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*'The Philology of Philosophy':
Romantic Literary Theory*

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Andrew Bowie

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In the English-speaking world 'literary theory' has, as is well known, been a source of persistent, often bitter controversy. Given the growing signs of a contemporary crisis in the development of literary theory, a crisis occasioned not least by the inflated claims of some of its main proponents, the suggestion that literary theory is merely a passing aberration which offends the most basic scholarly proprieties is now becoming more and more widespread. Although such claims are as invalid as the extreme versions of what they attack, it is perhaps time to take stock by re-considering the aims and nature of literary theory from a different perspective. Many of the reactions to literary theory on the part of those with a more historical, philological, or biographical approach to 'literature', who would, of course, be more than happy to get back to the old agenda, were always strangely reminiscent of reactions against the real -- but too rarely acknowledged -- founders of literary theory. The fact is that Hegel's (and, at times, Goethe's) responses to the disruptive role played by early German Romantic philosophy in relation to the attempt to establish post-theological foundations for the modern world have regularly been echoed by those who think that firm foundations are the essential prerequisite of serious scholarly activity. In this sense it is clear that any serious engagement with 'Literature and Romanticism' must, as the early Romantics already realised, also be an engagement both with the very question of 'literature' and with major questions in modern philosophy.¹

Let us begin at the most elementary level: what does the study of

¹ I have looked at other aspects of re-reading Romantic philosophy in Bowie 1993.

literature actually aim to achieve? The fact is that the investment of many scholars in literary interpretation still remains dependent upon the idea that there is 'meaning' 'there' to be interpreted in a text, and that, to quote those who opposed the award of Jacques Derrida's honorary degree at Cambridge University, texts 'have meanings (...) independent of the readings we choose to impose'. I shall term these scholars the 'realists', for reasons that will become apparent in a moment. 'Literary theory', on the other hand, is often understood as being dedicated to discrediting the notion of ascertainable meaning, be this in the name of Lacan's 'slipping of the signified under the signifier', Derrida's deferral of meaning as 'presence' via the differential semiotic constitution of language in 'différance', or one of the other available candidates for the account of why textual meaning in particular may in some senses never be finally decidable. Although some of these positions might have implications so extreme as to imply that 'meaning is impossible' (if that phrase itself actually means anything at all) the most interesting implication of literary theory is in fact that there can be far more 'meanings' than the realists might think, and that we cannot say how we would finally decide what they are, though we can still be pretty certain that some interpretations are simply wrong. For the purposes of this paper the literary theorists will, of course, be the 'Romantics'.

The realist position on meaning is interestingly echoed by those natural scientists who say things like the following, from a recent debate concerning relativism in the sociology of science, about truth: 'Somewhere buried in the awesome complexity of Nature, lies the truth. It is the task of science to disclose that truth...' (Peter Atkins in the Times Higher September 30th 1994 p. 19). Both literary and scientific realists hedge their claims about truth and meaning with reservations about the heroic difficulty of their enterprise, but in neither case do the members of the 'truth/meaning is really there' tendency notice that they have already presupposed something much more absolute than their own reservations ought to allow. How would we know the texts have such meanings if they were never read by readers who 'impose' whatever meanings

the texts have been understood as 'having'? Are there, then, other kinds of reader congenitally incapable of such imposition, and who decides who these readers are? Similarly, how does Atkins know that the truth is there hidden in nature -- as opposed, say, to it being merely a name for the one of the ways we post-Kantian moderns tend to deal with the natural world -- if he has not already found it? The suspicion that traditional literary scholars and realist natural scientists share some premises of the kind Kant termed 'dogmatic' is hard to resist, given their common attachment to a conception which seems to assume a priori that truth in a really very emphatic sense is already there to be found. As I shall show in a moment, the realists thereby fail to confront questions which form the very substance of early Romantic philosophy, which have now been revived in both literary theory and some areas of analytical philosophy, and which never really went away in certain versions of hermeneutics.

Opposition to 'realist' conceptions is one of the few points on which most of those interested in recent literary theory would probably agree. Their agreement is based on an attitude to knowledge and truth which I believe first developed in early Romanticism, and which is implied in Novalis' contention in the so-called Fichte-Studien of 1795-6, that the: 'Absolute given to us [in the sense of a final truth] can only be negatively known, by acting and finding that what we seek cannot be achieved by any action' (Novalis 1978 p. 181). In its extreme form the clash between the realist and the Romantic positions has led to much of the bitterness in the debate about literary theory in some areas of the humanities, a bitterness characteristic of most clashes where there are fundamentalists -- on both sides -- who think they already know what the truth is.

