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**Exposing Romanticism: Philosophy, Literature,
and the Incomplete Absolute**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor in Philosophy in Philosophy and Literature

University of Warwick, Department of Philosophy
September 2003

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the AHRB, and the University of Warwick for their generous financial support throughout the course of this thesis. My greatest gratitude is owed to Stephen Houlgate, for his continuous encouragement and for being an absolutely Ideal, as well as absolutely Real, supervisor. I am also grateful to Andrew Benjamin, for sowing the seeds of enthusiasm for the project, during his early supervision of the thesis. I am indebted to Beth Lord for her companionship, her unwavering support, and for being the best friend one could wish to have. A great many people, both in the University of Warwick and outside it have aided my thought during the writing of this thesis, whether they meant to or not: John Appleby, Heather Bailey, Tom Barker, Mick Eardley, Angelos Frantzis, Austin Hill, Wahida Khandiker, Spyros Krimbalis, Aislinn O'Donnell, Uriel Orlow, Korinna Patelis, Nina Power, Thaleia Protonotariou, Scott Revers, Jon Rubin, John Sellars, Ben Smith, Brian Smith, Michelle Speidel, Tim Thornton, Alberto Toscano, Damien Veal – and Sam Gillespie whom I will never forget.

None of this would have been possible without the support and love of my parents and family – my gratitude to them is extended far beyond this page. Finally, I want to express my love and gratitude to Brian Hannon for conclusively proving that relationships do not need to fall victim to PhDs.

In memory of my sister Iole Kolia (1977-2000)

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work, and that it has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to present the fundamental philosophical positions of Early German Romanticism, focusing on the three following writers: J. C. F. Hölderlin, Novalis, and F. Schlegel. Chapter 1 begins with an examination of the first-philosophical, or ontological foundations of Romanticism and discusses its appropriation and critique of the work of Fichte, arriving at an elucidation of Romantic ontology as an ontology of differencing and production. The second chapter looks at how epistemology is transformed, in the hands of the Romantics, and due to the attention they paid to language, semiotic theory, and the operations of irony in discourse, into poetology – a theory of knowledge, into a theory of poetic production. In the third chapter a confrontation between the philosophical positions of Romanticism and those of the main currents of German Idealism (Schelling, Hegel) is undertaken; through this confrontation, the essential trait of Romantic thought is arrived at, namely the thought of an incomplete Absolute, as opposed to the absolute as totality in Idealism. The final chapter considers the avenue left open by the notion of the incomplete Absolute, and the Romantics' chief legacy, namely the theory of literature; literature is thus seen as coextensive with philosophy, and analysed under three conceptual categories (the theory of genre, the fragment, criticism) which all betray their provenance from the thought lying at the core of Romanticism: the incomplete Absolute. Finally, in the conclusion a summation of this exposition of romanticism is presented, alongside a brief consideration of the relevance of the Romantic project in contemporary critical/philosophical debates.

INTRODUCTION: EXPOSING ROMANTICISM

Romanticism is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “ a movement or style during the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Europe marked by an emphasis on feeling, individuality, and passion rather than classical form and order, and preferring grandeur or picturesqueness to finish and proportion”. This is indeed what most people would understand by Romanticism, but I need to make it clear from the start that this is *not* what this thesis will be concentrating on, despite having the title “exposing Romanticism”. Clearly the *OED* definition is correct when applied to Romanticism in its utmost generality, and, like many such definitions of ideas or concepts that are necessarily historically circumscribed, manages to be too vague at the same time as relying on a simple binary opposition. Thus, Romanticism as the *OED* defines it is a term that can well be applied to most of the artistic production of the “long” 19th century,

which would thus include the end of the 18th and even possibly part of the 20th¹. Equally, the *OED*'s definition sets Romanticism in a relation of essential opposition with classicism, "individuality and passion" pitted against "form and order". Even from this meagre material, that is to say from a seemingly expansive chronological positioning alongside an 'essential' definition resting entirely on a supra-historical binary opposition, it is entirely possible to formulate a claim that Romanticism should therefore simply be defined as modernity, as "the modern" – in opposition to "the classical", and spanning modern European history quite possibly until the catastrophe of the First World War.

My own concerns, however, are with defining quite *another* 'kind' of Romanticism, and one which is thankfully both historically much more tightly limited, and definitionally not so vague, or great, as to be solely defined as part of a binary opposition. To begin with I am only concerned with Romanticism in Germany, not England, France, or any other European country. What is more, as German historiography of ideas is itself quite meticulous in distinguishing between "early" and "late" Romanticism, between Novalis and Heine, Schlegel and Nietzsche, Hölderlin and Mörike, I find no difficulty in curtailing the vagueness of "Romanticism" by stating that I will only be dealing with the *Frühromantiker*, the earlier category. Indeed, from a chronological perspective, the texts I shall be dealing with do not span a period longer than 6 years, from

¹ For fear of deserting my own remarks here in the same position of vagueness as I am charging the *OED* with in relation to its definition of Romanticism, I am compelled to add the following brief comments. Romanticism is generally taken to be born in the late 18th century so that figures such as William Blake or even, in some accounts, Jean-Jacques Rousseau can be determined as Romantic. Equally, within the field of literature, the early work of someone like W.B. Yeats can be classified as Romantic, even in the early years of the 20th century. To allow for temporal sub-categories such as "post-romanticism" would be to confuse matters more, when the general thrust of the argument, drawn out by what I see as the historical vagueness of the *OED* definition, is

1794 to 1800. And, to make matters even more limited, I will not be dealing with the traits that the *OED* defines as “romantic”, for the simple reason that, even though there may be ample scope to claim that such traits are in evidence in the *literary* works of the figures I shall be discussing, I will only concern myself with *philosophical* and *literary-theoretical* writing. Thus, when the word “Romanticism” is used, from this point onwards, readers could do well to forget the *OED* definition altogether, for “Romanticism” in the next two hundred pages or so means something quite different.

What, then, is meant, in the context of this thesis, by “Romanticism”? As anticipated by the title, it is the actual task of the thesis to give the full answer to this question. I aim to show what Romanticism, Early German Romanticism, and in particular the philosophy and literary theory of Early German Romanticism “mean”. I aim to undertake an *exposition* of the theory of Early German Romanticism, to present (in a sense which may be complicated later on in the course of the ‘presentation’) the philosophical and literary-theoretical positions of (Early German) Romanticism. Nevertheless, as an introduction to, and a first exposition of the problem, I propose to circumscribe the limits of “Romanticism” even further, and to demonstrate why it is that “Romanticism” should be a problem, an area, or a field of research worthy of treatment on the level of a PhD thesis (and well beyond it). To begin with, my thesis is concerned primarily with the work of three men, three proper names: Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), and Friedrich Hölderlin. “Romanticism” therefore is designated expressly as an umbrella description for what unites the work of all of them, and, as I will have the chance to discuss further, what

that Romanticism thus defined pretty much circumscribes the artistic production of the entire 19th

differentiates them from other names who might or might not equally merit the appellation “Romantic”, thinkers such as Fichte, or Schelling.

An issue immediately arises: why do I take it that I can deal with Schlegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin all together under the same rubric of Romanticism? Are there no problems, conceptual and methodological alike, in ascribing a common ‘identity’ to three individual thinkers? Are there no differences of thought, circumstantial or essential, between these three proper names? It would be foolish to claim otherwise. Throughout the course of the thesis I shall have the opportunity to bring the thoughts of these three different men into relief both individually and in connection with each other, and I am not in the least attempting to flatten possible differences between them, not in the least contending that Schlegel, Hölderlin, and Novalis are to be taken as *identical* with each other in their thought. The reasons are obvious, and need no further elaboration except to say that, among the possible connections that I will attempt to forge, or among the possible identifications that I will aim decisively to *avoid*, one appears more strenuous than others. One can relate the thought of Schlegel to that of Novalis with relative ease, and for good reasons: they were close friends, lived for a good while during the years here under consideration in the same city, Jena, and worked together in the hope of creating what they termed themselves “symphilosophy”. This cannot be taken to mean that their thoughts are identical, but it legitimises the drawing of critical connections between them. But Hölderlin? Hölderlin also lived in Jena between 1794-1795, where he met Novalis once, in the house of Immanuel Niethammer, alongside the philosophical

mentor of both, Fichte². This is not enough to tie him to the *Athenäum* circle, and I am not suggesting that he should be so tied. Among the chief critics and commentators on Romanticism (and this, by now, means Romanticism as I mean it), Walter Benjamin often draws significant parallels between Schlegel and Novalis, on the one hand, and Hölderlin on the other³; Peter Szondi argues for the congruence between Schlegel's and Hölderlin's theories of genre⁴; but Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy argue quite forcefully, after Maurice Blanchot, for "Hölderlin's irreversible withdrawal from a "constellation" to which he never really belongs"⁵.

Before attempting to give a brief answer to the question of Hölderlin's inclusion in the concerns of this thesis, I want to return to the larger issue of the grouping of all three of the proper names figuring in these pages under the general heading of "Romanticism". Having already admitted that their individual positions *necessarily* allow for the formation of specific differences, my contention is that these three proper names can, and should be placed *alongside*

² For this meeting, see Hölderlin: *Essays and Letters on Theory*, translated by Thomas Pfau, New York: SUNY press, 1988; cf. Dieter Henrich: *The Course of Remembrance and other Essays on Hölderlin*, Stanford: Stanford university Press, 1997.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstskritik in der deutschen Romantik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften, I-1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt; Suhrkamp, 1974. English translation in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1996.

⁴ Szondi, *On Textual understanding and other Essays*, trans. by H. Mendelsohn, Manchester University Press, 1986.

⁵ P. Lacoue-Labarthe & J.-L. Nancy, *L'absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand*, Paris, Seuil, 1978. English translation: *The Literary Absolute*, trans. by P. Barnard and C. Lester, SUNY, 1988, p. 28, n.4. This is not quite the place for a detailed explanation of why it is Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy think that Hölderlin does not "belong" to a "constellation" which he nevertheless certainly has connections to, seeing as they are referring not simply to Romanticism (Schlegel and Novalis) but also to German Idealism (Hegel and Schelling). I shall have the opportunity to discuss Hölderlin's 'belonging' to the Idealist constellation later, in chapter 1. Their objection seems to me to hinge inexorably upon their own admission that they "bear Heidegger's observation in mind" in discussing Hölderlin's relations with German Idealism (*ibid.*). Thus, and this is something worthy of being further demonstrated *not* within the confines of this thesis but in future research, it would appear that Hölderlin's belonging or not belonging among the Romantics or among the Idealists is a question with fundamental import on the Heideggerian version of the history of philosophy, and on the particular weight the figure of Hölderlin bears in Heidegger's thought.

each other in a *continuum* – which is what I will be doing in what follows. The ‘story’ I aim to tell, and as I hope to render evident, is not a story based on the unity or the identity of the ideas discussed, but rather on their *coextensiveness*, their belonging together in a kind of metonymic chain, if you wish, as opposed to a metaphorical unified stratification. In other words, I am not aiming to show that Romanticism, as the umbrella term I am here utilising, is a vertical accumulation of self-same, or metaphorically corresponding, ideas; rather, I propose to view Romanticism as an expansive, ‘progressive’ (in the quintessentially Romantic sense which I will be treating later) succession of concepts and conceptions. The ‘overall’ picture, the *unity* of Romanticism as a *whole* is something that Romanticism itself does not allow, and I believe that, had I attempted to draw such a unifying, *totalising* picture and had I not had recourse to the equivocation and resistance to closure that Romanticism always presents itself with (and as), I would have done grave injustice to the insights of all three of these proper names, and also to the continuum, the loose “constellation” they form together.

If this appears counter-intuitive, even paradoxical, I would suggest that this appearance would be due to the eccentricity and, at least in some cases, paradoxicality of what constitutes Romanticism. Ultimately, the aim of this thesis is to ‘present’ Romanticism as precisely such an essentially eccentric enterprise, to demonstrate, in other words, that Romanticism, the *philosophical* and *theoretical* Romanticism of Hölderlin, Novalis and Schlegel marks a radical departure for philosophy and literary theory. Without wishing to pre-empt the arguments of the following pages, I ought summarily to indicate where this new departure lies. Once again, it is not here a question of claiming that the radical departure or the eccentric path of Romanticism has not been detected in the past,

as the mere mention of the work of Walter Benjamin, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, or Manfred Frank would suffice to disprove. My *own* contention is that, however indebted I am to their (and others') work, the exposition of Romanticism here undertaken has not been attempted in this particular way, and that, consequently, some of the eccentric force and radical nature of the Romantic project has still gone unnoticed.

In the first instance, I aim to present Romanticism as having origins that are distinctly and incontrovertibly *philosophical*, or, as I will be claiming later, that Romanticism is grounded in ontology. This ontology, furthermore, is an ontology with no conceivable parallel among the Romantics' predecessors or contemporaries. It is a dynamic ontology of *differencing*, an ontology which is heavily based upon notions of ontological *production*. Production is indeed, as I will maintain, an essential trait of Romantic philosophy, and it is carried over, so to speak, from ontological to epistemological concerns. Thus, in the second instance, Romanticism presents us with an epistemology which is a theory of production, and, as I will have the chance to explain, of production with the significant inflection of *Poiesis*, so that my contention will be that Romantic epistemology is in fact *poetology*, no longer the theory of knowledge related to the (empirical or transcendental) subject, but the theory of poetic production as an 'expression' of ontological production, *Poiesis* mirroring Being. Finally, the theory of literature which is born out of Romanticism also mirrors and extends, along Romanticism's metonymic chain, their ontological and epistemological concerns and will be examined as being a part of the continuum of Romantic ideas.

This sketch, meant as a ‘preview’ of the main arguments of the thesis, is inadequate as an exposition of what makes Romanticism truly unique in the history of philosophy, at least up to the 20th century⁶. I believe this *could* be summed up in one expression, and since the expression already appears in the thesis’ title, I must turn to it. Romanticism’s chief legacy then, its essential trait and the point of connection between its ontological, epistemological, and literary-theoretical concerns as well as the thread connecting all the points alongside its continuum is the notion of the *incomplete Absolute*. At the heart of Romanticism lies the notion that the Absolute is not, as it is conceived in Idealism, a unity, a totality as one-ness, but essentially incomplete and always admitting further, infinite proliferation. This is what the entirety of the thesis, in one way or another, chiefly addresses. And it is this notion of an incomplete Absolute which finally will have allowed me to treat the umbrella term “Romanticism” as continuum and not as unity, both from the “thematic” perspective roughly corresponding to three out of four chapters of the thesis (ontology, epistemology/poetology, the theory of literature), and from the perspective of the proper names attached to it. Despite differences between Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel which I fully admit, the Romantic notion of an incomplete Absolute to which they are *all*, albeit in different ways, committed,

⁶ I will be concerned primarily with an exposition of Romanticism in its ‘proper’ historical context, as I believe that its philosophical importance can only be ascertained when it is placed in comparison and, as I will be expressing it in chapter three, *confrontation* with the major philosophical routes from which it is a divergence. Nevertheless I will endeavour to indicate, at appropriate points in the thesis’ development, where and how Romanticism’s eccentric path may lead in more recent philosophical developments, to show what Romanticism may be anticipating. As I explain in the conclusion, a more detailed and closely argued demonstration of such Romantic bequests, of the role Romanticism may have to play in 20th century philosophical arguments will remain, for the time being, a project for future research. Nevertheless, I must state from the outset that if I did not think Romanticism has a role, and an often unacknowledged or under-researched role to boot, to play in contemporary philosophical debates, there would be little point in attempting its exposition in the first place. For what it’s worth, Romanticism still

allows these three names to be placed not quite together perhaps, but alongside each other. So, and to counter objections about Hölderlin only, his text *Seyn, Urtheil* is indispensable for the establishment of what I take as Romantic ontology, just as crucial as Novalis' *Fichte-Studien*; similarly, his poetological theories of the Homburg years are just as essential as those of Schlegel for the transformation, as I see it, of epistemology into poetology.

There is, however, one more step to take, and that is to offer a corrective of sorts to the idea I have just made use of, the idea that Romanticism *could* be summed up in and by the notion of the incomplete Absolute. It should become clear in the course of the thesis that this 'summation' cannot be taken to mean that the incomplete Absolute somehow gathers together all the potentially disparate elements of Romanticism, all the possibly divergent thoughts of Schlegel, Hölderlin, and Novalis. As I have been arguing, the only idea of unity that Romanticism, and consequently perhaps also a thesis on Romanticism, may allow is that of a continuum, a metonymic chain, held together *only* by its own incompleteness, by the fact that its 'summing up' or its addition will always necessarily allow for the possibility that it be *added to*. The very 'summation' of a title, therefore, or of an introduction for that matter, is only ever a heuristic, temporary one. Romanticism, as I will have the chance to show, theorises this condition as the condition of the work as fragment. The introduction, each chapter, the conclusion, even the title of this thesis therefore, if it is ever to do justice to Romanticism and pay tribute to its full radical force, ought to be taken in the guise of a fragment. I cannot possibly contend that my exposition is in any way *accomplished*, and this not for reasons of modesty. "In-accomplishment" is

represents, for me, even after the completion of the thesis, an immensely rich and immensely

the very 'essence' of Romanticism; the incompleteness of the Absolute is its very absoluteness.

CHAPTER ONE: ROMANTIC METAPHYSICS – or GROUNDING ROMANTICISM IN ONTOLOGY.

Introduction.

Romanticism is not customarily discussed as an instance of the philosophical, as a philosophical moment. In the few cases where it is, it is taken for granted that Romanticism simply represents a moment, however important, in the genesis of German Idealism, a solely preparatory moment, on the way towards the mature systems of Schelling and Hegel⁷. My aim in this chapter is to present what Manfred Frank has called the ‘philosophical foundations’ of Romanticism, and to present them in such a way as to make clear that the philosophical impetus of thinkers such as Hölderlin and Novalis is singularly undervalued if seen only as a precursor to the greater things to come with Idealism. Even if it is conceded, at this point, that the texts generally taken to be

⁷ An exception must here be made for the work of Manfred Frank who, as I will have the chance to discuss during the course of the thesis, has been instrumental in kick-starting what can confidently be called a new understanding of the philosophical import of early German Romanticism.

the prime theoretical examples of the Romantic movement (the *Athenäum* fragments, Novalis' notebooks of 1797-98, Hölderlin's theoretical writings of the Homburg period) are not philosophical *stricto sensu* (and this is only a temporary concession, intended to be retracted in the following chapters), Romanticism is simply inconceivable without philosophy – to repeat the words of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, “Romanticism is rigorously comprehensible (or even accessible) only on a philosophical basis, in its proper and in fact unique (in other words, entirely new) articulation with the philosophical.”⁸

In order to understand the importance of Romanticism's ‘articulation with the philosophical’, it is necessary to retreat a few years from the ‘mature’ writings of 1797-1800, and examine the Romantics' writings in a period which can justifiably be called that of their *philosophical* formation: the years between 1794 and 1796. The key texts are Hölderlin's fragment *Seyn, Urtheil*, and Novalis' *Fichte-Studien*⁹, but neither of them is comprehensible without a prior discussion of the work of Fichte, a figure who, though not a ‘Romantic’, was certainly the most important philosophical influence on the Romantics. The focus is here on what can be called, after Aristotle, ‘first philosophy’, or metaphysics, and it can be no coincidence that the beginning of the theoretical trajectory undertaken by Novalis and Hölderlin finds them writing and thinking about metaphysics; more precisely, their beginnings as thinkers are immersed in

⁸ P. Lacoue-Labarthe & J.-L. Nancy, *L'absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand*, Paris, Seuil, 1978. English translation: *The Literary Absolute*, trans. by P. Barnard and C. Lester, SUNY, 1988, p. 29. References to this work shall always be to the English translation.

⁹ In this chapter only, exception is made of Schlegel, whose *published* writings in that period are entirely philological, and whose philosophical notes in the years under consideration are scant. Yet there can be no doubt that he was also engaging in the same philosophical readings (Kant, Fichte, Spinoza) as the other two, as his correspondence with Novalis amply shows. In the next chapter I will try to discuss some of Schlegel's more ‘mature’ fragments from the *Athenäum* period as an ‘articulation with the philosophical’.

the thought of Being, or ontology. What emerges from an investigation of Hölderlin's and Novalis' 'responses' to Fichte is a thought of Being which, though consistent with the philosophical vocabulary, methods, and concerns of the time is also a radical departure from the 'classical' historical articulation of the path leading from Kant to Hegel. Taking their 'cues' from Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and in particular developing his nascent dialectical method, and further elaborating on the transcendental framework erected by Kant, the texts here under consideration are novel and important, particularly as they attempt to begin philosophy, as Hegel will also do several years later, by taking hold of the concept of Being. Furthermore, the thought of Being here seen as the core of Romantic metaphysics is one that has no likeness in any of their more philosophically established contemporaries' works and systems. The ontological concerns outlined and discussed here, concerns with production, difference, and representation, make it entirely possible to stake a claim for the Romantics not having a true parallel until the arrival, more than a century later, of Heideggerian 'differential ontology'. Thus my aim is not simply to show that, contrary to conventional opinion, Romanticism is, in its very beginnings, at the moment of its birth, as it were, already grappling with fundamental metaphysical issues, not simply to show that Romanticism is 'grounded' in ontology, but also to show the truly radical nature of this ontology. If, as has often been noted, Romanticism as a movement in general (and by this, one chiefly means: as a literary movement, in theory and in practice) was not of its time, this is also due - even, I would suggest, *primarily* due - to the fact that its 'philosophical foundations', its ontological/metaphysical bedrock, was also quite ahead of 'its' time.

I. Fichte: Being, Activity, and Difference.

Any attempt to investigate what would constitute a ‘Romantic metaphysics’ has to start with an examination of the system of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. The reasons for this are numerous, and they range from the biographical-incident (the fact that Jena in the mid-1790s, where Fichte first took the post of professor of philosophy, was where Schlegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin all lived and studied, in the proximity and under the undeniable influence of the newly-arrived professor), to the textual (Fichte is mentioned in the correspondence of all three, as well as being the subject of a lengthy study by Novalis, the immediate ‘target’ of one of Hölderlin’s first theoretical pieces, and the object of praise from Schlegel well into the *Athenäum* years). If there is a Romantic metaphysics, it is only an appropriation, a rearrangement, and, at times, a disavowal of the Fichtean transcendental philosophy. In what follows, I will single out the elements of Fichte’s philosophy which Schlegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin took up and transformed into their own metaphysical doctrines.

Fichte’s project in the *Wissenschaftslehre* is a foundationalist one, trying as it is to establish the transcendental grounds upon which the edifice of the ‘science of knowledge’ is to be built. It should be noted from the start that if the Romantics found something of use in the foundationalist project, that was its

failure. For Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel alike, the attempt to ground philosophical knowledge, and thus every other science, on a set of axiomatic principles from which everything else is to be deduced holds little appeal. This can be partly explained by the philosophical climate of the time, as Fichte was conceived to be going against the tide of gradual disaffection with the foundationalism pioneered by his predecessor in the Jena professorship, K. Reinhold. Similarly, one cannot doubt that the works of all three would have been influenced by the reawakening of interest in Spinoza's philosophy brought about by Jacobi's treatise.¹⁰ However, as Schlegel's *Athenäum* fragment 216 attests, "Fichte's philosophy" was thought of as one of the "greatest tendencies of the age", and it is only when this is taken into account along with the Spinozist influences and anti-foundationalist drive of the Romantics that we can arrive at a better understanding of their properly philosophical project.

Fichte's foundationalist task is to "*discover* the primordial, absolutely unconditioned principle of all human knowledge".¹¹ This principle is the logical formula "intended to express that *Act* which does not and cannot appear among

¹⁰ These two progenitors of Romantic metaphysics are singled out as such by Manfred Frank in his 'Philosophical Foundations of Early Romanticism', in Ameriks & Sturma, eds. *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy* (SUNY, 1995). Frank takes it for granted that Fichte's project is a deeply foundationalist one, but there are growing dissenting voices on that matter among Fichte scholars. See in particular Tom Rockmore's 'Antifoundationalism, Circularity, and the Spirit of Fichte', in Breazeale & Rockmore, eds., *Fichte: Historical Contexts / Contemporary Controversies*, (Humanities Press, 1994). The volume also contains two 'responses' to Rockmore's position, in articles by D. Breazeale, and A. Perrinjaquet. It needs to be noted that Rockmore's antifoundationalist reading of the 'spirit' (as opposed to the foundationalist 'letter') of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is precisely the reading of the Romantics, Schlegel and Novalis in particular, even though Rockmore makes no reference to them. His radical double reading of a "foundationalist idea of grounded system and an antifoundationalist idea of ungrounded system" (*op. cit.*, p. 110) is then short-circuited by his own insistence that it is a matter of *deciding* in favour of the antifoundationalist idea, on the dubious grounds of its being at one with contemporary concerns. Without wanting to anticipate too much of the discussion which follows later in this chapter, I wish simply to quote, in response, Schlegel's *Athenäum* fragment 53: "It is equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two."

¹¹ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. P. Heath & J. Lachs (Cambridge, 1982), p. 93. All Fichte quotations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from this volume, and hereafter will be abbreviated as *W*.

the empirical states of our consciousness, but rather lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible.”(W., p.93). From this alone one understands that Fichte’s purpose, as he more or less admits in the first introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, was to take one step beyond Kantian transcendental epistemology and to establish the ‘absolutely unconditioned’ transcendental principle which grounds consciousness – in Hölderlin’s words, from a letter to Hegel dated January 1795, “he wants to move in theory beyond the fact of consciousness”.¹² Thus, with reference to Kant and his own establishment of the transcendental conditions for experience, Fichte may be seen as setting out the same conditions, but treating them, unlike Kant, as themselves *unconditioned*. Leaving aside, for the moment, Hölderlin’s rather disapproving tone and his re-interpretation of Fichte’s principle only a couple of lines later, what needs to be noted is that this principle as it is finally formulated will haunt Romantic thinking for the years to come, precisely because, in a certain Romantic reading, it dares to go “beyond the fact of consciousness” and ‘reach out’ to the unconditioned, the Absolute, as the Romantics will come to call it, itself. The Romantics, as I will show, are interested in the Fichtean ‘leap’ into the unconditioned or Absolute and its possible presentation. It is this leap which can be said to give cues for an antifoundationalist reading of Fichte, if one understands the unprovability of the unconditioned first principle as an explicit denial of foundationalism. However, if potentially the foremost Fichtean advance on Kantianism is that the *Wissenschaftslehre* can be thought of as attempting to go beyond the conception of the transcendental subject as inherently limited, Fichte’s system is ultimately unable or unwilling to leave the domain of

¹² Hölderlin, ‘*Essays & Letters on Theory*’, trans. T.Pfau (SUNY 1988), p. 124.

subjectivity, insofar as this is the domain of the transcendental, even if rendered unconditioned and unlimited. Already an area of contention between an ‘orthodox’ Fichtean reading of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and a ‘radical’ Romantic one begins to arise, in that what Hölderlin tries to articulate as a ‘beyond’, what Schlegel and Novalis will both interpret as a possible presentation of the Absolute, is, for Fichte, merely a ‘fuller’, more faithful presentation of the Kantian, transcendental realm. That “the entire Science of Knowledge, as a transcendental science, neither can nor should go beyond the self” (W., p.218) is already evident in the fact that Fichte’s principle is also the foundation for the Fichtean take on the transcendental subject: I=I. How this subject differs from Kant’s is here of no immediate concern; for the Romantics, as Hölderlin’s letter goes some way to show, what is at stake in Fichte’s unconditioned principle is both an opening up of Kantian metaphysics which would ultimately lead to the mature systems of German idealism, in the formation of which Hölderlin, Novalis and Schlegel played no small part,¹³ and also the fact that this opening up will be read, counter to Fichte’s own programme, as a move beyond concerns with consciousness and the subject. Hölderlin’s critique of Fichte, as I will show later, is based on the assumption of an Absolute removed from any notion of the

¹³ For the, by now undisputed, role Hölderlin’s thought played upon the formation of Hegel’s speculative idealism see D.Henrich, *The Course of Remembrance and other Essays on Hölderlin* (Stanford, 1997). For Novalis, see Manfred Frank’s comment (in Ameriks & Sturma, op.cit., p. 74) that “these reflections [Novalis’ *Fichtestudien*] open up nothing less than an independent course of idealist speculation.” Though Henrich treats Hölderlin’s early theoretical fragments as part of the ‘royal route’ to the mature idealism of Hegel and Frank is keener to see Novalis as carving an eccentric path away from Hegel and Schelling, both interpretations finally fail to give an account of exactly how eccentric and ‘independent’ the Romantics truly were, and this possibly because their radical reworking of Fichteanism is not fully considered. In Frank’s case, I would like to note, without wanting to pre-empt the discussion which follows in this chapter, that even though there are considerable critical advantages in considering the progeny, or the ‘foundations’ of early Romanticism to lie with the post-Kantian, and anti-Fichtean (at least as Frank explicitly reads it) anti-foundationalist drive, imbued with a renewed interest in Spinozism announced by Jacobi, to claim that Romanticism therefore represents a trend away from and against Fichte is simply misguided. It is more the case that Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel alike *transformed* Fichteanism into their own metaphysics, as the rest of this chapter aims to show.

subject, and Novalis' and Schlegel's fragments are applying Fichte's concepts and methodology whilst disregarding Fichte's dictate that the Science move not beyond the subject.

Moreover, the most important trait that the Romantics discerned in Fichte's principle, what they saw as a radical leap from foundationalist epistemology and transcendental subjectivity alike, was also something Fichte himself would not, could not have allowed – it can be called the ontological turn. Fichte is clearly at pains to demonstrate that, within the system of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Being can only be related to the unconditioned principle $I=I$, that there is no more fundamental way of thinking Being than Being-I, and consequently he reduces the ontological import of the system to the establishment of absolute subjectivity, yet the principle itself is *posited* as the ground for all consciousness in so far as it *posits* itself. “*To posit oneself and to be are, as applied to the self, perfectly identical. Thus the proposition, ‘I am because I have posited myself’ can also be stated as: ‘I am absolutely, because I am’*”.(W., p.99) Considering that the entirety of the system is ‘applied to the self’, it is clear that what is stated in the above proposition is the proposition of Being itself, of being as positing, and of being as positing-I. In other words, Being, for Fichte is dramatically reduced to the positing of Being *for* and *of* the I. As Werner Hamacher writes, “Fichte’s proposition is the thesis of ontotheseology”.¹⁴ This, in a sense, is only following from Kant who famously identified Being with positing in, *inter alia*, *The One Possible Basis of Truth for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*.¹⁵ Yet Fichte’s contribution to, and divergence from the history of ‘ontotheseology’ is that Being is established as

¹⁴ Werner Hamacher, ‘*Position Exposed*’ in *Premises*, (Stanford, 1996), p 231.

positing, as positing-I, and as I- positing its own identity with itself. I am, in so far as I posit myself as identical to myself. From Kant's ontotheseology, we have now arrived at onto-theseo-tautology, and Being is thus established not merely as positing but as positing of self-identity. As will be shown later, it is from this complex ontological structure that the Romantics will diverge in order to extract their own ontology, but for the moment it is enough to note that for Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel, albeit in slightly different ways, the Fichtean unconditioned principle is an *ontological* principle, the unconditioned given, and given-as-positing, of Being.

Another aspect of Fichte's philosophy which will be indispensable for an understanding of Romantic metaphysics is his method of deriving his fundamental principles from each other and then deducing the subsequent categories of knowledge in the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In most of the literature on the matter it is conceded that Fichte's method was pivotal in the development of what would become the idealist dialectical method¹⁶, insofar as the *Wissenschaftslehre* moves in an almost dialectical fashion from thesis to antithesis to synthesis in the presentation of its principles. Nevertheless it is necessary to note another element, which will become indispensable to the movements of thought within Romantic metaphysics, and which signals an all-important difference from Hegelian dialectics. Where the movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis is paramount and unbroken throughout the dialectical exposition of both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Logic*, the *Wissenschaftslehre* finds its beginning in an already *synthetic* proposition, the I=I

¹⁵ See Hamacher, *op.cit.*, footnote to p.231.

¹⁶Detailed explorations of this point can be found in R.Makkreel, "Fichte's Dialectical Imagination" and T. M. Seebohm, "Fichte's Discovery of Dialectical Method", both in Breazale & Rockmore, *op.cit.* Seebohm's article is particularly useful for the analysis which follows.

as principle of identity, and then proceeds to *analyse* it into the two principles for which it serves as foundation, “the principle of *opposition*” or $\sim I$ is not = I and “the *grounding* principle” of divisibility (W., p.120). Both the second and third of the fundamental principles find their ground in the synthetic, unconditioned first principle, but the analysis also shows the third principle of divisibility to be the *grounding* principle inasmuch as it is what makes the opposition constitutive of the second principle possible, and is thus indirectly presupposed by the synthesis of the first principle.¹⁷ As early critics of Fichte, among them Hölderlin, pointed out, the movement is oddly circular in that it shows both analysis and synthesis presupposing each other. Moreover, this circularity can be said to be disabling for any foundationalist claims made for the first principle which, though unconditioned, is an unconditioned *synthesis* of necessarily divisible elements.¹⁸ Fichte’s ‘first’ principle is not simply ‘I’ but ‘I=I’, and Fichte himself necessarily introduces the concept of analysis (though, it has to be noted, the word ‘analysis’ is not, in this instance, used by Fichte – it is the *process* whereby the synthetic principles are shown to be conditioned on one another that I call ‘analysis’) as a movement of thought co-dependent with that of synthesis. As it will be shown, Hölderlin’s starting point in his critique of Fichte is precisely the circular logic of analysis and synthesis within identity, whereas for Novalis and Schlegel, the ‘grounding’ principle of divisibility serves as the key methodological tool propelling their own movements of thought.

¹⁷ Following the rigorous formal-logical analysis of the exposition of the principles by T.M Seebohm, one can even arrive at the conclusion that the *second* principle (of opposition) is already presupposed by the first: “the second principle was, from the very beginning, implied in the discovery of the first principle”(Breazeale & Rockmore, *op.cit.*, p. 27).

¹⁸ On circularity and the threat it poses to the epistemological foundationalism of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, see the articles by Breazeale, Perrinjaquet, and Rockmore in Breazale & Rockmore, *op.cit.*

The fundamental unconditioned principle $I=I$ is a principle of identity directly parallel to the logical Aristotelian proposition of identity, or $A=A$, which is, Fichte writes “a judgment...an activity of the human mind” (W., p.97). Since this activity is grounded on the positing of an I, a human mind, it follows that the I is posited, and it is posited as *existing*, and its existence is posited as the *ground* for the judgment of identity. In Fichte’s words: “The self’s own positing of itself is thus its own pure activity. The *self posits itself*, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it *exists*; and conversely, the self *exists* and *posits* its own existence by virtue of merely existing” (W., p. 97). The absolute self-positing of the self as *existing*, in other words ontotheseology, is what yields the tauto-logical principle of identity, which then applies to the existing self. Within Fichte’s framework, the absolute positing of existence entails the positing of identity in that which posits, is posited, and exists; ontotheseology is dependent upon tautology; the meaning of the copula, as Fichte states boldly himself (W., p.94) is identity, or in other words, Being = Being identical. Yet if this is truly to become a foundationalist epistemology and a ‘science’ of consciousness and self-consciousness, Fichte must allow for a not-I, an object-world to the I-subject, and this he does with the principle of opposition and the principle of divisibility. The former states that $\sim I$ is not = I, and it is posited as absolutely as the first principle. The contradiction between the two principles when applied to the self could not be more obvious: on the one hand, the I is posited *absolutely* as identical with itself, and on the other, the not-I is posited *absolutely* as its opposite, which is to say as the opposite of the *same* absolutely posited I. In order to resolve the opposition through synthesis, it is necessary to mobilise the concept of a *limit*, of

both I and not-I, imposed respectively to one another by one another.¹⁹ This concept in itself entails that I and not-I are inherently divisible and capable of being limited, although still being posited absolutely. In Fichte's words: "*In the self I oppose a divisible not-self to the divisible self*" (W., p.110). The circular argument proves that the establishment of the absolute identity of the I=I is dependent upon the logically at least co-existent establishment of divisibility within that identity. Furthermore, Fichte argues that the absolute positing of I and not-I is not affected by the principle of divisibility, as they are both posited absolutely, and posited as absolutely divisible. What this means is that the establishment of Being as posited is also the establishment of Being as posited-divisible, *absolutely*.

However what is at stake here is more than the absolute posited-ness of Being, or the absolute divisibility of the self. For what the tautological proposition of ontological identity, the I=I must necessarily allow for is its self-limitation, its divisibility, ultimately the *analysis* of the tautology into its synthetic parts. In this sense, the copula of identity expresses far more, and far less, than the simple logical symbol '=' allows. It expresses the necessity for the analysis and separation of identity in its two identical parts. For the I to be = to itself, it must also be analysed, broken down to the two "Is" on either side of the copula, it must become the other *of* itself *as* itself in order to be identical *with* itself. This is pivotal to the whole mechanism of the movement of thought in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but it is an indication that within the very movement establishing identity as the fundamental ontological principle there lies the opening up (in John Sallis's term borrowed from Jacques Derrida, the *spacing*)

¹⁹ It is worthy of note that this is precisely, albeit in admittedly grander scope and greater detail,

of a difference. What I will maintain is that the single most important rubric under which Romantic metaphysics may be placed stems directly from this Fichtean ‘discovery’²⁰, and this can be called a metaphysics or an ontology of *differencing*²¹. It is some irony that the philosopher most closely associated with the concept of self-identity should end up as an originator of a philosophy of difference, but there can be little doubt that it was this inaugural opening to difference within the same that the Romantics appropriated from the *Wissenschaftslehre*, in ways which will be analysed in what follows. Fichte himself, allowing for the absolute self to be absolutely divisible is a means to making possible that the I be determined by something outside it, and thus that the I be seen as theoretically limited. His boldest formulation of the difference immanent in identity comes towards the end of the treatise:

“[T]he self must originally and absolutely posit in itself the possibility of something operating upon it; without detriment to its absolute positing of itself, it must leave itself open, as it were, to some other positing. Hence, if ever a difference was to enter the self, there must already have been a difference in the self as such; and this difference, indeed, would have had to be grounded in the absolute self as such.”(W., p.239-240)

the movement of thought of the beginning of Hegel’s *Logic*, which goes some way towards showing the Fichtean origins of the speculative dialectic.

²⁰ It is not a discovery as such, of course. If anything, it is the rediscovery of one of the oldest metaphysical ‘puzzles’, that of the Heraclitean ‘en diaferein eauto’, and its reappropriation from within the contemporary standpoint of transcendental ontology.

²¹ The neologism will be clearly explained later, in the section on Novalis. For the moment it is used simply to differentiate between the ontology at stake here, and the Heideggerian thought of the ontico-ontological difference which is more commonly cited as an ‘ontology of difference’.

Some years later, when Fichte re-writes the *Wissenschaftslehre* with a 'new method' ("*nova methodo*") of presentation, he calls this the "original duality (*ursprüngliche Duplicitaet*) of the subject-object"²², given that we understand his term 'subject-object' to designate the absolute I of the first version of the book. For the Romantics however, original duality becomes a dominant theme, evidenced both in the early theoretical writings of Hölderlin, and in Novalis' *Fichtestudien*, and it will become the theoretical bedrock upon which Schlegel will establish his philosophical and, what is more, his poetological theories.

The same duality can be said to inhere in Fichte's most original concept, that of the *Tathandlung*, the active deed, or, as he defines it, the "Act (...) [the] pure activity which presupposes no object, but itself produces it, and in which the acting, therefore, immediately becomes the *deed*." (W., p.42). The *Tathandlung* is the foundational act of self-consciousness whereby the absolute I comes to be posited in its identity, as both subject and object of (self-) consciousness. Nevertheless, it is also the act wherein the I performs the same doubling as in its unconditioned principle of identity; it is action (*Handlung*), and deed (*Tat*) at the same time, the doing and the deed done, *at once* the positing self and the self being posited. The Act is clearly a synthetic one, and a foundational synthesis as such, since without it none of the subsequent logical movements of the *Wissenschaftslehre* would be possible, but, following Fichte's own logical schema of presentation of concepts, it necessarily allows for analytic treatment. This is pivotal, for it will allow Fichte to introduce the concept of reflection, and

²² Fichte, '*Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) Nova Methodo*', trans. D. Breazeale, (Cornell, 1992) p.365. The transitions between the different re-writings of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and its Introductions, throughout the 1790s cannot be analysed in detail here, although the crucial introduction of the term 'Intellectual Intuition' in the 2nd Introduction of 1797 is taken up later, in the section on Hölderlin in this chapter. For more details on the

consequently to manipulate its usage in two distinct areas, that of theoretical and practical knowledge. The Acts of the I in both cases will always be synthetic, but “the reflection which postulates them is *analytic*.” (W., p.121). The *Tathandlung* establishes the I as synthetically united with the not-I in the inaugural act of self-consciousness, but for the distinction between theoretical knowledge, where “the I posits itself as determined by the not-I”, and practical knowledge, where “the I posits itself as determining the not-I” (W., p.218) to take place, the *reflection*, that is the analysis of the synthetic Act into its components, must be limited by a check (*Anstoß*) in the former case, and must remain unlimited in the latter. The I of theoretical knowledge, itself the product of reflection on the originary synthetic act, reflects analytically upon the acts of knowing the world around it as object or not-I, but must be checked so that the existence of that world, and its activity of determination *upon* the I itself be established both as *real* and as *objective* (otherwise Fichte’s would be a solipsistically idealist system). The I of practical knowledge on the other hand, and in conformity with Kant, must remain limitless in the face of its advancing synthetic (moral) Acts, so that the concept of the I’s absolute *freedom* is secured. The confusing but necessary reciprocal duality of theoretical and practical knowledge is perhaps better elaborated in the *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo* of 1796-1799 where Fichte manages to express, in G.Zöllner’s words, “the mutual requirement of practice or action and theory or cognition”.²³ What remains crucial is that the very inaugurating self-activity of the I, the *Tathandlung*, is a synthetic act that yields to the necessary movements of analysis by reflection, a concept that the Romantics will inherit from Fichte but will alter considerably.

Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo see G.Zöllner, ‘Original Duality: the Ideal and the Real in

If the *Tathandlung* is the original synthetic act which yields the absolute subject and establishes the principle of identity, it should clearly share the principle's ontological determination. In a certain reading, therefore, the *Tathandlung* designates the original act which founds Being as being-positing and being-identical. However the *Tathandlung* is not the mere act of positing, and thus not merely a cypher for ontotheseology, but rather designates the *active deed* of positing, the activity and the product of the activity of positing. Most importantly, the *Tathandlung* also becomes the foundational establishment of Being in Fichte's system since there is no moment of Being available to the I which would be *prior* to this foundational Act. Being, then, for Fichte, is Act. John Sallis has argued that "that the I means act means, ... , that it is distinct from being, that it has no being proper, that it is not *something* which is active, not an active being."²⁴ In this sense, and Fichte goes some way in arguing this, the I as *Tathandlung* is not a being, or quite simply *is not*. Yet, though this is true on an *ontic* level, insofar as the I as *Tathandlung* does not 'possess' being, is not (yet) a being, on an *ontological* level what the *Tathandlung* names is Being as Act, the Being-Act of the absolute I without which nothing can be granted being, without which there are no beings. The *Tathandlung* then, is Being as verb, and as verb-Act, not being as a noun, a determinate entity. Thus, in a certain reading espoused by the Romantics but which is not something Fichte would himself allow, Being in the *Wissenschaftslehre* is not so much established as the positing of identity, as it is disclosed as the *Act* of the I *producing* itself. What for Fichte still needs to be ontologically circumscribed as the positing of

Fichte's transcendental theory of the subject' in Ameriks & Sturma, op.cit.

²³ Ibid., p.121.

²⁴ John Sallis, op.cit., p.49.

Being *of* the I and *for* the I, becomes, for the Romantics, an understanding of *Being as such as self-production*, as the Act that produces itself.

This further ontological mark of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is of paramount importance to Romantic metaphysics, insofar as, I will maintain, the latter is a metaphysics, or an ontology, of production. Fichte himself touches upon the issue of production mainly in relation to the work of the productive imagination, and this will be taken up by Novalis' radical reconfiguration of the ontological horizon of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. It is when it comes to the knowledge of the practical that Fichte speaks of the "absolute productive power" of the I (W., p.195), a power which is essential to the possibility of the presentation of the I by itself as infinite activity, what Fichte calls the striving I. This bears some similarity to the founding act of the *Tathandlung* – the I is capable of arriving at a presentation of itself in (non-immediate) self-consciousness only because it is *Tathandlung*, it is the Act of Being-produced. Yet this should not be taken as an indication that the I of the *Tathandlung* is merely a product; it is, at once, the producing and the product, the activity and the deed which it enacts and produces, always already doubled into producer and product, and always already synthetically reunited in the activity and the deed of production. Indeed, if the Romantics took anything from Fichte's repositioning of Being as activity, and from the concept of the *Tathandlung*, it is surely the notion of the *doubling* of this activity, which Fichte elaborated into the distinction between the activity of the positing I in theoretical and that of the striving I in practical knowledge, or, to follow the terms of the *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo*, between the ideal and the real activity of the I. This doubling can also be seen as the necessary reciprocation between, on the one hand, reflection in the theoretical sphere

(where reflection means analysis of synthetic principles with the aim to establish an objective reality, and for the Romantics at least, *infinite* analysis of synthetic principles as sheer potency of thought), and production in the practical sphere (where production designates the infinite activity - of the I for Fichte though not, as will be shown, for Schlegel and Novalis - the activity which has its end in the realisation of practical freedom). In any case, it is only after such a reading of Fichte, a reading emphasising the 'original duality' of the unconditioned principle of identity and of the *Tathandlung*, the founding Act-of-Being alike, a reading which allows for the opening of a difference endlessly proliferating itself in reflection, on the one hand, and endlessly producing its own form as production, on the other, that we can start to investigate Romantic metaphysics in all its radical philosophical eccentricity.

II. Beyond Fichte I : Hölderlin's *Seyn, Urtheil*.

It is not without significance that the first text in the line of Romantic metaphysics proper would be fragmentary, and mysterious. Written in the spring of 1795, it has been attributed to Hölderlin (first by Friedrich Beißner, in the *Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe* where it was first published), though not without arousing concerns about its authorship,²⁵ under the title *Urtheil und Seyn*. It consists of two fragments on opposite sides of a single sheet of paper, one on *Seyn*, and one on *Urtheil*, and, in the *Große Frankfurter Ausgabe* their order has been switched over, with its title becoming *Seyn, Urtheil*. It is the section on judgment which represents, as all commentators agree, the critique of Fichte which I take to be the earliest written specimen of Romantic metaphysics.²⁶

Such a critique is already being voiced in a letter of Hölderlin's to Hegel, in January 1795:

²⁵ For a detailed, and by all accounts persuasive exposition of those concerns and for their eventual 'resolution', see Dieter Henrich, "Hölderlin on Judgment and Being: a Study in the History of the Origins of German Idealism", in *op.cit.*, pp. 71-89. I am not here concerned with problems of authorship and chronology, and I take the word of experts such as Beißner and Henrich as given. I only wish to draw attention to the fragmentary, mysterious and disputable nature of the text for reasons which, as I hope will become clear, are connected to the essentials, and the *form*, of Romantic thinking in general. For a reading of those disputes which, in its attention to the doubling of intentions, decisions, and concepts in the 'debate' and in the fragment itself, remains suggestive, even perhaps Romantic, see Andrzej Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation: Hölderlin, Hegel, Heidegger* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 4-11.

²⁶ I wish here to make a claim for the fragment being 'Romantic metaphysics' *as well as*, though curiously also *instead of* 'the Origin of Idealism', as Heinrich reads it. He argues, convincingly, that the fragment is indispensable in the history of thought leading up to Hegelian dialectics, and I am in no way denying this. Yet to me it is more important to see the fragment as the bedrock of Romantic metaphysics both because of its critique of Fichte which, though it cannot be claimed that Novalis and Schlegel were directly informed by it, still remains fundamentally *their* critique

“[Fichte’s] absolute I (= Spinoza’s Substance) contains all reality; it is everything, and outside of it there is nothing; hence there is no object for this ‘I’, for otherwise not all reality would be within it; however a consciousness without object cannot be thought, and if I myself am this object, then I am as such necessarily restricted, even if it were only within time, hence not absolute; therefore within the absolute ‘I’ no consciousness is conceivable; as absolute ‘I’ I have no consciousness, and insofar as I have no consciousness I am (for myself) nothing, hence is the absolute I (for me) nothing.”²⁷

Though it can be said that Hölderlin here admirably captures the movement of (self-) limitation which will give Fichte’s absolute I its determination as consciousness, and it can even be argued that, from Fichte’s perspective, there is a fundamental flaw in thinking the absolute I as consciousness²⁸, those Hölderlinian criticisms, which, broadly speaking, are coming from a Kantian heritage, are made extraordinary by the simple equation in parenthesis: “= Spinoza’s Substance”. It is this thought of the unlikely combination of Fichtean and Spinozist principles, and their transformation by each other, that will be the crux of much of Romantic metaphysics. This is not to say that Hölderlin criticises Fichte *from the perspective* of a Spinozist. It is to say that he views Fichte’s absolute I, if it is to remain absolute, as nothing other than the old dogmatist’s prime concept. In *Seyn, Urtheil* itself, there is no talk of

of Fichte too, and because of the reading of the concept of Being which follows, again pivotal for Novalis and Schlegel’s thoughts on the matter.

²⁷ Hölderlin, *op.cit.*, p. 125.

²⁸ This has been argued by, among others, Thomas Pfau, in his introduction to Hölderlin, *op.cit.*

Spinoza, but it is here that Hölderlin's critique of Fichte's absolute I comes to the fore. For Fichte, and specifically the Fichte of the *Grundlage* of 1794, the absolute I is the site of absolute unity and identity, as is the case with the fundamental principle of identity $I=I$; this expresses the necessary and originary connection between subject and object in the sphere of the absolute I, what Fichte will come to call, in the *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo* of 1797, the "subject-object". For Hölderlin in 1795, however, the connection between subject and object is seen in a twofold manner, and a distinction made between two opposed types of connection corresponding to the Being and the Judgment of the (editorially imposed) title. On the one side of the fly-leaf:

“*Being (Seyn)* – expresses the connection between subject and object. Where subject and object are simply, in a word (*schlechthin*), and not only in part united, that is, united in such a manner that no separation could be performed without violating the essence of what is to be separated, there and nowhere else can one speak of *simple Being (Seyn schlechthin)*, as is the case with intellectual intuition.”

And, on the other side:

“*Judgment (Urtheil)*, in the highest and strictest sense, is the original separation of object and subject which are most deeply united in intellectual intuition, that separation through which alone object and subject become possible, the originary division (*Ur-theilung*).”

