

**Galvanism and Excitability in Friedrich Schlegel's
Theory of the Fragment**

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Friedrich Schlegel was the co-founder of the journal Athenäum, which published 6 issues, in Jena, from 1798 to 1800. He collaborated on the journal with his older brother August Wilhelm, as well as with the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and the poet-philosopher Novalis. The Athenäum was the centre of what is called Early German Romanticism or Jena Romanticism. Philosophically, this movement and particularly its leader, Friedrich Schlegel, have been undervalued, perhaps as a result of Hegel's blistering condemnation.¹ Since then, German scholars Ernst Behler and Manfred Frank, and recently, American commentators like Frederick Beiser and Elizabeth Millan-Zeibert have contributed to a philosophical reevaluation of Friedrich Schlegel. More spectacularly perhaps, postmodern thinkers in the fields of literary theory and aesthetics have sought out, in his writings, foundations or premonitions of their own work and tastes.² Such efforts are often inspired by Walter Benjamin's fundamental thesis, Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik [The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism],³ where the ideas of the Frühromantik (Early German Romanticism) are accorded full aesthetic and therefore philosophical importance.

Contemporary approaches to Schlegel's philosophy, particularly those in literary theory, tend to concentrate on his theory and practice of the literary fragment, as well as his pioneering thoughts on romantic irony, central aspects to his work during the brief Athenäum period. Postmodern theory finds itself at home in the fragmentary breaks and ruptures, in the ironic tension of contradiction, and in the unsystematic aspect of

Schlegel's paradigmatic oeuvre, which tends to be interpreted, to use Maurice Blanchot's famous expression, as a non-totalizing désœuvrement. While it is generally acknowledged that Schlegel's fragments aspire to systematicity, they never approach anything as "totalized" as Hegel's system.⁴ The fragmentary oeuvre is perpetually incomplete and therefore open.

Such a view of perpetually deferred accomplishment certainly conforms to what Schlegel means by romantic poetry. By his definition, it is a universal, infinitely progressive, living work which never achieves completion, thus lending itself to a Neo-platonic interpretation, where poetry can be seen as expressing the endless human aspiration to return to "the very source of Being".⁵ The Neo-Platonic allusion allows Schlegel's romantic poetry to be seen as both universal and incomplete, reflecting the ecstatic yearning that humanity feels in its attempts to know nature, not just in its manifold details, but as absolute. However, a modern reference is more informative of the romantic project.

Schlegel, like most German intellectuals in the last five years of the 18th Century, was inspired by J. G. Fichte's revolutionary grasp of selfhood. According to Fichte's 1794 Wissenschaftslehre (Doctrine of Science), the Absolute I is a self-positing activity of conscious mind in general that implies an oppositional Not-I, an objective otherness that it seeks to overcome in a process of endless, willful striving. The debt Schlegel's aesthetic ideas owe to Fichte's seminal work is noted by almost every commentator, beginning with Hegel, who sees Schlegel as the individual personification of the self's absolute pretensions. More positively, the Schlegel-Fichte relationship is emphasized by Benjamin and explored by more recent commentators.⁶ While there is no doubt that

Fichte's dialectical grasp of subjectivity affected Schlegel as much as it did his philosophical contemporaries, it is far from forming the sole source of his inspiration. Schlegel's writing of the Athenäum period also reflects other fundamental dimensions: his early philological interests, his indomitable critical sense and, the subject of my discussion regarding his theory of the fragment, his interest in natural science.

Schlegel's appropriation of Fichte is nonetheless foundational to his theory of the fragment and romantic poetry, although it remains strongly interpretive with regard to Fichte's original project. This is not the place for a detailed examination of the discrepancies between the two philosophical visions, or to explicate the essential differences of temperament between the academic, single-minded author of the various editions and re-articulations of the Wissenschaftslehre, and the mercurial, playful author of romantic fragments.⁷ For our purposes, it is enough to remark that in Fichte the Not-I is defined as a thoroughly abstract resistance which the I must encounter, both theoretically, as the condition of possibility for any object of knowledge, and practically, as the possibility for any object of the will.

