CHAPTER 3

Novalis' Magical Idealism

1. Novalis and the Idealist Tradition

Sometime in the autumn of 1795, not long after Hölderlin wrote 'Urteil und Seyn,' another young thinker sat down to write his critical reflections on Fichte's philosophy. For one long year he entered his reflections into notebooks, which gradually swelled in size. These jottings laid down the basis for much of his later philosophy, and they were to prove no less fecund for the development of absolute idealism than the fragments of Hölderlin. This youth was none other than Friedrich von Hardenberg, or, to use his more commonly known pseudonym, 'Novalis.'

Like Hölderlin, Novalis has gone down in history as one of the foremost lyric poets of early romanticism. But he too was a philosopher, and not only in an incidental way. "Philosophy," he wrote his friend Friedrich Schlegel in the summer of 1796, is "my *Lieblingsstudium,*" "the soul of my life and the key to my innermost self."[1] Novalis' philosophical background was very much like Hölderlin's. He too was trained in Jena, where some of the foremost Kantians—K. L. Reinhold and K. C. Schmid—were his tutors. He too was an ardent admirer of Schiller, whose work and conversation proved crucial for his intellectual development. Again like Hölderlin, Novalis was part of the Niethammer circle, and counted Niethammer, Erhard, and Herbert among his intimate friends. He was indeed a member of that circle from 1790 to January 1792, its most formative and fecund years when its critique of foundationalism was first formulated. It was in the house of Niethammer in May 1795 that Novalis first met Fichte, and crossed paths—for the first and last time—with Hölderlin.[2]

No less than Hölderlin, Novalis deserves a prominent place in the history of German idealism. Around the same time as Hölderlin,[3] and long before

Schelling and Hegel, he formulated some of the basic themes of absolute idealism. That the absolute is the divine *logos,* the identity of the subjective and objective; that the ideal and the real are only parts of a single living whole; that thinking lapses into falsehood and contradiction in abstracting parts from the whole; that unity is not possible without difference; and, finally, that only art has the power to perceive the absolute—these themes are found in Novalis' notebooks as early as 1796. Along with Hölderlin and Schlegel, Novalis was also a leader in the reaction against Fichte's subjective idealism. While Schelling was still a Fichtean and Hegel still a Kantian, Novalis insisted that Fichte's principles are too abstract and one-sided: they could not explain the organic structure of nature, still less establish the systematic unity of the empirical sciences. Like Hölderlin, Novalis doubted whether self-consciousness could provide philosophy with a self-evident starting point, and he too questioned the very possibility of first principles. In all these respects, Novalis' critique of Fichte anticipates—and indeed goes beyond—Hegel's later *Differenzschrift.*

Recognition of Novalis significance in the history of German idealism has been late in coming.[4] The traditional picture of Novalis has been that of a mystical poet who had neither training nor discipline to think through a philosophical problem. While his philosophical interests were sometimes acknowledged, they were regarded as at best amateurish, and in their content dependent on Fichte.[5] To be sure, Novalis was recognized as the creator of a form of idealism—his so-called magical idealism—but this was considered extravagent and occult, a poetic version of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre.* It was only in 1954 that Novalis' philosophical stature was finally and fully recognized by Theodor Haering in his magisterial *Novalis als Philosoph.*[6] While it must be said that Haering viewed Novalis through Hegelian spectacles, he at least did justice to the full depth and range of his philosophical interests. In the 1960s the traditional picture of the mystical poet was completely exploded with the publication of the critical edition of Novalis' works. Sheer size alone shows the intensity and extent of Novalis' philosophical and scientific concerns: while the literary works make up a single volume, the philosophical notebooks encompass more than two larger volumes. Now that these notebooks have been carefully edited and published, the study of Novalis' philosophy has begun in earnest.[7]

While Novalis' philosophical importance is now widely recognized, his place in the history of German idealism has become the subject of controversy. In the past some scholars placed Novalis in this tradition, either be-

cause he was influenced by Fichte or because he anticipated Schelling and Hegel.[8] More recently, however, other scholars have argued that Novalis falls outside this tradition. They have put forward two arguments for their view. First, Novalis' general position is more akin to realism than any form of idealism because it makes being rather than the ego the first principle of consciousness.[9] Second, in the name of art Novalis developed a radical criticism of all philosophy, so that he places himself outside any philosophical tradition, not least idealism.[10]

There is some truth to these contentions. Regarding the first, it is true that Novalis was *not* an idealist in the Kantian–Fichtean sense. It does not follow, however, that he is not in the tradition of *absolute idealism*.[11] While Novalis, no less than Hölderlin, gives a central role to the concept of being, this is not a form of realism, as if his absolute transcends all subjectivity. For Novalis insists that the absolute has both a subjective and objective aspect, that it unites idealism and realism. In this respect Novalis belongs in the same tradition as Hölderlin, Schlegel, Schelling, and Hegel.

Regarding the second point, it is true that, unlike Hegel, Novalis held that true philosophy should end in ignorance because the absolute transcends the grasp of discursive reason.[12] It is also the case that, with Hölderlin, he believed in the sovereignty of art over philosophy, holding that only poetic imagination could fathom the absolute. Still, for all his criticism of philosophy, Novalis never turned away from it.[13] His critique of foundationalism should *not* be taken as a rejection of philosophy *tout court.* For Novalis insisted that, even though it cannot provide knowledge of the absolute, and even though it cannot establish an infallible first principle of all knowledge, philosophy is still the source of regulative ideas that are crucial for guiding human action.[14] No less than Kant and Fichte, Novalis prized the critical role of philosophy, taking to task those who had failed to scrutinize their own methods and goals. The goal of philosophy, as he formulated it in his 1798 *Allgemeine Brouillon,* was "to make everything loose," that is, to show how all standpoints on the absolute are only relative (no. 622; III, 378). By 1798, however, Novalis began to assign philosophy a much more positive role: it provided the key for the construction of his encyclopedia, the template for the system of the sciences. It was philosophy that founded the principles of scientific method, and that systematized all special sciences (nos. 622–624; III, 378). Though Novalis gave poetry sovereignty over philosophy, he still stressed the two disciplines were interdependent, so that good poets are good philosophers and conversely (nos. 29, 31; II, 531, 533) Philosophy in-

deed became for him the guardian and helpmate of poetry, the basis for "the theory of poetry" that would show the importance and necessity of art (nos. 31, 280; II, 590–591).

Both arguments for placing Novalis outside the idealist tradition draw invalid generalizations from his early notebooks, failing to consider his later philosophical development. While Novalis was critical of almost all philosophical pretensions in his early notebooks, he continued to nurture systematic ambitions, which eventually grew into his project for the encyclopdia of all the sciences. No less than Schelling and Hegel, Novalis was a systematic philosopher, whose goal was to show how all the sciences form a unity. Furthermore, the transcendent absolute of the early notebooks disappears in the later writings, which emphasize a neo-Platonic conception of God. Rather than a *deus obsconditus,* Novalis' God becomes the divine *logos* of Plotinus, who reveals himself in all creation. Indeed, Novalis wanted to make the idea of God into the organizing principle of his encyclopedia, so that the definition of God became the basis of all definitions; he also made God into the object of a rational perception or intellectual intuition along neo-Platonic lines (nos. 896,934; III, 440, 448). The stumbling block of nonrationalist interpretations of Novalis is his allegiance to the Platonic tradition, which goes back to his earliest years, but which became even more pronounced in his later ones.[15]

2. Fichte Studies

In the autumn of 1795 Novalis began a career as an administrator of the Saxon government, becoming secretary to a local official in Tennstedt. His job left him three free hours a day, when he would devote himself to "urgent introductory studies, [filling] basic gaps in my knowledge, and the exercise of my thinking powers."[16] It was during his Tennstedt days that Novalis began to write notes on Fichte, a task that preoccupied him from autumn 1795 until late summer 1796. His notebooks consist in six different groups of manuscripts, which were written at varying intervals, and which differ in content and style. They have been given the title *Fichte-Studien,* though the name is somewhat misleading since they do not consist in studies of, or commentaries on, any of Fichte's writings. Rather, they represent Novalis' effort to formulate his own position by thinking his way through what he called the "dreadful thread of abstractions" of Fichte's system.