So, on the one hand, Being would be what expresses the connection between subject and object in such a manner that they *cannot* be thought of as separated, the absolute connection without the possibility of division; whereas, on the other hand, Judgment is the connection between subject and object insofar as this connection necessarily allows for the separation of the two, or insofar as this connection is originally and necessarily a *disjunction*. And Hölderlin's critique of Fichte consists precisely in pointing out that the I=I is categorised as the exemplary form of disjunction, of judgment. The section on Being continues: "If I say: I am I, the subject ("I") and the object ("I") are not united in such a way that no separation could be performed without violating the essence of what is to be separated; on the contrary, the I is only possible by means of this separation of the I from the I." In the section on Judgment, on the other side of the sheet of paper, Hölderlin goes on to write: " "I am I" is the most fitting example of this concept of originary division (*Ur-theilung*)". As a critique of Fichte, therefore, the fragment can be read in two non-opposed ways: firstly, as indicating that Fichte's absolute first principle is not absolute nor first, since, for Hölderlin, the proposition of identity expresses a *disjunctive* connection between subject and object and not the *synthetic* originary identity Fichte requires; and secondly, that the originary *conjunctive* relation between subject and object, a relation where it would make no sense to speak of subject and object as separated, is to be sought elsewhere, in *Seyn schlechthin*, simple Being. What transpires from the first reading is, in some senses, an extreme faithfulness to Fichte's own insights on the absolute divisibility of the I=I, his own third, and grounding, principle of divisibility. Furthermore, it is an insight which Fichte himself will make systematic in the future presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, where he will

speak of the ‘original duality’ of the ‘I am I’ – though there is no reason even to suspect that Fichte ever glanced at Hölderlin’s fragment. What transpires from the second reading is, perhaps, what Hölderlin, in the same letter to Hegel, sees Fichte as doing – that is going ‘beyond the simple fact of consciousness’. A controversial statement when used about Fichte, it is perhaps less so when one considers what Hölderlin means by *Seyn schlechthin*, and in any case throws into precise relief the ‘ontological turn’ operated on the *Wissenschaftslehre* by the Romantics.

One cannot ascertain from the fragment’s own words whether Being, in Hölderlin’s sense, is indeed beyond consciousness altogether; one can, however, easily infer that it is beyond the consciousness defined as the consciousness of an I as subject and as object, as this is the exemplary instantiation of the realm of *Urtheil*. One can also infer, consequently, that the position of subject and object, as always already separated from one another, is only possible from within Judgment – or, in other words, whenever there is talk of subject and object *qua* themselves, we are always already within judgment. Yet Hölderlin complicates the relation between connection and separation, for he asserts: “In the concept of separation, there lies already the concept of the reciprocity of object and subject and the necessary presupposition of a whole of which object and subject form the parts.” Before examining what form this ‘whole’, the plenitude of *Seyn schlechthin*, can take, the implications of such an ontological position for philosophical method have to be examined. What is undoubtedly true if one follows Hölderlin is that subject and object are positions possible only from within the realm of separation and judgment. Yet, at the same time, the very realm of separation from which subject and object become possible is itself only

made possible when thought as presupposing the realm of absolute connection, *Seyn schlechthin*. The question, which cannot be answered purely by examining the fragment itself, and which consequently allows for a certain interpretative *decision*, is the following: does that schema of connection and separation, and of reciprocal co-implication of Being and Judgment allow us to think of Being as a pre-originary position which somehow *turns into* the originary separation of Judgment? Or, does it give grounds to thinking that Being is somehow present, perhaps even approachable from within the always already separated realm of objects and subjects? To put it in different terms, is Hölderlin here telling us a story which will later be told all the more forcefully in the dialectical moves of Hegelian logic? Or is he providing us with Being as the transcendental condition of possibility for judgment, subject, and object alike, which would make him more faithfully, though not in the least straightforwardly, Kantian? The question can only be adequately broached after a careful reading of what it is that Hölderlin means by Being; yet a preliminary remark is here necessary, and it constitutes one answer to the question posed above. Whatever Being turns out to be, the fragment is firm in stating that it *is* a necessary presupposition, a condition of possibility for the activities classed under judgment, and that includes the positions of subject and object. Consequently, from within those positions, Being as pre-originary connection is indeed presupposed, yet at the same time it is in the strictest sense unapproachable, since these positions are necessarily classed under the concept of originary division. For a subject (and in an object), Being is presupposed both as the condition of possibility for said subject (or object)'s ground, *and at the same time* presupposed in a manner which makes direct access to this ground of the subject (or object) *impossible* –

save for the possibility of an “intellectual intuition”. For the subject and for the object alike, Being turns out to be a *quasi-transcendental*.

There is, however, a ‘case’ (*Fall*), where one can speak of *Seyn schlechthin*, there is, indeed, a possible *third* answer to the question “what is Being” – intellectual intuition, where “object and subject are most deeply united”. Intellectual intuition is, in the strictest sense, the intuition of *Seyn schlechthin*, or, which is the same thing, *Seyn schlechthin* is the ‘object’ of intellectual intuition, its given. Yet the term is far from unambiguous, and in some senses creates more problems for the interpretation of this text than it resolves. The notion of intellectual intuition has a troubled history, starting from mediaeval theology, and adopted into rationalism by Leibniz²⁹. With Kant, the term comes to designate an impossibility. In contrast with sensible intuition of objects as phenomena, a (hypothetical) divine intuition which would *produce* the objects it intuits³⁰, or intellectual intuition, is the intuition of a noumenon understood ‘positively’ as “an object of non-sensible intuition”, and if we were to assume it, Kant asserts, “then we assume a special kind of intuition, .., which, however, is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand”³¹. Kant’s intellectual intuition, therefore, is impossible for us precisely because it would mean going ‘beyond the fact of consciousness’. When Fichte introduces the term in the second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, in 1797, it comes to designate the originary intuitive *act* which forms “the only firm standpoint for all philosophy. From thence we can explain everything that occurs in consciousness; and moreover, only from thence” (W., p.41). Fichte explains his

²⁹ These elements on the history of the term are primarily taken from Thomas Pfau’s *Introduction to Hölderlin*, op.cit., pp.22-23.

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure reason*, trans. P. Guyer & A. Wood, Cambridge 1997, B 145. All references to the CPR are to this edition and will be made according to the German pagination.

position vis-à-vis Kant in the following way: “The intellectual intuition alluded to in the Science of Knowledge refers, not to existence at all, but rather to action, and simply finds no mention in Kant” (W., p.46). Fichte is not concerned with the possibility of the existence of things-in-themselves; rather, he is grounding the whole enterprise of the *Wissenschaftslehre* on his own definition of intellectual intuition as nothing other than the *Tathandlung* itself: intellectual intuition is “the immediate consciousness that I act, and what I enact; it is that whereby I know something because I do it. We cannot prove from consciousness that this power of intellectual intuition exists, nor evolve from them what it may be. Everyone must discover it immediately in himself.”(W., p.38) Fichte’s intellectual intuition is the intuition acting out, and acted out by, the *Tathandlung*, it is not provable within the conceptual confines of consciousness, but it *grounds* consciousness; it does not refer to the existence of a thing in consciousness but rather *is* the *action* which *produces* consciousness. Thus Fichte goes ‘beyond the fact of consciousness’ not into Being or existence, but into action, the *Tathandlung* as foundation and ground for consciousness.

For Hölderlin, intellectual intuition is neither impossible nor, strictly speaking, grounding. If it is the intuition which would yield Being, it cannot be the intuition of a *subject*, since the position of a subject is only possible from within judgment and separation. As the intuition of a ‘whole’ that cannot be thought of as separated, intellectual intuition is not a part of judgment, and consequently cannot be sought in the subject. There is evidence that Hölderlin did indeed think such an intuition possible, even necessary. In a letter to Niethammer of February 1796, he writes of wanting “to discover the principle

³¹ CPR, B 307.

which explains to me the divisions in which we think and exist, yet which is also capable of dispelling the conflict between subject and object”, and all this “in intellectual intuition”.³² The tenor of the letter at this point is decidedly Fichtean, Hölderlin expressing the same wish to ‘discover’ the fundamental principle of human knowledge as Fichte does at the beginning of the *Grundlage*. Yet nowhere does Hölderlin attribute this intuition to a subject, transcendental or, even less so, empirical. The Fichtean notion of intellectual intuition as *Tathandlung* is also an impossibility for Hölderlin, since it presupposes, or rather it is nothing other than, the intuition of the ‘I am I’, and thus falls within the realm of judgment. It would appear that intellectual intuition, for Hölderlin, could be something akin to the Kantian regulative ideal, a necessary possibility and presupposition (as the intuition of Being) for every judgment, yet not, it would seem, itself approachable from within the realm of judgment, and thus consequently *not the intuition of a subject*. In the end, the most that can be said with any certainty about Hölderlin’s notion of intellectual intuition is that it is the intuition of *Seyn schlechthin*, the ‘of’ to be read as a curiously *disjunctive* double genitive. It is the intuition which yields Being (objective genitive) – in which case it is not the intuition of an empirical or a transcendental subject, and we would be hard pushed to imagine who or what ‘possesses’ it. It is the intuition of Being (subjective genitive) – in which case what intuits is the pre-originary, indivisible connection of subject and object and all it can presumably intuit is itself, which makes no room for object or subject.

Perhaps it would be better to attempt to determine what *Seyn schlechthin* means for Hölderlin. Yet, any positive determination of Being is inexorably

³² Hölderlin, op.cit., pp. 131-132.

caught up in the bind of intellectual intuition, since this is the only means of directly approaching it. It is unclear from the fragment itself that Hölderlin thinks that intellectual intuition actually *occurs* rather than being hypothesised as a regulative ideal. If a reading of the fragment *decides* that Hölderlin takes intellectual intuition as actually occurring, then a positive and direct approach to *Seyn schlechthin* has been found; if, however, one does not make this decision, and decides rather to leave the possibility of intellectual intuition as ambiguous as it appears, as I am doing here, then the route to such a determination or definition of Hölderlin's Being is, of necessity, negative. The fragment itself provides a significant cue to such a determination, as the section on Being closes off with the formulation: "Identity is not = to Absolute Being", an idea which lies at the core of Romantic metaphysics in general. Identity, which since Fichte must be seen as exemplified in the fundamental principle $I = I$, is classified under *Urtheil*, a product of an originary division, and a concept whose use only reigns over the already divided subject and object. Identity, more so the exemplary identity of Fichte's fundamental principle, is a concept designating the connection of subject and object *only* insofar as this connection presupposes, and emanates from within, the originary separation of subject and object, and in this way it clearly becomes a secondary concept. Being is the sphere where the originary separation does not apply, and identity consequently is not a concept capable of approaching it. Again, we must ask: what *is* Being? The prevalent interpretation of the fragment is Dieter Henrich's³³, who reads Spinoza into Hölderlin and thinks of the Being spoken of here as, fundamentally, a variation on Spinozist substance, thus at least tacitly deciding that intellectual intuition is

³³ In Henrich, *op.cit.*, pp. 71-89.

postulated in the fragment as possible, and as actually *occurring*³⁴. Being, in Henrich's reading, is not identity because it is rigorously *pre-identical*, both logically and temporally. Henrich's analysis of the intricate net of mutual presupposition between original separation (*Urtheil*), and pre-original connection (*Seyn*) tilts the balance towards the primacy of connection, and of Being. In his celebrated reading he makes much use of Isaak von Sinclair's *Philosophische Raisonnements* of 1796, reading them back into Hölderlin's earlier fragment, coming up with a Spinozist conception of Being as pre-identical, and a-thetic. Being cannot itself be posited, for all positing results from division and *Urtheilung*; it is thus not to be found in the Fichtean schema of positing and identity, and must be (*pre*)*supposed* to come *before* consciousness – in which case, as Henrich asserts, “if philosophical reasons should arise for assuming an absolute prior to all consciousness, one must then distinguish it from all consciousness. One would therefore do well not to call it misleadingly ‘I’ and to give it unequivocally the function of Spinoza’s substance.”³⁵ As a highlighting of the Hölderlinian ‘critique’ of Fichte, this reading cannot but be right; nevertheless, the Being Henrich leaves us with may come before identity, but its designation as “a-thesis”, or “peace” is merely an interpretative decision on Henrich's part, and one which is clearly made to fit with the Spinozan reading he undertakes. Moreover, Henrich seems to be ascribing to Hölderlin a type of ‘ontological foundationalism’ which not only appears as ‘stronger’ than that of Fichte, but which seems to decide that access to Being is directly and actually possible through intellectual intuition whereas, without intellectual intuition, the

³⁴ An interpretation which also runs along similar lines (and acknowledges Henrich's precedent) is Frederic Beiser's, in his chapter on Hölderlin in his *German Idealism: the Struggle against Subjectivism*, Cambridge, Mass; Harvard University Press, 2002.

³⁵ Henrich, *op.cit.*, p.86.

very ground of judgment is paradoxically only accessible indirectly (and negatively) *through* judgment. In other words, Henrich's designation of Hölderlin's Being as "a-thetic" bypasses what in my reading I termed the 'quasi-transcendental' character of Being, making Hölderlin's Being into a 'simple' ground for the operations of judgment, or a mere pre-original 'position' before judgement and before identity.

There is, however, as I have already indicated, another possible reading of Hölderlin's notion of Being, one that does not take "not = to identity" as meaning *before*, or *only* before identity. For this one must take a closer look at the exact *letter*, which is to say the *rhetoric*, of the fragment, rather than having to make the interpretative decisions that Henrich makes on the basis of the shadowy status of intellectual intuition. What the section on Judgment begins with is a straightforward definition of its subject, complete with a copula: "Judgment... *is* the original separation...". What the section on Being begins with is *not a definition*: "Being *expresses* the connection of subject and object" ("*Seyn drückt die Verbindung des Subjects und Objects aus*"). As A. Warminski writes: "Whereas Judgment is, Being expresses, means, signifies, *names*".³⁶ Being cannot itself, in the strictest sense, *be* the connection of subject and object, since the very presence of subject and object can only be determined from within the purview of Judgment, separation. If Being *is* the connection between subject and object, it can only be so in the hypothetical and ante-thetical situation where subject and object are united in such a way as for them to be indivisible – that is, *not* subject and object as we understand them from within the realm of *Urtheil*. Yet this realm of division is the only realm from which judgments, principles,

³⁶ A. Warminski, op.cit., p.8.

propositions are possible. Reading intellectual intuition as merely akin to a Kantian regulative ideal and not as actually occurring, Being can only ever be approached from within the realm of separation which presupposes it – and as such, the connection between subject and object that Being names *is* not, it can only be *expressed*. ‘We’, the subjects of philosophy, are always already situated within division, the division in which subject and object find themselves connected only through the relation of the one to the other, as connection, as identity. The already divided fraction which is the I *for* the I is the necessary precondition for all judgment, as it carries with it the originary separation that judgment is. For ‘us’, then, Being *expresses*, names, the connection of subject and object – which is not to say that Being is simply expression, or much less so representation itself. It is rather to say that Being can only ever be approached, can only ever be thought, from within judgment, as that which judgment itself presupposes but can never really reach. And from this, the establishment of the inexorable realm of division, though the fragment goes no further, it is a small step to an ontology of expression, representation, and signs. This, in part, is where we get to with Novalis.

III. Beyond Fichte II: Novalis' *Fichte-Studien*.

Novalis' *Fichte-Studien* is a collection of notes written from the autumn of 1795 to the autumn of 1796 which indeed seems to support its editorially imposed title in being a sustained exploration of problems posed by the first presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*³⁷. Yet it can be argued that, though Novalis begins the notebooks in direct engagement with Fichte's concepts and terminology, he fundamentally alters the application of these concepts and also radically transforms their synthesis, to the extent that the philosophical positions that can be extracted from them are uniquely his own. They, furthermore, present perhaps the single richest textual source for an investigation into Romantic metaphysics.

There is no evidence to suggest that Novalis had read Hölderlin's fragment, and yet there is a lot to suggest that both as a critique of Fichte and as an autonomous philosophical endeavour, the *Fichte-Studien* share with *Seyn, Urtheil...* a great deal of their positions, and the core of thought which constitutes them both as Romantic metaphysics. The notebooks are a vast array of thoughts, some of which take their departure directly from the *Wissenschaftslehre* and

³⁷ The studies themselves are not presented as a reading of the *Wissenschaftslehre* alone, and it has to be noted that, at least judging from what texts of Fichte's could have been available to Novalis at the time of writing the *Fichte-Studien*, there is chiefly one other Fichtean treatise which is directly addressed by Novalis – this is Fichte's essay on the origin of language (*Von der Sprachfähigkeit und dem Ursprunge der Sprache*). Novalis' linguistic theories will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter.

some where Fichte's concepts have undergone such a complete transformation as to warrant calling the results decidedly non-Fichtean. Moreover, there is no denying that there are confusing reprises, even straight contradictions in the fragments, so extracting a unitary philosophical position, or even a semi-systematic thought from them is strictly speaking impossible. I aim to present a picture of the metaphysics explored in the fragments, but this picture is far from the systematic exposition of concepts found in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and, due to the fragments' multiplicity, it is also going to be very different from the sustained engagement with Hölderlin's single sheet of paper of some 500 words. However, the horizon of thought opened up by Hölderlin's fragment is one which Novalis expands into his own. This horizon is made up of elements of both appropriation of, and disengagement from Fichtean positions. Novalis builds his ontology on the Fichtean notion of the originality and primacy of activity, and his philosophy is one which takes seriously the Fichtean claim to ground the freedom of the moral subject. Novalis' notion of imagination is a productive reading of Fichte's and one of the pivotal points of his ontology. Moreover there is little denying that it is Fichte's painstaking dialectical method which Novalis truly makes his own, and that the complexity of dialectical relations between determinations of concepts in the fragments is parallel to that of Fichte and only lacks Hegel's notion of progressive systematic development. But, to return to Hölderlin, Novalis also departs from certain Fichtean conceptions. As with Hölderlin, there is a basic disavowal of the Fichtean foundationalist,thetic drive, a mistrust which is expressed in the relegation of identity from a primary, unconditioned, fundamental principle to a secondary concept; and, as with Hölderlin, commensurate to this, there is an opening up of

the sphere of inquiry, an opening up to a notion of Being more originary than, and radically different from the self-positing of identity of the Fichtean 'I am I'.

The concept of identity, even the Aristotelian law which is the basis of Fichte's unconditional first principle, is one which comes under severe critical scrutiny, even from the very first entry in the notebooks.

"The statement a is a is nothing but a positing, a differentiating, and a linking... In order to make a more distinct, a is divided... The essence of identity can only be put forward as a *pseudoproposition* (*Scheinsatz*). We leave the *identical* in order to represent it."³⁸

From the Fichtean origins of positing, differentiating, and linking through division, which correspond with the three fundamental principles of the *Grundlage*, Novalis arrestingly claims that the resulting proposition or principle is but a proposition-in-appearance, not the unconditioned first principle. Nothing in the fragment, apart from that *Scheinsatz* of course, can be said to come from outside the principles set by Fichte, and yet Novalis manages to extract the fundamental character of identity, i.e., that it is the product of a division, in such a way as already to suggest that the very grounding of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is amiss. Where Fichte takes the proposition I=I to be the only certain foundation for philosophy, Novalis sees identity as something already left aside in representation, and seems to suggest that nothing but a pseudoproposition will

³⁸ Novalis, *Schriften*, ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl, Gerhard Schulz, Vol II, p. 104. All references to Novalis' *Schriften* shall hereafter be given by volume number, page number, and fragment number – in this case, II, 104, 1. All translations are my own, though available translations of selected fragments have been consulted. The full translation of the fragments under the title *Fichte Studies*, translated by Jane Kneller, Cambridge; Cambridge UP, 2003 has

result from the attempt to posit it as absolute ground. Like Hölderlin, Novalis sees identity as a strictly secondary concept: “Identity is a subaltern concept. That which is being-positing (*das Gesetzseyn*) in general cannot be identical”. (II, 187, 247). Novalis also, in a manner very much like Hölderlin’s, states, “Being does not express identity”(II, 247, 454). On a first, yet uncomplicated reading therefore, Novalis’ metaphysics is already a radical critique of Fichte’s, insofar as it makes the Fichtean unconditioned first principle into a pseudoproposition, and views identity as a secondary determination presupposing division and separation. Furthermore, and even more radically, Novalis directly goes against Fichte’s primary thesis in asserting that being-positing (*Gesetzseyn*) is *not* being identical. If the Fichtean I posits itself and posits itself as identical to itself, for Novalis the very being of being-positing cannot be subsumed under the category of identity.

If the Fichtean first principle is almost derided as a pseudoproposition³⁹, this should not be taken to mean that Novalis has arrived at a firmer, more solid and inexorable first principle but rather that his position on the very possibility of a first principle is far more guarded. He still uses the language of the first principle, of foundationalism, but what he proposes is a far cry from Fichte. In one fragment, he states: “A kind of proposition of reciprocal determination, a pure law of association seems to me must be the supreme grounding proposition – a hypothetical proposition”(II, 176, 234). The ‘supreme grounding proposition’ consists of the pure law of association (*Associations-gesetz*),

only been made available during the very last days of the preparation of this thesis and it has therefore been impossible to consult it.

³⁹ A *caveat* should immediately be added here. If there is a sense in which the word *Scheinsatz*, to the degree that it means ‘pseudo-proposition’, takes on a discernible derisory tone, Novalis’ further elaborations of the notion of *Schein* as ‘appearance’ and ‘illusion’ in the notebooks point

obtained by the primacy of *relationality* in reciprocal determination (*Wechselbestimmung*), and not by the secondary determination of identity, and, what is more, the proposition is no more a proper proposition than is that of identity. Where the proposition of identity was a pseudoproposition, this highest proposition is paradoxically only a hypothetical proposition. Novalis seems altogether reluctant to admit that the supreme principle would amount to a proposition proper, and is content to have it be simply a hypo-thesis, less and yet more than Fichte's thesis. In other words, being-positing (*Gesetzseyn*) is thought of as both more primary than the pro-position of identity and yet as less primary than the 'pure law of association'. The 'hypo-thesis' of *Wechselbestimmung* is conceptually anterior to being-positing, or to pure thesis; the law of association is thus *not yet* a being-positing, a thesis, and at the same time it is that which being-positing presupposes, its *hypothesis*. In any case, another fragment tells us, "The supreme principle must absolutely be nothing given, but rather something made freely, something *fabricated*, something *invented*, in order for a metaphysical system which starts from, and moves towards, freedom to be grounded." (II, 273, 568). Again, on the one hand, this statement seems to want to be faithful to some of the basic tenets of Fichteanism, namely the enterprise of grounding metaphysics on the concept of freedom, and yet it goes completely against the foundationalist grain of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to assert that the supreme principle is not an a priori given. What the exact ramifications of Novalis' position vis-à-vis Fichte are remains to be fully grasped but suffice it to say, for the moment, that it seems clear that for Novalis the fundamental, supreme principle does not take the form of identity, the form of a proposition, the form of

towards a more fundamental, and more directly *positive* determination, which is further analysed

thesis. If anything, the cited fragments suggest that its form is to be sought in reciprocal determination, (*Wechselbestimmung*), in a hypo-thetical relationality presupposed by any proposition.

Novalis does not, as Hölderlin does, make explicit the contradistinction between identity and Being, but the entries are littered with pronouncements suggesting that Being, as it is conceived of here, is indeed what lies beyond and before the order of identity. Firstly, and most fundamentally, it is Being which is consistently related to the relationality of change, the *Wechsel* which lies over and against identity as the supreme principle. This cannot be taken to mean that Being is itself that principle, if by that one understands a Fichtean foundational principle; as the previous fragments implied, the very notion of such a foundational principle is radically undermined by what is at stake here. Being, for Novalis, comes to designate that which comes before, or that which goes beyond positing (and also, commensurately, beyond being-positing: *Seyn* before the *Gesetzseyn*)⁴⁰ and beyond identity in that Being is thought of as the primacy of relation and change. Whereas for Fichte, Being is commensurate, identical with positing, Novalis thinks of Being as the condition of possibility for any such positing or being-positing, and consequently also as the condition of possibility of identity. Like Hölderlin's, Novalis' ontology is one where Being is assigned a space 'outside' identity and which identity, propositions, judgment in general presupposes, but unlike Hölderlin's, this is an ontology which leaves no doubt as to its dynamic, kinetic character. Being for Novalis comes before the positing of identity because it is the movement of relation which makes identity possible,

later in this section.

⁴⁰ If this is true, as the ensuing analysis hopes to show, then it would not be altogether premature to suggest that the *Fichte-Studien* are nothing less than a precursor of the Heideggerian ontico-

and there is no clearer marker of the radically new ontology mobilised here than its conception of Being as the originary productive relation, the movement which yields fixed determinations of concepts such as identity⁴¹. Novalis' ontology is nothing if not relational.

“I am – means I find myself in a general relation, or *I change*.”(II, 247, 455).

“Being expresses the relation of whole to part, and of part to whole”. (II, 194, 276).

“Being does not express an absolute constitution – rather only a relation of essence to a property in general – an ability to be determined. It is an absolute relation. Nothing in the world merely is; Being does not express identity.”(II, 247, 454)

Being for Novalis is that which comes before any determination and which makes for the possibility of any such determination; Being is absolute relation, the relation of part to whole without which neither part nor whole would have any determination. It is the movement of relation, or change, which is itself never arrested in a fixed determination but which alone makes possible every determination.

ontological difference, although the terminology of positing, of *setzen* and the *Gesetzteyn* is the terminology of Fichte and not that of Heideggerian ontology.

⁴¹ Curiously, this brings Novalis closer to Hegel's own conception of Being as the inauguration of a relational (dialectical) movement which yields categories and determinations of concepts in his *Logic*. I aim to show in the course of this section (but see also chapter 3) how Romantic

Perhaps the most daring and the most metaphorically precise designation of Being in the *Fichte-Studien* occurs in a group of sustained ontological explorations of the Fichtean absolute I towards the end of the notebook's run, and names Being (*seyn*) as *hovering* (*schweben*).

“All being, being in general, is nothing other than being free – *hovering* between extremes that must necessarily be both united and divided. All reality radiates from this luminous point of hovering – everything is contained within it. Object and subject exist because of this luminous point, and not the other way around.”(II, 266, 555)

And: “Being, being I, being free, and hovering are synonyms.”(II, 267, 556)

This hovering is the precise metaphorical determination of the relation which is Being, it is the *Wechselbestimmung* that forms the law of the supreme principle, and yet, in the strictest sense, it is *not* a determination but the *determining power*, or determining activity which produces determinations by uniting and separating extremes or oppositions. The correspondences with Hölderlin's fragment are striking. Being is conceived of as the hovering relation which yields the determinations of subject and object, performing both the connecting relation *and* in this case explicitly also the dividing one, the relation Hölderlin names judgment. It may seem at first that therein lies a difference, that Hölderlin's being only expresses the relation of connection between opposites,

ontology, despite the common emphasis on relationality, is fundamentally at odds with the

where for Novalis Being brings about both separation and connection. It is worth remembering, however, that for Hölderlin, Being has a quasi-transcendental status as that which is presupposed by the separating relations of judgment. For Hölderlin, Being is the direct source of the connecting relation but also, indirectly, the source of the dividing relation since it is presupposed by the direct source, which is judgment. I do not wish to claim that Novalis collapses the distinction between connection and division, and therefore collapses judgment into Being for, as I will show later, the distinction is operative on another level in the *Fichte-Studien* – but at this moment it is important to note that Novalis stresses the absolute relationality and hovering productivity of Being: Being is the absolute relation, only secondarily can the relation itself be determined as a connecting or a dividing one. Being therefore is not identity, nor is it determined difference since it is presupposed as the activity of hovering which produces all determinations of difference and identity. Being as hovering can be called not difference, but *differencing*⁴², the activity which produces fixed determinations of difference and identity by endlessly hovering in between oppositional extremes, by creating and occupying the space *between* difference and identity. This is how the Romantic ontology of hovering is also, therefore, an ontology of differencing as verb/activity presupposed by difference as noun/determination – and in this there can be little doubt that the Romantics were on their own. Fichte's metaphysics is but a point of departure for such an ontology; equally, Schelling's later move towards a philosophy of indifference seems a far cry from the Being-as-differencing of Novalis; and, even more so, the ontology of progressive becoming mobilised by Hegel, also stands at a distance from an

Hegelian project.

ontology emanating from the ‘luminous point’ of hovering, of infinite productive differencing that is at stake here.

Nevertheless, what the notion of Being as hovering brings to the fore, despite the evident departure from Fichte, is the conceptual debt to Fichte which is paramount in the notebooks. Hovering is a designation of Fichte’s for the power of the productive imagination, and this, as I will show later, is Novalis’ radical appropriation and expansion of Fichte’s term. What is more, Novalis’ Being is unthinkable without Fichte’s absolute I, with which Novalis constantly equates it. Firstly because the absolute I is absolutely free, both in Novalis and in Fichte. Novalis echoes a lot of the Fichtean pronouncements on the primacy of the ethical, free I over the determined empirical I of cognition. For Novalis, “morality must be at the heart of our existence, if it is to be what it wants to be for us.”(II, 266, 556) yet the absolutely free I of moral agency is such only in so far as it is equated with Being and hovering, only insofar as “Being, being I, being free, and hovering are synonyms.”(II, 267, 556) Whereas for Fichte the absolute freedom of the moral I is juxtaposed to the relative limitation and determination of the empirical I, Novalis situates freedom at the level of differencing, the activity of Being, and for him the I is but the infinite striving (itself a notion of Fichtean origin) *towards* Being: “An infinite realisation of Being would be the I’s destiny and determination. It would strive evermore towards Being.”(II, 267, 556). This comes from the same fragment that nonetheless told us that Being, Being I and being free are synonyms. What is at stake here is (and this would be in keeping with Hölderlin’s frustration with the Fichtean I being at once absolute and yet able to determine itself as empirical) an

⁴² The term is taken from David Farrell Krell, *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease and Death in*

implied distinction between the freedom of the striving I as it approaches “the ideal of Being” on the one hand, and the absolute freedom of Being as hovering between extremes, a freedom which is constituted purely by the designation of Being as relation and as differencing. The infinite realisation of Being’s freedom is always *on the way* for the striving I, it is its destiny and determination – but Being *qua* hovering, Being as relation is always already realised freedom in the activity of differencing, before and beyond any determination.

Yet possibly the greatest debt to Fichte is the conception of the absolute I not as substance, but as activity, the dual activity of the *Tathandlung*, at once action and the deed done, at once producer and product. For Novalis the *Tathandlung* is important not as an act which secures the positing of the I, and the positing of the I as identical, as it was for Fichte, but as a constitutive operation of Being itself. Activity (*Tätigkeit*) in the *Fichte-Studien* stands in an inexorable relation with Being. Firstly, Being, insofar as it is designated as hovering, is linked precisely to infinite differencing activity, the activity of hovering between extremes, the productive activity which yields determinations. Furthermore, Novalis sets the wheels of his dialectical thinking in motion and connects activity to both the notions of essence and of property *through* Being. Here is part of the fragment in question:

“Activity is the originary property (*Eigenschaft*) of essence (*Wesen*), Being the originary essence of property. Activity only allows itself to be shown through Being, Being through activity.”(II, 238, 438)

For Novalis essence and property stand dialectically opposed to each other, so that when activity is designated as the originary property of essence, and Being the originary essence of property, the link between Being and activity becomes itself a dialectical one, such that, not that one is or becomes the other in sublation, but that one is only ever thinkable from within the horizon of the other. Essence is not to be confused with Being itself, as it is a concept, like property, applied by the understanding, and not, by implication, the differencing activity which makes understanding possible in the first place. We read on:

“We know nothing of essence other than that it is that which is opposed to property in general. However, we can only determine properties through properties, and indeed this can be shown only through an examination of these properties, which are opposed to one another – for here we find the simple activity of essence – which appears in its opposing itself to itself.”(II, 239, 438).

Novalis is here giving his own version of Hölderlin’s distinction between Being and Judgment: from within our empirical standpoint, the standpoint of theoretical cognition, we are only ever dealing with properties of given objects, which properties appear to be opposed to each other; the essence of an object lies in the simple *activity* of opposition, the *differencing* of properties and can only appear to us as the opposition of essence to itself. The originary property of essence is therefore activity, the activity of self-opposition and hovering; similarly the originary essence of property is Being, that is Being as

differencing, the Being producing the ever-changing properties.⁴³ From within our horizon entirely constrained by the activity of essence producing opposing properties, we conceive of activity as the originary property of essence, and we conceive of Being, Being as differencing, as the originary essence of property. It can be argued that this is Aristotelian metaphysics only, to use one of Novalis' favourite expressions and methodological tools, *ordine inverso*, in reverse: the essence of a thing is what appears to us as ever-changing activity, whereas its properties, its accidents appear as the opposing determinations yielded by the differencing activity of Being.

Essence and property are of course concepts pertaining to the object of cognition, but the situation gets, if anything, even more complicated when the focus is on the subject of cognition, and on consciousness. Novalis asserts: "Consciousness is a being outside of being which is nevertheless within being."(II, 106, 2) This can only be made comprehensible if considered as a rendition of the Fichtean problematic of self-consciousness as the interrelation between the Absolute I and the empirical I of cognition. Consciousness is able to cognise its own being though it still forms part of it, or, in other words, to be (self-)conscious is to know myself as an object of cognition whilst remaining within myself as a subject. That Novalis recasts the question in terms of Being, something which Fichte himself would not be able or inclined to do, is already an auspiciously daring beginning, but more follows: "But what is that? Outside-of-

⁴³ Richard W. Hannah, in his *The Fichtean Dynamic of Novalis' Poetics*, (Peter Lang, Bern 1981) conducts a similar analysis of the dialectical opposition between essence and property and links it to the Fichtean distinction between substance and accident, coming to conclude that "the substances of the mediate, empirical realm are the accidents of the absolute substance" (p. 96). I do not wish to dispute the plausible link with Fichte here, yet it should be remarked that collapsing the opposition essence-property all too squarely onto the opposition substance-accident not only simplifies the dialectical movements of the *Fichte-Studien*, but also allows for a thinking of the Absolute as substance, which may or may not be appropriate with regard to

being need not be a proper being. An improper being outside of being is an image – thus, outside-of-being must be an image of being within being. Consciousness therefore is an image of being within being.” (II, 106, 2) This marks Novalis’ opening of epistemology, the theory of consciousness and self-consciousness to a generalised theory of representation from within his original ontology.⁴⁴ It maintains that consciousness is always already caught up in a schema of (re)presentation, what he will elaborate as a theory of the sign. Knowledge and consciousness are only ever possible from within the schema of (re)presentation, only ever conceivable as an image of being within being. What is implied here is similar to Hölderlin’s assertion that cognition is only ever possible from within the perspective of judgment and separation. Being in itself is only ever approachable from within (re)presentation, which is why being is

Fichte, but is certainly inappropriate for Novalis’ conception of an absolute *Schweben* that cannot be subsumed under a category as rigid and static as substance.

⁴⁴ This, the second fragment in the notebooks, is the first elaboration of a sustained semiotic theory in the *Fichte-Studien* and beyond. I will have the chance to mobilise it again, in the chapter which follows and which treats ‘semiotics’ as a major development in Romantic epistemology. For the moment I am content in looking at the fragment from the point of view of a theory of representation. Wm. Arctander O’ Brien, in his study *Novalis: Signs of Revolution* has painstakingly argued for the importance of the fragment, and he has argued it from the perspective that Novalis’ semiotics are a break from traditional theories of representation. For O’ Brien, even the opening gambit of the *Fichte-Studien*, the attempt by Novalis to analyse the *Scheinsatz* of identity $A=A$, has little to do with representation (*Vorstellung*) but rather with presentation (*Darstellung*), even to the degree that this presentation is shown to establish a loss in presentation: “the presentation of identity in language involves not a re-presentation, but a loss that only *seems* to establish or present an identity already lost in the act of presentation”(p. 84). There can be no doubt that, in these first pages of the notebooks the concept in question is that of *Darstellung* – yet to assert that presentation only results in a loss of presentation in the act of presentation is, I want to maintain, equivalent to suggesting that presentation (at least in its English usage) is *always already re-presentation*, the ‘re-’ being the marker of the difference between what is sought to be presented and what is in fact presented through the act of presentation. Ultimately, what O’ Brien is concerned to show, that Novalis’ moves offer a radical break from, and within the presentation of identity, is exactly concomitant with what I wish to uphold, namely that Novalis’ ‘discovery’ of semiotics is precisely the discovery of a horizon, like that of Hölderlin’s judgment, that is inescapable for the empirical subject, a horizon which, moreover, is bound up with re-presentation. To highlight the necessary complicity of presentation as *Darstellung*, with representation as I have just defined it, I will hereinafter refer to *Darstellung* as (re)presentation. For another interesting reading of Novalis’ semiotics see Geza von Molnár, *Romantic Vision, Ethical Context: Novalis and Artistic Autonomy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 29-56.

said to *express* connections, and why even the very designation hovering is a representation, a *metaphor* for Being, and never Being itself.

Novalis has another general designation for this process of (re)presentation from which (and from which alone) Being can be ‘approached’ by consciousness – he calls it, in various fragments dotted near the beginning of the notebooks, *Schein*, a word which carries the meanings of ‘appearance’ and ‘illusion’ together, and which had already been used in connection with Fichte’s ‘pseudo proposition’ (*Scheinsatz*) of identity. *Schein* is connected by Novalis to seemingly all the most important words/concepts governing any philosophical investigation: to truth, and to mind, or spirit (*Geist*) in one fragment (“Truth – fiction or *Schein*”, “*Schein* is *Geist*”, II, 179, 234); in the same fragment, to thought (“All thought is thus an art of *Schein*”, II, 181, 234); and, in another, to Being itself: “*Schein* is the reality of all Forms. Being is the reality of all matter [...] No Being, no *Schein* - no *Schein*, no Being.” (II, 183, 236). *Schein* is thus undoubtedly a key notion, since it designates something which is in theory opposed to Being, yet which lies underneath any ‘approach’ (by way of ‘truth’, ‘mind’, or ‘thought’) to Being, inextricably linked with it as form to matter. This last, seemingly Aristotelian, conception of *Schein* as ‘form’ is in effect anything but, since what takes the role of form is not only appearance but also, just as well, illusion. Furthermore, the gordian knot tied between *Schein* and *Seyn* entails that Being is not conceivable, knowable, ‘approachable’ in any other way than through *Schein*, or, in other words, that the absolute realm of Being as the hovering, differencing activity producing individual determinations is only ever approachable through its appearance (which at the same time is always, and of necessity, an illusion – a ‘fiction’), through (re)presentation in general. In this

case we are dealing with a general theory of (re)presentation or *Schein*, as *Schein* effectively forms the only possible horizon from which Being can be thought, in a manner strikingly reminiscent of Hölderlin's Judgment, and clearly not with a concept of representation, or one of appearance drawn out of the classical/Platonic conception of *mimesis*.

Yet representation also has a more particular, or localised, meaning, as *Vorstellung*. The dialectic of representation (*Vorstellung*) in the *Fichte-Studien* is incredibly complex and passes through numerous determinations of opposites within representation. There is however a basic and crucial distinction to be made, and that Novalis makes by marking the "difference between representing, and representing something"(II, 226, 330). The latter is the purview of consciousness, the representation *of* objects or *of* the subject as object. The former is the sheer activity of representation thought *in the absence* of a represented object. This activity is the activity of the productive imagination, which, for Novalis and Fichte alike, is the power which produces representations of objects. The productive imagination in Fichte is already linked with the power to hover between extremes of representation in the act of representation, but with Novalis it becomes explicitly the synthesising activity of differencing. "The imagination is the connecting copula (*Mittelglied*), the synthesis, the power of change."(II, 186, 246) The imagination is therefore not so much a faculty as it is the activity which at once yields the represented object and its own activity as a representing, a power of change, a hovering, and a differencing. It is not so much a part of consciousness as that which makes consciousness possible in the first place, it is the imagination which produces the 'image of being within being', for the activity of the imagination is the same as the differencing and

hovering of Being. It is the same absolutely free activity which the striving I takes as its destiny in the realisation of Being; it is absolutely free insofar as it is sheer representing, hovering between opposites, or differencing, yet it has the productive capacity to form represented objects for intuition and consciousness. It is not to be thought of as a faculty of the subject insofar as it is that which makes the subject, which is itself only a representation, an image of being within being, a “simple idea and nothing more”, possible. It is not itself equated with Being but its activity of hovering and differencing is the same as the activity of Being, the one producing representations for consciousness, the other ontological determinations of itself.

What lies at the core of the ontology of the *Fichte-Studien*, and of Romantic metaphysics in general, is a conception of Being as the activity of hovering or differencing, as an originary *productive relation*. The products of this relation are fixed determinations which can become, through representation (*Vorstellung*), objects of consciousness, including the subject as object of self-consciousness. The determinations of subject, object, consciousness, essence, property, proposition, principle, identity, difference, are all products of this infinite activity of differencing and hovering. Though we are firmly caught within the sphere of (re)presentation as *Schein* and determination, for that is the very essence of the differencing activity: to *produce* determination and to make itself appear as *Schein*, Novalis was perhaps the first to lay the ontological stress not on any of the various determinations such as identity, but on the sheer activity of production that makes them possible. (Re)presentation may be the only horizon possible from within which such an activity may be grasped, and as such it can never be grasped in itself, yet Being as this activity, as differencing, is

not a transcendent notion – along with every determination of being, along with every representation of the imagination there lies, undetermined, un-represented, perhaps one should say unexpressed, the mark of the very activity which produces them. Furthermore, it is crucial to stress once again at this point, that this activity of differencing which underwrites, as it were, all possible ontological determinations, is equated, within Novalis' work and, by extension, throughout Romantic metaphysics, with the primary relationality of the *Wechselbestimmung*, what I earlier discussed as the ontological hypothesis. Thus, Romantic ontology takes the guise of an absolutely originary relationality, where Being itself, in its designation as hovering and differencing is productive and relational *absolutely*. As I will have the chance to discuss further later, this can only amount to a notion of the Absolute which, unlike the Absolutes of Idealism (in Schelling or Hegel), or indeed unlike *any* such notions of the Absolute, at least before the advent of Heideggerian differential ontology, is entirely and consistently paradoxical: the Absolute, in this case Being as that which lies prior to any further ontological (or epistemological) positions, prior therefore to subject, object, essence, property, consciousness, *et al*, is a *relational Absolute*, which can only (re)present itself within the horizon of *Schein*. A further investigation of the horizon of (re)presentation, the horizon of Hölderlin's Judgment and Novalis' *Schein*, amounts to an investigation into the ways with which the activity of differencing, the productive relation that is Being can be thought, 'approached', made knowable – in other words, it becomes a matter of *epistemology*, which is the concern of the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: ROMANTIC EPISTEMOLOGY: FROM *THEORIA* TO *POIESIS*.

Introduction.

Novalis, in the crucial fragment from the *Fichte-Studien* where he introduces the central concept of Being as hovering (*schweben*), also writes this:

“all production approaches Being, and Being is hovering”, or

“*alles Hervorbringen geht aufs Seyn, und Seyn ist schweben*”(II, 267, 556).

Production here refers to the activity, the operation of the I as it “strives” in its approach towards Being. This approach of the I, already delineated in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, is what constitutes the concerns of epistemology. Epistemology is usually understood as a term denoting the theory of knowledge; if ontology asks the question “what is Being?”, epistemology follows by asking

“how can I *know* Being?”, which can subsequently be glossed as “how can I know the world and/or myself?”, inasmuch as “the world” and “I” are imparted with Being. With the Romantics, the question of epistemology is unquestionably framed by the Kantian notion of transcendental modes of cognition, and more particularly by their elaboration into what can be called a subjective transcendental framework in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. Thus, epistemology for the Romantics begins its operations in Fichte’s manner, asking, “how does the *I* come to know the *not-I* (the world) and itself?” The Romantics, as I showed in the previous chapter, took the Fichtean conception of the *I* as *activity* (the *Tathandlung*) seriously; their epistemology therefore seeks to chart the activity of the *I* as it approaches Being in cognition, and is thus eminently dynamic in character. In this respect it can be shown to be related to the dynamic epistemological stories of the development of consciousness and cognition found in the ‘mature’ texts of German Idealism, in Schelling and Hegel. However, where Schelling or Hegel present fully elaborated, complex and complete epistemological *systems*, where the aim is to present the full picture of a subject’s way towards the cognition of both the world and itself, Novalis, Schlegel, and Hölderlin are nowhere near as systematic in their endeavours⁴⁵. Romantic

⁴⁵ Here, I will have to allow a possible exception, Schlegel’s lectures on *Transcendentalphilosophie*, which he gave upon his return to Jena from Berlin in 1800-1801. The lecture course itself is now lost, and what remain are notes taken by a student – with an irony that would not have been lost on Schlegel, his earliest (though not his only) attempt at the creation of a system is itself in fragments. I will not be dealing with *Transcendentalphilosophie* at any length and this because, although it arguably represents Schlegel’s most complete elaboration of his philosophical positions, it adds little to what can already be glimpsed in the published *Athenäum* fragments and in his notebooks. As I hope to make clear later (viz. Chapter 4) the fragment as a form of writing is of cardinal importance in Romanticism, and it seems to me that more justice is being done to Schlegel in particular, and to Romanticism in general, if attention is focused on what can be derived from the fragments. After all, Schlegel himself was decisively ambivalent towards philosophical systematicity, as witnessed in the following extraordinary paradox, published as *Athenäum* fragment 53, and which I cannot resist quoting again as a response: “It is equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two.”

epistemology, just like everything else Romantic, is in fragments – but that should not mean that it not be taken seriously.

Novalis, to return to the *Fichte-Studien*, is quite specific when he writes “all *production* approaches Being”, and in this he offers us a glimpse of what Romantic epistemology has at its heart: a theory of production. This is a direct result of what I analysed as the Romantics’ *ontological* notions, since Being itself is, for them, a differencing, hovering activity which produces ontological determinations. Yet, even though it can be argued, as I tried to do, that Fichte’s epistemology is also such a theory of production, the Romantics take production one step further. What I want to assert chiefly in this chapter is that for Romanticism, epistemology becomes a theory of production with a very particular and radical new configuration – as the theory of the production of *poetry*. Obviously, Hölderlin and Novalis are renowned primarily as poets, and Schlegel certainly had aspirations to become, if not a poet, a novelist, with his ill-fated *Lucinde*, but it is not their personal literary aspirations that drive all three of them to such a position in their theoretical writings. Epistemology becomes poetology, or the theory of poetic production, in their hands, for reasons which are purely *philosophical*, and it is in this that they represent an altogether new and radical moment and position in the history of philosophy, and of German Idealism in particular.

Investigating this philosophical impetus driving Novalis, Schlegel, and Hölderlin towards an epistemology which serves, equally at the same time, as poetology, has to begin with the ontological foundations of Romantic philosophy, and more precisely, with the notion that Being, Being *as such*, (what could also be called the in-itself, following Kant) even in its understanding as

differencing activity and as hovering, is, strictly speaking, *inaccessible* to the subject. In *Seyn, Urtheil* Hölderlin asserted that every subjective position is already caught up in the ‘arche-separation’ of judgment, and in the *Fichte-Studien* Novalis takes the recognition one step further, arguing that *Schein*, as appearance and also as illusion, is intricately linked with *Seyn*, and is in fact the only way in which Being comes to be (re)presented for the subject. In the discussion which follows, I am using the term (re)presentation in precisely this manner: it is *not* mimetic representation, insofar as the Platonic legacy of *mimesis* is necessarily thought of as a completely secondary ‘moment’, a *false* epistemology⁴⁶; (re)presentation with the Romantics, and as I am using it here, is the *only possible*, necessarily oblique yet straightforwardly necessary, means of access to the inaccessible realm of Being. Even though, for the most part, the German word here at stake is *Darstellung*, and even though its ordinary meaning is presentation, and not *representation*, what becomes apparent in the *Fichte-Studien* (but also, as I intend to show, in Schlegel and in Hölderlin) is that presentation as *Darstellung* necessarily entails *representation*. This is entirely due to the transcendental framework the Romantics are working with. The act of presentation, and more particularly the act of presentation which occurs as language, thought transcendently, involves two moments: the presentation of that which is to be presented (the object of cognition, the referent, or, as Novalis will say, the signified), and, *always and at the same time*, the presentation of the act of presentation itself, which I am here attempting to highlight by writing (re)presentation. Novalis introduces the idea of a ‘transcendental schema’, which is the bearer of the presentation of the act of presentation, that which allows all

⁴⁶ This Platonic concept of representation as a false theory of knowledge can be seen throughout

linguistic-semiotic presentation to happen whilst, at the same time, always marking a particular presentation with the stamp of its transcendental condition of possibility. This double presentation takes on the form of reflection, already theorised as an epistemological ‘tool’ by Fichte, and, for Schlegel in particular, the form of the dominant Romantic trope, irony. For Novalis, the *Darstellung* of Being entails a remarkably modern conception of semiotics, a theory of language centred on “the transcendental schema”, as well as the extraordinary, but far from casual, remark that knowledge is itself a sign. In this way, Romantic epistemology becomes semiotics, caught within the signification processes of language as the only possible epistemological horizon.

Yet, this is not all. In his *Monolog*, written some two years after the completion of the *Fichte-Studien*, Novalis dramatically postulates a further, second aspect by which all language, all signification, is governed. On the one hand language prevents, necessarily, access to the Being of that which it puts into words, which is what Novalis means when he asserts that we do not “speak for the sake of things”; on the other hand, the very *act* of putting things into words, the very act of linguistic *Darstellung*, the act which prevents access to things, is a marker, a sign for language’s “efficacy”, resulting in what Novalis calls “enthusiasm” by language. Couched in epistemological terms, what this means is that the act of understanding, of knowing, the process whereby an object may be (re)presented as a comprehensible and communicable word or concept is doomed to failure; but, equally, that very doomed act, if isolated as the transcendental-reflexive moment of the (re)presentation of (re)presentation is the

Plato’s work, but particularly in *The Republic*, book VII (the simile of the cave), and book X (the expulsion of the poets from the Republic).

only possible chance for understanding – in Schlegel's terms, incomprehensibility is the only chance of understanding.

Having arrived at such an epistemological double bind, the Romantics still hold on to a notion of epistemology as a theory of production. But, since the epistemological double bind has been identified as essentially a semiotic, linguistic one, production takes the meaning of linguistic production, linguistic creation – poetry. Crucially, as will become clear in the course of the chapter, this poetry is not a 'simple' versification, mere 'imaginative literature', *Dichtung*, but a concept of poetic creation, *Poesie*. In Schlegel and in Hölderlin alike, the process of poetic creation is nothing other than the process of the creation of concepts, the process whereby the poetic subject or "spirit" *produces*, in a manner which will come to resemble the epistemological stories of German Idealism, the moments of its own creation. Hölderlin's long essay on the operations of the poetic spirit, and Schlegel's famous fragments on transcendental, or Romantic, poetry both testify to the Romantic reconfiguration of epistemology as poetology, the theory of poetic production. It is this, perhaps even more than their ontology of differencing, that sets the Romantics quite apart from the traditional philosophical route. With the Romantics, the age-old Aristotelian distinction between *theoria*, epistemology as theory of knowledge, and *poiesis*, the practice of creating poems, is totally transformed. This is not to suggest that the Romantics collapse the difference between theory and practice⁴⁷,

⁴⁷ Practice, in the Aristotelian sense of *praxis* utilised by the Romantics' predecessors and contemporaries (Kant, Hegel), is, as should be obvious, yet a different matter. Novalis, Schlegel, and Hölderlin all concern themselves with practical matters, insofar as they also, after Kant, have a conception of 'practical reason', or ethics. It is not, however, my own concern in this thesis to deal with this aspect of Romanticism. The distinction which I take to be crucial is therefore that between *theoria* and *poiesis*.

philosophy and poetry – but it is to say that a *theoria* of *poiesis*, a poetology, is for them the *only theoria*, the only epistemology.

I: Epistemology and Signification in Novalis' *Fichte-Studien*.

