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Chaos and Morphogenesis in German Romanticism

1. Aesthetic absolute

If there is to be a common element in the manner in which poetic form is conceived in German romanticism, this could be defined using the concept of secularisation.

Talking about the secularisation of the poetic form in this context is not to be seen as a simple evocative suggestion. Rather it is the actual thing-in-itself that presents itself in these terms, in a paradoxical journey liberating – in line with modern art's own defining characteristic – art from the sacred and the absolute, to become absolute itself. This is a problem that clearly emerges in Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, who has, at times, been evocatively defined as the first among the romantics; but also in the works of Ludwig Tieck, who was Wackenroder's friend and collaborator. In Wackenroder's eyes the sacred nature of German medieval art and Italian Renaissance art (which constitutes a paradigm for art *tout court*) is revealed where such continuity has been interrupted. The apologia of the art of the past, that insists on its religious nature, on its absolute reach, is possible only within a present that has indeed broken the bond between art and the sacred. Art asserts its claim to absoluteness just as it shows its terrible loss of contact with absolute truth, almost becoming ineffectual. Wackenroder significantly contributes to this, as the religious sphere is truly what connects art to daily life, in keeping with a never discarded continuity between individual, world, and cosmos, as paradigmatically asserted by Dürer in Mediaeval Nuremberg.

On the other hand, what is the *status* of present art? What shape does the latter take, with its claim to the aesthetic absolute, as opposed to the other, that kept the religious absolute as a standpoint, to which the elements of truth and aesthetic appearance were in the end subordinate? Let's go back to Dürer, and in particular to a text by Wackenroder dedicated to the German master. In *Homage to the memory of our revered forefather Albrecht Dürer from an art-loving monk*, after recalling the lost living conditions of old Nuremberg, the art-loving monk asserts that modern art has betrayed the conditions that are needed for the creation of an authentic work of art, or rather and more precisely it springs from their denial: in direction

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of an exercise of art as technical skill, and then as a kind of experience which is only aesthetic without a wide significance.

Now, we are, here, in the presence of that two-step by which art, that has freed itself from the sacred, it has after all access to another form of absolute – only aesthetic, only artistic; it becomes an absolute in itself and presents itself, first and foremost from an etymological standpoint, as the unconditional: art has distanced itself, it has loosened its bonds on the two dimensions it was tied to traditionally, the sacred and the truth, to impose itself independently. The absolute that is envisioned is, therefore, an absolute in loss, a paradoxical absolute, a near-absolute, one could say, of poverty. We are dealing with a surprising *pas de deux* that leads us, on the one hand, to *l'art pour l'art* and the aesthetic absolute and, on the other hand, to nihilism, the most direct descendant of this aesthetic absolute. What, in fact, is romantic nihilism if not the most patent testimony of the truly absolute power that artistry has taken on, forsaking the relationship with the other two elements to which the absolute was traditionally connected: i.e. truth and goodness? Thus absolute beauty is suddenly proposed as a separate sphere, that of *l'art pour l'art*, originating – as has been said – from that distancing of the truly aesthetic sphere from the two elements that were still associated with it in Schlegel's first attempt to found a systematic aesthetics, *Von der Schönheit in der Dichtkunst*. In this work the beauty of poetic art is actually thematized in relation to goodness and truth. Thus, however, art encounters also the nihilism of pure appearance, the one that Wackenroder denounces in his second passage above. Art having lost contact with the truth-and with goodness, assumes two definitions that are not evident at first: on the one hand that of artificial, a *Künstlichkeit* that signals that subjectivity has taken on that distance from but also that dominance over materials that leads it to the very borders of free will; and on the other – as a kind of inevitable consequence – we have nihilism.

It will be Hegel, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, and paradoxically partly alongside the Romantics themselves, who will denounce this new *status* of modern art which has forfeited absolute truth, and is incapable of expressing it adequately. Even this art that has reduced itself within the confines of artificiality, that has lost its relationship with the absolute (be it, I repeat, to impose itself as absolute, as the aesthetic absolute) will end up testifying to a sort of infinite exuberance, that from romantic nihilism to Nietzsche has been constantly denounced, and which, depending on the author or even within a single work (Nietzsche is again a case in point), can turn into exaltation.

