
Art as Science. Principles of Romantic Epistemology

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Abstract: What is the relation between art and science in the early German Romanticism? And what importance can its rediscovery have today for the history and philosophy of science? The present essay provides an answer to these two questions, searching for the traces of an embryonic reflection on the destiny of Western thought in the philosophical fragments of F. Schlegel, Novalis and others.

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Wissenschaft muß Poesie eben so wohl sein als die φσ [Philosophie] Kunst.

F. SCHLEGEL

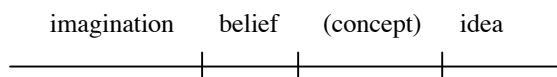
It is commonly thought that history proceeds along original and unpredictable paths, where each new season of thinking would follow the previous one without continuous progress, but retaining its own characteristics that distinguish it clearly within the larger structure of the general cultural development. It is then assumed that the action of a clear and consistent *ratio* is combined with the one of the case, creating the necessary and sufficient conditions, so that history has a sequel and the same circumstances will be created again, in order to allow a culture and its particular expressions to continuously reinvent themselves, thereby giving back to the present the appearance of an uncertain but definable time from the study of its origins. This historicist belief is indeed so deep-rooted in our paradigms of thinking that perhaps no thinking has ever fallen outside of itself, that is from the path already traced by history. Therefore, trying to predict the future, or analyze the present, using the study of the past, is more paradoxical than we would like it to be. Paradoxical, in the first place, because all judgment is to be based on what is little more than an opinion (*para-doxa*) and, secondly, because at this point the opinion itself is not seen as a historical truth, but as a super-historical one, a super-truth, we might say. In this way, the entire field of philosophical speculation of the last two millennia is subverted and the myth of origins, foundations and history are contradicted. Originally there is a thinking, perhaps *the* thinking transformed by centuries of its redundancy and yet so current, as it is our wish to recover it and also to overcome it. To exceed the limit of history – to know what we do not yet know.

What do we know? The Socratic question demands a Platonic answer: knowledge is equivalent to knowing the truth. But what truth? The epistemological turn of the last century has placed us in front of the ontological doubt and the need to remodel all our categories of thinking. Still, some critics might say that Nietzsche's historicism has

nothing to do with Kuhn's, that there are different kinds of history and reducing the entire history of thinking to the one outlined by Plato is just idealism. The main feature of idealism, however, is to transcend time and preserve over the centuries the essence of thinking intact, that first gave shape to the world: in this sense, getting back to Plato does not mean to re-evaluate the lesson, but rather to reconsider the legacy in the light of an opening in the theoretical system, that allowed us from the modern age to rediscover the prerequisites of history. Since afterwards, we can no longer assert that what we are and what we know depends directly and inevitably on the fate of tradition and it will not be possible to refer to it to justify what will be yielded: history does not justify itself, neither can we do that. But to understand it, it is perhaps necessary to start once more from Plato. Not from the Socratic Plato in the *Dialogues*, but from the Platonic one known in the *Republic*. It is here, in fact, that we are laying the foundations for a stable and enduring relationship between belief and knowledge, between knowledge and thinking. In particular, we are talking about some of the most famous passages of Western philosophy and its basic relationship: that is, between poetry and philosophy. The third book is already quite peremptory in accepting the second and discarding the first: this is because, unlike arts such as music and gymnastics, which inspire the soul to the good through the contemplation of beauty, poetry, which also has the power to move the human soul, rather than just directing it towards the good, leads it astray with bad examples, examples from the heroic and mythological tradition. But, since the myth has no ethical role, does it not have a moral? And listening to its story, are not men inspired to do good deeds, to comply with the customs and traditions of the heroes? On the contrary, precisely because the *mythos* is just a story, the story of something that no longer exists, it is suitable for rough deceptions and subtle exploitations and becomes a tool for those who have no knowledge of the facts, in short for poets. As already clarified in *Ion*, the poet can tell but the truth, but only on condition that he becomes the voice of God, that he loses his nature as a storyteller to be transcended by a superior knowledge, which does not belong to him and that he cannot have. In his heart, in fact, the poet does not know, and cannot, ontologically, know: that is, he cannot have knowledge of being, cannot have knowledge of the truth that he conveys because otherwise he would cease to be, to be a poet and would be transformed into its opposite, into a philosopher. The matter is then resumed and developed further in the sixth book, but not before that, in the fifth book, Plato remembers that the truth is the exclusive property of those who can distinguish it properly

from the opinion, from the belief that lies halfway between the most comprehensive ignorance and the deepest knowledge, that is why it is as misleading as a poem without knowledge of the facts (without being metaphysical, then?).

