

# ***ROMANTIC POETRY AND THE ART SYSTEM\****

## **POESIA ROMÂNTICA E O SISTEMA DE ARTE**

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper is an attempt at connecting the emergence of second order observation in critical philosophy with the theory of aesthetic autonomy as developed by Early German Romanticism. In outlining the genesis of an autonomous art system from the reception of critical philosophy, my intention is to show how those apparently overly hermeneutical philosophical developments relate to the birth of a system of production and reproduction of artworks, which – as I will argue – are the very materialization of the system’s code.*

**Keywords:** *Kant. Schlegel. Novalis. Luhmann. Aesthetics. System.*

**RESUMO** *Este artigo é uma tentativa de conectar a emergência da observação de segunda ordem na filosofia crítica com a teoria da autonomia estética desenvolvida pelo primeiro romantismo alemão. Ao delinear a gênese*

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*de um sistema da arte autônomo a partir da recepção da filosofia crítica, minha intenção é mostrar como esses desenvolvimentos filosóficos aparentemente hermenêuticos se relacionam com o nascimento de um sistema de produção e reprodução de obras de arte, que – como argumentarei – são a própria materialização do código do sistema.*

**Palavras-chave:** Kant. Schlegel. Novalis. Luhmann. Estética. Sistema.

Of all things that have to do with communicating ideas, what could be more fascinating than the question of whether communication is actually possible? And where could one find a better opportunity for carrying out a variety of experiments to test this possibility or impossibility than in either writing a journal like *Athenaeum* oneself or else taking part in it as a reader?

(Schlegel, F. “On Incomprehensibility”)

### 1. A brief Luhmannian preamble

It was Niklas Luhmann who, in his book “Art as a Social System” (2000), defined art as a system, and a very peculiar one. Amongst all other social systems, the art system is the only one capable of establishing a bridge between *perception* and *communication*. One should remember that, for Niklas Luhmann, autopoietic systems are operatively closed, therefore communication cannot perceive, and perception cannot communicate. The psychic systems are comprised of monads of consciousness inaccessible to one another. These monads are incapable of interfering directly in the processes of communication engendered by social systems. A prerogative to the social systems, communication can only operate as a system through events that unfold in time as it “materializes” its own operations (events conform the structure of the system in its self-replication). Else, to communicate meaning a social system should reduce immensely the horizon of possibilities of things that can be communicated: communication presupposes, thus, processes of high selectivity. However, for Luhmann (2000, p. 48), “art makes perception available for communication, and it does so outside of the standardized forms of language (that, for its part, is perceptible)”. It is not exactly surprising then that the 18<sup>th</sup> century should emerge as decisive to the genesis of the art system: the claim to a status of autonomy for art arises in the wake of an age that is haunted by the self-suspicion of its capacity to make itself understood. Philosophy’s incapacity to address the problems posed by itself during the *aetas Kantiana*

quickly escalates to the understanding, in Early German Romanticism, that philosophy's limitations are the limitations of verbal communication. Friedrich Schlegel dedicates to it a whole essay: "now, it is a peculiarity of mine", he says in "On Incomprehensibility",

that I absolutely detest incomprehension, not only the incomprehension of the uncomprehending, but even more the incomprehension of the comprehending. [...] I wanted to demonstrate that words often understand themselves better than do those who use them, wanted to point out that there must be a connection of some secret brotherhood among philosophical words that, like a host of spirits too soon aroused, bring everything into confusion in their writings and exert the invisible power of the World Spirit on even those who try to deny it. (Schlegel, 1971, p. 260)

This results in the institution, at least in formal terms, of a theory of interpretation – modern hermeneutics. Modern hermeneutics can only come to be in a world already duplicated in meaning by the activity of interpretation. This duplicated world, a direct consequence of the concepts produced by a first order observer, is basically what's behind the emergence of second order observation. Once the expectation of a first order observer of providing the world with a conceptual blueprint of reality fails, one has to either produce a way to navigate the resulting myriad of interpretations (hermeneutics' task) or to come to terms with the fact that all these interpretations could now only be – at best – perspectives. Second order observation, as we know it, has to do with this reflective movement of observing oneself in the act of observation. It is also deeply connected to the development of a theory of aesthetic autonomy: for autonomy can only be produced in the moment art becomes self-aware. This is achieved philosophically first: at least since the publication of Kant's third critique, theoretical autonomy flourishes as the touchstone for an art system that posits itself as a non-conceptual alternative to verbal-conceptual language. That is to say: the art system arises when language fails.<sup>1</sup> It is my intent, continuing with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's attempt at historicizing second order observation,<sup>2</sup> to: a. analyze how second order observation (reproduced

1 "None of the types of indirect communication discussed above, however, exhausts our search for communicative alternatives to language. Art, in the modern sense of the word, belongs to this category as well. In fact, art presents one such alternative, a functional equivalent to language even if, tentatively speaking, it employs texts as an artistic medium. Art functions as communication although — or precisely because — it cannot be adequately rendered through words (let alone through concepts)" (Luhmann, 2000, p. 19). It is interesting to note that the term "telepathy" also arises (and is popularized) in the nineteenth century – another symptom, perhaps, of the perception that verbal language is no longer sufficient to communicate meaning. The word, attributed to Frederic W. H. Myers, designates the transfer of thoughts between two or more individuals through an unknown medium.

