

Symphilosophie

International Journal of Philosophical Romanticism

Novalis's Magical Idealism

A Threefold Philosophy of the Imagination, Love and Medicine

*Laure Cahen-Maurel**

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Novalis's philosophy of magical idealism essentially consists of three central elements: a theory of the creative or productive imagination, a conception of love, and a doctrine of transcendental medicine. In this regard, it synthesizes two adjacent, but divergent contemporary philosophical sources – J. G. Fichte's idealism and Friedrich Schiller's classicism – into a new and original philosophy. It demonstrates that Novalis's views on both magic and idealism, not only prove to be perfectly rational and comprehensible, but even more philosophically coherent and innovative than have been recognised up to now.

Keywords: magical idealism, productive imagination, love, medicine, Novalis, J. G. Fichte, Schiller

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article défend l'idée selon laquelle trois éléments centraux composent ce que Novalis nomme « idéalisme magique » pour désigner sa philosophie propre : la conception d'une imagination créatrice ou productrice, une doctrine de l'amour et une théorie de la médecine transcendante. L'idéalisme magique est en cela la synthèse en une philosophie nouvelle et originale de deux sources philosophiques contemporaines, à la fois adjacentes et divergentes : l'idéalisme de J. G. Fichte et le classicisme de Friedrich Schiller. L'article montre que les vues de Novalis tant sur la magie que sur l'idéalisme sont non seulement réellement rationnelles et compréhensibles, mais philosophiquement plus cohérentes et novatrices qu'on ne l'a admis jusqu'à présent.

Mots-clés : idéalisme magique, imagination productrice, amour, médecine, Novalis, J. G. Fichte, Schiller

* Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Associate Member of the Centre Victor Basch, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 1 rue Victor Cousin, 75005 Paris, France – laurecm2004@yahoo.fr

Introduction: The Modern Philosophical Underpinnings of “Magical Idealism”

“Mysteries are a means of nourishment—inciting potencies. Explanations are *digested* mysteries.”
– Novalis¹

“Novalis”, the *nom de plume* or pen name with which Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772-1801) signed *Pollen*, his first published collection of fragments in 1798, not only reflects the ancient Hardenberg family lineage of *de novali*, signifying “someone who opens up new land”. For this name also embodies the new philosophical programme that the poet-philosopher of early German romanticism began sketching out in 1798. Novalis called this programme “magical idealism”, and it too aimed at breaking fresh ground.² Novalis’s contribution to the history of post-Kantian philosophy has long fuelled and continues to fuel prejudices against the romantics, as well as debates among the specialists.³ It is sometimes assumed by certain readers and commentators that by choosing the designation “magical” Novalis wished to underscore the irrational and inexplicable elements of his thought. The present article shows such an assumption to be uncritical and inaccurate.

¹ Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (1798/99), entry 138, in Novalis, *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs* (hereafter: HKA), ed. Paul Kluckhohn, Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl, Gerhard Schulz *et al.* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1983), vol. 3, 267; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, trans. David W. Wood (Albany/N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2007), 23.

² To be sure, in addition to “magical idealism”, Novalis also gives his conception of philosophy a number of other names. As this article will show, it is at times equated with the designation “realistic idealism”, at times with the operation of “romanticizing” the world, and at other times with the method of “encyclopaedistics”. Although they obviously carry different accentuations, I believe it can be shown that all these designations are synonymous at base.

³ For older and more recent philosophical studies directly treating the question of Novalis’s philosophy of magical idealism, see, among others, Heinrich Simon, *Der magische Idealismus. Studien zur Philosophie des Novalis* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1906); Theodor Haering, *Novalis als Philosoph* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1954); Manfred Frank, “Die Philosophie des sogenannten ‘magischen Idealismus’”, *Euphorion* 63 (1969): 88–116; Stephan Grätzel, Johannes Ullmaier, “Der magische Transzendentalismus von Novalis”, *Kant-Studien* 89/1 (1998): 59–67; Bernward Loheide, *Fichte und Novalis, Transzendentalphilosophisches Denken im romantisierenden Diskurs* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000); Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Olivier Schefer, “L’‘idéalisme magique’ de Novalis”, *Critique* 59, no. 673–74 (June–July 2003): 514–527; Ives Radizzani, “Philosophie transcendantale et idéalisme magique”, in *Einbildungskraft und Reflexion. Philosophische Untersuchungen zu Novalis / Imagination et réflexion. Recherches philosophiques sur Novalis*, ed. by Augustin Dumont and Alexander Schnell (LIT Verlag: Zurich, 2015), 103–113; Laurent Guyot, “Novalis et la question du prolongement poétique de la philosophie de Fichte”, *Fichte-Studien* 43 (2016): 277–89; and my monograph: Laure Cahen-Maurel, *L’art de romantisier le monde. La peinture de Caspar David Friedrich et la philosophie romantique de Novalis* (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2017).

In contrast, I argue that Novalis's conception of magical idealism essentially combines or *synthesizes* two adjacent, but divergent contemporary philosophical sources – J. G. Fichte's idealism and Friedrich Schiller's classicism – into a new and original philosophy. In this way, I demonstrate that the *syncretic method* of Novalis's thinking, his conceptions of *magic* as such and *idealism* and *realism* on the whole, not only prove to be perfectly rational and comprehensible, but even more philosophically coherent and innovative than have been recognised up to now.⁴

The present study builds on the work of scholars who have endeavoured to understand the rational strands of philosophical romanticism, and especially the extent to which it is embedded in post-Kantian debates. Manfred Frank's 1969 article "Die Philosophie des sogenannten 'magischen Idealismus'" is one such pioneering investigation that philosophically reassessed the nature of Novalis's romanticism within this tradition.⁵ Frank argued that the philosophy of magical idealism was not a mere whim of Novalis or a subjective trait of his fantasy, but the sensible and metaphysical expression of an unrealisable ideal of the absolute. In addition to Frank's seminal research in German, scholarly progress in grasping the rationality of philosophical romanticism in the American-Anglophone world is greatly indebted to the voluminous writings of Frederick C. Beiser, whose 2002 book *German Idealism* included among others an extensive chapter on "Novalis's Magical Idealism."⁶ Over the past two decades, many other researchers have travelled this path of rationally understanding and situating the major stakes of philosophical romanticism within the context of German idealism. These studies have provided in turn a powerful corrective to the customary and now thoroughly outdated interpretation of early romanticism as a form of irrationalism or anti-rationalism.

But the question still remains: how is it possible to critically understand Novalis's project of "magical idealism" as a rational and non-contradictory theory, when this project apparently attempts to combine the domains of magic and philosophy?

Magic belongs to an extremely old tradition, dating back to at least Zoroaster and the Persian magi, the Egyptian mysteries, to Pythagoreanism

⁴ Generally speaking, Novalis sought for a form of syncretism of various traditions, or as he also terms it, a form of "syncreticism". See, for example, Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, entry no. 457, labelled "PHILOSOPHY", HKA 3, 333; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 75. On the importance of syncreticism in Novalis, see Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism*, 431.

⁵ See Manfred Frank, "Die Philosophie des sogenannten 'magischen Idealismus'"; reprinted in Manfred Frank, *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 27–66.

⁶ Beiser, *German Idealism*, 407–434. Cf. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 18–21, 50–55.

and the Neoplatonist doctrine of theurgy.⁷ Novalis was well aware of all these older religious and philosophical traditions of magic, not to mention the many contemporary evocations of magic in prominent artistic works like Goethe's 1790 play, *Faust: A Fragment*, or Mozart's 1791 opera *The Magic Flute*. Hence, some of the key issues to be addressed in the present article are: what exactly did Novalis himself understand by magic? And what are the precise sources of magic for his conception of magical idealism – are they ancient or modern, religious or artistic, poetic or philosophical, or some combination of them all? For it is easy to see that any incorporation of magic into a serious philosophical programme could quickly devalue it, drawing it towards *Schwärmerei* or the deluded fantasies of a charlatan. Indeed, in *The Republic* Plato directly sets true philosophy against the charlatanism of the magicians.⁸ As we will see, even Novalis himself points out that magical idealism is not without some kind of internal risk that ultimately could end up leading to a pathological state.

An additional problem for many commentators is that although Novalis might have intended his conception of magical idealism to be serious philosophy, it can scarcely be called systematic. As Olivier Schefer points out in his article, “L’‘idéisme magique’ de Novalis”, not only are the explicit textual sources highly fragmentary, but countless interpretative inconsistencies and uncertainties remain.⁹ Moreover, the very terminology of “idealism”, which entered into wider contemporary discourse with Kant's critical idealism, did not have one single or stable meaning in the period in question. Commentators of Novalis's magical idealism are therefore correct in underscoring the different strands of idealism, and the need for interpretive reconstructions of the source materials. Although they generally agree that magic in Novalis seems to be correlated with the question of the absolute, they disagree on how to understand this romantic absolute. Accordingly, another issue is whether Novalis develops a negative philosophy of the transcendence of the absolute as a mere regulative idea in the Kantian sense, or whether he adopts a positive philosophy of the absolute as a constitutive and existential reality, one that is immanent to the universe and found at work within the phenomena of the sensible world, i.e. a view that seems to be more in line with F. W. J. Schelling's absolute idealism.¹⁰

⁷ See the special issue of the journal *Critique* entitled “2000 ans de Magie”, *Critique* 59, no. 673–74 (June–July 2003). On the connection of magical idealism with the Neoplatonist theurgy, see Olivier Schefer, “L’‘idéisme magique’ de Novalis”, 519–22.

⁸ See Plato, *The Republic*, 364e3–365a3.

⁹ See Olivier Schefer, “L’‘idéisme magique’ de Novalis”, 516; also see Manfred Frank, “Die Philosophie des sogenannten ‘magischen Idealismus’”, in Manfred Frank, *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus*, 28–9.

¹⁰ The latter stance is essentially the interpretation of Beiser, for example, who lays particular emphasis on the idea of the absolute as the unity of the real and the ideal, the subject and the object, whereas the former is above all the position of Frank. See for instance, Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism*:

In this regard, some commentators have suggested that Novalis's theory of magical idealism is inspired by the pairing of Fichte and Schelling.¹¹ Other commentators such as Beiser, put forward Fichte and Spinoza as the two decisive touchstones, since Spinoza is explicitly named along with the founder of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in Novalis's philosophical writings from 1795/96.¹² More recently, Augustin Dumont has argued that the origin of the expression "magical idealism" can be traced back to Novalis's early house tutor Carl Christian Erhard Schmid, who had negatively viewed Fichte as a magician; Schmid's anti-Fichteanism then ironically becomes the positive name of Novalis's project when formulating his own critique of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.¹³ While Jane Kneller points to the impact of Spinoza's monism, Schelling's organicism and Leibniz's vitalism on Novalis's thoughts about magical idealism.¹⁴ The textual sources undoubtedly show that Spinoza, Leibniz, Schmid and Schelling are all important philosophers for Novalis, including for the development of his new philosophical programme.¹⁵

Notwithstanding, my own position in this ongoing debate concerning the nature of magical idealism has arisen as a result of a close examination and reconstruction of the synthesizing principle that I believe drives Novalis's entire philosophical programme: that is to say, the *power of the productive or creative imagination*. My central claim is that Novalis's conception of

The Struggle Against Subjectivism (1781-1801); and Manfred Frank, "Philosophische Grundlage der Frühromantik", *Athenäum. Jahrbuch für Romantik* 4 (1994), 37–130, as well as the Introduction to: *Auswege aus dem Deutschen Idealismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 7–26.