While adopting the fundamental structure of an interaction (Wechselwirkung) between the self-positing I and the resistance it encounters in the Not-I, Schlegel nonetheless releases the movement from its Fichtean confines within conscious mind and attributes it to nature itself. This move is likely inspired by F. W. J. Schelling, a tangential member of the Athenäum circle, in his nascent Naturphilosophie,⁸ where the free self-positing of the I becomes an expression of nature's infinite creativity. The Not-I can therefore occur in Schlegel (and in Schelling) as the conditioning self-limitation or resistance that the creative impulse of nature must encounter in order to actually produce

its profusion of finite, diverse objects. The production of finite objects/things through conditioning resistance is particularly evocative in German, where “object” is that which “stands against” (Gegenstand) and where conditioning (Bedingen) brings about things (Dinge). Breaking free from Fichte’s subjective idealism, the interplay of self-expansion and self-limitation now represents the very heartbeat of nature, and to the extent that “many we call artists are really nature’s art” (CF 1),⁹ artistic creation may partake of the same dynamic interplay.

The human spiritual endeavors of art and science participate in the act of “self-limiting [that is] the result of self-creation and self-negation (CF 28)”. According to Schlegel’s theory of the fragment, artists reproduce the interaction between the I and the Not-I in such a way that the expansive freedom of creativity actually produces real individual objects of art. In fact, self-limitation becomes “the highest duty” of the artist “because one can only limit oneself at those places where one possesses infinite power, infinite self-creation (CF 37).”¹⁰ In natural science, universal reciprocity between the self and otherness is expressed as the constant striving of free, expansive thought to recognize itself in the ambiguous otherness of nature through scientific knowledge. In both art and science, the richness of production draws upon the dynamic of nature itself. This shared source in the dialectic of the I and the Not-I is at the root of Early German Romanticism’s deep affinity between the aesthetic and the scientific fields, one profoundly alien to how art and science tend to be viewed today. An important element of current interest in the Athenäum period concentrates on this crucial, lost empathy, exploring the philosophical relation Schlegel and his circle develop between art and the natural sciences of their day. By examining the scientific side of the relation, through chemistry and its electrical

repercussions in organic biology and medicine, we discover how Schlegel's richer, more sociable interpretation of the Fichtean dialectic plays itself out in the theory of the literary fragment.

Research in Romantic science is exemplified by Michel Chaouli's recent book on Schlegel and chemistry, and in Alison Stone's work on Schlegel, poetry and nature.¹¹ Each of these commentators examines how the 18th Century's highly speculative science informs and mediates the Romantic ideas of both nature and poetry. As both authors remark, such scientific mediation is only possible because of the quasi-poetical "mystifying aspect" (Stone, 16) of the day's natural philosophy. Its discursive, descriptive character still fails to "submit to a mathematical model" (Chaouli, 99) which defines science today. Although both authors see the centrality of chemistry, each has his or her particular approach. In her article, Stone concentrates on chemistry as a means by which Schlegel re-enchants mechanical Enlightenment-style nature, in such a way that it can provide a ground for human creativity, through romantic poetry. Chaouli is more concerned with how the model of chemical reactions and experimentation allows Schlegel to develop his theory and practice of the literary fragment. Nonetheless, for both authors, it is the interplay between chemical elements, their "underlying connections and affinities" (Stone, 15) or their "combinatorial operations" (Chaouli, 84) that provide Schlegel with a metaphor for his use of the literary fragment and elaboration of romantic poetry. Recognizing the evolving scientific paradigm of the epoch, the authors explore how chemistry allows nature and art to be configured in a more dynamic and lively fashion than the previous mechanical epistemological model had allowed.

