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From Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* to Novalis' Poetic Historicity

*Rylie Johnson**

ABSTRACT

This article broadly concerns the role of history in Novalis' romantic philosophy. It is broken up into two parts. First, it contrasts Fichte's system of critical idealism with Novalis' magical idealism. Unlike Fichte, Novalis argues that the "I" can intuit the absolute – constituting the realization of unconditional freedom – through poetry. Given that the end of history consists in the realization of the absolute, then the poet must play an essential role in the process. Second, it argues that the poet's role in history is to re-present human activity – past and contemporary – in terms of a fable, which serves to educate people morally. To render the world moral is to make freedom manifest, which is the teleological goal of history. Practically, Novalis turns this goal into a more political project of reviving European Christendom, which has disappeared as a result of secular modernity.

Keywords: Novalis, Fichte, Absolute, History, Poetry, Christendom, Magical Idealism

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article, "De la *Doctrine de la science* de Fichte à la poétique de l'histoire de Novalis", examine dans ses grandes lignes le rôle que joue l'histoire dans la philosophie romantique de Novalis. Il compare, dans un premier temps, le système de l'idéalisme critique de Fichte et l'idéalisme magique de Novalis. Contrairement à Fichte, Novalis soutient que le "Moi" peut intuitionner l'absolu – et réaliser en cela la liberté inconditionnelle – par le biais de la poésie. Étant donné que la finalité de l'histoire consiste dans la réalisation de l'absolu, le poète doit jouer un rôle essentiel dans ce processus. Dans un second temps, l'article défend l'idée que le rôle du poète dans l'histoire est de re-présenter l'activité humaine – passée comme contemporaine – sous la forme d'une fable servant à éduquer moralement les gens. Rendre le monde moral, c'est rendre la liberté manifeste, ce qui est le but téléologique de l'histoire. En pratique, Novalis fait de cet objectif un projet plus politique : celui de faire revivre la Chrétienté européenne qui a disparu avec la sécularisation moderne.

Mots-clés: Novalis, Fichte, absolu, histoire, poésie, Chrétienté, idéalisme magique

* PhD Candidate, Emory University, Department of Philosophy, 201 Dowman Drive, Atlanta, Georgia 30322 USA – rkjohn3@emory.edu

Introduction: History and Futurity

Novalis' novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* details the education of its protagonist Heinrich into the vocation of a poet.¹ Specifically, Heinrich is educated in five fields of knowledge: war, nature, history, virtue, and poetry. While each field is a necessary component in the education of the poet, we will focus on explicating the particular meaning of history for Novalis. After all, in his incomplete notes for a romantic encyclopedia, entitled *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, Novalis projected the creation of a "historical Doctrine of Science" (*Wissenschaftslehre*).²

While Novalis accounts for the historian's activity as both curator of the past and spectator of the present, he also emphasizes that history is necessarily tied to the anticipation of the future as well.³ This point is also carried over into his encyclopedia, "All history is threefold - remote antiquity, present time and future."⁴ Hence, the historian's task is not just to recollect and represent the past from the perspective of the present, but also to anticipate the future.

This *futural history* is also coextensive with his romantic cosmology. He maintains that through a process of historical development, nature will become moral, i.e. natural and human ends will be in accord, a state that is tantamount to the very realization of God.⁵ However, this process is not merely intellectual, rather it occurs through artistic practice, whereby nature becomes identified with art itself. In particular, he claims that art and nature are united in love, which marks the very end of his cosmology: "Love is the final goal of *world history* – the One of the universe."⁶ Consequently, we can see that Novalis' theory of history goes beyond human activity to include the cosmos as a whole. Given his claim in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* that poetry is meant to convey the nature of love, we can already posit that the poet has a necessarily historical task, realizing the very end of history itself.⁷

¹ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (Long Grove: Waveland Press Inc., 1992). I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team for their criticism and support, which greatly helped improve this article.

² Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (Albany/N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2007), #429, 66.

³ For historian Reinhart Koselleck, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* reflects the late eighteenth century debates regarding the constitution of history. History was not just the purview of the past, but a dynamic subject that connected the past with the future. He writes, "*Geschichte* (history) did not then primarily mean the past, as it did later; rather it indicated that covert connection of the bygone with the future whose relationship can only be perceived when one has learned to construct history from the modalities of memory and hope." Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), 270.

⁴ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, #598, 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*, #78, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, #50, 8.

⁷ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 116.

In order to better grasp Novalis theory of history, it will be contrasted with Fichte's philosophical system, which according to Novalis remains at the level of pre-history.⁸ Novalis criticizes Fichte's absolute "I" insofar as it lies only at the beginning of history, or rather the point anterior to history, since the absolute is rendered as the condition of time: "Fichte's ego – is a Robinson Crusoe – a scientific *fiction* – to facilitate the presentation and development of the *Doctrine of Science* (*Wissenschaftslehre*) – like the beginning of history etc."⁹ The absolute "I" is an epistemological premise with no reality unto itself. Even when Fichte pays heed to what is to come or what ought to come, the absolute "I" is only a regulative idea that the empirical "I" must strive for infinitely, i.e. without end.¹⁰ Consequently, if the realization of the absolute "I" in empirical reality is understood as the end of historical development, and this end is necessarily unrealizable, then the end of history is a fundamentally impossible concept.

How do we square Novalis' theory of history with the influence that Fichte had on the very shape of that theory? This article argues that the distinction can be found in Novalis' critique of the Fichtean absolute; for Novalis, the realization of the absolute is not an infinite task, but something that can be achieved through poetry. Consequently, the end of history becomes an actual possibility for Novalis. As such, there is a utopian kernel in Novalis' thought that can be fleshed out, relative to Fichte's more abstract, ideal system.

This argument will take shape in three parts. First, given that this is a paper on the philosophy of history, we will contextualize Novalis' and Fichte's views on historical development relative to debates regarding history in the late eighteenth century. Second, we will compare and contrast Fichte's critical idealist system with Novalis' magical idealism. Unlike the former, the

⁸ Why Fichte? Novalis' philosophical thought was largely informed by his studies on Fichte. It is for this reason that, according to Frederick C. Beiser, Novalis was for a long time dismissed as simply constructing a "poetic version of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*." Today, however, Novalis is recognized as a thinker in his own right who was quite critical of Fichte's system. For Beiser, Novalis belongs to the tradition of absolute idealism, pre-dating and anticipating both Schelling's and Hegel's respective systems. Specifically, Novalis criticizes Fichte for his reduction of the absolute to the "I," and sought to "synthesize Fichte and Spinoza" through an appeal to an absolute *qua* God. However, this point is not uncontested. Hence, in her book *The Romantic Absolute*, Dalia Nassar criticizes Beiser for rendering the romantic project into a kind of Spinozism; obscuring the romantic investment in constructing the "I" in a manner consistent with Fichte. As such, Novalis' philosophical projecting consists in realizing God in the world through the activity of the "I," but not in a matter of striving; a task, which, unlike Nassar or Beiser, this article seeks to show, is necessarily historical in nature. See: Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 420; Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795-1804* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 11.