Nowhere is the Romantic assumption of semiotic theory as the chief, indeed the *only* theory of knowledge available to the subject made more directly apparent than in the second fragment of Novalis' *Fichte-Studien* (II, 105-106, 2). Here, Novalis begins by stating that "consciousness is the sphere of knowledge", and this would be in keeping with the Fichtean terminology of the notebooks. Yet, in the first of many extraordinary moves performed in the space of a single, rather short fragment, Novalis goes on to equate knowledge with consciousness by giving them the exact same definition: knowledge is "a being outside of being that is nevertheless within being"; and "Consciousness is a being outside of being that is within being"(ibid.). Both knowledge and consciousness are defined therefore as *relations to Being*, using a paradoxical spatial metaphor denoting both the belonging and the not-belonging of knowledge/consciousness to Being. Knowledge and consciousness are situated within Being, that is to say, as Novalis asserts, they are necessarily situated within the determined being of the I; at the same time, knowledge and consciousness are just as necessarily *relations* to Being ("knowledge is a reference (*Beziehung*) to being", ibid.), they relate the I-subject to the objects of knowledge and consciousness. In one sense, this is but a simple unfolding of the operations of knowledge and consciousness according to the Fichtean transcendental-idealist tenets of I and not-I, subject and object –

what turns Novalis' formulation inexorably into a paradox is his use of the concept of Being in relation to knowledge and consciousness, or, in other words, his non-Fichtean, even anti-Fichtean insistence that epistemology be grounded on ontology. Examined *ontologically*, the fragment states, knowledge and consciousness bear a relation to Being which is both conjunctive and disjunctive, both inside and outside, at the same time.

The paradox is in need of further explanation, and Novalis provides it, right after the definition of consciousness:

“But what is that?

That which is outside of being must not be a proper (*rechtes*) being.

An improper being outside of being is an image (*Bild*) – thus, this outside-of- being must be an image of being within being.

Consciousness is therefore an image of being within being. A more detailed explanation of image. Sign. Theory of the sign. Theory of (re)presentation (*Darstellung*) or of the non-being that is within being in order to allow being to be *there in a certain way* for itself. (*für sich auf gewisse Weise daseyn zu lassen*) (II, 106, 2)

The bones of this paradoxical relation to Being that is consciousness (and knowledge, insofar as they are expressly equated) are given flesh when the relation is named *Bild*, image. Image is therefore, and again, thus far at least, *ontologically*, the ‘improper’ being, an assignation in complete accordance, it would seem, with traditional (Platonic) ontology. The radical complication, which at the same time is the ‘explanation’ of the conundrum, arises when

knowledge/consciousness is defined as that ‘improper’ being, the image, which nonetheless is situated *within* being. What is being sketched out here, and which Novalis will later take up as his ‘detailed explanation of image’ progresses through the notebooks, is a theory of knowledge *as* a theory of images, or as semiotics. Knowledge and consciousness are tantamount to a *Darstellung* of Being for and within itself; that is their ontological status and determination. Yet this *Darstellung*, though retaining the sense of its common translation as ‘presentation’, is already *representation*, it is already the operation of a representation of Being for and within itself.⁴⁸ From an ontological perspective, what knowledge amounts to is a (re)presentation of being for and within itself, and Novalis is both cleverly playful and astutely rigorous in connecting the *Dar* of *Darstellung* to the *Da* of *Daseyn* – knowledge, the fragment playfully suggests, is that which allows Being to be, or be-there (*Daseyn*), by re-presenting it to itself (*Darstellung*). Furthermore, there can be no doubt that what Novalis calls his “*Theorie der Darstellung*” is *the same* as a theory of images, signs – a theory of (re)presentation as the only possible epistemological horizon. The second fragment of the *Fichte-Studien* can thus be seen as inaugurating the establishment of semiotics as epistemology.

The promise of a ‘theory of signs’ made in the second fragment is fulfilled shortly afterwards, in fragment 11, which must be seen as the most sustained elaboration of semiotic theory in the whole of the *Fichte-Studien*. It is one of the longest fragments in the notebooks, and thus I cannot quote it whole;

⁴⁸ Novalis himself will go on to use, in the *Fichte-Studien* as well as his later notebooks, the term *Darstellung* alongside *Vorstellung*, and even the latinate *Repräsentation*. This is not to suggest that there is no definable difference in general between the three terms, but rather to intimate that the ramifications of Novalis’ semiotics are such that, with the crucial exception of the use of *Vorstellung* to express something akin to an intuition of thoughts, presentation (*Darstellung*), and

instead, I will paraphrase its arguments and provide quotations where further analysis is necessary. Novalis is first concerned with the relationship of the sign (*Zeichen*) to the signified (*Bezeichnete*), and immediately rejects the possibility of a 'natural language' where this relationship would be a necessary given for each pair of sign and signified. Both sign and signified constitute "a free effect", and are the same *only for the signifying agent (der Bezeichnende)*: "otherwise they are not the same – but this only for the signifying agent – both [the sign and the signified] are in relation to one another only in the signifying agent" (II, 108, 11). Signs are in effect arbitrary, Novalis suggests, and they can be placed in necessary relation (signifier-signified) only by the free will of the signifying agent⁴⁹. The arbitrariness of the sign is, at this moment at least, the consequence of the free will, the free choice of a determined signifying agent, who freely posits, in a (thus far) Fichtean manner, the sign *as a whole*, both signifier and signified, and their relation. This is, in an important sense, only the *first moment* in Novalis' description of the semiotic process; a *second moment*, which is not however a secondary or subordinate moment, as I hope to show in what follows, will put the freedom of the signifying agent in check, and place the production of the sign and the necessity of its internal relation transcendently *outside* a determined subject-signifying agent. For the moment, though, this freedom in the constitution of signs on the part of a signifying agent immediately creates the problem which the rest of the fragment is an attempt to resolve, namely that if the

this more than anything, again, in an *ontological* sense, is never anything other than representation. The *Darstellung* of being is the representation of being for and within itself.

⁴⁹ The notion that the relations in a sign are freely posited by a signifying agent or a determined subject has some degree of affinity with Hegel's later formulation of a theory of signs in the *Encyclopaedia* – but such superficial similarities are indeed only superficial. In the next chapter I will undertake a comparative examination of Novalis' and Hegel's semiotic theories which will demonstrate that beneath the surface there lurk unbridgeable differences in their conception of the sign.

relation between a sign and a signified is only a necessary one for a particular signifying agent, how is it then possible for this signifying relation to be communicable, and thus for the sign to be understandable, by a *second* signifying agent. Novalis wants to hold to the arbitrariness of the sign, to the notion that sign and signified are effects produced absolutely *freely* by the signifying agent (which only serves to point to his insistence on retaining fundamental Fichtean principles), but at the same time must allow for what he will call a *necessary* relation between sign and signified, if these are to be at all communicable: “Objectively and subjectively necessary signs, which are basically one and the same, are therefore the only ones through which something that is thought can be communicated” (II, 109, 11).

His resolution of these apparently contradictory necessities, much like his explication of the outside of being within being of the second fragment, rests on a paradoxical yet inexorable formulation – “free necessity” (*freye Nothwendigkeit*). He states: “The necessity of the reference of a sign to a signified must lie in a signifying agent. But in *the latter* both are freely posited. Therefore a relation of free necessity for both must exist in the signifying agent.” (ibid.) How can such a relation which is both free and necessary exist? Novalis’ answer to this particular problem constitutes possibly his most radical contribution to semiotics in general, and relies on an ingenious reworking of Kantian transcendental schematism. Now moving away from the Fichtean assumptions of the freedom of the subject, Novalis will have to appeal to an “originary schema”, which in itself amounts to nothing less than a reconfiguration of Kant’s transcendental schematism:

“The relation [between sign and signified] must be free with regard to this particular signifying agent – thus, it can only be necessary with regard to *the signifying agent in general* [*des Bezeichnenden überhaupt*] or other signifying agents. One could call free necessity self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*) – consequently self-determination would be the character of the *signifying agent in general* (...) Originary schema. One in all, all in one.” (ibid.)

If the relation between sign and signified is free for every particular signifying agent, it is nevertheless necessary for signifying agents *in general*; to couch Novalis’ words in the Kantian thought that undeniably gives them their cue, the relation may be free for each *empirical* subject but it is necessary for the *transcendental* subject in general – or rather, since Novalis does not speak of the transcendental subject, one could say that the relation between sign and signified is free for each particular empirical subject/signifying agent, but necessary *transcendentally*, necessary with regard to an a priori, self-determined transcendental schema: “Each *understandable* sign must therefore stand in a *schematic* relation to the signified.” (ibid.) The a-priori schema is in fact what carries ‘free necessity’, understood as the transcendental conditions of possibility for the constitution of a sign *as such*. *Before* the ‘freely effected’ constitution of the relation between sign and signified by a determinate subject-signifying agent, there must lie the *necessary condition of possibility* for that relation – this is precisely the “transcendental schema”, and with this notion Novalis takes a step *back* from the Fichtean notion of the absolute freedom of the subject and into the Kantian realm of transcendental, a priori conditions of possibility operating on a level entirely *prior* to any determinate subject, any signifying agent and her

capacity to constitute signs as free effects. This is why I previously insisted that the ‘moment’ of the constitution of the sign as free effect by a determined signifying agent may come first in Novalis’ own presentation of the signification process, but now comes to be placed in strictly *second place*, as coming *after* the transcendental constitution of the *necessary* relations in the sign which takes place with, and in, the *originary* schema. Thus, and even though Novalis still manages to hold on to the notion of arbitrary signs, their communicability is explained by having recourse to a transcendental schema. Just as the Kantian schema bridged the gap of incommensurability between the senses and the categories of the understanding whilst retaining their difference of order, the semiotic schema here allows for the signification process to be both essentially arbitrary and essentially communicable, *free* in its arbitrariness, yet emanating *by necessity* from the condition of possibility for the signification process in general, namely from the originary schema. Novalis goes on to determine how communication of signs through the schema is possible by recourse to the schema. The first signifying agent is able to communicate what is, for him, a *freely effected* relation between sign and signified, because the condition for this relation, insofar as the sign is to be understood, is *necessary for and in the schema*; the second signifying agent is able to recognise the necessary schematic relation accordingly. “The first signifying agent acts in accordance with the second in the sign, and the second signifying person acts in accordance with the first in the signified – a *quasi-free contract*.” (II, 110, 11) In this way, the semiotic theory of the *Fichte-Studien* is one where the understanding of the sign is wholly relational. From each particular vantage-point, be it that of the second or the first signifying agent, that of the sign or of the signified, the relation

appears to be a free and arbitrary one, yet this relation is necessary in the schema, since the schema itself and within itself is nothing other than relational: “The schema stands in a reciprocal relation (*Wechselwirkung*) with itself. Each part is only what it is in relation to the others.” (II, 109, 11) The essential relationality of the transcendental schema, analogous to the fundamental, indeed absolute, relationality that Novalis proposed as the hypo-thesis of Being, is the moment where Novalis, as I stated before, takes a curious step back from Fichteism into a reconfigured Kantian problematic. The schema allows for the positing of necessity, *not* in the particular determined relation between a sign and its signified as these are, each and every time, constituted by a determined signifying agent, but rather in the *a priori relational condition of possibility of any signifying relation itself*. Thus, every signifier necessarily *passes through*, as it were, the relational ‘grid’ of the *a priori* schema, before it can correspond to its signified. The particular relation between specific signifiers/signifieds is not necessary each and every time, which forbids the significations process from being taken as one based on the necessary “symbolic” connection of each signifier to its signified. Relationality is necessary *in the schema, and as the schema alone*. Since the schema itself is nothing if not essentially relational, what Novalis designates as necessity is the *Wechselwirkung*, the “free necessity” or “quasi-free contract” which, as the originary schema, is nothing other than the *a priori* condition of possibility for any particular, determined (and freely effected by a determined signifying agent) relation within particular signs.

This immanent essential relationality of the originary schema is what gives Novalis’ semiotic theory its unmistakably modern, even postmodern,

thrust.⁵⁰ Signs are not conceived, as they were in enlightenment epistemology, as either arbitrary or natural, and Novalis' approach foreshadows Saussure both in that it is synchronic, disregarding common 'histories' of the origin of language from Rousseau to Fichte, and in that what is called 'schema' is indeed very close to what in post-Saussurian linguistics and philosophy will be termed 'structure'. In fact, the full force of the designation of the originary schema as fully relational, or, to use a more contemporary but still relevant appellation, 'diacritical', points to it being less an equivalent of 'structure' but, since the schema is in effect what bears the conditions of possibility for the constitution of signifying structures, more akin to what the post-structuralist critique of Saussure, and in particular Jacques Derrida, calls "the structurality of structure"⁵¹. Interestingly, the fragment begins with what can be taken as a concession to linguistic 'psychologism', namely the idea that signs may be very much dependent on their users and their 'characters' – yet Novalis is careful to abstract his concept of the 'signifying agent' from any psychological determination whatsoever, and the resulting originary schema is very much completely independent, not only of psychology or character but of the very notion of subject itself. Indeed, if there is anything truly radical and groundbreaking about the semiotics of the *Fichte-Studien*, it must be the primacy of the schema over and above individual signifying agents, and, what is more,

⁵⁰ Wm. Arctander O'Brien's careful and rigorous examination of Novalis' semiotics (op.cit., pp. 97-106) is crucial in order not to leap to overhasty conclusions about Novalis' (post)modernity, as O'Brien shows clearly the indebtedness of the fragment to already existing semiotic theories, including Fichte's. I have appropriated a few elements from his study in what follows.

⁵¹ Derrida uses this formulation in the opening paragraph of "Structure, Sign, and Play", in Derrida, *Writing and Difference* and it is clearly a notion which informs his critique of structuralism in the entire text. Again, I need to warn against a hasty identification of Romanticism with post-structuralism, Novalis with Derrida. I am in no way suggesting that Novalis 'prefigures' Derrida in any simple way; what needs to be noted, however, is that Novalis' semiotics are constituted in such a way as to pre-empt the critique of post-structuralism. This is a

over and above signs and signifieds themselves. In a move comparable to Kant's famous 'Copernican revolution', Novalis clearly asserts that individual signs and individual signifieds alike are only ever communicable if one accepts the primacy of, and the a priori necessary relations within, the schema⁵². This is already a leap forward from 18th century theories of the sign, but Wm. Arctander O'Brien is right to suggest that "the schema's inherent and universal mediation between sign and signified undercuts any possibility of a stable priority of one to the other" (op.cit., p.104), and thus that it "implies a questioning of the priority of the signified which, until the late twentieth century will remain as unquestionable for Saussure as it was for eighteenth-century semioticians." (ibid, p.103) This should not mean, and O'Brien is right to point this out in a note, that Novalis should thus be seen as a precursor of Derridean deconstruction, or at least not without complications – but it goes some way towards suggesting that at least part of the radical nature of semiotic theory in the *Fichte-Studien* lies with the 'discovery' of a transcendental schema which underwrites, as its a priori condition of possibility, all possible further signification.

Yet, further to this discovery and to the overall radicality of Novalis' semiotics in and of themselves, it is their bearing on epistemology which has the most interesting ramifications for Romantic philosophy in general. For, if knowledge itself, and consciousness itself is a sign, as has already been asserted,

point which will be developed further in the discussion of Hegelian semiology in relation to Novalis.

⁵² I am here compelled to cite part of a fragment from Novalis' later *Allgemeine Brouillon*, written some time in 1798: "Philosophy *unfastens* everything [*macht alles los*] – makes the universal relative. Like the Copernican system it dissolves the fixed points – and turns that which is at rest into something hovering [*macht aus dem Ruhenden ein Schwebendes*]" (III, 622, 378). The citation seems to me to be paradigmatic of Novalis' project insofar as it states the transformation of the static into the hovering, the relational. This, then, would be the Romantics' own Copernican revolution: as concerns ontology, epistemology, the theory of signification all alike, what is taken to be at the 'centre', so to speak, of the system, is not a fixed point but rather

then it follows that the process of cognition and of consciousness is or should be subsumed under the originary schema. Epistemology is thus always already caught up in a process of signification, and is consequently also caught up within *Darstellung*, representation as the *work* of the originary schema. Once again, the conclusion that Romanticism ends up with is that all human processes of cognition, every “approach to Being”, can only ever take place from within the horizon of representation. Novalis’ notion of *Schein* is here most relevant once again. If, as we have already seen, *Schein* and *Seyn* are inextricably linked with each other, if “truth” and “thought” are also instances of *Schein*, and if, finally, the subject’s path towards knowledge is but “an approach to Being” – then it becomes clear that for Novalis, and for early Romanticism in general, *Schein* as appearance, illusion, even fiction, is the proper realm of epistemology. Beyond this, however, the transcendental schema already circumscribes the limits of the realm of signification, *Schein*, which is also the realm of epistemology, and it is those limits which Novalis will later take up as the subject of his *Monolog*: the primacy of the transcendental schema, which functions independently of sign/word, signified/thing and signifying agent alike will become (explicitly, for implicitly it already is) the self-sufficiency and self-referentiality of all signification, of *language as such*.

II. A Romantic Theory of Language: Novalis' *Monolog*.

The *Monolog* of 1798 is justly the most famous theoretical text by Novalis, and it is also apparently the most 'modern'.⁵³ It encapsulates what must be taken as the fundamental Romantic conception of language, and this is indeed a conception with no parallel until Nietzsche, Heidegger, and their more recent affiliates. Its importance for the issues at stake here is undeniable, and twofold: first, it is the most succinct presentation of Novalis' linguistic theory, and has to be read in relation with the semiotics produced a few years earlier in the *Fichte-Studien*, highlighting the degree to which Novalis applies the 'originary schema' to the *whole* of language; in this way, language, and the schematism which remains at its core, takes on the central role which the Romantics were the first to assign to it. Second, and equally important, the *Monolog* is the first Romantic text here under consideration whose significance lies not only with *what* it purports to say, but just as much with *how* it does so; in it, Novalis not only assigns a special role and characteristics to language in general, but in his own language engages with those characteristics, resulting in a text which, while denoting the self-referentiality of language, also, and at the same time, *performs* this self-referentiality in its own writing. Indeed, many of the key Romantic

the originary schema.

⁵³ As the text of the *Monologue* already exists in several translations and is quoted whole in almost every book on Novalis and Romanticism (including Bowie, O' Brien, Pfefferkorn, Schulte-Sasse, and Seyhan) I have resisted the temptation to provide yet another translation of its entirety. The translations used in my discussion are my own, but have obviously been informed by the several translations already in existence.

texts of the ‘mature’ period, not least the fragments of the *Athenäum*, will follow in the *Monolog*’s example and become explicitly self-referential, in a very particular manner which will be analysed later.

The very beginning of the text finds Novalis in awe at “the ridiculous error of people who believe that they speak for the sake of things” (II, p.672), and before even considering the ramifications of the statement we must pause to note and appreciate, for the first but most certainly not the last time, the appearance, in Novalis’ own language, of the dominant Romantic trope – *irony*. “[T]he ridiculous error” is an expression already loaded with the ‘simple’ irony of someone who laughs derisively at common misconceptions, and it finds a peculiar counterpart when Novalis speaks of “speaking and writing” as themselves “actually quite foolish (*närrische*) things”: “foolish” here denotes that which is the domain of the fool, the court-jester, the traditional seat of wit, and the “ridiculous” (*lächerlich* – laughable) error Novalis is being ironic about, is in fact the error of misunderstanding the foolish character of language. In this way - and this is typical of the Romantic irony most readily associated with Schlegel, what he in fact calls “irony of irony” – the foolish are those who misunderstand language, who do *not* take language itself for the fool that it is. It is a rhetorically remarkable opening gesture, and one to which the text, after the ‘detour’ that is its main body of concern, will return towards its end with renewed ironic ferocity. Rhetoric aside, however, what comes across most powerfully and succinctly from the very opening of the *Monolog* is Novalis’ acutely modern conception of language as a closed, self-referential system: language, Novalis tells us “is concerned only with itself”. Further more, and crucially for the analysis which follows, of this “peculiarity of language, that it is

only concerned with itself, nobody is aware.”(ibid.) Leaving to the side, if only briefly, the alarming succession of ironies which continues, and concentrating on the dictum that “language is concerned only with itself”, the first thing to note would be that it does indeed sound remarkably modern, and has become a commonplace of linguistics and of philosophy of language in the late 20th century, at least after Saussure and Wittgenstein. Secondly, though no less importantly, the pronouncement of a closed system of language has to be read in conjunction with the earlier semiotic fragments of the *Fichte-Studien* – the self-referentiality of language in general can simply be equated with the autonomy and primacy of the transcendental schema. In the long ‘semiotic’ fragment of 1795 Novalis established that the transcendental schema is *a priori*, operating independently of, and at the same time operating *on*, the signified and the signifying agent, or the sign in general; here, three years later, he asserts the same of language in itself, thus practically equating the schema with ‘language’. Crucially, however, as was pointed out in the previous section, the schema, and therefore language, was utilised as the pivot around which epistemology, as defined by Novalis, turns. Signs, language, form the horizon of (re)presentation which is thus *also* the horizon of epistemology, or, in plain words: “I”, the subject can only *know* things (objects) through signs, through language. What “I” know then, and in perfect accord with Kant, is the phenomenal sign of an object, the word and not the thing-in-itself. More than this, what “I” know I know through the representational activity of the transcendental schema, through the representational activity of language – but this is clearly no longer representation as *mimesis* or as correspondence. Knowledge may only be of phenomena within the representational horizon, but the self-sufficient and self-

referential representational *activity* that is language ceases to correspond in any necessary way to the realm of proper (or noumenal) objects. The truth that knowledge may aspire to will never be found outside the self-referential domain of language, and language thus becomes the inexhaustible and at the same time inexorable terrain of epistemology. Just as Hölderlin in *Seyn, Urtheil* circumscribes the very thought of Being as necessarily emanating from within the horizon of judgment, so Novalis circumscribes the limits of human knowledge as the limits of the representational horizon of language and signification.

This could just be taken as a simple linguistic ‘twist’ on the fundamental tenets of Kantian epistemology – but such ‘twists’ are hardly ever simple, and the philosophical paths now opening are quite new. The very ‘foolishness’ of language is also, according to Novalis, its most “wonderful and fruitful secret”; the “idle chatter” of self-referentiality Novalis still thinks people hate and misunderstand is also language’s “infinitely serious aspect” (ibid.). Far from being limitations and circumscriptions, the bounds of language are in effect its wonders, its mysteries, and ultimately its *infinite* seriousness. As a reading of the rest of the *Monolog*, as well as a passing acquaintance with the generally exalted tone of most Romantic theory would support, Novalis is not concerned with legislating over the limits of human knowledge in the manner of Kant, but with rejoicing in the endless self-referential play of language. The statement “a real conversation is mere wordplay” (*das rechte Gespräch is ein bloßes Wordspiel*) (ibid) is not meant to sound despairing or disparaging. For Novalis, it is when people seek “to speak for the sake of things”, when they seek “to speak of something definite” (*etwas Bestimmten*) that they perpetrate the error of

misunderstanding language; on the other hand, if one “speaks merely in order to speak”, then “he pronounces the most wonderful, most original truths” (ibid.). From this it can already be inferred that the very self-referentiality, the word-play aspect of language which means human subjects are not allowed to reach, to know objects-in-themselves is also the key aspect of language to be celebrated. The self-referential game of language should not be berated for denying us access to the world, but should rather be celebrated for the “wonderful” and “original” truths that it yields. The best way Novalis can think of to express this newfound evangelical belief in linguistic self-reflexivity is to compare language with mathematics, words with numbers. Both “constitute a world for themselves”, “play only with themselves, express nothing but their wonderful nature”(ibid.), and it is for this reason, because of their autonomy and self-referentiality, that language and mathematics, words and numbers are so “expressive” (*ausdrucksvoll*). One could easily think that, however much rejoicing in the self-referential nature of language is here taking place, the very notion that language actually does *express* something would lead Novalis straight back into a correspondence, or a mimetic, theory of language – but that would depend on what language is expressive of. In this case, words (or numbers) are *not* said to be expressive of things, or to correspond to things; instead they “mirror” the “strange interplay of the relations of things” (*das seltsame Verhältnißspiel der Dinge*)(ibid.). As the next couple of lines assert, words and numbers are indeed “members of nature”, and they are so because of, and not despite of their self-referential “freedom”. I want to maintain that this ‘mirroring’ of nature, of the world, onto words (or numbers) is at the furthest possible remove from the simple mimetic correspondence of ‘traditional’ philosophy, and

this because of the *ontological foundations* of Novalis' thinking. More precisely: the "strange interplay of the relations of things" is not the same as "things" themselves, and it would be a "ridiculous error" to think that one speaks "for the sake of things". Instead, one speaks, or rather language speaks, in its endless self-referential play, of *relations*, since, as I attempted to show in the previous chapter, Romantic ontology, and the ontology of Novalis in particular is nothing if not relational. What the self-referential, autonomous play of language mirrors is in effect nothing other than the *hovering* of Being, or the Being-hovering of the *Fichte-Studien*. This Being is not (yet) a *determinate* being, a thing, but rather (cf. *supra*, Chapter 1) the hovering, the *differencing activity* which produces determinations. Thus, what language is said to 'mirror' is not things, neither things-in-themselves nor even phenomenal things, for, as I showed in the previous section, the transcendental schema (and this, once again, *is* language) is a relational grid existing and operating independently of referents (in other words, independently of phenomenal 'things') - the transcendental relational schema, or language, mirrors, or *expresses* the relational differencing activity of Being.

From here on the *Monolog* takes another explicitly self-referential turn, as it considers what happens to understanding when language is taken as such a solely self-referential game. Novalis takes up again the theme of knowing and understanding of the opening ironies of the text. Earlier he had asserted that the truth about language of which the text speaks, that is the truth that language is entirely self-referential is one that "nobody is aware of", and, a few lines later, had prefaced his remarks on the congruence of language with mathematics with an almost despairing "if only one could make people understand..." (*begreiflich*

machen – render conceptual). Yet, and this would not be lost on any reader, this is precisely what the text of the *Monolog* aspires and attempts to do. It would be a serious, yet laughable error to consider Novalis' position as that of a simple, derisory arch-ironist, of someone who believes he can “make people understand” what they admittedly are not “aware of”; the misunderstanding emanating from the self-referential status of language is a necessary one, and it necessarily includes Novalis himself, and this should be taken as adding another layer to the already thickening irony. Language is a difficult beast to tame, and its only possible tamer would be a “prophet”, someone who is described in almost mystical terms as having “a fine feel for [language’s] application, its rhythm (*Takt*, a word connoting the time kept in music), its musical spirit”, as being able to “hear in himself the gentle effect of its inner nature and move his tongue or hand accordingly.”(ibid.) This prophet would be someone capable of seeing beyond the endless self-referential play of language into its rhythm, its “musical spirit”, and who, moreover, would be able to convert his own organs and limbs according to language’s rhythm and musicality, someone who would be entirely enthused, impregnated by the “spirit” of language, a seer and a speaker-in-tongues.⁵⁴ By contrast, whoever lacks those mystical, prophetic qualities of enthusiasm by language, whoever “lacks the requisite ear and sense” but is yet capable “well enough to write truths like these” would be *misunderstood* “as was Cassandra by the Trojans.” (ibid.) What is important to note here is that Novalis does not think of himself as one of those prophets, but as Cassandra: “When I

⁵⁴ Although I have not included it in this discussion, I cannot, at this point, fail to mention one of Novalis' more ‘fictional’, less theoretical texts which is concerned with precisely such prophets and their possibility, the wonderful poetic fantasy *The Novices of Sais* (*Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*). In this text, Novalis once again puts forward the notion that language is essentially incomprehensible, beyond understanding, as it “cannot understand itself”(Schriften, I, 79). For an instructive analysis of this text alongside the *Monolog*, see O’Brien, op.cit., pp 193-215.

thus believe that I have set out (*angegeben habe*) the essence and function (*Wesen und Amt*) of poetry most precisely, I still know that no man will understand it.” What the text has professed to be doing, fixing, setting out the essence of poetry, or of language falls prey to the necessary misunderstanding that all men have of this essence, and Novalis himself is a doomed Cassandra.

Is the prophet therefore an impossibility, a necessary fiction? Are all writers doomed to play the role of Cassandra? On the first instance it would seem so, but now the text takes another turn, as Novalis continues to write of himself in the first person. He declares that fixing the essence of poetry amounts to saying “something quite inane (*albernes*), because I wanted to say it”, and the derogatory term ‘inane’, or ‘silly’ must alert the reader to its relation with the earlier derogatory terms used in the beginning of the text: the inanity of speaking the ‘truth’ of language, of fixing the ‘essence’ of poetry is in effect the *same* inanity of “idle chatter”, the “foolishness” of *all* speaking and writing, and it is therefore the same inanity and foolishness which yields, at the same time, the “infinitely serious” side of language, its “wonderful and fruitful secret”. The incomprehensible ramblings of Cassandra-Novalis stake a claim for the essence and secret of language, *not* because they seem to ‘fix’ its essence, *not* because of what they say (that would be, strictly speaking, incomprehensible), but *in that* they are said, because in them and through them language speaks its own inanities. This fundamental insight is crucially given in the rhetorical form of questions, and the rest of the short text is entirely made up of them: “But what if I had to speak? And what if this drive of language to speak (*dieser Sprachtrieb zu Sprechen*) were the mark (*das Kennzeichen* – the *sign*) of language’s inspiration (*Eingebung*), of language’s efficacy (*Wirksamkeit*) within me?”

Novalis asks himself, wonders about the possibility (“what if...?”) that the marker of enthusiasm is not the gift of a prophet, but the very drive of language to speak (a wonderfully pleonastic formulation, alarmingly close to the famous Heideggerian dictum “*Die Sprache spricht*”). What if a writer is enthused by language not in any mystical way but in the very fact that s/he *has to* speak? What if the very necessity of the *Sprachtrieb*, the very agent that makes language “foolish” and “inane” is also the necessary marker of linguistic enthusiasm, the misunderstood sign of language’s “fruitful secret”? What if that which is necessarily misunderstood, the endless and inane self-referential play of language is *also* that which can “make a mystery of language understandable”(ibid.)? What if, to cut the questions short, incomprehensibility were the very root and necessary precondition of understanding?

This last surge of the text, laden with the pathos of rhetorical questions, meticulously laying layer upon layer of discomfiting irony to the already existing heap, is even more astonishing if one considers that it was written in 1798, not 1968. Yet, as I will show in the next section, it has a very direct and equally striking contemporary counterpart in Schlegel’s essay *On Incomprehensibility* which also considers the fundamental Romantic issue of the misunderstanding of language, and does it through an examination of the trope of irony. Irony in the *Monolog* may not be mentioned, but it is nearly omnipresent: from the opening derisory tone, all the way to the almost painful self-questioning of the end, Novalis finds that “he can only speak of language in language ironically.”⁵⁵ This is a rhetorical necessity which is the product of Novalis’ conception of language. Language is nothing but endless self-referential play,

divorced from the world of objects which it only “mirrors” insofar as its relational games reflect Novalis’ own relational ontology. Understanding, at least insofar as that is conceived as a correspondence of concept with thing, of word with object, appears to be, strictly speaking, impossible. And yet it is the very ‘misunderstanding’ of language, its foolishness, its inanity which is the bearer of the mark, the sign of language’s *efficacy*; the incomprehensible but uncontrollable *Sprachtrieb* (“What if I *had to speak?*”), even though it results in the ramblings of a Cassandra, even though it is necessarily misunderstood by men⁵⁶, and even though it will never yield “the essence and function of poetry” is the sign of language *working on*, effecting the speaker/writer, the marker of understanding from, and within, incomprehensibility. How else to convey this double bind of language than with, and as irony? This is why the *Monolog* must count as an exemplary Romantic (as well as an exemplary *modern*) text: its ‘said’ is complemented by its ‘saying’, the two are in effect inseparable, and what the text speaks of (the necessary incomprehensibility of a closed self-referential system of language being what in fact is language’s essence and the only condition, the only *chance* of understanding) the text rhetorically also performs with its multifarious layers of irony.

There is, however, one more interesting aspect, one more curious twist to this remarkable text, and it should be no surprise that it is a rhetorical one. I am referring to the peculiar slide in terminology effected by Novalis in the last section of the *Monolog*, the slide from “language” (*Sprache*) to “poetry” (*Poesie*). It happens suddenly, when Novalis writes of his “inane” goal to “set

⁵⁵ Azade Seyhan, *Representation and its Discontents: the Critical Legacy of German Romanticism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, p.88.

⁵⁶ Another echo of the first ironist, the first philosopher-riddler, Heraclitus: “Of the logos which forever holds men prove uncomprehending...”[B 1] (translation mine).

out the essence and function of poetry”, when only a few lines before it had been a question of the “musical spirit” of language. In the final rhetorical questions of the text the two terms seem inseparable and interchangeable: the linguistic drive, the *Sprachtrieb* is that which, through no wilful execution of the writer, independently and inexorably, yields poetry, *Poesie*. Are we to think that language and poetry are thus made the same? Would Novalis hold that *all* language is poetry? Is it merely coincidental that the shift of terms happens after Novalis has mentioned “rhythm”, “musical spirit”, and has evoked the tragic – and therefore poetic – figure of Cassandra? The text offers no direct answer to these questions. But they serve very well as a sign, a marker of perhaps the most basic and most important contribution that Romanticism ever made to the history of philosophy: that is to say, the notion that if Being is conceived as a relational activity, if non-mimetic (re)presentation is the only possible horizon of epistemology, or, as Novalis would have it, the only “approach to Being”, if, finally, language and the originary schema lying at its core is only an endless self-referential game – then, despite phenomena and noumena, despite I and not-I, the proper terrain, or, if I am allowed a ‘witticism’, the proper playground of philosophy is *poetry*. Thus, in the rest of this chapter, I will examine what the notion of poetry means *philosophically* for the Romantics, how their celebrated ideal of the union of philosophy with poetry comes about and, more particularly and presently, the tremendous role that the trope of irony plays in all this. And for this I must finally turn my attention to the writings of Friedrich Schlegel.

III. Irony and Incomprehensibility in Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenäum* fragments.

In the period between 1794 and 1799, when he was, first, in Jena and under the direct influence of Fichte, and then, in Berlin, editing the celebrated but short-lived journal *Athenäum*, Schlegel does not offer us anything like a comprehensive theory of language as such, not even a fragmentary one as intimated in Novalis' *Fichte-Studien* and *Monolog*. What he does offer us, among fragments and proclamations which sometimes touch on what his conception of language might be, is a radical theory of understanding situated in the context of both philosophy and literary criticism. The pivotal text for an examination of Schlegel's theory of understanding is undoubtedly his essay *Über die Unverständlichkeit*, or *On Incomprehensibility*, with which he chose to end the scarcely three-year-long publishing experiment that was the *Athenäum*. It is this overtly polemical, scathingly sarcastic and thoroughly *sui generis* text which exemplifies, more than any other, the central Romantic contention that, in the strictest epistemological sense, understanding is only ever possible alongside non-understanding, misunderstanding, or incomprehensibility, or, to be more precise, that understanding becomes possible only if one allows for the *necessity* that incomprehensibility be also, concomitantly, possible. What this contention highlights is not that understanding is somehow fatally compromised within

language, but rather that, within language and with language and (re)presentation given as the only possible horizon for epistemology and understanding, the possibility of understanding can only emanate from the possibility of incomprehensibility, that for understanding to be in any degree necessary one must first admit the necessity of the possibility of its opposite. In fact, if there is anything that, even within the context of a wilfully playful and perhaps ambiguous text such as Schlegel's, is made abundantly clear, that is the fact that Schlegel consistently holds to the necessary interrelation and exchange, the reciprocal determination of understanding and incomprehensibility. Furthermore, it would not appear contentious to suggest that the site for this reciprocal determination, or rather the horizon out of which it is formed, is language, and language conceived in a manner similar to the one in which it is conceived in Novalis' *Monolog*. Towards the beginning of his essay Schlegel asserts, like Novalis, that "words often understand themselves better than do those who use them"⁵⁷. It follows that, since human understanding and human pursuits such as science and art become possible through and in language, with all its potentially treacherous self-referentiality, such human pursuits as science and art are entirely complicit in this interplay between understanding and its lack. Schlegel puts it thus: "one obtains the purest and most splendid incomprehensibility precisely from science and from art, whose very aim is to be understood and to make understandable"(ibid.). Already what is intimated is what will become explicit in the course of the essay, namely that, just as, for Novalis, the "efficacy" of language is intimately tied up with its "inanity", for Schlegel, the greatest call for

⁵⁷ The essay is to be found in the *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, ed. E. Behler & H. Eichner, Schöningh, 1958- (hereinafter KFSA), Vol. 2, 363-372. A translation of the essay is found in J. Schulte-Sasse (ed.), *Theory as Practice: a Critical Anthology of Early German*

understanding, its greatest necessity and its greatest chance is intimately implicated with the most fundamental necessity of the possibility of incomprehensibility. But, as was mentioned earlier, the most important facet of this essay for the whole of the Romantic enterprise is the theorisation of irony as precisely the locus of this inter-relation between understanding and its opposite, as it is with irony that Schlegel identifies the problematic of understanding and incomprehensibility throughout not only this essay but, arguably, the entire period of the *Athenäum*.

Irony, more precisely the seemingly independent mode of “Romantic” irony which has become a commonplace in the history of ideas, is widely regarded as perhaps the key identifiable feature of Romanticism, and, although I have no desire to challenge this notion, I must already insist that if we want to understand irony the way the Romantics did, it is thoroughly counterintuitive to think of it as a specific kind or mode of irony among many others. Even though there is little doubt that the *conception* of irony in Schlegel must be differentiated from its counterpart in Plato (what has come to be called “Socratic irony”), or, even more so, that in Kierkegaard, and, finally, the mode of irony that has come to be called ‘postmodern’, it will become clear that ‘Romantic’ irony is a universal (non-)concept or it is nothing. This is not to argue with the easily established fact that irony can be, and has been conceived in a host of different ways, but rather to stress that its conception in Schlegel elevates irony to the status of a universal, necessary phenomenon of language and of the understanding, a ‘transcendental trait’, if you like, equally essential and all-pervasive as language and the subjects of epistemology themselves. And it must

also be stressed that there is no avoidance of the fact that irony, whether it be conceived of in the classical-rhetorical way as a mere trope, or as a ‘character’, a human type of intelligence and behaviour as with Socrates, or even in its elevation from the Socratic ‘character’ to a generalisable ‘existential’ predicament for the ‘ironic subjectivity’ (which, not at all coincidentally, also elevates irony to the status of a “concept”) in the hands of Kierkegaard⁵⁸ – in all these different modes and types it has historically acquired irony remains something intricately connected with the understanding. Irony in the rhetorical sense, from Quintillian to the present, is a trope which is designed to dissimulate, and therefore to confuse the understanding of those who do not possess it, and enhance that of those who do, a rhetorical slap on the back for the ‘happy few’ who *understand* that the speaker means the opposite of what s/he says. Socrates is an ironist, or, to be exact, an “eiron”, fundamentally because of the famous dictum: “I only know that I know nothing”, clearly an indication of the inexorable connection of irony and knowledge, irony and the understanding. Kierkegaard’s irony is more of a human condition, an existential given, but still, it could be argued, related to understanding, to knowledge and its loss. Finally, so-called ‘postmodern’ irony is the irony related to the infamous end of metaphysical metanarratives, the knowledgeable understanding of the loss of

with occasional slight modifications.

⁵⁸ Viz. The beginning of the chapter on “The World-Historical Validity of Irony, the Irony of Socrates”, in Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony*, New York: Harper & row, 1965: “If we turn back to the foregoing general description of irony as infinite absolute negativity, it is adequately suggested therein that irony is no longer directed against this or that particular phenomenon, against a particular existing thing, but that the whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject and the ironic subject in turn alien to existence, that as actuality has lost its validity for the ironic subject, he himself has to a certain degree become unactual.” Kierkegaard, *op.cit.*, p.259. I am not here concerned with Kierkegaard’s own conception of irony, even if it is conceded that this was influenced by Schlegel, through the intervention of Hegel (for more on this intervention, see the next chapter). I am here only sketching the reasons why Kierkegaard’s conception should be read as fundamentally different to Schlegel’s.

complete understanding⁵⁹. In all cases, irony is endemic to knowledge, and in all cases, irony is what both confuses, or undermines knowledge and understanding on the one hand, while simultaneously endorsing a higher, 'ironic' form of knowledge and understanding on the other.

All of this, there is no question, is nothing other than what Schlegel means by irony. And yet I would wish to contend that Schlegel's is by far the most universal and the most radical conception of irony, and this precisely because it is a conception which universalises and radicalises the essential relation that irony bears to the understanding. Irony as a trope, the simplest of its many guises, is already theorised by Schlegel in the same essay as a form of rhetorical and epistemological doubt⁶⁰, as the figure which symbolises or schematises the essential interrelation between understanding and incomprehensibility. In one dense and, needless to say, ironic paragraph of the essay Schlegel identifies several types of irony, from the "simple" or "unrefined", through the "fine and delicate", to the "dramatic" and beyond. Perhaps the most curious aspect of these examples of irony is that some of them appear to be situating irony in the object, and not the subject, or, even more surprisingly, in nature itself, as when Schlegel writes of "sincere" irony as being "most appropriate in old gardens, where wonderful pleasant grottoes lure the nature lover, brimming with feeling, into their cool laps, only in order to spray

⁵⁹ The *locus classicus* for a discussion of postmodernity as the loss of 'grand narratives' is J.-F. Lyotard's *La Condition Postmoderne*, Minuit, Paris, 1979. It is interesting to note Lyotard's subtitle, "rapport sur le savoir", or "a report on Knowledge", which situates the problematics of postmodernity within the sphere of knowledge and the understanding. For a 'postmodern' theory of irony with indubitable connections with Romanticism (and, for that matter, Kierkegaard), see Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge university Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989. Again I am not here launching into a discussion involving these 'postmodern' conceptions of irony; I wish merely to highlight this time the continuity of the perception of irony as related to the understanding.

him thoroughly from all sides with water and in this way to dispel his tender mood”(Schulte-Sasse, op.cit., pp. 124-125). This passage is in some ways typical of the biting ironic tone of the whole essay, and it is in its rhetorical irony that it divulges the most about what Schlegel really has in mind. It would be tempting simply to assume that we have understood correctly, first time around, and that Schlegel is really only ascribing irony to a feature of nature, as if old gardens were having a quiet joke at the expense of the nature lover who is impregnated with ‘feeling’. But this would be fundamentally wrong for two reasons at least: first, because it would go against the Kantian transcendental framework which Schlegel and the Romantics in general inherited nearly wholesale, and which would entail that, especially since irony is a feature of the understanding, its import is not on the object as such but on the way the object is made apparent and cognisable transcendentially to the subject (in the same way that it would be wrong to speak of the Kantian sublime as pertaining to the object itself); a couple of pages before hand, Schlegel states that his only working definition of irony is that “everything is still only a tendency”(ibid., p.122), and among these tendencies he singles out Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, which, at least, should alert us to the philosophical tradition that his essay is self-consciously a part of. Second, because the work of dissimulation that Schlegel seems here to ascribe to nature is, at the same time and even more clearly, operating on the level of the text itself – in plain words, if there is anyone poking fun at our understanding here, it is not the garden, but Schlegel.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that this conception of irony as epistemological doubt, or as scepticism, is one formulated earlier by Schlegel, as evidenced by his notebooks of 1796-1797, where irony is described as “the highest, purest scepticism” (KFSA, XVIII, p.406, no.1023)

The fundamental mistake people make is that irony could ever be contained on a single level, that one could simply laugh at being drenched by a treacherous ironic water-feature and that would be that. Schlegel, to a great degree a faithful Kantian and a faithful Fichtean, lodges his own conception of irony on the reflexive level⁶¹, the second power (in the same way as he will come to speak of poetry at the same time as ‘poetry of poetry’) – he calls that, and it is the ultimate ‘example’ given, “the irony of irony”. I quote at length:

“In general, the most basic irony of irony is indeed the fact that one easily tires of irony if it is offered everywhere and time and time again. But what we above all want to have understood by the irony of irony arises in more ways than one. For example, if one speaks about irony without irony, as was just the case; if one uses irony to speak of irony without realising that at that very moment one finds oneself in another, much more striking irony; if one is unable to escape irony, as appears to be the case with this experiment concerning incomprehensibility; if irony becomes mannerism and thus, as it were, ironises the author; if one has promised to contribute to a superfluous journal without previously estimating one’s reserves of irony, and now against one’s will must produce irony, like an actor with a stomach-ache; if irony runs wild and simply won’t let itself be governed at all.”(ibid., p.125)

⁶¹ The key text for an understanding of the essential relation between reflection and irony in Schlegel and Romanticism in general is Walter Benjamin’s dissertation, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol.1*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press 1996 (a translation of Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in den deutschen Romantik*, in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp Verlag 1974). Crucially, as Benjamin painstakingly analyses, the Romantic/Schlegelian notion of reflection differs from Fichte’s, as will be discussed in a later chapter. For the moment, I only wish to signal Benjamin’s essential formulation that “irony, like criticism, can demonstrate itself only in reflection”, *Selected Writings Vol 1.*, p.164.

If it seems that here Schlegel is simply allowing irony to proliferate unchecked, infinitely, it must also be stressed that this infinite proliferation is not wilful or contrived. If irony is reflexive it is so always and from the beginning. This can be seen most readily, at the simplest possible level, if one thinks through the canonical, rhetorical notion of irony as dissimulation of the understanding: for a sentence or a proclamation to be labelled ironic (example: “Hitler was a good man”), it always has to be referred *at the same time* to both its meanings, the ‘primary’, obvious one, which is a dissimulation, (“Hitler was a good man, straightforwardly”, the statement taken at face value) and the ‘secondary’, ironic one, which would be the ‘true’ one where the dissimulation becomes apparent *as* dissimulation (“no, Hitler was *not* a good man, I am being ironic”). In other words, for the irony to be understood, it must be understood on two levels at once, and thus irony always, inevitably presents the understanding with the necessity of its doubling, or the necessity of reflection. This is the ‘essence’ of irony, that it is never simple or straightforward, and thus, strictly speaking, irony cannot be said to have an essence, other than its necessary doubling⁶². Where Schlegel is indeed being more radical, and where his notion of irony decisively departs from ‘simple’ ironic statements such as the example I have just given, is in his insistence, evident throughout the essay and in all his statements on irony, that this doubling cannot itself be simple, cannot itself only happen once, but must be doubled, indeed must be infinitely proliferated. If, in the case of irony, the understanding is always necessarily called upon to double itself in reflection, Schlegel suggests that there is no reason to think that this

⁶² This is the reason why, in the preceding discussion, I have used the term “(non-) concept” for irony, that is, irony cannot properly be said to be a concept if it is found to be lacking a singular (conceptual) essence. In this way, when writing about the ‘essence’ of irony as precisely a necessary reflexive doubling, the word ‘essence’ will appear in quotation marks.

doubling should stop. Right after the passage just quoted, Schlegel changes paragraph, and writes:

“What gods will be able to save us from all these ironies? The only solution might be if an irony could be found that had the characteristic of gobbling up and swallowing all those large and small ironies so that nothing more could be seen of them. And I must confess that I notice in my own [ie., in my own irony, the irony Schlegel himself evidently employs in writing these lines] a decided inclination toward exactly this. But even this would only be able to help for a short time. I fear that if I correctly understand what fate seems to indicate to me, soon a new generation of small ironies would arise: because, truly, the stars are signalling the fantastic. And even assuming that things remained peaceful for a long time, they could hardly be trusted to remain so. One simply cannot fool around with irony. It can cast an unbelievably long shadow.”(ibid., p.125)

What this passage ironically prophesies, and then retracts, is the eventuality of irony itself being the closure of its own movement of doubling, a final, apocalyptic irony which would “gobble up” and “swallow” all the proliferations of irony that have occurred thus far, a reflection to end all reflection. But Schlegel knows that this would be impossible, closure and non-reflexive ‘rest’ are impossible, *essentially* impossible because of the ‘essence’ of irony being itself essentially double. What he “confesses” as his own tendency, the tendency infinitely to proliferate and enlarge ironies to the point that it might *seem* that one could be found to annihilate them all, is only a tendency – and we

must remember that irony is itself, Schlegel wrote earlier, a marker, a sign for a tendency. Irony survives its own monstrous self-proliferation, it survives its own tendency to annul itself, and must finally manifest itself as this survival, the survival of doubling, and the survival of reflection. There is no use in trying to find the irony to end all irony, and this precisely because irony does not possess a single self-identical 'essence'; it is but a tendency, a "shadow". And yet, simply because irony is that shadow and that tendency, and simply because irony is nothing other than the tendency to survive attempts to contain it, irony's shadow can be, that is to say, *has the tendency* to be "unbelievably long".

Nevertheless, the text does not end here. Schlegel still has to contend with incomprehensibility, he still has somehow to 'explain' why it is that the *Athenäum* was charged with being incomprehensible: "I've already had to admit indirectly that the *Athenäum* is incomprehensible, and since my admission was made in the heat of irony, I can hardly take it back since I would otherwise injure irony itself."(ibid., p.126) Schlegel's 'answer' is to turn the accusation of incomprehensibility on its head, and to assert that incomprehensibility is a necessity. "But is incomprehensibility actually something so completely reprehensible, so base?" he asks, indirectly accusing and attacking his own accusers. A few lines later he continues: "Indeed, you would all be quite apprehensive if the whole world, as you demand it, were for once to become entirely understandable."(ibid., p.126) What is being forcefully resisted here is the possibility of a closure of the understanding, the possibility of a complete and unified understanding which would be unassailable by the potentially infinite doubling of reflexive irony. For the moment this is only an indication, a 'feeling', perhaps, and the inexorable link between the possibility of understanding and the

necessity of the possibility of incomprehensibility has not yet been demonstrated. In the next paragraph, Schlegel finds that “consolation as regards the generally recognisable unintelligibility of the *Athenäum* lies in this recognition itself, because it is precisely this recognition that taught us that the problem will be temporary.”(ibid., p.126) From here on, the text launches into a famous and rhetorically complex, not to say bombastic, prophetic tone, heralding a “new age” of understanding, when the *Athenäum* will finally come to be understood. For some critics, this is read as a sign of a messianic utopian tendency on Schlegel’s part, or, the opposite face of the same coin, as a sign of a futural projection towards an end which is bound to be bad. The first case is exemplified by Peter Szondi, who writes of Schlegel’s “openness to the future that expresses itself in ‘presentiment’ and ‘projects’”⁶³; the second by Maurice Blanchot, who writes that “Romanticism, it is true, ends badly, but this is because it is essentially what begins and what cannot but finish badly.”⁶⁴ Both those readings must be resisted, denied, if the import of Schlegel’s essay is to be at all grasped. In Blanchot’s case, there is a lot to be admired in the position that Romanticism is indeed “that which begins”, but, biographical details aside, there is simply nothing to suggest, with the force of necessity that Blanchot suggests, that what begins will finish badly. In Szondi’s case, which is here much more apposite since he is directly referring to the passage under consideration, it is simply baffling that such an otherwise astute and learned commentator on Romanticism would read a text so heavily imbued with irony totally and throughout, *at face value*. Yes, Schlegel does present what appears to be a messianic vision of a time

⁶³ Peter Szondi, “Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic irony”, in Szondi, *On Textual understanding and other essays*, trans. By H. Mendelsohn, Manchester University Press, 1986, p.60.

