enigma of Fichte's First Principles (Das Rätsel von Fichtes Grundsätzen)

Herausgegeben von

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The Monogram of the “Sweet Songstress of the Night”: The Hovering of the Imagination as the First Principle of Fichte’s Aesthetics

Laure Cahen-Maurel

Abstract

This article presents a new reading of Fichte’s aesthetics that differs from a primarily functionalist interpretation of the imagination and art. It demonstrates that the “hovering” (*Schweben*) of the creative imagination should be viewed as the first principle of Fichte’s aesthetics, in which the latter consists of a triad of the pleasant, the beautiful and the sublime. Moreover, it argues that in the text *Ueber Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie* (1795/1800) Fichte created a real and original *monogram* of the hovering creative imagination, a monogram whose theoretical basis stems from Kant’s concept of the monogram in the 1st *Critique* as a “wavering sketch”. It contends that this overlooked but key artistic and practical example of a monogram opens up new perspectives for Fichtean aesthetics, further confirming that its first principle should be explicitly identified with the theory of the hovering imagination in the *Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794/95.

Keywords

first principle – aesthetics – hovering – creative imagination – monogram – Kant – Mozart – Schiller

1 Introduction: The Question of Fichte’s Aesthetics

The topic of aesthetics in Fichte’s philosophy and how he himself viewed the domain of art was for a long time ignored in the research. It was frequently held that Fichte was not an “aesthetician” or theoretician of art, and that he was above all concerned with abstract logical thought. *Prima facie*, that interpretation appears to have support when one sees the contested reception accorded to aesthetics within Fichte’s work compared to the important role ascribed

to aesthetics by Schelling, Hegel, or the German romantics. Fichte repeatedly announced that he would make aesthetics into one of the main sub-disciplines of his system.¹ And yet, unlike the sub-disciplines of natural right, ethics or religion, Fichte apparently did not furnish any scientific or systematic treatise on the general principles of aesthetics during his lifetime. External circumstances, a lack of interest and understanding, a deliberate distancing of his work from Kant – these are some of the reasons that have been put forward to explain this lacuna.²

To be sure, this subject is now no longer *terra incognita*.³ Commentators in recent decades have tackled this problem of the place of aesthetics within Fichte's system, but without fully resolving all the issues. The thesis that Fichte disregarded aesthetics outright was already dismissed in the 1990s.⁴ Currently

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- 1 For example, in the programmatic text, *Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* (1794; hereafter: *BWL*), *J.G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (hereafter: *GA*), ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Gliwitzky, Erich Fuchs, Peter K. Schneider, Günter Zöllner et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962–2012), vol. 1/2, ed. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Jacob, 1969, pp. 150–152; and in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, 1798/99 (*GA IV/2*: 261–266). I would like to thank David W. Wood, as well as Professor Karin de Boer, Luciano Perulli, Stephen Howard, and Elise Fkretich for their feedback at the Leuven Seminar in Classical German Philosophy on 25 April 2019. Their comments on this paper greatly helped to improve it.
 - 2 In France, commentators such as Alexis Philonenko, Alain Renaut and Luc Ferry have notoriously maintained that Fichte wished to substitute aesthetics with the doctrine of right. See, especially, Alain Renaut, *Le système du droit. Philosophie et droit dans la pensée de Fichte* (Paris: PUF, 1986); Luc Ferry, *Philosophie politique*, 3 vol. (Paris: PUF, 1986–1988); id., *Homo Aestheticus. L'invention du goût à l'âge démocratique* (Paris: Grasset, 1990).
 - 3 Luigi Pareyson was one of the first researchers to pay serious attention to Fichte's aesthetics. See Luigi Pareyson, *Fichte. Il sistema della libertà* (Milan: Mursia, 1976; 1st ed. 1950), and *L'Estetica di Fichte* (Milan: Angelo Guerini, 1997). For more recent studies see, among others, Ives Radrizzani, "Von der Ästhetik der Urteilskraft zur Ästhetik der Einbildungskraft, oder von der kopernikanischen Revolution der Ästhetik bei Fichte", in: Erich Fuchs, Marco Ivaldo, Giovanni Moretto (eds.), *Der transzendental-philosophische Zugang zur Wirklichkeit* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), pp. 341–359, and id., in collaboration with Faustino Oncina Coves (eds.), *Fichte und die Kunst, Fichte-Studien* 41 (2014); Petra Lohmann, "Die Funktionen der Kunst und des Künstlers in der Philosophie Johann Gottlieb Fichtes", in *Fichte-Studien* 25 (2005): 113–132; Giorgia Cecchinato, *Fichte und das Problem einer Ästhetik* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2009); Daniel Breazeale, "Against Art? Fichte on Aesthetic Experience and Fine Art", in *JTLA (Journal of the Faculty of Letters, The University of Tokyo, Aesthetics)* 38 (2013): 25–42; Elise Derroite, "L'esthétique pulsionnelle de Fichte comme théorie de l'auto-création", *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 140 (2015): 37–56; Claude Piché, "La lettre tue particulièrement dans la Doctrine de la science", in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, vol. 72/1 (2016), pp. 83–99.
 - 4 See, for example, Claude Piché, "L'esthétique a-t-elle une place dans la philosophie de Fichte?", in *Les Cahiers de philosophie* (1995): 181–201.

it no longer seems incongruous to speak of a “Fichtean aesthetics”, and even of an aesthetics that may claim to a certain amount of philosophical originality. A number of eminent commentators, like Daniel Breazeale, Ives Radrizzani or Claude Piché, rightfully underscore the propaedeutic or pedagogic function and anthropological scope of aesthetic experience in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, yet they also continue to question the significance and role of art and the imagination in Fichte’s thought.⁵ Such a functionalist interpretation of the imagination and art is indeed based on a number of statements by Fichte, according to which the aesthetic way of looking at things provides a means for educating people to freedom by tearing them away from the empirical world of nature and raising them to a higher ethical sphere. Yet this reading sometimes suggests that the philosophical science of aesthetics, i.e. the theoretical treatment of the principles of aesthetic experience, should not itself be considered an integral and independent branch of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and that Fichte’s real aim with regard to aesthetics was to include it under the sub-discipline of ethics.

This article presents a new reading of Fichte’s aesthetics that differs from a primarily functionalist interpretation of the imagination and art. I intend to supplement and extend the latter reading by highlighting the independent position of aesthetics – understood as the philosophical science of art and beauty – and its importance in Fichte’s work on the basis of a closer examination of the principle according to which art inherently harmonizes or integrates the empirical with the rational. Of course, understanding aesthetics as a mediator between nature and freedom, or the empirical and the transcendental spheres, is not new, and in this respect Fichte’s conception of aesthetics should once again be brought into dialogue with Kant.

However, I would like to add an entirely new element to the Kantian reading of Fichte by focusing on an example found in the published text *Ueber Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie* (*On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, 1795/1800), whose deeper philosophical significance has so far been completely overlooked in the research: the example of the “sweet songstress of the night.”⁶ As we will see, with this particular example I claim that Fichte has created a real and original *monogram* of the “hovering” (*Schweben*) of the creative imagination, a monogram whose theoretical basis stems from Kant’s concept of the monogram in the 1st *Critique* as a “wavering sketch” or indeterminate inner sil-

5 See, for example, Daniel Breazeale, “Against Art?”; Ives Radrizzani, “Art et philosophie chez Fichte”, in *Fichte und die Kunst, Fichte-Studien*, vol. 41 (2014), p. 183; Claude Piché, “La lettre tue particulièrement”, p. 86. On a more anthropological reading of Fichtean aesthetics as an “existential aesthetics of self-creation”, see also Elise Derroite, “L’esthétique pulsionnelle de Fichte comme théorie de l’auto-création”, p. 38 ff.

