

Reflections on the subject: Fichte, Hölderlin and Novalis

Self and Other

One of the most striking examples of the new concern with the nature of subjectivity in the eighteenth century is Rousseau's *Scène lyrique*, *Pygmalion*, in which the sculptor's creation, Galathée, comes to life and touches her creator, saying 'It's me.' Moving away, she touches a marble sculpture and says 'It's no longer me. . . .' Finally, touching Pygmalion again, she sighs: 'Ah! Me once again . . .', and he exclaims: 'it is you, you alone, I give you all my being; I shall no longer live except through you' (Rousseau 1776 pp. 32–4). Such a culmination of the subject's desire for self-recognition in the other already suggests the dangers that the desire brings with it. Is my whole being to disappear into the other? In what sense would I still be myself, if I have wholly gone over into my object? As the famous exchange in Act Two of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (1859) suggests – Tristan: 'You are Tristan,/ I Isolde,/ no longer Tristan', Isolde: 'You are Isolde,/ I Tristan,/ no longer Isolde', Both: 'Without naming,/ without dividing . . .' – the very sense of an individuated self may in fact be the obstacle to union with the other. However, the end of Wagner's music drama also implies that the ultimate union requires the death of the subject. Rousseau's text asks a further vital question: Is aesthetic creation a way out of the dilemma of self-knowledge or really just another version of it, because it makes one take the imaginary for the real? The precarious balance between subject and object is, as we are about to see, crucial to the issue of aesthetics and subjectivity in the early modern period.

A more sobering observation on the nature of the I is suggested by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (*c.* 1793). Along with the fact that Hamann already suggested inverting the *cogito, sum* in 1785, this text makes evident how many accounts of the history of the 'decentering' of the subject need revising (the text is very likely the source of Nietzsche's critique of Cartesianism):

We become conscious of certain ideas that do not depend on us; others believe that we at least depend on ourselves; where is the border? We only know the existence of our sensations, ideas and thoughts. *It thinks*, one ought to say, as one says: *it's thundering (es blitzt*, literally 'it's flashing (lightning)'). To say cogito is already too much as

soon as one translates it as I think. To assume the *I*, to postulate it, is a practical need. (Lichtenberg 1994 II p. 412)

Lichtenberg may well be thinking here of David Hume's notorious failure to find an *I* when he reflects on the content of his thoughts, but he is aware that some sense of the subject to whom those 'sensations, ideas and thoughts' pertain is required, even if it has to be an impersonal subject, an 'it'.

We already encountered some of the difficulties which emerge in the attempts of the *I* to understand itself in Kant's 'transcendental deduction'. During the later part of the eighteenth century, as the passages from Rousseau and Lichtenberg make clear, the nature of the self becomes a vital philosophical and cultural issue in many different areas of European society. Interestingly, the ways in which this issue are explored tend to produce very conflicting results. On the one hand, the *I* is often seen as what is required for the world to be intelligible at all, without which there would be nothing but opaque, inert being; on the other – and this can be the case even in theories which still give the *I* a central role in constituting the world's intelligibility – the *I* seems incapable of making itself intelligible *to itself* in any exhaustive way. This conflicting image of the *I* is evident in three of the most notable explorations of the nature of the *I* in German Idealism and early Romanticism: those of Fichte, Hölderlin, and Novalis, and the questions they raise remain central even to contemporary philosophy.

Fichte

Although he himself wrote little about aesthetics, the significance of J.G. Fichte (1762–1814), both for subsequent philosophy and for aesthetics in particular, can hardly be overestimated. The reasons for this have been suggested by his most influential recent interpreter, Dieter Henrich:

Fichte was the first to arrive at the conviction that all previous philosophy had remained at a distance from the life and self-consciousness of human-kind. It had had ontological categories dictated to it which were taken from the language in which we communicate about things, their qualities and their changes. With these categories philosophy had then investigated powers and capacities of the human soul. It was therefore fundamentally unable to reach the experiences of this soul, the processes of consciousness, the structure and flow of its experiences and thoughts. (Henrich 1987 p. 61)

Fichte radicalises the Kantian turn towards the subject, not just by making the world – at least the world as that which is intelligible – into a product of the '*I*', but also by an exploration of the structures of self-consciousness which reveals the irreducibility of self-consciousness to what can be said about the world of objects. It is this exploration which helps lead, via a very complex route (see Frank 1997), to Romanticism and beyond – even as far as to the contemporary philosophy of mind (see Frank 1991) – as well as to some of the most important ideas in aesthetic theory that we shall be looking at later.

Günter Zöllner has remarked in his valuable book on Fichte that ‘As any reader of Fichte knows, criticizing him comes easy; the hard part is making him intelligible’ (Zöllner 1998 p. 6). One way of doing this is to look at Fichte in relation to an analogous account of the self from a famous subsequent account of subjectivity, Freud’s thirty-first ‘New Introductory Lecture’, on the ‘Dissection of the psychic personality’. Freud almost certainly did not know Fichte’s work, but the influence of Fichte on Schopenhauer and on a range of other nineteenth-century thinkers with whose work Freud was acquainted meant that Fichte’s ideas are likely to have had an indirect effect on how Freud thought about issues to do with the self. It is therefore not surprising that Freud’s initial question in the lecture is reminiscent of some of the questions which Fichte poses for modern philosophy. In the lecture Freud develops the model of the psyche which divides the I into id, super-ego, and ego. The lecture concludes with the famous injunction that ‘*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*’ (Where Id [It] was, Ego [I] should become).¹ The aim of psychoanalysis, as Freud sees it, is to enable the I to integrate more of its basis in natural drives into itself and to become more independent of the super-ego, the locus of the imperatives internalised during socialisation which prevent it from developing in a healthy direction.

Freud assumes that the subject is divided within itself, and the crucial issue in his analysis is how the structure of the self can be described. The term ‘dissection’ has proto-medical connotations, and indicates Freud’s aim of giving his analysis scientific status, even though, as we shall see, the issues involved are actually inherently metaphysical. Embarking on the ‘dissection’, he remarks that:

We want to make the I into the object of this investigation, our most personal [*eigenstes*] I. But can one do that? The I is after all the most essential subject, how should it become an object? Now, there is no doubt that one can do this. The I can take itself as object, treat itself like other objects, observe itself, criticise, do heaven knows what with itself. In doing so one part of the I opposes itself to the rest. The I is, therefore, splittable, it splits itself during many of its functions, at least temporarily. The pieces can unite themselves again afterwards. (Freud 1982 p. 497)

Given the struggles he has in establishing the structure of the self throughout his work Freud is remarkably relaxed about how his version of the dissection can be legitimated. If one looks a bit more carefully, the argument entails serious problems and points to a way of understanding what makes Fichte’s arguments so significant.

Freud’s first problematic assumption was implicit in Henrich’s assessment of Fichte. Even though it is clear that the I can indeed in some sense split itself – how else does one, for example, criticise one’s own thoughts or actions to oneself? – can it look at *itself* in the same way as at any other object? Kant was unable to explain the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’, which must already be in existence for our multiple representations to be the representations of an ‘I’. He had to presuppose the existence of a grounding consciousness,

despite his inability to say anything about it beyond describing the objectifiable results of its operations. The source of his problem was precisely that this consciousness does not have the status of an object: it is a 'spontaneity', and is thus the condition of its own activity, unlike objects, which are always conditioned by something else. This spontaneity is the prior condition of any attempt to know what the I – or anything else for that matter – really is. Freud is faced with an analogous difficulty to Kant, and this becomes apparent when he claims that, having split itself up into subject and object, the I can reunite itself afterwards.

The question is which 'piece' – Freud's own word – is able to do the reuniting. That which does the reuniting cannot be an object of the same order as the 'objective' 'pieces' it reunites. It has to include within itself both a subjective, spontaneous aspect, and an objective, knowable aspect, i.e. it must be that which does the dissecting, that which is dissected, and that which brings the pieces back together. What, then, *is* the principle that brings the pieces back together? The answer in Freud's terms seems to be the I of the theorist who undertakes the dissection of the object which is the self. But this is circular. The I has in this case to be defined as that which can reunite itself *as* itself, having split itself into subject and object. However, the splitting in question, which Fichte refers to in terms of 'reflection', would seem to be the condition of knowing anything at all and thus of being able to theorise in the first place. How can one know something without there being an object that is other than oneself in some sense? But if that object is myself, how do I overcome the split I have introduced into myself and know it is *me*?

Fichte had already described the structure of this issue as follows: 'for originally I am neither that which reflects, nor that which is reflected, and neither of the two is determined by the other, but I am rather *both in their unity*; I admittedly cannot think this unity, precisely because in thinking I sunder that which is reflected and that which reflects' (Fichte 1971 I p. 489). What, then, prevents consciousness disintegrating into the objective pieces into which it is split in the act of reflection? Without the unification of the pieces consciousness could never result in coherent experience of the kind required for reliable judgements, including, of course, about the I itself. Moreover, how can the I which does the looking at itself be *shown* to be the same as the I which is being looked at? This only seems possible on the basis of an initial, unanalysable *presupposition* that what we begin with is already a unified I, which was what Kant assumed in the transcendental unity of apperception. The point of the investigation, though, was to establish the structure of the I by analysing it, by 'self-reflection', which means that the unified I would have to be both the result and the ground of the analysis. Finally, it is unclear what brings about the act of reflexive splitting, the action of the I making itself into an object in order to analyse itself. Quite simply: why does it bother, rather than simply being whatever it is without reflecting? What is clear here is that something that *makes* itself into an object cannot initially be just an object, and it must therefore have a *prior* subjective status of some kind. The question is: what kind?

Freud thinks knowledge of the psyche has to be of the same kind as other knowledge, if psychoanalysis is to count as a science. The complexities and confusions in his repeated reformulations of his theory seem not least a result of the assumption that he is engaged in an empirical investigation, when what is at issue necessarily depends upon prior assumptions which govern how empirical data are to be interpreted. These are, then, actually questions about transcendental philosophy in Kant's sense. One way of making the issues here clearer will be via the metaphor of self-objectification in a mirror. This, as the passage from Freud already suggests, tends to be how theories of self-consciousness are formulated. Henrich calls such a theory the 'reflection theory': 'this theory assumes a priori a subject that thinks. It then explains that this subject continually relates to itself. The theory further maintains that this relationship comes into existence via the subject's making itself into its own object. This capacity of becoming conscious of oneself via a reflexive act distinguishes human beings from animals' (Henrich 1982 p. 62). Fichte was probably the first person to realise just how problematic this theory is.

