

The Irreducibility of Aesthetics in Novalis' Conception of Nature

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Introduction: Novalis, the poet-philosopher of nature

Early German Romanticism is often construed as a counter-Enlightenment or proto-postmodern movement. On the former reading, its members are skeptical of the power of science and philosophy to secure truth, indeed are even skeptical of whether there is any truth out there at all.¹ On the latter reading, their critique of first principles and system building as well as their emphasis on the role of language in the creation of experience, the inexhaustibility of meaning, and the artwork as a self-contained whole prefigure its critique of foundationalism and ideas like constructionism, the destabilization of meaning, and the self-referential formal object of new criticism.²

In recent years, however, a number of groundbreaking works have argued against these pictures of early German Romanticism, stressing its philosophical, rationalist, and metaphysical proclivities.³ Using Novalis as a case study, I hope to advance this third line of scholarship. While I believe that this current line of interpretation is correct to emphasize the rationalist and metaphysical character of the movement, I also believe that it underplays its *irreducibly aesthetic* dimension: its claim that a unique combination of science and metaphysics *through* poetry is the best method for gaining knowledge of nature, particularly in the instance of Novalis.⁴

¹ Cf. Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

² Cf. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (SUNY Press, 1988); Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

³ Cf. Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Harvard University Press, 2006); Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795-1804* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁴ For instance, Beiser's chapter on Novalis in *German Idealism* is silent about his aesthetics, while Nassar's *The Romantic Absolute* regulates it to a two-page discussion of the *Novices at Sais* and *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (49-50). They focus on Novalis' *arguments* for his position, rather than the *aesthetic* character of his project. A noteworthy exception to this trend is Keren Gorodeisky, "19th Century Romantic Aesthetics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/aesthetics-19th-romantic/>.

Novalis, like the other early German Romantics, is indeed pessimistic about the worldview endorsed by Enlightenment science and philosophy, which, he contends, disenchant nature by exclusively explaining its phenomena by quantification and mechanism, thus leading to alienation and nihilism. But Novalis envisages the then-emerging Romantic poetry as a distinctive a type of rational practice that can establish a new, more life-affirming conception of nature, one in fact already suggested by various developments in the science of his time. It accomplishes these feats by permitting us to gain, through the aesthetic experience of the beautiful whole of nature, a non-discursive, yet objective awareness of nature itself as a God-like organism to which we belong like limbs or organs to a body. However, not only is this poetic act of romanticizing, whereby we re-enchant a now disenchanted nature, “similar to algebraicizing” (*General Draft*, III, 242, #10)⁵ and hence on par with mathematical rigour, but also it, rather than philosophy, is the vehicle for truth. As Novalis encapsulates his approach: “Poesy is the truly absolutely real. This is the core of my philosophy. The more poetic, the more true” (*On Goethe*, II, 647, #473).

To demonstrate the irreducible role aesthetic experience and Romantic poetry plays, for Novalis, in our cognitive projects of knowing nature, it will be useful to first look at his critique of the Enlightenment (§1), summarize the scientific developments that inspired him to move beyond the latter’s worldview (§2), and sketch how his conception of nature was a reaction to both (§3). On this basis, I can more easily show why he maintained that these elements are indispensable for observing and communicating what nature is (§4). To anticipate, only a philosopher with a poet’s aesthetic sensitivity for beautiful wholes could ever have rational insight into nature as more than quantitative and mechanistic and make it present as such to others, thus enabling Romantic poetry, so Novalis wagers, to breathe new life into the investigation of nature and our place in it. I conclude with a brief note on what relevance, if any, early German Romanticism may have today.

1. Novalis on the perils of the Enlightenment worldview

Like other Romantics, Novalis develops his conception of nature as a God-like organism in response to what he perceives as the existential threats of the Enlightenment worldview. According to him, this worldview stood at the end of a long cultural transformation of our understanding of nature. While ancient and medieval societies were able to see and celebrate the divine in nature (cf. his *Hymns to the Night* and *Christianity or Europe*), which allowed them to find a religious, life-affirming meaning to their own existence, this understanding had been attacked on two fronts. On the side of science, the new method proposed by Galileo argued that nature is best

⁵ In-text references to Novalis are given according to the title of the text followed by the volume in Roman numerals and page number in Arabic numerals of *Novalis Schriften: Die Werke von Friedrich von Hardenberg*, edited by Richard Samuel, H.-J. Mähl, P. Kluckhorn, and G. Schulz (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960–1988). All translations are my own.

understood through careful observation, induction, and reproducible experiments that stress what can be quantified. This led to his famous formulation that nature is a book we can read only if we learn the language it is written in: mathematics,⁶ shifting us from a worldview in which everything has its divinely allotted place, function, and uniqueness (“the great chain of being”), to one in which nature is a homogenous domain of things devoid of quality and which stand in mechanical relations that can be formalized and universalized. On the side of philosophy, Descartes, inspired by such a method, in turn argued that the essence of matter is extension and that of mind is consciousness such that never shall the twain meet, instigating an insurmountable separation between what we would today call “facts” and “values.” The explanatory prowess of such a conception of nature was epitomized by Newton who, with a few elegant formulae, described the motion of everything in the cosmos.

