
*Figure: What Is German Romanticism (noch einmal),
or The Limits of Scholarship*

The world must be romanticized. This is the way to rediscover its original meaning. . . . By giving the base a lofty meaning, the ordinary an appearance of mystery, the known the dignity of the unknown and the finite an aura of infinity, I romanticize it.

—Novalis

The mere idea of a coincidence of opposites can arouse in us inklings of the reality of the unseen, for we are stirred, even in spite of ourselves, by anything that bodes release from the prison of quotidian logic. Yet, to affirm the reality of the unseen, that is, to be a transcendentalist in Western academic culture at the turn of the century, is akin to being a liberal in current American politics: both positions are generally regarded as fraught with hope-fueled delusion and sentimental idealism. Consider, for instance, some recent post-structuralist re-visions of German Romanticism, which appear to have undermined that movement's lofty status in the annals of Western culture, a status that resides, in large measure, in its unabashed appreciation of the mystery of ontic unity. This undermining has taken two forms, one tendentious, the other well-intentioned. Paul de Man, echoing in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* Nietzsche's deconstruction of traditional metaphysical verities, epitomizes the former trend in his outright excoriation of the Romantic vision of Paradise Regained: "The idea of innocence recovered at the far side and by way of

experience, of paradise consciously regained after the fall into consciousness, the idea, in other words, of a teleological and apocalyptic history of consciousness is, of course, one of the most seductive, powerful, and deluded topoi of the idealist and romantic period” (267). The benign undermining is exemplified in Alice Kuzniar’s *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin*, the title of which announces its intention to “read against the grain of” (9) what it regards as the misguided millennialist perspective of traditional scholarship with its superimposition on the Romantics of such ideals as closure, synthesis, and identity—in a word, the beatific *goldenes Zeitalter*, whether conceived as the end-stage of history (*futurus*) or as its sudden apocalyptic interruption (*adventus*).¹ On this view, the Romantics were merely playing with the linguistic tropes and figures of traditional Pietistic transcendentalism as a way of ironizing the conventional essentialist mind-set. De Man would invalidate Romantic transcendentalism itself, Kuzniar the imputation of transcendentalism to Romanticism. Either way, should poststructuralism, at least as represented by these and other theorists,² carry the day, Romanticism would lose its transcendental dimension.

My aim here is neither to discredit the poststructuralist revisionists of German Romanticism (“differentialists”) nor, as these remarks may seem to suggest, to credit the millennialists of tradition (“logocentrists”), but rather to take a fresh look at (*noch einmal*, revise!) certain fundamental aspects of Romanticism itself, and to do this through the focusing power of the primordial principle at issue in this study, a principle, I am convinced, that underlies and informs *all* important aspects of Romanticism: the *coincidentia oppositorum*. This principle, deeper even than the archetypes, has, as we have seen, many names conjured of many languages and cultures and, most important for present purposes, can be shown to be a leitmotif in the German mystical tradition stretching at least as far back as Nicholas Cusanus, who promulgated the Latin designation,³ and Meister Eckhart before him. As the issue unfolds, as I reexamine Romanticism alongside highlights of its interpretative history, I believe the limitations inherent in both the revisionist and millennialist positions will become self-evident. A resultant irony, and one that will serve my aim, is that this very perspectival opposition, in becoming *itself* an enactment of the *coincidentia*, will indeed reveal what Romanticism is, but in a way neither scholarly camp could ever have imagined—that is, it will reveal Romanticism directly through its own dialectical wholeness, rather than through either of its signifying antagonists. The signifiers will become the signified.⁴ Once this happens, what might previously have loomed as poststructuralism’s dire threat to Romanticism’s spiritual viability⁵ should turn out to have been no more than a temporary obscuring of it.

If it be objected that I am assuming what I intend to “prove,” I would only reply that the very issue of proof, as a required end of rationalist procedure, is precisely what Romanticism supersedes. If I could “prove” that Romanticism were the *coincidentia oppositorum*, it would not be. So I dispense with proof, accept my confinement within the hermeneutic circle and proceed along the interpretative rim of my subject.

THE GERMAN MYSTICAL TRADITION

German spiritual literature is particularly rich in creative expressions of this fundamental experience of the coincidence or conjunction or unity of opposites. Certainly German Romanticism represented, not the initiation, but the brilliant if brief climax of the long spiritual development of a world view that was heterodox, though in no way opposed, to the predominantly rationalist outlook of the preceding and following eras. Like mystics in general, purveyors of this insight, if known to their societies at all, have been regarded as at best learned eccentrics and at worst demonic eruptions: thus it has been from the Dominican Meister Eckhart’s gingerly cat-and-mouse game with Rome down to Friedrich Schlegel’s complaint, in a more secular and liberal era, that he would have to give away a piece of candy with each issue of the *Athenäum* journal if he expected “the dull-witted bourgeoisie from Hamburg down to Swabia” to “get” his pithy aphorisms.