6 J.G. Fichte, *Ueber Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie* (hereafter: *GB*), GA 1/6: 346.

houette.⁷ Accordingly, I argue that this overlooked but key artistic example or monogram opens up new perspectives for Fichtean aesthetics, confirming that its first principle should be explicitly identified with the theory of the hovering imagination in the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794/95. Or to put it another way: the *Grundlage* furnishes the conception of the Fichtean imagination *in theory*, whereas the “sweet songstress of the night” in *On the Spirit and the Letter* furnishes a vivid example of the Fichtean imagination *in practice*. Both texts are philosophical counterparts, and this monogram example is a perfect illustration of Fichte’s contention in the *Grundlage* that “the power of imagination can be grasped only by the power of imagination.”⁸

Moreover, it is not surprising that this Fichtean monogram of the “sweet songstress of the night” has hitherto escaped the attention of researchers. For it too directly belongs in the Kantian tradition of the schematism of the imagination as an elusive form of art, one that is “hidden [...] in the depths of the human soul” – to use the famous expression from *The Critique of Pure Reason*.⁹

2 The Theory of the Imagination in the 1794/95 *Grundlage*

If we take seriously Fichte’s statement in *Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* (1794) that aesthetics belongs within the scope of his philosophical system, then we could imagine that he might have presented the foundations for his aesthetics in the 1794/95 *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (*Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*). According to Fichte, this one single text on the epistemology of the I, consisting of two parts, a theoretical and a practical, was all that was needed before he could proceed to the detailed formulation of the particular sciences or sub-disciplines. The *Grundlage* is known to be an extremely speculative, abstract and logical text, yet it does indeed contain the outlines of a genuinely philosophical theory of the imagination that tends to be neglected or less treated, even by Fichte specialists.¹⁰ Scattered

7 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (hereafter: *KrV*), B 598; *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 552. Cf. B 181 and B 861.

8 J.G. Fichte, *GWL*, GA 1/2: 415. I am grateful to Professor Daniel Breazeale for allowing me to quote from the manuscript of his new English translation of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (forthcoming with Oxford University Press, 2021).

9 *Ibid.*, B 180; Eng. trans., p. 273.

10 Although Fichte’s account of the imagination has drawn more interest in recent years, a number of commentators tend to favour the exposition in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, compared to the one in the *Grundlage*. See, for example, Augustin Dumont,

throughout the text are a series of very specific characteristics of the power of the imagination, which when brought together, provide an important foundation for the transcendental account of aesthetics. I will present here four main characteristics of the Fichtean theory of the imagination that can be found in the text of the *Grundlage*.

2.1 *A Creative Power of the I*

Like in Kant, Fichte's focus is on the imagination as a productive or *creative* power (*die produktive* or *schaffende Einbildungskraft*). This function of the imagination is understood as an absolutely free, original, self-active and independent power of the I. Fichte elevates it to the rank of a philosophical faculty of the transcendental subject, contrasting it with the empirical imagination, which is a prisoner of the given, and merely an imitator or reproducer. The empirical imagination depends on perception and memory and is subject to the laws of association. On the other hand:

All human beings share in [the *creative power of imagination*] (*schaffende Einbildungskraft*), since without it they would also never have possessed a single representation (*Vorstellung*); but it is by no means the case that most human beings have control over this power of creative imagination and are able to employ it to create (*erschaffen*) something purposefully; should the longed-for image (*das verlangte Bild*) suddenly appear before their soul at some fortunate moment, like a bolt of lightning, they are not

L'opacité du sensible chez Fichte et Novalis: théories et pratiques de l'imagination transcendante à l'épreuve du langage (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2013); and Virginia López-Domínguez, "The Imagination in Kant and Fichte", in *Revista de Estud(i)os sobre Fichte* (online), vol. 17 (2018). Commentators presenting a treatment of the imagination in the *Grundlage* include: Rudolf A. Makkreel, "Fichte's Dialectical Imagination", in Daniel Breazeele, Tom Rockmore (eds.), *Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies* (New York: Humanities Press, 1994), pp. 7–16; Jean-Christophe Goddard, "Introduction", in Fichte, *La Destination de l'homme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), pp. 18–25; Christoph Asmuth, "Das Schweben ist der Quell aller Realität. Platner, Fichte, Schlegel und Novalis über die produktive Einbildungskraft", in *e-Journal Philosophie der Psychologie* (2005; <http://www.jp.philo.at/texte/AsmuthC1.pdf>); Andreas Schmidt, "Fichtes Begriff der 'Einbildungskraft' und seine Maimonschen Ursprünge", in: Michael Forster, Johannes Korngiebel, Klaus Vieweg (Hg.), *Idealismus und Romantik in Jena. Figuren und Konzepte zwischen 1794 und 1807* (München: Fink, 2018), pp. 11–23; and Johannes Haag, "Imagination and Objectivity in Fichte's Early *Wissenschaftslehre*", in Gerad Gentry, Konstantin Pollok (eds.), *The Imagination in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 109–128. See too the recent discussion on Fichte's theory of the imagination in relation to his *Bildlehre* in *Fichte-Studien* 48: 3–130.

able to hold it fast and investigate it ... It is this power (*Vermögen*) that determines whether one philosophizes with or without spirit.¹¹

In other words, the productive imagination is *creative* insofar as it generates voluntary forms of possible intuitions: it produces representations or new *Bilder* – artistic as well as philosophical images. As the concluding line of this passage from the *Grundlage* claims, in order to philosophize with spirit, that is to say, to be truly original even in philosophy (i.e. beyond the field of mere art), genuine philosophers for Fichte must have recourse to the faculty of the productive or creative imagination. They must also have the ability to apprehend the rapidly passing play of the imagination and unify it into a concept.

2.2 The “Most Marvellous” Power of the I

For Fichte, a second characteristic of the imagination is that it is the “most marvellous” power of the soul or the I. The German adjective used by Fichte is *wunderbar*, “marvellous” or “wondrous”, in the strong sense of the miraculous (which comes from *Wunder*, a miracle or wonder). As Johannes Haag remarks, in the *Grundlage* “the imagination is brought into the picture first as a nameless ‘most wondrous power of the self’”,¹² before this unnamed power is finally designated as the faculty of the productive imagination:

By means of its most wonderful power (*durch das wunderbarste seiner Vermögen*) (one that we shall determine more closely at the appropriate time), the positing I brings the vanishing accident ...¹³

With this, we have, at the same time, begun conducting an experiment within us with the marvellous power of productive imagination (*mit dem wunderbaren Vermögen*) ...¹⁴

This truly “wondrous” or miraculous character of the creative imagination is due to the fact that it relates to the ability to rise above nature, above the apprehension of a given object of the senses. Another reason why Fichte designates the creative imagination as *wunderbar* is also because it is related to mystery. However, this does not mean that we are dealing with mere fantasy (*Phan-*

11 J.G. Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794/95; hereafter: *GWL*), § 4, GA I/2: 415–416; *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (Engl. trans. Daniel Breazeale).

12 Johannes Haag, “Imagination and Objectivity in Fichte’s Early *Wissenschaftslehre*”, p. 117.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 350; *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (Engl. trans. Daniel Breazeale).

14 *Ibid.*, p. 353.

tasie). Fantasy is a different function of the imagination, one that is negatively connoted as the involuntary production of fantastic or dream images, which are disconnected from reality (as opposed to the voluntary production of new images). On the other hand, in terms of mystery, the creative imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) still remains a matter of intellectual activity, of the normative and controlled transcendental productivity.

Moreover, by calling the productive imagination the "most marvellous" power of the I, Fichte is again following in the footsteps of Kant. As mentioned earlier, Kant famously defines the schematism of the imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a "hidden art (*eine verborgene Kunst*) in the depths of the human soul."¹⁵ Fichte likewise takes up for his own account, and almost to the very letter, this Kantian idea of the *Einbildungskraft* as a "hidden art". Not only does the *Grundlage* underline the fact that this creative power of the human mind is mostly unknown: Fichte speaks of the productive imagination as an "almost always misunderstood" power (*verkanntes Vermögen*).¹⁶ But by associating it with the wondrous, unknown, marvellous, and the flash of lightning, Fichte is also highlighting an essential convergence between the aesthetic point of view – that of *genius* – and the philosophical point of view. For in Fichte there is a substantial affinity between the imagination and the spirit that is even more essential than in Kant. This not only holds for the artistic or aesthetic spirit, but also for the pure spirit or reason. The creative imagination is the *source* of all transcendental spontaneity for Fichte, and not the understanding, as it is in Kant. According to Fichte, understanding is a much more passive and static faculty that only fixes the concept; it determines and designates with language what the imagination has actively produced. The imagination, on the other hand, constitutes the dynamic element of the human spirit, the origin and foundation of all representations, and therefore of all consciousness and intellectual life, and the condition for the spirit's entry into time:

It is this power [the most wonderful power of imagination] alone that makes life and consciousness possible, and, in particular, consciousness as a continuous temporal series ... the marvellous power of productive imagination, which will soon be explained, and without which nothing whatsoever in the human mind can be explained – may very well prove to be the foundation of the entire mechanism of the human mind.¹⁷

15 Kant, *KrV*, B180; *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 273.

16 J.G. Fichte, *GWL*, § 4, GA 1/2: 350; *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (Engl. trans. Daniel Breazeale).