⁶⁴ Maurice Blanchot, “L’ Athénaum”, in Blanchot, *L’entretien infini*, Gallimard, p.517, translation mine.

(for him, ironically, the 19th century, when his critical fortunes were at an all-time low) when the project of the *Athenäum* will finally be understood, but it should only take a simple reading of what has gone on just before (I am referring specifically to the resistance of closure by the understanding just noted, and more generally to the unavoidable *fact* that the whole essay, much less the heavy-handed rhetoric of this ‘messianic’ turn, cannot possibly be divorced from the dissimulation of irony) to understand that the projection into the future undertaken here is itself ironic. In both cases, what has been misunderstood (and this is itself a rich irony which would not have been lost on Schlegel) is that Schlegel’s apocalyptic, messianic, or utopian tone is itself but a feature of the tendency that is irony.

In any case, it is in this projected future dimension that Schlegel finally comes to articulate the reciprocal determination of understanding and incomprehensibility. He writes, still in the future tense:

“The great separation between understanding and incomprehension will become increasingly universal, pronounced, clear. A great amount of hidden incomprehensibility will yet have to break out. But understanding will also show its omnipotence – understanding, which ennobles sensibility to character and talent to genius, and which refines feeling and intuition into art. Understanding itself will be understood [...]”(ibid., p127)

In this ironically prophetic projection Schlegel postulates that the separation, the rift between understanding and incomprehensibility, the fault with which the *Athenäum* project was marred, will be enlarged, reflexively

proliferated like the endless list of ironies he was addressing earlier in the essay. The more the rift widens, the more understanding itself comes to the fore – but, crucially, there are two dimensions of the understanding here which allow us to grasp what Schlegel actually means by the term. One: the properties and effects Schlegel ascribes to the understanding are precisely concomitant with the understanding as conceived by Kant, they betray a more than faithful Kantianism on his part; this is the understanding as the faculty which connects sensibility to intuition. Two: understanding here is itself reflexive; what Schlegel says is not simply that understanding will strengthen along with the incomprehensibility that “breaks out”, but, with greater emphasis, that the understanding of understanding, understanding in the second power, or reflexive understanding will finally become possible – “understanding itself will be understood”. The reciprocal determination between understanding and incomprehensibility is therefore a relation which is itself reflexive, or doubled. It is not just the case that with more incomprehensibility comes more understanding - that could possibly be seen as absurd - but it *is* the case that incomprehensibility, to a progressively greater degree, allows for the understanding of understanding. Incomprehensibility is thus seen as that which permits the understanding of understanding; reflection of, and on, the understanding is made possible if one allows for the necessary possibility of incomprehensibility⁶⁵. Thus it becomes

⁶⁵ This point is also brilliantly made by Werner Hamacher, in *Premises*: “Irony ... is the structure by virtue of which language is possible but its complete constitution – as something like a *characteristica universalis* or a closed system of tropes – is impossible. Instead of being an inner-linguistic figure, for which it is often mistaken, irony is, for Schlegel, the limit figure of affiguration: the interminable opening of the domain of figures, always at their margin, noticeable in every particular figure as the quivering of its contours, and at the same time their de-figuration”. Hamacher, *op.cit.*, p. 17. Of course, another prominent figure (and Hamacher’s teacher and direct influence) who saw the true dimensions of Schlegelian irony and its relation to language in general, and figural language in particular, is Paul de Man; see, as the earliest example of his constant preoccupation with this issue, “The Rhetoric of Temporality” in his *Blindness and Insight*, London, Routledge, 1983.

obvious that, throughout the various rhetorical permutations and ironic doublings of the essay, Schlegel's conception of the understanding, of the movement of thought itself, like irony, is always doubled, reflexive. A simple, one-sided understanding is made impossible by the doubling operations of irony, just as impossible as a notion of understanding which would be complete, unified, whole and unassailed by the radical openness of irony; but it is this doubling of irony, signalling incomprehensibility as reflection *on* the understanding, which makes possible the reflection *of* the understanding, the understanding of understanding. The understanding of understanding is only possible from incomprehensibility, and thus the relation between understanding and its opposite is both a *disjunction*, a "separation" or a rift, and a *conjunction*, a necessary interdependence on the second, reflexive level.

It is clear that the motor behind this paradoxical inter-connectedness, the reciprocal determination of understanding and incomprehensibility is none other than irony. As was mentioned earlier, irony is the locus of the relation, both the rift and the link between understanding and incomprehensibility, and this is because irony is itself always a double movement and a process of doubling. In considering further some of Schlegel's numerous proclamations on, and definitions of, irony, I am guided by this principle, that is to say by the notion that irony is a process of doubling, a movement of reflection. When Schlegel writes, in *Athenäum 121*, that "An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts"⁶⁶, what is of key interest, more than the

⁶⁶ Schlegel's fragments are to be found in KFSa, Vol. 2. Translations are available in Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow, University of Minnesota, 1991. Once again, I follow Firchow's translations with slight modifications when required. References to the

definition of an idea, is what exactly is meant by “to the point of irony” (*bis zur Ironie*). It would seem that an idea differs from a concept in that precisely it cannot be thought of as simple, but must be thought of as double, a “synthesis”, as a connection, an “interchange”, and it is this doubling, connecting and synthesising which is the work of irony. Irony works to produce “an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses”, irony works to produce “a continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts”. In this way, and although the fragment does not directly offer us a determination or a definition of irony, it tells us much about the operation, the work of irony, and what it tells us follows inexorably from what Schlegel has written on the doubling of irony, on the “irony of irony” which is irony’s ‘essential’ determination. Irony is thus, once again, a reflexive (double), conjunctive/disjunctive relation, it keeps the two conflicting thoughts which form the idea through their interchange forever connected and yet forever disjoined, in a condition which Schlegel will also, in another fragment examined later, describe as “absolute antagonism”. This is a condition of the understanding (since irony, as was established, is *always* of the understanding) akin to the relational ontology of Novalis; irony, in other words, is the epistemological double of Novalis’ ontological hovering, a word and a ‘concept’ that Schlegel mobilises often in the fragments. In *Athenäum* 305 he writes, beginning again with a consideration “*bis zur Ironie*”, that “humour” (which in this case must clearly be seen as a sub-set of irony, perhaps the kind of ‘humorous’ irony Schlegel was employing in relation to his old garden) “likes to hover about the gently and clearly flowing rhapsodies of philosophy or of poetry”, and, in a formulation which should be enough to allow us to see his

utterly serious intent despite his writing on humour, that “humour deals with being and non-being, and its true essence is reflection”. Irony (and humour) then is much more than a simple rhetorical effect; it is the precise mirroring, or double, of Being-as-hovering, and thus takes on, for Schlegel, the role that in Novalis is taken by the self-referentiality, the simultaneous inanity and efficacy of all language, of language as such, as this is seen in his *Monolog*. I do not wish hastily to announce a simple identity between irony and language, but rather to point out that, in the context of Romantic epistemology and language theory, the conceptualisation of irony by Schlegel, its determination as a reflexive movement of connection and disjunction at the same time, as an essential relationality of the understanding, a *hovering* (between primary and secondary meanings, or even between understanding and incomprehensibility) finds its counterpart in Novalis’ conception of the endless self-referential, relational play of language; to suggest, in other words, that even when Novalis and Schlegel do not use the same terminology, nor even operate within the same rhetorical terrain, their basic conceptions of language, epistemology, ontology, can be, at the very least, directly linked.

In fact, it is difficult to resist the temptation of comparing Schlegelian irony with Novalis’ conception of language. It is hard not to see Schlegelian irony, despite Novalis’ own misgivings about his friend’s notion⁶⁷, as just this radical universal *condition* of language, and of the understanding, especially

Ideas), and their number.

⁶⁷ In a direct critical comment on Schlegel’s *Lyceum* fragments on irony, to be found in his *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, Novalis writes: “What Schlegel so sharply characterises as irony is to my way of thinking nothing other - than the result, the character of true reflection – the true presence of the spirit. The spirit only appears in a *strange, airy* form. Schlegel’s irony seems to me to be true humour. Several names are of benefit to an idea.” (II, 428, 36) I would like to suggest that perhaps Novalis’ objection is a nominalist one – indeed, “several names are of benefit to an idea”, and what he correctly identifies as “the character of true reflection”, and “the true presence of the spirit” is in gesture just as universal as Schlegel’s conception of irony.

when Schlegel goes to such lengths to make irony inescapable in *Über die Unverständlichkeit*. Irony is not another name for language, nor another name for the understanding, but it stands as the key Schlegelian term for the condition of both. This should become even more apparent when we consider another famous Schlegelian fragment on irony, *Lyceum 108*. Here irony is not only said to be “the freest of all licenses ... and yet ... absolutely necessary”, which already echoes Novalis’ key notion of the “free necessity” governing the transcendental semiotic schema, but its operation, its work is defined precisely as Novalis, in the *Monolog*, talks of the operation of the *Sprachtrieb*: “It [irony] contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute (*des Unbedingten*) and the relative (*des Bedingten*), between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication.” Irony is a relation, and thus a link, a conjunction, and yet a relation of antagonism, thus a disjunction; irony is the link between the possibility and the necessity of understanding and communication, and the possibility and necessity of incomprehensibility. Irony is at once the inane, destructive undoing of the understanding, and the enthusiasm, in Novalis’ terms, which makes it at all possible. What needs to be noted, further than the congruence between Novalis’ and Schlegel’s thought, is the kind of relation, the kind of process or operation that irony announces. As “indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative”, irony cannot be seen as a movement of dialectical sublation, despite the fact that its perpetual reflexive doubling and its seemingly infinite progression may suggest that. Irony can never be a process that somehow manages to complete its series of doublings, just as a final all-engulfing irony could not be possible in *Über die*

Unverständlichkeit - the antagonism is indeed indissoluble, the disjunction is always there.

This seeming permanence of disjunction, which operates at the same time as its double, a permanence of relation and conjunction, can perhaps best be seen in the fragment, and in this case it is little more than an unpublished note, which in my eyes says more about the Schlegelian conception of irony than any other. The briefest, and perhaps also the most paradoxical definition Schlegel gives of irony is to be found among his notebooks, and is written at the same time as the *Athenäum* fragments. It states: "Irony is a permanent parabasis" (*Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parekbase*) (KFSA 18, 668, p.85). Before attempting to show why this fragment is of such cardinal importance for the issues here at stake⁶⁸, first it must be literally explained. A parabasis is a classical rhetorical figure, found chiefly in Attic comedies such as those by Aristophanes, which takes the form of an 'aside', an interruption in the narrative of a play – perhaps the chief modern instantiation of parabasis is in Brecht's plays, where it is used to produce the desired *Verfremdungseffekt*. Already, when Schlegel uses the term to describe irony, a double aspect of irony comes to the fore. First, that the interruption of parabasis is, on the level of irony, the interruption of the process of understanding; in dramatic terms, parabasis disrupts the narrative flow of a play, disconnecting, in a decisive break, what precedes it from what comes after it, in a way analogous to the disruption of ordinary, 'simple' understanding performed by the operations of irony. Second, just as parabasis (most clearly and intentionally in the case of Brechtian drama), by interrupting the flow of dramatic narrative, actually points to the status of the play *as* a play, irony as

parabasis of the understanding, and, to be more precise, as parabasis of linguistic/rhetorical understanding is exactly what allows for the possibility of reflexive understanding, in that irony makes the understanding reflexively double, so that it can reflect on both the primary and secondary senses of the ironic word or statement, thus resulting in a reflexive understanding of the process of understanding. Briefly considered, this is at least one of the reasons why this note of Schlegel's is this cardinal – it states, in a few words, what in the few pages of *Über die Unverständlichkeit*, and given the essay's rich ironic texture, Schlegel attempted to assert and, as was seen earlier, severely risked being misunderstood about. But crucially Schlegel calls irony a *permanent* parabasis, something which, in dramatic terms would either be completely impossible or simply incomprehensible. In terms of irony being a feature, a phenomenon, or a condition of understanding, (and, again, here it needs to be stressed that understanding must be seen as schematic, semiotic, *linguistic* understanding, in keeping with what both Novalis, and, in his own oblique way, Schlegel, bring to bear in their epistemology) permanent parabasis suggests that the disruption of the 'simple' process of understanding is itself permanent, or rather, that this 'simple' process of understanding, understanding by means of simple correspondence of word to meaning is, strictly speaking, *always already impossible*. Another way of stating this would be to assert that understanding, within the epistemological limits ascribed to language, is always reflexive understanding, it is always double, because irony, operating upon the understanding, is itself double in its 'essence'. Irony as permanent parabasis is what makes us aware, what makes us *understand*, that language is the endless

⁶⁸ I am in no way the first to suggest that. The fragment is a favourite topos in the writings of Paul

self-reflexive play of Novalis' *Monolog* – no 'simple' correspondence between word and meaning, between signifier and signified is ever possible, because irony as permanent parabasis is the self-same condition of language which Novalis sees as inanity. And yet, irony as permanent parabasis also yields the necessary possibility of reflexive understanding, and this is the same condition of language that Novalis describes as the enthusiasm of the *Sprachtrieb*. Irony indeed means, to quote Novalis, that we do not "speak for the sake of things", since it prevents the simple correspondence of a statement with its 'true', singular meaning; but irony conceived in such a universal way as an inexorable, permanent parabasis, also means that what we do speak (ironically) we speak in self-reflection, and thus are we imbued with the "spirit" of language, we are enthused by language.

There is one more, indispensable, dimension of Romanticism, and of Romantic irony in particular, which is exemplified by this fragment of Schlegel's, and it is this which will bring us once more back to Novalis and the *Monolog*. This dimension is the commensurability, or the complicity, of philosophy and poetry *through* and *because of* irony. Schlegel asserts this elsewhere in the fragments, most famously in *Lyceum 42*, where he states both that "philosophy is the real homeland of irony" and that "only poetry can also reach the heights of philosophy in this way". Defining irony simply as a trope would place it firmly in the realm of the poetic, and yet there is no avoiding the fact that for Schlegel irony is indispensable to philosophy, at least, as he writes in *Lyceum 42*, "where philosophy appears in oral and written dialogues – and is not simply confined into rigid systems". The congruence of philosophy and poetry

for the Romantics is beyond doubt; it can be ascertained in such statements as Schlegel's "where philosophy stops, there poetry must begin" (*Ideas*, 48), or Novalis' "Philosophy is the poem of the understanding"(II, 531, 29), to which I will have to return. Irony, for Schlegel, is defined both in a philosophical manner, borrowing key philosophical terms (as "logical beauty" in *Lyceum* 42), and, in the fragment on parabasis, unmistakably as pertaining to the rhetoric and the domain of poetry. The *fact* of this congruence, this co-extensivity of philosophy and poetry within and through irony is not enough. What needs to be investigated is the manner in which this congruence is asserted, and to do this, it is necessary to ask not just what philosophy means for Schlegel (as for the Romantics in general) but also what poetry means, what is its "essence and function", to borrow once again from the *Monolog*. Irony in its Schlegelian understanding is, I wish to maintain, the key connection. Philosophically, irony is a marker for both the impossibility of 'simple' understanding based on direct correspondence, and for the possibility of a second-power reflexive understanding; irony can thus be seen to yield the epistemological limitations and reflexive aspirations of Romantic philosophy. But in poetry, irony is to be taken in a wholly positive way, and Schlegel's seemingly endless approval for irony in classic and modern poetic texts alike is indication enough. What is crucial to grasp here is that it is precisely because irony signals certain limitations and marks certain impossibilities from within philosophy that it can take such an infinitely liberating role in poetry. The necessity and the inevitability, indeed the primacy of reflection and relationality as signalled by irony may indeed be an essential philosophical legacy of Romanticism, and of Schlegel in particular, but

it is the very same primacy of relationality and reflection, momentarily grasped in the analogy of the Schlegelian expressions “irony of irony” and “poetry of poetry”, which is the foundation of Romantic poetology⁶⁹. Finally, it is this primacy of reflection and relationality exemplified in, and mobilised by, the Schlegelian notion of irony, shared by philosophy and poetry alike, that makes possible the radical Romantic reconfiguration of epistemology as poetology.

⁶⁹ I use the term ‘poetology’ in contradistinction with the more usual term ‘poetics’ in order to differentiate between what, in Romanticism, is a generalised theory of poetic production (hence “poetology”), and the more specific use of “poetics” to describe a *particular* theoretical

IV. From *Theoria* to *Poiesis* 1: Schlegel and Progressive Universal Poetry.

Irony, as we have seen, is one way in which the work of philosophy appears for Schlegel, and the Romantics in general, to be commensurate with that of poetry. The critical and sceptical impetus of irony brings much to bear on an epistemology organised around the central concept of reflection. Yet there is another way in which this crucial Romantic interlocking of philosophy with poetry occurs, and this too is dependent on the primacy of reflection, seen, this time, as operating within the practice of poetry itself. I am referring to what is perhaps the most famous Schlegelian legacy (alongside the formulation of Romantic irony) – the theory of ‘transcendental poetry’, ‘Romantic poetry’, or ‘the poetry of poetry’. In this instance, Schlegel theorises poetry (*Poesie*) in language which is distinctly philosophical, and, in essence, transports the chief philosophical arguments and tenets of Romanticism to poetry – if Schlegelian irony goes some way towards showing that philosophy is thought of as poetry (“Philosophy is the poem of the understanding” says Novalis), Schlegelian “progressive universal poetry” shows how the Romantics equally, at the same time, thought of poetry as philosophy. Furthermore, only a couple of years later, Hölderlin will present a thoroughly philosophical account of the genesis and

background to *particular* poetic practices, as in the commonly used designations such as

production of poetry, in which what he calls “the poetic spirit” is truly nothing less than the then emergent “spirit” of the German Idealist systematic philosophers, Schelling and Hegel. This is not to suggest that what can be properly called a ‘Romantic poetology’, or literary theory, collapses into idealist philosophy; as I intend to show in the final chapter, the Romantics have a very specific conception of what poetry (or literature) is. Nevertheless, the Romantic theory of poetic production, as exemplified by Schlegel (and Hölderlin), is, I will maintain, *at the same time*, a philosophical, more precisely an *epistemological*, story. Thus, with Romanticism, poetry retains, on the one hand, its specificity and particularity *as* poetry, while, on the other hand, becoming a generalised theory of production as *poiesis* and, as such, a theory of the production of concepts and knowledge, an epistemology.

At the centre of this radical reconfiguration of both poetry and epistemology lies what has already been identified as Romantic ontology, or metaphysics. As I demonstrated in chapter 1, Romantic metaphysics rests on a conception of Being as hovering, as a differencing activity, as well as on the postulation of an epistemological horizon, the horizon of “Judgment”, “*Schein*”, and (re)presentation, from within which Being is to be “approached”. This metaphysics itself rests on a transfiguration of Fichte’s transcendental idealism, on a reading of the *Wissenschaftslehre* which emphasises the founding Act-of-Being (the *Tathandlung*) as reflection and production, and it is those two key terms, reflection and production, which also form the basis for Schlegel’s poetology. This, of course, has not gone unnoticed: Frederick Beiser, for one,

writes of Schlegel's concept of Romantic 'poesy',⁷⁰ as "essentially the aesthetic version of the philosopher's eternal striving for truth", clearly having the *Wissenschaftslehre* in mind⁷¹. Nevertheless, I must take issue with Beiser's use of the term 'aesthetic'. What I will be maintaining in this section is that Schlegel's "version" is a *poetic* one, which is to say more than simply aesthetic; the transformation of the Fichtean philosophical (epistemological/ethical) story does not happen on the level of aesthetic reception, but on that of *poetic production*.

To see this transformation and its ramifications more clearly we need to examine closely Schlegel's famous fragments on "progressive universal poetry" (*Athenäum* 116) and "transcendental poetry" (*Athenäum* 238). In both, Schlegel expounds a theory of poetic production based on his own understanding of the transcendental, crucially mediated by the concept of reflection, and amounting to nothing less than, to paraphrase Beiser, a poetic transformation of the transcendental-idealist infinite epistemological 'journey', or approach, towards Being. To begin with, in *Athenäum* 238, he states: "There is a kind of poetry [*Poesie*] whose one-and-all is the relation between the ideal and the real, and which therefore, by analogy to the manner of speaking of philosophy, should be called transcendental poetry." The use of the term 'transcendental' to describe

⁷⁰ A note on terminology. I have chosen to translate Schlegel's term '*Poesie*' not as 'poesy' (which is how Beiser, as well as many others, such as Bowie and the contributors in the Schulte-Sasse volume, translate it), but as 'poetry' (with Behler and Seyhan). The reasons for this will become apparent in the discussion which follows, but can be summarised thus: although it is crucial to differentiate '*Poesie*' from '*Dichtung*', or poetry as imaginative literature, this, I feel, is better done by insisting, as I do, on the provenance of '*Poesie*' from the Greek 'poiesis', and all its incumbent, and crucial, connotations of creation and production in a generalised sense. At the same time, however, it is absolutely clear that '*Poesie*' in the Schlegelian sense *still* refers to poetry *as such*, thus to '*Dichtung*' (and Schlegel also frequently uses cognates of *Dichtung* alongside *Poesie*), and from this it can be linked to Hölderlin's more 'conventional' use of '*Dichtung*' throughout his theoretical writings. '*Poesie*' is *not just* '*Dichtung*', but is *always also* '*Dichtung*', and this is absolutely crucial. Poetry thus retains its specificity as poetry whilst being allowed, *at the same time*, to be extended into a generalised theory of production-*poiesis*.

poetry is immediately striking, but Schlegel is careful in explaining exactly what he means. ‘Transcendental’, for him, at least in this instance, is what maintains the tension between the real and the ideal, and this should be glossed in its evidently Fichtean provenance – the transcendental is that which is maintained, that which ‘hovers’, as Schlegel will say a few lines later, between the pure ideality of Fichte’s absolute I, and the pure reality of a ‘realist’ conception of nature, such as that Schlegel finds in Spinoza⁷². Although his use of the term elsewhere, and also in the context of this fragment, also suggests that he takes its meaning directly from Kant, defining ‘the transcendental’ as that which maintains the relation between the real and the ideal is surely *both* in keeping with his precursors, *and* an altogether novel reading of the term. It allows him even to formulate a cursory theory of genre, when he continues: “It [transcendental poetry] begins as satire in the absolute difference between ideal and real, hovers in the middle as elegy, and ends as idyll with the absolute identity of the two”. But ‘transcendental’ also, for Schlegel, retains its original Kantian designation, transported from the realm of philosophy (and, in particular, epistemology) to that of poetry:

“Just as one would not place much value on a transcendental philosophy which was not critical, which did not present [*darstellte*] the producer along with the product, which did not contain at the same time within the system of transcendental thoughts a characterisation of transcendental thinking: so too this kind of poetry should unite the transcendental materials and preliminaries of a

⁷¹ Beiser, Frederick, *German Idealism: the Struggle against Subjectivism*, Cambridge: Harvard, 2002, p. 448. The same argument is in operation in Behler, *op.cit.*, pp.137-139.

⁷² Schlegel read Spinoza avidly and there is ample evidence of his admiration for him, not least in the published fragments of the *Athenäum* (see fragments 270, 274, 301, 450).

poetic theory of the poetic capacity [*einer poetischen Theorie des Dichtungsvermögen*], something often found in modern poets, with the artistic reflection and beautiful self-mirroring found in Pindar, the lyric fragments of the Greeks and, among the moderns, in Goethe, and should, in all its presentations [*Darstellungen*], present also itself [*sich selbst mit darstellen*], and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry.”

Here transcendental becomes transcendental *and* critical, and by that Schlegel means *reflexive*. ‘Transcendental poetry’ is that which presents its producer along with its product, in keeping with what the term means in Kant and Fichte. Moreover, and this is critical, Schlegel really does mean transcendental *poetry*, he sees it in evidence in ancient and modern poets alike, and writes of a ‘poetic theory of the poetic/versifying capacity [*Dichtungsvermögen*]’; what in philosophy designates the mode of cognition which is not merely interested in the cognition of objects, but rather more in the *manner* of cognition of those objects, in poetry becomes self-reflexive, self-theorised versification, “simultaneously poetry, and poetry of poetry”. This is a wholesale transposition of a fully grasped philosophical vocabulary onto a wholly different terrain for which it can be shown (and Schlegel does it by providing examples) to be suited – poetry thought and conceived of as philosophy. Yet the crucial difference is that what in the realm of philosophy is a purely *epistemological* concern, both with Kant and with Fichte, becomes, when it is transposed to poetry by Schlegel, a reflexive, second-level (re)presentation of (re)presentation, a *poetic* representation of poetic representation itself. In Schlegel’s own terms, the “poetry of poetry” is, as it were, at *two* removes from

‘simple’ *Dichtung*; once as *Poesie*, and a second time as *Poesie der Poesie*. What is crucial in this is that the operation of reflection with which poetry becomes ‘poetry of poetry’ is itself reflected in a ‘beautiful self-mirroring’ – it is the germ of what is formulated, in *Athenäum 116*, as the *infinite* reflection of Romantic poetry.

Athenäum 116 is justifiably the most famous of all of Schlegel’s fragments. It is here where Romantic poetry is defined as “progressive universal poetry”, and is given a decidedly programmatic description, including its “aims” (among them, significantly, “to put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric”) and its elevation into the status of what all poetry should be. It is obvious that Schlegel is not here describing an already existing type of poetic creation, and he avoids giving any examples, as he did in the fragment just discussed; “the Romantic kind of poetry [here *Dichtart*]”, he writes in its closing sentence, “is the only one that is more than a kind, and is, as it were, poetry [*Dichtkunst*] itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be Romantic”. However, it is also obvious that the characterisation of “transcendental poetry” as seen in *Athenäum 238* pertains here with even greater force. Romantic poetry can “best hover at the midpoint between the presented object and the act of presenting it [*zwischen dem Dargestellten und den Darstellenden*], free from all real or ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, raising this reflection again and again to a higher power, multiplying it in an endless succession of mirrors”. Here are the main characteristics of the self-reflexive transcendental poetry taken up again, only this time even more powerfully, precisely, and radically. Romantic poetry *hovers* between that which is (re)presented and that which (re) presents – or the act of (re)presentation - that is to say, it manages to

(re)present both, like a good transcendental argument. It is, this time not a *combination* of the real and the ideal, but entirely free from either, at least insofar as these take the form of ‘self-interest’. Interestingly, this leaves Schlegel without the possibility of recourse to a theory of genre, but that is entirely concomitant with a ‘kind’ of poetry which is all kinds at once, the *über-genre* of Romantic poetry⁷³, but it allows him to situate this poetry “at the midpoint” between every pair of opposites that Schlegel is exercised by. This hovering at the midpoint has been seen as Schlegel’s version of Schelling’s more famous *Indifferenzpunkt*⁷⁴, but should more readily be seen in association with Novalis’ central ontological conception of the *Fichte-Studien*, as will become apparent in what follows. What is more, here Schlegel makes absolutely explicit his notion of the infinite proliferation of reflection, the endless play of mirrors allowed by the initial transcendental reflection of Romantic poetry. In a gesture which is entirely commensurate with that of Schlegelian irony, once the first reflection occurs, and here it occurs simply by the instantiation of transcendental poetry “on the wings of poetic reflection”, there is no reason why this reflection, this doubling, and this play of mirrors, should ever be stopped. Once the original doubling takes place, the doubling of self-reflexive poetry or, if you like, the transcendental doubling, Romantic poetry makes it its task to proliferate reflection infinitely. It is here where the influence of, and also the decisive break with, Fichte’s transcendental idealism is most apparent. Schlegel retains the Fichtean conception of the ‘originary duality’ of the *Tathandlung* in his

⁷³ These remarks on genre are here only preliminary, unavoidable because they pertain to the *philosophical* significance of the fragment. For a more detailed discussion of the great importance that a theory of genre has for Romanticism, and for the thoroughly philosophical implications of that importance, see chapter 4.

⁷⁴ See Beiser, *op.cit.*, pp.448-449. For a more detailed discussion of the similarities and differences between Schlegel and Schelling, see Chapter 3.

poetological transformation of the language of transcendental philosophy, but he does not see why the doubling, reflection, in the case of poetry at least (but this is also, as we have seen, the case with irony), should be checked by Fichte's *Anstoß*⁷⁵. The result is infinite reflection, an "endless succession of mirrors" as the medium of Romantic poetry.

Moreover, the result is that Romantic poetry itself is unending, infinite, in fact it is the *only* possible designation of the infinite: "It [Romantic poetry] alone is infinite, just as it alone is free". And, a few lines previously: "Other kinds of poetry [*Dichtarten*] are finished and are now capable of being fully analysed. The Romantic kind of poetry [*Dichtart*] is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming, and never be perfected." Thus, Romantic poetry is progressive, universal, infinite, forever in a state of becoming; it is also transcendental and reflexive, infinitely reflexive. All these designations are sign enough that what is at stake here is far more than simple versification, for which these already bloated claims would sound positively outlandish. But Romantic poetry, although contrasted (ironically?) with other *Dichtarten*, is decidedly not a simple type of poetry, not even simply 'the poetry of poetry', for which Schlegel can at least find examples, species of a genus. Romantic poetry is for Schlegel, and in solely philosophical terms, nothing less than the transcendental, real-ideal (re)presentation of the infinite, what most commentators on Romanticism call the Romantic Absolute⁷⁶. And this is just as momentous a conception as was Novalis' ontology of Being as

⁷⁵ On this, see the amusingly clever, but nonetheless decisively anti-Fichtean comment in one of Schlegel's notebooks: "*An seinem Anstoß bin ich immer angestossen*" (KFSa, XVIII, p.31, no.134) – the pun is, of course, untranslatable.

⁷⁶ For instance, Beiser, who labels Hölderlin, Novalis and Schlegel alike "absolute idealists", op.cit. See also, Bowie, op.cit., pp.75-80. For a discussion of the Romantic notion of infinity in contradistinction with that seen in Hegel, see chapter 3.

hovering, or his semiotic theory. Schlegel's Romantic poetry should, in fact, be seen in conjunction with both those notions. It is clearly connected to the inanity and enthusiasm of language as described by Novalis in the *Monolog*, of which Schlegel was aware before publishing the fragment in the *Athenäum*, since the fragment speaks of poetry in the same exalted tones as found in the *Monolog*, and, more importantly, since *Athenäum 116* can be seen to proceed from where the *Monolog* left off. Novalis' *Sprachtrieb*, the inane ramblings of the 'prophet' enthused by language, is what yields, significantly, *Poesie* – it is only a small step from the *Monolog*'s contentions on the self-reflexivity of *all* language, to their being brought to the infinite power in his friend's "*progressive Universalpoesie*". And Schlegel uses his friend's term "*schweben*", both in this, and the fragment previously examined. If one also takes into account Novalis' notion that "all production approaches being, and Being is hovering", it is not difficult to see how Schlegel's Romantic poetry [now *Poesie*] is just that theory of production infinitely approaching Being as hovering. This is perhaps how Schlegel's ideas on the real and ideal nature of transcendental-Romantic poetry can be best understood, via Novalis, and with Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* always waiting in the wings; Romantic poetry *mirrors* or *expresses*, like Novalis' transcendental semiotic schema, the infinite hovering of Being, a hovering between, in Schlegel's terms, the real and the ideal, Fichte and Spinoza, subject and object. As such it is far more than a simple poetological theory; it becomes a Schlegelian equivalent of an idealist (but also, crucially, realist) epistemology, insofar as epistemology is for the Romantics "an approach to Being". *Poesie* then is brought all that closer to its Greek origins, as *poiesis*, creation and production, whilst at the same time retaining enough of its specificity as a theory of *poetic*

production to warrant the assertion I am making in this chapter, that for the Romantics epistemology becomes poetology, and *theoria* becomes *poiesis*. Yet, there is one more step to take in this direction, a step which will take us into possibly the most intricate Romantic theoretical text, will show the complete congruence of epistemology and poetology, their belonging together under one roof, and which will also demonstrate the affinity of Romantic methodology with that of its bigger sibling in the Idealism of Schelling and Hegel, in the construction of the progressive dialectical method. All this is Hölderlin's domain.

V. From *Theoria* to *Poiesis* 2: Hölderlin's *On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit*.

Hölderlin's Homburg period (1798-1800) must be recognised as one of his most fertile, especially in terms of his theoretical output. Particularly towards its end, in 1800, Hölderlin wrote a handful of poetological, or theoretical, texts which would surely warrant him a secure place in the pantheon of early German Romantic literary theorists, alongside the Schlegels and Novalis. Having left Jena a couple of years previously, he was no longer in direct contact with the philosophical developments of the university, but his writings from Homburg show, together with a potent literary-theoretical drive, an astute philosophical awareness and provenance. In fact, as I will be arguing in what follows, even though texts like *On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit* and *On the Difference of Poetic Modes* should *prima facie* be read as poetology, indeed as possibly the most involved works on the subject of the whole period, they also continue, in more or less direct ways, the negotiation with, and critique of, Fichte which began with *Seyn, Urtheil* five years earlier. Moreover, they can be seen to be possibly the most detailed, if not always the most concrete, elaboration of the nascent dialectical method, and can be seen to point forward to the mature

dialectical systems of Schelling and Hegel. Once again, as with Schlegel and Novalis, the reader of these texts finds herself faced with a thought that bears on poetry, more specifically the poetic process of creation, just as much as it does on idealist epistemology, insofar as this latter is conceived of as the then emergent drive towards the self-reflexive philosophical system which seeks to tell a story whose “aim is to comprehend within the system itself the history which enabled the philosopher to come to the point of creating the system”⁷⁷. Again, a Romantic seeks to write of philosophy within poetry and of poetry within philosophy, turning epistemology into poetology, *theoria* to *poiesis*.

Out of those texts, which cannot, in truth, be considered anything more than fragments or notes, as they are frequently interrupted, unfinished, clearly meant for personal consumption rather than publication, *On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit (Über die Verfahrungsweise des poetischen Geistes)* is by far the most complex and also the most crucial for what is here at stake⁷⁸. It seeks to tell the story of the creation of a poem, which at the same time is the story of the development of the “poetic spirit” in a way which, if not in content then certainly in *form*, is strikingly similar to the story of the development of consciousness in Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism* and also Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. If comparisons with Schelling or Hegel may seem, at this stage, somewhat heuristic, I would like to stress that I do not wish here to argue for any possible congruence between Hölderlin’s and Schelling or Hegel’s thoughts, nor for a direct, and unavowed, debt owed by either or both to their erstwhile *Stift* friend,

⁷⁷ Bowie, op.cit., p.82. As Bowie concurs, the most famous and most complete elaboration of such a story comes with Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, written some 7 years *after* Hölderlin’s efforts.

⁷⁸ The title is not Hölderlin’s but, as with *Seyn, Urtheil*, editorially imposed by the editors of the *Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe*. The text exists in English translation in Pfau, op.cit., pp. 62-82. I have followed this translation, modifying it slightly when necessary.

although there is ample scope to do so elsewhere; rather, I want to highlight the unmistakable philosophical drive, both in vocabulary and in methodology, in a text which nevertheless seeks to elaborate *poetic creation*, and to point, once again, to the peculiar Romantic way of treating poetology as epistemology. In the arguments which follow I have had to curtail the text to selective quotes in order to be able to bring to the fore more general points about the text's construction, its philosophical impetus and method. This is due to the fact that this is a singularly impenetrable text, even by Hölderlin's standards – its first sentence alone, which I intend to discuss in some detail, contains at least four alternating pairs of oppositions developed integrally throughout it, runs to over two pages (three in the German edition), and is not even complete. It could be argued that Hölderlin tries to perform, within 20 pages or so, what takes the whole of the *Phenomenology* – admittedly, not a particularly 'easy' read either – for Hegel to do. Even though there can be no question here of a full textual analysis, my intention is to set Hölderlin's thought process off in relation to the cardinal issue here at stake, namely the Romantic conception of poetology *as* epistemology.

The text begins with a series of interrelated sentences beginning with "once", or "when" [*wenn*], and marking the moment in a process when the poet "is in control of the spirit", thus basically forming the pre-requisites for such a control⁷⁹. What the 'spirit' is, is not explicitly determined, but what is of importance here, as with the rest of the essay, is to understand that, at least on a first level, the issue of Hölderlin's discourse is the creation of a poem by a particular, empirical subject-poet, through the mediation of 'the spirit'. Thus,

⁷⁹ Translation in Pfau, op.cit., p.62.

and even though it is the determination of the different moments in the spirit's development which will chiefly hold Hölderlin's attention, the reader of his text should never forget that the end-result of the development here described is the production of a poem - in other words, the essay is, at the same time, both a 'practical' guide to the production, the genesis of a poem, and also a story about the spirit's development. How then is this spirit initially characterised? The spirit is in fact never characterised *as such*, never given a proper definition, and what we can understand about it we understand as *process*; the spirit seems to be nothing other than its own process of becoming, and it is no accident that all the initial, or grounding determinations of this process are to do with movement. Initially then, this process is characterised as "the free movement [*freien Bewegung*], [...] the harmonious alternation and progressive striving [*harmonischen Wechsels und Fortstrebens*] wherein the spirit tends to reproduce itself within itself and others" (ibid.). Already, correlations between what occurs in this text, and Schlegel's *progressive Universalpoesie* are abundantly clear⁸⁰: Hölderlin's spirit shares with Schlegel's concept a basic determination as 'alteration', and 'progressive striving', and this cannot but be at least partially due to both writers' familiarity with, and appropriation of, Fichte's epistemology. Next, Hölderlin asserts that the spirit begins in a state of "necessary conflict" [*nothwendiger Widerstreit*], that is to say, in an immanently *dynamic* state. It is this original conflict, this immanent dynamism and momentum which carries the movement of the spirit along its path, and which may be compared, not just with the dynamism and immanent development of consciousness in Hegel's

⁸⁰ This is not to suggest that Hölderlin must have had Schlegel's fragment in mind when writing his own essay. However it is well reported (*inter alia*, in Bowie, and Beiser) that Hölderlin expressed a wish for the creation of a journal which would be the counterpart to the Schlegels' *Athenäum*, and it would seem that he was at least aware of the fragments published there.

Phenomenology, but also with the dynamic ontology mobilised by Novalis' concept of hovering. What is more, the conflict the spirit originally finds itself into is that between two originary "postulates" [*Forderung*], "the most originary postulate of the spirit which aims at the communality and unified simultaneity of all parts [*Gemeinschaft und einiges Zugleichseyn aller Theile*], and the other postulate which commands the spirit to move beyond itself and reproduce itself, within itself and others, through a beautiful progression and alternation" [*in einem schönen Fortschritt und Wechsel sich in sich selbst und in anderen zu reproduciren*] (ibid.). This contradictory pull on the spirit, at once centripetal and centrifugal, is directly reminiscent of the distinction Hölderlin made five years earlier, in *Seyn, Urtheil*, between the unifying simultaneity between subject and object expressed in *Seyn* (the originary condition), and the separation and alternation of subject and object occurring within *Urtheil* (the *second* originary condition). It is also an element clearly demarcating Hölderlin's text from the process of Hegel, who does not begin with *two* but with *one* such postulate. There is, however, a crucial difference between the two Hölderlinian texts: where, in the earlier text, Hölderlin postulates the logical and temporal dependence of the moment of separation upon the moment of absolutely originary unity, in this text, the conflict, the struggle, is in fact what is being postulated as the originary motor of the spirit's process of development. Indeed, for the rest of the essay, Hölderlin will maintain the tension inherent in the originary conflict within the spirit, modifying it into an impressive series of dialectical oppositions, themselves in constant development and progression. It would seem that Hölderlin's thought, at least in what constitutes the development of the *poetic* spirit, is now able to move further from the fundamental assertion of

the arche-separation between the realm of unity and simultaneity, and that of disjunction and temporal progression, and it will become clear in the rest of the text that Hölderlin intends a ‘reconciliation’, a resolution of the contradictory pulls on the spirit. It seems, even from the very beginning, that it is the spirit’s dynamic, processual character which will allow it somehow to reconcile its initial conflict⁸¹.

So begins the series of dialectically opposed pairs, the very opposition between which is precisely what allows the spirit to carry on its development. In a sense, all pairs of opposition are permutations of the originary distinction, postulated in the spirit’s necessary conflict with itself, between alternation [*Wechsel*] and simultaneity [*Zugleichseyn*], or between separation and unity. Thus the conflict is reconfigured in terms of “the struggle between spiritual content [*geistigem Gehalt*] (between the interrelation, the affinity of all parts [*der Verwandtschaft aller Theile*] and spiritual form [*geistiger Form*] (the alternation of all parts) [*dem Wechsel aller Theile*]” (ibid.). This opposition is resolved when it is itself opposed to another opposition, that between “objective content” [*objectives Gehalt*], and “objective form” [*objective Form*], and this new pair is but a different version of the initial fundamental distinction between simultaneity and alternation. The “objective content” is “the form of the subject matter” [*Form des Stoffes*] (ibid., p.63) insofar as that is to “remain identical in all parts”; the “objective form”, on the other hand, is what arises from “the

⁸¹ This can also be seen as a way in which Hölderlin is able to move beyond the thought of an intellectual intuition as a means of grasping the originary unity behind difference earlier expressed by *Seyn*. While there is almost no talk of *Seyn* in this text, it is obvious that Hölderlin’s attempt to find a way in which contradictions and separations are somehow reconciled and made sense of is akin to his own ‘approach to Being’. What is significant in this attempt however, as I will be trying to demonstrate, is that it does not seek this reconciliation in an all-encompassing (and highly problematic) gesture, such as intellectual intuition, which would aim to grasp the totality of unity in one fell swoop, but seeks it rather in the process, the

material change” [*materielle Wechsel*] of the subject matter. We thus have not two but *four* pairs of opposites:

Spiritual Form - Spiritual Content

Objective Form - Objective Content

but also,

Spiritual Form - Objective Content

(since the objective content remains identical in all parts it is contrasted to the spiritual form whose essence is the alternation of all parts - Hölderlin contrasts them explicitly, *ibid.*, p.63), and

Objective Form - Spiritual Content

(since “precisely this material change constitute[s] the objective form, the appearance [*Gestalt*] in contrast to the spiritual content”, *ibid.*).

This complication in Hölderlin’s method of opposing becomes comprehensible when he states that the conflicts between the pairs of opposites are themselves *irreconcilable*, and also that this irreconcilability is what actually renders the oppositions *meaningful*. Remember that the sentence began with a series of admonitions towards the poet, who is called to ‘realise’ the existence of these oppositions; again, Hölderlin writes, “once he has realised how... the conflict between material alternation and material, identical striving [ie: effectively between *any two* of the four pairs just extracted from the text], insofar as they are irreconcilable renders tangible one as well as the other” (*ibid.*, p.64). Thus, what is of cardinal importance here, beyond the specific determinations of the opposing pairs which appear to be fairly interchangeable, is Hölderlin’s

development, the movement (which can be called differential, or dialectical) of the contradictory,

method of opposing oppositions both from within, and from without, with other oppositions, and, further to this, his notion that the 'resolution' of these oppositions rests in the *recognition of their reciprocal irreconcilability*. The spirit finds itself caught within a movement of constant self-opposition which has no *singular* resolution, other than the perpetual movement between oppositions afforded by the alternating pairs, and which is what ultimately makes the oppositions 'tangible' [*fühlbar*]. It is this, more than anything else, which differentiates Hölderlin's dialectical procedure from Hegel's: where Hegel seeks 'reconciliation' or 'resolution' by way of the sublation of opposites, and their eventual integration into the unity and wholeness of the concept, Hölderlin expressly postulates that such 'reconciliation' is precisely the recognition of irreconcilability – a paradox, perhaps, but a productive one⁸².

'Once', then, the poet has realised what the constantly self-opposing contradictory pulls of the spirit bring to bear on his operations, he is only concerned with "the receptivity of the subject matter [*die Receptivität des Stoffs*] to the ideal content and the ideal form" (ibid.). Yet another opposition obtains: that between the ideal, and the material, or the operations of the spirit, and the matter [*Stoff*] of the poem. And it is in this opposition, once again held in check, that the poem's *significance* or meaning [*Bedeutung*] lies: "Between the expression, the presentation [*Darstellung*] and the free idealistic treatment, there lies the foundation and significance of the poem" (ibid., p.66). Here, a lengthy quote will prove necessary:

conflicting spirit itself.

⁸² These remarks on Hegel's method may appear overhasty, and a much more sustained presentation of the methodological and essential differences between Hegel and Romanticism is undertaken in the following chapter. They appear here in such truncated form, lest it be thought that Hölderlin's procedure is closer to Hegel's than to Novalis' or Schlegel's who, as I have shown, place an equally great stress on 'irreconcilability', or 'perpetual antagonism'.

“It [the significance of the poem] is the spiritual-sensuous, the formal-material of the poem; and if the idealistic treatment is more unifying [...] whereas the expression, the presentation in its characters [...] are more separating, then the significance rests between the two; it gives itself meaning, it signifies itself [*sie zeichnet sich aus*] through being everywhere opposed to itself: through [the fact] that [...] it separates all that is united, fixates everything free, universalises everything particular, because it considers what is treated not merely an individual whole, nor as an entity complemented as a whole by what is harmoniously opposed [*harmoniscentgegengesetzten*] to it, but a whole altogether [...]; that it unites by way of opposing, through the meeting of the extremes insofar as these are not comparable with respect to content but with respect to direction and degree of opposition, such that it also compares what is most contradictory, and is quite hyperbolic [...] so that naïve, heroic, and ideal tendencies contradict each other in the object of their tendency yet are comparable in the form of their opposition and striving, and are united according to the law of activity [*nach dem Gesetze der Thätigkeit*], thus united in the most universal, in life.” (ibid., p.66).

Without aiming at a full and comprehensive explanation of this passage, something for which incomparably lengthy and detailed discussions of its somewhat elusive terms cannot be avoided, I want to highlight certain aspects which point to the direction Hölderlin’s thought is now taking. First, and although I will have the chance to analyse Hölderlin’s idiosyncratic theory of

genre later⁸³, I need to signal that the final designations “naïve”, “heroic” and “ideal” correspond to exactly such a theory, as propounded in this essay’s companion piece, *On the Difference of Poetic Modes*, written a few months previously. What is important in this instance is to realise that, even after such tantalisingly complex thought-movements as the essay has presented us with thus far, Hölderlin’s aim still remains the theoretical ‘explanation’ of the process of poetic creation - in other words, we are still dealing with a theory of poetic production. Yet the thrust of the argument presented here is unmistakably philosophical, and ascribes to something as ‘humble’ as the significance, the meaning [*Bedeutung*] of a poem the ability to perform “the meeting of extremes” but also the ability to “separate what is united”, the ability to “universalise everything particular”, resulting in the final unification of all opposing tendencies in “the law of activity”, or “life”. From this passage, a few important *philosophical* aspects of Hölderlin’s thought become apparent. First, the resemblance of the absolutely universalising tendency within the poem’s significance as Hölderlin states it, with Schlegel’s progressive universal poetry: in both cases we are dealing with the type of creation that is capable of manifesting the greatest universality through the greatest difference, with an absolutely universal theory of production. Second, the passage’s culmination in what is unmistakably a Fichtean determination of “the law of activity”, the *Tathandlung* which for the Romantics, as we saw in the previous chapter, is the founding of Being as the activity of differencing, but also, what is more, the law’s permutation into “life”. What I take Hölderlin to mean by “life” corresponds to a radical reworking of the position he expressed regarding Being

⁸³ Cf., chapter 4.

in *Seyn, Urtheil* - namely, that “life” seems here to encompass the unifying thrust, not of a singular, indivisible Being, but of the differencing *activity* capable of uniting what is most fundamentally opposed, and this only by virtue of the opposition. Just as earlier in the essay Hölderlin was adamant that the opposing pairs of Spiritual / Objective Form/Content were tenable, graspable, comprehensible as such only through the necessary irreconcilability between them, that, in effect, the unity of opposites is only tenable if the opposition between them is kept in check, so here he implies that opposite determinations are “united in the most universal” only when that universal, the Romantic Absolute, or as Hölderlin calls it, “life”, is one which is itself constantly opposed to itself, so that it can “unite by way of opposing”. Third, the designation of the process as “hyperbolic”, which seems to hold the key to Hölderlin’s own particular manner of thinking. Hölderlin had already expounded the notion of hyperbolic logic in his novel, *Hyperion*. Here, he clearly defines this logic as precisely that whereby extremes of opposition may be unified whilst retaining their initial opposition, the logic which is “characterised by being everywhere opposed to itself”, indeed, as he made explicit in *Hyperion*, his own version of the Herculitean “*en diaferein eauto*”. In this he must surely be seen to follow, albeit unknowingly, in the footsteps of Novalis’ ontology.

Yet what I wish to uphold as probably the most significant philosophical import of the text occurs a few pages later, after Hölderlin has progressed through a discussion of “life” as, indeed, “poetic life”, and after he has once again asserted that “that act of the spirit which, as regards the significance [of the poem], entailed only a continuous conflict, will be as much a uniting one as it was an opposing one” (*ibid.*, p.69). It occurs when Hölderlin shifts his attention

from the general operations of the poetic *spirit*, to the more particular ones of the poetic *I*. The argument is that the poetic spirit, if it is to be ‘embodied’ in a particular “poetic individuality”, by which we may well understand the empirical subject-poet, must overcome the same restrictions which Hölderlin foresaw in *Seyn, Urtheil*, namely that any notion of “individuality” or “subject” is necessarily limited as a product of the arche-separation of judgment. As we saw, this is a direct criticism of Fichte’s fundamental assumption of the I as originary identity. In this text too, Hölderlin raises a powerful critique of Fichte’s epistemology, but in a manner which differs from that of *Seyn, Urtheil*. Significantly, this also entails a curious twist to the terminology, and area of application, of Hölderlin’s concepts: even though we are still undoubtedly dealing with a process of poetic creation, the emphasis now, tellingly, is on the mode of the poetic I’s *cognition*, or *knowledge* of objects - what has been poetology throughout is now *explicitly* couched in the language of epistemology. He begins by delineating a moment in the I’s development, in its process, which he labels “the subjective nature” of the I (*ibid.*, p.72). In this instance, the I “can only form knowledge as an opposing or relating one”, and it “cannot recognise itself as the poetic I” (*ibid.*). In a note, Hölderlin explains that this ‘subjective nature’ of the I is the moment when “the I act[s] as that which differentiates or unifies” (*ibid.*, p.73), and this can evidently be seen as his own rendition of the Fichtean epistemological tenets wherein the I posits itself as a unity opposed to the unity of non-I; the I differentiates itself from the object in the process of cognition of the non-I, and unifies itself with itself in the process of its own cognition, or self-consciousness, depending, Hölderlin writes, “on whether, in its subjective nature, it finds something to be differentiated or unified; it therefore

posits itself as something differentiating and unifying in dependence and [is] absolutely dependent in its acts, so that it knows *itself*, *its* act, neither as something opposing nor as something unifying.” (ibid.). Thus, the ‘subjective nature’ of the I is always already one where the I finds itself separated from its object, whether that be an object (non-I) or itself - in other words, we are within the realm of *Urtheil*. But Hölderlin can now go further, and, after the critique of Fichte, can postulate an *overcoming*. This overcoming takes once again the form of a constantly sustained *double* opposition; the I is to be opposed not just to the non-I but also to itself as possible object of cognition. And the crucial transition comes when Hölderlin postulates that this double opposition results in a tripartite structure which follows the transcendental framework to the letter: “that which is cognised [*das Erkannte*] must always constitute that threefold nature of the poetic I together with the cognising [*dem Erkennenden*] and the cognition of both [*der Erkenntniß beider*]” (ibid, p.72). What is required for the I to leap from its ‘subjective’ nature into the fully-fledged assumption of ‘poetic individuality’ is that it encompass not only itself as subject, but also the transcendental demand for the process of cognition, *as well as* the cognised object. For the I to become the ‘poetic I’ finally, it must constitute itself in a three-fold manner as subject, object, *and* the relation between the two - in this case, significantly, a relation of *cognition*, knowledge. It is this extra dimension which makes the I *poetic*: “its threefold nature: as opposing the harmoniously opposed [ie, the object, the non-I], as formally uniting the harmoniously opposed, as comprehending in one the harmonious opposed, the opposition, and unification” (ibid). Hölderlin’s final formulation of the same idea comes in the form of a command: “Posit yourself *by free choice* into a harmonious opposition

with an outer sphere just as by nature you are in harmonious opposition with yourself, yet unrecognisably so, as long as you remain within yourself' (ibid, p.74).