In the German tradition, the idea, or more precisely insight, that any pair of opposites, if known intimately enough, will resolve itself into unity can be traced back at least as far as Meister Eckhart in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Whether heretically expounding God and man as two aspects of one Consciousness (or “Eye,” to use his term) or peppering his sermons with incoherent ecstatic outbursts of “mystic-speak,” Eckhart exuded the confidence of deep grounding in the *coincidentia oppositorum*. In one sermon, revealingly titled “Being is more than life,” he expresses the illumination this way: “The whole scattered world of lower things is gathered up to oneness when the soul climbs up to that life in which there are no opposites. Entering the life of reason [read: insight or enlightenment], opposites are forgotten, but where this light does not fall, things fall away to death and destruction” (*Meister Eckhart* 173).

Not only did the renowned Cardinal and Church statesman, Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464), share Eckhart’s vision of ultimate unity-in-difference, he also expounded that vision to the very limits of rational discourse and beyond in his tract, *De visione Dei* (1443), which represents the world as a

vast network of contradictions and God as the abyssal point at which they all meet or coincide (*coincidentia oppositorum*). The ensuing Renaissance and Baroque eras saw a burgeoning of the idea in the proliferation of secret religious societies with their elaborate, esoteric alchemical discourses, all aiming at a syncretism of metallic and human-psychospiritual transformation. As we know from the alchemical studies of Carl Jung and others, the *lapis* or stone became for Paracelsus and his magician-scientist contemporaries the objective correlative of that radiant spiritual pivot, extolled by the mystics, at which all boundaries become utterly porous (Jung, *Memories* 209–10).

The best of German Baroque poetry is mystical through and through, and the best of this best delights in conjuring a plethora of variations on the theme of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Thus the great, though to us today largely inaccessible, alchemical systematizer, Jakob Böhme, in a simple album verse playing with the time/eternity antinomy:

From stress and strife
Will he be free,
Who sees time
As eternity.

(M; Hederer 7)⁶

But it was the Baroque rhymed epigram, with its terse differential symmetry fusing form and idea, that provided the most nearly perfect form of expression for the mystery. In this the Silesian Angel, Angelus Silesius, had no equal:

The bottom of my spirit cries aloud in ceaseless plea
To the bottom of God's; tell me which deeper be.

(M; Hederer 177)

Generally, historical surveys of German mysticism jump about a century and a half from the Baroque era to the Romantics, connecting the two with copious illustrations of Böhme's influence on the early Jena circle. Recent research has shown, however, that there is an important intellectual-historical link in the interim, a link that becomes especially compelling when we fix our focus on the particular spiritual principle under discussion here. In an excellent contribution to the scholarship on Johann Gottfried Herder, entitled *Herder and the Poetics of Thought*, Michael Morton analyzes an early essay of the renowned philosopher of history and mentor to the young Goethe, demonstrating his grounding in the tradition of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, a tradition that, according to the author, stretches back to Cusanus and, long before him, to the pre-Socratic Ionian philosopher Heraclitus. Morton calls Herder "a direct ancestor of such thinkers as Hegel and Nietzsche" (51), this by reason of

his 1764 essay, “On Diligence in Several Learned Languages,” the exposition of which occurs in three stages, “corresponding broadly to the pattern of thesis-antithesis-synthesis that, a generation later, becomes the characteristic framework, not merely of the Hegelian system, nor even solely of German Idealism, but of Romantic thought and sensibility generally” (28). In the third chapter of his book, Morton offers a reading of Herder’s essay that shows how its subtle and paradoxical method of composition clearly prefigures the Romantic poets’ playful deconstruction of the presumably irreducible identity/difference antinomy: “Unity seems to restore itself by means of its own disruption. The return to unity, lost in the process of historically necessary differentiation, can be achieved only by sustaining differentiation” (Allert 248).

THE JENA CIRCLE

An Eastern metaphor much favored by Westerners for that state of consciousness most conducive to the realization of the *coincidentia oppositorum* is that of “the razor’s edge.” This is, of course, the *Bhagavad Gita*’s arresting image of the subtle and often painful difficulty involved in attaining that absolute equanimity of mind necessary to the realization of spiritual illumination. The idea is that, in order to embrace the entire universe (i.e., become cosmically conscious), one must inwardly withhold commitment to any particular aspect of it—one must sit on the razor’s edge. To be sure, the steely discomfort of this seatless seat says much about man’s profound need to come down securely on one side or the other of any issue that may confront him at any time. Things, it seems, must always be “decided” this way or that. Yet it is precisely this most human drive for settlement or fixity (or, in the parlance of deconstruction, “closure”) that must, finally, be relinquished if man is to realize what Nietzsche, in a moment of neo-Romantic illumination, called “the transvaluation of values,” that is, the equal and absolute value of everything. Such a realization would be synonymous with Cusanus’s definition of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the power beyond all duality capable of reconciling all oppositions, since every opposition is another mask or permutation of the ground-conflict between what is valued (self) and what is rejected or disowned (other).

