

# Mind's World: Imagination and the Modern Subject

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Abstract

Mind's World: Imagination and the Modern Subject

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This dissertation discusses the imagination as a highly contested discursive construct that is situated at the juncture of philosophy and literature. It aims to provide a deeper understanding of the concept's conflictual potential, which is still reflected in the current critical debate and its focus on the Romantic imagination as an instance of aesthetic ideology. I examine the discursive role of imagination by discussing its function in the philosophical systems of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, in Friedrich von Hardenberg's (Novalis) poetic reformulation of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and in Edgar Allan Poe's narrative transformation of the philosophical system outlined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This interdisciplinary perspective makes it apparent that imagination is not only conceptualized as a mediating faculty that allows for a connection of subject and object and the self and society. Imagination is also and simultaneously viewed as a disruptive force that endangers the rational subject and the unity of the philosophical system due to its connection to the body and the passions. Imagination is thus not only a figure for organic unity to be exalted by a conservative ideology but also a figure for an ultimately revolutionary potential that needs to be suppressed if the system is to retain its rational status.

This conflict, which is displayed in the ongoing philosophical struggle between reason and imagination, ultimately brings to light the irreconcilable contradictions and desires at the heart of modern concepts of autonomous subjectivity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Imagination dead imagine

—Samuel Beckett, *All Strange Away*—

Even a cursory look at the definitions the word “imagination” has been given, the meanings that have been associated with it, the abilities and functions of the human mind it has been taken to represent, in short, the desires and fears attached to it over the course of Western intellectual history, reveals an astonishing array of vastly different, strongly embattled, and oftentimes mutually exclusive assessments.<sup>1</sup> René Descartes for example presents imagination as the “inner sense” responsible for all mental representation, without which no knowledge of a reality exterior to the self would be possible. At the same time, however, he will insist that imagination is of necessity deceptive and needs to be excluded from the search for philosophical certainty that culminates in the discovery of the *cogito*. Similarly, Immanuel Kant sees imagination as a “blind, yet indispensable function of the human soul,” by means of which we apply concepts to intuitions, and which is thus absolutely essential for the epistemological process. Yet, this very same “function of the human soul” is also a potential source of madness and mental derangement for Kant, and thus needs to

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<sup>1</sup>Several encyclopedia articles and dictionary entries provide the possibility for such a cursory glance. For one of the currently best introductions to the concept’s history cf. Jochen Schulte-Sasse’s excellent article on “Einbildungskraft/Imagination” in Karlheinz Barck, ed., *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden* vol. 2 *Dekadent—grotesk* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001), 88-120. cf. also Karl Homann, “Einbildung/Einbildungskraft,” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel: Schwabe, 1972), 346-358. and Jürgen Klein, “Genius, Ingenium, Imagination: Aesthetic Theories of Production from the Renaissance to Romanticism,” *The Romantic Imagination. Literature and Art in England and Germany* ed. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 19-62.

be kept under control at all costs by the “higher” mental faculties of reason and understanding. Such an endeavor would seem hopeless to Blaise Pascal, who describes imagination as a “superior power” and a formidable “enemy of reason,” which easily dominates man’s rational capacities with its ability to create flattering and ultimately irresistible deceptions. For Johann Gottlieb Fichte on the other hand, imagination is the productive source of all reality and the fundamental mechanism on which the human mind is based. And while Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) presents imagination as a poetic principle and a synonym for freedom, Samuel Taylor Coleridge sees it as productive of an aesthetic unity that can connect the finite mind to nature and ultimately the divine.

Faced with such a variety of perspectives, one should harbor little hope that a study of the history of the concept of imagination could establish a stable meaning for the term or uncover a teleological development that would unify such heterogeneous conceptualizations by relating them to the overarching logic of a historical plot. As even the short presentation in the previous paragraph indicates, a discussion of imagination holds considerable promise, however, if it is employed as a discourse-analytical tool that can bring into focus the changing philosophical convictions and intellectual predispositions that lie behind and inform such conflicting assessments of this concept.<sup>2</sup> Imagination is an especially fruitful object for such a discussion because of the peculiar liminal position it occupies in the Western tradition. From the beginning of its philosophical conceptualization, imagination has been situated

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<sup>2</sup>With regard to the Greek philosophical tradition, Gerard Watson’s study *Phantasia in Classical Thought* (Galway: Galway University Press, 1988), which successfully links the shifting conceptualizations of the Greek term *phantasia* to changing epistemological and aesthetic positions is a good example of such an approach. By contrast, Murray Wright Bundy’s *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Mediaeval Thought*, while a helpful source of reference, seems resigned to a mere presentation of different theoretical positions without a connecting argumentative thread. Particularly disappointing in this regard is Barbara Ransch-Trill’s *Phantasie: Welterkenntnis und Welterschaffung. Zur philosophischen Theorie der Einbildungskraft* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1996), which, despite its promising title, merely presents and enumerates an array of philosophical perspectives without venturing any theses as to the reasons for the epistemological and aesthetic developments a comparison of these views might reveal.

at—or rather constitutes itself as—the decisive interface between the “outer” and the “inner” world, the realm of objects and sense-perceptions on the one hand and the realm of (self)consciousness and the intellect on the other. As the mental faculty that allows us to create and manipulate images, imagination will thus play a central role in any account of the production of self-consciousness and the connection between self and other, mind and world. The assessment of the values and merits, or the promises and threats imagination holds because of this position will vary considerably depending on the discursive and philosophical framework in which they are made. As it hovers between mind and body, self and world, the ideal and the real, as well as the human and the divine, imagination is a highly ambiguous term with considerable discursive charge that will always lead us directly to the heart of an ongoing philosophical debate. Decisive shifts in philosophical perspective, be they epistemological or otherwise, will always be detectable in the discourse about imagination.

The emergence of the modern notion of a rational and autonomous individual subject is without a doubt one such decisive perspectival shift, and it is the specific goal of this study to demonstrate that the modern philosophical discourse about subjectivity is inextricably linked to the concomitant discourse about imagination. The following chapters will show that from René Descartes’s *Méditations* to the aesthetic and philosophical systems of the Romantic period, thinking about the subject necessarily means to address the problem of imagination. And since the subject became, for better or for worse, the touchstone of philosophical certainty ever since René Descartes based his version of the rational philosophical project on the indubitability of the *cogito*, imagination, in its relation to subjectivity, is equally situated at the heart of modern philosophical system-building from the seventeenth century onward. As the opening paragraph of this study could already indicate, this philosophical predicament would be a matter of great trepidation for both René Descartes and Immanuel Kant. The texts of these two philosophers betray a considerable ambiguity with regard to a mental “faculty” that is both necessary and detrimental for the completion

of their philosophical projects. Descartes and Kant both realize that the unity of subjectivity depends on the processes of representation that are made possible by imagination. Yet, they simultaneously fear the unruly potential of a faculty that is connected to the body and the passions, a connection that must threaten a subject whose autonomy is defined by its capacity for reason. Consequently, both Descartes and Kant are at great pains to either exclude imagination from their philosophical speculations altogether, or to ensure that it is safely domesticated and controlled by the mind's rational faculties.

Despite all precautions, however, an unruly form of imagination that cannot be dismissed entirely from either Descartes's or Kant's accounts of subjectivity will come back to haunt their philosophical systems. A close reading of Descartes's philosophical texts, undertaken in Chapter Two, will reveal that Descartes ultimately cannot hide the representational and hence fictional nature of the *cogito*, which emerges as a narrative construction of the Cartesian text, and hence as a product of imagination, no matter how persistently Descartes attempts to divest the *cogito* of any representational remnants. The very centerpiece of Cartesian philosophy will thus come to depend on the faculty of imagination, that Descartes had so rigorously attempted to exclude from it. Kant on the other hand will struggle with an unprincipled disruptive imagination that threatens the rational subject with delirium and madness, and from which the critical system is unable to clearly separate itself. This struggle for the autonomy of reason, which ultimately jeopardizes the closure of the Kantian system, is openly played out in Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and will be revealed in Chapter Three as the unacknowledged subtext of the Kantian Critiques. Even as Kant works to secure the validity of his transcendental system and to distinguish it from the ravings of the "systematic madman," he equally finds himself dependent on the very same faculty that most openly embodies his greatest philosophical fears.<sup>3</sup> In both the Cartesian and the Kantian texts, (rational) subjectivity

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<sup>3</sup>As we shall see in Chapter Three, this reading of the Kantian position in the three critiques

is thus simultaneously dependent on and constructed in opposition to imagination, and the resulting ambivalence with regard to imagination is one of the fundamental conditions of modern models of subjectivity.

Neither Kant's immediate philosophical heir Johann Gottlieb Fichte nor his Early German Romantic contemporary Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known as Novalis, have any reservations about making imagination one of the central principles of the unity of subjectivity, of philosophical systems, and indeed of the creation of reality itself. This striking shift in perspective is directly linked to a reconfiguration of the concept of subjectivity in the Romantic period and to a changing view of the nature of philosophy's first principles.<sup>4</sup> While Kant attempts to strike an even-handed balance

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through the lens of the *Anthropology* will also allow for a reevaluation of one of the most influential philosophical analyses of Kant's theory of the imagination in the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger's *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, which unjustly discards Kant's view of imagination in the *Anthropology* as irrelevant for the critical project. cf. Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1991)

<sup>4</sup>With regard to this shift in perspective, my study directly engages both the thesis and the methodology of the book that has been most influential for the academic discussion—particularly in the context of British Romanticism—of theories of imagination during the Enlightenment and the Romantic period, James Engell's *The Creative Imagination. Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Engell enthusiastically presents the history of the concept imagination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as one of indisputable continuity, as a teleological process in which the Romantics merely bring to fruition an idea that had developed and ripened throughout the Enlightenment. Engell, to whose broad and detailed assessment of eighteenth-century concepts of imagination anybody embarking on a study of the topic will remain indebted, is certainly correct in pointing out that the Romantic focus on imagination cannot be explained without taking into account the resurgent interest in the "faculty" during the eighteenth century. Undoubtedly, the empiricist spirit of the Enlightenment was responsible for a renewed philosophical preoccupation with imagination as the mental capacity immediately associated with the senses and able to provide mental representations of sense-perceptions. Yet, particularly from the methodological perspective of the present study, one can hardly subscribe to Engell's (rather paradoxically) quasi-Hegelian view of imagination as a living idea that progressively found its "minds" over the course of a century in order to finally bring itself to full expression in the texts of the British Romantic poets. Especially in the eighteenth century, the concept imagination is informed by various and often conflicting discursive traditions, and Engell completely neglects the negative discourse about the faculty that, as we shall see in the discussion of Immanuel Kant's philosophical texts in Chapter Three, informs most Enlightenment positions to an equally strong degree. When both of these discursive traditions are taken into account, the emergence of the notion of a "creative imagination," which is the subject of Engell's book, can be shown to go hand in hand with the domestication of imagination as an unruly and unpredictable threat to the supremacy of reason. Both of these processes, which are the opposite sides of one and the same coin, cannot be separated in an attempt to trace the development of

between the empirical and the transcendental, the objective and the subjective poles of the epistemological equation, the German Idealists, in their self-described attempts to complete the Kantian project, unequivocally place philosophy's first principle in their varying conceptions of absolute self-consciousness, from which both mind and world, subject and object should be shown to flow.<sup>5</sup> By embracing the notion of an intellectual intuition, the subject's abstract and constitutive "vision" of its own transcendental origin, which Kant had explicitly excluded as an option from rational philosophical discourse, the Idealists—Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling in particular—could openly make the mediatory and representational power of imagination the indispensable precondition for the unity of self-consciousness and hence the unifying principle of "mind's world." While imagination, now seen as a purely intellectual principle, would thus lose its incriminating association with the body and the passions, it could simultaneously be embraced in Idealist philosophical discourse as the visionary power that allows the mind to "intuit" a supersensual origin that must of necessity remain inaccessible from within the rational parameters of the philosophical system.<sup>6</sup> Through this discursive reformulation of the search for philosophy's first principles, the German Idealists then also prepare the way for the openly aesthetic and poetic views of self-consciousness and philosophical systems proposed by the Early German Romantics, even if the specific assessments of the relation be-

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Romantic notions of imagination. In addition to Engell's book, two further studies, which discuss the eighteenth-century debate about imagination in the context of France and Germany also need to be mentioned here: Annie Becq, *Genèse de l'Esthétique Française Moderne. De la Raison classique à l'Imagination créatrice. 1680-1814*. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994) and Gabriele Dürbeck, *Einbildungskraft und Aufklärung. Perspektiven der Philosophie, Anthropologie und Aesthetik um 1750* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1998).

<sup>5</sup>For a concise overview of the views of imagination in post-Kantian philosophy cf. Karl Homann, "Zum Begriff der Einbildungskraft nach Kant," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 14 (1970): 266-302.

<sup>6</sup>This view of imagination as an "ecstatic" and "prophetic" power is part of a discursive tradition long connected to the faculty, which, as Chapter One will show, has been part and parcel of philosophy's conflicted attempt to define itself as a rational discipline ever since the Platonic dialogues. For an excellent discussion of Fichte's and Schelling's notion of an intellectual intuition as a moment of *extasis*, cf. Lore Hühn, *Fichte und Schelling. Oder: Über die Grenze Menschlichen Wissens* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994).

tween imagination and the subject within these two intellectual “movements” would vary considerably.<sup>7</sup>

As a particular example of this change in perspective, Chapter Four of this study discusses Friedrich von Hardenberg’s poetic critique of Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. Chapter Four is concerned with the double transformation of the relation between subjectivity and imagination that occurs as philosophical discourse shifts from Kantian transcendental philosophy via Fichte’s transcendental idealism to von Hardenberg’s Romantic notions of subjectivity and philosophical systems. What changes fundamentally in the intertextual movement from Kant to Fichte and von Hardenberg is not only the philosophical perspective on imagination, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a reformulation of the very concept of self-consciousness and subjectivity. Fichte still aimed to simultaneously complete both the Kantian and the Cartesian philosophical project by establishing the Absolute subject as the self-evident foundation of transcendental philosophy. Von Hardenberg, however, just like his friends Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Hölderlin, would question the very possibility of grounding either the self or philosophy on the basis of a first principle in the necessarily representational and semiotic realm of self-consciousness. While Fichte, in the very endeavor to secure the absolute primacy of the *cogito*, would resort to the very same “faculty” to which both Kant and Descartes had denied any foundational status, von Hardenberg in turn would base the self not at all on a static first principle, but rather describe imagination as a dynamic force that could guarantee the unity of the self as an organic whole of interconnected elements without a stable organizing center. The self and hence the system are for von Hardenberg, in quintessential Early Romantic fashion, clearly distinct from the Kantian or any Idealist approach, “the

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<sup>7</sup>A very concise discussion of Fichte’s concept of imagination and its influence on Friedrich von Hardenberg and Friedrich Schlegel is presented in Winfried Menninghaus, “Die frühromantische Theorie von Zeichen und Metapher,” *The German Quarterly* 62.1 (1989): 48-58. One of the currently best studies on Fichte’s influence on von Hardenberg is Bernhard Loheide, *Fichte und Novalis. Transzendentalphilosophisches Denken im romantisierenden Diskurs* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).

lack of a system brought into a system"—"Systemlosigkeit, in ein System gebracht."<sup>8</sup> Von Hardenberg thus integrates the unsystematic, decentering power of imagination so feared by Kant, and still contained by Fichte in the latter's hierarchical approach to philosophical systematicity, into the very definition of the system itself. Imagination as understood by von Hardenberg is not to be controlled *by* the system, which would make it, as Descartes and Kant had done, the domesticated handmaiden of reason, but is rather part of the intricate interplay of chaos and control that presents—at least for the Early German Romantics—the only adequate view of a philosophical system.

The critique of Fichte's philosophical search for first principles would lead von Hardenberg to develop a performative model of subjectivity and philosophical systems in which imagination is no longer construed as a clearly delimited mental faculty, defined by its perceived relation to reason and/or the senses. Rather, he understands it as the poetic principle of movement, interconnection, and change, which creates self-consciousness in analogous fashion to the Early Romantic ideal of the work of art. It should be noted that the Early German Romantic understanding of imagination as actively *creative* of self-consciousness thus goes hand in hand with their concept of irony, which arises from the philosophical insight that no absolute certainty can be found within the representational distortions of self-consciousness. The *aesthetic* unity of subjectivity provided by imagination is directly related to the necessarily divided nature of a subject that can only grasp itself through an act of reflection.<sup>9</sup> This reflective

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<sup>8</sup>Friedrich von Hardenberg, "Fichte-Studien" *Das philosophische Werk I* ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl, and Gerhard Schulz *Novalis Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965) 289.