Chemistry is certainly essential to understanding Schlegel's theory of the fragment and his idea of romantic poetry. As Schlegel writes, "The chemical nature of the roman, of criticism, of wit, of sociality, of modern rhetoric and of history up to now is evident (AF 426)." However, it seems to me that both Stone and Chaouli ignore a fundamental element of that science, as it was grasped by the Romantics, and without which it is impossible to fully understand how Schlegel's theory works. A satisfying approach to the question must introduce two additional dimensions that are necessary to this comprehension. First, rather than using chemistry as a means of re-enchanting nature, so that it may act as a source for human creativity (Stone) or as a metaphor for combinatory poetical practice (Chaouli), Schlegel sees chemistry as actually and metonymically present in the creative dynamic of the literary fragment itself. Further, the dynamic nature of the chemical reactions at play in the literary fragment only makes sense if we are sensitive to a crucial aspect of late 18th Century chemistry, which is missing from both Stone's and Chaouli's accounts: galvanic notions of electricity and their relation to organic medicine. Although it is true that 18th Century chemistry was fascinated by the combinations and elective affinities between chemical elements, it was also "mesmerized" by the contemporary discovery that chemical reactions could produce electrical energy, whose effects could be empirically witnessed in the dissected nervous and muscular fibers of animal organisms. Recognizing the importance of such galvanic notions allows us see how, for Schlegel, the universal, progressive poetry he calls romantic (AF 116) is actually powered by electrochemical reactions, and how his ideas of the fragment, wit (Witz), irony and the roman work in concert to form a living organic whole. Consequently, it is the galvanic (electrical) aspect of chemical reactions that

allows the fragment to transcend the chemical and attain the organic. If “the chemical epoch should be followed by an organic epoch” and if history has been chemical in nature only “up to now (AF 426)”, it is because chemical reactions are now known to produce electricity, which is inherently organic, and romantic! Of course, chemical galvanism is esthetically importable for Schlegel because it corresponds to the fundamental Fichtean paradigm of self-expansion and limitation that I outlined above, while further cohering with the popular theory of organic medicine put forward by John Brown, which I will discuss below.

It is easy to misunderstand the sense Schlegel ascribes to such technical terms as the fragment and irony, and to simply take them as purely literary expressions of romantic poetry’s essentially incomplete and self-contradictory nature, references to a system that is fragmentary because it is both fractured and non-totalizing, and ironic because, as a system, it is unsystematic. This misapprehension of how Schlegel actually uses the fragment and irony may also lead to the spurious conclusion that Schlegel’s theory of romantic poetry is itself somehow incomplete or fragmentary, whether because he was personally incapable of systematic thought (Hegel) or because he consciously refused it as not corresponding to his ideal of incompleteness. Most emphatically, however, it is not because we are dealing with a theory of the fragment and irony that the theory itself is unsystematic and incoherent, nor that our understanding of it must be fragmentary and ironic. A particular notion of galvanism and its medical extension in the concept of animal excitability are hermeneutically essential to Schlegel’s theory of the fragment and its role in romantic poetry. While the presence of these elements has been noticed in Schlegel’s writings,¹² it is important to see that since his romantic poetry

actually participates in the life of nature, the sciences of nature must be more than a source of metaphor. In this context, theories of natural science are immediately theories of art and vice versa. This applies to Schlegel's fragmentary project and its theory.

The theory of the fragment is found, first and foremost, in his fragments themselves, as they appear around the Athenäum period, between 1797 and 1800. Broader, less lapidary forms of expression, such as his essay "On Incomprehensibility", which appeared in the last issue of that journal, and his novel Lucinde, published in 1799, do not represent an abandonment of the fragmentary project. Rather, one of the aims of this paper is to show how they are themselves further fragmentary expressions, presupposed by the project's ultimate articulation as universal progressive poetry, which, as we will see, also remains fragmentary.

The natural ebb and flow of self-limitation and expansion can be speculatively applied throughout the natural sciences. In astronomy, the interplay of expansive centrifugal and limiting centripetal forces maintains planetary movement in constant orbits. In chemistry, acids and bases interact, creating new elements. Similarly, both magnetism and electricity are dynamic phenomena implying the existence of two opposing poles. At the organic level, the one Schlegel sees as animating the romantic epoch (AF 426) and its productions of genius (AF 366), the lively nature of contradiction is manifest in the discovery of chemically produced electricity. The insight into electrochemistry and its enigmatic relation to organic life, stemming from the work of Luigi Galvani, was conveyed to Schlegel by the brilliant, self-taught apothecary Johann Wilhelm Ritter. Ritter published his book Proof that, in the Animal Kingdom, a Constant Galvanism Accompanies the Life Process, in 1798, at 22 years of age. The book reprised

his lecture/demonstration at the Natural History Society in Jena, the year before, which had created such a stir that Ritter was offered a professorship at the University.

Schlegel's correspondence shows that he was so taken with the young physicist, introduced to the Athenäum circle by Novalis, that he intended to invite him to formally collaborate on the Athenäum (Ayrault, 70).

