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Studies in the Fine Arts and Five Fragments on Art

Novalis

Translated, Introduced, and Annotated by David W. Wood*

The first of the following two short texts was written by Novalis in September 1798, just after his joint visit to the Dresden Art Gallery on 25-26 August 1798 with many of the other members of the Jena romantic circle.¹ Given the title: “Studien zur bildenden Kunst” (Studies in the Fine Arts) by the editors of the Novalis, *Schriften (Historisch-kritische Ausgabe: HKA; cf. vol. II: 648-651; nos. 474-487)*, it remains a highly terse series of fourteen notebook entries. This compact text is translated below in its entirety. It was obviously not intended for publication in its present form and requires annotations.² Indeed, Novalis strove to rework these notebook entries himself, writing to Caroline Schlegel on 9 September 1798:

The letter on the antiquities has become recast. Besides an archaeological supplement, I'll send you a romantic fragment —The Visit to

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¹ The communal visit to Dresden in 1798 also artistically stimulated other participants of the group. This is especially the case for Caroline Schlegel and August Wilhelm Schlegel, who subsequently penned *Die Gemälde* (The Paintings). The latter text was published in the romantic journal *Atheneum* in 1799. A new translated excerpt from *The Paintings* can be found in this year's issue of *Symphilosophie* 5 (2023): 229-239.

² See above all Jürgen Balmes's commentary on this text in volume three of Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe*, eds. Hans-Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999). I have been considerably helped by his commentary.

the Antiquities—I'm quietly counting on your interest. (HKA IV: 260-261).

Yet the brief “Studies in the Fine Arts” do not appear to be identical with the fragment “The Visit to the Antiquities”. Nevertheless, they may have formed the basis for it. These studies reveal *in nuce* some of Novalis’s thoughts on art which became more developed and transmuted in poetic writings, like the *Hymns to the Night* and the *Disciples at Sais*.

Some of these further reflections on art can also be detected in the second short collection of poetic-philosophic fragments translated below, which I have called: “Five Fragments on Art.”³ *Inter alia* these Five Fragments contain Novalis’s thoughts on celebrated visual and poetic works of art such as Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*, the Laocoon sculptural group, or Goethe’s *Fairy Tale*. Fragment 1 specifically labelled “Archaeology” aligns in part with the “archaeological supplement” mentioned in the letter to Caroline Schlegel; Fragment 3 recalls the Dresden Art Gallery visit by referring to the angel at the base of the *Sistine Madonna* painting; while Fragment 4, with its further reflections on religious art, the Madonna, and telescopes, is perhaps even identical with the aforementioned “The Visit to the Antiquities”. In any case, this particular Fragment 4 on artistic “perfection” has clearly been polished by Novalis into a beautiful literary jewel.

³ These entries are originally numbered as 52, 382, 434, 737, 745 in Novalis’s 1798/99 encyclopaedia project, *Das allgemeine Brouillon*. The present translations are updated and revised versions of ones I published earlier in the volume: Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

Novalis

Studies in the Fine Arts

1. <The *Horen*¹, from *Gries*.>²

2. On the sensations of *thought* in the *body*.

3. *Antiquities*.³ The Madonna.⁴ / The human being is a self-given historical individual. Humanity in stages. As soon as humanity attains the highest stage, the highest will suddenly be revealed and integrated. / View of human history – of groups – nations – societies – individual people. / Elevation of mechanics. Fichte's intellectual chemistry. Chemistry is a *passionate soil*. Chemistry is the rawest and first formation. / *Descriptions of paintings* etc.⁵ / On *landscape painting* – and painting compared to sculpture in general. / Everything has to be simultaneously *squared* and *not squared*. The uses, usage, is infinitely gradual – hence, the measurement. Landscapes – *surfaces* – *structures* – *architectonics*. *Landscapes* with caves. Atmospheres, landscapes with clouds. The entire landscape ought to comprise *one individual* – Vegetation and inorganic nature – fluid, solid – *masculine* – *feminine*. geognostic landscapes. Variations of nature. / Shouldn't sculpture and painting be symbolic? / For the poet, the art gallery is a storage room of all kinds of indirect stimuli. / *Necessity* of all works of art. / Every art work has an *a priori* ideal – has an accompanying necessity to *exist*. This permits a genuine critique of the painter. / Series of Madonnas. Series of heroes. Series of sages. Series of geniuses. Series of Gods. Series of human beings. /

Antiquities force us to treat them as sacred relics. /

¹ The *Horen* was a journal edited by Friedrich Schiller, 1795-1797.

