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# "Philosophy on the Track of Freedom" or "Systematizing Systemlessness": Novalis's Reflections on the Wissenschaftslehre, 1795–1796

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# “Philosophy on the Track of Freedom” or “Systematizing Systemlessness”: Novalis’s Reflections on the Wissenschaftslehre, 1795–1796

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In notes that have become known as the *Fichte Studies*, Friedrich von Hardenberg closely documented his intellectual journey through the 1794/95 *Grundlage*. The notes, some of them developed pieces of philosophical reflection, others mere jottings, attempt to both personally and philosophically reassemble the themes and vocabulary of Fichte’s first grand exposition of *Wissenschaftslehre*. Recent translation of the studies into English and an upsurge in scholarly interest in the early Jena Romantics on the part of literary theorists and philosophers alike occasion this look at the young Novalis’s reception of Fichte. While Jane Kneller and Manfred Frank have offered readings of the fragments that highlight the themes of the mediated character of representation, the endless nature of reflection, and the indefinite freedom that arises from the “free renunciation of the absolute” (FS, xvi), I think they underestimate the seriousness of the

young critic's attempt to think the foundations of an absolute theory of consciousness *with Fichte*. Fichte himself struggled with the indefinite character of his project, the elusive character of its elements and language, the never-ending task of supporting the hypothetical synthesis of limited I and not-I by freely undertaken analysis. Novalis was not so much diverging from a finished and formulaic 'absolute' that Fichte offers – as if the *Grundlage's* first principle statically captures the evanescent nature of the act that underlies and supports all consciousness – but launching with Fichte into the almost self-undermining project of attempting to *think* that one act by transforming it through infinite dissection into an endless series of component acts and their partial syntheses (FTP 84). Expressed in fragments as striking such as: "Unending free activity arises in us through the free renunciation of the absolute – the only possible absolute that can be given us and that we only find through our inability to attain and know an absolute" (FS #566) and "An authentic philosophical system must systematize freedom and unendingness, or, to express it more strikingly, it must systematize systemlessness" (FS #[648]).

Novalis's train of thought lands him close to the paradoxical conclusions that Fichte reaches in the *nova methodo* lectures, where the initial postulation of an abstract self-reverting activity as a support for self-consciousness ends in the dispersed world of plural centers of consciousness as will, each a sensibly embodied I summoned to free action within social constraints (FTP, 119–120, 465; cp. FS #567). The embodied subject freely interacting with other free agents in a common sensible world seems to be a radically different endpoint for philosophical reflection than the 'completed system' that Fichte promised in his 1794 prospectus (Concept, EPW 113–119). Both Fichte and Novalis arrive at that point through working on – and working *within* – the limits of reflection.

## **1. *Fichte in the Fichte Studies***

It is difficult to get any sense of Novalis's struggle with Fichtean conceptions without a patient reading through of *Fichte Studies*. He is contending with ideas and facts, with the critical philosopher's awareness of the limitations of theory and with the poet's sense of the fragile purchase of words on things. Fichte's text is rarely addressed. It is not a matter of excerpts or sketches for developed critiques. The

critic is working on the matter, instead, on the fundamental lists of words that Fichte uses to indicate isolate and, as it were, freeze the underlying self-reverting activity. Where Fichte finds a single 'self-reversion', however, Novalis finds doubling, reversal and inversion, everywhere he looks. If Fichte somewhat problematically employs a term lifted from anthropology, e.g., *feeling*, to designate a phase of the ontological process, Novalis tends to liberate words from stable referents, to release them into a play of change and exchange, and finally to obliterate the anchorage of terms in any stable designation.

This process of reversion and inversion can be seen in the first group of fragments. While Novalis explores the grand themes of *feeling*, *reflection* and *life* in his early meditations – showing himself the acute reader of the *Grundlage*, following not the logic of its deductions and principles, but the thematic guidance of its severed parts – his initial comments on consciousness display a sense of the shiftiness and luminescence of the domain of knowledge, and of the arbitrary way that words or signs designate by hovering over and hollowing out things, as it were:

“Consciousness is a being outside of being that is within being.