Fichte wishes to found philosophy upon the one 'condition' which must be absolute and immediately certain, which is therefore itself 'unconditioned'. For Descartes the I had played this foundational role, and Fichte begins with the need to establish a Cartesian foundation in a more decisive way than Kant had been able to in his demonstration of the necessary role in cognition of the synthetic unity of apperception. Kant's problem, Fichte believes, was that he had tried to see the I as a fact, a *Tatsache*, literally a 'deed-thing', which suggests it has the same status as any other fact. For Fichte the I must be an action, a *Tathandlung*, literally a 'deed-action', a word he concocts to try to express the idea that the 'fact' of the I cannot be understood as something objective. Furthermore, this 'action' is not of the same order as the rule-bound actions of the I when it synthesises empirical intuitions in cognition: 'As it should not be contained in those actions, which are all necessary . . . it must be an action of freedom' (Fichte 1971 I p. 71).

The highest act of philosophy for Fichte, which is what makes philosophy possible at all, has to be the spontaneous act of coming to think about thinking. His conception is essentially opposed to the idea that having thoughts might be conceived of as a causal process, occasioned by whatever affects one in the world and by the mechanisms of the brain. The 'dogmatist', by which he means the materialist philosopher, 'denies the independence of the I completely . . . and makes it just a product of things, an accident of the world' (1971 I p. 431), so that the I is part of a mechanical series of causes and effects. The crucial point about the I for Fichte is that the activity in question does not, as any effect of a cause does, lead endlessly to other effects, but can instead – think here of the capacity for memory or for decision preceding an action – 'go back into itself', and thus have a 'being for itself (1971 I pp. 458–9): 'I and *activity which returns into itself* are completely identical concepts' (1971 I p. 462). As Fichte suggests (and the adherents of the myth of artificial intelligence would do well to listen):

‘The mechanism cannot grasp itself, precisely because it is a mechanism. Only free consciousness can grasp itself’ (1971 I p. 510). This grasping of itself cannot be the result of anything which determines the I to grasp itself, because that would require an account of what determines self-consciousness, and so on, either *ad infinitum* – in which case there would be no consciousness – or to a point which has to be assumed as the absolute origin, and this must, precisely, be the I itself: ‘The *Wissenschaftslehre* descends from the last ground which it has to what is grounded; from the absolute to what is conditioned that is contained within it, to the real, true facts of consciousness’ (1971 II p. 455). The impetus for this conception was already suggested by Kant, who claimed that the I of practical reason was capable of absolute beginning because it involved a ‘causality through freedom’ when it initiated an act for which there was no causal, conditioned necessity. As we saw in Chapter 1, the *point* of moral acts for Kant is that they can countermand the causal prompting of our instinctual nature.

How, though, do we give an account of the activity which is self-consciousness? Fichte’s answer is simple: one cannot, if this means defining – and thus limiting – it like anything else in the causally governed world. This leads him to the polemical stance exemplified in his notorious claims that ‘the philosophy one chooses depends on what sort of a person one is’ (Fichte 1971 I p. 434), and that those who do not take on their freedom cannot comprehend his philosophy. The evidence for the essential act is the very act of philosophical thinking about the I itself, which is both theoretical and practical. Fichte:

if [philosophy] starts with the fact [i.e. with something that can be explained like any other object in the world] it places itself in the world of existence and finitude and will have difficulty finding a way from this world to the infinite and supersensuous; if it starts with an action it stands at precisely the point which links both worlds and from which they can be surveyed in one gaze. (1971 I p. 468)

Fichte insists on the primacy of action in order to get over the vital metaphysical problem of how a causally determined objective world can give rise to that which is subjective, is not causally determined, and is able to apprehend causal relations *as* causal in contrast to its own potential for self-determination. The ‘infinite’ in this passage refers to an action which cannot be defined as knowledge would be, not least because knowledge itself depends upon this activity.

Grounding philosophy in the I leads, then, to the realisation that the ground of philosophy cannot be an object of knowledge. The transcendental unity of apperception was the ground of the intelligibility of empirical consciousness for Kant because the coherence of experience across time required something – which itself could not appear – that subsumed the endless diversity characteristic of sensuous appearance into identifying forms. Fichte insists on the necessary priority of what Kant admitted was required for experience in the following way: ‘It is . . . the ground of explanation of all facts of empirical consciousness that before all positing in the I’ – ‘positing’ can be understood via Kant’s assertion that

reality is ‘the position of things . . . in relation to perception’ which precedes the ascription of a concept in a judgement (cit. Frank 1997 p. 673) – ‘the I must itself previously be posited’ (Fichte 1971 I p. 95). The difference from Kant is that Fichte refuses to accept that we have no access at all to this ground. For Fichte the access involves what he terms a ‘thetic judgement’, in which only the existence of something is posited, and nothing is predicated of that existence, so that in the case of the I: ‘the place of the predicate is left empty to infinity for the possible determination of the I’ (1971 I p. 116). Our access is therefore the result of the realisation that we have a capacity – freedom – which raises us above all of the rest of nature, and which has no ground other than itself. This realisation can only come about by each person doing the realising for themselves: there can be no appeal to an objective fact – i.e. something which is referred to in a predicative statement – to establish the reality of freedom. A further way of seeing Fichte’s conception, which has become important in recent philosophy, is, then, that this is a philosophy of praxis which prefigures aspects of pragmatism: ‘We do not act because we know, rather we know because our vocation is to act; practical reason is the root of all reason’ (1971 II p. 263). There can, then, be no empirical account of the initial act of thinking, as we are always already engaged in it, indeed already *are* it, when we wish to intuit it.

Fichte’s epistemological problem is to find a way of describing an ‘eye’, or a ‘look’ – consciousness – that could ‘see’ itself seeing, which, of course, threatens a regress. It is the difficulty which emerges here that leads him to realise that the reflection model of consciousness, the model we saw in both Kant and in the passage from Freud, cannot grasp the undeniable fact of self-consciousness. The point of the reflection model, as was evident in Freud, is that it tries to make the I into something objectifiable. If the model fails to account for self-consciousness it will mean that not all that pertains to knowledge can be characterised in the manner we characterise knowledge of objects. Consequently, any philosophy which claims to be able to begin with the explication of a foundational principle is doomed to failure, as is the claim that scientific knowledge can ultimately explain itself like any other aspect of the objective world. The failure of reflection thus gives an increased importance to aspects of consciousness that are not accessible to the understanding, and this will be one source for Schelling and the early Romantics, as it already had been for the Kant of the *C7*, of attention to aesthetics, the realm in which what cannot be stated as verifiable fact may be articulated.

The only absolute for Fichte is the action of the I: all other kinds of knowledge are secondary. This does not, however, lead to an idealism like that of Berkeley. Fichte’s argument derives instead from Kant’s insistence on the transcendental unity of apperception: ‘one is very wrong if one believes transcendental idealism denies the *empirical* reality of the world of the senses etc.: it just demonstrates the forms of knowledge in empirical reality and for this reason destroys the sense that they are self-sufficient and absolute’ (1971 II p. 104). The ability to describe these forms entails the fact that the I must

transcend them if it is to be able to reflect upon them, in the same way as the I in Freud had to be of a different order from that which it splits and reunites, while also being in some way the same as it. What this involves becomes most apparent in Fichte's account of 'reflection theory', which is most powerfully stated in the 'Attempt at a New Presentation of the Doctrine of Science' of 1797. As Manfred Frank has shown (Frank 1984), Fichte's account of self-consciousness here is not touched by most of the Heideggerian and post-structuralist attacks on 'the subject' as the ground of the 'subjectification of Being' in 'Western metaphysics'. Even though Fichte will not achieve a philosophically viable account of self-consciousness, his 'original insight' (Henrich) has remained significant even for the contemporary philosophy of mind.

Fichte begins by asking me, the reader, to ponder what I do when I think of myself as 'I'. This thought is special because in it thinker and thought cannot be separate. The action of the I thinking about itself is an action upon itself. The I results, as we saw, from the return of thinking to itself: if it were always only thinking of an object there could, as Kant had shown, be no I, there would merely be unconnected, and thus opaque, empirical data. Fichte sees the problem of reflection as follows:

You are – conscious of your self, you say; accordingly you necessarily differentiate your thinking self [Ich] from the self that is thought in the thought of yourself. But in order for you to be able to do this, the thinking part of that thinking must be again the object of a higher thinking in order to be able to be an object of consciousness; and immediately you get a new subject which has again to be conscious of that which was being conscious of yourself. (Fichte 1971 I p. 526)

The result is one of those infinite series, of the kind 'I know that you know that I know that you know' etc., where *what* is supposedly known disappears in the endless reflection. In Fichte's terms it is a case of 'I am conscious that I am conscious that I am conscious', etc. In the *Vocation of Man* (1800) he starkly presents the problem as follows: 'And do I really think or do I just think a thinking of thinking? What can stop speculation acting like this and continuing asking to infinity?' (1971 II p. 252). Clearly, consciousness cannot be explained in this manner.

The problem lies in differentiating the reflecting and the reflected 'I' without losing the identity of reflecting and the reflected which is essential for there to be an I at all. Henrich puts it as follows: 'how can self-consciousness know that it knows itself if this knowledge is supposed to come about via an act of reflection? It is obvious that it cannot have this reflected knowledge without being able to lay claim to a preceding knowledge of itself' (Henrich 1982 p. 64). The nature of this 'knowledge' is a central problem in the development of Idealist and early Romantic philosophy. Even trying to find a word to characterise it which does not raise the problem of reflection involves difficulties. The 'knowledge' cannot be analogous to seeing oneself in a mirror: how would I know that I was seeing *myself* if I did not already 'know', *before* reflecting, that

I was doing the looking? One can have certain knowledge of seeing an object that is actually one's own reflection without knowing that it is oneself. Rorty's objections in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) to the mirror as the dominant metaphor for consciousness in Western philosophy do not, then, apply to this argument. The mirror metaphor actually just reveals the failure to *objectify* something whose existence is yet indubitable for the person seeing, namely their awareness that they are seeing at all, even if it they are mistaken about what they see.

