

ART AND KNOWLEDGE IN ROMANTIC PHILOSOPHY

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บทความนี้ผู้เขียนนำเสนอโลกทัศน์บางอย่างของความรู้และบทกวีของปรัชญาโรแมนติคเยอรมันในยุคเริ่มแรกจากมุมมองที่ไม่เป็นระบบเป้าหมายหลักไม่ใช่เพื่อการนำประวัติของปรัชญาโรแมนติคยุคเริ่มแรกมาสร้างใหม่ ผู้เขียนต้องการชี้ให้เห็นว่าข้อความทางทฤษฎีบางอย่างของนักคิดโรแมนติคยังคงมีความต่อเนื่องกับความคิดยุคปัจจุบัน ความคิดแนวโรแมนติคบางอย่างเกี่ยวกับความเป็นจริงและการสร้างสรรค์ศิลปะเป็นองค์ประกอบที่สำคัญของความคิดแบบตะวันตกและเป็นเงื่อนไขหนึ่งของประสบการณ์ประจำวันของเราเกี่ยวกับชีวิตและศิลปะแม้ว่าเราจะไม่ได้ตระหนักถึงเรื่องนี้ก็ตาม ผู้เขียนจะนำเสนอมนทัศน์สองอย่างเป็นแนวทาง กล่าวคือ มโนทัศน์เรื่องความเป็นจริงและมโนทัศน์เรื่องการจำลอง

Abstract

In this essay I will present some approaches to knowledge and poetics by the early German romantic philosophers. My main purpose is not a historical reconstruction of early romantic philosophy, but to point out its continuity with present thought. The essay will demonstrate that the romantic ideas concerning reality and artistic creation are still a constitutive part of western thought and a condition of our everyday experience of life and art, even if we are not aware of it. I will use two concepts as a guiding thread: the concept of reality and the concept of imitation.

Today we live in a world where everything seems relative. In our life everything is determined: everything has a dimension and a duration. Everything was made, everything has a purpose and it is connected with other things, that is to say, it is in *relation* with other things. For instance, we can say a book is on the table because we consider the “book” *is not* the “table” on which it lies. Everything is because it is not something different. In our everyday experience everything seems relative, because everything is related with other distinct things.

But in 19th century romantic philosophy we find a peculiar idea of reality, called the “absolute”. In our everyday lives, we consider the distinctness and relativity of things to the point where we have lost the sense for absolute and the meaning of the word. Nevertheless we can have glimpse of the original meaning of absolute if we consider such ideas as “God” or the experience of “love”. Even today, even in our “relativistic” and materially “conditioned” world, a “relative” or “conditional” love is not worth serious consideration.

For the romantic philosophers, *the absolute* is the central concept of concern. The absolute reality can be considered the infinite [in German: *das Unendliche*], or the un-conditioned [*das Unbedingte*], or simply the absolute [das Absolute]. Accordingly, the task of philosophy is to explain how we can conceive a finite reality. It is to understand the conditioned reality, and the relative, conditioned things of our everyday life, from the perspective of the absolute. For romantic philosophers the reality of the absolute is not the main problem. The task of philosophy is to explain the existence of finite reality.

For us, today, the concept of absolute is not so obvious. The challenge is to attempt to explain it and recover its importance through the romantic philosophers. The absolute is the unconditional reality: what is not conditioned by other things and what is not relative to other things, what is free from capture by any point of view.

The word “absolute” derives from the Latin adjective:

Absolutus = *ab-solutus* = not tied, not bound, i.e. free, not conditioned by anything, without bond, without connection.

In romantic philosophy the absolute is the only reality, it is object and subject at once, it is infinite, without beginning and without end. Determined things, finite things of the material world of experience are nothing but parts of the absolute, determinations inside the absolute.

The concept of absolute was unknown in classical age: for Plato and Aristotle perfection is related to measure and limit, whereas the unlimited and the infinite suggest imperfection. “Cosmos” is the finite and ordinate universe conceived by Plato. It is not until Nikolaus Cusanus (1400) that we find a philosopher using the word “absolute” to refer to God. God is beyond our possibility of knowledge and God is the first historical experience of absolute. God is something immeasurable, to whom nothing can be compared; he is the absolute; since our knowledge proceeds by comparison, God cannot be object of knowledge. Following Cusanus, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) proposed an infinite universe as effect of God’s (infinite) creative power. We can say that the romantic concept of absolute is derived from Spinoza and Bruno’s concept of nature as a necessary creation of God. The infinite effect (nature) of an infinite cause (God) is infinite.

Kant uses the word “conditioned” referring to the world of nature which we can know by means of intellect, whereas we can have experience of the “unconditioned” only by means of our freedom (morality). We can consider the epitaph inscribed on Kant’s gravestone.

Two things fill me with increasing wonder: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.

This well-known epitaph, drawn from his writings, recalls the two realms which are the central topics of Kant’s philosophy: on one hand knowable nature; on the other hand the infinite reality attested by our freedom and by the moral law. Nature and spirit: these are the two correlated realms that the romantic philosophers try to unify.

