

thinking. There are also of course many differences. Schopenhauer's assertions that reflective consciousness emerges from the thing in itself and his claims that our 'experience' of affection can only be accounted for in physiological terms would presumably have horrified Fichte, and seem in many ways to undermine and subvert *from within* the very spirit of transcendental philosophy.

## Positing/Hovering: The Early Romantic Reading of Fichte

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Being cannot *be*. Were it to be, it would no longer remain being but would become a being, an entity.<sup>1</sup>

In most versions of the history of philosophy, including the one implicit in Heidegger's writings, there is little or no space for the fragmented and unsystematic expositions of the group of writers commonly given the collective name of *Frühromantiker*, that is, the writers associated with the short-lived experiment that was the *Athenaeum*, chiefly Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. In most versions of the history of philosophy there is little space for Fichte. Moreover, this space is, in a very precise way, delimited: Fichte is seen as a curious appendix to the grandeur of the Kantian system, or, at best, as the connective bridge between Kant and the next momentous event in the narrative, Hegel. Perhaps one of the issues at stake in what follows is a reappraisal of these somewhat neglected figures, especially if considered under the spotlight of a history of philosophy which would be, according to Heidegger, a history of Being. Admittedly, neither Fichte's nor, particularly, the Jena Romantics' philosophies, are thought of especially as ontology. But maybe it is precisely when Being is not in the foreground of immediate concern that it is best disclosed. Perhaps the significance of Fichte, and that of Schlegel and Novalis<sup>2</sup> lies with their covert ontological theses precisely

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Kant's Thesis about Being', in *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.362.

<sup>2</sup> The grouping together of these two names should not appear as uncritical blanketing of two distinct thoughts under one rubric. It is beyond doubt that Schlegel and Novalis worked closely together and shared many philosophical and literary affinities.

insofar as they are covert, or, to put it in different terms, precisely insofar as their 'ontologies' do not allow Being to simply *be*, be identical with itself, and thus be merely an entity, but, in what must remain a tentative formulation, allow Being to be disclosed through its difference with itself.

This assertion would certainly come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the basic tenets of Fichte's philosophy, since it would be fair to say that the philosophical thesis with which Fichte is most readily associated is the axiomatic proposition of identity in the formula  $I=I$ . As a proposition of identity, and as Fichte makes painstakingly clear in the opening pages of, and both the introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre*,  $I=I$  signifies the autoposition of the self *as self by means* of this autoposition - in other words, the *action* wherein the I posits itself yields the I as being posited. As Fichte writes: "*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*'."<sup>3</sup> The formula can be regarded in two ways: firstly, as has been the norm, as the formula stating Being as positing, *setzen*, stressing Fichte's own insistence on the identity between being and positing - what could be called, after Heidegger, *onto-theseology*, as suggested by Werner Hamacher;<sup>4</sup> secondly, with the stress on a specific interpretation of action, as the formula announcing, not their identification, but the ineluctable relation between Being and *poesis*. In what follows Fichte will be seen as having been read by the Romantics in the second sense, inasmuch as this second sense is coextensive with the first. As Heidegger has shown, Being as positing is a metaphysical determination of Being at the time when Being comes to be thought under the regulating principle

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Moreover, let it be stated from the start that the issue here is the specific 'Romantic' reconfiguration of Fichtean theory. Novalis was as scrupulous and inventive a reader of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as Schlegel, and I draw on his *Fichtestudien* for a more 'systematic' reading of Fichte. Schlegel is seen here perhaps as the one who elaborated this reading into the more easily recognisable form of Romantic literary theory. Though there are, there need be distinctions to be drawn between Schlegel's and Novalis's philosophies (perhaps even, reading between the lines of the fragments, between their readings of Fichte), I am here concerned with the coherence of the 'Romantic' turn - hence the term Romantic will designate precisely this coherence and continuity between Schlegel and Novalis's thought.

<sup>3</sup> Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), hereinafter abbreviated as *W*.

<sup>4</sup> See Hamacher's invaluable "Position Exposed" in *Premises*, trans. Peter Fenves (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 221-260.

of the subject.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Fichte's  $I=I$  can be read as the thetic tautology which inaugurates and grounds the subject in the system of critical or transcendental idealism. As Hamacher, among others, has suggested, the overt tautology of the proposition, far from being a solipsistic philosophical error, points to the necessary implication of tautology in any ontological proposition organised around a concept of self, or subject.