August Wilhelm Schlegel clearly implies Jena Romanticism’s non-negotiable commitment to this radically nondiscriminatory spirit of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, which is, in effect, a “commitment to everything,” in the Vienna lectures (*Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* [1808]) when he says, in the context of artistic appreciation, that

[o]ne cannot be a true connoisseur without universality of spirit, i.e., without that flexibility that puts us in a position, even as we disavow personal preference and blind habituation, to ensconce ourselves amidst the peculiarities of other peoples and times, to sense these directly from within their own center. (M; 162)

In the remaining pages of this chapter, we will see how the underlying principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, this elusive equipoise on the razor's edge of subject-object consciousness, channels great spiritual and aesthetic power into the quintessentially Romantic attitude of openness, an attitude that, taken on the purely conceptual level, might strike one as little more than a banal echo of Enlightenment humanitarian tolerance.

The early German Romantics experienced themselves as possessed by a "Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen" [longing for the Infinite] (A. W. Schlegel). This quest for Ultimate Reality, nurtured by an inner awareness of its imminence, is the hallmark of what William James called the "religious sense," and justifies the Romantics' inclusion in any history of Western religious movements. But it was no mere sense of boundless expanse that the Romantics were after, no "empty Absolute where everything is one," as Hegel derisively characterized the vain efforts of formal logic to grasp the dialectic (qtd. in Altizer 30). Nor did the Romantics conceive of the Infinite as some diaphanous, all-pervasive cosmic substance. In fact, the point is that they did not lead with the faculty of conceptual thought at all, rather they *experienced* the Infinite holistically from the deepest, subtlest regions of the mind, regions where mind and body shade into one another, as a sense of the fundamental balance of things, and specifically, a balance assuming trinitarian form and function. (Indeed, this sense of mind/body interface was itself an instance of this balance.) "My dear man," observes one of Novalis's interlocutors, "you're obviously no chemist, otherwise you'd know that through genuine mixing a *third element* arises, that is both at once and more than either one by itself" (M; *Werke* 312; emphasis Novalis's). The mixing of the two did not "produce" the third but rather *revealed* it as an ontologically prior matrix.

On the chemical analogy, ultimate reality was for the Romantics one, but a one that constituted the bond between two. Not just air, but the atmosphere fusing heaven and earth; not just love, but the love between man and woman; not just "romantische Poesie," but its mediating function "between the depicted [object] and the one depicting [subject]" (M; F. Schlegel 93). The Absolute was thus fundamentally trinitarian, a three-in-one that was equally a one-in-three, the third term confounding all description since it was the connection between things and could therefore not be a describable thing itself. Yet this

indescribable no-thing of the Romantics' inner experience was to them more "real" than the things composing so-called reality, just as the science of the day was beginning to attribute greater reality to such invisible forces as electricity, heat, and magnetism than to the visible bodies they suffused.⁷ This emergent "reality of the unseen" within and without (where was the border now?) awakened in the Jena circle an intimate intuition of the world's abysmal mystery. A most incisive formulation of this intuition, one giving powerful expression to the precisely trinitarian nature of the mystery, is the following of Novalis, in which the third term is characterized as a "hovering" (*Schweben*), that is, "neither this nor that" or, in the Hindu negational expression, *neti neti*:

All being, being *per se* is nothing but a being-free—a *hovering* between extremes, which must needs be united and separated. From this luminous point of hovering all of reality streams forth—in it all things are contained—Obj[ect] and subject are [constituted] through it, not it t[hrough] them.

I-ness or the productive power of imagination, the *hovering*—determines, produces the extremes between which the hovering takes place—This is an illusion, but only in the sphere of common understanding. Apart from that it is something utterly real, for the hovering, its cause, is the source, the *mater* of all reality, indeed is reality itself. (M; *Novalis Schriften* 2: 266)⁸

All of this was the fruit of the Romantics' intrepid self-inquiry, guided, to be sure, by an ambitious program of reading and intellectual exchange. The proto-dialectical mystical insights elaborated in the writings of Plotinus, Böhme, and Spinoza, for example, could only have encouraged members of the early circle to probe themselves more deeply.⁹ But it was the direct looking into self, the exploratory ardor of Novalis's "Geh in dich hinein!" [Go into yourself!], that was paramount. We know from Oskar Walzel that the Romantics carried on an intensive regimen of experiments in self-contemplation or introspection (12). They were probably the first modern thinkers to entertain seriously the theory of an unconscious mind (Huch 81; Walzel 64–65; Ellenberger 202–10). Historian of psychiatry Henri Ellenberger goes so far as to hold the entire fields of modern dynamic psychiatry and depth psychology unthinkable without the foundation of "interest that was shown by Romanticism for all manifestations of the unconscious: dreams, genius, mental illness, parapsychology, the hidden powers of fate, . . . the psychology of animals" (200). But the speculation and theorizing of the Romantics always remained grounded in the confidence of inner experience, for they had done nothing less than tap an archetype, the primordial trinitarian archetype of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, and in so doing appropriated for their art, quite apart from its manifest religious or secular content, the empowering vision of all the major religions of the world.