Romantic philosophers will think the absolute in the Kantian meaning of “unconditioned”: absolute is nature, but nature as a whole, not as an object of understanding or intellect (which understands natural rules), but in its freedom. The whole as absolute cannot be conditioned, it is necessarily free.

The romantic poet and philosopher Novalis wrote:

Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge.

We look everywhere for the absolute, and we always find only things.

Novalis, *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs II* [Stuttgart, Kohlhammer: 1960] p.454.

The unconditioned (absolute) cannot be any object of knowledge; in the world we can only find things [German: *Dinge*], but we look for the absolute [*das Unbedingte*], which is not a thing and which cannot be a thing. This fact explains a general romantic attitude: passion, desire and *longing for* something (which one cannot reach) are more satisfying than the *possession* of a thing.

Romantic philosophers do not consider the infinite or absolute as an object of intellectual knowledge or of material possession. Romantic philosophers try to *think the relationship between finite and infinite* in its necessity, they try to catch the unceasing movement of reality between finite (things) and infinite (absolute). The central interest of early romantic philosophers was not the *possession* of finite (which cannot satisfy us), nor the infinite (which we cannot reach), but the *necessary relationship* between them (that we experience primarily as a desire and a *longing*).

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The idea that art is an imitation of nature has lasted for more than two thousand years. Imitation is the easiest and most *natural* in order to explain the relationship between things of nature and things called “works of art”.

Karl Philipp Moritz (1756-1793) wrote the work *On Creative Imitation of Beauty* [*Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*] in 1788. Moritz considers imitation from a new perspective. The artist imitates nature not imitating its creations (objects or natural things), but imitating nature as a creative principle.

The moment of creation is more important than the created object, because the act of creation is the creation of a new reality, it does not matter if it is the reality of a work of art instead of the reality of a natural thing.

Moritz's concept of "uselessness" [*das Unnützliche*] characterizes "beauty" as an ontological example of a perfect being. A thing of beauty does not need anything except itself.

With the concept "useful" we think of the relationship of a thing, that we consider as a part, with the connection of things [*Zusammenhang der Dinge*], which we think as a whole [*als ein Ganzes*]. [...] The whole, considered as a whole, on the contrary, needs no relationship with something else except with itself.

Moritz, *Werke* [Frankfurt, Insel: 1981] p.558

The artist's imitation is an imitation of reality in its very essence, which is a creative essence. The artist should imitate the creative power of nature (*natura naturans*) rather than the created product of nature (*natura naturata*). The work of art is an experience of the essence of reality, the creative principle of nature, and not just a copy of existing things.

In such a perspective the work of art does not need to appear realistic. It does not need to be justified by a similarity to any natural thing.

The work of art is a self-sufficient and "by itself consisting" whole, similar in the origin and in the structure (not in the appearance) to the whole of nature. Accordingly, since the work of art is reality, it does not need to imitate it. It is a small representation of the world, but from the philosophical point of view, work of art and world of nature lie on the same ontological level.

The great connection of things is the only, true whole; every single whole in it [...] is nothing but a product of imagination.

Every beautiful whole of the creative artist is nothing but an imprint [*Abdruck*] of the highest beauty in the great whole of nature.

Moritz, *Werke* [Frankfurt, Insel: 198] p.558

We could say that the work of art has not any “transitive” meaning, i.e. it does not mean anything existing in the world, it does not mean anything else and it has not any meaning except itself. Art becomes a non-imitative activity, a source of knowledge of reality in its essence. The work of art receives a new ontological *status*: it is “arbitrary”, it is freed from rules, from the will of representing reality, but this freedom and this “arbitrary” character reveals the essence of reality. The romantic concept of work of art is a self-sufficient whole, similar in the origin and in the structure to the whole of nature.

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Although for us this view of art may seem foreign, and the absolute may seem a distant concept, for the Romantics it was the very thing which art expresses. Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg] (1772-1801) and Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854) considered art as the way to know the absolute reality.

The work of art has a relational aspect, but it does not present any determinate content; that is, it does not communicate any truth by means of concepts, but presents a relationship between things. It forms a structure or system. The romantics considered this system presented by the work of art as reality in its highest form: the absolute. According to Friedrich Schlegel it is through the structure of the work of art that we can have an experience of the infinite or absolute. In his *Dialogue on Poetry* [*Gespräch Über die Poesie*] Schlegel takes the old classical mythology as an example. Mythology, as work of art, is the way by which the absolute reveals itself in the finite, in history.

Mythology is a work of art of nature. In its fabric [structure] are really shaped the supreme things, in it everything is relation and metamorphosis; everything receives a form and is transformed. [...] And here I find a great similarity with the great wit of romantic poetry, which shows itself not in individual tricks, but in the construction of the whole.

[...]

All plays of art are nothing but a far imitation of the infinite play of the world, of the eternal and self-creating work of art.

F. Schlegel, *Kritische Fr.-Schlegel-Ausgabe II* [Schoening, München: 1958] p.318

In the work of art (of which mythology is an example) the real subject of the work is the whole, the totality, whereas the finite determinations (the visible and concrete contents of the work) are nothing but means, devices, artifices or tricks to get this whole.