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 350 and 353.

2.3 *An Infinite Hovering*

A third characteristic of Fichte's theory of the creative imagination is that it hovers or oscillates. The very fact of movement is inscribed in the activity of the imagination itself, its structure is dynamic and processual. It is relatively well-known that Fichte chose to call the unusual movement of the productive imagination as "hovering" (*Schweben*):

The power of imagination oscillates or hovers (*schwebt*) in the middle between determination and non-determination, between the finite and the infinite ... This hovering (*Schweben*) designates the imagination through its product; in the course of its oscillation or hovering and by means of the same, the power of imagination, as it were, produces this product.¹⁸

The creative imagination oscillates between opposing directions and ultimately remains in an in-between space where everything is still undetermined, and yet it seeks to find a synthesis. Here Fichte expands, once again, on a Kantian idea that is specifically encountered in the notion of the monogram. In Kant, the verb *schweben* is only found in two marginal instances,¹⁹ whereas in Fichte, *Schweben*, hovering or oscillation, becomes a central and substantive element of his philosophy, insofar as it creates or generates something new.²⁰ Even though it is related to the topic of schematism, Kant included the most extensive discussion of the hovering movement of the monogram in the subject of the aesthetic ideal of the artistic imagination (as opposed to the ideal of reason), when dealing with the "creatures of imagination" in its free lawfulness. Kant writes:

... no one can give an explanation or intelligible concept [of them]; they are, as it were, monograms, individual traits, though not determined through any assignable rule, constituting more a wavering sketch (*schwe-*

18 Ibid., p. 360 (Engl. trans. Daniel Breazeale).

19 Kant, *KrV*, A 570/ B 598, AA III: 385; and *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 17, AA V: 235. Kant rather speaks of the free "play" (*Spiel*) of the imagination, understood in the mechanical sense of an ease of movement.

20 Neither Rudolf A. Makkreel, nor Jean-Christophe Goddard (nor any other scholar as far as I am aware), examine Fichte's practical example in the text *On the Spirit and Letter of Philosophy*, which I have called a "monogram". However, I do agree with both these scholars that Fichte's idea of the "hovering" (*Schweben*) of the imagination should be brought into connection with Kant's idea of the hovering in the monogram. See Makkreel, "Fichte's Dialectical Imagination", p. 9; and Goddard, "Introduction", p. 22.

bende Zeichnung), as it were, which mediates between various experiences (*im Mittel verschiedener Erfahrungen*), than a determinate image.²¹

In Kant's definition, the imaginative monogram brings under the unity of a *single* sensible figure – a “silhouette” (*Schattenbild*)²² or an “outline” (*Umriss*)²³ – a set of scattered and disparate traits that cannot be subsumed under the rule of any concept. The individual features of the monogram are themselves determinate, but the figure as a whole, its identity, remains indeterminate, hovering in the middle. This makes it uncommunicable and the figure that this inner silhouette traces in the subject's imagination does not correspond to any real, existing individual. In this regard, Fichte's view of the products that are generated by the imagination is quite consistent with Kant's view in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Nevertheless, Fichte's conception may still be distinguished from Kant's view in at least three central respects. 1). For Fichte (as we shall see), the monogram of the imagination can be communicated, provided that one exercises in turn one's own power of the imagination. 2). Its individual traits are not only sensible or empirically finite data, but beyond that it has spiritual and infinite features. 3). The monogram as the product of the imagination precisely hovers between two extremes that are opposed.²⁴

We should also certainly see in the Fichtean association of the creative imagination with this activity of hovering a reminder of a certain cultural polemic at the end of the 18th century against the “unbridled” imagination that prevents the human being from properly thinking and acting. Fichte's creative “hovering of the imagination” therefore retains in a certain sense a reference to the alleged erratic ways of fantasy or even perhaps of *Schwärmerei* (exaltation). However, in contrast to these more negative aspects, Fichte's theory of the hovering imagination above all underscores the positive elements of this faculty, with the notion of hovering pointing to the constant change, agility and fluidity of the *living* and *dynamic* imagination, which carries out interconnections and syntheses that make the very activity of intelligence possible.

Thus, the life of the creative imagination is defined by the *relationship* and *transition* between two opposing directions. Or to put it another way, the life

21 Kant, *KrV*, A 570/ B 598, AA III: 384–385; *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 552.

22 Ibid., p. 385; Eng. trans., p. 552.

23 Ibid., A 833/ B 861, AA III: 539; Eng. trans., p. 692.

24 On this difference between Fichte's concept of the imagination and Kant's, see Andreas Schmidt, “Fichtes Begriff der ‘Einbildungskraft’ und seine Maimonschen Ursprünge”. Schmidt sees in Maimon the historical origin of the Fichtean connection between imagination and contradiction, topics that seem unrelated in Kant, or that Kant at least did not explicitly link.

of the creative imagination is defined by the *diffraction* of its activity in two directions: from the finite to the infinite, and inversely, from the infinite to the finite; or from determination to non-determination, from non-determination to determination. This hovering of the imagination is therefore not a transition between separate and abstract opposites, but between the two directions of the composite or the *living* whole that the imagination forms in itself. This hovering process of the creative imagination is constant and necessarily unfinished: its power of oscillation never terminates, not even once a synthesis is found. According to Fichte's philosophy, the products of the imagination become fixed and determined as concepts by the power of reason (*Vernunft*), which are then held or preserved by the understanding (*Verstand*).

2.4 *A Power of Synthesis – the Reconciliation of the Ideal and the Real*

Lastly, a fourth main characteristic of Fichte's theory of the power of the creative imagination is an aspect I have just mentioned: the productive imagination is not just a faculty that simply hovers, but it is also a faculty of *synthesis*. It carries out a reconciliation between opposites, between the ideal and the real. The *Grundlage* indeed characterizes the creative imagination as precisely that power of the I that allows us to integrate and synthesize into our knowledge and cognition, at a deeper level than mere abstract logic, two opposing elements. Examples of these include the crucial syntheses of the I and the Not-I, the ideal and the real, or if you will: the self and nature. The imagination forms a synthesis that is capable of embracing the two antitheses within it, it relativizes and preserves them by cancelling their absoluteness and discovering the element of their identity:

This power is almost always misunderstood, but it is the power that combines into a unity things constantly posited in opposition to each other, the power that intervenes between moments that would have to mutually annul each other, and retains both ... The task was to unite two terms posited in opposition to each other, the I and the Not-I. They can be completely united by the power of imagination, which unites items posited in opposition to each other.²⁵

In this synthesis of the imagination, that is the only power capable of resolving the contradiction, the two opposites come together, clash rather than suppress

25 J.G. Fichte, *GWL*, GA I/2: 350 and 361; *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (Engl. trans. Daniel Breazeale).

each other, which at the same time imposes a limit on each other. The synthetic activity of the imagination takes the technical name of *Wechselwirkung*, "reciprocal action". At the same time as it generates contradiction and alternation (*Wechsel*) between the two opposites, the imagination is the decisive factor of their reunion and reconciliation. They remain distinct, but the imagination ultimately overcomes their contradictoriness by finding in each of the two something that they have in common or finding the meeting point at which they organically intersect.

Let us summarize our brief overview of Fichte's theory of the imagination in the *Grundlage*. The productive imagination in Fichte's view: 1). generates new products and is therefore original or creative; 2). Although it is frequently misunderstood or even unknown to us, it is the most marvellous (*wunderbar*) human faculty, common to both art and philosophy; 3). It is distinguished by its hovering movement, which forms a transition between two opposing directions, one that is not a purely abstract, linear or mechanical movement, but is a living movement; 4). The productive imagination is the faculty of overcoming contradictions insofar as it is able to reconcile or create a synthesis of opposites, such as the ideal and real, the finite and the infinite.

