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Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics

EDITED BY

J. M. BERNSTEIN

New School University, New York



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Introduction

... words without spirit, method without inner illumination,
figures of speech without feeling ...

Moses Mendelssohn

Almost from the moment that modern aesthetics took on a distinctive shape in the middle of the eighteenth century there arose claims that sought to privilege aesthetic reason or experience. In the writings collected in this volume we are offered the possibility of tracing the emergence and fate of this privilege. These writings are remarkably diverse in form, ranging from Lessing's subtle mixing of art theory with art criticism, Hamann's 'rhapsody in cabalistic prose', the manifesto for a future aesthetic philosophy entitled 'The Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism', through Schiller's letters to his friend, Körner, Hölderlin's to Hegel, and finally to the strange fragments, neither quite philosophy nor art, of Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel. This diversity in literary form has provided reason for philosophers to keep a cautious distance from these writings, comforting themselves with the more familiar articulations of aesthetic reason found in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and Hegel's *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, especially Hegel's

It was Karl Ameriks who seduced me into taking on the project of editing this volume. He has been a good deal more than a commissioning editor; he has been a true collaborator. His advice at every stage along the way has been invaluable. In particular, Stefan Bird-Pollan, I, and the reader all have reason to be grateful for his patient efforts in making the translations new to this volume (the Schiller, Moritz, and Hölderlin) more philosophically accurate and more readable than at first seemed possible.

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long Introduction. While these works deserve the attention that has been paid to them, so too, I want to urge, do the writings collected herein. Their philosophical weightiness has been insufficiently appreciated.¹ In a brief introduction, I thought the most helpful entrée into the world of these texts could be had through providing a theoretical framework that would characterize the main philosophical stakes running through them.

In the course of the attempt to explicate the specificity of the aesthetic there arose a simultaneous attempt to secure for it a privilege. While we are most familiar with this attempt as it appears in Nietzsche, this is not quite the form it takes in eighteenth-century aesthetics, although there are family resemblances between the two accounts. Rather, I want to argue, the most plausible account of the privilege turns upon a conception of artworks as fusing the disparate and metaphysically incommensurable domains of autonomous subjectivity and material nature, and hence, by inference, upon a conception of artistic mediums as stand-ins or plenipotentiaries for nature as (still) a source for meaningful claims. My argument has five parts: the setting up of the thesis against the background of a perceived crisis in Enlightenment reason brought on by the disenchantment of nature; the elaboration of the idea of artistic mediums in Lessing; Schiller's posing of beauty as the commensuration of freedom and sensible nature; and then the contrasting emphases of Hölderlin's tragic conception of the loss of nature with the effacement of this loss in the aesthetics of freedom of the Jena romantics, especially Friedrich Schlegel. The moment when aesthetic rationality takes on its most robust, self-authorizing articulation in romantic philosophy is equally the moment when the true claim of art becomes lost. If we watch carefully, the path that runs from Lessing to Jena romanticism looks uncannily like the path that runs from artistic modernism to the postmodern art scene of the present. So uncanny is the anticipation that we may feel it tells us more about our artistic and aesthetic present than the present can say for itself.

A crisis of reason and the aesthetic response

'I am now convinced that the highest act of reason, which embraces all Ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are brothers *only in*

¹ Insufficiency does not entail absence: the suggestions for further reading on pp. xxxvi–xxxix document some high points of appreciation.

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beauty.' With these infamous words the so-called 'Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism' crystallizes the rogue moment in idealist thought when philosophical rationality in its role as mimic and defender of scientific reason is displaced by the claims of aesthetics. Aesthetic reason is a reason aestheticized, drawn out of its logical shell where the rules of deductive reason are constitutive to become, in its reformed disposition, imbued with spirit, feeling, sensuousness, life. Hence the author(s) of the 'System Programme' continues: 'The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet [*Dichter*] . . . The philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy.'

The claim for aesthetic reason is best interpreted as a claim for the sort of reasoning expressed in art works as repositories for the forms of activity through which they are produced and/or consumed; hence, the claim for aesthetic reason must be, minimally, a claim about why works of art have a special claim on us which can suspend or displace the competing claims of scientific knowing and moral cognition. What kind of claim could works of art (and what is formally like them) be making that could be seen in this way? Works of art might be seen as making a peculiarly compelling claim if they could be seen as answering a *problem* given by scientific knowing and moral experience. The problem is systematically addressed in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*.

The crisis has two sides. On the one hand, it concerns the dematerialization of nature, the reduction of circumambient nature to a mechanical system whose lineaments are provided by the immaterial forms of mathematical physics. The paradigmatic allegory of the disappearance of sensuous nature and its replacement by an immaterial, mechanical system is given in the second *Meditation* by Descartes' dissolution of the sensuously resplendent piece of wax into properties (extension and malleability) graspable by the mind's eye alone. This dematerialization denies that there might be a unique, irreducible language of nature, and this is equivalent to the delegitimation of the authority of nature in favour of the authority of abstract, scientific reason. Thus the disenchantment of nature, which includes the human body, its pains and pleasures, leaves it dispossessed of voice or meaning, since all meaning is given *to* nature by (mathematical) reason. To say that reason delegitimizes the authority of nature means at least that the promptings of the body come to lack *normative* authority, that they no longer operate as *reasons*, and so cannot be thought of as raising claims or demands that should (or should not) be heeded.

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Such items become causal facts no different in kind than those of dead nature.

The flipside of the disenchantment of nature relates to a crisis of the subject. This crisis also involves dematerialization, the self losing its substantiality, its worldliness. Once nature is figured as a mechanical system, the self is divorced from the natural world as such. Again, it is easiest to begin with Descartes: only after he submits the whole of the natural world and his immediate experience of it to doubt does he discover what he cannot doubt: that he is thinking, and hence that he is by nature a thinking thing. Descartes' *cogito*, the sole survivor of methodical doubt, appears as utterly worldless. Kant thought Descartes still assumed too much by regarding the self as a substance of some kind. The 'I think', Kant argued, must be viewed solely through the activities which we must ascribe to it for a coherent experience of the world to be possible. So, as knower, the self becomes the active locus of the categorial forms, which shape and organize the sensory given so that it can be experienced as object related. Cognitively, the 'I think' is exhausted in executing this organizing, articulating role. Analogously in the moral domain, the self is identified with its subjective willings, the free will, and the rules, the hypothetical and categorial imperatives, that provide coherence for willing. The self is not identified with its bodily actions because as *worldly* events they stand outside the ambit of immaterial subjectivity. Only what is *fully* within our power belongs to subjectivity.