What is at stake in the proposition  $I=I$ , however, is more than that. Fichte himself spends virtually the entirety of the *Wissenschaftslehre* circumnavigating the fundamental problem of his principle of autoposition, namely that for the very tautology  $I=I$  to be understood, let alone grasped as the one possible ground for any further philosophical investigation, it has *also* to be read analytically, broken into its constitutive parts. To put it differently, for the tautology  $I=I$  to be a tautology, it has to double itself, to become the double of itself, and thus to become the *other* of itself *as* itself. Fichte was able to realise that for the proposition of tautology to be in any way tenable, for the self to be *itself*, it has to be, at least in one of its constitutive moments, *different* from itself. His attempt to formulate this into a theory of transcendental subjectivity, where the I is at once the producer of itself and of the not-I which comes to be posited as its limitation, cannot but end full-circle back into the split tautology of the  $I=I$ . Towards the end of the *Wissenschaftslehre* he comes close to expressing this paradox:

the 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.<sup>6</sup>

This practically amounts to an admission of what Fichte himself, in the Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo*, calls

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<sup>5</sup> For the metaphysical conception of *sein* as *setzen*, see Heidegger, 'Hegel and the Greeks' in *Pathmarks*, op.cit., p.323-336, 'Kant's Thesis about Being', op.cit., and *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. D. Herz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); on Heidegger's reading of this conception back into the Greek conception of *thesis*, see 'The Origin of the work of Art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 15-88.

<sup>6</sup> *W*, p. 239.

*ursprüngliche Duplizität*, originary duplicity, and it has to be read as an *ontological* thesis, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century repetition of the Heraclitean *en diaferen eauto*. Only now, the self-difference is part of an operation aiming at the transcendental grounding of self-identity as auto-position. A difference “grounded in the absolute self as such” is precisely what would ultimately ground the proposition of absolute self-identity, or I=I.

Fichte’s key notions with respect to his thesis of auto-position of the self are those of the *Act* of positing, the *Tathandlung*, and of reflection. Reflection is the movement whereby the self comes to be posited as self, and thus comes to be duplicated - as Walter Benjamin notes, it is “the autochthonous form of absolute positing: reflection is positing in the *absolute* thesis”,<sup>7</sup> or, if you like, it is the necessary transcendental step towards the positing of a self. The *Tathandlung* is nothing other than the act of positing itself, therefore, again in Benjamin’s words, “a positing reflection or a reflected position”.<sup>8</sup> The *Tathandlung*, just as much as reflection, names both the doubling of the proposition I=I, and its folding back into one; it is action (*Handlung*) and deed (*Tat*) at the same time, the doing and the deed done, *at once* the self positing itself and the self being posited. As the *Wissenschaftslehre* labours to argue, this seemingly paradoxical assertion of identity as duplicity is the only foundation for a transcendental-idealist theory of knowledge. Even before the start of the “Foundation of Theoretical Knowledge”, Fichte’s logical principles proceeded from the principle of identity, through the principle of opposition, to the *grounding* synthetic principle. What is important to note here is how the fundamental, initiating proposition of identity (A=A, or I=I) leads *logically* to the principle of opposition (~A is not equal to A, or not-I is not equal to I), and the overwhelming opposition between the two principles is resolved by appealing to an originary divisibility and duplicity of both, so that the action of positing is nuanced as follows: “Both self and not-self are posited as divisible”.<sup>9</sup> This is what Fichte will call the “grounding principle” and it announces, like the concept of the *Tathandlung*, both the unity and divisibility of the self. Fichte, *contra* Kant who explicitly denounced its possibility, names this originary reflective and auto-positioning act “intellectual intuition”.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’, in *Selected Writings vol. 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1996), pp 116-200, here p.124.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123.

<sup>9</sup> W, p. 108. The elaborate logical manoeuvres leading to this principle of divisibility are expounded in pp. 93-119.