2 See Gumbrecht, 2010.

philosophically) made possible for the emergence of an autonomous art system; b. how this apparently overly hermeneutical development is connected with the material, physical production of a myriad of experiments and artworks – the very materialization of the system’s code.

## 2. Theory turns autonomous: the building blocks of a system

Hegelian *Geschichte* depends on an effort to make possible for history to fit theory. But while *Geschichte* itself has a history that can be traced back to the famous controversy between Herder and Kant,<sup>3</sup> it is only in the writings of early German romantics that philosophy of history and art theory will be shaped together – as I intend to demonstrate – in an autonomous art system. The reception of the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* in Germany is, in that sense, instrumental: the dispute will consolidate philosophy of history as a universal (and ambitious) theoretical tool. From there on, it is expected from theory not only to predict the course of history, but also to assume its reins and to correct its course (in which case it fulfills in abstraction the greatest ambition of the French Revolution).

The high point of the dispute is materialized in Friedrich Schiller’s “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry” and in Friedrich Schlegel’s “On the Study of Greek Poetry”. Both put up an effort to develop an art theory capable, in a way, to connect Aesthetics (in the tradition of Baumgarten and Kant) to the perception – under development in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – of art as *art history*. It is not by chance that these texts were published between 1795 and 1797: since the Louvre Museum opened its doors in 1793, a true visual history of art became available for the first time in Europe. We know, for instance, that in 1799 the *Grande Galerie* became officially the location for a chronological arrangement of paintings. This visual experience helped push art criticism away from the description of individual artworks (such as Diderot’s *Salons*) and towards historicist analysis.<sup>4</sup> If one could use the term *Stimmung*

3 See Herder’s “This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity” (Herder, 2004), and “Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind” (Herder, 1968), and Kant’s “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” (Kant, 2007a). Also, see Kant’s review of Herder’s “Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind”, in Kant (2007a).

4 According to Hans Belting (2001, p. 37), in the second marriage of Napoleon in 1810 “all those invited to attend paraded past the paintings [...] tracing, as it were, the notional path of art history as they accompanied the Emperor to the marriage altar set up in the Salon Carré. Among the host of visitors drawn from across Europe, Friedrich Schlegel soon gazed in awe at the collection of over 1,000 paintings, and, standing before the assembled collection of works by Raphael, reverently studied the ‘gradual evolution of a great artistic mind’.”

to characterize broadly pressing atmospheres in distinct historical horizons, then it would be proper to say Early German Romanticism embodies – as does the Louvre Museum – the *historical Stimmung* of its age.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, Early German Romanticism re-signifies modernity – parting ways with a tradition (established at least since the Renaissance) that looks up to antiquity as a model to be imitated. The importance in recapitulating this process lies in showing how Early German Romanticism not only operated a self-description of the art system (as theory), but – and here lies its significance – made possible for this self-description to be reinserted for the first time in the formal arrangements of the artwork. Such recursive arrangement puts in motion the operational autonomy of the art system.

Back to the reception of the *Querelle* in Germany – by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the dispute seems to demand a synthesis: on the one side, there's Winckelmann's ideal of ancient Greece ("noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur") embraced by Lessing and its partisans;<sup>6</sup> on the other side, devouring everything in its path, there's critical philosophy and the inexorable march of self-reflexive reason. Schiller's "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" embodies such a synthetic effort but fails to achieve it: while there is some historical correspondence (antiquity/naïve poetry x modernity/sentimental poetry), Schiller goes on to identify sentimental poets in antiquity and naïve poets in modernity. The reason is, for Schiller, naïve/sentimental poetry are typological categories first and historical determinations only second. Nevertheless, the paradox is already posited: if naïve poetry spontaneously reaches (naturally) its finite perfection, sentimental poetry – being a deliberate product of reflection – can never reach it, for it is infinitely perfectible (the sentimental poet aims her production at an unattainable ideal). F. Schlegel will also address this paradox on his essay "On the Study of Greek Poetry" – however, his synthetic effort will give birth to the autonomous theory (it is crucial here to understand the difference between a theory of autonomy – such as Kant's – and an autonomous theory; the first is a precondition for the second; the second is, by itself, the art system in its operational autonomy).

Just like Schiller, F. Schlegel polarizes the constituent elements of ancient poetry and modern poetry: while ancient poetry results from spontaneity (*natürliche Bildung*), modern poetry is the product of artificiality (*künstliche*

5 More on the concept of *Stimmung* as atmosphere in Gumbrecht, 2012.

6 "[...] the universal and predominant characteristic of the Greek masterpieces is a noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur, both in posture and expression. Just as the depths of the sea remain forever calm, however much the surface may rage, so does the expression of the Greek figures, however strong their passions, reveal a great and dignified soul" (Winckelmann, 1985, p. 42).

