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## FROM THE WORK OF ART TO ABSOLUTE REASON: SCHELLING'S JOURNEY TOWARD ABSOLUTE IDEALISM

ANTOON BRAECKMAN

ONE OF THE MOST INTRIGUING EPISODES in Schelling's philosophical development is the transition from the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800) to the *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie* (1801), the starting point of the identity system. Looking back on that latter text, Schelling in 1805 declares that "then to me the light went on in philosophy."<sup>1</sup> This sounds as if the preceding years of philosophical investigation, including the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* that was written one year earlier, had to be considered merely propaedeutic and that the *Darstellung* was his real entry into philosophy. Schelling maintained this view of his philosophical development and in the contemporary *Schelling-Forschung* scholars widely agree that the *Darstellung*, being the outset of the identity system, marks the birthplace of so-called absolute idealism—to which Hegel's system of philosophy probably still is the most spectacular and successful heir. But if this common interpretation is true—and I would not deny it in the generality in which it is stated—then the question inevitably arises: what happened in the transition from the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* to the *Darstellung*, and above all, what made this transition possible? What, in other words, caused the constitution of absolute idealism?

It is my conviction that this transition is the result of the transposition of the inner structure of the work of art, as it is conceived in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, to the inner structure of absolute reason in the *Darstellung*. In the *Darstellung*, the features that until then privileged the work of art are now ascribed to absolute reason. This, I would like to argue below, is a major shift in Schelling's philosophical appreciation of the capacity of human reason to gain

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<sup>1</sup> Horst Fuhrmans, *F. W. J. Schelling. Briefe und Dokumente*, vol. 3 (Bonn: Bouvier, 1975), 222.

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absolute self-knowledge. It documents the passage in the history of German idealism from what I would call romantic idealism to absolute idealism.

The key texts at stake here are, on the one hand, the famous chapter on the work of art in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, in which art and the meaning of the work of art are still conceived from the romantic point of view, and, on the other hand, the initial sections from the *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie*, in which Schelling defines the concept of absolute reason. Again, the essence of the whole argument is to point to the remarkable affinity between the romantic concept of the work of art and the concept of absolute reason as it is articulated in the *Darstellung*. Absolute reason is endowed with an aesthetic capacity that was restricted to art one year earlier, that is, to the artistic genius and its product, the work of art.

## I

In the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* the subject is striving after an adequate self-consciousness which is only reached, in the end, through aesthetic intuition, that is, through the intuition of a work of art.<sup>2</sup> This work of art is an external object that has the structure of an absolute identity of subjectivity and objectivity, that is, of nature and freedom, as Schelling would put it.<sup>3</sup> The adequate self-consciousness aimed at is realized because the subject finally recognizes its own foundation and condition of possibility in the work of art. Put more precisely: in the subject-object identity of the work of art, the subject recognizes the revelation of its “primordial self.”<sup>4</sup>

This suggests that in order to realize adequate self-consciousness, the subject must rely on or is dependent on an aesthetic object

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<sup>2</sup> Schelling's philosophical concern with art was only granted a short life. By and large this period begins with his participation in the Jenaer Romantic Circle (1798), and it ends with the closing of his teaching commitment in Würzburg (1806). Before that period, one can hardly find any reference to art in his work, except once in his *Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus* (1795). The only lecture on art he gave afterward goes back to the time of his appointment as secretary-general of the *Akademie der bildenden Künste* in Munich: “Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zur Natur” (1807). The core of his work on the philosophy of art thus dates from the time he lived in Jena (1798–1803). The major text from that period is the *Philosophy of Art* (1802–05).

outside itself. The features of that aesthetic object are: (1) it is an objective phenomenon, (2) that as such transcends the subject, (3) but in which the subject recognizes its own essence. (4) This essence transcends the subject not only because it appears in an external object but also because it represents precisely what the subject, by itself, is unable to bring to consciousness: the absolute identity of the "primordial self" (*das Urselfst*) as its most inner essence.

Less than one year later, in the *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie*, the idea of art as an external, objective device that mediates the constitution of an adequate self-consciousness has vanished. The intuition of reason (*Vernunftanschauung*) now realizes what, according to the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, could only