It seems a good idea, then, by exploring the roots of the questions at issue, to have another look at the question of meaning in the study of literature. This may even allay some of the fears about the 'Untergang des Abendlandes' which seem to accompany so many attacks on even the most philosophically serious positions which do not accept that meaning is a ready-made essence

hidden in a text, which is to be uncovered by interpretation. The convergence of Romantic theories of truth and literature with a variety of contemporary approaches to meaning and truth in philosophy and literary theory is only just beginning to be apparent. If key literary authors, like Novalis and Schlegel, posed questions of truth and meaning which can now affect our contemporary self-understanding in more than just the area of literature, what does it mean for the future study of literature if we introduce such issues into the study of literature?

This question is itself not new. A defining characteristic of early Romantic thinking is its questioning of the borderline between philosophy and literature, a questioning which does not necessarily privilege either philosophy or literature. In his Philosophische Fragmente, from the Hefte zur Philosophie, which he begins writing in 1794, Schlegel says of philosophy in the wake of Kant's critiques: 'The critique of philosophy = philology of philosophy, they are One and the same. Since philosophy has criticised so much, indeed has criticised almost everything in heaven and earth, it can now tolerate itself also being criticised' (Schlegel 1988 5 p. 18). Behind what appears as perhaps just a characteristic example of Schlegel's cleverness actually lie some of the deepest philosophical issues of the age. This becomes apparent when we realise that Schlegel's claim seems, characteristically, to undermine itself. If philosophy is concerned with the truth, or at least with a theory of the truth, what position could be adopted from which to criticise the activity which is concerned with the truth, without that position itself just being another, 'higher' or more fundamental kind of philosophy? This leads to a regress of 'meta-philosophies', each of which would require a further philosophy to establish its own truth. Schlegel thinks the regress can be understood, but not finally overcome, by attention to the nature of language, and to 'Poesie' (which I shall sometimes translate as 'literature', but will sometimes leave in the German). In the Ideen of 1800 he therefore maintains 'Where philosophy ceases literature must begin ... One ought, for example, not just oppose unphilosophy (Unphilosophie), but also literature, to philosophy' (Schlegel 1988 2 p. 226). Schlegel's idea of the

'end of philosophy' has been echoed in many recent philosophical discussions. Why, though, is the end of philosophy for Schlegel to be followed by a turn to literature? Answering this question takes us in important directions. What is at issue here is actually what we think truth is.

The term 'Unphilosophie' is an explicit reference to F.H. Jacobi, who probably coined it. It was Jacobi who realised the major problem inherent in grounding modern philosophy without theology more clearly than anyone, perhaps even including Kant. He found the problem so serious that he maintained his own theological position should therefore be termed 'Unphilosophie', because it rejected the idea that philosophy could provide us with a ground for knowledge. Jacobi's initial realisation is perhaps the vital factor in how we can understand the emergence and significance of the early Romantic position, and it leads by a zig-zag route which I cannot describe here to contemporary literary theory. The question as to whether there is a truth in nature waiting to be discovered is a question about the basis of what we believe knowledge to be, a question which Kant had, in the wake of Hume, tried to answer in a new way, by attempting to ground knowledge in the synthesising of appearances by the subject, rather than in the world in itself.

In Jacobi an Fichte of 1799 Jacobi claims, in much the same manner as he claims against Kant:

A pure, that is a thoroughly immanent philosophy; a philosophy made only of One piece; a true system of reason is only possible in the Fichtean manner. Obviously everything must only be given in and through reason, in the I as I, in egoity, and already be contained in it, if pure reason alone should be able to deduce everything from out of itself alone (Jacobi 1799 p. 14).

Kant is routinely cited as claiming that Fichte's system, which had major effects on Romanticism, was 'totally indefensible'. However, in the Opus Postumum, he says things like the following, which hardly differ from the

claims being made by Fichte: 'Transcendental philosophy is the act of consciousness whereby the subject becomes the originator of itself and, thereby, also of the whole object of technical-practical and moral-practical reason in one system -- ordering all things in God, as in one system' (Kant 1993 p. 245). It was against any such possibility of self-grounding, in which the truth is claimed to be solely generated by the subject, that Jacobi's attacks were directed.

As long as one seeks to ground philosophy in what we can know, Jacobi maintains, there is no way of avoiding a regress of narcissistic meta-philosophies, which merely arrive at what their own premises already dictate. What we can determinately know, he argues, is only ever based on its relation to other things that we know. One thing is always 'conditioned' by its 'condition' and is itself the condition of other things. The task of knowledge, Kant maintained, is to 'seek conditions', within the limits of the understanding. In the 1787 Introduction to the first Critique Kant maintains that, while reason must postulate the 'unconditioned ... in all things in themselves for everything conditioned, so that the series of conditions should thus become complete' (B, p. XX), by restricting knowledge to appearances, rather than 'things in themselves', the contradiction of seeking conditions of the unconditioned can be avoided. Jacobi, on the other hand, thinks this leads to an insoluble dilemma for a philosophy which would provide post-theological foundations.