So, a path of thinking begins to take shape. The thinking for the first time in history begins to recognize itself and define its own path: the Socratic path of the search for the truth. In fact, it is the Platonic path of the *discovering* of the truth: of the truth as knowledge of being, of *episteme*. And *episteme*, as we learn in the sixth book, is what we come to, once we embark on the path of philosophical reflection and deviate once more from *doxa*, from the opinion apparently right and basically devoid of rational, or better, dialectic foundations. The philosopher, on the other hand, must use the word to educate other men and we understand that, at this point, the risk is huge: the philosophical discourse runs the risk of being confused with the poetic one. Dialectics is likely to be understood not as a process that leads to the truth, but as an exchange of words without sense, without *the* sense, as a story. It is obvious that this must be avoided at all costs and the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (παλαιὰ μὲν τις διαφορὰ φιλοσοφία τε καὶ ποιητικῆ), which Plato refers to in the tenth book, must be ended because the philosophical truth must be able to shine in all its splendour without being veiled by the shadow of doubt, by the shadow of sophistic suspicion that would otherwise reduce it to what it opposes and rejects, to an opinion. All this justifies the fury against poetry, that perhaps goes beyond that against the other arts, only guilty of imitating the appearance of things, being deceived by appearances and with the same appearance fooling those who believe them. Each faith, Plato suggests, should be placed in the truth, which only the philosopher is accountable to through the dialogue, as it is only the philosophical dialogue that leads to the truth, therewith distinguishing itself ontologically from the poetic one: therewith *epistemologically* distinguishing itself from the poetic one, precisely because the only truth is the one of being, which philosophy talks about. Philosophy and truth, in other words, are united by an indissoluble connection, the same that binds together poetry and opinion and that breaks up between the two extremes, separating them hopelessly, making one opposite to the other. This is the meaning of the line that Socrates tracks in the sixth book: separating truth and opinion and, within their respective areas, further separating the poet’s misleading imagination from the common belief of art, the philosophical idea from the still imperfect concept of mathematical sciences. We can draw this line as follows:



The die, for the moment, is cast: for more than two millennia, the philosophical research will just focus on the truth, excluding poetry, and reducing all arts to a mere technical exercise, whose purpose is the imitation of nature. It is from nature, therefore, from it alone that we could doubt about our knowledge, no longer a Cartesian doubt, which will grip the founders of modern philosophy, who, at this point, will have to deal with history and the fate of philosophy itself.

What can we know? The Kantian question responds to an instance from Leibniz: the one of finding a certain foundation for ontology (that is, to transform ontology into metaphysics). It could not be otherwise since, from Plato onwards, epistemology is based on itself, and becomes indeed the foundation of philosophy in general.¹

But what is the problem that Kant and, after him, the idealists are facing? For what specific reason does the triumph of epistemology have ontological consequences in the long run? And how are these consequences reflected in turn on epistemology, leading, for example, to Schlegel’s *skepsis*? Undoubtedly, given the paradigmatic value of the Copernican revolution done by Kant, modern philosophy can only arise from a direct comparison, even if partial, with the classical heritage. In the context of the late eighteenth century, this means, first of all, to rethink the role of consciousness and sensibility, combining Descartes with Hume. If the former feels to have released the reason from the constraints of medieval theology, the latter has the merit of having put the limits and possibilities of that same reason under scrutiny, paving the way for an analysis of our cognitive faculties, such as the one carried out by Kant. Leibniz was certainly the first to identify the presuppositions of modern thinking but, not surprisingly, this was only made possible from a recovery and revision of the Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysics. A revision that is based on the establishment of a new relationship between different kinds of knowledge, and, in this case, between poetry and philosophy. Let us proceed step-by-step: it was said that Kant’s intent is to reconcile the two major currents of modern philosophy, while giving substance and form to epistemology. Modern epistemology, from that point forward, will be shaped not as a mere pursuit of the truth, but as a philosophy of science. We must not forget, though, that Kant’s other intent is to officially separate philosophy *from* science, attributing to it the task of founding and justifying its cognitive claims. If criticism was not born as a theory of reason, we might then believe that Kant’s unstated goal was to actualize and refine the Platonic doctrine: and all that dissuades us from doing so is, in fact, little more than a term, “critics”, accompanied by “judgment”, from which it will advance, so far from being paradoxical, the radical criticism of the twentieth century and, before it, the romantic one. Of course, the *Critique of Pure Reason* has neither formal defects nor deficiencies in the argument, since it is intended to break down thinking into its constituent elements, using the same rational tools that thinking makes available to us. The picture that emerges is complex and varied, but consistent: consistent with Leibniz’s premises and with those of the eighteenth century philosophy. The problem identified by the first idealists (and romantics) appears, in fact, with the *Critique of Judgment*: and there is a reason to it. As long as we just take into account pure concepts or categories, sensible intuitions, etc., it is easy for the transcendental doctrine to describe an almost mechanical operation, that passively depends on the perceptive patterns of intellect, but actively on the sensible perception (it is, of course, knowledge): reason does not contradict itself. But, when to be referred to is precisely reason, or rather, are its foundations and its expressions in the form of judgments, the situation changes radically. It changes to the extent that reason contradicts, traditionally, the senses, and these in turn contradict themselves. Although the faculty of judg-