¹¹ This is the interpretation put forward by Olivier Schefer based on the following fragment of Friedrich Schlegel dating from 1806: "The third kind of idealism, in addition to objective and subjective idealism, is perhaps that of magical idealism; the idealists are to be sought for among the astrological magicians, and the alchemists of the middle-ages" (Die dritte Art des Idealismus neben dem objektiven und subjektiven ist vielleicht der magische; unter den astrologischen Magiern, Alchimisten des Mittelalters, sind die Idealisten zu suchen). Friedrich Schlegel, *Schriften und Fragmente: Ein Gesamtbild seines Geistes. Aus den Werken und dem handschriftlichen Nachlass zusammengestellt und eingeleitet*, ed. Ernst Behler [Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1956], 179). See Olivier Schefer, "L' 'idéisme magique' de Novalis", 515–16.

¹² See for instance Novalis, *Fichte-Studien* (1795/96), fragment 151, HKA 2, 157; *Fichte Studies*, trans. Jane Kneller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 55: "Spinoza ascended as far as nature – Fichte to the I, or the person. I [ascend] to the thesis God."

¹³ See Augustin Dumont, "Metaphysik und Sophistik des Bildes im romantischen Deutschland. Platons *Sophistes* und das Problem des Verstehens bei Novalis" in *Einbildungskraft und Reflexion. Philosophische Untersuchungen zu Novalis / Imagination et réflexion. Recherches philosophiques sur Novalis*, footnote 81, 266; cf. Augustin Dumont, *De l'Autre imprévu à l'Autre impossible. Essais sur le romantisme allemand* (LIT Verlag: Zurich, 2016), footnote 84, 157.

¹⁴ See Jane Kneller, "Novalis, Nature and the Absolute", in *Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations*, edited by Gerard Kuperus and Marjolein Oele (Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2017), 119–25.

¹⁵ I believe that Franz Baader (1765-1841) is also important for the development of magical idealism. See, among others, Novalis's letter to Friedrich Schlegel, 7 November 1798 (translated into English in this first issue of *Symphilosophie*), where he refers to Baader in connection with magic (HKA 4, 263).

magical idealism should be primarily understood as a new theory of the free creative imagination, and that its two chief modern inspirations are the philosophies of Fichte and Schiller. Of course, scholars of philosophical romanticism have long noted the attention that Novalis paid to Fichte's theory of the imagination.¹⁶ Yet detailed demonstrations of how Novalis understood and *positively transformed* Fichte's theory are still in short supply, while the crucial contribution of Schiller's philosophical thought to magical idealism has been surprisingly neglected so far. I will specifically show that Novalis's programme of magical idealism is decisively influenced by the conception of the imagination found in Fichte's 1794/95 text, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*. The creative power of the imagination is there introduced as a living and substantial activity of synthesis, constituting a remarkable and most "wondrous" (*wunderbare*) faculty that both philosophy *and* art share in common. Here the imagination is not the inverse or opposite of reason, such that the former is simply irrational or fantastical. On the contrary, Fichte's theory of the creative imagination is famously conceived as a highly positive mediating faculty capable of overcoming and reconciling opposites. I argue that magical idealism too should be seen as another striking example of an attempt to reconcile two domains and traditions – magic and philosophy – that appear at first sight to be completely opposed or contradictory. That the original power of the *creative* imagination could be positively related to reason, and is not at all the same as either the unoriginal reproductive imagination or mere speculative fantasy, often continues to be misunderstood or underappreciated in the research.

Schiller and Fichte were colleagues at the university of Jena from 1794-1799, but unlike Fichte, Schiller is not explicitly named as a source for magical idealism. This might appear to be problematic, but the difficulties are resolved when an examination is made of the totality of Novalis's references to magical idealism and to his views on philosophy in general. Novalis attended the University of Jena during the winter semester of 1790/91, where he frequented Schiller's lectures. As his letters from this time clearly demonstrate, he viewed Schiller as an intellectual mentor and

¹⁶ Among others, see Beiser, *German Idealism*, 421; Jane Kneller, *Kant and the Power of Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 128–30; and Augustin Dumont: "... Novalis confusedly refers to Fichte until the end of his life, incessantly seeking to demonstrate that transcendental idealism properly understood is magical idealism, i.e. whose heart is the *creative* imagination, manifest in his language. Nevertheless, reading [Novalis's] *Fichte-Studies* is undeniably like witnessing a Trojan horse being introduced into Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, which then becomes along the way a 'sophistic of the I'". Augustin Dumont, "Ordre et désordre dans la philosophie postkantienne: le problème du perspectivisme transcendantal. Introduction à la lecture des *Études fichtéennes* de Novalis", in: Novalis, *Les années d'apprentissage philosophique. Études fichtéennes (1795-96)*, 20.

model.¹⁷ Philosophically speaking, Schiller was a Kantian who had tried to overcome the dualism of Kant's criticism by employing Fichte's important concept of "reciprocal action" – *Wechselwirkung*. – I will return to this point in section three below.

With regard to the question of magic, although we find such a conception in Fichte's work, particularly in the 1795 text *On the Spirit and Letter in Philosophy*, Fichte's manuscript remained unpublished until 1800, which is after Novalis's first 1798 thoughts on magical idealism. Despite this fact, Novalis already privately viewed Fichte as a philosophical magician in 1797.¹⁸ In the works of Schiller published before 1798, we find two strands of magic in a positive philosophical sense. The first strand concerns *beauty*, *art* and *medicine*. Schiller was indeed the theorist of the magic of beauty with his new concept of grace, presented in the 1793 essay, *On Grace and Dignity*. Schiller was also a representative of both a philosophical and medical anthropology, and championed a physiology of art. The second strand of magic has to do with *sympathy*, *love* and *theosophy*, and ultimately leads back to the philosophical stream of Neoplatonism. Here Schiller was the defender of a certain form of humanism, the author of a profession of faith embodied in selfless love in a work published under the title, "Theosophy of Julius" (1786).¹⁹

The goal of this article therefore is to try and more precisely reconstruct this twofold Fichtean and Schillerian heritage of magical idealism on the one hand, and to determine the more original elements of Novalis's philosophy

¹⁷ See Novalis's letters to Schiller from 22 September 1791 and 7 October 1791, as well as his letter to Reinhold from 5 October 1791, HKA 4, 89–91, 93–97, 98–102. Before becoming his student and meeting him personally at the university of Jena, Novalis also wrote an "Apologia of Friedrich Schiller" in defence of the latter's poem "The Gods of Greece", for which Schiller had been accused of atheism. See Novalis, "Apologie von Friedrich Schiller", HKA 2, 24–5. For an analysis of Schiller's influential poem in the context of early German romanticism, see Alexander J. B. Hampton, *Romanticism and the Re-Invention of Modern Religion: The Reconciliation of German Idealism and Platonic Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 13–17.

¹⁸ Among others, see the letter of Novalis in Wiederstedt to Friedrich Schlegel in Berlin, 14 June 1797: "Fichte is the most dangerous thinker I know. He powerfully enchants one into his circle. ... You are destined to protect the striving independent thinker against Fichte's magic." HKA 4, 230.

¹⁹ The "Theosophy of Julius" is a part of Schiller's 1786 *Philosophische Briefe*. There is an older tradition of theosophy that is related to Jacob Böhme, which has been treated in detail in Novalis scholarship. For instance, see Hans-Joachim Mähl, "Novalis und Plotin: Untersuchungen zu einer neuen Edition und Interpretation des *Allgemeinen Brouillon*", *Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts* (1963): 139–250; Xavier Tilliette, *Recherches sur l'intuition intellectuelle de Kant à Hegel* (Paris: Vrin, 1995), 230–31, 240–41; or Paola Mayer, *Jena Romanticism and Its Appropriation of Jakob Böhme: Theosophy, Hagiography, Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 76–95. In his book, *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-Examination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Beiser notes that Schiller's "Theosophy of Julius" "would inspire the young romantics", but does not elaborate. See Frederick C. Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 35. In his book on *German Idealism*, however, Beiser mentions the mysticism of Schiller's "Theosophy of Julius" with reference to Friedrich Schlegel; see Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism*, 454.

on the other. It is divided into four sections: (1) reconstructs Fichte's theory of the imagination found in the 1794 *Grundlage* and its relation to the two domains of philosophy and art; (2) provides an account of Novalis's view of "true philosophy", underscoring how magical idealism understands itself as a continuation of Fichte's transcendental idealism insofar as it also synthesizes the spheres of idealism and realism; (3) examines what Novalis means by "magic" in the context of his philosophical programme; (4) highlights the specific influence of Schiller on the kind of magical idealism that Novalis philosophically envisaged, especially in relation to love, theosophy, pathology, and medicine.

1. Fichte's Creative Imagination as the "Most Wondrous Power"

Novalis read the philosophical works of Fichte during 1795-1796, writing two hundred pages of notes, reflections, and making numerous direct excerpts from the *Wissenschaftslehre*, that are preserved under the title, *Fichte Studies*.²⁰ Philosophical romanticism is often defined as a movement diverging from the metaphysical foundationalism of Fichte, and there is a lot of textual support for that interpretation. In certain other respects, however, the romantic philosophers appear to be in clear agreement with Fichte. In this section I will analyse the conception of the creative imagination found in Fichte's main published text: *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794/95). Such an analysis will form the basis for my claim that the *Grundlage* is one of the primary idealistic inspirations for Novalis's philosophy of magical idealism.

Although Fichte's *Grundlage* is rightly known to be an extremely speculative, rigorous and logical text, it nevertheless contains the outlines of a genuinely fruitful philosophical theory of the imagination that tends to be neglected or overlooked, even by specialists.²¹ Scattered throughout the text are a series of specific characterizations of the power of the imagination, which when brought together provide an important foundation for his transcendental account of philosophy. I will present here four main characteristics of the Fichtean theory of the imagination in the *Grundlage* that I believe later become significant for Novalis's magical idealism. Methodically it is important to look at Fichte's theory first, because any claim

²⁰ See Novalis, *Fichte-Studien* (1795/96), HKA 2, 104–296.

²¹ There are of course exceptions. Commentators presenting recent treatments of the imagination in Fichte's 1794/95 *Grundlage* include: Christoph Asmuth, "Das Schweben ist der Quell aller Realität". Platner, Fichte, Schlegel und Novalis über die produktive Einbildungskraft", *e-Journal Philosophie der Psychologie* (2005), <http://www.jp.philo.at/texte/AsmuthC1.pdf>; Andreas Schmidt, "Fichtes Begriff der 'Einbildungskraft' und seine Maimonschen Ursprünge", in *Idealismus und Romantik in Jena. Figuren und Konzepte zwischen 1794 und 1807*, ed. Michael Forster, Johannes Korngiebel and Klaus Vieweg (München: Fink, 2018), 11–23; and Johannes Haag, "Imagination and Objectivity in Fichte's Early *Wissenschaftslehre*", in *The Imagination in German Idealism and Romanticism*, ed. Gerard Gentry and Konstantin Pollok (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 109–28.

that Novalis appropriated, transformed or even rejected elements of the Fichtean system, all depend on first knowing precisely what Fichte's philosophy is in order to properly carry out such a comparison.

a) Volitional originality

The first characteristic of the imagination in Fichte's *Grundlage* is that it is *creative*. Like in Kant, the philosophical focus of Fichte is on the imagination as a productive or creative power of the human mind (*die produktive or schaffende Einbildungskraft*). However, the imagination manifests itself in several forms or guises, not only in a creative or productive sense, and these other forms should be clearly distinguished. Fichte contrasts the higher creative imagination with the lower empirically-based form of the imagination. The latter is merely an imitator and a prisoner of the given, dependent on external perception and memory. This unoriginal and non-creative form of the imagination is therefore labelled the *reproductive* imagination – since it essentially reproduces what already exists. Conversely, Fichte elevates the productive and creative form of the imagination to the rank of a philosophical *power* or faculty (*Vermögen*) of the transcendental subject. Fichte not only understands it as an absolutely original power of the self or I, but also as a faculty of the mind that is absolutely free, self-active and independent. Philosophers who correctly employ their creative imagination are therefore thinkers who freely philosophize with originality and spirit:

This, however, is a task for the *creative power of imagination* (*schaffende Einbildungskraft*). All human beings share in this power, since without it they would also never have possessed a single representation (*Vorstellung*); but it is by no means the case that most human beings have free control over this power of creative imagination and are able to employ it to create (*erschaffen*) something purposefully; nor, should the longed-for image (*das verlangte Bild*) suddenly appear before their soul at some fortunate moment, like a bolt of lightning, are they able to hold it fast and investigate it and to imprint it indelibly for any use they may freely choose to make of it. It is this power (*Vermögen*) that determines whether one philosophizes with or without spirit.²²

The productive imagination is productive and creative insofar as it generates voluntary forms of possible intuitions: “representations” or new images (*Bilder*) – which may be artistic as well as philosophical images. These new

²² Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre 1794/95* (hereafter: *GWL*), § 4, in *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (hereafter: *GA*), ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Gliwitzky, Erich Fuchs, Peter K. Schneider, Günter Zöllner et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962-2012), vol. I/2, ed. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Jacob, 1969, 414–15 (English translation by Daniel Breazeale). I am very grateful to Professor Breazeale for kindly allowing me to quote from his forthcoming translation of Fichte's *Grundlage*.

representations or *Bilder* produced by the imagination fall under the domain of the active will, in contrast with sense impressions that are merely passively received. Thus, true artistic creators or philosophers are those who have this higher function of the imagination “freely in their power”. Even more: if a philosopher exhibits any degree of innovativeness – i.e. both a flair for form and style and genuinely original content – then according to Fichte this thinker is not just employing their faculties of intellect and logical reasoning, but above all their power of the creative imagination. – Their originality is precisely due to this particular faculty of the mind; they have moved beyond the imitation stage of the mere reproductive imagination. Inversely, any thinker failing to properly make use of their creative imagination can never be an authentically original philosopher for Fichte.

b) Wonder and mystery

Second characteristic: the imagination for Fichte is the “most wondrous” power of the I. As Johannes Haag also remarks²³, in the *Grundlage* Fichte first leaves this faculty of the mind unnamed, characterising it in various ways, before finally designating this unnamed power as the faculty of the productive or creative imagination, and more closely determining its functions and scope:

By means of its most wonderful power (*durch das wunderbarste seiner Vermögen*) (one that we shall determine more closely at the appropriate time), the positing I brings the vanishing accident...²⁴

With this, we have, at the same time, begun conducting an experiment within us with the marvelous power of productive imagination (*mit dem wunderbaren Vermögen*)...²⁵

The German adjective used by Fichte is *wunderbar*, “wonderful”, “wondrous” or “marvellous”, in the strong sense of the miraculous – which comes from *Wunder*, a miracle or wonder. To be sure, from a purely philological point of view, this adjective could also have had a negative connotation in Fichte’s time, as an attenuation of the stronger word *seltsam*, “strange” or “weird”. But as we have seen, in the *Grundlage* Fichte makes all philosophical innovation dependent on the faculty of the imagination, thus the *wondrous* character of the creative imagination is clearly meant in a positive sense.

Why does Fichte marvel at this faculty or find it “wondrous”? At least two reasons can be given. First, doubtlessly because the creative imagination is correlated with the idea of genesis and *production*, the production of representations and images. That consciousness itself is at all possible stems

²³ See Johannes Haag, “Imagination and Objectivity in Fichte’s Early *Wissenschaftslehre*”, 117.

²⁴ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *GWL*, GA I/2: 350 (English translation by Daniel Breazeale).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 353 (English translation by Daniel Breazeale).

from this self-generating and productive ability of the imagination. In other words, the creative imagination is the *source* of all transcendental spontaneity for Fichte, and not the understanding or intellect, as it is for Kant. According to Fichte, understanding (*Verstand*) is a much more passive and static faculty that merely retains or holds the elements of the mind. Reason (*Vernunft*) then fixes and determines more precisely these elements, which have been actively produced by the imagination.²⁶ Thus, the imagination constitutes the dynamic faculty of the human spirit – it is the origin and basis of the mind’s representations and therefore of all consciousness and intellectual life. This power is the very condition for the spirit’s entry into time or the temporal world:

It is this power [the most wondrous power of imagination] alone that makes possible life and consciousness, and, in particular, consciousness as a continuous temporal series ... the marvellous power of productive imagination, which will soon be explained and without which nothing whatsoever in the human mind can be explained – ... may very well prove to be the foundation of the entire mechanism of the human mind.²⁷

In other words, the imagination is not only miraculous or wondrous insofar as it relates to our ability to rise above external nature, to the knowledge of a given sense object through the generation of representations and images, but also insofar it is a free process happening in time and temporality – within the ordinary phenomenal series of our sensibility. This is unlike the sphere of pure reason, which for Fichte is ultimately a-temporal and remains outside the sphere of time.²⁸

A second reason why Fichte designates the creative imagination as *wunderbar* (wondrous) is because it is related to mystery. However, this does not mean that we are dealing with mere fantasy (*Phantasie*), or with unknowable transcendent objects. Fantasy for Fichte is a completely different function of the imagination, one that is negatively connoted as the involuntary production of fantastic or dream images. These fantastic images are disconnected from realism and true reality, in contrast to the creative imagination’s voluntary production of new images that do have a link with reality. Hence, in Fichte’s eyes, the power of the creative imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) is not transcendent or fantastical but remains a matter of intellectual activity, of the normative and controlled transcendental productivity.

Moreover, by calling the productive imagination the “most wondrous power” of the I, Fichte is again following in the footsteps of Kant. In the

²⁶ See *ibid.*, 374.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 350 and 353 (English translation by Daniel Breazeale).

²⁸ On Fichte’s conception of reason, see *ibid.*, 360.

Critique of Pure Reason Kant famously defined the mysterious working of the schematism of the productive imagination as a “hidden art (*eine verborgene Kunst*) in the depths of the human soul”²⁹. For his own account, Fichte also takes up, almost to the very letter, precisely this Kantian idea of the creative imagination as a “hidden art”. Not only does the *Grundlage* underline that the nature of this creative power of the human mind is largely unknown, but Fichte emphasizes that the productive imagination is an “almost always misunderstood” power (*verkanntes Vermögen*), i.e. it is a power whose true scope and function still remains hidden to many people.³⁰ But by associating it with the wondrous, unknown, marvellous, and the flash of lightning (as quoted above), Fichte is also highlighting an essential convergence between the aesthetic point of view – that of *genius* or artistic inspiration – and the philosophical point of view. As we saw above, this relates to the originality of the imagination and to the fact that Fichte saw this faculty as a power to be deployed in the spheres of both philosophy and art.³¹

c) An infinite hovering

A third key characteristic of the Fichtean theory of the creative or productive imagination: it is in constant movement. But this movement should be understood in a very specific sense. According to Fichte, the imagination’s movement is one of oscillation or *hovering* (*Schweben*). This unusual oscillating movement is inscribed in the activity of the imagination itself, its structure is inherently dynamic, productive and processual:

The power of imagination oscillates or hovers (*schwebt*) in the middle between determination and non-determination, between the finite and the infinite ... This hovering (*Schweben*) designates the imagination through its product; in the course of its oscillation or hovering and by means of the same, the power of imagination, as it were, produces this product.³²

The creative imagination hovers between opposing directions and ultimately remains in an intermediate space where everything is still undetermined, and yet it still attempts to find a synthesis between them. Hence, not only does the creative imagination have a profound connection to the temporal world,

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (hereafter: *KrV*), B 180; *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 273.

³⁰ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *GWL*, § 4, GA I/2: 350 (English translation by Daniel Breazeale).

³¹ Whereas Kant famously dismissed the possibility of speaking of genius in science. On the convergence between the aesthetic and the philosophical standpoints in Fichte and the Romantics, see David W. Wood, “From ‘Fichticizing’ to ‘Romanticizing’: Fichte and Novalis on the Activities of Philosophy and Art”, *Fichte-Studien* 41, no. 1 (2014): 247–78.

³² Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *GWL*, § 4, GA I/2: 360 (English translation by Daniel Breazeale).

but also to the *spatial*, it likewise enters into the finite and determinate world of space, hovering in the middle between two endpoints or directions.

With this idea of a hovering Fichte is once again expanding on a point found in Kant – on the notion of the monogram.³³ Even though it is related to the topic of schematism, Kant included his most extensive discussion of the hovering movement of the monogram in the subject of the artistic imagination's aesthetic ideal (in contrast to the ideal of reason). When talking about the “creatures of the imagination” in its free lawfulness, Kant writes:

...no one can give an explanation or intelligible concept [of them]; they are, as it were, monograms, individual traits, though not determined through any assignable rule, constituting more a wavering sketch (*schwebende Zeichnung*), as it were, which mediates between various experiences (*im Mittel verschiedener Erfahrungen*), than a determinate image.³⁴

In Kant's definition, the imaginative monogram brings under the unity of a *single* sensible figure – a “silhouette” (*Schattenbild*)³⁵ or an “outline” (*Umriss*)³⁶ – a set of scattered and disparate traits that cannot be subsumed under the rule of any concept. The individual features of the monogram are themselves determinate, but the figure as a whole, its identity, remains indeterminate, hovering in the middle. This makes it uncommunicable, and no existing real individual corresponds to this figure which exists in the mind of the artist, which she has created in her imagination as an inner silhouette. In this regard, Fichte's view of the products that are generated by the creative imagination is quite consistent with Kant's view in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Nevertheless, Fichte's conception may still be distinguished from Kant's view in at least three central respects. 1). For Fichte, the monogram of the imagination can in fact be communicated, provided that one exercises in turn one's own power of the imagination. 2). Its individual traits are not only sensible or empirically finite data, but it additionally has spiritual and infinite features. 3). The monogram as the product of the imagination hovers between two opposite extremes.³⁷

Similarly, the wondrous hovering productions (creatures) of the productive imagination in Fichte could also be defined negatively. Indeed, the Fichtean association of the creative imagination with the activity of

³³ I agree with Rudolf A. Makkreel that Fichte's idea of the “hovering” (*Schweben*) of the imagination could be brought into connection with Kant's idea of the hovering in the monogram. See Makkreel, “Fichte's Dialectical Imagination”, 9.

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *KrV*, A 570/ B 598; *Critique of Pure Reason*, 552.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, A 833/ B 861; Eng. trans., 692.