It is truly in this intimately duplicitous attitude that the double-sided face of absolute art is revealed. Art, as it is absolute, can never hold back from a comparison with the other absolute of which it is but a surrogate. It becomes then, so to speak, a second absolute, that – starting from *Bonaventura's Night Vigils* by the Anonymous (August Klingemann?) and coming to (citing without order) names such as Jean Paul, E.T.A. Hoffmann – creates phantom universes; and the degraded meaning of this absolute is revealed only in the light which has become in the meantime a critic of absolute truth. Nevertheless this absoluteness that *only* pertains to aesthetics is inclined to present itself as a pervasive reality, permeating the universe,

tending to aestheticize it. A dimension that impregnates the religious cosmos, giving it an almost aesthetic aspect, that interprets it as the *erhabenstes Kunstwerk*, the “most sublime masterpiece” of the human race; thus religiousness is viewed as an ecstatic contemplation of the universe, where the stable metaphysic determination of the divine is dissolving to assume instead a mythopoetic semblance.

But this aspect of an absoluteness whose distinctive trait of metaphysical finality is constantly transcended, coincides, in line with what will be examined later, with another dimension of the absolute and of transcendence, that is typically romantic, and not simply, as is usual with this egoic emphasising that is brought about through the *medium* of transcendental imagination, fichtian. We will find ourselves within a frame (where Jacobi’s influence plays a fundamental role) in which the transcendence of the absolute is revealed as complete alterity that exhibits its own peculiar absoluteness precisely in its intranscendibility. This is how the aesthetic absolute appears as intrinsically contradictory, i.e. in terms of *in relation to*; and this strange absoluteness, which is lacking, cannot present itself in the classical sense as a complete and well-rounded presence.

These considerations place us yet again at the heart of the *Romantik*-Hegel debate regarding the death of art, rather depriving the latter of authority, since, along these lines, art is given back its own absoluteness on the one hand, but, on the other, paradoxically, one escapes from the *hybris* of the latter, to the emptiness of sole appearance, correlating it once again to an unattainable infinity.

2. Chaos as genesis

Now, exactly because of this, it may be useful to remember that German romanticism is to define also as a poetics of birth; and so the correlation between chaos and morphogenesis is present right from the start. Furthermore, in this context, a thoroughly anti-idealistic proposition is revealed, aiming to substitute the supremacy of a single origin with the idea of a double origin, that is able to bind the polar opposites of spirit and body, visible and invisible, word and silence, etc. In many respects, *Frühromantik* is a philosophy that proposes the problem of relation in terms of the *emergence* of being from a state of not-being that comes first; thus we are dealing with genesis by considering the identity of the subject in terms of its relations, that is on the basis of its differentiation from otherness.

This can be found, not only on the philosophical plane but also for example on the pictorial one, where, for example, Philipp Otto Runge expresses his metaphysical ideas relating to the genesis of pictorial art, which are not so different from the ontological one, as a process where nature reveals itself to consciousness².

The question could be greatly extended; but here I would simply like to cite Novalis as an example and then Friedrich Schlegel. From the former’s perspective,

2 P.O. Runge, *Color Sphere*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2010.

therefore, nature as the place of genesis, is not to be seen as stable, but in constant evolution – one could say: *from chaos to form*. In his *Allgemeines Brouillon* Novalis asserts for example that: “Nature is a *singular image* of the eternal kingdom. The world of fairy tales is the *absolute opposite* world to the world of truth (history) – and for this reason so *remarkably similar* to it – as *chaos* is to *completed creation*”³.

In this definition of being we move uninterruptedly (according to a tendency also present in Goethe’s work) from nature to the structuring of the being, from nature to culture. Morality is for Novalis where the definition of the individual being occurs; it pushes the flow of creation towards a formal definition, moving towards spirituality. He leads us from character to character, defining and distinguishing, in a constant need to improve, where this progressive definition is leading to an increased chaos: the place in which all the characters fuse into one. This is the process that Novalis will deal with in his *Ofterdingen*.

