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## Hölderlin and Novalis

### I Introduction

In Jena in May 1795, Hölderlin and Novalis were introduced to one another in Fichte's presence by their mutual friend, Immanuel Niethammer. How unfortunate that we do not know the details of their conversation!<sup>1</sup> For Hölderlin and Novalis were not simply on their way to becoming the two most important poets of Early Romanticism in Germany. They were already philosophers of great accomplishment. At this time, Hölderlin had developed a powerful critique of Fichte's philosophy, and in the following months Novalis would begin to do the same. Moreover, their thought moved in similar directions. Both charged Fichte with wrongly supposing that consciousness enjoys an immediate acquaintance with its own nature. Our subjectivity, they argued, has its basis in a dimension of "Being," which eludes not only introspection but philosophical analysis as well. By "Being" they understood different things. But they agreed in opposing one of the leading assumptions of Fichte's and later Hegel's idealism, namely, that reality is transparent to reason. For both of them, philosophy runs up against limits that poetry alone can point beyond.

Hölderlin's and Novalis's thought remains provocative today for several reasons. They grappled with the difficulties involved in conceiving the self's relation to itself as a form of knowledge. They showed how subjectivity could be denied the status of a self-evident first principle without being dismissed as an illusion, in contrast to recent theories of the "death of the subject." Most engagingly of all, they each worked out a conception of life that would reflect our nature as subjects who must live at a remove from the ground of our being. In fact, we can best understand the thought of Hölderlin and Novalis by focusing on these conceptions. First, however, we need to look at the two ethical ideals that set the terms of German discussion in the 1790s – Kant's ideal of freedom and Schiller's ideal of unity.

## II Background: Kant and Schiller

Kant's ethics turns on a dualism between duty and inclination. Moral requirements are binding upon us unconditionally, whatever the interests which nature and experience have given us. Because conscience apprises us of these categorical duties, we must be able to stand back from our "empirical character" and find in this very freedom sufficient reason to act in accord with duty. In fact freedom consists, positively speaking, in giving ourselves impartial rules defining the proper pursuit of our inclinations. The principles of duty are laws which, as rational beings, we impose upon ourselves. Morality is the basis of our sense of freedom.

For Kant, the desires which spring from nature and society can offer no moral guidance. On the contrary, they constitute a threat to our moral being. Leading us easily astray, they stand in need of regulation by morality. Kant went so far as to remark that inclinations are "always burdensome to a rational being, and though he cannot put them aside, they nevertheless elicit from him the wish to be free of them" (*KpV*, Ak 5:118). So extreme a statement could not be his last word, since in the absence of desire morality would have nothing left to govern. But it expresses in a pointed way Kant's opposition between duty and inclination. Desires need to be ruled by moral principle; they can never themselves produce genuine moral commitment. Thus, Kant dismissed out of hand earlier attempts to found morality upon sympathy. A benevolent action arising out of fellow-feeling can have "no true moral value." Indeed, imagining a person without any feeling of sympathy for others, yet disposed to do what is right out of a sense of duty, Kant declared that he would display "beyond compare the highest form of character" (*G*, Ak 4:398).

At his most rigoristic, Kant held therefore not only that our sense of duty has a source independent of inclination, and not only that the inclination to act in accord with duty, having no moral value itself, adds none to the resulting act. He also maintained that the moral worth of an action is more evident, the greater the contrary inclinations the agent must overcome. For then the "sublimity" of morality's demands shows forth more clearly (*G*, Ak 4:425). It is against this view that Schiller protested in his essay of 1793, *Über Anmut und Würde*. "In Kant's moral philosophy," he wrote, "the idea of duty is presented with a harshness that frightens away all grace and that could easily tempt a weak mind to seek moral perfection on the path of a dark and monkish asceticism" (*AW*, *SW* V, 465).

Schiller believed that Kant's rigorism was understandable, given the need to challenge the dominant view of the time that morality merely serves the agent's happiness. Our sense of duty, he agreed, cannot be based in feelings and desires. Right action springs from the freedom by which we give ourselves a rule of action

founded in the impartiality of reason. Yet Schiller also argued that Kant was misled into denying inclinations any positive role in the moral life. Virtue does not pit duty against inclination; on the contrary, it involves taking pleasure in doing duty for duty's sake. A harmony between duty and inclination represents the higher moral ideal because it is what the person struggling with contrary desires would prefer to display. How sincere could such a person's allegiance to morality be, if instead he relished the opposition of desire?

Thus, an element of grace (*Anmut*), wrote Schiller, always inheres in the actions of the truly virtuous person. The tact or ease with which he does the right thing involves a congruence between inclination and duty. Virtuous action is an expression of freedom since it arises from a sense of duty, but it is also an expression of feeling to the extent that the agent cares about those whom he respects. Grace is never deliberate, for feelings do not lie under the control of the will: "one should never look as though he knew about his grace" (AW, SW V, 450). As a result, true virtue must be understood as a synthesis of freedom and feeling, reason and sensibility. It is moral beauty, the harmony displayed by the "beautiful soul" (*schöne Seele*). Kant had succumbed to the sort of mistake to which philosophers are chronically driven:

The things which one must necessarily distinguish when philosophizing are not therefore in reality always separate . . . Human nature is in reality more of a connected whole than philosophers, who are good only at distinguishing, can make it out to be. (AW, SW V, 448, 467)

In place of Kant's dualisms, Schiller extolled the wholeness of the human person, in which reason no longer dominates sensibility, but joins with it.

Yet Schiller could not fully espouse this ideal. His notion of the beautiful soul was inherently unstable because of the Kantian elements it preserved. Kant himself tried to minimize their differences in replying to Schiller's critique (*R*; Ak. 6:23). Conceding that moral action need not be devoid of feeling, he insisted only that grace can play no role in determining the nature of duty, a principle, he observed, which Schiller endorsed. Was Kant's earlier praise of the triumph of duty over inclination as "the highest form of character" therefore just an exaggeration? In fact, his reply shows that rigorism represented the natural tendency of his thought. If duty is determined by reason alone, and reason is the expression of our freedom, how can the moral ideal involve anything more than what we can set out freely to achieve? How can it also include feelings harmonious with duty? Must we not strive as moral beings to live beyond feelings or at least (though this seems contradictory) to shape our feelings to accord with duty?