⁹ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, #717, 132.

¹⁰ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 286.

latter contends that the “I” can intuit the absolute – in this case, God – constituting the realization of unconditioned freedom (the harmonization of nature and morality). Moreover, this intuitive freedom can be instantiated in the world through rendering nature as an artwork, especially through poetry. This capacity to realize the absolute in practice makes possible the end of history. Second, we will argue that if poetry is the art that best presents the absolute, the poet must also be a historian in some form. This will explain why an education in history is necessary for the formation of the poet. As such, the poet-historian emerges as an agential force for the realization of the absolute.

1. The End of History?

Before further explicating the historical nature of Fichte’s and Novalis’ respective philosophical projects, it is necessary to contextualize this article in relation to notions of history that were operative in the late-eighteenth century. In his book *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Reinhart Koselleck argues that consistent with the enlightenment project of the eighteenth century was the rise of a distinct historical consciousness. In light of the French revolution, the notion of history transformed from the instructive representation of the past into a subject in its own right. Accordingly, one could now speak of history as being the agent of social transformation (e.g. one can be on the “wrong side of history”). In the German language, this is marked by the transition of generally denoting history with the word *Historie* to *die Geschichte*, i.e. from history as an account of past events to a collective singular narrative. In being rendered into a narrative, history takes on characteristics of an epic poem.¹¹ Koselleck writes: “Increasingly, historical narrative was expected to provide the unity found in the epic derived from the existence of Beginning and End.”¹² Accordingly, the notion of an end of history is itself a product of this new historical consciousness.

For Koselleck, modernity ushered in a distinct futurity that replaced religious eschatology (i.e. the anticipation of the end of the world) with the notion of indefinite progress. “The future became a domain of finite possibilities, arranged according to their greater or lesser probability.”¹³

¹¹ In his lectures on the philosophy of history, G.W.F. Hegel had explicitly made this point of connecting history as *Geschichte* with narrative. “In our language the term *History* (*Geschichte*) unites the objective with the subjective side, and denotes quite as much the *historia rerum gestarum*, as the *res gestae* themselves; on the other hand it comprehends not less what has *happened*, than the *narratives* of what has happened. This union of the two meanings we must regard as of a higher order than mere outward accident; we must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 60.

¹² Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

However, although the future became an open horizon of relative possibilities, the notion of an end of history nonetheless remained operative. In other words, those distinct possibilities are framed within a generalized goal that history itself strives for. In the philosophy of history this took shape both in the idea that history has an end, in the sense of a teleological goal, and the construction of a universal account of history, i.e. all particular histories became inscribed within a singular, over-arching history. Furthermore, this appeal to historical teleology was matched with a sublimation of chance and contingency, in favor of necessity. As Koselleck notes, Novalis is emblematic of this point insofar as he argued that the craft of history involves taking up chance events and rendering them into a “pleasing and instructive whole,” forming them into something poetic in shape.¹⁴

These three aspects of history (teleological, universal, and necessary) were particularly embodied in German idealist thought. Before Novalis and Fichte, for example, in his essay “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” Immanuel Kant had hypothesized that history is the process that will ultimately bring about the “perfectly constituted state” that is consistent with human nature.¹⁵ After Novalis and Fichte, Hegel posited the notion of an end of history more forcefully, arguing that its end consisted in the realization of freedom in the world:

The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom; a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature, it is our business to investigate ... The destiny of the spiritual world, and ... *the final cause of the world at large*, we allege to be the *consciousness* of its own freedom on the part of Spirit, and *ipso facto*, the *reality* of that freedom.¹⁶

With this in mind, it should be clear that Novalis' and Fichte's futural reflections on the end of history are consistent with their own historical period, albeit the former with a romantic orientation. Indeed, as we will see, they reflect the general German idealist trend that history is a process that reflects the progressive realization of freedom.

However, this trend experienced its own end with the rise of historicism in the middle of the nineteenth century. As Frederick C. Beiser argues, this new scientific approach to history would ultimately “liberate” itself from the philosophy of history, including the work of Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and by extension Novalis. This was primarily due to the fact that these philosophers were not practicing historians. “The problem was that the philosophers – Schiller, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel – had little idea of, or appreciation for, the distinctive methods and goals of historical research. They saw history as

¹⁴ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *On History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1985), 21.

¹⁶ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 19.

part of philosophy, and they could conceive it only as the philosophy of history.”¹⁷ In opposition to a universal and teleological history, historicism contends that each historical era has its own coherency, which must not be subsumed into some overarching historical goal. As such, historicism should be interpreted as a “break” with the Enlightenment, which would include the historical consciousness discussed by Koselleck.¹⁸ Although this is certainly not to say that universal and teleological history is not an operative concept in the world today. In any case, with this historical backdrop in place, this article turns to explicate Fichte’s system and its relation to the philosophy of history.

2. Fichte’s Absolute “I” and Historical Striving

Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* (*Science of Knowledge*) is structured around the opposition between his own system of “critical idealism” and what he designates as “dogmatism.” The former reduces and grounds all conscious experience in the activity of the free, self-positing “I.” Whereas the latter grounds experience in a posited thing-in-itself, of which the “I” is only a specific modification thereof. However, given that the thing-in-itself cannot appear to consciousness, Fichte maintains that it is a “pure invention.”¹⁹ Moreover, in a rebuke to Kant, positing the existence of a thing-in-itself has no explanatory power precisely for this same reason.

The primary problem with dogmatism consists in the fact that it is incompatible with freedom. Consciousness itself becomes an appearance that is conditioned upon the thing-in-itself. Consequently, dogmatic systems necessarily result in a form of fatalism. Conversely, the advantage of critical idealism is precisely that it posits “the presence in consciousness of the freely acting intellect, which is the basis of its explanation of experience.”²⁰ In other words, critical idealism is consistent with freedom. But while it has this advantage over dogmatism, neither system can actually be proven to be true, nor can they “refute” each other.²¹ They are both rooted in first principles, which are the presuppositions that the respective systems derive their results from. As Fichte explains in *The Vocation of Man*:

In short, neither of the two opinions [systems] can be justified with reasons ... I cannot ever become conscious either of the external forces which determine me in the system of universal necessity [dogmatism] nor of my own power through which I determine myself in the system of freedom [critical idealism]. Whichever of the two opinions I may

¹⁷ Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁹ Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 428.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 430.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 429.

adopt, therefore, I will always adopt it simply because I happen to adopt it.²²

Since neither system is provable, the choice between them is a function of one's personality and desires. In short, the difference is between those who want to consider themselves free and those who do not.

