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NOVALIS

Fichte Studies

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Preface

The preparation of this translation and introduction of Novalis' manuscript has been a lengthy and somewhat daunting enterprise, during the course of which I have become indebted to many generous and helpful folk. I would especially like to thank the series editor, Karl Ameriks, and editor Hilary Gaskin at Cambridge University Press for advice, encouragement, and patience that bordered on the saintly. Pauline Marsh did an extraordinary job with the painstaking work of copy-editing the typescript and was a joy to work with at all times. I am extremely grateful to Mathias Thierbach for his diligent work on a final reading of the translation, and also to Noell Birondo for compiling the index. Violetta Waibel gave extremely helpful last-minute advice on Novalis' reference to "players" in #445, as well as other useful suggestions and moral support.

Finally I want to thank my colleagues in the Department of Philosophy at Colorado State University, who never doubted the worthiness of this time-consuming and somewhat unorthodox philosophical enterprise. I owe special thanks to James Maffie for encouraging me to take on the project, and to Michael Losonsky for insisting that I finish.

Introduction

Georg Friedrich Phillip von Hardenberg is primarily known to Anglo-American philosophers, if at all, as a German Romantic poet, not as a philosopher. Indeed, until rather recently, the idea that early German Romanticism might comprise a philosophical as opposed to a purely literary phenomenon has hardly been taken seriously in anglophone philosophical circles at all.¹ Hence the name “Novalis,” as Hardenberg chose to call himself, typically conjures up images of a somewhat effete young man with large, moony eyes who fell in love with a child destined to die before she was old enough to marry him, and who himself died, romantically, as it were, of tuberculosis at the early age of twenty-nine. Even his literary efforts tend to be dismissed by analytically minded contemporary philosophers as paradigms of a stereotyped Romanticism: dreamy and mystical, valorizing medieval times, idealizing nature and human individuals, and worst of all, tending toward irrationalism. But just as the engraving of Novalis adorning the jackets and covers of books about him for the last hundred and fifty years is arguably a distortion,² so is this dismissive view of his work. The aim of this translation is to make accessible to an English-speaking audience the early, formative, and provocative

¹ A recent exception is Richard Rorty, who quotes Novalis in comparing pragmatism to Romanticism in “Truth without Correspondence to Reality,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 27; an interesting nineteenth-century exception is John Stuart Mill, who was fond of Novalis’ work. He quotes Novalis (from Carlyle’s translation) in his Berkeley essay, “Berkeley’s Life and Writings,” in *Collected Works*, Vol. xi, ed. J. M. Robson (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 466; and also in his *System of Logic*, Book vi, Ch. ii, “Of Liberty and Necessity” (*Collected Works*, Vol. viii), p. 843.

² William Arctander O’Brien discusses the mythologizing of Novalis, including the retouching of his portrait, in *Novalis: Signs of Revolution* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 25–26.

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philosophical struggles of a remarkable young thinker living in a remarkable time and place.

Friedrich von Hardenberg was born May 2, 1772 in Oberwiederstedt in Thuringia. His father, Heinrich von Hardenberg, traced his family origins to nobility in lower Saxony as far back as the twelfth-century. The father was what we would now call a “born again” pietist of the Herrnhuter or Moravian brethren sect. His involvement with the children, when he was not traveling, centered around their religious upbringing, and he remained a rather distant and cold figure in Novalis’ life. His mother, Auguste von Bolzig, with whom he always remained close, was the daughter of impoverished nobility and happy to be married to Heinrich. Friedrich was the first of her eleven children, all but one of whom died before her own death in 1818. Novalis was a sickly child and perhaps for that reason received her special attention, but whatever the cause, his attachment to her was strong, and eventually was reflected in the glorified mother-figures of his writings.

In 1784, the family moved to Weißenfels near Leipzig when the father was appointed director of the Saxon salt mines. Novalis was educated at home by private tutors and in 1790 enrolled in gymnasium and soon tested into the university at Jena in the fall. There he studied philosophy with the Kantian Reinhold and history under none other than Friedrich Schiller, with whom he developed a personal acquaintance and a love for poetry, much to the chagrin of his stern father. To satisfy his father’s concern that he study law, Novalis shifted his study in the fall of 1791 to the University of Leipzig and law. Although he failed to finish the degree there he became friends with Friedrich Schlegel and had an ill-starred love affair that foundered on the rocks of his father’s disapproval. The law degree was finally obtained in June, 1794 at the University of Wittenberg.

That fall, Novalis’ father apprenticed him to a director in the Prussian civil service in Tennstedt, where on a visit to a landowner in nearby Grüningen he met Sophie von Kühn, one of his daughters. She was at the time twelve years old. For Novalis, it was the proverbial love at first sight (“A quarter-hour determined it for me,” he wrote to his brother); for the adolescent girl it was perhaps a mildly entertaining visit. Novalis’ persistence prevailed and they were engaged the following March, two days before her thirteenth birthday. Novalis hid their engagement for fear once again of his father’s disapproval, but the older Hardenberg liked Sophie, and consented to the marriage.

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The affair with Sophie has since become the stuff of myth (or Gothic romance), although recent biographers, both historical and fictional, have helped to recover the human dimension of this pair. Sophie developed what was probably a liver inflammation and fell ill in November of that same year, 1795. In the meantime Novalis had met Fichte in the home of the philosopher Niethammer, and had vowed to himself to make a serious study of the philosopher's work, a pledge which he kept that fall. The result was the so-called *Fichte Studies*, notes written in fits and starts over the course of an eventful year, until the fall of 1796. Sophie's illness recurred at the beginning 1796 and by the following summer she was taken to Jena for what turned out to be a series of excruciatingly painful operations. She returned worse than ever to her home in December of that year and died, two days after her fifteenth birthday, in March of 1797.

Sophie's death followed the completion of the *Fichte Studies* by only a few months, and traces of the impending tragedy are evident in the later sections. The study of philosophy during this period of his life is inseparable from his personal development: "The study dearest to me is basically named the same as my bride: it is called philosophy – philosophy is the soul of my life and the key to my real self."³ Novalis' "love of sophia" was through and through determined by his love of Sophie – by his admiration for her courage in suffering combined with childish playfulness and ordinary common sense: an odd, compelling combination of resignation and fantastical hope (what F. Schlegel somewhat peevishly called "Herrnhuterei" and "absolute Schwärmerei" – pietism and absolute fanaticism⁴) that also characterizes the search for the true nature of the "I" in the *Fichte Studies*.