Nature dematerialized and human subjectivity deprived of worldly substantiality in their interaction and re-enforcement form the two struts supporting the various rationality crises of modernity to which it is proposed that art works and the reason they exemplify might somehow be a response. Now if art works are a response to this crisis, if they promise or exemplify a resolution, then they must suspend the dematerialization of nature and the delegitimation of its voice, on the one hand, and reveal the possibility of human meaningfulness as materially saturated and so embodied on the other. My hypothesis is that the core of art's rationality potential relates to its capacity to engender a compelling synthesis of freedom and materiality, reason and nature, with artistic mediums playing the key mediating role. By mediums I mean, minimally, the material conditions of a practice as they appear within an artistic community at a given time. So the medium(s) of sculpture at a given time includes not

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only the raw materials acceptable for sculpting (wood, marble, etc.), but what *kinds* of things are required to transform these materials into works. Working in a medium is working with a material conceived as a potential for sense-making in a manner that is material-specific. Hence the medium is not a neutral vehicle for the expression of an otherwise immaterial meaning, but rather the very condition for sense-making. Artistic sense-making is making sense in a medium. So mediums are a potential for sense-making. However, since mediums are at least certain types of materials, then mediums are matter conceived as a potential for sense-making. Since art is a sense-making that is medium-dependent, and mediums are aspects of nature conceived as potentials for sense-making, then art, its reason, is minimally the reason of nature as a potential for sense-making at a certain time. If art works make a claim at a particular time, then at that time nature is experienced as possessing a material-specific potentiality for sense-making. Hence, to experience a work as making a claim at a particular time is to experience the dematerialization and delegitimation of nature as suspended. The idea of an artistic medium is perhaps the last idea of material nature as possessing potentialities for meaning.

Working from the other side: in modern works of art freedom, the human capacity for autonomous sense-making, *appears*, that is, art works are *unique objects*, and as unique sources of normatively compelling claims, they are experienced as products of freedom, as creations; their uniqueness and irreducibility are understood as the material expression of an autonomous subjectivity. In autonomous works of art human autonomy appears. Beauty, Schiller tells us, is freedom in appearance. But the material bearer of appearing freedom cannot be neutral or indifferent, for then freedom would not be *embodied*, realized in sensible form, but simply carried or conveyed materially. So nature as truly amenable to human sense-making implies the notion of an artistic medium as, precisely, a potential for sense-making. Some such conception of freedom materialized and of artistic mediums as nature re-enchanted underlies the hopes for aesthetic reason. For reasons that will become apparent, giving shape to and sustaining these hopes is not easy, and for an urgent reason: modernity really is marked by the emergence of freedom and autonomy (from nature) as the distinguishing mark of subjectivity. Lessing's struggles with the problem of freedom and nature are exemplary, and hence an ideal place to begin.

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Artistic mediums and the space of mortification

Suppose one believes the aim of art is to produce beautiful representations of particular objects or events, then one might equally suppose that different art practices are ideally translatable into one another: ‘painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking painting’ (L, 1).² For this theory the systematic differences between Virgil’s representation of Laocoön and his sons being killed by sea serpents and that of the Laocoön group present a puzzle, if not a direct refutation. In Virgil the serpents are wound around Laocoön’s back and throat, their heads towering over him, and all the while he is lifting to the stars ‘horrifying shrieks; / Such bellowing as when a wounded bull has fled the altar’. However, in the sculpture one serpent is at Laocoön’s waist, another in his upraised hand (neither serpent is coiled around him), and from his grimaced facial expression, his mouth half-closed, we imagine him uttering an intense, anguished groan – for Winckelmann, following Sadolet, not even that, only an ‘oppressed and weary sigh’ (L, 1). Once extrinsic explanations for the divergence are eliminated, the best explanation for the differences between the poem and sculpture is aesthetic: by making Laocoön naked, by removing his priestly, blood-soaked fillet, by changing the position of the serpents, and, above all, by transforming the terrible scream into an anguished sigh, the sculptor is heeding the demands of his specific medium.

In a poem Lessing writes, ‘A cloak is not a cloak; it conceals nothing; our imagination sees through it at all times’ (L, v); hence, in the poem Laocoön’s cloak neither hides the anguish of his body nor is his brow hidden by the priestly fillet. This is not the case in the plastic arts where the set of spatial relations between real things operates as a syntactic constraint on representability. If in the real world a cloak hides a body, then it also must do so in the plastic arts. Medium is syntax. Minimally, and palpably in the case of sculpture, it constrains the semantic contents that are possible. The choice, say, between priestly garb or naked body, is determined by the ends of beauty, but that one must choose is determined by the medium itself.

The transformation of the agonized howl into the muted groan is more complex. This is Lessing’s dominant line of argument: Works of plastic art are made to be contemplated ‘at length and repeatedly’, to be capable

² *Laocoön or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. W. A. Steel. References in the body of the text, L, are to the chapter number.

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of sustaining continuous visual attention. This demand yields a medium-specific, formal content-constraint: 'The single moment of time to which [plastic] art must confine itself in virtue of its material limitations' entails that an artist never present an action or emotion at its climax (L, III). This is the rule of the pregnant moment. In the plastic arts, only a single moment is directly represented. In the representation of an emotionally charged event, the least suitable moment to depict is the climax, since that is when the action stops. In contemplating a climax the eye is riveted, and the imagination is thus *bound* to what the eye sees. Freezing imaginative engagement blocks both ongoing visual attention, depriving it of reason, and human significance. To incite imaginative response requires a moment of potentiality, full of the past which produced it and full of the future to come, so that the more we see, the more we are able to imagine. Only a moment big with past and future is suitable for material portrayal.