Fichte's system is grounded on three fundamental principles: (1) the absolutely unconditioned principle, the law of identity ($A=A$); (2) the law of opposition (A does not = $\sim A$); (3) the law of mutual restriction or limitation ($A=\sim A$, which means that both poles of the equation are not totally negated, but mutually divided). The first simply posits the self-evident law of identity, $A=A$, which also states the conditional claim that if "A exists, *then* A exists," or X. X can also be rendered as "if A is posited, then A exists as posited." But what does the positing? The self, or simply the "I." Hence: "if A is posited in the self, it is thereby posited, or, it thereby is."²³ Now, if there is a positing "I," then the "I" also exists. In this case, the "I" is self-positing, which is represented by the proposition "I=I," or "I am I." Positing anything in experience presupposes the "I's" self-identity. "Hence it is a ground of explanation of all the facts of empirical consciousness, that prior to all postulation in the self, the self itself is posited."²⁴ However, as the condition of empirical consciousness, the absolute, self-positing "I" is not itself a possible object of experience. It is rather something known immediately by an Act (*Tathandlung*) of "intellectual intuition."²⁵

As an abstraction, in order to represent its identity, the absolute "I" must empirically demonstrate its activity by "counter-positing" a "not-I" upon which it can act. This introduces the principle of opposition (A does not = $\sim A$), which posits that the "I" is opposed to the "Not-I." As Fichte puts it: "As surely as the absolute certainty of the proposition 'A is not equal to A' is unconditionally admitted among the facts of empirical consciousness, *so surely is a not-self opposed absolutely to the self.*"²⁶ However, since the absolute "I posits the opposition," this produces a logical contradiction whereby the "I" posits the "not-I" ($I=\sim I$).²⁷

The third principle is meant to resolve the contradiction above. The "I" and "Not-I" mutually limit/divide each other: "In the self, *I oppose a divisible 'not-I' to the divisible 'I.'*"²⁸ Fichte argues that to limit something is not to "abolish its reality," but only to negate a part of its being.²⁹ Moreover,

²² Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Press, 1987), 24.

²³ Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 93-94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 463.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

given that the absolute “I” is initially posited as infinite because it is not limited, to divide it relative to a “not-I” renders the “I” finite. This produces a further contradiction in need of resolution: the infinite “I” posits itself as finite.

Fichte attempts to resolve this second contradiction by means of his concept of “striving” (*Streben*), which refers to the inherent drive in the finite “I” to determine itself through the negation of the “not-I,” effectively becoming the absolute, infinite “I” it intuitively knows itself to be.³⁰ By introducing striving to his system, Fichte makes it largely into a practical task where the finite “I” desires to become absolutely free (i.e. not bound by the “not-I”).³¹ However, given that the system strives for the infinite, the task itself becomes infinite, and therefore impossible to complete. At best, the finite “I” can only seek to “approximate” the infinite.³²

By making his system an infinite task, it can never be realized in time. Consequently, there is no historical completion; at least insofar as history is understood as the detailed account of human striving. This is not to say that there is no account of history in Fichte’s corpus. *The Vocation of Man*, for example, presents a history of the steps that humans have taken to realize their freedom in the world (like the foundation of the state). There is even a futural dimension to this history, since Fichte thinks that there is a progressive striving to make the world better, or more in line with human freedom: “I simply cannot think of the present situation of mankind as the final and permanent one, simply cannot think of it as mankind’s whole and final destiny ... My whole life incessantly flows towards the future and better state of things.”³³ As such, Fichte projects the cultivation of humanity by

³⁰ Ibid., 261.

³¹ It is important to understand Fichte’s concept of freedom in relation to its conceptual opposite, necessity; or to be more specific, the necessity of nature. According to Frederick C. Beiser, Fichte accepts the Kantian definition of freedom as “spontaneity:” to be a first cause. However, this cause cannot be purely indeterminate. There has to be a reason for acting in the first place. But, if there is a reason, then this reintroduces necessity into behavior, undermining freedom. Fichte avoids this problem by specifically framing freedom as a matter of “self-determination.” The “I” determines the ends by which it acts, which are not reducible to natural necessity. But, this does not mean that necessity entirely disappears, given that Fichte argues that self-determination can only take place through harnessing nature (i.e. the “not-I”) in order that its purposes will be determined only by itself, and not something other. Outside the practical task of mastering nature to accord with the absolute “I,” there is also a moral dimension to this striving towards self-determination. In her interpretation of Fichte’s *Vocation of Man*, Angelica Nuzzo argues that the “I” determines its self through following moral duties that it imposes on itself. In other words, the “I” realizes its freedom through acting in accord with duty, which ought to be done and thereby contains an element of necessity. As such, Fichte reconciles the determinism of dogmatism and freedom of idealism through a process of moral self-determination. See: Beiser, *German Idealism*, 273-288; Angelica Nuzzo, “Determination and Freedom in Kant and in Fichte’s *Bestimmung des Menschen*.” In: *Fichte’s Vocation of Man: New Interpretative and Critical Essays*, eds. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Albany/N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2013), 236-237.

³² Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 116.

³³ Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, 81.

means of taming nature through science and the unification of all humans in one single, world community.

Although this text exceeds the present article, due to the fact that it was given after Novalis' untimely death, it is also important to note that Fichte's most sustained account of history occurs in his 1804/05 series of lectures, *Characteristics of the Present Age*, published in book form in 1806. Here, Fichte divides world-history into five distinct epochs: (1) when human behavior was governed by reason in the form of unreflective instinct; (2) when instinct grows weaker, and human behavior is governed by the reason of external authority (e.g. a monarch); (3) when this authority is overthrown, and consequently reason itself is cast aside; (4) when reason as such becomes an object of knowledge; (5) when reason governs and shapes all human behavior in the manner of art.³⁴ As such, the end of history is specifically rendered as the point when human activity becomes synonymous with art, which is rendered as the realization of freedom. Fichte's critical diagnosis consists in arguing that the present age best accords with the third epoch, which he calls the "Epoch of liberation" and the "State of completed Sinfulness."³⁵ With the liberation from the external authority (e.g. the aristocracy) humans have become free, but this also means that they are now free to sin as well. In the absence of reason to govern their behavior, humans have achieved total sinfulness, which can only be corrected by making reason into an object of knowledge, i.e. in inaugurating the fourth epoch.