In the Beilagen to the Spinoza Briefe Jacobi claims that 'our conditioned existence [rests] on an infinity of mediations' and that our scientific and other 'investigations have the discovery of that which mediates the existence of things as their object' (ed. Scholz 1916 p. 275). The worrying aspect of this is that any truth to which science lays claim is dependent upon its relation to other truths, so the claim that there can be a final cognitive truth must actually be a claim about the 'unconditioned', which leads to the following problem, of which realists of varying persuasions often seem pretty unaware:

if everything which is supposed to emerge and be present in a graspable manner has to emerge and be present in a conditioned manner, we remain as long as we grasp conceptually in a chain of conditioned conditions. When this chain ceases we cease to understand, and the context (Zusammenhang) we call nature itself ceases (ed. Scholz 1916 p. 276).

As such, the Truth cannot be in nature, if nature, as Kant claimed in the Prolegomena, is that which we see in terms of laws. Jacobi's answer to this problem, which he associates with the danger of 'Nihilism', is to make a theological 'salto mortale', which is, though, not required by the argument which leads to it, and which the early Romantic position does not entail.

The question which leads Jacobi to his leap of faith is the following: how do we explain that we have a conception of truth at all, given the regress to which all determinate knowledge leads. Jacobi asserts that we must presuppose truth: 'I understand by the true something which is before and outside knowledge; which first gives a value to knowledge and to the capacity for knowledge, to reason' (Jacobi 1799 p. 27). Something like this position will later reappear in Heidegger's idea that truth is the result of the world's 'Erschlossenheit', which is prior to anything which we can epistemologically ground, and prior to determinate propositional assertions. Truth is, then, as Donald Davidson suggests, something of which we only have a 'general and pre-analytic notion' (Davidson 1984 p. 223), and an 'intuitive grasp' (Davidson 1984, 267). This means, in line with Jacobi, that we cannot finally give a theoretical description of truth, because we always already rely upon it in order to describe or understand anything at all. If philosophy is reason's attempt to describe itself, Jacobi argues, what gives value to and grounds truth -- the fact that there is a disclosed world at all -- actually belongs to 'Unphilosophie'. This, then, is the situation which leads Schlegel to consider the end of philosophy in terms of 'Poesie', in a Romantic version of what will later come to be called the 'linguistic turn'.

The Romantic linguistic turn is important because, via its concern with the particular question of the aesthetic aspect of language in 'Poesie', it arrives at insights which later scientifically-oriented conceptions, of the kind which until recently dominated analytical philosophy, have tended to obscure. The very notion of literature in a modern sense might be said to develop in this period because of the questions at issue here. Far from being merely a Romantic quirk, Schlegel's questioning of philosophy with literature, which runs through much of his work, is actually a sign of a series of broader issues. This is evident, for example, in the way it is echoed by Richard Rorty's contemporary anti-foundationalist attempts to say farewell to 'philosophy' -- in the sense of that which would ground our knowledge of the world -- in the name of 'literature', the creation and exploration of new vocabularies with which to articulate our world.

The vital linking factor here is what we now term 'holism'. Schlegel makes the meaning of holism clear when, in Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie of 1795-7, he says 'A real single appearance is completely determined and explained by the context of the whole world to which it belongs' (Schlegel 1988 1 p. 105). In his early encyclopaedic mode Schlegel seems to think such an explanation is possible: this conviction will, though, soon give way to a sophisticated version of scepticism, when he realises that if knowledge is always constituted by the relations of its elements, it can never call itself absolute.

The Romantic position and key recent semantic positions begin to converge when the attempt to reach a final ground which would explain meaning is renounced. The underlying issue here is the move away from a representationalist conception of language and truth, towards a conception in which meanings are dependent upon the relationships within a language. In this sense 'meaning', in the realists' sense, may be said to fall prey to Jacobi's problem of grounding, because, as Novalis puts it with regard to the elements of language: 'In its place each is only what it is via the others' (Novalis 1978 p.14), and therefore the identity of an element will be contextually

determinable in an unlimited number of ways. It is no coincidence that during this period Reinhold attempted, unsuccessfully, to ground a version of Kantian philosophy on an 'absoluter Grundsatz', an 'absolute founding proposition', in order to stop the regress Jacobi revealed, that is also inherent in the relational view. The move away from the idea of the 'absoluter Grundsatz' defines what we now call anti-foundationalism, of the kind Rorty admires in Derrida and others, and relates to the sense that the greatest insights are often the result of the preparedness to re-combine language in new forms. What, then, does this do to the question of 'meaning'?