While recognizing that the Enlightenment provided us with vast gains in our knowledge of nature, Novalis’ worry is that there is, in reducing nature to a senseless, purely quantifiable and mechanical becoming, a loss of awe and reverence directed at it. This risks rendering not only the physical universe meaningless, but also human existence *tout court*. In the first place, its worldview makes nature into something dead and inert, in contrast with human life and activity. But by denying that some element of the divine is present in nature, we become alienated from it, which has the disastrous consequence that, since nature is the ultimate horizon of our being, the more it is deprived of meaning, the more we will fail to find anything to cherish or esteem in ourselves: “if people lost respect for their place of abode and their earthly fatherland, they would also lose their respect for their heavenly home and its race, [...] and would become accustomed to despising everything great and worthy of wonder, regarding both as the dead effect of laws” (*Christianity or Europe*, III, 508-509).

In the second place, the Enlightenment worldview cannot carve out any place within nature for human interests. In reducing, in principle, the entire plethora of qualitative human experience to quantifiable, mechanical laws, the irreducibility of human individual and freedom, central components of our self-conceptions, are lost. This point was made passionately by Jacobi in his *Doctrine of Spinoza* (1785).⁷ He argued that Spinoza is the most consistent Enlightenment philosopher because Spinoza alone had the courage to draw the logical consequences of its worldview, no matter how difficult they may be to bear, by demonstrating that nature, if we follow reason, must be a self-enclosed chain of efficient causes of which the human subject was no exception. Meaning and purpose therefore also have no metaphysical status. Consequently, the demands of reason lead not only to a deterministic pantheism where

⁶ From *The Assayer*. See Galileo Galilei, *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, ed. Drake (Doubleday, 1957), 238.

⁷ An English translation of this text can be found in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (McGill-Queen’s Press, 1995).

human individuality and freedom are eliminated, but also to nihilism (“nihilism” being a term he coined).

This was the birth of the so-called “Pantheism Controversy” that ravaged the Enlightenment in Germany. In criticizing the Enlightenment worldview, Novalis was following in Jacobi’s steps.⁸ As he bemoans, the Enlightenment “turns the infinite, creative music of the universe into the monotonous rattling of a monstrous mill, which is driven by the torrent of contingency and floating on it, a mill in principle with no architect nor miller and for all intents and purposes a true *perpetuum mobile*, a mill that grinds itself (*Christianity or Europe*, III, 515). Like the rest of his generation, he desperately sought a solution to the problem Jacobi diagnosed. Faced with the existential threat of nihilism, Jacobi himself had submitted that we should perform a *salto mortale*, reorienting reason around the intuitive givens of common sense belief or faith (*Glaube*), which upholds the absolute standing of human individuality and freedom against the deduction of their metaphysical non-existence. For Novalis this was at best a stopgap. If nature is, for good scientific and philosophical reasons, truly a senseless becoming, and we ourselves a product of it, we could never maintain that we have any intrinsic meaning or purpose. We would have no place in the grand scheme of things, for there would be no such scheme. How are we to get out of this impasse?

2. The new dynamic conception of nature intimated by Romantic science

Luckily, new scientific theories and discoveries were then putting in question the worldview of the Enlightenment. They made the case that a whole slew of natural phenomena cannot be explained by understanding nature as *dead* and *inert* matter pushed around by quantifiable, mechanical laws. Instead, nature is structured at all levels by fundamental *forces*. Let’s outline some of these theories and discoveries, taking them thematically from the lower to the higher levels of nature.

In terms of the physical, a new model of matter was taking centre stage. Kant’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786) articulated the conceptual framework for a dynamic physics in which what is primary is not mechanistically-governed atoms, but the polar forces of attraction and repulsion whose spontaneous *activity* shape all forms of matter. In the realm of the chemical, scientists had observed that it is not just magnets that “attract” and “repel” one another. The entire chemical process depends upon what they named the “elective affinity” between chemicals: rather than *x* just causing *y* to happen like the motion of a billiard ball causes the motion of another upon impact, whether or not two chemicals combine together into a new one is predicated upon whether they are *responsive* to one another. This inspired the

⁸ That Novalis was familiar with Jacobi’s text we know from a letter to Niethammer, dated April 1791 (IV, 85). For more on his relationship to the Pantheism Controversy, see Benjamin D. Crowe, “On ‘The Religion of the Visible Universe’: Novalis and the Pantheism Controversy,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 125–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608780701789335>.

search for the most basic chemical elements and an account of their interactions. Lavoisier published, in 1789, the first list. As for living things, thanks largely to Blumenbach's *On the Formative Drive and its Influence on Generation and Reproduction* (1781), the theory of epigenesis, according to which organisms develop out of an inchoate or undifferentiated state by an inner formative drive (*Bildungstrieb*), was gaining in popularity. This would put a stake in the old theory of preformation, which claims that the form of living things is premade and develops mechanistically, existing from the beginning of creation or eternally. Now one could give evidence for how unorganized matter spontaneously *self-organizes* into life.