But what is that?

What is outside being must not be a proper being.

An improper being outside being is an image – Consciousness is consequently an image of being within being.

A better explanation of the image. /Sign/ Theory of signs. / Theory of presentation, i.e., of not-being, within being, in order to let being be there for itself in a certain respect (FS #2).”

We have all the elements here for a theory of expression as well as for a theory of consciousness. What reflects does not reproduce; the sign designates because signifier is not signified; the 'there for itself' function of image, presentation, or word arises from the loosening or disjoining of being in sign. One thing is put in place of an other, which it is *not*. Consciousness, the reader of signs, lives in the distance between the two, and is both author and decipherer of the ever shuffling substitution between them – or is consciousness itself nothing but the shuffle?

Novalis clearly sees this line of thought is vertiginous, that reference disappears in the game of intersubstitution if the *not* of not-being is the core. The *not* is just a little hook on which to hang everything, and on which nothing can depend – “it just grasps a handful of darkness.” It must inhere in something, the ultimate *something*, life. But if word and thing rest in this third, then life escapes the grasp of sign. From the start, philosophy is doomed, for it is compelled to try to say the unsayable. Philosophy can only aim at its object, not get there; we sense the ground by *feeling the limit* that circumscribes us. We are not transcendent, but know only “in the I and for the I.” If philosophy is to do anything, then, it must operate poetically, turn from its object to the crafting of an image, and in the image discern the object it cannot see: “In order to conceive itself the I must represent to itself another like itself, anatomize, as it were. This other being that is like the I is none other than the I itself. The I similarly becomes aware of this act of alienation and respective production only through this same conceptual exercise –It finds that it is the same in its own case, that the act that precedes this reflection can occur in no other way” (FS #3).

The philosopher's abstraction-reflection is the poet's creation, mirroring in an other. Novalis instinctively sees Fichte's difficulty with locating his subject-matter and making a beginning: the *intellectual intuition* or sense of sense which is to be the foundation and tool of *Wissenschaftslehre* is never absent but never-present in a unitary and sufficient way. It is said to be, supposed to be an intuition of self-activity, but self-activity is never given as such, nor completely represented as enacted. It must be glimpsed, says Fichte, in the mirror of our moral life, in the self-activity I *ought* to be, rather than the external parade of sensory states that I am (Second Introduction, SK 38–41). I must construct myself, *fictionalize* myself, to be who I am and see who I am.

Novalis's instinct, however, is to recoil before the image of endless distorted self-imaging, or the journey ever onward to an I that never fully active or self-realized. –Much of this recoil may be explicable from the standpoint of the poet's life: as Sophie's health fails, Friedrich's courage fails. Moments of despair interrupt the march of thought like stabs of pain.–As thinker and critic, however, Novalis opts for an aesthetic eternity, available in the moment, and rejects the long-march of Fichte's elongated moral striving. Near the end of the

*Studies*, in passages of unusual clarity, he sees the situation this way: we are, in part, self-determining freedom, and the I has a greater purchase on activity the more it creatively transforms what is given, the present world. We are to actively put the world *under* us – a task of endlessly postponed fulfillment. “Our [creative] power gets as much free play as it has world *under* it. But since our *nature*, or the fullness of our being is unending, we can never reach this goal *in time*.”

But evidently the poet thinks delayed gratification is one thing, but endlessly delayed satisfaction of the drive for knowledge another. He invokes a metaphysical solution, rejects the rule of time and process, buys out of Fichte's infinite moral quest, and in a Faustian move declares the moment eternalized and infinite satisfaction gained. Continues Novalis, “– But since we are also in a sphere outside time, we must reach it [the goal] there in every moment, or, better, if we want, in this sphere we are able to be pure simple substance. /Here is morality and peace of mind, because an endless striving after what lies ever out of reach before us seems unbearable/” (FS #[647]).

Simple substance is certainly ‘endless striving’ pacified, but by what right can the thinker dissolve the tension between doing and being, between simply acting and being in a state, that Fichte's approach to philosophy brings with it?