In this lecture, Fichte presents his account of the role of philosopher in regards to history as well. The philosopher understands and reflects upon the *a priori* historical "World-Plan" – the transition from the first to the fifth epoch – in order to help point out specific *a posteriori* events that mark the possibility for transitioning to a new epoch (e.g. the French Revolution). Fichte writes:

Throughout the whole course of events, therefore, he selects only the instances in which Humanity really advances towards the end of its being, and appeals only to these instances, – laying aside and rejecting everything else; and as he does not intend to prove historically that Humanity has to pursue this course, having already proved it philosophically, he only points out, for the purposes of illustration, the occasions on which this has been visible in History.³⁶

In this manner, as will be evident, Fichte's philosopher-historian is not distinctly different from Novalis' poet-historian insofar as both point to historical events as specific examples for moral cultivation. While the World-

³⁴ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Characteristics of the Present Age and The Way Towards the Blessed Life or Doctrine of Religion* (Washington D.C.: University Publications of America, 1977), 70.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

Plan is necessary, Fichte nonetheless gives the philosopher the role of helping attend to its development, including its ultimate end.³⁷

And yet for all his concrete predictions (i.e. that history ends in the realization of freedom in the state, the rationalization of nature, etc.), Fichte still undercuts his position by making the goal of realizing the absolute fundamentally impossible. In *The Vocation of Man*, he reduces the historical shape of striving to merely an “earthly goal,” placing the absolute into the “eternal world.”³⁸ Consequently, he maintains a strict – infinitely so – separation of the eternal and the earthly, of which the finite “I” stands in the middle. It is precisely this infinite separation that Novalis will attempt to dissolve.

3. Novalis’ Critique of Fichte’s Absolute and The Emergence of Magical Idealism

Novalis’ most sustained reflections and criticisms of Fichte can be found in his *Fichte Studies (Fichte-Studien)*, which are a collection of notes that Novalis composed while studying the *Wissenschaftslehre* in the mid-1790s. While the fragmentary nature of the text makes it difficult to distinguish Novalis’ criticisms of Fichte’s system, one can readily discern his primary critique that the absolute is unattainable. Paradoxically, Novalis posits that the absolute can be realized, but only by giving up the very concept. He writes:

Unending free activity in us arises through the free renunciation of the absolute – the only possible absolute that can be given to us and that we only find through our inability to attain and know an absolute. This absolute that is given to us can only be known negatively, insofar as we act and find that what we seek cannot be attained through action.³⁹

This quote is consistent with Dalia Nassar’s argument that Novalis’ absolute is not something that we need to attain precisely insofar as it is already given

³⁷ This article agrees with the interpretation that Fichte’s conception of history is linear, necessary, and progressive. In other words, Fichte’s history of human striving is necessarily coextensive with the gradual and progressive realization of freedom. However, this position is not uncontested. Some commentators point out that Fichte’s five epochs of human history can exist simultaneously in a singular time-line, i.e. while some communities exist in a state consistent with the first epoch, others might exist in the third. Likewise, although concretely progressive, Fichte’s history is also circular in its ideal character, given that the end of history is the realization of the absolute “I” that lay at the beginning of history as its motivating principle. In this way, Fichte’s history can be both linear and circular. Cf. Eric Michael Dale, *Hegel, the End of History, and the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 144; George Armstrong Kelly, *Idealism, Politics and History: Sources of Hegelian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 236.

³⁸ Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, 91-94.

³⁹ Novalis, *Fichte Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) #566, 167-168.

to us.⁴⁰ Instead of striving for infinite freedom, Novalis proposes that we find freedom by renouncing the desire for it. Hence, the absolute is the very negation of action. This claim renders the absolute into a kind of quicksand, whereby we sink the more we struggle to free ourselves. The ultimate act of freedom is to renounce the desire for freedom.

Novalis' criticism of Fichte's absolute is coextensive with his commitment to aesthetics. As Michael G. Vater explains: "Novalis' instinct ... is to recoil before the image of endless distorted self-imaging, or the journey ever onward to an I that is never fully active or self-realized ... Novalis opts for an aesthetic eternity, available in the moment, and rejects the long-march of Fichte's elongated moral striving."⁴¹ How does aesthetics realize absolute freedom, in such a way that it is not reducible to some activity *qua* striving?⁴² Unlike other activities, art is not done for the sake of an intended end. Novalis calls art something that "presents for the sake of presenting," which makes it a "free presenting" (i.e. it's not conditioned).⁴³ For example, a wind turbine is not an artwork because it is made in order to harness energy, while a painting by Cézanne has no purpose outside of itself; it simply presents what it is. Specifically, the artwork presents the activity of the unconditionally, free "I:" "... what is being presented is the activity of presentation, the activity of the I. The artwork, then, is nothing but a manifestation of free activity."⁴⁴ Thus, the absolute is something that can be intuited and realized, but only through the free presentation of the artwork.

However, the artwork is also not passive, since it does creatively transform the natural world, such that it increases our freedom (i.e. it makes the natural world align with our being). For example, clay can be molded into a vase. This vase can be artistic for its own sake (i.e. a decorative pot), but it can also serve the function of collecting and distributing water. Thus,

⁴⁰ This reading of Novalis' *Fichte-Studies* is largely in accord with Dalia Nassar's interpretation of the text. Taking up Manfred Frank's claim that the absolute *qua* being is "given," rather than constructed, Nassar argues that being is given as a "self-determining relation." As immediately given to intuition, the absolute can be made manifest in artwork, which opens up the possibility for realizing the absolute in a way that Fichte foreclosed. However, while Nassar briefly discusses Novalis' desire to realize a "golden time [age]" – a time consistent with human freedom – she does not flesh out the historical character of Novalis' project that becomes partially worked out in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*. See: Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 19-38.

⁴¹ Michael G. Vater, "Philosophy on the Track of Freedom' and 'Systematizing Systemlessness': Novalis' Reflections on the *Wissenschaftslehre*," in: *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism*, eds. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 290.

⁴² However, we might object that while Vater presents an accurate characterization of Novalis' critique of Fichte, i.e. through an appeal to aesthetics. Fichte does ultimately appeal to aesthetics as having a fundamental role in the striving for the absolute. After all, Fichte does claim that the final, fifth epoch of his world-plan consists in the formation of reason into art, whereby human beings model themselves according to reason itself. In other words, not unlike Novalis, the fifth epoch is turning humanity, and the world itself, into an artistic model. Cf. Fichte, *Characteristics of the Present Age*, 9-10.

⁴³ Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, #633, 181.

⁴⁴ Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 34.

the artwork is not constrained to presentation as such, and can have practical effects in the world; in fact, it ought to. However, while we have explained that the artwork presents the absolute freedom of the “I,” we have yet to determine how the “I” has access to the absolute. Which is another way of asking, how is the artwork possible in the first place?

Unfortunately, the answer is not very clear. Novalis thinks in accord with Fichte that we have an intellectual intuition of the absolute. However, Novalis differs from Fichte by arguing that it can be tapped into at any moment, i.e. it requires no mediation nor does it have to be something strived for. Novalis writes, “But since we are also in a sphere outside of time, we must reach it [the absolute] there in every moment ... in this sphere we are able to be pure simple substance. /Here is morality and peace of mind, because an endless striving after what hovers ever out of reach before us seems unbearable.”⁴⁵ Vater argues that Novalis’ critical appropriation of Fichte’s system includes an implicit appeal to “Spinozistic theology,” which renders the finite “I” a manifestation of God.⁴⁶ Novalis identifies humans as the individuated expressions of God, and consequently we possess the power to immediately intuit God, which constitutes a “divine I.”⁴⁷ The intuition of the God is consistent with the intuition of freedom, since the God is unconditionally free. Hence, human willing is ultimately rooted in being the material manifestations of God.

