

## Chapter One

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# Finding Room for the Romantics between Kant and Hegel



Philosophers have frequently modeled their work on the mathematical or natural sciences and distanced themselves from anything literary. The stereotype shaping this tradition is that philosophers, like scientists and mathematicians, are interested in truth and reality and poets in appearances, imitations of reality.<sup>1</sup> This stereotype has led many mainstream philosophers to identify themselves closely with the community of scientists and shun the company of poets. The upshot of this is a dry, technical style of philosophizing that pays little attention to literary devices that would detract the reader from the truth that is being shown by the argument of the philosopher. For, to resort to rhetorical flourish (rhetoric is, after all, merely *ars bene dicendi*, and philosophy is not an art but a science) is to leave the esteemed company of the philosophers and to enter the ill-reputed company of those who do not use language to uncover truth, but rather to persuade, like the sophists, or to deceive, like the poets.

One of the most reductionist views of philosophy put forth in the twentieth century was that of the logical positivists. An emblematic figure of the logical positivist movement was Rudolf Carnap. According to Carnap the domain of art belongs to the poets and the domain of theory to the philosopher. And for Carnap anyone who hopes to bring the two together, to be a kind of poet-philosopher, has confused art with theory and will only be able to generate nonsense. In order to produce theories, philosophers support their statements with arguments, claim assent to the content of these arguments, and polemicize against philosophers of divergent persuasions by attempting to refute their assertions. Poets, on the other hand, “do not try to refute in their poem statements in a poem by another poet, for they know they are in the domain of art and not in the domain of theory.”<sup>2</sup>

This view of the distinct task of the philosopher and the poet was met with a warm reception by philosophers who sought to give philosophy the reputable standing of a science. Though the star of logical positivism itself has dimmed almost to darkness, its spirit nonetheless continues to inform the way in which philosophy is done (especially in Anglo-American circles, where analytic philosophy holds sway) and the distance many philosophers like to keep from anything smacking of the literary. Seen through the lens of logical positivism, the post-Kantian period of German philosophy, with its talk of spooky concepts like *'das Absolute,'* *'das Sein schlechthin,'* *'der Geist,'* and other such things “measureless to man,” looks like little more than an obscure pile of nonsense, nothing about which “real” philosophers have to trouble themselves.

Yet, there are some “real” philosophers who have attempted to defend the philosophical movements dedicated to analyzing such “non-sensical” terms. Richard Rorty is a well-known, even infamous, figure, who is well aware of the effects that reductionist views of philosophy have had upon the development of the field. He describes the legacy of positivism in his characteristically provocative way: “Logical positivists such as [Carnap] trained students to brush past romance and to spot nonsense. In the space of two generations, [. . .] dryness won out over [. . .] romance. Philosophy in the English-speaking world became ‘analytic’—antimetaphysical, unromantic, highly professional, and a cultural backwater.”<sup>3</sup> According to Rorty, the only way out of this stagnant water is to see that “Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition—a family romance involving, e.g., Father Parmenides, honest old Uncle Kant, bad brother Derrida.”<sup>4</sup> Linguistic analysis, a method that Rorty had promoted early in his career, is not a method that goes along with a conception of philosophy as a kind of writing.<sup>5</sup> If philosophy is seen as a kind of writing, literary form no longer fades silently into the background, viewed with a resigned sigh: it takes on philosophical significance. Furthermore, once we begin to see philosophy as a “family romance,” issues of “honest old Uncle Kant’s” relation to “Father Parmenides” and “bad brother Derrida” may arise and with these, the act of comparing various stages of this family romance with other stages. In this way, the hermeneutical dimension of philosophy becomes more prominent. The task of understanding a philosopher’s contribution will be more than simply a matter of getting the argument straight (although, of course, this will also be important). Rorty’s conception of philosophy as a kind of writing goes hand in hand with certain aesthetic methods that involve issues of interpretation and historical contextualization. This, as we shall see, is much in keeping with Schlegel’s view of philosophy as an essentially historical enterprise.

Philosophers who emphasize philosophy as a kind of writing are more open vis-à-vis the relation philosophy has to poetry and to disciplines other than mathematics and the natural sciences. Of course, philosophers should be cautious when entering these waters, for if philosophy becomes *merely* a kind of writing somehow reducing all reality to texts; that is, if philosophers give up the idea of an independent reality, then they are in danger of sinking into a kind of helpless relativism. Grim as it may be, philosophy as a cultural backwater would still be preferable to philosophy as a sea of relativism. Yet there is no reason to accept a false dichotomy: philosophy as *either* a set of verifiable propositions *or* merely as a kind of writing. There are many more models of philosophy available to us, models that need to be revisited.

The early German Romantics were one of the first groups of thinkers to seriously challenge the model of philosophy based on the natural or mathematical sciences, and, as a result, they faced then and continue to face now discrimination from “mainstream” philosophers. Insofar as they present their ideas systematically, it is much easier for philosophers who understand philosophy to be akin to science and to theory building to privilege the philosophy of Kant and Hegel; most philosophers remain suspicious of the use of fragments, dialogues, essays, and novels favored by philosophers such as the early German Romantics. Few philosophers are hospitable to a conception of philosophy that entails an intimate relation with the realm of art or a move toward making philosophy a cultural tool rather than a scientific tool.<sup>6</sup>

The unification of philosophy and poetry is threatening to philosophers because of the narrow way in which many of them conceive of *both* philosophy *and* poetry. On this narrow reading, philosophy is essentially an analytic exercise in clarity and critique, one that maintains an objective relation to an independent reality, whereas poetry tricks us with all sorts of semblances of reality, pulling us away from reality and into a never-never land of make-believe that obviously has nothing to teach us about how things are. More broad-minded views of both poetry and philosophy go a long way toward making us see that the two disciplines need not be “embattled adversaries.”<sup>7</sup>