Professionally, Novalis' life took an important turn when he was appointed assistant to the directorate of the Saxonian saltworks in Weißenfels (under the direction of his father). He moved from Tennstedt to Weißenfels to take up the job in February of 1796. His interest in mining was not incidental to his philosophical explorations and it is no coincidence that a year later, after enrolling in the Mining Academy in Freiburg, he immediately took up again his studies of the philosophies of Fichte, Kant, and Hemsterhuis. That same year (1797) Novalis met August Wilhelm

³ Letter to Friedrich Schlegel, July 8, 1796.

⁴ Quoted in Gerhard Schulz, *Novalis in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowolht, 1969), p. 57.

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Schlegel, brother of Friedrich and Caroline von Schlegel, as well as Friedrich Schelling. The Schlegel brothers, as co-editors of the journal *Athenäum* (1798–1800), were the leading figures of the so-called Jena Romantics, the early German Romantics whose circle included Caroline Schlegel (later Caroline Schelling), Schelling, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Dorothea Mendelssohn Schleiermacher, and Ludwig Tieck. Novalis became a key figure in this short-lived but enormously influential group. It was also during this year that Novalis undertook a serious study of mathematics, chemistry, physics, and geology.

By the end of 1798 Novalis was engaged to Julie von Charpentier, for whom he had developed a more tempered but deep love over the past year. The marriage never occurred. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent a month at the spa in Teplitz “taking the cure,” but was plagued by progressively poor health from that time forward. Just as his poetic program was coming to fruition, his physical health began to decline. Nevertheless, this year saw the publication of Novalis’ first major works, including *Blütenstaub* (*Pollen*), for the first time under the pen-name “Novalis,” and *Glaube und Liebe* (*Faith and Love*). He wrote *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* (*The Apprentices of Sais*) and the “Teplitz Fragment” and began notes for the *Allgemeine Brouillon* as well.

In spite of increasing ill-health, 1799 was another active year for him. He met Tieck and Goethe, studied Schleiermacher’s work, wrote *Die Christenheit oder Europa* (*Christianity or Europe*) and *Geistliche Lieder* (*Spiritual Songs*), and began *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and the *Hymnen an die Nacht* (*Hymns to the Night*). It was during this year, from November 11–14, that he took part in the historic meeting that might be called the only “real” Jena Circle, at the home of August Schlegel in Jena. There he read his *Geistliche Lieder* and *Die Christenheit oder Europa* to Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling, Tieck, and Jean Paul Ritter. His work life, meanwhile, continued to flourish: at the end of the year he was appointed associate director of the saltworks of Saxony.

Novalis continued to write during the following year, made plans to improve his financial and career status, and even began a geological survey tour of several regions in Saxony. But his weakened condition declined even further, and by October he was seriously ill. In December he was appointed circuit director of the Thuringian saltworks administration, but by January of 1801 his condition was so serious that he was forced to return to the family home in Weißenfels. On March 25 of that year he

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died, in the company of his closest friend Friedrich Schlegel and to the strains of the piano that his brother Karl was playing for him.

Novalis' Fichte critique

Novalis undertook his serious study of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* just months after having met Fichte, along with Hölderlin, in the home of a mutual friend, the philosopher Niethammer, in Jena. Little is known about that encounter except for an entry in Niethammer's diary stating that they "spoke much of religion and revelation, and that in this area many questions still remained for philosophy," but Mähl speculates that the meeting may have spurred Novalis' determination to engage with Fichte's philosophy more seriously and as soon as possible.⁵ In the set of notes beginning with reflections on Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, which comprises the bulk of the manuscript (about 400 pages) and which has been called "the most significant philosophical work of early Romanticism," Novalis comes to grips with the early philosophy of this thinker who had claimed, and nearly won, ascendancy to Kant's throne in German philosophy.⁶

Fichte's work was exciting to the young Romantics, since among other things it aimed to resolve the "crisis" of metaphysics in Kant caused by his relativization of knowledge to human modes of cognition. Insofar as it intended to say something definite and positive about the nature of the self as it is in itself, Fichte hoped to ground human freedom on a firm foundation and to rescue this fundament of ethics from the precarious status of an unknowable postulate. Novalis, like everyone in Jena, was fascinated by this bold attempt, and the *may* Fichte philosophized was an inspiration to Novalis, but after submerging himself in his work, Novalis moved away from and ultimately rejected much of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In particular, he criticized Fichte's account of self-consciousness, especially his view that the I of self-consciousness is to be understood as beginning with an act of "self-positing," and is not a representation, but a kind of intellectual intuition that, in Fichte's words, is "that act which does not and

⁵ Novalis: *Schriften*, Vol. II, *Das philosophische Werk I*, ed. Richard Samuel in collaboration with Hans-Joachim Mähl and Gerhard Schulz, revised by Richard Samuel and Hans-Joachim Mähl (Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne, Mainz: Kohlhammer, 1981), p. 31. All further page references in the text to Mähl's Introduction to the *Fichte Studies* will be to this volume. References to the *Fichte Studies* themselves will be by paragraph number following this edition.

⁶ Manfred Frank, in *Einführung in die Frühromantische Ästhetik* (Frankfurt-on-Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), p. 248. Hereafter, references to Frank in the text will be to this work.