Fichte is led to the demand for an *immediate* access to consciousness which does not entail any kind of splitting, and he will spend the rest of his philosophical life failing to give an adequate account of this immediate access and its grounding role in a philosophical system. As we shall see later, this immediate consciousness is often designated by the word 'feeling', for instance in Novalis's remark that 'Feeling cannot feel itself', precisely because having a feeling is not something that is initially objectifiable. The significance of 'feeling' for the thought of the period is not, *pace* many accounts of Romanticism, merely based on an increased attention to affectivity. For Fichte the subject *qua* object upon which the philosopher reflects must already be given in the original spontaneous *act* of self-consciousness, but it cannot be given as a knowable object. Consequently, the Kantian divisions of theoretical and practical, sensuous and intelligible, receptive and spontaneous, must result from a preceding unity *in the I*. According to Fichte the unity in question could only be denied if one were to deny the fact of self-consciousness, which is the very principle of thinking itself. This is what leads him to his most striking and problematic move, namely the extension of the notion of the I as spontaneity into being the principle of all reality, on the assumption that the intelligibility of things revealed in thought, and not their brute undifferentiated existence, constitutes their essential nature.

Fichte adopts the notion of 'intellectual intuition' in the attempt to grasp the decisive principle, but he characterises it in a different way from Kant, seeing it as 'that through which I know something because I do it' (Fichte 1971 I p. 463). Intellectual intuition involves both the act of thinking and the consciousness of that act: 'the consciousness of my thinking is not something which is just coincidental to my thinking, something which is added to it afterwards and thus linked to it, rather it is inseparable from it' (1971 I p. 527) – otherwise it is not clear what makes my thoughts mine, rather than random events in the universe. Zöllner describes intellectual intuition as 'an inferred condition, grasped in philosophical thought by means of abstraction from what is empirical in consciousness and reflection on what remains after such abstraction' (Zöllner 1998 p. 36). Self-consciousness is not subject to the division of theoretical and practical: the (practical) action of the I intuits itself as (theoretical) object of philosophy. The intellectual intuition which Kant rejects is, Fichte contends, analogous to the arguments of people who accept the ontological proof of God, who 'must regard the existence of God as a simple consequence of their thinking' (Fichte 1971 I p. 472). This kind of intuition would have to create a non-sensuous being, that

of the ‘thing in itself’ (as opposed to our intuitions of it), by pure thinking. Fichte’s intellectual intuition is not the creation of a non-sensuous *existence* via thinking, it is an intuition – in the sense of a direct apprehension, rather than a conceptual grasping – of the *action* of thinking itself. The problem it entails is manifest in the fact that Fichte soon becomes unsure whether the absolute I is immediately grasped in intellectual intuition (which as the term already suggests, entails a duality of the kind he is trying to avoid), or whether the absolute I is only an ‘ideal’ that is endlessly approached but never reached (see Frank 1997 pp. 744, 764). The notion of the intuition of the action of thinking leads to the apparently bizarre, but consistent idea in Fichte that the activity in question, which is both theoretical and practical, is the highest principle of reality. Why exactly should this be?

The highest principle cannot be located as part of an external world of nature, because without the activity of the I the very idea of a highest principle would not emerge from the causally determined appearing world. For Fichte nature’s externality, the existence of a realm of objects, can itself only be, as it will be for Hegel, a product of thought: ‘*the consciousness of a thing outside us is absolutely nothing else than the product of our own capacity for thinking* and . . . we know nothing more of the thing than we precisely know about it, posit via our consciousness’ (Fichte 1971 II p. 239). Because we always require the activity of the I for knowledge we only know even what is ‘outside’ us via what is ‘inside’ us: ‘everything that occurs in consciousness is *grounded, given, caused* via the conditions of self-consciousness; and a basis of the same outside self-consciousness absolutely does not exist’ (1971 I p. 477). If this sounds absurd it is worth trying to say anything about the world whilst subtracting the I which thinks what is to be said. It is important to note, though, that self-consciousness functions for Fichte within conditions that are *given* to it as part of what it is, and that it does not consciously make the world what it is. The resistance to objectification at the heart of self-consciousness means, as Zöllner claims, that it is ‘a being that has reason without being its own ground or reason’ (Zöllner 1998 p. 27), and does not mean that it is some kind of self-creating deity. In conscious experience any specific thought is filled by the intentional object of the thought, be it this computer in front of me or my inner speech at this moment. This, though, is not what is most important for Fichte, as it had not been for Kant. It is the ability to *move* intelligibly from one intentional object to something beyond it that reveals the ‘productive imagination’ as the real basis of self-consciousness. The imagination, which, as we saw, played such a central role in Kant, is the result of the fact that the I ‘posits itself as finite and infinite at the same time’ (Fichte 1971 I p. 215), finite when it limits itself to a determinate thought, and infinite when it moves beyond it.

Such movement requires freedom: nothing in the realm of necessity, the realm of the synthesising of intuitions into categories and concepts, could give rise to this aspect of imagination, because the very intelligibility of different syntheses of the same data depends upon it. Self-consciousness has a status

which puts it above anything one can say about objectivity, because it is for Fichte, as indeed it was for Kant, the condition of objectivity. It must, as such, be both subject and object, both the production of knowledge and the ability to describe the forms of that production. This is why the notion of the being of the world independent of our thinking, the ‘thing in itself’, has no content for Fichte: ‘the concept of a being that should occur, from a certain point of view, independently of thinking [*Vorstellung*], would yet have to be deduced from thinking, as it is only supposed to exist via thinking’ (1971 I p. 500). We shall encounter another version of this position in Hegel. Fichte is insistent that ‘One cannot abstract from the I’ (1971 I p. 500): to do so would require the I to abstract from itself, which is absurd, because the abstraction would require an account of what does the abstracting, which must be the I itself.

What is puzzling about Fichte’s view for most people is why we experience the world as external, hard, objective necessity if it is in fact our thinking which is the condition of the world’s objectivity. Manfred Frank warns, though, against a hasty dismissal of Fichte’s arguments:

If it is right that our feeling of being compelled [by the thing in itself as external to ourselves] presupposes as condition of its possibility the consciousness of our self, then we do not have the slightest right to reverse the sequence of the facts and to maintain that it is rather the thing (in itself) which determines our consciousness (including the consciousness of our receptivity). (Frank 1985 p. 80)

The reason that the I was the highest principle for Fichte lay, as we have seen, in a radicalisation of Kant’s practical reason, of the capacity to move beyond causally determined compulsion, in making ethical decisions. For Kant this entailed a self-determining ‘spontaneity’. Spontaneity was also the basis of cognition, because the synthesising of sense data requires that which synthesises, which is not reducible to the data themselves. As this spontaneity formed the basis of both the first two Kantian Critiques, it seems clear to Fichte that the task of philosophy is to describe it, thus unifying the theoretical and the practical. Doing this, though, seems to involve attempting to make the fundamental free action into something which philosophy can objectify, and this gives rise again to the dilemma for theory that what can be objectified is solely what is causally determined as part of the appearing world.

This is the source of Fichte’s insistence upon an ‘intuitive’ access to the action, which does not require a splitting into subject and object. However, the invocation of intuition also has the consequence that those unable to carry out the intuition are excluded from access to the highest point of philosophy. If one remembers Kant’s remark in the *Prolegomena* that the representation of the I is ‘nothing more than the feeling of an existence without the least concept’ (Kant 1989 p. 106), and his subsequent attempt in the *CJ* to arrive at an account of universality of feeling in (non-conceptual) aesthetic judgement, the importance of this issue becomes clear. Is the I ultimately to be something fully explicable, or is its very resistance to conceptual determination what is most important about

it? As we shall see in Chapter 4, Schelling will suggest in 1800 that ‘aesthetic intuition is precisely intellectual intuition which has become objective’ (Schelling 1856–61 I/3 p. 625), which makes art into the ‘organ of philosophy’, because it shows via perceptible objects what philosophy cannot definitively explain. Furthermore, the revaluation of the non-semantic medium of music in this period points to the sense that the resources of philosophy may be inadequate to the subject’s self-understanding in modernity.

Perhaps the most disturbing question for the transcendental philosopher in all this, which is vital for the development of Romanticism, is why the absolute I should objectify itself at all in an intelligible world which includes ourselves. Either the absolute, the unity of subject and object, remains enclosed in itself as an undividable unity, which means that there would be no manifest world and that any philosophical articulation is a priori impossible, or a division must take place within the absolute, which would enable philosophy to articulate it. Given that the highest thought for Fichte is that of the I, which is necessary for any articulation, there must in his terms be a way of articulating the absolute. The I is, after all, *specified* in terms of its lack of limitation, because it inherently transcends the finitude of the particular. However, it seems that no description of the I can explain why there is limitation and finitude at all. Fichte tries to account for the split in the I that limits its infinite nature and makes things determinate by his obscure doctrine of the ‘*Anstoss*’ (usually translated as the ‘check’). Fichte says the following regarding the source of the world of limitation and determination:

Now the activity of the I which goes out into infinity is to be checked at some point and driven back into itself; and, accordingly, the I is not to fill out infinity. *That* this happens, as a fact, simply cannot be inferred from the I . . . but one can at least say that it has to happen *if* real consciousness is to be possible. (Fichte 1971 I p. 275)

Having occurred, the ‘check’ gives rise to the demand for the I to fulfil its nature as infinite activity by overcoming finite limitation. This demand is manifest to us in moral action which countermands natural causality and therefore, as Kant suggested, may point to a goal beyond the finite. The check can only have its effect on something which is already active, but this still does nothing to explain the check in a non-circular manner, as more than an essentially arbitrary answer to a major philosophical problem. Fichte himself repeatedly admits that it cannot be explained in the theoretical part of his philosophy.

What emerges here is a further example of how at crucial junctures Fichte’s philosophy leaves an inescapable opacity which soon leads thinkers initially attracted by his undoubted insights into the nature and role of self-consciousness to abandon his extreme version of the self-grounding Idealist project. Schelling, as we shall see in Chapter 4, will initially focus on the unconscious aspect of the activity of the I in a manner which prefigures psychoanalysis, and he will in his late philosophy become obsessed with the problem of whether Idealist philosophy can overcome the contingency of the fact that there is a manifest world at all. There is, then, an essential tension in Idealist and

Romantic thought which resides in the uneasy *coexistence* of the (Idealist) desire to be able to *say* what it is in thinking that is unlimited, with an accompanying (Romantic) sense of the impossibility of saying it, an impossibility which seems to make the philosophical enterprise of grasping the absolute itself questionable. The Romantic attachment to art can be seen as deriving from an awareness of the need to respond to this tension.