The early German Romantics endorsed just such a broad-minded view of both philosophy and poetry. Moreover, they did not appeal to poetry as a way of dragging us away from reality and confusing us with mere appearances. Indeed, their call for the completion of philosophy in and as poetry is the result of a deep-seated skepticism regarding the limits of philosophy and ultimately of human knowledge. And while Schlegel did not offer us a closed system, this does not entail that he was not serious about philosophy. Yet philosophers consistently disregard the work

of the early German Romantics, precisely because of their innovative method and the fluid way in which they moved from philosophy to poetry, dismissing them in favor of the “grand system builders” of the period (esp. that almost holy trinity, Kant, Schelling, and Hegel). All too often, when the work of the early German Romantics is addressed, they are misread under the shadows of the more mainstream German philosophers of their period or even worse, demonized as the precursors of the Nazis.<sup>8</sup>

By clearly distinguishing the contributions of the early German Romantics from those of the more famous idealists of the period, I hope to go beyond the banal caricatures of the movement, which condemn the early German Romantics to a purely literary realm. In so doing I shall also carve a space for them that accurately depicts their philosophical contribution to the history of ideas and so to present them as something more than second-draft players on the great team of German Idealists (that famous line *from Kant to Hegel*, a teleological line according to which the problems introduced by Kant are solved by Hegel, in the culminating moment of the period). In short, then, one goal I have in presenting Friedrich Schlegel’s romantic philosophy is to show that the period between Kant and Hegel contains a far greater diversity of philosophical controversies, ideas, and movements than can be seen if the only lens we use to focus on the “golden age” of German Idealism, roughly between 1781 (the year Kant published the first version of his *Critique of Pure Reason*) and 1807 (the year Hegel published his *Phenomenology of Spirit*), is that of the grand system builders.

Yet, before turning to Schlegel’s contributions and the general philosophical thrust of early German Romanticism, we need to consider what is meant by German Idealism, a term that is all too elastic to serve us well if we are to attain a clearer understanding of the post-Kantian period. As idealism is a term that has been so often misrepresented, before beginning with a treatment of what the German Idealists were doing, it is worth clarifying some points regarding what the German idealists were not doing. For just as the Carnapian legacy has left philosophers with a suspicion of the nonsensical blending of philosophy and poetry, it has also left philosophers with a certain level of reserve against idealism, which is often read as a move away from reality.

### Idealism: From Misconceptions to Post-Kantian Variations

All too often, idealism is associated with an antirealist position, in this sense, the *ideal* of idealism refers to that which is “not real.” This sort of idealism is rooted in Berkeley’s idealism and his famous *esse est percipi* view of reality. According to this view, idealism is essentially a negative meta-

physical doctrine. It was this sort of idealism that formed the basis of G. E. Moore's famous refutation. Yet, as Frederick Beiser has recently argued, the sort of idealism behind the German philosophical movements of the 1700s was rooted not in Berkeley, but in Plato. Indeed, Beiser's book *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* tells a story of German Idealism according to which this philosophical position is compelling *not* because it leads us to the subject, trapping us there in some sort of egocentric predicament that makes it impossible to determine whether our ideas of the world actually correspond to something objective in the external world, but rather because it leads to the development of a robust realism and naturalism.<sup>9</sup>

As the reception of German Idealism, especially in the analytic tradition, has suffered because of the general misperception that all forms of idealism amount to antirealism, we do well to keep in mind the following warning offered by Karl Ameriks:

Anyone reading German Idealism should, at the very least, take note that the notion of idealism has carried with it both positive and not merely negative meanings and that the negative sense dominant in contemporary English is by no means to be assumed. The negative meaning of 'idealism' implies that most things that are commonly taken to be real are *not* in fact, that is, they do not exist at all, or at least not in the manner that has been assumed. The positive interpretation of 'idealism,' in contrast, involves seeing the term as *adding* rather than subtracting significance, as emphasizing that, whatever we say about the status of many things that are thought to exist at a common-sense level, we also recognize a set of features or entities that have a higher, a more 'ideal' nature.<sup>10</sup>

Beiser also stresses the importance of distinguishing between two quite different versions of idealism: "the two versions of idealism correspond to two senses of the term 'ideal,' the ideal can be the mental in contrast to the physical, the spiritual rather than the material, or it can be the archetypal in contrast to the ectypical, the normative rather than the substantive. Idealism in the former sense is the doctrine that all reality depends upon some self-conscious subject; idealism in the latter sense is the doctrine that everything is a manifestation of the ideal, an appearance of reason."<sup>11</sup> The dismissive reading of German Idealism would have the post-Kantian period represented as a slow eclipsing of the world by an overgrown subjectivity. Yet, according to Beiser's account, "the story of German Idealism becomes a story about the progressive *de-subjectivization*

of the Kantian legacy, the growing recognition that the ideal realm consists not in personality and subjectivity, but in the normative, the archetypal, and the intelligible."<sup>12</sup> A major advantage of reassessing the philosophical commitments of the German Idealists in the terms suggested by Beiser is that the influence of Plato's thought on the movement comes into sharper relief. Plato was a pivotal figure not only for the German Idealists but also for the early German Romantics: Friedrich Schleiermacher translated his works, and, as I shall discuss in chapter 7, Schlegel referred to him with great admiration and modeled his own romantic irony on Socratic irony. Yet I ultimately remain unconvinced by Beiser's reading of the early German Romantics as absolute idealists of a Platonic or any other bent.

Despite some disagreements I have with Beiser's classification of the early German Romantics, I fully support his antisubjectivist reading of the German Idealists. To prevent general misunderstandings of the post-Kantian period, we do well to follow Beiser's advice and keep in mind that German Idealism is *not* a threat to a subject independent reality, *not* a breed of antirealism according to which all of reality depends on the subject, and so it is *not* a position that reduces all of reality to the mental or spiritual realm. Yet, it is certainly not sufficient, for the purposes of distinguishing German Idealism from early German Romanticism, that we know what German Idealism is *not*, we have to know something more about what it is.

In order to highlight the differences between German Idealism and early German Romanticism, what I am after here is not a definition of idealism in the basic sense of an ontological doctrine according to which things in the universe are dependent, in some way or another, on mental structures. In broad brushstrokes, what I shall do is present German Idealism as a response to the problem of knowledge introduced by Kant's critical philosophy. Obviously, I cannot offer an exhaustive account of the movement, which was incredibly diverse. And even my sketch in this chapter shall be limited to a focus on Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel's reception of Kant's philosophy, with special attention to how they attempted to solve the problem of Kant's troubling dualisms. In chapter 3 I shall return to the distinction between German Idealism and early German Romanticism, with a detailed focus on Fichte's idealism and Schlegel's critique of it.