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cannot appear among the empirical states of our consciousness, but rather lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible.”⁷ For Fichte

The self is to be equated with, and yet opposed to, itself. It is all one consciousness, but a consciousness that involves an absolute self, on the one hand, and a divisible, limited self on the other. (p. 109)

Novalis’ problem with Fichte’s account of self-consciousness has to do with the latter’s view that it is possible to postulate an absolute self outside of presenting it to ourselves in reflection. As Novalis saw it, self-consciousness *must* be representational. Insofar as self-consciousness involves thought of oneself, it must be about some thing, an object one represents to oneself. But Fichte’s “I” is supposed to be *non*-represented, an original fact-act (*Tathandlung*) that can only be described as immediate consciousness, or a kind of “intellectual intuition.” The self-positing “I” is supposed to unite in an intellectual intuition the subject of consciousness with the self as object of consciousness. As Manfred Frank argues in his lecture on Novalis’ *Fichte Studies*, “Immediacy and self-reference are incompatible with each other” (p. 253). That is, self-reference requires a vehicle, something that points to the self, a means, or medium for referring. For Novalis, intellectual intuition can only be a reflection, an act of representing that is directed toward the only thing we can experience immediately, namely a feeling. (At #11 Novalis identifies sensible intuition with feeling.) Because self-consciousness is a reflective act, an attempt to reach an intuition (feeling) in thought, the best it can accomplish is still only a reflection of this feeling. It is the feeling grasped in thought – the thought of the feeling – but this grasping is not identical to the feeling itself (as the thought that something is funny is not itself funny). In other words, and in essence, Novalis refuses to grant Fichte’s very un-Kantian starting point – he refuses, as Kant certainly refused, to allow the conflation of intuition and thought, even in the guise of a pre-reflective “thought-act.”

Of course, there is more to Fichte’s story. The “conflation” or *Tathandlung* is an original act that brings consciousness into existence, but self-consciousness contains further moments that involve the positing of

⁷ *Fichte: The Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 93. Page references in the text hereafter will be to this edition.

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opposition in general, that is, the positing of a not-self in opposition to and limited by the self. Novalis' reading of Fichte was based on lecture notes that were published in haste by Fichte and later revised, and it may be objected that Fichte's most sophisticated account was not open to Novalis' objections.⁸ Be that as it may, Novalis categorically rejects any account of consciousness that depends on a single principle ("All searching for a single principle would be like the attempt to square the circle" [#566]). Referring to Fichte's account of a unitary self-consciousness that contains a divided self, Novalis speaks of "the famous struggle within the I" (#5). But Novalis argues that the struggle begins already in the (allegedly) "absolute *Urhandlung*" of self-positing, which is, Novalis argues, nothing more than a necessary deception of a mediated I that is attempting to be absolute – unmediated – and thus comes into conflict with itself. Hence, what Fichte takes to be an immediate act of self-positing is in fact a mediated act of representation. We see self-intuition (*Selbstgefühl*) reflected in the mirror of thought and conclude that we have reached it. But in fact we are fooled: we have only the "mirror image" of self-intuition, not that intuition itself.

Self-reflection presents us with an illusion of ourselves that, Novalis says, requires a second act of reflection if we are not to be misled into thinking that we have attained objective knowledge of what is essentially non-objective. This second reflective act "corrects" the illusion of the first thought that we had of ourselves, and leads us, not to the self, but to knowledge of our ignorance of it. That is, it shows us that we are incapable of grasping the absolute ground of the self, and hence of all our knowledge. Since Novalis holds that "striving after the thought of a ground is the ground of philosophy" and "all philosophizing must end in an absolute ground" (#566), this would seem to spell the end of all philosophizing, and for Novalis, in one sense this is true: "The borders of feeling are the borders of philosophy" (#15).

But in another sense, he argues, philosophy may recognize its own absolute when it recognizes that no absolute ground is given. Even in the face of giving up the search for the absolute, or rather, precisely *because* of giving it up, the "drive to philosophize" can never be satisfied, and when

⁸ For a thorough English-language account of the history of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and a translation of the student transcripts of the later lectures, see *Fichte: Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre), Novo Methodo (1796/99)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), Editor's Introduction.

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we “freely renounce the absolute” there arises in us an “unending free activity” that is “the only possible absolute that can be given us” (#566). Thus philosophy can only ever provide a negative account of the self. But since this negative characteristic *is* indeed *one* aspect of our nature, it is at least not a falsified account of the human self (which in essence he accuses Fichte of giving). Manfred Frank nicely captures this tension-laden conception of the self propounded by Novalis as “a non-knowing that knows itself as such” (p. 255).

Novalis’ philosophical theory of self-consciousness commits him to the view that no *theory* of the self will reveal us to ourselves as we are “in ourselves” or as we are “absolutely.” This view marks a significant departure from Fichte’s idealism, and in many respects it marks a decisive break within early German Romanticism from German idealism overall. Arguably, Novalis’ repudiation of a philosophy of the absolute marks him out as far more in the spirit of Kantian Enlightenment than those in his idealist cohort.⁹ Indeed, as von Molnár (pp. 41–42) points out,¹⁰ Novalis makes frequent reference to a Kantian notion of regulative ideas, especially in regard to the nature of the “I.” The absolute ego is for Novalis a regulative absolute:

I – has, perhaps, like all ideas of reason merely regulative, classificatory use – Nothing at all in relation to reality. (#502)

Or,

Every state, every fact-act [*Tathandlung*] presupposes an other . . . all quest for a First [genus] is nonsense – it is a *regulative idea*. (#472)

Given Novalis’ explicit criticism of Fichtean “seeking the unconditioned,” it is at least not surprising that Novalis returned, if only briefly, to the study of Kant immediately after his “Auseinandersetzung” with Fichtean philosophy.

⁹ In this regard he shares company with Hölderlin. See Frank, *Einführung*, pp. 248–249, and also my “Romantic Conceptions of the Self in Hölderlin and Novalis,” in *Figuring the Self: Subject, Absolute, and Others in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. D. E. Klemm and G. Zöllner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 134–148.

¹⁰ Géza von Molnár, *Novalis’ “Fichte Studies”: The Foundations of his Aesthetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970). Page references in the text are to this work.

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Overview of the *Fichte Studies*

The editors reorganized Novalis' notes into six distinct groups based on painstakingly careful handwriting analyses. The first (Group I) dates from fall to early winter of 1795; Group II from winter, 1795 to February, 1796; Group III from February to March, 1796; Group IV from March and April to early summer, 1796; Group V from summer of 1796, and Group VI from summer to fall, 1796.

Group I (1–210)

Novalis begins his Fichtean thought experiment by reflecting, as Fichte did in his published lectures from 1794/1795, on the form of the proposition “A = A” (p. 93). To understand what Novalis is responding to in this first crucial section it is important to keep in mind which of Fichte's works he most likely had before him. Texts that Novalis was certainly responding to when he undertook his serious study of Fichte include these lectures and also Fichte's essay “Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” published in May of 1795, as well as the first part of the *Foundations of Natural Right*, published in 1796.