² Johann Diederich Gries (1775-1842), translator. He visited the Dresden sculpture and art galleries in August 1798 with Novalis and other members of the Jena romantic circle.

³ *Antiken* = antiquities, in the sense of ancient works of sculpture.

⁴ Reference to Raphael's painting of the *Sistine Madonna* in Dresden.

⁵ Cf. *The Paintings*, by Caroline and August Wilhelm Schlegel (see translated excerpt in this volume 5 of *Symphilosophie*).

Special kinds of *souls* and *spirits*. Who inhabit trees, landscapes, stones, and paintings. A landscape ought to be viewed through the lens of dryads and oreads. A landscape should be felt, like a body. Every landscape is an ideal body for a special *kind of spirit*. / The sonnet. / *Wit*. / The sense for *the ancient world* – awakened by antiquities. /

4. Poets borrow all their materials, right up to the *images*. / On Friedrich Schlegel – etc. / Character, sense. /

5. Eternal virgins – born women. / Fichte’s apotheosis of the Kantian philosophy. / *Thinking* about thinking clearly teaches us to bring thought under our control – because we learn to think what and how we want. / Internal, utterly distant and infinite universe – analogy with the external world – light – gravitation. /

6. Do all human beings have to be human beings? Beings that are entirely different to humans could exist in human form. / As someone virtuous, the educator is the indirectly positive principle of the art of education. / *universal skill in writing*. / On *multi-thinkers* and solitary thinkers – Friedrich Schlegel, for example, and Fichte. / Trivialisation of the divine and apotheosis of the banal. / We have progressed beyond the age of universally valid *forms* - / Influence of the material of sculpture on the figure – and their *effect*. Shouldn’t the attractive and stronger effect of *more subtle and rarer matter* be *galvanic*? / *Compulsion* is a stimulus for the spirit – there is something about compulsion that is absolutely stimulating for the spirit. Medical application of fortune and misfortune. / On neutralisation – complicated illnesses – localized illness – systems of generation. / All doubt, all need for *truth* – solution – Knowledge is the consequence of *rawness* and *over-education* – symptom of an imperfect constitution. Thus, all scientific *education* aims at making us skilful – training – All scientific *healing* and the *restoration* of health, where one has no scientific needs. /

7. Revolutionizing and revision of mathematics. / Letter to Schlegel senior on art and antiquities.⁶ *Poems* / Letter to Friedrich Schlegel. / Fichte’s

⁶ See Novalis’s letter to A.W. Schlegel, 24 February 1798: “I happily accept your invitation regarding the fine arts” (HKA IV: 252).

synthesis – genuine chemical mixture. Hovering.⁷ / Individuality and generality of human beings and illnesses. / On necessary *self-limitation* – infinite versatility of the educated intellect. – One can draw upon everything – twist and turn everything, however one wants. / The *power of genius*. / Headings of the main masses in letters etc./ On *tints* – and *tones* – analogically moral. / On the correct state of dialogue. On experimenting genius. / The actual businessman has less need of knowledge and skills than of historical spirit and education. / Spiritual *métier*. / On mechanics. / *Scholarly conferences* – their purpose. / Weddings are mostly separations. / Mimicry in *notes*. / Wit on the whole. / Experimental religion and philosophy. / How do everyday *interactions* affect me in the Brownian sense? / Stimulus *becomes* something stimulating. – etc. Physiology. / Concept of neutralisation. Is the *neutral* the highest – negative neutral, positive neutral and their synthesis / On the transformation of history into tradition. The latter is higher.

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8. Everything visible clings to the invisible. – The audible [clings] to the inaudible. The tangible to the intangible. Perhaps the conceivable to the inconceivable –.