Kant's transcendental idealism presented his contemporaries with a dualistic conception of human nature that was found to be highly problematic. What Kant sought to explain was how the mental and the physical, so utterly different in nature, were nonetheless related in such a way that it was possible for us to have knowledge of the external world, a

world that was at once independent of us and yet accessible to us. In complicated ways, the term *transcendental idealism* brings together Kant's epistemological (the transcendental is that which lays out the conditions for the possibility of knowledge) and ontological (idealism is a position about the nature of the things in the world) commitments: commitments that are fully laid out only when we consider his system in its entirety as a combination of transcendental idealism and empirical realism. In working out his system, Kant was led to posit a duality between the *phenomenal* world, the world we can know, and the mind-independent or *noumenal* world, to which we can never have determinate access.

Much of the work of the post-Kantian German idealists was focused on overcoming the dualisms that they found troublesome in Kant's system, most notably, the one between intellect and sense, which is arguably *the* fundamental dualism in Kant's system (underlying the dualisms between, for example, concept and intuition, reality and appearance).<sup>13</sup> These dualisms were charged with landing us back in the very skeptical arena that Kant wanted to avoid with his critical philosophy. As Beiser has indicated, "[t]hrough German idealism assumes such different, even incompatible forms, what all its forms have in common is the attempt to save criticism from skepticism."<sup>14</sup> It is my contention that a more careful look at the various attempts to save criticism from skepticism will help us to come to a better understanding of how to distinguish the unique contributions of the early German Romantics (Schlegel's contributions in particular) from those of the German Idealists who were their contemporaries.

Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel each addressed the problem of the sources and limits of human cognition. A decidedly idealist focus in the period can be found in the view that the role of reason is constitutive in shaping human experience yet that there must be some ground of reason, some unity underlying thought and reality that would enable us to move beyond Kant's troubling dualisms and so escape the threat of a skepticism that leaves us without clear access to the world as it is. Kant set limits to knowledge in order to avoid the mistakes of unreason (fallacies, amphibolies, antinomies, paralogisms, and other "monsters" born of the sleep of reason).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Kant saw his "critical method" as a way to provide an account of knowledge that would resist Cartesian and Humean doubts. Kant viewed his transcendental idealism as the only truly critical idealism, that is, the only position that would enable us to avoid the skepticism of whether or not our beliefs actually correspond to something in the world. Quickly, however, Kant's critics found problems with exactly how the sensible and intellectual realms, utterly different in nature, were supposed to interact. So began a host of well-known attempts to finish Kant's revolution, by tending to its true spirit (Fichte),

providing the missing premises for his conclusions (Schelling), or finding a principle that truly grounded the critical philosophy (Reinhold).

### Searching for the Unity of Thought and Being: Idealist *Jäger* versus Romantic *Spürbunde*

What most of the self-appointed Kantian revolutionaries shared was a certain search for the unity of thought and Being, something that would give us a way out of Kant's troubling dualisms and provide an answer to the age-old question of how mind and world connect. The unity of thought and Being is also known as the Absolute. Andrew Bowie characterizes the philosophical developments in the immediate post-Kantian period in terms of the German Idealists' goal "to articulate the relationship between mind and nature as a relationship between two ultimately identical aspects of a totality, the Absolute, thus overcoming the split between idealism and materialism."<sup>16</sup> One sensible way to approach the problem of clarifying the meaning of the German Idealist movement is to focus upon how the "big three" thinkers of the period, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling, came to terms with the Absolute. Yet I want to avoid one standard reading justifiably criticized by Bowie and other scholars of the period, that is, the reading according to which "the move from Kant to Hegel via German Idealism and early Romanticism consists of the working through of a series of untenable attempts to deal with central Kantian problems, which are then largely resolved by Hegel."<sup>17</sup> Some of the problems posed by Kant's philosophy were addressed by the early German Romantics and in ways that, as Bowie points out, rejected "essential elements of German Idealism."<sup>18</sup> It is my view that an essential element of German Idealism that Schlegel rejects is that the ultimate origin of Being is transparent to reason. Schlegel and the early German Romantics accept a certain opacity of Being, which informs their skepticism and motivates their aesthetic turn, a turn too long underappreciated and dismissed as an irrational and unphilosophical move.

Each of the German idealists gives an account of the unconditioned or Absolute in order to overcome the split that Bowie refers to between idealism and materialism. Fichte's Absolute is pure being or the indifference point of the subjective and objective. Hegel's Absolute involves something like the establishment of the identity and nonidentity, the subjective and the objective, the ideal and the real in a correspondence that would explain the possibility of knowledge, all within the space of reasons generated by reason, and so, of course, transparent to reason.<sup>19</sup> Bowie goes on to characterize Hegel as arguing that "subjectivity and objectivity can therefore be thought of as grounding each other, without there being any



need for a further ground. The Romantic question will be whether the position from which this can be asserted could actually be philosophically legitimated, rather than postulated as the goal of philosophy, which may not be attainable.<sup>20</sup> As Bowie suggests, the way in which the post-Kantians appropriate the Absolute will turn out to be pivotal for drawing a line between the German Idealists and the early German Romantics. Schelling is a protean figure, and for him, the absolute identity of subject and object is the work of art (a view that, as we shall see, links him closely to Schlegel, for whom the epistemological role of art was to be a central part of philosophy).

In order to deal with the Absolute, the German Idealists have to appeal to a nondiscursive mode of knowledge (nondiscursive in the sense of not being dependent upon the rules of thought provided by Kant's categories) in the form of intellectual intuition. This need arises from the somewhat paradoxical situation in which we find ourselves when we seek to *know* something about the unconditioned. As Schlegel put it: "To know already indicates a conditioned knowledge," so "[t]he unknowability of the Absolute is [a] triviality."<sup>21</sup> Schlegel's solution to the problem of the unknowability of the Absolute was to develop an alternative way to understand the structure of knowledge and reality, and it is in this development that Schlegel's romantic skepticism takes shape.