In the lectures of 1794, Fichte uses the necessarily true statement “A = A” simply as a starting point, an occasion for uncovering the claim of the self's identity, “I am I,” which he argues is presupposed in all other identity claims. Novalis obligingly starts here too, but immediately finds a problem in the nature of the identity claim itself, which he calls a *Scheinsatz*, an “illusory proposition” that makes an identity claim but is itself incapable of revealing the essence of identity. In this regard he gestures already to aesthetic judgment – “taste and genius” – and so his path diverges from Fichte's at the outset. Nevertheless, he continues his reading, jotting notes on the text, but almost always diverging from Fichte's line of thought, taking long detours through his own reveries on a number of philosophical issues.

Some oft-quoted highlights from this section, by no means meant to interpret the text but simply provided as signposts for the reader, include the following:

#2, the nature of the knowledge and consciousness: “a being outside of being that is within being . . . an image of being within being”

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#3, on the attempt to verbalize being in-itself through opposition, by saying “not-being”: “It just grasps a handful of darkness.”

#5, on Fichte’s conception of the I: “Has not Fichte too arbitrarily packed everything into the I?”

#11, the “semiotic fragment,”¹¹ on the “theory of the sign”: deals with the “miracle” of signification and communication between two “signifying agents”; first reference to the “mirror” of reflection

#15, on the nature of philosophy: “cannot be self-observation” – “eavesdropping on the self”

#17–26, the nature of the self-reflective act, intellectual intuition, Fichte’s original act (*Tathandlung*)

#27–31, categories of thought

#31–50, nature and relation of the empirical and the pure I: #32, “the famous conflict within the I”; #33, subject and object in the I;

#36, the rule of reverse order: “What holds of the absolute I holds also for the mediated I, only inversely [*ordine inverso*]”

#38–50, categories of the absolute and relative act of self-positing, their matter and form, feeling, unity and division; the real and ideal

#51, the “particular subject” and morality, natural rights and politics

#86–112, theoretical and practical I.

Group II (211–287)

This group begins with thoughts on the nature of the imagination and its relation to the other faculties of “feeling, understanding and reason” (#212) or “of representation and of feeling” (213). Novalis chiefly differentiates the imagination as an active power: *Einbildungskraft*. He argues for the need to ground the sciences in a “theory of intuition” (217) which would include theories of feeling and imagination (211). He goes on to speak more of the faculty of representation as well, and distinguishes in the process material and matter (*Stoff* and *Materie*) – “the latter is the substrate of intuition, the former is the substrate of representation” (226), and space and time as “conditions of material” (224). There follows (226–233) a set of thoughts on the relative, interchangeable nature of form and material (see especially #233), followed by a set of fragments on the illusory nature of truth and the truth of illusion: “Truth is the form of

¹¹ O’Brien’s designation for this passage in *Novalis: Signs of Revolution*, pp. 97ff. Hereafter references to O’Brien in the text will be to this work.

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illusion – illusion the form of truth.” “Illusion is necessary everywhere” (234).

More sketches follow on the nature of other concept pairs: being/appearance, whole/part, determination/determinability, activity/passivity, reality/ideality, affirmation/negation (246), and rule/game, and the power of the imagination to mediate (or “oscillate” – Fichte’s notion of *Schweben*) between the two sides of each pair. He returns to consider once more the nature of positing or affirming in the “original act” (282), introducing the importance of words as “the passage [*transitus*] upon which everything rests” (282). He ponders the implications of the subject’s freedom as the substrate of reflection: “Freedom is the substrate, the sphere of the opposite, the idea,” says that it must be “a non-word, a non-concept,” and in a memorable aside asks: “How can that which is only a voice produce an echo?” (284).

Group III (288–372)

Under the heading “Principal rule” (*Hauptregel*), Novalis takes up his third set of reflections on self-consciousness: “Everything, irrespective of whether we reflect upon or sense it, is an object and so stands under the *laws* of the object.” He ponders the consequences of this for reflection itself: “Presentation is also object – but what kind of object?” (290). He introduces the term “state” (*Zustand*) to express the “real essence” of that which he has referred to up to this point as the “opposite” of the object and the relation of state and object to the activity of the subject: “Activity is change. Change is unthinkable without state and object” (292–306). He then continues to explore the active as well as the suffering (“taking”) nature of subject (311–324), as “drive” and “passion” (325–327). This is followed by a more fragmented set of entries on related concepts, words, and occasional musings, the scattered nature of which Mähl suggests may indicate the restlessness and frequent travel during this period of Novalis’ life (p. 65). The section ends with the enigmatic question, apparently inserted later: “Where do I exit, where do I go, and how do I proceed?”

Group IV (373–552)

The tone of this group changes dramatically and is no doubt a reflection of troubles in Novalis’ life tied to the illnesses of his brother Erasmus

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and his fiancée, Sophie. The first entry reiterates a Fichtean “egocentricity” that may well also portray Novalis’ own distracted state as he attempts to continue his studies: “When I ask what a thing is I am asking about its representation and intuition – *I* am wondering only about *myself*.” There is far less discursive continuity in this section than the preceding ones, so that it may prove frustrating for the scholar pursuing an interpretive or philosophical agenda. On the other hand it is full of provocative thoughts (“Scientist – rhapsodist, or free spirit” [394], “Is language indispensable to thought” [495]), interesting bits of self-help (“Practice slowness” [407], “Now I can do nothing better than to finish the studies and work leisurely on French . . .”), and revealing personal asides (“Equanimity – even in the most hopeless cases, for instance, as with Sophie” [388], “Why must everything I do now be so *painful* – nothing peaceful – at leisure – calm” [504]). Passing reference is made to Schiller, Wieland, and other writers, and traces of his religiosity, or need for it, are noticeable here. Paragraphs following #437 pick up threads from the earlier notes dealing with activity, state, and object, and the relative nature of being (“Only the whole is real . . . The whole rests more or less – like a game in which people sit on each other’s knees in a circular fashion without a chair” [445, also 454–456]). Novalis also makes several references to the merely regulative nature of philosophy in this section, as if he were learning to appreciate the wisdom of people (like his beloved brother and Sophie) who lacked scholarly wisdom (“One can also fulfill one’s vocation without philosophy, if one lives in accordance with what the wisest and best did and taught, and makes experience and common sense his guide” [505]).