These conclusions can be avoided, I believe, if we do not suppose at the outset that reason in its moral employment is self-legislating, but regard it instead as

responsive to a pre-existing order of reasons.<sup>2</sup> Then there will be no unbridgeable gulf between reason and sensibility. But Schiller was too much of a Kantian to contemplate surrendering the equation of morality with freedom. Thus, at one point in his discussion of grace, he took to calling moral beauty a “duty of appearances” (*AW, SW V*, 445–6), as though feeling too could be harnessed to the sphere of freedom. In the second part of his essay, devoted to dignity (*Würde*), he took a different, but equally symptomatic, path: instead of distorting the ideal of grace, he focused on a different ideal, more in keeping with his Kantian allegiances. Beauty of character is unattainable, he observed, because we are by nature divided beings, divided by our will. Even when our inclinations point in the direction of duty, it remains for us to decide whether to follow them or not. The will must be the ruler of our being.

Thus Schiller turned, like Kant before him, to describing the moral life in terms of the ideal of sublimity, in which the will shows itself superior to every given desire. Kant had defined the sublime as the experience of the disproportion between an idea of reason and something in the world we imagine in vain to embody it; as a result, he had seen a special kinship between the sublime and morality, in which reason must “exert its dominance over sensibility” (*KU, Ak* 5:269). Because Schiller agreed in viewing morality as an expression of our freedom, his thinking too moved inevitably toward this conception of human dignity. Not wishing to disown the ideal of moral beauty, he declared that human perfection entails the combination of grace and dignity (*AW, SW V*, 481).<sup>3</sup> But that seems an impossible undertaking. Schiller was caught between two contrary ideals.

The sublime expresses the transcendence of freedom, the ability to move beyond all that experience has made of us. Beauty, by contrast, is an ideal of unity, in which our noblest humanity feels at home in the world of experience. The sublime no less than the beautiful, freedom no less than unity, maintained their dual hold over the theoretical imagination of German philosophy in this period. The two aspirations pull in opposite directions, and yet Schiller was not the only one to seek some way of doing justice to them both. That was Hölderlin’s ambition too.

### III Hölderlin: being and subjectivity

In Hölderlin’s preface to the fragment of *Hyperion* published in Schiller’s review *Thalia* in 1794, the relation between unity and freedom appears as the theme of his novel. “Man,” he wrote,

would like to be *in* everything and *above* everything, and the motto in Loyola’s epitaph:

*non coerceri maximo, contineri tamen a minimo*

serves to designate the all-desiring, all-subjugating dangerous side of man as well as the highest and most beautiful condition he can achieve. (SA III, 163)<sup>4</sup>

It might seem that we must choose whether to feel at home in the world around us or to exercise the freedom of standing back and shaping our life ourselves. Yet this passage portrays our ultimate aspiration as wanting to be *both* in and above everything, combining the beautiful and the sublime. Like Schiller, Hölderlin believed that moral freedom, if pursued to the exclusion of a sense of unity with the world, leads to fanaticism. His way of marrying these two ideals was more successful, however, largely because he devised a dynamic conception of the human condition in which they figure as distinct moments.

For Hölderlin, reflection forms the essential obstacle to integrating unity and freedom, for it entails a division between the I and its object, even when the object happens to be itself. Yet he also believed that reflection depends on the presupposition of an underlying unity. The *Thalia* fragment begins by stating that human life unfolds as a movement from a condition of utter simplicity, where our needs coincide with our powers in virtue of our natural endowment alone, toward a condition of complete development, where we achieve a unity with the world through needs and powers we elaborate ourselves. This movement Hölderlin termed man's "eccentric path" (*exzentrische Bahn*). As reflective beings, we move irretrievably beyond an unthinking unity with the world, which continues nonetheless to be the center of our existence. It shapes the sort of relation to the world that, at our best, we go on to pursue, when we aim to be not just above the world, but at one with it as well.

Hölderlin began to work out his conception philosophically shortly after graduating from the Tübinger Stift (where he had been a fellow-student with Hegel and Schelling). Having found a position as preceptor in the vicinity of Jena, he was able to attend Fichte's lectures at the university in 1794–5. Jena was then at the forefront of German philosophy, and not just because of Fichte's presence. His predecessor in the chair of philosophy, Karl Leonhard Reinhold, had introduced the program for post-Kantian philosophy that Fichte was continuing. Moreover, some members of Reinhold's audience had already discovered important reasons to reject this program. Thus, when Fichte arrived in Jena in the spring of 1794, his thinking seemed to many there somewhat *passé*. Laying out this context will be helpful in understanding the most significant philosophical piece Hölderlin wrote, published only in 1961 and usually called *Judgment and Being* (*Urteil und Sein*).<sup>5</sup>

Reinhold had argued that Kant's philosophy could overcome the many difficulties stemming from its dualism of reason and sensibility, if it were recast as a system based upon a single ultimate principle, from which its various theses could be justified and given their proper meaning. The central idea of "representation" (*Vorstellung*) seemed ideal for this purpose, and Reinhold had

formulated his fundamental principle thus: “In consciousness a representation is distinguished from what is represented and from what does the representing and is set in relation to them both.”<sup>6</sup> Yet skepticism soon arose among Reinhold’s auditors (among them Niethammer) about whether any principle could do what Reinhold wanted, namely, justify as well as explain our knowledge of the world as a whole. Influenced by Jacobi’s view that reason can only justify one thing relative to another, they argued that no first principle can serve as a foundation (*Grundsatz*) for knowledge. Any principle substantial enough to explain the cardinal features of the mind’s relation to the world cannot be self-evident; its justification along with an understanding of its terms can come about only piecemeal and provisionally, as we see how well it organizes the other things we believe to be true. Far from being able to form a finished system, philosophy is therefore fated to be an unending enterprise. The mind’s fundamental relation to the world becomes clearer only bit by bit, as inquiry progresses. As editor of the *Philosophisches Journal*, Niethammer made this “anti-foundationalist” critique available to others outside the Reinhold circle.<sup>7</sup>

