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Revitalizing Romanticism: Novalis' *Fichte Studien*  
and the Philosophy of Organic Nonclosure

A dissertation presented

by

Kristin Alise Jones

to

The Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the subject of  
Germanic Languages and Literatures

Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2013

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Revitalizing Romanticism: Novalis' *Fichte Studien*  
and the Philosophy of Organic Nonclosure

Abstract

This dissertation offers a re-interpretation of Novalis' *Fichte Studien*. I argue that several recent scholarly readings of this text unnecessarily exclude "organicism," or a panentheistic notion of the Absolute, in favor of "nonclosure," or the endless, because impossibly completed search for knowledge of the Absolute. My reading instead shows that, in his earliest philosophical text, Novalis makes the case for a Kantian discursive consciousness that can know itself, on Jacobian grounds, to be the byproduct (or accident) of a self-conditioning being or organism, and even more specifically a byproduct of God's panentheistic organism, at the same time that Novalis does not allow the possibility of discursive immediacy with that absolute standpoint; the epistemic consequence is that, while empirical science can proceed in the good faith that it makes valid reference to being, nonetheless it can never know its description of being to be final or complete. I call this position "organic nonclosure," and argue that Novalis holds it consistently throughout his very brief philosophical career. The keys to understanding Novalis' reconciliation of organicism and nonclosure are contextual and textual. Contextually, Novalis appreciates the inadvertent organicism in Jacobi's metacritique of Kant and also applies Jacobi's organicist metacritique to Fichte as well, with the result that Novalis' position in the *Fichte Studien* bears much resemblance to Herder's panentheistic ontology and modest epistemology. Textually, Novalis engages in a polysemy in the fragments of his *Fichte Studien* that performs the dependence of the sphere of empirical consciousness on a higher, intellectually intuitive being (a being that

could only be a divinely creative intellection), and, simultaneously, the impossibility of presenting that identity in discursive terms. In other words, for Novalis, human knowledge of the existence of the organicist Absolute is enabled by, but also limited to, the merely contingent, empirical, and private experience of the dependence of the human subjective standpoint on an objectivity simply given to it.

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## Introduction

„Mein Lieblingstudium heißt im Grunde, wie meine Braut. Sofie heißt sie – Philosophie ist die Seele meines Lebens und der Schlüssel zu meinem eigensten Selbst.“  
*Novalis an Friedrich Schlegel, Juli 1796*

Novalis' eminent standing at the heart of literary German Romanticism has gone essentially unchallenged for more than 200 years, but his status as a reputable *philosopher* is much younger. The first recognition of his uniquely early-Romantic contribution to the philosophy of his day arrived only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany with Walter Benjamin, and in France only in 1978 with *L'Absolu Littéraire* by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy; then, in the English language, the first blossoming of scholarly notice began as late as the 1990s. Yet even a brief glance at Novalis' works and letters reveals copious professions of love for philosophy and the insistence on its centrality to his creative project, so this tardy acknowledgment can only come as a surprise. Philosophy was clearly an intellectual priority for Novalis, and also a beloved pursuit. While working as an *Akzessist* for the saltworks in Weißenfels in 1795, Novalis said he had “ohngefähr 3 Stunden des Tages frey, wo ich für mich zu arbeiten wollen kann,” which he filled with “dringende Einleitungsstudien auf mein ganzes künftiges Leben, wesentliche Lücken meiner Erkenntniß und notwendige Uebungen meiner Denkkräfte”<sup>1</sup> – all exercises that eventually grew into the 500 handwritten pages of the *Fichte Studien*, his first major philosophical work. On several occasions, he describes the joy of philosophy as like an embrace, or a first kiss: “Im eigentlichsten Sinn ist philosophiren – ein Liebkosen – eine Bezeugung der innigsten Liebe zum Nachdenken, der absoluten Lust an der Weisheit,” and he writes that he wishes readers could see “daß

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<sup>1</sup> Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe/Novalis* Bd 1 (München, Wien: Hanser, 2005) 574.

der Anfang der Philosophie ein erster Kuß ist, in einem Augenblick... wo sie Mozarts Composition ‘Wenn die Liebe in Deinen blauen Augen’ recht seelenvoll vortragen hörten – wenn sie nicht gar in der Ahnungsvollen Nähe eines ersten Kusses seyn sollten.”<sup>2</sup> For all the historical tendency to see Novalis solely as a poet, or as a dreamy mystic at best, in fact his discussion of the very relationship between poetry and philosophy was steeped in the epistemological and aesthetic concerns of his day. Novalis was quite aware of the strength and originality of his philosophical insights, too. In his diary, he wrote without modesty: “Philosophie: Schiller, Herder, Lessing, Ich selbst, Kant.”<sup>3</sup> Why, then, did scholarly recognition of his philosophical import arrive so late?

There are several possible reasons for scholars’ neglect of Novalis as a philosopher. The first is more a function of historical accident than any deficiency of merit: his philosophical work was not reliably compiled until very late. In 1929, Paul Kluckhohn attempted to order the utter disarray of Novalis’ philosophical notes; but only in 1960, after Hans-Joachim Mähl put these materials into chronological order according to a painstaking handwriting analysis, did a more reliably clear train of thought emerge from Novalis’ jottings. Their publication in English did not begin until 1996. Prior to 1960, from those German-language fragments that were available to the public, Walter Benjamin wrote his 1919 dissertation on the philosophical foundations of early Romantic *Kunstkritik*; in a fairly scathing review of it, Winfried Menninghaus said it made “a forced usage of textual sources” which “set the course for significant limitations to and falsifications within his exposition,” though he granted that certain insights were

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<sup>2</sup> Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe/Novalis* Bd 2 (München, Wien: Hanser 2005) 331.

<sup>3</sup> Novalis (Bd 1) 434

surprisingly accurate given Benjamin's lack of access to correctly ordered fragments.<sup>4</sup> In general, before handwriting analyses brought Novalis' notes any kind of coherence, scholars' decontextualized quotation of them made Novalis' philosophy sound like "something akin to anarchy and magic,"<sup>5</sup> and moreover, an artist's retouching of his dewy-eyed portrait only fanned flames of the myth of his irrational and "effeminate" mind. So the second reason is that what knowledge scholars *did* have of Novalis' philosophy did not inspire great interest in it. Third, even once his philosophical notes *were* properly collected, the influence of certain individual scholars drew attention away from their explicitly philosophical content and towards an almost exclusively literary interpretation. Ernst Behler is a crucial example; as Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert writes:

"Behler was a leading authority... and a case in point regarding the exaggerated literary interpretation of early German Romanticism... To be sure, Behler gives a detailed account of the philosophers who influenced [the Romantics] and refers, here and there, to [them] as philosophers. But this is insufficient..."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, perhaps largely because of Behler's influence but certainly also because of traditional disciplinary boundaries in the university, Romanticism is most often understood as a literary and critical movement, making Novalis a figure to be studied not by philosophers but by scholars of literature; meanwhile, most philosophy departments have shifted away from continental in favor of analytic philosophy, which has reduced the potential audience for Novalis' philosophical work.

However, while scholarly recognition of Novalis as a philosopher and not solely a poet was late coming, it has finally arrived. His prominence as a scrupulous thinker is

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<sup>4</sup> Winfried Menninghaus, "Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection," in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin, eds., (New York: Continuum 2002) 19 and 22.

<sup>5</sup> Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* (Albany: SUNY 2004) 156

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY 2007) 5-6

undisputed among those familiar with his works, the most extensive of which is his 500 pages of handwritten notes, the *Fichte Studien*. Today few philosophical studies of Novalis forego the (almost obligatory) opening remark, quoting Manfred Frank, that his *Fichte Studien* are “the most important contribution of early German Romanticism to the philosophical discussion of these years.”<sup>7</sup> Manfred Frank has done more than any other scholar to banish the “stereotypes and ignorance of some of the most fundamental texts of [early German Romanticism],” the reputation of which he says “is easily redeemed when one examines these texts with depth and care.”<sup>8</sup> In the *Fichte Studien* and in his later works, Novalis offered original responses to the leading debates of his time “in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics,” and with greater detail and rigor than any other Romantic, Allison Stone has written.<sup>9</sup> Frederick Beiser has called the flowering of interest in early Romantic philosophy “long overdue,” especially in light of its “historical significance” and the “vitality” of its relevance today.<sup>10</sup> Jane Kneller translated Novalis’ *Fichte Studien* into English, and her most recent book “brings the two most important German philosophers of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, Kant and Novalis, into dialogue.”<sup>11</sup> In her book on Schlegel, Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert announces “there is currently a renaissance of interest in the philosophical dimensions of early German Romanticism.”<sup>12</sup> Novalis’ long period of philosophical obsolescence is over.

With Novalis’ status as a rigorous thinker now an established fact, *new* obstacles confront the contemporary scholar of his philosophical work. The most important is that

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<sup>7</sup> Frank 151

<sup>8</sup> Frank 151

<sup>9</sup> Allison Stone, “Being, Knowledge and Nature in Novalis,” in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (Vol 46, Nr 1: 2008) 141

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative* (Cambridge: Harvard 2003) 1

<sup>11</sup> Jane Kneller, *Kant and the Power of Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge 2007), dedication page

<sup>12</sup> Millán-Zaibert 1

scholars are still considerably at odds with each other on even the basic elements of his thought. According to Theodor Haering, Novalis was proto-Hegelian; for Walter Benjamin, he embraced a filled infinity of reflection not unlike Leibnizian monads; for Lacoue-Labarthe, his most important influence was Kant's third Critique, though he supported a discursive equivocity that puts him in the company of Blanchot and Derrida; for Frederick Beiser, he offered a Platonic argument for vitalist organicism; and for Manfred Frank, Novalis' Kantian anti-foundationalism anticipated aspects of post-modern theories of the subject and of knowledge. This kaleidoscope of accounts of Novalis' thought and the influences on him is countered, at the other end, by Ernst Behler's characterization of the *Fichte Studien* as "surprisingly difficult to understand, because of the almost *complete lack* of an orientation to points of reference in traditional philosophy."<sup>13</sup> Disagreements can be explained, in part, by the fact that some scholars did not have access to the correct orderings of Novalis' texts, and in part because of the obscurity of his work: even in their current form, many writings are really just unfinished notes never meant for publication (though it would be a mistake to overlook them for that reason). But above all, the scholarly terrain is still fresh, and there is much progress yet to be made.

This dissertation examines a conceptual tension in Novalis' thought that became especially noticeable in the conflicting readings of contemporary scholars Manfred Frank and Frederick Beiser: the problem of "nonclosure" versus "organicism" in Novalis' philosophy. These terms are not Novalis' own, but rather scholars' descriptions of his early epistemology and later ontology, respectively. "Nonclosure" is the open-ended or ever-hypothetical quality of any possible system of knowledge because the absolute

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<sup>13</sup> Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge 1993) 184. Emphasis mine.

ground of knowledge cannot be known, and more specifically, because the condition of the relationship between knower and known cannot itself be incorporated into the system. Nonclosure thus expresses the endlessness, because the impossibility, of the search for such an Archimedean perspective. The term "nonclosure" was first applied to Novalis by Alice Kuzniar, who wished to demonstrate the proximity of early Romantic and post-structuralist theories of writing in Novalis' literature, rather than in his philosophy.<sup>14</sup> But the term is appropriate to his philosophical thought as well, and it captures an entire category of Novalis scholarship that has compared the *Frühromantik* to post-structuralism for their shared interest in the philosophical problem of the lost origin of human knowing, or *logos* that purports to underlie knowledge, yet is eternally irretrievable. This interpretation of Novalis' philosophy was popularized in the first place by Manfred Frank, whose 1989 reading of Novalis' *Fichte Studien* revolutionized Novalis scholarship for its demonstration of Novalis' anti-foundationalism and his attenuating characterization of the Absolute as an "*Unding*... an 'absurdity' or 'impossible thing'."<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, "organicism" refers to any ontology that positively characterizes the nature of the being of the Absolute as a "living organism." That is, the ontological ground of all things — the very nature of the sum of existence — is a living being, or a self-conditioning totality whose whole is greater than the sum of the immanent parts that constitute it as a whole. In this ontology, living being conditions both the difference and the union between knower and known by the very activity of its maintaining itself as itself; thus the Absolute organism quite literally comes to know itself *in* human consciousness. Organicism is a traditional reading of Novalis with fewer and fewer

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<sup>14</sup> Alice Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987)

<sup>15</sup> Frank 51

contemporary supporters; indeed, there has been a direct *tradeoff* in the emphasis of "organicism" with the growth in support for "nonclosure" and Frank's anti-foundationalist reading. Today, Frederick Beiser is the scholar who most energetically trumpets Novalis' commitment to organicism, and wishes to "restore the organic concept to its rightful place" in Novalis scholarship.<sup>16</sup> The tension between "nonclosure" and "organicism" should be clear, then: the former claims that we cannot know that which conditions the relationship between knower and known, while the latter actively claims that the ontological unity underlying this relationship is the Absolute as organism. And how could we both not know the Absolute, and know it as organism? Presently Novalis scholarship has essentially concluded that Novalis' opinion changes over time: nonclosure seems to be the position of his *Fichte Studien* starting in 1795 (and ending in 1797), but by the *Allgemeine Brouillon* in 1798, he seems to support organicism. Yet *prima facie* it is doubtful that Novalis' opinion would change so diametrically in such short time. The question thus suggests itself: *Must* we see the unknowability of being and the organic organization of being as opposed stances in Novalis' thought, explicable only as a change in heart?

In the following introduction, we situate the debate between nonclosure and organicism in its historical context. "Knowledge," "systematicity," "(non)closure," "being," and "organicism" must be defined and elucidated against the complex philosophical backdrop of Kantianism and the many responses to the epistemological project of transcendental idealism in post-Kantian idealism and realism. Ultimately this debate is about the relationship of Novalis to Kant, and the question of whether Novalis

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<sup>16</sup> Frederick Beiser, "The Paradox of Romantic Metaphysics," in *Philosophical Romanticism* (New York: Routledge 2006) 219

stands *with* Kant in a strict adherence to Kantian limits on valid knowledge, or else sacrifices the letter of Kant for the sake of his "spirit," by seeking a knowable ground to Kant's system in the unity of subject and object in the absolute organism. Though many scholars have participated in this debate, in the following pages we introduce the conflict over Novalis' role in this post-Kantian environment by examining, in particular, Frank's and Beiser's competing readings of him. Unlike their present, effective conclusion that Novalis changes his mind over time, this dissertation argues that "nonclosure" and "organicism" are not actually competing, inconsistent elements of his thought. On the contrary, Novalis' philosophy can be profitably characterized as "organic nonclosure," which is not a contradiction after all, and which he holds throughout his career. For Novalis, we argue, the nonclosure of our knowledge of being is a *function* of the organic organization of being: the Kantian synthesis of sensibility and understanding that both conditions human consciousness, *and* that bars consciousness of the thing in itself, is the living activity of the absolute organic being in the human mind. Just as Heinrich von Ofterdingen's *blaue Blume* is both symbol of the ever-receding knowledge of the absolute and a botanical object, so too is Novalis' organicism a consistent philosophy of the unknowability of the Absolute *and* the nature of the Absolute's being as an organism. But to understand this conclusion, we must first be clearer about the intellectual history behind Novalis' stance.



## I.       Organicism as the Closure of Kant's Transcendental Idealism

Echoing Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's broader assertion that "Kant opens up the possibility of Romanticism,"<sup>17</sup> the present study of the problem of organicism and nonclosure in the philosophy of Novalis also locates its context in Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. It begins with what has been called the "discursivity thesis,"<sup>18</sup> or Kant's claim that human cognition requires both concepts and sensible intuition and is produced by a synthesis of the faculties of sensibility and understanding. With this faculty dualism, Kant attempted to reconcile the two most influential competing philosophies that he inherited, empiricism and rationalism. The challenge Kant faced was that these two positions favored seemingly exclusive arenas as the guarantors of human knowledge: either knowledge stems from objects radically in the world (empiricism), or else knowledge rests a priori on concepts that have access beyond the physical realm to the ideal dimension (rationalism). Kant harmonized this historical dualism by bringing both positions into the confines of the human being, arguing that their seemingly competing notions of "real" and "ideal" were in fact both posterior to his own philosophical contribution: that the conditions for the possibility of knowledge are within the human mind. This is his famous "Kopernikanische Wende": "Bisher nahm man an, alle unsere Erkenntnis müsse sich nach den Gegenständen richten," when in fact objects must conform to our cognition.<sup>19</sup> There can be no object for the mind without the mind's own conditions for knowing that object, and *ipso facto* there is no valid knowledge that is not

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<sup>17</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute* (Albany: State University of New York Press, c1988) 29

<sup>18</sup> Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven: Yale, 2004) 12-13

<sup>19</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Meiner 1998) B xvi/Vorrede zur zweiten Auflage, p. 21

a possible knowledge for the given structures of human cognition. Thus empiricism's "object" is actually only the object post-cognition, or the object as we enable it to be represented to ourselves, while the a priori reasoning of rationalism's "subject," in turn, is the formal structuring power of cognition used towards its possible object. Kant achieved this masterful balance by re-positioning dualism at the very act of reflection itself: the object of empiricism and the subject of rationalism are now viewed as coordinated sides of the same human being, on the one hand as passively receptive sense perception, structured in space and time, and on the other as the spontaneously structuring understanding, which forms its object in Kant's categories of the understanding. The objectivity of knowledge, Kant says, is grounded in the synthesis of these irreducibly distinct faculties of sensibility and understanding; they work together, and the product of their harmony is cognition.

While solving some problems, the faculty dualism of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* invited a host of others in the minds of his readers. One was the famous disappointment at the main consequence of this dualism: barred access to answers to theological questions about the nature of God, freedom, and immortality. In *Über das Marionettentheater*, Kleist captured this disillusionment with Herr C.'s lament that "das Paradies ist verriegelt und der Cherub hinter uns."<sup>20</sup> Of course, for Kant, such disappointment was the necessary collateral damage of his securing a foundation for the natural sciences and, if not knowledge of, then at least a rational faith in a divinity or in life after death; that this consequence was unpleasant to readers like Kleist was not, ultimately, an argument against Kant's system. The more pressing criticisms of the critical project were immanent ones (or at least claimed to be immanent). One of the

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<sup>20</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, *Werke/Kleist* Bd 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2005) 559

most insightful came from Salomon Maimon. Maimon wondered how sensibility and understanding could *actually* synthesize with each other, if one is passive matter in space and time, and the other active form outside space and time. His concern was a variant of the basic puzzle of Cartesian mind-body dualism, or the problem that, if we have sense perception insofar as we are embodied and rational powers insofar as we have a non-physical soul, then the interaction of the two sides is difficult to explain. Maimon restates the Cartesian problem in the Kantian context (here in English translation):

"The question of the explanation of the unification of soul and body is... reduced to the following question: how is it conceivable that forms *a priori* should agree with things given *a posteriori*? And... how is the coming-to-be of matter, as something merely given but not thought, conceivable through the assumption of an intelligence, since they are indeed so heterogeneous?"<sup>21</sup>

For present purposes, the most important thing to note about Maimon's statement is that it questioned how one could make *ontological* sense of the requirements of Kant's epistemology. That is, Maimon wondered what the nature of the *being* of this synthesis in the subject was, that it could form a mental representation from passive empirical sense and active, non-empirical understanding. And in light of the difficulty explaining the nature of the relationship between these two disparate faculties, Maimon asked: with what right did Kant trace knowledge back to this synthetic origin?

Kant's critical deduction of knowledge from sensibility and understanding did not, in the first place, purport to be an ontology, or theory about the nature in itself of these faculties and of their relation. The "right" to trace knowledge back to these two faculties was based on a very particular notion of "deduction," the provenance — and modesty —

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<sup>21</sup> Salomon Maimon, *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* (London; New York: Continuum, 2010) 37.

of which was famously described by Dieter Henrich.<sup>22</sup> Though today we tend to assume that a "deduction" is a logical process of drawing a conclusion from stated premises, the source of Kant's usage is actually medieval German juridical discourse. Kant modeled his sourcing of the faculties on the court process of claiming a legal right. In law, for example in the authentication of a last will, the methodology for proving the legitimacy of a claim is "to focus on those aspects of the acquisition of an allegedly rightful possession by virtue of which a right has been bestowed, such that the possession has become a property."<sup>23</sup> In other words, one has to tell a story about how one came to acquire a property, and the rightfulness of one's claim to that property will be judged on the plausibility of the story — but there is no hard and fast science for making the case. "The very notion of a deduction is compatible with any kind of argumentation suitable for reaching the goal,"<sup>24</sup> and the case is built up using as many different arguments as it can to point to a claim. Kant appealed to the same holistic method when he justified the origins of our right to knowledge. First Kant assumed all humans have an instinctive, immediate awareness of the operations involved in certain rational functions, such as our ability to distinguish "counting from calculation, analysis from composition, and so forth."<sup>25</sup> His deduction of the sources of knowledge to particular faculties starts with those nonreducible instincts, and then builds its case by reconstructing a plausible system of relationships between those functions. The system thus created is unavoidably

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<sup>22</sup> Dieter Henrich. "Kant's Notion of a Deduction and the Methodological Background of the First Critique," in *Kant's Transcendental Deductions*, Eckhart Förster (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1989)

<sup>23</sup> Henrich 34

<sup>24</sup> Henrich 39

<sup>25</sup> Henrich 42

hypothetical. It does not follow from a syllogistic relationship of claims stemming from a single foundation, but rather is only as strong as the relations cohere in a whole story.

Even more importantly, a central goal of Kant's transcendental idealism is to *preclude* answers to precisely such ontological questions. As Kant said, "der stolze Name der Ontologie... muß dem bescheidenen, einer bloßen Analytik des reinen Verstandes, Platz machen."<sup>26</sup> Again, the basic consequence of Kant's deduction of the forms of intuition and categories of understanding, which was also his critical rejoinder to rationalism, was that concepts by themselves cannot entail the necessary existence of the objects of which they are concepts; instead, statements about the *existence* of something can only claim validity as knowledge if they follow from the application of concepts, by the faculty of understanding, to objects contingently given in the senses. And since the consciousness of objects in which we find ourselves situated — or "thrown," to borrow Heidegger's term — is conditioned by this synthesis, that synthesis cannot *itself* become an object of our consciousness. By the stipulations of Kant's own system, then, we cannot claim to know that which does the reflecting that results in our immediate consciousness of objects. Synthesis is what gives rise to our taking something as an object in the first place; thus consciousness so conditioned cannot then "turn around" to take that condition as an object, and must remain "[ein] für uns unbegreiflich[er]... Wurzel."<sup>27</sup> In short, we live in a reality always *already* conditioned by the act of reflection of reality. Another way of formulating the same problem, now from the perspective of consciousness itself or the "I," is that we experience the self as immediate both with itself and with the contents of its consciousness, but we cannot become

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<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Meiner 1998) A 247/B 303/p. 354, 355.

<sup>27</sup> Kant A 15/B29/ p. 86, 87.

conscious of the self as an object among other objects; whatever its nature is, and whatever ontological role it plays in conditioning the relationship between objects outside the self and objects as they appear to the self, thus simply cannot be known because it cannot become a valid object. Kant said that the "I think" must *be able to* accompany representations so that representations may be of a piece, but this stipulation remains circumspect as to whether the self is the *subject* of reflection or a *product* of some other reflecting being. As we will see below, Fichte attempts to ground Kant's system in the subject by claiming that the self is such that subject and object are unified in its self-knowledge, i.e., Fichte equates the subject of self-consciousness with Kantian synthesis. But for Kant, Fichte's move is not permissible. Maimon's question begged, and Fichte's philosophy made, an ontological commitment about the nature of the being of the unity of sensibility and understanding in itself; but contrary to both, Kant's critical move was to conceal its being beyond the sphere of valid consciousness and thus knowledge of it.

We can rephrase this concealment in words that throw its contemporary — and even post-structuralist — resonance into stark relief: the very synthesis that brings consciousness into being also veils the source of consciousness from consciousness itself. That is, the basic Kantian claim is that we live always already beyond the point of our conscious origin, in a world of objects already structured spontaneously, yet involuntarily, by our particularly human manner of conceptualization; the nature of the thing in itself, i.e., considered apart from our cognition of it, must then remain a permanent unknown even while it conditions our knowing. In a contemporary but still apposite term, this ultimate result of Kant's Copernican turn is philosophical "*nonclosure*," or epistemological open-endedness rendered by the unknowability of the

ground of knowledge. Alice Kuzniar, who studied nonclosure as a specifically literary problem of narrative open-endedness, also noted its philosophical expression in post-Kantian discourse both Romantic and contemporary: "[A]ll of us have inescapably inherited Kantian divisions: all are barred from transcendent certitudes and, with them, from the reassurance of any resounding closure."<sup>28</sup> Derrida cautions that this nonclosure is in fact inevitable, because all grounds necessarily unground themselves in their dependence on what they exclude; we cannot know the singular, originary *logos*, yet it haunts knowledge as the condition of its possibility — its "opening" in Derrida's formulation. This "*problème de clôture ou d'ouverture*" suspends all knowing in the nonclosure of a ground permanently lost, but never forgotten: "The transcendental of the opening is at once the origin and the undoing, the condition of possibility and a certain impossibility of every structure."<sup>29</sup> In Kant's own system, Derrida's wisdom took the form of the injunction that philosophy become self-criticism. The proper role of philosophy is the delineation of its own limits, a process by which philosophy simultaneously enables and impedes itself.

When so phrased, Kant's redirection of philosophy to the scrutiny of its own limits makes evident the extent to which he was engaged in a radical intellectual venture that reverberates even in contemporary thought. Yet Derrida's words also suggest where Kant's project collapses even in its own terms. For isn't the attempt to draw the limits of reason on the basis of the demands of reason *itself* subject to scrutiny, and to the same consequences of ungrounding? Kant fundamentally sought to show that the involuntary spontaneity of our knowing — the a priori conditioning of our consciousness that cannot

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<sup>28</sup> Kuzniar 24

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Genesis and Structure," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago 1978) 163

become an object of that same consciousness — is still a *rational* process, grounded in the autonomy of the interests of the subject's reason from sense. That is, the subject's reason should legislate the form of its contents to itself on its own terms. Yet Kant's deduction of the proper exercise of reason, as we've seen in Dieter Henrich's reading of him, did nothing to illuminate a method that would finally and conclusively ensure that this self-criticism of reason also legitimates *itself*. In other words, in the end Kant still faces a metacritical problem: while the basic critical claim is that the subject's reason legislates the formal aspect of consciousness, on a meta level Kant does not explain or justify how reason can have this knowledge of its own laws. How, especially, can reason know itself when Kant forbids that whatever it is that does the very reflecting that gives rise to our consciousness can become an object for that same consciousness? Derrida's comment about the simultaneity of "origin and undoing" in philosophy now takes on a more insidious tone for Kant. It seems Kant's system of knowledge itself falls prey to nonclosure.

We have now arrived at the crux of the matter. This specific notion of nonclosure — the open-endedness of Kant's system of transcendental idealism that follows from its dependence on an unknowable ground, the concealed origin of consciousness — is the context of the contemporary scholarly debate about Novalis' standing in post-Kantian philosophy. According to Manfred Frank, in the *Fichte Studien* Novalis adheres to a Kantian synthetic model of judgment, and then, in answer to the problem of system grounding, acknowledges that the search for a foundation of philosophy can only ever be an endless process; in short, Novalis *embraces* nonclosure. In contrast, according to Beiser, by the time Novalis starts writing his fragments a year after he finishes the *Fichte*



*Studien*, he has abandoned this more philosophically modest path in favor of the closure of Kantian idealism through a commitment to organic ontology, a move that also means he joins Schelling and Hegel in the ranks of absolute idealism; in short, Novalis turns to organicism, and this position is counter to his prior nonclosure. Again, this dissertation holds that organicism and nonclosure are not opposed in Novalis' thought, either temporally or logically: Novalis holds "organic nonclosure" for his whole career. But before this independent position is defended, precisely what an "organic ontology" is, and how post-Kantian idealism, especially in Fichte, attempt to reach closure of Kantianism by means of it, are examined in the following sections.

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An organic ontology is a theory of being as innately *self-organizing*. An "organism" or "living" being distinguishes itself from inert existing things by locating the principle of its maintenance as itself wholly internally to itself. Unlike a table, which only becomes and remains a table thanks to the purposive creation and ongoing repair by someone like a carpenter, the carpenter distinguishes himself as "living" or "organic" for containing the guidelines for his being himself only within himself. The carpenter is a true unity, or Leibniz's *unum per se*, whereas the table is merely inessentially a table. Only the tree from which the table's wood was cut was at one point — while it was "alive" — a self-organizing being rather than a merely dependent collection. Of course, all organic beings must be born of parents, so in a sense they too have precedents for their self-organization outside themselves; but the peculiar quality of a living thing, to which any parent could reverently (if exhaustedly) bear witness, is that as soon as that decision

to have a child is made, the child then takes on a "life of its own," and though the parents must support its self-organization with food and proper care, that parental role is merely attendant to the child's own essential, internal ordering, and not creative of it. The definitional self-organization of an organic being is often specified philosophically as a unique relationship between "form and matter," or relatedly, between "parts" and "the whole that is greater than the sum of those parts." According to Aristotle, all existing things are the union of a matter and a form, but a *living* thing in particular is matter that has a form called a "ψυχή," psyche or soul, which is a formal agency wholly internal to the being and responsible for the ongoing, purposeful maintenance of the being as that being. In the 18th century, Kant brought further specificity to this Aristotelian definition of the organism. He affirmed Aristotle's notion of internal purposiveness, calling the organism a *Naturzweck*, and added that an organism is matter continually maintained in a particular form specifically by the reciprocally causal relationship of a thing's parts to produce a greater whole: "so wird zweitens dazu erfordert, daß die Teile [des Naturzwecks] sich zur Einheit eines Ganzen verbinden, daß sie von einander wechselseitig Ursache und Wirkung ihrer Form sind."<sup>30</sup> The whole organism is the goal of its parts, acting like an antecedent *Bauplan* that the parts actualize empirically by being reciprocally cause and effect of each other; so causality is made internal to the being and intentionality is made to inhere in substance. This internal causality and internal intentionality is unlike the notions of external cause and ontologically separate mind in the paradigm of Cartesian, mechanistic explanation. The organism unifies intentionality and materiality, collapsing mechanism's dualistic substances of being and thought into the ontologically singular substance of "life," or thinking matter.

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<sup>30</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2001) Section 65 B291/p. 279

Organic beings have certain definitional properties that follow from the self-organized nature of their existence. For example, an organism is active (its parts are constantly cycling into and out of its whole, because the whole, rather than any individual part, is what defines it); appetitive (the being must take its parts into itself from outside itself in order to maintain itself); homeostatic (the being is in a constant state of self-regulation to maintain its unity); and responsive to the world. For our purposes, the most important property is "responsiveness," for this is also a "philosophy of mind." This dissertation is interested in the "organic" nature of being first and foremost for its implication of what a "mind" is, and how the mind relates to, and represents, the world outside the organism. According to organic theory, in an organic being, the mind is the internal aspect of the organism that is actualized as soon as the organism comes into being. The mind is the immediate internalization *of* the outward aspect of the organism, the body — or better still, because it is a more inclusive description, the subject is the immediate internalization of the object. There is no subject apart from the object, because both only come into existence as themselves as the internal and external aspects, sides, or "halves" of the organism; we can say that subject and object inhere, dependently, in the being of the organism. That is, subject and object are mutually or reciprocally determined, but ultimately dependent for their own existence on the coming-into-being of the organism of which they are byproducts or accidental aspects. Whatever that original principle of the creation of the being is — call it the "soul," for example, but the point is that it is the agency of organismic self-organization — *it* is not itself perceptible; only the consequence of its actualization (i.e., of its realization or instantiation) as itself, as the organism, is perceptible. The definitional quality of a

"representation" as a mental image, in a subject, of a world of objects given to the subject but as outside the subject, is explained in the theory of the organism as a function of this dual-aspect theory of mind: subject and object are distinct from each other insofar as they are internal and external aspects of being, but because they are aspects *of being*, they are also experienced in inextricable connection. The philosophical foil to any organic philosophy of mind is Cartesian dualism (though the dual-aspect theory of mind is indeed a "dualism" in the general sense of a theory of the nonreducibility, and so distinctness, of mind and matter). In the organism, mind and body form a reciprocity that is itself dependent on the creative principle that grounds that reciprocity in its own self-creation, rather than forming, as in Cartesianism, a mechanistic body and an only mysteriously simultaneous free mind. In the organism, the mystery is deferred to the inception of the being as a being, but the interaction of mind and body, subject and object, is unproblematic if that mystery has been assumed.

For our purposes, there were two precedents for organic ontologies that were important to Novalis: Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. The reader might be surprised to call Fichte organicist; after all, he did not theorize about the beings of plants and animals. But again, the definitional commitment in an "organic" notion of being is to being as self-organizing, and so is consistent with a wholly mental version in which "subject" and "object" are the mutually fulfilling parts of the Absolute subject that brings them into that relation by its own self-organization. This is Fichte's theory of the *Tathandlung* or absolute ego, and is described in detail below. Herder's organicism is a divinized, panentheistic version of Fichte's. God is the *Logos* whose creative self-reflection instantiates himself as all of creation, so that created things are the very parts

that constitute his existence. Creation constitutes God's being in an ascending hierarchy of more and more developed beings, a chain of being. Created beings, who are like God because they are instantiations of him, are organisms or *Kräfte*, and though these parts must die and be continually replaced, that process of organic continuation of the whole is the maintenance of God as himself.

Though Kant's definition of the organism as a *Naturzweck* gave his generation good reason to believe that organic life cannot be explained away as, or reduced to, a mere mechanism, as might be expected Kant himself did not actually countenance knowledge of the purposiveness of organisms in themselves. According to his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, the teleology of life is only a *regulatively* necessary concept, meaning that, while we can only *make sense* of living things by considering them to be self-instantiating purposes rather than mechanisms, we cannot validly claim to *know* that their inherent nature is purposive. Once again, the justification for this limitation is the defining move of Kantianism. We can only claim to know experience that is given in our senses and enabled by our human conditions of knowing, and according to Kant, those conditions do not enable the experience of telic causes, which are supersensuous. The organizing *Bauplan* of the organism is not itself intuitable, but merely an assumption that makes sense of the confluence of empirical elements that we can intuit. For instance, in biology, scientists conjecture *as if* the beetle's wing is designed for flight, but since the notion of "design" or "purpose" implies an antecedent intentionality that conditions the wing, while the empirically existing wing is the only actual object of experience, scientists are not entitled to knowledge of this purposiveness. (For Kant, this limitation had the radical consequence of making biology a permanently imperfect science.)

Herder's philosophy did indeed extend the concept of the organism to the very nature of being in itself. Of course, Herder never claimed in the first place to follow the critical Kant when he speculated beyond Kantian limits about the nature of being in itself as "Kraft." And Kant, in turn, famously called Herder's *Ideen* "so monstrous that reason shudders before them," because they leapt to unjustified supersensuous claims; though formerly teacher and student, Kant and Herder considered themselves to be at philosophical odds.<sup>31</sup> Organicism is not Kantian, according to Kant. In light of Kant's regulative limitation of organic ontology, it is all the more noteworthy that Fichte, as a self-proclaimed Kantian, would see organicism as an important part of the *fulfillment* of the Kantian project even on its own terms: that organic ontology is necessitated by Kantian commitments. Again, Fichte's claim is important for the debate on Novalis, because if Novalis indeed stood strictly with Kant (as Manfred Frank believes), where that means that Novalis agrees with Kant that knowledge of being is invalid, then any reasons Novalis gives for rejecting Fichte's solution could also be construed as his disavowal of organicism. We turn now to Fichte's argument in favor of closing Kant's system in the organic *Tathandlung*.

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To review, Kant's philosophy was explicit in its claim that, in consciousness, we live always already beyond the synthetic act that conditions the emergence of that consciousness. The *Ding an sich* — a notion that conceptualizes both whatever it is in us that enables consciousness but that we do not ourselves perceive, and whatever it is in the

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<sup>31</sup> Kant and Herder scholar John Zammito has written that "Herder's alienation from Kantian philosophy by 1783 is well documented." John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: Chicago, 1992) 181

object that we do not produce — is completely unknowable. But his philosophy was *also* the attempt to *prove* that the involuntary spontaneity of synthesis occurs in the interest of human freedom and can be validly known to be the process by which our rational, subjective conditions objectively enable our awareness of the world; so the activity of the subject in itself had to be at least somewhat self-transparent to empirical consciousness. These two goals were at odds. We have already suggested a Derridean reading of the problem, which we are calling Kant's outstanding issue of "nonclosure": Kant inadvertently found himself validating a sphere of the knowable (the sphere of empirical consciousness) *by* excluding the sphere of the unknowable thing in itself, such that the unmoored act of exclusion by itself, rather than some Archimedian meta-perspective, is responsible for marking what we know, and so marks precisely the point at which Kant's system undoes itself. By now exploring the historical context in which this accusation was made — Kant's transcendental argument, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's rejection of that argument, and K. L. Reinhold's call to foundationalism — we can better understand how Fichte would believe that the rubble of Kant's nonclosed edifice could be rebuilt as an organic closure.

Kant uses "transcendental" arguments to determine the right to know his idealist premise that understanding and sensibility synthesize to produce consciousness. The basic transcendental claim is that we could not be self-consciously conscious if the a priori categories of the understanding did not apply to a posteriori sensations, and so we have a right to accept that they do. The actual deduction is the complicated heart of Kant's first *Critique*, but for our purposes, we need only introduce its notion of "warrant." Here there are two key points to be made. First, Kant believes that, by starting with a

standpoint that even the skeptic cannot deny, namely the existence of apperceptive consciousness (after all, it is the world-orientation of precisely this consciousness of which the skeptic is skeptical), one should also be able to command assent to the necessary conditions of this minimal standpoint. The skeptic must grant the right to knowledge of the conditions of his own minimal stance, *because* they are the necessary commitments entailed by his own position. In turn, any knowledge that remains within those limits should be knowable with the same degree of certitude as the starting point. Second, Kant believes that seeking the conditions of this minimal standpoint will also justify reference to an objective world outside of that consciousness, because the activities that give rise to consciousness *must* be directed to an object that is distinct from those activities, if there even is to be a consciousness *of* objects. Part of what it means, in other words, that consciousness is "conditioned," is that its constitutive activities are directed to an independent object. So the conditions of the minimal standpoint of the skeptic, self-conscious consciousness or the realm of thought alone, justify knowledge of the world outside that realm, because that realm is traced in outline by these conditions.