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<sup>3</sup> Dieter Jähnig, *Schelling. Die Kunst in der Philosophie*, 2 vols. (Pfullingen: Neske, 1965), is still widely regarded as the most important and comprehensive interpretation of Schelling's philosophy of art. Other main sources are Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott. Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), that broadens the scope to the larger German romantic tradition, as does his still invaluable *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989). An interesting discussion of Schelling's view on art in English is to be found in Joseph P. Lawrence, "Art and Philosophy in Schelling," *The Owl of Minerva* 20, no. 1 (1998): 5–19. For recent studies in English of Schelling's philosophy of art, and especially of his theory of art as spelled out in the *System of transcendental Idealism*, I refer to James Dodd, "Philosophy and Art in Schelling's *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*," *The Review of Metaphysics* 52, no. 1 (September 1998): 51–85, who relies more or less substantially on the presentations in Jähnig and Frank, and to Richard L. Velkley, "Realizing Nature in the Self: Schelling on Art and Intellectual Intuition in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*," in *Figuring the Self. Subject, Absolute, and Others in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. David E. Klemm and Günter Zöllner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 149–68, who comments on Schelling's position from an Hegelian point of view. In comparison with the aforementioned studies of Schelling's view on art, the originality of my own approach in the present essay is located in its attempt to lay bare the constitutive role of the concept of art (as defined in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*) for the construction of the idea of absolute reason in the *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie* (1801).

<sup>4</sup>*System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, in *Schellings Werke* (hereafter, "SW," followed by the volume number) vol. 2, ed. Manfred Schroeter (Munich: Beck, 1927), 615. All translations are mine, except the quotations from *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* and *Philosophie der Kunst. Allgemeiner und Besonderer Teil*. These quotations are—unless otherwise stated—borrowed from the English translations: F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978) and F. W. J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, ed. and trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). For reasons of uniformity, all references are made to the Schroeter edition of Schelling's texts.

be realized by an aesthetic intuition: representation of the absolute identity of subjectivity and objectivity.<sup>5</sup> In other words, in the *Darstellung*, by the intuition of reason the subject seems to realize what self-consciousness in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* could not achieve except by recourse to the externality of the work of art. How is this possible? How can we understand that art, which in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* is still called “the only and eternal revelation” of the absolute, is no longer needed? How can we understand that this mediating agent has suddenly become superfluous?

## II

According to Schelling, the task of transcendental philosophy is to search for “the identity of the conscious and the unconscious in the self and for the consciousness of this identity.”<sup>6</sup> This identity he calls the absolute, or the “primordial self”:<sup>7</sup> for in the final analysis it comes down to the ultimate unity of subject and object, being the condition of possibility for self-consciousness. This identity of subjectivity and objectivity within the I is grasped at the outset by intellectual intuition. But what is absent in this grasping is a definite consciousness of that identity<sup>8</sup>—a curious idea that sheds light on the strange capacity of the intellectual intuition to grasp the absolute apart from any act of reflexive consciousness. Yet this is what Schelling has in mind: the intellectual intuition is not a reflexive or thetical knowledge. In the intellectual intuition the subject is immediately present to its own essence in a nonthetical way. It is an intimacy with oneself: an immedi-

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<sup>5</sup> Schelling, *Fernere Darstellungen aus dem System der Philosophie*, in *SWE* 1:413.

<sup>6</sup> *SW* 2:612.

<sup>7</sup> *SW* 2:615: “This unknown, however, whereby the objective and the conscious activities are here brought into unexpected harmony, is none other than that absolute [the primordial self] which contains the common ground of the preestablished harmony between the conscious and the unconscious.” In the original text the addition between brackets: “the primordial self” (*das Urselbst*) is given in a footnote.

<sup>8</sup> With reference to Wolfgang Hogrebe’s terminology I would characterize intellectual intuition as a prepredicative or prereflexive kind of “knowing” or “grasping” of the identity mentioned above; Wolfgang Hogrebe, *Prädikation und Genesis. Metaphysik als Fundamentalheuristik im Ausgang von Schellings “Die Weltalter”* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 58, 65–6.

ate intimacy with one's own subjectivity, without knowing oneself as a subject. Thus, what is grasped by intellectual intuition is the primordial self (*das Urselbst*), the ultimate unity of subject and object within the I. The purpose of the system now is that this identity of subjectivity and objectivity *within* the I, which is grasped by means of the intellectual intuition, in the end is consciously grasped *by* the I as well. Therefore, the object of the intellectual intuition must somehow appear as something objective. If not, consciousness would be impossible anyway. But the primordial self, the absolute cannot appear as something objective for it is the absolutely identical (*das absolut Identische*).<sup>9</sup> In other words, Schelling needs to (1) invoke an objective reality that (2) in one way or another represents the absolute, (3) without giving up the essential nonrepresentability of the absolute. This problem, according to Schelling, cannot be solved except by invoking an objective reality that symbolically refers to the absolute. This objective reality is the aesthetic intuition: the intellectual intuition becoming objective, or the work of art.<sup>10</sup> "The work of art," Schelling states,

merely reflects to me what is otherwise not reflected by anything, namely that absolutely identical which has already divided itself even in the self. Hence, that which the philosopher allows to be divided even in the primary act of consciousness, and which would otherwise be inaccessible to any intuition, comes, through the miracle of art, to be radiated back from the products thereof.<sup>11</sup>

From this may be concluded, he continues,

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<sup>9</sup> SW 2:624.