Fichte pursued a different line of criticism. Persuaded of the need to build upon a supreme principle, he believed that Reinhold had misidentified its nature. Not representation but subjectivity should be the key notion. After all, representation in Reinhold’s principle is defined in terms of two activities (distinguishing and relating) whose source can only be the subject itself. Thus, Fichte embarked in his *Science of Knowledge* (*Wissenschaftslehre*) upon a systematic philosophy of the absolute ego, according to which all knowledge is grounded upon the I and its relation to itself. To the Reinhold circle attending his lectures in 1794, however, Fichte’s new approach appeared only to perpetuate a mistake they had overcome. When Hölderlin arrived in Jena, he became acquainted with their objections, particularly through Niethammer, an earlier graduate of the Tübinger Stift, a remote relative of his, and the man he called a year later his “philosophical mentor.”<sup>8</sup> Niethammer’s influence is visible in *Urteil und Sein*, though filtered through a more radical critique of philosophy which was Hölderlin’s own.

This text, composed in April 1795, was written on both sides of a detached flyleaf, the one side devoted to judgment, the other to being. Hölderlin’s main thesis is that, contrary to Fichte, subjectivity cannot function as the first principle of philosophy, for it cannot be understood in its own terms. The I is essentially an I capable of judging and hence always defined in relation to an object of judgment distinct from it. All judgment (*Urteil*), he remarks in a bit of false etymology, turns on a primordial division (*Ur-Teilung*) between subject and object. This fact alone would show that the I cannot serve as a foundation of knowledge in the way that the absolute ego, supposedly definable in advance of any cognitive relation to the world, was meant to do.<sup>9</sup>

But the argument of *Urteil und Sein* goes further. The distinction between subject and object inherent in all judgment entails that self-consciousness, though involving the idea that subject and object are the same, cannot be explained by appeal to the nature of the I alone. We cannot understand a mental state as our own without judging it to be ours, but in doing so we must distinguish ourselves as the object of judgment from ourselves as judging. “How can I say ‘I,’” Hölderlin asked, “without being conscious of myself? But how is self-consciousness possible? Because I oppose myself to myself, separate myself from myself, and yet despite this separation and in being opposed to myself know myself to be the same.” Self-consciousness certainly assumes that we are one and the same as that of which we are conscious. But, Hölderlin pointed out, this sense of oneness cannot be explicated in terms of the I alone, since self-consciousness, to the extent that it is an act of the I, entails an inescapable distinction between subject and object.

Some have objected that this argument misses the originality of Fichte’s philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Fichte had insisted, against the tradition from Descartes to Kant and Reinhold, that self-awareness is not identical to self-reflection; to make any judgment about our mental state, we must already have an immediate, non-reflective acquaintance with ourselves.<sup>11</sup> Did not Hölderlin overlook this innovation, in supposing that the I, and so the I’s relation to itself, must be understood in terms of judgment? Not at all. On the contrary, this objection misses the crux of Hölderlin’s argument. He agreed, as shown by the passage just quoted, that I have a way of recognizing myself as myself despite the self-division created by making myself the object of my judgment. His point was that this self-recognition cannot be explained in terms of the nature of the I alone. To be an I consists in being able to say “I,” yet in saying “I” I am reflecting, taking up the position of a knowing subject and so contrasting myself with some object.

To grasp subject and object as one in self-consciousness, Hölderlin argued, we must draw upon a sense of their unity antecedent to the standpoint of the judging I. Moreover, this unity or “absolute Being” must underlie the distinction between subject and object inherent in every sort of cognitive attitude – not only in self-consciousness, but also in our relation as knowers to the world. For any sense we have of being one with ourselves, arising as it does from some basis other than the I itself, must by the same token embody a sense of being one with everything else. Subjectivity arises as a disruption of this unity and remains at bottom incomprehensible without it.

How, according to Hölderlin, is Being itself to be understood? Formally, it can be assumed to unite subject and object to such an extent that “no division can be made [between them] without violating the essence of that which is supposedly being separated.” This criterion suffices to demarcate Being from the lesser sort of unity (Hölderlin called it *Identität*) that the I by itself can guarantee in

self-consciousness, since it is the essence of the knowing subject to be distinct from its object, even in self-consciousness, where “the I is possible only through such a separation of the I from the I.” But we learn little thereby about the inner constitution of Being or about the process by which the subject emerges from it. Precisely the unknowability of Being, however, is what Hölderlin wanted to establish. Being cannot be an object of knowledge, since it would then have to be distinct from the knowing subject, instead of embracing subject and object in a prior unity. Being can only be a presupposition that we adopt to make sense of the possibility of reflection. In Hölderlin’s eyes, it functions as a ground, not as a principle.<sup>12</sup> We cannot begin with an understanding of Being and deduce the characteristic features of our relation to the world. Such was Hölderlin’s version of the critique of philosophizing from first principles that the Reinhold circle had directed against Fichte. He also had his own way of endorsing Niethammer’s conception of philosophy as an unending enterprise. It will become visible as we look further at Hölderlin’s complex theory of the self and the ideal of life he drew from it.

#### IV Hölderlin: unity and freedom

For Hölderlin, self-awareness involves two distinct components. On the one hand, I stand back from myself since, as subject, I must distinguish myself from the object of my attention. On the other, I understand myself as being one and the same with my object. These two dimensions give rise, in fact, to the two principal, though opposing, ideals of human life described in the *Thalia* fragment. The subject’s distinguishing itself from all that is its object provides the basis of freedom, the ideal of being “above” everything. The subject’s sense of being one and the same with itself harbors the intimation of an even greater unity, giving rise to the ideal of being “in” everything. One of Hölderlin’s most innovative ideas was that the self, far from ideally enjoying an identity with itself, is essentially pulled in contrary directions. As the *Thalia* fragment shows, he was in possession of this insight before coming to Jena. Working through Fichte’s philosophy allowed him to give a deeper philosophical articulation to his belief in life’s essential “dissonances.”