Thus, if Laocoön sighs, the imagination can hear him shriek; but if he shrieks, it can neither go one step higher nor one step lower than this representation without seeing him in a more tolerable and consequently more uninteresting condition. One either hears him only groan or else sees him already dead. (L, III)

In accordance with the logic of the imagination, the *perception* of Laocoön shrieking presents him as if dead: the shriek as climax fixes the whole in *the moment*, an 'utmost' excluding past and future as affectively, aesthetically interesting. The constriction of the imagination to a moment, or the constraining of the imagination to the sheer spatial display before the eye, and thereby to the uniquely spatially given, is the freezing of time. This makes a climax, any climax, equivalent to death. Material nature, the order of things in space, is the mortification of the (temporal) life of the imagination; hence, the materialization of ideas and concepts, the work of painting and sculpture, involves their increasing mortification. Matter is death. As an underlying premise, this does not bode well for a theory of artistic mediums. One can quickly justify the complaint that Lessing's survey of the limits of painting and poetry amounts to the slaughter of painting.³ This is the knot we need to untie.

In the opening paragraphs of chapter 16 of *Laocoön*, Lessing offers the basics for a deduction of the limits of painting and poetry 'from first

³ E. H. Gombrich, 'Lessing', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 42 (1957), pp. 133–56.

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principles'. Imitations in painting use different signs than poetry, namely figures and colours in space rather than articulated sounds in time. Figures and colours are natural signs (where properties of the sign itself account (in part) for its relation to the signified), whereas words are arbitrary signs. Lessing then introduces a medium-specific constraint thesis: *signs must have a suitable or appropriate relation to what they signify*. Signs only spatially related appropriately signify items whose wholes or parts coexist; while signs following one another best express items whose wholes or parts are consecutive. Wholes or parts of wholes coexisting in space are called bodies; hence bodies with visible properties are the proper objects of painting. Items succeeding one another in time are actions; hence actions are the proper objects of poetry.

This is clearly too restrictive because too abstract; or rather, leaving the domains of mind and matter, time and space (visibility), action and object utterly distinct from one another projects an almost inhuman art, maybe a non-art: the temporally frozen depiction of visible bodies, or the disembodied depiction of human action (which is not action but its antecedents). If Lessing had stopped here, letting the transcendental distinction between space and time, visible bodies represented by natural signs and free actions by arbitrary signs, bear *all* the weight, then the result would have been inhuman extremes: painting as perfected in, literally, the still life, *nature morte*; literature wholly cerebral, all but indistinguishable from non-literary prose. So for Lessing the ultimate threat to art comes from a hypostatized differentiation of painting and poetry, sensuous materiality and imaginative freedom; one might say that the ultimate threat comes from what occurs when art is reduced to its medium. Although Lessing inscribes aesthetic limits in a medium-specific way, the purpose of the inscription is to *resist* the claim that mediums provide the normative intelligibility of the practices dependent on them, which makes sense if the mediums are understood initially in terms of the duality of a disenchanted nature and de-worlded subjectivity. Pure painting and pure poetry stand for this dualism, and thus require overcoming, where the demand for overcoming is something like the demand of art as such. Painting and poetry must, for conceptual and aesthetic reasons, be brought closer together.

Bodies persist through time, possessing a differing relation of parts to whole, or offering different combinations of wholes and parts at each moment. Each (humanly significant) moment is the causal consequence

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of its predecessor moment, and the cause of its successor. So what is technically a single moment can fall at the centre of an action, so to speak; hence paintings can imply actions through the disposition of a body, that is, by revealing it as such a 'centre'. Conversely, actions must be embodied. Hence, poetry can partake of the domain of bodies through the way it depicts action. These principles and inferences generate the practice-specific rules for painting and poetry. The fundamental rule for painting is the pregnant moment; *the rule of the pregnant moment is the sublation of painting by poetry*, a poeticizing of painting where the material object becomes the source for revealing, for bringing to mind its *imaginary* counterpart: the complete, temporally extended action. The opposing rule for poetry is clumsier: because it can access only a single property of the body to coordinate with a given action, poetry must choose the most sensate image of the body, the sensuous image most suggestive with respect to the action being described.

The best explanation for Lessing's suppression of painting in favour of poetry is thus evaluative: it serves the end of imaginative vision, of art as enabling the intense imaginative experience of an object, which is the value orientation of freedom with respect to nature as determined by modern experience. This value orientation opens chapter 3: we modern, Enlightened folk have determined that truth and expression are art's first law. Hence, the tendential dematerialization of painting in its sublation by poetry is premised upon the thesis that poetry is a higher art than painting because human (imaginative) freedom is higher, more intrinsically valuable, than material nature. The surprising consequence of this value orientation is the restriction of the plastic arts to the norm of beauty (L, ix), the restriction of beauty as beauty to the plastic arts, thus a general neutralizing of the value significance of material beauty. The plastic artist cannot ignore its demands because an object's beauty is the harmonious effect of its various parts absorbed by the eye at a glance, but since the syntax of the plastic arts is one of part to whole, then the material syntax of painting directly converges or overlaps with the logic of beauty. For Lessing, Winckelmann's defence of the 'stillness' of the beautiful in Greek sculpture is, finally, a praise of material deadliness.⁴ We can thus construe Lessing's defence of poetry over painting, his poetic sublation of painting

⁴ David E. Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoön: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 164.

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as a defence of modern freedom, against the beauty of the ancient Greeks. Deflating physical beauty and subsuming it under the higher demands of freedom breaks the grip of classicism in aesthetic thought. The rule of the pregnant moment thus transfigures the goodness of ancient beauty into the demands of modern freedom, making modern (poetic) freedom the measure.