<sup>10</sup> SW 2:625: "This universally acknowledged and altogether incontestable objectivity of intellectual intuition is art itself. For aesthetic intuition simply is intellectual intuition become objective." In Schelling's copy these original sentences are replaced by the following passage that synthesizes the whole argument: "The whole of philosophy starts, and must start, from a principle which, as the absolute principle, is also at the same time the absolutely identical. An absolutely simple and identical cannot be grasped or communicated through description, nor through concepts at all. It can only be intuited. Such an intuition is the organ of all philosophy. But this intuition, which is an intellectual rather than a sensory one, and has as its object neither the objective nor the subjective, but the absolutely identical, is itself merely an internal one, which cannot in turn become objective for itself: it can become objective only through a second intuition. This second intuition is the aesthetic."

<sup>11</sup> SW 2:625.

that art is at once the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy, which ever and again continues to speak to us of what philosophy cannot depict in external form.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile it may have become clear that art is the “document” of philosophy for art represents both symbolically and objectively the absolutely identical (*das absolut Identische*) for which the philosopher is searching. But in what sense can art be considered the organ, that is, the instrument and method of philosophy? Because there is a resemblance between the creative process that generates the work of art and the procedure of transcendental philosophy. The transcendental philosopher, starting from the identity of subjectivity and objectivity within the I, tries to reconstruct the schematism that is behind the constitution of objectivity as such, so that, in the end, the initial identity of subjectivity and objectivity within the I *objectively* shows up before the I, that is, before consciousness. This is precisely what happens in the creation of a work of art. The artist, part consciously, part unconsciously, produces the work of art, in which he recognizes himself afterward and thus becomes aware of his own creative power.

One should realize, however, that the work of art is never the objectification of the absolute. It symbolizes the absolute. As a symbol, the work of art refers to what necessarily remains unrepresentable. The same holds for the relationship between the artist and the work of art. The work of art is not the objectification of the artist for the artist does not know precisely how the work of art originated. Behind this “how” hides the genius which is essentially beyond the reach of the artist himself. The genius manifests itself in the work of art, but it does not exhaust itself in it. In this sense, the genius is the artistic counterpart of the primordial self, which manifests itself in the work of art without ever being objectified by it. Schelling puts it this way:

Hence, if this absolute is reflected from out of the product, it will appear to the intelligence as something lying above the latter . . . a *phenomenon* which although incomprehensible [from the standpoint of mere reflection],<sup>13</sup> yet cannot be denied; and art, therefore, is the one everlasting revelation which exists, and the marvel which, had it existed but once only, would necessarily have convinced us of the absolute reality of that supreme [identity].<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> SW 2:627.

<sup>13</sup> In the original text the addition between brackets is given in a footnote (see SW 2:617).

As its organ, art is not an object but a part of philosophy; as the revelation of the absolute it is the only document that verifies the validity and truth of philosophical discourse. Therefore philosophy and art relate in a special way:

For though science at its highest level has one and the same business as art, this business, owing to the manner of effecting it, is an endless one for science, so that one may say that art constitutes the ideal of science, and where art is, science has yet to attain to.<sup>15</sup>

In Schelling's *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, art thus has a specific epistemological function. It mediates an adequate self-consciousness. Such a self-consciousness implies a becoming aware of the ultimate identity underlying all reflexivity, that is, the structure of subject–object differentiation that underlies all consciousness and all thinking. Indeed, the objectivity of the work of art makes it possible to break the circle of reflexivity. Without the intuition of a work of art, consciousness would never become aware of the transcendence of its own ground, and thus it would stay caught in reflexivity. In this sense, art is both the limitation and fulfillment of knowledge. It is the limitation of knowledge in the way that it refers to what cannot be thought or known and with the result that knowledge is relativized as

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<sup>14</sup> Schelling, *SW* 2:615, 617–18. The above text is a slight adaption of the English translation that runs as follows: “and art, therefore is the one everlasting revelation which *yields that concurrence*, and the marvel which, had it existed but once only, would necessarily have convinced us of the absolute reality of that supreme *event*”; F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 223; the adapted parts are italicized. Although this translation might be justifiable grammatically, it obfuscates Schelling's point. For it suggests somehow tautologically that the work of art reveals the possibility of the concurrence of the free and conscious and the necessary and unconscious activity within the artist, whereas, in my interpretation, the revelatory character of the work of art concerns the condition of possibility of that concurrence, that is, the absolute or the primordial self that, one page before, Schelling calls “the ultimate in man” (*das Letzte in ihm*), “the root of his complete being” (*die Wurzel seines ganzen Daseins*), or still: “the unchanging identical” (*das unveränderlich Identische*). The original version of the quoted text reads as follows: “so ist die Kunst die einzige und ewige Offenbarung, *die es gibt*, und das Wunder, das, wenn es auch nur Einmal existiert hätte, uns von der absolute Realität jenes *Höchsten* überzeugen müsste”; *SW* 2:618 (italics mine).