Here then, in a nutshell, is Hölderlin's critique and overcoming of Fichte's epistemology, in its transformation into a process of poetic production. The I of cognition, the Fichtean I, is incomplete if it does not recognise that, just as it is opposed to the 'harmoniously opposed', the 'outer sphere' of the world of objects, it is also, by its very nature and by the nature of the opposition, opposed to itself. If it comes to a comprehension in one of the opposed, the opposition, and the unification of both, if it *makes sense*, in other words, of its opposition with the outer sphere by opposing itself to itself, it shall be able to comprehend, to make sense again, (herein lies the significance of Hölderlin's word *Bedeutung*) of its unification with the 'harmoniously opposed' - it shall become, no longer the cognising I but the *poetic* I, and by this Hölderlin means no less than the I that is *free to produce* its own opposition, self-opposition, and unification with the opposed. Here is how, five years later than *Seyn, Urtheil*, Hölderlin may surely be said to have arrived at a radical new critique of transcendental epistemology, where it is no longer a question of the anteriority of an indivisible Being over the 'arche-separation' of judgment, but a question of the progressive development of a fundamental originary conflict and opposition into a unity which can only be such if it is conceived, not just as a unity of opposites, but the unity of opposites *and* the process opposing them. What Hölderlin postulates by the end of *On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit* is nothing less than, to follow Frederick Beiser's estimation, an 'absolute idealism'. But, and this cannot be overstressed, he can only arrive at such a position when he looks, no longer to a

'strict' epistemology, but to an epistemology lifted to a higher level when understood as the operations of the poetic spirit.

It may well appear that Hölderlin's fragmentary, hermetic, tantalising text is something of a culmination of the Romantic project. Indeed, it can be shown (as I tried to do here) that within it the most radical Romantic conceptions take shape, none more so than the transformation of epistemology into poetology, *theoria* to *poiesis*. And yet, some of the most groundbreaking philosophical notions and methods exemplified in this text will find a comparably great expression (if anything, a more systematic one), in the systems of Schelling and Hegel. Indeed, the methodological procedure witnessed in the essay can be said to be closer to the dialectics of Schelling and Hegel than the infinitised reflection of Schlegelian irony, were it not for Hölderlin's seemingly paradoxical insistence on the irreconcilability of the elemental oppositions. The difference between the Romantic project, on the one hand, and those great scions of Idealism, on the other, must therefore be examined.

CHAPTER THREE: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ROMANTICISM AND IDEALISM

I. Schelling.

Without doubt, Schelling, more than Hegel or any other philosopher contemporary to the Romantics, appears to be closest to the philosophical project of Romanticism overall. Indeed, commentators such as Frederick Beiser and Andrew Bowie often view Schelling's position either as a moment in the continuum from Kant, via Fichte and the Romantics, and on to Hegel, or, even more pertinently, ascribe to Schelling a "tension between an idealist and a Romantic conception"⁸⁴. In what follows I will follow such estimations up to a

⁸⁴ Bowie, Andrew, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, London, Routledge, 1997, p.199. note 14. Beiser's position (in his *German Idealism*, op.cit.) is admittedly more nuanced, as he is avowedly trying to exorcise the ghost of Hegel's history of philosophy, and of German Idealism

point, and will try and indicate the ways and moments in which Schelling's thought is indeed very close to that of Schlegel, Hölderlin, or Novalis. Nevertheless, my contention is that Schelling's philosophy should *not* be viewed as the natural progenitor or bedfellow of Romanticism, despite common departures and frequent similarities. The differences may be subtle but they are crucial for the reading of Romanticism presently underway.

My consideration of Schelling is based primarily on the first phase of his career, and in particular the first two important books under his name, the *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797), and the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800)⁸⁵. In the first instance, this limitation is imposed by purely chronological concerns, since Schelling's career spans most of the first half of the 19th century, long after Novalis, Hölderlin, and Schlegel were either dead, mad, or serving the Hapsburg empire. A second, perhaps more important reason for concentrating on the early phase of Schelling's philosophy is that this was the time when he was personally acquainted with all three Romantics under consideration, especially in the years of publication of the *Athenäum*, when he was closely associated with the Schlegels. Nevertheless, and although the later philosophy of freedom and philosophy of religion will not concern us at all, some mention of Schelling's most notorious philosophical development, that of the 'philosophy of identity' (first expounded in his *Darstellung meines Systems* of 1801) will also be

in particular, yet his positioning of Schelling after the Romantics as in some sense the carrier of what he terms 'absolute idealism' betrays the continuum I indicated.

⁸⁵ Hereinafter, these two works will be abbreviated as *IPN* and *STI* respectively. I have used the existing English translations of both, namely Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, translated by Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath, with an Introduction by Robert Stern, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1988; and Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, translated by Peter Heath, with an Introduction by Michael Vater, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1978. Of course, it should be noted, these are not Schelling's very first publications, far from it – they are, however, widely acknowledged to be the first publications where Schelling 'comes into his own' (as he acknowledges himself in his correspondence), where he is not merely

made, particularly since it is this phase in which Schelling can be said to come into his own and develop, as the title he gave to his book clearly indicates, his *own* philosophical system, having foregone even the attempt to forge a system which can be classified as ‘transcendental’ after Fichte. Having said that, it must be admitted that Schelling’s career is frustratingly inconsistent, even in the short space of time here discussed, and this makes pronouncements on ‘Schelling’ very difficult to make in general. Of course, this is a charge that can equally be laid against Schlegel, for instance. Yet I believe there to be a crucial difference, which goes some way towards highlighting the more profound philosophical differences between the two – namely that, where Schlegel is often accused of being a ‘dilettante’ who never managed to offer a fully systematic exposition of his philosophy, thus leaving us with a legacy of stymied, disheartening fragments, Schelling’s inconsistency almost always takes the appearance of potentially irreconcilable *systematic* treatises. Frederick Beiser praises Schelling for making “fully explicit and systematic” what was “only implicit and embryonic” in Schlegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin⁸⁶. I cannot deny this; yet my claim is that Romantic fragmentariness serves a defined and theorised purpose⁸⁷, as, indeed, does systematicity in Schelling. Therefore, to assume, as Beiser does, that it is somehow *naturally* better to adhere to Schelling’s systematicity over and against the pronounced problematisation of the notion of a philosophical system with the Romantics is indicative of the general tendency (which,

doing expository/critical work on the systems of other philosophers but attempts to construct and develop his very own systems.

⁸⁶ Beiser, *op.cit.*, p. 467. The reference here is to *Naturphilosophie* which indeed is made programmatically systematic in Schelling, whereas it is only afforded glimpses in Novalis, Schlegel, and Hölderlin. Yet the same could be said about transcendental philosophy, the philosophy of Art, or anything else – it is my impression that Schelling is a more systematic philosopher *in general*, and it is this systematicity, this “drive towards a system” as Schlegel would put it, that is at stake here.

⁸⁷ For more on the fragment, see the next chapter.

ironically, Beiser himself derides) to treat the Romantics as poor cousins in philosophy. Would it not be tempting, from a ‘Romantic’, anti-systematic and anti-foundationalist perspective, to see Schelling’s failure to construct a coherent and historically consistent system as the bankruptcy of philosophical systematicity itself? This provocation will remain, for the time being, tempting and tentative, but it is perhaps worth acknowledging as a possible ‘ideological’ axis for the discussion of Schelling’s philosophy that follows.

This discussion is organised around the two books that I mentioned, and around two central areas of inquiry: ontology and the philosophy of nature on the one hand, and transcendental epistemology and the philosophy of art on the other. These are two areas that Schelling himself views as complementary, not least in the foreword to the *STI* where it is a case of “the parallelism of nature with intelligence” (*STI*, p.2). Ultimately it is the precise nuances of this complementarity and parallelism that form the crux of the issue between Schelling and the Romantics.

1. The Ontology of Nature.

Schelling begins philosophy by postulating an originary identity between the subjective and the objective, or the ideal and the real. In the terms he puts it in the programmatic and methodologically illuminating *Supplement to the Introduction to the IPN*: “The first step to philosophy and the condition without which it cannot even be entered, is the insight that *the absolute ideal is also the absolute real*” (*IPN*, p. 44, emphasis mine). In an important sense, such a postulation is but the epigone of Hölderlin’s critique of Fichtean philosophy in

Seyn, Urtheil, and it has often been seen as such in the critical literature. Nevertheless, Hölderlin's Being, as I have already discussed, is not a clear, unproblematic identity between the subjective/ideal and the objective/real, in fact it is not an identity at all. Schelling, on the other hand, perhaps in keeping with his (at the time of the *IPN*) still undiminished admiration for Fichte, always postulates the Absolute as an essential and originary identity. Again, in the *Supplement*, he states:

“That equal and pure absoluteness, that equal identity in the subjective and objective, was what we have defined in this characterisation as the identity, *the equal essence* of subjective and objective. Subjective and objective are, according to this explanation, not one, as opposites are, for with this we should just admit them as such; rather, it is a subjectivity and objectivity only *insofar as* that pure absoluteness, which in itself must be independent of both and can be neither the one nor the other, introduces itself, for itself and through itself, into both as the equal absoluteness” (ibid., pp.46-47).

Subjective and objective, according to Schelling's careful formulation, cannot be thought of as united opposites, at least not *prior* to their being thought as opposites *tout court*, for precisely the same reasons that Hölderlin thinks Fichte's concept of identity cannot be thought of as primary – namely that the unification of opposites can only be possible *after* these are opposed, and thus divided, both in the logical and the temporal sense. Yet where Hölderlin's Being is admittedly that which cannot, in any way whatsoever, be thought of as divisible or internally opposed, Schelling's “equal absoluteness” is precisely an internally divisible

whole, which, “for itself and through itself”, splits itself into two *equally absolute* absolutes, the subjective and the objective. Thus, and even though Schelling is careful to avoid designating the subjective and the objective as opposites, he does characterise them as *equal*, which, to my mind, invites exactly the same sort of criticisms – how is it possible for an Absolute to be the equal of another? How is it possible that the one, undivided Absolute be split, even if it is “for itself and through itself”, into two? Schelling seems to be suggesting that the Absolute itself makes itself manifest in an absolute subjectivity and an absolute objectivity, which are thought of as such “only insofar as” they form equal parts of the self-same Absolute. I do not wish to deny the methodological advantages of such a position; it is precisely this which will enable Schelling to maintain the equivalence of *Naturphilosophie* as the manifestation of the absolute-objective, and transcendental philosophy as the manifestation of the absolute-subjective, which will allow him ultimately to postulate an identity, or at the very least a correspondence, at the end of his system. But the position is a deeply paradoxical one, inviting the same sort of criticisms Hölderlin directed against Fichte, and can, at best, be seen only heuristically as enabling Schelling to go on with the business of creating not one, but *two* philosophical systems of the Absolute. If it be objected that Schelling wants to hold to the position of the Absolute *qua* Absolute, indivisible and self-identical, which can be seen in his insistence that “the absolute [...] is necessarily *pure identity*” (ibid., p.46), the only possible retort is that it is precisely this which makes his position suspect, from the Romantic perspective – Novalis, as we have already seen, designates identity as a “subaltern”, secondary concept, which, it should follow, cannot possibly be an

adequate designation of the Absolute, and this particularly when it is the case that the identity is also, automatically, split in two.

Already therefore, and despite an initial similarity between Schelling's and Hölderlin's positions, a gulf of difference has emerged. This gulf between the Romantic and the Schellingian projects widens once we examine the precise characterisation Schelling gives to the absolute-ideal and the absolute-real. Once Schelling has established the split Absolute as the starting point of philosophy, he then asserts that philosophy must begin with the absolute-ideal, which, once again, is in keeping with Fichte's (and Kant's) assumption of the horizon of the transcendental subject as the only possible horizon for any philosophical investigation. Yet, if perhaps it can be argued that Schelling is following Fichte, the same cannot possibly be said with regard to Kant, since Schelling evidently postulates the transcendental subject's horizon as absolute in itself, and goes as far as defining the "absolute-ideal" "as *absolute knowing*, the absolute act of cognition"(ibid., p.46). In this Schelling betrays his fervent admiration for Fichte's attempt to 'break free' from the legislations and limitations of a Kantian reason which would always, in the last instance, be curtailed by the finitude of the transcendental subject. To want to begin with the absolute-ideal is the equivalent, from the Romantic perspective, of assuming the horizon of Hölderlin's *Urtheil*, wherein the subject is necessarily located; but to advance the position that the absolute-ideal is absolute knowing, "the absolute act of cognition", is to stay too close to the criticised Fichtean *Tathandlung* as an act of *subjectivity* on the one hand, and also, which is not insignificant, to veer close to the Hegelian position of the possibility of absolute knowledge, on the other.

What is more, this characterisation of the absolute-ideal as absolute knowing is fundamental for Schelling's thought, to the degree that it is not a consequence but a *cause* of the postulated identity between absolute-ideal and absolute-real. He states: "the first idea of philosophy already rests on the *tacit presupposition* of a possible indifference between absolute knowing and the absolute itself, and consequently on the fact that the absolute-ideal is the absolute-real" (ibid., p.44, emphasis mine). This 'tacit presupposition', the bedrock of Idealism, is for Schelling merely hypothetical, but it is the necessary hypothesis for the existence of philosophy itself: "If philosophy exists, then that is its necessary presupposition" (ibid.). In this Schelling shows himself as a follower of Fichte and a defector from Kant's postulation of the limits of human knowledge. From a purely 'first-philosophical' perspective then, this is the crux of the disagreement between Schelling and the Romantics, who, at least in this instance, and as I suggested earlier in chapter one, are far more faithful Kantians than either Fichte or Schelling. For the Romantics, as for Kant, cognition is *not* absolute; cognition, insofar as it proceeds from the human subject, is always already a part of the horizon of *Urtheil*, or *Schein*, always already emanating from the originary division, and thus necessarily divorced from the Absolute as such. Schlegel makes this argument with unquestionable force, in his notebooks of 1796: "Cognition already designates a *conditioned* knowledge. The non-cognisability of the Absolute is therefore an identical triviality" (KFSa, Vol. XVIII, p. 511).

Schelling's position on the issue of absolute knowledge is one which sets him *a priori* apart from the Romantics; it is a position following from Fichte's 'discovery' of the intellectual intuition of the I (as *Tathandlung*) which, as we

have already seen, is treated with some suspicion by the Romantics who remain faithful to Kant's more restricting notion of the limits of human knowledge. Yet to see Schelling as simply going beyond Kant in a way the Romantics would have disavowed is to oversimplify the issue. Crucially, it is from Fichte's influential (to all concerned) attempt to 'overcome' the limits of Kantianism that Schelling's most seemingly 'Romantic' notion stems, and this is the notion of the Absolute as productivity. Again in the *Supplement to the Introduction to the IPN*, Schelling states: "The absolute is an eternal act of cognition, which is itself matter and form, a *producing* in which, in eternal fashion, it converts itself in its totality as Idea, as sheer identity, into the real, into the form, and conversely, in equally eternal fashion, resolves itself as form, and to that extent as object, into the essence or subject" (IPN, p.47, emphasis mine). Two years later, in his *Einleitung zu dem Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie*, Schelling comes even closer to the vocabulary mobilised by Novalis, but borrowed, of course, from Fichte: "... that hovering (*schweben*) of nature between productivity and product must therefore appear as a universal duplicity of the principles, by which nature is sustained in continual activity and is prevented from exhausting itself in its product" (quoted in Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, p. 41). The introduction of the notion of productivity is undoubtedly an idea which the Romantics, particularly Novalis, also, as we saw, developed from Fichte and made their own.

Yet again however, the differences underlying the initial similarity are significant. In this instance, Schelling attributes productivity *both* to the Absolute as "an eternal act of cognition" and to nature itself. In the latter case, as commentators have readily observed, it is a question of Schelling's redrawing the

Spinozan distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, and indeed, where the philosophy of nature is concerned at least, the shadow of Spinoza is never far away. Insofar as the productivity of nature as *natura naturans*, as an active agent of auto-production, is held to be an ontological issue, it can be argued that Schelling's and Novalis' positions are equivalent, a fact betrayed by their equivalent transposition of the Fichtean rhetoric of productivity onto the realm of the ontology of nature. Yet, crucially, Schelling sets out the productivity of *natura naturans* on an ontological 'plane' which is "equal" or equivalent but not *absolutely the same* as that of the productivity of 'absolute knowing'; this is necessary in his own formulation, as it stems inexorably from the originary presupposition of the 'equality' between absolute-real (nature) and absolute-ideal (the mind, or knowledge). The point is this: Schelling *must* hold on to what he calls "the parallelism of nature with intelligence", since this parallelism, this equivalence is rooted in the curious notion of the Absolute we have just examined, namely that the Absolute is both the absolute-ideal and the absolute-real, and also the absolute identity of the two. On the other hand, the ontology of production mobilised by Novalis in his reappropriation and 'ontologisation' of Fichte's transcendental philosophy rests on the notion of Being as a productive relation, as the activity of differencing, situating productivity at the level of Being as an 'absolute' which *cannot* be thought of as split. Where Schelling takes on the basic arguments of Fichte's *Grundlage* and transports them equally onto the plane of the absolute-real (nature) and the absolute-ideal (intelligence), thus strangely doubling any potential criticisms such as those levelled at Fichte by Hölderlin and Novalis alike, Romantic ontology, perhaps precisely *because* it only has an 'embryonic' conception of the

philosophy of nature, locates absolute productivity on the singular level of Being as differencing/hovering, thus avoiding the pitfalls of the ‘equally split’ Absolute.

In this sense, what is perhaps Schelling’s most original idea would be alien and unacceptable to the Romantics. This is, once again, the “parallelism of nature with intelligence”, which finds its most famous expression at the end of the (original) *Introduction* to the *IPN*: “Nature should be Mind made visible, Mind the invisible Nature. Here then, in the absolute identity of Mind *in us* and Nature *outside us*, the problem of the possibility of a Nature external to us must be resolved” (*IPN*, p.42). For the Romantics, such an identity is *a priori* impossible *as identity*, as it is impossible to think of an absolute which is absolutely split into two equal absolutes – this is perhaps why Schlegel, as early as the *Athenäum* fragments, casually condemns Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* by writing that “his [Schelling’s] gift for universality is probably still not sufficiently developed to be able to discover in the philosophy of physics what it seeks” (*AF* 305). Schelling’s ‘parallel absolutes’ position would be inexcusable for the Romantics, especially when it leads him to suggest that “the same powers of intuition which reside in the self can also be exhibited up to a certain point in nature” (*STI*, p.3). From a disinterested viewpoint it is perhaps easy to see the reasons why for Schelling such pronouncements are necessary and strategic – it is a case of having to render nature absolutely knowable, of ‘epistemologising’ nature, if this cumbersome formulation can be allowed, just as he has to ‘ontologise’ the transcendental subject, in Fichte’s manner, by assuming the *Tathandlung* as intellectual intuition. If nature is mind made visible, then it follows that nature can be, or even *ought to be*, absolutely knowable, and if mind

is the invisible nature, then the mind has the same absolute ontological status as nature. The system, unsurprisingly, comes full circle: the presupposition of the equality between absolute-real and absolute-ideal becomes realised in the postulation of powers of intellectual intuition in nature (even if this is the 'ontological' *natura naturans* of productivity, as opposed to the determined product of *natura naturata*) and in that of the absolute knowability of the mind that knows itself.

It can be argued that Schelling evolves his thinking on the identity of absolute-real and absolute-ideal in quite different ways when he reaches the often-called 'dark' period of the philosophy of indifference. In some respects this is true; in the *Darstellung meines Systems* the Absolute has become pure identity, complete, unified self-sameness, perhaps along the lines of what Hölderlin expressed as the originary unity of Being. But where Hölderlin cautiously relegates any form of *knowledge* of that Absolute to the sphere of judgment as separation (*Ur-theil*) and thus renders it, in absolute terms, impossible, Schelling elaborates, *more geometrico* and with an unmistakable allusion to the composition of Spinoza's *Ethics*, the various levels of organisation of that Absolute as it appears in the particular ontic determinations of nature. In this way, he leaves himself open, even in this vision of 'the night where all cows are black'⁸⁸, to the fundamental criticism voiced by Hölderlin and Novalis, as to *how* it is possible for the Absolute which is One and indivisible, to form particular determinations. Schelling's answer is to distinguish between the form and the essence of absolute identity: as can be seen from the formal expression of absolute identity, $A=A$, even when the essence of identity is the unity of A with

A, this takes the propositional form of a *distinction*, and thus a *separation*, between A and A – this, Schelling suggests, is the *form* of the Absolute (*Darstellung meines Systems*, §15)⁸⁹. Knowledge of the Absolute, therefore, must of necessity be knowledge of its form (ibid., § 18). The problem arises with the fact that Schelling wants to hold on to the idea that knowledge of the Absolute in its form is itself Absolute, or, to put it in a way reminiscent of the earlier formulations of the 1790s, that Absolute knowing, the absolute-ideal is equivalent, or *just as absolute* as the absolute-real. It could be objected that Schelling's differentiation between the essence and the form of the Absolute is tantamount to Hölderlin's distinction between *Seyn* and *Urtheil*, or even to Novalis' dissection of the proposition of identity as a *Scheinsatz* – but the difference, not for the first time, is in the detail: even if we admit that Schelling's distinction between absolute form and absolute essence is a step forward from the identity between absolute-ideal and absolute-real, the fact remains that Schelling's Absolute is necessarily split, or double⁹⁰. And the crucial distinction between such a notion, and the ontology proffered by the Romantics is that the latter see separation, *Ur-theilung*, as the only possible epistemological horizon and deny any possibility of access to the unity of the Absolute, or to the Absolute as unity. This can clearly be seen by a comparison between Hölderlin's position

⁸⁸ This is, of course, Hegel's famous image of the Schellingian Absolute in the *Preface* to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁸⁹ My reading of Schelling's 1801 system here follows that of Frederick Beiser, op.cit., pp.565-576.

⁹⁰ This duplicity of the Absolute can evidently be seen to stem, again, from Fichte's insight about the *ursprüngliche Duplicität* of the subject-object as Absolute I. It can also be pointed out that the phenomenological critiques of Idealism, in the hands of Husserl and the early Heidegger, also have recourse to an idea of 'double origin' or *Gleichursprünglichkeit* (for this, see the discussion of double origin in Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Cambridge, Harvard, 1986, pp.181-183). The crucial point of difference between this and the Romantic position is, as I tried to demonstrate in chapter 1, that the notion of double origin for the Romantics, as also, perhaps, for the later Heidegger, is not one which can be resolved or 'sublated' in the search for a single origin.

in *Seyn, Urtheil* and such a Schellingian statement (from the *STI*, but unquestionably still tenable for the philosophy of indifference) as “[a]ll knowledge is founded upon the coincidence of an objective with a subjective” (*STI*, p.5). For Hölderlin, all knowledge is indeed founded upon such a coincidence between a subjective and an objective, *but only in so far as that is mediated by the unavoidable horizon of their separation* – access to the unity which is *Seyn as unity* is strictly impossible. Hölderlin himself, in 1799, may justifiably be said to have Schelling in mind when writing with derision about “the sages, however, who differentiate only with the spirit, only universally hasten quickly back into pure Being and fall into an all the greater indifference because they believe to have differentiated, and because they take the non-opposition to which they have returned for an eternal one” (in Pfau, *op.cit.*, p.49). Ultimately, the Schellingian Absolute(s) is/are *not* the Romantic one, despite the common origin of their thought in the *Wissenschaftselhre*, their seemingly equal determination to exit the realm of transcendental subjectivity, and their only apparently similar expressions. It must be seen, more than anything, that the Romantic ontology of productive differencing avoids the pitfalls of Schelling’s problematic equation between absolute-ideal and absolute-real, as well as the similarly problematic distinction between the essence and the form of the Absolute, and this for two related reasons: first, the Absolute as differencing maintains its characteristic as a singular Absolute not to be thought as divided into two, whilst, as I will show in the section on Hegel, allowing for a thought of the Absolute which is not, perhaps curiously, totalisable as a unity; second, and just as importantly, the Romantics do *not*, as Schelling does, want to postulate the Absolute as absolutely knowable.

2. Knowledge and Art.

More than any of Schelling's other books, or any stage of his philosophical development, it is the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), which has generated the most comparisons with the Romantic project⁹¹. The reason is quite obvious, in that Schelling is seen as the philosophical companion to the Romantics insofar as he elevates art to the level of "the universal organon of philosophy" (STI, p.12), and this in a book which professes to be a fully realised epistemological system, describing the quasi-historical path of consciousness from mere sensation to the Absolute revealed in the artwork. Having spent the previous chapter extolling the Romantic notion of turning epistemology into a theory of poetic production, it could seem as though I could have nothing to counter to such a Schellingian vision. Nonetheless, I wish to maintain that Schelling's elevation of art into the manifestation of the Absolute is ultimately a far cry from Romantic poetology. Once again, there is an apparent similarity between the Schellingian and the Romantic positions which points to fundamental differences of detail and nuance which in themselves betray a fundamental difference in the projects themselves. In the final analysis, I will maintain that Schelling holds the artwork to be a privileged means of access to

⁹¹ More than anyone else, it is Andrew Bowie who exemplifies this position. From *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, through *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, and onto *From Romanticism to Critical Theory* Bowie constantly equiparates the Schellingian and the Romantic positions in ways which are historically illuminating but also disingenuous in that they tend to flatten important distinctions and differences between Schelling and the Romantics. With regard to Bowie's project as a whole, and to the (incontestable, and fully admitted) degree that it is rooted in an understanding of Romanticism, I will have more to say in the concluding remarks to the thesis. Here I am only concerned to redress the all too frequent and unfortunate levelling of differences between Schelling and the Romantics in his work.

the Absolute, again, *insofar as the Absolute is taken to be knowable*, whereas for the Romantics poetry is a means of understanding what Schlegel explicitly states as the *non-cognisability* of the Absolute.

Just like the *IPN*, the *STI* begins with the postulation of the ‘coincidence of an objective with a subjective’ as the ground of all knowledge. Thus, the criticisms of this position previously voiced will still hold for this present book, and yet the different ways through which this position is consequently shaped and elaborated will concern us at greater length. And again, just as in the *IPN*, there is an essential (and on the surface very Romantic) focus on productivity; Schelling, taking his cue from the Fichtean notion of the *Tathandlung*, sees a parallel between the “consciously productive” activity which engenders the will (what Fichte would have called the ‘ideal sphere’ of the practical I) and an “activity which is productive *without consciousness* in bringing about the world” (*STI*, p.12), which he sees as forming two parts of the same activity. This being transcendental philosophy, Schelling then goes on to state that “this simultaneously conscious and unconscious activity will be exhibited in the subjective, in consciousness itself” (*ibid.*). And this is where art comes in: “[t]he ideal world of art and the real world of objects are therefore products of one and the same activity; the concurrence of the two (the conscious and the unconscious) *without* consciousness yields the real, and *with* consciousness the aesthetic world” (*ibid.*). Art is therefore, for Schelling, the concurrence of the two opposed aspects (conscious/unconscious) of the self’s activity elevated into the sphere of consciousness. But Schelling is not saying that the self’s production, in the Fichtean manner, of the object-world around it is itself only ever unconscious; it is so only in comparison to the acts of the will, moral or aesthetic.

Philosophy is also opposed to art with regard to the direction of the productive act: “For whereas in art the production is directed outwards, so as to reflect the unknown by means of products, philosophical production is directed immediately inwards, so as to reflect it in intellectual intuition” (ibid., p.14). Thus, both philosophy and art are grounded transcendently on the subject, and appear but as opposed directionally in their production. Already, the Fichtean bias towards the subject of self-consciousness becomes apparent: “by positing an absolute that is both cause and effect – both subject and object – *of itself*, and since this is initially possible only through self-consciousness, by again positing a *self-consciousness* as primary” (ibid., p.17). In this way Schelling has unmistakably grounded art in the operations of the subject, in a way which would have been alien to the Romantics in that, as I have tried to show, their notion of a transcendental subject is not such an avowedly Fichtean one, nor one which would hold on to the primacy of self-consciousness. Again, Schelling’s problem is his presupposition of the identity of the objective with the subjective, and, in this case, his positioning of that identity in self-consciousness, following the Fichtean positions which the Romantics were cautious to discard. Where Hölderlin and Novalis either explicitly reject or, at the very least, problematise the notion of intellectual intuition, as that is designated by Fichte, Schelling finds he has to rely on the founding act of self-consciousness, instantly recognisable as the *Tathandlung*: “This unmediated identity of subject and object can exist only where the *presented* is at the same time *that which presents*, where the *intuited* is also the *intuitant*. – But this identity of presenter and presented occurs only in *self-consciousness*” (ibid., p.24). For Hölderlin, and also for Novalis, such an *unmediated* identity between subject and object could never possibly be found

located in self-consciousness, since self-consciousness is itself a part of reflection, mediation *par excellence*.

The degree to which Schelling remains faithful to Fichte, and, what is more, to aspects of the Fichtean dogma which were previously criticised by the Romantics, can be glimpsed by his insistence on a Fichtean absolute self, over and against a more generalised notion of Being expounded by Novalis and Hölderlin alike: “The eternal, timeless act of self-consciousness which we call *self*, is that which gives all things existence, and so itself needs no other act to support it” (ibid. p, 32). The problem with this is that if Schelling is taken at his Fichtean word, where is the scope for a philosophy of nature that would be concerned, not just with the ontic level of natural entities (yet which, even at this level, could not possibly be said to be strict productions of a transcendental self), but also with the ontological status of a productive *natura naturans*? Even with the proviso that the *STI* is a work on transcendental philosophy, and thus must begin with the transcendental subject and not a dogmatic acceptance of ‘Being’ outside the subject, Schelling can only allow the complementarity, which he frequently advocates himself even in these pages, between transcendental philosophy and the philosophy of nature, if he takes nature to be *an intelligence*. The problems with such a position have already been addressed, but what has to be mentioned at this stage is that it is obvious that for Schelling, at least at this stage of his philosophical development, the residual Fichteanism marking itself everywhere in the *STI* means that the subject of self-consciousness is indeed the *terminus ad quem* for any philosophical investigation, and that would have to include the apex of the system, “the universal organon of philosophy”, art. Now, this is a position which could never have been supported by any of the

Romantics. To begin with, both Novalis and Hölderlin (and, to a lesser degree, Schlegel as well) would have immense trouble agreeing with the position of self-consciousness as the ground of philosophy, as it is evident from their critique of Fichte. Perhaps more importantly though, the Romantics cannot hold art itself to be unproblematically grounded upon the self, much less the operations of self-consciousness⁹². The apparent similarity between Schelling's and the Romantics' positions therefore is only apparent: yes, the Schelling of the *STI* privileges art as the Romantics do – but the *manner* in which this privilege is bestowed could not be more different, both in essence and strategically.

Henceforth it should be evident what those concerns of Schelling's which I have just termed strategic are: art is “the universal organon of philosophy” insofar as it is actually *in the service of the transcendental subject*. Moreover, since it is the task of the *STI* to tell the story of the development of the subject's consciousness (which is always already grounded upon the coincidence of objective and subjective in self-consciousness), art, as the culmination of the journey, is but the reverse image of its beginning, namely intellectual intuition. Schelling is explicit about this in a rightly famous passage: “This universally acknowledged and altogether incontestable objectivity of intellectual intuition is art itself. For the aesthetic intuition is simply the intellectual intuition become objective” (ibid., p.229). This betrays the strategic bias of the whole of the enterprise of the *STI*, which can now be seen, not so much as a document espousing the glorification, much less the emancipation of art from the confines

⁹² Unfortunately, a fuller discussion of the status of the work of art, and in particular the literary work, has to be assigned to the following chapter. Nonetheless, I believe it is possible to substantiate my claim here by pointing to my previous discussion of texts such as Novalis' *Monolog*, Schlegel's fragments on Romantic poetry and Hölderlin's essay on the operations of the poetic spirit, where it is obvious that the creation of a work of art (a poem), though of course

of a philosophy of the spirit (or a transcendental philosophy), as it has all too often mistakenly been read, but as one which posits art as the house-keeper, the first butler of transcendental subjectivity. From the very first page of the book, Schelling saw its purpose as illuminating “all knowledge”, and this, later on in the introduction, is the “simultaneously conscious and unconscious activity” of the spirit, as this can be seen “*in consciousness*” (ibid, p.12). Art is simply what strategically, in the system as a whole, makes this chimera possible. His ‘deduction of the art-product as such’ begins with postulating the “*identity of the conscious and the unconscious in the self, and consciousness of this identity*”(ibid., p.219). This is the role of the art-work: “In the activity at present under discussion [ie, the activity of art], the self must begin (subjectively) with consciousness, and end without consciousness, or *objectively*; the self is conscious in respect of production, unconscious in respect of the product” (ibid.). The originary distinctions between conscious and unconscious activity are united, and made conscious for the self, in the production of the artwork. This is why Schelling must have recourse to “the obscure concept of genius” as “that incomprehensible agency which supplies objectivity to the conscious, without the co-operation of freedom”(ibid., p.222). Thus art ends up being the flip-side of intellectual intuition; where the latter was the *terminus a quo* of the system, the originary, unmediated coincidence of subjective and objective, the artwork is now the *terminus ad quem*, revealing “what philosophy cannot depict in external form, namely the unconscious element in acting and producing, and its original identity with the conscious” (ibid., p.231).

never entirely divorced from the subject, cannot possibly be said to be straightforwardly *emanating* from the subject alone.

This is a salient point. There is an important sense in which Schelling adheres to the Romantic project in ascribing the role he does to the artwork; the conclusion to the *STI* is not all that far removed from the famous proclamation of Schlegel's: "Where philosophy stops, there poetry [*Poesie*] must begin" (*Ideas*, 48). Moreover, Schelling espouses ideas that Schlegel in particular, but the Romantic project in general also, would surely make their own: he introduces the idea of poetry (again, crucially, *Poesie*) as the "unconscious element in all art" (*STI*, p.223) in a manner which highlights the importance of poetry as production; he also, in line with the *Athenäum*, finds that "the basic character of the work of art is that of *unconscious infinity*" (*ibid.*, p. 225), and he complements that with the fundamentally Schlegelian idea that artworks are in themselves incomplete and "capable of being expounded ad infinitum" (*ibid.*)⁹³. It can thus be argued that Schelling's estimation of the work of art comes very close to that of the Romantics. The difference is the following: even when Schelling veers away from the stronghold of transcendental subjectivity, that is, even when he seems to admit that, despite the necessary original presence of intellectual intuition in the system, "the work of art merely reflects *to me* what is otherwise not reflected in anything, namely that absolutely identical which has already divided itself *even in the self*" (*ibid.*, p.230, emphasis mine), for him the work of art performs the function of 'revealing' the Absolute *as such, in its unity and identity, and to me, the subject*⁹⁴. Contrast this to Schlegel's proclamations on behalf of 'progressive universal poetry', where the subject is almost totally absent as a consideration, and where, if we are to take Romantic poetry as

⁹³ This is Schlegel's notion of the literary work being incomplete and open to infinite criticism and interpretation, which I will look at in greater detail in the following chapter.

somehow progressively striving for the attainment of the Absolute, it is never a question of that Absolute being *revealed* within it. The reasons for this should be obvious from the preceding discussions: the Romantic Absolute, even were it to be conceived as a unity (although never as an identity), is not of the kind that can be revealed *as such*, and Schlegel's infinite striving for it, or Novalis' 'inane' ramblings on linguistic enthusiasm in the *Monolog* serve as what Novalis calls *approaches to Being*. The Romantic Absolute is not accessible in itself, even by way of the revelation of the artwork or of poetry, and all poetry is, in relation to it, an expression of the infinite striving towards it, an expression which is privileged, as was seen in the last chapter, precisely because the subject-based epistemology of transcendental idealism, with which Schelling is ultimately completely tied up, is transformed into poetology. Schelling's elevation of the artwork to the "universal organon of philosophy" is therefore best not seen as a notion complementary to Romanticism. In fact, to the degree that Schelling relegates the work of art to the position of service to the transcendental consciousness he is closer to Hegel than to Romanticism.

⁹⁴ This is Bowie's main contention regarding Schelling, and although I do not doubt it in this

II. Hegel.

A confrontation with Hegel is inescapable – this much can be said from the beginning. On one level, the justification for such a statement is provided, as with Schelling, by historical and textual considerations: Hegel was, without a doubt, the major voice in the history of German Idealism of which Romanticism is unquestionably, though not perhaps straightforwardly, a part, and therefore a comparative overview of points of convergence and divergence between Romantic and Hegelian thought appears eminently warranted. Further more, with Hegel's major writings appearing almost a decade later than the crux of Romantic writings under consideration, Hegel had the time to consider the Romantics as thinkers and writers himself, and consequently made various and challenging pronouncements on them, which thus need to be taken into consideration. On quite another level, however, the confrontation is necessary not only because of any particular considerations (historical or textual-exegetical), but *because of Hegel himself*, because of who, or what he has become, unwittingly or not, in the history of modern philosophy, and because of what the name 'Hegel' stands for even in contemporary philosophical debate⁹⁵.

respect, I remain unconvinced that this is really the Romantic position, as will be clear in what follows.

⁹⁵ Although I have no intention on dwelling further on the 'Hegel renaissance' in contemporary philosophy, it is worth indicating that it is *his* name, and not that of Kant, or Schelling, or Nietzsche, that seems recently to have activated a major philosophical debate in what is traditionally seen as the analytical 'camp' of philosophy, which, also traditionally, can be taken to

From Nietzsche to Deleuze, through Heidegger, Gadamer, Sartre, Adorno, and Derrida, to name but a few, European philosophy of the past century or so has been, it would be fair to say, obsessed with precisely such a confrontation with Hegel, who has come to represent the apex of speculative thought, the culmination of metaphysics, and, in a complicated but unequivocal sense, the very end of philosophy itself. I will not be concerned with assessing such a heavy claim for itself, or in relation to Hegel's philosophy as a whole; I repeat the claim so as to contextualise my own, hopefully more modest, presentation of the confrontation with Hegel. For if the greater part of philosophy since Hegel has seen fit to place itself in relation to his thinking, then the claims that can be made for such a confrontation taking place at roughly the same time, or even *before*, this thinking, may well be illuminating for the history of philosophy as such. In other words: if, as I wish to maintain, the issues arising out of a confrontation between the Romantics and Hegel are of cardinal importance for an understanding of the development of philosophy (and also, at the same time, of literature and its relation to philosophy), then *perhaps* the later confrontation with Hegel with which the philosophy of the past century has almost exhausted itself can be backtracked, or at least reconfigured, by paying the attention needed to the 'original' confrontation between Hegelianism and Romanticism. This 'perhaps' is, however, crucial, inasmuch as it serves as a guard against the all-too-hasty (and entirely wrong) collapse of the whole of the history of philosophy since Hegel into the confrontation here underway. I am in no way suggesting that it would be possible to claim that later responses to Hegel can be eliminated by a reconsideration of his relationship to the Romantics. What such a

be the most inherently antagonistic to Hegel's philosophy. I am referring, of course, to the so-

reconsideration can, however, yield, is a new understanding of the ways in which responses to 'Hegel', to what Hegelianism has stood for since Hegel, are already at work even before 'Hegel' himself.

What needs to be taken into account, even with the given of modern philosophy's seemingly compulsive need to 'take on' Hegel, is that, as it has often been noted of late, the 'Hegel' that thus becomes the *object* of philosophical confrontation can frequently be distorted, turned into the monster to be slain by each coming philosophical Saint George. Accordingly, and to redress the balance, modern Hegelians have come to Hegel's defence by precisely pointing out the misconceptions and indefensible presuppositions at work in the anti-Hegelian camp. Chief amongst those misconceptions seems to be the idea that the absolute, self-sustained, and self-grounding philosophical system which is clearly the most 'monstrous' Hegelian legacy is somehow itself presupposed. In Stephen Houlgate's words: "Thus, even though he states in the preface to the *Phenomenology* that 'the true is the whole', Hegel cannot start out from any preconceived idea of the whole"⁹⁶. I accept such a position on the whole, not only as the necessary and perhaps long-overdue redress to some of the excesses of anti-Hegelian rhetoric, but also as a true challenge to any reading of Hegel which wants to avoid distortion and monstrosity. But I am not here concerned with a reading of Hegel *as such*, but rather, as has been stated from the beginning, with a *confrontation*, a head-to-head between Hegel and the Romantics, and it is for this reason *alone* that I cannot therefore accept the conclusion that Houlgate draws from the previously quoted statement. Thus:

called 'Pittsburgh Hegelians', Robert Brandom and John McDowell.

⁹⁶ Taken from Houlgate's *General Introduction to The Hegel Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1998, p. 18. Another such redress to anti-Hegelian claims can be seen in William Maker's *Philosophy without Foundations*, New York, SUNY, 1994.

“The task facing the reader of Hegel’s texts and lectures is thus to try to understand why *in each specific case* a concept (or form of consciousness) develops as it does ... It is only by comprehending these specific transitions, and their interconnections with one another, that a grasp of Hegel’s whole system can be built up. Hegel’s system does certainly form an integrated whole, but that whole is nothing beyond the interrelatedness of its manifold parts. Consequently there is no shortcut to the whole ‘itself’. There is nothing but the long and difficult, at times tortuous, at times exhilarating, path through the details”⁹⁷. There is a lot to be said for the challenges presented by such a demand for an *immanent* reading of Hegel, not least the fact that it can be said to issue from the exigencies of Hegel’s system itself, but by definition a confrontation cannot be immanent – it has to take place *between* the Hegelian and the Romantic thinking. Further than that, and although there is indeed “no shortcut to the whole ‘itself’”, there is a definite sense, and Houlgate cannot deny this, in which, simply stated, *there is a ‘whole’*, or that we find, with Hegel, the articulation of philosophy as an entire, absolute system. In William Maker’s words: “According to Hegel the system is absolute in that it is all-encompassing and fully justified; it expresses universal, necessary, unconditional, eternal, infinite, and absolute truth”⁹⁸. And not only does Hegel attest to a presentation of ‘the whole’, of ‘eternal, infinite, and absolute truth’ in his philosophical system, but this system, in its absolute immanence, “is self-grounding, absolute to the extent to which, in it, determinacy comes to be constituted out of indeterminacy in a manner such that no external determination enters into this process” (ibid., p.133). As Maker suggests, and as Hegel himself repeatedly states, the ‘whole’ system is constituted, in its

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.18-19.

wholeness and absoluteness, precisely *by virtue* of its immanence to itself. If, however, we are allowed to entertain the possibility of a position *outside* the absolute system, even if only for the strategic reasons of conducting a confrontation, then there also arises the possibility that the absolute system *as a whole* be itself confronted, conflicted, countered. Such a possibility is perhaps the *only* possibility of confronting such an immanently ‘perfect’, absolute system. It should be clear by now that such is the possibility afforded by and in the confrontation with Romanticism.

This confrontation will have to take place within “the long and difficult path through the details” of Hegel’s philosophy, although *not* in order to prove or disprove why any Hegelian concept “develops as it does”, but rather in order to show that, in the specific contexts within the system where the confrontation with the Romantics figures, the possibility of a position outside the system is always alive. Ultimately, the very core of the confrontation will have rested on the very notion of an absolute system as such – Hegel avowedly proposes such a system, and his defenders cannot but concur. Romanticism, on the other hand, will have to be seen as articulating doubts with regard to such an absolute system, or, which amounts to the same, as expressing the possibility that an absolute system need not be absolute *in the sense of self-contained*. It is in this articulation that the fundamental importance of the confrontation between Hegel and the Romantics arises – it is only in relation to Hegelianism, to the idea of an absolute philosophical system, and to the particular determinations that such a system engenders (more specifically, the determinations of infinity and absolute knowledge) that the true radical nature of what it is that Romanticism proposes

⁹⁸ Maker, *op.cit.*, p. 127.

for philosophy may be understood. And it is only with this relation to Hegel in mind that the claims advanced on behalf of Romanticism can be substantiated as being an important part of the history of philosophy, and especially of a philosophy that likes to play Saint George to Hegel's dragon. For, if there is a 'way out' of the absolute system, if the possibility of a position outside the system is allowed its chance, this is clearly better served as precisely the articulation of such a possibility and such a chance than with polemics which will always fall foul of the defence of immanence. This is why 'the long and difficult path through the details' is the *only* way this possibility may be articulated, in what Derrida has so aptly called the "point of almost absolute proximity to Hegel"⁹⁹. What the Romantics have to offer in such a confrontation is a reconfiguration, a revision even *before* Hegel, of the meaning and determination of the word 'absolute', both in 'absolute system', and in 'absolute proximity'.

With the above preliminary considerations in mind, the confrontation will take place only at those intersections within the Hegelian system where Romanticism's articulation of another possibility becomes apparent. To begin with, Hegel's own pronouncements on the Romantics, in the *Philosophy of Right* and in the *Aesthetics*, must be taken into account. Following on from that, the first articulation of a difference from Hegel's system is traced in the pages on signs in the third part of the *Encyclopaedia*. Finally, and perhaps most essentially, the pages of the *Logic* concerning infinitude will be seen as the most dramatic expression of the difference between Hegelianism and Romanticism,

⁹⁹ Derrida, *Positions*, trans. A. Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 44.

and will also allow the clearest articulation of what I have been calling the possibility of a position outside the absolute system¹⁰⁰.

1. Hegel *contra* Schlegel: the misreading of irony as subjectivity.

That Hegel was deeply inimical to Schlegel, at least by the time of his mature works, is incontestable. It would not seem inappropriate to suggest that the numerous scathing remarks on Schlegel dispersed throughout, chiefly the *Aesthetics*, but also in key moments of the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Phenomenology*, are, even when Hegel does not name Schlegel directly, aimed principally at Schlegel's person, his *personality* – but this is not to say that Hegel dismissed Schlegel's thinking because of his dislike of him as a person. Rather, it is quite the opposite: Hegel dismissed Schlegel's thinking *as* a thinking of personality, or subjectivity. The key focus for such a claim is Hegel's virulent dismissal of what he rightly saw as the dominant Schlegelian concept, that of irony. This rejection is entirely based on a *misreading*, on the part of Hegel, of Romantic irony as identifiable with a type of moral subjectivity (in the *Philosophy of Right*), a particular form of consciousness (in the *Phenomenology*), and a type of artistic character (in the *Aesthetics*), which all are variations on the

¹⁰⁰ I am here using the existing English editions of Hegel's writings, as follows: *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. J.M. Knox, Oxford, OUP, 1952 (hereinafter abbreviated as *PR*); *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. J.M. Knox, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975 (*A*); *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, with foreword by J.N. Findlay, Oxford, OUP, 1977 (*PS*); *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind; Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. W. Wallace, with foreword by J.N. Findlay, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971 (*E*); and *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, New York, Humanity Books 1999 (*L*).

same theme, the thematisation of irony as a type of subjectivity¹⁰¹. This finds its clearest expression in the section on irony in the *Philosophy of Right*, where “the supreme form in which this subjectivism is completely comprised and expressed is the phenomenon which has been called by a name borrowed from Plato – ‘Irony’” (PR, p. 101). In this instance, Hegel is careful to disassociate what he perceives as the ‘right’ conception of Plato’s irony from the ‘subjectivism’ that borrows its name and follows in its wake. Thus: “The name alone, however, is taken from Plato; he used it to describe a way of speaking which Socrates employed in conversation when defending the Idea of truth and justice against the conceit of the Sophists and the uneducated. What he treated ironically, however, was only their type of mind, not the Idea itself. Irony is only a manner of talking against *people*. Except as directed against persons, the essential movement of thought is dialectic” (ibid.). According to Hegel, Socratic irony, the fountainhead of the modern version, is “a way of talking against *people*”, and thus already endowed with a relation to personality and subjectivity, although the crucial moment comes when Hegel is keen to separate “the essential movement of thought”, as much his own as Plato’s, from whatever irony is. This is interesting, at least as far as a confrontation with Schlegel goes, in that, as I have already argued, for Schlegel irony clearly *is* something like “the essential movement of thought”, or at least the necessary and universal condition of the understanding; thus Hegel’s dismissal appears declamatory, programmatic.

¹⁰¹ This misreading has already been identified as such by a host of commentators on the subject, and my calling it so should therefore not appear controversial. Ernst Behler identified it, from as early on as his article “Friedrich Schlegel und Hegel” in *Hegel-Studien*, 2, 1963, and up to his books of the 90s, *German Romantic Literary Theory*, op.cit., and *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1990. Even more recently, the same judgment on the misreading can be found in Judith Norman’s “Squaring the Romantic Circle: Hegel’s Critique of Schlegel’s Theory of Art”, in William Maker, ed., *Hegel and Aesthetics*, New York, SUNY, 2000, as well as in Karl Ameriks’s “Hegel’s Aesthetics: New Perspectives on its

From then on Hegel concentrates on what irony has *become*, that is “the culminating form of subjectivity which conceives itself as the final court of appeal”, “subjectivity knowing itself as the arbiter and judge of truth, right and duty”(ibid., p.102). We are firmly in the realm of moral considerations, and more precisely subjective moral attitudes, with irony consisting “in this, that it knows the objective ethical principles, but fails in self-forgetfulness and self-renunciation to immerse itself in their seriousness and to base action upon them” (ibid.). It is only in a note that the real terms of this condemnation, and the culprits, are named. Irony is seen unequivocally as the “obliteration of good and evil” from a purely subjective position, the position of a “lofty attitude” which surveys good and evil and is capriciously capable of deciding on a moral action, arbitrarily and without recourse to the self-interiorising of objective principles, in full knowledge that it is its own “lord and master”. Irony is the ethical attitude of self-aware, and therefore also deflated, evil - “the consciousness that this principle of conviction is not worth much and that, lofty criterion though it be, it is only caprice that governs it” (ibid., p.258). And the culprits? “This attitude is really a product of Fichte’s philosophy, which proclaims that the Ego is absolute”, but, crucially, “of Fichte himself it cannot properly be said that he made subjective caprice a guiding principle in ethics, but, later on, this principle of the mere particular, in the sense of ‘particular self-hood’, was deified by Friedrich von Schlegel” (ibid). The germs of Hegel’s rejection of Schlegel are already here, in precisely the terms of a misreading: the misreading consists in taking Schlegel to be promoting, even further than Fichte himself, the principles of absolute subjectivity so that it now becomes absolute *particular* ‘self-hood’, or

*personality*¹⁰². Hegel takes issue with what he sees as the relegating of an objective ethical attitude to a subjective, and more than that, individualistic, particularised position. But Schlegel's idea of a 'person', or an 'individual' is never *quite* identical with that of a subject, let alone the 'absolute Ego' of Fichtean philosophy. The 'individual' is more akin to the fragment, it is a notion expressing a perhaps eccentric articulation of the relation between particular and universal, whole and part, as can be seen from *Athenäum* 242: "Aren't all systems individuals, just as all individuals are systems, at least in embryo and in tendency?" And *Ideas* 24: "The symmetry and organisation of history teach us that mankind, for as long as it existed and developed, has really always been and has become an individual, a person." I will have recourse to Schlegel's notion of individuality and personality in the discussion on the fragment in the next chapter, but for now, suffice it to say that it is clearly *not*, despite Hegel, a notion of particularised subjectivity with its origins in the Fichtean absolute ego.