In other words, according to Kant we can be as sure that understanding and sensibility synthesize to condition our valid knowledge of objects, as we are sure that there exists a self-conscious consciousness, and even the skeptic would grant that much. Whatever the ground of ontological commonality between these two very heterogeneous faculties might be, we can know *that* they relate, by dint of inference from the existence of our own apperceptive standpoint. But another thinker, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, noted that this deduction illicitly (on Kant's own terms) presupposed ontological knowledge of the thing in itself. More specifically, by believing that he can rise by



means of inference from apperceptive consciousness to the conditions of that consciousness, he is *presupposing* that the thing in itself *causes* self-conscious consciousness. But *cause* is a category of the understanding that only validly applies to sensation and cannot be employed outside of it, as Kant is doing here in an abstraction away from experience to its causes. So Kant has effectively transitioned, against his own rules, from a merely epistemological project to an ontological one, by implying that the synthesis of understanding and sensibility is a being, and our consciousness is an expression of its being. Yet it's hard to imagine how Kant could retain the very world-orientation of thinking that he is seeking by means of this deduction, if he *doesn't* allow that the thing in itself causes our consciousness. Hence Jacobi's famous statement, "ich kann *ohne* das Ding an sich nicht in die Transzendental-philosophie hineinkommen, *mit* dem Ding an sich aber nicht darin bleiben."<sup>32</sup> Certainly Jacobi did not characterize his reading of Kant as a "deconstruction," but in retrospect, we can see that it is effectively just that.

Fichte, though, believed that Jacobi had hit upon the very solution to Kant's problem, if only Kant acknowledges that this solution is what he already "means." The experience that consciousness has *of itself*—the self-consciousness of consciousness—is itself the very orientation of understanding in sensation that validates, in still-Kantian terms, Kant's inference to the ground in a synthetic being. That synthetic being is the I, and more specifically, the "I think" that Kant himself said must be able to accompany all representations, but that he had not explicitly acknowledged was the common root of understanding and sensibility that his system needed. Kant's transcendental reflection has

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<sup>32</sup>Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Werke/Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968) 304.

not, after all, illicitly operated outside the boundaries of a possible experience, and the common root is in fact knowable, precisely by means of the empirical experience that the self has of itself as the stable point in all knowing.

Now, in order to make sure that this ground in being also secures the *closure* of Kant's system — i.e., in order to demonstrate that the "I" acts as the metacritical standpoint that it must be to delineate conditioning from conditioned spheres validly — we need to *deduce* consciousness from the ego as foundation: that way, the warrant of self-consciousness can confer, via that deduction, to the critical act of judgment that requires metacritical justification. By insisting on this foundationalist, systematic securing of the metacritical validity of Kant's edifice, Fichte showed the influence of K. L. Reinhold. K. L. Reinhold was responsible not only for familiarizing the general public with Kant in the first place, but also for convincing many that Kant's system was unstable until its propositions derived deductively from a *single* starting proposition, which would be the system's grounding foundation. His concern was that if philosophy is not a true "science," or a set of propositions formally derived from a single, self-evident starting point, then there could be no solid reason to believe that its propositions aren't merely casual and unrelated observations, or potentially even contradictory statements. Its claims would have a merely hypothetical and ungrounded status until anchored by a foundation from which they derive and which would confer geometric surety to the whole structure. Kant had not yet achieved this systematicity, Reinhold claimed, because his system had not yet been derived from its "common root." But Fichte believed he had this common root, after all: the being of the ego. We can make sense of the being of the ego as the ground of consciousness, a ground that can also form a foundation from which

Kant's system can be deduced, if we understand that the I is an *organic* being, Fichte says. Fichte's *Tathandlung* is fundamentally an organism. "*Ich und in sich zurückkehrendes Handeln* [sind] völlig identische Begriffe," Fichte writes.<sup>33</sup> Self-as-subject and self-as-object constitute each other reciprocally in the "I think," a living activity.

The *closure* of Kant's system can be secured by articulating the grounding connection between this organic ego and the sphere of empirical consciousness that it conditions. That is, if Kant's transcendental inference to the conditions of consciousness can be stated in an intuitively self-evident propositional judgment, then his inference will also have the metacritical power of a deduction from the ground of consciousness to the act of judgment. Fichte believes he achieves this balance in the propositional characterization of the grounding organic being, "I am I." The proposition "I am I" captures the very act of judgment by which the I becomes self-intuited in self-consciousness. Fichte believes the I transitions from absolute creativity to finite, empirical self through self-creating self-reflection, which is also the taking of itself as object and the setting up of the "I" as an "eye," capable of registering the being outside it as an affection of its *own* being. The "I" is an "intellectual intuition," a thinking that thinks itself. Thus Fichte believes himself to have integrated the problematically noumenal or "outside" status of the I's being into reflection itself. Of course, Fichte knew well that Kant forbade intellectual intuition; for Kant, this was only possible (and only hypothetically so) in God, whose thought alone could be creative. But Fichte also believed that Kant had presupposed — as Jacobi pointed out — that the base of his

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<sup>33</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*. (Hamburg: Meiner, 1984) 42

system was indeed the subject as the original point of unity of activity and passivity, so that Kant did in fact allow at least this instance of intellectual intuition, in spite of himself, and indeed could, because the self-consciousness of consciousness is based in this being.

Scholars fairly universally agree that Novalis rejects Fichte's grounding of Kantian consciousness in the Absolute ego. The question now is, what precisely do they think Novalis rejects in Fichte's thought — and why — and must it also follow that he rejects all organic ontology? We now turn to the Novalis debate.

## II. The Novalis Debate: Nonclosure *versus* Organicism?

Before Paul Kluckhohn provided the first critical edition of Novalis' philosophical fragments in 1929 — the arrangement that Géza von Molnár said initiated "the phase of modern Novalis scholarship,"<sup>34</sup> not least of all because it demarcated the *Fichte Studien* as a text — most scholars believed that Novalis' philosophy was organicist, and more specifically that Novalis was a mystic who believed in direct experience of subject-object unity in the divine organism that underlies all things. This view of his philosophy was not especially charitable to the strength of his philosophical mind, though, and studies of the less rigorous "Novalis as philosopher" were usually first and foremost attempts to elucidate "Novalis as poet," who was indeed held in high regard.<sup>35</sup> It seemed that, by holding sheerly mystical beliefs about our embeddedness in God's organismic being, Novalis was simply operating amateurishly at the periphery of post-Kantian discourse

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<sup>34</sup> Géza von Molnár *Novalis' Fichte Studien* (The Hague: Mouton 1970) 20

<sup>35</sup> Rudolf Haym is arguably the most important example of a scholar who was interested in Novalis' philosophical thought specifically for the sake of illuminating his poetry.

(under the influence instead of thinkers like Jacob Böhme and Plotinus), and that he philosophically discredited himself by the way his "pyrotechnical metaphysics jettisoned Kantian limits on knowledge," as Jane Kneller summarized the typical indictment.<sup>36</sup>

But an extraordinary thing happened after a second rearrangement of Novalis' philosophical fragments by Hans Joachim Mähl in 1960: a new reading of the *Fichte Studien* by the German philosopher Manfred Frank convinced the academic establishment that Novalis had in fact been a Kantian all along, and that the traditional opinion of his philosophy had not only been unfairly dismissive, but also completely off the mark. After Frank, scholarly consensus transitioned from seeing Novalis as engaged in a mystical and even irrational organicism, to denying the knowability of God's being in proper Kantian fashion. "Novalis concluded that the unconditioned in human knowledge is a non-sens, literally a 'non-thing' (*Unding*), an 'absurdity' or an 'impossible thing'," Frank writes, "[yet] nothing of note regarding this daring conclusion is to be found in the [existing] literature on Novalis."<sup>37</sup> Frank showed that Novalis was in fact intimately involved in the discussions that followed Kant's first *Kritik*, and that he disagreed with Fichte's argument for the closure of Kant precisely in the name of Kantian moderation. As will be explored further below, Frank's reading of Novalis' *Fichte Studien* understands him to reject two central elements of idealist closure: first, Novalis denies that reflection can articulate being, and second (and relatedly), he denies that the ontological ground of knowledge can be brought into a Kantian system (for example as a foundation). Novalis' rejection of these two points, we are told, stems from his strict adherence to Kant's discursivity thesis and to the accompanying nonclosure that strict Kantian epistemology

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<sup>36</sup> Jane Kneller, "Novalis' Other Way Out," in *Philosophical Romanticism* (New York: Routledge 2006) 197

<sup>37</sup> Frank 50

entails. Frank even calls Novalis' thought "a return to Kant before idealism could spread its wings."<sup>38</sup>

For Novalis in Frank's reading of him, the givenness of the self to itself cannot result from the turning-back of the self upon itself *in reflection*, as Fichte had claimed was possible in the "Tathandlung." Instead, the undeniable familiarity that the self has with its own being and with being in general is a non-discursive, merely sensuous immediacy that Novalis calls "Gefühl," or feeling. Kant stipulated that reflection ("Reflexion"), or the act of division and relation of conscious matter by the mind, operates in the *medium* of feeling; only feeling, in other words, can be the matter for the application of concepts in reflection. This application produces the consciousness of objects that is our ordinary experience of our conscious selves and our consciousness of the world. Thus reflection *cannot* be its own matter; reflection by itself can no more produce content (apperceptive being) than two mirrors turned against each other can reflect *something* rather than an endless regress of empty reflection. The prefix "re-" in the English word "representation" nicely captures Novalis' concern in Frank's reading of him: reflection does not present its object immediately, but rather is the presenting-again, in the terms of its own conceptualizing structure, of the mere givenness or unmediated thereness of feeling (which, alone, is not yet "for itself" because it has not been reflected). As Novalis writes in his *Fichte Studien*, and Frank quotes: "Wir verlassen das Identische, um es darzustellen." The immediacy of the self with existence in feeling is the material of conceptual organization in representation, but *representation* is precisely *not* the immediacy of reflection and being, as Fichte would have it, but rather a deferral of

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<sup>38</sup> Frank 171

immediacy that, for its even being such a deferral, produces our experience as a conscious subject over and against a world of objects.

Novalis' objection to Fichte is textbook adherence to Kant, according to Frank. *Fichte Studien* translator Jane Kneller writes in agreement: "In essence Novalis refuses to grant Fichte's very un-Kantian starting point — he refuses, as Kant certainly refused, to allow the conflation of intuition and thought, even in the guise of a 'thought-act.'" <sup>39</sup> Knowledge, for Kant as for Novalis, must be the discursive *product* of the synthesis of sensibility and understanding (for Novalis, "feeling" and "reflection"), and so we cannot ever hope to know the common root that relates them. We cannot know that which knows itself in us. Thus the system-closure that Fichte's conflation was meant to achieve must also be refused: if a system of knowledge must be grounded in its root and systematically deduced from it, then it must remain an *endless* task, because such closure is an impossible goal, according to this reading of Novalis. Hence the "nonclosure" of knowledge, its infinite approximation towards the impossible consciousness of its own ground. Here Frank eagerly draws the parallel with Hölderlin's wordplay that judgment is always an *Ur-Teilung*, or an original separation, of reflection from being. Reflection is the separation of the subject from a merely felt identity that is fundamentally irretrievable in consciousness. Because reflection structures and constitutes the consciousness in which we always already find ourselves in the terms of an insurmountable difference between subject and object, there is no possibility of philosophy ever exiting its "Sfäre," as Novalis writes in the first fragments of the *Fichte Studien*, to grasp the "Muttersfäre" of original identity that would ground and close philosophy: "Bewußtseyn ist ein Seyn *außer* dem Seyn im Seyn" (emphasis mine). "Could there be a more striking difference

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<sup>39</sup> Kneller (introduction to her translation of the *Fichte Studien*) xiv

to Hegel?"<sup>40</sup> Frank asks, highlighting the unique path that Novalis (and early Romantic philosophy in general) carved *away* from German idealist closure. The pre-echo of Derridean post-structuralism has also been clear to many readers of Frank's explication of Novalis' notions of the fragmented subject, conceptual equivocality, and anti-systematism.

Thanks to the strength of Frank's reading, Novalis scholarship has widely retreated from its traditional assumption that Novalis is organicist *at all*. In light of this curtailment of reflection as the mere deferral of knowledge of being, the more metaphysically audacious notion of reality as God's self-positing organism that becomes conscious of itself in human consciousness seems simply at odds. In its stead, Novalis' Romantic concern with the inevitability of our remove from our ground in being has piqued scholarly enthusiasm for the similarity between early Romanticism and post-structuralism. In other words, after Frank, scholarship has tended to assume a direct *tradeoff* between readings of "organicism" and "nonclosure" in Novalis' thought. For example, Alice Kuzniar writes that Novalis "anticipates Poststructuralist concerns, which his writings strikingly exemplify... [Novalis] advocates a proliferation or a redundancy of structures, rather than the organic, unitary form often attributed to him... The oft-cited, supposedly Romantic metaphors of organicism — cycles and embryonic development — must be challenged."<sup>41</sup> In his deconstructive reading, Paul de Man claims that Novalis' Romantic irony "reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality."<sup>42</sup> The most outspoken exception to the trend of comparing the *Frühromantik* to contemporary theories of nonclosure only affirms the 'rule of tradeoff'

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<sup>40</sup> Frank 173

<sup>41</sup> Kuzniar 4, 49, 21

<sup>42</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 222



between nonclosure and organicism: Frederick Beiser has energetically repeated the traditional reading of Novalis' organicism, and in doing so has explicitly pitted himself against interpretations of nonclosure in Novalis' thought. Since Beiser explicitly opposes Frank's reading in particular, we introduce his position here.

To be clear, Frederick Beiser largely agrees with Frank's reading of the *Fichte Studien*.<sup>43</sup> His objection is not to the interpretation of Novalis outlined above, but rather that Frank's reading — of this earliest text by Novalis — has unjustly dominated the *overall* image of Novalis as a philosopher. Beiser claims that Novalis in fact turns *away* in his later years from this epistemologically modest program of "nonclosure" to the traditionally recognized, ontological commitment to organicism; that this organic turn places him in the company of the idealists described above; and that it is even the more mature and representative stance of his philosophical career as a whole. Thus Beiser writes: "Arguments for placing Novalis outside the idealist tradition draw invalid generalizations from his early notebooks, failing to consider his later philosophical development... [The *Fichte Studien* are] an early and immature work, riddled with doubt, hesitation, ambivalence, and inconsistency"<sup>44</sup>; and later: "Romantic *Naturphilosophie* and its organic concept of nature... [are] a domain completely ignored by Frank."<sup>45</sup>

Beiser claims that Novalis' transition from "nonclosure" to "organic closure" is both a historical and logical division in his thought. While, in the *Fichte Studien*, the ground of knowledge in being is indeed unknowable thanks to Novalis' rejection of Fichte's intellectual intuition, by the start of the *Allgemeine Brouillon* in 1798, Beiser

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<sup>43</sup> Beiser's discussion of the *Fichte Studien* in his *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism* follows — and acknowledges — Frank's reading of the same.

<sup>44</sup> Beiser (*German Idealism*) 410

<sup>45</sup> Beiser (*Romantic Imperative*) 75

says, Novalis has revived a Platonic, intuitive model of the intellect and does argue for direct knowledge of the nature of being, or of subject-object unity, as a totalizing organism that comes to know itself in the consciousness of human beings. Basically Beiser reiterates the traditional image of Novalis. His stance is against the recent flood of comparisons between Novalis and post-structuralism: "The main thrust of [my scholarship] is directed against postmodernist interpretations of Frühromantik... I believe their interpretation is one-sided and anachronistic."<sup>46</sup> His insistence on organicism in Novalis makes him see the emphasis on nonclosure as simply at odds with his own reading, and he wishes to "vindicate the older scholarly tradition and to restore the rightful place of the organic in romantic thinking," contrary to "the most recent trend of *Romantikforschung*, which has questioned the old emphasis on the organic concept, and which has stressed instead the lack of completeness and closure in romantic thought."<sup>47</sup>

The two portrayals of Novalis' thought by Frank and Beiser are philosophically incompatible. In Frank's reading, consciousness *defers* our knowledge of being, because reflection structures being in its own discursive terms rather than granting being as it is in itself. In Beiser's interpretation, the ideas of reason are in fact *immediate* knowledge of being in itself, which for Novalis is organic; consciousness and reality are simply two manifestations, internal and external, of the same underlying identity — being as living force — and the knowing mind is an immediately integral part of this force. Another way of stating this difference is that, while Frank maintains, for Novalis, a Kantian model of knowing whereby there is no valid knowledge that is not the sensible manifold always already reflected by human cognitive conditions and thus forever removed from the *Ding*

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<sup>46</sup> Beiser (*Romantic Imperative*) ix-x.

<sup>47</sup> Beiser (*Philosophical Romanticism*) 218-219

*an sich*, Beiser claims that Novalis denies this Kantian barrier with his commitment to an organic thing-in-itself that knows itself in the ideas of reason in the human mind. The underlying epistemologies in these two readings are thus fundamentally opposed: being is the unknowable, only infinitely deferrable object in Frank's reading, while for Beiser, being is knowable precisely as organically organized, thanks to the Romantic revival of an ancient notion of intellectual intuition as the mind's direct seeing of wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. Frank's nonclosure places Novalis in closer company to contemporary post-structuralists, while Beiser's vitalized, intentionalized notion of being places Novalis with his German Idealist contemporaries.

As it stands, Romantic philosophical scholarship has effectively reached a detente between these positions in the conclusion that Novalis changes his mind over time. The question now seems to be merely which stage one should "prefer": Beiser insists we take the later development more seriously, while Frank trumpets the significance of the earlier *Fichte Studien* and dismisses the later fragments as "wirklich fragmentarisch, auch im schlechten Sinne."<sup>48</sup> In a recent article, Allison Stone affirms the turn in Novalis' opinion and attempts to explain his motivation for the change in heart. "The evolution in Novalis' thinking becomes apparent," she writes, "once we appreciate that he has a central aim of showing how we could reacquire a (presently lost) experience of natural phenomena as 'enchanted' — meaningful, mysterious, and animated by spirit."<sup>49</sup> That is to say, essentially, that Beiser's organicism remedies Frank's nonclosure. But again, the two stances are seen as opposed poles of Novalis' thought.

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<sup>48</sup> Frank 420

<sup>49</sup> Stone 143

### III. Novalis' "Organic Nonclosure"

The position taken by this dissertation is a different kind of reconciliation than that presently offered by the secondary literature. Here it will be argued that the seeming conceptual tension, even mutual exclusivity between the epistemology of "nonclosure" and the ontology of "organicism" in Novalis' thought is itself mistaken, both historically *and* logically. Instead, these two philosophical notions are harmonious facets of a single, consistent viewpoint that Novalis maintains throughout his short career — a combined theory of epistemology and metaphysics that can be helpfully summarized as "organic nonclosure." Not a paradox, the phrase "organic nonclosure" rather expresses the utter *interdependence* for Novalis of the reflective deferral of knowledge of being with the organic organization of being. More to the point, the ungraspability of being by reflection is in fact a *function* of its organic ontology and the mind's organic relationship to it. Ironically it is a synthesis of Beiser's and Frank's conflicting positions that brings us to this more accurate characterization of Novalis' overall philosophical project. The scholarly debate on "organicism" versus "nonclosure" in Novalis' thought has essentially fallen into a false dilemma (to which it was easy to fall prey, due to the highly complex intellectual history of the problem): while it is true that organicism for the idealists is the attempt to secure the closure of Kant, it is false that nonclosure therefore has to be a stance against organicism by the Romantics. The alternative is precisely what we are calling "organic nonclosure," and detailing this position as Novalis holds it in the *Fichte Studien* is the goal of this dissertation.

While we must agree with Beiser that an organic ontology is indeed central to Novalis' philosophy in a way that has been under-developed by Frank's reading, we must square organicism not with Beiser's Platonic and intellectually intuitive model of knowledge of being on at a later stage of his thought, but with Frank's insistence that Novalis accepts Kant's discursive or synthetic judgment. However, while we agree with Frank that Novalis' stance is indeed an appropriation of Kant, we hold that Novalis develops Kant in a much more daring metaphysical direction than suggested by Frank's mere "return to Kant before idealism can spread its wings." Novalis in fact agrees this much with Fichte: the self-experience of consciousness — its self-consciousness, or privacy, or its quality as a lived perspective in the here and now, a *Dasein* — is what allows a Kantian consciousness validly to know that its condition in an organic being. That is, for Novalis, reflection inheres *organically* in the medium of feeling, a position that he believes retains what is respectable about Kantian strictures, the limitation of knowledge to sensuous experience, but *also* indicates our organic embeddedness being, just as Fichte argued. The difference between Fichte and Novalis is that Novalis believes the relationship between ground and empirical consciousness cannot be discursively articulated. Our conscious relationship to the ground is only a private perspective, an immediacy, an incommunicable witnessing in *Dasein*, of the dependence of consciousness on something higher. Frank's reading that we are immediate with being in feeling but estranged from it in reflection becomes the right to knowledge of organic being — not as a dialectical sublation, but as the individual's wholly subjective, and therefore inarticulable, experience of being "thrown" from an absolute creativity. So the very inability of our consciousness to perform a deduction from ground to subjectivity

points — *ex negativo*, but *not* merely regulatively — to what this organic being must be: it is God, the living or panentheistic God of Herder. Kant's critique drew the outlines of the scientist's objective world through a transcendental inference to the conditions of consciousness; Novalis' metacritique draws the outlines of the Absolute through a transcendental inference to the conditions of our self-experience as an empirically limited consciousness. The very synthesis by which human consciousness is simultaneously immediate with being through feeling, and estranged from being in the divisive activity of reflection that gives rise to consciousness of subject-object separation in the first place, *is the organic striving of God's being to be itself*. Thus at all points of his philosophical career, Novalis argues that human beings are constitutive parts of God's whole organism, and that God's being becomes "for itself" in our consciousness. In short, Novalis' *Fichte Studien* agree with Herder's organicism.

Because of its stance on the impossibility of the discursive articulation of our consciousness relationship to our ground in the organic God, Novalis' position is still a "nonclosure," or the claim that human empirical knowledge must remain hypothetical for lack of the possibility of its systematization. We can know, transcendently, *that* the organic God is ground of our consciousness, because it is the condition of our self-conscious consciousness; but that private experience cannot be translated into discursive terms that would secure, in a proposition that could become the immanent ground of a system of knowledge, the deductive relationship between that ground and our experience. The dependence of consciousness on its organic condition in God's panentheistic being cannot be retraced by human reflection. Whereas Hegel would say that thought can dialectically overcome the (only apparent) division between thought and being, and so

reach systematic closure, Novalis insists in reverse that, because thought always depends on the brute fact of the basic givenness of being (and the point is: a givenness to us from God), thought cannot reach behind it or ascend beyond it. Nonclosure — as the permanent deferral, yet dependence, of thought on its ontological ground, whereby the ground cannot be made a metacritical standpoint in a system of philosophy — is the unavoidable conclusion. While the subjective, wholly perspectival revelation of being in the Kantian reflection of feeling does indeed transcendently indicate our organic inherence in God's being, still the private character of consciousness, or its nature for us as a lived and personal experience, cannot be or become a system foundation, because its subjectivity is not conceptual or universalizable in character. For Novalis as for Fichte, consciousness is indeed a species of the life of being; but the idealists affirm, while Novalis denies, the possibility of grounding a Kantian system of knowledge in this organic interdependence of thought and being. Hence we say Novalis' is a philosophy of "organic nonclosure."

Our argument spans three chapters. Chapter One closely examines eight of the most influential scholars of early Romantic philosophy for their relevance in this debate: Walter Benjamin, Theodor Haering, Géza von Molnár, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Paul Nancy, Manfred Frank, Clare Kennedy, and Frederick Beiser. Not only is such a survey of the secondary literature presently absent and sorely needed in Novalis scholarship, it will also demonstrate that the fluctuating history of interpretation — readings that also evolved alongside ever-improving primary sources of Novalis' thought — can itself help account for the present, seeming tension between epistemological nonclosure and organic ontology. The false dilemma that "nonclosure" must exclude

"organicism" is traced to the changing role of reflection in these various readings of Novalis: arguments began in favor of the inherence of human thought in God's organic being, but abandoned organicism as they abandoned reflective immediacy in favor of reflective deferral.

Chapter Two examines the relevant intellectual background of the alternative of organic nonclosure overlooked by this interpretive tradeoff, by looking more closely at the influence that Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi had on his generation. In particular, we examine his role in the *Pantheismusstreit* for its simultaneous introduction of phenomenological arguments for ontology, and a metacritique of reason. The ontology that Jacobi himself explicitly proffered was organic. The fact that his metacritique of Kant implied, by way of phenomenology, that the synthesis at the root of consciousness is an organic being, at the same time that his anti-philosophy rejected the vain attempts of philosophers to articulate that being, shows that panentheism was born out of an epistemological modesty that would much sooner suggest nonclosure than the grand idealist systems more commonly associated with organic being. Herder's thought will also be more deeply explored in Chapter Two for its precedent of combining panentheism with anti-foundationalism and anti-systematism.

Chapter Three provides a close reading of the organic nonclosure of Novalis' earliest, largest, and most difficult text, the *Fichte Studien*. Where relevant, later fragments are discussed as well, in order to show that Novalis holds this position consistently throughout his (after all, quite brief) philosophical career. Our argument begins with a re-reading of the very same fragment that helped initiate the current enthusiasm for Novalis' remarkably contemporary-sounding thoughts. Novalis writes in



fragment two of the *Fichte Studien*: "Das Bewußtseyn ist ein Seyn außer dem Seyn im Seyn. Was ist aber das? Das Außer dem Seyn muß kein rechtes Seyn seyn." This fragment would seem a poetic restatement of the limitations enacted by Kant's discursivity thesis, and the affirmation of nonclosure in light of the impossibility of Fichte's attempt at systematic grounding. And it *is* that, at least in part. While feeling is immediate with being — it is our "Seyn im Seyn" — nonetheless our consciousness is always already beyond the subject-object division of reflection, which permanently casts us outside of immediacy with being: it is "ein Seyn *außer* dem Seyn im Seyn." Thus consciousness can no more reflectively retrieve its origin prior to the separation that constitutes it than a dog, when chasing its own tail, can truly catch itself. Fichte wanted to call the "Seyn außer dem Seyn" the system-grounding being of self-consciousness, but Novalis cautions that this is "kein rechtes Seyn." Since Fichte's ego is an organismic being, it might seem that Novalis' denial of it is also a rejection of organicism entirely. However, Novalis' statement can *also* be parsed in the following manner: "Das Bewußtseyn ist [ein Seyn außer dem Seyn] [im Seyn]." In other words, unitary being — God's being, as will become clear later — is the *medium* of conscious separation of subject and object. And this *is* an organic structure. More specifically, Novalis here argues for the immanence of reflection in being, as the relating of parts within a substrate or whole that also unifies them. Not an idealist conflation of reflection and being in the human *subject*, Novalis' point is instead that the subject-object difference that is our nonreducible, wholly private conscious reality, and that bars us from the experience of subject-object unity in being in itself, is a function of, or conditioned by *God's* living being. We are dependent not on ourselves, but on His absolute self-conditioning to be

conscious at all; the human subject is "kein rechtes Seyn" — a mere "eddy" in what is really God's absoluteness — and this insurmountable dependence is also philosophical nonclosure. Thus the further layer of organicism in our interpretation of this fragment does not conflict with the nonclosure in the first layer. Far from it: the duality, yet harmony, of these two layers of this fragment *performs* the fact that philosophy cannot sublate its own dependence on the organic Absolute. Only this reading appreciates the unique and rich philosophy of "organic nonclosure" in Novalis' *Fichte Studien*.

## Chapter One



### From Organicism to Post-Structuralist Nonclosure in Readings of Novalis: A History of an Interpretive Tradeoff

This chapter reviews seven interpretations of Novalis' philosophy by the most prominent scholars of early Romanticism. These readings span more than ninety years and display a remarkable lack of consensus about even basic aspects of Novalis' thought, thanks in part to ever-evolving primary sources, but certainly also due to the intellectual challenge of Novalis' texts: Manfred Frank has called the *Fichte Studien* "the most difficult [texts] in German philosophy."<sup>50</sup> Yet in spite of their diversity, these seven readings can still be grouped into two categories that demonstrate one significant interpretive shift. Walter Benjamin, Theodor Haering and Frederick Beiser form the first group, while the second is comprised of Géza von Molnár, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, Manfred Frank, and Clare Kennedy. The former argue that Novalis supports a knowably organic notion of the Absolute and of our inherence as thinkers in it (the stance we are calling "organicism"), while the second argue that there is no Absolute — it is a merely regulative notion for Novalis — and that philosophy must operate at an irremediable remove from its ground (the stance we are calling "nonclosure"). Indeed, a direct *tradeoff* between readings of organicism and nonclosure is quite evident.

This review of the secondary literature locates the source of that tradeoff in changing interpretations of the role of "reflection," or the human subject's taking of objects of consciousness, in Novalis' philosophy. Benjamin, Haering and Beiser all argue that, for Novalis, human reflection inheres in the being of the Absolute, which is understood, though in different ways between them, as an *equation* of reflection with

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<sup>50</sup> Manfred Frank, *Unendliche Annäherung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997) 248

being. That is, the Absolute exists by means of its own self-reflecting, and in turn, the reflection upon objects by humans, who are constitutive parts of the Absolute's whole, is knowably grounded in the self-conditioning of the Absolute. This relationship between human thinking and Absolute being is organic. In contrast, von Molnár, the two French authors, Frank, and Kennedy variously argue that reflection for Novalis is the *separation* of thinking from being — where "being" is now conceived merely as mind-independent reality, and not as a self-conditioning Absolute — and so philosophy is insuperably deferred from its ground. The former group outlines organicism in essentially idealist terms for Novalis, while the latter group sees Novalis as carving a path away from idealism because he limits the knowledge that can be granted by reflection.

## I. Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin's account of Novalis' thought was a bold and unique reading of this early Romantic's philosophy, and one that held scholarly sway for quite some time until the more recent, disabling critiques of Winfried Menninghaus and Manfred Frank consigned it to disrepute. Menninghaus, for example, speaks scathingly of Benjamin's "extremely 'free' treatments of quoted material" and the "significant limitations to and falsifications within his exposition," which have "astounding repercussions."<sup>51</sup> But in Benjamin's defense, we must note that his 1919 dissertation, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, was also the first significant scholarly attempt to understand Novalis as a philosopher seriously engaged in the early stages of German Idealism, and

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<sup>51</sup> Winfried Menninghaus, "Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection," in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin, eds., (New York: Continuum 2002) 19 and 22.

so Benjamin's important reading must be credited with putting Novalis on the academic map as an earnest participant in the philosophical discussions of his day at all. Moreover, Benjamin had no choice but to work with the 1901 Ernst Heilborn edition of Novalis' philosophical work, which presented Novalis' fragments in one continuous stream and did not contain many of the fragments with the most explicit formulations on which Menninghaus and Frank base their now very popular, quite different interpretations.

According to Benjamin, Novalis utilizes Fichte's notion of reflection in order to allow the Absolute to be an immediate object of reflection, yet he also radicalizes Fichte's notion of the "I" by extending it to all of reality, beyond the confines of the finite ego. Benjamin believes Novalis supports a notion of the "Absolute" that, in the end, bears resemblance less to Fichte's self-conditioning ego than to Leibniz's organic monadology: the Absolute is a network of interconnected reflections of which any individual I's reflection is just one integral act in its larger "medium of reflection." However, though the human ego is directly integrated within this Absolute like a stitch in mental fabric, any given act of reflection by the I can know the Absolute only incompletely, because, much like Leibniz's monadology, each I is merely one finite perspective on a whole that is infinitely greater than it. Thus Benjamin attempts to reconcile the *organic* relationship of human knowing to the Absolute — i.e., that each act of reflection is a constitutive part of the being of the Absolute's larger whole — with the open-endedness or *nonclosure* of that very relationship, by arguing that human reflection can only penetrate finitely into the Absolute's infinite medium. Benjamin reads Novalis, with us, as supporting "organic nonclosure" (though ultimately in quite different terms than this dissertation holds). His reading proceeds as follows.

For Fichte, as we saw in our introduction, reflection comprises the being of the self: the self *is* a turning-upon-itself and taking-of-itself as its own content, a self immediately given to itself in self-constituting self-reflection. More specifically, Benjamin notes, reflection for Fichte is the free ability of the self to take the form-giving function of itself as its object, and thereby to become immediacy with itself as the “form of form.” Benjamin quotes Fichte here: “Die Handlung der Freiheit, durch welche die Form zur Form der Form als ihres Gehaltes wird und in sich selbst zurückkehrt, heißt Reflexion.”<sup>52</sup> Fichte's conflation of reflection and being in this *Tathandlung* is also his attempt to curb an infinite regress that he understands to threaten the very immediacy of self to itself that this notion of self-reflection is meant to achieve: in reflection, the thinking self is distinguished from the thought self, and so in order for the thinking self to become *that self's* thinking self, it too would have to be thought by a higher thinking self, and so on *ad infinitum*, preventing the assumption of any actual self-consciousness. For this reason, Benjamin reminds us, Fichte insists that the Kantian philosopher must countenance the *Tathandlung* as the single valid instance of intellectual intuition, or a thinking that produces the object of which it thinks, in order to ground the transcendental idealist system finally and without regress.

The central claim of Benjamin's dissertation is that, unlike Fichte, Novalis *embraces* this capacity of reflection for infinite regress, and rejects that it be curbed by intellectual intuition in the I. While Fichte shies away from the possibility of an empty series of reflections that, because of its infinite deferral, never arrives at the immediacy of what is reflected, Novalis believes that this regress is not in fact empty, but rather gives

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<sup>52</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2008) 22

rise to a filled, because *interconnected* network of reflections. A "network effect" of reflection noticeably takes hold at the third level of reflection, as Benjamin writes here:

"Die Unendlichkeit der Reflexion ist für Schlegel und Novalis in erster Linie nicht eine Unendlichkeit des Fortgangs, sondern eine Unendlichkeit des Zusammenhanges... Das Denken des Denkens des Denkens kann auf zweifache Art aufgefaßt und vollzogen werden. Wenn man von dem Ausdruck "Denken des Denkens" ausgeht, so ist dieser auf der dritten Stufe entweder das gedachte Objekt: Denken (des Denkens des Denkens), oder aber das denkende Subjekt (Denken des Denkens) des Denkens. Die strenge Urform der Reflexion des zweiten Grades ist durch die Doppeldeutigkeit im dritten erschüttert und angegriffen. Diese aber würde zu einer immer vielfacheren Mehrdeutigkeit auf jeder folgenden Stufe sich entfalten."<sup>53</sup>

Structural ambiguity on ever-higher levels of reflection means that these reflections, though endless, actually "hang together" and so fill each other in a system of infinite *interpenetration*; where Fichte only sees an empty *Fortgang*, the Romantics see a filled *Zusammenhang*. The immediacy that Fichte sought in the privileged act of intellectual intuition is actually secured, even into infinity, by the web-like inter-connections of reflections at higher and higher levels.

The full ontological impact of this Romantic re-evaluation of reflection really becomes apparent with Novalis' next move (in Benjamin's reading of him), which is also the incorporation of a version of "organicism" into this theory of infinitely filled reflection. After restricting the regress of self-reflection in intellectual intuition, Fichte redirected the infinitizing aspects of reflection to practice, or to the realm of continuous ethical striving; but Novalis extends infinite reflection to *all of reality*, not just the I, thus removing Fichte's limits within the human mind in a redefinition of the Absolute as the "medium of reflection." Hence Benjamin quotes Novalis calling this philosophy a "Fichtismus, ohne Anstoß, ohne Nicht-Ich in seinem Sinn."<sup>54</sup> Benjamin explains that, for

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<sup>53</sup> Benjamin 28; 33

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin 38

the early Romantics, "die Reflexion konstituiert das Absolute, und sie konstituiert es als ein Medium... Seine Substanz ist überall dieselbe."<sup>55</sup> That is, the "substance" of the Absolute is this very interpenetrating network of infinite mental reflections, or the filled *Zusammenhang* of thinking thinking thought. As this medium of reflection, the Absolute is not material, strictly speaking; instead, it is only "objective" insofar as it becomes object to itself in its reflexive turn upon itself, thereby connecting reflections to each other as subject to object within its web-like network. "Objects" in our common-sensical understanding of them are more aptly described as "subjects," or really "centers of reflection": "Die Romantiker gehen vom bloßen Sich-Selbst-Denken als Phänomen aus; es eignet allem, denn alles ist Selbst."<sup>56</sup> Hence Novalis' claim that our knowledge of nature is really the "self-knowledge of nature," as Benjamin explains here: "Alles, was sich dem Menschen als sein Erkennen von einem [natürlichen] Wesen darstellt, ist in ihm der Reflex der Selbsterkenntnis des Denkens in demselbigen... Jede Erkenntnis ist ein immanenter Zusammenhang im Absoluten."<sup>57</sup> Early Romantic philosophy is thus similar to Leibniz's organic monadology, but with the important difference that "thinking centers" connect to each other through the network of reflections and are "nicht ein Aggregat in sich abgeschlossener Monaden," as Benjamin qualifies.<sup>58</sup> Since all of reality is composed of thinking "selves" that are integral parts of an underlying, self-reflexive whole. So Benjamin's reading of Novalis is "organic" insofar as the Absolute is the immanent whole that directs, and in turn is constituted by, its parts, which include the human mind. Reflective penetration into this organic Absolute is precisely what Novalis

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<sup>55</sup> Benjamin 39; 40

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin 30-31

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin 62-63

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin 61



means by "Romantisieren" as a "qualitative Potenzierung," according to Benjamin.<sup>59</sup>

In Benjamin's reading, then, reflection gives each thinking center immediate access to the organic being of the Absolute; but importantly, this knowledge is also only finite, restricted, and unavoidably incomplete. On the one hand, because interpenetrating reflections compose the Absolute as medium, "mittelbar kann dieser Zusammenhang von unendlich vielen Stufen der Reflexion aus erfaßt werden, indem gradweise die sämtlichen übrigen Reflexionen nach allen Seiten durchlaufen werden."<sup>60</sup> Winfried Menninghaus explains Benjamin's interpretation clearly here: "The whole 'being' of infinite reflection consists, as a totality of relation, in the mirrorings of all its parts – that is, as a decentred continuum of centres of reflection."<sup>61</sup> So, contrary to the philosophy of Fichte and other self-described finishers of the Kantian project, knowledge for the Romantics does not have to be built from a single foundation into a deductively closed system, but can start "anywhere" and still penetrate, via reflection, into the Absolute. But on the other hand, because of the very same structural *ambiguity* that links all reflections to each other in the filled infinity of the Absolute, reflection that attempts to take the Absolute, in its whole, as an object of knowledge necessarily falls short of completing this goal. Benjamin writes:

"In diesem Sachverhalt beruht das Eigentümliche der von den Romantikern in Anspruch genommen Unendlichkeit der Reflexion: die Auflösung der eigentlichen Reflexionsform gegen das Absolutum. Die Reflexion erweitert sich schrankenlos, und das in der Reflexion geformte Denken wird zum formlosen Denken, welches sich auf das Absolutum richtet."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Benjamin 40

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin 28

<sup>61</sup> Menninghaus 32

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin 33

Novalis' metaphysics of the Absolute as the "medium of reflection" accounts for the nonclosure of the knowledge that follows from reflection, according to Benjamin: each finite "thinking center" in the Absolute knows this Absolute directly, but only incompletely, because totalizing knowledge of the infinite is not available to this restricted perspective. Reflection merely dissolves into formlessness at this impossibly infinite, structurally ambiguous object. Hence Benjamin's quotation of Novalis' characterization of philosophy as "der Anfang einer wahrhaften Selbstdurchdringung des Geistes, die nie endigt."<sup>63</sup> In summary, Benjamin's reading reconciles three potentially incongruous strands of Novalis' thought — a theory of human reflection; an organic ontology of the Absolute; and the open-endedness of our knowledge of that Absolute — by arguing that the Absolute is an organically interconnected network of immaterial reflections, to which human reflection has immediate access but nonetheless cannot achieve a totalizing perspective on the Absolute, thanks to its finite position as mere part within the "erfüllte Unendlichkeit des Zusammenhangs," or the whole of the Absolute.