After long neglect, the importance of the *Fichte-Studien* for Novalis' philo-

sophical development has been fully recognized, and they have even been called "the most significant philosophical contribution of early German romanticism."[17] The notebooks anticipate, and lay the foundation for, many of Novalis' later views, especially those concerning the limits of philosophy and the role of art. Novalis sketches the rudiments of a philosophy of language, develops a dialectical methodology, and proposes an absolute idealism that is a synthesis of Fichte and Spinoza. But perhaps the most striking feature of the notebooks is Novalis' radical criticism of philosophy itself. He questions the very possibility of foundationalism, doubting the feasibility of any transcendental philosophy that would determine the first principles and conditions of human knowledge.

For all their importance, the notebooks are also an early and immature work, riddled with doubt, hesitation, ambivalence, and inconsistency. While some of their themes proved fecund, others fell sterile. After all, the notebooks are just that: notebooks, collections of jottings written on various occasions and never intended for publication. Their main purpose was exploratory and pedagogic, and their results were provisional and tentative. Often Novalis asks himself what he means, chides himself for vagueness, and even admits that he engages in sophistry. While it is wrong to dismiss the notebooks as an incoherent miscellany of fragments, it is also naive to see in them the preliminary exposition of a system.[18] Novalis did not have a principle, program, or system *before* writing the notebooks, but at best some vague ideas *after* writing them. But the main reason for caution in dealing with the notebooks comes from Novalis himself, who became dissatisfied and bored with them, complaining that they were superficial and lacked any organizing principle.[19] This does not mean that the notebooks are of marginal value for the study of Novalis—the very opposite is the case—but it does mean that there is a danger of anachronism where one treats the notebooks only as an anticipation of later ideas. Any complete and accurate account should treat them as a whole, considering them in all their ambivalence, incongruity, and tentativeness.

Nothing better reveals the provisional and immature character of *Fichte-Studien* than a profound tension running throughout it. While Novalis criticizes the very possibility of a system of philosophy, he also searches for one of his own. Hence he states that he is looking for a theory that will reveal the fundamental laws behind our mental life (no. 465; II, 250); he also often writes of "my system" (nos. 11, 108; II, 108, 153); and he even proposes his own first principle of philosophy.[20] Nevertheless, Novalis' investigation into

the possibility of philosophy comes to a negative conclusion, casting doubt on the feasibility of both a system and a first principle. This tension eventually became fully apparent to Novalis himself when he wrote in one of the closing entries: "The proper philosophical system must bring freedom and infinity, or, to put it more paradoxically, systemlessness into a system"(no. 648; II, 289).

Whatever his views about systematicity, Novalis' central concern in the notebooks is to investigate the very possibility of systematic transcendental philosophy. This interest is never explicitly stated, but it emerges clearly enough from several of the early fragments. Thus Novalis makes his subject of enquiry "philosophy in general—the possibility of a system" (no. 11; II, 108), raising the question of "grounding the possibility of reflection or systematic thinking" (no. 12; II, 111). In effect, Novalis' enquiry is *meta*-critical or *meta*-epistemological: to determine whether a transcendental epistemology like that of Kant or Fichte is possible.

Throughout the notebooks Novalis finds a systematic transcendental philosophy problematic for several reasons. The first concerns the circularities and infinite regresses of self-knowledge.[21] These difficulties arise because the transcendental philosopher attempts to determine within the self the ultimate conditions of all thinking, which cannot themselves be an object of thinking. Novalis raises these thorny issues almost immediately by asking whether philosophy can consist in self-reflection (*Selbstbetrachtung*) (no. 15; II, 113). He answers in the negative for the following reason. To reflect on itself, the self would have to be an object to itself; in other words, it would have to perceive itself and determine its specific characteristics; but the self cannot be such an object to itself when it is the ultimate condition of all thinking, the basis under which anything is an object of thought.

Although Novalis doubts that the self can know itself through reflection, he does not deny the possibility of *all* self-consciousness or self-knowledge. His argument excludes the possibility of *discursive* self-knowledge, but leaves open the possibility of *immediate* or *intuitive* self-consciousness. Novalis raises just this prospect when he states that the self is "perhaps" aware of itself through feeling (*Gefühl*) (no. 115; II, 113; no. ll; II, 25–26). If philosophy cannot be self-reflection, he says, it is still possible for it to be self-feeling (*Selbstgefühl*). He then affirms this possibility by stating that philosophy is originally feeling, and that there must be at least some feeling of the activities behind consciousness.

While Novalis concedes the possibility of self-consciousness in the form of

feeling, he also insists that feeling determines the ultimate limits of all transcendental enquiry. "The limits of feeling are the limits of philosophy. Feeling cannot feel itself" (no. 15; II, 114). Feeling is essential to self-consciousness, and so all consciousness; but it resists all discursive analysis, which presupposes its presence. Fichte would have agreed with Novalis that feeling marks the limits of all philosophy, for he too insisted in the *Wissenschaftslehre* that the realm of feeling is undeducible. This indeed helps to explain Novalis' own use of the term 'feeling.' But Novalis turns Fichte's point against him, maintaining that undeducible feeling exists in not only the empirical manifold but self-consciousness itself. It is impossible for transcendental philosophy to articulate and systematize feeling, Novalis argues, for here the same vicious circle reappears. We cannot think about this feeling without presupposing it. If we reflect on the feeling in consciousness, that is possible only if we lay down some prior mediating intuition (*Mittelanschauung*); but this intuition is in turn possible only through some prior feeling and reflection, and so on *ad infinitum* (no. 17; II, 114–115).

Of course, Fichte himself was aware of all the difficulties involved in self-knowledge, and he postulated intellectual intuition precisely to avoid them. Novalis does not deny the possibility of intellectual intuition; and he indeed affirms its necessity, insisting that it lies at the basis of all consciousness (no. 22; 119). While he sometimes seems to think it is composed of, and based upon, feeling and reflection (nos. 16–17; II, 114–115), he also insists that its analysis into these components holds only for reflection itself and that originally it lies at the basis of even that reflection (no. 22; II, 119; no. ll; II, 18–22). Nevertheless, Novalis holds that simply appealing to intellectual intuition does not resolve the difficulties posed by self-knowledge. The same problems reappear all over again, for the issue now is how the purely immediate intellectual intuition is to be made into the subject of a transcendental system. How do we make something purely intuitive and immediate into an object of thought without destroying its very immediacy and intuitiveness? Hence Novalis reasons as follows: "Intellectual intuition alone gives *mere reality*—but this is in reflection as good as nothing. It should be for reflection and it is not—i.e., it cannot be opposited.—Hence it is for reflection nothing" (no. 22; II, 120).