The misreading, or the mistake, therefore, is to think that Schlegel is somehow turning Fichte's absolute subjectivity into the particular subjectivity and the particular will of an empirical person. As was seen in the previous chapter, Schlegelian irony is not an operation of the subject, but a condition of language as such – but nowhere does Hegel seem to have made this realisation. In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel's critique of irony as a form of subjectivity results in him attacking explicitly the person, the figure of the ironist, and this as what he calls "the individuality of genius" (A., p.67). What immediately becomes apparent is

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¹⁰² Karl Ameriks has also recognised this symptomatic Hegelian misreading of the Romantics: "They [The Romantics] were not radical subjectivists or Fichteans demanding that philosophy demonstrate the mind's absolute domination over nature. Instead, they directly criticised this demand and understood romantic art, and irony in particular, as valuable precisely because it points us beyond the powers of mere subjectivity." In Ameriks, *op.cit.*, p.85.

the transposition of basically the same objections from the ‘evil subjectivity’ of the *Philosophy of Right* to subjectivity as genius in the aesthetic realm¹⁰³. In the introduction, Hegel defines “the general meaning of the divine irony of genius as this concentration of the *ego* into itself” (ibid., p.66) – there could hardly be a more decisive gesture to relate inescapably the notion of irony with that of the *ego*, and that of genius. Again, Hegel reads Schlegel as continuing and refining the model of Fichtean absolute subjectivity, but, as Judith Norman rightly notes, “although Schlegel did have a fundamentally Fichtean position, ... he never associated the artistic genius with the absolute subject”¹⁰⁴. Moreover, Hegel reads the ‘character’ of the Romantic-ironic genius as eminently destructive and self-destructive: “the ironical, as the individuality of genius, lies in the self-destruction of the noble, great, and excellent”; and “there is nothing in what is lofty and best, since, in its appearance in individuals, characters, and actions, it contradicts and destroys itself and so is ironical about itself” (ibid., p.67). There are a number of points to be made here. First, it should be noted that what Hegel has clearly in mind, as his reference to Novalis later in the *Aesthetics* shows, is, partly, a self-destruction as part of the individual life of the artist, the cliché of the doomed romantic genius which Novalis’ life-story has done so much (unfortunately) to propagate. This now banal characterisation points further to

¹⁰³ It should probably be noted, *mutatis mutandis*, that it is here in the *Aesthetics* that Hegel most explicitly derides Schlegel, alongside his brother August Wilhelm, in the most inimical manner, talking about “their completely non-philosophical, but essentially critical natures”, their “miserable philosophic ingredients”, and proclaiming that “neither of them can claim a reputation for speculative thought” (A., p.63). It is here then, with Hegel, that Schlegel’s reputation as what Frederick Beiser calls “a philosophical dilettante” arises.

¹⁰⁴ Judith Norman, *op.cit.*, p. 133. Although I am quoting Norman approvingly here, I have reservations as to whether it is really appropriate to state that Schlegel had a ‘fundamentally’ Fichtean position. As I tried to show in chapter one, much of the philosophical foundations of Romanticism, and of Schlegel’s thought in particular, do stem from a reading of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but this was, in Schlegel’s case too, a *reading*, and one which certainly transformed several aspects of Fichtean doctrine to such a degree that it would be careless to call any Romantic positions ‘fundamentally’ Fichtean.

the fact that Hegel is decidedly trapped into thinking of the Romantics, and perhaps also of Romanticism in general, as a collection of individual (and in this instance also empirical) *persons* in a way which is drastically incompatible with the figuration of impersonality in texts such as Novalis' *Monolog* (where the poet is 'enthused', *inhabited by* language) or Schlegel's 'Incomprehensibility' essay (where irony is never located on the level of the individual subject but on that of language as such). Secondly, what Hegel denigrates as "the self-destruction of the noble, great, and excellent" on the part of the artistic genius is also not concomitant with what Schlegel (or, for that matter, Novalis) has to say on the subject. Even though, in the cornerstone of Schlegelian theory, *Athenäum 116*, we can read a sentence ("[Romantic poetry] recognises as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself") which seems to conform perfectly with Hegel's indictment, there are several instances elsewhere in the fragments where the artistic genius is defined as the free *and self-restricting* will: "the dignity of self-restriction ... is, after all, for the artist as well as the man, the first and the last, the most necessary and the highest duty. Most necessary because wherever one does not restrict oneself, one is restricted by the world; and that makes one a slave. The highest because one can only restrict oneself at those points and places where one possesses infinite power, self-creation, and self-destruction." (*Lyceum 37*). This fragment is (relatively) early, and still betrays a hefty dose of Fichteanism, but it is also impossible to mistake the accent Schlegel places on self-restriction as a *duty* of the artist, precisely at those points where his power is the greatest – it can be read as Schlegel's own version of Fichte's *Anstoß*, transposed onto the level, no longer of the absolute

subject, but of the individual empirical artist, and could easily serve as a 'check' on Hegel's objections.

Nevertheless, here in the *Aesthetics*, more than in the *Philosophy of Right*, what Hegel has to say about Schlegelian irony, and despite the subjective misreading which always accompanies his comments, betrays true analytical greatness, and, most importantly, points towards what I wish to uphold as truly *essential* differences of position between his and the Romantics' thought. If irony for Hegel remains a matter of individual subjectivity, it nevertheless, he has to concede, finds ways of manifesting itself in the actual artwork, or the poem. In his view, this happens in the construction of character in a work, but through this seemingly specific literary-critical discussion Hegel touches on essentially philosophical distinctions between his own, and the Romantics' approaches. In the section on 'action', which forms a part of 'the determinacy of the ideal' in art, Hegel reaches the point where he needs to discuss "the modern principle of irony": "This false theory has seduced poets into bringing into characters a variety which does not come together into a unity, so that every character destroys himself as character. [On this theory] if an individual comes forward first in a determinate way, this determinacy is at once to pass over into its opposite, and his character is therefore to display nothing but the nullity of its determinacy and itself" (A.,p.243). Irony is the cause of the dissolution of determinacy in an artistic (poetic-dramatic) character, in such a way that, by Hegel's own admission, the character cannot be further sublated into a recognisable determinate 'unity'; as such, the operation of irony, in the specific instance of the creation of literary characters, acts as a moment in the dialectical movement which 'falsely' dissolves determinacy and disallows the Ideal from

being *actual* (ibid., p.244). Here we have, perhaps, a glimpse of a real, and essential, problem that Hegel would have with irony even if it were not seen merely as a subjective trait – irony, to put it in a pre-emptive manner, cuts the dialectical movement, “the essential movement of thought” short, it freezes the sublation of determinacy at precisely the moment where determinacy is destroyed. But this is not all. Irony, Hegel clearly sees, is a form of negativity, and as such comes at least quite close to the kind of productive negativity that is at work in the dialectic. The problem is, as Hegel sees it, that irony is not the kind of negativity that has an inherent, in-built check, a dialectical *Anstoß*, if the expression be allowed, of the kind that can lead to its *Aufhebung* according to the dialectical method. Back in his discussion of Novalis, Hegel identifies precisely why this is:

“True, irony implies the absolute negativity in which the subject is related to himself in the annihilation of everything specific and one-sided; but since this annihilation, as was indicated earlier in our consideration of this doctrine, affects not only, as in comedy, what is inherently null which manifests itself in its hollowness, but equally everything inherently excellent and solid, it follows that irony as this art of annihilating everything everywhere, . . . , acquires, at the same time, in comparison with the true Ideal, the aspect of inner inartistic lack of restraint.”(ibid., p.160)

Irony, by Hegel’s own admission, is *uncontainable*. It parasitises, contaminates, “affects” everything that stands in its path; it is a manifestation “of inner inartistic lack of restraint” insofar as it is *still* seen as emanating from the

subjectivity of the Romantic-ironic artist-genius, but this lack of restraint, looked at, so to speak, *objectively*, or in the work itself, amounts to nothing less than “the annihilation of *everything everywhere*”. In this Hegel is incontestably right, or at least, right from the position advanced about irony in Schlegel’s *Über die Unverständlichkeit*, where, as I have already shown, irony is seen as an infinite, uncontainable movement. In the Introduction, during a discussion of Solger which can easily be transposed onto Schlegel, Hegel objects to what he terms “the ironic dissolution of the determinate and the inherently substantial alike” (ibid., p.69), thus pointing the finger at what, at heart, is truly, essentially, objectionable about irony: not that it is the offspring of a bloated and evil subjectivity which annihilates all objects before it in a Fichtean paroxysm, but rather that, in its effect on the work, it is thoroughly destructive, a negativity which goes wild and cannot be contained within the dialectic, destroying *both* indeterminacy *and* determinacy, the particular as well as the universal. Of course, within the movements of the dialectic in the *Aesthetics*, irony represents nothing more than a ‘false’ moment, which is itself bypassed on the way to actualising the Idea – but, inasmuch as Hegel’s characterisation of irony at this point cannot be said to be remotely wrong and does not appear as a misreading, it points to what I maintain are the true, essential issues in the confrontation between Hegelianism and Romanticism, and which I will approach in the discussion on infinity in the *Logic* later. First, I must take a detour through the first instance where, even though Hegel does not mention the work of the Romantics, his own position can be seen to be radically at odds with Romanticism, and for substantial reasons – the theory of signs.

2. Signification and Subjectivity: Hegel *contra* Novalis.

It is highly unlikely, if not altogether impossible, that Hegel had any knowledge of Novalis' 'semiotic fragment' in the *Fichte-Studien*, or any knowledge of Romantic semiotic theory in general. His remarks on the sign therefore, appearing at a specific place immanently assigned to them within the whole of the system, must be considered primarily for their own sake – and yet, what I am proposing to undertake in this section is a *comparative* investigation of Hegel's and Novalis' semiotic theories, aiming to examine striking similarities, but also fundamental differences between them, and so throwing light on the essential distinctions between Hegelian and Romantic thinking. There is a sense in which highlighting the theory of signs in Hegel appears counterintuitive, at least bearing in mind the immanent development of Hegel's system and the particular place assigned to this theory within it; but even here, before the analysis has properly begun, a fundamental discrepancy becomes manifest. For Novalis, who will be the key figure in this investigation, the theory of signs also has a particular place assigned to it in the *Fichte-Studien* (which may in this instance, temporarily and heuristically, be viewed as at least approximating a 'system'), but this place is remarkably more prominent. In fact, if we take Novalis' notes at face value, the 'semiotic fragment' assigns the "theory of the sign" a place *before* the system itself, even before "the possibility of a system" or

“philosophy as a whole”¹⁰⁵. Even before any particular distinctions are to be made then, it must be noted that, even though both Novalis and Hegel, in their own way, place the theory of signs within a general theory “of consciousness” (Novalis), or of “subjective spirit” (Hegel), thus relating semiotics to subjectivity, in Novalis’ thinking the elaboration of a theory of signs strictly *precedes* the articulation of the very possibility of a system – this will not turn out to be a trivial difference, although, for the moment, it must remain suspended as the comparative examination begins.

Hegel places ‘the sign’ in the section on the imagination, part of the section on representation, itself part of the section on psychology in the first division of the philosophy of spirit, namely subjective spirit. The first two, ‘minor’ headings (imagination and representation) seem to suggest that Hegel is thinking of the production of signs as forming part of a general theory of representation, while the latter two, ‘major’ headings (psychology and subjective spirit) are indication enough that what is here being considered is closely related to a form of subjectivity, even though, it must be noted, this is not the subjectivity of consciousness pertaining properly to the *Phenomenology* – rather it is the subjectivity, or, better, the subjective nature or aspect, of spirit itself. In the ‘remark’ to paragraph 458 of the third part of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel puts the sign in its proper place, as follows:

“In logic and psychology, signs and language are usually foisted in somewhere as an appendix, without any trouble being taken to display their necessity and systematic place in the economy of intelligence. The right place

¹⁰⁵ See II, 108, 11: “1. Theory of the sign or / what can be *true* through the medium of language? /

for the sign is that just given: where intelligence – which as intuiting generates the form of time and space, but appears as recipient of sensible matter, out of which it forms ideas –now gives its own original ideas a definite existence from itself, treating the intuition (or time and space as filled full) as its own property, deleting the connotation which properly and naturally belongs to it, and conferring on it another connotation as its soul and import.” (E., p.213).

The proper place of the sign, therefore, is within “the economy of intelligence”, by which Hegel denotes a certain type of subjectivity which is not the ‘empirical’, so to speak, subjectivity of consciousness but the subjectivity of the subjective spirit. More specifically, the place of the sign in this economy is at the precise moment where the idea to be produced in the sign becomes an idea of the intelligence itself, “its own property”, where the sign “has received as its soul and meaning an independent mental representation”(ibid.). From this it can be inferred without ambiguity that Hegel adheres to the position, which is also that of Novalis, that the sign is essentially *arbitrary*, an “original” production on the part of intelligence or subjectivity, expressly unrelated to what could have been, so to speak, *objectively* “the connotation which *properly and naturally* belongs to it”. At the same time as being arbitrary, and in essence *because* it is arbitrary, the sign, according to Hegel, is also, however, in a decisive sense, *transparent*. It is created arbitrarily by the intelligence which thus bestows a connotation upon it which has nothing to do with its objective ‘natural’ properties, but rather with the intelligence itself as exercising “ampler authority in the use of intuitions” (ibid.). The sign is the creation of the intelligence, and

2. On philosophy as a whole – the possibility of a system, etc. / 3. System itself.” The ‘/’ marks a

as such it emanates from it, is controlled by it, and is witness to that intelligence's power and freedom to use and transform the givens of intuition.

It is in relation to what, in the system, precedes the sign, namely the symbol, that this becomes most apparent. For Hegel the symbol is anterior, or lesser, than the sign, in that in the symbol the intelligence selects "only that sensuous material whose independent signification corresponds to the specific content of the universal to be symbolised" (ibid., p.212). In the symbol, the intuition "counts positively, or as representing itself" (ibid.), the operation is not arbitrary but heavily reliant on a residue of objectivity, whereby what comes to be symbolised "properly and naturally" belongs to its symbol. Interestingly, for Hegel this apparent coincidence between symbol and symbolised (what in modern semiotics one would call the 'signifier' and 'signified'), does *not* render the symbol as transparent as the sign. From this it is obvious that the transparency of the sign is inherently dependent on its arbitrariness, on the *free choice*, the "ampler authority" of the intelligence producing it: "The *sign* is different from the *symbol*: for in the symbol the original characters (in essence and conception) of the visible object are more or less identical with the import which it bears as symbol; whereas in the sign, strictly so-called, the natural attributes of the intuition, and the connotation of which it is a sign, have nothing to do with each other" (ibid., p.213)¹⁰⁶. In the symbol, Hegel maintains, the intelligence is still too caught up in the objective content of what it represents,

change of line, diacritically further emphasising the positioning.

¹⁰⁶ At this point of the intersection between symbol and sign, or, to be precise, in the *Zusatz* added later between paragraphs 457 and 458, Hegel also takes into account the notion of *allegory*, differentiating it from the symbol in that, where the latter operates by assigning an object to a symbol imbued with that object's natural qualities, and this in a unified way (so that 'the eagle' is a symbol for 'Jupiter' because they both 'properly and naturally' attest to the single, unifying property of being 'strong' which is what binds the symbol and the symbolised together), allegory "expresses the subjective element more by an *ensemble* of separate details" (ibid.,

allowing the natural properties of the object to inform the symbol for it, whereas in the sign it has reached a degree of self-interiorisation of the objective in which its own *freedom*, the arbitrary choice of sign divorced from the natural properties of the object it signifies, becomes manifest – in the transparency and the arbitrariness of the sign which thus are inherently linked.

Arbitrary, transparent, an indication of free choice and instrumental power on the part of the intelligence, the sign is not simply ‘one better’ than the symbol; inasmuch as it *negates* the ‘natural’ and ‘proper’ connection between an object and its intuition or representation, inasmuch as it *re-interiorises* the ‘given’ of intuition, the sign is a model for the operations of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Hegel writes, beginning the next paragraph (459): “The intuition – in its natural phase a something given and given in space – acquires, when employed as a sign, the peculiar characteristic of existing only *as superseded and sublimated (aufgehoben)*” (ibid., p.213, emphasis mine). The sign is the *Aufhebung* of spatial intuition, its re-interiorisation and recasting in the form of time: “Such is the negativity of intelligence; and thus the truer phase of the intuition used as sign is existence in *time*” (ibid.). Thus the sign serves as the *Aufhebung* of spatial intuition into interiorised time, which, for Hegel, means that the intelligence is now capable of producing, in the sign, the element of its own “natural institution” – to wit, “the vocal note” (*Ton*), the voice. The voice is what, in the sign, makes the intelligence *institute*, bring or set forth “its (anthropological) own naturalness”(ibid., p.214). The voice is therefore the sound of “the psyche as a subject for itself and affecting itself by itself”¹⁰⁷, it is

p.212). I mention this here as the first manifestation of Hegel’s treatment of allegory, which is, again, divergent from its Romantic treatment.

¹⁰⁷ Jacques Derrida, “The Pit and the Pyramid”, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1982, p. 89. Derrida’s reading of Hegelian semiology is very

the clear indication that the sign is itself a sign of the special “negativity of intelligence”, of the process of *Aufhebung*. Undoubtedly, as Jacques Derrida has shown, Hegel privileges “the vocal note” in his discussion of signification; it is with the voice that the intelligence is capable of producing its “*own* naturalness” and able to bring it out into the arbitrary (vocal) sign. But, again as Derrida has shown, what becomes interesting is Hegel’s treatment of writing, given this privilege bestowed on the vocal sign. Hegel distinguishes between hieroglyphic and alphabetical writing in much the same way that he distinguishes between symbol and sign. He writes, in the remark to paragraph 459 concerned with written language: “It is from the province of immediate spatial intuition to which written language proceeds that it takes and produces the signs. In particular, hieroglyphics uses spatial figures to designate *ideas*; alphabetical writing, on the other hand, uses them to designate vocal notes, which are already signs”(ibid., p.217). Hieroglyphics are *spatial* representations of ideas, bereft of the *Aufhebung* which turns such spatial intuitions into signs proper, into the vocal sign, whereas alphabetical writing is the sign of the vocal sign, thus bearing the same *transparent* relation to the vocal sign that the sign bears to the intuition. This transparent relation is posited by Hegel as “the fundamental desideratum of language – the name”(ibid., p.217). Thus, “alphabetical writing retains at the same time the advantage of vocal language, that the ideas have *names* strictly so-called: the name is the simple sign for the exact idea, not decomposed into its features and compounded out of them” (ibid., emphasis mine). The name, then, is the true essential character of the sign in its transparency, and thus, as Derrida

important precisely because of the highlighting of the voice and its privileged position in Hegelian thinking. In what follows I shall often have recourse to arguments that Derrida was first to deploy in relation to Hegel, but which, as I hope to show, are closely related to the ‘alternative’ position, hidden away in the fragments of Novalis’ *Fichte-Studien*.

points out, “the linguistics implied by all these propositions is a *linguistics of the word* and singularly of the *name*” (Derrida, op.cit., p.96). The name is the name Hegel gives to the ultimate ‘desideratum’ of language and signification which is, not arbitrariness itself, but *because of* arbitrariness, because arbitrariness implies the freedom and power of intelligence, of the subject of signification, *immediacy* and *transparency*. “To want a name means that for the immediate idea (...) we require *a simple immediate sign* which for its own sake does not suggest anything, and has for its sole function to signify and represent sensibly the simple idea as such” (E., p. 217, emphasis mine).

Ultimately, what becomes apparent in the discussion of signs and symbols, vocal and written language, hieroglyphics and alphabetical writing, is that for Hegel the process of signification is presented as concomitant with that of naming, the sign is the name; this is because Hegel posits the name, in its transparency and immediacy, as the “fundamental desideratum of language”. The sign itself is transparent, and thus when alphabetical writing is described as consisting of “signs of signs”, what is achieved is a second level of transparency, so that both in vocal signification and in alphabetical writing “the visible language is related to the vocal only as a sign, and intelligence expresses itself *immediately and unconditionally* by speaking”(ibid., p.218, emphasis mine). To draw from this the conclusions that Derrida draws, to wit: that Hegel’s semiotics is an instance of the philosophical privileging of the voice as opposed to writing, seems inevitable. But for the purposes of elucidating the differences between Hegelianism and Romanticism, it is Paul de Man’s indictment of Hegel’s semiotics, that “the predication involved in a sign is always citational” that is

more directly relevant¹⁰⁸. What this means, as de Man explains, is that the sign, in its essential identification with the name, is always thought of by Hegel, without doubt, as essentially deriving from the subject which produces and *cites* it – the transparency and arbitrariness of the sign is, as I have been arguing, an indication of the freedom and power of the subject. Whether this necessarily implies (as I think it does) that Derrida is right in thinking that Hegel’s semiology is an instance of the philosophical privileging of presence through the valorisation of the voice is not here the issue. Incontestably, however one thinks of presence in relation to the subject, Hegel’s theory of the sign is one in which the sign properly emanates from the subject, from the intelligence, and where, more importantly, the transparency of the sign not only *means*, or is an effect of, the freedom and “ample authority” of intelligence, of the subject, but is achieved with a sign which always *cites* the subject’s authority alongside its production.

What, then, are those differences between Hegel’s and Novalis’ semiotic theories? As it should be clear already those differences are related to Hegel’s and Novalis’ varying positions on the relation between signs or language and the subject. Even a cursory look at the *Monolog* allows one to see that for Novalis, who speaks about being ‘enthused’ and inhabited by language, a relation of instrumentality, in the Hegelian manner, between subject and signs is unacceptable. But this is hardly sufficient. More interestingly, the conclusions that can be drawn by looking back at Novalis’ ‘semiotic fragment’ from the *Fichte-Studien* after having examined Hegelian semiology, are richer and point to further essential differences between their thoughts. What has to be stated

¹⁰⁸ Paul de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*”, in de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 96. I should note that, despite the title of de Man’s essay, the quotation just given comes in a discussion of the difference between symbol and sign in the *Encyclopaedia*.

from the outset is that Novalis shares, more or less, his starting point with Hegel, inasmuch as Novalis also considers the ‘theory of the sign’ to be a part, in a certain sense, of an examination of the subject, in his case the I inflected significantly by Fichte, but, as I have argued before, certainly not identical to Fichte’s absolute subjectivity. Before re-examining the ‘semiotic fragment’ however, a rather astonishing connection (though not identification) between Hegel’s and Novalis’ concerns must be noted. Shortly before the ‘semiotic’ fragment, Novalis writes:

“The I has hieroglyphic power.”

“*Das Ich hat eine hieroglyphische Kraft*” (II, 107, 6).

The fragment stands alone, and no further explanation is given as to what exactly this hieroglyphic power of the I may be. In conjunction with what Novalis has to say in the semiotic fragment, and against Hegel’s own proclamations on hieroglyphic writing, I would like to suggest that the I’s hieroglyphic power consists in nothing other than the ‘transcendental schema’ which lies at the foundation of every process of signification and which, as I will try to show, has more in common with the traits Hegel denounced in hieroglyphic writing than with the transparency of the Hegelian sign. To begin with, it needs to be stressed that, even though Novalis claims hieroglyphic power for the I, this should not be confused either with the Fichtean absolute subject or with empirical subjectivity. As I showed earlier in Chapter 2, the transcendental schema is, in the final analysis, both *prior to* and *independent of* any subject – thus, if it is in the schema that this ‘hieroglyphic power’ is to be found, it is *not*, strictly speaking,

the power of a subject, but rather the ‘power’ or the operation of the originary schema to which every ‘I’ as determined subject relates as part of the signification process¹⁰⁹.

Why ‘hieroglyphic’ though? In the semiotic fragment itself Novalis does not utilise the same expression, nor is there a sense in which the operations of the schema are explicitly connected to hieroglyphics. I would like to suggest that the picture may be made clearer if lines of connection are drawn, reading, as it were, between the lines of Novalis’ fragments. One first such line takes us back to what Hegel designated as the essential property of hieroglyphics, which is their provenance, as *written* marks, in “*spatial* intuition”, as opposed to the interiorised temporal intuition of vocal, and thus also of alphabetical, signs. As opposed to this Hegelian conception, Novalis states: “But thought, like everything else *that is external*, can only be communicated to a second signifying person through *space*” (II, 108, 11). For Novalis therefore, the communication of signs, the process of signification itself is *not*, as it is with Hegel, a process of re-interiorisation of spatial intuition into time, but remains within spatial exteriority. The sign, it can already be seen, is not “aufgehoben”, it *only* has the quality of spatial exteriority ‘through and through’ and thus, it would not be too bold an assertion, *all signs are*, in this singular sense of being imbued with spatiality, *hieroglyphic* – which is not, as I will show, quite the same as saying that all signs are identical to hieroglyphs. What Hegel denounces is what

¹⁰⁹ It stills needs to be acknowledged that Novalis does say that the hieroglyphic power is in the possession of the I, whereas in the analysis that follows I ascribe that power, to the extents that will be demonstrated, to the a priori, a-subjective originary schema. The justification for doing this should transpire with what follows – as for the I, I would merely like to appeal to the protean dynamic of the *Fichte-Studien* as a whole, where determinations (and especially of the ‘I’) are never stable; to the fact that the fragment (no, 6) is of the earliest, where Fichte casts the longer shadow; and to the fact that, from the perspective of an analysis of the Fichtean I which is what the fragments are, ‘I’ may well be much less a subject than the unconditioned a priori structure that ‘the schema’ here represents.

Novalis actively embraces – but this is not simply capricious or wilful. The essential reasons for designating signs as pertaining to spatial exteriority, as bearing essential hieroglyphic qualities, are to do with the originary transcendental schema itself. For, as was examined earlier in Chapter 2, Novalis’ postulation of the schema amounts to a rejection of the Hegelian notion of the transparency of the sign. Although for both Novalis and Hegel signs are arbitrary, and they are arbitrary because they are seen as effected *freely* by the power of a subject or an intelligence, the arbitrariness of the sign does not entail its transparency for Novalis. Instead, the paradoxical formulation of “free necessity” governs the relation of each particular determined sign (freely effected by a signifying agent) to the a priori necessary condition of possibility for any such determined signification, which lies in the originary schema and its essential relationality. What this means for the notion of transparency is that the necessary given of the transcendental schema as relationality *always mediates* every particular determination of the sign – sign and signified are not, as they are presented by Hegel, posited in a relation of immediacy, but rather as *always already mediated in, and by, the transcendental schema*. Consequently, although it would be mistaken to suggest that for Novalis the sign is opaque, it would be even more mistaken to see it as transparent – the sign appears as arbitrary effect, but is always the product of a mediation through the essential relationality of the schema.

The mediation of the schema has another radical consequence, parallel to the rejection of the sign’s transparency, and which also aligns it to Hegel’s notion of the hieroglyphic. This is the fact that, through this mediation, the mark of the transcendental schema is always imprinted on each particular, determined

relation between signifier and signified, on each determined sign. In the semiotic fragment we read:

“Question: How can the first signifier [das *erste Bezeichnende*]¹¹⁰ recognise this schema and act accordingly?

The first signifier will have painted its own image, unperceived, in the mirror of reflection, without forgetting the feature that the image [*Bild*] is painted in this position, that it paints itself” (II, 110, 11).

What this means is that the schema, which is what forms “the mirror of reflection” according to Novalis, always, necessarily allows the imprint, the mark of its operation to appear, to “be painted” in each signifier, and thus its sign. As a result, the sign for Novalis, far from being a “simple immediate” (E., p.217) as it is for Hegel, is the product of a mediation through the transcendental schema, a *singular* mediation which takes the form of the ‘transcendental mark’, the form of having imprinted itself on every sign. Through the mediation of the schema, the sign does not lose its arbitrariness but it does unequivocally lose all aspirations to transparency and immediacy that Hegel bestowed upon it. Thus, to repeat, every sign is hieroglyphic, or, to be more precise, the condition of possibility for each sign (which condition lies within the originary schema as essential relationality) is a certain kind of hieroglyphic (spatial, *marked*) imprint [*Bild*] that accompanies the process of signification. It is not without

¹¹⁰ A crucial point of clarification is here unavoidable. Novalis distinguishes between *das Bezeichnende* and *der Bezeichnende*, ie. between the signifier (in the sign) and the signifying agent, the subject. In this citation, he is concerned with the former, that is to say with the signifier as part of the sign.

significance that the semiotic fragment does not make clear whether the signification processes at stake are oral or written, or that Novalis decidedly does *not* place the vocal sign in the privileged position ascribed to it by Hegel. Although it would be wrong flatly to assert that Novalis thinks of all signs *as* hieroglyphs, mediation through the schema ensures that all signs bear a spatial, “painted” *mark*, a mark akin to Hegel’s own designation of the hieroglyph. Signs are *not*, simply, hieroglyphs, one and all, but they all bear the mark, the imprint of the “hieroglyphic power” which is none other than the operation, the mediation of the transcendental schema.

This comparative examination of the theory of signification in Hegel and Novalis has an importance which lies far beyond the localised concerns of a comparison. If, as I suggested at the beginning, Hegel’s philosophy represents a canonical body, a system to be confronted by all following philosophical endeavours, and if, as analyses such as those of Derrida and de Man seem to prove, the theory of signification within the Hegelian system is symptomatic of its concerns, exposition, and import, then it follows that the confrontation with the Hegelian system, and in particular with the theory of the sign, afforded by a look back to Novalis’ theory of the sign has already moved the goalposts and changed the stakes of philosophy’s general confrontation with Hegel. And it is at this point, with Derrida and de Man, that is with deconstruction, in mind, that a perhaps bold assertion needs to be made. If, as I readily admit, it cannot simply be asserted that the theory of the transcendental schema somehow *prefigures* the concerns of deconstruction, a perhaps more modest, but for this no less pertinent, claim can be made – namely that, with the theory of the sign as expounded by Novalis, with the primacy of relationality in the transcendental schema, the mark

of the hieroglyphic imprinted on the constitution of all signs, the 'other possibility' earlier intimated is *already with us, even before Hegel arrived*. Novalis allows for a reconfiguration of the signification process which presents already a 'way out' of that which, in Hegel, is seen as the hallmark of 'western metaphysics', 'logocentrism', or any other such designation. And if Manfred Frank is able, after a brief consideration of Novalis' semiotic fragment, to come to the Derridean conclusion that "the transcendental refraction of meaning has the effect of generalising every text, regardless of its genre and content – that is to say, every sign which carries with it an indication of the act of its making bears an index of its textuality"¹¹¹ then, *at the very least*, there is something in Romanticism, and in this case in Novalis' theory of the sign, that has been forgotten – what has been forgotten, in the rush to confront Hegel head-on, is the sense in which the confrontation, or at least the possibility of a non-Hegelian alternative, is already (and perhaps always already) before us.

To return to the matter at hand, however, let me add the following concluding remarks, before examining another aspect of Hegelian philosophy in its relation to Romanticism. What the different approaches to semiotic theory in Novalis and Hegel show is, firstly, that the theory of the sign, despite the specific positioning it has received within their respective thoughts, points far beyond that specificity and into general distinctions between the Romantic and the Hegelian thought. Secondly, and just as importantly, since a theory of signs and language is intimately connected to epistemology, it should not be hard to see, as I suggested previously, that the decisive element in the difference between Hegel and the Romantics may well turn out to be that step *back*, from the Fichteanism

¹¹¹ Frank, "The Infinite Text", in *Glyph* 7, 1980, p. 73. In the concluding chapter I will have the

that Hegel still accuses the Romantics of ascribing to, to a more rigorously Kantian perspective – and what this entails is of fundamental importance for what is here at stake. Where Hegel, in attempting to overcome Kantian restrictions and his legislation over the powers of reason, can uncontroversially be seen as attempting to form a system *as a whole*, a system where the coincidence of the Absolute with absolute knowing cannot fail but be a pivotal consideration, the Romantics' disavowal of the notion of the *complete* system marks a Kantian bias undetected, at least by Hegel. The difference between considering the sign either as a transparent and immediate relation (Hegel) or as always mediated by an originary relational schema, and, just as significantly, as always bearing the *mark* of that mediation, becomes none other than the difference between two versions of the Absolute in philosophy – and this is what will ultimately concern me in the following section.

3. 'Spurious Infinity' and the Absolute: Romanticism *contra* Hegel.

As already mentioned, in his discussion and condemnation of Novalis in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel touches on what he sees as a fundamental flaw in Romanticism, and which he designates as a certain kind of “longing” for infinity, “a longing which will not let itself go in actual action and production, because it

is frightened by being polluted by contact with finitude” (A., p.160). Even though, in this particular case, and also in his discussion of the ‘beautiful soul’ in the *Phenomenology* which commentators also associate with a (nameless) condemnation of Novalis¹¹², the charge is against a notion of infinity in relation to a particular empirical subject or, in the case of the *Phenomenology*, as a moment in the development of consciousness, the difference in the way Hegel and the Romantics understand and employ the concept of infinity bears traits entirely symptomatic of a fundamental philosophical difference. In fact, as I aim to show, it is this difference in the abstract concept of infinity which lies at the heart of the confrontation between Hegel and Romanticism. And, what is more, I wish to maintain that an exploration of this difference may also pave the way for a more fully articulated elaboration of the fate of Romanticism, not just in the hands of Hegel, but also in those of Hegel’s critics and detractors who employ Hegel’s own arguments *against* the Romantic position in an attempt to demarcate Romanticism from, in this instance, deconstruction. Thus, in the exemplary articulation and defence of deconstruction performed by Rodolphe Gasché, Romanticism is summarily dismissed using entirely, and admittedly, Hegelian arguments. In what follows I shall try to counter those arguments and to show, not that Romanticism may be equated with the work of Jacques Derrida and his followers, but that, at least, the elaboration of the concept of infinity in Romanticism, and in contradistinction with that found in Hegel, may well turn out to be much more similar, structurally, strategically, and systematically, to that of (Gasché’s) Derrida.

as de Man’s and Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy’s in more detail.

¹¹² See Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, p.86.

First, it is vital to take a close look at how Hegel conceives of infinity in the pages devoted to it in the first part of the *Logic*. For him there are two ‘types’ of infinity, the ‘true’ and the ‘spurious’, or ‘bad’ (in German, *schlecht*) infinite. The point of my reading is precisely to examine the degree to which ‘spurious’ infinity can indeed be associated with the concept of infinity operating in Romanticism. To begin with, I am assuming that the spurious infinite is, indeed, the Romantic one. How does Hegel define it? There are two answers, or rather, two *moments* of a single answer to this question. Firstly, spurious infinity is defined as the infinite *insofar as it is opposed to the finite*; further than that, in a formulation which will hold my attention with regard to Romanticism, this spurious infinite is designated as the infinite *of the understanding*. Thus: “The infinite as thus posited over against the finite, in a relation wherein they are as qualitatively distinct others, is to be called the *spurious infinite*, the infinite of the understanding, for which it has the value of the highest, the absolute Truth” (L, p.139). With Gasché, I must concede that “Hegel’s arguments against spurious infinity remain perfectly valid. They remain relevant because the relegation of spurious infinity to the empirical discredits it as a tool of philosophical analysis. Spurious infinity disregards the fundamental difference – *difference itself* – between what is given and the given *as thought*”¹¹³. The argument against this ‘type’ of conception of the infinite is that it is only an empirical conception, ultimately, as Hegel himself points out, a ‘finite’ conception of infinity. If the infinite is simply conceived as that which, permanently and indefinitely opposes the finite, that which is defined by its simple *negation* of the finite, then, as Hegel points out, this infinite is but the flip-side of the finite, its negation, and thus

¹¹³ Gasché, “Structural Infinity”, in *Inventions of Difference: on Jacques Derrida*, Cambridge,

becomes itself 'finitised': "the main point is to distinguish the genuine Notion of infinity from spurious infinity, the infinite of reason from the infinite of understanding; yet the latter is the *finitised* infinite, and it will be found that in the very act of keeping the infinite pure and aloof from the finite, the infinite is only made finite" (L., p.137). This expression of the distinction clearly exhibits similarities to the 'longing for infinity' Hegel ascribed to the doomed Novalis in the *Aesthetics*; it is an infinity which must, at all costs, be kept away, 'aloof', from the contamination of finitude; the way the understanding understands it, infinity can only ever be that which is *not* finite. But, as Hegel painstakingly explains, such a notion of infinity which finds its only determination in the negation of finitude dialectically becomes itself finite: "the infinite, in that case, is *one of the two*; but as *only* one of the two is itself finite, it is not the whole but only *one* side; it has its limit in what stands over against it; it is thus the *finite infinite*"(ibid., p.144).

The second 'moment' in the definition of spurious infinity comes about because, in its determination as the 'simple', 'finitised' infinite always opposed to the finite, this infinite is always in a relation of opposition with the finite, a relation which Hegel determines, in this instance, as the perpetual alternation (to infinity) of finite and infinite. In Hegel's words: "We have before us the alternating determination of the *finite* and the *infinite*; the finite is finite only in its relation to the ought or to the infinite¹¹⁴, and the latter is only infinite in its

Harvard UP, 1994, p.130.

¹¹⁴ This relation to 'the ought' (*das Sollen*) is how Hegel advances the dialectical speculation from finitude to infinity. I am here only concerned with the specific determinations of infinity that run through these pages, and cannot aim to provide an adequate (immanent) description of the transitions at hand. This should not mean that my reading or understanding of the *Logic* is somehow lacking in the immanent rigour which is indispensable for its proper development, as well as for its defence - my aim is to highlight how Hegel defines and articulates the difference between the spurious and the true infinite.

relation to the finite. They are inseparable and at the same time mutually related as sheer others; each has in its own self the other of itself”(ibid., p.141). This determination of finitude and infinity as always opposed to each other, “mutually related as sheer others” logically results in its perpetuation, as the constant alternation between a finite and a ‘finitised’ (simple) infinite: “it is this alternating determination negating both its own self and its negation, which appears as the *progress to infinity*, a progress which in so many forms and applications is accepted as something ultimate beyond which thought does not go”(ibid, p.142). As should be evident, it is this progress to infinity, this spurious infinite in its determination, no longer as simple but as *progressive* infinite, which bears the obvious mark of what the Romantics would call infinity, drawn in particular from Schlegel’s definition of Romantic poetry as infinite and progressive in *Athenäum 116*. According to Hegel, and although this represents a second moment or stage in the determination of infinity, we are still within the bounds of an infinite which is only and always defined as the *negation* of the finite, although whether this is indeed what the definition of infinity is for Schlegel or Romanticism remains to be seen. For the moment, let us note that for Hegel this is (still) the spurious infinite inasmuch as, within this alternating determination, finite and infinite are both thought of as “credited with a self-subsistent determinate being”(ibid.); in this way, just as with the ‘simple’ infinite, the infinite is finitised, rendered itself finite in the perpetuity of the alternating determination, for, as sheer negation of the finite, it still carries finitude within it. “The finite reappears *in the infinite itself* as its other, because it is only in its *connection* with its other, the finite, that the infinite is. The progress

to infinity is, consequently, only the perpetual repetition of one and the same content, one and the same tedious *alternation* of this finite and infinite” (ibid.).

Thus, and to recap, the spurious infinite is, according to Hegel, spurious because: 1) it is simple *negation* of the finite, and thus always carries the finite with it as its other; and 2) in its determination as negation of the finite, it appears as ‘the progress to infinity’, which in itself is only a “perpetual repetition” of the alternating determination of the infinite by the finite and vice versa – thus it is *still* simply the negation of finitude, and not the true infinite. At this stage it is useful to point out that not only is this spurious ‘progressive’ infinite aligned with its Romantic conception, (although not explicitly by Hegel himself) but also, crucially, that there seem to be important similarities between the perpetual negation of finitude which characterises spurious infinity, on the one hand, and the determination and condemnation of irony as an uncontainable negative force in the *Aesthetics*. In his notebooks Schlegel writes that “irony is the ‘epideixis’ [the exhibition, the demonstration, the *Darstellung* if you wish] of infinity” (KFSa, XVIII, no. 76), and I tried to show irony’s intimate relation with infinity in the previous chapter. The problem Hegel finds with the spurious infinite can be thus shown to be akin to that he found with irony – they both represent or express, they both stem from and result in, a negation which is uncontainable by the movement of dialectical logic, and they both result not in the articulation of a concrete whole but remain fundamentally *incomplete*. In the case of irony this can be seen from Hegel’s remarks about the paucity of dramatic characters created in the spirit of irony, characters which do not form concrete, whole, recognisable and determinable entities; in this case, the spurious infinite, the infinite of the understanding, is that which is perpetuated in its “tedious

alternation” of finite and infinite and does not comprehend them both in a unity. Hegel is quite explicit that this is in fact the way towards true infinity: “The reason why the understanding is so antagonistic to the unity of the finite and infinite is simply that it presupposes the limitation of the finite, as well as the in-itself, as *perpetuated*; in doing so it *overlooks* the negation of both which is actually present in the infinite progress, as also the fact that they occur therein only as moments of a whole, and that they come on the scene only by means of their opposite, but essentially also by means of the sublation of their opposite”(ibid., p.147). It is not enough to define infinity as sheer opposition to finitude, nor even to define it as the perpetual, infinite alternation between such two sheer others as the progress to infinity. Infinity, if it is to be true, can only ever be *infinity as totality*, it can only ever be determined as the sublation of the sheer opposition of finitude and infinity, as the *unity* of unity and opposition as moments of infinitude. Spurious infinity, by contrast, is, in Hegel’s words, “*incomplete reflection*” which “has completely before it both determinations of the genuine infinite: the *opposition* of the finite and infinite, and their *unity*, but it does not bring these two thoughts together; the one inevitably evokes the other, but this reflection lets them only *alternate*”(ibid., p.150-151). The *second* moment of spurious infinity, the ‘progress to infinity’ allows for both the opposition and the unity of finite and infinite, but it does not allow for the *unity of unity and opposition*, which results in the true infinite as the *whole, infinity as totality*. “What is required in order to see into the nature of the infinite is nothing difficult: it is to be aware that the infinite progress, the developed infinite of the understanding, is so constituted as to be the *alternation* of the two determinations, of the *unity* and the *separation* of both moments and also to be

aware that this unity and this separation are themselves inseparable” (ibid., p.151). This inseparability of unity and separation constitutes the completeness of the total infinite. Thus Rodolphe Gasché is right in saying that “the true infinite is characterised by absolute wholeness, in other words, by a wholeness that is also self-inclusive to the extent that it is not in opposition to that of which it is the totality” (op.cit., p.133).

In this complete, total infinity, all negation, all differentiation, which has nonetheless been the unmistakable motor of the movement of Hegel’s thought, dissolves – or rather, to be true to the Hegelian spirit, it is preserved in the very totality that no longer bears its mark. Thus the true Hegelian infinite is also absolute, it is indeed the Absolute. If anyone could think that this discussion of infinity is but a localised concern – which, given its specific place within the movement of the *Logic* as a whole, may seem to be tempting – Hegel himself offers an important corrective: “in this detailed example, there is revealed the specific nature of speculative thought, which consists solely in grasping the opposed moments in their unity”(L., p.152). I take this to be an admission on Hegel’s part of the character and motivation of the speculative procedure, of the dialectic as movement of thought and of the operation of the *Aufhebung* as its chief method of advance. Even though I concur, as previously stated, with recent immanent defences of Hegelianism and do not wish to repeat the damaging move of assuming Hegel’s goal before he has reached it, the conclusion appears to me inexorable, namely that, *in this specific instance* which, however, and by Hegel’s own admission, is exemplary of the Hegelian procedure *as a whole*, what ultimately appears to hold sway over everything is precisely *a thought of totality*, and of infinity as totality. The true is indeed, even now, the whole. The Hegelian

absolute therefore, even before its determination as Notion by the end of the *Logic* or as absolute knowing by the end of the *Phenomenology* can unequivocally be characterised as complete, unified, whole. And, as Gasché correctly notes, the completeness of Hegelian infinity represents, or expresses, nothing less than “philosophy’s requirement of wholeness, totality, and unity. It expresses it in a privileged way because, unlike the spurious infinite, it is complete. By including itself and its Other within itself, by being thus in opposition to all opposition, it is a fully determined whole which, because it includes itself, no longer has an outside. It is, therefore, identical with reason as pure thought”(Gasché, op.cit., p.134). It would be undesirable, and perhaps even impossible, to argue against such a conception *immanently*, in other words to say that Hegel’s Absolute, or his version of the true infinite is ‘wrong’ from within the perspective of the *Logic* itself, if only because there is, immanently speaking, *no possible position outside* the true infinite. And yet, I want to uphold just such a ‘position’, as the position of the spurious infinite, inasmuch as that represents the Romantic Absolute. This can only be possible if, somehow, it is possible to arrest the dialectical movement, if it is possible to uphold something other than the dialectic as “the essential movement of thought”, if it is possible to think of a radically *incomplete* Absolute (which may very well *not* turn out to be strictly philosophical) – in other words, if one is allowed to entertain the possibility that, for reasons which *cannot* fall within the purview of the dialectic, the spurious infinite is, if not “something ultimate beyond which thought cannot go” (that Hegel proved to be incorrect, and conclusively), then something which, presupposed as it is by the true infinite, marks the true infinite in such a way as to disallow unity and completeness, the spurious infinite as both condition of

possibility and condition of *impossibility* of the true infinite. This is what is at stake with Romanticism's version of the incomplete Absolute, and, it should be clear, it is not something which can be arrived at from an immanent Hegelian perspective. A step back needs to be taken, allowing the spurious infinite the chance not to be conceived as sublatable into the true one.

First, the question needs to be answered: to what degree can spurious infinity as Hegel conceives of it be taken to be concomitant to the Romantic notion of infinity? Gasché follows Hegel to the letter in assuming that it is *wholly* concomitant, an identical notion, but pays little attention to the detail of the Romantic conception. I shall attempt to broach the question obliquely, starting with the crucial characterisation of the spurious infinite as "the infinite of understanding". In *Über die Unverständlichkeit* Schlegel seems to uphold the position that, indeed, one cannot go beyond the limits of the understanding. This can easily be taken to be a position with fundamentally Kantian traits, the same kind of traits of limitation that Hegel seeks to transcend. Irony, revealed in Schlegel's essay as the essential operation, "the essential movement of thought" of the understanding, points to an infinity which, at first, seems indeed to be Hegel's spurious infinity. Irony is the "epideixis", the *Darstellung* of infinity *for the understanding*, as my analysis in the previous chapter showed. The operation of irony, all-pervasive in the understanding, is indeed an operation of *disjunction*, of what Hegel calls separation. In the case of the spurious infinite, this is the separation of finite and infinite in their alternating determinations, a separation which Hegel, curiously and crucially, perhaps even ironically, calls "*incomprehensible*. Neither such a finite nor such an infinite has truth; and what is untrue is incomprehensible"(L., p.153). Curious, crucial, and perhaps ironic (in

the Schlegelian, wholly unintentional sense) is the fact that ‘incomprehensible’ is the very characteristic which, for Schlegel, actually gives rise to the reflexive possibility of the understanding of understanding – incomprehensibility, the very ‘untruth’ of incomprehensibility is the condition of possibility for the understanding of understanding, or, it amounts to the same, for there ever being a ‘truth’. If Hegel suggests that the spurious infinite is such an incomprehensibility, Schlegel would counter that such an incomprehensibility is both what makes understanding (reflexively) possible, and that is to say, what permits the move from the spurious infinite of the understanding to the true infinite of reason as complete speculative reflection, and, *at the same time*, the condition of *impossibility* of reflexive understanding, or, better, that which would make it *impossible* for the reflexive understanding to achieve the goal of completion – that which would make it impossible to attain ‘true’ infinity as totality. Irony, which gives rise to incomprehensibility, is what makes for both the possibility of reflexive understanding, and for the impossibility of its completion. The spurious infinite therefore, though only if looked at from the ‘outside’ of Schlegel’s text and *not* from within the immanent dialectical moves of the *Logic*, is both that which permits the true infinite as totality to be entertained as a possibility, and, *at the same time*, that which perpetually defers its completion as totality.

Thus the Romantic infinite is, like the spurious infinite, aligned to the understanding, and fundamentally incomplete. But the Romantic infinite, in its very designation as that which is pointed at by the operation of irony, cannot be sublated into the dialectical movement towards the true infinite. It is not simply a question of arresting the movement at will; rather, it is a question of the

essential difference (which amounts to the *whole* of the difference of thought) between the negation that is irony and the negation that is the *Aufhebung*, between the process, economy, and operation of irony and those of the speculative dialectic. The latter, as Hegel expressly states it in the *Logic* “consists solely in grasping the opposed moments in their unity”, whereas the former, even by Hegel’s admission, is an uncontainable negativity which seeks to destroy and not preserve. Nevertheless, it is the dialectic which allows for the sublation of the spurious into the true infinite, and which allows for infinity to be grasped, in its unity, as totality. On the other hand, irony, even in its “dissolution of the determinate and the inherently substantial alike” (A., .69), even in its designation (by Hegel) as nothing short of a catastrophe, can only point towards systematic incompleteness, to the limits of knowledge, to the “triviality” of the “*non-cognisability* of the Absolute”, in Schlegel’s words. The Romantics, without a shadow of a doubt, are *not* ‘absolute’ Idealists, in the precise sense that they are Kantians. They assume, not the empty ‘presuppositionless’ beginning of Hegel’s *Logic* which, under the labour of the dialectic, results, not at the end, but even by the end of the first section (of the *Logic*) in the totality of infinity – the true is the whole, every time, everywhere – but the Kantian notion of the limits of knowledge. Yet, and this is absolutely decisive, the Romantic position on the ‘non-cognisability of the Absolute’ has nothing whatsoever to do with the limits of phenomenal knowledge, or the limitations of an empirical subject. The Romantic infinite is *not* the spurious infinite to the extent that it cannot be relegated to an empiricism which philosophy, rightly or wrongly, deems bereft of seriousness. If Gasché is right to suggest that “such a regress or progress ad infinitum implies indeterminateness and limitlessness, in short, the impossibility

of knowing” (op.cit., p.136) it also, when seen as the result of the operations of irony, implies the *quasi-transcendental* (Gasché’s own term¹¹⁵) conditions of *im*/possibility of knowing, the paradoxes of Schlegel’s incomprehensibility. And if Romanticism forbids ‘philosophy’ from ever attaining the goal of totality achieved by Hegelian speculative reflection, if it prevents anyone from ever assuming that the true is the whole, the Romantic incomplete Absolute, precisely because it is incomplete, gives rise to something *other* than, something *more* than philosophy, and which will come to be conceived – as literature (in the sense of *Poesie*).