One answer is, of course, that there are more voices in the *Studies* than those of Fichte and Novalis. Spinoza is present, and the critic employs his cosmological triad of ‘God, Nature, and I’ in several contexts, all of which suggest an endlessly vital or dynamic ground of being that is partially embodied in and viewed through separate but opposed finite domains. In one fascinating but cryptic fragment, Novalis translates Fichte's view of the I into this Spinozistic theology: “Our nature is immanent – our reflection [is] transcendent. We *are* God – we think as individuals. If transcendence becomes immanence, it is the idea of divinity –that is, if representation becomes intuition, then we are in the realm of the divine I –Imagination, as intuition, is God. Feeling is nature–Understanding is the person –personified psychology.” (FS#218)<sup>1</sup>

This fascinating passage shows the philosophical perils of the idealist-romantic dialogue. If one can permit oneself to slip away from the dynamic, self-constructive or transcendental psychological mode of Fichte's thinking, ‘dogmatism’ is already at the door and the way is at hand to dissolve all of Fichte's insoluble problems–the

unrepresentability of act or agility as such, the simply categorical lag between action and reflection, production and recognition, or the nobility and the frustration of the unrealizable moral project of making all *id* into *ego*. One forgets that one crafted the image of another self solely to understand and see oneself. No longer is one looking into a mirror, then, but simply staring at a map of the heavens. Fichte was notoriously impatient with Schelling for thinking that a dogmatic or critical approach to truth was an indifferent 'lifestyle' choice.

## **2. Playing with Words: Kant's Categories and a Theory of Signs**

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Novalis's reflections on Fichte is his freedom from the latter's precision in vocabulary and argument. Where the philosopher deduces, the poet plays. Indeed sometimes he just plays with words, turning them inside out, interchanging them, running through lists of roots and prefixes while remarking on the philosophical power of the German tongue (cf. FS #'s 342, 363). Most of the critic's intellectual playfulness, however, is reserved for his constant mulling over the chestnut of Kantian philosophy, the origin and interrelations of the categories. Novalis's first thoughts on the categories, inspired as much by Fichte as by Kant's slim comments, suggest that they are thought experiments undertaken in intellectual intuition (FS#23) or modes of combining form and matter in the I in such a way that the familiar thesis, antithesis, synthesis pattern emerges. In addition, Novalis claims that the dynamic categories of relation and modality are the ground of the formal ones of quality and quantity, with the thesis of the formal ones (unity, reality) corresponding to the synthesis of the dynamic ones (reciprocity, and necessity) (FS #28). The influence of Fichte's vocabulary is evident in such constructions, and the world-picture of the *Wissenschaftslehre* seems to be vindicated: 'reality' is the sphere of appearances generated by contrary activities, operating under necessary laws, producing a uniform texture of objectivity for the limited I. Novalis attempts, for instance, to vindicate Kant's famously undeduced twelve categories in a Fichtean, i.e., binary and dynamic way. The categories of quality are figured as modes of the concept, determined by the interworkings of concept and intuition; those of relation are accounted modes of feeling, determined by the interweaving of feeling and reflection, while the modal categories are

viewed as the forms of sensation, arising from the dance of concept and sensation (FS #297). Novalis does employ contrasting pairs of the *elements* of knowledge in this attempt to derive the categories, but they are material factors, not mere rules or schemata. The reader can become suspicious that either the critic is attempting to derive the formal from the material—a category mistake about the categories—or, worse yet, that these terms are being bandied about in almost arbitrary fashion, any term being able to function in the place of any other, depending on context and starting point (see FS #'s 599 and 641). The writer seems astoundingly far from understanding the categories who can pen these notes on the same page: “Categories – original properties of a noumenon” (FS #575) and “Kantian categories are merely for accidental substance” (FS #[564]).