The very structure of our conscious life, therefore, gives rise to our “eccentric path,” in which our assertion of freedom disrupts a prior unity with the world, while remaining rooted in it. To the extent that we heed both dimensions of our nature, we will seek a relation to the world that places a recognition of our freedom within the framework of a more encompassing unity. Yet because Being can never be an object of knowledge in its own right, but can only be elicited as the presupposition behind our capacity for knowledge, we can never perfectly achieve this goal. Or at least we can never do so in the terms which philosophy



allows. “The unity of subject and object,” Hölderlin wrote several months after *Judgment and Being*, “is possible by means of theory only through infinite approximation (*eine unendliche Annäherung*).”<sup>13</sup>

Hölderlin’s points of agreement with Niethammer form part, of course, of an analysis of self-consciousness and a speculative understanding of Being entirely his own. His philosophical thinking went far beyond the more down-to-earth views of the man he considered his mentor. In originality and power, it also outstripped anything his Tübingen classmates, Schelling and Hegel, were able to muster at the time<sup>14</sup> and called into question assumptions that Hegel at least would never consider abandoning. Hölderlin saw in the limits of philosophy reason to believe that poetry fares better in expressing the full reality of the human condition. The superiority of poetry was one of his deepest convictions, growing out of his philosophical reflection and inspiring his work as a poet. Its rationale will become clear as we pursue further his account of the self’s inner division and of the possibility of reconciling the ideals of unity and freedom.

Here our guide must be Hölderlin’s novel *Hyperion*, a half-poetic, half-philosophical exploration of these themes. Begun in 1792 in Tübingen, *Hyperion* went through a number of versions, until it was published in two volumes in 1797/9. In the Preface to the penultimate version (December 1795), Hölderlin observed that:

We all travel an eccentric path . . . We have been dislocated from nature, and what appears to have once been *one* is now at odds with itself . . . Often it is as though the world were *everything* and we *nothing*, but often too it is as though we were *everything* and the world *nothing*. *Hyperion* too was divided between these two extremes. (SA III, 236)

*Hyperion* feels the contrary tendencies of the self so intensely that they take an all-or-nothing form. His story consists in learning to integrate them into a coherent life.

The published version of *Hyperion* is a novel in letter form, but it departs significantly from its eighteenth-century models. All of the events *Hyperion*, a modern Greek, recounts in these letters to Bellarmin – the instruction he receives from Adamas about the glories of ancient Greece, his love for Diotima, his insurrectional campaign with Alabanda against Turkish rule, the death of Diotima – have taken place before he writes his first letter. Far from expressing his momentary moods in an unfolding drama, *Hyperion*’s letters reflect upon a set of experiences already behind him. They show him working through his past, learning to make sense of the setbacks he encountered, so that his development takes place, not just in the course of his experience, but also through reflection: the *Hyperion* who writes the last letter is no longer the same as the one who wrote the first. Reflection grows inescapably out of our more immediate

experience as the need to put it into intelligible form. By thus building the idea of man's "eccentric path" into the very structure of the novel, Hölderlin achieved a rare synthesis of form and content, since it is with that idea that Hyperion must come to terms.

In his first letters, Hyperion could not be farther from this goal. He regards reflection as a curse, cutting him off from the unthinking oneness with the world which he believes he once enjoyed, particularly in Diotima's company, and which he longs to regain. "Blessed self-oblivion" amidst the beauty of nature is his highest joy. But "a moment of reflection" hurls him down. His existence fractured into opposing extremes, Hyperion exclaims, "Man is a god when he dreams, a beggar when he reflects!" (*SA III*, 9). Reflection destroys all unity with the world because it seems itself to involve a "tremendous striving to be the whole." Yet for all the feeling of homelessness it produces, Hyperion cannot wish it away, for reflection is the sign of his freedom; it shows that he "was not born for the whip and the yoke" (*SA III*, 18). Thus he bounces back and forth between the desire to be "in" and the desire to be "above" everything.

Hyperion moves beyond this divided outlook through recounting his past to Bellarmin. As he comes to take stock of his past experience, his very conception of what it is to reflect changes as well. Adamas's nostalgia for the past, he realizes, could never be his. Instead of following his teacher into the Asian hinterland in search of a people still having the ancient virtues, he has to deal with the world of the present. Alabanda represented one possibility, the struggle for social justice. But he was a moral fanatic, sacrificing every human sentiment to the demands of principle. Early on, Hyperion saw the flaw in a man whose revolt against Turkish rule would later end in a bloodbath. "It has always made the state a hell," he remarked, "that man has wanted to make it his heaven" (*SA III*, 31). The portrait of Alabanda owes a lot to Schiller's critique of Kantian rigorism, and it may have been modelled on Fichte himself, since Alabanda appears only in the versions of the novel written after Hölderlin came to Jena.

In Diotima Hyperion discovered the other extreme, an unreflective being at home in the world instead of the world-alienation he found in Alabanda. Hers was the beauty of nature rather than of art, for at first she is depicted as naïvely lacking any awareness of the beauty Hyperion worshipped in her. And when she later belied this stereotype of the unreflective woman, it was to tell him that he was born for higher things than her, namely, for poetry (*SA III*, 87, 149). Only afterwards, however, does Hyperion grasp the significance of her statement, when he has begun to reflect more deeply upon his past.