It would appear then that the Romantics, with their profusion of dialectical systems of thought, paradoxical aphorisms, and multivalent symbols, were, in effect, “reinventing religion” for themselves by means of an ingeniously improvised depth psychology, literally rediscovering the transcultural archetypal wellsprings of the received Christian orthodoxy. Thomas Altizer makes this point with specific reference to two figures closely peripheral to our subject, Blake and Hegel, each of whom in his own way evolved a radically new *Heilsgeschichte* out of a seminal insight into the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Altizer summarizes the single apocalyptic moment beheld by both poet, in his *Jerusalem*, and philosopher, in his *Phenomenology*: “By moving through an actual death of its original form, every opposite will dialectically pass into its other: this self-annihilation will wholly dissolve the original identity of each opposite, and this process of the negation of negation will draw all the estranged contraries of a fallen Totality into a final coincidence of the opposites” (218).

ROMANTIC PANORAMA

I want to suggest that it is precisely this apocalyptic moment, epitomized in the cosmologies of Blake and Hegel, that Friedrich Schlegel is urging upon his fellow poets in his celebrated essay, “Rede über die Mythologie.” The ripeness of conditions for a leap into the transpersonal depths of mind, where the gods are at home, and still deeper into the dynamic trinitarian matrix (“those principles of eternal revolution” [M; 129]) that is their source, is what Schlegel is implying when he says, “[M]an is just beginning to become aware of his divine power” (M; 128). Not a mythology limited to sensory experience, as in antiquity, does Schlegel envision, but one grasping the fundamental triadic-dialectical principle generating *all* phenomenal reality, a metamythology therefore, that would realize “how it is of the essence of mind to determine itself and, in eternal alternation, to go out of itself and come back into itself” (M; 123–24). Since the *coincidentia oppositorum* was experienced as a kind of base-line gravitational field of the psyche capable of accommodating any culturally determined content, the new mythology would literally be a source of inexhaustible inspiration, giving powerful shape to any experiential particulars that came within its orbit:

The new mythology must . . . be fashioned from the deepest depths of the mind; it must be the most artful of all works of art, for it is to contain all others, to be a new bed and vessel for the old eternal *Ur*-source of poetry, even to be the endless poem that conceals the seeds of all other poems. (M; 122)

As *sine qua non* for the revitalization of poetry, Schlegel was advocating what Jung, more than a century later, would posit as the goal of his analytic psychology and of human evolution in general: self-realization.

The extent to which the other Romantics, in and beyond the early circle, caught the spirit Schlegel was at pains to articulate and were actually able to plumb their own inner depths to create “metamythologically” out of this triadic-archetypal foundation of mind is astonishing. Eminently citable examples abound, some obvious, others subtle. The obvious ones would include the entire dialectical-philosophical arc of Fichte, Schelling, Müller, and Hegel, all of whom drew inspiration from the idea of a synthesis of polar opposites, even if, in Fichte’s case, the inspiration was negative (no synthesis, but *unendlicher Progreß* toward one). Among the subtler, but no less compelling, manifestations of the archetype would be A. W. Schlegel’s dyadic view in the Vienna lectures of the Romantic era as both historical phenomenon (essentially, the post-antique Christian order, especially the late medieval to early modern era) and the transhistorical consciousness that sees “classical” and “Christian” as conceptually interdependent (165): hence Romanticism, as it were, remains “itself” even as it embraces its own “other.” (How close this is to Derrida’s nature/culture antinomy!)¹⁰ Then there is the acknowledgment by both Schlegels that this dialectical “Grundkraft” is prior even to distinctions between internal-individual and external-collective reality: “The whole play of vital movement is based on identity and difference. Why shouldn’t this phenomenon repeat itself even in the history of humanity at large?” (M; A. W. Schlegel 165).

Examples from the literary side would include Wackenroder’s many depictions of both the successful and failed struggles of artists to come to terms with the repressed poles of self: Raphael finally liberates the long-slumbering “Madonna within” (prefiguring Goethe’s late-Faustian “eternal feminine” and even Jung’s third- or fourth-stage anima); the effete composer Josef Berglinger fails to assimilate “Leben,” in the form of the Philistine courtiers surrounding him. As for Novalis, the “Hymns to the Night” live and breathe through the mystical reversal of innumerable pairs: night/day, inner/outer, ascent/descent, life/death, East/West, classical/Christian, personal/transpersonal, and so on

E. T. A. Hoffmann’s greatest tale, “The Golden Pot,” turns on a vision of the poet as the instrument of that Wisdom that is not opposed to ignorance. And Eichendorff’s entire *oeuvre* seems a magnificently obsessive flirtation with the diaphanous boundary between pagan eros and Christian agape, typically allegorized in the rhythmic tension between a seductive nocturnal and a bracing matinal nature.