The telescope is an artificial, invisible organ. / receptacle. /

The imagination is the marvellous sense that can *replace* all our senses – and which we already greatly have in our power. If the external senses appear to stand entirely under mechanical laws – then the imagination is clearly not bound to the present time and to contact with external stimuli.

9. Herder's *Sculpture*. page 7. We teach those born blind and those who have had their sight restored to visibly recognise their feelings. – They often forget the significance of the symbols of feeling – until their eyes have been trained to view *spatial figures* and coloured images as *the letters of earlier bodily feelings*, to quickly bring them all together and to *read* the surrounding objects.⁸

⁷ Hovering = *Schweben*; the hovering or oscillation of the productive imagination is a Fichtean term and concept. For Fichte, the imagination is that 'marvellous' faculty of the mind that is able to synthesize antitheses in cognition. See the next fragment number 8.

⁸ This is mostly a literal and paraphrased excerpt by Novalis taken from Herder's text on sculpture (presented here in small font). See *Plastik. Einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions bildendem Traume* (Riga: J.F. Hartknoch, 1778), 7. This passage of the book in Herder concerns among others Diderot's famous 1749 text *Lettre sur les aveugles* and the sightless English mathematician Nicholas Saunderson (1682-1739).

10. The unity of the image, form, and pictorial compositions rests on solid relations, just like the unity of musical harmony. / Harmony and melody. /

11.	Space.	Sculpture.	Sight.	Surface.
	Time.	Music.	Hearing.	Tone.
	Force.	Poetry.	Feeling.	Body.

Herder.⁹

12. Our body is a *part of the world* – a member, or better said: It already expresses the *independence*, the analogy with the whole – in short, the concept of the microcosm. This member has to correspond to the whole. There are as many modes as there are senses – the universe is wholly an analogue of the human being in the body – soul and spirit. The latter are the abbreviation, the former the elongation of the same substance.

I will not and should not work arbitrarily in general upon the world – I have my body for this – I modify *my* world through the modifications of my body. Through non-effectiveness on the *vessel of my existence*, I likewise indirectly fashion my world.

13. The tree can become a radiant flame to me – the human being a promising flame – the animal, a transformative flame.

14. Everything that is perceived is done so according to the measure of its repulsive force.

Explanation of the *visible* and *illuminated* – according to the analogy of sensitive heat. So too with tones. Perhaps with thoughts as well.

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⁹ This is another reference by Novalis to Herder's text on sculpture (cf. previous note).

[Five Fragments on Art]

1. **ARCHAEOLOGY.** Galvanism of antiquities, their *matter* – Revivification of the ancient world.

Wondrous *religion* which hovers around them – Their history – the philosophy of sculpture – gems – human petrifications – painting – portraiture – landscapes. – The human being has always expressed the symbolic philosophy of his being in his works, his acting, and his forbearance – He proclaims himself and his gospel of nature. He is the messiah of nature – antiquities are simultaneously *products of the future and of prehistory* – Goethe contemplates nature like an antiquity. – Character of antiquities – epigrams – antiquities are from another world. – It is as though they have fallen from heaven. Something on the Madonna. In conclusion, some poems. The study of antiquities must be *scholarly* (physical) and *poetic*. Is there a central antiquity – or a universal spirit of antiquities? Mystical sense for forms. Antiquities do not touch just one sense but all the senses, the whole of humanity.

2. **THE THEORY OF ART.** (Painting) Sculpture therefore is nothing more than the figuristics of music.

Remarkable expression: in the highest *momentum*.¹

(Painting) Sculpture—objective music. Music—subjective music, or painting. We should be able to *impress everything* (necessary) acoustically, to make it into a silhouette, to encipher it. *Lines* are fixed movements. The circle arises through the central oscillation of a plane.

Poetry is prose among the arts. Words are acoustic configurations of thoughts.

Every instrument on the whole is an inherently harmonized system of sounds. Minor instruments—Major instruments—everything has its own fundamental vowel. The human voice is, as it were, the principle and ideal of instrumental music.