Novalis' doubts about the possibility of transcendental philosophy are based on not only the problems of self-consciousness but also the difficulties of establishing any first principle. His skepticism about foundationalism begins from impeccable Kantian premises: that reason is limited to experience,

to the knowledge of given objects (no. 15; II, 113), and that it should not step beyond experience in the attempt to know the absolute or the unconditioned. But Novalis turns this doctrine against Kant and Fichte, using it to criticize the ambitions of transcendental philosophy itself. The incapacity of reason to know the absolute means that it cannot discover the first principles of knowledge, or develop a system about the conditions of experience itself. For these principles or conditions are themselves not within experience, and they too are unconditioned or absolute as the ultimate and final conditions of all thinking or experience. We should treat first principles or a complete system, Novalis thinks, only as regulative ideas, as ways of bringing unity into our thinking about the conditions of experience. We should be aware, however, of assuming that there is some first principle or complete system already there within ourselves, for that would amount to nothing less than hypostasis, the very fallacy Kant and Fichte so often warn against. Hence Novalis likens the search for such first principles or such a system to the quest for "the philosopher's stone" (no. 566; II, 270). Applying Fichte's doctrine of striving to transcendental philosophy itself, Novalis states that the only absolute given to the transcendental philosopher is the *striving* or *search* for first principles, which can be approached but never attained.

Novalis' reflections on the possibility of transcendental philosophy eventually lead him to the harsh conclusion that it is nothing but a form of what he calls the "sophistry of the ego" (nos. 44, 49; II, 136, 138). He arrives at this conclusion on the basis of a general critique of reflection, or abstract and systematic thinking, which reveals the influence more of Jacobi than Kant. The problem with transcendental philosophy is that it explains the first conditions of knowledge by postulating something absolute, which it then attempts to know through reflection, though the absolute cannot be grasped through reflection. Throughout his notebooks Novalis gives several reasons why reflection cannot know the absolute. First, the absolute is the unconditioned, the cause of itself; but reflection explains all events by the external causes acting on them. Second, the absolute is an indivisible unity; but all reflection divides. Third, the absolute is infinite, not limited by anything outside itself; but reflection is determination, defining a thing through negation, by how it contrasts with other things. Hence Novalis likens reflection to one-half of a sphere whose properties are the opposite of the other it represents (no. 17; II, 115). Reflection falsifies whatever it reflects on, so that whatever image or picture of reality it produces is the very opposite of the

truth (no. 64; II, 142). It creates an inverted world, an *ordo inversus,* whose statements have to be denied to find the truth.[22]

Novalis' criticism of transcendental philosophy eventually expands into an attack on discursive thinking in general, culminating in his striking claim that "all thinking is the art of illusion" (no. 234; II, 181). He indeed goes so far as to insist that illusion (*Schein*) is constitutive of experience itself, and nothing less than "the original form of all truth." His choice of terms here is significant: *contra* Kant, Novalis deliberately conflates appearance (*Erscheinung*) with illusion (*Schein*), because he thinks that experience is constituted by judgments, all of which are false. Novalis comes to this shocking conclusion from two perfectly pedestrian and plausible premises. The first is the Kantian claim that all knowledge, and indeed perception, involves the use of concepts, and so an (implicit and subconscious) act of judgment. The second is a conventional analysis of the logical form of judgment, which Novalis could have found in any textbook.[23] According to this analysis, the subject term of a judgment stands for a bare particular, which is formless, while the predicate represents a universal or form, which is contentless (nos. 227–230; II, 172). If we put these premises together, then the conclusion is inevitable: all thinking and experience will have to consist in illusion. For when we apply a predicate to a subject, we attribute the determinate to the indeterminate, a form to something formless. All thinking or judging involves an act of determination, carving a whole into distinct parts, which destroys the unity of the particular it attempts to know. All illusion arises, Novalis explains, when we elevate the part to a whole or degrade a whole to its part (no. 234; II, 180). But this is precisely what we do in judgment when we attempt to understand an indivisible and unique bare particular through a determination or property, which divides it and compares it to other things.

It has been argued that the intention behind Novalis' critique of philosophy in the *Fichte-Studien* was to establish the sovereignty of art.[24] Supposedly, Novalis wanted to show how the absolute cannot be known through reason but only through art. This reading is plausible, not least because it shows how Novalis fits into a common romantic project. Unfortunately, however, there is little textual evidence to support it. While Novalis later argues for the sovereignty of poetry over philosophy, no such claim appears in the notebooks.[25] He does suggest that beauty should be the criterion for truth in philosophy, and he even states the basis of representation and intuition consists in the "principle of beauty" (no. 234; II, 177). But these re-

marks are left unexplored. Novalis' distance from his later position becomes especially clear when we find him baldly reaffirming Fichte's doctrine of the sovereignty of practical reason: "The highest philosophy is ethics" (no. 536; II, 267).

Whatever Novalis' motives in criticizing philosophy, they did not prevent him from trying to develop his own system. Already in the first group of manuscripts he thinks that he has provided something of a "deduction of philosophy," the possibility of reflection to formulate intellectual intuition (no. 19; II, 116–118). Although reflection cannot conceive pure form or pure content, it can grasp *determinate* form—some unity of form and content—and it is just this that is provided by intellectual intuition. The method to construct a system, Novalis explains, is to see how each level of unity of form and content is opposed by another unity, and then to ascend to that unity that cannot be opposed by anything else (no. 20; II, 118). This method will be both analytic and synthetic, moving from the whole to its parts and then back to the whole from the parts (no. 271; II, 192). Novalis not only expresses systematic ideals but also attempts to practice them, proposing different ways of organizing and deducing the Kantian categories from a single idea or principle. This was the staple fare of transcendental philosophy in the 1790s; not even Novalis could resist the pastime of *Architektonikspiel.*

The tension between Novalis' critique of philosophy and his own philosophical ambitions runs even deeper, however. Although he doubts the possibility of a first principle, he attempts to discover one himself; and although he casts doubt on all knowledge of the absolute, he does not hesitate to speculate about its nature. There are some remarkable passages in the first group of manuscripts where Novalis attempts to synthesize and go beyond Spinoza and Fichte. While Spinoza's first principle is nature, and Fichte's is the ego or the person, his is nothing less than God (no. 151; II, 157). Novalis sees God as the highest thesis, the sphere of all analysis and synthesis (nos. 151–152; II, 157). God is what remains when we abstract from everything in the spheres of nature and person (no. 156; II, 158). Nature and person are only aspects of God, which come together in him like two pyramids with a common apex (no. 153; II, 157). In seeing the ego or the person as only one aspect or attribute of God, Novalis deliberately demotes the status of the *Wissenschaftslehre.* Rather than dealing with the first principle of philosophy, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is now nothing more than "*Subjektslehre*," treating the subjective rather than the objective side of the absolute (nos. 157, 186; II, 158, 163). Like Hölderlin, Novalis finds it difficult to understand why Fichte

calls his absolute an ego when it is not something subjective opposed to the objective but the unity or indifference of the subjective and objective (nos. 5–7; II, 107).[26]

Yet does not Novalis' own critique of philosophy also apply to his own first principle? If all first principles are only regulative, and if the belief in some reality corresponding to them is only an illusion, then the same would seem to hold for the idea of God himself. There are passages in the notebooks where Novalis appears to endorse this very conclusion. The idea of God is only an hypostatization of the idea of an absolute whole, he suggests, because it is only a *personification* of this idea, which is itself only a fiction (no. 462; II, 249). Whether God exists, he also implies, depends on whether we believe in him: "Where man lays down his reality, what he *fixes* upon, that is his god, his world, his everything" (no. 396; II, 233). Novalis comes closest to undermining the reality of the idea of the absolute when he later insists that the whole idea of pure being is nothing more than a fiction: "What does it mean, *pure* and *empirical*[?] What are these for concepts? Pure—what is not related, not relatable. The forms of the relatable are the empirical forms a priori. The concept "*pure*" is therefore an empty concept—i.e., a concept corresponding to no intuition—a concept that is neither possible, nor actual, nor necessary—everything pure is an illusion of imagination—a *necessary* fiction" (no. 234; II, 179). Novalis later expands this argument by stating that pure being does not designate anything, that one knows nothing about a thing if one knows only that it exists, and that a thing is for us nothing more than the totality of its properties (nos. 454–455; II, 247).