The tension is the source of a further, related philosophical problem. Fichte's account also gets into difficulties because the activity of his 'absolute I', the unlimited dynamic principle of reality, has, via the 'check', to generate an I and a non-I which are relative to each other. This means, though, that it becomes very hard to know in what sense the absolute principle could be referred to as an 'I': seeing A as opposed to not-A is impossible if it has to happen solely in terms of A itself. The problem is echoed in Freud's difficulties in giving an account of the overall structure of the psyche, if all psychic energy is seen as deriving from the id, which is unconscious. For Freud the id splits itself and directs its own forces against itself by the incorporation of the limiting, self-preserving ego and super-ego into the structure of itself. A grounding of this account requires the forces of the id to describe themselves, and this leads to another version of the problem of reflection. For the id to *know* itself as the chaotic, drive-basis of the I, it would already require the division into itself and its non-chaotic other. However, this division means that the id itself cannot be represented because it must always already be split into the representer, the conscious ego, and what is supposed to be represented, the unconscious id – whence Freud's insistence that only representations of drives, not drives themselves can appear. Freud, it is worth remembering in the present context, almost invariably has recourse at some point to the aesthetic means of metaphor when attempting to describe the nature of the id. Faced with the analogous problem with the absolute I, which is, like the id, the source of all activity, Fichte is forced into the move whereby '*I oppose in the I a splittable I to a splittable non-I*' (Fichte 1971 I p. 110). While it is possible to argue, as Fichte does, for the epistemological necessity of a prior subject without which the notion of an objective world makes no sense, calling the overall process 'I' within which I and not-I become separate, is inconsistent, as Hölderlin will be one of the first to see.

Fichte's philosophy is a strange mixture of defensible transcendental arguments which apply to aspects of thinking that seem inescapable in any attempt to work out a viable account of the self, and, at the level of the absolute I, of highly questionable speculation derived from the inflation of the activity of thought into the spontaneous activity which constitutes the whole of intelligible being. The basic Idealist problem with which Fichte is faced is that if there is to be an absolute, an unconditioned basis of philosophy, any dependence of the highest principle on something else must be transcended. If self-consciousness is relative to its other, Fichte's project must fail because it introduces a moment of dependency that the whole project has to avoid if it is to achieve what Kant had failed to achieve. Fichte's attempt to give an account of free self-consciousness which does

not reduce it to being an object is bravely revised and differentiated throughout his career, but it never overcomes the problems we have seen. The early Fichte's achievement should not be forgotten, though, as Henrich has argued. Fichte's real insight is that reflection upon the subject by the subject reveals a reality which will never exhaust itself in what could be known objectively. It is this insight that will make him so important to those engaged in aesthetic theory and aesthetic praxis.

Hölderlin

Some of the problems in Fichte's philosophy were quickly seen by the poet, Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), who in his youth was friends with both Schelling and Hegel, and who was in contact with the intellectual circles which established both Idealism and Romanticism.² The fact that an investment in understanding the I also becomes central to many areas of literature from this period onwards poses important questions about the relationship between art, aesthetics and the rest of philosophy. Can the literary text say what the philosophical text cannot, and what does this mean for that part of philosophy which itself seeks to explain the significance of art? Hölderlin is best known as a poet and novelist, but he also explores the question of the I in theoretical texts, and for a time he thought of devoting himself mainly to philosophy. Three theoretical texts, the last of whose remarkable use of syntax gives it claims to aesthetic status even as it relies predominantly on logical argument, present Hölderlin's prophetic insights in relation to the issues raised by Fichte: a letter to Hegel in January 1795, the untitled fragment usually called 'Judgement and Being' of 1794/5,³ and the untitled essay which is often called 'On the Working of the Poetic Spirit'. In the letter Hölderlin questions Fichte's use of the I as the highest principle of philosophy:

his absolute I . . . contains all reality; it is everything, and outside of it there is nothing; there is therefore no object for this absolute I, for otherwise the whole of reality would not be in it; but a consciousness without an object is unthinkable, and if I am this object myself, then as such I am necessarily limited, even if it only be in time, thus not absolute; thus there is no consciousness thinkable in the absolute I, as absolute I [*Ich*] I [*ich*] have no consciousness, and to the extent to which I have no consciousness I am (for myself) nothing, therefore the absolute I is (for me) nothing. (in (eds) Frank and Kurz 1975 p. 124)

The highest principle can never appear in my reflection on anything, including myself, if it is taken as an object, because this would contradict its very essence as the absolute, which must be both subject and object. Access to the absolute I requires an intuition which is beyond any division of subject and object, but, crucially, this intuition cannot be conscious, because intentionality requires a split between subject and object for it to be consciousness *of* something. The idea that access to the highest and loss or transcendence of consciousness are

inherently connected, which will later appear, via Schopenhauer's influence,⁴ in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, therefore emerges *logically* for Hölderlin from the way he understands the structure of Fichte's account of the absolute I.

'Judgement and being' investigates the separation of subject and object, which it sees as united in 'intellectual intuition', though the problem with this notion of intuition is already apparent in the letter just cited: how can a philosophy be founded on the loss of all awareness? Hölderlin claims that the origin of consciousness entails an 'original separation' (the German word *Urteil* means both judgement, and, via the artificial separation of its two parts into '*Ur-Teil*', 'original-separation') of subject and object. His decisive innovation lies in his suggestion that subject and object therefore also presuppose a 'whole of which subject and object are the parts' (Hölderlin 1963 pp. 490–1). This whole cannot, for the reasons suggested in his letter to Hegel, be termed an absolute 'I'. He therefore terms the whole '*being*'. Being cannot be incorporated into an account of the relationship of our thinking to the object-world, because it is the common ground of both our thinking and the object world. It therefore becomes 'transreflexive', not determinable in the way that a subject determines an object of knowledge, whether it be the subject as its own object or any object in the world. It is worth citing Hölderlin's argument at some length, as it also highlights the problem inherent in the reflection model of self-consciousness. For Hölderlin '*Being* – expresses the link of subject and object . . . this being must not be confused with identity' (490–1). Identity, which is expressed in the statement 'I am I', necessarily entails non-identity, because what is supposed to be unified has been taken apart in the act of reflection involved in the attempt to *state* its unity. The very form of the proposition entails a difference between the I in the subject- and the I in the predicate-position. The real unity of the I is, then, not grasped by what can be said about it by analysing it into its components. Hölderlin continues: 'If I say: I am I, then the subject (I) and the object (I) are not unified in such a way that no separation can be undertaken without infringing upon the essence of that which is to be separated; on the contrary, the I is only possible via this separation of the I from the I' (pp. 490–1).

There can, then, be no analytical account, no Freudian 'dissection', of the I which would grasp the unity that precedes the act of reflexive splitting, even if, in order to be *aware* of itself as an I, it must reflect:

How can I say 'I' without self-consciousness? But how is self-consciousness possible? By my opposing myself to myself, by separating myself from myself, but despite this separation by recognising myself in the opposition as the same. But to what extent as the same? I can, I must ask the question in this way; for in another respect the ego is opposed to itself. Thus identity is not a unification of object and subject that happens absolutely, thus identity does not = absolute being. (pp. 490–1)

Self-consciousness that seeks to know itself always involves a *relationship*, in which the terms are relative to each other (and so not absolute). This relationship has to be carried by an existential continuity which cannot be split up into

the moments of the analysis of the I. 'Judgement', then, entails a relation which separates what it wants to unify in the act of attempting to demonstrate its unity. For Hölderlin the act of self-identification is subsequent to and depends upon the existential fact of being. Self-consciousness is not to be understood here as just 'mind' opposed to the world because it has its own source in a whole which cannot just consist in the objective being of what is given in sensuousness and is subject to causal laws. Hölderlin therefore regards reflective self-consciousness as being unable to establish the unconditioned foundation that Fichte wanted to provide with the idea of the 'absolute I'. Frank sums up Hölderlin's insight as follows:

What is revolutionary about Hölderlin's reflection is that on the side of consciousness a [Kantian] primacy of intuition before the concept corresponds to the primacy of the real before the possible. For this reason absolute being can only be grasped by a limit-concept of cognition, intellectual intuition; because only immediate intuition concerns being; judgements, as cognitions mediated by concepts, must fail to grasp it. (Frank 1997 p. 725)

Being thus becomes an idea which orients our inquiries into what there is, but it can never be said to be fully present in any concept. However, this leaves a significant problem: how do we *come to terms* with the sense that our self-consciousness is divided in itself, and yet must involve some kind of prior unity if such division is to be apprehended *as* division at all?

Hölderlin explores this problem in 'On the Working of the Poetic Spirit'. Many of the implications of the idea of the dependence of subjectivity on an other that is beyond its control, from Schopenhauer (the 'will') to post-structuralism (Derrida's subject that is an 'effect of the general text'), are already contained in this essay. However, Hölderlin does not conclude, as much of this tradition does, that self-consciousness is consequently not a vital issue for philosophy. In 'On the Working of the Poetic Spirit' he shows the inadequacy of three basic attempts to give an account of the fact of self-consciousness. All three attempts end up splitting the I in ways which make it impossible to sustain the undeniable necessity of self-consciousness. As we have seen, the requirement of the transcendental unity of apperception was for an I which was not 'as differently multi-coloured as I have ideas that I am conscious of' (Kant *CPR* B p. 134). Without this unity nothing can be said about either the world of the subject or the world of the object, because the principle of their intelligibility would be lost. Hölderlin's question is how one is to sustain oneself *as* oneself in the endless changes with which one is confronted in the world, an idea which he sees as central to poetic production. It should already be clear, and this is a vital factor in the text, that Hölderlin does not limit his exploration to the cognitive dimension of the self, but seeks to incorporate the affective and other dimensions of the self as well.⁵ The aim of the 'Poetic Spirit' must be to 'remain present to itself in the various moods' (Hölderlin 1963 p. 515), rather than to lose itself in each moment. It must both avoid becoming 'something indeter-

minable', and yet not 'disintegrate into an infinity of isolated moments' (p. 515).⁶

Hölderlin poses the problem of the identity of the self in modernity in paradigmatic fashion. How does one avoid a fixed, dead identity that would be the result of total self-objectification, in which the point of being a living, moving self is lost? Total self-knowledge arguably obviates the point of our being at all. At the same time, how does one also avoid a complete loss of the self in the engagement with the diverse and conflicting moments of the other. How does one avoid simply being 'spoken' and determined by the language and cultural forms into which one is socialised and by the natural urges which are filtered through these forms? Hölderlin's attempted response to these undesirable alternatives is particularly significant because it sees aesthetic production as offering resources for dealing with them. He argues that the three attempts to analyse self-consciousness reveal an I which is 'in real contradiction with and for itself', because it can be grasped neither (1) as something known grasped by the knower; nor (2) as a knower grasped by the knower; nor (3) as known and knower grasped by knowing, or knowing grasped by the knower.