Adamas, Alabanda, and Diotima represent, in effect, three different ways of giving life unity – through nostalgia, moral sublimity, and natural beauty. Though identifying with each of these ideals in turn, Hyperion soon discovered something wanting; none of them could stand up to reflection. Whence his initial

feeling that oneness and reflection must always be opposed. But in the course of his letters to Bellarmin, Hyperion begins to discern a different meaning in his past. Rather than forming a string of defeats, these experiences of unity disrupted by reflection illustrate the very rhythm of human existence. “If the life of the world consists in the alternation between opening and closing, in going forth and in returning, why is it not even so with the heart of man?” (SA III, 38; also 47). The “hidden order” that Hyperion now sees in his life exemplifies the relation between Being and reflection laid out in *Judgment and Being*. Though neither nostalgia for an idealized past, nor devotion to duty, nor natural beauty give perfect expression to Being, they all involve the desire to recapture some kind of unity in life. Nor could Hyperion discover the inadequacy of their claims to completeness, did he not draw upon the inkling of a more encompassing unity. Reflection and unity do not therefore simply stand at odds, as he first believed. Their tension forms a pattern. Our lives move continually back and forth between the effort to achieve some order in our experience and the realization that the order achieved is imperfect, and both these forms of reflective activity draw on the sense of a pre-reflective unity of mind and world which reflection can only approximate. There will never be a moment of completion, only an unending quest fueled by intimations. Hyperion’s very name, meaning the one who “goes beyond,” symbolizes this insight. And so the last words in the novel are his promise, “More soon” (*Nächstens mehr*).

By virtue of grasping the true character of life’s “eccentric path,” Hyperion can now take to heart the intellectual understanding of art that he formulated even before writing to Bellarmin. Once, in conversation with Diotima, he had announced that the essence of beauty in art is “the One differentiated in itself” (*das Eine in sich selber unterschiedne*). This definition is very different from the notion of beauty as a selfless unity with nature that figures (later) in his first letters to his friend. But only now can he appreciate its import. At their best, works of art impress upon us through their own example the way all thought draws upon the oneness of Being while also distinguishing itself from its object. Philosophy can approach this fundamental unity only from the outside, by arguing that it is a presupposition we must make to give an adequate account of our experience, for Being is unknowable. Left to itself, philosophy can at best be, as Hyperion says, “the blind demand for an unending progress in the unification and differentiation of some subject matter.” Only poetry, “the beginning and the end” of philosophy (SA III, 83, 81), can give us a sense of the connection between Being and thought from within. Later Hegel declared that art is “a thing of the past,” everything important in the human condition now being expressible in conceptual form. Hölderlin would have disagreed, and not out of mere nostalgia (as Hegel liked to say in dismissing his romantic contemporaries), but as a result of philosophical argument.

After his year in Jena, Hölderlin increasingly turned his energies from philosophy to poetry. He gave up earlier plans of pursuing a teaching position in philosophy; he never completed the essays promised to Niethammer for the *Philosophisches Journal*. Like Hyperion, he recognized that his true calling lay in poetry. The great visionary poems he went on to write build on the scheme already presented in *Judgment and Being* and *Hyperion*. They evoke with religious awe the ultimate, “holy” ground in which mind and world are at one, yet they do so at a remove, by intimation rather than by direct description. Strain as it may against the division between subject and object, poetry remains an act of reflection. The poet must step back from whatever inkling he has of the unity of Being, in order to put it into words. For Hölderlin, the moments of vision are therefore never in the present. They are always past or future, remembered or anticipated, as in the elegy “Bread and Wine” (1800–1). Poetry must guard against the twin follies of trying to take the Holy by storm, as though to describe its innermost nature, and of being instead so fascinated by its opacity as to remain dumbstruck. The proper attitude, for the poet as for all humanity, is gratitude, the celebration of our dependence on a ground that thought can never make transparent to itself.<sup>15</sup>

It would be misleading to describe “the One differentiated in itself” as an ideal of wholeness. Certainly Schiller’s notion of grace could be characterized thus, for it refers to the congruence of reason and sensibility, duty and feeling. But Hölderlin’s ideal has a more complex structure. Rather than glorifying wholeness, it embraces the inescapable tension between unity and reflection as the expression of thought’s rootedness in the opacity of Being. To be sure, Hölderlin sought the resolution of life’s dissonances. Yet for him the contrary tendencies of the self are not reconciled by our coming to be at one with ourselves, but by understanding how they work together to form our nature, which is never to coincide with the ground of our being. The end of *Hyperion* compares this reconciliation to love because lovers, however closely conjoined, never lose their separateness (SA III, 160).

German romantic thought is often said to be a longing for wholeness and organic unity, a nostalgic flight from modern man’s alienation from the world.<sup>16</sup> Yet Hölderlin offers a notable exception to this *idée reçue*. His notion of absolute Being certainly qualifies as an organic whole, but the theme of all his thought is that our aim cannot be to merge with Being. I turn now to the other great philosopher-poet of German romanticism, Novalis (born Friedrich von Hardenberg), whose path crossed Hölderlin’s in Jena in 1795. He too challenged the goals of rational transparency and wholeness.

### V Novalis: reflection and poetic suggestion

Novalis studied philosophy in Jena with Reinhold in 1790–2, and was well acquainted with various members of his circle, particularly Niethammer. From late 1795 to the fall of 1796, he composed the critical notes on Fichte's philosophy, never published in his lifetime, which have come to be known as his *Fichte Studies*. They show Novalis arguing, for reasons similar to Hölderlin's, that the I cannot provide the basis for the first principle of philosophy as Fichte had imagined. There is no evidence, beyond the report of their meeting, to indicate any mutual influence. But their common debt to Niethammer helps to explain the similarities in their thought.

Novalis believed that on one important point Fichte was right. To him, as to many of his contemporaries, it seemed a genuine insight to claim that the I must have a more immediate form of acquaintance with itself than reflection, with its inevitable distinction between subject and object. But Fichte erred, he objected, in supposing that the I's immediate relation to itself can be explained in terms of the nature of the I itself as a conscious subject. Fichte had invoked the idea of "intellectual intuition" to designate the I's immediate self-awareness. But for Novalis this notion was a composite, a "unifying third," combining the two distinct elements of reflection and feeling.<sup>17</sup> To the extent that intellectual intuition means an act of knowledge, the I's relation to itself is still understood in terms of self-reflection, for there is no knowledge apart from reflection. If instead it is meant to be an acquaintance that the I has with itself prior to all reflection, then it can be only a feeling, passively registering an I whose being is simply given. The fundamental nature of this I, as well as the means by which it can come to reflect upon itself, cannot be explained. Therefore, Novalis concluded, the I cannot serve as the first principle of philosophy.