Group v (553–568)

This group is headed “Remarks on the *Wissenschaftslehre*” and marks a return to the original topic of his study. The page references are to Novalis’ copy of Fichte’s lectures, section 1 of the *Fundamental Principles of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, 1794. Novalis’ gloss on the identity “a = a” explains how what seems to be a mere tautology can be understood as a kind of predication – it is a “sharpened distinction” of terms that might otherwise not have been recognized as identical. He then moves in a new and important direction by taking the basic first principle of explanation,

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which Fichte had assumed as a postulate given in an intellectual intuition, to be a regulative ideal which serves to give a kind of unity to the “un-ending body of the known” (554). He also parts company with Fichte by emphasizing the freedom of the I as a tendency grounded in *harmonious* interaction, of imaginative “oscillation” between the relata, or “opposites” (555). At #556 he expands this, adding an element of mystical sensibility into his account that is compatible with a Spinozistic naturalism. The most important, and certainly the most frequently cited, passage in this section, however, is #566, where Novalis redefines philosophy as reflecting upon a ground, that is, “an ending free activity,” claiming that “All searching for a *single principle* would be like the attempt to square the circle. . .” This passage contains one of the clearest statements of what Novalis takes philosophy to be, and it is a cornerstone of his later thought and art.

Group VI (569–667)

The final group, like the fourth, is marked by a lack of continuity in tone and content, and probably for similar reasons. Sophie’s illness continued, the operations proved both excruciatingly painful and useless, and Novalis was certainly distracted. He continues threads from earlier themes, including fragments on the differences between the sexes, references to faith and Christianity, and references to Fichte’s views in the *Foundations of Natural Right*. In this section Novalis returns to his interest in language in a few passages on words and their use and meaning (590, 612, 622), as well as literary critical comments. There are comments on God and the “one true religion” that undermine traditional caricatures of Novalis’ religiosity (“Every *fixation* on an object is as *correct*, but also as *unjust*, as a ‘one true religion’ – human beings draw more from it than their humanity permits. . .” [647]), and gesture in the direction of Feuerbach (“Up to now concepts of God were quite correct concepts of human beings” [649]). Paragraph 633 is interesting for its application of the theory of representation developed earlier to art, ending with the claim “We stand now only at the beginning of the art of the writer.” In general in this last section, where Novalis returns to the original Fichtean themes it is with an eye to their relevance to art and life, and, one cannot help but surmise, to *his* art and life.

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The *Studies* finish with a perplexing passage ending in a question:

On humanity. Its pure complete development must first be in the art of the individual – and only then pass over to the great masses of people and then the species. To what extent is the species an individual? (667)

In his detailed account of the dating and ordering of the six groups, Mähl notes that since the last extant page of the *Fichte Studies* is filled to the very bottom, the question of whether there were further notes or whether this is indeed the conclusion of Novalis' project must remain open (p. 86) – an appropriate ending to this extraordinary work.

Recent interpretations of the *Fichte Studies*

The substantial contributions to literature that Novalis made in his short life have received, justifiably, much recognition beyond the German-speaking lands. It may be that the very success of his creative and artistic endeavors has obstructed perception of him as a thinker worthy of a place in the distinguished pantheon of German philosophy. It is therefore not surprising that the first major English-language study of Novalis as philosopher was published in a language series, Stanford Studies in Germanics and Slavics. This was Géza von Molnár's *Novalis' "Fichte Studies"*, published in 1970 and subtitled "*The Foundations of his Aesthetics.*"

Philosophical influences on Novalis included Kant, of course, as well as Hemsterhuis, Spinoza, Plotinus, Böhme, and Plato, to name a few, but there is no question that it was the philosophy of Fichte that had the strongest impact on his thought. Novalis' family was indirectly associated with Fichte through his benefactor, Ernst Haubold Freiherr von Miltitz, Novalis' uncle. Novalis had certainly had access to Fichte's writings as soon as they were published, and as early as 1794. It is worth considering some of the leading interpreters' views on the issue of Fichte's influence, however, if only to illustrate the surprising extent to which what may at first glance appear to be a rather tangled set of notes can indeed be unraveled into fascinating and original lines of philosophical argument.

Theodor Haering, in *Novalis als Philosoph*,¹² argues that Fichte's influence was direct with respect to four points in particular: the view of philosophy

¹² Theodor Haering, *Novalis als Philosoph* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1954). References to Haering in the text will be to this work.

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as a basic human drive to seek the original ground of experience in a systematic way; the view that this seeking must lead to a “creative (active)” principle that would allow human beings somehow to grasp the absolute; a dialectical account of phenomena; and finally, the view that the empirical I is a “not-I,” that is, an object among other objects. Haering’s fundamental assumption, one that has come to be shared by most students of Novalis’ thought, is that in the course of his studies Novalis develops his own philosophy in opposition to important aspects of Fichte’s philosophy. In particular, the Fichtean notion of the “I” as an original fact-act is thoroughly criticized and ultimately rejected by Novalis, according to Haering, in favor of a less idealist, more dialectical account of phenomena.¹³ This opposing account, while certainly adapted from Fichte’s own in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, then becomes absolutely central for Novalis’ own philosophical views. According to Haering, the greater part of the *Fichte Studies* is “dedicated to the proof and development of just this dialectical character of the whole of actuality as well as of true knowing” (pp. 620–621). He argues that Novalis effectively separates Fichte’s dialectical account of the self (the self can only come to be through positing an “other” or “not-self” and vice versa) from Fichtean idealism, which limits this understanding to subjectivity and the ego, or the “I.” Independently of Schelling, who developed a similar approach later, and in anticipation of Hegel, Haering argues, Novalis extended Fichte’s dialectical understanding of subjectivity to all natural phenomena. Nature and our knowledge of it are to be understood in terms of completion (*Ergänzung*) in a higher unity that contains both inner and outer “spheres.” Haering calls this process a “sublation,” using Hegel’s language, and claims that it is the very notion of romanticizing for which Novalis is famous.¹⁴

Moreover, according to Haering, Novalis elevates the dialectical process, which Fichte only *applied*, to an object of philosophical investigation in its own right. In so doing, he calls into question the very possibility of a

¹³ See *ibid.*, p. 620. Haering argues that Novalis was “quite critical” of the idealist aspect of Fichte’s theory of the self, not only pointing to his famous comment that Fichte “packed too much into the I,” but reminding the reader as well that Novalis’ “magical idealism” was also for him a “realist idealism” (*Real-Idealismus*).