In (1) the difference of knower and known (I as subject and I as object) would have to be regarded as a 'deception . . . which the I makes to itself as unity, in order to recognise its identity, but then the identity which it thereby recognises is also itself a deception, it does not recognise itself' (Hölderlin 1963 p. 517), an idea that is later echoed in Lacan's accounts of the I's self-misrecognition, and which recurs, as we shall see, in Novalis. Hölderlin, however, rejects this position and so does not take self-consciousness to be merely the form of narcissistic self-deception it is for Lacan.

In (2) the I assumes that it is inherently divided in itself: the very act of knowing presupposes the division of knower and known, which would also apply to the knowledge of oneself. This means, though, that the acts which the I performs cannot be identified as its *own* acts because it is already unable to identify itself as a unity: to which part of itself would the acts belong, to itself as knower or as known? If the I is inherently divided the division cannot itself be a result of the I, because the whole point is to establish the prior *unity* of the I. As such, 'the I is not that which is different from itself, rather it is its nature [which is different from itself], in which it behaves to itself as something driven' (p. 518), thereby becoming unable to account for why it is aware of itself as itself. The problem is much the same as the one we saw in Freud, where an initially unified I was required which splits itself up and is yet still there to reunite itself, having split itself up. A related Freudian problem that we have already examined in relation to Fichte also echoes Hölderlin's reflections. Because the id provides the energy for the ego, which is a result of the drives of the id being divided against themselves, it becomes impossible for the ego to *know* its real basis, the id: the ego requires the id for the activity of knowing in the first place. In other words, to what extent must I think of myself as driven by something, my 'nature', which is not my conscious self? If I *know* that I am driven by the other

of nature in myself, have I not already transcended this natural basis? But if the very activity of knowing itself depends upon a basis in an other that is ineliminably part of me, I can never fully transcend that basis, though I may gain indirect insight into it. Schelling will suggest that this is what takes place in aesthetic production, which fully conscious awareness of all one is doing renders impossible.

In (3) the I wishes to see itself as identical with itself, as split into subject and object. To do this, however, again relies on a split in the I, which destroys the unity that is supposed to precede the reflection: for it to see itself *as* itself requires prior awareness of itself as *not* divided from itself (as 'Judgement and Being' suggested). The argument is another version of the arguments against 'reflection theory', and Hölderlin therefore denies that the I can *represent* its own essential nature: it *is* more than it can know in reflecting upon itself.

Hölderlin does not overcome this problem at an epistemological level, but instead sees the striving to grasp the unity of the I in these three moves as leading to questions of 'poetic representation'. The internal reflection of the I leads it to the awareness of its dividedness once it tries to grasp itself as itself. Hölderlin therefore wishes to move beyond this division: 'It is a matter of the I not simply remaining in interaction with its subjective nature, from which it cannot abstract [by reflecting on itself] without negating itself' (p. 518). If it remains in this state it will be likely to resign and regress to the childhood state, where it 'was identical with the world', thus to what Lacan means by the 'imaginary'. In the imaginary the I only reflects itself and does not move beyond this form of self-identification. The other bad alternative for Hölderlin will be that the I will 'wear itself out in fruitless contradictions with itself' (p. 519). In order to get beyond this condition the I must exercise its free spontaneity in the choice of an external object, which will reveal its 'poetic individuality'. The external object *qua* object is separate from the I, but if the choice of the object is the result of the most fundamental act of the I, its free choice, a new form of relationship can result. In it the I escapes imprisonment within the imaginary by engagement with the freely chosen external object, but is also able to explore itself in new ways by abstracting from the object of its choice and reflecting upon itself *via the object*. The stress is now on the creative relationship to the object, not upon a cognitive relationship. This point is crucial. What is at issue in Hölderlin's vision is not an answer to epistemological scepticism about the external world, generated by a version of Cartesian doubt. Instead he is seeking a way in which self-conscious awareness does not just lead both to self-alienation and alienation from the rest of the world. On this basis he seeks to find ways in which we can *live* with the suspension between finitude and the often painful feeling, generated by our *awareness* of our relativity, that we are *more* than merely imprisoned in finitude.

'Poetic individuality' relates closely to the argument we saw in the *SP* (it has, remember, been argued that Hölderlin was involved in the writing of the *SP*), in which the 'highest act of reason' was an 'aesthetic act'. *Only* the I, as free

spontaneity, can apprehend nature aesthetically or produce aesthetic objects. The object here enables the subject to grasp what it would be like to achieve a harmonious existence, and prevents the division in self-consciousness leading merely to alienation. Because it recognises itself in the external world without surrendering itself, which it would do if it made itself dependent upon the desire to appropriate the object, the I can begin to realise how it need not repress its divided nature and can instead regard this nature as a source of ever-renewed possibility. The division, it is important to remember, came about by a free act, which moved the I beyond the imaginary stage into the complex world of self-conscious reflection. Hölderlin, then, wishes to make the dividedness of self-consciousness part of its own creative potential. The I can strive to show in aesthetic production what it would be to overcome its dividedness, without regressing into an imaginary unity.

Hölderlin thinks language is crucial to this process, but he does not regard it as a necessarily repressive symbolic order which prevents my self-realisation. The 'vocation of life' is to 'edify oneself from original simplicity to the highest form' (p. 524), to move from unarticulated feeling to the differentiated articulation of one's being, and this is also the vocation of '*Poesie*', perhaps best translated here as 'creative language'. From the 'original feeling (*Empfindung*)' of unity with which one begins in childhood, the poet has 'struggled upwards by conflicting attempts towards the tone (*Ton*), towards the highest pure form of that feeling and sees himself completely comprehended in his whole inner and outer life in that tone' (pp. 525–6).⁷ At this point 'he has an intuition of (*ahndet*) his language', a language which must not just be taken up from the existing symbolic order, but which must be made essentially his own on the basis of his 'feeling', even as it is also taken from the resources available to all. Inspiring and fruitful as this vision is – the links of such ideas of unity in division to an essential individual 'tone' which is yet universal offer, for example, a way of understanding the unique power of Beethoven's music – Hölderlin's own poetry will reflect the struggle that results when the objective political and social world makes it harder and harder to believe in the possibility of individuality harmonising with the universal. The poems more and more take on the attributes of autonomous art, of a refusal to communicate in generally accessible terms, via their growing complexity and resistance to interpretation, which is combined with a remarkable tragic and musical power.⁸ Hölderlin will, of course, be worn out in contradictions with both himself and the object world: he goes mad.

Although Hölderlin offers a vision of language which does not make it a 'prison house', but rather a source of vital possibilities for self-realisation, there is warning in his fate and that of not a few other artists of the age. He was evidently aware, as his letters show, that attempts creatively to explore the I which are not backed up by social and political advances will lead to a growing alienation of advanced aesthetic production from any effective social role. The need seen in the *SP* to link the aesthetic and the political is a necessary part of Hölderlin's vision: his own aesthetic production, though, moves increasingly in

the direction of an autonomy which threatens his work's communicability to others. As such, his work constitutes a prophetic index of the consequences of the failure to achieve a link between the aesthetic and the political in a non-destructive manner. This pattern is often characteristic of the fate of modern art.

Novalis

Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), who used the name Novalis in his published work, conceives his philosophy, like Hölderlin, in relation to Fichte. In the English-speaking world Novalis has until recently rarely been considered as a philosopher, being seen rather as the archetypally doomed Romantic poet. However, like so many of his contemporaries, he did not regard the boundaries between forms of theoretical and creative activity as fixed, and his philosophy is an integral part of a wider project which includes scientific and literary work. One of the main reasons why Novalis has become the focus of recent attention is that he asks questions about subjectivity which already involve issues relating to the 'subversion of the subject' which has become the theme of so much recent theoretical discussion. Claims in certain areas of contemporary European philosophy and literary theory to be saying something radically new should, then, be tempered by the evidence from Novalis and others that, from the very earliest stages of modern philosophy, the subject does not necessarily occupy the position of sovereign. I want here to give a brief account, partly based on the so-called 'Fichte-Studies' (*FS*) (1795–96), of Novalis's reflections upon subjectivity. These reflections, which only appeared in a philologically acceptable edition in the 1960s,⁹ again lead in the direction of aesthetics. Before considering the reflections it is worth citing one of Novalis's later fragments, in order to underline how the still dominant image of Romanticism, aspects of which are sometimes admittedly to be found in Novalis, is inadequate to the complexity of his thought: 'I am convinced that one achieves *true revelations* rather by cold, technical understanding and calm moral sense than by fantasy, which just seems to lead us into the realm of ghosts, this antipode of the true heaven' (Novalis 1978 p. 775).

The *FS* are not a coherently-argued sequential whole: they are a series of sometimes fragmentary reflections relating to Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. The difficulty for the interpreter is that the problems they confront are repeatedly explored in differing vocabularies, and it is not always clear whether Novalis is simply making notes about what Fichte has said, or whether he is formulating his own position. What is clear is that he rejects certain key Fichtean ideas. His basic objection to Fichte is summed up in a later fragment: 'Fichte has, as it were, chosen the *logical schema* of science as the pattern of a real construction of humankind and the world' (Novalis 1978 p. 684), thereby, as Hölderlin suggested, inverting the relationship between being and thought. As the most important commentator on Novalis, Manfred Frank, puts it: 'According to

Novalis the error of idealism consists in taking what reveals itself as the first in consciousness for what is first in itself' (Frank 1997 p. 823).