³⁷ On this latter difference between Fichte's concept of the imagination and Kant's, see Andreas Schmidt, “Fichtes Begriff der ‘Einbildungskraft’ und seine Maimonschen Ursprünge”. Schmidt sees in Maimon the historical origin of the Fichtean connection between imagination and contradiction, topics that seem unrelated in Kant, or that Kant at least did not explicitly link.

hovering recalls the many polemical debates at the end of the 18th century stigmatising the ‘unbridled’ imagination for apparently preventing the human being from properly thinking and acting. Fichte’s creative “hovering of the imagination” may therefore evoke for some a reference to the alleged erratic ways of *Phantasie* (fantasy) or perhaps even of *Schwärmerei* (exaltation). However, in contrast to these more negative aspects, Fichte’s theory of the creative hovering imagination above all underscores the positive elements of this faculty. The idea of hovering points to the constant change, *agility* and fluidity of the *dynamic* imagination, which actively carries out interconnections and syntheses that make the very activity of intelligence and consciousness possible.³⁸

d) A living synthesis

Lastly, the fourth main characteristic of Fichte’s theory of the creative imagination is that it is not simply a faculty that just hovers or oscillates between two opposites, but that it is also a faculty of a *living synthesis*. This synthesis of the imagination takes place in and is carried out by a living and dynamic entity – the human self or I. The *Grundlage* characterizes the creative imagination as that power of our I that allows us to integrate and synthesize two opposing elements into our knowledge and cognition. These two elements are not only opposed at the abstract level of mere logic, but even perhaps at the level of external reality, right down into the living world of nature and its physical forces. Examples of two opposing elements that can be synthesized by the creative imagination include: the I and the Not-I, the finite and the infinite, the ideal and the real, and the self and nature. The imagination forms a synthesis that is capable of embracing the two antitheses within it, it relativizes and preserves them by cancelling their absoluteness and discovering the element of their *identity*:

This power is almost always misunderstood, but it is the power that combines into a unity things constantly posited in opposition to each other, the power that intervenes between moments that would have to mutually annul each other, and retains both. ... The task was to unite two terms posited in opposition to each other, the I and the Not-I. They can be completely united by the power of imagination, which unites items posited in opposition to each other.³⁹

The creative imagination is the only power capable of resolving these contradictions, in which two apparent opposites come together; but they clash rather than suppress, simultaneously imposing a limit on each other.

³⁸ For a more detailed treatment of the monogram in both Kant and Fichte, see my forthcoming article: “The Monogram of the ‘Sweet Songstress of the Night’. The Hovering of the Imagination as the First Principle of Fichte’s Aesthetics”, in *Fichte-Studien* 49 (2020).

³⁹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *GWL*, GA I/2: 350 and 361 (English translation by Daniel Breazeale).

The synthetic activity of the imagination takes the technical name of *Wechselwirkung*, “reciprocal action”. At the same time as it generates contradiction and alternation (*Wechsel*) between these two opposites, the imagination is the decisive factor of their reunion and reconciliation. They remain distinct, but the imagination ultimately overcomes their contradictoriness by eventually finding an element in each of the two that they share in common – i.e. an intersection or meeting point – at which they organically coincide or are identical.

Thus, the very *life* of the creative imagination is defined by the *relationship, transition* and *synthesis* between two opposing directions. Or to put it another way, the life of the creative imagination is defined by the *diffraction* of its activity in two directions: from the finite to the infinite, and inversely, from the infinite to the finite; or from determination to non-determination, from non-determination to determination. The hovering or oscillating movement of the imagination is not a transition between separate and abstract opposites, but between the two directions of a living and composite whole formed by the imagination itself. The hovering process of the creative imagination is constant and necessarily unfinished: its power of oscillation never terminates, not even after the living synthesis is found and it has become fixed and determined as a concept by the power of reason, which is then held or preserved by the understanding.

Let us summarize this aperçu. Fichte’s theory of the productive or creative imagination in the *Grundlage* has the following characteristics: 1). Via the human will, it generates new products, images, and representations and is therefore original or creative; 2). Although it is frequently misunderstood or even unknown to many people, it is the most marvellous or wondrous (*wunderbar*) faculty of the human I, that both art and philosophy share in common; 3). It is distinguished by its hovering or oscillating movement, which forms a transition between two opposing elements or directions, one that is not purely abstract, linear or mechanical, but dynamic; 4). The productive imagination is the faculty of overcoming contradictions insofar as it is able to carry out a living synthesis of opposites such as the ideal and real, the finite and the infinite.

2. In the Tradition of Fichte – True Philosophy as “Realistic-Idealism”

In a fragment from 1798, Novalis presents the new philosophical land opened up by himself as the culmination of a history of philosophy that is conceived as a trajectory toward a higher philosophical standpoint. In so doing, he directly situates his own thought on magical idealism in the stream of transcendental and critical philosophy. His brief historical overview starts with various French philosophers as pure empiricists, progresses to the dogmatists and enthusiasts, moves from there to Kant and Fichte, before culminating in the romantic thinker’s own philosophical programme:

Similarity and dissimilarity between Asmus, Ligne and Voltaire. Jacobi also belongs among the *transcendent empiricists*. An empiricist is: someone whose manner of thinking is an effect of both the external world and fate—the passive thinker—his philosophy is given to him. Voltaire is a pure empiricist and so are several French philosophers.—Ligne imperceptibly tends to the transcendent empiricists. These form the transition to the dogmatists. From there we come to the enthusiasts—or to the transcendent dogmatists—then to Kant—then to Fichte—and finally to magical idealism.⁴⁰

For Novalis, philosophy can essentially be defined as the unified knowledge of the intelligence. It is the mind or spirit returning to its original element, where it feels intellectually comfortable in the world, as stated in his famous definition from 1798/99: “Philosophy is really homesickness – *the desire to be everywhere at home*.”⁴¹ However, in line with numerous other recurrent expressions in Novalis’s philosophical fragments, “true” or genuine philosophy, i.e. philosophy “proper” or “par excellence” (*kat’exochen*), is not simply to be understood as unitary or “one”. Rather, philosophy is “dyadic” (*Dyadik*)⁴²; that is to say, it has a twofold unity in which the union of two perspectives positively supplement or complement each other. These two main original perspectives are idealism (or rationalism), and realism (or empiricism):

PHILOSOPHY [...] The idealization of realism—and the realization of idealism leads to the truth. One *works* for the *other*—and hence indirectly for itself. In order to work directly for idealism, the idealist must seek to prove realism—and vice versa. The *proof of realism* is idealism—and vice versa.⁴³

Of course, both realism and idealism could be considered solely according to their own separate criteria. Realism generally refers to the outer world, to the senses, and everything related to the body. Whereas idealism particularly relates to the mind, to the sphere of ideas, concept and laws, which constitute a pure *a priori* system of the intelligence, just as formal logic enunciates certain laws of thought. The empiricist starts from the observation of contingent facts, the idealistic philosopher begins with thinking. In contrast to the empiricists, idealists are people who tend to generate their own thoughts; they do not think merely by means of outer experiences (*a*

⁴⁰ Novalis, *Teplitzer Fragmente*, frag. 56, HKA 2, 605; *Teplitz Fragments*, trans. M. M. Stoljar, in Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany/N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 1997), 107 (trans. mod.).

⁴¹ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 857, HKA 3, 434; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 155.

⁴² Novalis, *Fichte-Studien*, entry 206, HKA 2, 166; *Fichte-Studies*, 64.

⁴³ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 634, HKA 3, 383–84; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 115 (trans. mod.).

posteriori), but especially by employing the autonomous forces of their own minds.

By the very fact that it is based on the principle of rational autonomy and active reflexivity, the philosophical point of view deployed in Novalis's work therefore makes best sense when it is understood as *ultimately* grounded in idealism. It is subordinate to the *primacy of idealism* – because it is founded on the self-knowledge of the idealist that the pure realist does not possess. Nevertheless, true philosophy for Novalis is far from a type of cognition that gradually detaches itself from its empirical roots to become pure speculative forms that are merely subject to the requirements of reason. Considered from the point of view of its internal functioning, genuine philosophy remains the cognitive “chain” (*die Kette*)⁴⁴ through which things become *tied together* or intertwined within a person's individual consciousness. Consequently, philosophy is interlinked with both the inner world of ideas on the one hand, and to all real or empirical sources on the other, and is the very movement in which life becomes joined to necessity and truth. In other words, true philosophy is that singular movement in which opposites like idealism and realism eventually form a harmonious unity.

Novalis's designates this positive unification of idealism and realism as the dynamics of their mutual “co-penetration” (*Durchdringung beyder*)⁴⁵, the “conversion” (*Umsetzung*)⁴⁶ of the one into the other. Here we are not only dealing with one or two isolated quotes, but this view of genuine philosophy is constantly and repeatedly affirmed throughout Novalis's philosophical writings. We find it in his 1797/98 *Vorarbeiten* (Preparatory Studies): “The realist is the idealist who knows nothing about himself. – Raw idealism – first-hand idealism, is realism”⁴⁷; then in his 1798/99 *Romantic Encyclopaedia* project: “PHILOSOPHY. Idealism is nothing but genuine *empiricism*”, and “PHILOSOPHY. The complete concurrence of idealism and realism – with the most complete independence, furnishes the complete proof of the correct methodology for everything.”⁴⁸; and up until the last fragments of 1799-1800. It is perfectly summarized once more in the following late thought:

In itself, all philosophy and wisdom is idealism—the realm of thought.
True philosophy is wholly realistic idealism.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Novalis, *Poëticismen*, frag. 184, HKA 2, 562.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 634, HKA 3, 382.

⁴⁷ Novalis, *Teplitzer Fragmente*, frag. 374, HKA 2, 605.

⁴⁸ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 402 and entry 634, HKA 3, 316 and 382; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 62, and 114.

⁴⁹ Novalis, *Fragmente und Studien 1799/1800*, frag. 611, HKA 3, 671.

This expression “realistic idealism” (*realistischer Idealismus*) deployed by Novalis in 1800, directly echoes that of *Real-Idealismus*, “real-idealism”, used by Fichte at the end of the 1794 *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*. There Fichte writes: “The *Wissenschaftslehre* [...] is a critical idealism, though one could also call it a real-idealism or an ideal-realism.”⁵⁰ Like the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the philosophical position most *negatively* opposed to Novalis’s own position and with which it cannot be reconciled is not empiricism, materialism, or naturalism, but rather, a sterile kind of formalism or abstract type of idealism. Hence, in entry 565 of the *Allgemeines Brouillon* we read: “PHILOSOPHY. Idealism should not be opposed to realism, but to formalism.”⁵¹

Novalis’s philosophy is a serious reflection on the interweaving and positive intersection of the empirical and the rational, the sensible and supersensible, sensibility and reason, i.e. of realism and idealism. In other words, exactly like in Fichte’s *Grundlage*, magical idealism sees itself as a continuation of a programme within the tradition of transcendental philosophy that attempts to reconcile or synthesize apparent opposites, above all those of realism and idealism. As we saw, in Fichte, this synthesis of realism and idealism is carried out by the power of the creative imagination. But what carries out this reconciliation in Novalis’s philosophy? Does he also consider the faculty of the creative imagination as the living synthesis? This is where we need to turn to Novalis’s conception of magic and its cultural, literary and philosophical origins in order to provide an answer to these questions.

3. The Creative Imagination of the Magical Idealist

Compared to rational philosophy and science, at first glance magic seems to be at the opposite spectrum of human cognition, for it is often spontaneously associated with superstition, uncritical beliefs, and visions. Novalis himself writes in the *Allgemeines Brouillon* under the heading MAGIC: “Magic is utterly different from philosophy etc. and constitutes a *world*—a *science*—an *art* in itself.”⁵² Though he acknowledges the heterogeneity of magic and philosophy, after this statement, and without further explanation, Novalis immediately enumerates a list of possible combinations of magic with various

⁵⁰ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *GWL*, § 5, GA I/2: 412 (English translation by Daniel Breazeale). Regarding Fichte’s idealism-realism, see Günter Zöllner, *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4; and “German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer”, in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 201–03.

⁵¹ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 565, HKA 3, 364; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 100.

⁵² *Ibid.*, entry 137, HKA 3, 266; trans., 23.

cultural and scientific fields. Some of these are: “Magical astronomy, grammar, philosophy, religion, chemistry, etc.”⁵³ Thus, what exactly does Novalis mean by “magic” when he labels his philosophy “*magical* idealism”?

a) The history of magic

Generally speaking, magic articulates a particular relationship to the sensible world. It is a category for thinking about effects on sensible reality or how a power of action is related to the natural world. In a well-known fragment from the *Poeticisms*, appearing just after the programmatic fragment 105 on the theory of “romanticizing” the world, Novalis formulates a generic definition of how magic is to be understood: “Magic is = the art of using the sense world at will.”⁵⁴ In other words, magic may be defined as an effective, arbitrary or free manipulation of the world of nature. Some older traditional examples include: to calm the winds, bring drought or rain, raise the dead etc.