Lessing's defence of poetry's universality is over-determined. At its core, however, and what explains poetry's limitlessness, its ability to go where painting cannot follow, is its dependence upon *arbitrary* signs succeeding one another in time. Signs meaningful by convention are the medium of poetry and the source of its power. Because these signs are arbitrary, no content is in principle unavailable to them. Because the signs are immaterial, the existential absence of the object necessary for artistic illusion is already accomplished. By absenting themselves in the representation of objects, the immateriality of arbitrary signs allows for maximal imaginative engagement. Because arbitrary signs are temporally organized, then even for an object at a particular moment in time, they can ignore physical limitations (things hiding one another) and present multiple views of the same. Because linguistic signs occur in succession, no one sign aesthetically dominates, thus allowing the ugly and terrible to be represented without ruining the aesthetic unity of the whole. Finally, the arbitrary sign's systematic distance from materiality converges with the freedom of the imagination in a way that is the inverse of the convergence of the syntactical constraints of materiality with the holistic logic of physical beauty, beauty as beauty. If Lessing had said no more, his hierarchical ranking of poetry above painting would be tantamount to an anti-aesthetic – precisely what the dematerialization of subject and object portends. On pages xxvii–xxx, I argue that it is precisely this poetic universality, including poetry's sublation of the plastic arts, which is the cornerstone of Jena romanticism's claim that romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry.

There is, however, a countervailing pressure in *Laocoön* to the claims of modern freedom, the poetic sublation of painting, since the universality argument relates only to pure poetry, prior to the qualification that makes poetry art. The countervailing logic requires that the linguistic presentation is maximally sensuous or sensate, *sinnlich*. The issue for Lessing: in virtue of what features of poetic discourse does a poem make its object palpable, vividly present to the imagination?

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A poetic picture is not necessarily one that can be transformed into a material painting; but every feature, and every combination of features by means of which the poet makes his object so sensate that we are more clearly conscious of this subject than of his words, is called painterly (*mahlerisch*), is styled a painting (*ein Gemälde*), because it brings us closer to that degree of illusion of which the material painting is specially capable and which can most readily and most easily be conceptualized in terms of a material painting.

(L, XIV)

If poetry is different from prose, different from the ordinary language demands of communication, if it attains an imaginative vitality that is worldly, then it deploys its arbitrary signs so that they are forgotten for the sake of the object represented; hence, what is wanted from poetry is the production of the illusion of the immediacy of perceptual experience, the model for which is painting. Since what is at stake is not the production of pictures, but arbitrary signs becoming sensate, nature-like, with the power and on the model we associate with painting, then poetry requires *the idea of painting*.⁵

The *idea* of painting is the remnant of painting in the absence of painting, referring to a visual fullness, intuitive immediacy, or presentness. The idea of painting replaces painting in part because painting is eclipsed by poetry, so that aesthetically what remains of painting is its idea as a demand upon poetic production. Even so qualified, the demand that poetry live up to the idea of painting is equivalent to the demand that poetry give its representations a sensible worldliness, or, more accurately, a sense of possessing a sensateness that signifies worldliness. But to give representations the immediacy of a saturated (dense, replete) visual perception, where it is the 'at once' of a visual perception being held in place by the idea of painting, is to *recall* the medium-specific syntactical demands of painting, or, differently, to think, for the first time, of the syntax of painting provided by its medium as a *productive condition* of possibility rather than a mere limitation. Hence, the idea of painting stands in for a productive notion of artistic medium that is everywhere and nowhere in Lessing, the notion of medium that was displaced and/or cancelled by the pressures of dematerialization, including the poetic sublation of painting. Medium as productive means, minimally, material nature as conducive to human

⁵ Ibid., p. 183.

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meaningfulness. Or, to state this in terms of Lessing's semiotic theory: the idea of painting is the idea of natural signs in their naturalness as conducive to human meaningfulness, and by extension, arbitrary signs taking on the appearance of naturalness as a corrective to the abstractness of poetry in its moment of limitless universality. The idea of painting thus becomes a corrective to the idea of abstract, rationalized modernity, its agonies of dematerialization.

Lessing suggests three mechanisms by which arbitrary signs can take on the character, or immediacy, of natural signs. First, signs are relieved of their arbitrariness if their succession mimics the succession of things. Second, the unity of action provided by narrative provides an experience of oneness formally akin to wholeness of a single visual perception in the idea of painting. Finally, one offers to arbitrary signs a sense of naturalness through metaphor and simile. By likening the object of an arbitrary sign with the object of another sign, the use of the first sign brings to mind the latter's object, thus tying word and world together in a manner analogous to the way in which a natural sign brings to mind what it signifies; similarity, conceived as a natural or quasi-natural relation, thus relieves arbitrariness in the direction of naturalness.

Of freedom in appearance

Throughout the eighteenth century the power of the idea of art as fundamentally mimetic is only slowly displaced as the claim of freedom (imagination, creativity) asserts itself. In Karl Philipp Moritz's 'On the Artistic Imitation of the Beautiful' (1788), we sense the notion of imitation being stretched to breaking. After splicing the concepts of the beautiful, the noble, the good and the useful – and preparing the way for Kant's notion that the beautiful and the useless (what is without external purpose) overlap, as well as connecting the good and the beautiful – Moritz notes how natural beauties are metaphors for the beauty of nature as a whole, which cannot be grasped by the senses or imagination. We might say the artist imitates natural beauty, not nature. This leads immediately to Moritz's conclusions: first, the artist imitates not things but nature's creating, which forms the core of the idea of artistic genius; and second, since the beautiful is connected to the *power* of human action, the capacity to create, it must exceed the power of cognition to grasp it. Hence, the beautiful must be *felt*.

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Despite the fact that Schiller's 'Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner' (1793) were written to reveal the connection between freedom and beauty, the grip of the notion of imitation on Schiller is palpable in his concluding account of the role of artistic mediums. One might be forgiven for thinking that Schiller was transcribing passages directly from Lessing. Schiller provides an imitative conception of fine art where an object is 'freely depicted' only if its presentation does not suffer from interference by the nature of the depicting matter: 'The nature of the medium or the matter must thus be completely vanquished by the nature of the imitated . . . In an artwork, the matter (the nature of the imitating [object]) must lose itself in the *form* (the imitated [object]), the *body* in the *idea*, the *reality* in the *appearance*.'⁶ This is not just a manner of speaking; after pressing the point that the representing medium must shed and deny its own nature, he stipulates that the 'nature of the marble, which is hard and brittle, must disappear into the nature of flesh which is flexible and soft, and neither feeling nor the eye may be reminded of its disappearance'.