It seems possible to remove this tension simply by claiming that Novalis ascribes a strictly regulative validity to his own concept of God or absolute being. But the texts do not permit such an easy reconciliation. The tension persists because Novalis also makes the absolute into an object of feeling and faith (nos. 3, 15; II, 106–107, 113–114), which implies that it exists. If we claim that the absolute is only a regulative idea, that it is indeed only a "*fiction*," then it cannot also be made into an object of feeling and faith.[27] For this is to imply that there is nothing for us to feel or believe in; to assume that there is something in existence corresponding to the idea is just the fallacy of hypostasis all over again.

The source of the tension probably lies in Novalis' own religious feelings, which he had nurtured from childhood, but which clashed with the critical legacy of Kant's philosophy. Friedrich Schlegel had complained about Novalis' indulgence in pietist mysticism, which did not cease while writing

his notebooks. On July 8, 1796 Novalis wrote Friedrich Schlegel that he now felt part of an infinite whole, and that he missed Zinzendorf's and Spinoza's idea of infinite love in Fichte's philosophy (IV, 188). These feelings only grew during the illness of Novalis fiancée in November 1795, and they emerge with perfect frankness and clarity after her death when Novalis said that he would now have to live in "belief in God and immortality."[28] It was probably these kinds of feeling that inspired Novalis to make God into his absolute rather than merely nature or the ego. Whatever their source, Novalis' growing religious views were difficult to reconcile with the radical critical philosophy of Fichte and the Niethammer circle, which ascribed a purely regulative and moral status to the traditional objects of religious belief.

3. Fichte in Novalis' Idealism

Since the publication of Haym's magisterial *Die romantische Schule* in 1870, the prevalent interpretation of Novalis' idealism in histories of literature and philosophy has been that it is "poetically exaggerated Fichte," an imaginative, mystical, or occult form of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.[29] According to this interpretation, the starting point of Novalis' idealism is the Fichtean principle that the world is the creation of the absolute ego, the objectification of productive imagination. Supposedly, Novalis simply extended and radicalized this principle, making it the basis for his natural philosophy and poetry. Hence Novalis made self-knowledge the key for the study of nature, and productive imagination the source of poetry.

There is some truth to this interpretation. Novalis was indeed inspired by Fichte's idealism, which did play a central role in his aesthetics and natural philosophy. But there are also serious problems with this reading, which has to be heavily qualified to yield an accurate account of Novalis' idealism. Though it has come under increasing criticism, Haym's interpretation is still far too entrenched to ignore.[30]

The first difficulty with his interpretation is that it ascribes a very crude reading of Fichte to Novalis, whose understanding of Fichte—it must be said—was much more subtle and sophisticated than some of his expositors. It is clear from the *Fichte-Studien* that Novalis grasped perfectly well the limits of Fichte's critical idealism, its restriction of knowledge to experience and the regulative status of its basic principle. Novalis does not think that the Fichtean ego is some kind of universal creative principle or activity that cre-

ates the entire finite world. Rather, he maintains that it is only a regulative ideal, a goal for our action, which we can approach but never attain (nos. 479, 502; II, 256, 258). It is a crude fallacy, he further explains, to assume that this merely regulative idea has the power to create anything (no. 476; II, 255). While Novalis makes much of the powers of the creative imagination, just as his commentators stress, he does not think that these have the capacity to create the entire world. He indeed insists that the realm of feeling is given to us, and that no philosophy is in a position to deduce or to explain it (nos. 15–17, 515; II, 113–114, 261). The Fichtean ego is not "an encyclopedia" that contains the whole content of the empirical world within itself, but only "a universal principle" that assimilates content *after* it is given to it (no. 168; II, 273). Later, in his *Allgemeine Brouillon,* Novalis is explicit about the purely fictional status of the Fichtean ego, which he insists is only an ideal, something that we should construct, so that it belongs in the realm of art rather than nature (nos. 76, 717; III, 253, 405). The fact that the Fichtean ego belongs in the realm of art means that we, the multitude of finite agents, create it through our striving to become purely rational beings. It is our collective work of art, our creation, no less than society and the state.

Another grave problem with this interpretation is that it neglects a powerful anti-Fichtean influence upon Novalis' thinking: Spinoza. Like Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel, Novalis had read Jacobi's *Briefe,*[31] and he too was attracted by Lessing's *credo.* Spinoza became for him "*der Gott betrunkene Mensch*" (no. 562; III, 651), who rightly saw the divine presence in all things. Novalis was especially inspired by Spinoza's idea of the infinite, and by his intellectual love of God, which demands reconciliation with the world through a rational identification with it. Such ideas, he realized, could not be easily accommodated in Fichte's system. Because Fichte stressed that we must change the world, forcing it to conform to reason, he had failed to recognize that we must also change ourselves, learning how to adapt to, and become one with, the world. Novalis' sympathy for Spinozism, and his growing reservations about Fichte, are perfectly apparent from this passage in his July 14, 1796 letter to Friedrich Schlegel:

> I feel more in everything that I am the sublime member of an infinite whole, into which I have grown and which should be the shell of my ego. Must I not happily suffer everything, now that I love and love more than the eight spans of space, and love longer than all the vascillations of the chords of life? Spinoza and Zinzendorf have investigated it, the infinite idea

> of love, and they had an intuition of its method, of how they could develop it for themselves, and themselves for it, on this speck of dust. It is a pity that I see nothing of this view in Fichte, that I feel nothing of this creative breath. But he is close to it. He must step into its magic circle—unless his earlier life wiped the dust off his wings. (IV, 188)

The Fichtean interpretation of Novalis' idealism is only a half-truth, then, because Novalis' goal is to *synthesize* Fichte and Spinoza. Like many of his generation, 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. This synthesis of idealism and realism would not simply subordinate realism to idealism, as in the transcendental idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre,* but it would give both an equal and coordinate role. Novalis' search for this single principle appears repeatedly in some of his later notebooks, especially the *Allgemeine Brouillon.*[32] But we have already seen him stumbling toward such a principle in the *Fichte-Studien,* where he made the ego and nature two different appearances of a single reality, which he identified with God.