<sup>9</sup>The insight that the Early German Romantics' desire for aesthetic unity cannot be separated from their concept of irony could also help to reconcile some of the oppositions of the contemporary academic discussion, where traditional views of the Romantics' poetic project as aesthetically restaurational clash with deconstructive and systems-theoretical approaches that focus on the corrosive power of Romantic irony. Readings of von Hardenberg's concepts of "poetry," "imagination," and "analogy" in the explicit context of his particular Romantic version of transcendental philosophy are few and far between. For one example cf. Gabriele Rommel, "Imagination in the Transcendental Poetics of Novalis," *The Romantic Imagination. Literature and Art in England*

nature of thought entails an inescapable doubling within the realm of consciousness—the philosophical pun encapsulated in the word “reflection” would lead to the German Romantics’ extensive use of the mirror as a metaphor for consciousness—, which, as von Hardenberg will show, dooms the Cartesian—and by extension the Fichtean—search for first principles to failure. In the act of reflection, the subject is always divided into a reflecting subject and a subject of reflection, so that an act of thought, contrary to Descartes’s convictions, will never yield a self-evident first principle or a stable origin for self-consciousness. The Early German Romantics’ insistence on the speculative nature of thought thus completely changes the relation of truth and illusion on which previous assessments of imagination as a representational power had been based. The unity of subjectivity, von Hardenberg concludes, can thus only be produced in an imaginary and poetic process. The subject can only perceive itself as whole because it creates itself analogous to a work of art; the *cogito* can be seen as unified only *because* it is a fiction, an aesthetic construct fueled by imagination, not a self-evident truth. Such is the radical assertion of the Early German Romantics about the relation between subjectivity and imagination, a position that drastically redefines the parameters of the problem as set out by Descartes. In what seems itself like an ironic twist of the history of philosophy, Fichte’s attempt to complete the Cartesian and the Kantian philosophical projects thus leads to their complete reversal in the discourse of Early German Romanticism.

Another reversal of this kind will concern us in Chapter Five of this study, which discusses Edgar Allan Poe’s narrativization of the philosophical principles developed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria* and the “Essays on the Principles of Method” from the 1818 version of *The Friend*. Coleridge, the main “translator” of Kantian and German Idealist philosophy into the context of British Romanticism, embarked on his very own attempt to conceptualize a complete philosophical system,

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*and Germany* ed. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 95-122. cf. also Loheide 2000.

in which the philosophical principles of the German tradition could be reconciled with Coleridge's own religious concerns. As part of his endeavor to ground subjectivity in its noumenal connection to the divine, Coleridge developed what is without a doubt the best-known and most-discussed definition of imagination produced in the Romantic period.<sup>10</sup> Imagination emerges in the *Biographia Literaria* as the divine "living Power" of creation, active in both mind and nature, which can guarantee the unity of both through their connection to the divine. As such, his definition of imagination allowed Coleridge to complete his own Idealist search for the "one perspective central point" from which all philosophical systems could be seen as united, and to provide a first principle that could secure the unity of subjectivity.

Poe's texts appropriate the Coleridgean philosophical utterance while undermining—paradoxically by means of that very appropriation—Coleridge's as well as von Hardenberg's Romantic hope that the unity of mind and world could find expression in the imaginative processes of the work of art. Poe, himself a close reader of Coleridge, makes reference to Coleridge's philosophical and poetical work on the level of both form and content of his texts. He can be seen to rewrite Coleridge's particular attempt at Idealist system-building by transposing Coleridge's search for first principles onto the literary register of his short stories. By means of this transposition, Poe subverts the precarious distinction between philosophical and literary discourse and reveals Coleridge's claims for the unity of subjectivity and philosophical systems to be no more than aesthetic constructs.

The philosophical "method" for the completion of philosophical systems, which Coleridge had developed would thus resurface as the literary principle of "plot" in

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<sup>10</sup>The body of literature that engages Coleridge's definition of imagination in the *Biographia Literaria* is extensive. For good discussions of Coleridge's view of imagination cf. Engell 1981, James Engell's and W. Jackson Bate's introduction to the *Biographia Literaria*, Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1988), as well as the essays in Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe, ed., *Coleridge's Imagination. Essays in Memory of Pete Laver* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and in Christine Gallant, ed., *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today* (New York: AMS Press, 1989).

Poe's prose. While Friedrich von Hardenberg had diagnosed the philosophical impossibility to establish absolute first principles and hence the necessity to poetically replace them with the notion of interconnection within an aesthetic whole, Poe seeks to demonstrate that the unity of literary and philosophical systems relies on an aesthetic principle of formal consistency, grasped by means of imagination, not on the inductive or deductive discovery of absolute origins. Poe's aesthetic argument, however, unlike von Hardenberg's, no longer presents an attempt to see the unity of the work of art as a proof by analogy for the actual unity between mind and world. Von Hardenberg conceived of his poetic conception of subjectivity within a philosophical context, as a means to reconcile subject and object, mind and nature through the unity of their imaginative representation in the work of art. The poetic system would thus reveal an actually existing unity that only remains inaccessible from within the illusory distinctions of consciousness. Poe's texts on the other hand offer no such philosophical and poetic consolation, for their unity is clearly marked as the product of a self that desires to escape its own inevitable dissolution. In Poe's stories, the self typically encounters a threatening abyss where the philosopher might have gone looking for stable foundations. The aesthetic system of the literary text in turn is no longer called upon to perform an actually existing unity of mind and world, but rather emerges as an aesthetic projection that saves the self from complete disintegration. The act of writing, which temporarily gives form to the writing subject within the imaginary structures of the literary text is ultimately the only means for Poe's narrators to postpone their descent into madness and the gulf of their uncontrollable and mostly violent passions, and to postpone it just long enough for an act of literary communication. The looming threat of such a descent is not posed, as it was for Kant or Descartes, by an aberrant imagination that is to be controlled by the mind's superior rational faculties. Rather, this threat constitutes itself through the very split and separation between reason and the passions, the mind and the body, within a self whose seeming rational unity and autonomy is merely the product of an aesthetic

illusion.

Poe's texts thus reveal the dark flip-side of the philosophical attempt to secure the autonomy of the subject by means of rational control, a suppression of reason's "other"—the body, the passions, and hence imagination—which only unleashes all the more strongly the very demons the philosopher had set out to tame. At the same time, Poe remains equally sceptical about the Romantic hope that the unity of the self could be re-created by means of a system that would no longer repress but make use of imagination as a constitutive element of subjectivity. The unity of the work of art as an aesthetic system, afforded by an act of imagination, is revealed by Poe to be merely the product of a different philosophical desire, which arises from the subject's confrontation with its hopelessly abyssal condition, a confrontation that is the inevitable outcome of the subject's search for autonomy. The poetic construction of the unity of mind and world, as *Eureka*, Poe's "Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe" shows, remains inseparable from the subject's freefall into the mouth of a volcano, a bottomless descent in which the imaginative act of creation is immediately linked to the certainty of impending death.

As the chapters of this study thus complement, echo, and answer back to one another, they reveal the highly ambiguous relationship that links the concept of imagination to modern notions of subjectivity. As a figure of philosophical and literary discourse, imagination emerges both as a principle of unity and as an agent of disruption, and it thus always holds a double promise for the philosophical or aesthetic framework in which it comes to be defined. Whether it is perceived as central or as potentially threatening for the unity of subjectivity and the completion of philosophical systems, imagination is always directly connected to the conflicting desires and anxieties that are inherent in the modern concept of an autonomous individual subject. The present discussion of imagination's role in philosophical and literary texts from Descartes to Poe thus allows for a clearer understanding of this protean concept, the contradictory assessments of which are the very product of the contending desires

for unity and autonomy that inform mind's world and the constitution of the modern subject.

In order to prepare the ground for an adequate representation of this complex relationship, Chapter One will now present the interrelated discursive frameworks of the philosophical discussion about imagination that emerged in Greek antiquity, and which retained their influence well into the nineteenth century and in part until the present day.

## Chapter 1

**EPISTEMOLOGY, METAPHYSICS, AND AESTHETICS:  
CONTEXTS OF IMAGINATION**

While this chapter focuses on classical discourses about imagination, its approach and goal is ultimately not a historical one. In analyzing the contributions of Plato, Aristotle, and the rhetorical tradition, it is not my aim to uncover origins or to suggest inevitable historical progressions. Rather, the four interrelated sections of this chapter should be understood as templates that provide points of entry from which to engage the modern discussion about imagination. As discursive contexts for the varying conceptualizations of the term they provide the leading questions that will guide my account in the subsequent chapters.

One important caveat is required for any presentation of classical discourses about imagination: The word *phantasia* employed in the Greek texts is a term that does not carry the same connotations a contemporary reader might attach to the word “imagination.” Specifically, the notion of imagination as a creative capacity, involved in the artistic endeavor of producing alternative aesthetic realities and autonomous works of art has no precedent in classical thought and should hence not be connected with *phantasia*. While classical discourse informs the modern understanding of imagination, the term *phantasia* is not synonymous with the latter’s semantic field. The preconditions for this difference are one of the focal points of this study, which aims to show that the modern understanding of imagination is intimately tied to the problem of the autonomous individual subject, a problem that simply could not arise for either Plato or Aristotle, who did not conceive their philosophical arguments on the

background of the subject-object split that would become virulent with the Cartesian “discovery” of the *cogito*. At the same time, however, the classical assessments of *phantasia* would all be taken up again within the changed parameters of the modern discussion about subjectivity and imagination, a discussion which of necessity engages philosophical problems that are at least as old as the school of Athens. To begin my study with an analysis of classical texts about *phantasia* thus serves a two-fold purpose, on the one hand, this chapter will map out the discursive fields that still form the backdrop of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussion of imagination, while it highlights on the other hand the decisive epistemological change that is enacted in Descartes’s attempt to secure philosophical certainty through recourse to the thinking subject.

### **1.1 Aristotle, *Phantasia*, and the Problem of Epistemology**

The noun *phantasia*, derived from the verb *phainestai*, to appear, was introduced into the Greek language by Plato, who employed it in the *Republic*, the *Theaetetus*, and the *Sophist*.<sup>1</sup> The *phantasia*, did not receive an independent and clearly differentiated status in Plato’s texts, however, where it is described as a “judgment based on sensation” and hence as a hybrid mixture of two other faculties, *aisthesis* (sense-perception) and *doxa* (opinion or judgment).<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle was thus the first to provide a systematic philosophical assessment of *phantasia* as an independent capacity in the epistemological process. While the impact of Plato’s philosophy on the conceptual history of the imagination was extremely

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<sup>1</sup>cf. Georg Camassa, “Phantasia,” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel: Schwabe, 1972) 516-522. In particular, I need to acknowledge my indebtedness in this chapter to Gerard Watson’s study *Phantasia in Classical Thought* (Galway: Galway University Press, 1988). Watson’s thorough account provides a detailed discussion of the various classical discourses on *phantasia*, and the argument I will present in the following could not have been developed without the basis of Watson’s exhaustive research and meticulous philological work.

<sup>2</sup>Plato’s only extensive definition of the *phantasia* can be found in the *Sophist*, 263d-264a. For a comprehensive introduction to Plato’s use of the term, cf. Watson 1988.

significant, as will be shown in the following two sections of this chapter, only Aristotle's definitions would truly establish the term as a philosophical concept and hence set the parameters for subsequent systematic accounts of the faculty. In fact, Aristotle's discussion of *phantasia* in book three of *De Anima*<sup>3</sup> is to a large extent a pointed critique of Plato, whose definition seemed insufficient to Aristotle's analytical mind. Since the *phantasia* could neither be seen as identical with *aisthesis*, Aristotle argues, nor with *doxa*, it could also not simply be a combination of both and should hence be regarded as a separate mental activity.<sup>4</sup>

For Aristotle then, and his model of "faculty psychology"<sup>5</sup> would remain influential for subsequent systematic accounts of human cognition, *phantasia* is the particular capacity which allows for a mediation between *aisthesis* (sense perception) and *dianoia* (discursive thought). As the ability to produce mental images, it is responsible for transforming the data of *aisthesis* and to make them available in the form of representations (*phantasmata*) to *dianoia* for further processing. The mental activity of

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<sup>3</sup>Book three of *De Anima* provides Aristotle's main discussion of the functions and properties of the *phantasia*. cf. Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Kenelm Foster and Silvester Humphries, intr. Ivo Thomas (London: Routledge, 1951). Less prominent accounts can also be found in *De Motu Animalium* and the *Parva Naturalia*. For a scrupulous philological analysis of Aristotle's use of the term cf. Viviana Cessi, *Erkennen und Handeln in der Theorie des Tragischen bei Aristoteles* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>cf. *De Anima* book 3, chapter 3, 427b27-428b9. One of the main points of contention between Plato and Aristotle is the question of how falsity enters our judgments, and here, the *phantasia*'s distinction from or coextensiveness with the *doxa* is a crucial factor. An extensive discussion of this dispute, however, does not seem appropriate or necessary for the present context. Both Watson 1988 and Cessi 1987 provide a detailed account.

<sup>5</sup>So-called faculty psychologies are theoretical frameworks which divide the human soul or mind according to fundamental capacities. Most models, starting with Aristotle's first systematic attempt, operate with a basic division of the soul into a vegetative, sensitive, and intellectual part, each of which can then be further subdivided according to their various functions and objects. Faculty psychology is the dominant approach to explain human cognition well into the eighteenth century, and is by no means as "dead" as a theoretical model as one might assume. As Jerry A. Fodor has pointed out, as soon as one allows a certain degree of independence for a certain mental function or operation of a specific part of the brain, one has already taken a first step into faculty psychology. cf. Jerry A. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983). For a good overview of the historical development of faculty psychology cf. Dennis L. Sepper, *Descartes's Imagination. Proportion, Images, and the Activity of Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

*phantasia* then, can be seen as the precondition of human thought and consciousness, since without it, our thought processes would be cut off from any outside sensory input.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the Aristotelian *phantasia* is not exclusively tied to immediately present sense-perceptions. It can also recall them as *eikones* in the process of memory, or produce them as dream-images (*eidola, phantasmata*) during sleep. In these cases, where the processes of *phantasia* are not dependent on present objects of perception, *phantasia* is able to recall images which it produced earlier and which it finds as it were “stored” in itself. It can thus also become a factor in the construction of the past and the alternative realm of dreams. *Phantasia* is hence intimately tied to the input of the senses, without which it could not operate, while *at the same time* being able to perform some of the activities of the higher, logical and discursive functions of the soul, since it is able to differentiate various pieces of sensory data and reassemble them in the form of mental images. Yet, *phantasia* is defined as a separate faculty and is not clearly identified with either realm. It is a truly liminal activity and Aristotle himself is hard-pressed to precisely define its position:

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Further, there is the imaginative power [*phantasia*], which seems in essence

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle’s problem remains one of the central epistemological questions to the present day. While there is usually no recourse in the contemporary discussion to a “faculty,” be it *phantasia* or the imagination, to provide a philosophical option for a means of communication between mind and body, the conceptual challenge that the postulation of *phantasia* was meant to solve, still remains very much unanswered. The current successors of the *phantasmata* produced by the Aristotelian *phantasia* could very well be what philosophers of mind refer to as *qualia*. These are the highly individual “raw feelings,” such as the “blueness” of the sky, the “coffeeness” of the smell of coffee or the specific quality of the sound of a violin, which enter our consciousness prior to any further conceptual activity. The crucial difference, however, is without a doubt that while for Aristotle the connection between mind and world was a given that it would have been inconceivable for him not to assume, the ontological status of *qualia* such as “blue”, caught between the electromagnetic waves of the ‘outside’ world and the neuronal patterns of the human brain, is very much under debate. As Thomas Metzinger sums up the discussion: “Many, therefore, ask themselves privately whether the phenomenal property of ‘blueness’ really exists in this world: is there a point of contact between the inner world of consciousness and the outer world of physics?” Metzinger, Thomas ed. *Conscious Experience*. Paderbronn and Lawrence, Kansas: Schöningh and Allen Press. 1995. p.15. In continuous variations, this is the central epistemological question that drives the debate about *phantasia* or synonymous discursive creations from Aristotle until the present.

to be quite different from any other. With which of these others it is identical, or from which it differs, are difficult problems [...] (Aristotle 1951, 459; 432a15f.)