Turning to poetic depiction, Schiller generates the familiar problem concerning the arbitrariness of linguistic signs and their tendency, given the connection between language and conceptual understanding, towards universality and abstractness. The specific poetic application of language enables it to 'subjugate itself under the form', thereby enabling the linguistic 'body' to lose itself in the 'idea'; the beauty of poetic diction is thus the 'free self-activity of nature in the chains of language'. Although obscure, the orientation of the argument leads us naturally to construe the poetic subjugation of conceptual language as occurring through poetic figuration. However, if we study the logic of Schiller's thesis we detect in the invocation of poetic figuration a decisive swerve away from an emphasis on mimetic ends and towards a conception of art that is more explicitly autonomous, more imbued with the experience of subjectivity reaching expression in objective (linguistic, material) form. The "chains of language" are the material upon which poetic form works; nature is the object represented. Poetic form makes the object appear autonomous. The strange twist which leads the utterly inhuman to *appear* self-active, where self-activity represents both the idea of aesthetic *form* and the subjectivity of the subject, is the signature of Schiller's aesthetic theory.

⁶ 'Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner', trans. Stefan Bird-Pollan. All quotes in this section are from the 'Kallias Letters.'

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The 'Kallias Letters' are a reformulation of Kant's aesthetic theory that reaches its apotheosis in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*. While the approach of the former letters is systematic and constructive, they nonetheless have a visible philosophical spring: to re-construct Kant's aesthetics in accordance with the thesis that nature is beautiful only when it looks like art, and art is beautiful only when it looks like nature, while replacing the role of the understanding with reason in aesthetic judgement. For Kant the beautiful pleases without a concept, and judgements of taste are not subsumptive and determinative like standard empirical judgements. Schiller finds strange, first, Kant's aligning beauty with the understanding, whose task is to judge mechanical nature, rather than with reason and freedom; second, Kant's urging the isolation of pure from dependent beauties, making arabesques and the like paradigm beauties – as if the perfection of beauty is reached once emptied of human meaning. Third, converging with this criticism, Schiller contends that by making disinterestedness the condition by which things are seen for their form, Kant makes inexplicable why some objects are beautiful and others not. The idea of disinterestedness as forwarding a notion of the aesthetic as our *stance* towards objects, and the idea that paradigmatic pure beauties are without human meaning, converge to make formalism a recipe for emptiness. Still, Schiller wants to deepen Kant's formalism, not overturn it.

The specifically aesthetic appearing of an object, the experience of an object as beautiful, is the experience of it as possessing an excess of form, and in virtue of this excess soliciting an aesthetic rather than an explanatory response. The excess of form is the objective quality that solicits the judgement of beauty. An object's excess of form is its appearing in a manner that 'we are neither able nor inclined to search for its ground outside it', its form appearing to explain itself, to be self-sufficient or self-contained. So a form is beautiful 'if it demands no explanation, or it explains itself without a concept'. Schiller uses this criterion in explicating our judgements of both nature and works of art.

When considered in accordance with the principle of causality and the laws of nature, all objects, their states and dispositions, have their true explanation outside themselves. For aesthetics, however, the issue is not what explains an object, but how it *appears* to us. What is explicitly antithetic to beauty is the experience of something as needing causal explanation, as evidently subject to mechanical law, as palpably overwhelmed

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by external forces, like gravity, hence as being an explicit display of dead matter, mass. To experience a haphazard, irregular thread of paint as a frozen accidental drip yields a sense that its pattern and movement is explained not by itself but externally, by the force of gravity; the irregularity of the thread's shape directly insinuates the force producing it, and thereby makes the appearing thread unavailable for aesthetic appreciation. Schiller's way of understanding the miracle of a Pollock would be that the operation of the force of gravity displayed by the threaded lines of paint is at every moment overcome, interrupted, so that the experience of the drip continually becomes the optical experience of its pattern, of loops, sashays, webbing and tangles whose patterning and interaction *appear* self-sufficient, or self-explanatory. So the experience of a Pollock is the experience of mechanical nature as a form of resistance that is sublated at each moment by intrinsic material (visual) meaningfulness, the illusion of self-sufficiency. All Schiller's examples turn upon the difference between the appearance of self-sufficiency and the interruptive look of mass requiring causal explanation: in nature, the contrast between the clumsiness of the work horse and the elegance of the light Spanish palfrey; in art we are offended by didactic literature because the author's external intention intrudes upon the movement of the narrative, the characters appearing like puppets moved by obvious strings, not self-moving. When the nature of the medium (paint as subject to gravity) or the will of the artist appears distinct, it dashes the aesthetic meaning of the work by turning internal form into external manipulation, intrinsic meaningfulness into meaning only as a means for an external end, self-movement collapsing into external compulsion.

Such judgements are hardly novel; what is new with Schiller is that the explanation of what constitutes aesthetic appearance, semblance and beauty, concerns not harmony, proportion, or perfection in their classical or rationalist sense, but autonomy as opposed to heteronomy, where finally these terms relate strictly to the will's autonomy in opposition to mechanical causality. Schiller unpacks the claim this way: what does not (experientially) insist upon its determination from without engenders the idea that it is determined from within, or is self-determining. The *form* of the object invites us to regard it as determined from within. When objects possess form we suppose there is a rule doing the self-determining. Our model here is artworks, which is to say, our model is the sort of purposiveness engendered through the kind of intentional activity exemplified in

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the making of works of art. A *technical rule*, or simply *technique*, is at work in producing the complex unity of an artwork. Form points to a rule that is art-like or technical. When this rule appears intrinsic, self-explanatory, we consider the form to be self-determining, which leads us to associate objects possessing technical form with freedom. Hence, this argument concludes with the claim: beauty in nature is art-likeness. Schiller states the thesis in anticipation: ‘This great idea of self-determination resonates back at us from certain appearances of nature, and we call it beauty.’