Rorty, like the early Schlegel, is regarded by some as another irresponsible underminer of truth and meaning. It is clear, though, that Rorty also does not think linguistic communication is impossible. For Rorty, following aspects of the work of Davidson, and in line with key Romantic insights, meaning is 'the property which one attributes to words by noting standard inferential connections between the sentences in which they are used and other sentences' (Rorty 1991 p. 13). The crucial aspect of this explanation is that 'meaning' is not constituted by standard relationships of words to objects -- of the kind where the word table 're-presents' the object out there upon which my computer is sitting -- because what an object is said to be depends upon discriminations within language itself, rather than upon already existing discriminations in an objective world. As in Saussurian linguistics, which is heavily reliant upon certain key aspects of Romantic thought, the relationship of word to object is not a relationship between pre-existing entity and signifier, because the determinacy of differentiations between entities -- but not necessarily, one should add, the differentiations themselves -- depends upon relational linguistic differentiations. Rorty, then, is a holist, for whom meaning and context are inseparable. Much the same conception is present in Novalis' Monolog, as we shall see in a moment.

However contentious this view of meaning may be, it does help one avoid some frequent confusions. The most common confusion lies in how one locates the real problem of meaning in literary theory. T. J. Reed suggests, for

example, that 'once criticism has stripped literature of all claim to discoverable meaning it has necessarily put itself out of that job and has to find another' (Reed 1990 p. 28).² The question is, though, whether Reed has misinterpreted the question of 'discoverable meaning', a term which presupposes some sense in which meaning is initially 'covered up'. Now, as I talk to you, or as you read this text, I have no doubt that you will understand all (or most, and you could look up the others!) of the words I am using because, as Rorty suggests, they are occurring in the kinds of linguistic contexts with which you are (hopefully) already familiar. The fact is that one could not even begin to question whether one had understood if one had not already understood something, via the sense that you could use the same words in similar ways, and therefore think that significant parts of what I say could be regarded as true, including those parts with which you might in fact disagree. One cannot, as Schleiermacher suggested (and in this he is followed by Davidson), disagree with a sequence of words which one does not actually understand in any manner at all: non-understanding is not disagreement. The simple fact is that we do understand everyday language, even of the complex kinds that occur in some literary texts. We know what many words mean, and we can learn new meanings, though there may be times when certain combinations of words cause us trouble, as they do, for example, in the later poetry of Hölderlin. At this level, for the interpreter faced with utterances in their own language or in a language they have acquired, there is no question about meaning and its possibility: we only reflect upon meaning when we do not understand how someone is using a language which we already understand.³

In this sense most interpretative activity at this level is wholly unproblematic, and one does not even need to interpret a literary text in any

² For my critique of Reed's position see 'The Presence of Literary Theory in German Studies' in *Oxford German Studies* 20/21, and 'Gegendarstellung' in *Oxford German Studies* 22.

³ For the contemporary arguments on this issue see, e.g. Davidson 1984 pp. 183--198.

serious manner at all. Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* is easy to understand as a story about someone waking up having become a giant 'Ungeziefer', and, even though the question as to how to translate or understand this word causes trouble, it is the initial awareness of the problem of translating or understanding it on the part of anyone who understands both German and English that is significant here, not the difficulties one can create for oneself by the determination to get to the bottom of its 'discoverable meaning'. An obvious way of looking at Professor Reed's worry about the assumed role of literary criticism and discoverable meaning is, then, to maintain that the problem of meaning most evidently arises when I confront my understanding of the text with yours, given that we have both understood the words on the page and yet both differ as to what we think they mean in the particular context. Such disagreements will, importantly, concern the meaning of the text, rather than the meaning of particular words or sentences.⁴ The problems entailed here do get very tricky: even when I offer you my interpretation of the text you must still work out the correct way of understanding it, which leads to a possible regress, in that your interpretation of my interpretation is open to further interpretation by me or other people. This leads to inescapable questions as to which criteria we should employ to adjudicate on whose interpretation is correct, and thus to questions of truth.

Philosophical questions about meaning, which feed into literary theory and have been affected by literary theory, are not posed at the level of whether we understand the language we and others speak: in fact it is clear that such a question cannot be posed in a meaningful manner at all, because the requisite means of posing it are lacking.⁵ Meaning must be presupposed, thereby

⁴ Even this can be construed as a problem, in that it is not clear whether it is possible to attribute meaning to single words without some notion of their context.