Situated between *aisthesis* and *doxa* but identified with neither, the *phantasia* cannot be placed definitively in either the realm of the senses or the realm of the intellect. Oscillating between both of them, the *phantasia* is introduced by Aristotle in order to allow for their connection, without presupposing a bridge where both realms actually overlap. The ambiguous potential of the faculty in the epistemological discussion can be traced back to the liminal dilemma that already Aristotle had to face.

There can be no doubt, however, that for Aristotle the hierarchical status of *phantasia* within the process of epistemology remains unambiguously located below *doxa*, the least developed of the rational functions of the soul. While the latter is an exclusively human faculty, *phantasia* serves no such distinguishing function and is according to Aristotle found in humans and certain animals alike. Ultimately, *phantasia* has hence a solely subsidiary function in Aristotle's philosophical framework. It supplies the discursive faculties of the human mind with representations of sense-data and is hence indispensable for the processes of cognition. Discursive thought (*dianoia*) would be impossible without it, but *phantasia* itself is clearly not to be seen as among the cognitive abilities, such as *nous* and *dianoia*, that set man apart as an animal rationale.

Aristotle's epistemological model would remain influential for systematic philosophies to come. The liminal position of *phantasia* in the epistemological process, its role in the explanation of memory and the creation of dream images, as well as its assessment as inferior to the higher, rational functions of the human mind, all these are positions that can be found in more or less significant variations in the various attempts of subsequent philosophers to create a systematic account of human

knowledge.<sup>7</sup> From the outset in classical Greek philosophy then, the imagination as *phantasia* has a specific epistemological function that is still very much part of the contemporary debate: It provides an interface between the mind and the senses and hence by extension the mind and the world. It has thus been invoked in various guises to guarantee the unity of human knowledge and to provide an answer to one of the most fundamental philosophical questions: How it is possible at all for us to pretend to have knowledge of an “outside” world that is by definition *other* and cannot become part of the world of our consciousness except by means of representation?

### ***1.2 Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the Vagaries of the Sub-lunar World***

While Aristotle’s definitions of the *phantasia* as an integral part of the epistemological process would prove extremely influential for subsequent systematic accounts of human cognition, it was nevertheless Plato, who had the most significant impact on the history of the concept, for his metaphysics provided the crucial philosophical framework that would guide future *judgments* of the faculty as detrimental or beneficial for the pursuit of knowledge.

Such a question in connection to *phantasia* did not truly present itself for Aristotle, who never doubted the reality of the world of our everyday experience. For Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, it was in *this* world that things had their true being, and there was hence no philosophical necessity to presuppose the existence of ideal forms in a non-sensual and disembodied state in order to provide the human mind with objects of true knowledge. From an Aristotelian point of view, it is in the *ousia*, the substances or essences of the empirical world, and *only* in them, that the Platonic forms are actualized, and Plato’s philosophical assumption of two distinctly separate realms, the realm of the ideal forms and the realm of their sensual images has no longer any explanatory power.

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<sup>7</sup>The consequences of this liminal position of *phantasia* for the systematic approaches of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

Hence, even though for Aristotle *phantasia* was an inferior type of mental activity that could not provide the kind of knowledge to be procured by the higher faculties of *nous* and *dianoia*, the knowledge derived from the senses and hence by means of *phantasia* had its indisputable validity for a meticulous observer of the natural world such as him. There was no doubt for Aristotle, that the sense-data proper, provided by the *aisthesis* prior to human judgment and the possible errors of *doxa*, were unquestionably true. Consequently, while *phantasia* might introduce falsity into the cognitive process in its particular transformation of sense-perceptions that already entails selections and recombinations, it could not fall into disrepute simply because of its connection to the body and the senses.

The Platonic distinction, however, between a changing and ultimately deceptive world of the senses and an unchanging intellectual world of ideal forms, from which alone true knowledge could be derived, sets the metaphysical stage for just such a conclusion. To put it in the terms of Plato's most famous allegory, *phantasia* is largely responsible for the illusion that leads us to give the shadows flickering on the wall of the cave in which we are epistemological prisoners a higher ontological status than they deserve. The *phantasmata* presented to the mind by *phantasia* need to be discarded in order to enable the philosophically inclined to tear themselves away from the chains of the sensual world and to gain access to the only true knowledge, that of the eternal reality of the ideal forms. If anything, these *phantasmata* can provide a ladder for the philosophical souls to recollect their divine origin, but the information they provide can have no intrinsic value for the lover of true knowledge.

It is not the *Republic*, however, but another *locus classicus* of Plato's fundamental distinction, the *Timaeus*, which I would now like to discuss in a little more detail. For it is this dialogue, one of the most widely read of Plato's texts in classical antiquity, that provides a source for the different strands of assessments of *phantasia* that would develop from their Platonic background and not all of which conform to the one I have just outlined.

When Timaeus, at the beginning of his speech, which is presented for Socrates' entertainment, bases his cosmological speculations on the dichotomy of two distinctly separate worlds, *phantasia* is directly implied in the description of the changing world of the senses, even though the word as such is not directly mentioned:

The one is comprehensible by thought with the aid of reason, ever changeless; the other opinable by opinion with the aid of reasonless sensation, becoming and perishing, never truly existent.<sup>8</sup>

Since *phantasia* is for Plato a combination of *aisthesis* and *doxa*, this passage from the *Timaeus* indicates that the faculty comprises nothing less but the whole realm of knowledge accessible to us through the senses. The insubstantial world of becoming falls completely under the sway of *phantasia*, which thus actually gains much broader significance in Plato's text than it would later have for Aristotle. But Plato's low opinion of the sensible world ultimately induces a negative view of *phantasia*, even though Plato himself, who only discusses the faculty when the interrogative framework has already been reduced to our knowledge of the inferior realm of the senses, does not directly present it in a negative light.

The consequences of the Platonic devaluation of the sensible world for assessments of *phantasia* are in fact more readily visible in the writings of the Neoplatonists, who would be more outspoken in their specific condemnation of the faculty and by whom the *phantasia* was predominantly perceived as misleading and dangerous because of its connection to the senses, the body, the passions, and desire. If Truth depends on the mind's knowledge of the ideal forms, which it can only reach through contemplation and the intellect, then, as Gerard Watson puts it, "phantasia acts as a veil between the soul and reality, a form of earthly clothing which should be cast off." (Watson 1988, 131.) This position would receive its greatest influence within

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<sup>8</sup>Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. and trans. R.D. Archer-Hind (London: Macmillan, 1888) 87.

the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, where the temptations of *phantasia* would be regarded as enticements to sinful acts and hence as obstacles on the path to salvation.

Yet, there is an inherent paradox in Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy, which simultaneously also allows for a positive assessment of *phantasia*. For while the sensible world is clearly inferior to the ideal world of the forms, of which it is merely an image, it still *is* an image of that world and can hence also serve as a means to gain access to it. From this perspective, *phantasia*, which remains, in somewhat Aristotelian fashion, situated at the threshold of both realms, can also serve as a bridge from the realm of the senses to the world of the pure intellect. This paradox finds its probably most striking formulation in Plotinus' assertion, that since we possess two souls, a higher and a lower one, so that we are in fact caught between the two different realms, both of which exert their influence over our actions, consequently one would also have to assume a two-fold existence of *phantasia*: While *phantasia* in its lower form allows the mind to recall through memory what it had received by means of sense-perception, the higher form of the faculty can provide, in analogical fashion, a Platonic *mnemosyne* of the soul's true affinity to the higher world of the forms. While it is the lower form of *phantasia* that threatens to imprison us in the realm of the senses, its higher version can nevertheless serve as a means to become aware of the higher souls' true locus even while this perception is clouded through our contaminations by the sensual. The ultimate goal in this life will then be to bring both *phantasiai* into agreement, with the higher form of the higher soul with its superior memories serving as the guiding principle.

But if memory belongs to the image-making power [*phantasia*], and each of the two souls remembers, as has been said, there will be two image-making powers. [...] Now when one soul is in tune with the other, and their image-making powers are not separate, and that of the better soul is dominant, the image becomes one; [...] This other soul, then, sees

everything, and takes some things with it which belong to the other when it goes out [of the body] but rejects others; as when we keep company with inferior people and then change to other companions, we remember little of the inferior ones but more of the better sort.<sup>9</sup>

The danger of *phantasia*'s lower incarnation taking undue influence is, however, always given and the faculty thus remains mainly a source of concern in the pursuit of true knowledge. Yet, as a close analysis of a passage in Plato's *Timaeus* will reveal, this is not the whole story that needs to be told about Platonic metaphysics and *phantasia*.

### 1.3 *Phantasia and Ecstatic Knowledge*

In the creation myth related in Plato's *Timaeus*, the divine creator, after having brought into being the living universe and the Gods, entrusts the latter with the task of creating the other mortal beings. As he himself is unable to create anything less perfect than the Gods, it is up to them — mortal beings in Greek belief — to perfect the *kosmos* by furnishing it with human beings, animals and plants. They are thus given the immortal principle of soul (*psyche*) and are commanded to create the other mortals with its help in imitation of the first act of creation of which they themselves are the product.

To fulfill this task, the Gods, in creating human beings, not only fashion a mortal body for the immortal soul at their disposal, but also provide this body with a second and lesser type of soul, which is equally mortal and responsible for all the specifically human feelings, from anguish to love, and which thus produces the human passions. This mortal soul is then once again divided into two parts, which are separated by the diaphragm. While the lower part of the mortal soul, closer to the bowels, is

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<sup>9</sup>Plotinus, *Enneads* ed. G.P. Good, trans. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 133; IV.3.31.

responsible for the base desires such as the lust of food and drink, its higher part, with the heart at its center, produces nobler feelings such as pride and courage and is more susceptible to the influence of reason (*nous*), which emanates from the brain and the immortal soul located there.

As a remedy for the lower part of the mortal soul, which would be cut off from any reasonable influence, the Gods then provide it with the liver, which serves as a mirror for the rational thoughts proceeding from the brain, which it translates into an outflux of its bitter substance, in order to keep the lower, appetitive part of the human soul in check. But the liver not only reflects the admonishing input from the higher, immortal soul, it also receives “sweet” visions (*phantasmata*) from it at night and hence becomes the seat of divination, enabling even this part of the mortal soul to have access to truth. These visions are received by seers, the *manteis*, and for the power of vision itself, Plato employs the rare word *phantasis* (Plato 1888, 265; 71B), which Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* lists as a synonym of *phantasia*. (cf. Watson 1988, 11.) And since the images that the *manteis* receive, are referred to as *phantasmata*, the connection to the image-producing faculty of *phantasia* lies close at hand in any event. These visions are then decoded and transmitted by the interpreters (*prophetai*), who thus allow for a rational understanding of the revelations that the *manteis* receive.

Gerard Watson has traced back the positive Neoplatonic assessment of *phantasia*, which I outlined in the preceding section, to the passage in the *Timaeus* that I just summarized, and he is certainly correct in pointing out that Plato’s description of *phantasia* or *phantasis* as a mirroring power, reflecting *phantasmata* from the world of the forms, was subsequently expanded upon very effectively by the Neoplatonists. Yet, what interests me specifically in this passage, is that it is one among many in Plato’s dialogues that provide a connection to a closely related and yet quite different type of knowledge, a knowledge that is not the rational one of philosophical discourse, but the irrational and ecstatic knowledge of ritual.

For in fact, what Plato enacts in relating the visions received by the *manteis* to the metaphysical framework that subtends the *Timaeus*, is the transformation of a knowledge originally rooted in ritualistic and religious practice into a rational and philosophical form. Michael L. Morgan and others have argued that to negotiate the sensitive difference between philosophy and religion is one of Plato's main endeavors, as he tries to ensure that for the readers of the dialogues Socrates' philosophical teachings remain differentiated not only from those of the Sophists and the work of the poets, but also from the host of new religious orientations that sprang up in fourth-century Athens in the time of Plato's youth.<sup>10</sup>

What allowed for such a fear of identification was the fact that Socrates' philosophical eros, just as much as the religious cults that had become popular in Athens, allowed for an approximation and even identification of the human and the divine that was unthinkable within the religious framework of Greek tradition. Not to acknowledge the insurmountable gap separating the gods from mere mortals amounted to an unforgivable hubris for the older Greek beliefs, where oracles such as Delphi provided the only and rather precarious means to attain access to the divine. To posit the immortality and the divine origin of the human soul was intolerable within such religious beliefs. Yet it was precisely the promise to gain immediate access to the divine that provided the attraction of the dionysiac and corybantic rites that had been imported into Athens.

But such ritual actions based on possession beliefs did so of course to the detriment of any rational control, while Socrates' promise presented philosophy as a rational and hence the only truly beneficial means for the improvement of the soul and its redirection to its divine origins. Socrates, to quote Michael Morgan "replaced non-rational ecstasy with rational inquiry as a way to ascend to divinity, and substituted cognitive virtue and transcendence for pious displacement." (Morgan 1994, 22.) In both

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<sup>10</sup>Michael L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety. Philosophy and Ritual in 4th century Athens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

Socratic philosophy as related by Plato and the contemporaneous ecstatic rites, the gap between the human and the divine is thus bridged, but the main difference, as Morgan rightfully underlines, is the question of control: Is it the humans or the Gods who are bridging the gap? For Plato, the question is answered in favor of the philosopher: While the Corybantes, just as much as the poets in Plato's description, are possessed by the Gods and hence relinquish their rational control over the experience, it is the philosopher who achieves this approximation to the divine by means of his peculiar philosophical inspiration, which allows him to remain in control throughout the process.

The main sources for Plato's elaboration of the superiority of the philosophical form of divine madness are of course the *Phaedrus* and the *Ion*, and it might seem slightly far-fetched to consult the *Timaeus* for this difference. But it is the *Timaeus*, in its fascinating combination of Platonic metaphysics, myth-making, and cosmological, physiological and anatomical theorizing, that provides—almost despite itself—probably the most important model through which theories of the imagination, here in its form as *phantasia* are inscribed into the history of Western philosophy. For regardless of its dialectical and dialogical approach, the Socratic and Platonic method necessitates a moment of ecstatic recognition, without which true knowledge cannot be achieved. Even if the soul can be prepared by rational inquiry to reach the point where this moment becomes possible through a controlled path of reasoning, the transformational and still profoundly religious moment remains necessarily irrational. Ever since Plato's dialogues, this struggle between the rational and the irrational is thus inscribed into philosophical attempts at knowledge formation, the paradoxical predicament being that philosophical inquiry finds itself ultimately dependent on an inspirational type of knowledge that is incompatible with the rational approach that is necessary to ground philosophical discourse and to differentiate it from poetry, religion, and sophistry. For the present discussion, the *Timaeus* is thus central for two important reasons: On the one hand, it is probably the oldest source that can be

pointed to as associating this type of inspirational knowledge with *phantasia*, the faculty that would eventually be transformed into imagination, and on the other hand, as I will now try to show, it also provides one of the first models to conceptualize the struggle between these two types of knowledge as a struggle taking place *within* philosophical discourse. Plato thus allows us to elaborate a systematic relation between reason and imagination that would guide almost all subsequent discussions of the faculties in the Western tradition. The key to this discussion is the relationship of the *manteis* and the *prophetai*:

The visions of the *manteis*, as Plato makes clear, can only be received when the rational part of the cognitive apparatus is inactive. These particular *phantasmata* are, as Timaeus puts it, “the gift of God to human folly” (Plato 1888, 267; 72B) and only those who are for one reason or another, unable to exercise their power of understanding are able to receive them:

No man in his sound senses deals in true and inspired divination, but when the power of his understanding is fettered in sleep or by sickness, or if he has become distraught by some divine possession. (Plato 1888, 267; 72B)

Hence the common problem with all prophecies: They are incomprehensible in their “raw” state and need to be interpreted in a second step of the process for them to have any impact on our decisions or actions. That, as Greek epic and drama gives ample proof, was already the problem with the messages from Apollo delivered through the mouthpiece of the Pythia in Delphi or in the prophecies of Cassandra, a problem that obviously does not diminish in the case of various individuals who are blessed with divine madness in one form or the other. The interpretation then is not the job of the *manteis* themselves, but that of a second group of people, the *prophetai*, or interpreters. Only they will have the rational means at their disposal to make the utterances of the *manteis* part of the communicable logos:

[...] but it is not for him who has become mad and still is in that state to judge his own visions and utterances; the old saying remains true, that only for the sane man is it meet to act and to be the judge of his own actions and of himself. Whence has arisen the custom of setting up interpreters as judges of inspired prophecy: these are themselves called prophets by some who are altogether unaware that they are but the expounders of mystic speech and visions, and ought not in strict accuracy to be called prophets, but interpreters of the prophecies. (Plato 1888, 267; 72B)

On the background of the *Phaedrus* and Socrates' definition of the philosophical eros as a specific type of madness, this dichotomy assumes special significance. For the philosopher can now be seen as having two distinct manifestations, *both* of which nevertheless make up philosophical discourse: As participating in reason and *logos*, the philosopher is able to communicate and make accessible in rational form a knowledge that is at the same time not accessible by rational means. It is ultimately impossible to establish a clear hierarchy between these two types of knowledge, since they mutually depend on each other, while neither can truly claim priority. While rational philosophical discourse makes the inspirational visions communicable and hence contains them within the sphere of the *logos*, this discourse would ultimately remain mere sophistry if it could not rely on the authority of its inspirational counterpart.