In contrast to the German Idealists, there is no attempt made by Schlegel to begin from or arrive at the original unity of thought and Being. The early German Romantics maintain a closer relation to what Günter Zöllner has so aptly characterized as Kant's "oblique epistemological approach" and Andrew Bowie and Charles Larmore have described, using a somewhat different metaphor, in terms of an "opacity" in Kant (especially in reference to his talk of the imagination as "that art hidden in the depths of the human soul" and the enigmatic schematism as the way to circumvent the regress of rules for the application of rules).<sup>22</sup> As Bowie observes when discussing Kant's chapter on the schematism, a chapter that is uncharacteristically short and that has the function of explaining (in fewer than a dozen pages) nothing less than how we apply concepts of the understanding to objects of experience in order to form determinant judgments: "The functioning of judgment . . . relies upon an aspect of spontaneity which cannot be conceptually articulated, because if it were to be brought under a concept it would lose its mediating status between intuition and concepts, receptivity and spontaneity."<sup>23</sup>

Since the functioning of judgment cannot be conceptually articulated, the way in which we come to apply pure concepts of the understanding to objects of experience in order to form determinant judgments remains an "art hidden in the depths of the human soul, whose real

modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and have open to our gaze” (*verborgene Kunst in den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele, deren wahre Handgriffe wir der Natur schwerlich jemals abratzen, und sie unverdeckt vor Augen legen werden*) [A 141/B 180]). Claims such as these may have been what led Schlegel to characterize Kant as the *Spürhund* (or sniffer dog/sleuth) of philosophy and Fichte as the true *Jäger* (hunter) of philosophy; Schlegel himself is in this respect much closer to Kant than he is to Fichte, content to be aware that he is on the trail of the Absolute, without needing to grip it between his teeth.<sup>24</sup> An acknowledgment that there are aspects of our epistemological framework that remain elusive, that is, not open to our gaze, despite our most critical approach to philosophy, is something that Schlegel openly endorses, not, as has sometimes been claimed, as a detour away from the rationality celebrated by the Enlightenment thinking of Kant and his ilk, but rather as a humble acceptance of the limits of human cognition.<sup>25</sup> The German Idealists push for a crystal clear view of the Absolute as part of their effort to purify philosophy, understood as *Wissenschaft*, of any menacing shadows, anything that would not be open to our gaze, including, of course, the Absolute, or the unconditioned, and this sets them apart from their romantic colleagues. It is in this sense that Schlegel’s seemingly lighthearted characterizing of Kant as the *Spürhund* and Fichte as the *Jäger* of philosophy takes us to a deeper philosophical point regarding what philosophers are able to achieve: the idealists go after and believe they have hunted down the Absolute, whereas the early German Romantics are convinced that we can be on the trail of the Absolute and get ever closer but never hope to capture it. This point has crucial ramifications for their view of knowledge and of truth.

To avoid possible misunderstanding of Zöller’s position, generated by my references to his work, I should emphasize that Zöller, though concerned with presenting a counterimage to the Hegelian picture of German Idealism, is not interested per se in the early German Romantics and does not address Schlegel’s work at all. Nonetheless, several of the points he makes regarding the radical critique of German idealism that he claims was carried out by Fichte, Schelling, and Schopenhauer can be used to help us gain clarity regarding the philosophical project of German idealism and the important contrast to this project we find in the work of the early German Romantics.

In his article “German realism: The Self-limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling, and Schopenhauer,” Zöller is concerned with filling out the story of post-Kantian developments in terms of the “realist self-supplementation” found in the work of three important members of the German idealist tradition.<sup>26</sup> Zöller’s reexamination of German Idealism leads him to claim that “in placing reason in relation to a space on

which it borders but that it cannot enter, Fichte, Schelling, and Schopenhauer, each in their own way, continue the Kantian project of articulating the grounds and bounds of reason. Like Kant they seek to strike a balance between the idealist recognition that the natural and social worlds reflect reason's demands and interests and the realist insight that the world is more than the work of reason.<sup>27</sup> The acknowledgment that "the world is more than the work of reason" means that those hunters of the unity of thought and being are never going to find such unity. They can only be on its trail (as the *Spürhund* is on the trail of the hunted animal). Zöllner goes on to argue: "[T]o be sure, this reevaluation of reality does not amount to an outright cancellation of the idealist insistence on the constitutive role of reason. Rather, Kantian and post-Kantian idealism undergoes an emendation: the apparent self-sufficiency of reason is complemented, in fact completed, by being traced back to a dimension of ultimate origin or being that is beyond reason but without which there would be no reason."<sup>28</sup> The acknowledgment that Being cannot be fully uncovered via reason is no move to an irrational realm, but rather it "amounts to a radical critique of the system of absolute, purely rational idealism as developed by Hegel."<sup>29</sup> As Zöllner indicates: "Throughout his development Schelling considers it philosophy's task to start with the absolute. This marks a departure from the oblique, epistemological rather than metaphysical approach introduced by Kant and still very much carried forward by Fichte. For Kant and Fichte, the absolute can come into view only from the perspective of the finite, human mind. Moreover, both Kant and Fichte insist on the essential limitations of the human mind in grasping the absolute, which can only be approximated by cognition and has to be rendered in images."<sup>30</sup>

The Fichte to whom Zöllner refers is the later Fichte, who is much closer to Schlegel (more a *Spürhund* than a *Jäger*) than the early Fichte, who as we shall see in chapter 3, fell under sharp attack from Schlegel for his "crystal clear" reports of the foundations of knowledge. I am not here interested in entering a debate on how the later Fichte differs from the early Fichte. What I do want to highlight in bringing attention to Zöllner's points is the emphasis that the critique of idealism put forward by Fichte (at least by the late Fichte), Schelling, and Schopenhauer, for all of their differences, shares a common point: the rejection of an absolute, purely rational idealism.