⁵ This may be controversial: what of the question as to whether a computer understands what we say, which is supposed to be dealt with via the Turing test? There is no space to go into this here, but suffice to say that I do not believe 'behavioural' manifestations (such as a computer

obviating the question of its possibility before it can even be asked. This is probably even the case with wholly unrelated languages, as Schlegel suggests in his remark that 'The imperative of translation rests on the postulate of the unity of languages' (Schlegel 1988 5 p. 77): we would have no reason to call some sequence of noises or marks a language if we did not accept this postulate. It is, though, only a postulate: this is the fundamental assumption which determines the Romantic view. In a similar vein Davidson insists on the 'principle of charity' with regard to interpretation, the principle that we must assume that most of what people say is true if we are to understand them at all. With regard to the philosophical problem of meaning Hilary Putnam hits the nail on the head when he remarks in relation to Tarski's 'Convention T' - "'Schnee ist weiß/Snow is white" if and only if snow is white' - that: 'The problem is not that we don't understand "Snow is white" (...) the problem is that we don't understand what it is to understand "Snow is white". This is the philosophical problem' (Putnam 1983 p. 83). The fact is we have far too many ways of understanding the same utterance for these ways to be able to be circumscribed. Each new way of defining 'meaning' invokes new contexts which further shift what an utterance can mean: even the attempt to define the meaning of 'Snow is white' has led it to being best understood as the form of words certain philosophers use when they try to define truth.

It is when literary studies become interested in these questions in certain specific ways that the gates are open for what we now term literary theory: my contention is, then, that this specific approach first emerges via the key moves in early Romantic thought discussed above. The fact is that both analytical philosophy and literary criticism tended for quite some time to share the idea that they were concerned with how what Putnam terms the 'ready-

giving answers which could be interpreted as coming from a being which understands language) which we may interpret as understanding are sufficient to give an account of meaning and understanding. More and more analytical philosophers are now of the same opinion: e.g. Putnam 1983.

made' world was 're-presented' in language, such that the truth hidden in the awesome complexity of nature would finally become manifest, be it in a scientific theory of language or in the true interpretations of the meaning texts had beyond the impositions of their readers. It is this assumption that Romantic philosophy already rejected. The most striking example of this rejection is probably Novalis' Monolog:

It is a strange thing about speaking and writing; a real conversation is just a game of words. One can only be amazed at the ridiculous mistake, that people think they speak for the sake of things. Of the fact that language is peculiar because it only concerns itself with itself, nobody is aware. That is why it is a wonderful and fruitful secret, -- that precisely when someone speaks just in order to speak he pronounces the most splendid and original truths. But if he wishes to speak of something determinate, temperamental old language makes him say the most ridiculous and mistaken things. That is also the source of the hatred which so many serious people have for language. They notice its mischief but do not notice that wretched chattering is the infinitely serious side of language. If one could only make people understand that with language it is as with mathematical formulae -- They constitute their own world -- They only play with themselves, express nothing but their wonderful nature, and this is why they are so expressive -- precisely for this reason does the strange game of relations of things reflect itself in them. Only via their freedom are they members of nature and only in their free movements does the world-soul express itself and make them into a gentle measure and outline of things. Thus it is also with language -- whoever has a fine feeling for [language's] application, for its rhythm, for its musical spirit, who hears in himself the gentle effect of

its inner nature and moves his tongue or hand accordingly, will be a prophet; on the other hand, whoever knows this well enough but does not have the ears and the feeling for language will write truths like these but will be made fun of by language and will be mocked by people, like Cassandra by the Trojans. If I believe that I have thereby indicated the essence and role (Amt) of literature (Poesie) in the clearest possible fashion then I yet know that no one can understand it and that I have said something completely stupid, because I wanted to say it, and in this way no literature can come into being. But what if I had to speak? and this drive to speak were the characteristic of the inspiration of language, of the effectiveness of language in me? and if my will as well could only want whatever I had to do, then this could in the last analysis indeed be literature without my knowing it and believing it, and could render a secret of language comprehensible? and thus I would be a writer by vocation, for a writer is really only one who is enthused by language [ein Sprachbegeisterter, which has the sense of one who is 'in-spirited' by language]? -- (Novalis 1978 p. 438-9).

So far it is clear that I have not actually said what I mean by 'literature'. The reasons for this should become apparent via a discussion of a very few points of this marvellous text.

The most obviously striking aspect of Monolog is Novalis' dismissal of the representational model of language: he even points, in the statement that 'a real conversation is a game of words' (all quotations from Novalis 1978 p. 438-9), to the notion, common to both Wittgenstein and Gadamer, that language may be a rule-bound game (or games) whose working does not primarily depend upon the conscious mental acts of its users. The essential aspect of language, Novalis maintains, lies not in the identifying of 'things', in 'representation', but in the ways language, like mathematics, can establish new

relations between things, relations which constitute what a thing is understood to be. This is symbolised by the association of 'the strange game of relationship of things' in both language and mathematics, with language's 'musical spirit'. Novalis' linking of the holistic nature of both language and music suggests a vital connection of language to works of art, including non-verbal works, whose elements only acquire significance via their relationships to other elements. In Monolog the world of determinate knowledge, as Jacobi already suggested, can no longer be the final locus of truth, because the determinacy of the particular only emerges via its continually being related to other things, which is a process with no necessary conclusion. Language whose propositional aspect is not its most significant attribute therefore takes on a higher status than language which determinately refers to things in the world, because the latter will always fail in its attempt to be definitive. The language in question is, of course, 'literature'. In other texts Novalis links the poetic sense of language to music: the poet's 'Words are not universal signs -- they are notes -- magical words, which move beautiful groups around themselves ... For the poet language is never too poor, but always too universal' (Novalis 1978 p. 322). The crucial factor is the need to combine elements of the world, including the finite elements of language itself, in new ways, which constantly point beyond themselves, thereby employing the finite means to a non-finite purpose.