This problem can and would eventually be formulated in systematic terms: if there is indeed a way for us to access a kind of knowledge that is by its very nature inaccessible to our cognitive faculties, the only form in which we will ever be *conscious* of this knowledge is one that has been processed by the filters of our cognitive mechanisms in an inevitable act of interpretation. For inspirational knowledge to become understandable and communicable, it has to become part of the *logos* and hence cannot escape the latter's formal restrictions. We could not even *know* that we had just been

inspired if that inspiration had never been translated by the conscious processes of our cognitive apparatus. Hence one might say that the *prophetai* in Plato's text are ultimately nothing else but an externalized version of the cognitive restraints of our consciousness, linguistic and otherwise, which ultimately always mediate our access to anything that might lie beyond their limits.

As philosophical discourse attempts to establish itself, this paradox entails an uneasy cohabitation of the rational and the irrational, and as philosophical legitimacy comes to rely more and more on rational argument, the irrational and inspirational components of philosophical knowledge are either suppressed or emphatically resurrected in various attempts to challenge what is perceived as the dominating discourse of reason. *Phantasia*, as the example of the *Timaeus* shows, is already at the heart of this struggle, a struggle that would come to the center of the philosophical and literary stage particularly in the Idealist and Early German Romantic discussion of imagination.

#### 1.4 "A Wiser and Subtler Artist by far than *Mimesis*"

Neither Plato nor Aristotle, however, discuss *phantasia* in the context of art and artistic creation. For both of them, *phantasia* is not part of the artist's *techne*, his specific set of skills that allow him to produce a human artifact. *Mimesis*, not *phantasia* is the driving force of artistic production, both in the Platonic and the Aristotelian philosophical framework.

Even though it could be shown that *phantasis* or *phantasia*, is linked to divine inspiration in the *Timaeus* and could thus also be applied to the manifestations of divine madness described in the *Phaedrus*, poetic inspiration being one of these manifestations, it is only the philosopher, not the poet, who can reap the true benefits of this ecstatic moment, due to his skill of proper reasoning. The poet in Plato's description is unable to predispose himself for this transcendent experience by means

of rational inquiry, and can hence make no active use of it. He is a purely passive recipient of his gift of inspiration, which, as it bears no relation to his *techne*, can thus have no elevating effect on the state of his soul, the only truly worthwhile aim for any human activity.

Book Ten of the *Politeia* is of course even more explicit in this dismissal of artistic production due to the artist's dependence on the processes of *mimesis*: Since all he can truly produce are copies of physical objects, which are themselves already mere copies of the Ideas, the artist is condemned to be twice removed from any true insight and is thus of no use in Plato's ideal *polis*. The artisan, whose *techne* equally relies on a mimetic act of copying can at least claim a practical use for his objects, illusory as they might be. The products of the artist's *techne*, however, have no such redemptive qualities; at best they are useless, at worst they will have a detractive and subversive effect on the educational regime of Plato's utopian state. The expedient banishment of the unreliable artists from the *polis* is hence the logical consequence.

With Aristotle on the other hand originates the conception that would guide the thought about art and aesthetics for almost two thousand years under the formula "ars imitatur naturam." Human *techne* is for Aristotle intimately related to nature, *physis*, which it can either imitate in its objective form or complete in the teleological drive of its force: "In general, art (*techne*) either imitates the works of nature (*physis*) or completes that which nature is unable to bring to completion."<sup>11</sup> The dichotomy that Aristotle introduces here is due to the two-fold appearance of nature as *natura naturata*, nature in its visible form as existing objects and *natura naturans*, nature as productive force (*entelecheia*). Since Aristotle rejects the Platonic conception of two distinct worlds, nature has to take on all the aspects, Forms, Ideas and demiurgic creation, as well as matter, that Plato could account for separately in the sensual

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<sup>11</sup>Aristotle, *Physics. Books I and II* trans. and intr. W. Charlton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 40; II.8.199a. The translation of *techne* with "art" is somewhat misleading and one should bear in mind that *techne* is a much broader term, which is not limited to art in the usual contemporary sense but includes all forms of craftsmanship.

world and the realm of Ideas. The human artificer is thus bound to imitate nature even if he creates something that is as of yet not part of the physical world, since all human objects comply to the principles that nature would have used had the object in question already existed. The processes of art and nature, *techne* and *physis*, are interchangeable, as Aristotle explains in a most striking example in the *Physics*; had nature decided to grow houses, these would have looked no different from those that are now created by human means:

Thus if a house were one of the things which come to be due to nature, it would come to be just as it now does by the agency of art; and if things which are due to nature came to be not only due to nature but also due to art, they would come to be just as they are by nature. (Aristotle 1970, 40.)

Hence, even when Aristotle grants the poet superiority over the historian in his *Poetics*, since the former presents human actions as they ideally should be, while the historian can only present them in the deficiency of their actuality, the poet remains bound to *mimesis*, even though the term now describes a positive asset of the poet and artist and no longer a negative one as in Plato's *Politeia*.

Since the poet is an imitator, exactly like a painter or any other maker of images, he must necessarily in every case be imitating one of three objects: things as they once were or now are; or things as people say or suppose they were or are; or things as they ought to be.<sup>12</sup>

“Things as they ought to be,” even though they do not exist in a state of physical reality are hence not to be thought of as genuine creations of the poet if they appear in his art. Rather, they also are products of the poet's mimetic faculty, imitating not

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<sup>12</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics* trans. and intr. James Hutton (New York: Norton, 1982), 74f.; 25,1460b.

what exists or has existed, supposedly or in actuality, but what nature would have intended to exist, had the teleological drive of its productive powers already been brought to their ideal fruition.

There is thus no room in either Aristotle's or Plato's thought about artistic creation for the modern conception of art as generative of an autonomous realm that adds something intrinsically *new* to existing reality. Plato's *ideas* and Aristotle's *physis* already contain everything that is or can come to existence and do not really allow for a conception of genuine artistic creation in the modern sense. The artist can only imitate what is already *there*, either in actuality or in unrealized but predictable potentiality. The real has as of yet no alternatives which could be represented by the artist. It should thus not come as a surprise that there is no discussion in either Plato's or Aristotle's texts of *phantasia* in the modern sense of a creative imagination, as it is *mimesis* that firmly guides their respective discussions of the artistic process.

Yet, there are precedents in the classical tradition for a discussion of *phantasia* as a properly artistic capacity that can ultimately be contrasted to *mimesis*. To find those, however, one has to shift the focus of investigation and needs to turn from philosophy to rhetoric.

As Dan Flory has pointed out,<sup>13</sup> since discussions of the *phantasia* in classical thought mostly focus on the theories of Plato and Aristotle, it can seem almost impossible to establish any continuity between classical ideas about *phantasia* and modern conceptions of imagination as a creative power and a central concept in the artistic process. If however, as Murray Wright Bundy, and especially Gerard Watson and Dan Flory have done, one investigates the rhetorical tradition of both the Greek and the Roman tradition, *phantasia* turns out to be not at all alien to questions of art and aesthetics, but emerges as a not uncommon term in the rhetorical discussion, describing the power that allows the orator to visualize specific images and to present

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<sup>13</sup>Dan Flory, "Stoic Psychology. Classical Rhetoric, and Theories of Imagination in Western Philosophy," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 20:2 (1996) 147-167.

them so vividly to his audience in his speech, as to convince them that they and the orator are actually *seeing* the same “real” thing.<sup>14</sup>

Especially in the account we find in Quintilian’s *De Institutio Oratoria* (Quintilian 1960, p. 433f.; 6.2.29), *phantasia* is here clearly seen as part of the orator’s *techne*, a capacity the individual talent for which might be a gift, but which can nevertheless be acquired, trained and perfected. *Phantasia* is thus no longer a purely epistemological term, or the irrational event of divine inspiration of Plato’s *Timaeus*, but takes on the technical aspects of the craft of the orator and artist that in Aristotle remained restricted to the processes of *mimesis*. Ultimately, *phantasia* has become linked to the rhetorical practice of *ekphrasis*, the orator’s skill to vividly present images in words, and is thus intimately involved in the age-old struggle between the verbal and the visual arts, while it also figures prominently in the discussion of how artists, both verbal and visual, can create valid and acceptable representations of the Gods.

Both of these topics are at stake in the first and oft-cited source, where *phantasia* is discussed directly in opposition to *mimesis*, and which has thus gained most attention as a locus of the “transformation” (Watson) of *phantasia* into a concept more akin to a modern understanding of the imagination. The text in question is Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, published probably around 217 A.D., which is less a vita of Apollonius, a wonder-worker and philosopher of the first century A.D., but a hagiographic novel, which allows Philostratus to display his rhetorical skills and his various areas of knowledge.

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<sup>14</sup>This is the context in which the *phantasia* is discussed by Longinus in book fifteen of *On the Sublime* (Longinus, *On the Sublime* trans. James A. Arieti and John M. Crossett (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1985). and by Quintilian in book six of *De Institutio Oratoria* (Quintilian, *De Institutio Oratoria* trans. H.E. Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). ). The fact that both authors feel no need to discuss the term *phantasia* at any greater length or explain their use of it, seems to suggest that they are relying on an existing discussion and an available body of work, both in rhetoric and philosophy, of which the philosophical documents have all been lost. cf. Flory 1996, 156; Watson 1988, 60. For an extensive discussion of Longinus’ use of the *phantasia* see also: Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, “Phantasia und Einbildungskraft. Zur Vorgeschichte eines Leitbegriffs der europäischen Ästhetik,” *Poetica* 18 (1986): 197-248.

During the protagonist's journey to the sources of the Nile, described in chapter 19 of book 6, he encounters a gymnosophist, with whom he engages in a discussion about Greek and Egyptian practices of representing the Gods. Apollonius ridicules the Egyptian practice of symbolically representing the Gods in the form of animals, which he finds grotesque and in lack of the supreme beauty appropriate for and properly given to the Gods by the Greek artists and sculptors. Apollonius' opponent, well-versed in the principles of Platonic aesthetics, challenges Apollonius on this account and accuses the Greek artists, whom he believes must operate under the principles of *mimesis*, of pretending to have divine powers and direct access to the Ideas themselves:

Your artists, then, like Phidias," said the other, "and like Praxiteles, went up, I suppose, to heaven and took a copy of the forms of the gods, and then reproduced these by their art, or was there any other influence which presided over and guided their moulding?"<sup>15</sup>

Yet, as Apollonius' reply makes clear, the canonical mould of Platonic strictures has actually been broken and the work of the artist is no longer limited to the creation of copies of copies, but allows indeed for a direct access to the non-physical world. This however is achieved by other means than those of *mimesis*: In order to create representations of the Gods, the artist, like Phidias, has no need for a visible original to copy from, nor of access to heaven. To procure the Platonic forms of the Gods, he can find the necessary ideas in his own mind by means of *phantasia*:

Imagination [*phantasia*] [...] wrought these works, a wiser and subtler artist by far than imitation [*mimesis*]; for imitation can only create as its handiwork what it has seen, but imagination equally what it has not seen; for it will conceive of its ideal with reference to the reality, and

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<sup>15</sup>Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana. The Epistles of Apollonius and the Treatise of Eusebius* trans. F.C. Conybeare (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).

imitation is often baffled by terror, but imagination by nothing; for it marches undismayed to the goal which it has laid itself down. (Philostratus 1950, 79; 6,19.)

“Reality” here refers to the perfect reality of the Ideas and not to empirical reality, as Gerard Watson makes clear in his translation of the passage (Watson 1988, 63.), where he renders *tou ontos* as “the perfect reality.” *Phantasia* thus surpasses *mimesis* by being independent of a visible original in the process of copying, a conception which opens the way for a different kind of aesthetic theory that allows the artist to create without reference to an external reality. In particular, *phantasia* can produce what the senses have never experienced and what only the mind has conceived. Through the act of artistic creation and by means of the power of *phantasia*, the artist can thus introduce something into physical reality that has so far no precedent in it. Without relying on external objects as the foil for a mimetic process, artist like Phidias and Praxiteles can thus create statues of the Gods that are singular products of the ideal they conceived of in their minds.

Yet, even though such a view of *phantasia* as a creative, artistic power undoubtedly adds a new perspective to the ones discussed so far, the framework within which Philostratus operates is still clearly Platonic. In fact, the argument is rather close to those employed in Renaissance defenses of poetry, which attempted to repudiate the Platonic condemnation of artistic production, while doing so within Platonic parameters. To praise the artist for the creative power and vision of his *phantasia* is certainly unplatonic, but what is at stake here is more a claim for the artist’s share of the philosopher’s superiority, than an actual challenge to the Platonic system as such. This is quite apparent when Apollonius suggests to his opponent at the end of the discussion that to provide no representations of the Gods at all would ultimately be better than to display inappropriate ones, such as the Egyptians display at the moment, “for the mind can more or less delineate and figure them to itself better than

can any artist.” (Philostratus 1950, 81; 6.19.) Obviously, artistic creation is still a mimetic process that is prone to fall short of the true perfection found in the mental realm of Ideas.

Such a Platonism is openly explicit in the earliest source that can be adduced for Philostratus’ specific discussion of artistic creation: Cicero’s *Orator*.<sup>16</sup> When developing his presentation of the ideal orator, Cicero roots the latter’s practice in an ideal of oratory, to which his rhetorical performance constantly aspires. This ideal will never be embodied by an actual speech and can thus only be grasped by mind and thought. Like Philostratus two hundred years later, also Cicero uses the statues of Phidias as an example for the process of creation he envisions:

Surely that great sculptor, while making the image of Jupiter or Minerva, did not look at any person whom he was using as a model, but in his own mind there dwelt a surpassing vision of beauty; at this he gazed and all intent on this he guided his artist’s hand to produce the likeness of the god.<sup>17</sup>

Following the same model, also the orator should conceive “the ideal of perfect eloquence” in his mind’s vision, since any speech perceptible to human ears will always only constitute an imperfect copy. Here, Plato is directly mentioned as the source for Cicero’s conception of perfect oratory:

These patterns of things are called *ideai* or ideas by Plato [...] these, he says, do not “become”; they exist for ever, and depend on intellect and reason; other things come into being and cease to be, they are in flux and do not remain long in the same state. (Cicero 1942, 313; II.10.)

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<sup>16</sup>Cicero is discussed as a source for Philostratus’ view of *phantasia* by both Watson and Flory.

<sup>17</sup>Cicero, *Brutus and Orator* trans. G.L. Hendrickson and H.M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 311; II.9.

In Plato's dialogues, on the background of his battle with the Sophists, the realms of philosophy and rhetoric had to remain clearly separate; but in Cicero's Roman society the rhetor had been more than vindicated and could thus uncompromisingly be presented in the position of the Platonic philosopher. Cicero's argument thus already paves the way for the reassessment of artistic and rhetorical creation that is evident in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*. Cicero, however, does not employ the term *imaginatio*, the Latin equivalent of the Greek *phantasia*, in this context, but uses terms like *mens*, *cogitatio*, and *animus* that refer to the Platonic *nous*. The "slippage" that seems to have occurred between *nous* and *phantasia*, *cogitatio* and *imaginatio* in the two centuries which separate Cicero and Philostratus thus remains to be explained.