With nature becoming increasingly populated with forces, with some kind of life and activity, the Enlightenment quantitative and mechanistic worldview was bursting at its seams. It was no wonder that Galvani's *Commentary on the Effect of Electricity on Muscular Motion* (1791) struck the imagination of an entire generation. Here Galvani appeared to decisively show that living things have a *self-produced* vital force, which he called "animal electricity" but was soon named after him. Ritter, responding to Volta's rebuttal of Galvani in his *Proof That a Continuous Galvanism Accompanies the Process of Life in the Animal Kingdom* (1798), resuscitated the theory and in his later experiments tried to demonstrate that galvanism was also present in the inorganic realm. He believed that empirical evidence proves that nature *itself* is an organism in which all phenomena are interconnected in a spontaneously self-organizing whole governed by this vital force. Although ideas like those of Ritter may look to us more like fringe science and have long since been debunked, in the late 18th- and early 19th-century they were serious contenders, captivating Europe's best minds.

In short, these theories and discoveries intimated a new dynamic conception of nature wherein nature is, to varying degrees, alive and active, suggesting a *continuum* between physical matter, chemical reactions, living things, and human beings, even perhaps one great *cosmic* vital force being at work in all of them. While these theories and discoveries supplied the general context of early German Romanticism in general, Novalis was, amongst its representatives, by far the most familiar with them. During his stay at the Freiberg Mining Academy (1797-1799), a then world-renowned institute housing some of the most distinguished scientists of the time, he underwent formal training in mathematics and science, including physics, chemistry, and, of course, geology.⁹ Indeed, the *Freiburg Natural Science Studies* (June 1798-May 1799), which Gerhard Schulz has divided into seventeen distinct themes,¹⁰ shows his comprehensive knowledge of the scientific revolutions and debates of the epoch. His *Kant Studies* (1797) testifies to a systematic reading of Kant's *Metaphysical Foundation of the Natural Sciences*. Not only was he deeply impressed with Ritter personally to the point that he confesses, in a letter to Caroline Schlegel from 20 January 1799, that "Ritter is Ritter and we are only squires" (IV, 275), but also his own notebooks attest to his

⁹ For a list of the courses offered during his sojourn, see Wolfgang Hädecke, *Novalis: Biographie* (C. Hanser, 2011), 161–62.

¹⁰ Cf. the table of contents to volume III of *Novalis Schriften*.

endorsement of Ritter's claim that one vital force runs through all nature. For instance, he asks "Does galvanism have no influence on mechanics?," suggests a "link between *m[agnetism]* and *galv[anism]*" (*Notes of a Predominately Natural Scientific Sort*, III, 604, #313 & 314), and remarks that "The characteristics and appearances of every substance depends upon its excitability. [...] All of this agrees superbly with galvanism. Chemistry is already galvanism" (*On Goethe*, II, 644, #462).

3. Novalis' metaphysics: the doctrine of vitalist pantheism

Why Novalis would have been inspired to propose a new conception of nature as a God-like organism, which he calls "vital astronomy" (*General Draft*, III, 267, #143), should now be clear. On the one hand, some such conception seemed to be demanded by Romantic science to justify the idea of nature that it intimated and to unify its findings. By thus laying down the philosophical "foundation for all physical sciences," Novalis' metaphysics intends to make way for a new scientific understanding of nature (*General Draft*, III, 470, #1104). On the other hand, insofar as his metaphysics interprets nature in terms of some cosmically operative vital force that transcends and includes human life and activity understood as a product of nature, it could respond to the existential threats of alienation and nihilism intrinsic to the Enlightenment worldview. Let's sketch the conceptual moves by which Novalis rethinks nature.