Through the 1790's, Luigi Galvani published numerous writings describing his experiments with "animal electricity". These involved bringing different metals into contact with the muscles and nerves of dissected animals, and observing how the fibers contracted or twitched. Galvani saw evidence, in such phenomena, of an electrical stream or fluid, inherent and active in organic tissues. According to his view, the metal probes caused the fibers to react by coming into contact with them and allowing the animal electricity to continue its flow. The problem was that Galvani's conclusion of a positive, electrical life force ran counter to prevalent ideas of animal irritability, championed by the influential Swiss physiologist Albrecht von Haller (1708-77), and further generalized and popularized, as excitability, by the Scottish medical doctor, John Brown (1735-88), whose Elements of Medicine had recently been translated into German (1795). Theories of irritability or excitability explain animal life as the inherent capacity to be sensitive to, or excited by outer stimulation. Adherents to this view tended to interpret Galvani's experimental findings as illustrating their theory. Muscle and nerve fibers were merely reacting to outer stimulation. Electricity was not being produced and hence making the muscles jump. Galvani's manipulations were simply stimulating flesh's inherent vitality.

Inspired by experiments carried out by Alexander von Humboldt, Ritter produced a new theory that overcame the opposition between Galvani and Haller/Brown. Ritter put forward the idea that the electricity observed in Galvani's animal experiments was actually chemical in nature, produced through chemical reactions created by the differences in the types of metal brought into contact with the muscles or nerves. The proof was that distinct differences in the metals caused greater chemical and hence electrical activity. It was these findings that Ritter presented to the Jena scientific community in the above-mentioned lecture (1797, the year Schlegel produced his first series of fragments), drawing further conclusions in his 1799 article "Some Observations on Galvanism in Inorganic Nature and the Relationship between Electricity and the Chemical Quality of Bodies". Here, Ritter helps liberate chemical electricity from its animal confines and shows how it is generated through a chemical process of oxidation and reduction, involving two polarized metals in a distinct environment, paving the way for his invention of the dry-cell battery, in 1800.

Happily, Ritter's ideas on the chemical nature of electricity can be considered complementary to the Fichtean paradigm described above. Like other natural phenomena, chemically generated electricity follows the same logic that Schlegel and Schelling had found in the interaction between the I and the Not-I. The juxtaposition of two different metals can be considered a case of self-limitation through opposition, bringing about a conditioned, real result: electrical energy. Ritter's electrochemical theory, however, adds another significant element to the theory of the production of electricity, beyond the fact of productive opposition. The heterogeneous elements (metals) are necessarily brought together in a discrete, enclosed environment (eventually, the battery) in a state of

conductive compression where chemical reactions take place in a spontaneous manner. Electrical sparks fly as the result of the fortuitous, internal chemical interactions that the compression produces.

Of course, neither the molecular nor indeed the atomic nature of these interactions was understood at the time. Electricity could not yet be grasped as the flow of charged electrons or ions. Consequently, the productive chemical combinations that Ritter and others saw as a source of electrical current were conceived according to the reigning model of the day: static electricity produced by the rubbing together of particular objects. In other words, the interactions that take place through the chemical combinations were understood as producing electrical energy through friction. Thus, while the chemistry of Schlegel's Early Romantic period certainly relied on the combinatory nature of diverse elements, it is important to see that it is the "friction" of these chemical encounters, brought about by their "free sociality" (CF 34) within an enclosed space, that produces an electrical outcome, the spontaneous production of electricity.

The natural rhythm of expansion and conditioning resistance through opposition, together with discrete compression, efficient chemical interaction and electrical discharge are the fundamental, though largely occult, sources of Schlegel's theory of the fragment. These elements explain how the theory actually works, by incorporating irony and wit as operational concepts. To grasp the theory of the fragment, it is therefore necessary to look at what Schlegel means by irony, to distinguish it from wit and see how both work together to produce the progression of romantic poetry.