What really makes the sound, the body or the air? Isn't the elastic fluid the vowel, and the body the consonant—the air is the sun—and the bodies are the planets—the former is the first voice—the latter is the 2nd.

Geometry and mechanics are related to one another, like sculpture and music. (chemical motions, chemical inhibitors.)

¹ *im höchsten Schwung.*

All method is *rhythm*. If we take away the rhythm of the world—then the world also disappears. Every person has his own individual rhythm.

Algebra is *poetry*.

Rhythmical sense is genius.

Fichte hasn't done anything else than discover the rhythm of philosophy and expressed it in a verbal and acoustic manner.

3. **POETICS.** Poetry is the youth among the *sciences*. – When it was a child it may have looked like the angel below the [Sistine] Madonna, who presses his finger so significantly to his mouth, as though wary of this frivolity.

4. Everything perfected does not express itself alone – it also expresses an entire (co)related world. Thus, the veil of the eternal Virgin floats around perfection of every kind—dissolving under the slightest touch into a magic fragrance, to become the cloud chariot of the seer. It is not antiquities alone that we behold – It is at once heaven, the telescope – and the fixed star – and therefore a genuine revelation of a higher world.

Moreover, we shouldn't believe too rigidly that antiquities and the perfected are *made* – made in the sense in which we usually designate something as made. They are made like the beloved through the appointed sign of a friend in the night – as a spark is made through contact with a conductor – or the star via a movement in the eye. In precisely the same way as the star appears and penetrates into a *telescope* – so does a *heavenly form* appear in a marble figure.

(Poetic theory of telescopes – the star etc. is a spontaneous being of light – the telescope or eye is a receptive being of light).

With every touch of perfection the work leaps from the master into far more than the expanses of space – and with the final touch, therefore, the master sees the work that is supposedly his, become separated from himself by a chasm of thought – whose breadth he can barely comprehend – and which only the imagination, like the shadow of a giant intelligence, is able to bridge.² At that moment when it ought to have become entirely his, it became much more than he, its creator – and he became the unwitting instrument

² This is a reference to Goethe's 1795 *Fairy Tale (Märchen)*, published in Schiller's *Horen* journal. In this mysterious tale, the shadow of the giant functions as a bridge across the river at dawn and dusk. Among others, the character of the giant is inspired by the mythological Greek hunter Orion. Apart from the figure of the Man with the Lamp, Hardenberg-Novalis obviously had a penchant for the universal status of this character as he cites it a number of times in his writings.

and property of a higher power. The artist belongs to the work and not the work to the artist.

5. Laocoon – *sensuousness* of this sculptural group. The simple sensations of the children have become compounded and intensified in the father. Reflections on serpents – and the nature of serpents. Only One serpent – disregard the other serpents. Different groups of serpents. Laocoon, as a member of a series – as a study – not as a work of art – a mere scientific work of art. 2 satyrs, seizing 3 nymphs etc.

The serpent is (visible) sensible venom. Serpents don't need to devour, but only bite – inject venom and imbibe – only kill and imbibe life.

(Mechanical penetration, chemical penetration – living penetration – all three simultaneously.)

It is an *immoral* work of art. *Virgil's religious depiction of Laocoon* is a fortunate sleight of hand that turns Laocoon into a victim – or an eradication of the harmful by means of the harmful.

Mightn't it be possible to imagine a more comprehensive, i.e. a more elevated moment in the Laocoonian drama – perhaps there, where the greatest suffering passes over into intoxication – resistance into surrender – and the highest life into stone?

(Shouldn't the sculptor *always* seize the moment of *petrification* – and seek it out – depict it – and solely be capable of portraying this moment?)

The greatest works of art are *disagreeable*³ – They are ideals that can only approximately please us – they *ought to* become – aesthetic imperatives. The moral law too should only exist approximately – and be a formula of the (will's) inclination. (Ideal willing – infinite willing. In accordance with its character, we cannot conceive of reaching the unattainable – it only expresses the ideal sum of the entire series, so to speak, and consequently, it is apparently the final element – the type of every element – and indicated by every element).

³ *ungefällig*.