<sup>15</sup> *SW* 2:623. Although the German text indeed uses the word *Wissenschaft*, it is obvious that throughout the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* Schelling by this notion refers to philosophy and not to one or the total set of the sciences. In this respect, Schelling's use of the term *Wissenschaft* is akin to Hegel's at that time. See, for example, the preface of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*: “Vom wissenschaftlichen Erkennen.”



being unable to recover conceptually its own foundation. It is also the fulfillment of knowledge in the sense that the subject, due to this experience, becomes aware—*ex negativo*—of its relativity. The “ecstatic” experience of intuiting a work of art, though, is not a farewell to reflection but rather its intensification. For in this experience, the subject reflects its insurmountable finitude.

The intuition of the work of art, furthermore, has a doubly ironic effect. In the first place, the work of art, as the revelation of the absolute, both discloses the deepest essence of the subject and does not. It discloses the essence of the subject in the sense that in the work of art the absolute becomes visible and gives itself away; yet it does not disclose its essence in the sense that the work of art is not the absolute. As a revelation of the absolute the work of art at the same time reveals and conceals the connection between self-consciousness and its absolute origin.<sup>16</sup> But there is another, even more fundamental kind of irony.<sup>17</sup> This irony consists in the fact that the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* somehow results in its own negation. As transcendental philosophy it will demonstrate how every objectivity is constituted by the I. But at the very moment that it has to accomplish its ultimate task, that is, to demonstrate that the origin of the I too is “posited” (*gesetzt*) by the I, it fails. The I now suddenly and unexpectedly appears to be unable to recover its origin by a mere reflection on its own activity. On the contrary: in order to reflect this origin, it is referred to an intuition (that is not a thinking) of an object (that is not its own subjectivity) outside itself. Although the I realizes in the wake of this its highest consciousness, it is made ironic by the heteronomous point of support to which it has to appeal in order to reach this summit of consciousness.<sup>18</sup> What the Baron von

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<sup>16</sup> Dieter Jähnig specifies the distinction between objectification and revelation as follows: in the case of objectification, the subject exteriorizes itself into the objectivity of a product; revelation, on the contrary, consists in a dialectic of recognizability (objectivity) as to form and negation of objectivity as to content. See Jähnig, *Die Kunst in der Philosophie* 1:102, 106. By “revelation” he understands “epiphany”: an objectivity that somehow becomes transparent and by this transparency makes the subjective—which is beyond it—visible qua subjectivity.

<sup>17</sup> For Schelling’s concept of irony, see among others Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst. Besonderer Teil*, in *SWE* 3:326: “since irony is the only form in which that which goes out from the subject—or must go out—can detach itself from him most distinctly and become objective.” The situation of the I vis-à-vis the work of art, described above, yields a perfect example of this irony.

Münchhausen once did—to pull himself up by his own hair out of a swamp—now appears to be impossible. In the end, objectivity and not the self-conscious subject has the last word in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*.

The question remains, how then do art and philosophy relate to one another in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*? Which of the two takes priority? As the revelation of the absolute, art unmistakably takes priority; as a kind of knowledge, the philosophy of art takes priority because art is not itself a kind of knowledge. Art thus takes priority—from the perspective of philosophy. Yet Schelling states that “where art is, science has yet to attain to.” Philosophy, it is said, should become art. At least in the end, that is beyond modernity.<sup>19</sup> During the modern era, philosophical knowledge inevitably must be reflexive.

### III

In the *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie* the essential features of the concept of art as developed in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* are transferred to the concept of reason. As

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<sup>18</sup> See Dodd, “Philosophy and Art,” 80. Dodd offers a similar analysis but with a somewhat different conclusion. In his view, the “ultimate irony of transcendental philosophy” comes down to the proclamation of the artist as the highest expression of human self-consciousness—“the philosopher being at best its witness.” In my interpretation, the artist lacks a proper understanding of (the revelatory character of) his own product and therefore he should appeal to the philosopher to get it right. Ontologically the work of art indeed transcends philosophy, but epistemologically, philosophy presides over art.

<sup>19</sup> This is the way I would interpret the famous passage at the end of the chapter on art: “But now if it is art alone which can succeed in objectifying with universal validity what the philosopher is able to present in a merely subjective fashion, there is one more conclusion yet to be drawn. Philosophy was born and nourished by poetry in the infancy of knowledge, and with it, all those sciences it has guided toward perfection; we may thus expect them, on completion, to flow back like so many individual streams into the universal ocean of poetry from which they took their source. Nor is it in general difficult to say what the medium for this return of science to poetry will be; for in mythology such a medium existed, before the occurrence of a breach now seemingly beyond repair. But how a new mythology is itself to arise, which shall be the creation, not of some individual author, but of a new race, personifying, as it were, one single poet—that is a problem whose solution can be looked for only in the future destinies of the world, and in the course of history to come”; *SW* 2:629.

a result, the *Darstellung* introduces an aesthetic concept of absolute reason, which marks the decisive shift from romantic to absolute idealism.