The difficulty readers have in defining what exactly Schlegel means by the crucial concept of irony¹³ makes it tempting to blur its definition with that of wit, which tends to

be seen simply as an expression or type of the former. In fact, the two terms refer to concepts with distinct technical meanings that become clearer in light of the electrochemical framework discussed above. Accordingly, irony should be understood as the created, one might say engineered, compressive encounter between opposites. It is a “form” that is inherently “paradoxical” (CF 48), and as such, it “contains and excites the feeling of the insoluble conflict between the unconditioned and the conditioned . . .” (CF 108) Or again, “[irony is] an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the constant self-engendering exchange between two conflicting thoughts” (AF 121). If we are attentive to Schlegel’s definitions, we see that wit is distinctly presented as an electrical “explosion” that results from ironic compression (CF 90). Thus, the forced intimacy of heterogeneous elements that takes place in irony fills the imagination “with all sorts of life before the electrifying moment can happen”, and gives forth “brilliant sparks, lustrous rays or thunderbolts” (CF 34). Drawing on the Fichtean and galvanic structures outlined above reveals how Schlegel understands irony in its relation to wit. Irony can be defined as a mechanism of compression, where opposing chemical elements are put in contact, in such a way that they interact and spontaneously generate wit, which occurs as an electrical discharge. This dynamic expansion limits itself in the singular form of the written fragment, which therefore is both the condition for the production of wit and the conditioned product of the process. Simply put, fragmentary wit produces new (witty) fragments.

Interestingly, this is also how wit is produced in society, and Schlegel understands wit as inherently sociable, not in a vertical, hierarchical fashion but rather “horizontally”, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use the term in their Anti-Oedipus. Salon society,

like irony, brings together and combines diverse elements in a confined space; one thinks of the Berlin salon culture of Henriette Herz and Rahel Levin, where, in that propitious year of 1797, Schlegel met his future wife, Dorothea Veit, encountered Ritter, developed his cherished ideal of Symphilosophie and began writing fragments! Practically, the symphilosophical ideal involved the combining of different personalities in the relatively confined space of the Athenäum circle, stirring together Schelling, Schleiermacher, Hülsen, Baader, Tieck, Novalis and others. This is the dynamism of the “combinatory art” Schlegel refers to in some of his fragments, a literal social alchemy, ironically combining diverse elements that then interact in a frictional, fortuitous way, producing sparks of wit. In fact, he seems to have delighted in engineering possibilities of personal opposition within the group, for example attempting to confront Schleiermacher’s religiosity with Schelling’s Epicurean confessions. The collaborative journal Athenäum is the manifestation of this social chemistry, and the soul of the Athenäum is the fragment.

Although Schlegel’s fascination with the written fragment comes from his reading of Sebastien Roche Nicholas Chamfort’s Pensées, maximes et anecdotes, published in 1795, he quickly invests it with an ontological status far beyond that of an arbitrary literary form. The fragment is both the self-limiting figure implied by free, creative expansion and the privileged space of ironic compression for the production of electrochemical wit. The duality of this role, as both product and productive, as both a result and a condition, means the fragment participates in the infinite progression that is romantic poetry. The written fragment produces the real conditions for compression, friction and expansive, witty sparks that are equally at play in the literary salon, in the hermetic, chemical cell battery and in poetico-philosophical expression, which, like any

artistic expression, must always be limited or contained in an individual art form. Hence the witty fragment is rigorously structured; it is a “world” in itself (I 213), or, as Schlegel writes in AF 383, ironically echoing Kant’s systematic aspirations in the Critique of Pure Reason, wit should be architectonic.

Witz is the animating energy of the fragment only if the latter is grasped correctly.

Schlegel’s romantic fragment is not to be seen as a broken off piece or part of a pre-existing totality. Rather, it is itself a self-contained, singular organism, one Schlegel compares to the invitingly approachable yet hermetically prickly hedgehog (AF 206)!

It might appear that the individual nature of the fragment and the instantaneous aspect of wit stand opposed to any attempt at system. However, the ironic use of the term “architectonic” implies a world-producing power in wit that outstrips the creation of individual fragments. Schlegel’s project is clearly to produce systems of fragments, systems like those of his Ideas, his early Critical Fragments or his Athenäum Fragments. According to Schlegel’s theory as presented here, these ensembles are not simply arbitrary series, but form coherent and organic romans, as does, in a different way, his fragmentary novel, Lucinde. All these systems are formed through ironic self-contradiction and are therefore, in their particular ways, fragments. Lucinde is just as much an ironic take on the systematic pretensions of the novel as the series of Athenäum fragments represents an ironic take on the philosophical system.