"Philosophy always has need of *something given* . . . The limits of feeling are the limits of philosophy."<sup>18</sup> This statement shows the influence of Jacobi's general anti-foundationalist argument, which Novalis probably learned to appreciate through his friend Niethammer. All justification being of one proposition relative to another, Jacobi held that philosophy must take its bearings from the mere feeling or unreasoned belief that certain things exist. Novalis had this lesson in mind when working out his critique of Fichte. He also observed that his own argument cannot but proceed from the standpoint of reflection. The concept of "feeling" is deployed in the attempt to reflect upon the limitations of reflection (to reverse, as he liked to say, the "*ordo inversus*" by which our self-awareness seems so immediate as to suggest that it exhausts the I's very existence). Fichte inaugurated the critique of reflection, but his reliance upon the hybrid notion of intellectual intuition shows that he did not go far enough. Novalis sought to do better, but he acknowledged that philosophy can peer

beyond the limits of reflection solely in terms available to reflection itself. Thus, to say that the I's pre-reflective acquaintance with itself can only be by way of feeling indicates that the I's existence must count as *given* to the conscious I, instead of consisting in the I's self-awareness (as Fichte believed). And the I's givenness to reflection allows us to conclude that its nature must be a kind of "primordial activity" (*Urhandlung*), since we can infer that feeling, as something passive, must be the effect of something active.<sup>19</sup> But beyond this, he insisted, nothing more can be established.

Novalis's methodological scruples had important consequences. Like Hölderlin, he too talked of reflection being rooted in Being (*das Sein*),<sup>20</sup> and regarded the nature of Being as opaque to philosophical clarification. This was their common ground. Yet Novalis did not mean by such statements what Hölderlin meant in *Judgment and Being*. Being for Hölderlin is the inner unity of mind and world. For Novalis it is always the Being of the I, which he understood as antecedent to the I's self-awareness, but not as underlying all distinction between the I and the world. Philosophizing from the standpoint of reflection, he saw no reason to generalize the pre-reflective Being of the I beyond the I itself. This philosophical divergence entailed differences in their conception of art, as we see if we look at Novalis's collection of aphorisms (*Vermischte Bemerkungen*) which Friedrich Schlegel edited and published in 1798 as *Pollen (Blüthenstaub)*.<sup>21</sup>

The first aphorism, building upon his studies of Fichte, provides the key to understanding the rest: "We seek everywhere the Unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*) and always find only things." The proposition turns on a pun, "*das Unbedingte*" meaning "the unconditioned," but suggesting the idea of what is not a thing (*Ding*). The things of experience are always conditioned: their qualities, behavior, and very existence, depend on their relations to other similarly finite things. By the Unconditioned (or the Absolute) Novalis meant the ultimate reality on which depend the various things we distinguish in experience. In the mid-1790s there were two main candidates for the role of the Absolute: the pantheistic God of Spinoza's *Ethics* and the I of the *Science of Knowledge*. Fichte believed that the I must be the Absolute, since it alone can be the object of a philosophical first principle, serving to justify our knowledge of the world. As we have seen, Novalis followed Niethammer in holding that no first principle is possible in philosophy and argued in particular that the I cannot fill this role, since it lacks the self-transparency which Fichte supposed it possessed.

Yet Novalis never concluded that the very idea of the Absolute is incoherent. On the contrary, the first aphorism in *Pollen* implies that though knowledge of the Absolute lies forever beyond our grasp, we are impelled to seek it all the same. Reason naturally tries to trace things back to their ultimate source in the Unconditioned. The rub is that all we ever come thereby to understand are conditioned things. Nor, as the *Fichte Studies* make clear, did he reject Fichte's view

that the Absolute is the I. We can surmise, he believed, that underlying the standpoint of reflection and the knowledge of conditioned things it affords must be the primordial, pre-reflective activity of the I. It is the inner nature of the absolute ego that remains unknowable.

However, we can approach it indirectly. In the *Fichte Studies*, Novalis had written, echoing Niethammer:

What do I do when I philosophize? I reflect upon some ground . . . All philosophy must therefore end with an absolute ground. But if this is not given to us . . . philosophy must be an unending activity.<sup>22</sup>

This idea of “approximation” reappeared in *Pollen*, as in the remark that thought directed toward the Unconditioned is “never nearer than when it seems farthest away” (VB 98; B 99). The moment of felt distance carries a recognition of the very essence of our goal, which is to always elude us. This unknowability of the Unconditioned is something that philosophy can only *state* as a fact. Yet poetry (*Dichtung*), by which Novalis meant imaginative art in general, can do more.<sup>23</sup> Instead of commenting upon this fact from the outside, poetry is able to *show* the elusiveness of the Absolute. Like Hölderlin, Novalis found in poetry a deeper expressive capacity than philosophy can muster. But again, for him the Absolute that poetry can evoke is not Being as such. It is the Being of the I, its primordial activity from which reflection and knowledge derive. Poetry’s aim and method are correspondingly different. “The path of mystery leads inward,” he announced (VB 17; B 16) (*Nach Innen geht der geheimnisvolle Weg*).