*Bildung*). But unlike Schiller, he turns this antinomy (ancient x modern) into a philosophy of history, in a way anticipating Hegel's *Geschichte*. "Already during the initial stage of cultivation [Bildung] and while still under the tutelage of nature", says F. Schlegel, "Greek poetry encompasses the whole of nature in uniform completion, in the most felicitous equilibrium and without a biased disposition or a pronounced eccentricity [...] in Greece beauty grew without supervision of an artificial kind; it essentially grew wild" (Schlegel, 2001, p. 48/KA:276); the transition to modernity is pushed back to the beginning of the Christian era – and if there is still no artificiality for an extended period of time, this is only because "the great barbarian intermezzo — which occupies the space between ancient and modern culture [Bildung] — first had to be brought to an end before the character of the latter could become prominent" (Schlegel, 2001, p. 27/KA:235). F. Schlegel blames understanding for intervening and, therefore, terminating with the natural and spontaneous organization manifest in the art of the ancients.<sup>7</sup> His judgement on modern poetry, at first sight, seems harsh: "lack of character seems to be the only characteristic of modern poetry; confusion the common theme running through it; lawlessness the spirit of its history; and skepticism the result of its theory" (Schlegel, 2001, p. 20/KA:222). At this point, it would be reckless to assume, however, that F. Schlegel's criticism will lead him to take sides with the ancients.

In 1793 F. Schlegel had decided, in a letter to his older brother August Wilhelm Schlegel, to make of the study of literature the task of his life. The initial plan was to publish an exchange of letters in which he and his brother discussed the nature of poetry. The medium of reflection: the works of Shakespeare, Schiller and Goethe. But the idea was shelved and, in 1794, to the surprise of A.W. Schlegel and Novalis, F. Schlegel moved to Dresden and made of classical Greek literature his object of study.<sup>8</sup> "On the Study of Greek Poetry" was finished the next year, but got published only a few years later, in 1797. F. Schlegel admired modern poetry – the praises he lavished on the works of Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Goethe etc. are not scarce.<sup>9</sup> When we put his 1797 essay in biographical perspective, the apparent *graecomania* just

7 "In the natural development [*Bildung*] of the arts — before the understanding misconstrues its own rights and confuses the limits of nature by its forcible intervention, destroying thereby its beautiful organization — poetry, music and mime (which then was also rhythmic) are almost always inseparable sisters" (Schlegel, 2001, p. 64/KA:303).

8 See Ernst Behler (2005, p. 37).

9 F. Schlegel's admiration for the moderns is condensed in fragment 247 of *Athenaeum*: "Dante's prophetic poem is the only system of transcendental poetry and is still the greatest of its kind. Shakespeare's universality is like the center of romantic art. Goethe's purely poetical poetry is the most complete poetry of poetry. This is the great triple chord of modern poetry, the inmost and holiest circle among all the broad and narrow spheres of a critical anthology of the classics of modern poetry" (Schlegel, 1971, p. 197).

does not fit.<sup>10</sup> But as points Ernst Behler (2005, p. 101), F. Schlegel himself, in a short (but essential) sentence of the essay, provides us with a possible way out: at the end of a sequence of hyperbolic praises on Greek poetry, he concludes: “the pleasure that the works of the golden age of Greek art affords could indeed be further augmented” (Schlegel, 2001, p. 55/KA:287). Now, in view of this “further augmented” all compliments suddenly shift in meaning – they reveal themselves to be ironic metaphors.<sup>11</sup> From that point on, the *graecomania* in “On the Study [...]” becomes only a semblance, and what emerges is a true theory of modernity. Or, to put it differently: the reflection on ancient poetry becomes the medium through which the development of a project for modern poetry takes place.

For F. Schlegel, ancient poetry is the “prototype of art and taste”.<sup>12</sup> It ended its cycle in “an independent, perfect whole, complete unto itself”,<sup>13</sup> but which is still only a relative maximum, because “art is infinitely perfectible. An absolute maximum in its continuous evolution is not possible: yet a conditioned, relative maximum, an unsurpassable, fixed approximation is possible” (Schlegel, 2001, p. 55/KA:288). Precisely because F. Schlegel historicizes his categories, a return to the natural culture of the ancients (in which “beauty grew wild”) is impossible. But said return is not desired either! Antiquity should function as a counterpoint to modernity: as an ideal construct, it enables a definition of what is essentially modern. And what is essentially modern? “Nothing”, says F. Schlegel, “can better explain and confirm the artificiality of modern aesthetic development [Bildung] than the great predominance of the individual, the characteristic, and the philosophical throughout the entire mass of modern poetry” (Schlegel, 2001, p. 30/KA:241); or yet: “with greater intellectual development [Bildung], the goal of modern poetry naturally becomes individuality that is original and interesting” (Schlegel, 2001, p. 32/KA:245); this is why “the works that it

10 *Graecomania* is an ironic expression coined by Schiller regarding what he saw as F. Schlegel's fascination for the Greeks. See Ernst Behler (2005, p. 39).