Novalis’ theory that we have an intuition of the absolute that becomes instantiated in the artwork, which in turn signifies the moralization of nature (nature in line with human willing), constitutes his own philosophical project that he calls “magical idealism.” As David W. Wood explains: “As the name suggests, it was a combination of the idea of romanticizing and an extension of transcendental idealism. The term ‘magical’ referred to Novalis’ belief in the ‘art of using the sense world at will,’ that is, that the rest of nature could some day conform or be subjugated to our will.”⁴⁸ The ability to instantiate the absolute in the natural world is “magical,” in the sense that the magician is usually understood as someone who has the capacity to control the forces of nature. Intuition magically alters the world of nature that we belong to.

In line with Fichte, magical idealism has a critical function as well. For Novalis, criticism is still a method that studies the self as the condition for knowledge of the natural world, but he adds that one should apply that knowledge in such a way that the world conforms to the activity of the self. “It [criticism] lets us divine Nature, or the *external world*, as a human being – It proves that we can and should only understand *everything*, as we

⁴⁵ Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, #647, 186-187.

⁴⁶ Vater, “Philosophy on the Track of Freedom,” 291. Beiser also makes this point of connecting Spinoza’s God as the counteractive to Fichte in Novalis’ thought. See: Beiser, *German Idealism*, 419.

⁴⁷ Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, #218, 66.

⁴⁸ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, xxiv.

understand ourselves and our *loved ones*, as we understand us and *you*.”⁴⁹ Criticism simultaneously grasps hold of nature and changes it as well. But, what is the meaning of love in this quote? What does this mean for magical idealism to transform nature into a loved one?

As Wood discusses, love is a crucial concept for magical idealism.⁵⁰ Indeed, love makes magical idealism possible: “Love is the basis for the possibility of magic. Love works magically.”⁵¹ In one sense, love appears as indefinable to the extent that it is not an object of experience. However, a few distinctive characteristics can be discerned. (1) Love constitutes the “inner union of 2 beings.”⁵² Love unifies people, both in terms of sexual copulation and simply sharing a life. This typical conception of love can be applied to nature as well. It is through love that human activity (art) becomes unified with nature. It is not sufficient to simply force nature to accord with the will, rather it has to be understood, which implies a certain degree of respect and reverence that is consistent with love. (2) Learning to love one thing allows the “I” to love everything.⁵³ Love is not relegated to one object, rather it opens up into the world as a whole, such that it can be in accord with the “I.” (3) The unification of the “I” and nature, through love, means that the latter does not impede the activity of the former. Consequently, love is consistent with freedom: “Freedom and love are one.”⁵⁴ Love constitutes and expresses the unity between humanity and nature, forming Novalis’ conception of the absolute. Hence, as mentioned above, Novalis posits love as the goal that history strives for.⁵⁵

Novalis’ veneration of love is also consistent with his appeal to poetry. He shows the necessary relationship between love and poetry in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*: “Love is mute; only poetry can give it voice. Or love itself is nothing but the highest nature of poesy.”⁵⁶ On the one hand, poetry is the means to express love; on the other, love is identified with poesy itself. In any case, the quote above indicates that poetry is the most important form of artwork. Although all forms of artistic presentation make manifest the freedom of the “I’s” will over nature, poetry is the highest form this freedom can take. Indeed, Novalis calls it the “Ideal of total willing. Magical will.”⁵⁷

The reason for this lies in the fact that the poet is master of the world of language (a system of signs and sounds). This linguistic world can be

⁴⁹ Ibid., #820, 151.

⁵⁰ Ibid., xxv.

⁵¹ Ibid., #79, 13.

⁵² Ibid., #653, 120.

⁵³ Ibid., #723, 134.

⁵⁴ Ibid., #717, 132.

⁵⁵ Ibid., #50, 8.

⁵⁶ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 116.

⁵⁷ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, #769, 141.

posited over the natural world, expressing the poet's will over nature itself.⁵⁸ By doing so, the poet makes the world appear human-like, or something also invested with a will. This is best exemplified by the poetic fable. The fable tends to anthropomorphize various natural entities, including animals and natural forces. For example, Aesop's fable "The North Wind and the Sun" depicts a competition between the north wind and the sun to see which force is stronger. Fables also contain a moral theme, which in this case is that persuasion is more powerful than force, since the force of the wind could not blow off a traveler's cloak, while the heat of the sun "persuaded" the traveler to do so.⁵⁹ As the paradigmatic form of poetry, the fable signifies that poetry is a fundamentally moral activity.⁶⁰ Poetry moralizes nature, making it more amenable to human willing (not something hostile).

The realization of the absolute becomes a necessarily poetic task. Novalis' magical idealism, therefore, calls for the combination of poetry and philosophy. Philosophy deals with universal first principles and concepts, while poetry concerns the particular sensuous content that is derived from experience. For Novalis, philosophy is incomplete if its generality is not informed by some particularity, i.e. it would be too abstract to adequately reflect reality. As Nassar explains: the "object of philosophy is to understand the relation between the general and the particular and to see not only how the particular is part of the general but also how the general is manifest in the particular."⁶¹ Philosophy requires the particularity of poetry in order to adequately express its object, i.e. the absolute. Given that the realization of the absolute is also the resolution of the infinite with the finite, Novalis posits that poetry acts as the "communion" between the finite and the infinite.⁶² In Fichtean terms, poetry dissolves the contradiction of the infinite "I" with the finite "I."

Poetry performs the task of realizing the absolute, a task that Fichte had rendered structurally impossible. For Fichte, human striving for the freedom of the infinite "I," which is manifest in historical activity, is never ending. In making infinite something that can be adequately resolved in the finite, Novalis opens up the possibility that there can be a realizable end to history. Specifically, if love is the goal of history, and poetry is the expression thereof, then poetry serves as the force to bring about this goal in reality. This indicates the necessary relationship between the study of history and poetry that Novalis' expresses in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. However, this raises a

⁵⁸ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 116.

⁵⁹ Aesop, *Fables* (New York: Signet Classics, 2004), 98.

⁶⁰ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, #769, 141.

⁶¹ Nassar's claim that philosophy requires the particularity of poetry to grasp the absolute is due to her interpretation of the absolute as relational. The absolute is neither universal nor particular, but the relation between the two. Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 30.

⁶² Novalis, *Philosophical Writings* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1997), 54.

multitude of questions. As the agent that helps realize the end of history, why exactly does the poet need to learn history? Moreover, how does the poet harness historical knowledge? Moreover, how is the past available as an object at all? To answer these questions, it is useful to turn to Novalis' account of recollection and memory.