Arguments for this view may be found by comparing the position of the intellectual intuition in the *Darstellung* with that in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*. In the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, the object of intellectual intuition is the so-called primordial self (*das Urselbst*); in the *Darstellung*, that object has become reason (*die Vernunft*). In the *Fernere Darstellungen aus dem System der Philosophie* (1802), Schelling therefore calls intellectual intuition “the intuition of reason” (*Vernunftanschauung*). Furthermore, this intuition of reason no longer has its counterpart in an aesthetic intuition, as was still the case in the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*. There the aesthetic intuition was needed to verify the postulated object of the intellectual intuition (that is, *das Urselbst*). Because of the fallout of this verifying device, the postulatory character of the intuition of reason too appears to be abandoned.<sup>20</sup> The intuition of reason therefore receives the status of a truly (absolute) principle in which something is definitely known, and it is understood as some sort of immediate, absolute knowledge. In the *Darstellung*, the intuition of reason thus seems to combine the distinctive functions of the intellectual and the aesthetic intuitions of the transcendental system. Considered from the viewpoint of the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, this would mean that in some way or other the aesthetic intuition has been internalized. For the object of aesthetic intuition is an external object, namely, the work of art, whereas the object of the intuition of reason is reason itself. The external, aesthetic intuition of the transcendental system thus seems to be internalized and replaced by a complex intuition within knowledge itself. This would imply furthermore that reason, being the object of the combined intellectual and aesthetic intuition, at the same time has to be understood as the former primordial self: the absolute identity of subjectivity and objectivity (that is, the object of intellectual intuition) and as the work of art (that is, the object of aesthetic intuition) which mediates absolute knowledge. Thus, in the *Darstellung*, reason would at the same time occupy the role of the mediator of absolute knowledge and the role of the absolute itself. Put schematically: the triad I—the work of art (mediation)—primor-

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<sup>20</sup> *SWE* 1:413.

dial self (*das Urselfst* or the absolute) of the transcendental system would be replaced in the *Darstellung* by the triad I—reason (mediation)—reason (the absolute). Comparing both schemata, two elements strike us: first, the fact that the notion of reason has a double meaning and therefore is not entirely unequivocal, and second, that reason as mediating absolute knowledge now occupies the position that was still reserved for the work of art in the transcendental system.

As for the ambiguity of the notion of reason, this is confirmed thoroughly by Schelling's text. In the *Darstellung* he distinguishes between the essence (*das Wesen*) and the form (*die Form*) of the absolute. By the essence of the absolute he means the *an-sich* (or "in itself") of the absolute. By the form he means the absolute insofar as it "is" or "is thought of." For in accordance with the best idealistic tradition Schelling maintains that the absolute can only be said to be insofar as it is thought of:

The absolute identity cannot be thought of except by the proposition  $A=A$ , but (at the same time) by that very proposition it is posited as *being* [*seyend*]. As a consequence, the absolute identity *is* because it is thought of.<sup>21</sup>

This thinking is tied—as is all thinking—to the structure of judgment and is thus incapable of expressing the absolute in its absoluteness:

What is posited together with the form of the proposition  $A=A$ , is also immediately posited with the being of the absolute identity, but this does not belong to its essence, it only belongs to its form or to its way of being.<sup>22</sup>

So the form concerns the knowledge (and the being) of the identity and is distinct from its essence:

The absolute identity is unable to know itself in an infinite way without positing itself infinitely as subject and object. . . . It is one and the same absolute identity that qua form of being is posited as subject and object, albeit not qua essence.<sup>23</sup>

This infinite knowledge, this absolute identity being posited as subject and object, is reason. As (its) form it is distinct from the essence of the absolute identity. But again, not altogether: "Reason . . . also is

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<sup>21</sup> Schelling, *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie*, in *SW* 3:14; see also *SW* 3:16–18 (emphasis in original).

<sup>22</sup> *SW* 3:16; see also *SW* 3:16–17.

<sup>23</sup> *SW* 3:18; see also *SW* 3:17.

one with the absolute identity."<sup>24</sup> For, he explains, the difference between essence and form is only valid from the point of view of the form. From the viewpoint of the essence, even this difference does not hold. For the absolute is absolute identity. From the standpoint of the essence the difference between essence and form must be abandoned, and it should be stated that the form, as the knowing of the absolute, *eo ipso* is one with its essence.<sup>25</sup> So the *Darstellung* does indeed operate with an equivocal concept of reason: reason as form, in which the absolute is known, and reason as essence, which from the perspective of the form, is different from that form.