For the moment, let us pay closer attention to that ‘limit’ designated by Romantic infinity. Even though progressive infinity is, as infinity, limitless, it also is a limit, *the* limit, with regard to the difference between Hegel and the Romantics. It is the limit of dialectical thought in its difference from the operations of irony; it is the limit *before* the ‘arrival’ of totality, and, as such, it is the limit which no thought other than Hegel’s dialectic (which is itself the thought of the totality, and *because* it is the thought of totality) can transcend. If it is the limit of the understanding, it is nothing empirical. The limit is precisely what Hegel deems incomprehensible, to wit, the perpetual separation, or the deferral of unity, of determinations. Where the *Aufhebung* destroys and preserves, sublates, ultimately unites oppositions, irony keeps them perpetually opposed. This is paramount in Schlegel’s fragments: irony is said to amount to

¹¹⁵ By this point it is, I hope, evident that I am attempting to use Gasché’s own version of ‘philosophical’ deconstruction to counter his own ‘philosophical’ (Hegelian) dismissal of Romanticism, and of the Romantic infinite as the spurious infinite in particular. For Gasché’s own use of the term ‘quasi-transcendental’ see his *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1986, p.316. What is at stake in this attempt will become more fully apparent in the concluding chapter but, for now, I must once again warn that I am *not* thereby committed to a position which would straightforwardly align Romanticism and deconstruction.

“indissoluble antagonism” (*Lyceum* 108); irony is “permanent parabasis”; “an idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts” (*Athenäum* 121). Hegel rightly saw this as a progress to infinity, as an infinity resulting from the perpetual alternation of determinations, which is the same as the perpetual deferral of unity in determination – and he called this ‘spurious’. But it is only spurious if looked at from the perspective of Hegel’s position, the position of unity and totality. Lest it be objected that this is not the position Hegel *begins with*, it is necessary to compare what Hegel’s and Romanticism’s ‘starting positions’ are. Hegel’s initial Being in the *Logic* is nothing other than the indeterminate immediate, which, as known, is what allows it *immediately* to turn into its opposite, nothing. I have no interest in questioning the validity of this beginning, but, when compared to Schlegel’s proclamation that “philosophy, like epic poetry, always begins *in medias res*” (*Athenäum* 84), it suggests, as does the unbridgeable difference between dialectic and irony, two fundamentally different thoughts at work. It *could* be argued that Hegel’s beginning in the indeterminate immediate, coupled by the “essential movement of thought” as the dialectic can *only* end up being a thought of totality, inasmuch as the indeterminate immediate is so thoroughly empty of relation that it immediately flips over into its *dialectical* opposite, establishing, from the very start, the dialectic as “grasping the opposing moments in their unity”. The flip-side of this argument could be that Being as the indeterminate immediate is always already *also* its opposite, nothing, it is always already *doubled* precisely because it is indeterminate and immediate; for Hegel, explicitly, this means that it is the *doubling* of the beginning which, under the form of the *Aufhebung*, always, and

at every step, yields ‘the whole’ as double - this is only a sketch of an argument, and I am not here concerned with ‘proving’ it further. What is undeniable, however, is the essential difference between such a beginning and such a movement of thought, on the one hand, and Romanticism on the other. For, if, as I suggested earlier, a step back is necessary in order to show that there *are* ways in which to prevent the Romantic Absolute, in its designation as spurious infinity, from being sublated back into the dialectical system, that step back takes us nowhere other than the ‘beginning’ of Romanticism itself – the thoroughly *relational* ontology of differencing and hovering, analysed earlier in Chapter 1. If irony, the Romantics’ version of “the essential movement of thought” as against Hegelian dialectic, is the thought of disjunction, it is also, just as essentially, the thought of *the primacy of relationality*, the ‘effect’ of the originary doubling at the heart of Romantic metaphysics. The crucial distinction is that, as the irreducibility of irony within Romanticism demonstrates, the originary doubling with which Romanticism begins is always maintained as such, insublatable and irreducible to a unified whole. And it is because of this ontology, because of this primacy of relationality, that the Romantic infinite is, *pace* Hegel, decidedly *not* spurious, but rather the inevitable culmination of such a beginning.

The aim of the preceding, lengthy comparison, or confrontation, between the Romantics’ thought and that of Schelling and Hegel has primarily been to highlight what is radical, original, and often unaccounted-for in the philosophy of early Romanticism. The full force of the Romantic project is thus grasped in its

difference from the Idealist project. One, exemplary but not singular, way this difference can be expressed is with the eccentric but decisive position of Romanticism with regard to the idea of a philosophical system. It cannot be doubted that Idealism, from Fichte through Schelling to Hegel, is concomitant with such a thought of systematicity. Schlegel's infamous fragment, on the contrary, states that: "It is equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two" (*Athenäum* 53). What must be stressed is that, contrary to the hasty disavowals of most commentators, even those involved in a defence of Romanticism, this is a statement that has to be taken *seriously*, and not as an expression of idiosyncratic wilfulness. Karl Ameriks will serve me here as a case in point. In an article which is essentially a defence of Romanticism against Hegel's misinterpretations, he nonetheless writes, after citing Schlegel's fragment:

"To be memorable and provocative, Schlegel added, "we must have both" – which is, of course, literal nonsense, but is *intended* this way: it is supposed to make us think on our own about what is needed. The idea it is pointing to is not that one can literally have a system *and no* system. Rather, what one can do, and what the Early Romantics were doing and advocating, is to have a modest respect for rationality and system, as exemplified in [a] non-foundational system of a Kantian variety that accepts various "givens" from common sense and modern science; and then one can combine this with a sharp rejection of the Idealist notion of a "complete" system" (op.cit., p.79).

The problem with this assessment is that, even though Ameriks ends with a perfectly valid point about the Romantic allegiance to Kant as opposed to Idealism, it admittedly fails to take the fragment seriously and to treat it as

anything *but* “literal nonsense”. What the idea of combining system and non-system means, as I hope my previous analyses have indicated, is that the Romantics do indeed reject the possibility of a complete system, or of philosophical thought as the thought of totality, but *also*, that the Romantics are not completely devoid of a system, and that this ‘system’ is *not entirely* aligned with the “givens” (or, in Hegelian terms, “presuppositions”) of Kantian philosophy. Romantic systematicity is precisely the thought of irony and ‘spurious’ infinity, a thought which bears the essential *structural* traits of a system but which acts as a *quasi-transcendental condition of im/possibility of a system as such*. In other words, Schlegel’s idea of a ‘system’ is that of the necessary condition of possibility of a realised system, which, however, is such that it prevents that system from ever becoming ‘realised’ in the complete, Idealist sense. Irony, incomprehensibility, the transcendental schema – these are all such conditions of possibility for systematicity, but they are also, *at the same time*, the conditions which render *impossible* the construction or realisation of *one, total* system.

Ultimately, this notion of systematicity without system can be said to amount to a singular conception of the philosophical Absolute. The Romantic Absolute bears some essential traits which need to be fully articulated in contradistinction with the Schellingian or Hegelian Absolute. These are:

- a) The Romantic Absolute is *not* accessible epistemologically, in and by knowledge, it is *non-cognisable*. In this it differs fundamentally from the Schellingian and the Hegelian conception; the Romantics must be seen as essentially adhering to the earliest critique of Idealism expressed in Hölderlin’s *Seyn, Urtheil*: the ‘unity’ of the Absolute as

Being may be postulated as a condition, but it is not *as such* accessible.

- b) The Romantic Absolute is fundamentally *incomplete*. It is *not* the originary coincidence of subjective and objective (Schelling), nor is it the true as the whole in the thought of totality of the Hegelian system. This incompleteness is the direct and inexorable result of another fundamental trait of Romantic metaphysics, that is *relational ontology*. This ontology is the result of a conception of Being, further to that in *Seyn, Urtheil*, as differencing-hovering activity, as intrinsically relational. The primacy of relation has the effect that the “essential movement of thought” is irony and not the dialectical *Aufhebung*, and that infinity is progressive rather than total.
- c) Because the Romantic Absolute is both non-cognisable and incomplete, it prevents philosophical investigation, the thought that is called philosophy, from achieving the Idealist goal of complete, absolute knowledge. Hence, and because this Absolute is itself understood as expansive, relational, and non-totalisable, Romanticism opens the path of thought to something other than philosophy, but which has intimate connections, within Romanticism, to philosophy – and that is literature, *Poesie*, which will concern me next.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE INCOMPLETE ABSOLUTE AS LITERATURE

I: The coming of 'Literature'

There can be little doubt that what is chiefly recognised as the original contribution of Jena Romanticism to the history of thought lies with literature; more precisely, with the institution and theorisation of literature as an object of critical inquiry. Such recognition is paramount in the most important writings on German Romanticism from the 19th century to the present and appears incontestable. What will concern me here, nevertheless, is a probing into what makes such a claim incontestable, especially if taken in conjunction with my own (and others') earlier claim that Romanticism is *also* through-and-through philosophical. What exactly is this 'literature' that the Romantics are widely claimed to have been the first to theorise? What is the nature of the relationship between their philosophical endeavours, their arduous readings of Kant and Fichte, their epistemological and ontological concerns, on the one hand, and their obvious concerns with *Poesie*, on the other?

A preliminary sketch of an answer must already, once more, encompass the claim, visible everywhere in the texts of early German Romanticism, that ‘literature’ is not something alien to philosophy but rather rigorously co-extensive with it: “Where philosophy stops, there poetry must begin”, writes Schlegel in *Ideas* 48. One of my concerns in what follows is to circumscribe precisely where that point where philosophy stops and poetry begins may be, and equally, *why* it is that Schlegel is able to make, and frequently repeat under different guises, such a bold claim. The short-cut through both these related questions would surely be to claim, as I already have intimated, that both the cut-off point, as it were, and the reasons for its existence as such are matters of philosophy and philosophy alone. In other words, Schlegel’s statement must be seen as a statement *of philosophy*, in both the subjective- and the objective-genitive sense. And this should really come as no surprise. Whatever ‘literature’ may be (up to this point, I am basing my statements on a purely ‘intuitive’ grasp of the word), its definition, constitution, determination all arise from the conceptual frameworks of philosophy. This is not simply the bequest of Romanticism – far from it. It is a well-analysed fact that poetry, ‘literature’, the product of what can be summarily called ‘literary writing’ is determined and defined by philosophy ever since its inception, as even a cursory look at, for example, Plato’s *Republic* will easily prove. Moreover, this ‘type’ of writing (and there will be ample scope to pursue the question of ‘types’ or genres of writing from a philosophical perspective) is defined as literary or poetic precisely and *always* in contradistinction with philosophy or the type of writing, the kind of argument, that is the property of philosophy. What Romanticism contributes to the endless ‘quarrel’ between philosophy and literature is neither a resolution

‘in favour’ of one or the other, nor, despite possible appearances to the contrary, a resolution as the product of a harmonious ‘union’ of the two. Rather, what is proposed is a radical reconfiguration of the very stakes of the argument, a decisively *modern* (and this also necessarily means *contemporary*¹¹⁶) conception of the limit of philosophy as the bedrock of ‘literature’, and of the intricate interrelation of one with the other.

First, it would be helpful to attempt to define ‘literature’. In historical terms, the usage of the word ‘literature’ which is still current today and of which I am here using dates, not accidentally, from the end of the 18th century, just before the period of early German Romanticism itself. This is the case with German, English, French, and should point to a change in the conception of the word, in all these languages, from its older (now obsolete) meaning of humanistic learning to its current use to denote a set of literary works. Around the end of the 18th century, then, ‘literature’ as we still know it is born. According to Michel Foucault, this birth is due to a radical change in the understanding of language, a “demotion” of language for which the emergence of literature is a “compensation”; this change occurs, according to Foucault, “when words cease to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things”, resulting in the creation of literature as “the isolation of a particular language whose peculiar mode of being is ‘literary’”¹¹⁷. Although Foucault does not mention this text, his description of the birth of

¹¹⁶ This notion of the modernity and contemporaneity of Jena Romanticism is, of course, not my own invention. It forms the fundamental justification for Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy’s authoritative examination of Romanticism, *The Literary Absolute*, op.cit. It is even the very notion with which their book ends. Throughout the course of this chapter I shall have the opportunity to engage with Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s arguments on Romanticism and its literary inception.

¹¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, a translation of his *Les mots et les choses*, London, Tavistock 1970, pp. 304 and 300.

literature out of the effectuation of a rift between word and thing, out of the death, if you like, of a conception of language which, as Hegel wished, would be based around the name, is exactly what takes place within Novalis' *Monolog*. It is what Novalis names "the ridiculous mistake people make when they think they speak for the sake of things", and it results, also within the confines of Novalis' text, in the 'birth' of literature as the pure saying, the self-referential language whose being Foucault terms 'literary'.

Thus, although it would be an exaggeration to claim the birth of literature on behalf of Romanticism, it is unquestionable that the major paradigm shift in the understanding of language which Foucault diagnoses for the end of the 18th century finds an exemplary manifestation within Romanticism itself. Furthermore, and following my analyses of the second chapter, we can see that 'literature' is born out of an epistemological crisis, the crisis attending what Novalis perceives as the "ridiculous mistake" of thinking a sign coincides unproblematically with its referent. 'Literature' results from a crisis within philosophy, a crisis which Jean-Luc Nancy locates at the heart of the Kantian enterprise, a crisis emanating from critique¹¹⁸. It is within this general context that the oft-repeated assertion that Romanticism represents the attempt to complete the philosophical (critical) project by way of literature must be understood. Thus, when Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy state that with Romanticism "philosophy must effectuate itself – complete, fulfil, and realise itself – as poetry"¹¹⁹, it is clear that they have this context in mind. Nonetheless, I must take issue with the precise way in which this statement, and its incumbent

¹¹⁸ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le discours de la syncope 1: Logodaedalus*, Paris; Aubier-Flammarion 1976, where Nancy analyses the question of form in the Kantian critique as precisely linked to the relation of philosophical discourse with that of literature, and where the claim about the birth of literature with Kant at the end of the 18th century is also made.

analysis in the hands of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, is made. Crucially, the statement is made towards the end of the first chapter of *The Literary Absolute* where the issue is the curious text given the name *The Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism*, a text which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy claim “opens” Romanticism from a purely philosophical perspective. The authorship of the text is altogether unclear; it could be written by Hegel, in whose writing it appears in manuscript, or Schelling, whose later work it prefigures in many ways, or even Hölderlin, whose ideas commentators think it may well represent. The text proclaims that “the highest act of reason [...] is an aesthetic act”, and apocalyptically calls for a time when “there no longer exists any philosophy, any history; poetry alone will survive all other sciences and arts”¹²⁰. I am not concerned with the issue of the text’s authorship, and would not be commenting on it were it not for the fact that it seems to form the basis, the “overture” of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s treatment of Romanticism and leads them to the claim I want to take issue with. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy themselves point out that the text “does not belong, strictly speaking, to the romantic corpus itself” but suggest that its inclusion in their analysis forms the philosophical foundations for the Romantic literary-theoretical project¹²¹. I have tried to demonstrate in chapter 1 that there is ample scope for looking for those foundations elsewhere, in the writings of Novalis and Hölderlin themselves, and in their critique of Fichte. To take the *Earliest System-Programme* as the philosophical bedrock of Jena Romanticism is, in some respects at least, to conflate Romanticism with the ‘aesthetic’ idealism of Schelling, in particular, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s

¹¹⁹ Op. cit., p. 36.

¹²⁰ The text is reproduced, among other places, in Pfau’s translations of Hölderlin’s *Essays and Letters on Theory*, op.cit., pp.154-156.

¹²¹ Op.cit., p.27.

arguments in this instance show. The apocalyptic tone with which poetry is exalted in the text is indeed akin to some of Schlegel and Novalis' proclamations, and there is a lot that the text shares with Romantic philosophy, this much is difficult to deny. However, the notion that the highest act of reason is an *aesthetic* act, and the incumbent suggestion, in *The Literary Absolute*, that the text calls for an "organon" of philosophy to be found within aesthetics is clearly, as I hope the last chapter has already shown, an Idealist, more precisely a *Schellingian* one.

This is in essence my main bone of contention with *The Literary Absolute*, and it warrants inclusion in this discussion not simply because the book is still the single most accomplished overview of German Romanticism, but also because, as it forms the basis of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's analyses, it casts a long shadow over what in my mind is, for this reason alone, a *misrepresentation* of the Romantic project. In what follows I shall often refer to the arguments of *The Literary Absolute*, more often than not in order to appropriate them for my own analysis – but the question of whether, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy assert at the end of their 'overture', Romanticism represents a shift from Platonic eidetics to aesthetics, whether their coinage "eidaesthetics" "traces, within the landscape of idealism in general, the horizon proper to romanticism [,] the philosophical horizon of romanticism"¹²² is a crucial one. It is Schelling, and in particular the Schelling of the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, who best fits this description, not Novalis, Schlegel, or Hölderlin. Art (or poetry) as the organon and the completion, the effectuation of philosophy is Schelling's idea, not the Romantics'. There certainly is room for comparison, there certainly are a

¹²² Ibid., p.37.

lot of common elements, but the crucial notion that poetry could *complete* philosophy is not a Romantic one, however often it has been seen that way. As I have shown in the previous chapter, incompleteness is, for the Romantics, an essential trait of the Absolute itself, and if I tried to suggest that it is this incompleteness of the Absolute which opens the space for literature, in an analogy with Foucault's suggestion that the 'gap' between word and referent gives birth to literature, I do not mean to suggest that literature, as the Romantics conceive it, comes to fill that gap and complete the Absolute. Schlegel's fragment may well state that poetry begins where philosophy stops, but does *not* state that thereby poetry completes philosophy's incomplete project. The Romantic theory of literature which is my concern in these pages and which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy themselves have brilliantly set out is arranged and established within a framework of concepts such as genre, fragment, and criticism which, all in their own way, point to an essential incompleteness *also* within literature and its theory. Literature does not *complete* philosophy, but rather gives explicit expression to the *incompleteness* that is philosophy itself. Philosophy, as the thinking of the incomplete Absolute, is already intrinsically 'poetic' (in the sense of *Poiesis*) and must therefore become *explicitly* poetic or 'literary'. It is therefore wrong to suggest that if the Romantics conceive of an essentially incomplete Absolute via philosophy, they seek its completion via literature. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy themselves suggest as much towards the end, or the "closure" of *The Literary Absolute*, where their notion of 'Romantic equivocity' serves as a cipher for the radical incompleteness at the heart of the Romantic project, as I will have the chance to discuss later.

Romanticism's assumption of an essentially incomplete Absolute, an assumption which, as I showed in the previous chapter, stems from philosophical considerations, finds its counterpart in their theory of literature as well. Thus, when Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy refer to the Romantic theory of literature as "the literary absolute", it is vital to circumscribe the nature of this Absolute. According to them, Romanticism approaches literature "as a new *genre*, beyond the divisions of classical (or modern) poetics and capable of resolving the inherent ("generic") divisions of the written thing. Beyond divisions and all definition, this *genre* is thus programmed in romanticism as *the genre of literature*: the genericity, so to speak, and the generativity of literature, grasping and producing themselves in an entirely new, infinitely new Work. The *absolute*, therefore, of literature¹²³." Already, as I will show in more detail in a following section of this chapter, there are problems with assuming that the 'absolute of literature' arises with the inception of a total, all-encompassing genre "beyond divisions" which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy locate in the programmatic statement of *Athenäum* 116. However, they are perceptive in insisting on the "genericity" or "generativity" of literature as conceived with Romanticism, that is, the productive extensiveness of a class of writing which does seek to transcend divisions and boundaries, albeit not necessarily yielding a conception of totality. The productive essence of the literary is captured, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy cannot fail to mention, by the employment of *Poesie* as opposed to 'mere' *Dichtung*: "The absolute of literature is not so much poetry as it is *poiesy*... *Poiesy* or, in other words, production. The thought of the "literary genre" is thus less concerned with the production of the literary thing than with

¹²³ Op. cit., p.11.

production, absolutely speaking¹²⁴.” I have already showed that this, along with all of the Romantics’ literary-theoretical notions, stems from a thorough reconsideration of the idea of philosophical (ontological) production, and it remains the case that *Poesie*, even if considered as the total *über-genre*, so to speak, is always a conception which highlights the production of itself as such, what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call “autopoiesy”. Further more, this (auto)-production must be seen as the auto-production of the Romantic incomplete Absolute, the progressive infinity which is the unmistakable hallmark of *Athenäum 116*, and a clear demarcation from the notion of the total Absolute of Idealism must be made – and again, this is where Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy do not go far enough. They write: “And if it is true (as Hegel will soon demonstrate *entirely against* romanticism) that auto-production constitutes the ultimate instance and closure of the speculative absolute, then romantic thought involves not only the absolute of literature, but literature as the absolute. Romanticism is the inauguration of the *literary absolute*” (ibid.). But it cannot simply be the case of a parallel between speculative Idealism and Romanticism, in which the Absolute is conceived as the auto-production of Spirit for the former, or the auto-production of literature/Poiesis for the latter¹²⁵. If there is a crucial and all-pervasive difference between Schelling/Hegel on the one hand, and Schlegel/Novalis on the other, it is that the Romantic Absolute (and that is *also*

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp.11-12.

¹²⁵ Strangely, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy themselves warn off such concrete parallelisms between Idealism and Romanticism throughout the book, as, for instance, with this comment: “The difference in the setting-to-work – or, as one could just as well say, the difference in *operation* – between Schelling and the *Athenaeum*, ... , does not amount to the difference between the philosophical and the literary.” (op.cit., p.39). Ultimately their position on what they call ‘Romantic equivocity’ seems to suggest that it is Romanticism itself that is ambiguous about its own project and position vis-à-vis the major currents of German Idealism. It has been a significant part of my efforts throughout this thesis clearly to demarcate where it is that Romanticism parts company with Idealism, where Schlegel and Novalis forsake Schelling and Hegel, so that it may not be possible to claim the sort of general parallelisms at stake here.

the literary Absolute) does not correspond to the thought of totality but to that of progressive expansion within production – the literary absolute of the Romantics remains, as *Athenäum 116* makes perfectly clear (the “real essence” of Romantic poetry is “that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected”), an essentially incomplete one, and is thus clearly, even *programmatically* removed from the speculative cycle.

So what becomes of literature? What of the Romantic literary absolute? Foucault’s prognosis of the birth of literature out of the rift in signification and the crisis of representational language, especially as this can be seen in Romantic texts such as Novalis’ *Monolog* remains true, as does Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s analysis of Romanticism as thinking the absolute of literature as a response to the philosophical (epistemological) crisis of post-Kantianism. With Romanticism ‘literature’ comes to signify the auto-production of a language which is no longer securely representational, as well as the auto-production of a progressively infinite, expansive Absolute allowed for by such a notion of language – literature is not so much the ‘other’ of philosophy than that which the incompleteness (perhaps even the failure) of philosophy gives birth to, and which works and is organised in tandem with philosophy as long as one allows the incomplete Absolute. Thus, no less than Romanticism *qua* philosophy, “Romanticism (literature) is that which has no essence, not even in its inessentiality”, as the authors of *The Literary Absolute* pithily put it¹²⁶. In the end ‘literature’, in this conception, the conception of its inception, and thus a conception which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy rightly stress is still incumbent upon us necessarily after more than two centuries, this ‘literature’ is nothing

¹²⁶ Op.cit., p.83.

more or less than its own generative expansion, the Absolute as it infinitely engenders and produces itself.

II. Poetry and Prose.

The preceding characterisation of literature, although essentially true to the Romantic project, lacks specificity. If the literary Absolute ultimately has exactly the same characteristics of incompleteness, progressivity, inessentiality and so on, as the Romantic Absolute in philosophy, what remains unaccounted for is what makes for 'literature' in the sense that was born with Romanticism, the current sense of literary writing. Does Romanticism have an answer to what constitutes literary writing as opposed to philosophical, legal, or any other kind? It should be said at the outset that in strict terms, if one follows the programme of *Athenäum 116* to the letter, the answer to that question is no. And yet, I want to maintain that the Romantic conception of literature is one which *also* allows for the greatest possible degree of specificity about what literature is. How can this be possible? If "in a certain sense, all poetry is or should be romantic" as Schlegel tells us, and if, even further, this romantic poetry is also connected with, co-extensive to philosophy, the sciences, the arts, what remains of the specificity of literature? Even further, what remains of the specificity of poetry as *Dichtung*, when Schlegel's fragment switches seemingly randomly between *Poesie*, *Dichtung*, and the generic *Dichtart*? The answer lies, again, with the peculiar conception of the Romantic Absolute, this time the literary Absolute, and, in particular, with how, according to Schlegel, Novalis, but also, in a similar way,

Hölderlin, this Absolute comes to be instantiated in particulars. If everything falls under the rubric of the Romantic Absolute as *progressive Universalpoesie*, the question then becomes: what is the relation of the particular *work*, the poem, drama, or novel, in all its specificity, to the Absolute that encompasses them all? It becomes, therefore, a question of genre, or, more precisely of the generation of (literary) genre, a question of the relation between particular and universal. Before broaching that question in detail with an investigation of the Romantic theories of genre, it is important to assess the ways in which this relation between particular and universal are to be broached, and to ask the question in yet another mode: what is the criterion with which such a relation between particular and universal is to be addressed? In other words, what will guide the investigation that the Romantics undertake into the theory of genre, what is the vantage point from which judgments about particulars are to be made?

This is a question that has been most successfully answered by Walter Benjamin, in his dissertation on the German Romantics¹²⁷. In asserting that “the Romantic theory of the artwork is the theory of its form” (Benjamin, p. 155) Benjamin traces precisely this criterion or vantage point – in the idea of form. The form of literary works becomes the ‘medium’ through which the analysis of different genres, or of the very difference between a particular work and the universal of ‘literature’ can be staged. All genres, all particular works, even the universal of literature have a form, and it is by this form that the Romantics, as Benjamin sees, will undertake their investigations. That the Romantics, and in particular Schlegel, were preoccupied by the notion of form in connection with

¹²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, I-1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt; Suhrkamp, 1974. English translation in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and

literature can easily be ascertained by even the most cursory look at, for example, the *Athenäum* fragments. What Benjamin brings to bear on this discussion however, and what should be recognised as perhaps his most original and profound contribution to the literature on Romanticism, is the notion that form itself is absolutised as what he calls “the medium of reflection”. Basing his analysis on a painstaking examination of the difference between the Romantics’ and Fichte’s conception of reflection, Benjamin arrives at the conclusion that “reflection constitutes the absolute, and it constitutes it as a medium”(ibid., p.132). I also tried to show the role that reflection plays in Romantic philosophy, and have tried to establish mediation, the notion of a universal medium as a cornerstone of Romantic thinking, especially in connection with Novalis’ transcendental schema, but also, as should be evident, in Schlegel’s Romantic irony as the all-pervasive (and eminently reflexive) medium through which understanding passes. Here, it is a case of understanding mediation, the medium of reflection, and the reflexive, mediating *form* of the Romantic Absolute, with Benjamin, from the perspective of literary analysis. If the literary Absolute is best seen as Schlegel’s “progressive universal poetry”, it is simply a matter of understanding that the universality and ‘absoluteness’ of this ‘concept’ is a universality and ‘absoluteness’ of form. Form, in this case poetic or literary form, is the absolute medium through, and in which particular literary works stand in relation, not just with one another but also with the whole, the universal itself. Thus, when Schlegel or Hölderlin discuss individual works in relation to their common genre (say, the tragedies of Sophocles in relation to those of Shakespeare), or genres in relation to one another, the mediating term allowing

comparison and differentiation is form. And because such a mediating term is precisely a necessary condition for *any* such comparison or differentiation, and because any particular work or genre *must* be referred to it in any judgment, form as the mediating term, the medium of form is absolute.

This Absolute, in keeping with the Romantic notion of Absolute, is absolute as medium, as incomplete “continuum of forms”, as Benjamin calls it (ibid., p.173), and shares with The Romantic Absolute as expounded in the previous chapter the fundamental mark of difference from the Idealist Absolute of unity in totality¹²⁸. ‘Progressive universal poetry’ is an infinitely expanding continuum of different poetic/literary forms (genres or particular works), all of which are related to the universal absolute, that is to ‘progressive universal poetry’, through being *forms*. Curiously, although initially it may appear that through this conception of the literary absolute we have gained nothing in specificity, or that we are no nearer in determining the nature, if you will, of the Absolute form, Benjamin is able to characterise precisely and definitively exactly this nature of the Absolute form – it is prose. Another vital and strikingly original insight of Benjamin’s is his celebrated statement that “the idea of poetry

English translation.

¹²⁸ It must be noted that Benjamin thinks of the Romantic notion of infinity in a way which may appear contradictory to mine. He notes: “The Romantics define the relation of artworks to art as infinity in totality – which means that the infinity of art is fulfilled in the totality of works. Goethe defines it as unity in plurality – which means that the unity of art is found again and again in the plurality of works. This infinity is that of pure form; this unity is that of pure content” (Op.cit., p.183). In the first instance it may appear that Benjamin’s use of the word ‘totality’ contradicts my own assertion that Romantic infinity is not a totality. However, as the crucial distinction he makes here between Romanticism and Goethe, and which, from a purely philosophical perspective pertains almost to the letter to my distinction between Romanticism and Idealism (Hegel) shows, the main issue at stake is that whereas for Goethe or Idealism totality also and always means unity, the Romantics conceive of their infinite as an ever-expanding ‘totality’ (here of literary works). There can be no mistaking Schlegel’s definitive statement that “Romantic poetry...should never be perfected”. As I aim to show in the following section on the fragment, the relation between a particular work and the ‘totality’ of literature is, for Romanticism, never one which simply subsumes the former’s particularity to the latter’s universality, and this finds its exact counterpart in the Romantic denial of the Hegelian notion

is prose”(ibid. p. 173). It may appear counter-intuitive to suggest that a theory of art, such as Romanticism, which employs the notion of the poetic with such emphasis, should also want to claim that the Absolute ‘idea’ of poetry should be what is commonly perceived as its opposite, but herein lies another ingenious twist in the Romantic conception of literature and its Absolute. Benjamin expresses it thus: “The reflexive medium of poetic forms appears in prose; for this reason, prose may be called the idea of poetry”(ibid., p.174). For the Romantics, prose represents the *Indifferenzpunkt* of poetic forms, if you will – that is to say, the formal medium in which and through which all poetic forms combine and relate to one another. Novalis comes the closest in formulating this idea clearly when, in an excerpt from his “logological fragments”, and utilising his favourite conceptual method of *ordo inversus*, states: “It is a good (*artige*) question, whether the lyric poem would properly be *poem (Gedicht)*, plus-poetry, or prose, minus-poetry. Just as the novel has been taken for prose, so the lyric poem has been taken for poetry – both unjustly. The highest, most authentic prose is the lyric poem” (II, p.536, 51). The inversion of the ordinary characterisations is significant for the entire Romantic literary-theoretical project. The novel, as I will have the chance to discuss in more detail, represents a truly and authentically *poetic* form, whereas the lyric poem is extolled for being “the highest most authentic prose” – this is because the lyric poem, the distillation, as is commonly perceived, of the poetic form, is for Novalis what he calls “minus poetry”, by which I take him to mean poetry divested of the particularity of any of its incumbent forms, distillation of form in the sense of absence of form, or rather, in the sense that all later particular or generic formal characterisations are

that the Absolute of speculative reason is always already there, as a whole, in each of its

or should be missing from it – poetry as prose. This may indeed appear counterintuitive, given an ‘ordinary’ understanding of the meaning of ‘prose’ and ‘poetry; but it should be clear that for the Romantics who have elided distinctions between poetry and language as such, ordinary discourse, as was seen in Novalis’ own *Monolog*, is the basic form of poetry – ‘ordinary discourse’, which is the *OED* definition of ‘prose’ is, from the Romantic viewpoint, ‘mere’ poetry. Schlegel’s praise of the novel in general, and of Goethe’s *Meister* in particular, also rests on the inversion of commonly-held views on what constitutes the poetic and the prosaic: “This marvellous prose is prose, and yet it is poetry”¹²⁹. The literary Absolute therefore appears curiously Janus-faced. It is, unmistakably, *progressive Universalpoesie* on the one hand, and on the other, it is ‘mere’ prose. This is because its *form*, distilled to the ‘essentials’ of Novalis’ ‘minus poetry’ and divested of any particular poetic form, this form in its most abstract and universal, in its Absolute, is the form of prose. Again, Romanticism does not seem to have a *specific* answer to what makes literature, other than to say that its Absolute form is that of prose, a form which, it can be claimed, it shares with other ‘prosaic’ writing such as philosophy and the sciences. However, if Romanticism stubbornly refuses to characterise literary writing in its specificity, this does not mean that it has lost touch with the distinctions and differentiations which, within the universal formal medium of ‘prose’, make up the *genera* with which literary theory, then as now, likes to concern itself.

particular ‘phases of development’.

¹²⁹ I am quoting Schlegel’s essay *Über Goethe’s Meister*, from the translation published in Kathleen Wheeler, *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism; the Romantic Ironists and Goethe*, Cambridge; Cambridge university Press, 1984, pp. 59-73.

III. The Novel and other Genres.

The constitution and dissolution of a theory of poetic-literary genres forms one of the major cornerstones of Romantic literary theory. But the question of genre is not merely a literary question. Classification, definition, and systematic arrangement of a body of writing (what is called 'literature') has always been one of the major *philosophical* concerns about the study of literature, and it has always been, or at least ever since Plato's *Ion* and *Republic* and, in the most exemplary fashion, Aristotle's *Poetics*, a question addressed to 'literature' *by* philosophy. It is, after all, a philosophical demand *par excellence* to ask for definitions and ordering, and, furthermore, to insist that this ordering somehow follows after the internal ordering of philosophy in the categories. The Greeks were able to leave posterity with a complete framework of genre theory in essence *because* they were able to formulate such a theory after the philosophical organon of the categories, and Aristotle's procedure in the *Poetics* unmistakably demonstrates this. If Romanticism has anything to add to the discussion, this addition takes the form of a complete overhaul of the ancient categories and the ancient genres, an overhaul which is neither a reconfiguration of the ancient genres for the modern age, like Schiller's momentous essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* of 1795-96 which greatly influenced the Romantics (especially Hölderlin), nor a complete forgetting of the ancient

taxonomy in favour of some radically new system. ‘Hovering’ between these two alternatives, the Romantic theory of genre, especially as it is to be glimpsed from Schlegel’s notes and fragments but also in the tantalisingly complex arguments of Hölderlin’s poetological work, performs a radically *critical* reconfiguration of genre-theory, which means it seeks not only to replace or reconfigure existing divisions but critically (in the transcendental Kantian sense of the word) to delve into the conditions of possibility for the very *generation* of genre, what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy aptly call “generativity”. At the outset, however, we can begin by seeing the Romantics’ dissatisfaction with the ancient taxonomy, and thus to see their own re-working as a reaction. Schlegel’s *Lyceum Fragment 60* is most succinct: “All classical poetic genres have now become ridiculous in their rigid purity”. It is simply inexorable, from the modern perspective which must accommodate Dante, Cervantes, or Shakespeare (not to mention Tieck, Richter, or Goethe), that the ancient triumvirate epic-lyric-drama is insufficient. The answer, at least in the hands of an experienced classicist such as Schlegel, is already seen at work in the latter, decadent phase of antiquity: “behind the confusion of all the artistic genres by the poetic eclectics of late antiquity there lies the demand that there should be only One Poetry and One Philosophy” (*AF* 239). Thus, even though it is clearly correct to view Romanticism, and its theory of genre in particular, as the inauguration of the modern age in explicit contradistinction with classical Greece, Romanticism as modernity has always already complicated issues just as inescapably by insisting that even the modern be contained within antiquity¹³⁰.

¹³⁰ These are merely preliminary remarks to what could have developed into an investigation of the relation between Romanticism and modernity, the notion of modernity and antiquity within Romanticism, or even the overall concept of history in Romanticism, all of which can be expounded utilising the Romantic theory of genre, and for none of which there is scope in the

What Schlegel identifies in the Alexandrians and Romans is also a major Romantic exigency – the demand for the union of genres, the union of philosophy and poetry, so frequently found among the fragments. Genre, as the German word for it, *Gattung* clearly indicates, primarily signifies marriage, union, and Romantic genre theory often takes the aspect of a demand for unity, for a comprehensive single genre – the literary absolute. But this demand should never be taken merely at face value, for it is accompanied by a *critical* questioning of the grounds for such a unity. In other words, in Romanticism it is *not* a question of assimilating divided genres into one, but rather of examining the grounds for the division, what makes for the possibility of genre. As Schlegel puts it: “We already have so many theories of poetic genres. Why do we not yet have a concept of poetic genre? Perhaps then we should have to make do with a single theory of poetic genre” (*LF* 62). As Peter Szondi shows, the rhetorical form this fragment takes is highly significant; first, the slightly weary statement of fact – there already exist many theories of genre; second, the essentially *critical* question, seeking after the ground for the constitution of such theories in the *concept* of genre; and finally, the seemingly half-hearted, irresolute hypothesis bearing on the possibility of answering the question, the half-glimpsed possibility of a single, unifying theory of genre. The rhetorical form of this fragment should be enough of an admonition against an all-too-hasty characterisation of the Romantics as seekers after a single complete genre, or a single complete theory of genre. The Romantics do seek, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy put it, “the union, in satire (another name for mixture) or in the novel

course of this thesis. Any further investigation into this field should have to take into account, apart from *The Literary Absolute* where such issues are frequently (if somewhat perfunctorily) broached, Peter Szondi’s work on Hölderlin as well as his essay ‘Friedrich Schlegel’s Theory of Poetical Genres’ in Szondi, *On Textual Understanding*, op.cit., pp. 75-94.

(or even in Platonic dialogue), of poetry and philosophy, the confusion of all the genres arbitrarily delimited by ancient poetics, the interpenetration of the ancient and the modern” (op.cit., p.91) but they are also acutely aware that the union of divided parts is a synthesis, a mixture, a *Mischung* of *Gattungen*, and that the resulting union is a confused, murky one.

Thus, even when genre appears to be theorised by the Romantics as a totality, or even as unity in totality, even when “progressive universal poetry” appears to be the genre of genres uniting all divisions within it, this cannot be left unqualified. Even in *Athenäum 116*, which remains a pivotal instance of Romantic genre theory, Schlegel writes that Romantic poetry is “the only one that is more than a kind (*Art*)”, it is the *one* genre that is *more than one genre*. In effect, this is the Romantic diagnosis for genre theory in general – there is always *more than one genre*, and, what is more, if one is to seek, critically as Schlegel would demand, the ground or the concept of poetic genre, this will be, like Romantic poetry, *the single genre which is more than one genre*, genre in excess of itself. Thus, with the proposed and projected union of genres comes the dissolution of genre. It is no coincidence that, in one of the fragments most concerned with genre, *Athenäum 434*, Schlegel will again berate the rigid existing classifications inherited from Greece, contrast them with the Romantic, modern notion of an ever-changing system of classifications (“in the universe of poetry nothing stands still, everything is developing and changing and moving harmoniously”, a clear repetition of the idea of romantic poetry being “always in becoming”), only to project into the future the possibility of discovering “the true world system of poetry” in a manner strikingly reminiscent of the ironic prophecies of *Über die Unverständlichkeit*. We are still lacking the concept of

poetic genre, the concept that would perhaps allow us to formulate a single theory of genre, but it is this very lack of a concept, this very lack of a theory, which essentially marks the concept of genre as the absence of concept. This is why the single unifying Romantic genre will never be single or unifying in any comforting sense. In his *Literary Notebooks* Schlegel states this in exemplary fashion: “One can just as well say that there exist *infinitely many* as that there exists only *one* progressive *poetic genre*. Therefore there really exists none; for a genre cannot be conceived without an accompanying genre”¹³¹. Beyond unity then, and beyond even the dissolution of unity, genre is really theorised as the impossibility of transcending what Werner Hamacher has called “an irreducible duality”¹³². There is always more than one genre, and even when one tries, as Schlegel programmatically did, to conceive of a single genre encompassing all others, this can only be done by conceiving of a single genre in excess of itself, Romantic poetry as a genre and yet more than one genre, in excess of itself. It should be clear that this is also the essential trait of the literary absolute, expansively always in excess of itself, a ‘genre’ which, in being more than one genre, manages to find the sought-after ‘concept’ of genre¹³³.

Apart from Schlegel, it is Hölderlin who offers us a comprehensive theory of genre which can be analysed along similar lines. Peter Szondi has already shown, and Walter Benjamin much intimated, the similarities and connections between Schlegel and Hölderlin’s projects for genre theory, but I

¹³¹ Fragment 72 from Schlegel, *Literary Notebooks*, edited by Hans Eichner, London 1957.

¹³² Hamacher, *Premises*, op.cit., p.230.

¹³³ I have to note, if only in passing, that this consideration of genre and its ‘concept’ arising from Romantic texts is exceedingly close to Jacques Derrida’s investigation into “The Law of Genre” (as seen in his ‘La loi du genre’ in *Parages*, Paris; Galilée, 1986). Curiously, while Derrida approvingly mentions what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have to say about genre in relation to the German Romantics, there is nowhere a mention of Schlegel himself – but the theorisation of genre that has been at stake here is *not* performed by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy but by Schlegel, and Romanticism in general.

need to state from the outset that there are also significant differences. For one, Hölderlin does not seek a ‘concept’ of genre, nor does he arrive at the conclusion reached by Schlegel, that genre is indeed its own dissolution, or that genre always means more than one genre. What Hölderlin does do is attempt a comprehensive, complex and involved theory of genre which stops short of the ‘deconstruction’, if you will, of the concept but which nevertheless bears the hallmarks of Romanticism in theorising genre as mixture, confusion, and which significantly advances the ‘rigid’ classifications of the ancients in the eminently modern direction of infinite becoming and transformation. This can be seen in his essay ‘On the Difference of Poetic Modes’, written around 1800, at the same time as ‘On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit’ of which it can be said to form a companion piece¹³⁴. As it has been observed by Hölderlin’s editors as well as numerous critics, the key influence on the essay is Schiller’s ‘Naïve and Sentimental Poetry’, but where Schiller can be said simply to redefine ancient classifications and to give them a ‘modern twist’, accounting for the difference between ancient and modern to be reconfigured as that between naïve and sentimental in the process, Hölderlin’s operation is more profound and more radical. Although the genres he is dealing with are still the ones prescribed by the Greeks (lyric, epic, and tragic), Hölderlin radically redefines them and, most crucially, sets them in a perpetual relation with each other by delimiting them according to basic characteristics that appear in different permutations between them. Thus, to quote merely the beginning of the essay:

“The lyric, in appearance idealistic poem, is naïve in its significance.

¹³⁴ The title, again, is that proposed by the editors of the *Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe*. A

The epic, in appearance naïve poem, is heroic in its significance.

The tragic, in appearance heroic poem, is idealistic in its significance”

(Pfau, op.cit, p.83).

An in depth analysis of the particular meaning of Hölderlin’s designations (heroic, idealistic, naïve) cannot be undertaken here, and their precise significance is not what is important. Rather, what needs to be stressed is the manner in which Hölderlin sets the genres in motion, animates them, if you will, by ascribing them traits (which themselves are traits of genre) that can be exchanged or modulated in order to produce different generic combinations. By operating with a ‘grid’ of three genres (epic, lyric, tragic), three generic traits (idealistic, naïve, heroic) and, further more, two distinct aspects of a poem (its ‘appearance’ (*Schein*) and its ‘significance’ (*Bedeutung*), Hölderlin renders classification, the essence of genre theory, mobile, and, as he explains, poems are to be ‘classified’ according to the different combinations of the elements on the grid. Among his notes and fragments of the same period are found numerous ‘poetological schemata’¹³⁵ with various permutations of the grid elements, showing the great versatility that the new classificatory schema allows Hölderlin. Even further, Hölderlin utilises yet another distinction, that between the ‘basic mood’ or ‘ground tone’ (*Grundstimmung* and *Grundton*) on the one hand, and the art-character (*Kunstcharakter*) on the other, a distinction which, as Peter Szondi observes, finds its parallel in Schlegel’s generic distinction between form

translation, which I am here using, is to be found in Pfau, op.cit., pp.83-88.

¹³⁵ This time this is the ‘title’ given to such fragments by the later editors of the *Frankfurter Ausgabe*. I have taken these fragments and the editorial remarks on them from Hölderlin, *Theoretische Schriften*, Hambur; Felix Meiner, 1998, pp. 63-73.

and content, or ‘material’ and ‘expression’¹³⁶. Apart from the correspondence between Schlegel and Hölderlin’s poetological thoughts, in itself no small coincidence, what is of note here is that, despite the fact that Hölderlin only appears to mobilise the ancient genres, the genres as he conceives them become far less static, “rigid in their purity”, as Schlegel would have it; they become mixed, even, amidst the chaos of Hölderlin’s notes, confused, in essence agile and undulating, “in becoming”. Thus, even though Hölderlin does not theorise, as Schlegel does, the problematic of classification and of the dissolution of genre, he arrives at a *practical*, even pragmatic, elaboration of genre theory which sees classifications as essentially mobile, conforming entirely with the Romantic notion that poetry be forever in becoming¹³⁷. Genre is no longer a static, rigid entity but a changeable becoming obtained by differing permutations of the agile elements of the grid, and it should not be surprising to find that, even though Hölderlin has nothing to say on a ‘genre of genres’, his qualifications of existing genres bring his position, as Peter Szondi notes, very close to Schlegel’s; where for Hölderlin (and in this, it would seem, he stands alone), the modern genre *par excellence* is the lyric poem, for Schlegel, but with a description and definition which aligns itself exactly with Hölderlin’s description of the lyric poem, this distinction falls on the novel¹³⁸.

“A novel is a romantic book”, Schlegel writes in his ‘Letter on the Novel’, part of what, along with the fragments, remains his most sustained

¹³⁶ Szondi, *op.cit.*, p.93.

¹³⁷ It should also be noted that it is, at the very least, entirely possible to see in Hölderlin’s use of what I here called a ‘grid’ yet another nascent application of a fundamentally dialectical method. This would also connect this essay with its sister piece, *On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit*, which, as I showed in chapter two, is also a piece of poetological theory which transforms existing literary definitions and classifications by setting them in motion, in becoming.

¹³⁸ See Szondi, *op.cit.*, p.92.

theoretical work, the *Dialogue on Poetry (Gespräch über die Poesie)*¹³⁹. He is, of course, playing on the etymology of the German *Roman*, but the play is serious. The novel is a Romantic book, in fact it is *the* Romantic book, because in it Schlegel saw the embodiment, the real, living example of the genre of genres, the genre which combines all other genres and is a theory of genre itself; as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, among a host of others, have observed, the novel is precisely what *Athenäum 116* calls ‘progressive universal poetry’¹⁴⁰. In the *Dialogue* Schlegel specifies that he can “hardly think of a novel but as a mixture (*gemischt*) of storytelling, song, and other forms”¹⁴¹. The novel is in essence a mixture, a combination, it is the genre of genres because it betrays more evidently than any other form of writing the fundamental ‘law of genre’, which is that there is always more than one genre, that genre is always to be mixed. Novalis, very often the ‘wilder’ thinker among the Romantics, expresses the same view on the novel as a great, inclusive genre, in the following excerpt from one of his *Logological Fragments*: “The novel is about life – (re)presents *life* (*stellt Leben dar*). ... The novel as such contains no definite result – it is not the image and fact (*Factum*) of a *proposition*. It is the visible execution – the realisation of an idea. But an idea cannot be comprehended in a proposition. An idea is an *infinite series* of propositions” (II, 212, p. 570). The novel is the *Darstellung* of life, in all its complexity, confusion, and, it is implied, resistance to rigid classifications; it is not a simple proposition but an *infinite series* of propositions, or an idea, “a concept”, as Schlegel would say, “perfected *bis zur*

¹³⁹ I am reading the ‘dialogue’ from the German of the KFSÄ, or, to be more precise, in its transposition in the second volume of the *Studienausgabe*, Paderborn; Schöningh, 1988, pp. 186-222. Translations are my own, although a translation of the ‘letter on the novel’ exists in Wheeler, op.cit..

¹⁴⁰ “The “Letter” contents itself with transposing to the novel what *Athenäum* fragment 116 says of poetry”, op.cit., p.97.

Ironie”, it is a genre posited to infinity, inclusive of itself and all other genres, and emblematic of the very generativity of genre, its infinite generation. The reason, therefore, why the novel is “the romantic book” is not simply because the novel ultimately can be shown to ‘contain’ all other genres, but because it can also be shown, transcendently, as one would say, to contain the containing itself. Schlegel, again in the “Letter”, writes: “when one thinks of a book, one thinks of a work, a whole existing for itself”¹⁴². For the Romantics, it should be clear, a “whole existing for itself” can only be such if it contains all its components but also the very act of containment, transcendently – this is the novel, and this is why the novel can only be theorised *through* and *by* the novel: “a theory of the novel should itself be a novel”¹⁴³. Once again, as with the proclamations on the genre of genres as *progressive Universalpoesie*, one must pay attention to the full scope of the Romantic conception, and to note that this “whole” is only ever an expanding, infinite whole in becoming, and not a completed, perfected whole. The novel is the genre of genres not just because it can be shown to contain all other genres alongside the very act of containment itself, but also because it is in the “continuum of forms” as Benjamin would have it, the most poetic (in essence) and the most prosaic (in appearance). It is the zero degree of genre at the same time as being the ultimate genre of genre.

But if genre is thus dissolved, thus analysed to the point where its infinite propagation and the genre which represents it (the novel) become at the same time the ultimate genre of mixture (*Mischung*), and the ‘no-genre’, the “pas de genre” of sheer prose – what, then, remains of the particularity, the specificity that genre belongs to, serves, and aims to protect? Does Schlegel, and

¹⁴¹ *Studienausgabe*, vol.2, p.213.

Romanticism in general, dissolve all specificity in the *menstruum universale* of “the Romantic book”? Perhaps curiously, the answer is a resolute no. To begin with, it is a matter of cardinal importance that the theorisation of the Romantic book does not take the form of a utopian project, and even if it may appear to do so in *Athenäum* 116 (though, even there, I would argue that it is only a matter of appearance – “progressive universal poetry” is not a vision of a vague utopian future), it certainly takes the flesh and blood of a very specific literary form in the “letter on the novel”. The Romantic book, in all its expansive, infinitised glory is, according to the Schlegel of the *Dialogue*, the novel. And this is the ultimate paradox of the Romantic theory of genre – that in its attempt to get at a “concept” of genre, at a formulation of the grounds for genre theory itself as they would be transcendently included in that theory, and whilst it reaches the greatest, most infinite degrees of generality, it still does not lose sight of the specificity, the particularity that a theory of genre is really all about. Schlegel’s most ambitious attempt at showing how the universality of Romanticism is also, at the same time, respectful of the greatest possible particularity within it, can be seen in the rightly famous *Athenäum* 252, which can be viewed as a crystallisation of his genre theory. A “philosophy of poetry”, he writes:

“would hover (*schweben*) between the union and the division of philosophy and poetry, between poetry and practice, poetry as such and the genres and kinds of poetry; and it would conclude with their complete union. Its beginning would provide the principles of pure poetics; its middle the theory of the particular, typically modern kinds of poetry, the didactic, the musical, the

¹⁴² Ibid., p.213.

rhetorical in a higher sense etc. The keystone would be a philosophy of the novel, of which the first outlines are contained in Plato's political theory of art."