Thus, chaos is the realm of pure intensity that needs to be extended, in this analogy to the thing-in-itself and to the unconditioned absolute that encompasses all possibilities before being explicitly rendered.

We are dealing with a purely negative determination, the realm of a truly inexplicable intensity, as we were saying, that Novalis associates to the thing-in-itself. The thing-in-itself represents the undetermined absolute, pure and simple matter in need of being processed and therefore of being inserted within a framework of relations to find definition:

...We could say – the world has come into being out of a *silly question*)⁴.

Also in Schlegel, in the essay on *Univerständlichkeit*, on incomprehension, a similar assumption can be found. Here too chaos is that dimension that originates the definition of being:

Verily, it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest. And isn’t this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos?⁵

Chaos is therefore, coming back to Novalis after this short digression – the inexplicable that needs to be explicitly rendered. This explicit rendition creates a framework of relations that is at the same time the framework that makes up the identity of each individual being. The identity of a being is defined as a constant need to relate

3 Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia. Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, ed. D.W. Wood, Suny Press, Albany (NY). 2007, Kindle Edition, 716 (234).

4 Novalis, *Notes, cit., Extract from the Freiburg Natural Scientific Studies* (1798/99), 2845 (94).

5 F. Schlegel, *On Incomprehensibility*, in trans. P. Firchow, F. Schlegel *Lucinde and the Fragments*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1971, p. 261.

to someone; this is testified particularly in Novalis *Allgemeines Brouillon*, an encyclopaedic project pertaining not only to knowledge but foremost to ontology itself.

Enciclopedia“Transcendental physics is the *first* science, yet the lowest – like the *Doctrine of Science*...It treats of *Nature*, before it *becomes Nature* – in those states, where *mixture* and *motion*, (matter and force) are still one. Transformation of chaos into harmonious *heaven and hearth*”⁶.

This transformation of chaos into order coincides in the encyclopaedia as this is the place of ontologic definition; chaos and formal definition, origin and completion, are, from this point of view, in very close contact moving from the realm of possibility to reality, so that Novalis can formulate this utopic assertion:

In the world of the *future* everything is just as it in the *former* world – and *yet everything is utterly different*. The world of the *future* is *rational* chaos – chaos suffused with itself – inside and outside of itself – chaos or ∞ ⁷.

Now one must not forget that the chaos/order relationship coincides for Novalis, as for Goethe, with the ancient/modern relationship and vice versa; in such a way that natural elements flow into historical and cultural ones. So, in Novalis’ eyes, a universe that deals with the problem of morphologic definition within infinity is modern; that is an indefinite redefinition of the relationships within which form takes shape. Thus chaos is the unlimited flow of form that looks onto the infinite universe (modern, idealism), which is, however, also closed within the confines of the cosmos (old, realism).

From this standpoint utopia and tradition are not alternative but complementary in the definition of modernity:

Synthesis of the *ancient* and *modern*⁸.

And again:

Our (modern) history has antiquity at the end – our (older) history at the beginning – et sic porro⁹.

But if we translate the ancient-modern-ancient formula into “chaos-form-chaos” are we not coming back to the core of the (ontological) question, that of identity definition which is the common thread of these notations? And, wanting to conclude these reflections with a simple notation: is this not the same project outlined in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*? Here the peak of the characters’ final agnition process is reached with the confusion of origin and completion, with the one flowing into the multitude and the multitude as one, according to the notion that

6 Novalis, *Notes, cit.*, 398 (50).

7 Novalis, *Notes, cit.* 717 (234).

8 Novalis, *Notes, cit.*, 2155 (838).

9 Novalis, *Notes, cit.*, 518 (99).

in the end chaos is order, but an order that is grounded and dispersed within each single entity, after this has experienced the unity of the multitude.

Order (chaotic) is, therefore, the principle of singularity beyond the univocality of being, according to the notion that its very foundation is dispersed in each and every single individual renewing the uniqueness of the morphological concretion each time.