The problem with which Novalis begins is the same as concerned Kant, Fichte, and Hölderlin. How can the I that is supposed to be the highest principle of philosophy give an account of itself? The basis of the attempt would obviously seem to be the statement of identity, 'I am I'. However, Novalis, like Hölderlin at much the same time, shows that the very attempt to determine the nature of something by a *statement* of identity robs it of its essential nature:

The essence of identity can only be demonstrated in an *pseudo-proposition* [*Scheinsatz*]. We leave the *identical* in order to represent it – Either this only apparently happens – and we are persuaded to believe it by the imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] – what already *is happens* – naturally via imaginary separation and unification – Or we represent it by its non-being, by something non-identical – a sign. (Novalis 1978 p. 8)

The basic point here is, as Hölderlin also argued,¹⁰ that the splitting of the I in reflection means its essential character is lost. The separation required for consciousness to be *of* something, including itself, contradicts the prior necessity that there be a unity for the I to be an I at all: 'There can be no more content in the proposition I am I than there is in the simple concept of the I' (p. 9). The first and the second I in a proposition need a prior I to unite them, so that I as 'content' and I as 'form' can be the same, but our awareness of this is reflexive, and so is only 'apparent', part of the I as 'form'. The I as 'form' comes after the existential fact, the 'content', required for the analysis to be possible in the first place. Designating myself as I by the signifier 'I' means employing something external to me, the publicly used mark, to stand in for me. The signifier introduces a non-identity into myself in articulating my identity. As Hölderlin suggested, then, if I need to reflect on myself to know myself *as* myself it is already too late to know the essential ground of my self. Any result of such reflection will be a self-deception because what I know as the result of my reflection cannot be the same as what inaugurates the reflection in the first place. We

do not become aware [of the 'first action'], in consequence we feel it as not-free. Why we do not become aware of it [?] – because it first makes becoming aware possible, and consequently this [becoming aware] lies *in* its sphere – the action of becoming aware therefore cannot go out of its sphere and wish to comprehend the mother-sphere [because it depends upon it, is within it, in the manner of subject and object in relation to Hölderlin's 'being']. (1978 p. 8)

As such the I cannot be transparent to itself, because this would require comprehension of what makes it aware in the first place. It cannot use *itself* to explain what makes it aware, because it would need to step *outside* itself to do so. This structure of the totality which cannot describe itself as a totality is vital to Romantic thought, and to much subsequent philosophy which rejects the idea that we can gain a 'view from nowhere'.

Novalis's initial question is, therefore: how do I represent myself to myself?

The difficulty echoes the difficulty faced by theories of truth as the true representation of what there is in the world. What criterion does one use to compare the representation with the object, in order to see if it corresponds to it? To do this would require taking up a position outside the relationship between representation and object, which is impossible, because this would also involve a representation of the relationship, and so on, to infinity. Unlike the rest of being that can be 'real' in Kant's sense of being a possible object of perception, consciousness itself is 'a being outside being in being' (p. 10). This means it is an 'image', 'an image of being in being' (p. 10). Novalis invokes a 'Theory of representation or of non-being in being, in order that being is able to exist (*daseyn*) for itself in a certain manner' (p. 10). In existing in a certain manner, namely as image, as consciousness, being does not exist absolutely.¹¹ Consciousness is therefore, a kind of relative non-being, like Sartre's '*néant*' (as opposed to the absolute nothingness of '*rien*'): 'I is basically nothing – Everything has to be given to it – But it is to it alone that something can be given and the given only becomes something via the I' (p. 185). Novalis then relates the image to the linguistic sign via the notion of the schema – 'Every *comprehensible* sign . . . must stand in a schematic relation to the signified' (p. 14) – and he links this to the problem of how different subjects can understand the same signs used by others (see Frank 1997 pp. 804–6 for the influence on this of Fichte's conception of language). The schema, as Kant argued in his account of the imagination, is the bridge that connects the receptive and the spontaneous sources of knowledge, the realms of necessity and freedom. In consequence, for Novalis, the sign can be a sign because those who use signs are '*necessarily free*' (Novalis 1978 p. 14), the schema linking the necessary and the free. Language can only be understood as language via the assumption that the necessitated material events in which it is instantiated (moving airwaves, electric charges, etc.) are linked to the meaning intentions of a (free) subject. Communication is possible, then, via the '*as it were, free contract*' (p. 15) inherent in language. One accepts the objective, learned necessities entailed in communication with other language users at the same time as acknowledging their capacity as free agents to mean something only they can mean.¹² Describing the position of the language user who relies in this way on schematism, Novalis suggests that in doing so they 'will, without realising it, have painted their own image before the mirror of reflection' and that 'the picture is painted in the position that it paints itself' (p. 15). They will, then, be schematising themselves, and this involves some crucial problems which go to the heart of Novalis's thinking, and are suggested in his question: 'Can I look for a schema for myself, if I am that which schematises?' (p. 162).

Let us take up some possible implications of Novalis's metaphor. Remembering that consciousness is an 'image of being in being', in a painting in which the painter includes himself or herself as painter of the picture within the picture, he or she reminds the viewer that without the painter there would be no painting. At the same time we actually see the painter not as creating *subject*, but as *object*, who appears as visible image *within* the painting, which is

supposedly his or her own, thus inverting the real state of affairs. Something analogous applies to the use of the term 'I'. We all use this term in the same way to designate ourselves, even though the point of using 'I' is to *differentiate* myself from everything and everyone else, but at the same time my ability to use it relies on my unique pre-reflexive sense of self which Novalis will term 'feeling'. We can infer from the picture that the painter is theoretically necessary in bringing about the existence of the image we have before us, but we have no access to what generates the image, because we see the creator as object, thus as a result of reflection, with the concomitant inversion. To see the painter as subject we would have to become him or her as I, and thus be able to generate the painting ourselves.

A famous example of the sort of issues involved in a self-reflexive painting is Velasquez's *Las Meninas*. In *Las Meninas* there would have to be a mirror in the position where the viewer of the painting is located, which the painter would be looking at in order to see himself and to be able to paint his own reflection. In fact, though, one infers that in the position of the assumed mirror is the object that the painter is supposedly painting: the King and Queen of Spain. We infer this by the fact that the object the painter is supposed to be representing exists as empirical object, within the painting, as a faint reflection in a mirror that is represented on the farthest wall of the painting. The I – the painter – retreats into a position in which he cannot be represented as active I: he is dependent upon a reflection in a non-existent mirror. It is clear, though, that this does not mean that the I does not exist: *the very sense of its absence points to its undeniable existence*, not least as the ironic creator of a baffling aesthetic object. This coexistence of presence and absence evokes the world of Novalis's reflections upon the I, and hints at how they relate to aesthetics.

Taking up the image of the painting with regard to language, Novalis argues that the signifier 'I' is the 'Non-being' (p. 8) of the I because it attempts to represent the I. If the signifier is to represent the I to anyone else – if it is to be a signifier at all – it must be recognisable to another as *designating* the I, but therefore not *being* the I. It cannot express the being of the I, because it is merely an objective condition of the I being taken by another as an I. In order to *understand* the signifier, the other must already possess a pre-reflexive sense of self which is precisely not dependent upon the ability to use the objectively existing word I (how, as the problem of seeing oneself as oneself in a mirror suggests, would they know that the word can be used to refer to themselves?). The identity of the signifier is, furthermore, constituted by its difference from every other signifier: 'In its place each [schema] is only what it is by the others' (p. 14). It is, as such, wholly determined by its relationship to everything else: 'I' is not 'you', is not 'he', etc. However, the dependence of the signifier on its not being *all* other signifiers for its identity means that what determines it – all other signifiers – also points to the opposite of determination. There seems to be a negative way of representing the absolute, in that the very relativity of the attempt to represent it makes us aware of what is being missed in the attempt. This happens,

though, in a way which we cannot articulate: 'We feel ourselves as part and are precisely for that reason the whole' (p. 44). We could not feel only a part if we did not also have a feeling, but not a concept, of what it would be to be whole. This 'feeling' leads Novalis to a central idea in early Romanticism.

The idea is that philosophy sees things the wrong way round because it relies on reflection.¹³ Fichte's response to Kant began with reflection upon the activity which is required for reflection to take place at all: the action of the I. The I is, therefore, already subsequent to its basis: without some *prior* being of the I there would be no reason to reflect at all, because there would be nothing to reflect upon. Novalis terms this basis '*Gefühl*', literally 'feeling', which refers to the pre-reflexive I whose being is more than can be thought, all thoughts depending on the structure of reflection. However, this entails a fundamental problem. If the I is to be represented as the highest principle of philosophy it must somehow give an account of its pre-reflexive basis. This basis, though, as we have seen from a similar argument in Hölderlin, is not available to reflection: 'Feeling cannot feel itself . . . It can only be looked at in reflection – the spirit of feeling not there any more' (p. 18). Novalis insists that it is 'not possible to represent the pure form of feeling. It is only One and form and matter as composed [in the sense of made up of differing elements as in a 'judgement'] are not at all applicable to it' (p. 21). Reflection begins by an awareness of the difference of subject and object, a limitation of the self by another, even if that other is in fact itself. For Novalis, reflection puts what is derived, the I of conscious reflection, before what it is derived from, 'feeling', thereby inverting the real sequence. This can, though, lead a stage further, to a vital argument.

The metaphor of the mirror can help to explain the basic idea and how Novalis responds to it. In a reflection of myself in a mirror what is in fact my right eye will appear as my left eye. In order not to confuse the reflected image with my real being I must further reflect in my 'mind's eye' to invert what I see and arrive at a correct representation: 'The image is always the inverse of being. What is on the right on the person is on the left in the image' (p. 47). The 'correct' image, though, is an image created by a double reflection, not a form of direct access to reality.¹⁴ Frank suggests that for Novalis 'reflection can itself illuminate and thus correct the inverted relation of consciousness to being/reality by a further reflection upon the *ordo inversus* inscribed in it' (Frank 1997 p. 823). However, this does not mean that he falls into a pre-Kantian version of the claim to know reality in itself, beyond the conditions of consciousness: '[reflection] does not at any moment step over the critical boundaries of the immanence of consciousness and yet it has explained that not everything is in consciousness' (p. 823). If one applies this argument to the absolute I the result is the realisation that it is unrepresentable, because what is to be represented would itself have to do the representing at the same time (with the problems seen in the picture metaphor). Novalis says of freedom: 'All words, all concepts are derived from the object [*Gegenstand*, in the sense of that which "stands over against" its other] – [they are] objects – and they therefore cannot

fix the object. Namelessness constitutes its very essence – for this reason every word must drive it away. It is non-word, non-concept. How should something make an *echo* which is only a voice?’ (Novalis 1978 p. 110). If words are constituted differentially, no word could be absolute because of its dependence on all other words. In this sense words are objects: cognition of any object is, as we have seen, dependent upon what is not the object for the object to have a knowable identity. The argument points towards the realisation that philosophy cannot positively achieve its task of showing the identity of subject and object. For philosophy to grasp the real nature of the absolute it has to correct the inversion which results from putting reflection first. Marx’s claim that Hegel’s philosophy must be stood on its feet because it reverses the relationship between thought and social being contains an echo of the Romantic thinking at issue here. It seems likely, as Frank suggests, that there is a traceable route from these ideas, via the later Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Feuerbach to Marx. The question is then whether one gives up talk of the absolute, as Nietzsche will later do in his attempt to say farewell to metaphysics altogether.