Intellectual intuition as originary *Tathandlung* is a thinking that produces at once its “subject”, the doing, and its object, the deed, “an Act (that is,...a pure activity which presupposes no object, but itself produces it, and in which the acting, therefore, immediately becomes the *deed*)”.<sup>10</sup> Thus reflection for Fichte, and here I am following Benjamin’s analysis, becomes a way of ensuring that, at least in the realm of theoretical philosophy, there are objects cognisable to the thinking and reflecting self. One might call this a theory of *limited* reflection, or rather, a theory of reflection as *limit*, for, as the long analyses of the *Wissenschaftslehre* show, the self’s reflection on itself is what ultimately grounds the *Anstoss*, the check it performs on its own seemingly unlimited acts which thus gives rise to limit and to cognisable objects. The concept of limit is what permits Fichte to avoid solipsism, for it allows for the absolute self to posit a non-self which becomes the object of cognition, and, what is more, it allows for both self and non-self to be posited as divisible: “the notion of limit also contains that of divisibility”.<sup>11</sup> This is how Fichte allows for the transcendental distinction between theoretical knowledge, where “the self posits itself as *determined* by the not-self”, the world, (and, consequently, finds itself able to render the not-self an object of cognition), and practical knowledge, where the self “posits itself as *determining* the not-self”.<sup>12</sup> In the first case, reflection is necessarily limited (determined by the not-self), in the second, according to Fichte, the activity of the self is that of an infinite striving with no imposed limit or determination.

Walter Benjamin was the first to distinguish between this theory of reflection and the theory of reflection elaborated by Schlegel and Novalis. Benjamin neatly expresses it as follows: “Intellectual intuition [Fichte] is a thinking that produces its object; reflection in the Romantics’ sense, however, is thinking that produces its form.”<sup>13</sup> What I wish to argue is that this Romantic conception of reflection, undeniably indebted to that of Fichte, is a way out of the tautological, auto-positional aporia of transcendental idealism, not in the sense of a transcendence of it, but rather in the sense that it fully embraces, as Benjamin persuasively shows, the striving for infinity inherent in the movement of reflection to which Fichte was anything but blind (striving, after all, is his own term) *as well as* embracing at the same time what Schlegel will call the

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.108.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.218.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, *op.cit.*, p.128.

"indissoluble antagonism" between the infinite and the finite, the unconditioned and the conditioned, the universal and the particular. If Fichte's "onto-theseology" can be read both as the establishing of Being as the I which posits itself, and as the activity wherein, to quote Novalis's remarkable formulation to which we shall have to return, "all production approaches being, and being is hovering",<sup>14</sup> the Romantic reading of Fichte will be read as privileging the latter interpretation - which amounts to an inversion, even an "overthrowing" of onto-theseology, and its reformulation as something more than a theory of production. What is more, I wish to argue that the Romantic reconfiguration of the Fichtean notion of reflection results in a re-articulation of basic philosophical (ontological) problems as moments within a generalised theory of *Poetry*. With the Romantics, the Fichtean *Tathandlung*, action and deed, becomes, if I may be allowed to gloss, poetry as *poesis*, production *tout court*, without the supplement of an "object", a product.

In a note not to be found in any of the published fragments, Schlegel writes that "the greatest inconsistency in Fichte is that pure Being should be lively and yet without manifold".<sup>15</sup> "Pure Being", that is, the absolute self-positing of the self as itself, and of Being as positing, is "lively" (*lebendig*) inasmuch as it is *Tathandlung*, action, activity, the opposite of stasis. In Schlegel's reading, which one would not be mistaken perhaps in calling a misunderstanding, but a richly productive one, this positional Being is without manifold insofar as it is programmatically opposed to a Spinozist conception of Being as a single substance with plural attributes and modes. In Fichte's model, pure Being has to posit its own limit as the manifold of cognisable objects - in a certain sense, Fichte's Being has to produce its object along with itself, and even, *as* itself. In his 'Introduction to the Transcendental Philosophy', Schlegel will also call this the "principle of self-sufficiency". But if Schlegel, undoubtedly an admirer of Fichte, can equally claim that this is an inconsistency, it is not because he wishes to restore the Fichtean enterprise to a mode of self-sufficient consistency, but because he sees in this inconsistency the opening of the transcendental-idealist system to a notion of the Absolute which allows for, even demands internal inconsistencies, and which paves the way for what Schlegel, in his *Athenaeum* Fragments, will call, alternatively, "symphilosophy", and "sympoetry", that is the syncretic

<sup>14</sup> Novalis, 'Fichte Studies' 556, in Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al., eds, *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 106. All references to Novalis's 'Fichte Studies' shall hereinafter be indicated by N, followed by the fragment number.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Hamacher, *op.cit.*, p.238.