Just as magical idealism may be understood in relation to the history of philosophy, seeing itself as the culmination of the diacritical shifts of idealism’s conceptual orientation, it may also be viewed in relation to the history of magic. In several fragments Novalis mentions the historical development of magic, at other times he talks about magic as constituting an actual period of history:

All true enthusiast and mystics have without doubt been possessed of higher powers—strange mixtures and shapes have certainly resulted from this. ... the time has not yet come when such tasks [clean, refine, and clarify this grotesque (wondrous) mass] can be performed with little effort. This remains to be achieved by future historians of *magic*. As very important documents of the gradual evolution of magic power they are worthy of careful preservation and collection.⁵⁵

... In the age of magic the body is the servant of the soul, or of the world of spirits.⁵⁶

Historically speaking, modern conceptions of magic consider it as a particular type of mental attitude, whereas primitive theories of magic viewed it as a set of specific *skills* with regard to religious functions, such as sacrificial and funerary rituals, divinatory practices, etc., but also healing skills. The term “magus” meant a “servant of the gods” and by extension “a human being that is divine”, and the magi originally referred to a caste of wise men or

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Novalis, *Poeticisms* (*Vorarbeiten*), frag. 109, HKA 2, 546.

⁵⁵ Ibid.; English trans. in Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 60–1 (trans. mod.).

⁵⁶ Ibid., frag. 111, HKA 2, 547; trans. mod., 61.

sacred sages among the Persians.⁵⁷ The characterization of someone as a “magician” was often pejorative in classical Greece, i.e. it denoted a sorcerer or charlatan. For Plato, the term *magi* or magician could not only refer to seers and initiates of the mysteries, but sometimes to sophists and painters and poets who are illusionist imitators. Subsequently, however, the figure of the “magus” became the source of a more positive appraisal among the ancient Greeks, especially with the advent of Neoplatonism. Because of its supposed therapeutic effects, the art of the magician was conceived as a *pharmakon*, among other things, i.e. both a poison and a remedy, which could heal the appetitive part of the human soul. In his writings, Novalis plays on this contrasting twofold reputation of the magician in antiquity, who was sometimes considered as a trickster, sometimes as a wise man.

And this is where we can start to see in Novalis one relationship between magic and the power of the imagination. It is the latter power that helps us to pierce through the coverings of illusion and error in the sphere of knowledge. For instance, in his *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, Novalis writes:

Evil is a *necessary illusion* ... just like *error* in the pursuit of truth.—So too with pain—ugliness—disharmony. These illusions can only be explained through the magic of the imagination (*Magie der Einbildungskraft*).⁵⁸

What were the effective means used by magicians in antiquity to act on and effect reality? They did not just employ external objects like amulets or talismans, but *spoken* incantations: ancient magic was therefore associated with an effective kind of speech that was addressed to the divine powers and aimed at bringing about a contact between human beings and the gods. The magician’s spoken performance is best illustrated by the musical power of poetic speech, an effective and modulated mode of speaking that is capable of acting or having an effect on a body or individual.

b) Passive and active magic. Physical and idealist magician

Like with its relation to the stream of idealism, Novalis’s philosophy of magical idealism also marks a shift in its theoretical orientation towards the stream of magic. For Novalis, all fantasy, illusion, or the wishful dream that something supernatural could take place without us having to do anything, should be viewed as “mere” or passive magic, something that is independent of our will. In opposition to this passive form of magic, Novalis proposes a *fully active form of magic*, one that arises through the voluntary exercise of

⁵⁷ See Fabienne Jourdan, “Orphée, sorcier ou mage?”, *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 1 (2008): 22–3, <http://rhr.revues.org/5773>; DOI: 10.4000/rhr.5773.

⁵⁸ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 769, HKA 3, 417; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 141.

our own inner faculties, and more precisely, of the power of the *creative imagination*. Because it consciously involves our will and autonomy, this latter form of magic is superior compared to ordinary, simple or passive magic. Thus, in the late 18th-century, there is a mentality or type of thinking for Novalis that must be saved from the forces of mechanism, from inertia, laziness or “mere” magic. Yet many people do not wish to actively employ their power of imagination:

It is on account of indolence that man demands *mere* mechanism or *mere* magic (*bloße Magie*). He doesn't want to be active—to employ his *productive imagination* (*seine productive Einbildungskraft*).⁵⁹

Consequently, the link between Novalis's conception of true and active magic and Fichte's theory of the creative imagination – as a similarly active and productive cognitive faculty – is becoming progressively more explicit.

Furthermore, in line with his conception of “genuine philosophy” as realistic idealism or idealistic realism, Novalis distinguishes between two main types of magician: the “physical magus” of the natural or realistic world on the one hand, and the idealist magician or “magical idealist” on the other. These two magicians of the real and ideal worlds should ultimately constitute a modern philosophical synthesis.

According to Novalis, the “physical magus” is to be primarily considered from an empirical or natural point of view. This corresponds to the conventional idea of magic, noted above, in which the human being may enter into a volitional relationship of sympathy and direct action with the universe or nature, just as a person normally does with their very own body:

MAGIC. The physical magus knows how to enliven nature, and as with *his body*, to use it at will.⁶⁰

Perhaps the most famous example of a physical magus is the ancient figure of Orpheus, the Thracian bard whose spoken incantations (his poetry and music) had the ability to tame wild animals and to attract living creatures, and even trees and inanimate stones. His magical skill was equated with the power of bringing civilization to the natural world. Moreover, Orpheus was a miraculous healer figure, a discoverer of medicinal remedies.

In contrast to the physical magus of the real world of nature, the “magical idealist” should be primarily understood from the standpoint of the spirit or mind. A frequently discussed point in the scholarship on Novalis's magical idealism relates to it as a specific ability of the metaphysician, as a skill to carry out a *Wechselwirkung* or reciprocal action between external things and inner thoughts. In one of the most famous passages on magical idealism, found under the heading of “metaphysics” in his encyclopaedia

⁵⁹ Ibid., entry 724, HKA 3, 408; trans., 134.

⁶⁰ Ibid., entry 322, HKA 3, 297; trans., 47.

project (entry 338), this is how Novalis describes a thinker or philosopher who is a “magical idealist”:

METAPHYSICS. ... if you are unable to transform thoughts into external things, then transform external things into thoughts. If you are unable to make a thought into something independent, something separate from yourself—and *therefore* also something *alien (fremd)*—that is, into an externally occurring soul, then proceed in the opposite manner with external things—and transform them (*verwandelt sie*) into thoughts. Both operations are idealistic. Whosoever has both completely in his power, is the *Magical Idealist*.⁶¹

Thus, according to entry 338 of his encyclopaedia project, the philosopher as a magical idealist should have perfectly in their control that twofold reciprocal operation involving the realization of the ideal and the idealization of reality, which forms the core of Novalis’s conception of true or genuine philosophy. Even though the characterization of the magical idealist in this particular passage does not explicitly mention the power of the imagination by name, it should be clear from our earlier sections and arguments that this passage implicitly expresses and even endorses the main elements of the Fichtean theory of the creative imagination. In other words, this passage seems to be advocating that any thinker who wishes to be a true magical idealist should above all be someone who is capable of philosophically employing to a high degree their own power of the creative or productive imagination. Let us examine this famous entry 338 more closely in this light.

c) Novalis’s transformation of Fichte

From Fichte’s *Grundlage*, we know that the first characteristic of the productive imagination is creativity, i.e. originality and activity. Now, looking again at entry 338, magical idealists are characterized as not confining themselves to mere imitations or passive reproductions of external models, of something that is already given or produced by nature. In other words, Novalis is talking about a power of transformation that generates something new and original – the transformation of things into ideas and thoughts, for instance: how external phenomena can become transformed into an inner principle or conceptual law. And *vice versa*, the transformation of inner ideas or thoughts into external things, would take place when an aesthetic idea becomes turned into an outer work or art, where the one is no longer exactly the same as the other. Therefore, in Novalis’s description of the magical idealist, the first criterion of the higher form of the creative imagination as generating a new or original production seems to be fulfilled.

The second characteristic of the Fichtean creative imagination is that it has a wondrous, marvellous or mysterious aspect. Could what is described

⁶¹ Ibid., entry 338, HKA 3, 301; trans. mod., 51.

by Fichte as something marvellous and wondrous – *wunderbar* – be in fact related to Novalis’s idea of magic? We could say that we do have the element of *mystery* or at least hiddenness here, not only on account of Novalis’s explicit reference to the sphere of “magic” and the philosopher as a magical idealist, but also because curiously the term “imagination” is not explicitly uttered in this passage. – Even though this is what entry 338 seems to be explicitly referring to and describing, if my hypothesis is correct. In that case, the second criterion of the “wondrous” or “mysterious” would also be met, even though this is done by Novalis employing different terminology to Fichte: Novalis uses the term *magic* in place of the Fichtean term of wondrous (*wunderbar*). This reading is confirmed elsewhere in the encyclopaedia project, when Novalis labels *magism* as: “combining both fantasy (*Fantasie*) and the power of thought (*Denkkraft*)”⁶², where fantasy is redefined as the plastic force of an outer form (*Gestalt*) in the sense of sculpture⁶³, i.e. as the artistic activity, whereas the *Einbildungskraft* is conversely the inner forming force (*Bilden*). This again is another direct link between Novalis’s views on magic and the creative power of the imagination.

What about the third Fichtean characteristic: the “hovering” (*Schweben*) motion or moving between two opposite elements or directions? We clearly find this too in entry 338, especially in the first sentence describing the structure of a reciprocal action – the *Wechselwirkung*, to use Fichte’s technical term. – There is an alternation or oscillating between two poles: on the one hand ideas and thoughts, which are internal, on the other hand, things belonging to the external or the “alien” world of nature. From his earlier studies, Novalis was well-aware of the Fichtean conception of the *Schweben* or hovering of the imagination, and gives examples of its oscillation between two poles like being and non-being, the actual and the necessary.⁶⁴ Thus, although the specific term “hovering” is missing in this particular entry 338, there is still very clearly the Fichtean idea of a double directionality of movement between the internal and external worlds (interiorization and exteriorization).

Finally, as for an ultimate reconciliation or dynamic synthesis of these opposites – the fourth characteristic of the imagination in Fichte’s *Grundlage* – this also seems to be present, insofar as it is the goal or mission of the magical idealist to seek to achieve a synthesis of the ideal and the real, or

⁶² Ibid., entry 765, HKA 3, 417; trans., 141.

⁶³ See *ibid.*, entry 698, HKA 3, 401; trans. (mod.), 129: “Theory of the *fantasy*. It is the *sculptural* ability (*das Vermögen des Plastisirens*).”

⁶⁴ See Novalis, *Fichte-Studien*, frag. 3 and 234, HKA 2, 106 and 178; *Fichte Studies*, 6 and 76: “Should there be a still higher sphere, it would be the sphere between being and not-being. – The oscillating (*Schweben*) between the two. – Something inexpressible, and here we have the *concept of life*. ... The concept *actual* is grounded in intuition and is the antithesis, since it is a relational concept – [the concept] *necessary* is grounded in imagination and is the synthesis – *possible* is a twofold relation in the third – it is nothing but an oscillating (*Schweben*) between the *necessary* and *actual*.”

idealism and realism. Like the Fichtean philosopher of the creative imagination, the magical idealist has fully in his or her power a twofold operation that is capable of presenting the sensible as spiritual, and *vice versa*, where inner thoughts become transformed into outer objects. Thus, once again, even if the word “imagination” (*Einbildungskraft*) is not explicitly mentioned in this passage, in his specific requirements for what the magical idealist should attempt to philosophically carry out, Novalis does seem to be describing the very idea and qualities of the productive imagination.