¹⁴ See Haering, *ibid.*, pp. 45–46 and also 638. Although Haering sees Novalis as a precursor to Hegel, it is interesting to note that in the *Fichte Studies* the term *Aufheben* and its cognates occur very few times, and even in the passages quoted by Haering in support of his account of romanticizing as a kind of “(hin)aufheben” (p. 638), Novalis actually uses the term *erheben* – “to raise” or “to raise to a higher power.”

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successful philosophy of consciousness, answering it with what Haering calls his “philosophy of representation” – the view that the necessarily non-identical relation between representing thing and thing represented (the sign is always other than the signified and so cannot “be” the sign) holds in every area of philosophy and serves as an explanatory prototype for all relations, including that of the empirical self to the absolute. It is, in Haering’s words, a metaphysics of representation, far removed from Fichte’s idealism (p. 622, and pp. 152–156, 641). All in all, Haering’s view is that although Novalis is deeply indebted to Fichte, especially as a stylistic and terminological source, Novalis went far beyond Fichte, forging in essence a new metaphysics whose innovativeness renders irrelevant the issue of whether he truly understood Fichte. In light of this, says Haering, the question of influence “loses interest” (p. 622).

Géza von Molnár’s *Novalis’ “Fichte Studies”* takes issue with Haering’s “Hegelian” reading, arguing for the centrality of the Fichtean concept of the ego (or as I have preferred to translate it, the “I”) in Novalis’ work.¹⁵ He makes the important point that Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* first and foremost involves his enjoining his students to perform an introspective exercise: “It is reasonable to assume,” he argues, “that Novalis’ fragments constitute subjective exercises in accordance with this Fichtean exhortation” to repeat Fichte’s own introspective processes, and “the only possible object of such scrutiny is the ego itself” (p. 33). Thus von Molnár argues that what distinguishes Novalis from Fichte is not that Novalis rejects the latter’s conception of the I, but rather that Novalis’ view of the underlying ground of subjectivity is a “negative principle” or regulative idea (pp. 35ff.). The paradoxical fact of human existence, that we are both subject and object to ourselves, is to be understood in Novalis as a matter of perspective or aspect, of whether we are looking inward or looking outward. If the absolute is sought inwardly it gives rise to the (regulative) thought of the I as the source of all subjectivity; if outwardly, it gives rise to the regulative notion of God as the source all objectivity, i.e., of nature. The “unifying function” of the I is “the only manifestation of the absolute unity which is the absolute ego” (p. 54).

¹⁵ Géza von Molnár, *Novalis’ “Fichte Studies”*: *The Foundations of his Aesthetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970). Page references in the text are to this work.

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Molnár, like Haering, takes the activity of representating to be a central aspect of Novalis' philosophy, but again, he argues for a direct appropriation of Fichtean ideas. The importance of representation is tied to the Fichtean "fusion" of subject and object, agency and thought, practical and theoretical in the original activity of the I. For Novalis, von Molnár argues, the I is regulative in the sense that it represents the relation between the two:

The schema of interrelation, where the ego is the image of nature, nature the image of the ego, and the relation between the two the image of the nameless Absolute, is obviously not a static condition but constitutes rather a dynamic relationship which we came to know as representative action (*Darstellung*). (p. 97)

The difference is not that Novalis rejects the Fichtean conception of the ego as a union of the subjective and objective self, or even that Novalis rejects Fichte's acceptance of an absolute self. He argues rather that Novalis simply gives equal emphasis to what Fichte himself, were he not such a moralist, could have emphasized, namely the equally absolute nature of world. Even here von Molnár claims that Novalis remains within Fichte's philosophy inasmuch as he maintains this emphasis by appeal to "Fichtean concepts of 'feeling' (*Gefühl*) and 'faith' (*Glaube*)":

Novalis, to be sure, stays within the Fichtean framework, only his accentuation is more evenly distributed between self and world, since he never loses sight of the Absolute's "form-contentual" aspect, or, in Fichte's terms, he never forgets that *Tathandlung* comprises *Tat* as well as *handeln*, content as well as form . . . Fichte's absolute is the Ego . . . but Novalis can call the Absolute both God and Ego in one and the same breath, since his state of the empirical is the simultaneity of action and passion, spirit and "being", form and content, where both paths reach out to the same Infinity and where a change in name is merely indicative of the direction from which the Absolute is approached.

The conclusion of his analysis of the *Fichte Studies*, then, is that they represent a "reinterpretation" of Fichte's philosophy that by emphasizing nature as well as self allows him to replace Fichtean "absolute action" of self-positing with the absolute activity of artistic representation. Thus Novalis does not so much break with Fichte as rather recognize what

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is already inherent in the latter's own account of the imagination, thus placing aesthetics center stage in his philosophy.

In German scholarship, no one has argued more forcefully for the independent contributions and unique place of early German Romanticism in German philosophy than Manfred Frank. The 1989 publication of his lectures on Romantic aesthetics has been instrumental in reviving interest in the *Fichte Studies*. Novalis' debt to Fichte, in Frank's estimation, is primarily as a catalyst to his own systematic working through of the paradoxes of explaining self-consciousness in terms of reflection, a problem that he shared not only with Fichte, but, in Frank's view, with his generation.¹⁶ Novalis uses Fichte's language at first (and confuses matters somewhat by occasionally couching Fichte's arguments in his own poetic language), but gradually comes to speak in his own voice, and, from the very start, is critical of the Fichtean (and according to Frank, also Kantian) account of self-consciousness.¹⁷

Frank points out that if there is a position that resembles Novalis' during this period, it can only be that of Hölderlin's in "Judgment and Being," which was written at roughly the same time. But even so, he argues, the basis for Novalis' position is far more carefully formulated than Hölderlin's view, and is the result of a philosophical struggle the depth of which makes the *Fichte Studies* one of the "most difficult [texts] in German philosophy" (p. 248). The position that Frank is referring to involves the "aesthetic consequences" Novalis draws from the failure of reflection, i.e., of judgment, to produce knowledge of the fact of self-consciousness:

Poetics [*Poesie*] must jump into the breach where the air becomes too thin for philosophy to breathe. But this conclusion must be drawn in a completely immanent way through purely philosophical means. The thesis that the Absolute is inaccessible to reflection indeed opens the gates to poetics and invites it to achieve what philosophy was incapable of achieving; but the thesis itself is not a piece of poetic thought, but rather a work of genuine and rigorous philosophical speculation. (Frank, p. 248)

¹⁶ "One can practically explain it as a generational experience." Frank, *Einführung*, p. 249.