11 What *Critical Fragment 7* resonates, thus, is irony of irony: “my essay on the study of Greek poetry is a mannered prose hymn to the objective quality in poetry. The worst thing about it, it seems to me, is the complete lack of necessary irony; and the best, the confident assumption that poetry is infinitely valuable — as if that were a settled thing” (Schlegel, 1971, pp. 143-144).

12 “For this level of accomplishment, I know of no more appropriate name than *ultimate beauty*. Not simply a beauty about which nothing more beautiful could be thought but, rather, the complete example of the unattainable idea that essentially becomes here utterly apparent: *the prototype of art and taste*.” Friedrich Schlegel (2001, p. 55/KA:287-288). A lesson learned from Winckelmann, according to F. Schlegel's “Dialogue on Poetry”: “... Winckelmann, who in his studies on Greek art was the first to demonstrate how to establish a theory of art through the history of its genesis” (Schlegel, 1968a, p. 20).

13 “The homogeneous mass of Greek poetry, however, is an independent, perfect whole, complete unto itself, and the simple integration of its rigorous interrelations comprises the unity of a *beautiful organization*, where even the smallest part is necessarily determined by the laws and aims of whole, and yet is nonetheless free and self-sufficient” (Schlegel, 2001, p. 65/KA:305).

produces lack an inner principle of life; they are only individual pieces bound together by an external force, without any actual interrelation. They do not make a whole” (Schlegel, 2001, p. 29/KA:238). Fragmentation, individuality, originality, the philosophical (the analytic-reflexive component) etc.: F. Schlegel attempts a typological classification of modernity, so that it can be seen in its entirety – as the photographic negative of antiquity! On the one hand, *Sophocles*:

The ideal of beauty — which is predominant throughout all the works of Sophocles as well as in their individual features — is thoroughly perfected. The force of the individual essential components of beauty is symmetrical and the organization of the unified components thoroughly law-governed. (Schlegel, 2001, p. 62/KA:300)

On the other hand, *Shakespeare*:

Of all artists, however, Shakespeare is the one who most completely and accurately characterizes the spirit of modern poetry in general. In him the charming blossomings of romantic fantasy and the enormous magnitude of the Gothic age of heroes are united with the finest traits of modern social life and the most profound and the most comprehensive poetic philosophy. [...] Without exaggeration, one can call him the pinnacle of modern poetry. (Schlegel, 2001, p. 33/KA:249)

But while he separates historically modernity from antiquity, this initial polarization fades as we realize both are involved in a process of reciprocal determination. Antiquity is only completed through an examination of its own nature, and this examination only becomes possible in modernity. Alternatively, since it aims at an intangible ideal, modernity can never be fully attained (contrary to Schiller’s assumption, classicism then is never truly abandoned); but again, at the same time, this unattainability is precisely what characterizes modernity’s movement of unending self-improvement. The invention of antiquity/modernity as reciprocally – albeit historically – determined types allows F. Schlegel a way out of the competition triggered by the *Querelle*. In the late foreword written for the publication of “On the Study...”, he already speaks of an *aesthetic imperative*: “for the aesthetic imperative is absolute, and since it can never be fulfilled perfectly, it must at least be ever closer to attaining it through the endless appropriation of artistic development [Bildung]” (Schlegel, 2001, p. 100/KA:214). This imperative is exercised, in the fashion of Kantian reason, as an infinite march – and it is fully developed in the famous fragment 116 of *Athenaeum*, under the concept of *romantic poetry* (*Romantische Poesie*):

Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn’t merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the



poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical; poeticize wit and fill and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humor. It embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song. [...] It alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age. And it can also — more than any other form — hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors. It is capable of the highest and most variegated refinement, not only from within outwards, but also from without inwards; capable in that it organizes — for everything that seeks a wholeness in its effects — the parts along similar lines, so that it opens up a perspective upon an infinitely increasing classicism. [...] The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal. [...] The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic. (Schlegel, 1971, pp. 175-176)

The critique of the fragmentary character of modern art – since regulated/given by a unitary ideal of ancient art – is finally synthesized in the (romantic) drive for the integration of multiple fragments in a whole. In fact, the concept of romantic poetry can only be properly understood in perspective of this very process. In the moment antiquity and modernity become historically determined conceptual tools, the romantic project of synthesis ensues: the task of modernity, for F. Schlegel, is then to overcome the dichotomy (ancient x modern) established by modernity itself. The whole movement (all that has been produced by ancients and moderns) is therefore embraced under a much broader unity – the synthetic project presupposes the regulatory unity of *art in general*. This unity emerges from the conclusion that art does not have to take any specific form. Poetry then no longer concerns only the discursive arts: F. Schlegel explodes the conceptual limits of the word and, in doing so, brings it closer to its Greek version and meaning, *poiesis* (as a creative principle, it belongs to all arts).<sup>14</sup> Artworks are understood from now on as nothing more than materializations of absolute art. They are, consequently, particular

14 It is worth noting, as an example, the following excerpt from *Gespräch über die Poesie*:

*Amalia*. Wenn das so fortgeht, wird sich uns, ehe wirs uns versehen, eins nach dem andern in Poesie verwandeln. Ist denn alles Poesie?