In a first moment, Novalis argues that nature must be a whole that explains whatever is, whether it be an item of physical or human reality, as a part of said whole: "Only the whole is *real* – The only thing that would be absolutely real would be something that would not be the *component* of something else" (*Fichte Studies*, II, 242, #445). In this regard, the existence of anything whatsoever is only fully grasped when it is seen as contributing to this whole to which it stands in a reciprocally interactive relation—in that each part requires the whole to which it belongs in order to exist as the part that it is, just as the whole requires the parts that compose it in order to exist as the whole that it is. Consequently, the whole does not ontologically *precede* nor is it ontologically *independent* of the activity of its parts through which it is realized, nor are the parts ontologically *primary* elements from which the whole is assembled. Its unity is a dynamic *unity in difference*, a whole that only emerges through the mediation of its parts as organizing themselves according to an internal principle. As Novalis states the matter metaphorically, "the whole rests [upon itself]—like people playing, who, without a chair, form a circle by each one sitting on another's knee" (*Fichte Studies*, II, 242, #445).

In this sense, the relation between whole and part in nature is, for Novalis, not that of aggregation through mechanical causes nor that of an artefact, which has its principle of organization imposed upon it from the outside via its creator—say, a transcendent God with a preplanned design for the world. Rather, Novalis speaks of "the structure of the world—the world-*organism*" (*General Draft*, III, 352, #503). As such, even "Our body is a *part* of the *world*—or, better still, a *limb* [...] The whole must correspond to this limb" (*Studies on the Plastic Arts*, II, 650-651, #485). That is,

nature is identical to how the components of an organism (the tissues of bacteria, the organelles of a cell, or the organs of plants and animals) ontologically *depend* upon the biological system that alone bestows upon them their self-contained vital function and how that system ontologically *depends* upon these components to function.

However, to say that nature is an organism further entails that its unity is a spontaneously self-organizing whole. Just as the biological system of an organism is not *performed* but arises through a *development* structured by a formative principle that internally directs its *growth*, the organic system of nature must also progress from an initially inchoate or undifferentiated state, what Novalis calls “chaos,” into new states, thereby making itself more and more determinate as it advances, perhaps in radically transformative and unpredictable ways (think of the metamorphosis of insects and amphibians). In this fashion, there are, Novalis insists, *levels* of self-organization in nature, different “epochs,” as the one cosmically operative vital force of nature evolves over time, one level setting the stage for the next so that the unity that is just otherwise implicit at the beginning can become increasingly explicit with each stage, as it seeks its innate goal: self-knowledge in humanity (cf. *General Draft*, III, 277, #216). Consequently, neither natural or human history are exclusively mechanical processes open to strict quantification—they are teleologically structured ones through which nature comes to ever-higher expressions of itself so that, eventually, its vital force should become fully alive and active, that is, fully conscious and free, rather than lying in the dark depths of dull matter and semi-aware life, actualizing the potential after which each part strives: “*Thinking*, like the *blossom*, is certainly nothing but the finest *evolution* of the plastic forces—and is only the universal force of nature raised to the *nth degree of dignity*” (*General Draft*, III, 476, #1144). As such, “Humanity is, as it were, the higher meaning of our planet” (*Logologische Fragmente [II]*, II, 562, #186).

But nature, conceived as a spontaneously self-organizing whole that no outside influence can have an effect upon, is thus an unconditioned totality that conditions everything in the world. Nature is, in short, what Kant names “the absolute,” “the unconditioned totality” that explains everything and explains itself by having no condition¹¹—but now taken, instead of as a regulative idea for our cognitive projects, as possessing a metaphysical standing to which cognition, albeit cognition of a very distinct kind as we shall see, can gain access, even if only partially.¹² Nevertheless,

¹¹ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Wood, Allen W. (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A307/B364, A417n/B445n.

¹² Novalis does say, however, that this unconditioned totality is “a *regulative idea*” (*Fichte Studies*, II, 254, #472). But this does not reduce his position to that of Kant. Novalis’ point is that while we may never be able, as conditioned beings, to have a *full* grasp of the unconditioned, that does not mean that we cannot have a limited perspective on it that can discern, at least *in part*, what it is. There may be no God’s-eye point of view that will guarantee, once and for all, that we have the right system of nature. But our cognitive closure does not mean (1) that there is objectively no system or (2) that we should not strive after a system. Romantic irony is a position of *epistemic humility*.

interpreting nature as such a whole not only gives us a framework that justifies and unifies Romantic science, showing how the new dynamic physics, chemistry, and biology are moments of the teleologically structured self-development of nature; more intensely still, it also lets nature, as a self-producing and self-generating absolute life and activity, be regarded as a divine, God-like organism. Consequently, this metaphysics has the benefit, for Novalis, of being life-affirming: in contrast to the Enlightenment worldview, which must concede that we are the products of a senseless becoming, depriving our existence of any higher purpose, it shows that we play a crucial role in the growth of nature itself or, better put, God himself, making us into the concluding chapter in its or his divine and cosmic odyssey: “Nothing is more Romantic than what we typically call ‘the world’ and ‘destiny’ – We live in a colossal (*in a large-scale and small-scale*) novel” (*General Draft*, III, 434, #853). This, in short, is Novalis’ unique solution to the Pantheism Controversy: we must not leave behind Spinozism, but revise it by showing how nature is not only God-like (Spinoza said as much), but also alive, active, and something in which we have a special place, swapping a deterministic pantheism for a vitalist one.