Each of the three thinkers discussed by Zöllner, admittedly in strikingly different ways, admits some opacity with regard to just how much of the Absolute can be illuminated by reason alone. This point marks an important departure from full-blown idealism (that is an idealism according to which reason is entirely self-sufficient), even while each of the

three critics maintains a certain commitment to idealism. The views of the period that granted reason full self-sufficiency in uncovering the ultimate origin of reason gave rise to a view that the Absolute, according to which it could be fully grasped by the human mind, that is, in a way that made the Absolute transparent to us. Schlegel rejected both the self-sufficiency of reason in connection with the problem of uncovering the ultimate origin of Being and the accompanying view that finite human beings could grasp the Absolute in its full light. The light of reason continues to shine for Schlegel and the early German Romantics, keeping us on the trail of our search for the Absolute, even while they argue that it alone cannot fully illuminate the ultimate origin of reason. Part of the philosopher's task is to help us find our way in the darkness, to give us a method for dealing with the opacity of the Absolute. Schlegel's rejection of the transparency of the Absolute is what gives rise to the most original aspects of his thought.

In contrast to Zöllner, Charles Larmore and Andrew Bowie are both concerned with the early German Romantics in particular. Despite the different focus that they have, both Larmore and Bowie, like Zöllner, refer to a departure from classical German idealism in terms of an acknowledgment that the Absolute "eludes" the grasp of reason. Larmore is interested in Hölderlin and Novalis' critique of Fichte, so he is interested in the early Fichte, the same Fichte that Schlegel critiques. In his article, "Hölderlin and Novalis," Larmore underscores the common philosophical convictions of Hölderlin and Novalis and how those convictions distinguish their philosophical contributions from those of Fichte.<sup>31</sup> His analysis clears space for a deeper understanding of the epistemically valuable aesthetic insights of the early German Romantics. As Larmore points out, Hölderlin and Novalis argued that our subjectivity "has its basis in a dimension of 'Being,' which eludes not only introspection but philosophical analysis as well . . . For both of them, philosophy runs up against limits that poetry alone can point beyond."<sup>32</sup> The opacity of Being is thus critical for understanding the difference between German Idealism (be it Fichte's, Hegel's, or Schelling's) and the philosophical project of the early German Romantics. Larmore's reading of Hölderlin and Novalis brings the unique contribution of the early German Romantics into focus, setting them apart from the German Idealists under whose shadows they are too often read.

Hölderlin and Novalis (and as we shall see, Schlegel too) agreed in opposing one of the leading assumptions of the idealism of the early Fichte and of Hegel, namely, "that reality is transparent to reason." As Larmore is careful to point out, Hölderlin and Novalis's move to deny subjectivity the status of a self-evident first principle does not entail that

they dismiss subjectivity as an illusion, so the romantics are not heralding the “death of the subject.”<sup>33</sup> What Hölderlin, Novalis (and, though Larmore does not mention him, Schlegel) do herald is an end to foundationalist approaches to knowledge and the beginning of a turn to poetry that is no embrace of the irrational but rather a turn toward aesthetic experience as a reliable and by no means irrational guide in our approximation toward the Absolute.<sup>34</sup> The early German Romantics do not make a typically German Idealist move to achieve a transparent look at the Absolute. And the most typical German Idealist, indeed the one against whom the contributions of the so-called secondary figures have too often been measured, is Hegel.

Andrew Bowie deftly captures the distinction between early German Romanticism and Hegelian idealism in the following way: “The core issue between the Romantic and Hegelian positions is, then, whether the Absolute really can, as Hegel thinks, be grasped by the power of reflection, and whether it therefore requires no presupposition external to reflection.”<sup>35</sup> As Bowie goes on to claim, the early German Romantics do *not* think that the Absolute can in fact be grasped by the power of reflection alone, and this recognition gives rise to a view of knowledge markedly different from Hegel’s: “The Romantic Absolute is not what philosophy can articulate by revealing the ultimate relativity of finite contradictions, because there can be no end knowable in advance to the contradictions generated in the structures we have described. The Absolute is, rather, what renders our knowledge relative and continually open to revision, at the same time as sustaining the goal of truth by assuring that revised judgement must be able to be predicated of the same world as the preceding now false judgement.”<sup>36</sup> This point regarding the Absolute as that which renders our knowledge relative and continually open to revision is crucial to distinguishing *Frühromantik* from German Idealism. As we shall see, even the meticulously presented version of absolute idealism that Beiser presents overlooks this, which is part of the reason that he insists that the early German Romantics are absolute idealists.

Terry Pinkard’s “Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and *Logic*: An Overview,” also makes reference, albeit it not entirely explicitly, to a kind of “oblique epistemological approach,” in Hölderlin’s work, as he traces several of Hegel’s insights back to this tragic figure who for far too long has been neglected by philosophers.<sup>37</sup> According to Pinkard, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a reaction to Hölderlin’s original insight that all mediated knowledge (all judgments we make) presupposes an original unity of thought of Being (something that cannot be judgmentally articulated): “The original, primordial unity of thought and being was reconceptualized by Hegel as an *intersubjective* unity constituted by patterns of mutual

*recognition*, from which other conclusions could indeed be derived. However, Hegel also believed he had to motivate such a change in direction in idealist thought by showing that this conception itself had historically come to be *required* of us, that it was not simply one philosophical option among others.<sup>38</sup> While Pinkard does not himself derive from his argument ways of distinguishing between *Frühromantik* and German Idealism, the elements are there to draw such differences (so our task is much easier than Schelling's—we do not have to look for the missing premises of a given conclusion, just to draw the conclusion from clearly presented premises): the early German Romantics accept the opacity of Being, whereas idealists such as Hegel develop an absolute idealism that allegedly provides a transparent glimpse of Being.

Hegel, good German idealist that he was, could not accept the epistemological opacity that is a hallmark of romantic thought. He instead, according to Pinkard, developed a notion of judgment as taking place within the whole of the “space of reasons,” or the “absolute I,” which is what articulates the original unity of thought and being that Hölderlin (and the early German Romantics) insisted could not be articulated via judgment.