The problem posed in the later part of Monolog -- concerning the status of the text itself -- should begin to make the relationship between the concept of literature and the concept of truth characteristic of Romantic philosophy more accessible. How can one finally say that what one says is true? If one says x is true because of y, one then has to ask why y is true, and so on, which leads to another linguistically formulated version of the problem of grounding we have already seen in Jacobi. Language's internal relationships make an articulated world possible, but even if the world of things is also essentially a web of relations, one cannot finally articulate a way of mapping, in language, one set of relations onto the other, because that would just entail a further web of relations, and so on. The relations in question are anyway not

seen as permanent: each shift in one relationship between elements will also alter the relationships between the others. Novalis' claim is that by engaging in the play of the resources within this dynamic web of relationships one can reveal 'truths' that cannot emerge if one wishes to define the relationships or find a 'grounding proposition', such as the statement of identity, 'A is A'. Novalis terms this an 'apparent proposition', because 'We leave the identical in order to represent it'. The world thus constituted is not a realm of fixed objects, but rather a world in which 'truths' arise by combining differing articulations of what there is. Does this, though, not just render truth merely indeterminate, insofar as there is no absolute point from which these differing articulations could finally be validated?

Novalis' claims about 'truths' might seem almost frivolous, especially to realists who are used to the assumption that truth resides in propositions which adequately correspond to a ready-made world. However, the idea implicit in Monolog -- that truths can only be understood holistically, because meaning is dependent upon ever-shifting contexts -- has now become almost a commonplace in many contemporary accounts of the working of language, from Gadamer to Davidson, or even, in some interpretations, to Derrida. In a recent discussion of holistic accounts of meaning, for example, J. E. Malpas considers the implications for a theory of meaning of what he terms, following W.V.O. Quine, the 'indeterminacy thesis'. The indeterminacy thesis is implied by Quine's assertion that 'manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with one another' (Quine, Word and Object p. 27, cited in Malpas 1992 p. 14). As such, Quine's argument implies, there is no location from which one can write the final 'absolute' manual, and thus no final ground for adjudication between competing translations (or interpretations), beyond the actual praxis of further use of language. hilariously, Quine opposed the award of an honorary degree to Derrida, who holds a view which is in this respect almost identical with his own.

Malpas looks at this issue in terms of what Jerry Fodor has called, unconsciously echoing Jacobi, 'semantic nihilism'. The indeterminacy thesis, Malpas claims, very much in the spirit of Monolog, 'undermines the idea of meaning as a determinate and determinable entity attaching to sentences or terms' (Malpas 1992 p. 63). For Fodor this position leads to there being no meanings at all, because of the kind of regress seen in Jacobi, the regress of 'semantic nihilism'. In a holist conception terms only gain meaning via their relations to other terms, which means they never gain a final meaning, in the sense of that which could be described independently of context. In order to escape this supposed nihilism Fodor thinks one must ground meaning in terms of reference, 'a causally determined relation holding between mental representations and objects in the world' (ibid. p. 65). This, though, poses the question as to what causes the intelligibility of the relationship between representations and objects, the question Fichte, following Kant, had tried to answer without getting into another regress via the 'unconditioned' (uncaused) nature of the subject which is the source of representations, a solution which Fodor's desire for a causal explanation of meaning cannot countenance. Malpas maintains against Fodor, thereby echoing the alternative conception of truth evoked by Novalis, that 'indeterminacy consists, not in the rejection of meaning, but rather in the claim that there is always more than one acceptable way of assigning meanings to utterances' (ibid.) and thus no finally groundable correspondence between representation and object that could define meaning and truth. Such a conception leads to questions of truth in relation to coherence rather than to representation.

Schlegel says in relation to exactly this problem that

Criteria of truth for a system would be organic unity and infinite fullness (potentia) ... -- Correspondence with another truth -- correspondence with itself [in a coherent system] is a better but empty [in the sense that it is not finally positive] characteristic than correspondence with the object, because one

only ever has an idea (Vorstellung) instead of the object, or there also is no object [in the sense that many true propositions do not refer to concrete entities in the world] -- (Schlegel 1988 5 p. 108).

The contrast here, between the contention that the move away from a conception of truth grounded in determinacy of meaning and reference leads to nihilism, and the contention that it merely changes the way we theorise and use the truths we always already understand, underlies the debates between the realists and the Romantics.