*Lothario*. Jede Kunst und jede Wissenschaft die durch die Rede wirkt, wenn sie als Kunst um ihrer selbst willen geübt wird, und wenn sie den höchsten Gipfel erreicht, erscheint als Poesie.

*Ludoviko*. Und jede, die auch nicht in den Worten der Sprache ihr Wesen treibt, hat einen unsichtbaren Geist, und der ist Poesie" (Schlegel, 1968b, p. 304).

manifestations of a universal ideal.<sup>15</sup> For the first time, art is recognized as an idea that manifests itself historically in particular artworks: *art is the art system*. The art system is art in becoming – for it must admit, precisely (from the moment it comes to be), everything that is conceived – theoretically – (in the past and in the present) as *art*. The system operates in translating the intangibility of the idea into the particularity of the artwork.

### 3. Artworks as code scripts

Finally, I would like to suggest there is a link between the romantic project (the poetic imperative) and the crisis of representation – as described by Michel Foucault’s “Les mots et les choses” – that, in the eighteenth-century Germany, burst with the reception of Kant’s critical philosophy. We should remember that, for the 18<sup>th</sup> century episteme, it is of utmost importance to secure we are equipped with the needed faculties to observe and represent adequately reality. In Germany, invariably, responses to the crisis have been filtered by critical philosophy. Reinhold and later Fichte strove to ground philosophy on a first principle – as a *principle of consciousness* or *absolute ego*, this first principle always refers to a self-sufficient subjectivity (because it must be secured in one’s own consciousness); for bringing together thought and Being, mind and nature, subject and object and so on, subjectivity is seen as absolute. This movement will develop in the Hegelian understanding that consciousness is capable of diluting the difference established by itself between the subject and its supposed alterity (the object). One can read the Hegelian system, therefore, as the becoming of immanent unity, revealed in the digestive movement of Mind itself.<sup>16</sup>

For the early German romantics, on the contrary, a first principle can never be produced/secured by our cognitive faculties, and the absolute, therefore, can only be accessed by other means. What is rejected here is the conception (a trademark of German idealism) that the absolute origin of Being is transparent to reason itself. It is worth noting that this does not mean that the early German romantics rejected the absolute (as an idea), but subjectivity as an absolute principle. The absolute transcends subjectivity (because, as Being, it precedes

15 “Only that *work of art* [...] can be an unsurpassable example in which the whole purpose of fine art becomes as manifest as it can in an actual work of art” (Schlegel, 2001, p. 58/KA:293).

16 This approach, inaugurated by Dieter Henrich (*Konstellationsforschung* – constellation analysis), allowed the reconstruction of German idealism as an arc of debate constitutive of a theory of subjectivity; the starting point is Kant/Jacobi and the point of arrival, obviously, is Hegel. See Dieter Henrich (2008).

it).<sup>17</sup> This is why, for F. Schlegel, “viewed subjectively, philosophy, like epic poetry, always begins in *media res*”.<sup>18</sup> A twofold movement results from this: 1. since this alleged first principle can never be grasped by philosophy, philosophy becomes an infinite longing/activity; 2. and since philosophy cannot be rebooted and start over from a first principle either (and thereby dispense with its history), it becomes its own history – history of philosophy. As Novalis puts it: “we *seek* the absolute everywhere and only ever *find* things”.<sup>19</sup> The absolute, since it can only be postulated philosophically *ex-negatio* (in its absence), becomes sort of a regulative principle of reflection (seeking for it is what moves reason, but reason can never capture it). It is precisely here that the poetic imperative is consolidated as a philosophical answer to the problem of the unknowability of the absolute: for “where philosophy stops, poetry has to begin”.<sup>20</sup>

Early German Romanticism conceives Being as epistemologically obscure. It is worth reminding that Early German Romanticism, just like German Idealism, presupposes as given the object of the (Kantian) idea of a supersensible unity linking theory and practice.<sup>21</sup> German Idealism proceeds from the expectation that this supersensible unity could be somehow grasped by consciousness (since it is contained in it) – hence the term “subjective idealism”. Romantic absolute, in turn, transcends all determination: subject and object thus become only their instantiations.<sup>22</sup> Sketchily, this is the way early German romantics explain it: if, for Kant, *thought* is the exercise of *judgement* (thinking=judging), and judgement consists in an instantiation of Being (it separates subject and object), then thought can only be exercised as *concealment of Being*.<sup>23</sup> That is why reflection can never capture the absolute:

17 This is Manfred Frank’s thesis (Frank, 2004).

18 “Athenaeum”, fragment 84 (Schlegel, 1971, p. 171).

19 “Miscellaneous Observations”, fragment 1 (Novalis, 1997, p. 23).

20 “Ideas”, fragment 48 (Schlegel, 1971, p. 245).