### Frank's Romantic Realists versus Beiser's Romantic Idealists

Like Bowie, Larmore, Pinkard, and Zöllner, Manfred Frank traces classical German Idealism to its articulation by Hegel that consciousness is a self-sufficient phenomenon, one that is able to make the presuppositions of its existence comprehensible by its own means. Frank contrasts this kind of idealism and the accompanying view of the self-sufficiency of consciousness to the conviction that characterizes the early German Romantics, namely, that self-being owes its existence to a transcendent foundation that cannot be made fully transparent by consciousness, claiming, in no uncertain terms, that it is a mistake to read *Frühromantik* as a mere appendage to German Idealism.<sup>39</sup>

Frank offers the following (admittedly *ad hoc*) definition of early German Romanticism:

The thought of Hölderlin and that of Hardenberg (Novalis) and Schlegel *cannot be* assimilated to the mainstream of so-called German idealism, although these philosophers developed their thought in close cooperation with the principle figures of German idealism, Fichte and Schelling (Hegel, a late-comer to free speculation, played at that time only a passive role). The thought of Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel implies a tenet of basic real-

ism, which I will provisionally express by the formula, that that which has being—or, we might say, the essence of our reality—cannot be traced back to determinations of our consciousness. If *ontological* realism can be expressed by the thesis that reality exists independently of our consciousness (even if we suppose thought to play a role in structuring reality) and if *epistemological* realism consists in the thesis that we do not possess adequate knowledge of reality, then early German Romanticism can be called a version of ontological and epistemological realism.<sup>40</sup>

Frank emphasizes the strong connection between the romantic position that the true foundation of self-being is a puzzle that cannot be handled by reflection alone to the early German Romantics' privileging of art and aesthetic experience. Frank's reference to the puzzle posed by the problem of Being, the "oblique epistemological approach" alluded to by Zöllner, and the "opacity" of Being to which Bowie and Larmore refer, each points to a characteristic feature of romantic philosophy, an acknowledgment that our epistemological limitations make it impossible for us to get a transparent, crystal clear look at the Absolute: aesthetic experience allows us to approximate the Absolute. This epistemological humility contrasts rather sharply with the confidence exhibited by the German idealists of the period, (the early) Fichte and Hegel, both of whom are led in their philosophical endeavors by the belief that Being is, ultimately, transparent to reason.

The epistemological humility that is a hallmark of romantic thought and to which Frank appeals in distinguishing early German Romanticism from German Idealism should not be confused with a move away from reason, a confusion that seems to affect Beiser. Beiser characterizes Frank's strategy for distinguishing between early German Romanticism and German Idealism as one that brings us back to the misleading view that the early German Romantics were anti-*Aufklärung* thinkers, reviving the "distinction between the aestheticism of *Frühromantik* and the rationalism of the *Aufklärung*," by maintaining "that the romantics' first principle is suprarational and presentable only in art."<sup>41</sup> This in turn leads Beiser to make the rather puzzling move of classifying Manfred Frank, a philosopher who is more interested in the affinities between early German Romanticism and analytic philosophy (that is, in analyzing the connections between say, Novalis or Schlegel in relation to Donald Davidson, Hillary Putnam, or Thomas Nagel) than he is in tracing the connections between early German Romanticism and the work of Jacques Derrida or Paul de Man, as a postmodern interpreter of early German Romanticism.<sup>42</sup>

Yet Frank does not claim that the Romantics' "first principle is suprarational and presentable only in art." Frank, in fact, argues that the early German Romantics abandon the project of a philosophy based on first principles altogether; their Absolute is not a first principle of any sort but rather a *regulative idea*. Moreover, their turn to aesthetics is no "suprarational" move. Frank explicitly distances early German Romanticism from postmodernism, by emphasizing the role that the notion of the Absolute plays in the development of early German Romanticism: "Without the tendency towards the Absolute philosophy could not act 'polemically' towards the finite. Therefore he who wishes to mark the beginning of the truly radical modern (or even post-modern) with the dissolution of the notion of the Absolute is in error. Were it not for the orientation of a non-relative One, then the different interpretations which surface in history could never contradict one another and so also not annihilate one another."<sup>43</sup> Frank underscores the pivotal role that the notion of the Absolute plays in the romantic conception of knowledge: the Absolute is that which renders our knowledge continually open to revision. In his discussion of Novalis' conception of the Absolute, Frank emphasizes that according to Novalis' view, the Absolute can only be known negatively, which is why Novalis calls "searching for the first principle" a futile activity, "the squaring of the circle," and "from the impossibility of ultimately justifying the truth of our conviction [Novalis] draws the conclusion that truth is to be replaced with probability." Probable is what "is maximally well connected," that is, what has been made as "coherent as possible without there being an ultimate justification to support the harmony of our fallible assumptions of an evident Archimedean point of departure."<sup>44</sup> But this emphasis on coherence as a criterion for truth claims hardly amounts to an irrational move.

If we follow Frank's portrait of the early German Romantics, we come to a view of them as realists who nonetheless bid farewell to certainty as an epistemological goal and who embraced something like a coherence view of truth, built around a conviction that absolute justification is an impossibility, an attempt to square the circle, yet who are thinkers who strive for ever more knowledge and who drew important aesthetic consequences from the lack of any absolute grounding for our knowledge claims, not as part of any move away from reason and the progress of knowledge, but rather to serve both.

Fred Beiser, in part perhaps because of his belief that Frank's portrait of early German Romanticism lands us in an irrational realm, paints a strikingly different picture of the early German Romantics: they are not realists but absolute idealists. Beiser carefully unpacks what he means by the term *absolute idealism*: "True to its name, absolute idealism was first



and foremost a doctrine about the absolute, or to use some synonyms, the unconditioned, the infinite, or the 'in itself.' Like the term 'absolute idealism,' however, 'absolute' is rarely explicitly defined or explained [by the early German Romantics]."<sup>45</sup> After telling us that absolute idealism is a mixture of monism (not a plurality of substances, but a single substance exists), vitalism (the single, universal substance is an organism, which is in a constant process of growth and development), and rationalism (this process of development has a purpose or conforms to some form, archetype, or idea), Beiser tells us: "In absolute idealism a distinction is finally made between two senses of the ideal that had constantly been confused before Kant and by Kant: the distinction between the noumenal and archetypal on the one hand, and the mental and spiritual on the other."<sup>46</sup> Beiser claims that Frank's classification of the early German Romantics as realists is based on too narrow an understanding of idealism:

Frank makes a sharp distinction between the philosophy of early romanticism and absolute idealism. Frank uses the terms 'absolute idealism' to designate the doctrine that 'the basic facts of our reality are mental (even ideal) entities' (*Unendliche Annäherung*, op. cit., p. 27). In this sense it is certainly correct to claim that the early romantics were not absolute idealists. However, it is important to see that the romantics themselves did not use the term in this sense, and that they did sometimes espouse a doctrine they called 'idealism.' Furthermore, it is misleading to place the romantics outside the idealist tradition entirely, as Frank would like, because they still adhere to some of its central principles.<sup>47</sup>

But it is incorrect to claim, as Beiser does, that Frank places the Romantics "entirely" out of the idealist tradition. In fact, Frank emphasizes, for example, some of the basic convictions that Schlegel shared with his idealist contemporaries, Hegel and Schelling, in particular, the insight that "the concept of finitude is dialectically bound to that of infinity and cannot be isolated from it."<sup>48</sup> Frank does observe, however, where Schlegel departs from Hegel and Schelling (and from an important strand of German Idealism), namely, in his conviction that we cannot represent the Absolute positively in knowledge.