A final problem with the Fichtean interpretation of Novalis' idealism is that it does not consider the profound extent to which Novalis *reinterpreted* and *transformed* Fichte's basic concepts according to neo-Platonist principles. In the autumn of 1798 Novalis made a momentous discovery: Plotinus! Plato and Hemsterhuis had been his favorite authors since he began his study of philosophy,[33] but he became acquainted with the ideas of the great neo-Platonist only much later by reading Tiedemann's *Geschichte der Philosophie.* Novalis found that Plotinus' ideas were exactly what he had been looking for in his attempt to fuse idealism and realism, and that no other philosopher suited him so well. So pleased was Novalis with his find that he later told Caroline Schlegel that Plotinus was the first philosopher to enter the sacred temple, and that no one after him had penetrated so far inside it (IV, 276). This is how he explains his discovery to Friedrich Schlegel on December 10, 1798:

> I do not know if I already wrote you about my dear Plotinus. I learned about this philosopher, who was born for me, from Tiedemann—I was almost astonished by the similarity with Fichte and Kant—and his *idealistic* affinity with them. He is more to my heart than the two of them . . . In Plotinus there is still much unused—and he is well worth making better known. (IV, 269)

After his discovery of Plotinus, Novalis began to give many of the concepts of Fichte's philosophy a neo-Platonic interpretation. In his *Allgemeine Brouillon* Novalis praised Plotinus for anticipating many of the fundamental results of modern philosophy, such as the need for a synthesis of idealism and realism (no. 924; III, 443). But rather than making Fichte the standard to judge Plotinus, he made Plotinus the standard to judge Fichte. The concept of intellectual intuition now became the inner light or ectasy (no. 896; III, 440), and Fichte's ego was the forerunner of reason or the divine *logos* (nos. 908, 1098; III, 443, 469). Where Fichte went astray, Novalis complained, is in not having any idea of the *hypostases* (no. 1067; III, 465); because of this, he had grasped only half of what is meant by the creative mind. This was Novalis' way of saying—what Schelling and Hegel would insist on two years later—that Fichte had only a subjective idealism; in other words, Fichte had failed to see that reason is something objective in reality itself and not only a form of self-consciousness.

Novalis' discovery of Plotinus, his lifelong sympathy with Plato, and his enthusiasm for Hemsterhuis casts doubt on another aspect of the Fichtean reading of his idealism: the claim that Novalis poeticized Fichte's system by replacing reason with the imagination.[34] For all his criticisms of philosophy in the *Fichte-Studien,* Novalis never lapsed into irrationalism, denigrating the value and necessity of reason itself. While reason did not have the creative power of imagination, he still saw it as the characteristic trait of humanity (no. 476; II, 255), and indeed as the basis to unify all our mental powers (no. 86; II, 543). Reason was nothing less than "the sole salvation of humanity," "the only genuine and true *logos* coming from God and returning to him."[35] While Novalis had prized mystical insights that lie beyond our discursive powers, these had more to do with the hyperrational intuition of Plato and Plotinus than the arational perception of Luther and the Protestant tradition.

4. The Elements of Magical Idealism

In several fragments Novalis devised the name 'magical idealism' for his own philosophy, and it is under this title that his views have become known to history. The name appears repeatedly in his 1798 *Allgemeine Brouillon,* though the essential ideas behind it emerge in some fragments from the *Vorarbeiten,* the 'Logologische Fragmente,' which were written in late 1797.[36] Novalis wrote of "*Mein magischer Idealismus*," and he sketched a pro-

gression of philosophical positions culminating in his doctrine.[37] There is more than sufficient justification, then, for regarding magical idealism as his personal philosophy.

However, the exact meaning of this doctrine is obscure and ambiguous, and it has been the subject of some dispute. Some maintain that Novalis abandoned it in his final years,[38] while others hold that it is not truly representative of his complete philosophy.[39] There is indeed an apparent difficulty in reconciling magical idealism with other aspects of his philosophy: it postulates the possibility of a complete control over our bodies and all of nature, so that it appears to clash with Novalis' sympathy for Spinozism.[40] Before we examine these thorny issues, it is best to consider the basic meaning of the doctrine.

The germ of magic idealism lies in an analogy that appears in a few fragments from the *Vorarbeiten*.[41] In one fragment Novalis imagines that someday we will have the power to control our external senses just as we now have the power to direct our internal ones (no. 111; II, 546–547). This analogy appears in the context of the common eighteenth-century distinction between inner and outer sense. Novalis locates external sense in the body, internal sense in the soul. Through the body we perceive stimuli in the external world, whereas through the soul we perceive stimuli within ourselves. Thanks to our powers of attention and abstraction, Novalis writes, we have great control over our internal senses. We have the power to determine what we perceive within ourselves by abstracting from, or directing our attention to, some things rather than others (no. 235; II, 577–578). Is it also not possible, Novalis asks, for us to have the same degree of control over our external senses, if we only educate this latent power?

In another adjacent fragment Novalis somewhat alters the terms of the analogy, now focusing on the relationship between mind and body in general rather than that between internal and external sense. He imagines that one day we will be able to control the inner organs of our body just as we are now able to control our thoughts, actions, and speech (no. 247; II, 583). That the soul has much greater power over the body than we normally think is apparent, Novalis says, from psychosomatic phenomena, and from those individuals who have some power over usually involuntary functions. We can make the whole body dependent on our will, Novalis thinks, if we can only learn how to direct the will itself. The more control we have over our bodies, the more we will have over our senses, and so we will influence the world we perceive, so that we will ultimately be able to live in a world of

our own making (nos. 247–248; II, 583–584). The body is the tool for the education and modification of our world, so that the more we modify it, the more we create our world (no. 256; II, 587).

Though their formulations differ, the underlying analogy in both fragments is roughly the same. The essential idea is that we should have the power to control our external senses or body just as we now have the power to control the internal senses or the mind. In either case, the power of the will is to be extended further over our nature—"everything involuntary is transformed into something voluntary" (no. 273; II, 589)—so that the world we perceive is made to approximate the world in which we want to live. Novalis sometimes took his utopian thinking to extremes, postulating the ideal of a complete control over nature, so that we human beings finally attain the status of God (nos. 78, 320; III, 253, 297). Though this seems fantastic and even perverse, it is important to stress that Novalis, like Fichte, saw it only as a regulative ideal that we could approach but never attain. The utopian dimension of Novalis' thinking here is already clearly stated by Fichte in his *Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten,*[42] and it should not be taken as evidence for the excesses of romanticism.[43]

Such is, if only very crudely, one essential idea behind magical idealism. Novalis gave his doctrine this name because magic is for him the art of making nature conform to our will (no. 109; II, 546), and because idealism is the doctrine that what we perceive depends on our own creative activity. It should be obvious that much of the provenance of this doctrine is Kantian–Fichtean. Novalis began from the general principle behind Kant's new method of thought: that we know or perceive what we create or produce. He gave this principle an especially clear formulation in a fragment from the *Vorarbeit:* "We know something only insofar as we *express* it—i.e., can *make* it. The more completely and diversely we can *produce, execute* something, the better we *know* it. We know a thing perfectly when we can communicate it everywhere and in every manner" (no. 267; II, 589). But Novalis then added to this principle a basic Fichtean doctrine: that our cognitive faculties stand under the direction of the will. Fichte taught Novalis that we can do whatever we will to do, and that the limits of our powers are determined only by those of our will.[44] He then took this voluntaristic element of Fichte's thinking to its final conclusion when he wrote that the will is nothing less than "the basis of all creation" (no. 512; II, 354). Now if we add Kant's principle that knowing is making with Fichte's doctrine that making depends on willing, we arrive at the view that the world we know and live

in depends on the will itself. What Novalis adds to these Kantian and Fichtean elements is an aesthetic dimension: that the will should create the world according to the standards of beauty, so that it becomes a work of art. According to Novalis' own definition, magical idealism is the *romantic* doctrine because romanticism is making the world into a work of art, so that it regains its magic, mystery, and beauty.[45]