Both Gerard Watson and Dan Flory have pointed to the philosophy of the Stoa in order to account for the fact that the term *phantasia* takes on qualities that would formerly have been reserved to *nous*, and both argue convincingly that a strong Stoic influence on the rhetorical tradition is responsible for this transformation, stipulating that a "Stoicizing Platonist" would have been the first to use the term *phantasia* in the way it is employed by Philostratus. (Watson 1988, p.84, 91; Flory 1996, p.157)

For in fact, *phantasia* plays a dominant role in the materialist philosophy of the Stoa, in which there was no place for immaterial faculties such as *nous* or *dianoia*, and where hence *phantasia* had not only to fulfill all the rational functions of the human mind, including those attributed to reason and understanding, but where it was also responsible for the human capacity of language:

Thus, *phantasia* had to produce language in the Stoic epistemological scheme, just as it had to perform mental operations such as ascertaining similarity, transition, and composition (*phantasia homoiotes*, *phantasia metabatike* and *phantasia synthetike*), or, in the words of another philosophical system, it had to perform operations of synthetic judgment.

(Flory 1996, 151f.)

For the Stoics, the knowledge derived through the senses was not only not an inferior type of knowledge, but moreover the *only* kind of knowledge available to the human mind. Hence, only *phantasia*, in its close connection to the realm of the senses remained to perform all the mental operations necessary for the transformation of sense-data. Consequently, also art and oratory were products of only these mental activities, and Watson's and Flory's argument for a syncretism of Stoic, Platonic and rhetorical discourses as the source for the conception of *phantasia* that comes to light in Philostratus' Apollonius vita is thus very convincing. Especially Watson's detailed argument for a combination of Stoic ideas about *phantasia* with the Platonic creation myth of the *Timaeus* in the ongoing classical discussion, theological as well as rhetorical, about divine and artistic creation, (Watson 1988, 80f.) provides a persuasive account for the "transformation" of *phantasia* into an important term for the discourse about artistic creation.

Watson and Flory are hence certainly correct in stressing that this Stoic and rhetorical tradition of conceptualizing *phantasia* must be taken into account in any attempt to analyze classical discussions of the faculty. In contrast to the theories of Plato and Aristotle, it provides a classical conception of *phantasia* as a creative faculty, at work in the artistic process, and can thus provide a link to a modern understanding of imagination as an aesthetic concept that is difficult to see if the discussion is limited to Platonic and Aristotelian accounts.

It needs to be stressed, however, more so than Watson and Flory do, that what this tradition provides, is a precedent for the discussion of imagination in the context of artistic creation. It is *not*, however, a prefiguration of modern aesthetic theories about the work of art as the product of a creative faculty, a work of art which could constitute its own autonomous reality, follow its own internal laws, and which is not bound by mimetic ties to a world which alone it could represent. The Stoics were

certainly not Kantians, and even though Flory may be correct in asserting that Stoic theories about mental processes are more acceptable to the contemporary discussion than those of Plato and Aristotle (Flory 1996, p. 155), their view of art and artistic creation is still firmly rooted in an epistemological framework that does not coincide with a post-Kantian aesthetics.

A case in point is provided by the account of the Stoic's convictions about the nature of the *kosmos* and its relation to human creativity, which is given in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, a passage quoted by both Watson and Flory. It positions human creation in Aristotelian fashion not in contrast to natural processes but as an extension and reflection of nature's creative *energeia*:

Zeno says that the whole world and the heavens is the substance of God, and likewise Chrysippus in Book One of *On the Gods* and Posidonius in his first book of *On the Gods* [...] They say that nature is both that which holds the world together and that which causes things to grow. Nature is a force moving of itself, producing and preserving in being its offspring in accordance with seminal principles within definite periods and effecting results homogenous with their sources. It aims at what is useful and at pleasure, as is clear from the creative activity [demiourgia] of man.<sup>18</sup>

There can be no doubt that aesthetic theories were developed, especially throughout the Romantic period, which were intended to reconnect the work of the artist to the creative force of the *natura naturans*, thus serving to bridge the gap between mind and nature that figured so prominently in Cartesian and enlightenment philosophy. In this context, the analogy that is presupposed in Diogenes Laertius' rendering of the Stoic's view, between the artist's creative activity and that of nature would again be employed as a central aesthetic tenet. But in clear contrast to any previous classical conceptions, it is precisely the crux of any modern aesthetic theory that such

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<sup>18</sup>Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. 7.148-149 as quoted in Watson 1988, 82.

a position now needs to be reconciled with the modern concept of the autonomous individual subject and a post-Kantian conception of the work of art. For art now constituted the locus and proof of human freedom and autonomy and could no longer be presented as an imitation or a completion of the teleological forces of nature in an Aristotelian sense.<sup>19</sup>

It is only under these preconditions that the concept of imagination could take on the peculiar function it would serve in the Romantic period, as both a safeguard of the autonomy of the subject *and* of that same subject's unity with nature, a unity equally to be reflected in the work of art. There is hence no direct way from the concept of *phantasia* in Philostratus, Longinus or Quintilian to Romantic views of the imagination. In order to provide a better understanding of these conceptions, it will thus be necessary to discuss the role of imagination in the two philosophical systems that have been most informative for modern conceptions of subjectivity, those of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant.

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<sup>19</sup>Kant's own aesthetic theory is no exception here. The *Critique of Judgment*, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter Three, is after all among other things a tight-rope walk trying to reconcile a modern aesthetics based on Kant's transcendental philosophy with the teleological tradition that goes back to Aristotle.

## Chapter 2

**DREAMS, DOUBTS, AND EVIL DEMONS: DESCARTES  
AND THE IMAGINATION**

La pire place que nous puissions prendre, c'est en nous.

The worst place we could take is within ourselves.

—Montaigne, *Essais*—

While the previous chapter provided the discursive entryways to the discussion of imagination that remain pertinent to the philosophical and literary positions that will interest us in the following chapters, the current chapter opens up and brings into focus the peculiar connection between imagination and the modern concept of the autonomous subject that is the specific concern of this study. René Descartes's *Médidations* and his *Discours de la Méthode*, as we shall see, are not only among the *loci classici* that allow us to observe the institution of modern subjectivity, they equally enable us to see that in this institutional moment the *cogito* emerges in direct relation to the Cartesian concept of imagination. On the one hand, the essence of the *cogito* is defined by Descartes in direct opposition to imagination: The *cogito*, if it is to provide a point of certainty from which one could built a stable philosophical system, necessarily excludes imagination from its self-description. On the other hand, a close reading of the Cartesian text will reveal that the *cogito*, in ways unacknowledged by Descartes remains dependent on imagination in the subject's seemingly autonomous institution in the philosophical text. It is this peculiar double relationship with regard to imagination which my discussion of Descartes will bring to light as the essential condition of modern subjectivity.

## 2.1 *Mediatio Prima: Certainty, the Cogito, and the Imagination*

René Descartes begins the first of his *Meditationes de prima philosophia* by recalling the decision he had reached four years earlier in the *Discours de la méthode*<sup>1</sup>: In order to establish a philosophy that would provide reliable principles to organize one's thought, as well as the firm ground on which to build a coherent and complete system of the human sciences, it would be necessary to reject as possibly erroneous everything that had so far been accepted as true, and to distance oneself critically from the philosophical tradition. Only by freeing oneself from the assumptions of one's acquired opinions, which prove to be contradictory and unfounded upon closer scrutiny, as Descartes maintains, could one hope to give philosophy the precision of geometry and arithmetic, while developing clear, distinct, simple, and certain principles to guide scientific thought, and to keep its premises within verifiable limits. The desired clarity of the new hence demands a forceful erasure of the old, and Descartes's radical gesture institutes a central rhetorical topos of modernity: The precondition for progress is presented as an unconditional break with tradition that ultimately renders the past and the present irreconcilable. Cartesian philosophizing thus begins with the creation of a *tabula rasa*:

[...] il me fallait entreprendre sérieusement une fois en ma vie de me défaire de toutes les opinions que j'avais reçues jusques alors en ma créance, et commencer tout de nouveau dès les fondements, si je voulais établir quelque chose de ferme et de constant dans les sciences.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The *Discours* was published in French in 1637, the Latin edition of the *Meditationes* followed in 1641, while the French translation, the text I will be using in the following, appeared six years later, in 1647.

<sup>2</sup>René Descartes, *Œuvres philosophiques* ed. Ferdinand Alquié (Paris: Garnier, 1967), vol. II, 404. (AT IX, 13) Ferdinand Alquié presents a modernized French version of the standard edition of Descartes's original texts, *Œuvres de Descartes* ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964-) (Cited hereafter as AT. I will include the respective volume and page numbers of Adam and Tannery's edition in parentheses for each reference).

This complete rejection of one's old beliefs can be achieved most efficiently, Descartes asserts, by attacking their unreliable common foundation, the senses.—Even though their topic is seemingly metaphysics, Descartes's *Méditations* are first and foremost an attack against empiricist approaches to epistemology. The modernity, and what Descartes describes as the novelty of his philosophical approach, lies precisely in his insistence on the predominance of mental categories in the epistemological process, which the Descartes of the *Méditations* believes to rely on innate ideas, without which no knowledge of objects seemingly exterior to the human mind would be possible. The senses on the other hand, are not only seen to depend on the mind, but also prove to be treacherous, unreliable, and hence generally unfit to provide the foundation for one's philosophical convictions:

Tout ce que j'ai reçu jusqu'à présent pour le plus vrai et assuré, je l'ai appris des sens, ou par les sens: or j'ai quelquefois éprouvé que ces sens étaient trompeurs, et il est de la prudence de ne se fier jamais entièrement à ceux qui nous ont une fois trompés. (Descartes 1967, 405) (AT XI, 14)

Such an assessment of the senses does not bode well for imagination, certainly not within the Aristotelian framework of faculty psychology outlined in the previous chapter. If the senses cannot be trusted, not much is to be expected of their mental spokesperson, imagination. And throughout the *Méditations*, Descartes's understanding of imagination proves to be an Aristotelian one, as is exemplified by the most extensive definition given by Descartes in the sixth meditation<sup>3</sup>:

De plus, la faculté d'imaginer qui est en moi, et de laquelle je vois par expérience que je me sers lorsque je m'applique à la considération des

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<sup>3</sup>By the time Descartes joins the discussion, Aristotle's categories and definitions have of course already undergone centuries of commentary, variations, and redefinition. The essential role of imagination in the epistemological process, however, has remained the same. For a concise overview over the development of faculty psychology, particularly in the Middle Ages, and its influence on Descartes, cf. Dennis L. Sepper, *Descartes's Imagination. Proportion, Images, and the Activity of Thinking*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

choses matérielles, est capable de me persuader leur existence: car quand je considère attentivement ce que c'est que l'imagination, je trouve qu'elle n'est autre chose qu'une certaine application de la faculté qui connaît, au corps qui lui est intimement présent [...] (Descartes 1967, 480) (AT XI, 57)

Imagination is thus also for Descartes the means through which thinking proper, “the faculty of knowing,” receives knowledge of, “considers,” or “applies” itself to the outside world and to the body. It is only through the medium of imagination that the existence of the corporeal and material world can suggest itself to the mind. Just as Aristotelian *phantasia* provided *nous* and *dianoia* with *phantasmata* of exterior objects, it is by means of images or figures, that the Cartesian imagination allows the mind to “apply” itself to the exterior world, as is explained in the second meditation: “puisque imaginer n'est autre chose que contempler la figure ou l'image d'une chose corporelle” (Descartes 1967, 420) (AT XI, 22). Like the Aristotelian *phantasia*, Descartes's imagination is hence the inner sense responsible for all mental representation by way of images and figures, upon which any consideration and even awareness of the possibility of objects exterior to the mind itself and of the images of these objects in the mind is dependent.

But while both Descartes and Aristotle ascribe a similar role to imagination/*phantasia*, their understanding of the relation between the images/*phantasmata* the faculty provides and the actual objects they represent is radically different. For Aristotle, *phantasia*, while inferior to the conceptual mental faculties of *nous* and *dianoia*, plays an important role for the connection of mind and world, and produces images of the exterior world that are undoubtedly correct. Incorrect *doxa* and the resulting inaccurate judgments about the knowledge derived from the senses, not the senses themselves or the *phantasmata* presented by *phantasia*, are the source of error in perceptual judgments. Aristotle saw no reason to doubt the adequacy of the representational re-

relationship between the actual objects of the physical world and the images presented to the mind by *phantasia*. Descartes's radical doubt in the *Méditations*, however, calls precisely this conviction into question. His central concern in the first meditation is the problem of how one can be certain that one's mental representations of the exterior world do in fact coincide with the actual objects of that world. Dreams become the most forceful reason for this doubt: Since the images we receive while we dream do not coincide with the current reality exterior to our minds—while I might believe for example, as I am dreaming, to be awake, seated, and writing at my desk, I actually lie in bed and am sleeping—how are we to determine that the same does not hold true while we consider ourselves awake in “real life?”

Combien de fois m'est-il arrivé de songer la nuit, que j'étais en ce lieu, que j'étais habillé, que j'étais auprès du feu, quoique je fusse tout nu dedans mon lit ? Il me semble bien à présent que ce n'est point avec des yeux endormis que je regarde ce papier ; que cette tête que je remue n'est point assoupie ; que c'est avec dessein et de propos délibéré que j'étends cette main, et que je la sens : ce qui arrive dans le sommeil ne semble point si clair ni si distinct que tout ceci. Mais, en y pensant soigneusement, je me ressouviens d'avoir été souvent trompé, lorsque je dormais, par des semblables illusions. Et m'arrêtant sur cette pensée, je vois si manifestement qu'il n'y a point d'indices concluants, ni de marques assez certaines par où l'on puisse distinguer nettement la veille d'avec le sommeil, que j'en suis tout étonné ; et mon étonnement est tel, qu'il est presque capable de me persuader que je dors. (Descartes 1967, 406) (AT XI, 14 f.)

As the distinction between dream and waking breaks down, due to the impossibility of assuming a position from which a difference between the two could be ascertained, the link between the actual objects exterior to the mind and the representations which the mind receives by means of imagination loses its certainty. The

images we receive in our waking life might be just as illusory as the ones we receive while dreaming. While Aristotle did not entertain the thought of a complete fallacy of representation at the level of the senses and *phantasia*, Descartes's radical doubt arises precisely from that suspicion and creates a gulf between the mind and the world that can no longer be bridged. There are no discernible means for the self to ascertain the accuracy of its own mental representations, since it can only compare them with other representations of the same kind, but never with the things supposedly represented.<sup>4</sup> There is thus no true certainty to be found by attempting to secure the representational relation of mental images to the world they refer to, an act which proves impossible as there is no means to separate truth from illusion. Salvation, it seems, can only be found in the philosophical method that Descartes had already outlined prior to 1629 in his unfinished *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, and which does not depend on a notion of correct representation in order to determine philosophical certainty.

One arrives at absolute certainty, Descartes had maintained in the *Regulae*, by breaking down any problem into its smallest components, the "simple natures," principles that can no longer be subdivided and are hence thought's most universal building-blocks. Such "simple natures" are statements of arithmetic and geomet-

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<sup>4</sup>By the end of the sixth mediation, Descartes will have refuted this doubt as hyperbolic. But it takes divine intervention to do so: Only through proving the existence of a benevolent God in the third and fifth meditations is Descartes ultimately still able to vouchsafe the mind's connection to the world and to return the cogito through its existence in God to a world it can trust. Without having to discuss Descartes's deist beliefs, it is clear that the carefully constructed architecture of the *Méditations* depends on a true *deus ex machina*; mind and world are only held together thanks to a metaphysical entity exterior to both of them. The self alone has no means of observing its mind's representations of the world from the outside and hence cannot determine their accuracy. Only a benevolent God who neither sleeps nor slumbers can still provide that function. The religious argument, however, that the *Méditations* are designed to provide, and the metaphysical reassurance at which Descartes arrives at the end of his text, remains rhetorically unconvincing when compared to the prose of paranoia of the first and second meditations. The fear of a universe devoid of a metaphysical center is only barely contained in the *Méditations*, and their argument was not able for long to hold the consequences of modern science at bay. The infinite and eternally silent spaces of Pascal's *Pensées* are the disquieting shadow of Descartes's metaphysical optimism in the *Méditations*.

rical simplicity, such as the assertion that a triangle always has three sides, which are necessarily true under all and any circumstances. Such certainty is not derived from a representational relation (a triangle is a purely geometrical construct that does not exist in the “outside world”) but rather from the fact that one cannot but believe such things to be true. It is impossible—at least in the world of euclidian geometry—to imagine a triangle with only two sides, or one with more than three for that matter. And such simple truths apply in the dreaming as well as in the waking world, since the activity of mental representation itself is based on them. According to Descartes, *all* images, whether real or imagined, are constructed by means of such universal “simple natures.”