## II. Theodor Haering

In the thirty-five years between Benjamin's dissertation and the next most important interpretation of Novalis as a philosopher — Theodor Haering's voluminous *Novalis als Philosoph* of 1954<sup>64</sup> — important progress in the collection and ordering of Novalis' original texts was made. In the 1920's, the Germanist Paul Kluckhohn recognized the inadequacies of existing manuscripts of Novalis' work, which had been

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<sup>63</sup> Benjamin 41

<sup>64</sup> Theodor Haering, *Novalis als Philosoph* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1954)

organized into subject groups by friends and family members of Novalis after his death often according to arbitrary selection criteria. Through analysis of content as well as of changes in Novalis' handwriting, Kluckhohn created the first "critical" edition of his philosophy, the *Novalis Schriften* of 1929. Most importantly, Kluckhohn's collection distinguished the *Fichte Studien* as its own, separate set of notes (actually given this title by Kluckhohn, not by Novalis), with a coherent, though by no means systematically presented philosophical content. Later scholars would even consider these notes to comprise a unique phase of his intellectual development as well. However, Haering — like Benjamin, who simply did not have access to these notes — does not treat the *Fichte Studien* separately from the later fragments, and portrays Novalis as a consistent thinker over time, referring to his "einheitliche und frühreife Natur."<sup>65</sup>

In two important ways, Haering's interpretation of Novalis agrees with that of Benjamin. Both men argue that, for Novalis, human reflection inheres in the self-conditioning of the Absolute, or in other words, reflection by the "I" is a reflex *of* the Absolute *in* the "I." The ego is merely a dependent, integral part of the Absolute whole, which underlies and conditions it, and so the ego is not the absolute origin of its own free act of reflection, as Fichte had argued. Thus Haering and Benjamin agree that Fichte's influence was positive insofar as Novalis accepted that reflection entailed ontological identity with its object, while Novalis diverged from Fichte in his belief that the "I" should be dethroned from its seat as the Absolute itself. Moreover, the dependence of the I, not on itself, but on an Absolute that conditions it, is understood by both scholars as "organic" in nature, in the sense that this dependence is the relationship of a part to a whole that it helps to constitute *as* part, and to a whole on which it is simultaneously

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<sup>65</sup> Haering 605

reliant as *mere* part. But the similarities between these two scholars end here. If we provide a more precise definition of this "organic" relationship for Novalis according to Haering, we see that his and Benjamin's interpretations diverge: above all, Haering's integration of Novalis' *Naturphilosophie* into the general picture of his philosophy materialized his notion of the Absolute. While Benjamin argued that the Absolute is composed of interpenetrating minds, Haering physicalized or substantialized the Absolute organism, conceiving of it in more Herderian terms as a hybrid of mind and matter. Haering's reading of the systematicity of Novalis' epistemology further distinguishes him from Benjamin; the most important difference, for our purposes, is that Haering propounds a more thorough form of epistemic *closure*.

One of Haering's most central claims is that Novalis' equally "material" understanding of objects has been ignored by readings that overemphasize the introspective elements of his philosophy and so falsely insist that his philosophical stance is essentially idealist-panpsychist. Haering writes:

"Einer der Hauptfehler in der bisherigen Beurteilung des Novalis ist die Einseitigkeit, mit welcher man einzelne Stellen der philosophischen Meditationen des Nachlasses herauszuklauben pflegt, ohne zu beachten, daß das scheinbare Gegenteil, in Wahrheit aber nur die erst den ganzen Gedanken ergebende 'Ergänzung', in einer oft ebenso prägnanten Zuspitzung sich an einer anderen Stelle findet... Immer und immer wieder wird in allen Darstellungen des Novalis das Wort zitiert: 'Nach innen führt der geheimnisvolle Pfad', wobei man ganz zu bemerken unterläßt, daß sich ebenso viele Stellen finden, an denen die Notwendigkeit eines 'Äußeren' für jedes 'Innere' mit gleichem Nachdruck betont wird."<sup>66</sup>

To Haering, only an imperfect reading of Novalis would argue that thought alone constitutes the Absolute as medium. Of course, Benjamin does indeed argue that Novalis places "equal emphasis" on "the outer" as the correlate of every "inner" experience, since the Absolute is the "medium of reflection" that appears immediately to itself as an object

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<sup>66</sup> Haering 23

because it bends back *upon itself* in the interpenetrating network of reflections that is the Absolute; but Haering's point is that a better understanding of Novalis' notion of the "Absolute" must consider his numerous writings on *Naturphilosophie*, which is every bit as much a philosophy of physically extended, materially substantial existence outside the I's capacity to cognize it, as it is a philosophy of reflection.

In Haering's different reading, the Absolute is an organism that comprises a *continuum* of levels of development and organization of a single "life force" or "Lebenskraft," which in itself is neither purely "mental" nor "material," but rather both. Herder is clearly the intellectual influence here. For him as for Novalis, the interior manifestation of life force is mentality, and its exterior manifestation of the same life force is physical extension. More specifically, all existing things have both an "psychische, innere, ideelle Seite" as well as an "äußere, reelle Seite," such that the differences between, for example, anorganic, organic, appetitive, and even spiritual beings is merely a matter of different degrees or "Potenzen" of the same life force in an "Entwicklungsreihe," rather than a matter of the simple binary of physical extension or mental freedom, such as one might find in the mechanistic paradigm of Cartesian dualism.<sup>67</sup> Thus Haering quotes Novalis: "Es gibt eine mineralische, vegetabilische, animalische Chemie, Mechanik, Kalorik, Magnetism, Elektrizität" — that is, the same activity of life force may realize itself differently at higher and higher levels of self-constituting organization, but it is fundamentally the same ontological force.<sup>68</sup> At its apex is human consciousness and creativity, every bit an expression of this force as the

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<sup>67</sup> Haering 518

<sup>68</sup> Haering 519

lower levels, just at a higher degree of organization. The Absolute, in turn, is the sum total of this rising spectrum of development.

How are we able to *know* that the Absolute is this sort of organically organized being, in which our own act of reflection is an integral, indeed the highest part, according to Haering's reading of Novalis? Here Haering also diverges from Benjamin in his different interpretation of precisely how Novalis rejects Fichte's "intellectual intuition," and of precisely how Novalis radicalizes the relationship of the human subject to its object. Recall that, for Benjamin, Novalis rejects Fichte's intellectual intuition because he supposedly thought it was unnecessary to curb its infinite penetration into the Absolute. In Haering's reading, too, Novalis does not think that reflection on the Absolute should be checked within the "I," but for a different reason: Fichte's Absolute, and his explanation of our knowledge of this Absolute, are too one-sidedly subjectivist. The identity of the ideal and the real cannot be explained by appeal to the ideal alone; rather, the real and ideal must be seen as parts of a higher unity that contains both subjectivity and objectivity in its single sublated substance, life force. To reach that higher unity, reflection must conceive of the more unifying concept that negates the perceived opposition. In other words, according to Haering, Novalis favors a *dialectical* account both of the I and of the Absolute, which is the totalizing "Real-Ideale" that relates subject and object in the I, and composes all of reality as medium:

"Novalis hat sich... recht kritisch nicht nur gegenüber diesem nach seiner Meinung allzu einseitigen Namen [des Absoluten] ('Ich'), sondern auch zu Fichtes allzu einseitig idealistischer Stellung geäußert, der er die seinige als einen 'Real-idealismus' gegenüberstellt wissen will; also als einen Standpunkt, der auch die 'reelle' Seite wirklich erst ganz zu ihrem Recht kommen zu lassen glaubt und damit dies Absolute, mindestens in höherem Grade als Fichte, auch wirklich zum 'Grunde' *aller* Phänomene der Wirklichkeit, auch der 'reellen' Seite derselben, macht... Die Art... in welcher sich dies Absolute in die ganze Mannigfaltigkeit und Bestimmtheit der reell-ideellen

Einzelphänomene 'dirimieren' und entfalten sollte, ist auch für Novalis von Anfang an die *dialektische*... [und] man darf nicht vergessen, daß Novalis *vor* Hegel seine Gedankenwelt ausbildete."<sup>69</sup>

And here again:

"Es ist zweifellos, daß für Novalis der Gegensatz von Sein und Schein zugleich auch die beiden Seiten des Absoluten, die reelle und die ideelle bezeichnen soll. Damit rückt der Gegensatz von Sein und Schein offenbar zugleich in die Nähe des Gegensatzes von 'Ansichsein' und 'Erscheinung' im Kantischen Sinne. Bei Kant war dieser Gegensatz freilich ein schließlich unüberbrückbarer gewesen... [Aber für Novalis] ist die Erscheinungswelt (die 'gegenständliche Welt', wie Novalis sagen wird) nicht mehr bloßer 'Schein', sondern die für das wahre Sein wesensnotwendige andere Hälfte: seine 'Erscheinung'. Novalis vermag in der Tat Sein und Erscheinung, Sein und Schein als die in Wahrheit zusammengehörigen Komponenten der wahren *dialektischen* Totalität des 'Absoluten' zu bezeichnen."<sup>70</sup>

Where Benjamin turns Novalis into a "Fichteanized Leibniz," if you will, Haering turns Novalis into Hegel. Both scholars agree that the act of reflection is an integrated part of the activity of the absolute whole (an organic relationship); but the precise substantial nature of this absolute medium of reflection, and the precise manner in which reflection accesses that nature, are different between their two readings. More specifically with regard to Novalis' turn away from Fichte, according to Haering: in the reflection of the I on itself, the I also encounters itself as a felt object, immediately given to itself in material, sensuous particularity; the perception of the difference between reflection and feeling in the I then begs the question of the possibility of their unity, to which reflection next *ascends* by thinking of the whole of which both the real and ideal in the I could be constitutive parts. This higher whole is the notion of the Absolute as "life force," the unitary real-ideal and ideal-real substance, in which the I is reflective insofar as it is ideal and can feel itself sensuously insofar as it is real. Through the reflective process of dialectical sublation, the I eventually becomes aware of itself as a merely finite moment

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<sup>69</sup> Haering 620, emphasis mine

<sup>70</sup> Haering 94, emphasis mine

in the Absolute as the infinite living organism. Once again, even natural objects in the world, like plants and animals, are finite realizations of the Absolute striving to know itself and eventually reaching the point of self-consciousness in the very dialectical reflections of the human mind. Unlike Benjamin, Haering argues that the I, in spite of its own finitude, can still ascend to knowledge of the Absolute through reflection, because each reflection and correlate sensuous feeling is an attempt by the Absolute to come to know its infinite nature in the I. Indeed, Haering claims that this raising of finitude to ever-higher levels of more unifying, more infinite concepts — rather than Benjamin's non-systematic penetration of reflection into the Absolute — was precisely the process of "Romanticizing the ordinary" for which Novalis is so famous.

Thus in contrast to Benjamin, Haering does not see any problem of our never reaching final knowledge of this Absolute for Novalis. "Nonclosure" is not an element of his reading, nor is its absence discussed. Instead, we are to understand that the Absolute is finally reachable through the dialectical process; every finite object in the world or reflection in the mind is a manifestation of the very Absolute itself in its dialectical march towards the closure of self-knowledge. Though no single or stand-alone reflection can provide complete knowledge of the Absolute (and instead we must pass through the entire dialectical process to reach its completion), there is at least a conceivable endpoint to this process that did not exist for Benjamin. Any given cognition, Haering writes, is an "Übergang zu einem anderen und — als begründetes — zur Einheit mit ihm in einem höheren Ganzen, ja, schließlich in einem *wenigstens hypothetischen* System."<sup>71</sup> Haering has been roundly criticized by scholars who followed him for failing to acknowledge

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<sup>71</sup> Haering 639, emphasis mine



Novalis' reflective nonclosure and therefore his difference from Hegel.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, this criticism has not led to a preference for Benjamin's open-ended alternative (which still ultimately argues for reflective mediation by an organic Absolute even as it denies that reflection penetrates the Absolute completely). Instead, as we will see now, more recent scholars have rejected that reflection is even a vehicle of the absolute for Novalis at all.

### III. Géza von Molnár

Géza von Molnár's 1970 study, *Novalis' Fichte Studies*, marks the beginning of an important shift in Novalis scholarship, both interpretively and with regard to the primary sources of Novalis' philosophy that scholars used. Indeed, these two factors are closely related. Though in 1929 Paul Kluckhohn advanced the organization of Novalis' philosophical notes with his better analysis of their content and handwriting, it was Hans-Joachim Mähl who brought these notes to their most coherent and reliable state yet with an even more painstaking study of the changes in Novalis' handwriting over time. Mähl also gained access to more original material after the 1959 death of the publisher Salman Schocken, who had carried some of Novalis' papers into exile during the Nazi period.<sup>73</sup> Mähl's critical edition (*Novalis: Werke*) was published in 1965, and the most significant result of the new arrangement was the expansion and improvement of the *Fichte Studien*

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<sup>72</sup> Frederick Beiser wrote "it must be said that Haering viewed Novalis through Hegelian spectacles," *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism* (Cambridge: Harvard 2002) p. 408; Géza von Molnár argued that Haering didn't recognize that the path to the Absolute for Novalis was not a positive dialectical movement, but a "via negativa," and a regulative one at that *Novalis' Fichte Studies* (The Hague: Mouton 1970) p. 38.

<sup>73</sup> See detailed discussion in Frank p. 156-7.

in particular. Von Molnár was then the first scholar to offer an explication of these notes by themselves, and one of his conclusions has been shared by all scholars who followed: the *Fichte Studien* form a unique stage of Novalis' thought that forces us to reconsider previous readings of his philosophy. Von Molnár especially criticizes Haering for failing to treat these notes separately (since they were indeed available to him even in Kluckhohn's edition, though incompletely). Von Molnár quotes Kluckhohn:

"Gerade weil diese Aufzeichnungen die Anverwandlung der Fichtischen Philosophie in ihren einzelnen Stadien bis zur Selbstfindung des Autors sichtbar machen, haben sie ihren Eigenwert und verdienen für sich allein betrachtet zu werden, was bisher noch nicht geschehen ist, da alle Darstellungen von Hardenbergs Philosophie die Studien mit den späteren Fragmenten vermischen."<sup>74</sup>

With von Molnár, a new phase of Novalis interpretation emerges, which acknowledges that the *Fichte Studien* contain different philosophical content than the later fragments (like the *Blüthenstaub* but especially the *Allgemeine Brouillon*).

More specifically, the organic commitments in Benjamin and Haering's readings of Novalis — that underlying human reflection is the ontological unity of subjectivity and objectivity in the Absolute, thanks to our relation as integral part of the Absolute's whole that conditions the activity of reflection in the I — are denied in this new phase of scholarship by its reading of Novalis' opposite stance on reflection in the *Fichte Studien*. In slightly different but related ways, each of the readings we consider here (by von Molnár, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, Manfred Frank, and Clare Kennedy) claim that, in the *Fichte Studien*, Novalis outrightly rejects the knowable inherence of reflection in the Absolute; instead, the representational quality of human consciousness necessarily defers any knowledge we might have of it, separating the act of knowing from the object known rather than unifying them in an organic holism. In the

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<sup>74</sup> Von Molnár 22

case especially of Frank's reading, Novalis is seen as adhering to Kantian critical limits that prevent knowledge of the thing in itself; in light of our inability reflectively to grasp the source of our knowing, then, Fichte's foundationalist attempt to ground knowledge of knowledge is rejected in favor of a radicalized Kantianism that deems even the transcendental idealist project unavoidably hypothetical. The conclusion of the Romantic metacritique of criticism is that philosophy must remain open-ended, nonclosed.

The result of this scholarly shift has been a re-appropriation of Novalis, and of early Romanticism in general, to post-structuralism *avant la lettre*, as well as the marginalization of organicism to the last stage of his philosophical development, the late fragments. For example, the endless deferral of absolute knowledge thanks to the effective "*différance*" of reflection has garnered comparisons of Novalis to Derrida: Margaret Stoljar speaks of his "veritably Derridean deferral of closure," and Clare Kennedy devotes an entire study to the parallels that can be drawn between these two thinkers.<sup>75</sup> Derridean nonclosure seems to preclude the very possibility of organic commitments, as Paul de Man has written ("[Novalis propounds] a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, no totality"<sup>76</sup>), and with which Alice Kuzniar has agreed ("Novalis advocates a proliferation or a redundancy of structures, rather than the organic, unitary form often attributed to him... The oft-cited, supposedly Romantic metaphors of organicism — cycles and embryonic development — must be

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<sup>75</sup> Margaret Stoljar *Novalis: Philosophical Writings* (Albany: SUNY 1997) 12; Clare Kennedy, *Paradox, Aphorism and Desire in Novalis and Derrida* (London: Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2008)

<sup>76</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 222

challenged"<sup>77</sup>). Meanwhile, Novalis' organicism has been relegated to a later stage of his philosophical activity, above all to the *Naturphilosophie* of the *Allgemeine Brouillon*, where it has either been disparaged as a degeneration of his thought (Manfred Frank calls this stage "wirklich fragmentarisch, auch im schlechten Sinne"<sup>78</sup>); or defended as an unjustly sidelined phase of his intellectual development (Frederick Beiser complains that recent studies have "failed to consider his later philosophical development"<sup>79</sup> adequately enough, and asserts that we ought "to vindicate the older scholarly tradition and restore the rightful place of the organic in romantic thinking"<sup>80</sup>); or, his later organicism has been more neutrally explained as part of the addition of an aesthetic program to re-enchant the natural world (Allison Stone writes, "The evolution in Novalis' thinking [towards an organicized nature] becomes apparent once we appreciate that he has a central aim of showing how we could reacquire a presently lost experience of natural phenomena as 'enchanted' — meaningful, mysterious, and animated by spirit"<sup>81</sup>). In the midst of such interpretive diversity, this much is clear: the history of Novalis scholarship shows a definitive tradeoff between "organicism" and "nonclosure" in his philosophy, and the philosophical faultline along which this schism occurs is the problem of how reflection does or does not enable consciousness of the Absolute. Thus we turn now to Géza von Molnár's reading of the *Fichte Studien*, which was the first to suggest that reflection does not operate organically for Novalis at this stage in his thought.

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<sup>77</sup> Alice Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) 4, 49

<sup>78</sup> Frank 25.

<sup>79</sup> Beiser 410

<sup>80</sup> Frederick Beiser, "The paradox of romantic metaphysics," in *Philosophical Romanticism* (London, New York: Routledge 2006) 219

<sup>81</sup> Allison Stone, "Being, Knowledge and Nature in Novalis," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (Vol 46, Nr 1: 2008) 141

According to von Molnár, Novalis' notes from the years 1795 and 1796 indicate that he followed Fichte quite closely during this first phase of his engagement with German idealism, largely taking his cue from Fichte's philosophy of the ego and only diverging from it in certain specific respects that in no way add up to the proto-Hegelianism of Haering's reading (nor to Benjamin's interpretation). We are told that, like Fichte, Novalis is interested in the special paradox of empirical consciousness: the apparent dualism between the subject and the outer world of objects, objects which are nonetheless given *to* the subject in and as the subject's consciousness. In other words, Novalis agrees with the *Wissenschaftslehre* that the ego's empirical consciousness is "the point of tangency" of subject and object.<sup>82</sup> The ego manifests a paradoxical simultaneity of both division and unity: subject and object are divided insofar as the object appears as if standing against the subject, and yet they are united insofar as objects appear to the subject at all, as the subject's immediately available consciousness *of* objects. Certain questions naturally follow: What is the substrate that underlies and conditions this difference-in-unity of consciousness? Can it be known? Like Fichte, Novalis calls this ground — whatever it may be — the "absolute," because it would have to be the most fundamental condition of the knowledge-relationship of subject and object. "Novalis cannot consider the prime empirical dichotomy of subject and object without referring its apparent dualism to a ground of absolute unity," von Molnár explains, and so Novalis follows Fichte in asking the same question, begged by Kant, about the nature of that which absolutely relates knower and known.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> von Molnár 26

<sup>83</sup> von Molnár 30

But Novalis *breaks* with Fichte — and, most importantly for the present history of Novalis scholarship, here von Molnár's reading breaks with Benjamin's and Haering's — by claiming that the identification of this substrate as an "Absolute" is a function of the way *we* must think about it, and does not qualify as knowledge of it. In different ways, Benjamin and Haering had allowed for such knowledge by expanding the immediacy of Fichtean reflection to an Absolute that is no longer just contained in the I, but rather contains the I's reflection immanently within itself. Von Molnár *does agree* that the primary reason for Novalis' rejection of Fichte's own, idealist proposition for absolute knowing was that it was "too subjectivist": for Novalis, the object side of consciousness was, indeed, just as important as the subject side, and only a philosopher consumed with the "moralistic fervor" to preserve the subject's freedom would insist otherwise.<sup>84</sup>

However, in contrast to Benjamin and Haering, von Molnár claims that the specific reason for Novalis' equal privileging of the object was that the ego's consciousness of objects is possible in the first place because the ego simply finds itself as that special point of tangency at which subject and object appear in "balanced neutrality."<sup>85</sup> And in even more significant contrast to his two predecessors, von Molnár further argues that there can be no expansion of the powers of reflection beyond the confines of this I, because the balanced neutrality of subject and object that characterizes the paradoxical experience of the I's empirical consciousness is also a dichotomy that forces two opposed concepts of the Absolute in itself — concepts between which reflection cannot validly choose.

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<sup>84</sup> von Molnár 99

<sup>85</sup> von Molnár 29

Following Novalis' fragment #8, in the *Fichte Studien*, that "Die Handlung, dass Ich sich als Ich setzt muss mit der Antithese eines unabhängigen Nichtich und der Beziehung auf eine sie umschliessende Sphäre verknüpft seyn — diese Sphäre kann man Gott und Ich nennen," von Molnár claims that Novalis' two hypothetical, regulative candidates for the Absolute are "God" and "Ego": God as the self-conditioning, absolute source of the world of objects, and Ego as the self-conditioning, absolute source of subjectivity. The problem is that reflection cannot choose between them. They are equally valid, because they explain equally well the respective absolute sources of subject and object in the I; yet they are irreconcilable, because nothing in the I's paradoxical experience (of subject-object unity and difference in itself) could allow the choice of one over the other, and meanwhile, they are mutually exclusive descriptions of the nature of the Absolute considered in itself. Nor does Novalis appeal here to conceptual sublation, von Molnár counters Haering, because insofar as oppositions are related to each other, Novalis' "dialectic" must be understood as more fundamentally Fichtean — because always confined to the empirical limits of the ego — than Hegelian.<sup>86</sup> Thus the I is prevented from ever knowing what the Absolute is. Its nature remains a fundamentally unknowable "X" for human consciousness. This reading supports a stronger form of nonclosure than we saw in Benjamin, and does so precisely because it lets go of the organic commitment to the inherence of reflection in the Absolute. Von Molnár writes:

"Absolute unity, the Absolute itself, is for Novalis a purely negative value, never to be perceived directly as One and, therefore, manifest only in the relative unity between the empirical ego's subjective and objective aspects; never to be expressed by any one name, and, therefore, entitled either 'God' or 'Ego' according to the perspective from which it is viewed."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> von Molnár 28-29

<sup>87</sup> von Molnár 44

"God" and "Ego" are alternative conceptual descriptions of the Absolute that arise *merely regulatively* as a function of the apparent dualism of subjectivity and objectivity in the I, which the I cannot deny because that is the fundamental quality of its experience. "God" and "Ego" are not perceptions of the Absolute as it really is in itself, but are effects of how the I must think about the possibility of the Absolute, given that the only experience available to the I is the "paradox that otherness is sameness, that ego and non-ego are related."<sup>88</sup> In light of their use of different sources, Benjamin and Haering's insistence that human reflection, for Novalis, actually has an organic relationship to an organic Absolute effectively amounts to the mistaken incorporation of Novalis' later (and different) opinions on *Naturphilosophie* into this early phase of philosophical engagement. In von Molnár's reading of the phase from 1795 to 1796, no organic commitments are attributed to Novalis. Hence von Molnár's claim that the main difference between the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the *Fichte Studien* is merely "a variation in emphasis" — the former emphasizes the I's moral striving against the not-I; the latter, the balance of I and not-I in the I — though this is a variation that results, significantly, in the open-endedness of philosophical reflection for Novalis.<sup>89</sup> The impossible choice between descriptions of the Absolute as "God" or "Ego" is Novalis' nonclosure in von Molnár's reading of him.

Arguably one of the weaknesses of von Molnár's reading is that it does not *philosophically* motivate Novalis' break from Fichte's subjective conception of the Absolute. Von Molnár claims that Fichte suppresses the not-I in service of the I's freedom, whereas Novalis prefers to account for empirical consciousness with a more

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<sup>88</sup> von Molnár 24

<sup>89</sup> von Molnár 29



balanced dualism between subject and object in the I; but why? In answer, von Molnár suggests at the end of his study that Novalis rejected the ego-Absolute because his goals were ultimately "aesthetic" rather than "practical":

"From the aesthetic standpoint, the disharmonious strife between the absolutely founded 'ought to' of the ethical imperative and the demands of physical existence which ultimately are doomed to submission *is most unsightly*. The artist, *therefore*, seeks out that point of unity, that point of harmonious tangency, which must underlie all relationship, even that of opposition... [Novalis steps] away from the divinity of ethics, in whose honor Fichte had still erected his edifice of thought, toward a potentially equal glorification of the aesthetic. Novalis' reinterpretation of Fichtean philosophy during the years 1795 and 1796 must be viewed as the final step which was to usher in the new era of art's isolated supremacy."<sup>90</sup>

Here the transition from Fichtean ethics to Romantic aesthetics amounts to a difference in taste, rather than an argument for or against the former. After all, citing the mere "unsightliness" of the dominating ego is not a philosophical justification for avoiding it (unless an aesthetic argument is integrated). A philosophical motivation for Romantic aesthetics is just what is offered by the *next* most influential interpretation of Novalis as a philosopher to follow historically after von Molnár's reading: the 1978 *L'Absolu littéraire* by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (hereafter referred to as *The Literary Absolute* according to its English translation in 1988). This highly regarded interpretation showed, in greater philosophical detail than von Molnár did, how the root of Novalis' transition to aesthetics lies in the subject's inability to present itself to itself in reflection — in other words, that Romantic aesthetics is motivated by nonclosure. However, *The Literary Absolute* is not without its flaws, the most surprising and lamentable of which is its omission of any textual support from the *Fichte Studien*. Since it is limited in this way, it does not contextualize Novalis' philosophy in response to Fichte like Benjamin, Haering and von Molnár did. Yet the authors still paint a picture of

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<sup>90</sup> von Molnár 111-112 (emphasis mine)

Novalis that is consistent with the new wave of readings of him, precisely by addressing the inability of reflection to achieve knowledge of its ground.

#### IV. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy begin their reading of Novalis with the problem of nonclosure after Kant, specifically as the problem of the unknowability of the ground of knowing considered as self. That is, it begins with the empty Kantian *cogito*, or with the fact that Kant seemed to ground the intelligibility of objects in the human subject, yet allowed for no representation of the self to itself. To restate the problem in their terms: Kant restricted the "I" to a mere "logical necessity" that "must accompany representations" so that those representations might be of a piece for one consciousness, but this move not only prevented the self from knowing itself as phenomenon, it also threatened to strip the subject of any possible substantiality. *The Literary Absolute* states: "One must set out from this problematic of the subject unrepresentable to itself and from this eradication of all substantialism in order to understand what Romanticism will receive, not as a bequest but as its 'own' most difficult and perhaps insoluble problem."<sup>91</sup> Each of the interpretations in the second wave of readings approaches Novalis' philosophy from this starting point — the basic metacritical problem of our knowing the source of our knowing in the very act of knowing itself — but Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy distinguish themselves with the suggestion that it is specifically Kantian aesthetics that inform the Romantic answer to the problem of the *Darstellung* of the subject to itself

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<sup>91</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute* (Albany: State University of New York Press, c1988) 30-31.

and that render philosophy nonclosed. "Kant opens up the possibility of Romanticism," they plainly assert.<sup>92</sup>

Kant's third Critique suggested that *beauty* presents the self to itself – or more specifically, a beautiful object can make the self intuitable, or available to the senses – in two possible ways: either immediately, through aesthetic pleasure, or regulatively and mediately, in the image or *Bild* of the beautiful in art, nature, or culture. Let us begin with the first possibility. According to Kant, when an observer looks at a beautiful object, the form of which definitionally cannot be subsumed under a discrete concept of the understanding, then a special kind of reflection takes place in the mind: the faculties of understanding and imagination bring themselves into a relation of “free play,” or reciprocal striving to subsume the empirical given under a concept. This striving of aesthetic reflection is endless, because its goal of conceptual subsumption is impossible. Importantly, this same striving is also the unity of the subject, because it is the very self-synthesis of the faculties of the subject. Moreover, this “free play” of the faculties is experienced by the subject as aesthetic pleasure. Pleasure in beauty, in other words, *is* the sensibilization of self-synthesis to the self, according to Kant; pleasure is, however, a nondiscursive or nonconceptual presencing. The second proposal for *Darstellung* of the self from the third Critique is mediate rather than immediate. Though Kant seemed to relegate the subject to the mere *function* of unity or synthesis of the faculties, the beautiful object is indeed a concrete, material thing. And for its being a *beautiful* thing, it expresses more than can ever finally be stated in discursive terms: its object is ultimately ineffable and only to be endlessly approximated, yet is made as intuitable as it can be in beauty. Beauty makes possible at least the symbolic presentation of the Ideas of reason,

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<sup>92</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe 29

and most importantly, it symbolizes the Idea of freedom of the self as a self-sustaining, spontaneous being in a sensible world. As such, beauty offers a merely regulative sensibilization of the “substance” of the “subject” – an analogy, in physical form, for the non-physical ground in freedom that undergirds all human endeavors in the world.

Kant ultimately limited aesthetic feeling to the architectonic role of mediating between cognition and desire, and he limited beauty to the merely regulative role of orienting moral beings in the physical world. But for Novalis, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy claim, Kant’s suggestion that the subject can only become sensible to itself in beauty serves to upend the primacy of philosophy *tout cour*. These authors write: “Philosophy must fulfill itself in a work of art; art is the speculative *organon par excellence*... this Romantic conversion... presupposes an extremely complicated maneuver, which takes place ‘behind Kant’s back,’ so to speak.”<sup>93</sup> That is, for providing a sensibilization of the very thing missing in Kant’s system after the first Critique – the self-present self, the ground of knowledge beyond the confines of his system of knowledge – beauty inadvertently becomes the condition of Kant’s own system for the Romantics (hence the “literary” in *The Literary Absolute*). But importantly, beauty is also non-conceptual, and so steps outside the boundaries of philosophy *per se*. After all, as we saw above, the sensibilization of the self occurs through reflection on “the image (*Bild*) of something without either a concept or an end.”<sup>94</sup> For Novalis, the unsolvable in philosophy must move into art, which in turn merely presents the unsolvable as such, in the feeling of endless striving and in the image without conceptual determination. The self is not finally grasped in art, and instead, art performs the infinite deferral of such a

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<sup>93</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe 33.

<sup>94</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe 31

conceptual grasping. The English translators of *The Literary Absolute* explain this indetermination or “equivocity” clearly here: “Equivocity occurs when, in its auto-productive gesture, literature and its (philosophical) subject, of necessity, but an unaccountable necessity that begins to undermine literature despite itself, never reaches identity: ‘The Same, here, never reaches sameness’.”<sup>95</sup> Here we are far from Benjamin's reflective immediacy with the Absolute conceived as mental medium of reflection, as well as from Haering's claim that "Dichtung und Philosophie" enjoy a "lebendige Einheit in dialektischer Wechselbeziehung" in Novalis' thought.<sup>96</sup> Instead, these French readers of Novalis conclude in favor of a strong version of nonclosure: the unavailability of the ground of knowing to philosophy, presentable in art only insofar as art is *unable* finally to arrest the subject in discursive terms. Philosophy must seek its "fulfillment" in the performance of its own impossibility in art, which is to say, philosophy cannot complete itself and so must remain nonclosed.

## V. Manfred Frank

If *The Literary Absolute* can be credited with deepening our understanding of Romantic aesthetic equivocity, we must save the highest credit for a work that appeared one year later: Manfred Frank's *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik* of 1989. (However, in Frank's own words this earliest work was "still inadequate," so we will reference the later study that he considers more thorough, his *Unendliche Annäherung* of

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<sup>95</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe xix

<sup>96</sup> Haering 252

1997.<sup>97</sup>) As we will see, this work effectively bridges the gap between von Molnár and *The Literary Absolute* by situating early Romantic aesthetics in the more detailed contexts of the Romantics' rejection of Fichte's notion of self-consciousness, and their acceptance of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's argument for the inevitable estrangement of reflection from its ontological ground.<sup>98</sup> To date, no other scholarship on Novalis as a philosopher enjoys such prominence as Frank's contribution. For example, Jane Kneller, who published the first English translation of the *Fichte Studien* in 2003, writes in her introduction to this text:

"In German scholarship, no one has argued more forcefully for the independent contributions and unique place of early German Romanticism in German philosophy than Manfred Frank. The 1989 publication of his lectures on Romantic aesthetics has been instrumental in reviving interest in the *Fichte Studies*."<sup>99</sup>

Frank's work solidified the present scholarly acceptance of Novalis as a thinker ahead of his time, who rejected the inherence of reflection in the Absolute and so embraced the paradox of knowledge, that knowing must operate at an unbridgeable remove from its ground. Though Frank first debued his position over twenty years ago, the majority of interpretations of Novalis that since followed have not so much disagreed with Frank's stance, as they have explored the similarities that Frank's reading seems to open up between Novalis and post-structuralism. Thus in the following sections, we examine Frank's ground-breaking interpretation of the *Fichte Studien* extensively, and then look at one representative example of these post-structuralist re-readings of Novalis: Clare

Kennedy's *Paradox, Aphorism and Desire in Novalis and Derrida* (2008).

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<sup>97</sup> All quotations of Frank's position will be taken from the abridged English translation of Frank's *Unendliche Annäherung*, entitled *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* (Albany: SUNY 2004). Frank 152.

<sup>98</sup> Here we find a terminological shift from the "Absolute" to mere "being." As we will see, the important point that Frank notices, but von Molnár misses, is that Novalis' use of "being" indicates the influence of Jacobi.

<sup>99</sup> Jane Kneller, translator, Novalis, *Fichte Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2003) xxvi.

Among the many virtues of Frank's interpretation, perhaps the most important for our purposes is that it acknowledges the indebtedness of Novalis' thought to another figure, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Indeed, the holes that arguably remain in von Molnár's reading can be filled by Frank's contextualization of the *Fichte Studien* in Jacobi's rebuttal to Kant that took place in the *Pantheismusstreit*. To review: in von Molnár's reading, Novalis rejected Fichte's practical striving of the I over the not-I in favor of the "balanced neutrality" of subject and object in empirical consciousness, in which the paradox of the I as simultaneously divided and united also prevents any defensible choice between the descriptions of the Absolute as either "God" or "Ego"; our claim was that von Molnár did not philosophically motivate Novalis' preference for "balanced neutrality" over Fichte's absolute ego.<sup>100</sup> But Frank's reading of Jacobi's influence better explains Novalis' insistence on an object in the I that cannot be surmounted by the I's own self-reflection.

Jacobi was a leading metacritic of Kant's transcendental idealism. Kant's dualism between sensibility and understanding in the mind solved a major impasse between rationalism and empiricism: it gave intersubjective grounds for the knowability of empirical facts, and it justified the irresolvability of metaphysical aporia, by claiming that the concepts of the understanding (only) properly apply to the contents of sense. But in Jacobi's own reformulation of this dualism, he exposed what he saw as a necessary presupposition of Kant's argument, which would go on to influence the entire Romantic generation, Frank claims. According to Jacobi, Kant's limitation of predicative forms to the faculty of understanding, along with his limitation of the testament to the existence or

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<sup>100</sup> Again, von Molnár merely said that balance was more "aesthetically pleasing," but even this appeal to aesthetics was more thoroughly detailed, philosophically, in *The Literary Absolute* than by von Molnár.