Much goes awry here, above all that all purposiveness is presumed to be intentional, leaving out the possibility of living, biological systems. By ignoring the possibility of purposive life, Schiller overdoes the idea of rational freedom finding an image of itself in sensible nature; this makes the account implausibly fix upon the idea of practical reason projecting itself on to appearing nature, making natural beauty a debilitating example of anthropomorphism. But this does not mean that the governing thought, that beauty is freedom in appearance, is not required for art beauty. In fact, part of the curiosity of the ‘Kallias Letters’ is that its account of natural beauty keeps sounding as if it concerned art beauty, which is unsurprising since for Schiller art beauty is the model for natural beauty. But this embedded account of art beauty, prior to the explicit one concluding the letters, has the distinctive advantage of sustaining an integral connection between how material nature can appear and the will – which finally is the driving topic of the letters. In the ‘Kallias Letters’ the social problems of the disenchantment of nature and the de-worlding of freedom – and their overcoming in beauty – are implicit everywhere, but explicit nowhere; hence the force of the primary thesis, that beauty is freedom in appearance, possesses only formal significance. It did not take long for Schiller to see the issue more fully.

Tragedy and the loss of nature

Both Lessing and Schiller view art as a unique locale where the duality of worldless freedom and dumb nature is overcome. Subjectivity is given sensible presence in natural beauty and the work of art; and in manifesting an image of a fit between the extremes of freedom and nature, the artwork appears as a solution to the problem of their metaphysical separation, of how human meaning can become a worldly reality. Artworks have depth because they project a unification of the claims of reason and sense,

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freedom and nature, which is a necessary condition for the possibility of human meaningfulness.

One might consider the programmes of Hölderlin and Jena romanticism as forming opposing sides of the fragile Schillerian synthesis, and hence as underlining the crisis of reason as a whole: Hölderlin's tragic thought is premised upon and attempts to articulate the loss of (the authority of) nature, while Schlegel's aesthetics radicalizes poetry as the discourse proper to human freedom. Hölderlin intended to entitle his first contribution to Niethammer's *Philosophical Journal* 'New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man'. If we read Hölderlin's fragments in this light, then they can be interpreted as drawing out the dark side of Schiller's programme for re-uniting what modern history has sundered: the *need* for aesthetic education entails a tragic or elegiac modernism.

Hölderlin's fundamental philosophical achievement derives from his criticism of Fichte. The cornerstone of this criticism appears perspicuously in his letter to Hegel of 26 January 1795. Hölderlin begins by conceding to Fichte his controlling assumption that the 'I' (or the 'I think') is absolute, which means that it can have nothing outside it: if absolute, then unconditioned, if unconditioned, then without an exterior. But this raises a problem: since all consciousness is necessarily consciousness *of* something, then consciousness must have an object. So all consciousness is a relation between subject and object, even if I am the object of thought. Even minimal self-consciousness is conditioned, yielding a sense of the I as restricted, at least, Hölderlin supposes, by time. If the absolute I is unconditioned, as originally assumed, then it cannot be conscious of itself. Insofar as I am not conscious of myself, then for myself I am nothing; so the absolute I is necessarily for itself nothing. One might complain that Hölderlin is unfair to Fichte in not distinguishing between empirical and transcendental self-consciousness, and for not acknowledging Fichte's original insight: 'self-awareness is not identical to self-reflection; to make any judgement about our mental state, we must already have an immediate, non-reflective acquaintance with ourselves'.⁷ Even so, as long as Fichte considers the 'I think' as origin and absolute, then this criticism is going to have force.

⁷ Charles Larmore, 'Hölderlin and Novalis', in Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 146.

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As is evident in ‘Being Judgement Possibility’, however, there is a Fichtean moment which Hölderlin accepts, namely, the idea of the unconditioned, a fundamental *unity* of subject and object, as ground. Of course, even in Kant the unconditioned is the governing idea of reason, the regulative idea orienting our explanatory and inferential activities: every conditioned ultimately presupposes an unconditioned, which is the central idea generating the Antinomies. However, the critical notion of the unconditioned is not Hölderlin’s. Hölderlin thinks it is necessary for something to have a status not unlike Spinoza’s notion of substance, that is, there is a necessary unity of subject and object as – well what? If this unity is not a first principle, as it is for Fichte, then what is its role? Perhaps it is the goal of striving to achieve a unity of subject and object? But what does this mean? Hölderlin’s unification philosophy is a unification of what? Subject and object sounds opaque. To begin reading ‘Being Judgement Possibility’, I think we need the Schillerian background, the sense that the absolute unity of subject and object points to a *re*-conciliation of freedom and nature, which in turn presupposes their original unity.

In the preface to *Hyperion* we find: ‘“The blessed unity of being, in the unique sense of the word, is lost to us.” We have torn ourselves loose from it in order to reach it. But “neither our knowledge nor our action reaches, at any period of our existence, a point where all strife ceases”. The peace of all peace is irretrievably lost. Yet we would not even seek after it if that infinite unification, that being in the only sense of the word, were not present to us. It is present – as beauty.’⁸ What is lost to us is nature as home, peace figuring ‘our lost childhood’.⁹ There is thus the sense that there is something from which we have been separated, that we experience our relation to nature as being forever beyond it (because we live in self-consciousness, language, culture and history), where being separated and beyond are jointly experienced as loss. The experience of loss tempers and orients what we count as progress, what requires unification. In the penultimate version of the Preface to *Hyperion*, Hölderlin states: ‘We all travel an eccentric path . . . we have been dislocated from nature, and what appears to have once been *one* is now at odds with itself . . . Often it is as

⁸ Dieter Henrich, *The Course of Remembrance and Other Essays on Hölderlin*, edited by Eckart Förster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 84. The phrases in double quotation marks are from the preface to *Hyperion*.

⁹ Friedrich Schiller, ‘On Naive and Sentimental Poetry’ (1795–6), trans. Daniel Dahlstrom in Friedrich Schiller, *Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1993), p. 181.

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though the world were *everything* and we *nothing*, but often too it is as though we were *everything* and the world *nothing*.¹⁰

We need thus to track two moments in Hölderlin's thought. The first is the construction of the aporetic duality of judgement and being. When thinking about this first moment, something obvious becomes striking, namely, if being is not a self-evident first principle, then being is not self-evident, or available to judgement, hence not available to philosophy. So we need a second moment, which is the emergence of, let us call it beauty or poetry, or what it is for Hölderlin, namely, tragedy, as the narrative that makes manifest our separation from an origin to which we remain bound.