If we now return to the triadic schema of the *Darstellung*, the I—reason (as mediation)—reason (as the absolute), then reason as form appears to be the mediating factor whereas reason as essence appears to be the absolute itself. When we compare this schema with that of the transcendental system (the I—the work of art—the primordial self), then the former mediating position of the work of art is now shown to be taken by reason as form. This would indicate that the form in the *Darstellung* fulfills the epistemological and systematic function that was initially fulfilled by the work of art. So the form would be within knowledge the internalized work of art; an internalization by which the knowledge of the form (*genitivus subjectivus*) becomes itself some sort of work of art.

The similarities between reason as form in the *Darstellung* and the work of art in the transcendental system are striking indeed, both in terms of structure and function. Reason as form, it is said in the *Darstellung*, is the self-knowing of the absolute. Just like the work of art, it is the locus where the absolute becomes knowable. This locus, however, does not coincide with the absolute. The work of art and the form may represent the absolute, but they are different from it; the absolute as such remains basically ineffable. But then again the structure of the form and the work of art resemble the absolute. In both cases there is an identity of subjectivity and objectivity—a structure that can only be disclosed by an intuition: an aesthetic intuition in the case of the work of art, an intuition of reason (*Vernunftanschauung*) in the case of the form. This structure of identity reveals in both cases a kind of knowledge that supersedes reflection by denying and founding it at the same time. Access to this knowledge presupposes that

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<sup>24</sup> *SW* 3:14.

<sup>25</sup> *SWE* 1:420; see also *SWE* 1:422, 432.

the subject renounces its own subjectivity and is receptive to a rationality that transcends it. This is exactly what was intended by aesthetic intuition in the transcendental system; in the *Darstellung* this “decentering” of the subject is part and parcel of the intuition of reason:

to reach the standpoint that I urge, one must abstract from the one who thinks. For those who do so, reason immediately stops being something subjective.<sup>26</sup>

This indicates that reason as form functions, as did the work of art before, as the organ, that is, as the instrument and method of philosophy. For philosophical discourse remains a discourse proceeding from the identity of subjectivity and objectivity and aiming at thinking this identity within differentiation. But whereas in the transcendental system this identity is revealed by the work of art, it is now disclosed in and through reason itself. In accordance with the shift of the organ-function of the work of art to reason as form, philosophy is no longer defined as the conceptual expression of what happens in art but as the expression of the structure of identity of the form.

The internalization of the work of art within knowledge also points to some interesting differences between the transcendental system and the *Darstellung*. The locus where the absolute becomes knowable is no longer the external, objective work of art but the form, that is, the basic structure of knowledge itself. Knowledge in the *Darstellung* seems to be self-sufficient to generate absolute knowledge. By this tacit affirmation of the autonomy of philosophical knowledge, art is no longer the exclusive revelation of the absolute. The absolute need not be shown first in the work of art before philosophy is capable of gaining adequate knowledge of it. To know the absolute, philosophy has only to intuit the basic structure of its own knowing. Philosophical knowledge has an immediate access to the absolute on its own. The ironical, heteronomous element in the constitution of absolute knowledge has vanished.

In this way, philosophy has taken over the privileged affinity of art with the absolute. Yet philosophy is only able to do so by conceiving of the element of its own discourse, that is, the form, as an aesthetic activity and, in line with this view, by conceiving of itself as a work of art. As to this strong affinity between art and philosophy, it

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<sup>26</sup> *SW* 3:10–11.

suffices to refer to the key function of the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) in the identity system. For according to Schelling it is indeed the imagination, this creative faculty *par excellence*, that is at work within absolute knowledge. Therefore absolute knowledge and poetry are related. Absolute knowledge is a creative knowledge, a productive knowledge, that understands the differentiated objects of knowledge proceeding from the identity structure of reason as form while imagining (*einbilden*) them as manifestations of this identity. Whereas in the transcendental system, Schelling primarily conceives of philosophical rationality as a higher reflexivity, he now explicitly ascribes to it a unifying, and thus productive, imaginative or poetic capacity. Thinking becomes poetry, philosophy becomes an art-product. In the identity system, philosophical discourse expresses conceptually what hitherto could only be revealed by art. From now on, art and philosophy are each other's mirror image.<sup>27</sup> Put differently, in the *Darstellung* one witnesses the transferral of the aesthetic structure of the romantic absolute to the structure of rationality itself.<sup>28</sup> Until then—that is, throughout romantic idealism—the highest principle of unification had been located in different instances such as beauty, freedom, being, love, or life (see in this respect the work of Hölderlin, the writings of the young Hegel, or even Schelling's own early writings) but never within thought itself. This happens for the first time in the *Darstellung*—a text about which Schelling in 1805 declares that “then, to me the light went on in philosophy.”<sup>29</sup>

What is the effect of dropping the nonreducible objectivity of the work of art in the constitution of absolute knowledge? What does it mean that philosophy can do without the revelatory function of art in bringing the absolute as such before consciousness? It means that philosophy understands itself as absolute idealism. The heart of absolute idealism is the idea that philosophical knowledge can, by itself,

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<sup>27</sup> Fuhrmans, *F. W. J. Schelling* 3:222; see also Schelling, *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums*, in *SW* 3:370.