4. Novalis’ aesthetics: towards a new epistemology of feeling

This goes to show Novalis’ strengths *as a philosopher*. Indeed, he proposes his conception of nature as a God-like organism through arguments as well as readings and criticisms of scientists and thinkers in various notebooks (e.g., his *Fichte*, *Hemsterhuis*, *Kant and Eschenmayer*, and *Natural Scientific Studies*) and poetic works. Nevertheless, while his notebooks may be indispensable for understanding him, none of them were intended for publication. Novalis himself maintained that the only adequate presentation of this conception would be poetic, a task he himself pursued in fragments such as *Pollen*, poems like *Hymns to the Night*, his unfinished *Bildungsromane*, *Novices at Sais* and *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, and his *General Draft* for a Romantic encyclopedia. So, even though the latter contain philosophical reflections as moments of a poetic presentation, the question to be answered is why exactly the then emerging Romantic poetry was viewed by Novalis as necessary for the successful development of the new Romantic science and metaphysics. As he himself puts it: “To philosophize is as much as to scientize, to think through thoughts, to cognize cognitions—to treat the sciences scientifically and poetically” (*Kant and Eschenmayer Studies*, II, 390, #45). This a conviction that leads him to write, in the following year in a letter to August Wilhelm Schlegel (24 February 1798) accompanying the manuscript of *Pollen*, his first publication under the pseudonym “Novalis”: “In the future I will pursue nothing but poesy—the sciences must be all poeticized—I hope to speak to you at length about this real, scientific poesy” (IV, 252). Before we can elucidate how poetry can be scientific for Novalis, i.e., rational and objective, we must first grasp why aesthetic experience could play a role in science and metaphysics at all.

4.1 The cognitive significance of beauty and the normative pull of feeling

Early German Romanticism was constructed on the idea that nature is a God-like organism, a spontaneously self-organizing whole whose life and activity is self-contained and self-justifying, i.e., absolute. There was the difficulty of how to make that whole intelligible as an object of critical inquiry. The problem was that science, whose method was quantitative and mechanistic, could only effectively conceptualize a whole as an aggregation of parts and these parts as in external relation to one another. To successfully integrate the findings of Romantic science and the metaphysics that provided its philosophical foundation into its discourse, we needed new tools and methods:

That the outer sciences need assistance has become apparent in recent times, the more familiar we became with them. Nature has begun to look ever more meagre, and we more clearly saw, accustomed to the brilliance of our discoveries, that it was only a borrowed light, and that we would not, with the familiar tools and the familiar methods, find and construct the essential, what we sought for. (*Christianity or Europe*, III, 521)

But reason on its own, as Jacobi had shown, could also only consistently explain nature as a series of efficient causes, which makes its living unity dead and inert. Novalis agreed: “the brutish, discursive thinker [...] builds his universe out of logical atoms—he destroys all living nature in order to put in its place a conceptual trick—His goal is an infinite automaton” (*Logologische Fragmente [I]*, II, 524, #13).

This precisely is where aesthetic experience comes in. Natural and artistic beauty is analogous to the teleological structure of organisms in that, in each case, there is a reciprocally interactive relation between whole and parts. On the one hand, a beautiful whole only emerges through the specific arrangement of its parts, so that these parts purposively contribute to the whole. Were any one of these to change—say, the colour of this plant or the use of lines in that painting—the beauty of the whole may be lost. On the other hand, these beautiful parts only emerge as beautiful through the whole in which they have a purpose prescribed by the whole: a hue of green or a diagonal line is not, by itself, beautiful. Consequently, the cultivation or education (*Bildung*) of our aesthetic sense through the appreciation of natural and artistic beauty should make us more perceptive of the organic unity all around us, which can be used to supplement the limits of quantitative and mechanical scientific enquiry and discursive reason. As Novalis states, through the aid of criticism, which requires us to determine the inner norm by which the whole of an artwork functions, “We catch sight of ourselves in the *system, as an element*” (*General Draft*, III, 429, #820).