"thereness" of an object to sensibility, meant that the appearance to human consciousness that many different things exist must then "be explained as an illusion, which has nothing to do with being itself but rather with the conditions of our knowledge."<sup>101</sup> Individual things, Jacobi laments, cannot be said to be created by a God who transcends them, but rather are recognized as individual or as causally related to each other at all only because the mind supposedly imposes notions of "substance" and "cause" on an existence that does not contain these relations in itself. Kant's model of cognition thus seems to presuppose that there is only one true, existing substance that contains no real division or difference in itself (between objects, or between subject and object) — a Parmenidean being — and that the certainty of the existence of this singular being is given immediately to sensibility; the act of predication in judgment, then, merely posits a "derivative form" of being, which is the relative existence of objects vis-a-vis other objects that we experience in ordinary consciousness, which makes our consciousness an illusion or falsification of being.<sup>102</sup>

In Jacobi's eyes, this reformulation of Kant's position should have also been a scathing criticism of it, because it seemed to him that by even countenancing such a notion of "being," Kant was embracing "an All that is One and therefore nothing," or a pantheism that annihilated all real individuality. Jacobi saw this problem as just another example of how the restriction of knowledge of an object to subject-grounding reflection only separates human beings from the Absolute (his non-philosophical alternative was sheer faith in a transcendent God). But Novalis, according to Frank, instead *accepted* Jacobi's redescription of Kantianism. That is, the idea that knowledge must entail a break

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<sup>101</sup> Frank 59

<sup>102</sup> Frank 59



from its ground in identical being became the new mantra of Romantic philosophy, Frank says. The ultimately unitary nature of being, and the positing in the synthetic act of judgment of relative, individual existence to objects, have as their combined consequence for Novalis that *consciousness consists of illusion*. What it means to be conscious of a thing is to attribute a relative, differentiated existence to what in itself is actually unitary and self-identical. At the same time, Novalis acknowledges that there would be no consciousness in the first place without this division – all awareness of things definitionally sets a subject over and against an object, and objects against each other – but that cognition is also thereby not a truthful representation of that which fundamentally exists: unitary Parmenidean being. In claiming this, Frank says, Novalis joins Hölderlin in considering judgment to be an “*Ur-Teilung*,” a creative pseudo-etymology that calls knowing the “original-separation” of unitary being into subject and object(s). Novalis’ philosophical argument is ontologically realist, Frank says, because it attests to mind-independent existence, at the same time that it is epistemologically modest, because the very conditions of knowing do not allow us to have valid knowledge of this being.

Importantly, though Frank does indeed countenance a reading of Novalis as integrating the act of knowing with the ontological substrate of all things (being) insofar as he grants that sensibility attests to existence in an immediate connection to it, Frank's is still not a reading of Novalis as *organicist*, because nothing about the nature of that substrate in itself accounts for the relationship between subject and object in human consciousness (much less does Frank offer any claim that the substrate is *alive*). We humans are connected to the brute fact of existence through our sensibility, but can say

nothing about that being's nature in itself, because our felt immediacy with it is nothing more than the barest attestation to its thereness, and then in reflecting upon it to make it an object to ourselves, we falsify it. Again, according to Frank, this stance is Novalis' agreement with Kantian strictures (albeit following Jacobi's redescription of Kant).

According to Frank, for Novalis, the falsifying tendencies of judgment then have the same impact on *self*-knowledge that they do on consciousness of being in general. If judgment is always separation from unity, so self-judgment only separates the self from itself; there cannot be, as Fichte claimed, a conflation of subjecthood and objecthood in the act of self-reflection itself. More specifically, in his *Fichte Studien*, Novalis argues that when the self turns upon itself as object, the division inherent in any act of reflection between self-as-subject and self-as-object means that the self cannot know itself *as knower*. It encounters itself as object, but not simultaneously as subject. One might visualize the difficulty here with the amusing analogy of a dog chasing its own tail in the attempt to “get behind itself.” The dog is always already “in the front with itself,” just as we are always already *in* consciousness (conscious awareness of objects), so that the dog’s ability to stand behind itself is as impossible as our taking, as an object of knowledge, the taking-as-object that is the subject’s act of knowing. In Frank’s succinct summation: “immediacy and self-reference are incompatible with each other.”<sup>103</sup>

But just as knowledge in general requires felt immediacy with being, so too does the self’s undeniable consciousness of itself entail a certain kind of immediacy of the I with its own being. According to Frank’s reading of Novalis, the self is indeed immediately given to itself, but once again, only through feeling. That is, the self is present to itself, but not via reflection as an object of knowledge, which is the division of

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<sup>103</sup> Frank 167

or ascription of a concept to an indeterminate given; rather, the self's undeniable encounter with itself, as something that it nonetheless cannot *know*, indicates that the self's familiarity with itself is instead non-discursive, non-conceptual, or indeterminate. Novalis also calls the self's immediate familiarity with itself *Gefühl*, which he uses interchangeably with "sensibility" and in line with its definition by Jacobi as the sensory encounter with being as unitary, indeterminate existence. Frank writes that, for Novalis, feeling:

"...is a way in which consciousness is not objectifyingly opposed *to* but is immediately familiar *with* itself. This feeling, to which the seamless identity of being is revealed, can ground the relation of the self to itself as a knowing relation to itself *as itself*. The mere [reflective] relation of a subject to itself could not do this."<sup>104</sup>

In other words, where reflection fails to take the self-sameness of the self as an object of knowledge, feeling succeeds, though only as the self's non-conceptual immediacy with itself (and with the unity of being in general). This notion of feeling could (conceivably) be consistent with Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's discussion of the feeling of aesthetic pleasure as the sensibilization of the self to itself, but Frank does not consider the problem at this stage of Novalis' thought to be aesthetic; instead, he relates "feeling" in Novalis to the Jacobian-Kantian "sensibility" of the first Critique, not the third. (That said, Frank does agree that this problem of non-conceptual awareness "prepares an aesthetic solution" for the Romantics discussed below.<sup>105</sup>) Certainly Frank's interpretation is far from Benjamin's argument that the self can know itself specifically because reflection penetrates into the infinitely filled *Zusammenhang* of the Absolute as "medium of reflection." By instrumentalizing both Jacobi's notion of being and Kant's notion of sensibility, Frank claims – contra Benjamin – that the fundamental oneness

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<sup>104</sup> Frank 167

<sup>105</sup> Frank 163

shared by the self with itself and with being at large is sensible rather than conceptual, material rather than formal, real rather than ideal for Novalis. And, for its being "real rather than ideal," but not "the real that can be recognized as always already ideal," Frank's reading of the self's immediacy with itself in feeling is *also* not compatible with Haering's Hegelian description of self-relation.<sup>106</sup> Frank's immediacy denies even the possibility of reflective mediation of the Absolute. "The seamless identity of being is revealed" to feeling, but that revelation only attests to the primacy of something that *cannot* be known in the self, in all its acts of knowing.<sup>107</sup> Being is not an epistemological ground, because it is not the conceptually knowable ground of our knowing; rather, it grounds consciousness merely ontologically, as the substantial condition of the self's existence. Frank explains, "nothing follows from [being] in the logical sense of the word, except that the self is no longer the master of its own house."<sup>108</sup>

We are now in a position to understand how Frank's reading fills the gaps in von Molnár's interpretation. If judgment is an "original separation" from the unity of being that is given immediately in feeling, then von Molnár's "balanced paradox" of empirical consciousness is more appropriately described as the twofold fact that the self is given to itself immediately in feeling, but separated from itself in reflection. Novalis accepts this balance and cannot countenance Fichte's absolute ego, because, following Jacobi's reformulation of Kant, he does not grant that being can be accessed reflectively; being is merely immediate with sensuous feeling as a brute subjective givenness or "thereness" of existence, and its conceptual description is a distortion that inaugurates the illusion of

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<sup>106</sup> Frank writes: "By the way: Could there be a more striking difference to Hegel? Being is not created, but posited as subsisting prior to its negation through any work of any concept," p. 173.

<sup>107</sup> Frank 167

<sup>108</sup> Frank 173

consciousness in the first place. Indeed, Novalis' model of the mind ends up looking much less like Fichte's, as von Molnár had claimed, and more like Kant's (albeit in a Jacobian re-reading); Frank even calls Novalis' position "a return to Kant before absolute idealism had time to spread its wings."<sup>109</sup> But in agreement with von Molnár, Frank claims that "God" and "Ego" then become mere conceptual placeholders for the indescribable Absolute, but now in the more Kantian sense of "regulative" concepts, or mere ways we must make sense of the world if we are to explain our cognition of it — ways that are grounded in us and not in the world. The Absolute is a figment of the mind.

According to Frank, the upshot of Novalis' deflation of the absolute status of the self, as well as of the unknowability of the existential condition of consciousness (being), is that philosophy is open-ended or nonclosed for Novalis. "Philosophy" is of course the Kantian but especially Fichtean transcendental project of the self-reflection of the knowing subject upon itself as knower, so as systematically to justify knowledge of objects. Frank calls Novalis' position "anti-foundationalist," in specific contrast with Fichte's idealism. Because there is no absolute, self-knowing self that grounds knowledge by showing it to be in a deductive relationship with the self's identity, but instead consciousness is merely ontologically conditioned by a being that is outside its conceptual grasp, all conceptual statements about being are necessarily only a striving towards an impossible goal. Philosophy must instead content itself with a "not-knowing that knows itself as such," as Novalis writes. Frank calls attention to Novalis' notion of the "*ordo inversus*" to highlight the mirror-like aspect of the philosophical limitations of reflection. The object given in self-reflection is quite literally a mirror image — and so

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<sup>109</sup> Frank 171

presents an "inverted order" — of the original unity of the subject with itself, rather than that unity itself; and so philosophy that would ground itself in self-reflection actually only investigates its own incapacity to arrive at the would-be foundation of philosophy. Instead, since no single principle could serve as a starting point, the sum total of empirical facts gathered by science can only ever be a probable description of being, where "probable" means "maximally well connected," or internally coherent.<sup>110</sup> According to Frank, there is no possible Archimedean perspective from which consciousness could know that its "maximally coherent" claims about being are true of being, and so he writes:

"[F]or Novalis, the formula of philosophy as a 'longing for the infinite' is thus an indication of philosophy's intrinsic openness, or the non-final nature of its claims... completing the search... [is impossible, which is to say that] realizing what is sought [is impossible]... Novalis establishes an explicit connection between the thought that being is beyond knowledge and the characterization of philosophy as an infinite task."<sup>111</sup>

Human beings simply find themselves always already *in* consciousness, unable to conceptualize the conditions *of* it, and hence faced with the ultimately limited philosophical task of unravelling the false impressions that follow from the illusory nature of judgment, the most important of which is Fichte's mistaken belief that the self's identity in absolute reflection is the foundation of knowledge. In Frank's view, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy are correct in arguing that, for Novalis, philosophy must turn to art for a "solution" to this diminution of its powers. Frank writes, the inability of philosophy to secure complete knowledge...

"...prepares an *aesthetic solution*: what philosophy attains to only in the long run (so never actually), aesthetic intuition can grasp immediately, even though taking it *as* a content inexhaustible by any concept. 'When the character of a given problem is

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<sup>110</sup> Frank 175

<sup>111</sup> Frank 174

unsolvability, then we solve it if we present its unsolvability as such.’ Art is able to achieve this as ‘Darstellung des Undarstellbaren.’”<sup>112</sup>

An incomplete figuration of being in art is its only possible fulfillment, and so here Frank agrees with the authors of *The Literary Absolute*. But Frank’s reading also uncovers an even more complex motivation for this “aesthetic solution” than the two French scholars describe, namely that the specific limitation in every act of knowing is that it is ontologically “grounded” in unitary being. For its complexity, for its greater degree of contextualization in late 18th-century thought, and for the connections it draws between the defining concerns of Novalis and other early Romantics, Frank’s reading of the *Fichte Studien* justifiably holds sway as the most important scholarship on philosophical Romanticism to date. And the image of Novalis as a poet who yearns for unity with being receives, from Frank, its most contemporary formulation yet: philosophy is the necessarily endless striving of always-inadequate conceptual description towards its lost origin in being.

## VI. Clare Kennedy

The windfall of interest in Novalis as a philosopher that followed Frank’s scholarship is largely thanks to his characterization of the earliest stage of Novalis’ thought as a strikingly contemporary nonclosure. Above all, scholars have drawn comparisons between Novalis and Derrida, and so next we consider one of the more recent and explicit of those studies: Clare Kennedy’s *Paradox, Aphorism and Desire in Novalis and Derrida*. It might actually seem surprising that Frank’s reading would ever

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<sup>112</sup> Frank 163-4.

encourage this particular comparison; certainly Frank himself has been an outspoken critic of drawing parallels between philosophical Romanticism and post-structuralism.<sup>113</sup> If anything, the Novalisian notion of the non-reflexive, felt ground of consciousness in identical being seems to have closer affinities to Heidegger, whom Derrida countered with his notion of *différance* as the endlessly non-totalizing "infrastructure" of identity. But precisely for this reason, we focus here on Clare Kennedy's work. Her scholarship addresses the challenge that Frank's reading of "feeling" presents to any simple claim for the total resemblance between Romanticism and post-structuralism, and concentrates on a more specific arena of overlap between Novalis and Derrida (one with which Frank, too, would agree): the importance of *paradox* to both thinkers.<sup>114</sup> The paradox that pervades both Novalis' and Derrida's writings is the necessity that one strive to articulate the Absolute, yet simultaneously acknowledge the impossibility of such an articulation. Kennedy describes: "The texts of both writers are often meditations upon ways of accommodating the idea of the absolute, and looking at their reflections on philosophy's desire for a secure foundation or absolute origin leads us directly to consider the emphasis which both place on aporia."<sup>115</sup> Just as Derrida demonstrated how all texts "write with both hands," or offer a transcendental term even while the contingency of the text only inevitably denies the presence of the transcendent, so too does Novalis refer to the Absolute while also calling it an impossible object. Central to both arguments is the claim that no designation of an object as this or that particular object can occur except via representation, which is also always the deferral of any possible knowledge of the object

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<sup>113</sup> See, for example, his *Die Unhintergebarkeit von Individualität* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986).

<sup>114</sup> Kennedy 5-6: "I argue in this book that the most important similarity between Derrida and Novalis is their affirmation of paradox... Recognizing the importance of paradox is in my opinion the most productive and interesting way to approach any comparison between Romantic and post-structuralist thought."

<sup>115</sup> Kennedy 17



in itself; in turn, the absence of this presence provides the only possible relation to it, not as dialectical approximation but as the endless seeking of the "tout-autre."

Clare Kennedy essentially restates Manfred Frank's reading of the *Fichte Studien* in such a manner that its existing, implicit parallels with Derrida's thought become more apparent and explicit. Most importantly, she recasts Novalis' rejection of Fichte's absolute self-reflection as a Derridean deconstruction. While Fichte attempts to ground knowledge in "a self-consciousness which emerges along with the self, [a] conscious self which, because its Being is simultaneous and identical with its self-positing, is absolute, whole, and self-identical," she tells us that, for Novalis, "consciousness of something is not possible without objectification and representation," and that representation necessitates that the represented object cannot be of the same order as that which does the representing.<sup>116</sup> By locating self-consciousness at the self's self-identical origin, Novalis claims, Fichte fails to see the difference engendered by the representational structure of consciousness itself and thus the deferral of absolute self-presence that follows from that difference. Kennedy writes: "Novalis' terminology [regarding Fichte] is reminiscent of Derrida's description of Hegelian philosophy as 'the absolute desire to hear oneself speaking'."<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, the same medium of the endless deferral of the self's presence to itself — the sign — is also the means for its being endlessly addressed, again in Derridean fashion. Kennedy calls this paradox "the impossible possible."<sup>118</sup> "The sign is conceived only on the basis of the presence that it defers and is held to ensure

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<sup>116</sup> Kennedy 22-23; 25. On page 26 Kennedy continues: "It is my contention that the importance of Novalis for modern literary-theoretical positions lies in his recognition that the act of equating consists in representation and that representation always already involves difference. In this, I do not in any way contradict Manfred Frank... the intervention of representation in self-consciousness involves *différance*: deferral as much as difference."

<sup>117</sup> Kennedy 23

<sup>118</sup> Kennedy 35

movement towards the deferred presence that it seems to reappropriate; the absence is thus a modified presence," she writes.<sup>119</sup> More specifically, the "modified presence" of the Absolute is its "absolute alterity," or the manner in which its radical inaccessibility is also its only possible suggestion. Novalis' formulations of this problem come strikingly close to Derrida's descriptions of the same, Kennedy says. She quotes Novalis here: "Der Begriff *rein* ist also ein leerer Begriff — ein Begriff, dem keine Anschauung entspricht — ein weder möglicher, noch wirklicher Begriff... — eine *nothwendige* Fiction."

Likewise, Derrida writes:

"Dans le visage, l'autre se livre en personne *comme autre*, c'est-à-dire comme ce qui ne se révèle pas, comme ce qui ne se laisse pas thématiser. Je ne saurais parler d'autrui, en faire un thème, le dire comme objet, à l'accusatif. Je puis seulement, je *dois* seulement parler à autrui, l'appeler au vocatif qui n'est pas une catégorie, un *cas* de la parole, mais le surgissement, l'élévation même de la parole."<sup>120</sup>

Or, in Kennedy's paraphrase: "That which escapes objectification and knowledge manifests itself as a certain absence. We cannot speak *of* the absolutely-other, only *to* it."<sup>121</sup> Of course, even though Novalis denies that the Absolute can be present in its representation, *feeling* (Gefühl) is indeed the direct immediacy of conscious experience with being; so one might wonder whether Novalis accords *it* the status of the Absolute in the place of absolute reflection or the transcendent sign. Here Kennedy takes Frank's objection to the resemblance between post-structuralism and Romanticism seriously, but once again, she does *not* ultimately disagree with Frank's position. She writes, "This is vitally important[:] the 'Selbstgefühl,' unlike the Fichtean Absolute ego, is not absolutely original, autonomous, or spontaneous. It is, rather, contingent, the 'Resultat' of an

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<sup>119</sup> Kennedy 24

<sup>120</sup> Kennedy 36

<sup>121</sup> Kennedy 36

absolute cause which always already escapes it."<sup>122</sup> Thus Novalis does distinguish himself from Derrida, just as Frank argues, insofar as Derrida would not countenance that there can even be such thing as a felt immediacy with identical being; but while Kennedy grants this distinction, her point is that feeling *still* does not qualify as the transcendental signifier that would guarantee the closure of the discursive philosophical system. Instead, feeling once again serves as the radical alterity to reflection that *prevents* reflection's closing in upon itself, still in a distinctly Derridean sense. Thus Kennedy's paradox — that we must seek a ground in the Absolute and yet cannot reach it — remains the Romantic *and* the post-structuralist credo on the human condition.

To summarize: each of the more recent readings of Novalis considered here (by von Molnár, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, Frank, and Kennedy) have in common that the traditional reading of Novalis as organicist falls from view, thanks to the claim that reflection cannot access the Absolute — reflection is *not* immediately unified with the organismic self-conditioning of the Absolute — and instead effects the separation of consciousness from it. Indeed, our goal has been to show that organicism about being even seems to be *incompatible* in the secondary literature with the stance that consciousness necessarily entails distortion: after all, how could we validly claim to know that the Absolute is organized organically, if knowledge of the Absolute is fundamentally illusion and representation is fundamentally deferral? How can we speak of organic unities at all, when all consciousness is a *break* from unity and the experience of endless nonclosure? According to this interpretation, the mistake of previous readers of Novalis (such as Benjamin and Haering) was that they believed that, for Novalis, reflection presences the Absolute thanks to its inherence in the Absolute, i.e., its status as

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<sup>122</sup> Kennedy 27

an integral part of its immanent whole, either because the Absolute *is* a mental web of reflections (Benjamin) or else because the Absolute spirit's self-production of being could converge with our own reflection dialectically (Haering). With the rejection of this model of reflection, and the endorsement of the role *différance* in Romantic epistemology, so too did scholars reject the living nature of the Absolute in Novalis' thought.

## VII. Frederick Beiser

The notable exception to this trend in contemporary readings is Frederick Beiser, who has frequently insisted that readers not forget the importance of organicism to Novalis' thought.<sup>123</sup> Beiser does, in fact, largely accept Frank's interpretation of the *Fichte Studien*, but he rejects the general caricature of Novalis as a philosopher of nonclosure that tended to follow Frank's reading, because he is concerned that the unknowability of being in Novalis' earliest work is not actually representative of his overall thought. There are two aspects to this concern: his contention that the *Fichte Studien* are not quite as consistent as Frank's reading would make them seem, which Beiser thinks ought to diminish their centrality to the scholarly conception of his philosophy; and his belief that the later, Platonically-informed turn towards organicism (above all in the *Allgemeine Brouillon*) does not qualify as post-structuralist nonclosure *avant la lettre* and is still an important stage of Novalis' development that should not be neglected or underplayed.

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<sup>123</sup> For example, he has made this claim in his *German Idealism*, his *The Romantic Imperative* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), and his article in *Philosophical Romanticism*.

In Beiser's *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism*, the discussion of Novalis' *Fichte Studien* is mostly a restatement of Frank's groundbreaking reading of the same. That is, Novalis rejects Fichtean self-reflection, Beiser writes, because he cannot countenance that the self can become an object to itself insofar as it is the condition of taking objects in the first place; non-discursive self-feeling is the only allowable givenness of the self to itself in consciousness, but it too cannot become a foundation for a philosophical system. The format of this denial of Fichte then extends into a denial of the possibility of systematic transcendental philosophy in general: a denial of the possibility of closure, in other words. Any attempt to find a ground in the Absolute for knowledge within the confines of reflection must fail, because reflection can only "define a thing through negation, by how it contrasts with other things," whereas the Absolute would necessarily have to be the underlying identity that conditions all difference.<sup>124</sup> Philosophy then becomes the endless striving towards impossible knowledge of the Absolute in reflective terms. Clearly Beiser's discussion traces the same basic outline of Frank's reading.

However, Beiser *also* points to what he sees as inconsistent layers of the *Fichte Studien* that do not harmonize with Frank's reading, and which he believes betray the immaturity and hesitancy of Novalis' earliest philosophical work. At many points in the *Fichte Studien*, Novalis does not hold back from describing what being is like in itself (saying more than simply that it is "identity," the regulative indifference of subject and object), and he even describes how we might actually know its nature through the systematic use of reflection. Beiser writes:

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<sup>124</sup> Beiser (*German Idealism*) 414

“Whatever Novalis’ motives in criticizing philosophy, they did not prevent him from trying to develop his own system... The tension between Novalis’ critique of philosophy and his own philosophical ambitions runs even deeper, however. Although... he casts doubt on all knowledge of the absolute, he does not hesitate to speculate about its nature.”<sup>125</sup>

For example, Novalis says multiple times that the highest sphere of Being is God (the Absolute), who contains in Himself two aspects, “Natur” and “Person,” which come together in Him “wie zwey Pyramiden, die Eine Spitze haben.” (#153) It seems that Novalis attributes the original division (*Ur-Teil*) that constitutes human thought to the two sides of highest level of Being, God — God as matter, and God as form — thus suggesting that we participate in God’s existence in our very act of thinking. Novalis also suggests that we can *know* that God has this nature and that our thought relates to Him in this way, Beiser says, because the difference between feeling and reflection must be conditioned by ever-higher levels within being itself, that are themselves ultimately conditioned by the highest possible sphere of being, which could only be God as the self-unifier of all difference. Thus it seems to Beiser that Novalis very briefly experiments with a proto-dialectical, reflective methodology for knowing an Absolute that has an organic nature in itself, even while paradoxically also denying, as Frank claimed, that reflection can mediate the Absolute at all. These earliest notebooks thus lose some of their significance for Beiser as the defining statements of Novalis’ overall philosophy. He writes: “For all their importance, the notebooks are also an early and immature work, riddled with doubt, hesitation, ambivalence, and inconsistency... After all, the notebooks are just that: notebooks, collections of jottings written on various occasions and never intended for publication.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Beiser 416

<sup>126</sup> Beiser 411

According to Beiser, Novalis' thoughts in the *Fichte Studien* on the nature of God are the barest rudiments of an organic theory of the Absolute, a theory that receives better, though also never complete explication in the later fragments and especially the *Allgemeine Brouillon*.<sup>127</sup> Beiser's description of this later organicism is very similar to Haering's (though he is careful to critique the "Hegelian spectacles" with which Haering turns Novalis into a system-builder). Like Haering, Beiser argues that Novalis' organicism consists of a vitalization of substance that counters Descartes' mechanistic model of matter and causality. Cartesian metaphysics holds that matter consists of inert extension in space, Beiser explains, for which all change occurs by the efficient causality of external collision: parts impinging mechanistically on lifeless parts, like clockwork. Nature is a machine, so it becomes unclear how the mind, as free thought outside of space, could possibly have an impact on the matter of nature — hence the dualist conclusion that the mind is another substance entirely, and stands outside of nature, or Spinoza's conclusion that the mind is in fact unfree, a dependent attribute or accident of substance. In contrast, in the organic framework, matter already contains the animus for purposeful change within itself, because matter itself is alive: it is *Lebenskraft*. Matter pursues its own organization, and so can develop purposively into the various levels of nature, from minerals to plants, animals, and humans, and finally to the mind itself. Mind is the highest point of organization of matter, and so not at odds with it, substantially speaking. As Beiser explains:

“The mind and body are no longer heterogenous substances, they are only different levels of organization and development of the single living force throughout nature. The mental is simply the highest degree of organization and development of the living forces active in matter; and matter is merely the lowest degree of organization and development of the living forces present in the mind. We can therefore regard mind as highly organized and

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<sup>127</sup> Beiser 426

developed matter, matter as less organized and developed mind.”<sup>128</sup>

Indeed, the goal of Nature’s organization is to know itself through the free and purposeful movements of the human mind. So when, in the *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, Novalis says that “der Unterschied zwischen Wahn und Wahrheit liegt in der Differenz ihrer Lebensfunktionen,” or when he speaks of Fichte as having an “inside” view and Spinoza an “outside” perspective on Being, he refers to the ability of living matter to be both subjective and objective at its different levels of potency. (#8) Beiser often calls Novalis’ metaphysics a “marriage of Fichte and Spinoza” – a seemingly paradoxical fusion of the absolute freedom of the I, and absolute mechanism of Nature – because in *organic* substance, there is no difference between Fichte’s idealism and Spinoza’s realism, except unproblematically between higher and lower levels of complexity. The notion is essentially Herderian.

But if Beiser agrees with Frank that the *Fichte Studien* mostly deny that reflection can give us such knowledge of the Absolute's organic nature, and if he claims that Haering was also incorrect to argue for the dialectically discursive mediation of the Absolute even in the later stages of Novalis' more explicit organicism, then the next question becomes: what philosophical model *does* allow for knowledge of the organic nature of being, according to Novalis in Beiser's reading of him? How does reflection change for him, so that the subject can know the ground of its relation between itself and object? On the one hand, Beiser is clear that Novalis "unfortunately does not explain in any detail how idealism and realism would demonstrate one another."<sup>129</sup> But on the other hand, he says another of Novalis' later philosophical influences at least implicitly

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<sup>128</sup> Beiser (*Philosophical Romanticism*) 223

<sup>129</sup> Beiser (*German Idealism*) 427. The "reciprocal demonstration of idealism and realism" is another way that Beiser describes "organicism."



suggests the solution: (neo-)Platonic intellectual intuition.

Of course, we have already heard many times that Novalis rejects Fichte's intellectual intuition in the *Fichte Studien* because he would not countenance that reflection could ever render immediacy with the object of its conceptualization. But in 1798, according to Beiser, evidence from letter correspondence shows that Novalis had meanwhile read and enjoyed the writings of Plotinus.<sup>130</sup> This fact, along with subsequent developments in the content of his philosophy, suggest to Beiser that Novalis embraces a very different and much more ancient notion of "intellectual intuition" later in his intellectual career — a notion that is indeed a capacity of reason, but quite different from Fichte's version. Beiser explains:

“Following [the Platonic] tradition, the early Romantics saw reason as not only a discursive faculty but also as an intuitive one. Reason is not simply a formal power that conceives, judges, and draws inferences from facts; rather, it is also a perceptive power that discovers a unique kind of facts not given to the senses. This perceptive power often went by the name of intellectual intuition... It was through the intellectual intuition of aesthetic experience, [the Romantics] believed, that reason could perceive the infinite in the finite, the absolute in its appearance, or the macrocosm in the microcosm... What [intellectual intuition] intuits is the unity and indivisibility of an organic whole, a whole that is irreducible to its parts, and from which no part is separable.”<sup>131</sup>

The "intellektuelle Anschauung" of the Platonists is the rational-aesthetic perception of the unity and indivisibility of a whole, as a property that emerges from, or is more than, the sum of the parts that compose the whole. Reason in this capacity is not division of identity into parts, but rather the immediate synthesis of conceptual wholes from parts. It

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<sup>130</sup> Beiser writes: "Novalis wanted to find the common principle of Fichte's idealism and Spinoza's naturalism, the point of identity of which the subjective and objective, the ego and nature, are only appearances... In the autumn of 1798 Novalis made a momentous discovery: Plotinus!... Novalis found that Plotinus' ideas were exactly what he had been looking for in his attempt to fuse idealism and realism," *German Idealism* 420.

<sup>131</sup> Beiser (*Romantic Imperative*) 60-61

is also aesthetic, because this rational unity appears as beautiful.<sup>132</sup> The ancient notion of intellectual intuition is the perception of the universal idea that underlies sensual particulars and gives these particulars their goal and purpose in the unifying whole; for example, there are very many contingently existing leaves, but no leaf is exactly like the other, and so our capacity to perceive the different leaves as nonetheless participating in the universal idea of the leaf is intellectual intuition. Thus we can see its potential as perception of the *organic* nature of the Absolute, as well: it is our capacity immediately to perceive how individual, real objects are actually interdependent parts of the greatest possible ideal unity that underlies and informs all difference. The real and the ideal can be known, in intellectual intuition of wholes, to demonstrate each other and to be different only insofar as they are different perspectives on the same fundamental substance, the Absolute as the real-ideal or ideal-real. Now, Beiser acknowledges that Novalis almost never speaks explicitly of Plato.<sup>133</sup> But he avers that references in the *Allgemeine Brouillon* to "the inner light or ecstasy" of reason, and the idea that Fichte's ego was the forerunner of "reason or the divine *logos*" are evidence that his epistemological turn towards a knowably organic notion of the Absolute was informed by Plato (via Plotinus).<sup>134</sup>

It is precisely Novalis' Platonically-inspired turn to organicism that leads Beiser to reject the currently more popular description of Novalis as, generally speaking, a

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<sup>132</sup> Importantly, Platonic aesthetic intellectual intuition is quite different from the Romantics' "aesthetic solution" as described by the authors of *The Literary Absolute*. According to Beiser, Novalis claims that our ability to perceive wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts is intellection of the organic organization of the Absolute. Beiser writes: "The Platonic legacy of the *Frühromantik* shows that its aestheticism was itself a form of rationalism" (*Romantic Imperative*, p. 60). Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, in contrast, merely claim that beauty for Novalis presents the impossibility of presentation of the unitary self that must underlie Kant's system for that system to be possible.

<sup>133</sup> Beiser (*Romantic Imperative*) 72

<sup>134</sup> Beiser (*German Idealism*) 421

philosopher of "nonclosure." Indeed, Beiser believes the Romantics' organicism is *incompatible* with a philosophy of nonclosure, because their Platonism grants the cognition of the unity of the real and ideal, or material and mental, in rational terms and thus still *within* the boundaries of philosophy itself, which is the criterion for closure.

Two statements from two different works demonstrate Beiser's point:

"Frank places the early romantics in the tradition of the critique of reason that ends in postmodernism... The hallmark of his interpretation of Novalis has been his tireless insistence that these thinkers affirm the thesis that the ground of rationality presupposes something that transcends rationality. Such a thesis is flatly contrary to the Platonic tradition, to which early romantics belong."<sup>135</sup>

"There is nothing new in stressing the importance of the organic concept for romanticism... However, this traditional view does not agree with the most recent trend of *Romantikforschung*, which has questioned the old emphasis on the organic concept, and which has stressed instead the lack of completeness and closure in romantic thought. [But] this organic concept is indispensable in unraveling the paradox of romantic metaphysics, and more specifically... its apparently quixotic [marriage of] idealism and realism."<sup>136</sup>

Beiser ultimately upholds the opposition between "organic closure" and "post-structuralist nonclosure," aligning himself with the more traditional stances of Benjamin and Haering. Thus even though Beiser lies outside the trend of contemporary scholarship by emphasizing Romantic organicism, and even though Beiser would not agree with the precise arguments for organicism presented by Benjamin and Haering, his reading still falls in line with the historical dichotomy in Novalis scholarship that we have been detailing in this chapter.

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<sup>135</sup> Beiser (*Romantic Imperative*) 192 (footnote 8).

<sup>136</sup> Beiser (*Philosophical Romanticism*) 218-219. In the footnote to this quotation, he mentions Alice Kuzniar and Paul de Man as two representatives of the "recent trend in *Romantikforschung*," and we've already seen that he incorporates Frank into this group as well.

Chapter Two  
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The Historical Precedence of Novalis' "Organic Nonclosure":  
Jacobi and Herder

Chapter One demonstrated a shift in Novalis scholarship over time between readings of "organicism" and readings of "nonclosure" in his thought. That chapter argued that this shift occurred because of changing interpretations of Novalis' notion of reflection. While the first wave assumed that Novalis argued for the inherence of human thinking in divine thinking (that reflection in the human I is God's reflection), the second wave, and especially Manfred Frank, argued that Novalis' notion of reflection was essentially Kantian, and so knowledge of the being that conditions that reflection is off-limits and any talk of the Absolute has a merely regulative function for him. The second wave dismissed the organicism of the first, opting instead for a reading of "nonclosure," or the hypothetical quality of knowledge claims due to the impossibility the grounding of a closed system of knowledge in the absolute being that conditions knowledge.

This Chapter Two proposes that the problem with this supposedly necessary tradeoff between organicism and nonclosure in Novalis' thought — "necessary," again, on the basis of Novalis' limitation of valid knowledge to Kantian representation — is that it ignores a *third* intellectual possibility in which both organicism and nonclosure are unified rather than mutually exclusive. In this position, the Kantian restriction of the exercise of understanding to the material offered in a given sensation itself becomes the very platform from which to make a valid inference to the organic nature of being and the organic relationship of consciousness to being. By this we mean not the dialectician's insight that the always-already-reflected quality of Kantian consciousness validates a

reflective sublation to a higher level of knowledge, but rather the Jacobian insight that the privacy, the perspectivity, the quality of that consciousness as a personally lived experience, is both what validates the presupposition of a higher, unifying ontology *and* does not allow that higher sphere to become an object of consciousness. To borrow a Heideggerian term: our "*thrownness*" into the empirically limited perspective of Kantian discursive judgment can, by virtue of its very dependent status as a "thrownness into" and not a "creation of" its own conscious content, know itself to be thrown *from* an absolute creativity, and even specifically from a panentheistic creativity. Kant's phenomenal realm of appearance then becomes "appearance" in the ontologically stronger sense of the "revelation" of the noumenal realm — even as this appearance remains, because of its very nature as empirical and immanent to consciousness, a falsification of the infinite and transcendent absolute, such that no finite claim made by empirical science can approach the absolute and must remain a mere approximation of its nature ("nonclosure"). This position is most commonly attributed to slightly later thinkers such as Schleiermacher (with his *Über die Religion* of 1799), the late Herder (with his *Metakritik* of 1799), and the late Schelling (with his Berlin lectures of the early 1840's), but the overarching thesis of this dissertation is that Novalis held it himself as early as 1795 in his *Fichte Studien*.

The intellectual insight needed to understand this third possibility is that it introduces the *self-experience*, or subjectivity, of consciousness into the Kantian transcendental argument, whereby it links the "lived" or private awareness that consciousness has of itself to the existential ground of that consciousness, without (so it claims) disrupting the fundamental restriction of knowledge to a "possible experience" that lets it remain "Kantian." Several thinkers after Kant believed that the experience that

consciousness has *of itself* is a special indication of the organic nature of the synthetic being that conditions it, and that Kant not only required knowledge of this being if his system was to be coherent, but that he implicitly assumed this knowledge and made use of it anyway. Briefly, so as to introduce the fundamental claim: the argument for moving from self-experience to ontology is that, first, the undeniable immediacy we have with our own conscious contents is the self-experience *of* the limitation of representational cognition to sense; and second, in a transcendental inference, that the condition of this self-experience can only be a self-creating being, the accidental property of whose (noumenal) self-creation is our phenomenality. But while Fichte, for example, used this line of thinking also to argue that the relationship between ontological ground and empirical conscious perspective could be reflectively articulated, other thinkers — like Jacobi and Herder, but also Novalis — believed that this self-experience of consciousness could only amount to a personal, so non-universalizable, witnessing of absolute dependence, which is to say, dependence on the Absolute. The felt immediacy of an infinitely dependent reflection indicates, though only in subjective terms or "for me," the nevertheless epistemically undeniable fact that God becomes real in us. There is an Absolute, and it is the panentheistic God.

For our purposes, the historical background required to understand how the post-Kantian discourse on reflection and being shifted to include this subjective bridge to organic ontology is the work of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and Johann Gottfried Herder in the *Pantheismusstreit*. More precisely, it is Jacobi's philosophy in spite of himself, a difference that Herder and others understood. Jacobi's metacritique of Kant suffered from a fruitful internal inconsistency: in spite of his own anti-Spinozism, Jacobi

influenced the post-Kantian generation to adopt monist, organic theories of being and to reconcile this monism with Kant's theory of representation. In the eyes of some thinkers, like Fichte and Hegel, the organic insights that Jacobi brought to Kant enabled the intellectual possibility of the systematic closure of Kantian epistemology. But for others, such as Herder, the epistemological modesty that Jacobi shared with Kant prevented — even within an organic ontology — the possibility of closure. The lineage from Jacobi's epistemologically modest Spinozism to Herder's organic nonclosure is an important influence on Novalis' own work, even the early *Fichte Studien*.

Of course, to claim that Jacobi is an important influence on Novalis is not at all new. Manfred Frank's groundbreaking reading of Novalis was so influential, in part, because it convinced scholars that Jacobi was a heretofore ignored voice in Novalis' thought, and that listening to that voice would reveal new meaning in the *Fichte Studien*. As we saw, the momentous consequence of Frank's reading was that Jacobi's critique of Kant — namely that if knowledge follows from the synthesis of blind sensation and empty concept, then Kant's model of judgment in fact painted consciousness as "illusion" — was accepted as Novalis' own position. In this reading, reflection's constitutive illusion cannot be overcome, rather only revealed as illusion, so that consciousness becomes a "non-knowing that knows itself as such" and any theory of an organic Absolute becomes a regulative fiction of the operation of reflective illusion. In this chapter, we aim to present a fuller story of Jacobi's influence, so as to build the case for the point made in our final chapter, namely that Novalis takes advantage of Jacobian subjectivity or "*Dasein*" to make stronger ontological claims than Frank believes he

made. In our reading, Jacobi's inadvertent organic Spinozism was as important to Novalis as his metacritique of Kant. Novalis interprets Jacobi much the way Herder did.