Following the same natural pulse of compression and expansion found within the discrete, witty fragment itself, such romantic systems as the ironic novel or the series of fragments, themselves form larger architectonic fragments where diverse elements are again compressed and combined to produce further electrochemical reactions. In other

words, the system of fragments is driven by the same dynamic conditions that drive the singular literary fragment itself, the production of wit and the reproduction of new systems of fragments, new romans, new fragmentary systems, and so on. The entire process is the universal, progressive spiritual oeuvre that Schlegel calls romantic poetry, where “the greatest systems of art [contain] within themselves still further systems (AF 116)”. There is obviously an organic, living quality to such a self-moving system, and to understand this quality, we must conclude with a brief look at how the electrochemical dimension of Schlegel’s theory of the fragment is linked to a theory of organic medicine.

The organic quality of Schlegel’s idea of the fragment is reflected in the title of Novalis’ series, “Grains of Pollen”, which appears in the first issue of Athenäum and includes, symphilosophically, four fragments written by Schlegel. The fragment, like the grain of pollen, should be seen as fertile and indeed seminal, something productive of new organic worlds. The ironic system, for Schlegel, is truly alive or, more precisely, it is alive on an organic level, one that incorporates and goes beyond the internal electrochemical reactions of its constituents (AF 426) to form a living, engendering organism, where individual artists can be seen as “nature’s art”(CF 1).

Endlessly dynamic, the universal, progressive romantic poem is, of course, itself self-contradictory, alive in the ironic compression of being both systematic and the greatest fragment of all. The living, organic nature of such systematic incompleteness implies a particular relation to the otherness that lies outside itself, to a Not-I that is more than a self-imposed limitation. In the natural sciences, with which we are dealing here, the relation between an (always incomplete) organic system and the otherness of its environment is the subject matter of medicine. This brings us, as promised above, to John

Brown's theory of organic life and medicine, and its notions of excitability and stimulation. The reference shows how the electrochemical nature of wit, drawing upon the dialectic of the Fichtean self and its other, fuels a process (romantic poetry) that is alive and reproductive.

Scottish physician John Brown's theory was much in vogue in Germany following the translation of his work, in 1795. Brown's ideas responded to a general requirement for the natural sciences of the time: the need to find a unique principle of organic medicine that was as universal in scope as Newton's laws of mechanics. As well, the conceptual simplicity of Brown's theory lent it a certain republican, even revolutionary flavor, which must have accounted, to some extent, to its popularity in post-Kantian Germany.

Although its applications and diagnostics were doubtlessly arcane and often dangerous, for example Schelling's "Brunonian" treatment of the young Augusta Böhmer in Jena seems to have led to her death, Brown's theory itself was painfully simple. Animal vitality (health) is seen as dependent on a level of organic excitability, a similar concept to Haller's irritability. Excitability represents the degree to which an organism can react to external stimulus. Highly excitable states bring about sthenic pathologies, while asthenic conditions are characterized by weakness and lethargy. Most diseases are considered asthenic, and consequently, treatment involves increased levels of stimulation, for example through such external agents as red meat, alcohol and laudanum. These external stimuli are meant to solicit a response from the patient. In some cases, indirect asthenic pathologies may arise as a result of over-stimulation. Such conditions require what may be described as a homeopathic treatment where depressants are administered to

the depressed (asthenic) patient in order to solicit the contrary response and provoke vital excitability. Brown's theory sees life as a fragile, ephemeral state of excitation, only temporarily and uncertainly held from stillness and dissolution through the imperfect intervention of external, stimulating agents.¹⁴

As John Neubauer shows, both Schelling and Novalis were fascinated and influenced by Brown's ideas, but only because the philosophers were able to interpret the material relation between excitability (life) and foreign stimulation as a Fichtean relation between the I and the Not-I (Neubauer, 375-6). In fact, as Neubauer also points out, both philosophers react strongly against the perceived mechanical nature of Brown's theory of medicine when left on its own.