I can at best hazard a guess about Novalis's penchant for wordplay in lieu of deduction. Directly after an attempt to derive the Kantian twelve from modifications of modality – surely the most abstract interpretation possible – Novalis writes: “Principles of algebra applied to metaphysics” (FS #600). This of course suggests that there are necessary laws or algorithms at play, expressing a contrast between two fundamental values or qualities – and that would fit nicely with all of the critic's inversions of categories or transformations of opposites, one into the other. But it might also suggest that the fundamental values or qualities are themselves *variables*, and that an indefinite range of contrasting elements might be specified as the values of these variables. Algebraic metaphysics, then, might mean *endless intersubstitutability*, as in a Leibnizean universe of monadic mirrors, each of whose being is a function of the distortions of the perceptions of all others. This would make being chaotic and representation (or sign) arbitrary – exactly what Novalis suggests in a long passage where, investigating the interrelations between time, space, and matter, the critic from time to time steps back, observes his procedures and voices the following metacomment and questions:

“It is as impossible to think of space without time as it is to think of intuition without a representation.

/Time is the form of space in the imagination  
/Why dichotomous oppositions everywhere?  
/Everything is recognizable through opposition

/An image is a represented intuition.  
/A sign is an intuited representation.  
/Symbolic formative power [*Bildungskraft*]. Imagination.  
/ What are representation and intuition?  
/There is no absolute form, and no absolute material [*Stoff*].

They all condition each other alternatively in the circle." (FS # 226)

What does this mean? In a Fichtean world, I might suggest, things arise as appearances – or illusions – floating on a bed of activities that we can sometimes understand as opposed, refractory and mutually limiting, and we can at other times understand as one activity, but can never understand as *simultaneously one and self-opposed*. Novalis comes to some clarity about this later in the fragments, when he is working on the important doctrine of the momentary fact-event and the two opposite roles it can play, state (*Zustand*) and object (*Gegenstand*) or sensation and impression: "Every thing, like every ground, is relative. It is a thing insofar as it is opposed to a thing. Only the whole is *real*. –A thing would only be absolutely real if it was not again a *constituent*. The whole rests more or less – like a game in which people sit on each other's knees in a circular fashion without a chair." (FS #445)

A thoroughgoing relativity and intersubstitutability reigns in Novalis's world of appearance, yet interconnection through the power of the *not* – the distinction, opposition, exclusion, or semantic contrast that forms the world of representation (sign, image, word) – keeps the parts connected, keep being open to *imagination*: the power of unification.

At the foundation of this world picture are ideas borrowed from Kant (schema) and Fichte (free activity as self-determination). Novalis brings them together in a dense passage early in the *Studies* on the theory of signs. Signification – meaningful interchange or intersubstitution, generative of the relation "standing for" – happens when one signifying agent freely or arbitrarily forms a relation between 'sign' and something 'signified'. But this relationship can be communicated to a second signifying agent only if there is some structure or necessity, first, to the relationship itself and, secondly, to

the way it is conveyed. The necessary element enters in the material or sensible character of the sign, which is the constant in the communication between the two signifying agents (FS #12, pp. 7–8).

How can the sensible sign, supposing that its materiality means that it stays the same and appears in the same way to both signifiers, secure communication of an arbitrarily chosen meaning to a second signifier? Some signs must be natural or involve a homology between sign and signified; Novalis does not elaborate, but one might think of imitation, which might give way to gesture, which in turn might give way to pointing, and so on. That would be the material side of the relationship, which Novalis quickly treats. More interesting to him are the immaterial conditions of communication, first, that the first signifying agent *freely determine* herself and her world in the act of signification, and second, that there is some general sort of schema available for the mapping of the conceptual onto the sensible and vice versa (FS #12, pp. 9–10). I am not sure whether this account of conditions, material and immaterial, supplies an adequate account of the nature of sign and signification. It is similar, however, to the account of human interpersonality that Fichte supplies in early in the *Foundations of Natural Right* to support the social-political *Ur-*phenomenon of recognition (FNR 53–79). Only if somehow the presence of the immaterial can be manifested in the material and yet understood by another immaterial being, can the taking-the-other-as-conscious gesture of mutuality between humans be initiated; similarly, only if what is meant is shown in what is not meant, the material sign, can what is meant be communicated. The process of signification is that of ciphering and deciphering.