A real "philosophy of poetry", a real theory of literature that is, and by extension therefore a real theory of genre, would "hover" (not accidentally the verb here) between union and separation, once again¹⁴⁴ - but this we have read before. What is not so tried, and quite vital, is that Schlegel, not for the first time it must be said, goes into specifics: this "philosophy of poetry" would concern itself with pure poetics, but also with the particular modern genres of poetry, and will culminate in a theory of the novel, first glimpsed with Plato's dialogical imagination¹⁴⁵. The highest, most general theory therefore, according to Schlegel, must also be a consideration respectful of the greatest particularity, and will culminate in something which not only has a particular form, but also a particular historical provenance. Particularity, for Schlegel, at least when it comes to literary forms and genres, is always of historical provenance, and Romanticism's respect for particularity is tantamount to a concern with the real specificity of history. Back in the "letter on the novel", we read: "in my historical investigation I encountered several originary forms which are not further reducible to one another. In the sphere of Romantic poetry, it seems to me that novellas and fairy tales are, if I may say so, infinitely opposed"¹⁴⁶. This is a clear assertion, coming scarcely a paragraph after the definition of novel as a "mixed"

¹⁴³ Ibid., p.214.

¹⁴⁴ I must acknowledge that here Schlegel rings the utopian note, perhaps, by including the statement "will conclude with their complete union". As a corrective to the idea that this union is postulated as realisable, it is sufficient to be reminded of the resolute phrasing of *Athenäum 116* – there is no reason to believe that if Romantic poetry should forever be in becoming and never be perfected, then its theory and philosophy could or should desire to do so.

¹⁴⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy make the interesting point that the theory of the novel represents, in effect, the definite tendency within Romanticism, and the thought of Schlegel in particular, to 'go back' to Plato. See op.cit., p.88.

genre, of the irreducibility of originary genres, and, what is even more striking, of the irreducibility of *modern* genres such as the novella or the fairy tale.

Why is this so important? Not just as a corrective to the mistaken identification of Romanticism with the dissolution of specificity in a vague universality, but precisely because the very universality of the Romantic conception of genre is ultimately what makes Romanticism respectful to the utmost specificity of genre *as such*. This is the paradox of genre: its most universal essence - that is: there is more than one genre - is also the clearest index of the strictest particularity - there is *more than one* genre, no one universal solvent is possible within which the specificity of particular genres may be dissolved, as this specificity always survives in the 'more than one' genre. Dissolution into universality is impossible, because the universality of genre entails the greatest particularity. And, I am compelled to note at this point, there can be no clearer indication that, even within the realm of what should by rights be literary theory *par excellence*, Romantic thought is a thoroughly *philosophical* thought; the theory of genre is nothing other than a theory of universals and particulars, parts and wholes. Schlegel's *Lyceum Fragment 14* is typically succinct: "In poetry too every whole can be a part and every part really a whole". Even more than genre theory, however, the aspect of Romantic thought that most clearly corresponds to a thinking of universality and particularity is the practice (and theory) of the fragment.

¹⁴⁶ *Studienausgabe*, p. 213.

IV. The System-Fragment.

The fragment, another renowned Romantic legacy, is not quite what it seems. It may be a favourite form of writing for Schlegel, but, as is well documented¹⁴⁷, his brother August as well as other members of the group were not quite so happy with it. Novalis deliberately practiced the form for his *Athenäum* publications, but neither his nor Hölderlin's notes can be taken to be fragments in the programmatic sense that Schlegel's are. Yet, it is incontestable that the greatest majority of the material I have been dealing with, and indeed the majority of Romantic textual material, are, *de facto* if not *de jure*, fragments. My argument here will be that, deliberately or not, Romanticism could only ever have survived, in its essence, in fragments. Consequently, the notion that Romanticism radically fails to produce a body of work worthy of that name, bequeathing a motley heap of torsos and ruins instead, completely misses the essential characteristic, indeed the essential tendency and the very heart of the Romantic project. It may be the case that only Schlegel seriously managed to theorise the fragment, but the Romantic fragments, whether they be intentional or not, are the only way in which Romanticism could have expressed itself. Far from an index of failure, which may indeed be what it appears to be, the Romantic fragment, is the specific and quintessential Romantic way of

¹⁴⁷ Among others, by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *op.cit.*, p.40.

expressing, and thinking about, specificity and particularity, and as such, it is also the quintessential Romantic expression of the opposite, of universality.

The fragment is not a genre. It may be said to be one inasmuch as it is a type, a form of writing practice, and especially since Schlegel consciously mobilises it as such a type – but it is not. It is never talked about, as are the traditional genres or even the novel and ‘progressive universal poetry’, as one genre among many. It is not even the genre of genres – at least not if what one understands by this expression is what I have tried to elucidate in the preceding section, namely the exemplary genre which would encompass all others whilst also containing within itself, transcendently, the ‘act’ of containing or encompassing. But the fragment may well be said to be the *strict formal appearance* of the Romantic theory of genre. If genre theorises the peculiar relation between universality and particularity that Romanticism sought to bring to life, then the fragment is the not necessarily deliberate practice of it. To be sure, it can be claimed that the novel, as the privileged genre, is the practice of its own theory, and Schlegel will say as much of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, the exemplary novel, and one could even, with a fair degree of sympathy, push for Schlegel’s own *Lucinde* or, less obviously, for Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* or Hölderlin’s *Hyperion* being such examples of the Romantic genre of genres. But in the very strict sense of the infinitisation, consequent dissolution, and persistent survival of the essence of genre (as more than one genre), of this sense of ‘genre’ or of ‘genre of genre’ it is the fragment which is the sole true and necessary survivor – the inexorable ruin of genre theory. This is because the fragment is an exemplary (re)presentation (*Darstellung*) of the relation between particularity and universality that Romantic genre theory sought

to investigate. The exemplary fragment on the fragment is, of course, the famous *Athenäum* 206, the ‘porcupine’ fragment: “A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine”. At first glance this may appear innocuous enough, stating only the absolute independence of a fragment, its standing or being posited alone. But this is already a paradox – a fragment is, at least conventionally, a fragment *of* a greater entity, a broken-off piece of a once-complete whole. Schlegel insists that a fragment is isolated, on its own, a whole in itself – and yet, to complicate matters more, it is entirely isolated “from the surrounding world”, which means it is *not*, strictly speaking, isolated, but exists, however curled-up and protected by porcupine thorns, *in* a world, at once complete unto itself and in relation with an outside. The paradox is precisely this relation: the fragment is a part of a whole to which it is related precisely *by not being in relation to it*; it is a part *only inasmuch* as it is itself whole, its own *singular universal*, if the oxymoron be allowed.

Schlegel, for instance in *Athenäum* 22 and 77, calls fragments “individuals” (and vice versa, which amounts to the same), and what he means is certainly nothing to do with any ideas of ‘personhood’ or subjectivity. Rather, his stress is that fragments and individuals are indivisible wholes, micro-totalities that form their own world and stand apart from it at the same time, much like the metaphorical porcupine. Fragments and individuals are equated with each other, but also, crucially, with the third term that illuminates them both – system. *Athenäum* 242 (“Aren’t all systems individuals and all individuals systems...?”) equates individuals with systems, and the 930th fragment from the *Literary Notebooks* equates fragments with systems (“even the greatest system is merely a

fragment”). The equations are left tantalisingly unqualified in the fragments themselves (they are themselves fragments, as befits them) but the thought behind them is unmistakable, and a hallmark of Schlegel’s conceptual powers. A fragment is a system in the sense exemplified by the porcupine metaphor – it is a part which stands alone in a singular disjunctive relation with the whole, a whole unto itself and a part of its own whole at the same time. Schlegel writes of “a chain or garland of fragments”, even “a system of fragments” (*Athenäum* 77). A system, then, is only one if it is made up of fragments, that is of systems – herein lies the singular conception of systematicity at the heart of Romanticism, and, as I showed in the previous chapter, it is a conception which, in its radical difference with the systematic thought of Idealism, must be taken in its full force. A system, etymologically a compound of connected parts, is not the Idealist vision of the whole, but rather its ruin, its fragment – every one of the connected parts is itself ruin, and the overall totality is a fragment. To ask whether it is the whole that is fragmented first, or its parts, is to miss the point entirely – Schlegel can only think of the system as a fragment, and this means also that he can only think of the fragment as a system; in his thought, the whole is always a part, and the part is always whole.

This would merely be an interesting, if arcane, exhibition of contradictory logic, of the kind that would surely be imbued with Schlegelian irony, were it not for the fact that the fragment, as I suggested earlier, is the chief Romantic form for the literary as well as the philosophical work, and were it also not for the fact that this peculiar articulation of system and fragment (or system and individual, or individual and fragment, Schlegel virtually invites us to take our pick) is one of Romanticism’s quintessential elaborations of its own singular (literary *and*

philosophical) Absolute. Both these points require further elucidation. First: as I explained earlier, the Romantic concept of a literary work, conceived from within the horizon of genre theory, paradoxically allows for particular works, or particular genres, to be thought of not as *belonging* to a universal whole, the literary Absolute, if you will, but as themselves *constituting* the Absolute anew, each and every time. This is why Schlegel will heap praise on Goethe's *Meister* for "the manner of representation, which endows even the most circumscribed character with the appearance of a unique, autonomous individual, while yet possessing another aspect, another variation of that general human nature which is constant in all its transformations, so that each variation is a small part of the infinite world", or for the manner in which "each essential part of the single and indivisible novel becomes a system in itself"¹⁴⁸ – in brief, Schlegel commends Goethe for making every part a whole, that is a fragment, like the porcupine. The literary Absolute, therefore is only such because each and every one of the particular parts it contains is itself absolute, in the sense of isolation implied by the porcupine fragment. A particular is only a particular inasmuch as it is also, at the same time, universal, inasmuch as it befits what can be called the universal form of particularity. And this can also be read in reverse. The universal is only ever articulated through an *infinite series* of particulars, the "infinite series of propositions" Novalis used for his notion of the novel. Moreover, it should be noted that this is not a conception akin to Schelling's indefensible version of the two "equal" philosophical Absolutes; the absoluteness here in question is totally different to Schelling's: each 'absolute' particular is the bearer of the same *incomplete* 'absoluteness' as the 'absolute' universal, and not a totality split in

¹⁴⁸ In Wheeler, op.cit., p.60, and pp.65-66.

two. We are at many removes from the traditional notion of the fragment; the fragment is nothing negative, nothing simply ‘detached’ from a greater whole as it signifies the whole itself, each and every time. As Rodolphe Gasché puts it: “fragments are not leftover pieces of an integral whole, broken parts of an anticipated totality; they are the whole itself *in actualitas* – the only way in which the supersensible substrate [ie: the Absolute] occurs, or becomes present. Fragmentation, consequently, rather than implying some loss or lack of presence, represents the *positive* mode in which presentation of the whole occurs”¹⁴⁹.

As it should be evident, this theorisation of the fragment is inextricably linked with the Romantic Absolute as an *incomplete*, indeed *fragmentary* Absolute. Even though the fragment is the presentation of the whole, this could only be the case if the whole itself is fragment – and, once again, to ask the question of causality, namely whether Schlegel arrives at a notion of an incomplete Absolute because of his theory of the fragment or vice versa, is notionally akin to asking the question about the chicken and the egg. In *Lyceum 103*, Schlegel is, for once, very clear about his notion of incompleteness, from the specific perspective of the literary work: “Many a work of art whose coherence is never questioned is, as the artist knows quite well himself, not a complete work but a fragment, or one or more fragments, a mass, a plan.” At this stage this reads merely as an indictment of world literature, along the same lines of *Athenäum*²⁴: “many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written”. But, by positing the condition of “many” modern works as fragmentary from their inception, Schlegel elevates this fragmentariness into a necessity – ancient works may have *become*

¹⁴⁹ Gasché, “Foreword” to the English translation of Schlegel’s *Philosophical Fragments*, op.cit.,

fragments, but modern works *are born* as fragments. The fragment thus lies in a paradoxical but inexorable relation to incompleteness, summarized effectively in *The Literary Absolute*: “the fragment combines completion and incompleteness within itself, or one may say, in an even more complex manner, it both completes and incompletes the dialectic of completion and incompleteness”(op.cit., p. 50). Or, in other words: the fragment is essentially incomplete, but it is also essentially the *only possible* instantiation and actualisation of an Absolute that is itself incomplete.

V. Criticism: the final Incompletion of Literature.

The notion of criticism can be seen in many ways as the completion, at least the final part, of the Romantic theory of literature, but this claim has to be qualified to suit the overarching exigencies of the incomplete Absolute. Thus, in a variation of the same paradox of completion by incompleteness that we have encountered in the Romantic theories of genre and the fragment, criticism is postulated as the element in the literary work which allows for its extension, reconfiguration, and development, and which thus points towards the incomplete kernel of the particular. It should be noted, from the outset, that the notion of criticism one encounters in Schlegel, who is, without doubt, the principal 'critical theorist' among the Romantics, is almost entirely divorced from the traditional, and still current, idea of the critic as judge. Criticism aims not at the judgment of a particular literary work for the posterity of readers and future critics, but rather at the ever-continuing expansion of the meaning (the sense, the *Bedeutung*) of the work, and is thus an instrument, perhaps the chief instrument, of a work's infinitisation, its approximation to the progressively universal infinity of the literary Absolute. Criticism, evidently, at least for a thinker so imbued in the principles of transcendental philosophy, is directly related to the Kantian notion of critique. When Schlegel writes of critical (re)presentations of literary works, which, as we shall see, ought themselves to be literary works, he intends this to

signify a representation raised to the second power, a transcendental critique which would reflexively represent “the producer along with the product”, as *Athenäum* 238 would have it. Thus, when Schlegel, in the same fragment, introduces his idea of transcendental poetry, its designation as “poetry of poetry”, its characteristics of “artistic reflection and beautiful self-mirroring” enjoining the “transcendental raw materials”, and his final imperative that “in all its (re)presentations (*Darstellungen*) , this poetry should (re)present itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry” – these are all indications of the transcendental and *critical* nature of this second-power *Poesie der Poesie*. In other words, the poetry of poetry, although it obviously remains essentially poetry also bears the fundamental traits of *criticism*.

Already, then, criticism is theorised as something occurring not strictly *outside* but *within* poetry itself; criticism is not an exterior addition to the literary work, but a reflexively necessary part of it. This takes on an even more radical form when Schlegel explicitly, and on several occasions, writes that the criticism of poetry is to be thought of as being in a continuum with poetry itself, or, even more resolutely, that criticism of literature should be itself literature. “Poetry can only be criticised by way of poetry. A critical judgment of an artistic production has no civil rights in the realm of art if it isn’t itself a work of art, either in its substance, as a representation (*Darstellung*) of a necessary impression in the state of becoming, or in the beauty of its form and liberal tone, as in the Roman satires”, he writes, in *Lyceum* 117. What is noteworthy in this statement is not so much the notion that criticism of literature should itself be literature, but the precise demarcation of the *manner* in which it is possible. Thus, a critical appreciation or judgment of a literary work may count as being itself literature by

sharing the “beauty” of its form with the literary work, which Schlegel will expound on in his essay on Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, or, and this is much more interesting, by being a “representation of a necessary impression in the state of becoming”, which unmistakably suggests that the critical judgment is itself only a step, a phase in the infinite becoming of the work, and points further to the element of essential incompleteness and infinite becoming in the work – the critical judgment is not a complete evaluation of an already whole work, but another step in the continuum of its becoming. This is why Schlegel often appears inimical to the notion of critical judgment, at least as that is traditionally conceived. The judgment of a work is not left to the critic but is an integral part of the process of the work itself, its ‘completion’, not in the ordinary sense but in the sense of its ascension to a further step on the path of its becoming – which is why Walter Benjamin is extremely perceptive when he writes that “the critic does not pass judgment on the work; rather, art itself passes judgment, either by taking up the work in the medium of criticism or by rejecting it and thereby appraising it as beneath all criticism”¹⁵⁰.

It is in his essay on Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* where Schlegel most appositely and precisely captures the essence of what he takes criticism, and criticism as *literature*, to mean. He finds, in Goethe’s novel, not simply the example of “the Romantic book”, but of one of the chief elements of what makes the novel the paradigmatic genre, and Goethe’s novel the exemplary novel, of Romanticism – and that is the fact that the book criticises itself. It is, as *Athenäum* 238 would have it, “simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry”. The book, Schlegel writes, “turns out to be one of those books which carries its

¹⁵⁰ Benjamin, op.cit., p.161.

own judgment within it, and spares the critic his labour. Indeed, not only does it judge itself; it also (re)presents itself (*es stellt sich auch selbst dar*)¹⁵¹. Thus, the book is not only critical of itself in the common use of the term (it “judges” itself, it is its own review) but also, and far more importantly, in the transcendental sense with which Schlegel always understands the notion of criticism: it represents itself, it sets its own mode of production alongside the finished product, it is thoroughly *critical*. Of course, Schlegel does not expect this of any ordinary work of criticism, it is the privilege and the boon of what he calls “poetic criticism”, and he makes this distinction only shortly after, in the same essay, in a discussion of the criticism of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, found in Goethe’s novel. The passage is worth quoting at length:

“The view of *Hamlet* to be found scattered partly here and partly in the next volume is not so much criticism as high poetry. What else but a poem can come into being when a poet in full possession of his powers contemplates a work of art and represents (*darstellt*) it in his own? This is not because his view makes suppositions and assertions which go beyond the visible work. All criticism has to do that, because every great work, of whatever kind, knows more than it says, and aspires to more than it knows. It is because the aims and approach of poetic criticism are something completely different. Poetic criticism does not act as a mere inscription, and merely say what the thing is, and where it stands and should stand in the world. For that, all that is required is a whole and undivided human being who has made the work the centre of his attention for as long as necessary. If he takes pleasure in communication, by word of

¹⁵¹ In Wheeler, *op.cit.*, p.64, translation modified.

mouth or in writing, he will enjoy developing and elaborating an insight which is fundamentally single and indivisible. This is how a critical characterisation of a work actually comes into being. The poet and artist on the other hand will want to represent the representation anew (*die Darstellung von neuem darstellen*), and form once more what has already been formed; he will supplement the work, restore it, form it anew. He will only divide the whole into articulated parts and masses, not break it down into its original constituents, which in respect of the work are dead things, because their elements are no longer of the same nature as the whole; however, in respect of the universe they are certainly living, and could be articulated parts or masses within it”¹⁵².

Schlegel’s notion of criticism finds here its most acutely articulated expression. ‘Ordinary’ criticism is shown to be already a continuation and a re-shaping, a reconfiguration of the literary work, merely by saying “what the thing is”. This is expressly because the work “knows more than it says, and aspires to more than it knows”, the work is always *in excess of itself*. Even when, admittedly, the work is “single and indivisible”, it constitutes a unity and a totality of sorts, it is only that unity and totality if it admits of “developing and elaborating”, it is a unity which exceeds itself at the very least *in potentia*. This is the element that Walter Benjamin captures excellently in his dissertation when he distinguishes between the Romantic notion of the artwork and that found in Goethe himself: “the entire art-philosophical project of the early Romantics can therefore be summarised by saying that they sought to demonstrate the criticizability of the work of art. Goethe’s whole theory of art proceeds from his

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 69, translation slightly modified.

view of the uncriticizability of works”¹⁵³. ‘Criticizability’ is a direct result of the fact that the work of art, on its own, whole and indivisible as Schlegel says, nevertheless is *fundamentally incomplete*, and admits further elaboration. Criticism is therefore not an activity operating from outside the literary work but a phase in the continuum, as Benjamin has it, of its becoming. Further more, what Schlegel calls *poetic* criticism, by which he presumably not only means the criticism of existing works found amidst the pages of other literary works, as is the case with *Wilhelm Meister* and *Hamlet*, but also the kind of literary criticism that would assume the same level of “beauty” as the literary work that occasions it, this ‘other’ type of criticism goes even further in (re)presenting the existing (re)presentation of the literary work anew, re-shaping it, supplementing it in the precise sense of *transforming* it. And, Schlegel adds, this can only be done if the poet-critic pays exact attention to the precise articulation of the elements within the work, treats them as “articulated parts”, which is to say as wholes, as universal-particulars – to cut the list short, as *fragments*. The work of this type of criticism is thus less practically to demonstrate the fundamental incompleteness of the literary work (any “whole and undivided human being”, that is, any *individual*, can do that if s/he pays the requisite attention to the work, Schlegel says), and more to demonstrate an astute understanding of the *essentially fragmentary form* of the work, which is to say, a creative (poetic) understanding that takes entirely into account the nature of the elements of the work, and of the work itself, and consequently *also of itself*, as fragments.

Criticism is thus exemplary of the Romantic notion of literature in many ways: it exemplifies and, what is more, effectively *demonstrates* the essential

¹⁵³ Benjamin, op.cit., p.179.

incompletion of the particular work; it forms a continuum with the work itself, working as a transcendental critique of the work, a raising of it in the reflexive second power; it stands in relation to the work as genres stand in relation to one another, since the fundamental incompletion of the work necessarily allows for the possibility of its criticism, like one genre allows, by the law of genre, for another – more than one genre; it effectively produces the infinite continuation and reconfiguration of the work, allowing the work to be re-presented, re-produced, to continue to become, progressively and expansively; and, finally, it exemplifies the form of incompletion, as well as the form of particularity-as-universality that is the fragment, by taking the work itself as well as individual elements of the work as themselves fragments. Criticism, then, is the ‘completion’ of the work *only* in the sense that it reflects, mirrors the work’s essential incompletion, and belongs, right alongside literary works themselves, in the incomplete and infinitely progressive literary Absolute. This Absolute, which I have tried here to theorise under the ‘categories’ of genre, fragment, and criticism, essentially presents and produces itself (“literature”) in the same fundamental manner of infinite becoming and essential incompletion in all these ‘categories’. But this is the ‘same’ of auto-production, of an infinite becoming which can never be identical to itself as it is not yet, and will never be, complete, an idea expressed also by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy very near the end of *The Literary Absolute*, where they capture the essential thrust of Romanticism perfectly: “[I]n this auto-manifestation, it is not only the identity of philosophy with literature and of literature with philosophy that never takes place, for the identity of literature with itself and philosophy with itself are absent as well. The

Same, here, never reaches its sameness”¹⁵⁴. But this is because there was never really a question, with Romanticism, of the production of ‘the same’, or of ‘the idea’ in the sense given to it at roughly the same time by German Idealism – it was never, in other words, even within the confines of the question of literature, of an “eidaesthetics”, regardless of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s earlier assertion a propos of *The Oldest System-Programme*. Rather, it has always been a question of auto-production as the auto-production of *difference*, as the ontological concerns of the Romantics find their parallel, perhaps with even greater force, in their theory of literature; it has been, to adapt and also to alter Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s term, a question of literary “eidopoetics”, the creation, the infinite becoming of an immutable yet ever-changing idea, or Absolute.

¹⁵⁴ Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, op.cit., p.123.

CONCLUSION: ROMANTICISM EXPOSED

I: Exposition.

My aim throughout this thesis has been to present what I take to be the central theses of Early German Romanticism, what I take to be the radical contributions of Hölderlin, Novalis, and Friedrich Schlegel to the history of ideas in modernity. As thinkers, all three share a position in the history of European thought which can, with some justification, be qualified as eccentric; they have only relatively recently begun to be considered as thinkers, and in this case that primarily means as *philosophers*, in their own right, although of course their literary output, especially that of Hölderlin and Novalis, has continued to attract critical attention. They can also be qualified as eccentric in the sense that, at least until recently, they have been largely forgotten, their thought ascribed a particular, secondary place in the development of German Idealism, themselves

mainly assigned the role of the poor cousin to Kant, Fichte, Schelling, or Hegel. In part, therefore, my aim has, at least minimally, been polemical. ‘Minimally’, because it has never been my intention to overthrow the giants of Idealism from their thrones and replace them with these three ‘alternative heroes’ – quite the contrary. If Schlegel, Novalis, and Hölderlin can genuinely be called ‘eccentric’ or ‘alternative’, this is because their thought presents an alternative to the traditional conception of German Idealism, and because the path that Romanticism carves out in the history of philosophy is a genuinely eccentric one. It is genuinely a *divergence* from the main path.

Having admitted that, however, it also seems crucial to me to establish that Romanticism is also relevant *now*, that the thought of Hölderlin, Schlegel, and Novalis is with us at the beginning of the 21st century, perhaps more than it had ever been in the past. This is not because Romanticism is slowly ceasing to be eccentric, quite the opposite. It is because its eccentricity is starting to be recognised as such, and from this perspective, my aim in presenting it is to attempt to establish Romanticism as an alternative route, at a time when philosophy may perhaps be in need of one. To achieve this it would be impossible, not to mention simply hypocritical, to claim that the presentation, the exposition (both possible translations for the German *Darstellung*¹⁵⁵) of Romanticism in these pages is neutral, or ‘objective’. It is *my own* claim that Romanticism presents such an eccentric alternative, and I have consequently inflected my presentation of the Romantic positions accordingly. As a result, I hope it would not appear too arrogant to suggest, this presentation of Romanticism bears, in some weak sense, the ‘transcendental mark’ that the

Romantics themselves espoused and analysed, the mark of the producer on the product, and thus becomes - quite deliberately though, I hope, not forcibly - a (re)presentation, in the sense of my own translation of *Darstellung* in the course of this thesis.

My (re)presentation of Romanticism has consisted in highlighting those traits in the thought of Schlegel, Hölderlin, and Novalis which I take to be tracing out the eccentric Romantic path within the history of philosophy. To begin with, I aimed to show that Romanticism should be conceived as having not simply philosophical but first-philosophical, metaphysical, or ontological foundations. Starting from the Romantic reading and reconfiguration of Fichte, I tried to trace a Romantic line of thought which sought to establish ontological grounds for the transcendental-idealist project, and to show that, in the process, Hölderlin and Novalis both, in their own ways, arrive at a criticism of Fichte which yields the ontological foundations of the whole Romantic philosophical enterprise. Hölderlin establishes that the entire Fichtean operation has to be seen as emanating from the horizon of what he calls *Urtheil*, the original separation of subject and object, whilst at the same time postulating the necessity of presupposing a pre-originary unity of subject and object in what he calls *Seyn*. Thus, and this is already a departure from, and a critique of, Fichte, Romanticism establishes an absolute ontological domain as the ground for any further philosophical investigation. I have then tried to show that, with Novalis' *Fichte-Studien*, Romanticism's critique of Fichte develops into an ontological critique, along the lines initiated by Hölderlin, so as to make it possible for me to claim that Romanticism is philosophically *grounded* in ontology. Yet this is no

¹⁵⁵ I need to acknowledge that the translation of *Darstellung* as 'exposition', which I am now

ordinary ontology, and it is even from here that one can see the radical eccentricity of the Romantic path. The ontology of the *Fichte-Studien*, the most sustained exploration of ontology anywhere within Romanticism and the most pivotal text for establishing Romantic metaphysics, is a *dynamic, differential* ontology, where Being is designated as the activity of *hovering* (*schweben* – Novalis’ word, but also a key topos in the writings of Schlegel), or *differencing*. Being is not a static element, however originary, but rather a dynamic, *productive relation*, and the Romantic ontology establishes Being as the Absolute relation, on the ontological level, which is productive of fixed ontic determinations and categories. Furthermore, both Hölderlin with his notion of *Urtheil*, and Novalis with his own notion of *Schein*, postulate a horizon which is inescapable to thought just as it is inexorably linked to the Absolute of Being, and which determines that any ‘approach to Being’, any thought of Being is but an endless approximation, or, in other words, that Being *as such* is inaccessible to thinking which is always already tied within the horizon of separation (for Hölderlin), or appearance (for Novalis).

This leads me to the form that this endless approach to Being takes. Conventionally speaking, this would be nothing other than the realm of epistemology, the mode of inquiry after Being, or knowledge of Being. In the second chapter I dealt with precisely these aspects in the thought of the Romantics which are concerned with such an approach, and it should be expected that, at least in my (re)presentation, Romantic epistemology traces yet another eccentric path. To begin with, what has already been circumscribed as a limited horizon from within which the approach is to be made (the horizon of

using for strategic reasons which will, I hope, become apparent, comes from A.V. Miller’s

Urtheil and *Schein*), now gets further circumscribed as the Romantics, particularly Novalis, come upon a significant determination of the medium in which knowledge of Being, any knowledge, takes place: language. Novalis is among the first in a long line of thinkers for whom language becomes much more than a simple medium of human knowledge, and can be seen as an important precursor to what has often been called 'the linguistic turn' in modern philosophy and theory. In the *Fichte-Studien* he expounds a truly radical linguistic theory, expressed precisely in the terms of a theory of knowledge, and a theory of knowledge as and through signs. He proposes what he calls "the transcendental schema" as lying at the basis of language, a schema which is undeniably influenced by Kant's schematism, but which transports Kantian concerns onto the realm of a semiotic theory, the schema acting as the absolutely inexorable medium for the production and communication of signs/words. The truly radical nature of Novalis' semiotics is that this schema is not simply a theoretical basis for the construction of signs, but is imprinted, marked upon every sign, every word, language as such, in a specific way which Novalis terms 'hieroglyphic'. True to their transcendental heritage, the Romantics' view of language is one wherein every word, every sign, bears the hieroglyphic mark of the transcendental schema mediating it; this is the mark, not of the empirical subject/producer upon the product/word, but of a wholly impersonal, a priori transcendental schema which, in my reading, is the direct parallel or mirror-image of the Absolute relation that is Being. Thus, just as Being as productive relation produces particular ontic determinations whilst retaining its ontological status as production, Romantic semiotics, which is nothing other than Romantic

epistemology, is also a theory of production, with the transcendental schema acting as the a priori element of productivity that yields particular signs.

This conception of language and semiotics has important consequences, not least of all the fact that words cease to correspond unproblematically with their objective referents; language is no longer a transparent medium but a medium in which every word, every 'linguistic entity', so to speak, refers only to another one, or where words only refer to themselves, as Novalis puts it in his *Monolog*. A further consequence is that, apart from the simple relation between word and thing which has been deprived of its correspondence certainty, language displays its own transcendental mark as the very *act* of linguistic production, what Novalis calls both the "inanity" and the "efficacy", the self-referentiality which, nevertheless, and crucially, is thought of as the principal element in language, the 'true being' of language, if you like. It is Schlegel who takes up the theme of the paradoxical combination of inanity and efficacy in language, the Romantic linguistic double bind, and theorises it as irony. Schlegel's notion of irony is far removed from being a mere trope, and comes to mean the very linguistic condition by which understanding (of words or concepts) on a simple correspondence level is impossible; yet the reflexive understanding of understanding is eminently possible if one admits, through and with irony, the necessary possibility of what Schlegel calls 'incomprehensibility'. Irony thus becomes the major Romantic appellation for the (re)presentation, the *Darstellung* of the epistemological double bind. Nevertheless, even within the necessary limitations of language and the epistemological double bind, Romanticism's view of language and knowledge through language is far from bleak. In keeping with their ontological concerns with production, and as can be

glimpsed from the exalted tones of both Schlegel and Novalis even when they write about inanity and incomprehensibility, the production of linguistic *Darstellungen*, however inane or incomprehensible, is viewed as production in the sense of *poiesis*. In my own (re)presentation of Romanticism, this is seen as the transformation of the philosophical ‘discipline’ of epistemology into *poetology*, the theory of poetic production, the chief examples being Schlegel’s theory of transcendental poetry and Hölderlin’s theory of the operations of the poetic spirit. In such works, Romanticism manages completely to transform the ‘conventional’ transcendental-idealist story about the production of knowledge into a theory of production exemplified as *poetic* production. And, what is more, in this way, and according, again, to my (re)presentation, what in the texts of the ‘mature’ German Idealism (Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism* or Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*) is conceived of as the narrative of the formation of consciousness, and thus of subjectivity, is reconfigured by Romanticism as a theory of poetic production, directly related to the ontology of production analysed in chapter 1.

By this stage what I have called the eccentric path traced by Romanticism should perhaps already be apparent, but in order to bring it into better relief, I proceeded to contrast, or confront, Romantic thought with the thought of the ‘royal route’ in the philosophy of the time, thus with Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel’s ‘big cousins’, Schelling and Hegel. What Romanticism offers as an alternative to their undeniably influential systems and conceptions can best be seen in direct comparison with them. Thus, I have analysed in a third chapter what I see as the major points of philosophical divergence between Romanticism and Idealism, chief amongst which is undoubtedly that, at least in my

(re)presentation, subjectivity and the development of consciousness as this largely figures in the work of Schelling and Hegel is absent (although, of course, not totally) from Romantic philosophy. Yet, perhaps even more crucially, the Romantics arrive at an utterly different idea of the philosophical kernel of thought, the notion of the Absolute, from that seen in Schelling or Hegel. The most pivotal difference is that the Romantic Absolute, in what I take to be a direct consequence of both the centrality of relational ontology within Romantic thought, and the epistemological-linguistic double bind which they discover, is essentially an *incomplete Absolute*. Following the lines of divergence between the Romantic and Idealist conceptions of the Absolute in areas such as the role of art as revealer of the Absolute in Schelling versus the Romantic conception of art as an infinite series of productive approximations of the Absolute; the semiology of immediacy and the privileging of the name in Hegel versus Novalis' thought of signs inexorably mediated by the transcendental schema; and the movements of dialectical sublation aiming at a thought of totality in Hegel versus the uncontainable, abyssal negativity of Romantic irony, the difference of thought between Romanticism and Idealism can best be seen in their conflicting notions of infinity. Hegel's infinite is the thought of infinity as totality, in accordance with the procedure of the *Aufhebung*, whereas, for the Romantics, infinity is abyssal in structure, progressive, as Schlegel would maintain, in the sense of always necessarily admitting of further infinite proliferation. An Absolute which, like Schlegel's "progressive universal poetry" can never be perfected, though admittedly paradoxical, is entirely consistent with the key elements of Romantic thought in that it allows for an essential incompleteness which forbids the closure of a unitary, total philosophical system (the ultimate desideratum of Idealism)

whilst nevertheless maintaining the necessity of a structural systematicity, the necessary quasi-transcendental condition of im/possibility for a system.

But perhaps the most visible consequence of the *philosophical* incomplete Absolute of Romanticism – which, I would maintain, has been neglected or misconceived by critics and commentators – is that it has opened a second space beside philosophy, another, separate but related field of productivity for the theory of which Romanticism has often been fêted: this is literature. In a final chapter I attempt my own (re)presentation of the Romantic achievement in the theory of literature, taking into account this time the several unquestionably prominent critical accounts of this achievement. Whilst Romanticism cannot, in the final analysis, circumscribe the space of literature with anything like the precision and specificity that traditional philosophical analysis would demand, this is perhaps less of a problem and more of a gift – after all, the space of literature (what I call, after Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, Romanticism’s Literary Absolute) is entirely concomitant and coextensive with the ‘space’ they explored in philosophy, and it shares the central characteristic of being incomplete. If poetry and its theory is formulated within Romanticism as an epistemology, and if the field of inquiry opened by Romantic epistemology yields and is dependent upon a necessarily incomplete Absolute, then it follows that their theory of poetry or literature is equally committed to incompleteness, to infinite, progressive proliferation. Thus, as I analyse it under the conceptual-theoretical ‘categories’ of *genre*, *fragment*, and *criticism*, incompleteness, abyssal reflexivity, essential relationality above and beyond particular conceptual determinations and identities, again make up the conceptual framework of Romantic literary theory. Romantic theory of genre is thus seen as essentially

relational, allowing for a particularly modern problematisation of the concepts and tools of literary-critical division and stratification, and yielding a 'law of genre' which can be succinctly formulated simply as +1, or: more than one genre, evidently an idea with fundamental affinities to the incomplete Absolute. The Romantic theory (and practice) of the fragment, much like the theory of genre, is read as an inquiry into the relation between particular and universal which is also the bearer of the mark of the incomplete Absolute: the part is always also the whole, to paraphrase Schlegel. And the Romantic notion of criticism also allows for the essential incompleteness of the literary work, and produces an endless series of reflexive progressive additions to it, rendering each and every particular literary work as essentially incomplete as the literary Absolute itself. As is evident, even in this second space opened up by the incomplete Absolute, literature is not something alien to philosophy; the two 'spaces' operate co-extensively with each other, each is the distension of the other, along the continuum of the incomplete (and thus necessarily distended) Absolute. My exposition, or (re)presentation of Romanticism can thus best be summarised as centring on the notion of the incomplete Absolute, a notion which sets Romanticism radically apart from Idealism and transcendental philosophy alike, despite the obvious common provenance and historical congruity between them.

II: Ex-position.

My ambition in writing this thesis has not only been to provide what I take to be my own exposition of Romanticism, but also to expose Romanticism to what remain central issues in contemporary philosophical and literary-theoretical debate. In other words, I have aimed at a presentation of Romantic thought which would not merely treat it as an incident, however interesting, in the history of ideas in Europe, but which would demonstrate the modernity, indeed the contemporaneity of Romantic thought, its survival in the critical debates of today and thus its continuing importance. This ambition has, however, proven to be far too big for a PhD thesis, and the constraints of time and, especially, space have proven too strenuous for it to be realised in full. This is because the exposition of Romanticism that has preceded these words must be seen as the minimum prerequisite for the ex-position, the sending off of Romantic thought into the contemporary arena; if I want to show how Romanticism is still, not simply relevant, but, to use a thoroughly Romantic metaphor, essentially *alive* today, breathing in the same space and time as the debates about postmodernity and the 'loss' of reason, the era 'after' the subject, literary interpretation and the question of truth, and many others, then I first need to present the elements of Romanticism which constitute its survival – and this is what, I hope, the previous exposition has done. Nevertheless, throughout the

course of this exposition I have attempted at least to hint at the possible ways in which Romanticism figures in contemporary debates, by incorporating, wherever necessary, contemporary critical responses to the Romantic project which themselves reach out to, are exposed to, the contemporary.

In what follows I aim merely to present some facets of this contemporary survival of Romanticism, and my remarks are meant to be read in the spirit of possible further avenues of research, impossible to be embarked on within the confines of the main body of the thesis, if I am to do justice both to the complexity of the Romantic thought I wish to expose, and to the relevance of the debates I wish to ex-pose it to. What is more, I will be further constraining myself in considering only *some* of the possible avenues leading on from the exposition of Romanticism here undertaken, and will have to leave others unmentioned. I will concentrate on discussing, in a simple descriptive manner and admittedly without recourse to protracted argument, or sustained referencing, what I take to be Romantic bequests in the work of a handful of contemporary thinkers, and on situating myself (which is to say, my own exposition or (re)presentation of Romanticism) in the context of contemporary critical responses to the Romantic project. The structure of this, my final (for the moment) ex-position of Romanticism will address, in brief, what I take to be points of divergence between my own presentation of Romanticism and those recently undertaken, firstly, on its behalf, or at least with an avowed debt to Romantic thought, that is to say where Romanticism figures as a precursor, an instance of the same; and secondly, in strategic contradistinction with Romantic thought, that is to say, where Romanticism figures as something from which to differentiate oneself, an instance of the other. Finally I will briefly examine a

case that I take to be manifestly consistent with (my own (re)presentation of) Romanticism, but which does not situate itself either as a friend or a foe of Romantic thought.

In the first instance, I am thinking particularly of the work of Manfred Frank, a thinker who, ever since his doctoral thesis¹⁵⁶, has consistently thought to situate himself in the context of an ‘aftermath’ to Romanticism, and who can be justifiably called a (self-appointed, perhaps) successor to the Romantic project. My interest in Frank lies not simply, or not so much, with the fact that, as a commentator on Romanticism, he is near-indispensable (in actual fact, his direct engagement with Romanticism more often than not touches on issues, such as time, left undisturbed by my own presentation) but also, and much more, with the fact that he astutely reconstructs Romantic arguments and ex-poses them to contemporary debates, especially those concerning meaning and subjectivity, and the seemingly endless ‘war’ between analytic rationalism and post-structuralist (or, in Frank’s terms “neostructuralist”) anti-rationalism. I am perhaps already being too hasty in my characterisations: the appellations ‘rationalist’ and ‘anti-rationalist’ belong not to Frank himself, but to Martin Schwab, in his foreword to Frank’s monumental *What is Neostructuralism?*, and what is curious is that Schwab assigns Romanticism a place in the ‘anti-rationalist’ camp, whilst at the same time praising Frank for his ‘rationalism’¹⁵⁷. Frank’s reading of Romanticism appears to me to be, in a crucial sense, *strategic*, in that it, on the one hand, portrays Romanticism as a precursor to the contemporary debate about meaning and subjectivity, and often results in a presentation of Romanticism as

¹⁵⁶ Frank, *Das Problem ‘Zeit’ in der deutschen Romantik*, Munich: Winkler, 1972, and Paderborn: Schöningh, 1990.

¹⁵⁷ Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*, translated by S.Wilke & R.Gray, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. xii.

(almost) deconstruction *avant la lettre*¹⁵⁸, but, on the other hand, wishes to retain a notion of the subject and to ‘cull’ it from Romanticism itself. Thus, in *What is Neostructuralism?*, which fundamentally is a treatise on post-structuralist notions of subjectivity and semiotics, he uses Novalis as prefiguring the critique of ‘the metaphysics of presence’ in Derrida by stating that “self-consciousness, according to this [ie: Romanticism], is not and *cannot* be grounded on presencing”¹⁵⁹, whereas in his “Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism” he writes, again a propos of Novalis, that “like Kant and Fichte, he does concede to self-consciousness an eminent position and thus distinguishes himself, e.g, from ‘post-modern’ detractors of subjectivity”¹⁶⁰. I am here less interested in whether Frank is right or wrong in his views about Romanticism and subjectivity or self-consciousness, as I have demonstrated elsewhere in the thesis (especially chapters 1 and 2) what my own notion of Romantic notions of subjectivity is, and more in the fact that Frank seems to want to use Romanticism in the context of a key contemporary debate, and to use it in a double way, both as a precursor to, say, deconstruction, and as an alternative to it.

Frank’s fundamental position, as his translator Andrew Bowie (whose own work I take to be in a continuum with that of Frank’s) has it in his introduction to Frank’s *The Subject and the Text*, is the following: “The meaningfulness of the differential marks in which language is manifested cannot be explained without involving the consciousness which renders those marks intelligible as language, as opposed to their being just natural phenomena”¹⁶¹. This makes whatever sense it makes and has whatever value it has, but, at least

¹⁵⁸ This is especially evident in his article *The Infinite Text*, op.cit.

¹⁵⁹ Frank, op.cit., p.194.

¹⁶⁰ Frank, In Ameriks & Sturma, op.cit., p. 76.

¹⁶¹ In Frank, *The Subject and the Text*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

according to my own exposition or reading of Romanticism, it has little to do with Romantic thought about language – after all, Novalis explicitly has the transcendental schema operating *prior to* and *independent of* empirical subjects. And this is no mere particular difference of opinion, for Frank, and Bowie in his wake, misconstrues what I have presented as the most fundamental element in Romanticism, the incomplete Absolute. In his *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik*, Frank writes of the Romantic Absolute: “It exists as that which, in the divisions and fragmentations of our world of the understanding, yet creates that unity, without which contradiction and difference could not be shown as such”¹⁶², which may *almost* be true of Hölderlin’s *Seyn*, (except for the fact that in my reading nowhere in the fragment does Hölderlin maintain that the unity of *Seyn* is what *makes possible* the differentiation of *Urtheil*, see *supra* chapter 1, section II), but is certainly not the case with the Absolute as it is theorised in the *Fichte-Studien*, or in the *Athenäum*, and which, in any case, proposes a version of the Romantic Absolute which renders it unified and *total* in the Hegelian-Idealist sense and misses the crucial element of incompleteness which I have tried to highlight.

Again, I must stress that what interests me here is not the disagreement I may have with Frank and Bowie¹⁶³, but rather the fact that this notion of the unity of the Absolute is *strategically* utilised by Frank alongside the concomitant argument about self-consciousness, to counter post-structuralist ‘anti-rationality’, and to ground the project of a decentred subjectivity which nonetheless, as I indicated earlier, is still the bearer of meaning through language. And what is *really* interesting is that this is the *same* mis(re)presentation of Romanticism that

¹⁶² Frank, *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik*, Frankfurt: Surhkamp, 1989, p. 340, also

is utilised by Rodolphe Gasché in his otherwise wholly admirable attempt to claim the work of Jacques Derrida for the history of philosophy, and away from such charges as ‘anti-rationalism’. Again, I am aware that I may be oversimplifying matters, and I must, at the very least, concede that Gasché’s project is not to counter criticism such as Frank’s but to wrest deconstruction away from its more ‘fanciful’ embodiment in the hands of the Yale critics. Nonetheless, for what interests me here, for the survival of the Romantic project and its ex-position in the context of contemporary philosophy and literary theory, the crucial fact remains that both the defenders and the detractors of deconstruction utilise the same mis(re)presentation of Romanticism for utterly opposed purposes. With Gasché, the purpose is expressly the demarcation of deconstruction from Romanticism, since the latter is seen as forming part of ‘the philosophy of reflection’ — which is particularly interesting when one compares it to Frank’s contention that Romanticism, on the contrary, *problematizes* reflection, at least as a model for self-consciousness. Whether it be in the service of a model of subjectivity and self-consciousness which is thought of as impervious to the charge of Derridean deconstruction, or in that of a seemingly imperious attempt to demarcate deconstruction from any such notions of subjectivity as modelled on reflection, Romanticism, or rather, the *mis(re)presentation* of Romanticism I am here concerned with assumes an exemplary role.

In *The Tain of the Mirror*, his undoubtedly authoritative book on the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, Gasché (whom I take, perhaps all too

quoted in Frank, *The Subject and the Text*, p. xxxv.

¹⁶³ I have dealt with this disagreement as such in the main body of the thesis, especially chapter 3.

straightforwardly¹⁶⁴, as a ‘stand-in’ for Derrida himself, who has, curiously, hardly ever written a word on Romanticism) takes great pains to differentiate deconstruction as a *philosophical* enterprise from what he sees as the pitfalls of Romantic ‘abyssal’ thinking. This he does, as I also tried to show in greater detail in chapter 3, by proposing an eminently *Hegelian* interpretation of Romantic thought, especially with regard to Romantic notions of infinity and the Absolute. Thus, he is able to state that “the Romantic idea of the medium of reflexivity, as well as that of the text as a medium of neutralisation and annulment of concepts and strata, fails to achieve what it seeks: a unitary ground or essence in which all self-subsistent opposites dissolve in order to ground themselves”¹⁶⁵; or, in an explicit attempt to demarcate deconstruction from Romanticism by way of his notion of ‘infrastructure’: “the reserve of the infrastructure as the medium of all possible differentiation is also distinct from the Romantic medium of reflexivity, in which everything communicates with everything within the full presence of the soul of the world”¹⁶⁶. What I take to be wrong in such statements about Romanticism I have already indicated earlier; what is of more interest is that this mis(re)presentation rests, again, entirely on the Romantic Absolute being divested of what I take to be its chief element – radical incompleteness, which prevents it from ever being thought of as a “unitary ground”, much less as “the full *presence* of the soul of the world”. What

¹⁶⁴ Gasché’s work has elicited some engaging critical responses on the part of Derrideans who do not necessarily think it such a good idea to locate Derrida so rigidly in the field of philosophy, and in such explicit contradistinction with his ‘appropriation’ in literary criticism. A prominent example is Geoffrey Bennington, who has written two perceptive and thought-provoking review articles on Gasché’s work. See Bennington, ‘Deconstruction and the Philosophers (The Very Idea)’ in his *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction*, London: Verso, 1994, pp.11-60; and ‘Genuine Gasché (Perhaps), in Bennington: *Interrupting Derrida*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp.155-161.

¹⁶⁵ Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Cambridge, mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 141.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.153.

is more, as I indicated earlier, this is none other than the *same* mis(re)presentation, undertaken, as I understand it, in a similarly *strategic* vein, as that of the opposite ‘side’ of the battlefield. Again, as I have been at pains to show especially in chapter 3, I am *not* suggesting that Romanticism should be seen as deconstruction *avant la lettre*. Gasché’s meticulous list of the ‘chain of infrastructures’ (retrait, supplement, iterability, and so on) in Derrida’s work finds no direct counterpart in Schlegel, Novalis, or Hölderlin, and this for many (some evident) reasons which I cannot possibly do justice to here. Perhaps one should heed the words of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, who, on the one hand insist, for instance, that Romantic “fragmentation is not a dissemination” in the Derridean sense¹⁶⁷, but *also* suggest, in a careful formulation, that even though “never for a moment did the Romantics imagine” a thought such as Derrida’s, they also were “able, in time, by maintaining [their] proper equivocality, to make [it] possible”¹⁶⁸.

With this I, or rather the exposition of the Romantic project that I have undertaken, can rest. Romanticism as I have sought to present it appears to be at the crux of debates raging in the very present of European philosophy and literary theory, and the curious misreadings, misappropriations and misgivings that it has engendered are, if anything full proof of its continuing *life*. However, I do not wish to end with such a seemingly ‘negative’ highlighting of such mis(re)presentations of Romanticism, if only because I do not wish to suggest that it is only *this* exposition which does justice to Romanticism: I merely proposed an *exposition*, in the modest sense of the presentation of the arguments in this thesis, and have left the *ex-position*, in the modest sense of the continuing

¹⁶⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 49.

involvement of Romanticism in contemporary debates, for this final, incomplete and incompletable, sketch. Finally, therefore, I want to present, even if just as sketchily, as a preparatory series of notes, an example of a (near-)contemporary theorist whom I believe to be entirely aligned to my own exposition of Romanticism, and who, furthermore and cardinally, can also be taken as exposing the Romantic project to a thoroughly contemporary context – Paul de Man. I am not so much concerned with de Man’s own reading of Romanticism, the theory of Romantic irony in particular, which, suffice to say, I find exemplary, nor can it be claimed that de Man *uses* Romanticism solely to situate himself within a current debate – if anything, German Romanticism has been one of many favourite platforms for de Man’s work. My contention is that de Man appropriated the Romantic incomplete absolute in his theoretical writings, and also transformed the radical implications of Schlegelian irony by transposing them in his own ‘definition’ of theory. The text I have in mind is ‘The Resistance to Theory’¹⁶⁹, which can, in this instance hastily, be read as his own *Über die Unverständlichkeit*, a theory of the essential inability to theorise a complete, perfected reading. If the whole essay bears uncanny resemblances with Schlegel’s closing statement of the *Athenäum*, the tour de force that is the last paragraph of the essay seems to me to stem directly from *Athenäum 116*. How can ‘progressive universal poetry’ be assimilated to “the universal theory of the impossibility of theory”? The theory de Man has in mind, resulting from what he calls “rhetorical readings”¹⁷⁰, is the theory he came to defend in this programmatic essay, the generalised, indeed universal theory of the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p.124.

¹⁶⁹ In de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp.3-20.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p.19.

epistemologically unreliable yet rigorously necessary process of the formation of allegorical/tropological systems which are supported and yet, at the same time always break down under the weight of what, after Schlegel, he calls irony; a theory which, therefore, and in striking resemblance to the Romantic notion of systematicity, necessarily resists its own theorisation as theory, a theory which rests on the notion of incompleteness and non-totalisability just as much as it relies on the notion of structural systematicity as a quasi-transcendental condition of im/possibility for a complete system. de Man writes: "Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance" (ibid.). The gesture is familiar to anyone with a passing acquaintance with Schlegel's *Incomprehensibility* essay – there is no theory to end theory, just as there is no irony to end irony. In yet another striking parallel, just as progressive universal poetry, the Romantic Absolute, resists its own completion and totalisation, de Man's theory does the same: it systematically undoes and denies the possibility of its own closure into a system, which is *precisely* what constitutes its systematicity. Theory as de Man understands it is nothing other than the manifestation, within the rhetorical field of criticism just as within that of philosophy, of the Romantic incomplete Absolute.

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