Hegel’s suggestion with regard to the absolute will be that it is present in the very principle of philosophical reflection. Everything is what it is via its relations to everything else. If it can be shown that the structures of thought exhaust the way things can be articulated, the absolute will be arrived at precisely by describing the necessities of thought. In this Idealist conception of the absolute, the forms of thought are shown to be the forms of being. Novalis, in contrast, maintains that ‘the true philosophy could never be represented’ (Novalis 1981 p. 557), because, as Frank puts it: ‘Being is not completely resolved into the form of thought (the judgement). It [being] just (metaphorically speaking) separates a layer of itself from itself which is accessible to thought . . . Kant had already called existential “being” [*that* there is something] absolute positing, and the “is” of the predicative judgement [*what* it is said there is] relative positing’ (Frank 1997 pp. 832–3). Hegel, as we shall see in Chapter 5, essentially assimilates the former to the latter, the ‘real ground’ to the ‘cognitive ground’, via his attempt to work out the logic of the ‘speculative proposition’.

The link of the question of the absolute to aesthetics begins to become apparent when Novalis maintains that *Poesie*, in the sense of *Poiesis*, creation, ‘represents the unrepresentable’ (Novalis 1978 p. 840). Philosophy for Novalis is ‘striving’ to think an absolute ‘basis’ (*Grund*) that would allow its completion. However, ‘If this were not given, if this concept contained an impossibility – then the drive to philosophise would be an endless activity’ (p. 180). The need that generates philosophy can, therefore, only be satisfied in relative terms, and thus never be satisfied. The free activity of my I is destined not to achieve the absolute because it would thereby cease to be itself, given that the drive to philosophise, which is itself the free act of the I, is based upon a ‘voluntary renunciation of the absolute’ (pp. 180–1), an acceptance that the condition of knowing is the acknowledgment of finitude. The ‘ideal’ can never be achieved because ‘it would destroy itself. To have the effect of an ideal it must not stand in the sphere

of common *reality*. The nobility of the I consists in free elevation above itself – consequently the I can in a certain respect never be absolutely elevated’ (p. 170). If the goal of philosophy were present there would be no need for philosophy to seek it. This is why Fichte’s I, as the supposed absolute beginning, is just ‘a Robinson [Crusoe] – a scientific [i.e. philosophical] *fiction* – to make more easy the presentation and development of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ (p. 645), but it is only a fiction, not the real principle of being.

These reflections lead Novalis to introduce a strikingly modern temporality into his argument: ‘Time can never stop – we cannot *think away* time – for time is the condition of the thinking being – time only stops with thinking’ (p. 180). He therefore, pre-empting Nietzsche, breaks with conceptions of philosophy which see it as concerned with the representation of the eternal. Elsewhere he talks of his ‘conviction . . . that precisely the old lament that everything is transient can become the most joyful of all thoughts’ (p. 433). Such ideas also lead in the direction of a conception of art which, as I suggested in relation to Kant’s sublime, regards the limitation of the finite as a way of attempting, always inadequately, to experience what is beyond the finite, the world of reflection. If philosophy is a *striving* for the absolute, the absolute cannot already be achieved in philosophy, even though philosophy presupposes the absolute as its aim; without it philosophy would not be philosophy: ‘The unattainable cannot by its very character be thought of as being attained – it is, so to speak, just the ideal total expression of the whole sequence and therefore apparently the last member’ (p. 643). As such: ‘The absolute which is given to us can only be recognised negatively by acting and finding that what we are seeking is not reached by any action’ (p. 181); in short, ‘We everywhere *seek* the unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*), and always only *find* things’ (p. 226). Novalis relies on the paradoxical principle, which will influence Adorno, that philosophy ‘must be systemlessness brought into a system’ (p. 200). In another formulation: ‘There is no philosophy *in concreto*. Philosophy is, like the philosopher’s stone – the squaring of the circle etc. – just a necessary task of scientists – the absolute *ideal of science*’ (p. 623). The ‘true philosophy’ could not ‘be represented’ (p. 828) because representing an ideal does not make it real, for the reasons we have seen in the remarks on reflection.

Along with his consideration of why philosophy cannot come to an end, Novalis also repeatedly ponders, against Fichte, why philosophy should have a beginning: ‘(What is a *beginning* for at all? This unphilosophical or half-philosophical goal leads to all mistakes)’ (Novalis 1968 p. 383). Elsewhere he claims ‘There is no absolute beginning – it belongs in the category of imaginary thoughts’ (Novalis 1978 p. 699), and ‘Every real beginning is a *2nd moment*. Everything which exists, appears, is and appears only under a *presupposition*’ (p. 380). Consequently, ‘All seeking for the First is nonsense – it is a *regulative idea*’ (p. 164). The idea of a beginning is itself reflexive: something only *becomes* the beginning because of what follows it, so it is inaccessible to our thinking until it has ceased to be what it was. It can therefore only be an idea which motivates

our search for truth. Instead of thinking that philosophy could represent the fundamental ground, the 'initial impulse' of freedom that Fichte posits as the absolute beginning, philosophy must, then, realise its own inherent failure to be complete. Philosophy 'teaches the relativity of all grounds and all qualities – the infinite multiplicity and unity of the construction of a thing etc.' (p. 616). At the same time, philosophy does not renounce the absolute completely, because the sense of lack generated by our sense of a missing unity is what makes us desire to know and act at all.

Philosophy which adopts such positions gravitates towards art, which 'represents the unrepresentable' (p. 840). Novalis relates his rejection of an absolute beginning to art: the 'beginning is already a late concept. The beginning arises later than the I, for this reason the I cannot have begun. From this we see that we are in the realm of art' (p. 485). The necessary failure to represent an absolute ground, in this case the I which occasions the beginning, leads to thinking about forms of representation which might incorporate this failure. This idea is the source of Novalis's Romantic notion of art. As we have seen, the I seems to be constitutionally lacking, but this very fact leads it beyond itself: 'I means that absolute which is to be known negatively – what is left after all abstraction – What can only be known by action and what realises itself by eternal lack./Thus eternity is realised through time, despite the fact that time contradicts eternity' (p. 181). The relationship between our empirical self, and the feeling of a self which transcends temporality but which can only be a regulative idea is crucial to Novalis's conception of art:

Self-consciousness in the greater sense is a task – an ideal – it would be *that* state *within which* there was no movement in time . . . In real self-consciousness we would just change – but without going any *further* . . . we are not *I* by *inferences* and indirectly – but immediately . . . All our memories and events link to a mystical unity which we call I. (p. 672)

He therefore seeks a medium in which the sense of lack generated by the dissonance between the transient empirical self and the idea of an a-temporal pre-reflexive self can be meaningfully articulated. What is lacking would here be somehow gestured towards, without it being able to appear as itself. He realises that the idea is particularly appropriate to the temporal form of music. A piece of music makes most sense, *is* music in the most emphatic sense, if its temporality is overcome by our ability to link together its different moments into an integrated whole that *seems* to abolish time. The relationship between language and music is central to this conception.

Language for Novalis is, as we saw, constituted differentially. It is therefore marked by reflexivity, each of its elements *lacking* something which can only be completed by the other elements. Language relates to the question of the absolute, in that the need in the signifier for all other signifiers for it to be itself points to an unrepresentable totality: 'The whole of language is a *postulate*' (p. 347). The temporality of thinking means that the attempt at completion will be a

continual movement from signifier to signifier. Something akin to *différance*, Derrida's idea of the deferral of signification as presence that is occasioned by the signifier's dependence on other signifiers is, then, already part of Romantic thinking. However, Novalis seeks to avoid the problem present in the notion of deferral, which must entail *some* kind of 'presence', of the kind evident in the non-inferential, pre-reflexive aspect of self-consciousness that enables experience to be possible, if the notion of what is lacking and thus deferred is to be felt as lacking at all.¹⁵ The alternative to this is, of course, a mere infinite regress of signs, with no account of why the regressing movement takes place at all.

Novalis describes music as a 'general language', an idea which we will encounter again in Schopenhauer; 'language' itself is, in turn, a 'musical ideas-instrument' (p. 597). In a famous fragment Novalis says philosophy is 'really homesickness, *the drive to be at home everywhere*' (p. 675). Our sense of the absolute as lack is clear in this: in order to feel homesick we must have a feeling, but not necessarily a clear concept, of what home would be. If one puts this remark into the context of one of his remarks about music a decisive link becomes apparent. Music, he claims, enables the mind to be 'for short moments in its earthly home', because the mind is '*indeterminately* excited' (p. 517). In such excitement it does not seek to define its intentional object, and can thus be with itself in the non-objectifying manner suggested by the notion of 'feeling'. In the *FS* Novalis frequently formulates the problem of reflection in terms of the separation of the determiner from what it determines. Music is linked to 'feeling', which does not entail such a separation, because, as we saw, it 'cannot feel itself'.

On the one hand, Novalis regards music as inferior to painting, because animals can be said to possess music, whereas they could never see the beauty of a landscape, and the power of music's effect should therefore not be used as the measure of its 'intellectual rank' (p. 364). On the other, 'Musical relations really seem to me to be the fundamental relations of nature' (Novalis 1981 p. 528), and he asks 'Might musical relations be the source of all pleasure and unpleasure?' (Novalis 1978 p. 772). He elevates music above other art when he imagines an attempt to '*speak determinately* through music', our language having lost its musical quality and become prosaic. The indeterminate excitement occasioned by music would then become a new determinate way of relating to what we are. For this to happen language 'must become *song* again' (p. 517). This idea can be understood via the fact that music reveals a lost past and a hoped-for future, based upon what lacks in the present. It contains a dynamic which integrates all dimensions of time, thereby in one sense fulfilling the demands of philosophy, as well as giving hope for an at least temporary affective reconciliation with our transience. In verbal language indeterminate propositions 'have something musical' and are able to give rise to 'philosophical *fantasies* – without expressing any determinate path of philosophical thinking' (Novalis 1968 p. 319). As we saw, Novalis refused to give freedom a name: music thus seems better able to express freedom, because of its conceptual indeterminacy.