This Chapter Two will proceed through the following steps. In part one, it traces the contours of Jacobi's metacritique of Kant, which is also part of his critique of philosophy in general. In part two, it details Jacobi's alternative theory of consciousness: his theory of the human being as an organic soul-body complex. In part three, it describes Jacobi's notion of the epistemic warrant to knowledge of this ontology. In part four, it shows how Jacobi's organic alternative contained, especially in light of his metacritique of Kant, an implicit and inadvertent Spinozism that many thinkers saw as the key to resolution of outstanding problems in Kant. In the final part five, we discuss how Herder seizes upon this line of thought in his own philosophy, which is a philosophy of "organic nonclosure." Each of these sections sets the historical stage for the organic nonclosure of Novalis himself, which is the subject of the next, and last, chapter.

## I. Jacobi's Metacritique of Kant

Like Kant, Jacobi believed that the flaw — and the arrogance — of rationalist philosophy was its belief that it could arrive at metaphysical truths solely through the logical analysis of concepts. The problem with rationalism was that it derived being from thought, describing what *is* by examining the necessities of *logic*, and more specifically by mistaking the merely formal relations of thoughts to each other for the ontological relation of form and matter. Kant's and Jacobi's epistemologies, in contrast, both limited what humans are validly able to know to sensuous experience. Unlike God, whose



thinking *creates* being,<sup>137</sup> human thinking must be tied to finite, contingent experience of the empirical manifold. Human consciousness is a "taking-in," not a producing. The human capacity to think cannot justifiably exercise itself outside the contents of sensation; "pure reason" steps beyond its valid limits. In these ways Jacobi's theory of knowledge is every bit as modest as Kant's. *However*, unlike Kant's transcendental point of view, Jacobi made these claims from a Christian fideist standpoint. Below it will be shown that Jacobi's casting of the epistemic mode of consciousness as "belief" (*Glaube*) was his expression of the dependence of human thought on God's creation, or on created being that simply opened up to the subject in what is really the divine *revelation* of consciousness in us. For Jacobi, pure reason is indeed invalid because it is removed from its existential touchstone in sense, but in the ontologically stronger meaning of the removal from a divinely revelatory origin: concepts are higher-order abstractions of sense perceptions, or generalized re-presentations of a reality divinely given and already formally structured in sense. Thus though we are conscious by the grace of God, it is a mistake to believe that we can "think God" — account for his nature solely through logical argumentation — since the truths of metaphysics do not result from the subject's logical efforts, but rather are simply given in sensation by God.

In spite of their differences, and because of the epistemological modesty they nonetheless shared, Jacobi sought Kant's support as a kindred thinker during the *Pantheismusstreit* that he initiated in August of 1785 (see discussion below). But after Kant published the second edition of his first *Kritik*, Jacobi became more and more pronounced in his disagreement with him. It seemed that Kant himself was still making

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<sup>137</sup> For Kant, of course, the notion of "God's intellectual intuition" is a heuristic device, a way of conceiving of a consciousness unlike human representation. In contrast, Jacobi was committed to real ontologies of divine and human thinking.

the traditional rationalist mistake, again upending the proper relationship between thinking and being, only now in the sphere of consciousness. In his 1787 essay entitled "David Hume über den Glauben," Jacobi described the issue as their different ways of accounting for the "taking-in" of the outside world in consciousness — that is, how they differently explained what makes objects exist for a subject, or what makes the world appear to the subject as outside him. Kant had of course argued that the human mind is passive, in the faculty of sensation, with respect to the matter of representation, but active, in the faculty of understanding, with respect to the form; subjective consciousness of objects, the givenness of a world of objects to a subject, follows from the synthesis of these two faculties, which are external to each other. Sensation is "blind" and understanding is "empty," but together they enable self-conscious perception of content. But for Jacobi, that Kant's "discursivity thesis" would locate the emergence of the subject's experience of the world in a reflective act could only amount to what Hamann, too, called "Purismus der Vernunft"<sup>138</sup>: the attempt *per impossibile* to extract being from a concept. The only difference between the flawed rationalisms of the prior century and Kant's own mistake, is that "being" in this case is the "being-there" of consciousness, or *Dasein*. Jacobi countered that the basic quality of experience as a givenness, to a subject, of an external world of objects could never be accounted for by the subject's application *of a concept*; a concept, which is mere empty form, cannot *bring about* the basic thereness of the world for a subject — it cannot make *Dasein* emerge. Of course, Kant had claimed that it is indeed sensation that connects the subject to the contingently given empirical manifold, but the problem for Jacobi was that this empirical data could only become *for* the subject *by means of* the subject's application of concepts, which still

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<sup>138</sup> Johann Georg Hamann published his *Metakritik über den Purismus der reinen Vernunft* in 1784.

makes subjective form-giving the ground of the appearance of reality. For Jacobi, the "blindness" of Kantian sensation amounted to relinquishing orientation in the real. It seemed indefensible to Jacobi that Kant would, on the one hand, hold to the good insight that thought leaves its basis in reality when it extends beyond what it knows immediately *in sense* to be true and existing, and yet, on the other hand, also argue that reality only becomes an object of consciousness specifically by means of the cognitive activity of the subject (and that only thusly is the universality of knowledge secured). Kant seems to give excessive priority to reflection, which — precisely by being made the prime determiner of valid cognition — in fact *loses* touch with the basis of knowledge, which is sensed reality.

More specifically, Kant's insistence that consciousness follows from an act of reflection upon contingently given and "blind" sense data amounts to the equation of consciousness with *illusion*, Jacobi claimed. Because Kant locates the categories, and above all the category of causality, only in the subject, reality outside the subject cannot be known as the cause of our experience that the world consists of events that follow each other in this or that particular way. If we accept that the matter of consciousness is contingently given in sense, but that the causal and structural relationships within that matter, as well as its relationship to the subject — and thus our perception of external events as occurring in this or that way — are provided not in that contingently given sensation, but by the understanding, then we can only conclude that reflection, rather than reality, accounts for our specific experience of reality. In other words, human cognition is the contrivance or falsification of reality, and we are left with the extreme idealist conclusion that consciousness is illusion. Since Jacobi understood Kant's epistemological

goal to be the grounding of the objectivity of knowledge of the world, the unavoidable conclusion that "consciousness is illusion" only amounted to the failure of that philosophical project. Where understanding no longer orients *to reality* as its one and decisive norm, the criterion for "real" versus "merely thought" falls away, and the road to Berkeleyan idealism paves itself. And were Kant, instead, to preserve the objectivity of knowledge by insisting that sensuous impressions of objects are not "blind," but already contain an orderedness that corresponds to the categories of the understanding, he would contradict another key tenet of his own philosophy: that we cannot know the *Ding an sich*. Hence Jacobi's famous quip towards the end of the *David Hume*, "Ich kann *ohne* das Ding an sich nicht in die Transzendentalphilosophie hineinkommen, *mit* dem Ding an sich aber nicht darin bleiben."<sup>139</sup>

According to Jacobi, we should expect precisely this upending of the proper relationship between thinking and being from *philosophy in general*. All philosophy cannot but be the attempt to explain existence by means of reflection, which then only ever misrepresents existence in the terms of thought. "Reflection," or the operation of explanation, makes one event conditional upon another event, and so opens up a regress of causes that can never exit itself to know the ultimate ground of the events. So if reflection is the medium of one's argument about being, then reflection necessarily loses sight of the fundamental nature of being, not as a causal sequence, but as a *revelation*, what Jacobi calls "Geschehen," a bringing-into-being by means of God's transcendent power. Jacobi writes in his *David Hume* essay:

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<sup>139</sup> Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Werke/Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968) 304.

"Stellen Sie sich einen Zirkel vor, und erheben Sie diese Vorstellung zu einem deutlichen Begriff. Wenn der Begriff genau bestimmt ist, und nichts außerwesentliches enthält, so wird das Ganze, welches Sie sich vorstellen, eine ideale Einheit haben; und alle Theile werden, nothwendig miteinander verknüpft, aus dieser Einheit hervorgehen. Nun haben wir, wenn wir von einer nothwendigen Verknüpfung des Successiven reden, und das Verknüpfende selbst in der Zeit uns dabei vorzustellen glauben, nie etwas andres wahrhaft in Gedanken, als gerade ein solches Verhältniß wie das bei dem Zirkel; ein Verhältniß, worin alle Theile zu einem Ganzen wirklich schon vereinigt und zugleich vorhanden sind. Die Succession, das objective Werden lassen wir aus; als wenn es sich von selbst begriffe, wie es sinnlich sich von selbst vor Augen stellt; da doch gerade dieses, nemlich das Vermittelnde der Begebenheit, der Grund des Geschehens, das Innere der Zeit, kurz das *principium generationis* dasjenige ist, was eigentlich erklärt werden sollte."<sup>140</sup>

*Logical* operation (here, the "nothwendige Verknüpfung" of parts in a "deutlichen Begriff") can only but misrepresent *ontological* operation ("das Verknüpfende selbst in der Zeit"), and so, as an attempt to know what is, reflection will only ever set up the *unknowability* of existence ("nie etwas andres wahrhaft in Gedanken"). Kant's systematic approach to knowledge has done just that. His dualistic conditions are the conceptual product of a transcendental reflection upon *Dasein*, and not surprisingly, the result of his reflection, if Kant is only honest about his confusion regarding the thing in itself, is a conditionalizing of being to understanding; and the proper consequence of that conditionalizing is that consciousness is Berkeleyan illusion.

Jacobi believed that this tendency on the part of philosophical culture of his time, even in Kant, to entrust analysis with the explanation of (*Da-*)*Sein* had its fullest expression and intellectual origin in the philosophy of Spinoza. Spinoza's ontological argument for God's existence tried to prove God's existence, and precisely by attempting to *prove* God, i.e., to make reflection the medium of the justification of God, only ended up equating God with being and making our thinking a mode of his being. Jacobi was a traditionalist, an orthodox theist who believed in a personal and transcendent God, and so

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<sup>140</sup> Jacobi 194-195

this pantheistic result was anathema to him. He embarked on a crusade to show that all philosophy, because it operates in the medium of conceptual analysis, invariably results in this "Spinozistic" consequence of the full equation of thinking and being (which can only mean the "Spinozistic" annihilation of individuality and freedom, and the atheistic denial of the transcendent God, or in Kant, the solipsistic rather than materialist equivalent of the same). Jacobi called upon his generation to perform a "*salto mortale*": to jump head over heels and start walking on the firmer ground of faith, by rejecting philosophy *tout cour*. To meet Kant on this battlefield, Jacobi needed an alternative account of consciousness to the dualistic faculty model, one that retained Kant's orientation of thinking in sensation, but that made consciousness the divinely enabled immediate revelation of being.

## II. Jacobi's Organic Theory of Consciousness

Jacobi's alternative preservation of the receptivity of human consciousness to a contingent, sensuously received object is his equation of all of consciousness with sense perception, the epistemic modality of which then becomes "*Glaube*" ("belief") in the senses both of Humean sensuous *feeling* and religious *faith*. Jacobi says that the appearance, in our minds, of a world of objects outside of us — consciousness or "*Dasein*" — is the divinely enabled registering or mirroring of that world by our souls, a mirroring that occurs directly upon our sensuous affection by the world, rather than (with Kant) as the product of application of a priori concepts by an independent understanding. The figures to whom Jacobi appeals in making this claim against Kant are Leibniz and

Hume. Leibniz, too, argued that concepts refer objectively to the order and constitution of the relationship of objects in themselves, while the conceiving of this order in immediate mental representations lies in the individual mind alone. But whereas Leibniz claimed that God pre-established the harmony between these two real and ideal realms, Jacobi maintains that this very same notion of harmony, this immediate mental presencing is, instead — and in re-interpretation of Hume — "sensuous," because it is a mental immediacy with physical affection. According to Jacobi, God is indeed responsible for establishing harmony, though not in Leibniz's sense of two realms that independently march on in mirror image of each other, rather in the sense of endowing us with souls that have this capacity for immediate presencing.

In other words, Jacobi offers an *organic* theory of consciousness: a theory of the human being as soul-body complex, or material parts organized into the true unity of wholeness by the soul, whose mirroring of that unity is our consciousness. In the organic being, the self-presence of the mind and the material body are mutually fulfilling aspects of its single living being, in which consciousness emerges when its definitionally unitary being comes into contact with another being outside it. Organic beings have many parts (for example humans have limbs, hair, organs, etc., or trees have leaves, branches, bark, etc.) but importantly, their status as unitary individuals — their identity as "one person" or "one tree" — depends on the emergence of a wholeness that is greater than the sum of their constitutive parts. The organic being, in other words, is not a mere "heap," but rather what Leibniz, Jacobi quotes, called the *unum per se*<sup>141</sup>: the only true substance, because a self-maintaining unity. Its maintenance as itself or as this greater whole — which is not only constituted by many different parts, but also whose parts are constantly

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<sup>141</sup> Jacobi 254

replaced according to the plan of the whole — is not dependent on an external cause, but rather on a principle of unity that is wholly internal to the individual. Jacobi joins many before him when he calls this internal agency the "soul," or, from within the perspective of the soul itself, the "I." The organism's continual activity of preservation as itself is its "life," and this continuance appears on the outside as the unitary body and on the inside as the unitary mind. Material parts are inessential insofar as they are replaceable, and essential insofar as their ongoing replacement is the continual substantiation of the essence of the being, its internal form. Jacobi writes:

"Wir fühlen das Mannigfaltige unseres Wesens in einer reinen Einheit verknüpft, die wir unser Ich nennen. Das Unzertrennliche in einem Wesen bestimmt seine Individualität, oder macht es zu einem wirklichen Ganzen... Dahin gehören alle organische Naturen. Wir können keinen Baum, keine Pflanze, als solche, das ist, ihr organisches Wesen, das Princip ihrer besonderen Mannigfaltigkeit und Einheit, zerlegen oder theilen ... [Ihr] Körper ist aus einer unendlichen Menge von Theilen zusammengesetzt, die er annimmt und wieder zurückgibt, so daß von allen auch nicht Einer wesentlich zu ihm gehören kann. Sie fühlen aber diese Theile als zu ihm gehörig mittelst einer unsichtbaren Form, die wie einen Wirbel mitten in einem Strome verursacht."<sup>142</sup>

While only one being exists, it nonetheless exhibits two aspects, mind and body, depending on the perspective from which it is approached. Internally, it exhibits the subjective unity of mental life as an "I." Externally, it exhibits the objective unity of physical life as a "body." The two do not influence each other, insofar as "influence" is a *causal* relationship; rather, mind and body are *mutual fulfillments* of each other: neither can exist without the other, and they come into being at the same time and through each other. Thus Jacobi writes that the body is expressed in the soul, at the same time that "das denkende Wesen, als solches, hat mit dem körperlichen Wesen, als solches, keine

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<sup>142</sup> Jacobi 209-210; 255



Eigenschaft gemein."<sup>143</sup> Instead, what happens physically is registered immediately internally *as* mentality. In one and the same moment of the organism's definitional self-perpetuation, mentality and physicality are produced as the internal and external expressions or "accidents" of this ontologically singular being. The mind inheres in all points and all parts of the body, and insofar as the body is a unity, so too is its mentality the unitary experience of the singular I. Mental and physical life inhere immediately in the organic being like the two sides of a single coin.

According to Jacobi, his theory of the organic nature of the human being accounts for how consciousness is determinate content for a subject, without falling into the solipsistic traps either of Kantian dualism, nor of the Humean skepticism that follows from our access supposedly to nothing more than subjective representations. It does so by reasserting the proper hierarchy of being and thought: thought is dependent on being. More specifically, Jacobi reformulates consciousness as the reciprocal fulfillment of subjectivity and objectivity that is grounded not in the understanding's application of a concept, but in the quality of being as an activity — the striving of organic life. He writes:

"Ich erfahre, daß ich bin, und das etwas außer mir ist, in demselben untheilbaren Augenblick... Daß unser Bewußtseyn lauter in einander greifende Momente des Thuns und Leidens, der Wirkung und Gegenwirkung darstellt, die ein reales, in sich bestimmtes und selbstthätiges Princip voraus setzen, ist auffallend... So müssen [Individua], wenn sie Wirkung erfolgen soll, andre Wesen mittelbar oder unmittelbar berühren. Ein absolut durchdringliches Wesen ist ein Unding. Ein relativ durchdringliches Wesen kann, in so fern es einem andern Wesen durchdringlich ist, dasselbe weder berühren, noch von ihm berührt werden. Die unmittelbare Folge der Undurchdringlichkeit bey der Berührung, nennen wir den Widerstand. Wo also Berührung ist, das ist Undurchdringlichkeit von beiden Seiten; folglich auch Widerstand; Wirkung und Gegenwirkung..."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Jacobi 245-246

<sup>144</sup> Jacobi 175; 206; 212-213

In other words, when an organism, which is the self-determining activity of being and therefore a real unity, comes into contact with another being that is also impenetrable and therefore able to impinge effectively upon its living activity, then this impediment is immediately registered inside the organism *as* the consciousness of objects. The organism is, by definition, a striving to incorporate infinitely divisible matter into its unitary being, thereby becoming a *Dasein* or being-in-the-world; but when a being outside itself resists this attempted "penetration" of its being, or when the organism is only partially penetrated by another being, then the organism's "forward movement," as Jacobi calls it, is checked against this object and so is forced into passivity with respect to this object, and the internal representation of this check is object-perception. Jacobi follows Leibniz in claiming that perception is nothing but the internal representation of an external change. Jacobi's organic theory of consciousness counters both Kant and Hume: the dependence of representations on contact with an object is grounded not in a subject's concept application, but in the activity or striving of living being. In Kant, the faculties of sensibility and understanding are wholly separate, and consciousness depends on the possibility of reflection as their synthesis (though Kant does not commit either to the notion that the subject is the source of that reflection, nor that it is a product of reflection by something else). Jacobi, in contrast, unites sensation and conceptualization of sensation in the single activity of life, in which both capacities emerge at once; sensation is never "blind," as Kant would have it. For Jacobi, the difference between sensation and understanding is only functional. In fact one never exists without the other, since they are mutually dependent for their respective actualization. Over time, after repeated examples of penetration by objects checked by the organism's activity, the

resulting awareness forms a *concept*, which is to say that concepts are not a priori, contra Kant, but rather originally dependent on sensuous affection by the thing of which they are a concept. Concepts are higher-order abstractions of a subject-object distinction already present in the moment of physical affection, because sensation is always already also conceptualized. Jacobi writes:

"So erkläre ich mir auch das Nachsinnen, das Ueberlegen, und ihre Wirkungen, aus der immer fortgesetzten Bewegung (wenn ich mich so ausdrücken darf) des activen Principis in uns gegen (nicht wider) das passive, nach Maaßgabe der empfangenen Eindrücke und ihre Verhältnisse. Bey jeder Wiederholung ihres Consensus in Absicht eines nemlichen Gegenstandes muß die Vorstellung neue Bestimmungen erhalten, und bald mehr subjectiv bald mehr objectiv vergrößert werden. Die Entdeckung wichtiger Wahrheiten, und die Entstehung lächerlicher Irrthümer, wird auf diese Weise gleich begreiflich. Wenn wir von der Seite der Spontaneität allein — ohne zu erwägen, daß diese sich nur reagirend äußert — die Vernunft betrachten: so sehen wir der Vernunft nicht auf den Grund, und wissen nie recht was wir an ihr haben."<sup>145</sup>

The givenness of self to itself, and at the same time the givenness of world to the self, are produced in the very first moment of affection, which brings sensation and understanding into existence at the same time. Sensation is already formally organized, and understanding already has sensuous content, in other words, and so concepts are not a priori, as in Kantianism; concept formation is only "a priori" insofar as the life activity that is checked is, indeed, original to the organism. The dependence of the a priori on the a posteriori also explains why rationalism's derivation of being from thought could only be, as Jacobi says, a walking on one's head. Concepts are higher-order abstractions upon immediately, sensuously experienced distinctions (between objects and between the subject and the object), which means that concepts are not closer to truth, but rather removed from it.

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<sup>145</sup> Jacobi 269-270

### III. *Dasein* and *Glaube*

Now that the details of Jacobi's organic theory of consciousness have been provided, the reader might be wondering how Jacobi could even think he had the *right* to philosophical speculation about body and soul in a post-Kantian environment. But Jacobi's response is to question Kant's own purported right to restrict this kind of knowledge on the basis of transcendental reflection. Jacobi offers an alternative notion of *Dasein* as its own justification for the knowledge that it mirrors being, as well as an alternative notion of the epistemic status of knowledge as *Glaube* ("belief"). Both claims relate to his religiously motivated desire to see consciousness as a divine revelation — a gift that God grants to us, his creatures.

Earlier we showed that, in Jacobi's eyes, Kant's transcendental reflection only managed to establish the *unknowability* of being. Kantian critique attempts to carve out the conditions of knowledge of being, but precisely *by* seeking them, only sets up the very conditions under which being would be unknowable: transcendental reflection upon the conditions of self-consciousness consciousness suggests "sensibility" and "understanding" as *separate* faculties, but if understanding is indeed separate from sensibility, then consciousness would have to arise from understanding's reflection upon sensation — understanding makes being appear as consciousness on *its* terms — which means precisely that consciousness is *not* an immediate mirroring of being, *not* a true mental *re*-presentation of being, but rather the production of a Berkeleyan sphere of illusion. We should even expect the operation of transcendental reflection to upend the proper relation between being and thinking, Jacobi says as part of his critique of

philosophy in general: as a merely formal process, all reflection presents being in merely formal terms, in Kant's case literally accounting for *Dasein* in the terms of the formal understanding. Philosophizing — seeking explanation by means of analysis — always leads to "Spinozism" or nihilistic and atheistic monism, whether in the form of deterministic materialism or, in Kant's case, a solipsistic idealism that is essentially an inverted materialism with the same consequences.

Jacobi argues in the *David Hume* essay that this failure of Kant's system to secure the terms of valid knowledge is precisely the reason we do not need to cater to Kantian notions of epistemic warrant: Kant has warrant *backwards*. Kant's platform for transcendental deduction is the minimal standpoint of the skeptic — the existence of self-conscious consciousness — from which he then reflectively seeks its conditions so as to justify any knowledge of being that remains within those conditions; but in fact, securing warrant should occur the other way around: the starting point in the experience of *Dasein*, the self-awareness that consciousness has of its own existence, is all the "proof" one needs in order to know that consciousness is the immediate presentation of being as mental life. The core of Jacobi's claim is that the *self*-experience of consciousness — its quality as a *lived* experience, an opening up of the world for me alone in the here and now of my private perspective — is what validates knowledge of the fact that mental life mirrors being; any abstraction from that experience only has a weaker warrant. What my lived experience proves, albeit only as private and not universalizable proof, is that I simply find myself in a position of not being able to have consciousness *except* as a mental relation *to* the world. "Das Wirkliche kann außer der unmittelbaren Wahrnehmung desselben eben so wenig dargestellt werden, als das Bewußtseyn außer

dem Bewußtseyn, das Leben außer dem Leben, die Wahrheit außer der Wahrheit."<sup>146</sup>

The point here is not that all of our thoughts are directly oriented to the world — imagination and speculative philosophy often obviously take leave of any recognizable experience; the point is rather that *consciousness*, i.e., firsthand awareness, is always the interdependence of subjectivity and objectivity: I experience my I-ness simultaneously and inextricably with my experience of the world. "Ich erfahre, daß ich bin, und das etwas außer mir ist, in demselben untheilbaren Augenblick." So there is no "relation of thinking to the world" that needs *further* proof than the intuitively or self-evidently obvious fact that my experience just is a world-relation. The most indubitable thing, precisely because it is my nonreducible personal experience and the first point from which all abstract knowing begins, is that *Dasein* directly depends on *Seyn*: it is a mirroring that would have no content and thus no existence for itself except as the mirroring *of being*. "Wir fühlen das Mannigfaltige unseres Wesens in einer reinen Einheit verknüpft, die wir unser Ich nennen... Sie fühlen aber diese Theile als zu ihm gehörig mittelst einer unsichtbaren Form, die wie einen Wirbel mitten in einem Strome verursacht." Jacobi answers Kant with an ontology, not because he fails to appreciate the lack of his right on Kantian grounds to speculate about ontology, but because only philosophizing from the standpoint of being considered as opened up directly to our consciousness even is the true orientation of thinking in being, the limitation of consciousness to sensation, that he thinks Kant too is fundamentally committed to upholding.

Since Jacobi's justification for the meta-knowledge that our consciousness is an immediate registering of being is a merely private or subjective experience, and so not

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<sup>146</sup> Jacobi 232-233.

universalizable, Jacobi concludes that the epistemic mode of our consciousness of being is more properly described as "belief" than "knowledge" (though it is no less objective, as in object-oriented, for this epistemic downgrade). By "*Glaube*," Jacobi claims in his *David Hume* essay to mean Hume's notion of sense perception or feeling, but the religious overtones of this term are equally important to him. At some level, *all* knowledge of objects fundamentally orients from a lived experience that is irreducibly individualized — the organic soul's mirroring of a bodily encountered world — and so is a witnessing or disclosure by a soul that is dependent, not only on the object, but on a higher power that placed it in this receptive or contemplative relation to its object in the first place. This dependence is central to both sensuousness and religious experience. Jacobi calls the "revelation" of consciousness "der geheime Handgriff des Schöpfers... Ein Schauer ergreift mich, so oft ich dieses denke; mir ist jedesmal, als empfieng ich in dem Augenblick unmittelbar aus der Hand des Schöpfers meine Seele."<sup>147</sup> What I experience, in my experience of *Dasein* as a simultaneity of the "I" and the "object," is also the divine givenness to me of this capacity for reception of the object:

"Die Quelle des Lebens bedarf keines Gefäßes. Sie ist nicht wie der Tropfe, der es bedarf, daß ein Gefäß ihn sondernd fasse und bewahre. Schoepfer ist dieser Geist; und das ist seine Schöpfung, daß er Seelen eingesetzt, endliches Leben gestiftet, und Unsterblichkeit bereitet hat... Es erklärt zugleich, warum wir von diesem Wesen aller Wesen nichts begreifen, und seine Natur, wenn wir sie erforschen wollen, nach unserer Vorstellungsart sogar unmöglich finden müssen. Denn wir mussten abhängig werden bis ins innerste Mark unseres Daseyns, und deswegen unfähig seyn, schlechterdings unfähig seyn und bleiben, von einer ganz unabhängigen Natur, einer durch und durch reinen Thätigkeit, uns die entfernteste Vorstellung zu machen... unser endliches Daseyn musste mit dem Leibe [beginnen]...Unsere natürliche Erkenntniß konnte nie über das Resultat in einander fließender Verhältnisse des Endlichen zum Endlichen, vorwärts und rückwärts unabsehbar, sich erheben."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Jacobi 272

<sup>148</sup> Jacobi 274-275.

Our consciousness of God — *Glaube*, now as in religious "faith" — is just as "sensuous," though in the negative sense of awareness that what it takes to be the creator of life is absolutely beyond the restriction of our creativity to our embodiment. More specifically, that negative sensation of God is the awareness that, even if we "became dependent to the last limit of our existence," or attend to our embodiment to the greatest possible degree in the attempt to feel all aspects of our soul's relation to being, still we would not be able to overcome the (thereby negatively revealed) fact that our souls must be *placed* into relation with our bodies by a higher power. Thus for Jacobi, the experience of the interdependence of subjectivity and objectivity is equally the religious sensation of the dependence of the "I" on the "Thou" that makes that experienced interdependence possible. It is under this dual formulation of sensuousness and religious feeling that Jacobi hoped outrightly to reject philosophy and to replace it with a *Glaube* that would revive traditional fideism.

#### IV. Jacobi's Inadvertent Spinozism and the Road from Kant back to Being

One of the greatest stories of unintended intellectual influence must be Jacobi's role in the *Pantheismusstreit*. He had hoped to show that all philosophical thinking leads to a morally repugnant, because "Spinozistic" (atheistic and nihilistic) reversal of the proper hierarchy of thinking and being, and that philosophers must perform a "*salto mortale*": they must stop "walking on their heads" by rejecting philosophy *tout cour*, and start walking on the ground of sensuously substantiated common sense and traditional religious faith. Instead, Jacobi ended up playing a central role in both a Spinoza revival



and the grandest period of philosophy that Germany has yet seen: German Idealism and philosophical Romanticism. The historical details of his influence in the controversy — his "outing" of Lessing as a Spinozist — are more well-known, but the intellectual details are perhaps less obvious, in part because they involve an inadvertent and unacknowledged Spinozism on the very part of Jacobi himself. Jacobi's Spinozism, when it is embraced as an intrinsic (even if unintentional) part of his argument against Kant, led many of his contemporaries to the exciting conclusion that *Kantianism, too, only makes sense as Spinozism*.

This fact of the implicit union of Kant and Spinoza in Jacobi's own inadvertent Spinozism is an important context of Novalis' thought, specifically for the way that it shows that the organic movement in Germany began as an intellectual reaction to a fundamentally *modest* epistemological program. Kantianism, as a theory of reason as spontaneous yet involuntary, is nothing if not the insistence that the condition of consciousness remains at all times partially mysterious to consciousness. It's important to remember this modesty, because too often scholarship has seen organic theories of being exclusively as an epistemologically *immodest* revision of Kant, i.e., in the idealisms of Fichte and Hegel. These systems did both argue, albeit in different ways, that an organic notion of being was the pathway to the *closure* of Kantianism. But theirs was not the only organic epistemology that sprung from the union of Kant and Spinoza implied in Jacobi's thought: the other, also highly public option was Herder's nonclosure. We will detail Herder's organic nonclosure later, but the task still falls to us now to describe Jacobi's inadvertent Spinozism and how it even could lead, intellectually speaking, to the incorporation of Spinoza into Kant's system.

To review, we have seen that Jacobi believes that Kant's notion of reflection, as an a priori concept application by an independent understanding to the blind sensuous content in sensibility, amounts to Berkeleyan idealism, if it is only honest about the contradictory demands it places on the *Ding an sich*. In order reasonably to claim, in a Kantian theory of the understanding, that consciousness re-presents being rather than producing a sphere of illusion, one must also be able to know that the forms of the understanding correspond to the percepts of sensation, which themselves must be an immediacy with being. But Kant *cannot* allow this knowledge, so long as the thing in itself cannot also be known to be a cause of sensations: this correspondence of understanding and the immediate presentation of the thing in itself in sensation required a metacritical perspective that is a thinking beyond the boundaries of Kant's own restrictions. So Jacobi said that Kantianism must admit that it is the theory of consciousness as "illusion," or the active operation of an understanding that finds what *it* puts in sensation. Jacobi's alternative was to claim that consciousness is the soul's direct, internal mirroring of being, and that only this dual-aspect theory would be the true orientation of thinking *in being* that any theory of a representational, rather than creative, intellect requires. His justification for this knowledge of the ontology of consciousness was two-pronged. On the one hand, he appealed to the self-experienced nature of consciousness as a *Dasein*, the living, wholly private dependence of my consciousness of self on a simultaneous consciousness of object. On the other, he challenged Kant's notion of warrant: he need not abide by Kant's restriction of knowledge of being, because that restriction was made by means of a knowledge-*invalidating* inference to the conditions of *Dasein*. He believed that all "reflection" (including transcendental reflection), since it is

a mode of explanation that redescribes being in the purely formal conditioning terms of thought alone, could only misrepresent the fundamentally revelatory quality of being.

But in Jacobi's formulation of his own alternative to Kant — the striving of the soul continually to organize the material of the body into a true unity, which organic whole would be capable of resistance to beings outside of it and so form a conscious image of that resistance in the soul, i.e., "consciousness" — Jacobi fails to see that he, *too*, is proposing that the purely formal activity of the soul organizes the manifold of the body into a unity that would then register the outside world in its own terms. His organism is still *an act of reflection*, albeit a reflection *as a concrete entity*: ontologically speaking, the organism is the forming of matter such that the thereby produced "informed matter," or being, can recognize in its formal aspect what the matter encounters in the world and according to the terms delineated by its form. "Wir fühlen das Mannigfaltige unseres Wesens in einer reinen Einheit verknüpft, die wir unser Ich nennen... Sie fühlen aber diese Theile als zu ihm gehörig mittelst einer unsichtbaren Form, die wie einen Wirbel mitten in einem Strome verursacht." So, in trying to prioritize being over thinking in a theory that still supports a representational or sensuously limited consciousness — a priority that he believed Kant had lost sight of, with solipsistic consequences — Jacobi still found himself needing to place an act of reflection at the founding act of consciousness. And the consequence of this theory of reified reflection, of which Jacobi himself had forewarned, is that consciousness indeed loses its quality as "firsthand": consciousness becomes merely a mode, accident, or byproduct of the organic quality of being, indeed a correspondence to being, but a correspondence as an appearance solely in mental terms, rather than a presentation of that being in itself, which

being is a creative reflection, a reflection that reifies and is reified. In short, Jacobi's alternative, organic account of consciousness is itself a Spinozism. More specifically, it is a unity of Kant and Spinoza: by making Kant's synthesis into a being, he makes Kantian consciousness into a mode of being.

Had Jacobi understood his own position better, he surely would have been horrified to recognize his enemy Spinoza in his own thought. Jacobi's God was supposed to be the orthodox, wholly transcendent and personal God, and his sensuous appreciation of God was supposed to be a traditional fideism. But many of Jacobi's post-Kantian contemporaries were *not* so repulsed with his Spinozism, because it solved a problem. Jacobi had offered a convincing metacritique of Kant, *and* suggested the solution, without (in spite of himself, it turns out) reneging on the precepts that made Kant a figure worth saving in the first place. That is, Jacobi had convincingly pointed out Kant's inconsistent use of the "thing in itself"; he had demonstrated that Kant lacked the epistemic license to deny all knowledge of it; he also showed that the subjectivity of consciousness — its lived quality as a *Dasein* — was ground enough to know that Kant's thing in itself is actually his discursive synthesis *as a being*; and by so converting Kant's epistemology into an ontology — by reifying Kant's discursive synthesis — he had maintained the valued Kantian principles of the restriction of consciousness to sense, reason as involuntary spontaneity, and the difference between phenomenal and noumenal realms. Granted, the original Kantianism must indeed be altered, but some would argue that its spirit remains. The grounding act of synthesis has been re-understood as an "intellectual intuition," the *creative* reflection that gives rise to being as the simultaneity of being and consciousness of being, or in other words, this act of reflection produces our empirical

consciousness as the byproduct or "accident" of its self-creation. Kant did not permit "intellectual intuition," but after Jacobi and in the eyes of many, it was hard to see how he could maintain his most important claims without it.

The terms of this summary of Jacobi's "Spinozistic Kantianism" (or just as well, "Kantian Spinozism") are general enough that the reader should be able to recognize very different thinkers as specific examples of it: Fichte, Hegel, or Herder, for instance. Fichte called the organic being the "I," a "*Tathandlung*" or activity of self-positing being, whose parts are the I-as-subject and the I-as-object in reflection, the organic interdependence of which parts is actualized by external affection, to produce empirical consciousness as a byproduct of the original being of the *Tathandlung*; Hegel and Herder instead called the organic being *Geist* or God, a panentheistic divine whose *causa sui* self-reflection also produces the world, which is his instantiation and whose relation to his original *Logos* produces our consciousness of objects. We introduce organicism this generally, because again, our overarching goal in this chapter is to demonstrate that organicism need not rule out nonclosure. Fichte and Hegel might have famously appealed to their respective organic beings with the goal of incorporating the "Ding an sich" into empirical human understanding, in Fichte's case as a foundation on which to build a closed system, and in Hegel's case as the goal of a process of dialectic reflection that reaches closure at its endpoint. But these "closures" are not the only option for organicism. Herder adopted organicism while trumpeting the impossibility of such systems (though his nonclosure was spelled out in response to Kant rather than to Fichte or Hegel). We turn now to Herder.

## V. The Nonclosure of Herder's Organicism

Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi exchanged a famous letter during the *Pantheismusstreit* — an exchange that showed Herder understood the power of Jacobi's implicit Spinozism much better than Jacobi understood himself. They were in touch because Jacobi was, of all things, seeking support for his anti-Spinozism. In 1781, Jacobi, who had heard that Moses Mendelssohn planned a memorial work for the recently deceased Lessing, privately asked Mendelssohn if he was aware that Lessing was actually a "Spinozist." Jacobi claimed that Lessing confessed an appreciation for Spinoza's *hen kai pan* in a conversation between them in person in 1780, shortly before Lessing's death. Since calling someone a Spinozist had been, for some time, culturally tantamount to accusing someone of atheism and nihilism, Mendelssohn was scandalized at this defamation of his good friend and fellow *Aufklärer*, and so turned from memorializing to defending Lessing in his *Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Dasein Gottes*, a work that aimed to clarify that Lessing's was an "enlightened" pantheism. Jacobi, meanwhile, introduced his alternative anti-philosophy in his *Briefe über die Lehre Spinozas*, which was published almost at the same time as Mendelssohn's work in 1785. The joint appearance of these works inaugurated the *Pantheismusstreit* — which, for all its intellectual influence, ended up being a social *faux pas* for Jacobi: it did not seem respectful to the beloved and recently departed Lessing that Jacobi would try to diminish his reputation, and to make matters worse, Mendelssohn died only a year later, in 1786, and it seemed that Jacobi had hastened his death. In the attempt to gather more minds to his side, Jacobi wrote to Herder with the expectation that he would agree with him.