amalgamation of both systematic and non-systematic expositions of Being. This is what Benjamin had in mind when talking of the Romantic notion of reflection as thinking producing its own form: the Romantic notion of *poesis* (and at this time I should recall that Schlegel writes specifically of *Poesie*, not *Dichtung*) rests on a notion of thinking which does not wish to ground intelligible objects for a transcendental subject, but rather wishes to present thinking itself, *mere* thinking, as the producing, *not the product*, of itself. This has many serious implications for philosophical thinking in general, for it allows for a thinking of thinking without a thought, or of saying without a said, producing without a product. In the immediate context of the relation between Fichte and Schlegel, this means, as Benjamin points out, that the Romantic notion of reflection can and ought to be infinitised in all realms of thought, whereas Fichte explicitly denounces that possibility for theoretical knowledge and reserves it for the knowledge of the practical. Fichte's system, read as onto-theseology, is, from its very inception, an attempt at closure, a thesis of Being, to borrow Heidegger's terms, incorporating infinity only as return to self, as reflection and auto-position. The Romantic non-system is an opening and a project - it cannot, and does not wish to complete itself as system, but remains necessarily incomplete, never perfected, always in becoming. It is no coincidence that the most programmatic expression of this idea names this "non-system", not philosophy (though philosophy is necessarily co-extensive with it as I hope to show), but poesy - I am, of course, referring to *Athenaeum* Fragment 116, where Schlegel defines what he calls "progressive universal poesy", the essence of which is "to be eternally in the process of becoming and never completed".<sup>16</sup>

The reason for this slide from the tautological constraints of onto-theseology to the infinite becoming of progressive universal poesy lies not so much in a renunciation of Fichte as in a productive reworking, or misunderstanding (the two can be said to be the same) of the transcendental-idealist principles. The most sustained reformulation/reading of Fichte along these lines is Novalis's *Fichte Studies*, which will thus be read as the inevitable starting point for any competent understanding of the key Romantic (Schlegelian) notion of progressive universal poesy. Novalis's reading of Fichte is remarkable for at least two

<sup>16</sup> Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971). References to Schlegel's fragments will hereinafter be indicated as follows: *Lyc*, for the Lyceum Critical Fragments, *Ath*, for the Athenaeum fragments, *I* for the Ideas, followed by the fragment number.

reasons: first, for the unmistakable emphasis placed upon the founding divisibility and duplicity of Fichtean self-identity, which leads to a consideration of positing as *secondary* to a far more radical conception of being as “hovering”; and second, for the fact that this conception stems avowedly from (and is thus a productive ‘misunderstanding’ of) Fichte’s more systematically narrow use of the word to describe the operations of the productive imagination.<sup>17</sup> Novalis starts by announcing the problem of tautology as onto-theseology, almost one and a half century before Heidegger, beginning, like Fichte, with an estimation of the principle  $a=a$ : “The statement *a is a* is nothing but a positing, a differentiating, and a linking. It is a philosophical parallelism. 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” (N 1). The positing and the proposition of identity is seen as a ruse, a pseudo- or quasi-identity. This is not a disagreement with Fichte, rather a radical probing of the inaugurating principle of the absolute self, or the pure I, in concordance with Fichte’s synthetic grounding third principle of division: “The pure I is divided precisely insofar as it is whole, and it is whole precisely insofar as it is divided” (N 32).

The pure I is of course the ‘site’ of the *Tathandlung*, the unconditioned originary act, but where this, for Fichte, was a ‘synthetic’, combining act and the basis of positing, for Novalis it becomes the site of the paradoxical conjunction and disjunction of opposites: “The unconditioned itself, which is positing and nonpositing, and yet at the same time neither, unites them within itself – it is their unconditioned union.” (N 31, emphasis mine). What emerges here is a conception of the unconditioned, or the absolute as the Romantics will more often call it, as a site of conjunction and disjunction at the same time (*zugleich*), that is to say, of conjunction as disjunction. In the context of the *Fichte Studies*, Novalis does not stray from Fichte’s thought and identifies the unconditioned with the Absolute I. However, this Absolute I is, in its turn, identified, by the simple parataxis of a comma, with the productive imagination, and with *hovering*: “The absolute I, or productive power of imagination (in other words, *hovering*) determines, produces the extremes between which hovering occurs” (N 555). Fichte’s discussion of productive imagination, though the place where hovering (*schweben*) is