And what about the question of the originality of Novalis? If magical idealists are genuinely able to employ the “wondrous” or “marvellous” power of their own creative imaginations, they are not at all just passively following in the philosophical footsteps of Kant and Fichte. This is because the creative imagination forces a person to be active and productive, and in this regard they are always to some extent original. The true magical idealist therefore should simultaneously seek to be both an artist and philosopher, a thinker capable of generating “wonderful works of art”. This does not necessarily mean being a better transcendental or critical philosopher *per se*, but more endeavouring to be a creative and artistic thinker. – This is the sense of learning to “Fichticize” better than perhaps even Fichte himself had done. And it again encapsulates the task of the philosopher as magical idealist:

It may well be possible that Fichte is the inventor of an altogether new way of thinking—for which our language doesn’t even have a name yet. The inventor is not perhaps the most skillful and brilliant artist on his instrument—although I’m not saying that this is so. However, it is most likely that there are and will be people—who Fichticize far better than Fichte himself. *Wonderful works of art* (*wunderbare Kunstwerke*) could come into being here—as soon as one begins to Fichticize artistically.⁶⁵

Thus, to be a magical thinker or idealist, above all signifies for Novalis a person who is able to skilfully use their power of the creative imagination. In numerous other fragments and passages Novalis expressly employs Fichte’s terminology of the marvellous, wondrous or *wunderbar* in relation to the imagination. For example, he does so in the following fragment when introducing a further skill of the magical idealist that has to do with trying to increase the control over their external sense organs. It is precisely the power of our imagination that Novalis views as a new kind of *wunderbare* sense:

The power of the imagination is the wondrous sense that can replace all the senses for us—and that is already entirely in our power.

⁶⁵ Novalis, *Logologische Fragmente* (*Vorarbeiten*, 1798), frag. 11, HKA 2, 524; trans. (mod.) in David W. Wood, “From ‘Fichticizing’ to ‘Romanticizing’: Fichte and Novalis on the Activities of Philosophy and Art”, 258–59.

*(Die Einbildungskraft ist der wunderbare Sinn, der uns alle Sinne ersetzen kann—und der so sehr schon in unserer Willkühr steht.)*⁶⁶

Not only is there a direct intertextuality with Fichte's thought in Novalis's use of the adjective *wunderbar*, but the characterization of the imagination as a faculty entirely in our power (*in unserer Willkühr*) should be brought together with the above-quoted definition of magic in the *Poeticisms*, where magic is termed the "the art of using the sense world at will (*willkührlich*)".

The future period of magic that Novalis is interested in is the epoch of a new theory of the sense organs called "organology"⁶⁷, where the new organ, or rather, the new use of our sense organs, becomes an effective principle for acting on reality itself. Genuine magic in Novalis's philosophy is no longer about calming the winds, bringing drought or rain, or raising the dead by an incantation addressed to divine powers. It is a matter of perception or sensibility ceasing to be a passive tribute paid to finitude. Perception and sensibility in the age of magic is no longer pathologically extorted and necessarily determined, no longer merely organic, determined by biological or physiological laws. Rather, genuine magic becomes voluntary and volitional, contingent, free or arbitrary and active. This is by virtue of its exceptional inner moral and *spiritual* power, i.e. for Novalis, this wondrous new use of the sense organs is based on none other than our own productive or creative imagination, so that the magical idealist leads back to the physical magus.

These are some of the conclusions that can be drawn so far. True magic as Novalis understands it is the development of a new use of the senses, and this is *another name for the active use of the creative imagination*. Thus, Novalis's choice of the term "magic" for his philosophy does not refer to anything irrational or inexplicable, but just as he himself had indicated in 1798, it is something perfectly understandable in line with the Kantian and Fichtean tradition of transcendental philosophy: for the true magical idealist is a rational philosopher-artist who has this *creative faculty of the imagination entirely within their power*.

4. "My Magical Idealism": From Schiller to Novalis

From what has been presented above, it might seem that an examination of solely the Fichtean heritage could be enough to interpret Novalis's philosophy. This is not the case. It would lead to misunderstandings of Novalis's theory and methodology, and fail to take into account other primary sources in Novalis's work. Attaining a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of magical idealism and its *originality* therefore

⁶⁶ Novalis, *Studien zur Bildenden Kunst*, frag. 481, HKA 2, 650.

⁶⁷ On Novalis's "organology", see Leif Weatherby, *Transplanting the Metaphysical Organ. German Romanticism between Leibniz and Marx* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

requires going beyond the influence of Fichte. Besides the obvious significance of the creative imagination, another important element of magical idealism that has not been mentioned so far is that of *love (Liebe)*. Love forms an integral part of the philosophy of magical idealism. Indeed, under the heading THEORY OF THE FUTURE, in the *Allgemeines Brouillon*, Novalis writes: “*Love is the basis for the possibility of magic. Love works magically.*”⁶⁸ As one can see, love is not somehow simply related to magic for Novalis, but furnishes its foundation. In other words, love too should be conceived in relation to the transcendental philosophical tradition, insofar it forms the very basis for the possibility of magic.

Yet the philosophical writings of Fichte known to Novalis appeared to lack this element, for which he criticized the author of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. A letter of Novalis to Friedrich Schlegel from 1796 contains a direct criticism of Fichte in this regard: “Spinoza and Zinzendorf explored it, the infinite idea of love ... Too bad I haven’t found a trace of this view in Fichte yet.”⁶⁹ If Novalis was not able to find this key aspect of magical idealism in the works of Fichte, where did he find it? As noted in the Introduction, some commentators have proposed Spinoza as a source. There is of course much merit to that interpretation, and it even has the textual support of the above letter. I do not disagree with that view, but I think it is insufficient for fully grasping the essence of magical idealism. In this section I claim that Novalis also significantly engaged with the philosophy of love found in the writings of another contemporary poet-philosopher: Friedrich Schiller. Love is a form of magic and magism for Schiller too, and it appealed to Novalis for precisely that reason. This will in turn lead us to one final key element of magical idealism – Novalis’s doctrine of therapeutics or philosophy of medicine.

a) Schiller as a new Orpheus

In addition to the infamous “*Horen-Dispute*” (*Horenstreit*) that opposed Fichte and Schiller during the summer of 1795 on the question of style in popular philosophical writings, there are many direct and indirect interconnections between the philosophies of these two thinkers that Novalis was also familiar with. Perhaps the most well-known example is Schiller’s attempt in the letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) to ground his anthropology and aesthetics on the Fichtean transcendental methodological principle of “reciprocal action” or *Wechselwirkung* – a principle that defines the creative imagination’s inner dynamics in Fichte’s *Grundlage*.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 79, HKA 3, 255; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 13.

⁶⁹ Novalis, letter to Friedrich Schlegel, 8 July 1796, HKA 4, 188.

⁷⁰ See Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (1795), Letter 13, footnote 1, in Friedrich Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004; hereafter: SW), vol. V, 607.

Another point where their thoughts organically (though more indirectly) intersect is the theory of grace outlined in Schiller's 1793 essay *On Grace and Dignity*. For Schiller, grace is the expression of freedom in bodily phenomena and therefore of a moral beauty specific to the human beings. However, this latter theory is also where a characteristic difference already appears between the Schiller and Fichte that Novalis likewise knew. Schiller's text deploys an entire vocabulary of a love towards grace that is consistent with the philosophy of love already contained in his early 1786 *Philosophical Letters*, particularly the "Theosophy of Julius".

It is in the context of his discussion of the modern concept of grace in *On Grace and Dignity* that Schiller himself draws a connection with magic, positively underlining the magism of beauty and art. Schiller starts with the Greek myth of the Goddess Venus, who is the ancient archetype of beauty and love. Venus is escorted by the three Graces, and wears a magical attribute – the belt of grace. Here Schiller extends the Kantian concept of the ideal of beauty by enlarging it from the human bodily form to the latter's contingent movements emanating from the freedom of the human spirit or its emotional states:

As far as the ideal of beauty is concerned, all *necessary* movements *must be* beautiful, because, as necessary, they belong to its nature; the beauty of *this* movement is therefore already *given* with the concept of Venus, whereas the beauty of the fortuitous movement is an *enhancement* of this concept. There is a grace of the voice, but no grace of breathing.⁷¹

Grace is a living or mobile beauty. It is referred to as a movement that is subject to variation, which Schiller calls the "beauty of play" in order to distinguish it from the stable or fixed "architectonic" beauty of a pleasing body.⁷² Schiller links this kind of grace with the point of view of the "beautiful soul"⁷³, i.e. with the modern point of view of the subjective inwardness that is missing from the mythological figure of Venus. The magical power of grace now permits an elevation and openness to an order that is different from nature, to a freedom that is beyond necessity, to an ethics that is beyond pathological sensibility in Kant's sense, and finally, to a change and infinity that are beyond all fixed identity and finitude:

A belt which is nothing more than a fortuitous outward ornament certainly seems not very fitting image to denote the *personal* character of grace; but a personal characteristic, which is at once thought as separable from the subject, could not be illustrated otherwise than by means of a fortuitous ornament, with which the person may part without

⁷¹ Friedrich Schiller, *Über Anmut und Würde* (1793), SW V, 436; *On Grace and Dignity*, trans. George Gregory (Schiller Institute, Inc., 1992), 340.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 446; trans., 349–50.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 468; trans., 368.

detriment to himself. The belt of grace, thus, does not work its effect *naturally*, since, in that case, it would be incapable of changing the person; rather, its effect is *magical*, that is, its power is enhanced beyond all natural conditions.⁷⁴

Like in Novalis, here we find again the general definition of magic as a particular kind of relationship to the sensible world, as a category for envisaging a type of acting that affects reality. More specifically: it is an effective and arbitrary or free manipulation of the world of nature. The soul and the spirit are the leading principle of the action, and the body is the means employed in this action whose ultimate principle however is spiritual. Novalis adopts this same triad of the spirit, soul and body.

Moreover, in *On Grace and Dignity*, the very grace of the voice that Schiller views as a paradigmatic example of the “beauty of play” takes us back to the magical qualities of the voice of an ancient singer – to the poet and musician Orpheus. For Novalis, Schiller is a much greater magician than Hamann, the so-called Magus of the North, because “Schiller makes exceedingly philosophical music.”⁷⁵ Indeed, Schiller not only had an impact on Novalis with his essay *On Grace and Dignity*, i.e. with the concept of the beautiful soul and morality’s exteriority in the human bodily form, Schiller’s philosophy of human history was just as important to Novalis. And according to Novalis, the philosophy of history, which emerged at the time hand in hand with the way in which the particular histories became encompassed into one single “universal history”, is a musical composition with respect to its form. In entry 461 of Novalis’s *Allgemeines Brouillon*, Schiller seems to be therefore a model for the new and modern philosopher of history in the tradition of Orpheus:

SCIENCE OF HISTORY. Mere history (movement, development) is musical and sculptural (*plastisch*). Musical history is philosophy. Sculptural (*plastische*) history is the *chronicle*—the narration—the experience. Every mass of material is a *chronicle*—every description a narration. Only then, when the philosopher appears as Orpheus, will the Whole arrange itself together into regularly common and highly formed, significant masses—into true *sciences*.⁷⁶

Schiller first presented his philosophy of history in his 1789 inaugural lecture upon taking up his professorship of philosophy at the university of Jena. This lecture is entitled “What is universal history and why does one study it?” The history in question here is a history in accordance with the idea, rather than the exact restitution of the past by the continuous narration of a succession

⁷⁴ Ibid., 435; trans., 339.