Herder's response shocked Jacobi: Herder took sides with Spinoza! Instead of justifying Jacobi's gauche move, Herder wrote to Jacobi:

"Das *proton pseudos*, lieber Jacobi, in Ihrem und in aller antispinozisten System ist dies, daß Gott, als das große *Ens entium*, die in allen Erscheinungen wirkende Ursache ihres Wesens ein 0, ein abstrakter Begriff sei, wie wir ihn uns formieren; das ist er aber nach Spinoza nicht, sondern das allerreellste, tätigste Eins, das allein zu sich spricht: ‚Ich bin, der ich bin, und ich werde in allen Veränderungen meiner Erscheinung... sein, was ich sein werde.‘... Was Ihr, lieben Leute, mit dem ‚außer der Welt existiren‘ wollt, begreife ich nicht: existiert Gott nicht in der Welt, überall in der Welt, und zwar überall ungemessen, ganz und unteilbar... so existiert er nirgends. Außer der Welt ist kein Raum; der Raum wird nur, indem für uns eine Welt wird, als Abstraktion einer Erscheinung... Gott ist das höchste lebendigste, tätigste Eins – nicht in allen Dingen, als ob die was außer ihm wären, sondern durch alle Dinge, die nur als sinnliche Darstellung für sinnliche Geschöpfe erscheinen."<sup>149</sup>

Herder cannot make sense of Jacobi's orthodox creator God who is "outside existence," because what is outside existence is as good as *nothing*. Space is an abstraction that we produce from the appearance of existence to our senses, and so there is no such thing as space "outside" existence where a personal creator God might himself "exist." Being must be what it is in and through God, and Herder believes that Spinoza's pantheism was a defensible version of this position. In this response, Herder shows a full appreciation for both the explicit and implicit layers of Jacobi's own thought. God's thinking produces creation, but if thinking, as Jacobi himself so passionately argued, loses touch with being if it is not an ontological immediacy with being, then existence too must be dependent on God's thought in a fundamentally immediate way. God is *in* being.

Herder claimed that what Spinoza needed — and what Jacobi himself ironically provided in spite of all his arguments to the contrary — was a *vitalized* notion of God's pantheistic being. The feared consequences of pantheism (its atheism and nihilism) could

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<sup>149</sup> 6. Februar 1784, Herder an Jacobi, in *Briefe Gesamtausgabe 1763-1803 / Johann Gottfried Herder* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1977) 28-29.

be avoided if Spinoza's flawed conception of "substance" were only replaced with the very living, active God to whom Jacobi inadvertently pointed all along. Spinoza only seemed an atheist and a fatalist because his equation of God's being with nature was limited by his Cartesian understanding of substance as inert, dead extension; thus God, and the human beings that are modes of God, lose intentional agency in favor of a mental lockstep with clockwork mechanism. But again, Herder argues that such a notion of dead extension is not the true nature of God's being, but rather an abstraction from our sensation of existence, and that Spinoza's *Deus sive natura* can be salvaged if we re-interpret God as *Kraft*: force, living matter, or units of existence that are themselves intentional. *Kraft* is Herder's appropriation of the Leibnizian monad, but "with windows," so to speak, just as Jacobi argued: the fundamental unit of existence is the organism, a unity of body and soul. God, the *Urkraft* or primal, original and absolute force, is himself an organism — the *ultimate* organism of which all created things are parts (parts that are themselves organisms or *Kräfte*). Such a vitalized notion of substance lets the pantheistic God become a full, positive, and intrinsic infinity rather than the propertyless, agencyless ground that Jacobi feared in his atheistic vision of Spinozism. Creation need not be a machine-God set once and ineluctably into deterministic motion, but rather can be a living process, ever-evolving and developing. God is the transcendent force that, in becoming immanent and finite, in becoming life itself, sustains all life. The orthodox Holy Trinity of God the Father, God made man in the Son, and God the Holy Spirit who remains with us after Christ's death and resurrection, is recast in Herder's panentheistic trinity as God the soul, God the body (creation), and God the life, the ongoing perpetuation of body by soul.



The goal of this section of this chapter is not to discuss Herder's precise contribution to the *Pantheismusstreit*, but to emphasize an aspect of it that has become obscured thanks to the tendency to hasten discussion of Herder on the way to Hegel, an aspect that has therefore been lost to the contemporary debate on Novalis' own organicism: Herder's organicism is also a philosophy of *nonclosure*. Just like Jacobi, he ascends to knowledge of organic being from the non-propositional, because merely private experience of consciousness as *Dasein*. From the organism's first-person perspective, our always-already immediate status simultaneously with our selves and with our conscious contents is immediate because it inheres in God's self-creating, living substance, in his ongoing thinking-cum-existence; yet the ground of God, the unconditioned, is not the conditioned thing that we experience as the actual contents of our consciousness. The striving of God's living substance opens up the consciousness in which we then find ourselves permanently lost to our conscious origin. Hegel supported the same organismic notion of God as Herder, but would later introduce dialectical reasoning with the goal of demonstrating closure, within his own system of knowledge, as the convergence of God's self-knowledge and of human knowing in the movement of living being into the movement of living concepts and eventually to stasis in knowledge of the fact that God knows himself in us. But for Herder, who never develops a dialectical notion of concepts, the inherence of human knowing in God's being can never become a knowing *with* God. God's appearing in and as finite beings is eternally distinguishable from God the ground of that appearance. Since the latter remains uncognizable, yet is the ultimate condition of our knowledge, Herder's philosophy is one of "organic nonclosure."

Herder avoids the simple equation of God with nature — the equation that is so offensive to the orthodox religious insistence on the omnipotent transcendence of God — by calling God an "organism." This qualification means that Herder's "pantheism" is better described as a "panentheism," a notion of the divine as simultaneously transcendent and immanent, which simultaneity is due the special part-to-whole relationship that defines the organism. The parts that constitute God's existence are indeed finite, but since God is the whole that those parts actualize, a wholeness that in turn directs the interrelationship of the parts so that he is actualized as their whole, God is also more than his parts. God is analogous to that more familiar example of an organism, the human being: body parts constitute the human existence, but the whole that the parts actualize (the body) and the unified mental perspective that inhabits those parts (the mind), are more than just the sum of their parts. However, unlike the human organism, God's thinking *creates* being. Thought of himself brings himself into existence, which existence is also all of creation, from the smallest creature to the colossal cosmos. In his self-contemplation, God is a completely self-sustaining, self-maintaining existence, the *Urkraft*, the ultimate and absolute organism. His eternal self-finitization is his infinite existence, and so his becoming determinate and limited in created things does not mean he is reducible to mere finitude; finite parts of his being die, but these parts are absorbed into other life forms again and again in the process by which God, the whole, maintains himself as himself eternally. The existence of finite, created beings is thus dependent on God's infinite life, a relationship that Herder describes in *Gott, einige Gespräche* with the analogy of the branches and roots of a tree:

"Alles trägt sich selbst, wie die Kugel auf ihrem Schwerpunkt ruhet: denn alles Daseyn ist ja in seinem eignen ewigen Wesen, in seiner Macht, Gute und Weisheit gegründet... Nichts kann untergehen, nichts vernichtet werden oder Gott müßte sich selbst vernichten; aber alles Zusammengesetzte wird aufgelöset, alles was Ort und Zeit ausmißt, wandert. Da nun in unendlichen Daseyn alles liegt, was kann und ist; wie Endlos wird die Welt, Endlos nach Raum und Zeit und in sich selbst beständig. Gott hat den Grund seiner Seligkeit Wesen mitgetheilt, die auch wie er, das Kleinste wie das Größeste, Daseyn genießen... [wie] Zweige von seiner Wurzel ewigen Lebensaft schöpfen."<sup>150</sup>

When God's thought becomes real, he creates himself and so becomes finite and determined, but remains a transcendent infinitude insofar as he also forever sustains the life of this finite creation. In Herder's panentheism, nature is in God, but God is also more than nature. Though God is the ground of existence, no determinate existence is adequate to his eternal being, his infinite whole, according to Herder.

Herder extends the consequences of this inadequacy to the mental life of the organisms that are the constitutive parts of God's being, thus explaining the limitations of human knowing with his organicist theology. The organisms or *Kräfte* that God creates in his self-instantiation are finite versions of his own being, which however reverse the divine relationship between thinking and existence: God's thought is productive of reality, while the thought of finite creatures (including human beings) is merely a taking-in, a re-presenting of reality. The details of Herder's argument are as follows. God's self-contemplation brings himself into being, a being that is also all of creation, in which he recognizes himself because each finite part is itself also a *Kraft* or organism. *Kräfte*, including human beings, are finite analogies of God. So just like God, and precisely because they are immanent parts of his being, each *Kraft* is a living unity of mind and body. And just as God recognizes himself in this creation as a whole (his body), organismically actualizing the unity of that body in the very act of self-recognition, so too

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<sup>150</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Gott, einige Gespräche* (Gotha: K. W. Ettinger, 1787) 197, 199.

does the mind of each finite *Kraft* recognize itself in its body, which is also composed of lower *Kräfte*, thereby actualizing the organic unity of the body and its own mental perspective through that recognition. In other words, *Kräfte* exist in an ascending, endlessly embedded hierarchy in which each organism actualizes at a higher level the abilities of the lower organisms of which it is composed, and God, the highest and absolute *Urkraft*, is actualized by the sum total of these eternally developing parts. However, even though the organisms that compose God's absolute organism are analogies of his being, because they are finite the divine relationship between thinking and being is reversed in them, which reversal gives rise, in the human organism, to our merely representational consciousness. In other words, the *Kräfte* that are produced by God's self-reflection are the *mirror image* of his being — a being-that-is-a-thinking, rather than a thinking-that-is-a-being — which means the mental life of each organic being is limited by its embodiment. Unlike God, whose thought creates that of which he thinks, the contents of consciousness in the created being must be given, via the finite body that sensuously registers the external world, to the soul that is actualized as the specific organic unity of these specific parts; that is, the soul re-presents (in the sense of "presenting again") in unified form the mixed sensory manifold contingently experienced by the body. Consciousness is dependent for its contents on the given revelation of the senses, and not on the capacity of its own soul to produce that of which it thinks, which only God can do.

This dependency is evident in the details of Herder's psychology of knowledge, which like Jacobi's is an organicized alternative to the dualistic faculty model of judgment that Kant proposed. According to Herder, consciousness in human beings,

characterized as a consciousness simultaneously of self and of a world of objects given to that self, is an actualization of the abilities of our particular organismic being. The *Kräfte* that compose our body are themselves embodied souls that are specifically capable of sensation, and they register the impingement of the external world in sensory manner; in turn, and in reciprocal reaction to the impingement, the soul that unifies these body parts into a bodily whole also unifies these sensations into a single, simultaneously self-conscious consciousness by recognizing itself in the mental aspect of its *Körpermonaden*. Herder describes this actualization as the soul's recognition of itself in sense "as if in a mirror":

"Wir fühlen uns in einem sehr vielartigen und zu Einem Zwecke äußerst fein organisirten Körper lebend. Körperlich zu reden, fühlt sich die Seele d.i. unsre Kraft zu erkennen und zu wollen, selbst in ihren abgezogensten Verrichtungen mit dieser Masse... verbunden, daß sie diesen Ort im Universum nicht verlassen kann... Sie fühlt weiter, ihre selbst gedachte und abgezogenste Kenntniße als Resultate ihrer Verbindung mit dem Körper... Sie fühlt endlich... sich als Inwohnerin gleichsam in diesen Körper ausgegossen, daß sie mit allen Werkzeugen desselben empfinde, desselben Körperliche und Organische Kräfte brauche, dadurch immer eine Kraft von sich anwende, sich also im Gebrauch dieser Kraft fühle, wohlseynd, daurend in sanftem Maas fortstrebend fühle — sich also in diesem Körper, wie in einem Spiegel ihr selbst erkenne."<sup>151</sup>

Though body and soul can be functionally differentiated, their capacities are intimately dependent on each other. Neither the recognition of the soul in the *Kräfte* of its body, nor the higher-order spiritualization of sensation as perception of objects, could occur except by means of each other in a reciprocal fulfillment. This reciprocity is thanks to the fundamental nature of the organism as a mutual determination of parts for the sake of an emergent whole; the very being of the parts and the very being of the whole are interdependent — neither can exist without the other. In the human organism, and as a function of this reciprocal nature of its being, cognition is the higher-order fulfillment of

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<sup>151</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke / Johann Gottfried Herder*, Bd. 2 (München: Hanser, 1987) 547

animal sensation, and takes the form of a self-conscious consciousness of objects. Herder believes that Kant's faculty separation smacks of the scholastic tendency to invent sub-personal agencies for as many capacities as could be imagined. Hence Herder writes: "Unsere Seele hat zwei Kräfte oder Klassen von Kräften, die der Philosoph obere und untere nennet, aber nur der Philosoph und als Philosoph nennet er sie so."<sup>152</sup> Reason should be seen, Herder claims, as the unified and spontaneous expression of our particular organic being.

Herder's philosophy of life is strikingly similar to Jacobi's, even while his theology is so different. Herder agrees with the anthropocentric turn in Jacobi's epistemology, or in other words, he agrees that knowledge does not follow from the a priori analysis of concepts, but rather that concepts are themselves formed from the contact of an organically embodied soul with the world. This anthropocentrism is a form of religious and epistemological modesty for both philosophers: only God's thinking is a producing, while human consciousness is a mere representational taking-in according to its divinely appointed organic capacity. The insistence on the dependence of human consciousness on a soul that grasps the world only through embodiment is also a *sensualism* that they both share. The private mental life of the "I" is not a self-generating, self-subsistent being apart from the body, but the actualization of an interior perspective in a direct, reciprocal determination with the soul's external, bodily extension. According to both Herder and Jacobi, philosophy must proceed from the assumption of an immediate, and therefore indisputable, certainty of being, which is given to us through the self-experience of our existence as an organic soul-body complex. Jacobi emphasizes

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<sup>152</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, quoted in: Robert T. Clark, Jr, "Herder's Conception of 'Kraft'," *PMLA*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (1942): 744

this sensualism with his equation of consciousness with "feeling" — an immediacy of self-feeling and the feeling of something given to the self — and Herder similarly claims that consciousness arises in one stroke as the soul's recognition of itself in the mental aspect of the *Körperkräfte*. But this last point of similarity also suggests the inconsistencies of Jacobi's position, which were mentioned earlier, and which Herder resolves with his vitalism. Jacobi says consciousness is the result of the active striving of the soul against a passivity instigated by external impingement; but it's hard to imagine how this reciprocity of activity and passivity could be the immediacy of existence and consciousness of existence that Jacobi seeks, yet meanwhile be grounded in sensation rather than, say, a Fichtean absolute ego, unless consciousness raises the pre-conscious mental life of the body to a higher level — a claim that makes consciousness into a basic aspect of what "substance" is, i.e., Spinozism.

Herder explains the immediacy of being and consciousness by means of our inherence in God's organic being, contrary to Jacobi; but precisely because Herder, like Jacobi, conceives of consciousness as an *immediacy* — a givenness in the mind of a world of objects, not mediated by the act of an independent mind, but rather as a spontaneous organic unity of mind and body — his philosophy likewise resists the tendency of other post-Kantian transcendental idealists to ground knowledge in the ratiocination of the subject, and instead supports nonclosure, the impossibility of the systematization of human knowledge. The ground of the appearance of objects to the subject cannot itself appear as ground, and so any philosophy that purports to build a system of knowledge from this ground, as if it even could be incorporated into a system as a knowable foundation, must fall short of this goal.

Herder conceives of consciousness as the product of the striving of God's organic being, and the "nonclosure" of his philosophy is the concealment of this ontological ground from the very consciousness to which it gives rise. According to Herder, consciousness occurs because a soul perpetually strives to substantiate itself in a body; this activity is "life," and its product is a unity, the organism, in which mentality and materiality inhere as two aspects, like two sides of a single coin. These aspects are realized in reaction to each other and ultimately activated upon impingement of the organism by an external object, just as Jacobi claims. But Herder is clear: that striving of life is the striving of God to create himself, and that duality of internal and external aspects of being is the unity of mind and being that God effects by being the original, absolute self-creative thinking. In other words, for Herder, God's self-reflection conditions "appearance" in the sense of our human mental representation or subjective experience of the world: "In jedem Erkenntniß, wie in jeder Empfindung spiegelt sich das Bild Gottes."<sup>153</sup> But crucially, God as ground of appearance does not appear *as himself*. Appearance is explicitly acknowledged in Herder's philosophy as a kind of "illusion." God is the eternal, transcendent, omnipotent capacity for infinite form-taking, but his appearance — the mental life of organisms — is the mirror image of this infinite nature, a world of finite objects given to an only seemingly self-sufficient ego. But this is just the point: God's appearance *must* be illusion. Appearance is the determination, limitation, or finitization, in spiritual form, of a God who is absolute, who is the ability to be any possible form. After all, what would it even mean for the infinite to appear *as infinite*? That could only mean the generation of endless appearances, which is precisely the nature of the organismic cosmos, an eternal churning. We've already seen that, when

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<sup>153</sup> Herder (München) 558



God self-contemplates and instantiates himself in that contemplation, the instantiations (finite *Kräfte*) *invert* his divine relationship between being and thinking. Our point, now, is that this reversal is also ultimately Herder's argument for nonclosure. God's appearing means becoming an embodied mental life, which is precisely not an appearance as infinite, even as it is the enabling of appearance at all. The careful reader will see that Herder's notion of illusory consciousness via God's ontological inversion is an organicist version of what Frank identified as the "ordo inversus" in Novalis (though didn't acknowledge it to be organically motivated in him): the tendency for judgment to invert the relationship between being and thinking, and so to require a reflection of reflection, not to cognize the absolute ground of reflection, but simply to correct its epistemic mistake, whereupon it recognizes its infinite dependence on an infinite God.

Even though it is the very opening up of our phenomenal realm of the appearance of objects, the process of God's self-instantiation is transparent to God alone, because his thought alone creates of itself. Herder made this point very clearly in that fateful letter to Jacobi: God is "das allerreellste, tätigste Eins, das *allein zu sich* spricht: 'Ich bin, der ich bin, und werde in allen Veränderungen meiner Erscheinung (*diese beziehen sich nicht auf ihn, sondern auf die Erscheinungen untereinander*) sein, was ich sein werde.'"<sup>154</sup> In himself, God is the freedom to become one of infinitely many appearances. In contrast, human consciousness, which is conditioned, is merely receptive and dependent on God's activity, which is unconditioned; were we to know God, we would have to become God, become the one and only knowing that is also a creating of the one and all, as Herder explains: "Eine völlig philosophische Sprache müßte die Rede der Götter sein, die es zusahen, wie sich die Dinge in der Welt bildeten, und also jeden Namen der Sache

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<sup>154</sup> Emphasis mine.

genetisch und materiell erschufen."<sup>155</sup> Both objectively and subjectively, human beings inhere in God's being; but this is immediacy with God only insofar as he has "thinged" his intrinsically formless and infinitely free capacity for becoming all things. The very ontological mystery in question, the organic "thinging" or becoming-real of God's thought, produces the world-disclosure of consciousness in our finite being that cannot then turn around and witness its own birth, but rather must receive the resulting sensuous impressions as a divine gift, and simply bear witness to the reality opened up to it. Herder writes: "Wir endliche Wesen, mit Raum und Zeit umfassen, die wir uns alles nur unter ihrem Maas denken, wir können von der höchsten Ursache nur sagen: sie ist, sie wirkt; aber mit diesem Worte sagen wir alles."<sup>156</sup> Once again, it is Novalis who expressed this limitation — which is Jacobian *and* Herderian, this chapter has aimed to show — most poetically with his fragment, "Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge."<sup>157</sup>

For both Jacobi and Herder, organic nonclosure is an explicit critique of Kant. By assuming that the formal aspect of human consciousness is grounded in a faculty of understanding that is autarkic and sense-independent, Kant attempts to preserve a classical model of the autonomous or self-legislating subject, even while making consciousness dependent on contingently given sensuous content. The problem with this move, in Herder's eyes, is that understanding *cannot* be separate from sensation, though indeed it must be functionally distinct. They are functions that must fulfill each other, which is to say, understanding must become itself in the very act of its recognition of sense — to grant it independence, Kant would have to claim that understanding has a

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<sup>155</sup> Herder (München) 16

<sup>156</sup> Herder (Gotha) 118.

<sup>157</sup> Novalis, *Werke / Novalis*, Bd 2 (München, Wien: Hanser, 2005) 226

self-understanding apart from its actual functioning as understanding (Marion Heinz aptly calls this a "performative contradiction"<sup>158</sup>). Herder's insistence on this reciprocity is also his argument that the very indubitability of our private conscious standpoint is the indication of our nature as an organism: it is his agreement with Jacobi's argument for organic being from *Dasein*. In understanding an object, the mind only *recognizes* what is already given in sense, which means the understanding is not the source of the given nor of the likeness between itself and its object, yet in the very act of recognition that brings consciousness into being, it immediately identifies its shared nature with the given, a sharedness that is an *organic* homology between subject and object. In assuming this notion of self-presencing being, Herder is not dogmatically ignoring Kantian epistemic limits, but rather offering, just like Jacobi, a metacritique of the architectonic with which Kant draws those limits: "Was Philosophie thut," Herder writes of transcendental idealism, "ist bemerken, untereinander ordnen, erläutern, nachdem sie Kraft, Reiz, Wirkung schon immer voraussetzt."<sup>159</sup> In other words, after presupposing the ontological possibility of a unitary expression of mind and body in consciousness — the "standpoint of the skeptic" that Jacobi, too, argues is the only "proof" needed for objectivity — Kantian philosophy further analyzes the parts of this unity as if to show whence the unity came. But for Herder, our organism's consciousness just is a unity, so analysis of the parts that supposedly compose it only takes a perspective on consciousness that we simply cannot have. Herder writes: "To make oneself independent of oneself, i.e., to place oneself beyond all original, inner and outer experience, to think

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<sup>158</sup> Marion Heinz and Heinrich Clairmont, "Herder's Epistemology," in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder* (New York: Camden, 2009) 56

<sup>159</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, quoted in Clark, 745.

beyond oneself, entirely free of the empirical: this no one can do."<sup>160</sup> That is, we cannot break apart consciousness *ex post facto* as if "understanding" were ever any real, self-legislating entity apart from "sensation." Herder's argument is fundamentally the same as Jacobi's, only he embraces both the implicit Spinozism and the explicit epistemological modesty of Jacobi's position. Philosophy cannot ground itself, but must rather take its bearings from consciousness understood as immediacy with being, a given presencing of substance to itself, which is God's organismic self-constitution.

Another way of formulating this metacritique is that grounding the contents of consciousness in the rational a priori activity of the individual is only reason's seeking itself and, upon finding itself, mistaking itself as the ground of that consciousness. Frank's notion of the "ordo inversus" suggests itself again — though Herder's *organicist* version states, in contrast to Frank, that philosophy that does not accept conscious immediacy with being as God's immanent self-revelation merely finds in the self what it puts there. Jacobi too argued that Kant only establishes the unknowability of being by attempting to extract *Dasein* from the operation of an independent understanding. In *Gott, einige Gespräche*, Herder even acknowledged his more fundamental agreement with Jacobi on precisely this point:

"Die Wahrheit, die er [Jacobi] mit diesen Ausdrücken ['Sinn' und 'Glaube'] festsetzen will, dünkt mich doch immer, unpartheiisch erwogen, sehr annehmenswerth... 'das Vernunfteln sei nicht das ganze Wesen, nicht der ganze Bestand des Menschen.' Substanz, Daseyn, liege allen, auch den edelsten Kräften unsrer Natur zum Grunde; diese könne nicht in Vernünfteln aufgelöst oder gar durch sie hinweggeraisonnirt werden. Ohne Existenz und eine Reihe von Existenzen dächte der Mensch nicht, wie er denkt; folglich müßte es auch der Zweck seiner Gedanken seyn, nicht, sich Hirngespinnste zu erträumen und mit Scheinbegriffen und Scheinworten, wie mit einer selbstgemachten Wirklichkeit zu spielen; sondern wie ers [Jacobi] nennt, Daseyn zu enthüllen, solches als etwas

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<sup>160</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, quoted in Sonia Sikka, "Herder's Critique of Pure Reason," *The Review of Metaphysics* (Vol. 61, No. 1: 2007) 31

Gegebenes oder (nach seinem Ausdruck) als eine Offenbarung Gottes anzunehmen, über welche und hinter welche man nicht hinauskann. Man müsse also seine Sinne durch Erfahrung, seinen innern Sinn durch Wahrheitliebe, Ordnung und Zusammenhang im Denken reinigen und schärfen, allen willkürlichen Verbindungen existenzloser Scheinbegriffe, d. i. dem trägen, todten Nichts entsagen und dafür was da ist, in den Eigenschaften und Beziehungen wie es da ist, kennen lernen. Ein solches Erkenntniß mit innigem Gefühl der Wahrheit verbunden, sei allein wahr."<sup>161</sup>

Here Herder proclaims his agreement with Jacobi's organic explanation of the relationship between thinking and being. Existence is an in-itself that is also for-itself, a unity of subject and object grounded not in the subject's rational act of appropriation of the object, but in the very nature of substance as disclosive, because alive. *For us*, reality disclosure by the substance of which we are composed *just is* our subjectivity, and our proof of this fact is simply our "thrownness" into the privacy of our conscious perspective. Herder's implicit philosophical opponent is Kant, seen here, just as Jacobi did, as falling prey to the sins of the very rationalism Kant's theory was meant to counter: "playing with ideas as if with a self-made reality." Kantian "arguing away" of ontology via epistemology is a "subtle reasoning" that mistakes its own activity as the ground of disclosure rather than as originally dependent on sensuous immediacy, or felt givenness, that must simply be taken on *faith*, a sensuous faith, as immediacy with the real. The consciousness in which we always already find ourselves is the sphere that opens up the world to us, and the sphere "beyond and behind which" there is no knowing. Properly understood, then, truth is always the immediate, which is to say, in the organic terms shared by Herder and Jacobi, that truth is delivered in our organism's embodied relationship to the world that it is divinely designed to reveal: "such knowledge, in union with an inner feeling for the truth, is alone true." So, Herder's is also a philosophy of "organic nonclosure." We cannot take, as an object of our consciousness, the manner in

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<sup>161</sup> Herder (Gotha) 150-152

which substance is also an *Innewerden*, because we are always already within the realm of subjectivity that substance opens up to us; to ground it in reason's activity, moreover, is only to have reason find what it puts there. Our immediacy with being is an ungroundable "belief," and for Herder, moreover, it is ultimately a givenness to God's organismic Being of which we are a living part.

Herder is most famous as one of the first major philosophers of cultural relativism, especially through his notion of different languages as the repositories of unique cultural inheritances; now we see how intimately related this relativism is to his organicism. If concepts only arise in the first place thanks to the actualization of cognition in the mutual fulfillment of mind and matter, then sensuous circumstance — with all the environmental diversity that entails — is the context of an ultimately living, breathing, constantly evolving human knowledge. A "pure" reason and "neutral" sensation are precisely not the ground of universal human knowing. The building of Kantian (or Fichtean, or Hegelian) systems, which only forcibly misconstrue the organic revelation of consciousness as a self-legislating reason that is transparent to human understanding, must be replaced with a model of mutable knowledge formed in ever-changing circumstances, as Herder scholar Sonia Sikka so aptly writes:

"Whether placed in the subject or the object, categories claiming for themselves universal application and eternal validity are mistaken about the character of human relation to reality. They attribute to the human power that invents those categories an autonomy from the shifting sands of embodied experience which it never truly possesses."<sup>162</sup>

The phrase "shifting sands of embodied experience" is a fitting metaphor for Herder's ontology. The organism, in both Herder's and Jacobi's philosophies, is a mind sensualized in continuous physical change, a constantly striving but unitary perspective

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<sup>162</sup> Sikka 48

on a world encountered in and through a body composed of innumerable parts, which are replaced like flowing grains of sand by the soul (God as *Geist*). And though the same organic ontology accounts for the presencing of reality in all human minds, the precise reality revealed changes with shifting circumstances and so knowledge of it cannot be justified by any universal a priori framework.

Chapter Three  
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Organic Nonclosure in Novalis' *Fichte Studien*

Chapter Two detailed an intellectual-historical alternative to the "false dilemma" of Novalis scholarship, or the supposed mutual exclusivity of "organicism" and "nonclosure" in Novalis' thought. We showed that two other figures of the post-Kantian philosophical scene — Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and Johann Gottfried Herder — argued influentially for the right to draw far-reaching ontological conclusions from the perspectivalty of a "Kantian" representational consciousness, at the same time that they denied that being could be articulated in the logical terms required for a closed system of knowledge. We showed that Jacobi paved the road from Kant back to being (largely in spite of himself), and that Herder popularized a specifically organicist notion of that being. The fact that we only ever *experience* our subjectivity *at the same time* as we experience objects outside of us (Jacobi) implies that the Kantian faculties of understanding and sensibility are mutually fulfilling — i.e., they are capacities actualized as themselves *upon* their relation; this organic relation of the conditions of our consciousness implies that consciousness comes into being as a byproduct of the coming-into-being of being (Herder). Kant's phenomenal realm becomes the byproduct of the activity of the noumenal realm, and more specifically, it is the revelation, in space and time, of the panentheistic, organismic God. Yet even though the ground of consciousness *can* be known to be this God whose creative self-reflection conditions both the identity and the difference of subject and object in our consciousness, nonetheless God's being *cannot* be taken as an *object* of consciousness, such that the certainty of our knowledge claims could be secured by deduction from his absolute ground. What prevents this



closure is that our receptive intellect cannot become immediate with God's creative intellect in any way except as the nondiscursive "opening" or revelation that is *Dasein*: the reflective synthesis of sensations, i.e., our private sphere of consciousness *as lived experience*. This reconciliation of a panentheistic ontology with an anti-foundationalist epistemology is the philosophy of "organic nonclosure."

In this Chapter Three, we provide a close reading of Novalis' *Fichte Studien*<sup>163</sup> in order to show that this "organic nonclosure" is precisely Novalis' own stance, too. In other words, even as early as Novalis' first philosophical text, Novalis supports the notion of a divine, organismic Absolute that comes to empirical consciousness of itself through our finite being. Jacobi and Herder loom large as intellectual precedents in the text, but Novalis mostly formulates his position in tight reaction to Fichte's foundationalism and theory of the ego Absolute, or *Tathandlung*. While Novalis fundamentally agrees with Fichte (both men influenced here by Jacobi) that the personal experience of self-conscious consciousness entitles the subject to knowledge that our consciousness is the appearance of the Absolute, he believes that Fichte has been deceived — by a necessary illusion of the divine Absolute's self-instantiation — into believing that the underlying being is the human subject. In his correction of Fichte's deception, Novalis demonstrates that the Absolute can in fact only be *negatively* approached in philosophy; contra Fichte, the Absolute cannot form a self-evident foundation from which a system of knowledge could be deduced and so secure the claims of empirical science with finality. Instead,

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<sup>163</sup> All quotations in this chapter are from the Hans-Joachim Mähl edition (Novalis, *Werke/Novalis Bd. 2, Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk* (München, Wien: Hanser, 2005)), which is currently accepted as the most reliable ordering of Novalis' *Fichte Studien*. Also, unless explicitly noted otherwise, the reader should assume all fragments are from the *Fichte Studien*, which forms the focus of this chapter. It is customary in Novalis scholarship to cite fragments by their number in parentheses following the quotation, and we follow that custom here.

Novalis suggests a more modest theory of truth: because we have a right to knowledge *that* God conditions human consciousness of objects, the efforts of empirical science are indeed not in vain (solipsism is not a danger for the human knower); but there can be no final surety of any given claim about the world. The only available option to finite knowers such as ourselves is the endless attempt at the coherence of empirical observations, a process that can never know when it has reached the finish. In short, Novalis' position in the *Fichte Studien* is "organic nonclosure": our consciousness inheres in God's being and so our scientific investigation of the world can take place in the good faith that it indeed reveals being, but God's being cannot be incorporated into a system of knowledge that would ever allow us to know that science has come to an end.

#### I. "Bewußtseyn ist ein Seyn außer dem Seyn im Seyn": Novalis' Organicism

In his *Fichte Studien*, Novalis examines self-conscious consciousness and so joins philosophers from Descartes to Kant in orienting the task of philosophy — the defense of empirical knowledge — in the knowledge one can have of oneself. Novalis fundamentally agrees with Kant that human consciousness is discursive, i.e., the synthetic product of understanding and sensibility. But unlike Kant, who asked about the conditions of self-conscious consciousness in general (his was a transcendental reflection upon what is required for any consciousness that can say of its content that it is "mine"), Novalis follows the lead of Fichte and Jacobi in examining the private and lived experience of consciousness — consciousness considered as in fact *mine*. Another way of putting this point is that, while Kant was concerned with any consciousness that can be

accompanied by an "I think," Novalis is concerned with immediacy, the actual experience of self-conscious consciousness. Hence when Novalis speaks of Kant's two conditions of consciousness, understanding and sensibility, he describes them instead in the phenomenological terms of "Reflexion" and "Gefühl," or the synthesizing perspective of the I and the intimately connected, sensuous material synthesized in the I.

One of Novalis' keystone ideas is that human beings do not experience feeling and reflection separately, but rather that our experience is their inextricable unity. "Gefühl und Reflexion bewirken zusammen die Anschauung." (#16) More specifically, what Novalis describes of the firsthand experience of consciousness is that the unity of feeling and reflection forms a *boundary* around our possible experience, such that all consciousness we ever have is a reflected sensation, a "unifying third": "Gefühl und Reflexion bewirken zusammen die Anschauung. Es ist das vereinigende Dritte — das aber nicht in die Reflexion und das Gefühl kommen kann." (#16) Sometimes he uses the term "sphere" for the boundedness of consciousness, of which reflection and feeling are constitutive halves, as he writes in fragment #17 ("Reflexion" is "Hälfte einer Sfäre," where "Die Sfäre ist der Mensch" and the other "Hälfte ist das Gefühl"). We find ourselves always already inside the enclosed "Sfäre" of reflected sensation, or sensations unified into our singular perspective, and so we find ourselves thrown beyond the original act of the relation of sensations to each other that is the "Muttersfäre" that gives birth to our consciousness: "Warum wir [die erste Handlung] nicht gewahr werden — weil sie das Gewahrwerden erst möglich macht, und folglich dis *in* ihrer Sfäre liegt — die Handlung des Gewahrwerdens kann ja also nicht aus ihrer Sfäre herausgehen und die

Muttersfäre mitfassen wollen." (#1) Part of what it means to be always already within the sphere of self-conscious consciousness is that the origin of our consciousness is lost to us.

Thanks to the bounded quality of our consciousness, according to Novalis, the "I" can only ever experience objects within its own private perspective, which is to say, insofar as its understanding is actualized in feeling, its existential touchstone. *I* cannot experience *your* perspective because I am not *in* your being ("Weil das Ich ein durchgehends bestimmtes ist, so kann es den allgemeinen Gehalt nur in sich erkennen... Wissen, als eine Bestimmung, kann es ihn nicht, denn sonst müßte er *in ihm* seyn", #1). Nor can I hope to analyze concepts independently of my empirical experience of them and still make valid claims about the world ("Die Philosophie soll nicht mehr antworten, als sie gefragt wird. Hervorbringen kann sie nichts. Es muß ihr etwas gegeben werden", #15). With these two claims — and especially with the second — Novalis agrees with the Kantian limitation of valid knowledge to a possible experience, understood as the experience enabled by the understanding's embeddedness in the existential touchstone of sensation. Yet, according to Novalis and in contrast to Kant, even though the sphere of consciousness can never *witness* the original act of reflection of sensation, and so cannot hope to grasp its own constitutive synthesis nor to glean universal truths by conceptual analysis alone, nonetheless the first-person experience of our thrownness into consciousness still does indicate the nature of the original relationship between sensibility and understanding that gives rise to our sphere. Importantly, by working out the ontological implications of phenomenology, Novalis shows his participation in a distinctly post-Kantian discourse, and so the insights of his *Fichte Studien* ought not be characterized, with Manfred Frank, as a mere "return to Kant," nor should the objectivism

of his notion of reflection be characterized as a merely retrograde affinity for Platonism, as Frederick Beiser has suggested.

To preview Novalis' argument: the "spherical" quality of our consciousness also gives us the right to infer the *inherence* of our consciousness in a *higher*, self-conditioning being. It is the right, in other words, to organic Spinozism or Herderian panentheism. To claim that the I's undeniable self-discovery as always already within a sphere of consciousness and beyond its point of origin is to claim that consciousness does not emerge *until* a synthesis of sensations occurs. Understanding *becomes* understanding in the moment of recognition of itself in sensations given to it, and sensibility *becomes* sensibility in the presentation of its material by the understanding: that is, sensibility and understanding must be reciprocally determining or mutually fulfilling, an identity of matter and form that are only matter and form in their union with each other, to account for the boundedness of immediacy. This hylomorphism of the two conditions of consciousness is significant, because it means that consciousness is an accidental byproduct of the coming-into-being of the "Muttersfäre": consciousness is a "mode" or a modification of the organic — actively self-creating — substance of the Absolute, which Novalis calls a panentheistic God. Another way Novalis puts the same point is that the phenomenal sphere is the *appearance* of the noumenal sphere, in the sense of the way the noumenal sphere appears or reveals itself in and as our mental life. Sensibility and understanding are not Kant's separate, dualistic faculties that unite only mysteriously across an unbridgeable divide; rather, the relation of sensations (the existential parts or components of consciousness) to each other (i.e., their reflective synthesis into the perspective of the I) is directed by the whole that they constitute — being — which

makes empirical consciousness the accident of the self-relation of being, the panentheistic being of God, or the whole that precedes the created parts that instantiate his existence as creation. Our mental life is thus the *self-awareness of being* — and an answer to the problem of the knowability of being, or the basic goal of Kantian epistemology. Again, what is so significant about Novalis' contribution to the post-Kantian debate is that he claims we have a right to knowledge of the relation of consciousness to absolute being — a right, in other words, to the knowability of being or its re-cognizability by our understanding — as an implication merely of the self-experience of consciousness as an enclosed sphere. The goal of Chapter Two was to show a discourse of the relationship between reflection and being, in the philosophies of Jacobi and Herder, that does not rule out knowledge of the nature of being simply because reflection is a division from sensuous immediacy with being; our point here is that Novalis too joins in agreement with this discourse. Our thrownness into a bounded sphere of consciousness as reflected feeling is itself a relation to the panentheistic or organicist Absolute: it is the relationship precisely *of thrownness from it*. Textual evidence for this position now follows.