4. History and Recollection

While we have so far emphasized the futural project of Novalis' posited goal of history, this is not to say that the future is privileged relative to the past, or the present for that matter. History is threefold – past, present, future – where each aspect of time is not reducible to another.⁶³ Rather, they consist as an interconnected whole. One of the crucial implications of Novalis' magical idealism is that we can intuit both the future and past, given that the absolute is both the end of history and what constitutes the beginning. Of course, this intuition is already conveyed in Fichte's system. The absolute "I" is the beginning of history since it is the origin of time itself, i.e. time is constituted through the dialectical mediation of the finite "I" with the "not-I."⁶⁴ The absolute "I" is also futural; given that it is what the finite "I" strives for.

Novalis' appropriates this picture, but gives it a romantic, literary flair. He represents the intuition of the absolute in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, when Heinrich finds a novel that depicts the story of his life.⁶⁵ This reflects Novalis' broader claim in his encyclopedia: "Nothing is more romantic than what we commonly call the world and destiny – we live in a colossal novel (writ *large* and *small*)."⁶⁶ Through intuition, humans have the capacity to read the world – past and future – like a novel. However, the quote above raises a significant question. If history can be intuited as a whole, and given his mention of "destiny," then does Novalis' magical idealism constitute a form of determinism? If so, how does this square with his appeal to freedom?

Fate and destiny are prominent themes in both Novalis' and Fichte's respective work.⁶⁷ For example, Johann Heinrich Gottlieb Heusinger and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi accused Fichte of being a fatalist. Specifically, the latter calls his system an "inverse Spinozism," which "compared the personal, creative power of God (and the individual, concrete freedom of the

⁶³ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, #598, 106.

⁶⁴ Specifically, it is through the faculty of the productive imagination that the "I" and "not-I" are able to waver between each other, constituting time: "It is this wavering of the imagination between irreconcilables, this conflict with itself, which... extends the condition of the self there to a moment of time." Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 217.

⁶⁵ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 90-91.

⁶⁶ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, #853, 155.

⁶⁷ For more information regarding Fichte on freedom, see footnote 31.

moral subject) to the mechanical, self-reverting activity of the I.”⁶⁸ However, Fichte, and by extension Novalis, could be called compatibilists.⁶⁹ The finite “I” has the almost unconscious drive to become what it already is, i.e. the Absolute “I.” Thus, the “I” is determined to become itself, which paradoxically means being absolutely free. As such, Fichte’s system can be understood as a kind of stoicism whereby the finite “I” comes to terms with its destiny/fate. Likewise, Novalis projects that the poet must acquire a certain “mastery of fate,” which is rendered as a freedom over the determinate forces of nature, including the forces that implicate human behavior as well.⁷⁰ However, in terms of compatibilism, it is not the case that mastery negates fate, rather it simply recognizes and works with it. In terms of magical idealism, the magician makes nature correspond to his or her will, not negate the very forces of nature as such.

Both Novalis and Fichte attempt to reconcile freedom with a determinate course in historical development. Moreover, this development is necessarily circular insofar as the end mirrors and reproduces the beginning, albeit in a concretized form. The belief in an idealized past that serves as the archetype for the future is a common theme in romantic thought. We find this theme, for example, in Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, when he speaks of a “primeval golden age” that will eventually “return.”⁷¹ He also calls this age “eternal,” implying that it never ended. We can speculate that it is always already present for intuition, given that the golden age represents the unity of nature and willing, or the absolute.⁷² Novalis appears to indicate this claim when Heinrich states that his father was capable of reflecting on this age through “recollection.”⁷³ As such, intuition and recollection appear to be functionally identical.

Recollection and memory are two extremely important themes in romantic literature in general. According to Laurie Ruth Johnson, and similar to Koselleck’s historical claims, romanticism reflects a “memory-crisis” that

⁶⁸ Yolanda Estes, “J. G. Fichte’s *Vocation of Man*: An Effort to Communicate,” in: *Fichte’s Vocation of Man: New Interpretive and Critical Essays*, eds. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore, (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2013), 85.

⁶⁹ Beiser would disagree with calling Fichte a compatibilist insofar as the latter wants to renounce the claim that human action can be consistent with natural necessity. Rather, Fichte wants to overtake nature such that it accords with the “I’s” activity. However, I defend calling Fichte a compatibilist insofar as the “I” strives to realize the compatibility of natural necessity and freedom, such that both appear synonymous. See: Beiser, *German Idealism*, 275.

⁷⁰ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 109.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷² Nassar also discusses the intuition and realization of the “golden time [age].” But she denies its historical realization by rendering the task as something fundamentally unattainable: “every moment in which the human being acts freely – morally – he or she is doing nothing less than realizing the eternal in the temporal. Thus, the golden time will never be fully attained, though it can be achieved in every free act.” Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 34.

⁷³ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 161.

occurred as a consequence of the French revolution.⁷⁴ This event constituted a radical break in history, inaugurating the modern world from out of the ashes of the pre-modern past. The romantics attempted to recollect and reproduce the pre-modern past in their literary texts. However, the romantics did not simply want to overcome the crisis, rather they creatively harnessed it. Instead of recovering the past as such, they creatively “re-collected” the past in an idealized form. In the case of Novalis, there is a drive to reproduce the golden age in a distinct, concrete form.

Johnson emphasizes that Novalis tends to use the word *Erinnerung* for “recollection.” This form of memory is distinct from *Gedächtnis*, which refers to memory as the storage of past impressions, and *Wiederholung*, the act of remembering those impressions. *Erinnerung*, however, refers to the reproduction of impressions through the faculty of the imagination, making it a fundamentally creative form of recollection. As Laurie Johnson explains, *Erinnerung* is a “creative capacity, one that allows us to transcend the time that both enables and destroys our earthly existence and to intuit ... an alternative world, a different life.”⁷⁵ Again, we see that recollection as *Erinnerung* accords with Novalis’ intuition of the absolute.

However, in making recollection creative, Novalis also renders it fallible; that is, memory does not always give factual knowledge about the past. Recollection appears as an interpretative activity. Count Hohenzollern directly implies this in his conversation with Heinrich: “Our countless memories are entertaining company and all the more so as the point of view from which we look at them changes; indeed, it is this change in our point of view which discloses their true interconnection, the profundity of their sequence, and the significance of their phenomena.”⁷⁶ Here, memories are not posited as the simple recordings of past impressions, and for this reason the recollecting of them takes shape differently in time, like when a childhood experience becomes recollected as something traumatic from the position of adulthood. By making recollection creative, we also return to the theme of poetry.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Laurie Ruth Johnson, *The Art of Recollection in Jena Romanticism: Memory, History, Fiction and Fragmentation in Texts by Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002), 5.

⁷⁵ Johnson, *The Art of Recollection in Jena Romanticism*, 105.

⁷⁶ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 83.