Beiser points us to Schlegel as the first romantic to use 'absolute idealism,' yet Schlegel's references to absolute idealism do not lend great evidence to Beiser's case that the best way to categorize the early German Romantics is as absolute idealists, for Schlegel never claims that absolute idealism alone would be enough to give us a clear understanding of the mind or the world. He in fact emphasizes that idealism must always be

complemented by a strong breed of realism. And the fact that Schlegel emphasizes this seems to contradict Beiser's claim that absolute idealism, of the sort that characterizes the romantics, amounts to a kind of realism, for if Schlegel agreed with this, why would he insist that absolute idealism had to be complemented by realism? Consider the following fragments which Beiser offers as evidence of Schlegel's commitment to absolute idealism: "Absolute idealism without realism is spiritualism,"<sup>49</sup> or "The half-critic is more an idealist—Kant, Fichte—or more realist—Jacobi, Mohr, for to be an absolute [idealist or realist] in opposition and separate from the other is impossible. Only the absolute idealist is an absolute realist and vice versa."<sup>50</sup>

The most important element in Beiser's defense of early German Romanticism as a kind of absolute idealism is the Platonic heritage he ascribes to their breed of idealism: "This Platonic heritage means that—in one form or another—the absolute is identified with the logos or telos, the archetype, idea or form that governs all things. The absolute is not transcendent being, which is somehow presupposed by reflection and consciousness and so can never be its object."<sup>51</sup> Yet, as I will discuss in chapter 6, Schlegel is not receptive in general to a fixed, unchanging realm of being (except as we shall see, to provide rules of thought (logic) and laws to explain the motion of the cosmos (mathematics)), so Beiser may be treading on thin ice if he wants his classification of the early German Romantics as absolute idealists to rest on a Platonic heritage understood in terms of a philosophy guided by teleological principles.

Finally, Beiser claims that his appeal to the Platonic legacy of *Frühromantik* allows several important features of the movement to come to light, while avoiding the irrationalist readings of the movement, which have hindered a proper reception of its philosophical dimensions. He again takes Frank's reading to task for too easily slipping onto a path of irrationality:

One of the most important [respects in which awareness of the Platonic legacy of *Frühromantik* leads us to revise our understanding of the movement] is recognizing that romantic aesthetic experience is not a kind of suprarationalism, a form of inscrutable awareness of the "mystery of being," which somehow presents the unpresentable only by virtue of the inexhaustible interpretability of a work of art. This assessment of romantic aesthetics, which finds its most powerful spokesman in Manfred Frank, suffers from several fatal difficulties. It is blind to the Platonic concept of reason in *Frühromantik*; it neglects the close connection between romantic aesthetics and *Naturphilosophie*, where the ro-

mantics did attempt to provide holistic explanations of nature; and, more important of all, it injects an unnecessary element of obscurantism into *Frühromantik*, which makes it vulnerable to all the old charges of antirationalism.<sup>52</sup>

While I take issue with aspects of Beiser's reading of the early German Romantics, I have deep admiration and respect for his work and for what he has accomplished with it. He has brought the early German Romantics into the canonical historical fold and has revealed crucial features of their work. Finally, philosophers are in a position to realize that questions such as, Can philosophy provide an exhaustive answer to the question of the nature of the self/mind (subjectivity) and its relation to the world? Must we give up the hope of exhaustive, certain answers to our questions and accept that limitations, deficiency, and a lack of absolute synthesis is part of the human condition, so philosophy will always have the epistemological opacity articulated by Kant, an opacity that art helps us to address? were addressed by the early German Romantics. A serious study of their unique contributions brings us to greater clarity regarding fundamental issues concerning the nature of human knowledge and the relation between mind and world. Nonetheless, in his attempt to save the early German Romantics from the allegedly obscurantist readings, I do believe that Beiser falls into a trap of a different sort, the dangers of which he is only too well aware:

Someone might object that my Platonic interpretation of *Frühromantik*, with all its emphasis on holistic explanation, is proto-Hegelian. But I am tempted to turn this objection against itself: it is more a romantic reading of Hegel than a Hegelian reading of the romantics, for it shows just another respect in which Hegel was indebted to the romantic tradition. Specifically, it shows how Hegel's absolute idealism grew out of the romantic tradition; it was indeed only the most obscure and cumbrous expression of the absolute idealism that had already been worked out by Novalis, Schlegel, Hölderlin and Schelling . . . Still I admit that there is some point to this objection. Any proto-Hegelian reading of *Frühromantik* is problematic if it sees the romantics as system builders like Hegel . . . I think that my Platonic interpretation of *Frühromantik* avoids this pitfall. It still permits, indeed insists upon, a fundamental difference between *Frühromantik* and Hegel: namely, Hegel affirms, while the romantics deny, that it is possible to create a complete system of philosophy. In other words, Hegel affirms and the romantics deny that there is a single

conceptual elaboration and demonstration adequate to the intuitive insights of reason. In the romantic view, which again only follows the Platonic tradition, the discursive performance of reason will always fall short of, and never do full justice to, its intuitive insights. The romantics deny, in other words, that there is such a thing as the system of absolute knowledge; they read such a system as only a regulative goal, which we can approach but never attain through infinite striving.<sup>53</sup>

In stressing the romantic emphasis on the notion of system as a regulative goal, “which we can approach but never attain through infinite striving,” Beiser’s characterization of the early German Romantics begins to sound quite similar to Frank’s reading, the one that Beiser rejects as irrational and inaccurate. Ultimately, I do not think that Beiser’s reading of the early German Romantics as absolute idealists escapes the proto-Hegelian reading, which may unwittingly lend support to Frank’s move to distance the early German Romantics from the German Idealists, well aware that without this distancing the Hegelian snare threatens.