<sup>17</sup> While it is impossible here to elaborate on this, there can be no doubt that Fichte’s notion of productive imagination is directly derivative of that proposed by Kant. Consequently the Romantic privileging of its operations can be seen as amounting to nothing less than a fundamental reconfiguration of the transcendental itself.

named, is a far more restricted affair, compliant to the Kantian schematism relegating the power of imagination in a specific theoretical context. The imagination is “a faculty that hovers in the middle between determination and non-determination, between finite and infinite ... This hovering characterizes the power of imagination even in its product; in the course of its hovering, as it were, and by means of its hovering, it brings this product about.”<sup>18</sup> The imagination is said to hover between finite and infinite, and to thus produce its product. But for Novalis this hovering is equated with the Absolute, with “All being, being in general” (*ibid.*), which seems diametrically opposed to onto-theseology. Novalis’s interpretation of Fichte turns the autopoitional thesis on its head, and results in the extraordinary statement: “Being, being I, being free, and hovering are synonyms” (N 556). What for the Fichtean *Tathandlung* was a case of coincidence between act and deed, production and product, is transformed to a hovering between the two; no more the establishing (*Herstellung* in the sense Heidegger uses it) of Being but Being as hovering, production as an *approach* to Being: “all production approaches being, and being is hovering” (*ibid.*). Herein lie the ontological foundations (or, quite simply, the ontology) of Romanticism.

The notion of hovering is not just a leitmotif with the Romantics – it becomes their own, so far little acknowledged, footnote in the history of what Heidegger would call the names of Being. But this is not all. If Novalis adopts the term from Fichte and, by radicalising it, transforms the fundamental tenets of transcendental idealism, Friedrich Schlegel’s use connects it to an even more radical Romantic gesture: the articulation of Being in and as *poesy*. It occurs in *Ath.* 116 in order to define the key Schlegelian concept: progressive universal poesy, which, he says, “can hover on the wings of poetic reflection between the presented and the presenting, free from all real and ideal interest, and continually raise this reflection to a higher power, thus multiplying it as in an endless row of mirrors.” Schlegel’s conception is that of a poesy “eternally in the process of becoming”, of an infinite *poetic* reflection. For this hovering to take up its eminent place in the thought of progressive universal poesy, it is necessary that all pretensions to systematic closure are dropped. Just as the infinitising of reflection cannot yield the stable determination of I and not-I that Fichte strives for and which then has to be substituted for a constant state of becoming, the hovering of poesy between presenter and presented, action and deed, thinking and thought, production and product is only possible because it is interminable and because it maintains the

<sup>18</sup> W., p.194.

tension between the pairs. Fichte names the coincidence of action and deed in one word - *Tathandlung*. If we take "progressive universal poesy" to be Schlegel's "answer", then all that names is the persistence of hovering *between* action and deed, which is to say, poesy names the irreducibility of Fichte's "originary duplicity".

Schlegel has a name for this originary duplicity, this indissoluble hovering between action and deed, which, in the strictest sense, is nothing other than a hovering between particular and universal, the Absolute and the relative, the Unconditioned and the conditioned - the hovering of Being itself. The name is Irony. *Lyceum* Fragment 108 tells us that irony "contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication." In his *Literary Notebooks* he phrases it thus: "Irony is the analysis of synthesis and antithesis."<sup>19</sup> What these statements foreground is the irreducibility of the trap transcendental idealism falls into by necessity - namely that what it names as conditions of possibility and ground for the understanding (the I=I) is also, at the same time, necessarily, the conditions of impossibility of the same. It is the *analysis*, to wit, the dissolution and dispersal, of thesis and antithesis, not their synthesis - it is, if you like, the reverse mirror image of the synthetic Fichtean *Tathandlung*. Irony, "the form of paradox", or "logical beauty" as another two fragments would have it, is a rupture of the philosophical system, or of the systematicity of philosophy, but it is a rupture demanded by the philosophical exigency itself. Irony is not an abyss, it is not chaos, rather it is "the clear consciousness of chaos", as yet another definition (*I* 69) has it; if it is *Ab-grund*, it is only in the very nearly Heideggerian sense that it is the groundlessness that grounds all grounds, the groundlessness that *is* ground and foundation for philosophical speculation. Again, irony in the Romantic / Schlegelian sense, has been consistently (I would dare say, systematically) been misread and misunderstood as a bloated reconfiguration of a mere rhetorical trope - but, to put it somewhat hastily, it is precisely the trope that *is not* a trope but the condition of possibility and impossibility of the generation of tropes, and hence, the condition of possibility and impossibility of understanding *tout court*.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Schlegel, *Literary Notebooks 1797-1801*, ed. Hans Eichner (London: Athlone, 1957), 802, p.93: *Ironie ist Analyse der These und Antithese*.