⁷⁷ The present article has made use of Johnson’s book to help articulate the relationship between memory and history in Novalis thought. However, it departs from her book in a significant way. In discussing Novalis’ essay *Christendom or Europe*, Johnson argues against the view that Novalis’ history is a “seamless, organic continuity,” consisting in taking up actual past events as such, i.e. in their true character. For Johnson, Novalis’ emphasis on creative recollection means that there is a distinct separation between the past, present, and future, which allows for the creative recollection of each. While I agree with this discontinuous and fragmentary reading, it is nonetheless the case that Novalis does present a distinct picture of a perfect future that will necessarily be realized, which concretely exists in the reintegration of Christianity with the state. As such, there is a distinct history from which continuity can be creatively constructed from a discontinuous past. Novalis writes: “That which does

5. The Poet-Historian

This account of recollection *qua* creative activity has important implications for understanding history, where the articulation and transmission of past experiences becomes a creative interpretation. Given that the word poetry comes from the Greek *poiesis*, which can be translated as creation, historiography is rendered as a poetic practice. We obtain an indication of this point in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. While in conversation with Heinrich, the Count of Hohenzollern claims that the historian must be a poet: "... it seems to me a historian must necessarily also be a poet, for perhaps the poets alone master the art of skillfully organizing events."⁷⁸ The adequate presentation of historical events is therefore poetic in form.

How does the poet acquire historical knowledge? While Novalis posits that knowledge of history is partially experiential, insofar as events gain their coherence over time, Novalis affirms that history is best learned through intuition. As finite, experience will only present history as discrete events, while intuition allows us to immediately grasp human history as a whole.⁷⁹ Novalis' historical intuition is identical with his account of recollection, wherein the individual has an implicit memory of the world as a whole, past and future. In being able to recollect these memories as a "total past" one can succeed in discovering "the simple rules of history," or its teleology.⁸⁰ This possibility is founded on the circularity of history, whereby the ideal golden age of the past is to be realized in the future. Both the end and beginning of history are expressions of the absolute, thus to intuit the absolute is to also intuit history as a teleological whole. In terms of Novalis' conviction that the world is one great novel, then the role of the historian-poet is to recollect and represent that novel.

However, all of this remains quite abstract. If the poet intuits the beginning and end of history, then why study the material events in the middle? In other words, how does Novalis account for the more typical conception of history as an account of human events over time? This will become clear if we discuss Novalis' primary objects of historical recollection and poetic presentation: war and religion. The latter is especially significant, given that religion is one of the ways in which humans present the absolute (God) in experience.

In his discussion with Heinrich, the poet Klingsohr argues that war is one of the primary subjects of poetic representation and historical reflection,

not achieve perfection now will achieve it at some future attempt or the next; nothing captured by history is ephemeral, from countless transformations it comes forth renewed in ever richer forms." See Johnson, *The Art of Recollection in Jena Romanticism*, 32-33; Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 140.

⁷⁸ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 85.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

because it mostly conveys the passionate nature of humans. Moreover, in warfare humans attempt to destroy what is deemed “evil,” which is generally tied to what is immoral and opposed to freedom. Hence, war implies the freedom that belongs to the absolute. However, this dimension of war is not explicit, for people are “not aware that the romantic spirit excites them in order to annihilate useless evils along with themselves.”⁸¹ Studying war has an instructive power for the poet-historian, because it demonstrates the absolute in human activity. We can then hypothesize that the poet-historian studies the events of history in order to better intuit the absolute, and, in turn, instantiate it in the world through artistic presentation.

More importantly, the poet’s creative activity is mirrored in warfare. Novalis posits that any act of destruction ultimately results in a new creation, of which it is the very job of poetry – *poesies* – to reflect. Klingsohr writes: “In war ... the primal sea stirs. New continents are to arise, new races to come forth out of the great dissolution. The true war is the religious war; it positively aims at self-destruction, and in it the madness of men appear in its perfect form. Many wars, especially those that spring from national hatred belong in this class and are genuine poetic creations.”⁸² Thus, an education in history has two values: (1) history helps the poet intuit the absolute; (2) to help the poet improve his or her art by seeing it materialized in the act of warfare, being itself a poetic formation. But, why is the religious war the best presentation of the poetic, as opposed to other forms of war? What is the role of religion in Novalis’ account of history?

Religion is a crucial concept in Novalis’ work. In *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, Novalis calls “religious” people those who “perceive” God in all things. Given his identification of the absolute with God, then the religious person is someone who can intuit the absolute.⁸³ As such, the poet would also have to be a religious person. This is indicated by Novalis’ identification of the poet with the priest.⁸⁴ However, obviously not everyone involved in a religious organization is a poet. We can speculate that while the masses of Christians cannot immediately intuit God directly, they do so indirectly via the mediation of the priest/poet. Moreover, religion cannot be just the personal work of a few religious people; rather it has a necessarily social function as well. Specifically, Novalis argues that the primary role of religion is to construct a human community: “People will only truly become one through religion.”⁸⁵ This is rooted in the fact that unification is an expression of love, which is identical with God’s being. Consequently, the religious community is the incarnation of God’s being on Earth.

⁸¹ Ibid., 113.

⁸² Ibid., 113-114.

⁸³ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, #257, 38.

⁸⁴ Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 36.

⁸⁵ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, #834, 153.

With this picture, we receive the impression that the process of history (the realization of the absolute as God, love, freedom, etc.), is going to necessarily take shape through religion. Or, as Count Hohenzollern states, the “church is the dwelling place of history.”⁸⁶ This is most concretely manifest in Novalis’ essay *Christendom or Europe*, where his theory of history takes on a directly religious-political character. Idealizing the middle ages, Novalis claims that Europe was once a fully united Christendom.⁸⁷ “There once were beautiful, splendid times when Europe was a Christian land, when one Christendom dwelt in this continent... one great common interest bound together the most distant providences in this broad religious empire.”⁸⁸ However, due to human immaturity, the state of unity was ruptured by a variety of factors: the reformation, “business life” (capitalism), and general selfishness.⁸⁹ The remains of the Catholic Church furthered this rupture through its violent counter-reformation and its war on Protestant states.⁹⁰

However, in accord with his circular, but progressive conception of history, Novalis argues that the downfall of Christendom only necessitates its eventual reemergence in a more powerful form. Novalis writes: “That which does not achieve perfection now will achieve it at some future attempt or the next; nothing captured by history is ephemeral, from countless transformations it comes forth renewed in ever richer forms.”⁹¹ With this theory in place, he projects the emergence of a new Christendom that will not negate secular institutions entirely, but reinvigorate them by making them co-extensive with religion. “Then no one will protest any more against Christian and secular constraints, for the essence of the Church will be true freedom, and all necessary reforms will be carried out under its direction, as peaceful and

⁸⁶ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 84.