ment is able to express the moral freedom, it has to deal with what exists *per se*, even if, for theoretical reasons, it is hypostasized its dependence on judgment itself: it is, of course, nature. Let us be clear: nature is absolutely independent from judgment, both crucial and reflective (the problem of the existence of reality will be raised later by the idealists and, in the second half of the twentieth century, by the postmodernists); but, in order to permit judgment to *actually* exercise a form of cognitive control over the object of knowledge, it must be assumed that nature conforms to what we know about it. And the question, then, is represented more than effectively by the role of *art*. But how is it possible that, after devoting so much attention to the problem of knowledge (i.e. the truth), the Kantian discourse is interested in the fate of art? How is it possible that philosophy to its highest degree has to confront itself again with what, for at least two thousand years, appeared to be separated and even opposed? Perhaps because, for the first time in two thousand years, art claims once again a prominent *theoretical* role. Perhaps because, in particular, art allows Kant to temporarily overcome the contradictions of history (of thinking). On the basis of Baumgarten, in fact, Kant is forced to recover a deeper sense of aesthetics, that is not the transcendental one, and to give art not really a cognitive value, but at least a heuristic one. On the other hand, it was the same classical gnosiology to allow it when, developing a theory of sensitive knowledge and, at the same time, excluding the practical knowledge of art from the theoretical one of philosophy, it had laid the foundations because *aisthesis* was placed in relation to *techne*, and because, after the synthesis of Plotinus, fine arts could become a vehicle of Platonic ideas.

What wonder, therefore, if the *logos* is once more in comparison, during the eighteenth century, exactly with *aisthesis*? What else could justify judgment if not taste? And in what other form could that express itself if not in the word, in dialectics, in short, in philosophy? Here is the true centre of modern and classic philosophy. And here is the real *impasse* of modern poetry that, from Schiller to Friedrich Schlegel, from Herder to Goethe, will revolve around the question whether it is possible, by means of reflection, to give back to the world the unity and serene unconsciousness from which classical poetry had flown.² If the transcendental investigation of nature had arrived at the need to reassess the role of art, so it is to it that the idealists and romantics must address themselves at this point: what remains to be shown is basically what the true limit of thinking is. Not a pin point if we consider that, since Plato, the only limit of thinking was the truth.

The romantics subordinate epistemology to ontology.³ and this can give reason to Georges Gusdorf, but only to the extent where epistemology goes back to claim a leading role in respect to ontology. Only to the extent that the search for the truth redefines the one for being. The Kantian legacy is clear: there is a fundamental separation between knowledge and reality, what we know is not what is; and yet, precisely for this reason, art can mediate between the world of phenomena and the one of noumena, can play a role that rightly Fichte and the romantics enhance as a creative activity. Kant's thinking is autonomous: it depends solely and exclusively on the faculty of judgment, that is, from our innate ability to express the limits of nature and the freedom of reason at the same time. But what makes