Music's lack at the level of concepts actually means it is able to evoke what Novalis requires for the 'Universal system of philosophy', which 'must be like time, A thread along which one can run through endless determinations' (p. 201) and cannot be a '*positive system*'. Like signifiers in language, notes depend upon other notes for their significance, attaining their full, but non-conceptual, sense in the overall temporal continuum of the piece. The idea of rhythm, to which Novalis, like Schlegel, attaches serious philosophical importance is essential to his conception.¹⁶ Novalis claims: 'All method is *rhythm*', and that 'Fichte did nothing but discover the rhythm of philosophy and express it ver-balacoustically' (p. 544). Rhythm, like language, is a form of meaningful differentiation; a beat becomes itself by its relation to the other beats, in an analogous way to the way in which the I of reflection is dependent upon the not-I, the signifier on the other signifiers, the beginning upon what follows it. Rhythm is therefore a form of reflection. It is constituted temporally and is not semantically determinate, being the *movement* from one articulation to the next within a pattern. To regard a rhythm *as* a rhythm, though – and this is the vital point – requires a subject for which it is felt as a series of linked articulations, and not a random set of phenomena of the kind the empirical I would be subjected to were it not grounded in the pre-reflexive I. What is important, then, are forms of articulation which are not dependent on representation and are a means of finding new ways of understanding self-consciousness: 'The musician takes the essence of his art from himself – not even the least suspicion of imitation/representation (*Nachahmung*) can touch him' (p. 363). Novalis, then, does not, as Derrida tends to, for example, cease to pay attention to self-consciousness because of its resistance to representation.¹⁷ Instead he looks for new approaches to what philosophy seeks to do which do not exclude the interrogation of the subject. What, though, does this tell us about the wider issues which emerge from the Fichteian and Romantic reactions to Kant?

It might seem 'Romantic' in the bad old sense to suggest that philosophy's conceptual failure means it should delegate its most significant role in this period, that of articulating freedom, to the aesthetic form of music. Such hyperbole can, however, be made sense of, and offers a way of approaching some major philosophical issues that were first seen clearly in Romanticism. To conclude this chapter, let us, give a rough recapitulation of the philosophical choices that have emerged, in order to see how the issues ensue from these choices. Fichte's post-Kantian opposition to materialism was based on the claim that there is no way in which what is merely objective and mechanical can give rise to what is subjective and self-determining, which, following Kant, is the essential focus of a philosophy no longer reliant upon theological dogmatism. This led Fichte to an absolutisation of the I. The advantage of this absolutisation was that it seemed to obviate the problem of the thing in itself, which is now located within the I, albeit in a largely unexplained manner. If this approach were to work it would get over the problem of how objective causality could give rise to subjective representations, abolishing the divide between the objective and the

subjective by making the former that which is derived from the self-division of the latter. In Fichte's view the philosopher's job was to overcome the finite limitations of anything particular in the name of what is the essence of our being, namely self-determining spontaneity. Lurking in this conception, though, was the sense that the activity of mind is driven by something which is prior to any kind of conscious control – this will be why Fichte's conception of the will becomes so important for Schopenhauer, who, of course, will link his conception of the will to music as the 'true philosophy' (see Chapter 8).

The aim of Fichte's system was, then, to find a new ground for philosophy and it attempted to do so by taking an Idealist route, albeit one in which there was a concern to avoid Berkeleyan problems. By establishing the foundations of philosophy in the I the pattern of reality was to be derived from the patterns of what the mind does, and reality was to be regarded as intelligible only through that activity. As we have seen, this strong Idealist programme came up against difficulties in relation to its founding principle. The Romantic problem lay therefore in giving an account of philosophy in which the undeniable fact that the I seems ineliminable from intelligible cognition (causal inputs alone giving no way of explaining the structure of seeing things *as* things) can go along with the ideas (a) that the ground of the self relates to a being to which the self has no cognitive access, and, consequently, (b) that being, including our own being, is always more than we can know about it.

Two initial interpretations of this position offer themselves. As we saw in Chapter 2, Frank thinks the essential Romantic position is akin to contemporary 'metaphysical realism'. In this view reality is assumed to be the way it is independently of our thinking about it, so that, at best, we can see truth as an 'endless approximation' to it. The real in this sense, though, seems to be truth-determinate in the way the empirical world seems to be – it is just that we have not reached that truth yet. The problem with this kind of position, as we saw, is that it relies on the correspondence theory of truth, a theory which has proved very hard to defend (which Schlegel, for example, explicitly rejects and which Schleiermacher, like Davidson, suspects may be vacuous).¹⁸ Without a valid version of the correspondence theory which can show how it is that we are converging on the truth, without just presupposing that we are, metaphysical realism leads straight to an emphatic form of scepticism, because we could *never* know what it would be for our thought to correspond to reality, precisely because reality is the way it is *independently* of thought.

The weaker version of the non-Idealist position, which is closer to Novalis's position and comes closer to certain versions of contemporary pragmatism, makes truth a regulative idea. This position admittedly involves a form of scepticism about any claims to know in a definitive manner – such claims would seem anyway to require the representationalist correspondence theory – but it derives its force precisely from a sense that truth-claims should always be open to revision, even though there is no guarantee that there *is* any ultimate truth at all – How would we know if there is? Truth effectively becomes a normative, rather

than an epistemic matter. Both interpretations of the Romantic position lead to the idea that the best we can actually do is make our beliefs as coherent with each other as possible, which is an endless task, because each justified new piece of knowledge will require adjustments in the system. Novalis's claims that philosophy 'must be systemlessness brought into a system' and that philosophy is the – unrepresentable – 'absolute *ideal of science*' suggest what this entails. The move to aesthetics has here to do with the coexistence of the need for ways of understanding (and enjoying) the ways things can cohere beyond what we know about them with the realisation that, for us, knowledge could never be complete.

Frank claims that the 'primacy of being over consciousness' leads Hölderlin and the Romantics to a ground which can only be represented by 'the darkness of aesthetic representation' (Frank 1997 p. 753). This darkness can be suggested most evidently in music's combination of a meaningfulness generated by the relation of parts to a whole with its resistance to semantic determination. In Schelling's emphatic version of this position, considered in Chapter 4, art's combination of resistance to definitive interpretation with its enduring ability to reveal new aspects of being in a direct manner contrasts with the claim that progress in science is only ever particular and is simply the next step in an endless chain of determination. Art therefore takes on the privileged role in philosophy, giving access to a truth nothing else can. This view has plausible aspects, some of which I hope already to have indicated, but it also needs to be located in a historical argument relating to real works of art, and here things become much more difficult.

After an initial flowering of art from the 1790s onwards, particularly the music of Beethoven, which indeed seems to aspire to something no other form of articulation can achieve, art itself becomes increasingly problematic, to the point in the early twentieth century where the avant-garde puts the very notion of art into question. One of the many reasons for this questioning is the growing ability of science to explain and solve problems which were previously inexplicable and insoluble, a development which also continually reduces the role of philosophy in determining our place in things. Odo Marquard has seen this situation in terms of the move in nineteenth-century secularised thinking from aesthetics, the means of reconciling ourselves, at least in the realm of appearance, to the pain of a now irredeemable existence, to 'anaesthetics', as a scientifically produced means of really countering pain. The fate of aesthetics and notions of the subject in relation to the movement from aesthetics to anaesthetics will concern us in the chapters to come.

Notes

- 1 If, as one should, one translates 'Es' as 'It', the proximity of Freud to the tradition to which Lichtenberg (and, in his wake, Schelling and Nietzsche) belong becomes apparent. It should be clear from the context that I think the traditional, rather than the Lacanian reading, is apt here. Aspects of Lacan's theories will be apparent in some of the theories of the I in Romanticism, most notably in Schelling's 1833–34 Lectures *On the*

History of Modern Philosophy (see Schelling 1994, Bowie 1993, Zizek 1996).

- 2 For the details of the reactions against Fichte, see Frank 1997.
- 3 It now seems clear that this text should be called 'Being and Judgement'. As I am working from an edition of the text which has the older title I shall use that one, even though the logic of Hölderlin's argument makes it clear why the new title better describes the order of the text.
- 4 It is clear that Fichte and Schelling both had a decisive influence on Schopenhauer's conception, despite his attacks on them. The idea of loss of self being a condition of access to the absolute is, of course, part of Buddhism, and Schopenhauer himself was influenced by Buddhism.
- 5 Like Friedrich Schlegel and the early Hegel, Hölderlin also considers this issue in relation to love, as the form of self-transcendence which can lead to a non-alienated sense of identity that does not lead to retreat from the world.
- 6 It seems clear from Hölderlin's presentation of this issue that Hegel derived many of his key ideas from these arguments.
- 7 The word '*Ton*' usually means 'note', but it seems clear that it here relates to the 'moods' whose meaningful connection he sees as essential to the self's search for unity in division.
- 8 Something similar, as Adorno has argued, takes place in the late Beethoven's rejection and reconfiguring of musical convention in the light of his growing disappointment with the development of the society of his time.
- 9 How much the ideas they contain played a role in the history of philosophy is therefore an open question. As Frank 1997 shows, the criticisms of Fichte they contain were part of a widespread reaction against Fichte's idealism – which itself was hugely influential in many areas of intellectual life – on the part of many thinkers at the time, and the basis of the criticisms has reappeared in many forms in subsequent philosophy, some of which was at least indirectly influenced by Romantic thought (see Bowie 2000).
- 10 See Frank 1997 for details of the common sources of these arguments for Hölderlin and Novalis.
- 11 This pattern of thought recurs in an almost identical form in Schelling's critique of Descartes in the early 1830s (see Schelling 1994).
- 12 Frank points out, though, (Frank 1997 p. 808) that this does not explain how it is that one subject comes to interpret the physical manifestations of the other as signs in the first place.
- 13 See Manfred Frank and Gerhard Kurz: '“Ordo inversus”. Zu einer Reflexionsfigur bei Novalis, Hölderlin, Kleist, und Kafka' in *Geist und Zeichen* Festschrift für Arthur Henkel, Heidelberg 1977 pp. 75–92.
- 14 The failure to see that this is therefore not a dogmatic claim has led critics of the later Schelling, who uses the same argument, to mistake this for a pre-critical position.
- 15 Derrida's exclusion of any vocabulary to do with feeling, and his over-concentration on the subjectless semiotic generation of difference derives, one suspects, from the Cartesian-Husserlian heritage which he seems to regard as the only significant philosophical history of subjectivity.
- 16 Discussing the origins of philosophy in the Orphic period in Greece, Schlegel claims that 'rhythm in this childhood of the human race is the only means of fixing thoughts and disseminating them' (Schlegel 1988 2 p. 16).
- 17 In recent texts Derrida has become more concerned with questions about the subject, but his Heidegger-inspired antipathy to the subject as the subject of 'Western metaphysics' is very evident in his earlier work.

18 The essential objection to correspondence theories is, as Habermas argues, that ‘we would “have to step out of language” with language itself . . . Obviously we cannot compare the linguistic expression with a piece of uninterpreted or “naked” reality’ (Habermas 1999 p. 247). Davidson sees the notion of correspondence as ‘without content’.