3 The Triad of Fichte's Aesthetics

As previously noted, for many commentators, Fichte apparently did not write any systematic philosophical treatise on art. They consider that a genetic deduction of the principles of aesthetics from the foundational principles established in the 1794 *Grundlage* is not to be found in his writings. However, the sub-discipline of aesthetics is already briefly, but explicitly, mentioned by Fichte in the concluding part of the 1794 published text *Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre*. When announcing the relationship between the overall main system of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the applications of its foundational principles in the different particular sciences, Fichte singles out aesthetics, and states that it consists of a triad of subjects: "In this second part [i.e. the Practical Part] the foundations are laid for [a] new and thoroughly elaborated theor[y] of the pleasant, the beautiful, and the sublime (*des Angenehmen, des Schönen, und Erhabenen*) ..., the principles of which are material as well as formal."²⁶ Thus, here Fichte also seems to announce that the traditional triad of the pleasant,

26 J.G. Fichte, *BWL*, GA 1/2: 151; *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*, Eng. trans. Daniel Breazeale, in: Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 135.

beautiful and the sublime will form the main subject matter of his aesthetics. These three predicates about the nature of aesthetic experience are in Fichte's thought nothing but the three modalities of the expression of the *inner* spirit or imagination that becomes expressed in and through the *outer* letter of a work of art. Indeed, Fichte had reflected already on this aesthetic triad in his unpublished notes entitled *Practische Philosophie* from 1793.²⁷

Moreover, in terms of detailed *published* texts related to the field of aesthetics there does exist one highly interesting writing in Fichte's corpus. Written in 1795 for Schiller's journal *Die Horen* (*The Hours*), this text is devoted in its entirety to the question of art, and consists of a series of three fictive letters, to which Fichte gave the title: *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*.²⁸ Certain commentators have already pointed out that it is the most significant work of Fichte's aesthetics and for this reason deserves special attention.²⁹ It should be further remarked that although it is often considered a so-called "popular work", it nevertheless belongs to the early Jena phase of "scientific philosophy", in the sense of philosophy as *Wissenschaftslehre*. That is to say, it is a text that is dated after Fichte's discovery of a single, first, unconditioned principle of all human knowledge – the "I am", which expresses the I's activity of absolute self-positing. Dated 1795 (but only published in 1800), *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy* is chronologically situated between the 1794 *Grundlage* and the 1798 *System of Ethics*. In passing it should also be noted that section §31 of the latter work also contains an important paragraph on which many commentators

27 On the considerations entailed in the 1793 notes *Practische Philosophie*, see Giorgia Cecchinato, *Fichte und das Problem einer Ästhetik* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2007), p. 46 ff.

28 It was published only in 1800 after being rejected by Schiller, a rejection that started the so-called *Horenstreit* between the two thinkers.

29 See, for example, Luigi Pareyson, *L'Estetica di Fichte*; Elise Derroitte, "L'esthétique pulsionnelle de Fichte comme théorie de l'auto-création"; and Paul Gordon, *Art as the Absolute: Art's Relation to Metaphysics in Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), ch. 3: "Fichte: *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*", p. 56. To be more precise, the aesthetic question is thematically treated in four main works published in Fichte's life-time and some unpublished notes from 1793 entitled *Practische Philosophie*. The first of the published works is the 1793 opusculum titled *Beweis der Unrechtmässigkeit des Büchernachdrucks. Ein Raisonement und eine Parabel* and published in the *Berliner Monatsschrift*. There the products of art (Fichte takes the example of a painting from Corregio, *The Holy Night*) are more marginal instances with regard to the main subject matter of the reproduction of books and intellectual property, but Fichte offers a parable that he had to invent in all probability. Then in 1794, he published the *Grundlage*, which furnished his first real philosophical exploration and exposition of the "hovering of the imagination" and introduced (albeit very briefly) the topic of the sublime. In addition to the *Grundlage*, he also published, in 1800, *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy* and the *System of Ethics* (1798).

rely. Here Fichte sets out the “duties of the artist” and theorizes the pedagogical function played by the intermediate sphere of aesthetics from the perspective of the architectonic of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.³⁰

Fichte’s key text *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy* raises the following important questions: what is the origin of the artist’s creative ability, and how does a work of art succeed in powerfully and mysteriously attracting the spectator? Fichte does not address here the question of judgments of taste, nor the artist’s real or practical activity, i.e. the technical execution of an aesthetic idea in the incarnated and determinate form of a concrete specific artwork. Rather, what Fichte addresses is the power of imagination,³¹ or what is often simply known as artistic inspiration – the “spirit” (*Geist*) in the broad aesthetic sense of an “animating principle” (*belebende Prinzip*)³² or “vitalizing force” (*belebende Kraft*).³³ This is synonymous with genius, which Kant had already defined as the natural aptitude (*Anlage*) or ideal activity of the artist, e.g. the ideal element insofar as it is active in the artist’s subjectivity.

Aesthetics may form a triad of the topics of the pleasant, beautiful and sublime, but it is imperative to also ask the following question: what is the *Grundsatz* or *first principle* of Fichte’s aesthetics – is there such a first principle, or is there none, or are there perhaps even three first principles? Here we can already see that it might be worth investigating in the future a possible link between the triad or all three first principles of Fichte’s 1794 *Grundlage*, and the triad of the pleasant, beautiful and sublime. It would take us too far beyond the scope of this article to treat that question in detail. However, as far as the question of a first or most foundational principle is concerned, based on the two main texts, the *Grundlage* and *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, I would argue that the hovering productive imagination is actually the first principle of Fichte’s aesthetics as a whole. In this regard, the outer triad of the pleasant, beautiful and sublime are expressions of the work of the inner hovering imagination. Moreover, in terms of the scientific text of the *Grundlage*, the productive imagination actually belongs to the third main principle of the

30 See J.G. Fichte, *Das System der Sittenlehre, nach den Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre*, § 31, GA 1/5: 307 ff.

31 Not only in the production of artworks but also in the reception of the same. On this, see, among others, Ives Radrizzani, “Von der Ästhetik der Urteilskraft zur Ästhetik der Einbildungskraft, oder von der kopernikanischen Revolution der Ästhetik bei Fichte”.

32 Kant, *KU*, § 49, AA V: 313; *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 192.

33 J.G. Fichte, *GB*, GA 1/6: 336; *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, Eng. trans. Elizabeth Rubenstein (modified), in: David Simpson (ed.), *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 77.

Wissenschaftslehre's triad of foundational principles. That is to say, it is the synthetic principle in the “original threefold act of consciousness *qua* self-positing (thesis), counter-positing (anti-thesis) and limitation (synthesis)”.³⁴ Thus, the imagination is situated both at the *end* of the abstract (logical) philosophical analysis, and the *beginning* of the concrete, substantial, or pragmatic activity of the mind, as the first fact of consciousness.³⁵

But the productive imagination does not exist in a vacuum, it is of course generated by particular human beings. In this respect, it is always the productive imagination of a particular person or *Ich*, say of the I of the artist or even philosopher, if they are able to produce original works of art or texts. Since the productive imagination creates new and innovative works, one could also say that in the sphere of art and aesthetics the first principle is *genius*. As Kant showed,³⁶ fine art can have no other foundation than this source of creating new images, and the “ability to come up with both content for works of art and forms for the expression of this content that will ... manifest the freedom of the imagination”³⁷ of the artist's I. For Fichte, in contrast to Kant, this is precisely the brace that holds together both art and philosophy or science – where the imagination and genius are at work in both domains.

In other words: the first principle of the sub-discipline of aesthetics – the hovering power of the productive imagination of the human I – is actually the third principle in the scientific system of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Hence, this shows us the path leading from the main *Wissenschaftslehre* down to the sub-discipline of aesthetics.

After the above brief but more *theoretical* account of the productive imagination in accordance with the epistemology of the self-positing I in the *Grundlage* of 1794/95, we can now move to Fichte's highly *practical* example in his

34 Johannes Haag, “Imagination and Objectivity in Fichte's Early *Wissenschaftslehre*”, p. 114.

35 As Johannes Haag puts it: “This is the true ‘terminal result’ ...: The oscillating of imagination, i.e. the first fact of consciousness – which is not merely an artificial, but a real fact – thus facilitates the complex synthetic reconstruction of the principle of consciousness that is the *pragmatic history of the human mind*. It can serve as the starting point of this process since only the power of imagination, oscillating between opposites and thus mitigating and mediating between them, can give *reality* (not merely possibility in thought) to the opposites themselves”. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

36 It is well-known that Kant already claimed that fine art is always a product of genius, and that genius forms in the Kantian theory of art the “animating principle” that gives the dead letter of a material work “spirit” or “soul”, and by which nature gives entirely new rules to art. See Kant, *KU*, § 49, AA v: 313.