The self-experience of the boundedness or "spherical" quality of consciousness by itself implies that consciousness is a mode of organic being, according to Novalis, because "[d]ie Handlung, daß Ich sich als Ich setzt muß mit der Antithese eines unabhängigen Nichtich und der Beziehung auf eine sie umschließende Sphäre verknüpft seyn" (#8). Novalis makes two, related claims to note here. The first is that the self-experience of consciousness — the I as immediacy — is only ever the result of the understanding's finding itself in a given object (given, as in, not produced by it: "Antithese eines *unabhängigen* Nichtich"). I simply do not have firsthand experience of

myself except as a unity *of sensations* (Herder made this same point in slightly different terms when he said that the soul "in d[em] Körper wie in einem Spiegel ihr selbst erkennt"<sup>164</sup>). The second claim to note in this fragment is that it is not possible for the understanding to find itself in a given object, unless that object is something in which the understanding *can* find itself, or in other words, unless concept and sensation share ontological likeness, a common root in a higher sphere whose relationship to itself conditions both the nonreducibility and the unifiability of form and matter ("und der Beziehung auf eine *sie umschließende* Sphäre"). By this "relationship of sphere to itself" is meant quite specifically that the sphere as whole directs, and is in turn instantiated by, the relationship of the parts to each other; that is, sensations in the synthetic relationship that is their reflection into consciousness. Without this organic grounding, the "sie umschließende Sphäre" would not be the relation that conditions immediacy, but rather a third party in a tripartite determination that then begs how all three are related. The relation of two functionally distinct yet ontologically identical parts — this identity-in-difference of concept and percept — could only be grounded by their mutual containment in a higher being, or a whole that is constituted by them as parts but that also, in turn, relates the parts to each other as parts of its whole, its self-identity as sphere. Since we do, undeniably, find ourselves always already in the sphere of reflected feeling (it is the minimal perspective to which even the skeptic would attest), we have a right to the inference to the higher sphere and its organic containment of our consciousness: "Der

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<sup>164</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, quoted in Marion Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1994) 124. Novalis himself actually used the terms *Körper* and *Seele* with precisely this Herderian conclusion that the actualization of the soul's self-consciousness only occurs in the medium of, or in connection with, the body, in *Fichte Studien* fragments 568 and 637. He also agrees with Herder about "matter" and "spirit" in being (not just body and soul in human being, but matter and spirit in all being) as mutually determining aspects in fragment 225.

Mensch fühlt die Grenze die alles für ihn, ihn selbst, umschließt, *die erste Handlung*; er muß sie glauben, so gewiß er alles andre weiß." (#3)

Novalis makes this point in several places, including the very first fragment: "Was ist Ich? / Absolutes thetisches Vermögen/ Die Sphäre des Ich muß für uns alles umschließen. Als Selbst Gehalt kann es Gehalt erkennen. Das Erkennen deutet auf sein *Ichseyn*." (#1) The "I" is a capacity for bringing an object to self-consciousness (it's an "absolutes thetisches Vermögen"), and is capable of recognizing itself in the given material because its capacity is "contained" in, or enabled by, a being of which it too is content, which is to say, for the very reason that the I is ontologically the same as its object, namely that they are related to each other by their inherence in a higher being, the I can re-cognize itself in the other ("als Selbst Gehalt kann es Gehalt erkennen"). The mere fact that *the I finds itself always already* in the sphere of subject-objectivity that encloses all possible experience for it is by itself justification enough to infer that the I is the product of a higher being, even while the ground is not itself an object for the I ("Die Sphäre muß für uns alles umschließen").

Essentially Novalis utilizes Kant's limitation (that knowledge must be restricted to valid empirical experience) to infer the conditioning that gives rise to the very experience that empirical consciousness has of itself as limited. Novalis does not claim to take the underlying being itself literally as an object of consciousness (the way that we are conscious of objects like a "computer" or "desk," for example), but rather to infer its organic nature from the very fact that consciousness cannot take its origin as an object:

"[Das] Ich [ist] im Grunde nichts — Es muß ihm alles Gegeben werden — Aber es kann nur ihm etwas gegeben werden und das Gegebene wird nur durch Ich etwas... Dis hellt auch die Materie von Deductionen a priori auf. Was dem Ich nicht gegeben ist, das kann



es nicht aus sich deduciren — aber mit dem Gegebenseyn tritt auch seine Befugniß und Macht ein, dasselbe zu deduciren." (#568)

If the I can only become self-conscious in its union with an object that must be given to it, and can become immediate with no object — including itself — *except* in that relation, then the empirical I must also acknowledge that it is only by virtue of a higher reflection that organically contains both the I and the object in its self-relation that the I finds itself in fact always already empirically self-conscious. Because the I does in fact find itself thrown into empirical, self-conscious consciousness, it has the right to deduce that its undeniable thrownness is indeed a product of a higher being's self-relation, precisely because it could not find itself existing in the sphere of empirical consciousness without that higher "Muttersfäre."

So, without leaving the sphere of the I and the empirical knowledge that it marks as valid within its boundary ("wir sind hier noch nicht transcendent, sondern im Ich und für das Ich," #3), Novalis is able to make an inferential leap to knowledge of an ontology previously unavailable to Kant's system. His notion of the inherence of consciousness in a higher being is an organic version of Spinozistic monism. The I's finding itself always already in consciousness implies that an actively self-conditioning being lies at the root of empirical consciousness and enables that the understanding even can re-cognize itself in the opposed object. This "Muttersfäre" brings itself into being, and its absolute self-realization, which is an ongoing activity of self-materialization of its own form ("Was Ist — ist durch die Thätigkeit," #303), produces an "accident" or byproduct of consciousness, just like Socrates' *tan* is an accident of his underlying human being: "[D]as Absolute, wie ich das Ursprünglich Idealreale oder realideale nennen will, [erscheint] als Accidens..." (#17). That is, by becoming substance — by becoming finite

or existing, by becoming being — in its act of self-realization or self-instantiation by the parts that constitute it as whole, the Absolute unites form and matter as nonreducible, mutually determining elements of existence. Consciousness is an immediate product of this relation, and so an embeddedness as byproduct or "accident" of the substance of the Absolute:

"Gefühl und Reflexion bewirken zusammen die Anschauung. Es ist das vereinigende Dritte — das aber nicht in die Reflexion und [das] Gefühl kommen kann — da die Substanz nie ins Accidens kriechen kann, die Synthese nie ganz in der These und Antithese erscheinen. So entsteht ein Object aus Wechselwirkung 2er Nichtobjecte." (#16)

By "Nichtobjecte," Novalis means the form and matter of the understanding and sensibility ("Gefühl ist Stoff im Ich — Reflexion Form im Ich," #27) considered as independent, and thus not yet existants, because not yet actualized by the self-realization of the underlying being of the Absolute. Once this Absolute brings being into being by its own act of self-realization, or self-materialization of its form, then consciousness (i.e., reflected feeling, substantiated form) emerges as the simultaneous self-experience of this being: the mental or internal aspect or mode of its becoming-finite. In short, our consciousness is the way that the Absolute appears in finite form. The phenomenal realm is conditioned by the noumenal realm, and the phenomenal is the appearance of the noumenal; Kant's "transcendental" conditions have become, in Novalis' reading, also the "transcendent" conditions whose becoming-immanent gives rise to our empirical consciousness.

Novalis also claims that the self-instantiation of the Absolute, or the becoming-immanent of its transcendent form, conditions our consciousness as the byproduct of its becoming finite in fragment #25. The fragment reads:

"Nachzuholen möchte noch seyn — daß die Urhandlung mit sich selbst in Wechselwirkung steht. Ihre relativ erste Handlung, ihre relative Konstituierung, ist ursprünglich die zweyte, ihre relativ 2te Handlung, das Fortschreiten zum Was, ursprünglich die erste Handlung. Letztere ist ursprünglich absolute, Erstere relativ absolut... Was ihm die Beschränkung durch sich selbst gleichsam zur Natur macht, das Absolute Ich, von diesem derivirt sich beydes, das Abhängige und durch sich selbst Beschränkte — Es ist das Eigentliche Unabhängige und Unbeschränkte."

The *Urhandlung* or "original act" is the self-instantiation or self-materialization of the Absolute's immaterial form, whereby it becomes a finite being. Because the original act is the finitization of the infinite, Novalis describes it as having two sides or moments — the "first" and "second" acts — which refer to the infinite-*becoming*-finite and the infinite-*become*-finite, respectively: a subtle difference meant to capture that finite being is produced by an ongoing activity of the self-finitization of the infinite. "Was ihm die Beschränkung durch sich selbst gleichsam zur Natur macht, das Absolute Ich, von diesem derivirt sich beydes, das Abhängige und durch sich selbst Beschränkte — Es ist das Eigentliche Unabhängige und Unbeschränkte." Here Novalis calls that infinite the "absolute I," but his point (an argument that will become even clearer when we address Novalis' criticism of Fichte below) is that the truly *absolute* "I" can only be the *divine* ego: self-finitization occurs because the Absolute can *create* that of which it thinks, so that an Absolute self-reflection is a self-materialization, a true "intellectual intuition" in the sense of a creative immediacy of form and matter.

So just as much as Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte, Herder is a key intellectual ingredient of the *Fichte Studien*. Novalis does not mention Herder by name in the *Fichte Studien* (neither does he mention Jacobi, and only rarely even Fichte or Kant); indeed, his most programmatic statement explicitly gives *himself* credit for his Absolute: "Spinoza stieg bis zur Natur — Fichte bis zum Ich, oder der Person. Ich bis zur These Gott." (#151)

Nonetheless, many of Novalis' formulations of God's ontology and of God's organic relation to creation would have been famously familiar in Novalis' day from Herder's *Gott, einige Gespräche* (1787). One of the reasons that the details of Herder's influence in the *Fichte Studien* is not presently more acknowledged is that it contradicts Manfred Frank's dominant reading that the Absolute is a merely regulative concept. But far too many fragments in the *Fichte Studien* are made without any qualification that even could be interpreted, with Manfred Frank, as a regulative diminution of the ontological commitment to God's existence<sup>165</sup>; indeed, Novalis most often speaks of God in the *Fichte Studien* with palpable reverence, not epistemological restraint.

Novalis agrees with Herder that the Absolute is the panentheistic God, an organismic version of Spinoza's divine being, and that consciousness is the modal byproduct of the infinite God's becoming finite as creation. God is the self-creating ground of created existence, which makes him the whole that is actualized by the very parts that he creates (God exists by means of his creation) and the ongoing sustenance of created life, its immanent spirit: "These ist in der Monadik — Gott schlechthin allein. Antithese — Gott als Schöpfer. Synthese — Immanentschaffende Gottheit." (#192) Created being is life, an ongoing activity, because only as eternal change can finite existence be a material approximation of the infinite and transcendent God: "Seyn ist Schweben" (#556); "Gott ist die unendliche Thätigkeit... Was Ist — ist durch die Thätigkeit." (#303) God is the soul of the world (#567 and 568), and the world is his body, just like finite organisms are material parts put together by and in service of their immaterial souls: "Gott und Welt — wie Materie und Geist." (#453) But unlike the finite

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<sup>165</sup> This specific interpretive issue (regulative vs. positive concept) will be addressed below, in the section about Novalis' ex negativo deduction.

organism, God is the only organismic being that, as Herder claimed, can truly say "I" in the sense of a being who is the creative subject of its own thoughts, the true immediacy of thinking and being: "Gott ist Ich. /Unendlichkeit — Allheit in der Theilbarkeit." (#54)

Novalis also sketches his agreement with Herder's philosophy of nature, writing: "Die transscendente Natur ist zugleich immanent — so auch die immanente Person ist transscendent zugleich — und auch umgekehrt... Sie sind wie Eine Linie. Her ist sie das Bild der Natur — hin das Bild des Ich." (#153) This statement echoes Herder's thesis in *Gott, einige Gespräche* that nature and consciousness are aspects of God's being in an ascending hierarchy or chain of being that becomes more and more spiritually advanced, with the human being at the apex of finite beings. This Herderian philosophy of nature is intrinsic to the philosophy of mind that we have been detailing in the *Fichte Studien* thus far. Novalis writes, "Unsre Natur ist immanent — unsre Reflexion transscendent. Gott sind wir — als Individuum denken wir" (#218): our consciousness is a byproduct of God's self-instantiation by means of his creative self-reflection, so that our sensation, the existential touchstone of our consciousness (and as an embodied capacity, the existential touchstone of our whole being), is our unity with God insofar as he is self-created matter, and our reflection, or the capacity to bring that sensation to imagistic consciousness, is our unity with God insofar as he is self-creating form. "Wir sind, wir leben, wir denken in Gott." (#462)

This panentheism need not necessarily diminish the "Kantian" limitation of thought to sensation. One of the main theses of this dissertation is that we must read Novalis' famous fragment, "Das Bewußtseyn ist ein Seyn außer dem Seyn im Seyn," in the pious mindset of a Herderian panentheist in order to appreciate its *multiple* layers of

meaning, rather than read it as a statement of epistemic limitation alone; this one line expresses *both* the limitations of our representational thinking *and* the conditioning of that thinking by the inherence of our being in God's being. By adding brackets to the fragment, we can graphically indicate its polysemy: consciousness is a [being outside of] [being within being], or a [reflection] of [feeling] and therefore a bounded sphere that can know nothing but itself; at the same time — a simultaneity performed by the polysemy of the fragment — consciousness is a [being outside of being] [within being], or [the closed sphere of consciousness] [conditioned by the identity of being]. In short, consciousness is a "being outside of being within being" *because* it is a thrownness into the world by God's own becoming-immanent. It is especially astonishing that Novalis arrived at a Herderian, organismic God by inference from the self-experience of bounded consciousness years before Herder offered the same vein of response to Kant in his *Metakritik* of 1799. Herder's metacritique was indeed consistent with the psychology of knowledge that he had publically propounded for decades (i.e., the human being is a "*Kraft*" or living force that is simultaneously being and consciousness of being); but Herder himself did not see the argument from immediacy to panentheism until after Novalis did. (That said, we do not mean to argue for Novalis' direct influence on Herder, since the *Fichte Studien* were of course never published.)

Thus far, this reading of Novalis distinguishes itself significantly from Manfred Frank's. Frank argued that Novalis' philosophy was a hybrid of Jacobi's monist notion Being, or identity in a thoroughly Parmenidean rather than organic sense, and Kant's notion of judgment, or the discursive synthesis of a priori concept and sensuous matter. Novalis believed that Kant required that sensation (feeling) be a nondiscursive

immediacy of the self with Being; upon the reflection of that feeling by the understanding, consciousness separates itself from identity with Being and presents an illusory world of difference (between objects and between subject and object) in the sphere of consciousness. Consciousness thus cannot hope to take its point of immediacy with Being as an object; instead, all philosophy can do is correct the "ordo inversus" that reflection presents to consciousness, namely the seeming priority of the I as a Fichtean ego, after which correction we merely understand that the I is not "master of its own house." More than this, we cannot know. The "Absolute" is then a merely regulative idea for Novalis, or the way the human understanding must think about its condition by virtue of its own cognitive nature as perception by means of division of identity. The Absolute is an "Unding" in the sense of an "absurdity," something that doesn't exist and shouldn't be pursued philosophically with any goal of actually reaching it within thought (though thought will be compelled by its own tendencies to seek it nonetheless, and its approach will necessarily be endless, because impossible: an "unendliche Annäherung," as Frank titled his work). My reading of Novalis, in contrast, argues that the reflection of feeling — the standing of the I's perspective over and against a sensuous immediacy with being in which that perspective recognizes and so actualizes consciousness of being — is warrant for the inference to a sphere of self-conditioning being or the Absolute, even as we are also thrown beyond the Absolute in the realm of phenomenal appearance. The Absolute is indeed an "Unding," but not as an "absurdity"; rather it is that which, in itself or prior to its self-actualization, is not a thing, infinite rather than finite. Its becoming a thing produces our consciousness and thereby is lost to us as an original transcendence. We can nicely summarize the difference with Frank with our different interpretations of

the fragment "Bewußtseyn ist ein Seyn außer dem Seyn im Seyn." While Frank only sees one level of this fragment — namely that consciousness arises from a reflection or standing outside (Seyn außer) the immediacy of feeling with being (Seyn im Seyn), and so is cut off from immediacy — this dissertation both acknowledges this level *and* the other layer, which claims that this sphere of reflected feeling is conditioned by its containment in being, "im Seyn." Because he failed to acknowledge this polysemy, Frank could not see that precisely the *reflective division* that *separates* consciousness from its absolute ground and "throws" it into the sphere of empirical finitude is an absolute self-reflection, God's becoming immanent as creation, and that thrownness is itself a relation to the Absolute for Novalis.

## II. Novalis' Metacritique of Fichte

Fichte, too, supported the notion of an absolute being that conditions empirical consciousness, and specifically an absolute being that is a self-reflectively self-constituting activity (which can also be called "organic" insofar as its whole directs and is put together from the relationship of its parts). Just as influenced by Jacobi's reading of Kant as Novalis was, Fichte too saw himself as inferring this Absolute from the standpoint of the empirical self-awareness of consciousness. But in contrast to Novalis, Fichte's Absolute is not God, but the human ego. Fichte calls the "Ich" the *Tathandlung*, an absolutely free activity of self-reflection, and the self-creation of a subject-objectivity that, through its self-reflection, sets up an a priori self-given I that becomes empirically self-conscious upon sensuous affection by the outside world. Now, if they shared so



many methodological instincts, then why does Novalis reject Fichte's Absolute in his *Fichte Studien*? In the reading that follows, Novalis' argument against Fichte is that the human understanding, which must be *dependent* in its role within consciousness on a sensory matter that is *given* to it, cannot set up any consciousness by means of itself alone. Novalis shows that, wherever Fichte believes to have indicated that the underlying being is a representational knower that can take itself as object, invariably his derivation actually ends up obscuring the ontological contribution of sense-matter by attributing its materialization to the formal activity of the understanding in the I alone. In various ways, Fichte *mistakes* the understanding for the complex of understanding and sensation, form and matter. Fichte's derivations therefore fail as inferences to being, and the self he "reveals" is not the ground of consciousness, according to Novalis. Thus Novalis offers his own "metacritique" of Fichte's metacritique of Kant, by questioning of the validity of Fichte's inference to the being that conditions Kantian judgment.

Fichte understood himself to deduce the underlying being that gives rise to consciousness by seeking the condition of the self-experience of our empirical consciousness. This project of locating the ground in being could proceed in any number of ways, but Fichte chooses (in the first versions of his *Wissenschaftslehre*) to take a law that is unquestionably certain — the law of identity, or "A is A" — and then ask, in what does its undeniability consist, what makes this law true for us, in short, what is the necessary condition of its undeniability? Because of the particular undeniability of the law *for our* human consciousness, the condition of the undeniability should be the being that underlies our consciousness, according to Fichte. Now, the point of "A is A" is that the "A" could be any thing; the truthfulness of the law does not stem from the *object* that

is claimed to be self-identical. The law "A is A" is really the assertion of the absolute truth of the *equation* of A(1) and A(2), or the copula or bond "is," as in, some object "is itself." More precisely, then, Fichte seeks the condition of the copula in order to find the being that conditions the undeniability of the law of identity. Fichte then claims that it is only for a consistent standpoint that any given object can be consistently equated with itself; so, the condition of the copula must be the ego's representational capacity or capacity for synthetic, conceptual understanding that joins matter or sensations together. In other words, the absolute conditioning being of the certainty of "A is A" is reflection *as being*, which is to say, the unconditional self-positing or self-affirmation of the "I." The I is an "intellectual intuition," or a subject of and object to itself, an "I am I" that, in its self-reflection, conditions its own being and so conditions the standpoint whose affection by external objects, in what Fichte calls "feeling," gives rise to our empirical consciousness of objects, such as the consciousness that "A" is also an enduring, self-identical thing.

Novalis agrees in principle with deducing being as the conditioning origin of the self-experience of consciousness. Both Novalis and Fichte have been influenced by Jacobi's reading of Kant to believe that the inference to being is justifiable, because it is an inference to the conditions of the experience that consciousness has of itself. But he does not agree that Fichte has successfully carried out this deduction, and therefore believes that Fichte has not successfully identified the nature of the absolute ground of consciousness. The problem with Fichte's deduction from "A is A," Novalis argues, is that it has not actually taken its bearings from the self-experience of empirical consciousness. In the very first lines of his first fragment, Novalis writes that the law "A

is A" is a merely formal indication of identity, "ein philosophischer Parallelismus" that operates by the logical (but not *ontological*) rules of "Setzen, Unterscheiden und verbinden." The law indicates the matter or the particularity of any given "A" with these relations — i.e., with the relations of form to itself alone — and so the ontological nonreducibility of matter to form, sense to concept, is precisely what is obscured by the analysis of "A is A" as if it were an empirical experience. In "A ist A," the copula ("is") is not the actual matter of A, but rather the merely propositional relation of A(1) to A(2), so that the "to itself" of the law's relation of form to itself *seems* to be matter, but is not: the actual matter of A must be given to form in what Jacobi called a "Geschehen" and to which Novalis here refers in his comment, "was geschieht." (#1) Hence his conclusion that "A is A" is a "Scheinsatz" or illusory proposition. (#1) In thinking that the matter is explained by (what is here really) the relation of form to itself, Fichte only mistakes the relations within the law of identity for the relations of being. According to Novalis, Fichte has fallen prey to the very cardinal sin against which his whole post-Kantian generation warned in unison. He has effectively claimed to know the movement of concepts in abstraction from their sensuous instantiation, and so ends up misattributing the partner-role of sensuous matter to the logical relations necessitated by conceptual form alone.

Novalis continues this line of argument against Fichte in fragments #3 and #15, in which he discusses the phenomenological and the methodological aspects of Fichte's mistake, respectively. Fragment #3 states:

"Wenn nun der allgemeine Gehalt nur im Ich wäre, so könnte man das bestimmte Seyn nicht dem Nur Seyn entgegensetzen? Der *Glauben* zwingt uns auch nur diese Scheingegensetzung vorzunehmen, zu der wir allerdings im thetischen Vermögen die Kraft besitzen. /So wechselt das Denken und d[as] Fühlen die Rolle des Subjectiven und

Objectiven./ An dem Nur Seyn haftet gar keine Modifikation, kein Begriff — man kann ihn nichts entgegensetzen... Um das Ich *zu bestimmen* müssen wir es auf etwas beziehn. Beziehn geschieht durch Unterscheiden — beydes durch These einer absoluten Sphäre der Existenz."

Here Novalis repeats the Kantian injunction that the I must only become empirically self-aware as a *result* of the synthetic unity of the understanding and sensibility ("Um das Ich *zu bestimmen* müssen wir es auf etwas beziehn. Beziehn geschieht durch Unterscheiden"), because only such a dependent notion of self-consciousness upholds the representationality of human judgment. Fichte believes that he, too, upholds this limitation by proposing an original immediacy of self that becomes empirically or actually self-conscious only upon affection by something outside the I. But in the above fragment, Novalis essentially wonders: how are we even to understand an immediacy that is not actualized or empirical, given that there should be no awareness, no subject-object relation at all, without true opposition of self and other? Given that determined being for Fichte is only in the I ("Wenn nun der allgemeine Gehalt nur im Ich wäre"), what is outside the I would then have to be "chaos" in the sense of undetermined being ("Nur Seyn"), and then, on the rule that the I must emerge from "Beziehn," the opposition between chaos and determination would have to give rise to the empirical self-awareness of the I. But Novalis notes that chaos is not consciously objectifiable, because it is not something to which we can affix a concept or "Modifikation"; so Fichte has not succeeded in describing the original relation of the I to the external object that underlies the sphere of our empirical consciousness. In essence Fichte has abstracted *to* the immediacy that he should have started from — a mistake that is subjectively easy to make, given that "das Denken und d[as] Fühlen [wechselt] die Rolle des Subjectiven und Objectiven": the existential or objective touchstone of thought is in fact sensation, not

thought by itself — but the subjectification of sensation by thought makes it seem, to itself, that it is an independent immediacy unto itself, a self-giving being. This fragment, in other words, is the *phenomenological* version of Novalis' above critique of Fichte, which is that Fichte mistakes the dependence of form on matter for the dependence of form on itself, or in other words, mistakes the logical for the ontological. Subjectively or phenomenologically speaking, I do indeed find *myself* in a sphere of objects given to my perspective, but it is a Fichtean mistake to believe that this experience — this givenness of objects *to me* — indicates the ontological priority and independence *of the being of my I*.

Fragment #15 discusses Fichte's same confusion of the relations of logic for ontology, only now from the methodological angle of Fichte's attempted metacritique of critical knowledge. Again, Fichte hoped to secure the knowledge of knowledge — the *Wissenschaftslehre* — by deriving Kant's system from the self as *Tathandlung*, which should be revealed in a reflection upon the lived experience of self-awareness. Novalis summarizes Fichte's method in fragment #15: "Nun wird sie ['die Philosophie'] Selbstbetrachtung seyn. Ey! wie fängt es der Lernende an sich selbst in dieser Operation zu belauschen" (later in the updated *Wissenschaftslehre novo methodo*, Fichte would state his position similarly: "die WißenschaftsLehre fordert jeden auf, zu überlegen, was er thut, in dem er sagt: *Ich*"<sup>166</sup>). Of course, we have argued extensively that Novalis supports the orientation of a philosophy of knowledge in the self-experience of consciousness. He does not disagree with Fichte's general methodology of "self-observation," but rather with its presumption that *what* the self-experience of consciousness intuits is — or even could be — *the self* as ground. According to Fichte,

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<sup>166</sup> Fichte 7

when consciousness reflects upon itself, it encounters a *medium* of conscious objects that *must* be the self, understood as an original thinking-that-thinks-itself. This inference to the self as "intellectual intuition" or *Tathandlung* is necessary, Fichte claims, because the self-experience of consciousness is both *immediate* (a nonreducible thrownness into its own position) and *thought* (intellection). But Novalis counters that the "self" is precisely *not* what this self-experiencing medium could be. All consciousness is always already *beyond* the synthetic act that conditions it: "Die Philosophie ist aber selbst im Lernenden." *Ex hypothesi*, the synthetic act — what Novalis here calls "lernen" — operates by an impression of a distinct object upon our otherwise empty capacity to represent it, *after* which impression, self-conscious consciousness arises: "unter lernen verstehn wir überhaupt nichts, als den Gegenstand anschauen und ihn mit seinen Merckmalen uns einprägen." So Fichte's claim (that what self-reflection "learns" is the self as medium of all consciousness) unfeasibly requires that, in the underlying synthesis, the self-as-learner impresses the self-as-object upon itself, i.e., impossibly separates itself *from itself* to take itself as object again. "Es [das Ich] würde also wieder ein Gegenstand." Novalis concludes that *the self* cannot be what we intuit immediately when experience reflects upon itself and is aware of a consistent medium or vehicle of the objects of our consciousness: "Nein Selbstbetrachtung kann sie nicht seyn, denn sonst wäre sie nicht das Verlangte." Fragment #15 is the methodological version of Novalis' critique of Fichte in fragment #1. The self-experience of empirical consciousness does not reveal the self as its conditioning being, because that would require, impossibly, that *re*-presentation can intuit itself, or in other words that an empty form can become, impossibly, a "Dasein" by somehow taking itself as matter. By inferring the self as the ground of the self-

experience of consciousness, Fichte has effectively mistaken the activity of inferring itself, i.e., the merely formal side of seeking the conditions of experience — metacritique — for the whole condition of consciousness: the seeking finds itself and mistakes the ground for a seeking-that-finds-itself, an impossible subject-objectivity.

Chapter One showed that all the reviewed scholars of Novalis' *Fichte Studien* concurred, in spite of their otherwise very different interpretations of his text, that Novalis disagrees with Fichte's Absolute as ego. The present reading is no different in this respect: it too agrees that Novalis denies the condition of empirical consciousness could be an act of self-reflection by a representational thinker that takes itself as object and so sets up the self as the medium of empirical consciousness of objects. But this dissertation disagrees with other readings on the precise terms of Novalis' rejection of Fichte. The central dividing issue is Novalis' stance on what can be inferred from the experience that consciousness has of itself. The dividing issue, to put it in discourse terms, is how Novalis appropriates the Jacobian insight that the experience of subjectivity simultaneously with objectivity implies that consciousness is immediate with being.

To review, Benjamin and Haering both suggested that, according to Novalis, self-reflection is the knowledge that consciousness inheres in a pantheistic Absolute, in Benjamin's reading because Novalis conceived the "form of form" of self-knowledge to be an infinitely filled network, rather than infinite regress, and in Haering's reading because Novalis developed a dialectical philosophy, or dialectical convergence of human and Absolute thinking (i.e., a philosophy of *closure*), even before Hegel did. In other words, both Benjamin and Haering attributed an organic, pantheistic notion of the Absolute to Novalis, because they saw Novalis as rejecting Fichte's human ego in favor

of a *divine* ego that reflects upon itself, thereby producing our consciousness as its immediate byproduct. But later scholars like von Molnár, Frank and Kennedy rejected these earlier readings for not properly recognizing that Novalis never described the immediacy that the self has with itself in terms of "reflection," but rather as "feeling," or a non-conceptual, sensuous immediacy with being, which cannot become an object *to itself* and so acts as an absolute limit to the knowledge that consciousness can have of its ground. Since consciousness arises as reflection upon — understood by each of these later readings as a division from — felt immediacy with being, consciousness is a realm forever beyond its origin, and the proposal of an origin in divine being is its merely regulative explanation for a limitedness that it cannot explain. According to Frank, Novalis understands Jacobian notion of consciousness as "feeling" as precisely this inexplicable limitedness of consciousness. The Absolute is not a pantheistic God for Novalis; it does not even knowably exist — it is an "Unding," or an absurdity, Frank claims. Novalis' rejection of Fichte is then a rejection of Absolutes and absolute grounding *tout court*.

In contrast, this dissertation suggests a middle path between these two phases of Novalis scholarship. It is not the deduction of an absolute being from the self-experience of consciousness that Novalis denies, but rather the deduction of Fichte's representational self as the absolute in particular; our argument has been that Novalis utilizes the restriction of consciousness to the sphere of reflected feeling in order to infer that the ground of their relation is a creative form, a form that instantiates itself, and therefore could not be a dependent form, or representational consciousness. Reflection is indeed a division from the nondiscursive immediacy of feeling, whereby it creates the sphere of



empirical consciousness, but *because* reflection enacts this division *by* recognizing itself only *in* feeling, the very dividedness of consciousness from its ground in being is simultaneously its right to the knowledge of its thrownness from the self-activity of the Absolute. Thus Novalis *joins* Fichte (and Herder too, as we saw in Chapter Two) in believing that Jacobi's persuasive notion of the phenomenological simultaneity of subject and object actually commits him, in spite of himself, to an act of reflection as the condition of that simultaneity, so that Jacobi's convincing metacritique of Kant necessitates a union of Spinoza and Kant in the form of a single, self-reflectively self-creating being, the accident of whose self-creativity is our empirical consciousness. But while Fichte believes that he has successfully abstracted to the reflective condition of this Jacobian subject-objectivity as human ego, Novalis claims that his inference actually mistakes its own formal process for what is really a dependence of that form on a given sensuous matter. That his deduction produced the underlying being as "Ego" is really the illusion of an inference that mistakes logic for ontology, just like "A is A" is *Scheinsatz* that only illusorily presents the essence of identity.

### III. Novalis' Alternative Deduction: The Ex Negativo Approach to Panentheistic

#### Absolute

We have just learned that, according to Novalis, the key mistake of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is that its inference to the being that conditions the sphere of empirical consciousness did not actually occur from the standpoint of the reflection of feeling that would validate that very inference. Following the hybrid of Kant and Jacobi

that both Novalis and Fichte accept, knowledge is valid when it orients from an *allowable* experience (consciousness that is the product of a concept actualized in sense matter), and the private experience of subject-object simultaneity is the self-experience of our conscious immediacy with the being that conditions our consciousness. Fichte attempted to use that self-experience as a platform for a transcendental reflection upon its conditions, so as to discover the Absolute; but since Novalis shows that Fichte's inference is in fact the operation of reflection in abstraction from its substantiation in sense, the deduction is invalid and the ego *Tathandlung* that Fichte discovers is also not the true Absolute.

Yet certainly it was not *unreasonable* of Fichte to *believe* that he had performed a proper deduction. Even Novalis readily concedes this.<sup>167</sup> After all, it's a fair description of our self-experience of consciousness to call it an "Ausgangspunkt,"<sup>168</sup> or an orientation within our own perspective in all acts of knowing, which then not unreasonably begs a Fichtean inference to the condition of that subject as an original subject-objectivity. If Fichte was doing what Novalis would in principle agree with, namely inferring ontology from phenomenology, then what went awry — why did, or more properly how *could*, Fichte's inference effectively get his own phenomenology "wrong"? That Fichte's self-experience would still be a mistake, or in other words, that the finite subject's experience of itself as "Ausgangspunkt" would be both phenomenologically undeniable *and* a misperception of the Absolute as a human subject, leads Novalis to his next major point in the *Fichte Studien*, and to his own *ex negativo* deduction of the relationship between consciousness and the absolute being that conditions it. Novalis' major claim is that the

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<sup>167</sup> See discussion of *Fichte Studien* fragment #3 below.

<sup>168</sup> This is Manfred Frank's term. See, for example, p. 405 of *Unendliche Annäherung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

revelation of the divine Absolute in and as our perspectival consciousness necessarily falsifies the Absolute. The phenomenal realm, the realm of empirical consciousness, is an appearance of the divine in both senses of "appearance": "revelation" *and* "illusion." Insofar as the Absolute appears or becomes finite, it disguises itself, becoming what, in itself, it is not, namely finite rather than infinite, immanent rather than transcendent, empirical rather than immaterial. By offering this reading of Novalis' deduction, this dissertation distinguishes itself once again from the two past and present waves of Novalis scholarship: because Novalis' is an inference from empirical experience to an unobjectifiable condition of that experience, Novalis' deduction of the absolute is indeed a "negative" approach to it (contra the first wave), but this negative approach is nonetheless a positive ontological commitment to the Absolute, rather than the proposal of a merely regulative notion of the Absolute in the sense of a merely necessary idea for our consciousness and that is itself an ontological "absurdity" (contra the second wave).

Novalis' *ex negativo* deduction is one of the more difficult aspects of his *Fichte Studien*. It is helpful to approach the issue "backwards," first detailing how Novalis believes the organic activity of the Absolute gives rise to what is really the illusion of perspectival human consciousness, and next detailing Novalis' defense of the philosophical right to make this claim — a defense he makes alongside his metacritique of Fichte and often using a polysemy that was once again missed by readers like Manfred Frank with significant interpretive consequences.

According to Novalis, the self-experience of human consciousness as a perspective, or a subject's experience of itself over and against a world of objects given to it as outside of it, is itself a function of the divine Absolute as a creative self-reflection

(i.e., a function of its "organicism" or "panentheism"). One of the most direct and stand-alone statements supporting this claim that the human perspective is an accident of the organic self-finitization of the divine is fragment #25 (just after it, in fragment #26, Novalis writes in summary-like fashion: "Untersuchung der absoluten Urhandlung"):

"Nachzuholen möchte noch seyn — daß die Urhandlung mit sich selbst in Wechselwirkung steht. Ihre relativ erste Handlung, ihre relative Konstituierung, ist ursprünglich die zweyte, ihre relativ 2te Handlung, das Fortschreiten zum Was, ursprünglich die erste Handlung. Letztere ist ursprünglich absolute, Erstere relativ absolut — aber für sie allein muß es umgekehrt seyn. Der relative Gesichtspunct dreht immer die Sache um — Er ist ein Schreiten vom Beschränkt Unbeschränkten zum Unbeschränkt Beschränkten, oder vom scheinbar Unbeschränkten/weil es sich selbst beschränkt und also keinen Zwang, keine Schranke spürt/zum Scheinbar Anhängigen/nemlich von diesem durch sich selbst Beschränkten/Das Abhängige ist nemlich mittelbar durch sich selbst abhängig — Das Mittel ist jene Beschränkung durch sich selbst. In diesem Felde ist Täuschung der Einbildungskraft, oder der Reflexion unvermeidlich — in der Darstellung — denn man will Nichtreflexion durch Reflexion darstellen und kommt eben dadurch nie zur Nichtreflexion hin — man beeifert sich zu demonstrieren, daß Schwarz Weiß sey./ Was ihm die Beschränkung durch sich selbst gleichsam zur Natur macht, das Absolute Ich, von diesem derivirt sich beydes, das Abhängige und durch sich selbst Beschränkte — Es ist das Eigentliche Unabhängige und Unbeschränkte."

This fragment was excerpted earlier to demonstrate that Novalis believes that finite being is the product of ongoing self-finitization (Beschränkung) by the Absolute (das Unbeschränkte). The "Urhandlung," or the original act of the Absolute by which being and consciousness of being come into being, has two sides, the "erste Handlung" and "zweite Handlung," which are the infinite-*becoming*-finite ("das Fortschreiten zum Was") and the infinite-*become*-finite ("ihre relative Konstituierung"); Novalis means that all existence is an activity perpetuated by the continual movement of the divine from transcendence to immanence, from *Logos* to existence.

Now we can additionally see in fragment #25 Novalis' larger argument for why that very ongoing activity of self-instantiation by the Absolute *also* conditions the self-experience of human consciousness as an *Ausgangspunkt* on the world (a perspective that

would then be liable to make Fichte's false inference to the Absolute as *Tathandlung*).

Thanks to the fact that being is produced by the constant self-finitization of the infinite by means of creative self-reflection, there is nothing *in existence* that isn't a "reflection" of the infinite in the sense of a materialized infinite or a "Beschränkt Unbeschränkte." For the "limited unlimited," for our finite being, the divine self-limiting form that is *also* our own capacity for understanding is only ever attached to the Absolute's self-limited matter, which is also our sensibility. Consciousness only arises from that ultimate proximity of form and matter conditioned by the organic process of God's becoming finite, and that means that it (consciousness) is not immediacy — it is not creative form — but rather the product of immediacy. On the one hand, our origin in the self-limitation of the unlimited Absolute explains why the human perspective *can* be a representational consciousness at all, or a subject standing over and against an object, capable of recognizing itself in an object at the same time that it stands opposed to it so that it has consciousness *of* an object. It can, because God's creative intellect is a thinking-as-existence that continually ties form to matter in our living being. And on the other hand, the Absolute's original self-limitation also explains why the illusory or falsified perception, from the perspective of that finite being, is that *it* is the point of orientation of being (i.e., as if its finite ego, rather than the higher divine ego, were the ground of the appearance of being).