21 “The function of prescribing laws by means of concepts of nature is discharged by understanding, and is theoretical. That of prescribing laws by means of the concept of freedom is discharged by reason and is merely practical. [...] Understanding and reason, therefore, have two distinct jurisdictions over one and the same territory of experience. But neither can interfere with the other. [...] Still, how does it happen that these two different realms do not form *one* realm, seeing that, while they do not limit each other in their legislation, they continually do so in their effects in the sensible world? The explanation lies in the fact that the concept of nature doubtless represents its objects in intuition, yet not as things in themselves, but as mere phenomena, whereas the concept of freedom represents in its object what is no doubt a thing in itself, but it does not make it intuitable, and further that neither the one nor the other is capable, therefore, of furnishing a theoretical cognition of its object (or even of the thinking subject) as a thing in itself, or, as this would be, of the supersensible – the idea of which has certainly to be introduced as the basis of the possibility of all those objects of experience, although it cannot itself ever be elevated or extended in cognition” (Kant, 2007b, “Introduction: II. The Realm of Philosophy in General”, pp. 10-11).

22 See Frederick C. Beiser, 2002, chapter 4: “Friedrich Schlegel’s Absolute Idealism”.

23 Manfred Frank develops this argument from Hölderlin’s *Urtheil und Sein*. For Hölderlin, consciousness is the product of self-segregation: it depends on the “I” opposing itself (the thing in me which is circumscribed

the more it seeks for it, the more it is concealed! Now, although this unity can never be revealed by our cognitive faculties, F. Schlegel admits the possibility of a “partial peek” – through *art*.<sup>24</sup> Artworks would thus make possible for us to glance and have an “instantaneous” intuition of the absolute – although, as particular materializations, they suggest a totality that should remain, above all, intangible to consciousness. Novalis, in his “Monologue”, puts the problem in a most interesting way:

There is really something very foolish about speaking and writing; proper conversation is merely a word game. One can only marvel at the ridiculous mistake that people make when they think – that they speak for the sake of things. The particular quality of language, the fact that it is concerned only with itself, is known to no one. Language is such a marvelous and fruitful secret – because when someone speaks merely for the sake of speaking, he utters the most splendid, most original truths. But if he wants to speak about something definite, capricious language makes him say the most ridiculous and confused stuff. This is also the cause of the hatred that so many serious people feel toward language. They notice its mischief, but not the fact that the chattering they scorn is the infinitely serious aspect of language. If one could only make people understand that it is the same with language as with mathematical formulae. These constitute a world of their own. They play only with themselves, express nothing but their own marvelous nature, and just for this reason they are so expressive – just for this reason the strange play of relations between things is mirrored in them. Only through their freedom are they elements of nature and only in their free movements does the world soul manifest itself in them and make them a sensitive measure and ground plan of things. So it is too with language – on the one hand, anyone who is sensitive to its fingering, its rhythm, its musical spirit, who perceives within himself the delicate workings of its inner nature, and moves his tongue or his hand accordingly, will be a prophet; on the other hand, anyone who knows how to write truths like these but does not have ear and sense enough for it will be outwitted by language itself and mocked by people as Casandra was by the Trojans. Even if in saying this I believe I have described the essence and function of poetry in the clearest possible way, at the same time I know that no one can understand it, and in this way no poetry comes about. What would it be like though if I had to speak? And this instinct of language to speak were the hallmark of what inspires language, of the efficacy of language within me? And were my will to want only everything that I was obliged to do, in the end could this be poetry without my knowledge or belief, and could it make a secret language understandable? And thus I would be a born writer, for a writer is surely only a language enthusiast? (Novalis, 1997, pp. 83-84)

Just like F. Schlegel, Novalis no longer considers verbal-conceptual language a sufficient cognitive instrument for world appropriation. What

as *object* determines – and is determined in turn by – the thing in me posited as *subject*). All judgements we carry out presuppose this original oneness of Being – which for this very reason can never be recovered by our own consciousness (since it can only operate in self-segregation). For the complete argument, see Frank, 2004, “Lecture 6: On Hölderlin’s Critique of Fichte”.

24 In which F. Schlegel seems to anticipate Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art”.

is problematized here is the idea of truth as correspondence: if there are no guarantees that our conceptual representations relate to things in the world, then our effort of world appropriation through concepts can only produce “the most ridiculous and confused stuff”. “All the superstition and error of every age”, says Novalis,

of all nations and individuals, is based on the confusion of the symbol with the symbolized — on their identification — on the belief in true, complete representation — and the relation between the image and the original — the appearance and the substance — on the inference from the external likeness — to the thoroughgoing internal correspondence and connection — in short, on the confusion between subject and object. (Novalis, 2011, p. 126)