37 Paul Guyer, “Editor's Introduction”, in: Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. xxxiv.

near-contemporary text, *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy* (1795/1800). I maintain that Fichte’s practical example of the creative imagination in this text is a figure or *monogram* in the Kantian tradition.

4 The Monogram of the “Sweet Songstress of the Night”

Being a more popular writing, Fichte’s text of *On the Spirit and the Letter* provides us with a wealth of concrete sensory images, artistic experiences, cultural references, yet it also philosophically discusses the role of the imagination.³⁸ Among all the different artistic evocations, and ancient and contemporary references, we find one highly unusual and singular image. Although this image shares distinct parallels with other cultural figures, it will ultimately prove to be an original artistic example that was invented by Fichte himself. At first glance, this example may seem to be altogether simple and naïve, but it is worth examining in close detail. This creation, or should I say, this creature of the Fichtean imagination, is given a central place in the work because it is intended to exemplify the special character of genius’s ‘aesthetic state of mind’ (*aesthetische Stimmung*). Fichte even gives this new artistic creation a name, calling it: “the sweet songstress of the night”; in German: *die liebliche Sängerin der Nacht*. Somewhat surprisingly, it appears that Fichte’s example of the songstress has been completely neglected in the research so far. Nevertheless, I contend that the figure of the “sweet songstress of the night” becomes in Fichte’s text a specific and performative example of the productive imagination. As cited in my introduction above, the *Grundlage* had already alerted us to the fact that “the power of imagination can be grasped only by the power of imagination”.³⁹ Thus, in addition to exercising our reason, judgment, and philosophical understanding, it is clear that if the philosopher Fichte has genuinely put his theory into practice in his own texts, then we will also have to employ *our own creative* power of the imagination in order to fully grasp this Fichtean image.

In other words, the example of the “sweet songstress of the night” is not to be merely discursively conceived as a fact, or as something passively given, or merely to be read about and intellectually grasped. Rather, as just mentioned, each reader will have to work and independently exercise their own cre-

38 Marco Ivaldo is one of the few commentators to discuss the role of the imagination in this text. See Marco Ivaldo, “Die Rolle der Einbildungskraft in Fichtes Überlegungen über Geist und Buchstaben aus den Jahren 1794–1795”, *Fichte-Studien* 42 (2016): 49–65.

39 J.G. Fichte, *GWL*, GA I/2: 415; *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (Engl. trans. Daniel Breazeale).

ative power of the imagination in order to construct Fichte's "sweet songstress" for themselves. The interpretation of such a product of Fichte's imagination therefore becomes *genetic* in this way. It brings to light and renders apparent as a principle – as the first formal principle of aesthetics – the artistic function of the imagination itself. As we will also see, the monogram of the sweet songstress of the night also organically accords with the threefold nature of Fichte's doctrine of aesthetics. That is to say, this example is a synthesis of the above-discussed "triplicity" of art – namely, of the triad of the pleasant, the beautiful and the sublime. The poetic invention of "the sweet songstress of the night" in *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy* therefore testifies in an even more concrete manner to the originality of Fichte's aesthetics.

However, before examining in a step-by-step manner the three different elements of this triad of aesthetics that are embodied in Fichte's monogram of "the sweet songstress of the night", let me simply first quote the passage in question at some length. This is how Fichte presents the example of the "sweet songstress of the night" in his text *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*. He begins by asking the reader to think about the following example of an aesthetic mood (*aesthetische Stimmung*):

As a fitting image (*passendes Bild*) for the aesthetic mood, imagine the sweet songstress of the night. Imagine, as you can perfectly well do along with the poet, her soul as pure song; her spirit (*Geist*) as a striving (*Streben*) to form the most perfect chord, and her single tones as the representations (*Vorstellungen*) of her soul. Unconscious of herself, the direction of this songstress's spirit drives (*treibt*) her up and down the entire musical scale, and her spirit gradually develops its whole capacity (*Vermögen*) through the most manifold chords. Each new chord lies on the ladder of this development and is in harmony with the original drive (*Urtrieb*) of the songstress, which she is unaware of, because we have not given her any other representations than the tones themselves; she cannot make any judgements about its connection with what is for her a chance chord; in the same way as the direction of the aesthetic drive remains hidden (*verborgen*) to our eyes ... But her inner and hidden life drives her onward to the following tones ... Her life hovers (*schwebt*) on the surging waves of aesthetic feeling, just as the artistic life of every true genius does.⁴⁰

40 J.G. Fichte, *GB*, GA 1/6: 346–347; *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, pp. 83–84.

How exactly are we to understand Fichte’s example here of the “sweet songstress of the night”? Who or what is she exactly? From a strictly aesthetic viewpoint, Fichte’s sweet songstress of the night constitutes one *single* figure – that of a *Sängerin* – a female singer. If we remain at this initial stage, we merely take into consideration the unity and natural unconsciousness of the aesthetic mental state. Fichte first encourages us to grasp this state “along with the poet”, by means of words. In such a state, the singer unfolds the essence of her soul, traversing up and down the entire musical scale in order to produce the most perfect harmony. In the motif of the musical scale and the double movement of elevation and descent, oscillating from the base level to the apex and back, we find again the image of the hovering and diffraction of the productive imagination in two opposing directions, which is central to the *Grundlage*. The ‘thing’ or spirit that Fichte wants to make us actively imagine here is first of all based on the written “letter” of his own text. In this regard, the song of Fichte’s songstress of the night, is *not* something externally uttered or heard. That is to say, it is a song that is not actually sung, it is a song without external sounds – it is a purely internal form of music that must be produced and imagined by each reader for him or herself. This is the exemplification in act of the *ästhetische Stimmung*, where the singer’s activity and manner of being is inwardly grasped – from within her “soul” (*Seele*) as it were. Fichte explicitly notes that her soul is “pure song”. If the example of the songstress is actually a new and *original* invention on Fichte’s part, as we are claiming here, then it would be because his philosophy is above all interested in the productive or *creative* imagination, rather than the mere reproductive imagination. The latter of course is simply a copy of an already given model and is not at all original.

Furthermore, if this example of the sweet songstress of the night is truly an innovative production of the artist as an original *genius*, then it is possible for the philosopher, according to Fichte himself in § 31 of *The System of Ethics*, to elevate the unconscious aesthetic state of the artist into a fully aware and philosophical form of consciousness.⁴¹ Thus, for the purposes of philosophical analysis, it should also be possible for the philosopher to break down the aes-

41 See J.G. Fichte, *Das System der Sittenlehre, nach den Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre*, § 31, GA I/5: 307; *The System of Ethics According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 334: “Perhaps one cannot express what fine art does in any better way than by saying that *it makes the transcendental point of view the ordinary point of view*. – The philosopher elevates himself and others to this point of view by means of work and in accordance with a rule. The beautiful spirit (*der schöne Geist*) occupies this viewpoint without thinking of it in any determinate manner; he is acquainted with no other viewpoint.”

thetic unity of this single united figure of the songstress into its different components. That is to say, if the example of the songstress is modelled on Fichte's conception of aesthetics as a *triad*, then we – as transcendental philosophers – should be able to analyse this example into the three components of the pleasant, the beautiful and the sublime – and ultimately again perceive the harmony of these as a unified synthesis. On the other hand, if the work of art is not a work worthy of that name, then its elements will be disharmonious and there is no real unified synthesis.

My hypothesis is that Fichte's figure of the sweet songstress of the night forms a new and original synthesis comprised of three distinct or even apparently opposing figures. I argue that these three component figures are already partially found in Kant, Mozart and Schiller respectively. However, none of these three figures – when taken separately – are *fully* able to account for the uniqueness of Fichte's songstress of the night. Accordingly, Fichte's "sweet songstress of the night" articulates and composes in a completely fresh and original way three already existent figures. Even though Fichte's songstress may *initially* rely on a lower form of the imagination that is merely reproductive or imitative – because it has recourse to certain figures that already exist in Kant, Mozart and Schiller – it is *ultimately* a new and original figure, and therefore ascends to the higher stage of the creative imagination. In this regard, we not only have to see those elements that the songstress shares in common, but especially how it is different from them. If we fail to see how Fichte's "sweet songstress of the night" differs from these three earlier figures, and actually contains something new and unique, it could be a sign that we ourselves have not sufficiently engaged our own higher power of the productive imagination.