Novalis' claim about the revelation of truths in Monolog leads, though, to his paradoxical conclusion: 'If I believe that I have thereby indicated the essence and role (Amt) of literature (Poesie) in the clearest possible fashion then I yet know that no one can understand it and that I have said something completely stupid, because I wanted to say it, and in this way no literature can come into being', which suggests just how much may be at stake in the contrast just outlined. The paradox emerges because Monolog has to explain how it is that language discloses the world in 'Poesie', even as it shows that this explanation involves a necessary conflict between two possibly incompatible notions of truth. What status does a discursive explanation of 'Poesie' have if we must already understand beforehand in a non-discursive manner what 'Poesie' -- as opposed to any other kind of articulation -- tells us? Novalis later claims: 'Criticism of Poesie is an abomination. It is already difficult to decide, but the only possible decision, whether something is Poesie or not' (Novalis 1978 p. 840). If one could really characterise 'the essence and role of literature' the need for literature itself would thereby presumably be obviated, because the theory of literature would itself be the final truth, and criticism and analysis of the text on the basis of firm foundations for judgement would take precedence over the text itself. This does not, one should add, mean that the text has a status independent of its being read and interpreted, but rather that a literary text will always give rise to suspicion of any determinate

reading. In Novalis' classic formulation: 'The true reader must be the extended author' (Novalis 1978 p. 282), and not just a repetition of the author.

Monolog is, then, either a statement of the highest truth, or it is meaningless, because it refutes its own assertions. Taken literally Monolog must, presumably, be meaningless, because what it means cannot, in its own terms, be said: but what is meant by taking it 'literally'? 'Poesie' and truth are seen as in some way inseparable, but the attempt to say this refutes content by form: one begins to be 'made fun of by language', because what one means cannot be determinately understood and must instead be concretely experienced in the play of the text, rather than in an analysis of its meaning. The crucial aspects of language which produce 'truths' are, Novalis alleges, its rhythm and its 'musical spirit', aspects which are not what is now called 'truth-functional'. These aspects cannot themselves be adequately described by another kind of literal language, because their significance will be lost in the process, much as explaining a joke kills the joke qua joke by attempting to replace the effect of the particular combination of elements with an account of those elements which does not employ that combination itself. The analogy of describing the real meaning of a piece of music in words, as opposed to listening to a great performance -- itself a kind of interpretation -- of the music, can also suggest what is meant here. If the significance of a piece of music lies in its articulating a world in ways which nothing else can, our attempts to explain this insight will in one sense miss what it is that the music discloses, even though each statement we make in analysing the piece is, in the sense of 'justifiable assertion', 'true'. This does not mean that a verbal account of music cannot in fact reveal more of that music: the crucial fact is that the process can go in both directions, so that music can elucidate a verbal account of an aspect of the world, and vice versa.

Schlegel summarises what is at issue in this kind of aesthetic apprehension of truth in the following wonderful manner: 'If the chemist thinks a thing is not a whole because he can dissect it, that is just the same as what bad critics do to literature. -- Didn't the world emerge from slime?'

(Schlegel 1988 5 p. 48). Are not the Busch Quartet's recordings of Beethoven's Late Quartets just the articulated -- and scientifically describable -- scraping of horse hair on steel, transferred into a material storage-medium? The crucial factor is the suspicion that discursive analysis of any aspect of the world can lose sight of the interplay of that aspect with other aspects which are essential to its determinacy. 'Poesie' becomes the reminder of this fact, and therefore itself only really becomes possible when the analytical method begins to dominate conceptions of truth in the modern period. The fact is then, rather than the question of regress being the fundamental problem for the Romantic notion of literature, regress is actually constitutive of literature, as the famous Athenäum-Fragment 116, on 'romantic Poesie' as 'progressive Universalpoesie' demonstrates.

Romantic literature, Schlegel maintains, aims to reunite 'all the separate genres of Poesie' (Schlegel 1988 2 p. 114). Schlegel's formulations make sense when interpreted via the Romantic holist view of truth and the epistemological and semantic issues we have been examining. Romantic art, Schlegel asserts, must, 'like the epic', to 'become a mirror of the whole surrounding world' (ibid.). It does so, though, not in a mimetic, 'representational' sense: the potential for regress which prevents the articulation of a final ground becomes positive and revelatory, a source of ever-renewable articulations, rather than the failure to represent a ready-made truth.⁶ Once more the capacity for creating new relationships is the key factor, not the establishing of stable facts. Romantic literature

can hover, in the middle, between the represented and the representer, free of all real and ideal interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, can continually potentialise this reflection and multiply it as if in an endless row of mirrors ... Romantic

⁶ This interpretation of Schlegel's view is the core of Benjamin's argument in his dissertation on The Concept of Art Critique in German Romanticism: see Bowie 1990 Chapter 7.

literature is, among the arts, what wit is to philosophy, and society, sociability, friendship and love are in life. Other forms of literature are finished and can now be completely analysed. The Romantic form of literature is still in a process of becoming; indeed that is its real essence, that it can eternally only become, and never be finished. It cannot be exhausted by any theory ... in a certain sense all Poesie is or should be Romantic (Schlegel 1988 2 p. 114-15).