<sup>20</sup> The canonical exploration of this, and of irony in Schlegel in general, must be the work of Paul de Man. See 'The Concept of Irony', in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). See also the remarkable conclusion that a consideration of irony leads de Man in his *Allegories of Reading*

The decisive gesture then, in the Romantic appropriation of Fichte's attempt to ground transcendental idealism in a double auto-positioning, is double: first, the radicalisation of the notion of hovering which becomes what could be called an ontological principle; and second, the substitution of progressive universal poesy for philosophical system, highlighting the irreducibility of irony at the expense of transcendental synthesis. Consequently, notions such as system, determinacy, closure, even reason itself, are sidelined, if not altogether dropped from the Romantic enterprise. This is not to say that Schlegel is then, as Hegel first and foremost, and many others in his wake would have it, simply not a philosopher.<sup>21</sup> If anything, I would contend that this slide from system to becoming, or from philosophy to poesy, is the philosophical gesture *par excellence*, the movement which brings Being out of the constraints of systematic representation, and into an ecstatic, or if you will, ek-thetic hovering.<sup>22</sup> If Schlegel is able to write, in his *Fragments on Literature and Poesy* of 1797, that "the theory of Art (*Kunstlehre*) [is] the absolute antithesis to the Theory of Knowledge (*Wissenschaftslehre*)", it is precisely because "Art" in this sense, or "Progressive Universal Poesy", is what the aporias of Fichte's system yield. Schlegel is explicit about deriving his concepts from what he sees as a necessary reading of Fichte's theses - I quote *Athenaeum* Fragment 252:

A philosophy of poesy as such would begin with the independence of beauty, with the proposition that beauty is and should be distinct from truth and morality, and that it has the same rights as these: something that - for those who are able to understand it at all - follows from the proposition I=I. It would hover between the union and the division of philosophy and poesy, between poesy and practice, poesy as such and the genres and kinds of poesy.

Schlegel's demand, far from being the dissolution of concrete philosophical theory into the morass of indeterminate poesy, is that poesy be thought in coextensivity, and, as Fichte would perhaps have it, in a sphere parallel with that of philosophy. That beauty be independent of

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), where he defines irony as "the systematic undoing of understanding" (p. 301).

<sup>21</sup> Hegel's contempt, in particular for the concept of irony as expounded by Schlegel, is paramount in practically every reference he makes to him. See, for instance, the *Introduction to Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Adapted from Hamacher's characterisation of Schlegel's ontology as an "ektheology", in Hamacher, *op.cit.*, p.250.

truth and morality is certainly a statement which a system like Kant's would scorn - yet Schlegel insists on its being necessarily drawn out of the transcendental construct. Possibly the most concrete and resolute of Schlegel's reactions to Fichte's project is voiced in his essay *On Incomprehensibility*, where he writes that he regards "the *Wissenschaftslehre*, for example, as nothing more than a tendency, a preliminary sketch, like Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*."<sup>23</sup> What this means is that the systems of Fichte, as well as Kant, are no more but indices to the infinite, unending becoming of the Absolute of Progressive universal poesy - or, in different terms, that the 'moment' of onto-theology is but a momentary stasis in the interminable hovering of Being. Schlegel cannot in any way be said to be a polemicist against transcendental philosophy, be that Kant's or Fichte's. On the contrary, he is the figure who most clearly sees the transcendental enterprise as the point from which philosophy leaps into the infinite becoming that is its transformation into progressive universal poesy.