These Kantian and Fichtean elements of magical idealism have been one of the chief reasons for the Fichtean interpretation of Novalis' philosophy. It is important to see, however, that they do not exhaust the meaning of magical idealism, but express only one of its aspects, more specifically its subjective or idealistic side. For, true to Novalis' attempt to find a system that would unify Fichte and Spinoza, there is also an objective or realistic side to magical idealism. The purpose of magical idealism is to give us power over ourselves and nature, to be sure, but that power does not consist simply in being active, in creating nature and making it conform to our will. Rather, it also consists in being passive, in learning how to integrate ourselves with nature and to receive her stimuli. Unlike Fichte and more like Schiller, Novalis' goal is not the annhilation of the realm of sensibility, but the unity of our powers, an aesthetic whole where activity and sensibility, inner and outer sense, are harmonized with one another.[46] The ideal constitution, Novalis states, is that where the highest degree of sensitivity is united with the highest degree of energy (no. 235; II, 577). Control over our body and senses means making them not only instruments to change the world, but also more sensitive organs to perceive it. Novalis further explains that his ideal is where our inner and outer sense enjoy an *interplay* with one another, so that they work in perfect harmony (no. 111; II, 546–547). This harmony means that they must each retain their specific characteristics when united with one another. The elements of harmony are not only the will but also chance; the goal is to unite them so that the voluntary appears like chance and the chance voluntary (no. 112; II, 547–548). This is precisely what would be involved in making our lives more like a work of art or novel.

That Novalis had in mind Schiller's aesthetic unity more than Fichte's titanic will becomes apparent from his allegiance to the physiology of John Brown. No less than Kant's and Fichte's epistemology, Brown's physiology was an essential basis for Novalis' magical idealism.[47] According to Brown's doctrine, the state of health of an organism depends on it finding a balance between overstimulation and understimulation, activity and passivity. There are diseases that result from overstimulating the organism, and those

that result from understimulating it. True to Brown's theory, Novalis recognizes that too much activity of the will, and too little receptivity to the outside world, would result in danger to the organism. Thus he warns that too great activity of our inner powers results in delusions (II, 376, 451). The point behind magic idealism was to give longer life to the organism by counteracting the overwhelming stimuli of the external world with a stronger source of stimulation from within (no. 399; III, 315).

One of the major stumbling blocks to Novalis' philosophical rehabilitation has been the very term 'magical idealism,' which has connotations of the occult. There can be no doubt that Novalis had some sympathy with the hermetic and cabalistic traditions, and that some of its ideas play a crucial role in his magical idealism (nos. 137–143; III, 266–268). But rather than denying or wishing away these elements of Novalis' thinking, it is necessary to ask what lay behind them. All too often in Novalis the mystical and magical is simply a poetic or religious formulation for philosophical or scientific doctrines. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Novalis' fascination with one of the central ideas of the cabalistic tradition: the sympathy of the sign with the signified, the doctrine of the *signatura rerum,* according to which everything in nature is a secret language. This idea was central to Novalis' whole conception of magic. He became so excited by it because it seemed to rest on a profound scientific truth: that the external appearances of nature reveal an underlying chemical structure. Novalis' insistence on this doctrine was crucial to his program of unifying the sciences, and it was one of the main points of his disagreement with the physicist A. G. Werner, who denied that the external empirical features of a phenomenon provide any clue to its underlying structure.[48] Novalis' hope was that we could achieve greater control over nature, and as a result acquire better health, by learning how to read these signs of nature. The magical idealist would become versed in the art of interpreting the signs of nature, learning how to read the inner structure of things from their external and empirical characteristics.

The connotations of the occult disappear when we realize that Novalis never believed that the control over nature could be achieved by supernatural means, by reciting formulas, waving wands, or casting spells. No less than Bacon, who also influenced him,[49] Novalis wanted to achieve the grand ambitions of traditional magic—control over nature—through method, rule, and reason. Hence Novalis insists that magic is an art, which means for him that it must conform to definite rules (nos. 111, 252; II, 546–547, 585). There are indeed two arts that the magical idealist must cultivate:

medicine and poetry. It is through medicine that the magical idealist learns how to increase our inner stimuli, and to achieve a balance between over- and understimulation; and it is through poetry that he learns how to achieve a magical transformation of the sensible world.

The distance from the occult grows even further when we realize that Novalis distinguishes between good and bad forms of magic.[50] The appeal to the supernatural, the hope to achieve something simply by willing it or by influencing a spirit, was simply a bad form of magic. There were both magical idealists and realists, as Novalis put it, and both of them could become forms of illness if they sought complete control and perfection, failing to grasp the limits of their activity (no. 638; III, 384–385). The sick magical idealist failed to recognize the limits on his activity imposed by the physical world. Any one who tried to achieve certain goals has to take into account the properties of the means and instruments he uses, which impose definite limits on what he can achieve. The hindrances and obstacles of the real world have indeed their point in our overall mental economy since they prevent us from delusions of power and grandeur (no. 80; II, 451).

5. Syncriticism

Although Novalis' had sketched a synthesis of idealism and realism in the *Fichte-Studien,* his ideas did not move beyond the very rudimentary. He had postulated a single absolute, God, of which the ideal and real are only appearances; but he did not explain this in any detail, let alone give any hint about how he could resolve the apparent contradiction between idealism and realism. Novalis tackled some of these issues in his later notebooks, especially the 1797–1798 *Entwürfe* and the 1798–1799 *Allgemeine Brouillon.* Never did he form his scattered reflections into a system, though, so only programmatic and suggestive fragments remain. Still, if we collect all these fragments, the outlines of an interesting and original system emerge.

There should be no doubt that Novalis' synthesis of idealism and realism would go beyond the boundaries of the *Wissenschaftslehre* by making realism not subordinate but coordinate to idealism. Around the same time as his friend Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis insists that idealism and realism should each provide a basis to prove the other, and that both are opposing perspectives on a single truth. This emerges especially clearly from a fragment in the *Allgemeine Brouillon:*

> Philosophy. The perfect coincidence of idealism and realism—the most perfect independence gives each the most perfect proof of the correct procedure. One should be converted into the other . . . Idealization of realism—and the realization of idealism leads to truth. One works for the other—and so indirectly for itself. The idealist must, in order to work directly for idealism, attempt to prove realism—and so conversely. The proof of realism is idealism—and conversely. (no. 634; III, 382–384)

Unfortunately, Novalis does not explain in any detail how idealism and realism would demonstrate one another. He does give some further indication, however, about the nature of the synthesis he has in mind. The synthesis of idealism and realism means that we can treat nature as if it were visible spirit, and spirit as if it were invisible nature (no. 69; III, 252). It also means that it is one and the same whether we put the universe within ourselves, like Fichte, or whether we put ourselves in the universe, like Spinoza (no. 633; III, 382). Whether things conform to concepts, or concepts conform to things, is ultimately one and the same, Novalis writes, alluding to Kant's own formulation of the distinction between transcendental idealism and realism (no. 268; II, 589).[51]

Novalis calls the system that will be a synthesis of idealism and realism 'syncriticism.' This term, used to refer to the mystical and eclectic tendencies of neo-Platonism, once had derogatory connotations. Undaunted and defiant, Novalis attempted to co-opt it in a positive sense.[52] For him, syncriticism is that form of criticism that synthesizes idealism and realism; standing above both standpoints, it assigns each of them their necessary part in a whole (no. 457; III, 333). One central thesis of syncriticism is that we understand nature on analogy with ourselves, as if all nature were one great mind (no. 820; III, 429). But another basic thesis is just the converse: that we understand ourselves on analogy with nature, as if the self is only a microcosm that reflects the order of nature as a whole (nos. 69, 338; III, 252, 301). Rather than being a mature view that supersedes magical idealism, syncriticism seems to be another formulation of it, for Novalis explains magical idealism in similar terms. The magical idealist, he writes, should have the power to make not only his thoughts into things but also his things into thoughts (no. 338; III, 301). He shows how the soul externalizes itself in the things of nature as well as how the things in nature internalize themselves in the mind (no. 69; III, 252).