When applied to the Fichtean conceptual structure, however, Brown's idea of organic vitality as the capacity for external stimulation adds a new distinguishing characteristic to the increasingly determinate Not-I. Rather than being seen as a general limiting condition through which a specific self-positing I becomes effective or the further condition of ironic compression necessary for the production of electrical wit, the Not-I now plays the active, determined role of a particular stimulus that actually solicits and excites the self-positing of the I. Applied to the organic, living entity of romantic poetry, Brown's paradigm leads to the recognition that otherness has an actual role in creative self-expression, adding the real quality of reciprocal selfhood to Schlegel's appropriation of the hitherto faceless Not-I.

When superimposed on Ritter's electrochemical discoveries, Brown's idea that life results from external solicitation adds a rich, almost personal dimension to the concept of limiting ironic compression, which can now be seen as a form of otherness

that stimulates the vitality of the creative self. Together, these elements underlie Schlegel's symphilosophical Athenäum project and help constitute his theory of romantic poetry.¹⁵ It is a living, systematic fragment, universal and yet, ironically, progressing towards completion. As both system and fragment, as both self-contained and yet relying on otherness in order to live, it answers perfectly to Brown's idea of the living organism.

To conclude, Schlegel's theory acknowledges the agency of otherness in the generation of fragments, whether these are taken in their most discrete, aphoristic embodiment or in the larger systems they form, in the roman or in romantic poetry itself. For the fragment to be a living organism and for romantic poetry to be powered by the sparks of electrochemical wit, otherness must be thought of as an exciting "thou".

At the level where such progressive, universal poetry operates, stimulating otherness can take the general form of a Not-I, of a self-limitation or of a "sense of chaos outside the system" (I 55), "from which a world may spring (I 213)". In the individual artist, however, this "sense" takes a more particular form, where it is "the excitation of the smallest contact, friend or enemy" that draws from the creative imagination "brilliant sparks, lustrous rays or thunderbolts" (CF 34). Finally, for the romantic writer of witty fragments and ironic systems, the exciting other is, above all, the critical reader, the thou for whom he writes, and who can never fully comprehend.¹⁶

¹Hegel's judgment can be found in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy (Schlegel as a decadent derivative of Fichte's philosophy), in his Lectures on Aesthetics, Werke in 20 Bänden, vol. 13, Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 92-99, in his Philosophy of Right (§§ 140 and 164 Additions) and in his Review of Solger's Posthumous Writings and Correspondence. See Otto Pöggeler's Dissertation, Hegels Kritik der Romantik, Bonn, 1956 and my book, L'anti-romantique. Hegel contre le romantisme ironique (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007).

² For example, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe et Jean-Luc Nancy, who write in the introduction to their L'absolu littéraire, "Romanticism does not lead us to something we should imitate or that is meant to inspire us, simply because it leads us foremost to ourselves." (Paris: Seuil 1978), 10. My translation. In his valuable contribution to the philosophical dimensions of Schlegel's irony, Gary Handwerk writes, "The modest but long overdue, resurgence of interest in the work of Friedrich Schlegel is encouraging; it suggests a growing recognition that Schlegel anticipated many of the themes central to current critical debate..." Irony and Ethics in Narrative, from Schlegel to Lacan (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), 18. For a useful survey of current English-language scholarship, see Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert, "The Revival of Frühromantik in the Anglophone World", Philosophy Today, vol. 49 No. 1, Spring 2005.

³ Bern: Francke, 1920 [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973].

⁴ Roy Brand puts this eloquently. "The fragments [...] are not anti-systematic; rather, they elucidate the idea that philosophy, like the modern work of art, no longer represents the unity of a closed system but a unity beyond the system. The fragmentary project is an ambitious attempt to find a form of philosophical coherence beyond the compulsion of a system." "Schlegel's Fragmentary Project", Epoché, 9,1 (Fall 2004), 37-8.

⁵ See Ernst Behler's introduction to his Friedrich Schlegel, Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1968), 16.