<sup>28</sup> Despite the difference in argument, this conclusion comes close to Wolfgang Schneider's in *Ästhetische Ontologie. Schellings Weg des Denkens zur Identitätsphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1983), 505: “Darin wird deutlich, dass Kunst und insofern das Phänomen des Ästhetischen eben nicht nur Bindeglied und Vermittlungsinstanz ist, um das sich selbst reflektierende Denken von ausserhalb seiner ganz zu sich zu bringen, sondern das gedankliche Fundament sowohl der Transzendental- wie auch der Identitätsphilosophie selber.”

<sup>29</sup> Fuhrmans, *F. W. J. Schelling* 3:222.

suspend its subjectivity and elevate itself to the level of the absolute, as the only viewpoint from which reality is to be thought of truthfully. The result of this is the implosion of reality within thinking: the reduction of all reality to a reality that is thought or conceived of. Considered from the romantic perspective, it implies that philosophy no longer recognizes the "fictitiousness" of knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Every knowledge that no longer feels the need to test itself against the revelation of any transcendence whatsoever has dropped its relativity. Yet in Schelling, this dropping of the fictitiousness of knowledge again remains ambiguous. First, because it is unclear what kind of (nonreflexive) knowledge the intuition of reason is supposed to yield; second, as a result of his continually oscillating between the affirmation of the identity of form and essence and the confirmation of their difference. According to the text, the absolute at the same time is the identity of subject and object as form and the condition of possibility of this form. As the essence (*das Wesen*) the absolute conditions its own form, but at the same time it denies this form as an adequate expression of itself. Hence, even in the *Darstellung* the intuition is upheld that the definition of the absolute according to the logic of identity remains deficient with respect to the absolute as such because it always is a kind of knowledge anyway.

#### IV

Philosophical knowledge is aesthetic knowledge. It is a unifying activity that relies on the faculty of the imagination. Philosophy realizes within the ideal what art accomplishes within the real: the absolute unification of identity and difference. With these words one could formulate the affinity between philosophy and art in the identity system. It is time now to check the validity of this view by turning to Schelling's philosophy of art.

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<sup>30</sup> I borrow the notion of the "fictitiousness of knowledge" (*die Fiktivität des Wissens*) from Panajotis Kondylis, *Die Entstehung der Dialektik. Eine Analyse der geistigen Entwicklung von Hölderlin, Schelling und Hegel bis 1802* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979), 619. Through this expression Kondylis points to the romantic view that all knowledge is bound to the differentiation between subject and object and therefore is unable to grasp the unity (or undifferentiated ground) of reality. In other words: all knowledge is conditioned by the subject-object differentiation as its form, and therefore it can never be regarded as an adequate representation of the reality it intends to grasp.



The assertion that philosophical knowledge is aesthetic knowledge is based on the assumption that the former relies on the imagination. This transcendental faculty, which according to Kant plays a major role in the mediation of the (cognitive) faculties of the mind and sensory experience, was ontologized by the romantics—including Schelling—and was understood as a unifying power in a metaphysical sense. As early as Novalis, imagination is identified as the creative and productive power as such—an activity that manifests itself in nature, art, and human knowledge—whenever these exhibit forms of creativity. Schelling's *Philosophie der Kunst* maintains that perspective: art and philosophy have imagination in common.<sup>31</sup> It is their capacity to represent the infinite in the finite in such a way that the finite becomes the symbol of the infinite.<sup>32</sup> The indistinctiveness of the universal and the particular which is realized in that way constitutes the representation of the absolute within the finite. Schelling specifies:

Particular things, to the extent they are absolute in that particularity, and thus to the extent they as particulars are simultaneously universes, are called ideas. . . . What ideas are for philosophy, the gods are for art.<sup>33</sup>

Philosophical construction and artistic creation thus result in a similar product. In philosophy this product is contemplated ideally, as ideas, whereas in art it is contemplated really, as gods. Both represent the identity of the universal and the particular within the particular.<sup>34</sup> This identity of universality and particularity is the essence of beauty:

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<sup>31</sup> Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst. Allgemeiner Teil*, in *SW* 3:406; see also *SW* 1:475.

<sup>32</sup> *SW* 3:427; see also *SWE* 3:205–6.

<sup>33</sup> *SW* 3:410–11; see also *SW* 3:390.