If, at least at the level of declared intentions, Schlegel's renunciation of the wish for closure<sup>24</sup> and his embracing of the "infinitely teeming chaos" of Irony as the cornerstone and, at the same time, the decisive rupture in any conception of thinking appears as counterproductive, demeaning of the philosophical understanding, this is because, he would contend, that understanding has yet to be understood. This is something Fichte also admits in connection with his own work. He writes, near the end of the *Wissenschaftslehre*:

The Science is perfectly entitled, in the nature of the case, to declare in advance that many will misunderstand it, and more will not understand it at all; that, not only in the present exceedingly defective accounts [ I pause here - he means, presumably, his *own*, a modesty uncommon in a systematic philosopher but which perhaps points to a possible reason why Schlegel appreciated it, not because Schlegel is modest himself, but because the "presently exceedingly defective accounts" are a structural necessity for the romantic notion of infinite and indefinite becoming], but even in

<sup>23</sup> Schlegel, *On Incomprehensibility*, in Schulte-Sasse, op. cit., pp 118-128, here p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> This wish can be read as the epistemological desideratum of transcendental philosophy, or, which amounts to the same thing, the epistemological manifestation of onto-theology.

the completest that any one Man might achieve, it will remain sorely in need of improvement in every part.<sup>25</sup>

For his part, Schlegel will radicalise this statement in a way which will present it, without any possibly deceptive appearance of false modesty, as the fundamental condition of understanding itself. *On Incomprehensibility*, the essay with which he chose to end the *Athenaeum* in the most polemical manner possible, presents exactly such a scenario. Responding to charges of incomprehensibility (and in particular reproducing and defending the fragment on irony as the indissoluble conflict between absolute and relative - *Lyc.* 108), he polemically, and indeed, ironically asks: "But is incomprehensibility actually something so completely reprehensible, so base? I think that the welfare of families and of nations rests on it."<sup>26</sup> Incomprehensibility (*Unverständigkeit*) is not a curse, but a blessing. Why? Because, as Schlegel goes on to explain, it is just as necessary as understanding itself, more, because it is in fact a condition of understanding itself, the necessary possibility of the impossibility of understanding. "The great separation between understanding and incomprehension (*Unverständigkeit*) will become increasingly universal, pronounced, clear",<sup>27</sup> he states, in a future projection reminiscent of Fichte's wish that his science be more fully understood in the future. "A great amount of hidden incomprehensibility will yet have to break out. But understanding will also show its omnipotence ... Understanding itself will be understood." Within the context of a highly rhetorically conscious, and, indeed, expertly ironic text such as this, it would be a misunderstanding to take Schlegel's proclaimed assurance at face value. And only a reading stubbornly captured in the very desire for closure and systematicity that Schlegel denounces would misunderstand rhetoric for philosophical statement. It would be the equivalent of having Being *be*, and be as an entity, erasing the ontico-ontological difference, setting (*setzen*) Being, and arresting its hovering. But this very reading, this very misunderstanding, Schlegel is all too aware, is the necessity propelling the progressive universal misunderstanding of poesy by philosophy (and perhaps vice versa) to its

<sup>25</sup> W., p.251.

<sup>26</sup> Schlegel, in Schulte-Sasse, op.cit., p.126.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.127.

always already indefinite future.

## Romantic Rationality

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When we say of a person, "She is rational", we are praising her for being the sort of person who uses reason to make sensible inferences, who weighs options objectively, who is not prone to become lost in a swell of feelings and misguided passions, etc. The rational person is mentally well-balanced and healthy. There are even therapeutic methods whose goal it is to bring people to act more rationally.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, no one strives to be irrational. Indeed, to say of a person, "He is irrational", is to condemn his mental habits. An irrational person is removed from calm reflection and reasoning and drawn toward the passions, which philosophers have traditionally defined as opposing reason. In short, then, we praise individuals for their rationality and condemn them or, at least, pity them, for their irrationality.

Something similar holds for philosophical movements. A philosophical movement that is characterized as rational is one worthy of attention and study, while one which is branded irrational is dismissed and scoffed at by rigorous thinkers. So the charge of irrationality is one not to be taken lightly, for it can condemn a movement to the darkness of neglect.

My focus here will be upon two movements that blossomed in Germany during the 1700's, one lauded for its "rationality" the other still nowadays scathingly criticized for its "irrationality".<sup>2</sup> The German

<sup>1</sup> Albert Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy (or R.E.T.) is just one example among many others. There are, as far as I know, no therapies whose purpose it is to make people more irrational (even if some therapies do in fact end up doing just this).

<sup>2</sup> One can, for example, see this in authoritative texts such as *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Press, 1967). In particular, the entries on 'Enlightenment' (*Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 519-525) and 'Romanticism' (*Ibid.*, Vol. 7, pp. 206-209) by Crane Brinton reflect this. Of the Enlightenment, Brinton claims, "As a cultural period it is more closely linked with,