¹⁷ *Das Problem "Zeit" in der deutschen Romantik: Zeitbewußtsein und Bewußtsein von Zeitlichkeit in der frühromantischen Philosophie und in Tiecks Dichtung* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1990), p. 130.

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Frank's account of Novalis' path to his aesthetic conclusions places strong emphasis on the latter's examination of the judgment of self-identity: "I am I," or the more abstract "a is a" with which Novalis begins. Novalis is concerned that "We abandon the identical in order to present it" (#1) or, in Frank's paraphrase, "In order to present identity as it is expressed in judgment we have to step outside judgment" (p. 251). Frank takes the key to his interpretation from the Novalis claim in the same passage that "The essence of identity can only be presented in an *illusory* proposition [*Scheinsatz*]." He explains Novalis' theory of reflection as literally a kind of representational mirroring and remirroring that is "the structure of reflective inversion" (or, following Novalis, the *ordo inversus*) (p. 257).

This account of the structure of judgment is the "invariable schema" that governs the entire study, according to Frank, and the failure to recognize this basic theme in all Novalis' varied expressions of it explains why, according to Frank, Novalis' real contribution to philosophy and the theory of consciousness has been ignored or misunderstood. Judgment necessarily misrepresents, or reverses, the self at first, but upon recognition of this reversal can re-reverse itself in a second reflective act that amounts to a reversal of the error, the damage to knowledge, of the first act. What is investigated is not the absolute self, but the "unity and being" of "the incapacity of reflection" (p. 261). When we understand the self as, as it were, *absolutely* finite, and the absolute as merely a regulative idea of infinite being, we first truly grasp the nature of the self. The result, according to Frank, is that Novalis radically distances his account of consciousness from any kind of metaphysical absolutes. If Frank's reading is correct, Novalis' account of subjectivity is of interest not only for contemporary theories of self-consciousness, but also as an important and hitherto neglected precursor of postmodern theories of the subject.

In *Novalis: Signs of Revolution*, William Arctander O'Brien carries the postmodernist implications of Novalis' theorizing even further. He argues that the latter's problematizing of the nature of the self and its relation to being led him not only to reject absolutizing metaphysics, but to move beyond philosophy altogether. Novalis' revolutionary move, O'Brien claims, was to subsume it, together with the central problem of the nature of the I, under linguistic and semiotic theory:

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Hardenberg's notebooks do not so much investigate language as a philosophical problem as they approach the problematics of Fichte's philosophy understood *as* language . . . Language, which Hardenberg explicitly subsumes under the larger rubric of semiotics, is not just one philosophical problem among others in the *Fichte Studies*, and to examine it as such misses its special role in the text. To approach Hardenberg's discussions of language and semiotics as philosophical issues within the *Fichte Studies* overlooks or underestimates their most radical gesture, for they insist on just the opposite: they approach philosophy as a linguistic and semiotic problem. (p. 78)

O'Brien's reading carefully pulls together those strands in the *Fichte Studies* that deal with the nature of the image or the sign and its implications for self-knowledge. While acknowledging that Hardenberg was not only familiar with but also still in part committed to eighteenth-century linguistic theory, O'Brien is concerned to expose those aspects of the *Fichte Studies* that extend and finally break with Enlightenment linguistic traditions.

O'Brien's reading thus focuses on the explicit problematizing of representation that is a recurrent and, he believes, the most fundamental theme in the *Fichte Studies*. It is easy to underestimate the extent of late-eighteenth-century philosophy's faith in its own ability to achieve its goals. Even the post-Kantian philosophers like Fichte, who recognized difficulties for transcendental philosophy, never doubted that philosophical method was the appropriate tool for discovering the nature of consciousness. Novalis is far more critical, however, recognizing from the outset the need for a distinction between being or identity and its presentation. O'Brien points out that Novalis approaches Fichte's first principle not as a proposition, but as a *sentence*, a linguistic entity. This is the sense in which the "essence" of the principle can only be an illusory proposition or *Scheinsatz*: as a sentence it signals identity, but does not literally re-present it for transparent inspection: "By introducing the term 'sign' (*Zeichen*) for what stands in the place of what is lost, Hardenberg divorces presentation (*Darstellung*) from representation, and grounds it in semiosis" (p. 84).

Central to O'Brien's reading is what he calls the "semiotic fragment" (#11), which he sees as providing a sort of proto-structuralist account of meaning, eschewing causal accounts of the relation between sign and signified, and introducing the notion of a signifier as an "agent of

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semiotic invention.” He glosses the entry in terms of four stages: (1) an examination of the sign/signified relation as in general an arbitrary relation between dissimilar relata; (2) an examination in light of this fact of how signifying agents manage to communicate with each other; (3) an account of communication between agents as the result of self-determination; and (4) a discussion of the role of a universal “schema” (adapted from Kant and Fichte) shared by signifying agents in guaranteeing the success of communication between them. This final move, according to O’Brien, is “epoch-making” in its implications:

Although Hardenberg’s solution here recalls Fichte’s similar use of the schema, it has one radically different consequence. For whether it is used by the first or the second signifier, the schema’s inherent and universal mediation between sign and signified undercuts any possibility of a stable priority of one to the other: the sign and signified are given “simultaneously” in the priority of the schema itself.