Now, what Novalis’ claim means is that, for the early German romantics, the duplicated world of concepts ceases to be (in fact, it could never be) the privileged locus of truth. The relationship established (by the idea of truth as correspondence) between concepts and objects is thus turned upside down: objects do not pre-exist their conceptual determinations (as pure facts) but, on the contrary, they can only inhabit the world through the differentiation operated by language itself (for F. Schlegel, an infinite substance is shaped by the activity of a creative imagination). This move liberates language to act as *poiesis* – and therefore poetic language becomes more valuable than verbal-conceptual language (“the chattering they scorn is the infinitely serious aspect of language”).<sup>25</sup> In fact, this properly romantic inversion can be traced back to Kant’s “Critique of Judgement”. In releasing judgement from the exclusive task of conceptual determination, Kant set the stage for the recognition of imagination as a faculty that also fulfills a cognitive function. One should remember that in the “Critique of Pure Reason” imagination is subordinated to understanding. There, imagination operates a first synthesis of multiplicity (it produces an image – *Bilden*), but it is still “a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious. Yet to bring this synthesis to concepts is a function that pertains to the understanding, and by means of which it first provides cognition in the proper sense”.<sup>26</sup> However, in the “Critique

25 This is Andrew Bowie’s insight – cf. Bowie, 1997, chapter 3: “The philosophy of critique and the critique of philosophy: Romantic literary theory”.

26 Cf. Kant (1998), “Critique of Pure Reason”, Doctrine of Elements. Pt. II. Div. I. Bk I. Ch. I. Section III: “On the Pure Concepts of the Understanding”, (A78) p. 211. There are three steps to the cognitive process: “the first thing that must be given to us a priori for the cognition of all objects is the manifold of pure intuition; the synthesis of this manifold by means of the imagination is the second thing, but it still does not yield cognition. The concepts that give this pure synthesis unity, and that consist solely in the representation of this necessary

of Judgement” the two faculties are somehow leveled: in the judgement of the beautiful imagination and understanding must not reach an agreement, seemingly undertaking an equally important role. But still, Kant assigns no cognitive role to imagination. Early German Romanticism, in turn, puts in check the cognitive role of understanding through its critique of truth as correspondence (truth is missed when understanding sticks a concept to the synthesis). Imagination becomes, precisely for this reason, the only faculty capable of offering an alternative to the schematism understanding forces upon us – through imagination we could get a glimpse of the absolute (an image free of concepts). “Reason is only one and in everyone it is the same”, says Schlegel in the “Dialogue on Poetry”,

however, as every human being has their own nature and their own love, so does everyone carry within themselves their own poetry. This poetry must remain theirs, as surely as they are what they are, as sure as there is anything original in them; and no criticism can or ought to steal their innermost essence, their innermost power, to purify and cleanse them into a common image, without mind and meaning, as strive the fools who do not know what they want. But the high science of genuine critique should teach them how to educate themselves within themselves, and above all it should teach them how to grasp every other independent form of poetry in its classical strength and abundance, so that the flower and the essence of alien spirits become food and seed for their own fantasy. (Schlegel, 1968b, p. 284)<sup>27</sup>

Once imagination is understood as a cognitive faculty, art becomes a *medium* twice as important. The reason is imagination is not only passive: contrary to understanding, it is also capable of producing positive content. This positive content is *poiesis*, as the principle of creation in art. It populates the world with images through which we could peek at the (otherwise inaccessible) absolute. For early German romantics, in fact, reality is nothing else but a product of *poiesis*: “all philosophy is idealism, and there is no true realism except poetry”.<sup>28</sup> Or yet, as Schleiermacher puts it: “no poetry, no reality”.<sup>29</sup> Whenever one walks away from the domain of aesthetics (in which imagination

synthetic unity, are the third thing necessary for cognition of an object that comes before us, and they depend on the understanding.” *Ibid.*, (A79) p. 211.

27 “Die Vernunft ist nur eine und in allen dieselbe: wie aber jeder Mensch seine eigne Natur hat und seine eigne Liebe, so trägt auch jeder seine eigne Poesie in sich. Die muß idhm bleiben und soll ihm bleiben, so gewiß er der ist, der er ist, so gewiß nur irgend etwas Ursprüngliches in ihm war; und keine Kritik kann und darf ihm sein eigenstes Wesen, seine innerste Kraft rauben, um ihn zu einem allgemeinen Bilde ohne Geist und ohne Sinn zu läutern und zu reinigen, wie die Toren sich bemühen, die nicht wissen was sie wollen. Aber lehren soll ihn die hohe Wissenschaft echter Kritik, wie er sich selbst bilden muß in sich selbst, und vor allem soll sie ihn lehren, auch jede andre selbständige Gestalt der Poesie in ihrer klassischen Kraft und Fülle zu fassen, daß die Blüte und der Kern fremder Geister Nahrung und Same werde für seine eigne Fantasie.”

28 “Ideas”, fragment 96 (Schlegel, 1971, p. 250).