The work of art presents reality in its relational structure: we experience a relationship between things before we meet the things themselves. The work of art presents the world because of its structure and not because of its content. The presentation of a specific content is not the principal aim of the work of art.

As we have seen, the work of art cannot be simply considered as an imitation of reality, but it is reality, it presents reality in its structure. It presents reality as “the absolute”. Even today in our relativistic world we could say that the work of art offers the experience of a relationship between things rather than the experience of a thing. In the experience of a work of art we do not see simply a new thing, but we can see usual things under a new light and in a new perspective. By means of the work of art we have neither the experience of a real thing nor of a real person, but we can live a new relation with things, facts, persons, since the work of art discloses a new perspective.

Novalis writes that, “Poetry elevates each individual phenomenon through an original association with the rest of the whole”. It does not mean that poetry is an instrument of knowledge. Poetry works in this way, connecting the individual with the totality, because poetry is the essence of reality, or better it is reality in its secret essence:

Poetry is the genuine absolute reality. That is the kernel of my philosophy. The more poetic, the truer.

Novalis, *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs II* [Stuttgart, Kohlhammer: 1960] p.647.

Poetry is reality. In other words, poetry is the essence of reality (*ratio essendi*) and so it is the way to understand reality (*ratio cognoscendi*). Poetry is the most important form of art, since the poetical language shows the essence of reality:

In the language [i. e. poetry] happens that words are a world apart. Words reflect the unusual game of the relations between things. Only through freedom they are members of nature and only in their free movement the soul of the world reveals itself.

Novalis, *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs* II [Stuttgart, Kohlhammer: 1960] p.414.

Poetry tells us the truth, whereas history tells us facts without an essential connection.

There is more truth in a fairy-tale than in a chronicle. Though characters and events are invented, the sense in which they have been invented is true and natural.

Novalis, *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs* I [Stuttgart, Kohlhammer: 1960] p.259.

The truth of the “invented sense” is the truth of the work of art, the absolute expressed in a finite form.

We can now read a fairy-tale composed by Novalis himself which presents the mysterious relationship between nature and absolute. It is Novalis’s fairy-tale of Hyacinth and Little Rose Flower, from the novel *Disciples of Sais*.

Hyacinth is a young man living in a village. He is engaged to Little Rose Flower, a nice girl of the same village. They are happy together, but one day a stranger comes into the village. He is an old man with a long, white beard. He is very wise and well-travelled and he teaches Hyacinth some of the secrets of nature. He gives him a book and, since this moment, Hyacinth loses his happiness. He has interest neither for Little Rose Flower nor for the rest of his family and community. Now he is longing for something that he does not know. Actually, he is striving for the secrets of

nature. One day the fairy of the forest burns Hyacinth's book and tells him that he must move on and meet the "veiled maid". The "veiled maid" is nothing but the goddess Isis, an Egyptian-Greek mythic goddess, the "Mother of all things", the oldest personification of nature. She is veiled because she does not easily surrender her secrets. Hyacinth goes searching for the veiled goddess and he forgets Little Rose Flower, his family and his village. After a long quest, and many experiences, he becomes calmer and less eager to know and to grasp immediately the secrets of nature, i.e. the secret of everything.

At the end of his quest he finally meets the veiled goddess Isis. Now he can lift her veil, the veil hiding nature's secrets. And what does he see under her veil? He finds, after his long searching and wandering, his original love, Little Rose Flower.

This story suggests that our quest for the absolute must start from the conditioned. Reality is an absolute totality where we are involved with determined things and yet are unaware that these determined things are the absolute.

We have to start and to finish in the conditioned, in order to have some intimation of the unconditioned. We realize that we have to undergo a long process to know who we are and to grasp our essence. In other words, we need the finite in order to understand the infinite or the absolute. Hyacinth in the beginning cannot be aware that the secret of nature (Isis), the absolute, is within the nearest thing, in his beloved Little Rose Flower; he must first look for it far away. He needed to face a long journey and many experiences in order to recognize what is nearest to him.

One may consider this a mere fairy-tale, a romantic representation of absolute, and ask what it means for the philosopher? Here we can turn back to Kant. Kant refers to an illustration of the veiled goddess Isis on the front page of a handbook of physics written by Segner, published in the 18th century. He expresses his approval with this image in a note of the *Critique of Judgement* (1790):

Perhaps it was not ever said something more sublime, or expressed a thought in a more sublime way, as in that inscription on the temple of Isis (mother nature): "I am all that what is, and that was and that will be, and no

mortal has raised my veil". Segner used this idea by means of an ingenious picture put on the cover of its book of physics, in order to fill with awe the student who he was preparing to introduce in this temple, and to dispose his spirit to a solemn attention.

Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957] p.176

This suggests that human being (which is nature itself) using the mathematical-scientific method, can follow the steps of nature only so far. He can understand its manifestations, but he cannot know nature itself.

Knowledge of nature presents precise limits. Nature can be measured in its external effects, but it remains an inaccessible secret in presence of which it is often better to be silent. Yet the romantic philosophers have in their own aesthetic way, strived to approach this secret and to unveil the goddess Isis.