Descartes follows the same argumentative strategy in the *Méditations*. He does not attempt to solve his problem by searching for a clear distinction between the real and the imagined, but rather by looking for principles that are necessarily true, regardless of any particular reference. In the first meditation, Descartes strikingly gets his clue from an artistic form of representation: painting. Painters, Descartes maintains, might create imaginary beings like sirens or satyrs, but such representations, while without precedent in nature, are nevertheless recombinations of parts of animals that are already known to us. And in the extravagant case that the painters would actually discard all representation whatsoever to create something completely new and unseen for us, their creations would still have to be made up of the colors known to the human eye. In the case of painting, colors are for Descartes the simple natures that are unquestionably certain and on which any painterly representation depends. The “truth” of painting is to be located not in the adequacy of its representations, but in its use of color:

[...] si peut-être leur imagination est assez extravagante pour inventer quelque chose de si nouveau, que jamais nous n'ayons rien vu de semblable, et qu'ainsi leur ouvrage nous représente une chose purement feinte

et absolument fausse, certes à tout le moins les couleurs dont ils le composent doivent-elles être véritables. (Descartes 1967, 407) (AT XI, 15)

This much then, hopes Descartes, we can be certain of: Any mental image we construct, be it in dreams, in what we believe to be our waking state, or in the imaginary realm of art, is necessarily constructed out of those simple facts and fundamental truths without which our mind could not even conceptualize the world. While all of our mental images, and hence from a Cartesian perspective literally everything we experience of the outside world, even the experience of our own bodies, are products of imagination and as such uncertain, potentially deceptive, and illusory, the methods according to which our mind organizes them are not.

Et par la même raison, encore que ces choses générales, à savoir, des yeux, une tête, des mains, et autres semblables, pussent être imaginaires, il faut toutefois avouer qu'il ya des choses encore plus simples et plus universelles, qui sont vraies et existantes; du mélange desquelles, ni plus ni moins que de celui de quelques véritables couleurs, toutes ces images des choses qui résident en notre pensée, soit vraies et réelles, soit feintes et fantastiques, sont formées. (Descartes 1967, 407) (AT XI, 15)

These “simple and universal things,” which so thoroughly inform our thought that they will apply in any world, no matter if real or imaginary, are of course not “things” at all, but rather mental categories. As examples, Descartes lists time, space, matter, quantity, form, and extension. Here, as already in the *Regulae*, Descartes thus provides a solution by effectively changing the framework of the problem and by ultimately asking a quite different question: The relation between mental representations and the world they represent is no longer part of the problem of truth and certainty at all. Rather, certainty is to be found in the ordered processes of thought itself and in the way it organizes the images at its disposal, quite independent of these images’ representational qualities. Truth and certainty thus turn out to be not representational,

but formal and hence ultimately aesthetic problems.<sup>5</sup> Hence Descartes's preference for arithmetic and geometry over any other science. While disciplines like physics, astronomy, and medicine for example are still subject to doubt, since they continue to be concerned with a possibly illusory exterior world, arithmetic and geometry only deal with general principles and abstract rules of thought, which are a thing of the mind only, independent of any representational vicissitudes. They alone could provide the secure basis for a philosophical system unconcerned by the vexing problem of the difference between the real and the imaginary.

But in the *Méditations*, Descartes decides to doubt even his most deeply held philosophical convictions, he truly "goes all the way," as Derrida notes admiringly in "Cogito et Histoire de la Folie." "Descartes va à la ligne."<sup>6</sup> Where no reasonable philosophical doubt seems possible, a hyperbolic doubt can suspect even the ordered categories of thought to be merely imaginary. Enter the fiction of a deceitful God, the infamous "malin génie":

Or qui me peut avoir assuré que ce Dieu n'ait point fait qu'il n'y ait aucune terre, aucun ciel, aucun corps étendu, aucune figure, aucune grandeur, aucun lieu, et que néanmoins j'aie les sentiments de toutes ces choses, et que tout cela ne me semble point exister autrement que je le vois?

(Descartes 1967, 409) (AT XI, 16)

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<sup>5</sup>For an extensive discussion of Descartes's formal concepts of truth and certainty in the *Regulae* cf. Josef Simon, *Wahrheit als Freiheit. Zur Entwicklung der Wahrheitsfrage in der neueren Philosophie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978), 121-166; for the non-representational character of the relation between images and objects in the *Regulae* cf. Sepper 1996.

<sup>6</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Cogito et Histoire de la Folie," *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 71. The debate between Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault about the cogito, madness, and the discourse of philosophy, which Derrida opens with his critique of Foucault's critique of Descartes in "Le Grand Renfermement," the second chapter of *Folie et Dérison. Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique*. Paris: Plon 1961, has itself become a classic of twentieth century French philosophy. For a good overview over the debate and its ramifications, cf. Melehy, Hassan: *Writing Cogito. Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

At the end of the first meditation, any kind of mental representation, even the most fundamental one, is thus considered as possibly illusory and deceitful, a product of the imagination, the correctness of which the self cannot ascertain. What remains is thus only this self alone, stripped of any connection to the physical world, a pure mode of reflection, which sees itself as constantly bombarded by deceiving imagery and which can only define itself as the mode of resistance against these images. Like St. Anthony in the desert, the self is caught in a constant heroic struggle against temptation. Its only remaining defense, Descartes asserts, the only means to guarantee an autonomous identity that is not possibly the product of an evil deceiver who manipulates the mind, is to make doubt the constant mode of thought. Only by constantly holding the products of imagination at bay, by accepting literally everything that can be known as possibly illusory in order to keep one's judgment in suspense, can one at least prevent oneself from being tricked into accepting a non-truth. Particularly, in order to ensure its autonomy in this state of constant paranoia, the self has to perform the extremely laborious task of denying the existence of what it perceives to be its own body. "Je," "moi-même," the self that will become the cogito, the *res cogitans* in the second meditation, hence defines itself in opposition to its own physical sense of being embodied, ultimately the most insidious trick of the "malin génie":

Je me considèrai moi-même comme n'ayant point de mains, point d'yeux, point de chair, point de sang, comme n'ayant aucun sens, mais croyant faussement avoir toutes ces choses. Je demeurerai obstinément attaché à cette pensée; et si, par ce moyen, il n'est pas en mon pouvoir de parvenir à la connaissance d'aucune vérité, à tout le moins il est en ma puissance de suspendre mon jugement. [...] [je] préparerai si bien mon esprit à toutes les ruses de ce grand trompeur, que, pour puissant et rusé qu'il soit, il ne me pourra jamais rien imposer. (Descartes 1967, 412) (AT XI, 18)

What is thus created is a striking imbalance: On the one hand, literally everything that the mind receives from the “outside” is a product of imagination, and the faculty retains a central position in Descartes’s discussion of the epistemological process. It is imagination that quite literally makes the world for the mind. On the other hand, none of the input the mind receives by means of this faculty has any validity within the parameters of Descartes’s philosophical quest for truth and certainty, and the products of the imagination need to be completely discarded when one has this objective in mind. Only the *cogito*, as a formal mental device without any direct relation to the physical world, retains any credibility under the preconditions of the metaphysical search for certainty that Descartes has established for himself.

## 2.2 *Excursus I: Imagination in the Regulae*

The way for this discrepancy is already paved in Descartes’s *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*. Written about twenty years earlier, these unfinished guidelines for the most beneficial training of the human *ingenium*, our inborn and individually embodied cognitive capacities<sup>7</sup> present Descartes’s early attempt at a *mathesis universalis*, a universal problem-solving strategy, based on the fundamental principles of order and measure. In order to bring any problem or question into an ordered form and to subsequently solve it by what one might call a figural algorithm, the *ingenium* makes use of three basic operations: *intuitus*, the clear and distinct intellectual grasping of the simple natures, the irreducible and self-evident core elements of any problem, *deductio*, the establishment of the connections that necessarily follow once the simple natures have been recognized, and *enumeratio* or *inductio*, the correct ordering of the various elements of a problem in a continuous series. By bringing to light and by explaining the indispensable principles and operations of solving scientific problems, the *Regulae* should allow anyone to drastically improve the efficiency of their thought

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<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of the history and Descartes’s use of the term, cf. Sepper 1996, pp. 87-94.

processes and the acuity of their *ingenium*.

*Intuitus* is ultimately the most important of these three mental activities creating order and measure, since it alone can furnish the mind with elements of knowledge that are not subject to doubt, and which can thus become the building blocks of the order to be developed. Both *deductio* and *enumeratio* depend on the prior activity of *intuitus*, which, as Descartes states unequivocally, should neither be associated with the senses, nor imagination, but needs to be seen as solely an activity of the pure intellect:

Par *intuition* j'entends, non point le témoignage instable des sens, ni le jugement trompeur de l'imagination qui opère des compositions sans valeur, mais une représentation qui est le fait de l'intelligence pure et attentive, représentation si facile et si distincte qu'il ne subsiste aucun doute sur ce qu'on y comprend ;<sup>8</sup>

Just as much as the cogito in the *Méditations*, also *intuitus*, the activity on which the whole edifice of the *Regulae* ultimately rests<sup>9</sup>, is thus securely in the domain of the pure intellect and clearly divided from the processes and products of imagination, which are, together with sense-perception, discarded from the basis of knowledge-formation in well-known fashion as "deceptive."

This hierarchy is reinforced in *Regula XII*, where the *Regulae*'s physico-psychological framework of the inner senses is made explicit. The imagination here appears in two

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<sup>8</sup>René Descartes, *Oeuvres philosophiques* ed. Ferdinand Alquié (Paris : Garnier, 1963), vol.I, 87. The French translation in Alquié's edition was prepared by Jacques Brunschwig. The Latin text, which only survives in form of various copies made after Descartes's death, runs as follows : "Per *intuitum* intelligo, non fluctuantem sensuum fidem, vel malè componentis imaginationis iudicium fallax ; sed mentis purae & attentae tam facilem distinctumque conceptum, ut de eo, quod intelligimus, nulla prorsus dubitatio relinquatur ;" (AT X, 368.)

<sup>9</sup>One can rightfully point out that the basic principle of the Cartesian method in the *Regulae* is order, but without *intuitus* there could be no starting points from which to link the various elements of a problem, and the establishment of an order would become impossible.

forms: On the one hand, under either its Greek name *phantasia*, or the Latin *imaginatio*, Descartes presents it as an actual organ of the human brain. As such, *phantasia* is the physical storing place for images that are imprinted in it by the *sensus communis*, the “common sense,” which collects and combines the information that it receives from the external senses. In as much as it can retain these images for a certain time before they disappear to provide space for the impression of new ones, *phantasia* as an organ of the brain is seen as more or less identical with memory. On the other hand, the actual cognitive functions are executed by the *vis cognoscens*, the cognitive force, a synonym for *ingenium*, which, Descartes explains, is alternatively called sense perception, memory, imagination, or pure intellect, depending on whether it applies itself to the common sense, to existing images in *phantasia*, to the creation of new images from those already imprinted in *phantasia*, or whether it simply acts on its own. (cf. Descartes 1963, 141 (AT X, 415f.)) The actual activity of imagination, the formation of new mental images is hence an activity of the *vis cognoscens* or *ingenium*, which applies itself to the physical part of the brain called *phantasia* or *imaginatio*.<sup>10</sup>

As Descartes makes clear, the privileged form of these four incarnations of the *ingenium* is the *intellectus purus*. Imagination, together with memory and sense perception, is located beneath it in the hierarchy of cognitive powers, and can only support or hinder it in the pursuit of a true science, of which the intellect alone is capable. As Descartes states in *Regula VIII*:

En nous-mêmes, à la vérité, nous ne remarquons que l’entendement qui soit capable de science; mais aussi trois autres facultés dont il peut recevoir assistance ou entrave, savoir l’imagination, les sens, et la mémoire. Il faut donc voir dans l’ordre en quoi chacune de ces facultés peut nous trahir,

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<sup>10</sup>This characterization of the imagination still survives in slightly modified form in the *Méditations*, where, as we have seen, Descartes describes it as “une certaine application de la faculté qui connaît, au corps qui lui est intimement présent.”—The *ingenium* or *vis cognoscens* survives as the *facultas cognoscitiva* in the *Méditation’s* Latin text.

afin de nous en garder; ou nous rendre service, afin d'en utiliser toutes les ressources. (Descartes 1963, 121)<sup>11</sup>

And again, in an argument that prefigures that of the *Méditations*, while the use of imagination is deemed essential in the treatment of any question that necessitates figural representation, these ressources need to be discarded when questions of a non-corporeal nature are concerned:

[...] si l'entendement traite de questions où il n'y a rien de corporel ou qui ressemble au corporel, il ne peut recevoir aucune aide de ces facultés; au contraire, pour qu'il n'en reçoive point d'entrave, il faut écarter les sens, et dépouiller l'imagination, autant que faire se peut, de toute impression distincte. Mais si l'entendement se propose un objet d'examen qui puisse être rapporté au corps, il faut en former l'idée dans l'imagination, avec autant de distinction qu'il sera possible. (Descartes 1963, 142)<sup>12</sup>

There is thus, starting with the *Regulae*, a quite outspoken iconoclasm in Descartes's thought when it comes to mental processes that are not related to the corporeal world. Higher truths are imageless, and the slate of imagination in its form as the physical repository of mental images needs to be wiped clean if the *ingenium* is to have any success in the contemplation of such matters.

This is true despite the fact that, as Dennis Sepper as well as Josef Simon have pointed out (cf. Sepper 1996, Simon 1978), Descartes makes imagination the central

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<sup>11</sup>Et quidem en nobis advertimus, solum intellectum esse scientia capacem; sed à tribus alijs facultatibus hunc juvari posse vel impediri, nempe ab imaginatione, sensu, & memoria. Vivendum est igitur ordine, quid singulae ex his facultatibus obesse possint, ut caveamus; vel prodesse, ut omnes illarum copias impendamus. (AT X, 398f.)

<sup>12</sup>"[...] si intellectus de illis agat, in quibus nihil sit corporeum vel corporeo simile, illum non posse ab istis facultatibus adjuvari sed contrà, ne ab iisdem impediatur, esse arcendos sensus, atque imaginationem, quantum fieri poterit, omni impressione distinctâ exuendam. Si verò intellectus examinandum aliquid sibi proponat, quod referri possit ad corpus, ejus idea, quam distinctissime poterit, in imaginatione est formanda;" (AT X, 416f.)

faculty for the problem-solving strategy that the *Regulae* ultimately outline. For the *Regulae* do not address the non-corporeal problems that Descartes has here limited to the realm of the intellect. Rather, they provide a method for dealing with those kinds of questions that can and hence indeed should be transposed into the realm of extended bodies, where they can then be solved most efficiently with the help of imagination. The abstract of *Regula XIV* makes this clear:

La question doit être en même temps transposée dans l'étendue réelle des corps, et représentée tout entière à l'imagination à l'aide de figures schématiques : ainsi sera-t-elle en effet saisie avec beaucoup plus de distinction par l'entendement. (Descartes 1963, 167)<sup>13</sup>

The process that is outlined in *Regula XIV* and the following rules, in which the imagination indeed plays a central role, hence picks up the second part of the quote from Rule XII, and addresses any kind of problem that can be translated into the corporeal realm of extension. Descartes takes great pains throughout *Regula XIV* in the definition of his terminology to ensure that the reader is clear on this point. "Extension" (étendue), Descartes insists, is here not to be understood as an abstract term, precisely because as such it could not have a corresponding figure, or *idea* in imagination, since abstraction is limited to the non-imaginary processes of the pure intellect.

Enfin, si l'on dit: *l'étendue n'est pas le corps*, on prend alors le mot d'étendue dans un tout autre sens que ci-dessus; et en ce nouveau sens, aucune idée qui lui soit propre ne lui correspond dans la fantaisie; cette assertion dans son ensemble est l'oeuvre de l'entendement pur, qui seul possède

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<sup>13</sup>Eadem est ad extensionem realem corporum transferenda, & tota per nudas figuras imaginationi proponenda : ita enim longè distinctiùs ab intellectu percipietur. (AT X, 438)

la faculté de séparer des entités abstraites de cette espèce. (Descartes 1963, 174)<sup>14</sup>

And since *Regula XIV* will treat the solution of problems with the help of imagination, terms like extension, number, surface, line, point, and unity in their abstract, non-corporeal sense are not addressed in Descartes's discussion, precisely because they cannot be subject to imagination:

Toutes ces propositions, et celles qui leur ressemblent, doivent, pour être vraies, être complètement soustraites à l'imagination; et c'est pourquoi nous n'avons pas l'intention d'en traiter par la suite. (Descartes 1963, p. 175.)<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding the centrality of imagination for the problem-solving process that Descartes outlines subsequently, the limitations of imagination expressed in the *Méditations* are well-anticipated in the *Regulae*.