4.1 *The Nightingale and The Pleasant*

Let us begin the process of philosophical *analysis*, decomposing the originally synthetic and unified figure of Fichte's example into its related artistic elements.

First of all, if we remain at the literal letter of the text, particularly at the level of mere factual evidence or facts, it could be imagined that the "sweet songstress of the night" is just to be identified with a singing bird of nature, for example, with a nightingale. Several interpreters have already pointed this out.⁴² Indeed, in German, the phrase *Sängerin der Nacht* is frequently used to designate the common name of *die Nachtigall*, the nightingale bird, whose song

42 See, for example, Luc Ferry, in: Fichte, *Essais philosophiques choisis (1794–1795)*, trans. and ed. Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut (Paris: Vrin, 1999), p. 112; and Paul Gordon, *Art as the Absolute*, pp. 72–73.

is both nocturnal and diurnal. Hence, it could be argued that the "nightingale" bird is simply and *literally* the primary referent of Fichte's phrase the "sweet songstress of the night"; i.e., it above all refers to a bird of nature, and this interpretation even seems to have philosophical support. For this passage from Fichte's text *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy* appears to directly echo the Kantian reference to the trill of nature's nightingale "under the gentle light of the moon",⁴³ as Kant poetically puts it in § 42 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Now, there is nothing surprising that we have found here a parallel in Kant or an element of Kantian inspiration: after all, Fichte considered himself as following in the tradition of Kant's critical philosophy.

However, I would like to put forward a further larger claim in order to show that the Kantian parallel alone with a bird of nature is not sufficient to fully understand Fichte's songstress of the night. My contention is that the unnamed fictional people presented in Fichte's three letters *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy* are actually *inspired* by three real historical personalities. According to the text, we have one person writing to a "friend" who is the recipient of the three letters. I would argue that this letter writer is based on Fichte himself, and the recipient of the letters is based on Schiller, which is precisely how *On the Spirit and Letter in Philosophy* came into being in reality. As mentioned, the text was commissioned by Schiller and originally intended to be published in his journal *Die Horen* (The Hours) in 1795. In addition, the "neighbour"⁴⁴ mentioned in letter two of Fichte's text, who is having trouble reading "a certain philosophy"⁴⁵ – is doubtlessly inspired by Goethe, who at the time was also trying to understand Kant's philosophical writings, and whose poetical works are cited numerous times in Fichte's text *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*. Thus, the entire literary construct of *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy* actually arose from Fichte, Schiller and Goethe trying to grapple with the "spirit and letter" of the Kantian critical philosophy.

Returning to the problem of the "sweet songstress of the night" as merely a reference to the nocturnally singing bird, the nightingale, we should ask: What *philosophical* role does the nightingale play in Kant's critical philosophy? In § 42 of the third *Critique* the nightingale is for Kant the possessor of the secret of musical charm. More precisely, the reference to the Kantian nightingale contributes two things. On the one hand, the song or trill of the nightingale is magical, "enchanting" or "bewitching" – Kant calls it *bezaubernd*;⁴⁶ it is an example

43 Kant, *KU*, § 42, AA V: 302; *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 182.

44 J.G. Fichte, *GB*, GA 1/6: 333; *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, p. 75.

45 Ibid.

46 Kant, *KU*, § 42, AA V: 302; cf. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 182.

of *Reiz*, attraction or the pleasant, which we should recall, is the first element in the triad of Fichte's aesthetics. In Kant himself, the charm of the nightingale's trill is one of the rare instances where attraction is rehabilitated into the transcendental sphere of aesthetics or pure taste. Insofar as it *speaks* to us, it arouses an immediate interest for the mind, and is not merely to be rejected as pathological or impure. There is an intellectual judgment in addition to a simple aesthetic judgment. The charm of the nightingale's song not only produces pleasure, but intellectually it evokes the moral idea of *joie de vivre*.

For Kant, the nightingale is also a bird whose singing can "almost be exactly imitated by the human being."⁴⁷ The example of the nightingale occurs in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* when Kant engages in a kind of *paragone* between nature and art, i.e. a comparison between the two in order to establish which of them, the nightingale of nature or the illusion of the nightingale created by art, can legitimately be declared superior. Kant uses this example on two occasions⁴⁸ to affirm the "preeminence of the beauty of nature over the beauty of art in alone awakening an immediate interest."⁴⁹ Artistic beauty (the bird of poetry or art) may be superimposed onto natural beauty (the living bird) from the point of view of simple aesthetic judgment. But then art takes on the appearance of nature and this implies an immediate satisfaction, e.g. a disinterested pleasure. If the reciprocal pair of art/nature can serve as a definition for beauty, in terms of the intellectual interest in the beautiful the symmetry breaks down and art becomes inferior to nature, since art according to Kant is always subject to an intention. Art cannot interest in itself, but only through its end, whose concept is external and prior to the artwork; the satisfaction in its products "would arouse only a mediate interest in the cause on which it is grounded."⁵⁰ The song of the nightingale is therefore

47 Ibid., § 22, AA V: 243; Eng. trans., p. 126.

48 In the "General remark on the first section of the Analytic" (§ 22, B 73) and in § 42 on "On the intellectual interest in the beautiful" (B 172–173).

49 Ibid., § 42, AA V: 299; Eng. trans., p. 179.

50 Ibid., AA V: p. 301; Eng. trans., p. 181. By contrast, the example of the nightingale's trill that is imitated as closely as possible by human skill is, according to Kant, "deceptive" for the poet from the moral point of view since the poet seeks immediacy, spontaneity, and pure beauty, or "purposiveness without purpose." Charmed by what he first believed to be a natural phenomenon, the poet is no longer well disposed towards the artifice produced by human activity. This discovery of a deception in which art is substituted for nature, the false for the true, destroys for him all interest in the melody or even its very beauty. The nightingale's song (purposiveness without purpose, and yet telling for the solitary lover of nature who knows how to read in its sensible beauty its correspondence with all the nuances of the moral idea of joy) is therefore opposed to its imitation by the mischievous young man (linked to a purpose).

the intellectual or moral touchstone of beauty as what has its end in itself, in the pure expression of its form, as opposed to the technicism of the art object. In order to find a path from aesthetics to ethics, Kant therefore gives pre-eminence to nature over art and stresses the contradiction between the two.

However, if we reduce Fichte's "sweet songstress of the night" merely to the nightingale of nature and nothing more, we immediately encounter a contradiction. Encountering a contradiction here is neither surprising nor problematic. Rather, in accordance with Fichte's own theory of the imagination as presented in the 1794/95 *Grundlage*, it is a sign that we are dwelling in the right realm of the imagination. For as we saw above, the imagination initially oscillates or hovers between opposing elements and it is precisely this power that eventually permits the transcendental philosopher to overcome any apparent contradiction. If Fichte's figure of the "sweet songstress of the night" simply referred to a singing nocturnal bird in the animal kingdom, there should be no real problem, and the example could be fully understandable as such. However, we do additionally meet with a contradiction if we only consider the songstress as a bird like the nightingale. The contradiction arises as soon as we more closely examine the very ideas and language used by Fichte in the above passage to describe his figure of the sweet songstress of the night. Fichte's songstress is explicitly said to possess "spirit" (*Geist*), "striving" (*Streben*), "development", a "power" or "capacity" (*Vermögen*), and especially: an "original drive" (*Urtrieb*). – In Fichte's philosophical system, these traits belong to the anthropological and practical domains of the human kingdom, and essentially differentiates the human being from the animal, including of course, the nightingale. The "drive" (*Trieb*) is not an animal trait, but a specifically *human* one that Fichte defines in terms of autonomy and freedom. This is clearly stated in the text of *On the Spirit and the Letter of Philosophy* itself:

Self-activity in human beings, which determines their character and distinguishes them from the rest of nature, places them outside their limits (*Grenzen*), must itself be based on something that is specific to humans. This specificity is the drive (*Trieb*). A human being is above all human because of this drive. What kind of human being each person is, depends on the greater or lesser force (*Kraft*) and effectiveness of the drive, of their inner living and striving.⁵¹

51 J.G. Fichte, *GB, GA 1/6: 340*; *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, trans. modified, p. 79.

The *Trieb* or drive is the primary inner force that drives the mind, from which the life of spirit can and must develop. Therefore, the drive is literally the *turning point*, where we return from the outer song of nature's living bird, which is subject to sensory perception and reflective judgment, to a sound that is the formation or product of an inner movement of the spirit along the musical scale. That is to say, a human sound which is the object of aesthetic intuition (as opposed to mere sensible or external intuition), that goes beyond the limits of natural sounds. Therefore, the Fichtean figure of "the sweet songstress of the night" cannot be reduced to nature or the non-human. To resolve this tension within the figure of the songstress, it is then necessary to progress, by means of the imagination, from the unconscious and outward-orientated animal of nature that the songstress first appears to be or embody, back towards the inner being. Here the songstress is brought back to herself, revealing herself to her own self by experiencing herself in the form of self-feeling, pleasure and displeasure. This does not mean that the reference to the nightingale now has to be discarded or abolished. Rather, it merely signifies that the Kantian representation of the nightingale as the possessor of the secret of musical charm is not sufficient to fully explain this Fichtean monogram.