The poet’s task must be to bring his own thinking into proximity with its ultimate ground, to “take hold of his transcendental self, to be at the same time the I of his I” (VB 28; B 28). Of course, the poet too can only approach this goal, but he does so, not by straining to describe that ground, but by deploying the special resource of poetic speech, which is to suggest more than it explicitly says. In Novalis’s view, the ability to use language so as to intimate more than can be rendered by paraphrase, to express more than can be made precise, displays the I’s primordial activity in its difference from the determinate mode of thinking it takes on in reflection. Poetry is obviously not the I’s *Urhandlung* in the pure state, for then it would be unintelligible. Nothing can be suggested except on the basis of something definitely asserted, something “conditioned.” But poetry uses the things of our world, even the most common, to evoke a sense of the Absolute. This was for Novalis the essence of romanticism: “To the extent that I give to the lowly a high meaning, to the ordinary a mysterious air, and to the well-known the dignity of the unknown, I am romanticizing it.”<sup>24</sup>

The poet thus focuses on some determinate idea at the same time as he moves beyond it, and though the direction of his movement is indicated by his point of departure, there is no way to nail down precisely the point toward which he is

heading.<sup>25</sup> Novalis used his account of poetic activity to develop a theory of interpretation. “Only then do I show that I have understood a writer,” he remarked, “when I can act in his spirit, when I can, without diminishing his individuality, translate him and alter him in manifold ways” (VB 29). To interpret a work of art faithfully is not to determine what it really means. It is to run through some of the things it can be said to mean, since its very intention is to outstrip any particular content it might be assigned. Novalis was one of the first to declare that interpretation is inherently unending, never definitive. “A poem must be quite *inexhaustible*, like a human being.”<sup>26</sup> His point was not that what precisely the poem says always eludes us. It was that what it says is such as to exclude the possibility of any adequate interpretation. Because the poem asserts something specific only to transcend its assertion in the direction of an “elsewhere” that is nowhere in particular, its hallmark is “irony” (VB 36; B 29). Here he referred to Friedrich Schlegel by name, and Schlegel indeed worked out in detail Novalis’s aesthetics of irony and infinite interpretation.

## VI Schlegel and irony

Novalis entitled the short, numbered texts he intended for publication “remarks” or “aphorisms.” Schlegel called his own three collections “fragments,” and the title was significant. To the extent that art becomes aware of its nature as art, as he believed it had increasingly done since the Middle Ages, it must recognize that it is necessarily a fragment. Everything it appears to mean can be but part of the indefinitely more that it suggests. “Many works of the ancients have become fragments,” he wrote in the *Athenaeum Fragments* (1798), “many works of the moderns are fragments from inception” (§15). His own *Fragments* were meant to illustrate this truth, no less by the abruptness of their form than by their content. As a literary genre, the “fragment” differs importantly from the classical maxim or epigram. They aimed to be complete in themselves, to give full if concise expression to some idea. The fragment, by contrast, is meant to be incomplete, to express the essentially incompletable.

Just as his “fragments” differ from classical maxims, so irony for Schlegel departs from its classical models. Socratic irony consisted in feigning ignorance while possessing knowledge. Quintilian defined irony as the trope in which a speaker substitutes for the proper expression of his thought an expression whose literal meaning is the opposite.<sup>27</sup> In both cases, irony is assumed to involve having some fully determinate thought that one chooses not to express directly. Schlegel’s irony is of a very different sort. It involves using some particular set of words to suggest the Absolute; what is not directly, but only indirectly communicated is therefore not some fully determinate thought, but rather something essentially indeterminate. Later, Hegel dismissed Schlegelian irony as mere



frivolity, the act of a mind that never means what it seems to mean. But this charge turns on a misconception. Irony, Schlegel remarked, is in “the most holy earnest.”<sup>28</sup> It does not signal a lack of commitment, for one cannot suggest the infinite except from some particular point of view, employing some determinate form of speech. Thus he observed:

There are men whose whole activity consists in always saying No. It would be no little thing always to be able to say No correctly, but whoever can do nothing else can certainly not do it correctly.<sup>29</sup>

The ironical mind is not uncommitted, but rather divided, and divided, not between one opinion and its contrary, but between the view it affirms and the realization that no position it adopts can express fully its nature as the activity that gives rise to thought and commitment. Clearly, wholeness was no more Novalis’s or Schlegel’s ideal than Hölderlin’s. Or at least it did not begin to exert a hold over Novalis’s thought until later when, as in his essay *Christianity or Europe* (1799), he sang the praise of homogeneous societies. It is essential, however, to notice the important difference in the ways Hölderlin and Novalis refused to make oneness their highest value. For all his insistence on our need to stand at a distance from the unity of Being, Hölderlin incorporated into his ideal a retrospective element – namely, gratitude for the pre-reflective unity of mind and world which makes thought possible. By contrast, Novalis’s ideal (and Schlegel’s) is resolutely forward-looking. Romantic poetry, Schlegel wrote, is “a *progressive* universal poetry” (*Athenaeum Fragments* §97). The way we are to regard ourselves as never at one with the ground of our being is by gesturing beyond wherever we happen to be. Thankfulness has no part to play.

This difference turns on how they understood the Absolute with which poetry, more than philosophy, puts us in touch. Novalis and Schlegel conceived it in terms of subjectivity. Novalis rejected, of course, the self-transparency of the I that lay at the basis of Fichte’s philosophy. But the sort of Being which he and Schlegel after him postulated as the pre-reflective ground of thought is the fundamental activity (the *Urhandlung*) of the I. Hölderlin, however, appealed to an Absolute that precedes any sense of subjectivity. His critique of Fichte cut deeper than theirs: not only is self-consciousness inexplicable in terms of the I’s nature itself, but the ground of Being on which it rests cannot be subjective in character, since the very notion of a subject implies a contrast with some object of thought. Being involves a unity of mind and world on which subjectivity depends, and to which it remains indebted.

Novalis and Schlegel embraced a form of the Kantian sublime. They glorified the freedom of the I and its ability to transcend every “finite determination,” every particular point of view, on which it may fix. Hölderlin, by contrast, subordinated the sublime to a conception of beauty. He believed that we must

acknowledge our debt to a fundamental affinity of mind and world, even if we can glimpse their unity only from the decentered perspective of memory or anticipation, which is the mark of our freedom.