### 2.3 *Meditatio Secunda: The World of the Cogito*

But it would be the *Méditations*, in which Descartes decided to turn to precisely the metaphysical problems with which the *Regulae* are not concerned, that imagination would become problematic in a way unprecedented in the *mathesis universalis* of the latter. It is in the shift from *ingenium* to the *cogito* that imagination loses its place among the fundamental mental operations of the self.

In the second of Descartes's meditations, the *cogito* is instituted as the only vestige that allows the self to defy the machinations of the "malin génie." As Descartes turns

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<sup>14</sup>Denique si dicatur: *extensio non est corpus*, tunc extensionis vocabulum longè aliter fumitur quàm suprà; atque in hac significatione nulla illi peculiaris idea in phantasiâ correspondet, sed tota haec enuntiatio ab intellectu puro perficitur, qui solus habet facultatem ejusmodi entia abstracta separandi. (AT X, 444)

<sup>15</sup>Quæomnes & similes propositiones ab imaginatione omnino removendæ sunt, ut sint veræ; quamobrem de illis in sequentibus non sumus acturi. (AT X, 445)

the beleaguered position of the self vis-à-vis a chimerical world into its most powerful asset, the seeming privation of the self, its division from the world and the body, is now shown to constitute its true essence. For it is precisely through its separation from the body and the physical world, of which it is found to be independent, that the self in Cartesian terms can now come to understand and define itself as that which it truly is: a mode of thought. The conviction that the self indeed exists when it *thinks* itself as existing, famously expressed in the proposition *cogito, ergo sum*, provides the point of certainty from which the self can finally secure its identity. Even if the *content* of thought might prove delusional and pure deceit, the act of thinking itself and hence the existence of the *res cogitans* in turn cannot be doubted, since the latter is the very precondition for even the possibility of doubt and deceit:

Suis-je tellement dépendant du corps et des sens que je ne puisse être sans eux? Mais je me suis persuadé qu'il n'y avait rien du tout dans le monde, qu'il n'y avait aucun ciel, aucune terre, aucuns esprits, ni aucuns corps; ne me suis-je donc pas aussi persuadé que je n'étais point? Non certes, j'étais sans doute, si je me suis persuadé, ou seulement si j'ai pensé quelque chose. Mais il y a un je ne sais quel trompeur très puissant et très rusé qui emploie tout son industrie à me tromper toujours. Il n'y a donc point de doute que je suis, s'il me trompe, et qu'il me trompe tant qu'il voudra, il ne saurait jamais faire que je ne sois rien, tant que je penserai être quelque chose. De sorte qu'après y avoir bien pensé, et avoir soigneusement examiné toutes choses, enfin il faut conclure, et tenir pour constant que cette proposition: *Je suis, j'existe*, est nécessairement vraie, toutes les fois que je la prononce, ou que je la conçois en mon esprit.

(Descartes 1967, 415 f.) (AT XI, 19)

Thought is thus the only property that makes up the self in its essence, which cannot conceivably be detached from the self, and which thus defines it without any

possible substitutes: “[...] je trouve ici que la pensée est un attribut qui m’appartient: elle seule ne peut être détachée de moi.” (Descartes 1967, 418) (AT XI, 21). Not only is the act of thinking not subject to doubt on the part of the self; the act of thinking *is* the self. Anything material on the other hand, and hence everything that is accessible to the mind by means of imagination can not only be doubted as potentially illusory, but can also be detached from the self without altering its essence. The *cogito*, if it is to provide a point of certainty from which one could build a stable philosophical system, thus necessarily excludes imagination from its self-description:

Et ainsi, je reconnais certainement que rien de tout ce que je puis comprendre par le moyen de l’imagination, n’appartient à cette connaissance que j’ai de moi-même, et qu’il est besoin de rappeler et détourner son esprit de cette façon de concevoir, afin qu’il puisse lui-même reconnaître bien distinctement sa nature. (Descartes 1967, 420) (AT XI, 22)

The argument of the first meditation is thus completed in a reaffirmation of the fundamental opposition between the self as pure disembodied thought and any knowledge derived by way of imagination.

The single certainty of the *cogito* being established, Descartes can now set out to remake the universe. Whereas the first meditation had severed the self from the physical world, ultimately presenting it as abandoned in an overwhelming sea of doubt, the second meditation now begins with the assertion of the absolute certainty of this self’s existence, in order to then successively reassimilate the material world to it. Where the first meditation began with a self searching for certainty in the physical world, stripping it step by step of everything material in the process, the second meditation now sets out with the isolated mental phenomenon of the *cogito* and proceeds to reincorporate the world into it.

This is accomplished through what seems a stunning reversal in Descartes’s argument. For now that the undoubtable position of the self as a pure mode of thought

has been assured, all the other, non-essential aspects of the self regain their validity simply by virtue of being possible contents of the mental activity of the *cogito*. Immediately following the establishment of the “nature” of the self, Descartes can further characterize it in the following way:

Mais qu'est-ce donc que je suis? Une chose qui pense. Qu'est-ce qu'une chose qui pense? C'est-à-dire une chose qui doute, qui conçoit, qui affirme, qui nie, qui veut, qui ne veut pas, qui imagine aussi, et qui sent. (Descartes 1967, 420 f.) (AT XI, 22)

All these mental activities have now become acceptable attributes of the self, because they can be seen as specific modes of thought, validated by their existence *within* the reflective framework of the *cogito*. The products of all of them might be erroneous, but they are nevertheless part of the self because the *cogito thinks* itself as having these qualities. Thus, also imagination makes a redeemed return onto the philosophical scene. While its products are not to be trusted, its existence as a mode of thought of the *cogito* is nevertheless unquestionable.

Et j'ai aussi certainement la puissance d'imaginer; car encore qu'il puisse arriver (comme j'ai supposé auparavant) que les choses que j'imagine ne soient pas vraies, néanmoins cette puissance d'imaginer ne laisse pas d'être réellement en moi, et fait partie de ma pensée. (Descartes 1967, 421) (AT XI, 22f.)

The self's various capacities of interacting with the world are hence repatterned as qualities of the *cogito*. Even sense-perceptions and feelings are now returned to a state of certainty, regardless of their possibly illusionary quality, because it is ultimately the *cogito* that senses and feels. It cannot be doubted, Descartes maintains, that it seems *to me* that I sense and feel particular things. Strictly speaking, even feelings and sense-perceptions are thus nothing else but particular modes of thought:

Mais l'on me dira que ces apparences sont fausses et que je dors. Qu'il soit ainsi; toutefois, à tout le moins, il est très certain qu'il me semble que je vois, que j'ouïs, et que je m'échauffe; et c'est proprement ce qui en moi s'appelle sentir, et cela, pris ainsi précisément, n'est rien autre chose que penser. (Descartes 1967, 422) (AT XI, 23.)

The hierarchy between the *cogito* and its various qualities, however, remains unchanged. Regardless of this retroactive inclusion, the *cogito*, as the essence and foundation of the self, of which no doubt is possible, remains a thing apart. Particularly, it remains defined in contradistinction to the products of imagination. Descartes brings this into sharp focus, when, in a rhetorical strategy already employed in the first meditation, his meditating narrator impersonates the doubtful voice of an uninitiated apprentice, who finds it difficult to believe that the greatest certainty available to the human mind should be derived from an abstract entity that is impossible to grasp by means of mental representation, and not from the representations of the corporeal world, of which the mind receives such vivid images.

Mais je ne me puis empêcher de croire que les choses corporelles, dont les images se forment par ma pensée, et qui tombent sous les sens, ne soient plus distinctements connues que cette je ne sais quelle partie de moi-même qui ne tombe point sous l'imagination: quoiqu'en effet ce soit une chose bien étrange, que des choses que je trouve douteuses et éloignées, soient plus clairement et plus facilement connues de moi, que celles qui sont véritables et certaines, et qui appartiennent à ma propre nature. (Descartes 1967, 422 f.) (AT XI, 23.)

The *cogito* is here defined as precisely that *which cannot be imagined*, and it is in this passage that one encounters the central opposition between the *cogito* and imagination. What baffles the impersonated novice, still unaccustomed to thinking

in Cartesian terms, is the inevitable consequence of Descartes's search for certainty. All of the mind's mental *content*—in forms of figures, images, and representations—is a product of imagination, and even the categories that organize this content and allow the mind to work with it, can be suspected to fall into this class, as the rhetorical device of the “malin génie” had suggested. Thus, any kind of mental content, anything that can be *imagined*, in the traditional definition of that term, is subject to doubt. Conversely, the elusive entity that “does” the thinking, and the existence of which is not subject to doubt, cannot be represented mentally, it cannot become an object of thought. If the *cogito* could be imagined, i.e. if it could be represented, it could also be doubted. This is the reason, why the self cannot picture its own “nature.” As center and circumference of the self, the *cogito* remains absent from that which it enables to be. While everything mental is potentially implicated in processes that involve imagination, the essence of the self pointedly is not.

To convince the incredulous empiricist reader of the priority of thought and judgment over the body, the senses, and imagination, Descartes now proceeds to consider the example of a piece of wax—certainly not an incidental example. At first sight, what seems most certain about the piece of wax from the empirical perspective that Descartes seeks to undermine, is the information we receive about it by means of the senses: Its shape and form, its colour, its smell, its consistency, and the sound it makes when struck. Ultimately, however, its empirical qualities prove to be unstable: If the same piece of wax is exposed to heat, it quickly changes its outward appearance: its shape becomes fluid, its smell dissipates, it is hot to the touch, and it no longer renders a sound upon contact with a hard surface. What is essential about the piece of wax thus cannot reside in the qualities we come to know about it by means of the senses. The only essential and hence certain attributes of the wax seem to be its extension, its flexibility and the fact that it can be moulded into different shapes. If these attributes are not grasped by the senses, which can only notice their varying forms, could they then be known by means of imagination? Descartes comes to the

conclusion that this is equally not the case: The forms the wax could potentially take on are infinite, and infinity could never be pictured by imagination, which has only finite capacities of representation.<sup>16</sup> The same holds true for the wax's extension, which may equally receive an infinity of possible variants. It is hence only by means of the intellect that the essence of the piece of wax is actually known:

Il faut donc que je tombe d'accord, que je ne saurais pas même concevoir par l'imagination ce que c'est que cette cire, et qu'il n'y a que mon entendement seul qui le conçoive. (Descartes 1967, 425 f.) (AT XI, 24)

Hence, what seemed like a sense-perception is actually a mental act of judgment. It is the mind that truly perceives the wax, not the senses, or imagination.

Mais ce qui est à remarquer, sa perception, ou bien l'action par laquelle on l'aperçoit, n'est point une vision, ni un attouchement, ni une imagination [...] mais seulement une inspection de l'esprit [...]. (Descartes 1967, 426) (AT XI, 25)<sup>17</sup>

Because of the absolute priority of the mind thus established, Descartes can take his conclusion even a step further. Since the only certainty about the piece of wax turns out to be a mental act of judgment, the seeming perception of an object exterior

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<sup>16</sup>This particular limitation of the imagination will be employed again by Descartes in the sixth meditation to elucidate the difference between the imagination and the pure intellect ("la pure intellection ou conception"). Here, the imagination is shown to quickly reach its limits in the task of representing geometrical figures to the mind, which are nevertheless quite clear to the intellect. To conceive a megagon, for example, proves to be an impossible task for the imagination which cannot produce a precise mental image of such a complex figure. cf. Descartes 1967, 481. (AT XI, 57f.) Immanuel Kant, as we shall see in the next chapter, will employ a similar argument to demonstrate the supremacy of reason over imagination in the "Analytic of the Sublime."

<sup>17</sup>Ultimately, Descartes can only uphold this absolute priority of the mind over the senses through the doctrine of innate ideas, which he advances in the third and fifth meditation. Without such a metaphysical conception, as the eighteenth-century empiricists would not tire to point out, it is difficult to see how the intellect could make a judgment about the existence of exterior objects without prior input from the senses. The burden to reconcile both positions would be taken up by Immanuel Kant.

to the self ultimately proves not so much the existence of the object, which remains doubtful, but rather the existence of the perceiving self.

Que prononcerai-je, dis-je, de moi qui semble concevoir avec tant de netteté et de distinction ce morceau de cire? Ne me connais-je pas moi-même, non seulement avec plus de vérité et de certitude, mais encore avec beaucoup plus de distinction et de netteté? Car si je juge que la cire est, ou existe, de ce que je la vois, certes il suit bien plus évidemment que je suis, ou que j'existe moi-même, de ce que je la vois. Car il se peut faire que ce que je vois ne soit pas, en effet, de la cire; il peut aussi arriver que je n'aie même pas des yeux pour voir aucune chose; mais il ne se peut pas faire que lorsque je vois ou (ce que je ne distingue plus) lorsque je pense voir, que moi qui pense ne sois quelque chose. De même, si je juge que la cire existe, de ce que je la touche, il s'ensuivra encore la même chose, à savoir que je suis; (Descartes 1967, 428) (AT XI, 25 f.)

The self can thus remain secure in the assertion of its dominance over the empirical world. What the self encounters, by means of an analysis of its perceptions, is ultimately always the imprint of its own mind. Hence, it is only the *cogito* that can provide any form of philosophical certainty, a perspective from which the products of imagination ultimately lose philosophical significance. Descartes's argument in the following four meditations will ultimately reconcile the mind with the physical world and refute the hyperbolic doubt that had led to the predominant position of the *cogito* in the first place, but the hierarchies that the first two meditations have established are never rejected. Imagination, as associated with the body, remains a faculty that is inessential to the self:

Je remarque outre que cela que cette vertu d'imaginer qui est en moi, en tant qu'elle diffère de la puissance de concevoir, n'est en aucune sorte

nécessaire à ma nature ou à mon essence, c'est-à-dire à l'essence de mon esprit ; car, encore que je ne l'eusse point, il est sans doute que je demeurerais toujours le même que je suis maintenant [...] (Descartes 1967, 482) (AT XI, 58)

Imagination, essential as it is for the self's relation to the empirical world, is thus effectively discarded from the center and foundation of Descartes's philosophical system.

#### 2.4 *Excursus II: Descartes, Montaigne, and Pascal*

Descartes's decisive exclusion of the products of the imagination and the senses from his search for philosophical certainty has of course not developed in an intellectual vacuum. The main reason that leads to this exclusion, the denigration of the senses and the radical doubt about the validity of the information they are able to provide, is by no means solely a Cartesian position. Although Descartes presents his philosophical system as an isolated phenomenon, the product of a type of thought that is as autonomous as it is new, the development of Descartes's philosophical ideas needs to be read in relation to the intellectual climate of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and particularly as a response to the work of Michel de Montaigne, whose essays are probably the single most important intertext for the *Discours de la Méthode* and also for *Méditations*.<sup>18</sup>

When Descartes's texts are read in conjunction with Montaigne's essays, the specificity of the Cartesian shift from a representational to a coherence theory of truth and the effect of that shift on the role of the senses and imagination comes into clearer view. In his *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*, the book-within-a-book that is lodged

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<sup>18</sup>For a classic study on the topic cf. Léon Brunschvicg, *Descartes et Pascal lecteurs de Montaigne. Être et Penser, Cahiers de Philosophie* 12 (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1945). A deconstructive and discourse analytical reading of the relation between the texts of Montaigne and Descartes is presented in Melehy 1997.

in the middle of the *Essais*, and to which parts of the *Discours* are direct reactions, Montaigne finishes an exhaustive sceptical exercise, in which he consecutively demonstrates the impossibility to reach any kind of certainty with regard to the various subjects of human knowledge, with a devastating assessment of the capacities of the human senses. Most of the examples and arguments Montaigne uses in order to prove the unreliability of knowledge derived from the senses, are the same ones that Descartes will provide about half a century later in the *Discours* and the *Méditations*. And those parts of the *Apologie* that demonstrate the hopeless and irreconcilable confusion among philosophers, theologians, and the world's various cultures about practically any issue imaginable, easily read as a detailed explanation for the desperation which Descartes himself describes in the *Discours* as the outcome of his own studies, travels, and education.