Whereas Kant's analysis of the beautiful remains at the level of the contradiction and a separation between nature and art, we also find the idea of a contradiction in Fichte. Yet it is one that does not separate natural beauty and artistic beauty, but rather leads to their synthesis at a higher level and creates a twofold ambiguous discourse that lends itself to multiple readings. For a common feature of the two allows us to establish a link or intersection between the nightingale of nature and the human being, between the natural bird of art and human bird as it were. – This link is the fact that the quavering sound of the bird and human vocalizations have the same modulation. Or to put it another way: they share and partake in the same musical activity: *singing*. Unlike other birds, the nightingale does not only make cries: it modulates the external and perceptible cries it produces in accordance with the different degrees of the diatonic scale. This musical modulation takes the previously mentioned name of a "trill" – which is a continuous and extremely rapid beat of two very close alternating tones. Unlike the sharp and unpleasant screech of the eagle, or from the short, repeated sound of the magpie's chattering, or the muffled and confused clucking of the hen, the cries of the nightingale's trill order themselves into extended sounds or melodies that form types of sentences.

Nevertheless, although the Fichtean monogram of the sweet songstress of the night therefore combines both animal and human features by virtue of the ideas of the musical scale, modulation and order, which the nightingale's singing shares in common with human singing, it is only the latter that can ele-

vate itself to a superior order – the autonomous and unlimited order of spirit and pure reason. This is contrary to Kant’s view. For Fichte, in the domain of art the human being is superior to nature, and nature is not superior to art.

4.2 *The Queen of the Night and the Sublime*

If we follow the Fichtean synthetic method as outlined in the *Grundlage*, then it is not surprising to see that it is the power of the productive imagination that helps us to overcome the contradictions and antitheses between nature and the human by finding various points of intersection between the two, such as in musical singing. Moreover, from the point of view of the Fichtean triad of aesthetic content, we could conceive that the figure of the sweet songstress of the night might also include the antithesis of attraction or the pleasant, namely: the *sublime*. That is to say, both the concrete content of the natural phenomena (i.e. the variety of sounds of the nightingale’s trill) as well as the feeling of the human spirit, take on original features in Fichte’s theory of aesthetics. A moment of amazement and rest, like in a flash of lightning, freezes and fixes the otherwise constant internal oscillating movement of the productive imagination, as Fichte states in the *Grundlage*.

However, the endogenous aesthetic drive must be able to be communicated in an external manner. That is why I am convinced that Fichte’s example of the “sweet songstress of the night” is not just inspired by the nocturnal singing of the nightingale of nature, but also by another existing artistic figure of a female singer. This second songstress inspiration is: the singing character of the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute*. Her sublime coloratura were first performed by Josepha Weber at the opera’s creation in 1791. Here again the reference to Mozart is not surprising, since it turns out that at the time of writing *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, the “neighbour” mentioned in the opening of the text – i.e. Goethe – was working in 1795 on a poetic sequel to Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*.

There is indeed a clear reference to the sublime in Fichte’s text, namely in the motif of the elevation to the paroxysm of the sung voice. This voice ascends to the top of the sound or musical scale, in a movement oriented towards the ideal of perfection – as Fichte writes: “to the most perfect chord”.⁵² Thus, the artistic character of the Queen of the Night not only evokes “the literal image of a cosmic power – the starry night”,⁵³ which Kant famously described as sublime, but she also has an exceptional high-pitched “soprano” voice. The soprano is

52 J.G. Fichte, *GB, GA 1/6*: 346; *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, p. 83.

53 Jean Starobinski, “Pouvoir et Lumières dans *La Flûte enchantée*”, in: *Dix-huitième Siècle*, n°10 (1978), p. 446.

the highest and most brilliant voice, whose range (*tessitura*) is literally “above” the viola, tenor and bass voices. Thus, in terms of the highest, in terms of sublimity, Fichte’s songstress of the night and Mozart’s Queen of the Night seem to perfectly coincide.

Again, this does not prevent Fichte’s figure of the songstress from retaining animalistic traits. On the contrary, some traits of both the animal and human singers are directly superimposed on one and the same figure in Fichte. Just as the nightingale sings at night, so the singer of Mozart’s opera sings for the kingdom of the night. Similar to the trills of the nightingale, the most famous aria of the Queen of the Night in Act II of the opera, directly corresponds to a rapid and extremely lively movement (*allegro assai*) and is rich in *trills*. Just as the bird is capable of soaring high into the air, the high-pitched voice of the soprano hovers above in the heights. These images of course evoke Fichte’s choice of describing the power of the productive imagination as a hovering power in the human being. And lastly, just as the bird’s secret of the power of music is rooted in a certain spontaneity and immediacy, so too Mozart’s Queen of the Night is the possessor of a *naïveté* or natural unconsciousness.

Fichte’s songstress of the night is barely aware of what her aesthetic drive or productive imagination produces. She ascends up and down the musical scale without her own full consciousness, knowledge and understanding of this process. Her spirit *actively* brings this dynamics to a form of consciousness, yet without completely consciously positing (by reason) in front of her mind what she only carries in a sensible (aesthetic) form within herself – it hovers at the back of her consciousness. The singer’s activity has a spiritual content that she configures in a sensible way, because she can only become aware of it in this sensible mode. Thus, the Fichtean figure of the songstress of the night likewise shares in these common traits or analogies between human and animal natures.

However, if we wish to merely stay at this standpoint, and explain Fichte’s songstress figure solely with reference to the nightingale and Mozart’s Queen of the Night, we once again encounter difficulties or apparent contradictions. For example, like the magic of Kant’s nightingale, Mozart’s Queen of the Night is certainly a magician. For she is the one who gives Tamino the magic object – the flute that has such a bewitching effect on animals. Tamino needs this magic flute to assist in bringing back the Queen’s own daughter Pamina, who is captive of her opponent Sarastro. But the Queen is an evil and dark magician as opposed to the positively enchanting power of nature’s nightingale, as well as of the true work of art, in Fichte’s view. It is therefore highly incongruous that the Queen of the Night, who embodies the spirit of evil, and whose most famous aria expresses monstrous feelings of fury and hatred, should be

depicted as “sweet” (*lieblich*), as Fichte’s songstress is called. Finally, the character of the Queen of the Night does not float on waves, which as we saw, is also a feature of Fichte’s sweet songstress of the night. Thus, even though Mozart’s singing Queen of the Night and Fichte’s songstress share certain key traits in common – especially their abilities to ascend to the sublime via the highest and most chords of the musical scale – we still encounter a number of contradictions if we merely remain at this level of explanation. Hence, we have to therefore exercise our own power of productive imagination again to see if these contradictions can be overcome.

4.3 *Venus and the Beautiful (Soul)*

As we just saw above, the direct inner link (and not merely the indirect analogical links involving reflective judgment) between the enchanting trill of nature’s nightingale and the sublime vocalizations of the dark magician Queen in Mozart’s opera, is precisely the magic of the singing voice. If Fichte is consistent in his theory of aesthetics, then in addition to the pleasant and the sublime, in the example of the “sweet songstress of the night” it would seem imperative to also take into account the third aspect of Fichte’s aesthetic triad: *beauty*. In my opinion, this third dimension is present in the passage on Fichte’s songstress, and this dimension draws its inspiration from a third already existent figure – who is the central figure in Schiller’s 1793 essay *On Grace and Dignity*, namely, *Venus*. The Goddess Venus, who is escorted by the Three Graces, is of course the ancient archetype of beauty and love, and like the Queen in Mozart’s opera, she is also the bearer of a magical attribute – the belt of charm. This reference to Schiller should also not come as a surprise, since, as I have argued, it is precisely Schiller who is the recipient of Fichte’s text, both literally and artistically, and a thinker who has tirelessly studied both the letter and spirit of Kantian philosophy.