⁸⁷ However, while Novalis venerates a supposed past where Europe was united through Christianity, this does not mean that this was a historical fact. While it has often been argued that Novalis’ romanticized past renders his philosophical thought into a reactionary desire to return to medieval feudalism, Pauline Kleingeld argues that this “past” is a creative symbol that is used to set up an antithesis to the problems of the modern world, in order to thereby better constitute a new cosmopolitanism, i.e. in contrast to the individualist, enlightened cosmopolitanism. She writes: “It would be misguided to take the poet-philosopher as wanting to represent an accurate historical description of medieval reality. It is a ‘mistake’ to confuse or identify the symbol with the symbolized ... The Middle Ages thereby come to symbolize the cosmopolitan unity of humanity, pointing the audience in the direction of a cosmopolitanism ideal of love, faith, and unity, but without providing a specific and determinate blueprint.” With regard to this claim of not actually representing the past, Kleingeld is consistent with Johnson’s point that Novalis’ recollection is creative. See Pauline Kleingeld, “Romantic Cosmopolitanism: Novalis’s ‘Christianity or Europe,’” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2008): 281.

⁸⁸ Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 137.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

formal processes of state."⁹² As true freedom, then, Novalis is positing the realization of the absolute in much more concrete terms, i.e. the recombination of Christianity and the state.⁹³

If this historical process takes place necessarily, we are once again confronted with why the poet needs to learn history? Or, in other words, what is the role of the poet in this realization of the absolute in history? *Christendom or Europe* contains an intermission whereby Novalis discusses the limits of the secular state that took shape with the Protestant Reformation and French Revolution. He identifies the revolutionary (i.e. as in the secular state inaugurated through the French revolution) with Sisyphus; any progress they make will be negated. He implies that the Sisyphian boulder will only remain uphill if it pulled from above, i.e. "heaven." Thus, Novalis is implying that progress is impossible without religion ("heaven"). He argues that the study of history serves as evidence for this claim: "I direct your attention to history, search in its instructive context for similar moments, and learn to use the magical wand of analogy."⁹⁴ We find the implicit presence of poetry in this quote. As an instance of poetic language, the use of analogy allows us to compare historical periods in order to discern generalizable lessons therein. In this case, societies cannot exist independent of religion, and thus the secular gains in Europe were necessarily doomed. As such, the poet is there to announce the limit that will necessitate the re-emergence of Christendom, or the end of history as true freedom.⁹⁵

Although Novalis recognizes determinism at work in the world, it is the capacity of the poet to harness their fate in order to bring about a higher, nobler end of humanity, i.e. the absolute. This is especially true given the moral function of poetry. As has been mentioned, poetry is meant to present the very activity of the free, divine "I;" it does this by also presenting nature as endowed with human qualities, making it amenable to moralization; as is

⁹² Ibid., 151-152.

⁹³ What does Novalis specifically mean by Christianity? Pauline Kleingeld argues that Novalis' Christianity is meant in three ways: (1) as a general term for religion and spirituality as such; (2) the "mediation in general" that links the immanent to the transcendent; (3) the belief in Christ. It is interesting to note the second in particular, because this appeal to mediation explains why Christianity is necessarily connected to the absolute *qua* God, i.e. Nassar's identification of the absolute as mediation. See Kleingeld, "Romantic Cosmopolitanism," 275; Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 16.

⁹⁴ Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 146.

⁹⁵ Here is where this article critically diverges from Kleingeld's reading of *Christianity or Europe*. Although she alludes to the text's interpretation of the past as being performed with an eye towards the future of history: "In presenting the medieval image, he (Novalis) is not so much looking backwards as forwards." She nonetheless posits that this romantic history is not to be taken as a "blueprint for the future." As we have argued, however, Novalis does present a futural picture that will emerge from out of the necessity of history itself, hence there is a telos of historical development. Moreover, this telos can be rendered into a "blueprint" (a guide for making something), if we understand the specific task of the poet historian to be bringing forth this end, i.e. in realizing the absolute. Cf. Kleingeld, "Romantic Cosmopolitanism," 272-273.

most manifest in the fable. In any case, the poet acts as master of his or her fate in order to take part in the realization of the absolute, i.e. the end of history. As such, the poet is a kind of an agent of the absolute.

With regard to Novalis' circular history, the role of the poet-historian is to read and present the historical development of the world as if it were a fable. But, given that the fable signifies the absolute, the poet-historian also helps to make the world itself into a fable. Cryptically, Novalis writes: "In time, history must become a fairy tale – it shall be once again, as it was in the beginning."⁹⁶ This point is mirrored towards the end of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. Here, Novalis presents the end of history as the realization of conscience, the immediate knowledge of what is good and evil, such that it is no longer hindered by the natural world. Such a state amounts to the transformation of the world into a fable.⁹⁷ In any case, these claims can be simplified to mean that the poet makes nature into a kind of poem, something that teaches and uplifts humanity to the level of the absolute, in a concrete, realized form.

Conclusion: Novalis' Philosophy of History

In his "Last Fragments," Novalis writes: "History is applied morality and religion... From this comes the marvelous connection of history with our vocation – of Christianity and morality."⁹⁸ Albeit in a manner that is a bit vague, this nonetheless summarizes Novalis' philosophy of history. History, as we have seen, is recollected with an eye towards revealing the morality implicit in human events. Even if the event is horrific, like in the case of the reign of terror during the French Revolution, the presentation of the event has the educative effect of teaching people what is right and wrong. In the case of Novalis' critique of modernity, the lesson is that pure secularism can lead to violence. Consequently, religion serves some necessity in the constitution of a moral life. Of course, this example is a narrower account of history insofar as it accords with Novalis' valuation of religion, i.e. the presentation of the absolute on earth. For Novalis, history serves to demonstrate the absolute underlying human activity in the form of religious and moral practices. Consequently, history is crucial in educating humanity about their vocation. That is, to intuit and realize the absolute in the world, which would make nature moral, the "I" free, and to realize God as such; reconciling the contradiction of the finite and infinite that Fichte rendered structurally impossible.

The study of history is meant to facilitate the very end that it predicts. Novalis' theory of history is necessarily teleological; it emerges from and

⁹⁶ Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, #234, 35.

⁹⁷ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 67.

⁹⁸ Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 163.

results in the absolute. Specifically, it is the role of the poet to help realize the absolute *qua* end of history, since the poem is the pure presentation of unconditioned freedom. This is not to say that the poet does this alone, since the end of history has a political end in terms of the creation of a new Christendom, which will obviously involve the activity of the religious community. However, the poet as priest is the voice through which the community expresses itself. The poet is then the preeminent actor in Novalis' theory of history. Although, this is somewhat inappropriate, given that the poet is only one individual expression of the absolute *qua* God. As such, the absolute is enacting itself through the poet's art.

In any case, we can conclude that while both Novalis and Fichte have teleological perspectives on history, only the former posits a finite, realizable end. While Fichte rendered the end of human striving to be a logical impossibility (one cannot make the finite infinite, and vice-versa), Novalis' magical idealism shows that the infinite can be immediately intuited and presented in the form of the artwork. Consequently, history does have an end, which is making the world as a whole one great artwork, i.e. as a fable or novel. Thus, Novalis' theory of history shows that the world begins and ends as a fable, the purview of the poet-historian.