<sup>34</sup> An idea is a particular that realizes the universality of its predicate and so becomes a primordial image (or archetype) of its own finite appearance. Such an identity of particularity (subject) and universality (predicate) is naturally realized within the absolute identity (A is A). But this is also the case in the work of art. Particularity and universality at least are not differentiated in the work of art. For the work of art cannot have a different concept, cannot have a different predicate but the one it has indeed. The work of art, therefore, realizes what philosophy brings about ideally: ideas (*SWE* 3:152). The ideas insofar as they are contemplated really are gods: as particular subjects they coincide with the universality of their concept. Aphrodite is fertility; Athena is wisdom.

Beauty is posited wherever the particular (real) is so commensurate with its concept that the latter itself, as infinite, enters into the finite and is intuited *in concreto*.<sup>35</sup>

So, strictly speaking, only ideas are beautiful; or again: philosophy and art, truth and beauty are one, for they are the different products of one and the same aesthetic or poetic creative activity.

The difference between philosophy and art only concerns the domain in which they are producing. In the world of thinking, philosophy is as much a kind of art as art is a kind of philosophy in the world of the sensual.<sup>36</sup> Schelling expressed this mirroring of art and philosophy as follows:

Art . . . as a representation of the infinite stands on the same level with philosophy: just as philosophy presents the absolute in the *archetype* [*das Urbild*], so also does art present the absolute in a *reflex* or *reflected image* [*das Gegenbild*].<sup>37</sup>

Art and philosophy mirror one another not only because they both represent the absolute but also because they both do so in the same, aesthetic way. Therefore, the representation of the absolute is, in both cases, inevitably symbolic.<sup>38</sup>

However, it is not only interesting to see how the inner structure and makeup of art and philosophy are geared to one another; it is symptomatic that even the idea of autonomy, which at the end of the eighteenth century was still exclusively attributed to art, is now completely transferred to philosophy. "Fine Art," Schelling states, "is absolute in itself, and thus without any external purpose; it is not a matter of need."<sup>39</sup> In the identity system, this far-reaching, autonomous status of art is also the status of philosophy: "Philosophy is unconditional through and through, without any purpose outside itself."<sup>40</sup> Yet it should be noted that Schelling does not confirm the autonomy of philosophy because he endorses the modernization process (Weber), that is, the process whereby art, morality, and science (philosophy) gain independence. On the contrary, in the affirmation of the autonomy of a "higher" rationality, Schelling sees the only remaining hope for an agency which would be capable of keeping together those

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<sup>35</sup> *SW* 3:402; see also *SW* 3:418.

<sup>36</sup> *SW*, 3:401–3; see also *SW* 3:426.

<sup>37</sup> *SW* 3:389 (emphasis in original).

<sup>38</sup> For the distinction in Schelling among schema, allegory, and symbol, see *SW* 3:426–7.

<sup>39</sup> *SWE* 3:225–6.

<sup>40</sup> *SW* 3:372.

domains of art, morality, and science which at that very moment were differentiating rapidly. Put differently, in Schelling's view philosophy does not owe its autonomy to its difference but to its unity with art and morality.

## V

The shift from the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* to the *Darstellung*, so it is argued, marks the distinction between romantic and absolute idealism. Romantic idealism holds on to the irrecoverableness of the absolute, to the essential "nonidentity" of the object of thought, moral action, and art. This irrecoverableness is an idea that is kept vivid by the use of irony. In Schelling, this irony is preserved in the role of art in the transcendental system. The subject, which has recovered almost the whole domain of objectivity from nature up to history, is at the very last moment referred to something outside itself that discloses the true essence of the subject. The irony here is that self-consciousness appears to have an irrecoverable blind spot. In the end this blind spot is remedied by the revelatory intuition of the work of art, although the mechanism by which the work of art is produced remains irrecoverable; it is the work of genius within the artist. In absolute idealism this susceptibility is given up. The external character of the work of art, under the name of reason, is smuggled into knowledge itself. This reason is now conceived of in an aesthetic sense as the unifying principle *par excellence*. The way in which reasonable knowledge proceeds is modeled after the artistic creative process. Philosophy, which has the task of expressing the absolute identity of reason (*Vernunftidentität*), now becomes an aesthetic construction that in every respect resembles the work of art not only with respect to its inner structure but also with respect to its status as an autonomous piece of work. Only the ambiguous distinction between essence and form of the absolute still reminds one of the former irrecoverability of the absolute. From the perspective of romantic idealism, the internalization of the aesthetic activity, and hence of the work of art, within the field of knowledge embodied by a unifying reason, is a seizure of knowledge. The result for art is, on the one hand, that it loses its exclusive epistemological significance; its transformation into the identity-theoretical paradigm of rationality, on the other hand, gives aesthetics an unseen philosophical strength.

Aesthetics's capacity for unification, which had been attributed to it ever since Kant, now receives an additional qualitative label of "higher" rationality and of ontological logic of identity *par excellence*.

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