29 “Athenaeum”, fragment 350 (Schlegel, 1971, p. 216).

resides), the activity of the understanding (as conceptual determination) neutralizes imagination: hence, for F. Schlegel, “poetry can only be criticized by way of poetry”.<sup>30</sup> This conclusion is reached by means of a complicated operation, sort of a synthesis of Fichte and Spinoza: the origin of every subject and object is attributed to a Being in perpetual becoming (for F. Schlegel, an infinite substance); Being is always hidden from the subject, for the subject can only translate it (and always through a productive imagination) into finite forms – or, to put it differently, into a world of objects; Being, as infinite substance, remains radically alien to consciousness.<sup>31</sup> This “translation into forms” is the work of *poiesis*, and those forms are what we call artworks.<sup>32</sup>

As Early German Romanticism established art as a privileged medium of reflection, the last condition for art to become an autonomous system at the operational level was fulfilled. Art then offered itself as an alternative to a system of communication that had proved insufficient (philosophical language or, alternatively, verbal-conceptual language) – for “how often one feels the poverty of words – to express several ideals all at once”.<sup>33</sup> This romantic art system anticipates Niklas Luhmann’s concept of autopoiesis much more to the

30 “Critical Fragments”, fragment 117 (Schlegel, 1971, p. 157).

31 In fact, F. Schlegel’s philosophy puts up an effort to synthesize Fichte and Spinoza. “Matter”, as infinite substance, only “enters” consciousness as form – and therefore can only be translated by an imagination that produces forms. F. Schlegel conceives of Being as this stretched unity, an equation encompassing consciousness (Fichte) and the infinite (Spinoza): “And now we have the elements which could give us a philosophy; namely, consciousness and the infinite. These are the two poles around which all philosophy turns. Fichtean philosophy pertains to consciousness. But the philosophy of Spinoza is concerned with the infinite. The formula for Fichtean philosophy is  $I=I$ , or what we would like to say,  $Non-I=I$ . The latter is probably a better formulation, because there the statement is, even in its expression, the most synthetic possible. The formula for the philosophy of Spinoza would be something like this: If one takes ‘a’ to represent what is representable, and ‘x’ what is not representable, then ‘a’=‘x’. Through combination, two more formulas are derived, namely,  $Non-I=x$ , and  $a=I$ . The latter formula, namely,  $a=I$  is the formula of our philosophy. The statement is indirect and seeks to sublimate the error of the finite, so that the infinite can arise by itself. Our formula, from a positive point of view, reads more or less as follows: *the minimum of the I equals the maximum of nature; and the minimum of nature equals the maximum of the I*. That means, the smallest sphere of consciousness equals the largest of nature, et contra. The consciousness of the infinite in the individual is the feeling of the sublime. This is present completely unrefined in the individual. And this feeling of the sublime is enthusiasm, which we had earlier as a factor of philosophy. The feeling of the sublime should therefore be raised to a science. The elements of philosophy are consciousness and the infinite. These are also the elements of all reality. Reality is the point of indifference [Indifferenzpunkt] between the two” (Schlegel, 1997, pp. 243-244). On F. Schlegel’s synthetic effort, see also: Mitchell; Oksiloff, 1997, “Introductory Essay — Romantic Crossovers: Philosophy as Art and Art as Philosophy”; Bowie, 1997, chapter 3: “The philosophy of critique and the critique of philosophy: Romantic literary theory”.

32 In a way, F. Schlegel anticipates Nelson Goodman’s constructivist cognitivism and his theory of symbols: since we communicate and/or perceive through symbols, and since these symbols are constructed actively – there is no such thing as an innocent observer –, our symbolic activities always operate constructing realities – or worlds. Obviously, art as language responds, also and specially, to an epistemological function. See Goodman, 1968.

33 “Miscellaneous Observations”, fragment 70 (Novalis, 1997, p. 34).

point than the Hegelian concept of “Spirit”.<sup>34</sup> The concept of Being/absolute (theory) regulates the production of artworks. Forms acquire a positive – if not fundamental – value here: for we can only relate to Being/absolute through them (as their instantiations). Reflection is exported to the art system through the concept of beauty: it is incorporated into the dynamics of the forms that are produced within the system itself (art objects). Artworks are then conceived of as attempts at producing actualizations of an idea (theory) – the difference between the artwork and the idea (one could also say: the source-code) is continually replicated in each work produced by the system. The system’s code, of course, is composed by the sum of all the system’s products. At the same time, as we look at any particular artwork, the difference between communication and perception (between the art system and the psychic system) is replicated within our own consciousness. “The artwork”, says Luhmann, “takes on the burden of paradox and dissolves it in its own formal arrangement; one then sees quite concretely: it works!” (Luhmann, 2000, p. 301).

Operational autonomy implies that theory, as a self-description of the art system, continually reproduces the difference (between itself and its object) as it materializes/inscribes itself in each individual artwork. Or, to put it differently: art theory becomes aware of itself and finds itself capable, in this process, of determining its own object. In this sense, operational autonomy is nothing else but the digestive reproduction of the theoretical difference that made the system itself possible in the first place. This digestive reproduction depends on whether theory is then reinserted into the formal arrangements of the artworks. Art thus becomes an open field for experimentation – and Early German Romanticism the first artistic movement to take full advantage of the operative autonomy of the system.

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34 “The formula of ‘Spirit’ anticipates the notion of ‘autopoiesis’ but lacks sufficient informational content” (Luhmann, 2000, p. 176).



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