In each case, the Romantic sensibility is drawn to the protean spirit of the archetype in which a given term—madonna, wisdom, agape—seems to be both itself and the link between itself and its other. In the climax of Hoffmann's "modern fairy tale," for example, the wise old archivist/salamander Lindhorst vanquishes his mortal foe, the sorceress Liese, not with a killing blow but a transforming embrace: he smothers her in the thick, warm folds of his princely mantle. Thus, a reconciliation and, as such, a victory for a "higher third term" (the poet Anselmus, around—that is to say, *within*—whom this cosmic agon takes place) rather than for either faction. Of course, when the poet, whose soul is the object of the struggle, "wins," all of nature wins, for what is the poet but the arrival of nature at a condition of total self-awareness.¹¹

In his classic elaboration of the mystical consciousness in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James expresses beautifully this shifting identity of triangular forces that inspired the Romantics: "It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but *one of the species*, the nobler and better one, *is itself the genus, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself*" (298; italics James's). James, who incidentally was well schooled in German idealist philosophy, seems here almost to have had Lindhorst's absorbent mantle in mind.

FOCUS: NOVALIS AND FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL ON THE SELF

It is not difficult to argue from interpretations of the imaginative forms of literature to the Romantics' embrace of the *coincidentia oppositorum* as a potent source of aesthetic and spiritual inspiration, since such argument benefits from the fundamentally indeterminate nature of all interpretation. In the particular case of poetic or literary interpretation, the act of interpreting must be considered at least as creative as it is discoverative. (Indeed, in the spirit of the present inquiry one might well ask what the relationship is between these two modes of consciousness.) On the other hand, if we limit our focus to such nonimaginative forms as the aphoristic fragment and the essay, forms in which members of the Jena circle address the wide range of issues that concern them in direct and prolific exposition, the variable of interpretation is minimized, baffling and abstruse though many of the utterances remain. In many cases one need only point out what is manifestly there to convey an

indelible sense of the *coincidentia oppositorum* as of the very stuff and substance of “Romantic reality”—by which I mean *all* reality, not just its aesthetic aspect (unless, of course, one broaden the scope of “aesthetic” to include all reality, as the Romantics themselves did).

For this reason I would like in this section to limit discussion primarily to the prose fragments, particularly the pivotal aperçus of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. Allow me, moreover, to sharpen the focus still further by confining discussion to a single theme, the theme of self, which was an intense preoccupation of both thinkers, as indeed of the early circle generally. It is also a theme that, doubtless by reason of its elusiveness and subtlety, continues to spark the interest of scholars of Romanticism today.¹²

The most important thing to know about the German Romantics’ understanding of the self is that for them there *was* no self in the sense of a discrete conscious being or entity. Rather, they conceived of—and, in their best moments, experienced—the self as a relationship, indeed, as the very spirit of relationship. In Brentano’s exquisite verse, “Alles ist freundlich wohlwollend verbunden” [Everything’s joyously interconnected]. This wondrous sense of *Verbindung*, of the primordial interconnectedness of things, was the realization of self, which is to say, Self. Relationship was more real to the Romantics than the terms of relationship, the links between things ontologically prior to the things linked. (Which means, incidentally, that in thus “limiting” our discussion here to the Romantic concept of self, we are in paradoxical effect “opening up” the discussion to that mysterious “what?” that scintillates between *any* pair of opposites. Upon reflection a dizzying irony begins to emerge, not unlike the intended effect of the facing mirrors of F. Schlegel’s famous *Athenäum* fragment 116: one has the oddly buoyant sense of finding one’s ground by losing it.). Needless to say, this perspective confounds our ordinary view of the world, the view constituting what Schlegel called the “mechanischer Geist” or dualistic mind, which assumes connections or relationships to be derivative of substantial preexisting entities. But the Romantics knew from patient introspection that this was no more than a habit of conventional consciousness, which accords greater reality to the palpable objects of sense and less to the “empty air” between them. The “empty air” it was, though, that fascinated the Romantics, the typically overlooked “space” or “gap” between things, for the reason that their meditations had shown them that the emptier the mind is of its own content, the more radiant—which is to say, conscious—it becomes. This meant that the “light” of consciousness dimmed according as objects entered into it, as if, in a giddy reversal of common sense, so-called

objective existence represented a subtraction from an absolutely conscious plenum, which, if fully realized, would have no (necessary) content at all. As Novalis has it, “The outer world is the shadow world; it casts its shadow over the realm of light” (M; *Werke* 327).

Those who read the Romantics as otherworldly escapists¹³ generally follow the equation only this far, failing to accompany them in the next, and crucial, step of insight, which is that any sought-after *nirvana* of absolute consciousness would itself necessarily be a “content” or object, in contradistinction to the *samsara* of the relative world of objects, and hence would not be absolute at all. By definition, what exists by virtue of distinction cannot be absolute. The Romantics recognized, in other words, that the human mind was its own trap since it could only function by an act of differentiation in which one of the two terms at issue was necessarily excluded/rejected/repressed (Derrida would say “deferred”). One especially striking simile used by Novalis in the “Pollen” fragments to convey a sense of this functioning of ordinary consciousness by way of repression is that of the flautist’s finger stops, that is, the enforced silencing of some notes precisely in order to express others:

Certain inhibitions resemble the touches of a flautist, who, in order to bring forth different tones, will keep now this, now that opening shut and will thereby seem to create deliberate couplings of mute and ringing openings. (M; *Werke* 325)

This dynamic view anticipates several conceptions of human-consciousness-as-structured-by-exclusion proffered by later thinkers, to wit: Hegel’s autonomous negation; Jung’s intro/extraversion dynamic; and, as mentioned, Derrida’s *différance*, by which the signifier indefinitely “defers” meaning.