### **3. Subjects as Placeholders, Language as Verb**

If, as I argued in the last section, for Novalis ontology mirrors semiotics and the beings of appearance are, as entities, only relative to one another or in distinction from one another, then being as a whole is only a play of appearances or a dance of illusion.

Indeed, the concept of illusion [*Schein*] is built into the concept of truth, for when things trade places – as they will in Novalis's world of change– parts and whole are reversed, or part is lifted out and presented as whole (image, signification, transposition). Skirting perilously close to nonsense, the critic affirms: "Illusion and truth together constitute only one actual reality. Illusion is the original form

of truth, of original material. It is truth related to itself – reality is for reality only through relation. /The form of being is not-being – the form of not-being [is] being./ The relation of not-being is being. Consequently truth is existence –the form of illusion, of not-being – and illusion [is] the form of existence.” (FS #232).

It is an untidy world picture, perhaps, where things turn into their opposites as the price they pay for being able to stand for each other. Indeed, Novalis's universe is one of constant change and interchange—or momentary fact—carried on the surface of the incessant moves and countermoves of action, imagination, and will that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* makes fundamental. The critic offers two formulations of this changing world, one categorical and one dynamic. In categorical terms, the underlying activity of I is change in the form of exchange – exchange between essence and property being 'sphere' [jointure of limited I and limited not-I, in Fichte's language], between whole and part being 'relation', and between cause and effect being 'change' (FS #451). In the underlying world of activity that is philosophy's hypothesis, "being is a rhythmic relation, the active and passive exchange between the *positing* and the *positable*." Viewed on the surface, being is indeed, permanence – but only permanence of change, positing, and exchange. (FS #456) In this context, what am I? What is I? Only the locus of change and transaction: "I am – means I find myself in a universal relation, or *I change*. – It is part of change in general, without an opposite. – an exposing to all possible uses, to original thought[.] Refrain – repetition – expression of mere activity without object and content – first *play*." (FS #455)

In this world of shift and interchange of components, Novalis destabilizes all the components of epistemic and psychological explanation that Fichte so carefully segregated. In a world of poetic imagination, where anything can stand for anything else and form is nothing but function or power, feeling and reflection, intuition and concept merge into one another. These are all factors in the interchanging dynamic of the one self-opposed activity, after all, and it is imagination's function to mix up again what philosophic analysis has distinguished. Generally, Novalis will insist there are four features to any cognitive episode: on the objective or content side, *feeling* and that which establishes it, *intuition*, on the formal or subjective side, *reflection* and that which reflection establishes, *sensation*; these elements correspond to the four classes of categories (FS #294).

These terms have the general sense they do in *Wissenschaftslehre*, they designate collisions of opposed activities that have been imaged as a 'there' and subsequently solidified into a 'something' due to the reverberations of further activities. So while in terms of human faculties of cognition, there are imagination, feeling, understanding, and conception, these four are really two in terms of their product: imagination and feeling together arise as *intuition* (the real element, that which supplies the 'there'), while understanding and conception arise as *presentation* – the cognitive counterpart of the 'there' or the 'aware' (FS #215). All of these matters are subjected to all possible permutations in the first two groups of fragments, it seems, but one can safely assume that Novalis is operating with Fichte's lexicon in hand.

The third and fourth groups of fragments introduce a new factor into Novalis's elements of knowledge, the idea of the 'stand' or 'trace' that can function in either of two positions, in the subject as *condition* or sensation or as the outwardly projected *object* or impression. The same 'thing' – in the sense that anything can be a thing that is but the product of imagination – or 'stand' can appear as *Zustand* or *Gegenstand*, as the momentary cognitive state of the subject or its momentary condition as represented.