Whereas O’Brien clearly rejects the view that Novalis is still operating entirely within the framework of Fichtean metaphysics, he suggests that Novalis’ semiotic theory is strongly influenced by Fichte’s views on language, and thus in a way

merely extends Fichte’s thought more consequentially than Fichte himself. . . . When Hardenberg extends the function of the schema to *all* signs, he merely continues a line of reasoning already introduced, but neglected by Fichte.

O’Brien argues that Novalis even prefigures post-structuralist accounts like Derrida’s in his recognition of “the signifier’s lack of motivation and its differential constitution with the signified” (p. 80).

Significance for contemporary philosophy

The very fact that this unusual collection of notes can generate such vastly different interpretive enterprises over the past half-century is a tribute to its potential to continue to engage philosophers well into the future. This is not surprising if we view Novalis’ study of Fichte and subsequent reworking, revolutionizing, or repudiating (depending on one’s interpretation) of the philosophy of human subjectivity as a unique chapter in modern western philosophy’s attempt to understand the relationship of

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human knowledge to its object. In Novalis' own time, Kant had pulled the rug out from under foundationalist accounts, so to speak, by arguing that building metaphysical systems from universal principles of reason was methodologically unsound and substantively unwarranted, since all human knowledge depends on human ways of knowing. The Copernican Revolution in philosophy, as it has since come to be called, was intended by Kant to circumscribe once and for all the area within which human beings can lay claim to knowledge of themselves and their world. But what for Kant seemed an enlightened and reasonable proposal was for many of his era an oppressive command to cease all efforts to find the "core" of their being and the absolute nature of the world. For all Fichte's claim to be carrying on the Kantian tradition, his effort to define the human subject in terms of an originary act of which we have an intellectual intuition was clearly a return in many respects to a Cartesian model of consciousness.

But just as the Cartesian cogito gives rise to problems in identifying the "I" that is supposed to be the conclusion of his argument (What do I know everytime I think/doubt? An idea? Or the self itself, in an intuition?), so too does Fichte's account of our grasp of the original act of positing the I (*Tathandlung*). Novalis asks, how do I grasp the true (absolute) self (as it is-in-itself, to use Kant's language) in anything *other* than representation? I might indeed "have a feeling" of myself that somehow precedes my recognition of it, but the moment that feeling is stated or asserted, it belongs to the realm of representation. Introspection won't work because consciousness is not transparent to itself. So, "the borders of feeling are the borders of philosophy":

Philosophy cannot be self-observation, because it would not then be what we are after. Perhaps it is self-feeling?" . . . "What then is a feeling? It can only be observed in reflection – the spirit of feeling is then gone. (#15)

What is the solution? Whatever interpretive approach one prefers, I believe that it is safe to say that basically, Novalis has a two-pronged answer. The first prong of the answer, which may be taken as the leading or at least most general conclusion of the *Fichte Studies*, is to accept that philosophy is fundamentally a product of an endless activity, *philosophizing*, that is a "striving after the thought of a ground" that is not given to us. We must look for but never expect to attain the "absolutes" we seek:

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Unending free activity in us arises through the free renunciation of the absolute – the only possible absolute that can be given us and that we only find through our inability to attain and know an absolute. This absolute that is given to us can only be known negatively, insofar as we act and find that what we seek cannot be attained through action. (#566)

So Novalis parts company with Fichtean idealism, but also with Cartesian foundationalism. Moreover, he argues, in a way very much prefiguring the later Wittgenstein, that the product of philosophizing – philosophy – is really a breach in the unending activity of philosophizing:

Philosophy, the result of philosophizing, arises accordingly through *interruption* of the drive towards knowledge of the ground – through standing still at the point where one is. (#566)

The philosophy of the subject, then, cannot provide a positive solution to the nature of the I:

The I signifies that negatively known absolute – what is left over after all abstraction – what can only be known through action and what only realizes itself through eternal lack. (#566)

Given this regulative notion of philosophy as an unending, and endless, activity, Novalis may certainly be seen as a precursor of the so-called postmodern philosophers who, in various ways, have declared the end of philosophy.

At the same time, however, Novalis moves further in the direction of transforming the modern conception of philosophy by suggesting that the activity of philosophizing may move seamlessly over into the creation of art. And this is the second prong of his solution to modern philosophy's question of the relation of thought to reality. In the very next sentence following the dramatic announcement that the self is only realized "through eternal lack," Novalis strikes a more optimistic note:

/Thus [through the realization of the self as an eternal lack] eternity is realized temporally in spite of the fact that time contradicts eternity. The I becomes effective and determinate in itself only in its *opposite*. /Insofar as I ask "What is that?" I demand the *externalizing* of the thing in itself – I want to know – *what is it?* Of course I already

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know that it *is* this or that thing, but what sort of a thing? This is what I want to know – and here I step into the sphere of the subjective. (#566)

In other words, Novalis says, what I demand is an exhibition or external presentation of the thing as it really is, absolutely, or in itself. That, whether it be the I or any other object, can never be given to me in reflection (“I never find intuition because I must seek it through reflection and vice versa” is how Novalis ends this paragraph). A paragraph later Novalis gestures toward the second half of his solution to the problem of reflection:

/To ground is to philosophize. To *think up* [something] [*erdenken*] is to poeticize. (#567)

Then, a few lines later, he adds an interesting parenthetical remark about Fichte’s style of philosophizing:

(Fichtean philosophy is a call to self-activity – I cannot thoroughly explain something to someone unless I refer him to himself, unless I bid him to perform the same action that clarified it for me. I can teach someone to philosophize when I teach him to do it as I do it – when he does what I do, he is what I am, is there, where I am.)

This is followed by the apparent non sequitur, “/All art begins with invention or imitation/.” But for Novalis the connection is clear. What is most important about Fichte for Novalis, in the end, is his invitational approach to philosophy – what Cavell has called the “reseduction” of poetry and philosophy¹⁸ – and it is precisely this invitation to imitate and reinvent another’s experience that leads Novalis to the connection between philosophizing (the activity, not philosophy the product) and art. Where philosophizing ends, poeticizing may begin, and if one is doing philosophy inventively, *with feeling*, so to speak, the transition should be seamless.

In another fragmentary set of notes on Kant, Novalis suggests that the practice of philosophy itself, and practical reason, must move into a new, aesthetic dimension:

¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Scepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 75.