At one level, 'Being Judgement Possibility' proceeds in a Kantian way: judgement is original separation (this is the bad, speculative etymology: *Urteil* becomes *Ur-Teilung*, primordial division) in virtue of which there is subject and object. Subject and object are not natural existences, but internal correlatives of judgement. Hölderlin's stinging rebuke to Fichte follows: because the 'I am I' reveals an identity of the I *with* itself, then 'I am I' shows, at the theoretical level, the truth of separation. Being, in contrast, requires a unity of subject and object that cannot be violated or conjured into being as a completed synthesis. In 'Being Judgement Possibility', Hölderlin gets at the depth of this idea by distinguishing unity from identity. I am I is identity of the self with its self, not unity. Identity is the work of reflection and judgement. I am I requires separation, at least the separation of time. Judging is separating and unifying; hence any awareness of myself enables me to distinguish my acting/seeing self from my seen self; my present from my past self; my transcendental ego from my empirical ego. Identity then is other than absolute being, which we possess as something lost to us. At a stroke, Hölderlin has removed being from judgement and hence from philosophy.¹¹ Whatever else happens in philosophy during this period, clearly this wrenching of being from the grip of philosophy enables a general revaluation of the significance of beauty or art. We now have the more radical claim that being, or unity, has no other way of being manifest except through art. So art either replaces first philosophy or stands in for its absence.

Hölderlin states that the tragic is idealist in its significance; it is the metaphor of intellectual intuition 'which cannot be other than the unity

¹⁰ Following Larmore, 'Hölderlin and Novalis', p. 149.

¹¹ More accurately, Hölderlin re-inscribes Kant's removal of being from philosophy.

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with everything living which . . . can be recognized by the spirit'.¹² In tragedy we experience nature as the (lost) ground of order. Nature in its original power or unity cannot appear directly. We know from 'Being Judgement Possibility' that this means that nature as the ground of the human cannot appear because it would have to be judged, but if judged, then it is already in a state of dispersion. So nature as the unitary ground from which we are separated can appear only in its weakness, as broken or dependent upon the human for its appearance. Art is the weakness that allows the strength of nature to appear (albeit improperly, not *eigentlich*). In tragedy nature is mediated by the sign, which is the suffering hero. As Peter Szondi states it:

Unable to prevail against the power of nature, which ultimately destroys him, he is 'insignificant' and 'without effect'. But, in the downfall of the tragic hero, when the sign = o, nature shows itself as conqueror 'in its strongest gift', and 'the original is openly revealed'. Hölderlin thus interprets tragedy as the sacrifice man offers to nature so that it can appear in an adequate manner. Herein lies the tragic aspect of man's situation: this service, which gives his existence meaning, is one he can perform only in death, when he becomes a sign that is 'in itself insignificant = o'.¹³

Although pointed, this is excessive with respect to the claim that in tragedy nature appears in 'an adequate manner', which makes tragedy a stand-in for philosophical knowing rather than the rehearsal of its impossibility. As in Moritz, the whole is felt in response to a part, but the part here is the hero, not natural beauty, and the feeling is heroic suffering.¹⁴ This explicates the dark side of Schiller: self-consciousness is grounded in an originary unity from which it is necessarily separated. Tragedy thus reveals *the necessity and impossibility* of the unity of freedom with nature.

¹² Hölderlin, 'On the Difference of Poetic Modes' in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 85.

¹³ Peter Szondi, 'The Notion of the Tragic in Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel' in his *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 47. The moment when the sign equals zero appears in 'Remarks on Oedipus' as the tragic transport, the poetic logic of which is given in the account of the caesura as the counter-rhythmic interruption. Broadly speaking, Oedipus' 'savage search', the 'insane questioning' for full consciousness, is the stand-in for the ambition of philosophy, an ambition that is tragically satisfied only through his destruction.

¹⁴ I am here relying on Hölderlin's 'On the Difference of Poetic Modes'.

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Freedom and universal poesy

In a manner continuous with Lessing's conception of poetry as the expression of the freedom of imagination, Friedrich Schlegel comes to think of modern, romantic poetry as the exemplary instance of human freedom, its fullest expression and articulation. The cost of so conceiving of poetry is that the connection between freedom and nature which was the dominant leitmotif of eighteenth-century aesthetics is severed. The seeds of Schlegel's conception of poesy are planted in *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (1795),¹⁵ where the characteristic comprehension of the relation between ancient and modern literature is first laid down. Equally, Schlegel develops a conception of poetry in relation to the other arts that explicitly elaborates upon Lessing's. Schlegel contends that classical art stands to modern art as natural *Bildung* stands to artificial *Bildung*, which is here given in its multiple senses: development, culture, education, formation, maturation. In the Greek world, ideal and actual are joined. In the modern world, in light of the emergence of subjectivity and the experience of freedom as belonging to the individual, as its essence, the ideal is removed from the domain of empirical actuality: 'with greater intellectual development [*Bildung*], the goal of modern poetry naturally becomes *individuality* that is *original and interesting*. The simple imitation of the particular is, however, a mere skill of the *copyist*, not a free art. Only by means of an *arrangement* that is *ideal* does the characteristic of an individual become a philosophical work of art.'¹⁶ Individuality emerges when self-realization no longer occurs through identification with established social roles. Individuality is expressed through originality and the interesting; they are what individualize an individual. The interesting for Schlegel is a provisional aesthetic totalization manifesting the disappearance of taken-for-granted universality. Sophocles wrote objective tragedies, Shakespeare interesting ones. Sophocles summoned the fate of a culture as a whole, while Shakespeare narrated the experience of individuals etched by the absence of a governing culture. Modern works

¹⁵ Translated by Stuart Barnett (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001). Although written wholly independently, this essay contains a conception of the relation of ancient to modern that is quite similar to that found in Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, published just months before Schlegel's essay, forcing him to write a Preface taking into account Schiller's work. *On the Study of Greek Poetry* thus can be regarded as triangulating romanticism with Schiller's modernism and Lessing's defence of poetry.

¹⁶ *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, p. 32.

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stand in relation to an ideal separate from the work; the gap between the ideal and actual, the infinite and finite, is what makes the modern an incomplete striving. The modern age is an artificial formation because self-realization is something striven for in accordance with *proposed ideals*, hence without determinately objective ends or criteria, which is why our perfectibility and corruptibility go together, why our world lacks cultural cohesion. Schlegel deems the modern work of literature philosophical because its arrangement occurs by means of a *concept* whose ideality, again, both informs and stands apart from the work. So modern artworks are riven with a critical self-consciousness of themselves as works of art in relation to indeterminate ideals from which they remain forever separate.