In their different ways, Hölderlin and Novalis both called into question some of the deepest assumptions about reflection and subjectivity shaping not just Fichte's and later Hegel's idealism, but much of the philosophical tradition. Great poets that they were, they were also philosophers of considerable talent, who speak to contemporary concerns. I want to point out in conclusion, however, one central assumption they did not challenge. No more than Fichte did they doubt that the I is at bottom a knowing or judging subject, for they all three (despite the potential in Fichte's own description of the I as an activity of self-positing) understood its relation to itself as primarily one of self-acquaintance. Thus, in arguing against Fichte that self-acquaintance cannot be explained in terms of the conscious subject, which must always be distinct from its object, Hölderlin and Novalis sought its basis elsewhere than in any relation the subject bears to itself, namely, in "Being." But suppose that in the first instance we are not so much knowers as beings committed to rules of thought and action and only thereby capable of knowledge, even of ourselves. Suppose therefore that our fundamental relation to ourselves consists in holding ourselves responsible to reasons. Then we can regard the immediate acquaintance we have with ourselves as rooted, not in "Being," but in our nature as normative beings. It would be worth exploring how much of Hölderlin's and Novalis's speculations about Being could survive this shift in perspective.

## NOTES

- 1 See Manfred Frank, "Unendliche Annäherung". *Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 571.
- 2 See Charles Larmore, "L'autonomie de la morale," *Philosophiques*, 24 (1997), 313–28.
- 3 So, too, in his essay *Über das Erhabene*, Schiller wrote that beauty and sublimity need to come together so that man will form a "complete whole" (SW V, 807).
- 4 Loyola's motto is "Not to be confined by the largest, but to be contained in the smallest, is divinity." References to 'SA' are to Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke, Grosser Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, 15 vols., ed. Friedrich Beissner (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1943–85).
- 5 Hölderlin, SA IV, 216–17. Dieter Henrich's magisterial study of this text, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein. Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992) is indispensable.
- 6 See George di Giovanni, "From Jacobi's *Philosophical Novel* to Fichte's Idealism: Some Comments on the 1798–99 'Atheism Dispute,'" *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 26 (1989), 75–100. See too the discussion of Reinhold in Franks, ch. 5 in this volume.
- 7 For an analysis of the views of this Reinhold circle, see Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein*, 113–26, and Manfred Frank's pathbreaking book, "Unendliche Annäherung," part II.

- 8 See Hölderlin's letter to Niethammer of 24 February 1796.
- 9 Earlier in the year, Hölderlin had already made this anti-Fichte point in a letter to Hegel (still in Tübingen) of 26 January 1795.
- 10 See, for example, Jürgen Stolzenberg, "Selbstbewußtsein. Ein Problem der Philosophie nach Kant. Reinhold-Hölderlin-Fichte," *Le premier romantisme allemand, Revue internationale de Philosophie*, 3 (1996), 461–82.
- 11 The point is made *en passant* in Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794) (Fichte, *Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991], p. 97), and then at length in his *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797) (*Werke* I, 521–34).
- 12 See the discussion in Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein*, ch. VIII (92–113). In the Preface to the penultimate version of *Hyperion*, Hölderlin writes of our having an "inkling" (*Ahnung*) of Being (SA III, 236). The similarities between this philosophy of Being and Heidegger's are striking, particularly in light of Heidegger's neglect of Hölderlin's philosophical work in favor of the poetry to which he attached such exceptional importance (*Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1951).
- 13 Hölderlin to Schiller, 4 September 1795.
- 14 He paid Schelling's precocious work, *Vom Ich als Prinzip der Philosophie* (1795), the mixed compliment of telling him, "You have gotten just as far as Fichte."
- 15 See the poem *Dichterberuf* (1801), lines 55–8: "Doch es zwinget/Nimmer die weite Gewalt den Himmel./Noch ist's auch gut zu weise zu sein. Ihn kennt/Der Dank." For more on vision and gratitude in Hölderlin, see my book *The Romantic Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 25–8, as well as Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein*, 614–22.
- 16 A recent and sophisticated defense of this view is Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'art de l'âge moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), especially 19, 88–9.
- 17 Novalis, "Fichte-Studien" I.16 in *Schriften*, 5 vols., ed. R. Samuel, H. J. Mähl, and G. Schulz (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960ff.), II, 114. For his analysis of the I in terms of feeling, see "Fichte-Studien" I.15–22, 32–43 (*Schriften* II, 113–20, 126–33). Novalis's philosophy and his differences with Hölderlin are helpfully discussed in Frank, "Unendliche Annäherung" (chs. 32 and 33) and Christian Iber, *Subjektivität, Vernunft und ihre Kritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), chs. V and VI.
- 18 Novalis, "Fichte-Studien" I.15 (*Schriften* II, 113).
- 19 "Fichte-Studien" I.15 (*Schriften* II, 113f.). See also "Fichte-Studien" I.17 (*Schriften* II, 115).
- 20 See for example "Fichte-Studien" I.3 (*Schriften* II, 107).
- 21 References are given in the text to the numbered aphorisms, "VB" signifying the *Vermischte Bemerkungen* and "B" *Blüthenstaub*. An English translation of *Blüthenstaub*, with helpful notes, appears in F. C. Beiser, ed., *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9–31.
- 22 Novalis, "Fichte-Studien" V.566 (*Schriften* II, 269).
- 23 See VB 6/B 6: "We will never completely understand (*begreifen*) ourselves, but we will and can do a lot better than to understand ourselves."
- 24 Novalis, *Schriften* II, 545 ("Vorarbeiten zu verschiedenen Fragmentsammlungen. 1798" §105). Cf. D. Sturma, ch. 11 in this volume.
- 25 Cf. VB 65/B 66: "All the circumstances of our life are materials out of which we can

make what we want . . . Every acquaintance, every incident can be for the person of real intelligence the first member of an infinite series, the beginning of an infinite novel.”

26 Novalis, “Fragmente und Studien 1799–1800” §603 (*Schriften* III, 664).

27 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* IX.2.

28 F. Schlegel, “Über Goethes Meister” (1798), in *Schriften zur Literatur* (Munich: Hanser, 1970), 266.

29 F. Schlegel, *Athenäumsfragmente* §71. Cf. also §53: “It is equally fatal for the mind to have a system as not to have one. So the mind has to resolve to do both,” as well as the similar thought in Novalis, “Fichte-Studien” VI.648 (*Schriften* II, 288–9).