Although Novalis is never so explicit, the basis for his synthesis of idealism and realism lies, in part, in his general organic concept of nature. Like many of his contemporaries in the 1790s, Novalis reacted against the mechanical physics of Descartes, and developed a more dynamic concept of nature, which analyzes matter into living force. Like Schelling, Novalis revived the concept of the world soul, seeing all of nature as a single organism. Each individual living thing is comprehensible only by how it depends on all other living things; and the organic system of all individual living things forms another single individual living thing, which is the world soul (nos. 460, 477; III, 334, 341). Life, which consists in power (no. 598; III, 660), is indeed the *universale menstruum* of all things, what gives them their form, shape, and being (no. 235; III, 281). Novalis ascribes to something like the "great chain of being," a hierarchy of powers in nature where each higher power organizes and develops lower ones. The hierarchy begins with pure *stuff* (*Stoff*), or first matter, whose material form is due to power; it is followed by the *soul,* which is the power of all powers in matter; the soul is succeeded by *spirit* (*Geist*), which is the soul of all souls; and finally spirit reaches its culmination in God, who is the spirit of all spirits (no. 24; II, 529). While each higher stage might be *temporally* consequent to the lower one, it is *logically* prior to it, for it determines the purpose and rationale of all lower forms of activity. Clearly, such a doctrine was the very opposite of materialism.

On the basis of this organic concept of nature, Novalis could overcome the dualism between the mental and the physical, which had dominated the dispute between idealism and realism in the eighteenth century. Both idealism and realism had attempted to overcome this dualism, of course, but they could do so only by reducing one entity down to the other, by explaining matter in terms of the mind or mind in terms of matter. Novalis avoids this dilemma by denying the common premise behind it: that matter consists in inert extension. By analyzing all nature into living force, he has a unified means of understanding both the mental and the physical, which are simply different degrees of organization and development of living power or force. Matter is inchoate and nascent force, whereas mind is organized and developed force. Depending on one's perspective, matter could be seen as a primitive form of mind, or mind as a developed form of matter.

As explained so far, Novalis' ideas for a synthesis of idealism and realism seem very much like those of Schelling. The resemblance is by no means coincidental, for Novalis had been studying Schellings's writings since early 1797. The two philosophers eventually met in December 1797, a meeting

that pleased Novalis, who said he had become Schelling's friend after spending "several precious hours symphilosophizing with him."[53] A correspondence was planned, though nothing of it survives, if it ever took place. There are indeed surprising parallels between Novalis and Schelling regarding their attempts to develop a system of idealism and realism. Both wrote of the absolute as a point of identity that is neither ideal nor real; and both described a critical standpoint that stood above both idealism and realism. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that Novalis developed his ideas under Schelling's influence. Although Novalis had read Schelling's *Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus,* he did so only in the summer of 1797, a year after expounding the basic ideas of a philosophy of identity in the *Fichte-Studien*.[54] Indeed, while Schelling still remained loyal to Fichte in 1797 and would only break from him in 1801, Novalis was already struggling to break the spell of Fichte's "magic circle" in 1797.[55]

Novalis soon became increasingly critical of Schelling, defining his own philosophy against that of his new friend. The most notable point of friction concerns the status of nature itself. While Schelling, in 1797, still believed that the foundation of *Naturphilosophie* ultimately lay with transcendental philosophy, he also held that, within *Naturphilosophie* itself, nature should be treated as a self-sufficient realm. The world soul, the highest hypothesis of *Naturphilosophie,* did not depend on any supernatural realm outside itself but stood for the self-dependent organism of all nature. For Novalis, however, nature is not a self-sufficient whole, but only an emanation of the divine, while the world soul too is only the earthly embodiment of God (no. 453; II, 643). In reaction against Schelling's naturalism and Spinozism, Novalis increasingly stressed the distance between the natural and divine while also the dependence of nature on a higher moral order.[56] This difference emerges clearly in Novalis' July 20, 1797 letter to Friedrich Schlegel, where he writes that he has made "the interesting discovery of the religion of the visible cosmos," an allusion to his concept of the moral world order, which he insists transcends nature. He then explains that with this discovery he will be able to treat all of physics symbolically, and thus "far to surpass Schelling" (IV, 255).

Schelling, for his part, was not blind to these growing differences. When Novalis read his 'Christenheit oder Europa' to the romantic circle in Jena, he was so repelled by its pious tone that he wrote a satiric poem to mock it, his 'Glaubensbekenntnis des Heinz Widerporsteins,' the most irreligious of all his writings.[57]

What is distinctive of Novalis' synthesis of idealism and realism, as he implies in his letter to Schlegel, is the idea of a "symbolic physics." This idea is indeed absent in Schelling's thinking in the late 1790s and early 1800s, though it did play an important role in his later thought. What did Novalis mean by a symbolic physics? The inspiration for his idea seems to have come from the neo-Platonist Hemsterhuis and the Paracelsian tradition,[58] which taught that everything in visible nature symbolizes something invisible, or that everything sensible represents something intelligible.[59] Novalis was especially attracted to the ancient mystical idea of the *signatur rerum,* the idea that nature is the secret language of God, his esoteric way of communicating with his creatures: "Everything that we experience is a *communication.* In fact, so is the world too a *communication*—the revelation of spirit. The time is gone when the spirit of God was comprehensible to us. The meaning of the world has been lost to us. We have only seen its letters. We have lost that which is appearing behind the appearance" (no. 316; II, 594).[60] Novalis fused this idea with the neo-Platonic *Emanationslehre,* according to which everything in nature represents or symbolizes everything else.[61]

That this symbolic physics played a central role in Novalis' synthesis of idealism and realism becomes clear as soon as we see how he applied it to the problem of mental–physical interaction. Novalis used the idea of representation to explain the mutual dependence between the subjective and objective. Both can be understood as signs or symbols of the other. If the meaning of the subjective lies in its externalization in nature, so the meaning of the objective lies in its internalization in the mind; the mental and the physical therefore represent or signify one another. This is how Novalis applies the idea of representation to this problem in a passage from the *Allgemeine Brouillon:*

> Something becomes clear to us only through representation. One understands an idea most easily when one sees it represented. Hence one understands the ego only insofar as it is represented by the non-ego. The non-ego is the symbol of the ego and only serves the self-understanding of the ego. So, conversely, one understands the non-ego, only insofar as it is represented by the ego, and this is its symbol. (no. 49; III, 246)

Thus Novalis' syncriticism had two models for explaining the connection between the subjective and objective, the ideal and the real. One of these is vitalist, according to which the subjective and objective are simply aspects of living force; and the other is neo-Platonic, according to which the subjective

and objective are each the representation or symbol of the other. If the former model is a common idea in the late eighteenth century, the latter is more characteristic of Novalis' own syncriticism, his unique synthesis of idealism and realism.