⁶ Hegel reduces the Fichtean aspect of Schlegel's thought to individualistic solipsism; Walter Benjamin sees the Fichtean contribution to Early German Romanticism as primarily one of self-reflection (Benjamin [1973], 76). This idea is taken up, more recently, by Winfried Menninghaus, Unendliche Verdopplung: die frühromantische Kunsttheorie im Begriff absoluter Selbstreflexion (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987). Both Milan-Zeibert and Beiser emphasize the antifoundationalism in Schlegel's refusal of Fichte's first principle (I = I). However, the key notion of Wechselerweis (reciprocal proof) that Milan-Zeibert discovers in Schlegel's theory of knowledge and Beiser's focus on his irony as a conflict between the conditioned and the unconditioned can each be seen as highlighting Schlegelian expressions of the crucial interaction (Wechselwirkung) or oscillation (Schweben) between the I and the Not-I, in Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre. Frederick Beiser, The Romantic Imperative (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003). Elizabeth Milan-Zeibert, Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy (Albany: SUNY P, 2007).

⁷ Roger Ayrault stresses this difference of temperament. La genèse du romantisme allemand, vol. 3 (Paris: Aubier, 1969) 147. For its depth of erudition and richness of insight Ayrault's work is certainly one of the most important scholarly studies on the Frühromantik. According to Ayrault, Schlegel's main debt to Fichte is for the adopted technical vocabulary the former employs. For a helpful, nuanced reading of Schlegel's thought in relation to his contemporaries, see Milan-Zeibert's Friedrich Schlegel.

⁸ Schelling taught at Jena until 1800 and was involved with the Athenäum circle, contributing his polemical poem (against Schleiermacher) "The Epicurean Confession of Heinz Widerporst" and marrying August Wilhelm Schlegel's ex-wife, Caroline. Schelling's First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature was published in Jena, in 1799.

⁹ Schlegel's fragments occur in three different sets: the Critical Fragments (CF), published in the journal Lyceum, in 1797, the Athenäum Fragments (AF), published in Athenäum, in 1798, and the Ideas (I), appearing in the same journal in 1800. The fragments can be found in Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments, translated with an introduction by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971). The translations in this article are my own, although they are informed by Firchow's.

¹⁰ "A poem is just an object of nature that seeks to become a work of art" (CF 21). Roy Brand derives Schlegel's fragmentary project entirely from the fruitful interplay between subjective freedom and natural necessity in Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment, passing over Fichte entirely.

¹¹ Michel Chaouli, The Laboratory of Poetry, Chemistry and Poetics in the Work of Friedrich Schlegel (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 2002); Alison Stone, "Friedrich Schlegel, Romanticism, and the Re-enchantment of Nature", Inquiry, Vol. 48, No. 1, 3-25. See Gary Handwerk's review of Chaouli's book in Clio, Vol. 33, No. 1, 220 – 225. For an interesting take on how German Romanticism influenced subsequent notions in life science, including Darwinism, see Robert Richards, The Romantic Conception of Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹² See, for example, Raimund Belgardt, Romantische Poesie (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1969), 132, where the author refers to romantic poetry as synthesizing natural feeling and natural science discoveries in galvanism and magnetism to form a new mythology. See also Peter Kapitza, Die frühromantische Theorie der Mischung (Munich: Hueber, 1968).

¹³ For example, Steven E. Alford writes, "Critics have despaired of finding a single meaning to Schlegel's term 'irony'..." Irony and the Logic of the Romantic Imagination (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), 17. Alford quotes Benjamin, who makes the same assertion (Benjamin, 76).

¹⁴ I would like to thank James Gricke for his research on John Brown, presented during my 2007 graduate seminar on Hegel's philosophy of nature. See John Neubauer, "Dr. John Brown and Early German Romanticism", Journal of the History of Ideas, vol. 28, No. 3 (July- September 1967), 367-382.

¹⁵ Perhaps the most poignant expression of this dialectic is found in Lucinde, in the section, "A Dithyrambic Fantasy on the Loveliest Situation in the World", where Julius evokes for Lucinde their "wittiest and most beautiful" moment, when, in their love-making, they exchange roles, thus creating "a wonderful, deeply meaningful allegory of the development of man and woman to full and complete humanity (Firchow, 49)."

¹⁶ See Schlegel's essay "On Incomprehensibility" where he writes: "I wanted to show that the purest incomprehension emanates precisely from science and the arts — which by their very nature aim at comprehension and at making comprehensible — and from philosophy and philology." Further on: "[E]verything is going to become more and more critical, and artists can already begin to cherish the just hope that humanity will at last rise up in a mass and learn to read (Firchow, 260, 261)."