Schlegel's direct borrowings from Lessing begin in a discussion of the universality of the arts. It may be the case, Schlegel concedes, that not all circumstances, cultural and/or geographical, are propitious for the production of the plastic arts; but this is not the case with respect to poetry, which is a 'universal art' because 'its organ, *fantasy*, is already incomparably more closely related to freedom, and more independent from external influence. Poetry and poetic taste is thus far more corruptible than plastic taste, but also *infinitely more perfectible*'.¹⁷ Poetry's reliance upon the imagination, or fantasy, makes it proximate to pure freedom and hence independent from the constraints of external circumstance, which is the ground of poetry's anthropological universality, in comparison to the other arts, and its infinite perfectibility. When Schlegel raises this issue again later, poetry's relative universality has become absolute: poetry is the 'single actual *pure art* without borrowed vitality and external assistance'.¹⁸ The other arts, Schlegel contends, are 'hybrids that fall between pure nature and pure art'.¹⁹ The vitality and particularity of music and the plastic arts are not intrinsic to these arts as arts, but are borrowed from nature. An appeal to the senses was thought by Lessing to distinguish art-meanings from non-art-meanings; it here becomes the remnant of nature *intruding* upon art, making any art so dependent a 'hybrid', human and inhuman at the same time. Hence, nature, even as a principle of sensible vitality, is conceived as essentially extrinsic to *pure art*; only poetry, 'whose tool, an arbitrary sign-language, is the work of man, and is endlessly perfectible and corruptible'.²⁰ So an argument that begins by asserting poetry's 'unrestricted compass', giving it an advantage over

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 42.¹⁸ Ibid., p. 59.¹⁹ Ibid.²⁰ Ibid.

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the other arts, concludes by making the other arts hybrids between nature and art, and poetry alone pure art. Pure art, the meaning of art, is thus aligned directly with freedom and universality, which are our capacities for infinite perfectibility, in opposition to the limiting character of what belongs to intuition and sensibility.

The Lessing influence of this defence of poetry as the only pure art is underlined in the following paragraph where Schlegel compares the kinds of unities achievable by the different arts. Because an action is only completed in time, then sculpture cannot truly represent an action. Equally, the most fully determined sculptural character presupposes the world in which it belongs, a world that sculpture itself cannot provide. Hence, ‘the most perfect statue is still only a sundered, incomplete fragment, not a whole perfect unto itself. The most that images can attain is an *analogon of unity*.’²¹ Poetry, conversely, offers the perfection of artistic integration since it can present a complete action, which, Schlegel contends, ‘is the sole unconditioned whole in the realm of appearance’.²² Action, however, is not what works represent, but the work of representing: ‘An entirely accomplished act, a completely realized objective yields the fullest satisfaction. A completed poetic action is a whole unto itself, a *technical world*.’²³ The integration of the work as *poetic action* enables the poetic work to be an actual unity, and it is the model of the poetic action itself, the model of the work as act, that offers the notion of completion and fulfilment to action.

This is Lessing’s poetry without the complement of the idea of painting, and Schiller’s defence of reason and freedom without the concern for *sensible* presentation. For Schlegel, only by escaping the constraint of materiality, a *resistant medium*, does the unity of action appear – the infinite perfectibility which ‘arbitrary sign-language’ provides to poetry derives from its indefinite plasticity. So the linguistic medium ideally is not a specifically artistic medium at all, which is its strength. The *arbitrariness* of the sign-language, having no causal or material reasons for relating *this* sign to *that* object or meaning, is the profound source of its universal power. That power, so understood, is the mainspring of ‘romantic poetry’ as ‘progressive, universal poetry’, uniting all the separate species of poetry

²¹ Ibid., p. 60. ²² Ibid.²³ Ibid. It is certainly plausible to think that this notion of technique refers back to Schiller’s in the ‘Kallias Letters’.

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in itself, and, significantly, poetry with philosophy; romantic poetry is to be the self-consciousness of modernity.

Athenaeum fragment (hereafter: AF) 216 sets the terms aligning modernity and romanticism: ‘The French revolution, Fichte’s philosophy, Goethe’s *Meister* are the greatest tendencies of the age.’ The mutual references of these three items form the constellation composing Jena romanticism. They share: the experience of the collapse and overturning of traditional authority; the premising of all forms – social, political, theoretical, literary – on freedom and autonomy; the necessity for including within forming action a reflective account of it (‘the new version of the theory knowledge is simultaneously philosophy and the philosophy of philosophy’ (AF, 281) – Fichte’s philosophy and Goethe’s *Meister* providing the self-consciousness of the Revolution; the removal of hierarchy (the levelling out and mixing of classes and genders in society, and genres in literature); the affirmation of becoming and history (hence the infinite perfectibility of literature as paradigmatic for the infinite perfectibility of the self); and the accounting of history through a process of self-creation (self-positing), self-destruction (positing the other as not self), and self-restriction.²⁴

In Schlegel’s ‘On Goethe’s *Meister*’ (1798), the exegesis of the third element of his constellation, he argues, ‘This book is absolutely new and unique. We can learn to understand it only on its own terms. To judge it according to an idea of genre drawn from custom and belief . . . is as if a child tried to clutch the stars and the moon in his hand and pack them in his satchel.’ The novel as ‘new and unique’ is constitutive of what it is to be a novel; it must exceed genre requirements – as emblems of traditional authority – as a condition for it being an artwork. To fail in this regard would make the work a mere imitation, a copy. The absence of pre-established standards entails that the idea of what it is for something to be a novel, and by inference to be a work *überhaupt*, is only given through the work itself. Hence the work inscribes and projects its own account of what it is to be a work. To judge a work on the basis of genre considerations, say the ideals of the classical, would miss the true nature of the work entirely. It requires understanding on its own terms, which is to say that a romantic work ‘spares the critic his labour’ since ‘it carries its own judgement within itself . . . not only does it judge itself, it also

²⁴ *Critical Fragments*, number 37.