For the Romantics any given moment of consciousness, however noble or sublime, always and of necessity left something out. The most fundamental omission, however, and one implicit in every conscious discrimination, was “the other,” that which was experienced as not-self. But then, these two were themselves a binary, were they not, the result of a primordial splitting of mind, so that the true self must have more to do with this mind prior to splitting, prior to the rise of consciousness, than with the I/Not-I binary constituting consciousness. In other words, the true self was to be found on the borderline between I and Not-I, that is, in the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Here, then, in the vital seam between self and other, self and world, subject and object, lay that absolute freedom of the True Self for which the Romantics yearned, not in some remote ethereal sphere within or without. Indeed, the very pursuit of an “inner” as opposed to an “outer” self or vice versa was an expression

of that privileging or preferential desire of the binary rational consciousness that necessarily entailed bondage. Strictly speaking, the “rational” pursuit of a self chained one to two ghosts, the unattainable preferred and the inescapable rejected. This is why it is precisely *between* “within” and “without,” in the very interstices of desire, that Novalis locates the Self in the “Pollen”:

The seat of the soul is to be found there where inner world and outer world touch. Where they interpenetrate, it is in each point of the interpenetration.¹⁴ (M; *Werke* 327)

The Self was realized through penetration, and essentially what was penetrated was the illusion of an interior world as situated over against an exterior one. A leap of the mind out of itself had to be ventured, a leap from the privileged part with which one had identified to the dialectical whole that one *was*. Once made, one found oneself in a condition sometimes characterized by Novalis as *Ekstase* (the ecstasy of “standing outside” the confines of the personal or egoic self) and, at others, as *Interesse*: “Interest is taking part in the suffering and activity of a being. A thing interests me when it succeeds in moving me to this taking-part” (M; *Werke* 330–31). (One notes here Novalis’s deft—and characteristic—use of Latin and Greek-derived, rather than Germanic, terms to convey a sense of the awe or gravity entailed by any dislocation of the sense of conventional identity.) For Novalis the Self was *Interesse*, literally an *inter esse* or “being between” ego and other that enabled one to “take the part” that the other was into oneself. This triangular or three-in-one dynamic of the True Self transformed separating barriers into connecting borders. Thus did consciousness expand.¹⁵

To speak of self is, for Novalis, to speak the language of paradox, in particular the paradox of ecstatic reciprocity. One gets a most disarming sense of the exquisite dynamism involved in the reciprocal interpenetration of opposites in the following in which Novalis affirms/negates the self as that which is always “becoming other” and the other as that which is always “becoming self.” The True Self’s elusion of any limiting essence is brought home not only by the statement’s meaning but, perhaps more importantly, by its very rhythm, almost as if the writer were using a primitive erotics of rhythm to undermine our overly civilized obsession with “meaning” as the linguistic analogue of “essence,” both these latter here exposed as phantasmic dead ends in the tortuous, delusion-prone quest for Self. This quasi-orgasmic rhythm, it will be noted, evokes the mathematical sign for infinity. Thus, Novalis’s German: “Ich kann etwas nur erfahren, in so fern ich es in mir aufnehme; es ist also eine Alienation meiner selbst und eine Zueignung oder Verwandlung einer andern Substanz in die meinige zugleich” [I can only come to know something to the

extent that I take it into myself; it is therefore at once an alienation of my self and an appropriation or transformation of another substance into my own] (M; Hardenberg 341). Gail Newman certainly has in mind this fundamental boundlessness of the Self in Novalis when she describes the relationship between Heinrich von Ofterdingen and Mathilde in the poet's *Bildungsroman* as a dialectical hovering the vibrational frequency of which tends toward absolute fusion: "Novalis posited the process of hovering (*Schweben*) between subjective and objective moments as the most authentic form of subjectivity, yet the two moments tend to conflate entirely at important points in his work. The two selves involved in the lovers' discourse become almost literally one self" (66).

In light of our earlier discussion of the ontological significance of the term *schweben* for Novalis, Newman's observations suggest the synonymousness for the poet of Self and Reality or Being outright. More particularly, they suggest an affinity of Novalis's mystical insight with the Buddhist metaphysical doctrine of the *sunyata*, the great fertile Void that is forever bodying forth and reabsorbing all discrete phenomena. In a kind of widening gyre, the fixed boundary that is ego can become the permeable border that is Self, which can itself "hover" freely between dynamic triangularity, the subtlest state of phenomenal existence, and Nothing. Even the *coincidentia oppositorum* itself, it would seem, when it exists as a phenomenon in pointed contradistinction to its own possible nonexistence, is a product of Itself. The Self as the absolute identity of these two, of existence and nonexistence or *samsara* and *nirvana*, is the cornerstone of Eastern mysticism. (In the concluding chapter we will observe Novalis's flirtation with this most basic phase of the Self's hovering in his fragments on time.)