Reflection in the I is God's reflection, but only insofar as God has become finite, i.e., reflection attached to God's self-instantiation in sensation; so when the formal or reflective half of the finite ego recognizes itself in the feeling given to it, it reflects an infinite creativity, inverting that infinitude and thereby attributing it to itself, so that *to* the finite perspective, infinite creativity seems to come from inside it rather than to be its

higher condition. "In diesem Felde ist Täuschung der Einbildungskraft, oder der Reflexion unvermeidlich — in der Darstellung — denn man will Nichtreflexion durch Reflexion darstellen und kommt eben dadurch nie zur Nichtreflexion hin." The reflection of infinite self-production results in the appearance to the ego that it is the ground of appearance.

Fragment #17 is Novalis' other, more succinct formulation of this point:

"Im *Bewußtseyn* muß es *scheinen*, als gieng es vom Beschränkten zum Unbeschränkten, weil das *Bewußtseyn* von sich, als dem Beschränkten ausgehn muß — und diese geschieht durchs *Gefühl* — ohnerachtet das Gefühl, *abstract* genommen, ein Schreiten des Unbeschränkten zum Beschränkten ist — diese umgekehrte Erscheinung ist natürlich. Sobald das Absolute, wie ich das Ursprünglich Idealreale oder realideale nennen will, als Accidens, oder halb erscheint, so muß es verkehrt erscheinen — das Unbeschränkte wird beschränkt et vice versa."

To our human consciousness, it *seems* that the universe is an unlimited physical space and that we are self-given perspectives on it, limited (perhaps unfortunately) by our sensory or embodied nature to the merely stepwise empirical exploration of the universe. But this appearance, this phenomenology of *Dasein*, is a necessary inversion of what happens at the level of the Absolute to condition our consciousness. The Absolute is infinite mind, infinite *Logos* or form, whose thought of itself creates itself, i.e., makes itself finite, in the ultimate proximity of form and matter in being (and in the "human being" specifically, the ultimate proximity of reflection and feeling). So, "in itself," the infinite is *not* existing or actualized (it is not the physical universe), and "in itself" (i.e., as if in abstraction from feeling), the human mind is simply nothing at all: its *Dasein*, its existence as a perspectivalty, is not limited by feeling but contingent on feeling, which is to say, contingent on a higher being that produces consciousness as an accident of *its* self-reflection. So what we experience is indeed, fundamentally, the Absolute's experience of

itself, but *we experience* that ontology in mirror image: God's infinitely creative mind is representational consciousness in us. "Diese umgekehrte Erscheinung ist natürlich. Sobald das Absolute, wie ich das Ursprünglich Idealreale oder realideale nennen will, als Accidens, oder halb erscheint, so muß es verkehrt erscheinen — das Unbeschränkte wird beschränkt et vice versa." Similarly, Novalis writes later in the *Fichte Studien*: The human being "muß Gott völlig correspondieren nur auf eine umgekehrte Art. Sie ist ein Bild des Malers von sich selbst." (#188) Human beings are God's self-portraits, the products of his self-reflection, and so in them the capacities of understanding and sensibility exist through him but only as a product, not a simultaneity, with his creativity. In 1798 and in the *Vorarbeiten* fragments — that is, in a period scholars typically call "organicist" in *distinction* from the supposedly non-organicist *Fichte Studien* — Novalis likewise writes: "*Gott will Götter.*" (#248) Creation is God's will, and it is his will that humankind be finite instantiations of himself that, for their finitude, merely receive rather than create the contents of their consciousness.

Note the important simultaneity of three notions of "appearance" in Novalis' theory of the Absolute. As soon as the Absolute creates itself, i.e., substantiates its own form and thereby comes into being, so too does consciousness simultaneously arise as the reference to being, the self-awareness of being made possible by the union of matter and form in that absolute self-creation: reflection of feeling, the I, is a givenness of absolute being to itself, whereby it appears. So consciousness is 1) the "revelation" of the Absolute — the *coming-to-appearance* that is the simultaneity of consciousness and the Absolute's coming-into-being — and *also* 2) the way the Absolute "seems," or *appears to a standpoint*, namely the perspective of self-conscious consciousness created by the

Absolute's self-creation, which inversion of creative thinking into representational thinking is also its appearance as 3) "illusion," or falsification. We have already seen how Novalis brilliantly summarizes this absolute conditioning of appearance that is simultaneously the division of appearance from being with the polysemy of his famous fragment #2, which states "Das Bewußtseyn ist ein Seyn außer dem Seyn im Seyn." The immediacy of the Absolute with itself in the act of self-creation — the ultimate proximity of form and matter in the *causa sui* activity of substantiating form — becomes, as soon as the form is actually substantiated and the Absolute is revealed in the finite guise of reflected feeling, a standpoint of a self over and against a world of objects and only capable of recognizing itself in a given object. In standing against itself, the Absolute becomes, in its appearance in consciousness, the polar opposite, even the inversion, of its creative intellect. "Kein Seyn, kein Schein — Kein Schein, kein Seyn — Sie sind die Gegensfären der absoluten Gemeinsfäre — die beyden Hälften einer Kugel" (#237) On the one hand, it is only by means of this standing-against that anything can appear to a standpoint; and yet on the other hand, precisely for its becoming a standing-against itself, or a re-presentation of itself in and as consciousness, the pure and self-creative force of the Absolute falsifies its true being in finite appearance. In the very moment of creating itself and creating our consciousness, the Absolute is lost to consciousness as the condition always already beyond the point of origin of the empirical sphere. Our consciousness is the "inside-out" of the being of the Absolute: a reflection *of* feeling, a formal standpoint over and against a given material, that is conditioned by the opposite, an absolutely creative self-reflection, a form that instantiates itself.



Having detailed what Novalis means by his thesis that the organic Absolute reveals itself as the illusion of the human perspective, we can turn now to Novalis' defense of the philosophical *right* to make this claim. It might seem that he contravenes the Kantian limitation of knowledge to a valid experience (a limitation that he too cares to uphold) by speaking at all about the ontology of the Absolute. But the clue to understanding how Novalis claims to describe the Absolute without also permitting that consciousness leave its empirical sphere is once again his appeal to the bridge from phenomenology to ontology. We find Novalis' defense of his deduction of the Absolute alongside his criticism of Fichte: indeed, the very mechanism of Fichte's deductive mistake is, for Novalis, also the key to the correct deduction of the true absolute being that underlies consciousness. Novalis' metacritique of Fichte is simultaneously — a simultaneity once again marked by polysemy — an *ex negativo* deduction of the divine rather than human ego. Thus Novalis does not see himself as contravening Kantian restrictions by claiming to know the Absolute as object, but rather sees his argument as claiming no more about the Absolute than what is validly inferable as the condition of the standpoint of the sphere of empirical consciousness, and more specifically, the condition of the sphere of empirical consciousness *while* it self-reflects in search of its own condition.

According to Novalis, as we have already seen, we human beings find ourselves always already in a sphere of empirical consciousness, which is the limitation of the self-experience to sensation. We *could* only be this limited *Dasein* if thinking and feeling become themselves *upon* their synthetic union with each other, which is to claim, transcendently, that our sphere of consciousness is an organic product of a higher

reflection. That our empirical consciousness is a byproduct of the Absolute self-reflection *means* that thinking and feeling are related by *its* absolute self-relation. Now, another way of putting this same claim, without heightening its ontological commitment, is that the only consciousness that is indeed the revelation of the Absolute is that consciousness which is the product of the *true interdependence* of feeling and reflection. This reverse formulation of Novalis' move from phenomenology to ontology lets us see how Fichte's *mistake* could become the key to his correction for Novalis. In each of Fichte's attempted deductions, Novalis shows, Fichte thought he was reflecting upon the condition from the standpoint of that interdependence, but he was in fact mistaking the dependence of the human I on feeling for its own original independence, and more specifically, attributing the feeling-half on which reflection is actually dependent to itself as an independence, *thereby finding itself*. Novalis' key insight is that this "mistake" is precisely the *mechanism of "appearance"* in the dual sense of the revelation of Absolute and the emergence of the phenomenal realm as the perspective of *Dasein*. Reflection in the I raises its object (feeling) to the status of empirical consciousness *by finding itself* in the object, which finding or recognition is only possible because both reflection and feeling are contained in a higher self-reflecting being. And by finding *itself*, reflection in the I also systematically inverts the interdependence of thinking and feeling — reflects the higher reflection, in other words — giving rise to the phenomenology within the sphere of empirical consciousness that the subject is the ground or that from which the appearance of being springs. Novalis summarizes this simultaneous critique of Fichte and alternative deduction in his polysemous fragment #14:

"Was die Reflexion *findet*, *scheint* schon *da zu seyn* — Eigenschaft eines *freyen* Actus — Sie findet die Kategorien, die schon *da zu seyn* scheinen — i.e. deren Möglichkeit

(*Form*) und insoferne Nothwendigkeit (*Form*) im Ich und durch das Ich ist, — deren *Wircklichkeit* (*Stoff*) nur in der Reflexion ist." (emphasis by Novalis)

Two things are happening at once in this statement. By emphasizing that the consciousness of the object is only actualized ("deren *Wircklichkeit*") in the moment of synthesis of sensations ("nur in der Reflexion ist"), Novalis iterates that consciousness is an "accident" (elsewhere he is clearer that it is an accident of a higher being's becoming-being). But at the same time, precisely because reflection, in the sense of the conscious image of an object, only emerges *upon* the higher synthesis, the *illusion* from the standpoint of the I is that *it* is the being that actively does the finding of the object, as if it were a self-sufficient source of appearance. Novalis suggests here that this is a *natural mistake*, given that the higher synthesis makes the "I" too only appear with this appearance of the object as there. So in one and the same breath, Novalis show Fichte's ego-*Ausgangspunkt* to be an illusion and also claims that this illusion is the necessary appearance of the (divine) Absolute in falsified guise. We find this same polysemy in the very first lines of the first fragment, in Novalis' use of the term "Scheinsatz":

"Das Wesen der Identität läßt sich nur in einen *Scheinsatz* aufstellen. Wir verlassen das *Identische* um es darzustellen... dis geschieht nur scheinbar — und wir werden von der Einbildungskraft dahin gebracht es zu glauben — es *geschieht*, was schon Ist..."<sup>169</sup>

The illusion that Fichte's self-reflection reveals the *Tathandlung* arises from our constitutive reflection's making us believe that "what occurs, already is," or that the subject-object simultaneity of *Dasein*, which is in fact a *product* of the Absolute's self-reflection (a "Geschehen" or "occurrence" in Jacobi's sense of a revelation of divine creativity), is instead "already there" as the self-giving ego. The divine Absolute appears as the illusion of our finite perspectivity. Thus "A is A" is a "*Scheinsatz*" in the double

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<sup>169</sup> Fragment #1. Emphasis by Novalis.

sense of a false proposition (a merely formal or logical account of identity that obscures the ontological dependence of all form on a matter not presentable in formal terms), and the very way the Absolute reveals itself (the falsifying activity of reflection in the I is the mechanism of Absolute self-revelation).

Novalis also explores how natural it is to mistake the I for the ground of the appearance of being in fragment #3:

"Wenn nun der allgemeine Gehalt nur im Ich wäre, so könnte man das bestimmte Seyn nicht dem Nur Seyn entgegensetzen? Der *Glauben* zwingt uns auch nur diese Scheingegensetzung vorzunehmen, zu der wir allerdings im thetischen Vermögen die Kraft besitzen. /So wechselt das Denken und das Fühlen die Rolle des Subjectiven und Objectiven./" (Emphasis by Novalis.)

Recall that it was Jacobi's insight into the *simultaneity* of the *experience* of the subject and the object that inspired Fichte's (and Novalis') notion of the right to ontology from phenomenology: since we experience them at the same time, Jacobi surmised, our consciousness *must* be an immediacy with being, or our soul's unmediated imaging of the object, that led Jacobi to equate all of consciousness with "feeling" and the epistemic status of consciousness with "belief." But Novalis' point here is that belief, too, because it is *still* the notion of the emergence the conscious sphere *upon* the soul's finding itself organically in the body, leads the subject all too easily to the false conclusion that the source of the appearance of objects is the soul alone, or as Novalis puts it, "so wechselt das Denken und das Fühlen die Rolle des Subjectiven und Objectiven": thinking is the seeming-to-itself that it is the ground of "objectivity" or being, rather than what it really is, the "subjectivity" or mental internalization of the object merely given in feeling.

Incidentally, this fragment #3 is excellent evidence in favor of our, rather than Manfred Frank's, reading of Novalis' appropriation of Jacobi, with significant implications for the

ontological role of the Absolute in the *Fichte Studien*. Frank claimed that Jacobi's notion of sensuous immediacy with being became, for Novalis in his notion of "feeling" within Kantian judgment, a limit to our possible knowledge of being: the reflection of feeling that is consciousness is the deferral of immediacy with being, and also a manner of thinking about objects that necessitates a merely *regulative* notion of their higher condition in an "Absolute." In our contrasting reading, which is substantiated by this fragment #3, Novalis in fact sees Jacobi as failing to understand that even his theory of our conscious immediacy with being still committed him to the nature of consciousness as a product of a *higher* self-reflection: it's only upon the soul's reflection of the body that subject-object simultaneity arises, and that makes the relationship between soul and body a function of neither soul nor body alone, but rather that which could bring their relation into being as an accident of its own coming into being. As we saw in Chapter Two, Herder too saw this problem in Jacobi, and his response was the same as Novalis' in our interpretation of the *Fichte Studien*: the ground of being must be an organic or panentheistic God, because it is the only intellect capable of bringing itself into existence; our consciousness is then the byproduct of this divine and self-creative self-reflection.

By arguing that what *seems at first immediate* (the subject's experience of itself as a self-sufficient standpoint on the world) must be shown by another reflection to be *always already reflected* (i.e., the product of an even higher reflection over which the ego has no control), Novalis is indeed engaging in a "dialectical method" of sorts. But it is important to distinguish Novalis' dialectic from the Hegelian dialectic that Theodor Haering attributes to him, because that difference explains how Novalis' position in the *Fichte Studien* can still be an epistemology in support of *nonclosure*. Unlike Hegel,

Novalis performs an *ex negativo* approach to the Absolute, a thinking-about-thinking that can *never* become the convergence (and so closure) of human and divine thinking, even as it can know that its thought-about-thought is only possible because of a higher divine thinking that conditions it.

"Wir müssen das gleichsam Objective, zum gleichsam subjectiven machen, das Seyn in eine Form des Denkens bringen, um es untersuchen zu können. Wie sorgfältig man aber dann von *dem nothwendigen Zusatz*, von der gegebenen Form, abstrahiren muß, um die ursprüngliche Form des Seyns zu finden und mit dieser das mögliche Substrat alles Stoffs, dies ist leicht einzusehen (#12) ... Nur im Gefühle gleichsam kann die Reflexion ihre reine Form aufstellen — neues Datum des überall herrschenden Wechselverhältnisses zwischen den Entgegengesetzten, oder der Wahrheit, daß alles durch Reflexion Dargestellte nach den Regeln der Reflexion dargestellt ist und von diesen abstrahirt werden muß um das Entgegengesetzte zu entdecken... Die Synthesis dieser These und Antithese [i.e. Reflexion und Gefühl] — muß Eins, Gränze und Sfäre von beyden, absolute Sfäre seyn, denn es ist Synthesis; wir sind aber im bestimmten Stoff, also es muß, es kann nicht anders als — Mensch oder Ich seyn..." (#19)

In short, "abstracting the additive" of reflection, in the midst of the very process of self-reflection, means understanding philosophically that our self-givenness is not put together from reflection alone, but from the interdependence of feeling and reflection, which form an "absolute" sphere, a boundary negatively marking the contours of the Absolute from within the empirical I. Novalis engages in this single dialectical move in order to point to the divine Absolute *outside* of the sphere of human thought; he does not offer a theory of concepts as themselves living or organic entities that imply their own processual sublation to divine self-consciousness. When I seek the condition of my self-experience, I engage the ground of my appearance while I look at myself in order to find that very ground. So, when I find *myself* — when I, the knower, look everywhere and notice myself as that which is looking — I must understand that *this* appearance, too, is conditioned by an even higher reflection. I *do* find myself when I reflect upon myself: this self-discovery is an undeniable phenomenological fact of empirical consciousness,

and because it remains in the sphere of the empirically conscious I, it is a valid claim in "Kantian" terms. But the reflective condition of that self-discovery is necessarily higher than myself, and, *for being higher*, can be known to be God, even as I cannot take God himself as an object of my thinking. In his later, famous *Blüthenstaub* fragment #16, Novalis writes:

"Ist denn das Weltall nicht in uns? Die Tiefen unsers Geistes kennen wir nicht. — Nach Innen geht der geheimnißvolle Weg. In uns, oder nirgends ist die Ewigkeit mit ihren Welten, die Vergangenheit und Zukunft. Die Außenwelt ist die Schattenwelt, sie wirft ihren Schatten in das Lichtreich..."

This later-stage fragment validates the same process outlined in *Fichte Studien* fragments #12 and #19. Self-experience is a deep phenomenon; and it is not what it initially seems.

But it is also all that we need to understand our ultimate dependence on God (in *Blüthenstaub* #6, Novalis writes, "Ganz begreifen werden wir uns nie, aber wir werden und können weit mehr, als begreifen"). Reflection upon self-experience reveals an infinitude that comes, not to the I from the outside, but from "beneath" the I as the condition of its encountering space and time everywhere. The I is thus not an independent standpoint on the world, but a Jacobian "Geschehen" (*FS* fragment #1): an opening, revelation, and dependent byproduct of a hidden and bottomless creativity that is the organismic God.

Returning to the iconic statement at the beginning of the *Fichte Studien*, "das Bewußtseyn ist ein Seyn außer dem Seyn im Seyn," we can see now that the two possibilities for parsing this statement do more than just indicate the thrownness of our empirical sphere from the Absolute; they offer a performative miniature of Novalis' ex negativo argument for the Absolute in the *Fichte Studien* as a whole. Earlier we saw that,

on one level, consciousness is a [being outside of] [being within being], or the private experience of subjectivity over and against objectivity; on the other level, this enclosed sphere of consciousness is possible as such *because* consciousness is a [being outside of being] [within being], or in other words, its sphere is enabled by a higher being. Now we can additionally appreciate that the impossibility of presenting this twofold point in anything but a *polysemy* — requiring a "Gestalt shift," if you will, between one interpretation and then the other, but never granting both simultaneously — captures the impossibility of anything but the solely negative approach of the Absolute. To *presence* the Absolute "in thought" would mean, for Novalis, that this very phrase must leap off the page and itself become productive being, which it clearly cannot; and yet, at the same time, the phrase is indeed God's "appearance," or phenomenal manner of revealing himself, for the infinite God could only ever *appear* by becoming finite, which is to say, by disguising himself as representational rather than creative consciousness. Novalis' dialectic, for being a one-time correction that is only a knowledge of our dependence on the Absolute, is quite different from Hegel's dialectical movement to closure.

Now that our interpretation of Novalis' inference to the divine Absolute has been detailed, our stance on other readings (see Chapter One) can fruitfully be reviewed. Novalis does not allow even the possibility of sublative passage beyond the representational division from the Absolute, and so contemporary scholarship is right to disagree with this aspect of Theodor Haering's Hegelian reading of Novalis. Walter Benjamin arguably comes closest to Novalis' true position with the notion of the "network effect" of Absolute self-reflection, which stymies the finite perspective that attempts to know its whole from within it as mere part; however, it must indeed be said,



with Winfried Menninghaus, that Benjamin's reading does little to substantiate this claim textually, and more importantly, his thesis that Novalis comes to the Absolute *from* the insight that infinite reflections need not be regressive but could also "fill a network" is simply wrong. Geza von Molnár grasped a key idea with his reading of Novalis' "I" as a "balance" of the self and not-self; but, because he never understood the influence of Jacobi in that claim (that insight was Manfred Frank's), von Molnár's reading never grasped the phenomenological importance of this balance, especially its bridge to ontology. So, when von Molnár reads Novalis' statement that the "Muttersfäre" could be called "God and I," he assumes this choice is an antinomy and so an impasse to any knowledge of the Absolute, whereas in our reading, Novalis was in fact speaking with Herder, who said God is the only being who can properly say "I," in the sense of the creative subject of his thoughts. Frederick Beiser is certainly correct that the organicism of Novalis' philosophy must be recognized again. But not only did Beiser miss an opportunity to support his own position with a sustained argument for organicism in the *Fichte Studien*, he also missed that Novalis' organicism was in fact the result of his grappling with Kant and post-Kantian discourse, rather than first and foremost the influence of neo-Platonists such Jakob Böhme. Manfred Frank's reading comes closest to the achievement of full historical contextualization of Novalis' thought, especially with the insight that Novalis wished to reconcile Kant and Jacobi in his *Fichte Studien*. But Novalis was actually much closer to Fichte — and especially to Herder — in that reconciliation than Frank acknowledges: Novalis was not influenced by Jacobi to believe that Kantian sensation must be immediacy with being in the sense of a Parmenidean unity, the reflection of which produces the illusion of subject-object difference that can

never reclaim immediacy philosophically; rather, like Fichte and Herder, Novalis saw Jacobi as committing himself in spite of himself to an underlying, constitutive act of reflection, so that the phenomenology of subject-object identity in the sphere of consciousness actually entitles the finite knower to the inference of the inherence of consciousness in a higher, self-reflecting being. The "illusory" quality of consciousness is a direct function of that inherence; Novalis' "ordo inversus" is not Frank's "return to Kantianism" but rather *Herder's* inverted, mirror image of the organically productive God. Finally, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy make the very important point that Novalis' interest in Kantian aesthetics was in its claim to make sensible, in our nondiscursive pleasure in beauty, the impossibility of the philosophical presentation of the Absolute; but they missed the opportunity to relate that pleasure to Novalis' inference from phenomenology to the organic ontology of the Absolute.

#### IV. The Nonclosure of Novalis' Organicism in the *Fichte Studien*

In the introduction to this dissertation, we defined "nonclosure" as the hypothetical quality of any given claim to empirical knowledge, because the absolute ground of knowledge cannot be taken as object of consciousness and so be made to secure the finality of claims by means of their systematic deduction from that ground. The above discussion of Novalis' restriction of the knowledge of the Absolute to *inference* alone, or the ex negativo approach from actual consciousness to a God unavailable as a cognitive object himself, has already gone a long way towards detailing how Novalis' organicism is in fact also a philosophy of "nonclosure" (and thus that any

scholarly tendency to see "organicism" and "nonclosure" as mutually exclusive is a false dilemma). The remaining step in our discussion of nonclosure is to describe how, precisely, the claims of empirical science remain merely hypothetical in their epistemic status, according to Novalis. If Novalis believes we can know *that* subjective knowledge of objects is secured by the inherence of consciousness in Absolute self-reflection, then why must empirical science remain an endless endeavor? The answer will agree with Frank's reading of Novalis' coherence theory of truth, but with a basis in, not a rejection of, organicist ontology.

In these concluding remarks, it is helpful to return to the very beginning: the Kantian context of the problem of nonclosure. Kant defended our right to empirical science by reflecting upon the conditions of a minimal standpoint that even the skeptic would not deny — the existence of self-conscious consciousness — the conditions of which would then trace the boundaries of valid knowledge. Those conditions are sensibility and understanding, or more specifically, spatio-temporal sensuous content and the a priori categories of the understanding that raise that material to apperceptive consciousness by recognizing meaningful order in it. All knowledge that is the synthetic product of these two conditions remains within the boundary of the knowable and is therefore valid. The problem with Kant's defense is that what performs the very validating of knowledge — the *inference* to the condition of apperceptive consciousness — cannot itself be validated by the terms of Kant's own system. Inference carves the "inside the system" (valid knowledge is that which remains within the conditions) from the "outside the system" (invalid knowledge is the operation of concepts apart from sensation); but by what right — by what "Archimedean" or super-systemic perspective —

does the inference draw that very boundary? On Kant's own terms, I can only know what *follows* from the synthesis of sensibility and understanding; but then I also cannot know that synthesis occurs in my case, because the condition of my consciousness cannot become the object of my consciousness. In the eyes of some of his contemporaries, Kant's system of the first *Critique* and the empirical claims it defends remain "nonclosed" or hypothetical: only *if* a metacritical framework for the transcendental inference can be found can the critical system be secured.

Fichte believed that this problem was solvable, and meanwhile that the "Kantian" restriction of knowledge to empirical experience could be retained. What Kantianism needs is systematic closure, and more specifically, a self-evident foundation from which Kant's synthetic judgment can be logically derived such that the indubitability of the ground can confer to the critical system and so bolster it with metacritical validity. He believed, furthermore, that Kant had effectively already suggested what that foundation must be, in his requirement of the "I think" that must accompany all consciousness: Fichte says that the *human ego* as a *Tathandlung*, or reflection that can take itself as object, is the foundation of all knowledge, the self-evident point of orientation in all acts of knowing. The I's self-positing self-reflection, "I am I," is the fulcrum, the discursive act of self-knowing, that also that knits together the dualistic conditions of Kant's discursive judgment. Fichte essentially argues that the "Archimedian point" that metacritically validates Kant's system is the private experience of the perspectival quality of our own consciousness: the "subject" is the fundamental being that enables the awareness of being outside it, and it is knowable as such because, phenomenologically, we cannot deny that all empirical knowing orients from its observing perspective.

One of the centerpieces of Manfred Frank's reading of Novalis' *Fichte Studien*, and surely an accurate assessment of this text, is that Novalis rejects Fichte's foundationalism. Frank provides a very thorough contextualization of Novalis' response to Fichte's systematic ambitions in the anti-systematic philosophy of the Niethammer circle, arguing convincingly for Novalis' anti-foundationalism and nonclosure.<sup>170</sup> No foundationalism, which by definition claims to start from a self-evident propositional statement of the ground and then logically deduce the system of knowledge from that foundational proposition, *could* uphold the Kantian division between concept and percept that is necessary for consciousness even to be a re-presentation of being. That is, if one agrees with Kant (as Novalis does) that the conditions of subjective consciousness of objects are a priori categories in synthesis with a posteriori sensations, then we simply cannot claim that any *proposition* could be the synthesis — i.e., that its propositionality could both presence the absolute ground of consciousness and confer its self-evidence deductively to a system. Reflection divides itself from its object, referring *to* it, but not presencing it ("wir müssen das Identische verlassen, um es darzustellen" as Novalis says in fragment #1). So Kantian philosophy *cannot* be a foundationalism, and empirical science cannot be a set of finally knowable claims. In place of foundationalism stands Novalis' notion of philosophy's infinite striving after the Absolute — infinite, because impossible: "For Novalis, the formula of philosophy as a 'longing for the infinite' is thus an indication of philosophy's intrinsic openness (or the non-final nature of its claims)."<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Of course, Frank himself does not use the term "nonclosure," which we borrow instead from Alice Kuzniar's literary study (*Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin*, (Athens : University of Georgia Press, c1987)). We use her term rather than Frank's anti-foundationalism, because of its ability to capture not *only* the stance against systematic closure, but also the endless striving after the Absolute that follows from the absence of that possible closure.

<sup>171</sup> Frank 174

And in place of epistemic finality in science stands Novalis' coherence theory of truth, in which the best we can achieve at any given time is a "maximally well connected" set of empirical propositions:

"Novalis... calls this futile 'searching for one principle' an 'absolute postulate' — like a 'squaring of the circle,' the '*perpetuum mobile*,' or the 'philosopher's stone.' And from the impossibility of ultimately justifying the truth of our conviction he 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 regarding the world."<sup>172</sup>

For Novalis in Frank's reading of him, coherence can never know itself to be finally achieved, and so science must be an endless process. The nonclosure of philosophy leads directly to the nonclosure of empirical science.

This dissertation agrees with and defers to the terms of Frank's position as stated above. But our contention is that, whereas Frank understood Novalis' anti-foundationalism also as the ontological rejection of the Absolute, which gives Novalis' coherence theory of truth a very contemporary-sounding ring, in fact Novalis' anti-systematicity and endless striving of empirical science are compatible with what he understands the panentheistic or organismic divine Absolute *to be*. Once again, our reading carves a middle path between scholars' false dilemma of nonclosure versus organicism. The impossibility of grasping the Absolute in propositional terms, and the impossibility of conferring metacritical validity to the critical system (and therefore to empirical science) by means of logical deduction from that propositional ground, have as much to do with the intrinsic nature of the panentheistic God as it does the inability of a Kantian consciousness to overcome the reflection that separates it from the Absolute.

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<sup>172</sup> Frank 175

The point is that "identity" for Novalis means the "immediacy" of subject and object in the sense of *productive or creative intellect*, an absolute freedom, a form that is immediate with its matter because it instantiates itself. Identity for Novalis is not, as Frank reads it, a Parmenidean being (or as Hegel would say, a "night in which all cows are black"). Frank is indeed right that our representational consciousness cannot hope to stand at the Archimedian point, but for Novalis that limitation is *due* to the fact that our consciousness is the receptive, instantiated end of the organismic God's infinite creativity, and so cannot rise above its created finitude to presence the absolute freedom that brings it and everything into being. The *Fichte Studien* argue that human apperceptive consciousness is the appearance or revelation of the noumenal realm, and what that means is that perceptions or observations of the world are themselves also finitizations, or fragments, of God's own *Logos* — and because they are finite, they are also only partially true, only approximations. The only presencing of God's original, creative form available to us is the *interconnectedness* of our observations, or in other words, the coherent theories or laws that we fashion out of the stuff of our observations. But because scientific theorizing proceeds from a finite and receptive standpoint, its process of making observations cohere in laws can never know itself to be complete. Private empirical experience is the "court of final appeal," so to speak — the only and nonreducible way that *we* objectify the Absolute — but that also means that *our* knowledge of the Absolute must remain forever inadequate. So, even though Novalis has just engaged in 500 handwritten pages of "philosophy" in the general sense of "thinking about thinking," the *proof* of the existence of the Absolute is not *in the philosophy*, but in something that can never be captured propositionally — the revelation of lived

experience, the private world of our own subjective experience, the phenomenon — and which itself will never be anything more than a finite, fragmentary, inadequate presentation.

Much like Schelling would argue at the end of his philosophical career, Novalis in the *Fichte Studien* calls the Absolute, considered in itself or apart from its instantiation in existence, a "freedom" — "der absolute Grund alles Begründens, die Freyheit" (#566) — in order to characterize its capacity both to become anything and to be fundamentally falsified by any fixation. When God instantiates himself in being, his original nature as a transcendent and infinite capacity becomes change, oscillation, or life ("[die Sphäre] zwischen Seyn und Nichtseyn — das Schweben zwischen den beyden — Ein Unaussprechliches, und hier haben wir den Begriff von Leben," #3). Being, everything that exists, is always also being destroyed in the endlessly churning attempt to realize infinite productivity; that surging, that ontological unity of identity and difference, enables the subject-object relation of our consciousness. "Alles Seyn, Seyn überhaupt ist nichts als Freyseyn — Schweben zwischen Extremen, die nothwendig zu verinigen und nothwendig zu trennen sind. Aus diesem Lichtpunct des Schwebens strömt alle Realität aus — in ihm ist alles enthalten — Object und Subject sind durch ihn, nicht er durch sie." (#555) So, though our mental life, which is also the sphere in which the observations of empirical science are made, is indeed one mode (the internal appearance) of the Absolute, its quality as a "beschränkt Unbeschränkte" (#17) means that any observation only fragmentarily approximates the infinite freedom that conditions it. Novalis held this organicist position in both his early *Fichte Studien* and later philosophical fragment phases. For example, in his later *Vermischte Bemerkungen* fragment #5, Novalis would



likewise say, "Der Geist führt einen ewigen Selbstbeweis." And most famously: "Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge." (*Vermischte Bemerkungen* #1) That is, the only *appearance* of that which "things" itself is the world of things, and not the absolutely creative freedom that underlies all things.

In light of this nature of the absolute ground in itself as an infinite creativity or freedom, the foundationalist attempt to capture the ground in a proposition and to relate all empirical claims deductively to that ground so as to know them with certainty is clearly misguided. Again, any determination is, as a fixation, necessarily also a falsification: "Warum Universalphilosophie kein positives System seyn kann — Sie kann nichts, als die Form der vollständigen Thätigkeit des Geistes bey *einer Bestimmung* enthalten." (#650) Instead of seeking the validation of empirical knowledge claims by means of the deductive connection of knowledge to its ground, Novalis suggests that scientists can only seek greater and greater levels of coherence between their beliefs, just as Frank argues. But our inflection of Novalis' theory is different from Frank's reading. Greater and greater — endlessly greater — coherence between empirical observations is the only possible approximation of the Absolute, *because* only aggregation across all finite observations could approximate the infinite *Logos*, which exists outside space and time, and which these observations realize in space and time. The *proof* of that coherence (the "science of science," to borrow Fichte's phrase) is not a law or a reflection, but rather — in keeping with the theory of the *phenomenal* appearance of the Absolute that this dissertation has propounded all along — can only be the *sensation of unifying reflection*, which Novalis describes as the feeling of freedom and at one point, even the pleasure of *beauty*, suggesting Kant's aesthetic solution in the third *Critique*.

This phenomenal, private experience of proof is not conclusive, deductive proof, but rather a divine encouragement, if you will, that the finite observer can proceed in good faith. It is worthwhile to quote the relevant fragment from the *Fichte Studien* at length:

"Filosofiren muß eine eigne Art von Denken seyn. Was thu ich, indem ich filosofire? ich denke über einen Grund nach. Dem Filosofiren liegt also ein Streben nach dem Denken eines Grundes zum Grunde. Grund ist aber nicht Ursache im eigentlichen Sinne — sondern innre Beschaffenheit — Zusammenhang mit dem Ganzen. Alles Filosofiren muß also bey einem absoluten Grunde endigen. Wenn dieser nun nicht gegeben wäre, wenn dieser Begriff eine Unmöglichkeit enthielte — so wäre der Trieb zu Filosofiren eine unendliche Thätigkeit — und darum ohne Ende, weil ein ewiges Bedürfniß nach einem absoluten Grunde vorhanden wäre, das doch nur relativ gestillt werden könnte — und darum nie aufhören würde... Abstraction von dem absoluten Grunde, und Geltendmachung des eigentlichen absoluten Grundes der Freyheit durch Verknüpfung (*Verganzung*) des Zu Erklärenden/zu einem Ganzen. Je mannichfaltiger die Glieder dieses Ganzen sind desto lebhafter wird die absolute Freyheit empfunden — je verknüpfter, je Ganzer er ist, je wircksamer, anschaulicher, *erklärter*, ist der absolute Grund alles Begründens, die Freyheit, darinn." (#566)

After Kant, the goal of much of Novalis' generation was to secure critique with metacritique, or as Novalis puts it above, to ground philosophy by thinking about thinking. But Novalis is clear that the thinking about thinking is not even what *could* secure knowledge conclusively. The ground is that which gives rise to all parts of being and their relation; it is, organically, what gives the parts their interdependent roles and what makes them hang together. As such, its scientific description would have to be the result of a process of connecting observations to each other — a process that, for us, never ends: "Die Welt wird dem Lebenden immer unendlicher — drum kann nie ein Ende der Verknüpfung des Mannichfaltigen... kommen." (#565) But as we have seen, consciousness already has all the security it needs in order to trust or to believe that its search for knowledge can indeed continue in good faith (and is not, for example, a solipsism, or a Humean, merely psychological exercise); it can trust that the endless approximation towards the Absolute is in fact asymptotic, an endless *nearing*: "Gott im

Geist und in der Wahrheit anbeten — theoretisches unendliches Streben zu Gott —  
 practisches Streben zu Gott" (#54). The security consciousness has is the very sphere of  
 empirical experience, *Dasein*, the opening of being to itself; consciousness has being as a  
 being-there-for-itself. Above, Novalis states that the indication that empirical science is  
 approaching truth is the enlivening satisfaction of ever more coherent observations. And  
 in the very first fragment, Novalis even suggests that this experience of identity is  
 aesthetic, the pleasure of beauty: "Wir verlassen das Identische um es darzustellen... wir  
 stellen es durch... [ein] Zeichen [vor]... dieses gleichförmig bestimmende muß eigentlich  
 durchaus unmittelbar das mitgetheilte Zeichen durch eben die Bewegungen bestimmen,  
 wie Ich — Frey und do so wie ich. Geschmack und Genie." Later in the *Fichte Studien*,  
 Novalis says slightly more clearly: "Man kann so gewiß seine Philosophie wahr nennen —  
 so gewiß man es schön nennt." (#234) Truth is indicated in the particular pleasure of  
 beauty: the way things hang together to form a pleasing whole. This pleasure *can* be this  
 indication of truth, because, as a pleasure *in the hanging-together* of thoughts, it is a  
 phenomenal expression of the interdependence of feeling and reflection, and therefore the  
 closest we finite beings come to cognizing *with* the absolute *Logos*: it is pleasure in the  
 creative principle, the freedom, that conditions all.

Manfred Frank called Novalis' *Fichte Studien* a "return to Kant," a formulation  
 with which we have disagreed throughout this dissertation because it reduces Novalis'  
 ontological commitment to a merely regulative stance, and ignores another intellectual  
 option, which is that the phenomenology of the Kantian judgment could have  
 implications for the Kantian noumenal realm. But in a certain sense, we must concede  
 that Frank is right. Whereas Fichte's closure attempted to remove the *Ding an sich* by

arguing it away, or more precisely, making it an integral part of argumentation itself and so not an unknowable element outside of thought, Novalis appreciates the fundamentally Kantian insight that the *Ding an sich* must be retained, if the sphere of consciousness is to be maintained: there must be a fundamental *difference* between subject and object, if consciousness is even to be possible as a *re*-presentation. But so too must there be a fundamental ontological sameness between subject and object, the only expression of which identity would be precisely our sphere of consciousness. And so here we part ways with Frank. Novalis' "return to Kant" in fact occurs as a *romanticizing* of Kant. The transcendental is also the transcendent, the phenomenal also the revelation of the noumenal, and the human being a part of God's organic whole. "Das Allgemeine jedes Augenblicks bleibt, denn es ist im Ganzen. In jedem Augenblicke, in jeder Erscheinung wirckt das Ganze — die Menschheit, das Ewige ist allgegenwärtig — denn sie kennt weder Zeit noch Raum — wir sind, wir leben, wir denken in Gott, denn dis ist die personificirte Gattung. Es ist nicht in unserm Sinn ein Allgemeines, ein Besonders. Kannst du sagen es ist hie, oder dort? Es ist alles, es ist überall; In ihm leben, weben und werden wir seyn. Alles Ächte dauert ewig — alle Wahrheit — alles Persönliche." (Fichte Studien #462)

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