But aesthetic experience also takes us a step further. In becoming more attuned to the intrinsic beauty of nature, for Novalis we will come to realize how nature as a beautiful whole is, to play with a Kantian term, “purposive without a purpose.” When we begin to perceive that all its parts purposively contribute to its beautiful whole just as much as said whole prescribes the specific arrangement of its parts—a whole that

they spontaneously organize in and through themselves as much as the whole spontaneously organizes them—we begin to perceive nature as purposively ordered by an inner formative drive.¹³ However, since nature does not have this purposive order imposed upon it from the outside, nor does it self-consciously set its own ends, it must therefore be taken as unconsciously intelligent. As a result, nature and spirit or mind (*Geist*), insofar as both are shown to realize themselves according to purposes, are different from one another by *degree* rather than *kind*. This is why, for Novalis, criticism also “allows us to have a presentiment of nature as like a human being—It shows that we can and should only understand *everything* as we understand ourselves and our loved ones, ourselves and *you*” (*General Draft*, III, 429, #820). Put differently, in aesthetic experience we do more than come to appreciate how nature has aesthetic properties *for us*. More primordially, through it we become sensitive to the ways that nature *itself* is like a “silent human artist” (*Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, I, 262), its artwork being its own physical body, that is, the entire universe.¹⁴

But how can the aesthetic experience of beauty, something that is on the surface merely a *subjective* feeling associated with a certain kind of pleasure, possibly authorize any rational, normatively binding awareness of the *objective*, purposive order of nature? For the early German Romantics like Novalis, feelings are not quintessentially irrational, something outside “the logical space of reasons.” Here the influence of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* makes itself known. On Kant’s conception, aesthetic experience is non-discursive. The empirical cognition of nature works by subsuming a particular object under a universal concept itself governed by *a priori* categories, whereby we make a judgment *about* something in the world, a judgment attributed with *objective validity* and *the truth* of which we can argue about.

¹³ Kant had already suggested as much. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 251, §67.

¹⁴ However, this is a theoretical gambit. The feeling of the beauty of nature may suggest that its vital force, which transcends and includes human life within it, is akin to us. But what if, instead of the experience of awe, nature elicits the experience of the uncanny, the disturbing, or the destructive whereby nature reveals itself as *indifferent* to us, a *blind will* with a senseless drive rather than one that is unconsciously intelligent and inherently meaningful? One of the voices in the *Novices at Sais* speaks of nature being always “an awful mill of death,” “a kingdom of voracity,” “an immensity pregnant with misfortune” such that, faced with a nature eating itself, “terrors of all kinds must frighten every observer to the point of numbness” and our affective response is not a feeling of beauty, but rather “vertigo” (I, 88-89). While the early German Romantics emphasized the *harmonious*, purposive order of nature, other Romantics emphasize the latter. Indeed, insofar as Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation* is largely a work building upon Romantic science and is based on the intuition of the insatiable will omnipresent in nature, impelled by hunger rather than unconscious mind or spirit, it should be read at exploring a distinctive Romantic pessimism in face of the early Romantic optimism about nature like we see in Novalis and other early German Romantics. Cf. Frederick C. Beiser, *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy, 1860-1900* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 37–38.

In contrast, aesthetic experience tells us about how we subjectively respond to the formal structure of an object. Nevertheless, the feeling of beauty is said to be universal. This is because the affective state that it arouses, the free play of imagination and the understanding at the foundation of cognition in general, brings into animation faculties that we all, as rational animals, share, so that we expect others to experience a beautiful object in the same way we do. As such, the feeling of beauty itself is taken to be a *normatively appropriate response to the formal structure of an object*, with its own fulfilling conditions similar to those of concept or category application. In Novalis' words: "Feeling and perceiving relate to being, representing and sensing to cognizing" (*Fichte Studies*, II, 249, #464).

In virtue of such considerations, for the early German Romantics Kant's aesthetics laid the groundwork for a new *epistemology of feeling*. Feeling itself is rational, even if non-discursive. For the content made present through feeling is here not something pejoratively subjective, but already a kind of *rational insight* into something objective *about* the world, an insight that I can take to have normative pull over others whenever I have it. The aesthetic experience of beauty in nature, therefore, gets at its purposive order and I can demand that others' experience agree with my own. In short, feeling *just as much* as thinking can be revelatory of the objective structure of things.

4.2 Romantic poetry as the true science and metaphysics of nature

As we have seen, the fundamental metaphysical and existential dilemma for Novalis is that we, in reducing nature to quantification and mechanism, are no longer sensitive to nor celebrate the "divine" element of nature, as the ancients and medievals did: "The era is no more when the spirit of God was intelligible. The meaning of the world has been lost. We have stopped at the letter" (*Anecdotes*, II, 594, #316). As a result, nature itself, even for those who want to rediscover its higher meaning, has become, to speak metaphorically, a series of hieroglyphs (recalling that it was not until the 1820s that they were finally decoded) (cf. *Logologische Fragmente [II]*, II, 545, #104). It is only with an enriched aesthetic sense that its cosmically divine "cryptic" or "wondrous script" (*Novices at Sais*, I, 79), as Novalis calls it, might be deciphered, whereby we would begin to hear once more the language of the universe and thus could start the task of establishing his envisaged "vital astronomy." For if nature is alive and active, hence some kind of *agent* or "I", it and everything in it must be "transformed," not as Fichte argued into a "Not-I" infinitely Other to us, but into a "You"—something with which we can stand in *dialogue* and in which we can be *at home* because it is something like us (*General Draft*, III, 314, #398): "The human being does not speak alone—also the universe *speaks*—everything speaks—infinite languages" (*General Draft*, III, 267-