If this seems merely hyperbolic, consider another aspect of Malpas' account of semantic holism, which he regards as a way of 'seeing epistemology in the mirror of meaning', thereby, without realising it, echoing Schlegel almost verbatim:

One might think of a holistic system on the model of a system of mirrors, rather than a single mirror, and of the mirrors as mirroring each other in a play of reflections or of meanings ... the mirror of meaning is not a mirror which re-presents the world. The world is not reflected in meaning. Rather ... the world is the mirror of meaning (Malpas 1992 p. 7).

Contemporary approaches to a theory of meaning and truth which have given up the idea that the theory should be an explanation of the kind used for natural phenomena, in favour of an account of how truth works in a context, are, therefore, linked to Romantic theories devoted to understanding the status of literature and the other arts at the beginning of modernity.

The essential reason for this connection is that both approaches share the anti-representational premise, and realise that the only way to approach the problems involved is holistically. In Schlegel's Gespräch über die Poesie of 1800 the exploration of the interaction between philosophy, science and art leads one of the participants to ask: 'Is everything Poesie, then?', to which the

reply is given that 'Every art and every science whose effect is achieved by language (Rede), if it is practised as an art for its own sake and achieves the highest summit, appears as Poesie' (Schlegel 1988 2 p. 198). Once the possibility of a final grounding has been abandoned, what renders life meaningful can no longer be sought in an answer which one knows already to exist. It must, furthermore, involve a value which does not simply lead back to something instrumental or cognitive, which merely creates another kind of regress. Schlegel says in the Hefte zur Philosophie that 'In morality reflection must not be continued into infinity' (Schlegel 1988 5 p. 76). The power of Kant's view of aesthetics lies in the notion that there are aspects of the world which are valuable for their own sake. This linked to his notion of 'dignity', the intrinsic worth of the rational being, who should not be merely the means for the ends of another rational being. In Kant's moral philosophy this sense of intrinsic worth is used to argue for the imperative 'Act in such a way that you always use humankind, both in your own person and in every other person, as an end and never merely as a means' (Kant 1974 p. 61, p. BA 67). For Kant the pleasure and insight generated by the work of art need have no further purpose than the disinterested, non-appropriative fact of that pleasure itself, which connects it to the sense of intrinsic value upon which his moral philosophy relies.⁷ The moral imperative, which we aspire to follow for its own sake, but may always fail to live up to, is significantly analogous to the Romantic idea that even truth may be such an ideal, which is felt to be of value in itself, rather than that which can be grounded by philosophy or in ulterior motives, such as the desire for power over the object. The further turn in the Romantic position is to make substantial links between these differing aspects of the new philosophy which are only hinted at by Kant.

One way of understanding the Romantic position is, therefore, to

⁷ This does not mean that aesthetic experience cannot have cognitive and moral effects, but that those effects, because they are not based on intrinsic value, are not what defines the experience as aesthetic.

suggest that it involves two further 'imperatives', which complement Kant's categorical ethical imperative. The first, the 'aesthetic imperative', is a term formulated by Novalis; the second I will term 'the hermeneutic imperative'. Novalis expressly links the aesthetic imperative to Kant's moral philosophy:

The highest works of art are completely recalcitrant (ungefällig) -- They are ideals, which only could and should please us approximando -- aesthetic imperatives. In the same way the moral law should approximando become the formula of inclination (will). (Ideal will -- infinite will. There is, in terms of its character, no way of conceiving of the attainment of the unattainable -- it is, so to speak, only the ideal overall expression of the whole sequence...) (Novalis 1978 p. 652-3).

Just as the idea of being moral is only ever something at which one can aim, but never claim to have achieved, the particular empirical engagement with a work of art will often be frustrating, and the truth of that work only glimpsed in repeated engagements with it which give rise to the demand to understand more of what it means. Art thereby provides a model for an attitude to the world which goes beyond what is apparently merely aesthetic, because it confronts one with the reality of the need to always try to see another perspective, without any guarantee that it will lead to a truth which is intersubjectively acceptable.

In this sense the 'hermeneutic imperative' follows from the aesthetic imperative: what I mean by the term is evident in Novalis' remarks in Vermischte Bemerkungen (the first of which is also a part of Blüthenstaub):

The highest task of Bildung is -- to gain power over one's transcendental self -- to be simultaneously the I of one's I. For this reason the lack of complete sense and understanding of others is all the less strange. Without complete understanding of

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