⁷⁵ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 419, HKA 3, 320; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 66.

⁷⁶ Ibid., entry 461, HKA 3, 335; trans., 77.

of facts over time. What enables the transition from the facts to the idea and permits the totalization of the entire sphere of time (past, present and future) is the concept of analogy, which is strictly defined in Kant as a structure of reasoning.⁷⁷ Analogy draws a universal connection between the facts into a “harmonious whole”⁷⁸, to use Schiller’s own terms. Via this epistemological tool, the philosophy of history (or the idea of a universal history) is borrowed from the philosophy of nature and establishes the reality of progress towards the human being’s own dignity – freedom – in the manner of a hypothesis – a conjecture – which is not gratuitous, but consistent with the principles of scientific reason. It involves both the faculty of reflective judgment and the imagination in the production of a symbolic presentation or indirect intuition of the rational idea. Schiller’s approach becomes further developed in Novalis’s late historical speech/essay *Christendom or Europe* (1799), where he outlines his own poetics of history. However, what was cautiously and tentatively employed in Schiller’s lecture⁷⁹ – the use of analogy – now becomes in Novalis’s speech an imperative, and associated with *magic*:

I refer you to history, research its instructive relations according to similar points of time, and learn to use the magic wand of analogy.⁸⁰

b) The magism of love: sympathy instead of *Anstoß*

As we saw above in Section 1, in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, the productive imagination is a synthetic power that connects what the intellect has separated. By means of the hovering imagination, the antitheses of the real and the ideal, nature and the self, etc. are able to interfere, meet, intersect and collide with each other. The power of the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), in contrast to fantasy (*Phantasie*), therefore strives to be embedded in reality, it is never mere subjectivism. Rather, its independent movement and activity is inseparable from an impulse or a “check” – an *Anstoß* in Fichte’s language – through something approaching the I from outside. This *Anstoß* cannot be explained by any positing activity of the I, even though it

⁷⁷ See Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*, in *Kant’s Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1902 sq.) (= *Akademie-Ausgabe*, hereafter: AK), vol. IV, 357; and I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 59, AK V, 352.

⁷⁸ Friedrich Schiller, “Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte? Eine akademische Antrittsrede”, SW IV, 764.

⁷⁹ See Friedrich Schiller, “Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte? Eine akademische Antrittsrede”, SW IV, 764: “The method of drawing conclusions by analogies is as powerful (*mächtiges*) an aid in history, as everywhere else, but it must be justified by an important purpose, and must be exercised with as much circumspection as judgment.” (Eng. trans. C. Stephan and R. Trout, https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/transl/Schiller_essays/universal_history.html)

⁸⁰ Novalis, *Die Christenheit oder Europa*, HKA 3, 518: “An die Geschichte verweise ich euch, forscht in ihrem belehrenden Zusammenhang, nach ähnlichen Zeitpunkten, und lernt den Zauberstab der Analogie gebrauchen.”

presupposes it, and does not exist without it. It is the feeling that the I has of its original limitation, both opening the way to the deployment and realization of the pure I and attesting to its immanent limitation:

The impulse or check [*Anstoß*] (which is not posited by the positing I) would happen to the I insofar as it is active, and it would therefore be an impulse or check only insofar as the I is active. The possibility of such an impulse or check is conditional upon this activity: no activity of the I, no impulse or check. Conversely, the I's [independent] activity of determining itself would be conditional upon the impulse or check: no impulse or check, no self-determination. – Furthermore, no self-determination, nothing objective, etc.⁸¹

In other words, the Fichtean notion of something that is “Not-I” makes it impossible to separate the treatment of nature from the question of a certain type of opposition, from a check, even if the check occurs against the background of an original unity.

However, in the romantic philosophy of Novalis, it is *the power of love* that plays this specific role in knowledge; love is the driving force of cognition. This corresponds of course to the original etymological meaning of the term philosophy: the word *philo-sophia* reminds us that it is originally linked with a love of wisdom. Consequently, Novalis's philosophy of magical idealism receives a more intimate and affectionate accent in its connection with other living beings. This occurs in the soul's deeper *feelings* of love or friendship, where the encounter with the other is a recognition of the same, whereas Fichte's philosophy deploys the dual critical standpoint of the I and the Not-I, of the self and nature, as a weapon of differentiation, if not of combat. Perhaps the most famous gesture of Novalis in this regard is to replace the Fichtean “Not-I” with a “You”.⁸² In his encyclopaedia project, under the rubric PHILOSOPHY, Novalis proposes a “true Fichtism”, that is to say, a form of philosophy “without a check (*Anstoß*) – without the Not-I in *his sense*”⁸³; while another definition of philosophy reads as follows: “Higher *philosophy* is concerned with the *marriage between nature and spirit*.”⁸⁴ So much so that there is a major shift in Novalis's own understanding of the nature of metaphysics: philosophy no longer begins with the negatively deduced infinite striving of reason or with an endless process of reflection, as was the case in the earlier *Fichte Studies*, but as is appropriate for a philosophy of magical idealism, it now begins with the soul's awakening to the power of love. As Novalis writes in the 1798 *Poeticisms*: “The principle of philosophy

⁸¹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *GWL*, GA I/2: 356 (English translation by Daniel Breazeale).

⁸² Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 820, HKA 3, 430; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 151.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, entry 639, HKA 3, 385; trans. (mod.), 116.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, entry 50, HKA 3, 247; trans. (mod), 8.

is the first kiss in this understanding – the origin of a new world ... Who wouldn't be fond of a philosophy whose seed is a first kiss?"⁸⁵

Thus, I maintain that the reception of the idea of love in Schiller's thought decisively contributed to a modification in Novalis's magical idealism of the *Anstoß* aspect of Fichteanism, while still retaining a critical and transcendental idealistic core. To be sure, Novalis's elaboration of a true philosophy of love also places itself in the older tradition of Spinoza, as the above-quoted 1796 letter to Schlegel shows. Furthermore, one could even argue that Novalis is partly in the tradition of Jacobi too, just as Novalis himself had claimed in his 1798 brief fragment on the history of magical idealism. Jacobi ignited of course an intellectual fire-storm with the publication of his Spinoza book; but in his own philosophy there is also the idea of intersubjectivity based on a relationship of understanding and affection between human beings.⁸⁶ However, in Novalis's eyes, Spinoza's realism or naturalism is largely unconscious of itself – it is uncritical and therefore merely passive – whereas Jacobi is a dogmatic and even a utilitarian thinker. In addition, Jacobi actually lacks a poetic sense, which renders him unable to grasp the deeper sense of Fichte's philosophy and its commitment to the productive freedom of the spirit:

Jacobi does not have any sense for art and therefore lacks the sense for the *Wissenschaftslehre*—he seeks coarse, useful reality—and does not enjoy mere philosophizing—serene philosophical consciousness—affecting and intuiting.⁸⁷

Novalis's criticism that Jacobi lacks a sense or organ for art leads of course back to the question of the productive imagination as a species of philosophical magic. Why is true magic not possible without love? Because magic is precisely the idea that all its practices and actions are based on the belief that there exist regular relationships and laws of *sympathy* between all the different beings in the world. Consequently, any work of art or book expressing the power of love should be considered as a modern form of magic. In an entry on ROMANTICISM Novalis accordingly writes: "All novels in which true love plays a part, are *fairytale* – *magical events*."⁸⁸

Moreover, with this modern philosophical principle of magic, I believe it can be argued that Novalis romanticized the notions of sympathy and love found in Schiller's early 1786 *Philosophical Letters*, especially in the text

⁸⁵ Novalis, *Poeticismen*, frag. 74, HKA 2, 541: "Der erste Kuss in diesem Verständnisse ist das Princip der Philosophie – der Ursprung einer neuen Welt. ... Wem gefiele nicht eine Philosophie, deren Keim ein erster Kuss ist?"

⁸⁶ See my essay "'(Toi.) (À la place du Non-Moi – Toi)'. Jacobi, Fichte, Novalis", forthcoming in: *L'homme et la nature. Politique, critique et esthétique dans le romantisme allemand*, ed. Giulia Valpione (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2020).

⁸⁷ Novalis, *Fragmente und Studien 1799–1800*, frag. 121, HKA 3, 572.

⁸⁸ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 80, HKA 3, 255; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 13.

entitled the “Theosophy of Julius”. This text draws at times on the hermetic and Cabbalistic tradition and consists of a dialogue between two characters named Raphael and Julius.⁸⁹ The fact that Novalis gave the nickname “Julius” to Friedrich Schlegel, with whom he felt such an affinity and friendship, is therefore highly telling.⁹⁰ In these early *Philosophical Letters*, love is for Schiller “the omnipotent (*allmächtiger*) magnet of the spiritual world.”⁹¹ Unlike the later theory of grace from the critical, post-Kantian 1793 essay *On Grace and Dignity*, which properly speaking is a moral human beauty that “works magically” and attracts love, the moral beauty referenced in this pre-critical 1786 “Theosophy of Julius” is not merely the beauty of a ‘beautiful soul’: it is also the beauty of nature. Indeed, the character of Julius in this text wishes to extend the power of love to everything in the ladder of creation:

There are moments in life where we are impelled to press to our breast every flower and every distant star, every worm and every sensed higher spirit – to embrace the whole of nature like our beloved.⁹²

Schiller’s “Theosophy of Julius” puts forth the view that there is a harmony in the universe *qua* sacred and providential creation, and that love itself reflects this very harmony. In the tradition of the Platonic *eros*, it advances the theory of a mystical and initiatory dimension to love that is experienced as a religious knowledge of the world. As Julius states: “Hence, love, my dear Raphael, is the ladder upon which we climb to become like God.”⁹³

Besides the doctrine of love, Schiller’s “Theosophy of Julius” includes a cosmogony, a theogony, a theory of abnegation, and finally, a doctrine of God. As Frederick C. Beiser has underscored, this profession of faith in the doctrine of selfless love “reaffirms Schiller’s earlier views about the vocation of man. Just as in the first dissertation and *Karlschule* speeches, the highest good is to achieve spiritual perfection, and in doing so to imitate the divine spirit who has created us all.”⁹⁴ This is summarized in Julius’s closing declaration, according to which “all spirits create from four elements – their I (*ihr Ich*), nature, God and the future.”⁹⁵ And Schiller’s character of Julius goes so far as to suggest the heterodox if not heretical idea that, as Beiser observes: “God is an ideal that we create through our own activity”; for “if everyone were only to love one another, then they would overcome the

⁸⁹ For more detail, see Frederick C. Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 33.

⁹⁰ See for example Novalis, [*Randbemerkungen zu Friedrich Schlegels “Ideen”*], HKA 3, 493.

⁹¹ Friedrich Schiller, *Philosophische Briefe* (1786), SW 5, 348.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 350: “Es gibt Augenblicke im Leben, wo wir aufgelegt sind, jede Blume und jedes entlegene Gestirne, jeden Wurm und jeden geahndeten höheren Geist an den Busen zu drücken – ein Umarmen der ganzen Natur gleich unsrer Geliebten.”

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁹⁴ Frederick C. Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 33–37.