With this third element and aspect of the aesthetic triad, we now progress further from the sounds of the musical scale, which is at the same time the scale of living beings and of spiritual development, passing from the animal (the nightingale), then the human (the Queen of the Night), up to the divine (Venus). With regard to the nocturnal background of Venus, she is also known as Venus Urania, the Evening Star or light in the night. The name of Fichte’s songstress also perfectly fits with the divine figure of the Goddess. For the letter of Fichte’s text not only uses the adjective *lieblich* (“sweet”, “charming”) to characterize her nature, which belongs to the vocabulary of love deployed in Schiller’s 1793 essay. But the figure of Venus also helps illuminate Fichte’s reference to the songstress and the sea: “Her life floats (*schwebt*) on the surging waves of aesthetic feeling, as does the artistic life of every true genius.” One

of the most well-known elements of the myth regarding the birth of Venus is of course how she emerges from the foam of the waves. The use of “*schweben*” here is another explicit intertextuality to the *Grundlage*’s technical term for the specific movement of the creative imagination – its hovering and floating – which may correspond to either an aerial elevated movement or to a floating movement on water. Furthermore, Fichte’s text incorporates in his text the exact same expression of the notion of a “fitting image” (*passendes Bild*), which Schiller uses in *On Grace and Dignity* concerning the ornament of Venus’s garment – the magic belt. This belt is the appropriate symbol for the concept of grace:

A belt which is nothing more than a fortuitous outward ornament certainly seems no very fitting image (*passendes Bild*) to denote the personal character of grace; but a personal characteristic, which is at once thought as separable from the subject, could not be illustrated otherwise than by means of a fortuitous ornament, with which the person may part without detriment to himself.⁵⁴

This repetition in Fichte’s German text of both the expression *passendes Bild* and the adjective *lieblich*, indicates – and this is the essential point – that we are in the field of the “personal character” of grace, and not just in that of *natural* beauty alone. With his concept of grace, Schiller enlarged the Kantian discourse of the ideal of beauty in the third *Critique* by opening it up from the human form to its contingent movements emanating from the freedom of spirit, as opposed to the mere necessity of nature. Schiller writes:

As far as the ideal of beauty is concerned, all *necessary* movements *must be* beautiful, because, as necessary, they belong to its nature; the beauty of *these* movements is therefore already *given* with the concept of Venus, whereas the beauty of the fortuitous movements is an *enlargement* (*Erweiterung*) of this concept. There is a grace of the voice, but no grace of breathing.⁵⁵

Fichte’s “sweet songstress of the night” therefore serves as a symbol of the aesthetic, of the inner hovering mental state of genius. She links onto the orna-

54 Friedrich Schiller, *Über Anmut und Würde* (1793), in: *Sämtliche Werke* (hereafter: SW) (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), vol. V: 435; *On Grace and Dignity*, trans. George Gregory (Washington, DC: The Schiller Institute, 1988), p. 339.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 436; Eng. trans. (modified), p. 340.

ment of the voice that Schiller's philosophical analysis had already regarded as an example of grace. For Fichte, with regard to the internal purely subjective side of activity, the dynamic productive imagination produces an ideal synthesis of the empirical and the rational. It bridges the gap between the sensible (empirical feelings or attraction) and the supersensible (the sublime as the feeling of spirit). Whereas in Schiller's thought, grace is a mobile beauty, a beauty not only referred to a movement subject to variation, but the mediating or unifying element between nature and spirit, and the body and soul. Grace effects the transition from reason to sensibility (and *vice versa*), for it depends on the affective states of the spirit. Schiller terms grace as the "beauty of play"⁵⁶ in order to distinguish it from the fixed "architectonic beauty"⁵⁷ of natural body conformation.

The magical power of grace opens us up to an order that is different to the order of nature. Through it, we move from necessity to freedom, from fixed identity and finitude to change and infinity. Consequently, the concept of grace also applies to anyone who is naturally "less beautiful" or even "not beautiful at all". This is because "even someone who is not beautiful is still able to *move* beautifully".⁵⁸ Consequently, the artist of beauty does not have to be beautiful herself. This explains why Mozart's Queen of the Night may be an extremely horrible character, yet she is not a horrible singer, but a beautiful one. Her singing, including the aria of Act II, is seductive on account of the *crescendo* and *decrescendo* of the *bel canto*. The magical grace of her soprano voice is furthermore sublime, for it is the highest and most brilliant voice range and also "coloratura"; that is to say, a *light* voice, which achieves maximum agility and flexibility in the form of vocalizations – trills and arpeggios. This ability saves the Queen of the Night and makes her character even draw close to the divine. This mediation of grace or mobile beauty is the expression of the productive imagination in and through a work of art. For Fichte, this beauty corresponds to the divine insofar as it creates a possible unity or synthesis that overcomes the tension between the two antithetical poles of the animal and the human.⁵⁹

However, despite this reference to the figure of Venus in Schiller's *On Grace and Dignity*, there seems to remain one final contradiction concerning Fichte's

56 Ibid., p. 446; Eng. trans., p. 349.

57 Ibid., p. 438; Eng. trans., p. 342.

58 Ibid., p. 435; Eng. trans., pp. 339–340.

59 Whereas for Schiller grace corresponds rather to the human or the personal, as opposed to beauty as the quality of the divine nature or creation.

“sweet songstress of the night”, and it is a more difficult one to resolve: what about the singing aspect? Unlike the nightingale bird and Mozart’s Queen of the Night, the goddess Venus apparently does not sing at all. And yet, I maintain that she is the model or inspiration behind the third facet of the Fichtean monogram of the “sweet songstress of the night”. How, then, is Venus a songstress? I do not believe that the question of singing has been now overcome or cancelled. The solution to this apparent contradiction is again to use our own productive imagination, and see that the ancient figure of the *externally* beautiful corporal Venus now has to be complemented by the modern figure of the *internally* ‘beautiful soul’, which Schiller theorizes in the text *On Grace and Dignity*. According to this Schillerian perspective, both beauty – and its extension grace – place us at the intersection of the interior and the exterior: grace objectively embodies the movement of our spirit, its self-deployment, so that the exteriority of the body is totally inhabited by the interiority towards which it points. The ‘beautiful soul’ therefore ultimately makes us return once again to the viewpoint of our inner being. This inner soul aspect is lacking in the mythological figure of the beautiful Venus.

With the beautiful soul, we have now moved back to our original starting point, but at a higher and more conscious level: to a form of inner and silent song. In the above Fichtean textual passage on the songstress, her song is initially silent, but whose sound or singing we are able to step-by-step create in an inner manner by employing the power of our imagination. Likewise, grace in the Schillerian sense, is the expression of a beautiful soul that is a “*speaking*”⁶⁰ *silence*, a silent word carried by the modulations of the voice, the looks, sighs, or smiles. Indeed, Schiller writes the following words about the graceful movements of the beautiful soul: “The voice shall become music, and move the heart with the pure flow of its modulations.”⁶¹ In other words, Venus, who has become an inwardly beautiful soul, does not sing outwardly, all she has to do is speak, to create an inner song.

5 Conclusion: Fichtean Theory in Practice

To summarize: Fichte’s monogram of the songstress is an original synthesis of three other figures. It constitutes a concrete example in practice of Fichte’s theory of the creative imagination on the one hand, and his triadic conception

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., p. 435; Eng. trans., p. 369.

of aesthetics on the other, which comprises the topics of the pleasant, sublime and the beautiful. The singing of the “sweet songstress of the night” cannot merely be reduced to the mere natural singing of the nightingale of nature, such as we find in Kant. In order to fully understand this creature of the Fichtean imagination, we must furthermore include the figure of the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, and the ancient archetype of beauty and love, the goddess Venus, to which a ‘beautiful soul’ is added in Schiller. It is only through this intertextual synthesis that we go beyond the merely reproductive and unoriginal level of a given-dependent form of the imagination, to reach a new and original creation, a genuine product of Fichte’s own productive imagination: the “sweet songstress of the night”. It is the faculty of the hovering imagination of the I that allows us to overcome all the above apparent contradictions and arrive at a coherent synthesis and understanding of this monogram. And it is precisely for this reason that the productive imagination forms the first principle of Fichte’s aesthetics.