that expression possible, what that expression *is*, is precisely art. So art, not science, defines the full potential of the human subject: at least, according to the way in which the romantics read the Fichtean *Science of Knowledge*. It is no coincidence that it is Friedrich Schlegel to pin that «Streng genommen ist der Begriff eines wissenschaftlichen Gedichts wohl so widersinnig, wie der einer dichterischen Wissenschaft»⁴; and that “streng genommen” would have no special meaning if we did not admit that the romantic concept is developed in relation to the Kantian one, assuming that it is also related to the whole classical tradition. Strictly considered, art is not a technical knowledge that is produced in a finished work, but, given its role as a transcendental mediator, at this point it must rediscover itself as a *science*.⁵ Or, at least, as a condition of science: condition of knowledge, of which it is the principle. But this reversal of the Kantian formulation, whose origin is only the will to overcome the contradictions of criticism, making it the definitive doctrine, does it not qualify as a reversal of Plato? Was not Plato the first to separate poetry from philosophy, the artistic activity from the cognitive one, establishing a boundary between different kinds of knowledge, intended to shape the field of western theoretical speculation? Friedrich Schlegel is well aware; yet his observation:

Die ganze Geschichte der modernen Poesie ist ein fortlaufender Kommentar zu dem kurzen Text der Philosophie: Alle Kunst soll Wissenschaft, und alle Wissenschaft soll Kunst werden; Poesie und Philosophie sollen vereint sein.⁶

But still, what does it mean to say that poetry and philosophy should be merged (*sollen vereint sein*)? What does such a union imply and entail? If it is interpreted only in the light of Kantian developments, we should probably conclude that the romantic turning point lies between mysticism and idealism and that the kind of revolution, mentioned several times in Schlegel's fragments, pertains more to the history of ideas than to the one of science. In a way, but still in the Kantian perspective, that is the one in which initially the romantics present themselves, that is not entirely wrong, but it leads to the belief that we can safely set aside the season of early German Romanticism as an experience without any special historical significance. But this is wrong from a *theoretical* point of view, because most of the achievements of twentieth century epistemology, certainly are not due to the pioneering studies of the romantics, but they are partly anticipated: from Popper to Feyerabend, from Wittgenstein to Russell, the conception that has shaped the study of science, or rather, the fundamentals and methods of science, clearly comes from Kant; however, it could not ignore the development of transcendental philosophy for very long. Developments, as shown by the romantics, are far from being illogical and unscientific, since they necessarily converge towards a revision of the presuppositions of thinking, from which no science itself is immune. We have the feeling, in short, that the search made by Novalis on the nature of language, intended as the world of separate meanings, or the one made by Schlegel on the essence of knowledge, is to be re-evaluated and repositioned properly in the history of thinking. Since thinking, from Plato to Kant, was conceived not as the unfolding of a worldview (*Weltanschauung*), but as the result, the product of the research and of the finding of

the truth: with all due respect to Plato, it was not art to be reduced to an object of unconscious production, but rather science. But is this not precisely what Friedrich Schlegel seems to suggest, seeking an artistic principle of organization of science, a mathematical principle, that mingles with the mythological one, that is, with the story of the origins of the world – and of knowing?⁷ That is why «Durch Mythol.[ogie] wird Kunst und Wissenschaft zur π [Poesie] und ϕ [Philosophie]»⁸, and that is why, once again, to establish a “new mythology” (*Neue Mythologie*) means to closely vie, although indirectly, with the Platonic thinking. It means rethinking the relationship between poetry and philosophy, which inevitably leads to changing the system of classical philosophy and the modern one. And if the theoretical structure of these was represented by the Socratic line, Schlegel has no choice but to fold up that line:⁹