The recent—and, as it strikes me, forced—efforts of scholars, alluded to at the opening of this chapter, to deny the transcendental status of the Self in Romanticism are based on the false conclusion (though one that is by now virtually unquestioned in our scientific academic culture) that the Self's relative inaccessibility to ordinary conceptual consciousness means inaccessibility *outright* and therefore, in effect, nonexistence. But it is clear that neither Novalis nor Friedrich Schlegel sees it this way. What they *do* see is the necessity for what dialectical philosophers of consciousness from Hegel through Marx to Althusser have identified as "a move of the critique" in order to realize transcendence (Harland 95–96). This means that thought itself must actually experience its own inadequacy to the issue of Self. It must see that it is itself a mere function of Self, that Self comprehends *it* but never the reverse. Coming up thus hard against its own limits, thought abdicates, as it were, and in so doing, clears the ground for a "move of the critique," a move, that is, of

consciousness, backward behind itself, so to speak, to a more comprehensive dimension, as if the eyes had suddenly jumped back to catch a glimpse of themselves. This move or leap of consciousness is the manifestation of the Self, which is both the one glimpsing and the one glimpsed, that is, the dialectical unity of subject and object. That all this occurs quite beyond the pale of logical thought, with its exclusionary unidirectional movement, has confounded the current demythologists of Romanticism who themselves cannot fathom, that is to say “think,” a Self not dominated by thought.

But it is just such a “thought-free” Self (which, by the way, does not mean “vacant of thought”), realizable through an inner leap, that Novalis and Schlegel deftly imply through the occasional use of “meta” language. Novalis speaks of an “Ich seines Ichs” which he identifies with the “transzendentalen Selbst” (*Werke* 329), and Schlegel is partial to expressions such as “Philosophie der Philosophie” (87) and “poetische Poetik” (88) to suggest that the True Self functions qualitatively rather than quantitatively, that is, it inspires philosophy or poetics without necessarily “adding” to them, since all “additions” are necessarily confined within the domain of thought. Paradoxically, the Self must be free of the partial, incremental, hence, necessarily incomplete nature of thought if it is to “complete,” that is, illuminate thought.

Schlegel’s metalanguage also aims to suggest the Self’s simultaneous transcendence of and immanence within its own conscious functions. Jaffé notwithstanding, transcendence for the Jena Romantics in no way signals aloofness or insulation from that which is transcended. *Das Ideale* is not sealed off from *das Reale* in some remote metaphysical Shangri-la. Rather, true transcendence is the freedom to *be with* the world, which is to say, with the content of one’s own consciousness, whatever it may be. (Hence, Wackenroder’s tragic-because-overly-sensitive musician, Josef Berglinger, is to be taken as the subject of a cautionary tale and not in any sense as an elite exemplar of true Romantic devotion to art.) This is the only way to understand Schleiermacher’s famous definition of religion as “being one with the Infinite in the midst of the finite.” And it is why Schlegel rejects any form of censorship on principle and does not hesitate to recommend the literary exploration of even the most repugnant of human impulses, for the blackest of hearts is always already transfigured when viewed in the light of the Self:

If, out of psychological interest, one writes novels or reads novels, then it is quite illogical and petty to wish to avoid even the most long-drawn-out and detailed dissection of unnatural desires, ghastly torments, hair-raising infamy or disgusting sensual or spiritual decadence. (M; 94)

Here the themes of thought and beauty touch, as we see in the Romantic Self the coalescence, not only of thought and no-thought, but also of beauty and ugliness, an aesthetic apotheosis not unlike that of Kafka's hideous sirens with their sterile wombs (symbolizing perhaps his profound ambivalence toward his "call" to writing) who could not help it "that their lament sounded so beautiful." It is precisely within the sterile womb that the most exquisite beauty may gestate. As with single terms, so too with polarities: thought/no-thought, beauty/ugliness, the Romantic Self does not favor one over another (to do so would unilateralize the dialectic) but manifests itself indiscriminately, as it were, in the interstices of any pair, or pair of pairs.

The notion of the Self as coupling or marriage is, if possible, even more pervasive in Schlegel than Novalis. This becomes evident once one grasps that the myriad antinomies with which Schlegel plays in the *Athenäum* fragments are to be understood as dynamic, transparent, mutually interpenetrating phases of the illumined consciousness rather than discrete and sedentary "bookends" holding upright a linear world of volumes. Thus, *real* and *ideal*, *Absicht* and *Instinkt*, *Historiker* and *Prophet*, *System* and *kein System*, *Sympoesie*, and the "zwei befreundete Gedanken" [two befriended thoughts] that provide the alchemy for "witzige Einfälle" [flashes of wit] (89–94) are all seamless correlates of Mind, not composite spheres "out there" or "in here" (further correlates).