We can now see more clearly the connection of Novalis syncriticism with his magical idealism. For, as we saw, magic idealism too is based on the idea of *signatura rerum.* Novalis made this connection very clear in several fragments of the *Allgemeine Brouilon* where he defined magic in terms of the "sympathy of the sign with the signified," and connected the art of medicine with that of magic (nos. 137–143; III, 266–268). These fragments show that the magician gains his power over nature not only by moral striving or the use of technology—as Fichte had imagined it—but by learning how to read and interpret the signs of nature. If we only know how to interpret these signs, Novalis thinks, then we will know how to find that balance between ourselves and the world on which our health depends.

6. Models of Knowledge

The reason many commentators stress the Fichtean dimension of Novalis' idealism, and overlook his attempt to synthesize Fichte and Spinoza, is his clear adoption of the Kantian–Fichtean model of knowledge. There can be no doubt that he accepts Kant's and Fichte's account of knowledge as a form of creation or making. "We *know* only insofar as we *make,*" as he puts it in his *Hemsterhuis-Studien* (II, 378). True to Kant and Fichte, Novalis explains how all knowledge depends on *appropriation,* that is, making an object conform to the laws of my own activity so that it is no longer alien to me (no. 468; II, 646).[62]

Novalis allegiance to this model of knowledge seems to place him so firmly in the Kantian-Fichtean camp that it appears impossible for him also to be a realist of any kind. If we know the world only insofar as we create it, making it conform to the laws of our activity, then how do we know it in itself, apart from and prior to the application of our knowing instrument? We seem trapped here inside the circle of consciousness, which it is the very purpose of absolute idealism to escape.

Novalis knew this impasse all too well, and he struggled to avoid it. In some interesting passages from the *Vorarbeiten* and *Allgemeine Brouillon* he attempted to supplement and synthesize his idealist model of knowledge with another more realistic one. Here Novalis stresses how knowledge of an ob-

ject involves not only an act of *appropriation,* but also one of *alienation;* in other words, the subject must not only make the object its own, but it must also make itself into the object. This means that all knowledge also involves an act of identification with the object, which requires that I put myself in its place. Hence Novalis writes in the *Allgemeine Brouillon* that we understand what is alien to us only through *self-alienation* (*Selbstfremdmachung*) (no. 820; III, 429).

Novalis provides a further account of the realistic dimension of knowledge, and its connection with the idealistic dimension, in *Vorarbeiten* no. 118. Here Novalis states that to know an object completely I must *enliven* (*beleben*) it. To enliven it means that I give the object its "soul," that unity of elements characteristic of its individuality alone (II, 551). The act of enlivening the object involves not only my appropriating it, making it an element of my own living whole, but also my identifying and becoming one with it. I create and extend the nature of the object by making it conform to me; and I create and extend myself by making it conform to the object. What I know is a product of both acts, the point of indifference between them. This means that I see the object of my perception as both mine and as alien to me. It is mine insofar as I appropriate it according to my forms of perception; and it is alien to me insofar as I am made to perceive it in a determinate manner (II, 551–552).

The crucial question remains how my appropriating the object develops *its* individuality, revealing rather than concealing its nature. Why are we not left with an unknowable thing-in-itself? Novalis addresses this very issue in another fragment of the *Vorarbeiten* (no. 125; II, 554). My mental activity does not involve a "decomposition" or "recreation" of the world, he says, because it consists in only its "variation operation" (*Variations Operation*).[63] That is, it gives the world one of its many possible specific forms. This is because the world in itself is not entirely determinate but it becomes so, at least partly, through me. Apart from the subject who knows it, the object in itself is something relatively inchoate and indeterminate, at least in some respects, and especially with respect to the knower; it then becomes organized and determinate, and so what it is, only through my act of knowing it. Novalis implies, then, that it is wrong to make a distinction between the nature of the object and the knowledge of it because the object realizes *its* determinate nature only through me and in my act of knowing it. The converse holds for the knowing subject: it becomes what it is only through the object.

Novalis comes to this conclusion because he places the act of knowing within his general organic view of nature. Like Schelling, he refuses to place the knowing subject in some transcendental sphere where it remains sealed against the influences of nature. Thus, in the *Vorarbeiten,* he stresses how my senses and body, the instruments of my knowledge, are determined to act as they do because all of nature, the "world soul," acts through them. They are inseparable from the world, and indeed only a variation of it (no. 118; II, 551). And in the *Allgemeine Brouillon* he states that the subject and object of knowledge are both members of the organic whole of nature, where each has its identity only through the other and the whole (no. 820; III, 429). Since the identity of each thing in nature depends on every other, it would be false to separate the subject and object of knowledge; both become determinate only through the other, so that the subject's knowing activity makes the object more determinate just as the object's activity makes the subject more determinate by acting upon it.

In Novalis' view, then, the problem of knowledge appears insolvable only because one forgets the general natural context in which the act of knowing takes place. We conceive the subject and the object as self-sufficient entities and then ask how they correspond with one another; we then attempt to explain their correspondence by the interaction between them. Since each is conceived as self-sufficient, the only relation between them is conceived to be one of external causality. Either the subject is the cause of the object (idealism) or the object is the cause of the subject (realism). But since these entities are so self-sufficient and heterogeneous, even such a causal interaction becomes impossible. To get beyond this *aporia,* it is necessary to conceive the relation between subject and object in more organic terms, such that each becomes what it is only through the other.

Novalis' attempt to fuse realism and idealism also leads him to reassess the account of self-knowledge in the Kantian–Fichtean tradition, which he thinks is very one-sided. According to Fichte's account of self-knowledge, the self attains its self-awareness only through abstraction and reflection, that is, by abstracting from everything that is an object of knowledge and by reflecting on itself as a subject of knowledge. In some revealing fragments from the *Vermischte Bemerkungen* Novalis evaluates this very model of self-knowledge (nos. 26, 43; II, 422, 430). He agrees with Fichte that abstraction and reflection are indeed essential to the development of self-consciousness; but they are not sufficient, he thinks, because the reverse activity is also necessary. If the self is to know itself, then it should not only go inside but also

outside itself, becoming part of the world of which it is a part; it must *negate* the very act by which it abstracts from the world and makes its activity visible in the world. The self knows itself, Novalis suggests, only by embodying or manifesting its activity in things, by identifying and becoming part of something outside itself. "Self-alienation is the source of all self-abasement, but also just the opposite: the basis of all self-elevation" (no. 26; II, 422). So important is this theme of self-alienation to Novalis that in the *Fichte-Studien* he regarded it as "the highest philosophical truth" (no. 98; II, 56).

Such, if only very crudely, is the general drift of Novalis' fragments on the criterion of knowledge, his last will and testament on how to fuse idealism and realism. Though his views are sketchy, they are also suggestive and interesting. It is obvious that, in their own inchoate way, they anticipate the more elaborate and systematic ideas of Schelling and Hegel. Novalis could indeed claim to have lived up to his namesake: he had indeed broken new ground.[64]