267, #143).¹⁵ Playing upon a claim that Novalis makes in a letter to August Wilhelm Schlegel on 30 November 1797, we can say that, for Novalis, “In the end, all poesy is translation” (IV, 237). This, of course, is a gibe at Galileo: the book of nature is written in a language richer than that of mathematics; mathematics is merely one of the languages that formally structures the great cosmic and divine novel, and not the most important one for understanding what that novel is truly about.

In this regard, aesthetic experience in Novalis is not only *preparatory* for the *truth-making* experience of the deeper, purposive order of nature, but also the most proper medium for *expressing* and *adjudicating* this truth. With the intuitive, “hard facts” of aesthetic experience functioning as a “truth checker,” in the medium of poetic presentation artistic choices are to be made with an eye towards what will most effectively incite within us a feeling of nature as a whole, an *objective* feeling that, as a kind of rational insight, is normatively binding. To proclaim that the sciences must be poeticized—that reason must be supplemented by feeling, mathematical formula by imagery, in short: the game of giving and asking for reasons by the given—is thus to expand (1) what counts as rational and (2) what counts as cognitively significant content in our experience of nature and ourselves. Exploiting this newly discovered epistemological realm of feeling entails that feeling itself can disclose the objective structure of the world in a fashion that modern science and philosophy cannot, but which can be in conversation with it. With this in mind, the poet, as one who is trained to perceive and produce beautiful wholes, logically becomes the one best suited, with the proper scientific and philosophical background, to cognize the spontaneously self-organizing whole of nature, which is by definition a beautiful whole, and make it present to others through a new form of Romantic poetry that is in unison with science and philosophy. They thus have a privileged role to play in Romantic science and metaphysics.

The epistemological status of feeling has two implications for the method of Romantic poetry as a distinctively rational practice. First, because the self-writing book of nature that the Romantic poet seeks to translate in their art is *already written* or, more precisely, is *already in the process of being written*, it is *just there* and the task is to *become aware* and *make others aware* of it. Consequently, just as there are good and bad translations, some Romantic poetry will be better and others worse at capturing the meaning of its secret language. In this way, Romantic poetry for Novalis

¹⁵ This, I take it, is the meaning behind Novalis’ odd claims that we must *expand* and *master* our sense organs, with the goal of making even the involuntary voluntary (cf. *Anecdotes*, II, 577-578, #235 & 583, #247). Since our sense organs are that through which we feel the whole of nature, to augment and have control over them would be to broaden our rational insight into that whole, to make something that is otherwise below the explicit awareness of our conscious experience arise into it, thereby gaining a new bodily awareness that can supplement mental cognition (cf. *Logologische Fragmente [II]*, II, 546-547, #111). For while we may display knowledge of a deeper level of reality in varied altered states of mind (say, trances, dreams, visions), only on the presupposition of such a change in our embodied existence could the truth unveiled in these states become the subject matter of a general science.

has a *truth-functional value*: it is true to the degree it succeeds in letting nature speak to us in its voice and false to the degree that it fails in doing so. Expressed in terms closer to Novalis, it is true when there is a sympathy of the signifier with the signified (cf. *General Draft*, III, 266, #137) and false when there is no such sympathy. But rather than this truth being adjudicated through, say, the efficacy of formula to retrodict or predict, it is done so by whether the feelings evoked by its imagery are deemed a normatively appropriate response to what nature is. Such a rational assessment can occur because we are able, in *our own* aesthetic experience of nature, collectively check the truth of one another's intuitive grasp of nature as revealed through the content of our feelings about it. This is why early German Romanticism conceives itself as a project of "symphilosophy," a philosophizing together.

Second, the imagery mobilized by the Romantic poet to convey nature's higher meaning cannot be arbitrary. The procedure of artistically choosing which imagery should be deployed to make the organic whole of nature present has to be similar to the experimental method employed by modern science: "Experimenting with images and concepts in the faculty of representation in a way entirely analogous to physical experimenting" (*General Draft*, III, 443, #911). In other words, we must observe nature not only empirically, but also artistically: "The *natural genius* is a part of experimenting, that is, the wondrous capacity to encounter the meaning of nature, and to act in its spirit. The true observer is the artist—they *have a presentiment* of *what is significant* and know how to feel out the important elements from the strange, ephemeral mixture of appearances" (*Freiburg Natural Scientific Studies 1798/99*, III, 179). Nevertheless, since the experimental method of Romantic poetry goes further than that of modern science by validating a more comprehensive conception of nature, Novalis can boldly assert: "The *poet* understands nature better than the scientific mind" (*General Draft*, III, 468, #1093).