⁹⁵ Friedrich Schiller, *Philosophische Briefe*, SW 5, 358.

separations between spiritual beings and create a single spiritual being, which would be God.”⁹⁶

Why is Schiller’s early text the “Theosophy of Julius” so crucial for an understanding of magical idealism? Theosophy is the wisdom of God, and Novalis himself in his reflections on theosophy in the *Allgemeines Brouillon*, draws exactly the same links as Schiller between God and magic on the one hand, and God and love on the other:

THEOSOPHY. In order to be truly moral, we must endeavor to become magicians (*Magier*). The more moral, the more in harmony *with God*—the more divine—the more *in communion* with God. ...⁹⁷

THEOSOPHY. God *is love*. Love is the highest *reality*—the primal foundation (*Urgrund*).⁹⁸

All these points – the image of the ladder and its ascent, the four elements of all spiritual creation, the idea of God as a creation, theosophy as magic and love – evoke Novalis’s later interest in the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions of theurgy. They also recall his declaration in the *Fichte Studies* concerning the task of his own philosophy: “Spinoza ascended as far as nature – Fichte to the I (*Ich*), or the person. I [ascend] to the thesis God.”⁹⁹

c) Philosophy of pathology and medicine

One final important aspect to be accounted for in any interpretation of magical idealism, is the extension of it from the sphere of the creative imagination (the mind), to the realm of love (the soul), and then right down to the *body* and the spheres of physiology, pathology and therapeutics – i.e. to domains falling under medicine and the philosophy of medicine. This gives rise to a threefold philosophy of the body, soul and spirit.

The relationship between magical idealism and these medical fields and the philosophy of medicine is frequently neglected in the secondary literature.¹⁰⁰ Yet it was significant for Novalis. As he remarks: “The philosophy of medicine – and its history, are exceedingly large and still utterly unexplored fields.”¹⁰¹ In his eyes, the true transcendental philosopher and

⁹⁶ Frederick C. Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher*, 36.

⁹⁷ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 61, HKA 3, 250; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 9–10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, entry 79, HKA 3, 254; trans., 12.

⁹⁹ Novalis, *Fichte-Studien* (1795/96), frag. 151, HKA 2, 157; *Fichte Studies*, 55.

¹⁰⁰ Yet it has recently been the object of an international symposium entitled: “‘Construction der transscendentalen Gesundheit’: Novalis und die Medizin im Kontext von Naturwissenschaften und Philosophie um 1800” (Schloss Oberwiederstedt, 4–7 May 2017). See the proceedings of the conference in: Richard Faber, Dennis F. Mahoney, Gabriele Rommel and Nicholas Saul (eds.), *Blütenstaub. Jahrbuch für Frühromantik* 6 (2019).

¹⁰¹ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 142, HKA 3, 267; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 23.

artist or poet should know and work and be effective in both the idealistic and realistic worlds, to ultimately become a healer: “Poetry is the great art of the construction of transcendental health. The poet is thus the transcendental physician.”¹⁰² Although the romantics were often castigated as mere *Schwärmer* or irrational otherworldly dreamers, Novalis was fully aware of the anthropological, medical and bodily aspects of a one-sided approach to life and philosophy. Thus, he was conscious of the intellectual dangers and extremes of philosophy, yet also cognizant of the medicinal means for remedying any one-sidedness. Magical idealism may recall therefore a *phármakon* in accordance with the ancient conception of magic, and in the word’s double sense of both a poison and a remedy.

Indeed, magic is linked in Novalis with omnipotence, the absolute and the ideal of perfection: “Ideal of total willing. Magical will”; “one sought in philosophy an omnipotent organ. *Magical idealism.*”¹⁰³ However, recalling the notion of *Wechselwirkung* or reciprocal action, any striving for perfection in philosophy that does without the reciprocal relationship of perfection with imperfection, or of the absolute with the limit, idealism with realism, etc. might easily result in a pathological disturbance or illness. Here the philosopher descends into “logical afflictions”, into “types of delusion” with “morbid” physiological symptoms.¹⁰⁴ Novalis specifically underscores the logical pathology resulting from any unbounded, one-sided and absolute drive (*Trieb*) towards an unconditional completeness, one that is devoid of all sense of the relative, of the empirical, and negating all that is unfinished, incomplete, imperfect:

PATHOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY. An absolute drive for perfection and completeness is morbid, as soon as it shows itself to be destructive and adverse to what is *imperfect*, and incomplete. If we want to attain and accomplish something definite, then we must also set up provisional and definite limits. Yet whoever does not wish to do this is perfect, just like he who doesn’t want to swim, before he is able to. He is a Magical Idealist ...¹⁰⁵

Novalis considers this as a pathological form of magical idealism because the sphere of the spirit is claiming to be absolute. Idealism or the spirit has become an abnormally enlarged and omnipotent center, instead of correctly seeing itself as merely one pole which only fully exists when it is completed

¹⁰² Novalis, *Poésie*, frag. 42, HKA 2, 535; Eng. trans. in Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 56.

¹⁰³ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 769, HKA 3, 417: “Ideal des Alleswollung. Magischer Willen.” (trans., 141); and *ibid.*, entry 642, HKA 3, 385: “Man suchte durch Philosophie immer etwas werckstellig zu machen—man suchte ein allvermögendes Organ in der Philosophie. *Magischer Idealism.*”

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, entry 638, HKA 3, 384–5; trans., 116.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

and synthesized with its other pole – that of realism or the body. As a mere philosopher or metaphysician, Novalis conceives the philosophical “ideal” that “nonetheless ... manifests or reflects itself”¹⁰⁶ within such a delusion. That is to say, the ideal of a pure spiritualism without any realism, without the principle of a limitation that operates as a “check” or *Anstoß*. But it is for him an unrealisable idea in the Kantian sense.

On the other hand, Novalis also connects the philosophy of magical idealism with the positive, anthropological and (in his view) realizable idea of immortality. In this regard, an explicit formulation of Novalis’s own stance as a representative of a particular type of magical idealism is presented in the encyclopaedia project under the heading of PHYSIOLOGY, and not under the heading of metaphysics.¹⁰⁷ There the magical idealist is conceived as a philosophical kind of therapist or poet-physician, as an artist who ultimately attains a knowledge of immortality by means of a higher kind of medicine. Entry number 399 of the encyclopaedia shows Novalis drawing another direct connection between physiology, therapeutics and medicine and his philosophy of magical idealism:

PHYSIOLOGY. ... True therapeutics is simply a prescription for the preservation and restoration of this special relation and exchange between the stimuli or factors. The artist of immortality practices higher medicine—infinitesimal medicine. He practices medicine as a higher art—as a synthetic art. He constantly views both factors simultaneously, as one, and seeks to harmonize them—to unite them into one goal. ... My Magical Idealism.¹⁰⁸

Novalis’s conception of magical idealism as a healing, medicinal and theosophical practice again situates him in the tradition of Schiller, who had trained and practised as a medical doctor before becoming a poet-philosopher. – Although of course, there are many other sources for Novalis’s thoughts on medicine and therapeutics besides Schiller.¹⁰⁹ However, in relation to the philosophy of magical idealism, it is not a matter of lower or ordinary medicine, but of a higher, musical, and spiritualised medicine in the sense of Orpheus: “MEDICINE. Every illness is a musical problem—the cure is a *musical solution*. The more rapid, and yet more complete the solution—the greater the musical talent of the doctor.”¹¹⁰ As we saw, magical idealism therefore becomes a remedy for the morbid neglect of the bodily world and

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., entry 399, HKA 3, 315; trans., 61-62.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ See Richard Faber, Dennis F. Mahoney, Gabriele Rommel and Nicholas Saul (eds.), *Blütenstaub. Jahrbuch für Frühromantik* 6 (2019).

¹¹⁰ Novalis, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, entry 386, HKA 3, 310; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 58.

nature by “practicing medicine as a higher art—as a synthetic art”.¹¹¹ That is to say, as an art that produces the “synthesis of the soul and body—and of irritability and sensibility.”¹¹²

In this reciprocal relationship of the inner with the outer that Novalis’s magical idealism is seeking, the “development and enhancement of the soul”, that is to say the animation, increase and development of sensibility, “is the first and most important undertaking”.¹¹³ This aligns magical idealism again with the doctrine of “organology”, in which the control over our external senses is increased so that they “become ever more *under our will* (voluntary).”¹¹⁴ Just as the ancient magus Orpheus had the ability to heal and bring civilization to the natural world through his music and poetry, so the “artist of immortality” in Novalis’s sense has the ability to bring the whole of the human body to a state of perfect harmony and freedom by reconciling the inner and the outer worlds. And how is this healing harmony accomplished? As we have seen, by the philosopher employing their powers of the creative imagination and love as a force of cognition. This idea of immortality is understood as a real and actual state of harmony, completion and perfection that would “improv[e] ... the human race, [raise] mankind to a higher level”, where the human being would be like God.¹¹⁵ Here Novalis is once again following in the footsteps of Schiller, who draws a distinction in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* between the “one-sided” point of view of morality and practical philosophy, and the “complete” point of view of anthropology, which embraces the whole of the human being.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate on the one hand the threefold nature of Novalis’s philosophy of magical idealism, and maintains on the other that it should be viewed primarily as a new and original synthesis of the thought of Fichte and Schiller. For Novalis, magical idealism expresses the threefold philosophical articulation of the human spirit, soul and body. This philosophy essentially consists of: 1) a transcendental conception of the creative imagination, which is the proper dynamics and source of the mind’s or spirit’s representations; 2) a doctrine of love and sympathy, which concerns the anthropological sphere of the feelings or the soul; and 3) a theory of transcendental medicine, which treats and relates to the senses and organs of the body.

¹¹¹ Ibid., entry 399, HKA 3, 315; trans., 62.

¹¹² Ibid., entry 409, HKA 3, 318; trans., 64.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.; trans., 64–5.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, Letter 4, SW V, 577.

Section 1 of this article reconstructed the Fichtean epistemological background of Novalis's philosophy of magical idealism, namely the hidden, wondrous and often misunderstood role of the *creative* imagination in its relation to reason, as theorized in Fichte's foundational text, the 1794/95 *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*. This function of the imagination is common to both art and philosophy and strives to overcome and transform the opposition of the ideal and the real into a living synthesis. Section 2 showed that this synthesis accords with Novalis's view of "true" philosophy, which he himself directly situates in the transcendental tradition of Kant and Fichte. Section 3 demonstrated that the main four characteristics of Fichte's theory of the creative imagination underpin Novalis's own conception of genuine or "higher" magic. Hence, when seen in this textual light, Novalis's employment of the term magic for the name of his philosophy does not denote anything inexplicable, but becomes fully rational and coherent. However, Novalis extends Fichte's methodology and synthetic principle of reciprocal action (*Wechselwirkung*) into other domains. Some of these extensions were analysed in section 4. There I argued that the philosophy of magical idealism also encompasses the spheres of love, medicine, and the healing and therapeutic effects of poetry and art. I traced some of their philosophical roots back to the work of Schiller, not only to the writings *On Grace and Dignity* (1793) and *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), but to two earlier texts: the 1786 "Theosophy of Julius", and the 1789 lecture "What is universal history and why does one study it?".

A number of consequences can therefore be drawn from the above research relating to current debates in the scholarship. Firstly, it demonstrates that philosophical romanticism – especially with regard to Novalis's philosophy of magical idealism – not only crucially engages with and transforms the tradition of Kantian and Fichtean transcendental idealism, but also the classicism of Friedrich Schiller's thought. In other words, I claim that philosophical romanticism should be interpreted as an original synthesis of both idealism and classicism. Secondly, the question concerning a possible turn away from philosophy to poetry in Novalis's last writings. The present article has sought to underline that any answer to this question would need to take into account whether the literary works of Novalis might not just be a poetical expression of the philosophy of magical idealism itself, since these later works obviously depend, among other things, on the very use and employment of his own power of the creative imagination.