The circle, not surprisingly, has no limit, and as the fundamental opposition disappears between the two extremes, reunited on the whole of knowledge, in the same way, we limit again the field of that knowledge. We delimit the field of knowledge, whose history has to be rewritten from the beginning. In Schlegel's concept, and in the classic one, arts and sciences, of which we call into play the relationship, are naturally distinct and opposed, since these conform to poetry, that is to opinion, and the others to philosophy, that is to the truth: but, what Schlegel guesses is that talking again about the role of art (*Kunst*) and science (*Wissenschaft*) leads to question the centrality of the opposition between poetry (*Poesie*) and philosophy (*Philosophie*). This is still a relationship of four members, like the one already identified by Plato, however, Schlegel's proposal actually reduces everything again to the fundamental opposition, with the intent to undermine its legitimacy. A historical and no longer theoretical legitimacy, that in fact the theory, from the early twentieth century, will have to re-evaluate in depth. As to it, after all, is more than deeply connected the legitimacy of the scientific and philosophical thinking, of knowledge as a whole. It should not come as surprise if Schlegel's considerations then appear present, the relevance of romantic reflection is equal only to the one of the Platonic thinking, and perhaps only the need is more relevant, once we have full knowledge, to reconsider not just the object of scientific inquiry, but its subject as well. This means that epistemology must confront itself once more with ontology, not to overcome or to incorporate it in its interior, which would represent a return to the Kantian's or idealistic positions, and not even the opposite, which would presuppose a radical critique of metaphysics, pre-

monitory of a theoretical limitation (hence Heidegger's reference to history), but to find an accommodation that finally has the features of a real breakthrough, of a revolution like the one attempted perhaps too early by the romantics. The field to be taken into account, the field of thinking, is not unlimited, it is rather limited by a principle which claims to escape from it, and to interpret a certain conception of the world, whether historic or idealistic, scientific or pragmatic. Once again we need to deal with our possibilities to know, with the possibility of knowledge: and this time we can say that it is really about making history.

Notes

¹ It is essentially the theory supported by Richard Rorty in his famous *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1979. More precisely, Rorty supports that epistemology was born in the modern age as an attempt to make space for philosophy, besieged by the concomitant development of sciences. However, if we assume that the issue of the search for the truth becomes central from Plato, it is perhaps necessary to redesign the field of epistemology and, consequently, rewrite history, taking account of its ancient origins and its modern development.

² Essays such as *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* by Schiller or *On the Study of Greek Poetry* by Friedrich Schlegel are, in this regard, exemplary.

³ See G. Gusdorf, *Les sciences humaines et la pensée occidentale*, Paris, Payot, especially vol. X: *Du néant à Dieu dans le savoir romantique*, 1983.

⁴ *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, herausgegeben von H. Eichner, München, Paderborn, Wien, Schöningh, Zürich, Thomas-Verlag, Bd. II: *Charakteristiken und Kritiken I (1796-1801)*, 1967, *Lyceums-Fragmente*, n. 61.

⁵ Consider in this regard the famous Schlegel's prophecy according to which «So wie es das Ziel der W[issen]sch[af]t ist, K[unst] zu werden; so muß auch K[unst] endlich W[issen]sch[af]t werden» (*Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, herausgegeben von H. Eichner, München, Paderborn, Wien, Schöningh, Zürich, Thomas-Verlag, Bd. XVI: *Fragmente zur Poesie und Literatur. Erster Teil*, 1981, [V] *Fragmente zur Litteratur und Poesie*, n. 92).

⁶ *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, herausgegeben von H. Eichner, München, Paderborn, Wien, Schöningh, Zürich, Thomas-Verlag, Bd. II: *Charakteristiken und Kritiken I (1796-1801)*, 1967, *Lyceums-Fragmente*, n. 115.

⁷ Read, for example, the following fragment: «Die Basis aller Wissenschaften und Künste muß eine W[issenschaft] und Kunst seyn – die man der Algéber vergleichen kann», Novalis, *Schriften*, herausgegeben von R. Samuel, H.-J. Mähl, G. Schulz, Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln, Mainz, Kohlhammer, Bd. III: *Das philosophische Werk II*, 1983, *Abteilung IX: das Allgemeine Brouillon. Materialien zur Enzyklopädistik 1798/99*, n. 90.

⁸ *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, herausgegeben von H. Eichner, München, Paderborn, Wien, Schöningh, Zürich, Thomas-Verlag, Bd. XVI: *Fragmente zur Poesie und Literatur. Erster Teil*, 1981, [IX] *Fragmente zur Poesie und Litteratur. II. und Ideen zu Gedichten (S. 18-95)*, n. 466.

⁹ *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, herausgegeben von E. Behler, München, Paderborn, Wien, F. Schöningh, Zürich, Thomas-Verlag, Bd. XVIII: *Philosophische Lehrjahre 1796-1806. Nebst philosophischen Manuskripten aus den Jahren 1796-1828. Erster Teil*, 1962, *Beilagen [VIII]. Zur Philosophie [≈ 1803-1807]*, n. 110.