The Hegelian snare is dangerous in terms of the reception of the early German Romantics, for when the early German Romantics are compared to Hegel, they are too often read as rashly scribbling down what the plodding Hegel systematically carried to the finish line, winning the philosophical race.

### On Why Schlegel Is Not Hegel<sup>54</sup>

One important reason why the early German Romantics have gone unnoticed by most philosophers is that their work is read as part of the tradition of classical German Idealism, and in the company of grand system builders such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, their work, which was not designed to result in grand theories at all, is often dismissed as incomplete and unimportant, as nothing more than a collection of dilettantish efforts either to do some strange version of poetic philosophy or to deal with philosophical problems that were much more “professionally” addressed by their contemporaries, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.

Encouraging this misreading of the early German Romantics as, at best, second-rate philosophers we find teleological historical narratives of the type initiated by Richard Kroner in his influential study of German Idealism (1921), *Von Kant bis Hegel*. Kroner presents the period from Kant to Hegel in terms of a teleological process culminating in the “universal synthesis of all prior views and standpoints that is Hegel’s system.”<sup>55</sup> Fortunately, in the years since the publication of Kroner’s work, we have moved

away from this Hegelian way of reading the period, and, as a result, the contributions of other thinkers of the period have come into sharper focus. Fichte, for example, has finally received the attention he deserves.<sup>56</sup>

Nonteleological readings of the period such as Beiser's *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* clear much-needed space on the map of philosophy for the early German Romantics.<sup>57</sup> Beiser privileges the early German Romantics in his tale of German Idealism, claiming that his study is “a reaction against the Hegelian legacy” and that Hegel was a “tortoise among hares,”<sup>58</sup> the hares being his predecessors in Jena, who never created grand systems, and who were treated with contempt in Hegel's rewriting of the history of philosophy. Beiser rejects the teleological reading of history that followed in Hegel's wake. One consequence of this rejection is that Beiser does not read German Idealism as a progression toward Hegel or a decline from Kant but rather as a much more nuanced movement and looks carefully at the contributions of individual thinkers on their own terms.

Nonetheless, vestiges of the Hegelian approach to history taint Beiser's reception of certain aspects of the Romantics. He claims that the Romantics' use of the fragment was part of a disorganized way to present their idea; the fragments lacked systematicity and completeness, which would be provided by the likes of Schelling and Hegel: “What was merely fragmentary, inchoate, and suggestive in Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel became systematic, organized, and explicit in Schelling”<sup>59</sup> and “[w]hat Hölderlin, Schlegel, and Novalis . . . had left in fragments—what they regarded as a mystical insight transcending conceptual articulation—Schelling would now try to rationalize and systematize.”<sup>60</sup> Although Beiser seeks to clear space on the map of ideas for thinkers squeezed out by Hegel, he claims, nonetheless, that “in unsurpassed fashion [Hegel] summarized and integrated into one system all the themes his less scholastic and organized contemporaries had left in fragments or notebooks.”<sup>61</sup> With claims of such tenor, Beiser, for all of his insistence on the need to look at the post-Kantian period in a nonteleological way, seems to fall back into reading the period precisely in the Hegelian way he so strongly (and justifiably) criticizes. Beiser, in effect, reduces some of the Romantics' achievements, including their rejection of closed systems for the presentation of their ideas, to mere imperfect forms that awaited completion by system builders such as Schelling and Hegel.

The early German Romantics did have systematic ambitions, yet their conception of system had a rather special architecture, few were (and few continue to be) capable of appreciating. As I mentioned at the outset, philosophers continue to underestimate the role of literary form in philosophy, which hinders an appreciation of the philosophical contributions of

the early German Romantics. The work of the early German Romantics was not work that awaited completion, even culmination, in Hegel or Schelling. The themes of incompleteness and incomprehension we find in their work are reflected in the literary forms they used to present it: the use of the fragment, for example, was *not* a result of a lack of resolution, a blameworthy incompleteness, in the sense of something that was meant to be finished and never was. Early German Romantic philosophy is incomplete not because the Romantics *failed* to finish their work but rather because they were convinced that a complete system could not be built.

As we have seen, many of the fragments published in *Das Athenäum*, the journal edited by Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel between 1798 and 1800, reflect a skeptical attitude concerning the “proper starting-points” of any scientific investigation and the possibility of certain results and of complete systems for the presentation of those results. We shall return to the aesthetic implications of Schlegel’s antifoundationalism in chapter 7.

Yet, even before I give a detailed analysis of the romantic move to put philosophy and poetry into closer company, it is worth emphasizing at once that a major point of difference between the early German Romantics and the German Idealists is found precisely in that underappreciated element I have mentioned: literary form. The German Idealists favored conventional systematic approaches to their problems: the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the *System des transszendentalen Idealismus*, the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, each, while by no means in strictly conventional ways, has systematic ambitions based on a view of philosophy as a discipline that should aspire to be like a science [*Wissenschaft*]: the literary form that Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel use is not open or playful (even while it is innovative). It guides the reader via strict argumentation to the conclusions that will authoritatively establish the theses defended. Rüdiger Bubner stresses that the Romantics, more concerned than their idealist contemporaries with commentary, criticism, and interpretation, also developed a different model of system. For the early German Romantics, “[t]he relevant model . . . is not a godlike creation of a system *ex nihilo*, as it was for the early idealists, but rather an actively sympathetic response of the part of the critic and the philologist to the significant creative works of the past.”<sup>62</sup> As we shall see, Schlegel does indeed explicitly reject attempts to ground philosophy “*ex nihilo*” in ahistorical first principles, stressing the intimate relation philosophy has to history and tradition and searching all too often in vain for an active and sympathetic response to his own work, which was slow in coming.

Schlegel’s view of philosophy is strikingly different from the view of philosophy shared by his Idealist contemporaries. It is a view shaped by