Conclusion: The irreducibility of aesthetics in Novalis and its contemporary relevance

Now we can address why, for Novalis, only the then-emerging Romantic poetry could breathe new life into the investigation of nature and our place in it and thereby correct the trend in current Novalis scholarship that stresses his status as a philosopher, but often downplays the irreducible status of aesthetics in his own project. True: there are *philosophical* arguments for his conception of nature just as much as *philosophical* encounters with and musings about scientists and thinkers in his notebooks and poetic works. But he himself never intended his notebooks for publication; they are personal ruminations through which he *came* to that conception, *not* how he thought it should be presented to the public. Moreover, the philosophical reflections in his poetic works must be understood as *moments of their beautiful wholes*. According to Novalis, only a *poetic* presentation, as pursued in texts like his unfinished *Bildungsromane*, the *Novices at Sais* and *Heinrich von Oftendingen*, his *General Draft* for a Romantic

encyclopedia, and his various collections of fragments are apt for the successful development of the Romantic project.

This is because, on the one hand, Novalis believes we have lost the aesthetic sensitivity required to have rational insight into the spontaneously self-organizing whole of nature. In this regard, his *Bildungsromane* play a crucial, preparatory role: by re-enacting a path one can take to *train* the senses to perceive said whole, they show us how we too can become Romantic poets capable of giving witness to it and making it present to others. Without such a sensitivity made active, arguments and reflections *alone* will never convince us of its existence. Only a truth-making *experience* of it can prove to us that it is *actual*, even if philosophy may show us that such a whole is *possible*: “philosophy makes *perfect* poesy possible through forming the outer whole [...] poetry forms the *beautiful* society, or the *inner whole*—the world family, the beautiful housekeeping of the universe” (*Hemsterhuis Studies*, II, 372). On the other hand, texts such as the *General Draft* and his fragments, as it were, presuppose this aesthetic sensitivity. Arranging scientific theorems, philosophical ideas, and indeed material drawn from all of the disciplines of human knowledge in such a way that permits the reader to more readily feel or intuit the interconnectivity between them, the reader is supposed, through their poetic presentation, to perceive their place in the purposive order of nature. But without this aesthetic sensitivity, we do not have the tools to check their truth, nor can we found a new scientific community, a new “guild,” with the power to change our relation to nature and to ourselves (*Christianity or Europe*, III, 521). For Novalis, poetry is the entry point into and the means for creating a new Romantic way of life, which neither science nor philosophy can do on their own. As he himself puts it: “One must build a poetic world around oneself and live in poesy” (Letter to Caroline Schlegel, 20 January 1799, IV, 275).

The purpose of this essay has been to increase the historical accuracy of our picture of Novalis and, by implication, the early German Romantics. Nevertheless, I would like to conclude with a brief, broader note. In many ways, the worldview of someone like Novalis is very far from our own. Few of us would ever entertain the idea that poetry should be the vehicle of truth. Moreover, the days of Grand Narratives are behind us. While our universe is governed by forces, these are not signs of its life, activity, or unconscious intelligence, but are mechanical processes open to strict quantification. It is far from being a “You,” a “great I” (*General Draft*, III, 314, #398). Further still, the universe does seem, according to the best science, to be “floating on the torrent of contingency” (*Christianity or Europe*, III, 515), whether it be in terms of its laws, its cosmological formations, or the evolution of its life forms.

In other ways, on the other hand, the worldview of a Novalis is perhaps closer to us than ever. In an age where the quantitative and mechanistic method developed in the Enlightenment is stronger and more successful than ever, indeed so strong and successful that most believe nature is without intrinsic meaning or purpose, that it just *is* as result of its causal laws, there is still a lesson to be learned. Science and philosophy has done little, try they may, to change our nature-deprecating attitude,

even in the face of environmental collapse. However, the early German Romantics like Novalis knew they would never be enough. But they also knew the power of art, a power it could, so was their wager, only muster if it the feelings it evoked revealed truth. A renewed study of the Romantics, their celebration of nature, and their aesthetics may therefore be of more relevance than ever. It could help us develop our own tools for convincing people of nature's awe-inspiring and reverence-deserving existence. For surely there must be, as they so firmly believed, a way to see once again the magical and the miraculous, something approximating the divine but in a secular register, in nature and ourselves as a part of it—and perhaps aesthetics is in this context, as it was for Novalis, of irreducible importance for creating a new conception of nature.