The argument Novalis uses to introduce this distinction is novel: in general, we distinguish subject and object, but insofar as reflection seizes upon anything, whatever it targets is object, never subject. Given, therefore, that reflection can seize upon an object of cognition, e.g., a determinate sensation, it can turn round one hundred eighty degrees and investigate that which is opposed to the object – not *the subject*, but another, subject-like object (FS #288). Presentation and object, sensation and reflection are not fixed contents or fixed activities, though they do sort themselves out as 'subjective' and 'objective' in empirical consciousness (FS #'s 290, 292). Sprouting up from originary activity, each is characterized by the other. The one item that is most indicative of this epistemic ambiguity is the Janus-like 'stand' – *Zustand* or state in context, *Gegenstand* or object in another. Only if we erroneously insist that there "is" a fixed inside and a fixed outside, or that subject and object are real, and not constructed, will this duplicity of the single appearance be confusing.

Novalis provides further detail on this intriguing idea of an epistemically neutral expression that functions as subject or object,

depending on the context in which it is placed. First of all, the 'stand' is activity or change, displacement from one position to another, so its bipolarity or double-function capacity should not be amazing (FS #306). The change of position involved is not displacement inwards, as the realist might imagine, but displacement outwards. "Activity begins in the state. It always ends in the object" (FS #315, see also 310–314). Novalis ties this all together in the following passage, where he suggests that the 'stand', where it is and however it functions, is not so much a crystallization of being as an activity and a knowing: "On the concept of standing [*das Stehen*] Stand [*Stand*] – represents and is. It is not what it represents, and does not represent what it is. The state [*Zustand*] stands for [literally: "to": Zu] and also against [*Gegen*]. Thus too the object [*Gegenstand*] stands for and against. [...] Intuiting and representing lies in the concept of standing. Stand feels insofar as it is, it senses, insofar as it represents. It feels inward, in relation to itself – it senses outward, in relation to an other – It intuits in relation to itself – it represents in relation to [an] other – this is the *Stand* in *Gegenstand* [i.e., object]. In *Zustand* [i.e., state] everything is just the opposite." (FS #330)

With this intriguing notion of the 'stand' or trace-project, metamorphosed from internal activity to outward shape, Novalis has a fully articulated model of a momentary *Tatsache*, the monadic flash of activity become knowing-being. This is his own creation, not derived from Fichte, but capable of integration with the more static and abstract apparatus of the 1794/95 *Grundlage*. When Novalis, quite late in his reflections, finally turns his attention to Fichte's principles and conclusions, he is able to assimilate the position with startling simplicity, shrinking the philosopher's moral universe into his simple 'stand' or moment-fact: "Being, being-I, being free and oscillating are all synonyms – one expression refers to the others – it is simply the matter of a single fact." (FS #556). Novalis goes on to note, however, that the 'simple fact' is not the mere glob of time, the surpassed fact, but a cosmic or eternal moment – the spiritual moment in which we live, move and have our being as "*an identically eternal acting genius – being-I.*" Though we want to reify this world and chop it into persistent things, or atomize its eternal 'is' into endless before and after, its structure comes to the fore in language and its grammar of presentation. For the world of activity become I, the sentence or unit

of expression must be parsed somewhat unconventionally: "Verb – Substantive – adjective – particle." (FS #340)

The deep connection between activity, ontology, and semiotics that mark Novalis's *Fichte Studies* signal a profound thinking-along-with that is better than any discipleship. Whether Fichte could have been nudged by further contact with Novalis and his fellow to a more satisfying and dynamic presentation of *Wissenschaftslehre* is an open question. A good author is lucky to get a good reader.

## Endnote

1. The Spinozistic triad of God, Nature, and I was part of Novalis's vocabulary from the start of the *Fichte Studies*. Remarks 142–152 show a sustained attempt to employ that language. The poet's most striking remark in that regard is: "Spinoza ascended as far as nature – Fichte to the I, or the person. I ascend to the thesis God." Perhaps this portends the mystic theology of later fragments – "We shall understand the world when we understand ourselves, because we and it are integral halves. We are God's children, divine seeds. One day we shall be what our Father is" (*Logological Fragments*, PW 61) –and of *Hymns to the Night*. See also FS #'s 71 and 303.

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