But *what* mind, *whose* mind, one demands. The very questions assume dichotomies (individual/collective, personal/impersonal, possessor/possessed) that are themselves categorical structures of the delusive binarist mind (again, "mechanischer Geist," in Schlegel's expression). There is for Schlegel just Mind, just Consciousness, just Self, all connoted for him in the term "organischer Geist" (102, 104), the ground-zero dialectical mind of *Genie* that infinitely supersedes its own lower "human, all too human" stages, "chemischer Geist" (wit) and "mechanischer Geist" (intellect) (102), which are by nature given to "a one-sided . . . ideal. . . [B]ut the antitheses to these are missing" (M; 104). In the Romantic Self both thesis and antithesis are always present; indeed, each exists solely to "present" the other in an ongoing "mutual saturation of all forms and all substances" (M; 106). The delusive mind, be it *mechanisch* or even *chemisch* (an evolved intermediate consciousness enjoying occasional flashes of illumination, somewhat like a flickering lightbulb not yet firmly screwed in), exists by virtue of the repression of the antithesis (cf. Derrida's *différance*); the Enlightened Mind or Self heralds the return of the repressed, culminating in an embrace ("mutual saturation," or perhaps even deconstruction's "aporia," that luminous moment in which a text is reunited in the reader's mind with its own negation or anti-text).¹⁶

It should be clear from the foregoing excursus on the Romantic Self that German Romanticism is in fundamental accord with those *Weltanschauungen*, religious or quasi-religious, that deny the validity of an autonomous individual ego, such as Buddhism with its pivotal anatomic or no-self doctrine. In fact, one might view Romanticism as a link between very ancient and very modern, indeed postmodern, perspectives on the ego, historically situated as it is between Buddhism and the recent “death-of-the-author” proclaimed by deconstruction, an intellectual-spiritual force that has probably yet to tap fully its own resources of mystical insight.¹⁷ Derrida’s and de Man’s insistence on regarding all foundational Western values (self, essence, truth, etc.) as decentered and their obsessive fascination with undecidability and aporia, dialectical phenomena so seemingly akin to Novalis’s “hovering” and Schlegel’s “mutual saturation,” give one pause to wonder just how new deconstruction really is. If one object that deconstruction keeps its focus narrowly trained on the self-negating gestures of language, while the purview of Romanticism is cosmic, I would simply cite Harland’s observation that “Derrida expands his theory of language into a philosophy of the world *as* language” (141). In any case, as I hope to demonstrate more fully in the concluding chapter of this book, we are far from closing our accounts with the subtle and complex relations that seem to obtain between these two heterodox Western paradigms.

SCHOLARSHIP AS ENACTMENT OF ROMANTICISM

Once one comes to appreciate fully that for the Romantics *das Reale* and *das Ideale* are neither separate nor merely linked (both dualistic positions) but *absolutely identical*, then the scholarly debate between the traditional millennialists and the current poststructuralists over Romantic transcendence begins to take on the surreal contours of an Escher engraving: Is it black geese that are flying East or white geese that are flying West? No matter which position one takes, the counterposition is forever disturbing one’s barely settled view. At some point the theoretical debate begins to wobble and soon collapses in on its own insubstantiality. In that moment the irony of ironies is realized as the debate, heretofore like all scholarly argument a quest for a “truth” or “meaning” or “understanding” not quite yet in view, is transformed into the very enactment of Romantic “hovering.” In a stunning manifestation of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the debate itself has become what it presumed to be pointing to; the signifier has become the signified. Now the debate is a

dance, and the dance can go on forever, *being* Romanticism even as it forever falls short of *meaning* it.

It will be clear by now why, at the outset of this essay, I remained non-committal in the scholarly debate over “Romantic transcendence.” To have taken a position would have been to violate the very spirit of Romanticism which is the spirit of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Romantic transcendence consists in this very freedom within—or better yet, freedom as—the dialectical dance of transcendence and immanence, conditions now revealed to be in some mysterious way both different and identical. Romanticism is, in the end, all about the exhilarating emancipation from any and all positions, a dynamic a-positionality which alone fully discloses the bedrock “reality” of any given position, which is empty. But then this emptiness is fullness itself; kenosis is plerosis. And so it goes, on and on.

Even to affirm, as I do here, that Romanticism is the lively and enchanting dance of a-positionality is to run the risk of reifying the unreifiable.¹⁸ Older scholars such as Gero von Wilpert who stress above all the sheer undefinability of Romanticism seem to me to come closest to the spiritual mark (525).¹⁹ If it be objected that this amounts to an intellectual nihilism that abrogates the obligation of scholarship to do all it can to establish the “facts of the matter,” I can only reply that a closer look will reveal it to be rather a humility that brings one up hard against the existential limits of factual scholarship. But then, to be truly humbled by one’s own scholarly ignorance is already to have taken a small step into that condition of Mind known, at a certain Western cultural-historical juncture, by the name of Romanticism. Scholarship that thus reveals its own limitations has served its purpose well indeed.