In the case of Montaigne, the negative assessment of the senses is the final blow that can be dealt to the aspirations of human knowledge. For Montaigne, the latter is inescapably based on and informed by the input it derives from the senses, the empirical limits of which it can hence never exceed.

Or toute connaissance s'achemine en nous par les sens: ce sont nos maîtres.  
[...] Les sens sont le commencement et la fin de l'humaine connaissance.<sup>19</sup>

The human mind is thus necessarily at the hand of the senses, and there is nothing it could produce in terms of knowledge that would not be fundamentally tainted by the deficiencies of sensual input. For Montaigne, we are irrevocably cut off from whatever truth the reality exterior to our minds might actually constitute, since the only way we have access to it—excepting the possibility of divine grace—is by means of our conceptual apparatus, which is in turn completely dependent on the irremediably distorted input of the senses:

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<sup>19</sup>Michel de Montaigne, "Apologie de Raymond Sebond," *Essais II* ed. Pierre Michel (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 330f.

Or, notre état accomodant les choses à soi et les transformant selon soi, nous ne savons plus quelles sont les choses en vérité; car rien ne vient à nous que falsifié et altéré par nos sens. (Montaigne 1965, 346)

Convinced by Montaigne's sceptical charge, Descartes does not attempt a defense of the epistemological validity of sensual knowledge. Rather, in the philosophical position that he advertises precisely as the novelty of his approach, Descartes subsequently denies the exclusiveness and formative role that Montaigne had given to the senses in the epistemological process. The *Méditations* begin, as we have seen, with a rejection of all knowledge based on the senses. For the Montaigne of the *Apologie*, such a gesture would have meant the rejection of human knowledge *tout court*, while for Descartes it opens up the possibility to counter Montaigne's scepticism and to assert the priority of the mind's *ideas* over any kind of empirical input.

John D. Lyons<sup>20</sup> has pointed out that—the exclusion of the imagination from the self-description of the *cogito* notwithstanding—Descartes's shift in approach to the problem of epistemology constitutes in fact a redemption of imagination and needs to be seen as a first step towards a modern assessment of the faculty, away from the more traditional Aristotelian framework, within which Descartes still defines it. I agree with Lyons that Descartes's shift in approach ultimately also changes the role of imagination, which is now no longer perceived purely as the representational means to furnish the mind with images from the "outside," but rather as the faculty that provides the mind with images and figures to work with internally. Imagination provides the "raw material" so to speak that will and understanding can then act upon in order to provide judgments about truth and falsity. These judgments, as the system of the *Regulae* shows, are to be made on the grounds of internal coherence, not through a process of comparison between mental conceptions and outside reality.<sup>21</sup> Descartes's

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<sup>20</sup>John D. Lyons, "Descartes and Modern Imagination," *Philosophy and Literature* 23.2 (1999): 302-312.

<sup>21</sup>The truth of ideas can thus be established independent of their correspondence to external

break with the scholastic tradition lies precisely in his redefinition of the term “idea,” which for him is no longer an ontological term, designating the true essence residing in things, but rather a purely mental concept that the mind can work with in the process of reasoning. It is this shift in position that allows Descartes to accomplish a reversal from a conception of the mind as passively receiving external input, to one that gives mental processes an actively constructing role in the epistemological process. “The mind can, in a more affirmative sense, produce ideas not only of the external world as it exists but as such a world might exist, and thus opens towards possibilities and towards the future.” (Lyons 1999, 306) In this capacity, the representational power of imagination, as we will see later, will become a necessary tool for the formation of scientific models and hypotheses.

The *Méditations* make abundantly clear, however, that—at least from Descartes’s perspective—this reversal does not constitute an elevation of the imaginative faculty as such. The contents and the representations it provides remain doubtful, cannot be fully trusted, and do not reach the level of certainty and security reserved to the *cogito* alone. Ultimately, the only reason why Descartes is able to “redeem” imagination is the fact that he places it firmly under the control of the mental faculties of understanding, will, and judgment. Since it is the mind itself that is in the final analysis at the basis of the world it experiences or imagines, imagination can no longer threaten the former’s autonomy through a deceptive outside input that the mind cannot but accept. The rational Cartesian self, which “uses” the material at its disposal, always has full discretion over its application. It can accept it as true, reject it as erroneous, and recombine it in appropriate fashion. Descartes’s imagination has become fully disciplined and domesticated, as Lyons himself puts it, and it is precisely this process of domestication and control that constitutes the “redemption”

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evidence. They form an interrelated mental network that is ultimately secured in the self-evident immediacy of the *cogito*.—Hence Descartes’s notorious lack of concern for the need to conduct any empirical experiments to validate his scientific hypotheses.

of the faculty.

Descartes writes with calm assurance of a fundamentally disciplined imagination. [...] [His] most meaningful innovation in the history of imagination is his insistence on the possibility of controlling our imagination and thus turning it from a wild, unruly distraction or from an overwhelming source of error about physical reality to a kind of laboratory or workshop in which the mind can forge hypotheses for inspection by judgment. (Lyons 1999, 307f.)

Essentially then, the innovation which Descartes effects, concomitant with the shift in his epistemological position, is a defusion of the danger the imagination presented in the Neoplatonic tradition discussed in the previous chapter. By weakening its ties to the passions and desire, Descartes can cast it not as an enemy but as a handmaiden of the mind's rational faculties. Imagination has become a rational tool, and Descartes's "most meaningful innovation in the history of imagination" is thus to consider it only as already dominated and delimited by reason. The body, the senses, the passions, and imagination as their most immediate conduit to the mind no longer exert a most powerful influence over the self; they are safely under the control of the rational faculties of the mind, to be inspected by a distanced and autonomous act of judgment.

In this conviction, Descartes, the seventeenth-century philosopher and scientist, is already a man of the Enlightenment, and his views stand in stark contrast to those of his most prominent contemporaries. While Descartes develops his position in an attempt to master the challenge posed by Montaigne's scepticism, the exceptional position of his belief in an ultimately unchallenged dominance of will and judgment over imagination comes much clearer into view when compared to the assessment of a contemporary like Blaise Pascal.

In the fragment of the *Pensées* that is dedicated to the "maîtresse du monde," as Pascal describes imagination—pun fully intended—, he leaves no doubt that reason

is involved in a hopeless battle when it comes to the seductive mastery of imagination over man's actions, perceptions, and desires. For whereas reason can only preach restraint and a turning away from the amenities of the world, unable to promise immediate rewards in return, imagination irresistibly flatters that most powerful force driving people's actions in the view of most seventeenth-century French thinkers, their *amour-propre* or self-interest, and it thus offers her followers what reason cannot provide: happiness. Happiness on earth is a product of deception, a deception that cannot be achieved without the consent of imagination. As Marcel Proust, that nineteenth-century moralist would still write three hundred years later, our pleasures and desires are meaningless to us, unless they have been given life and concrete shape by our imagination.<sup>22</sup> Imagination thus builds a golden cage of flattering illusion, a second nature that is much more liveable than the first. Reason in turn, even if it manages to make us realize the machinations of imagination, could offer nothing in return but an insight into the misery of the human condition. A hopeless battle indeed:

Cette superbe puissance, ennemie de la raison, qui se plaît à la contrôler et à la dominer, pour montrer combien elle peut en toutes choses, a établi dans l'homme une seconde nature. Elle a ses heureux, ses malheureux, ses sains, ses malades, ses riches, ses pauvres; elle fait croire, douter, nier la raison; elle suspend les sens, elle les fait sentir; elle a ses fous et ses sages: et rien ne nous dépote davantage que de voir qu'elle remplit ses hôtes d'une satisfaction bien autrement pleine et entière que la raison. [...] Elle ne peut rendre sages les fous; mais elle les rend heureux, à l'envi de la raison qui ne peut rendre ses amis que misérables, l'une les couvrant de gloire, l'autre de honte. [...] Combien toutes les richesses de la terre

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<sup>22</sup> "Or dépouiller d'elle [l'imagination] nos plaisirs, c'est les réduire à eux-mêmes, à rien." Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* III. *A la recherche du temps perdu* V. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 41.

[sont] insuffisantes sans son consentement! [...] L'imagination dispose de tout; elle fait la beauté, la justice, et le bonheur, qui est le tout du monde. [...] Voilà à peu près les effets de cette faculté trompeuse qui semble nous être donnée exprès pour nous induire à une erreur nécessaire.<sup>23</sup>

Little is left of the power of this “mistress of the world” in Descartes’s descriptions of the faculty, where even the “malin génie” appears as less influential because he works against the self’s *amour-propre* rather than with it. Pascal’s personified imagination, one is tempted to say, knows more about human nature than Descartes’s fictional evil deceiver, and the devil would be better off taking lessons from the moralists. To bring out the contrast most clearly, it is illuminating to consider Descartes’s *Les passions de l’âme*, the guide-book for self-mastery he wrote late in his life for the melancholy Princess Elisabeth of Sweden. Descartes’s treatise is a rigorous application of his scientific method to matters of human psychology, and imagination, Pascal’s omnipotent antagonist of reason, plays little part in it. It retains its role as the means by which the passions—and for Descartes this term covers everything that the mind, or the soul, passively receives, from sense-perceptions to the traditional passions like love, hate, fear etc.—are represented to the mind, but it is never portrayed as a guiding power for human actions. For Descartes, the human will is completely autonomous, free of external influence, and always able to use imagination to produce precisely those mental representations that will lead to the desired course of action.<sup>24</sup> As long as one has internalized the truth about the separation of body and mind, and the mechanistic causes of the passions one experiences, the self’s will and judgment are guaranteed to have ultimate control over the representations they receive by means of imagination. In the final analysis, this is simply a matter of retraining one’s

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<sup>23</sup>Blaise Pascal, *OEuvres complètes* II, ed. Michel Le Guern (Paris: Gallinard, 2000), fragment 41 “Imagination,” 552-554.

<sup>24</sup>cf. René Descartes, *OEuvres philosophiques* ed. Ferdinand Alquié (Paris: Garnier, 1973) vol.III. 985, 988.

mental habits, and since, as Descartes remarks, even animals are routinely trained to act against their natural instincts, this should be easily accomplished by even the weakest among rational creatures like human beings:

Car, puisqu'on peut, avec un peu d'industrie, changer les mouvements du cerveau dans les animaux dépourvus de raison, il est évident qu'on le peut encore mieux dans les hommes, et que ceux même qui ont les plus faibles âmes pourraient acquérir un empire très absolu sur toutes leurs passions, si on employait assez d'industrie à les dresser et à les conduire. (Descartes 1973, 996)

Pascal would hardly have consented, and one doubts that this conclusion was of much consolation for Princess Elisabeth. What interests me most in the present context, however, are not so much the religious, philosophical, or anthropological differences between Pascal's and Descartes's positions, but rather the element of violence and constraint that informs Descartes's view of the controllability of the human psyche. To be sure, a battle is waged in Pascal's fragment, too, but its weapons are seduction, illusion, and the fulfillment of desire, a type of combat for which reason appears singularly unequipped. Descartes on the other hand responds with a grim determination to assert reason's authority with whatever force necessary. The thesis of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is contained *in nuce* in the argument between Pascal and Descartes, and this passage from the *Passions de l'âme* already describes the techniques to internalize violence that would create the self-disciplined bourgeois citizens of the eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Thus, if Lyons is correct in stating that the domestication of imagination which Descartes's texts perform is the precondition for the acceptability of the faculty as a concept in modern philosophy, he fails to mention

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<sup>25</sup>In this context also the gendering of the two texts, particularly the threatening female charms of imagination deserve further discussion, but at present it will have to suffice to simply point it out.

the price at which this disciplinary goal is achieved. There can be no talk of a reconciliation of reason and imagination while the repression of the body, the senses, and the passions is complete, a repression, the effects of which are all too visible from a contemporary perspective.

This oppositional relationship between reason and imagination, however, is not the only one that can be detected in Descartes's texts. A close look at some of his earliest writings will lead to the discovery that reason and the *cogito* remain simultaneously dependent on the very same faculty which it seemed so essential to repress. The recognition of this dependency may then also suggest a possible reconciliation of the rational structures of the self and their suppressed imaginary counterpart.

## 2.5 Analogies and Enthusiasm

Until his death in Stockholm in 1650, Descartes kept several notebooks from the early period of his writing, none of which have survived in the original, but which have nevertheless been preserved by two different routes. Adrien Baillet, Descartes's first biographer, quotes from them extensively in his *Vie de Monsieur Descartes* from 1691, and most of Descartes's notes were also copied by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz after Descartes's death and are kept with Leibniz's writings at the royal library in Hanover.

For anybody who has become familiar with Descartes's philosophical thought primarily through the *Discours de la Méthode* and the *Méditations*, it will be quite surprising, when examining Descartes's early writings, to discover the following entry among the notes entitled *Olympica*<sup>26</sup>:

De même que l'imagination se sert de figures pour concevoir les corps, de

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<sup>26</sup>Charles Adam and Paul Tannery have collected these notes under the title *Cogitationes Privatae*, but this title, as they note, is of uncertain origin. I have thus followed Ferdinand Alquié's decision to make them part of the *Olympica*, which connects them to Descartes's famous dream of 10 November 1619, which I will discuss subsequently.

même l'intelligence, pour figurer les choses spirituelles, se sert de certains corps sensibles, comme le vent, la lumière. D'où il suit que, philosophant de façon plus élevée, nous pouvons conduire l'esprit, par la connaissance, dans les hauteurs. Il peut paraître étonnant que les pensées profondes se rencontrent plutôt dans les écrits des poètes que dans ceux des philosophes. La raison en est que les poètes ont écrit sous l'empire de l'enthousiasme et de la force de l'imagination. Il y a en nous des semences de science, comme en un silex (des semences de feu); les philosophes les extraient par raison; les poètes les arrachent par imagination: elles brillent alors davantage. (Descartes 1963, 61)<sup>27</sup>

Several points are noteworthy in this short passage, which probably dates from late 1619 or early 1620. It indicates first of all that for the young Descartes analogy was still a fundamental principle of thought and epistemology. For what enables the intellect to reach the higher realms of knowledge is the underlying analogy between the spiritual and the corporeal that allows the intellect to proceed in analogical fashion to imagination. Just as the latter is able to represent corporeal entities to the mind by way of figures, the intellect can use these corporeal entities themselves as representations of spiritual ones. The central epistemological tool that emerges in this note is thus analogy, and Descartes's assertions point to a considerable Neoplatonic influence. Imagination and the intellect in Descartes's short sketch are in fact in a relation that is very close to Plotinus's theory of the two-fold *phantasia* discussed in the previous chapter, which provides knowledge of the world of the senses in its

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<sup>27</sup>Descartes's original Latin runs as follows: "Ut imaginatio utitur figuris ad corpora concipienda, ita intellectus utitur quibusdam corporibus sensibilibus ad spiritualia figuranda, ut vento, lumine: undè altius philosophantes mentem cognitione possumus in sublime tollere.

Mirum videri possit, quare graves sententiæ in scriptis poetarum, magis quàm philosophorum. Ratio est quòd poetæ per entusiasmum & vim imaginationis scripsère: sunt in nobis semina scientiæ, ut in silice, quæ per rationem à philosophis educuntur, per imaginationem à poetis excutiuntur magisque elucent." (AT X, 217.)

bodily, and knowledge of the Platonic ideas in its spiritual form.<sup>28</sup>

The process of thinking in correspondences, resemblances, and analogies is made even more explicit in another note that presents the metaphorical key which allows for the catachrestic substitution of physical entities for spiritual ones:

Les choses sensibles nous permettent de concevoir les olympiques : le vent signifie l'esprit ; le mouvement avec la durée signifie la vie ; la lumière signifie la connaissance ; la chaleur signifie l'amour ; l'activité instantanée signifie la création. Toute forme corporelle agit conformément à l'harmonie.  
(Descartes 1963, 62)<sup>29</sup>

The (admittedly quite conventional) metaphors that Descartes lists are able to create a likeness precisely because a universal harmony is thought to underlie the connections of all things. Wind is no more “like” spirit than light is “like” the understanding, but the way Descartes matter-of-factly states these metaphorical relationships shows how much he is still steeped at this point in an epistemological universe of resemblances.<sup>30</sup>

The epistemological rift that Michel Foucault has famously pointed to in *Les Mots et les Choses*,<sup>31</sup> between a Renaissance world view, based on resemblance,

<sup>28</sup>Dennis Sepper has aptly dubbed this passage the “two-imaginings note,” without, however, addressing the Neoplatonic tradition it is connected to. Sepper, who presents an extensive analysis of the role of analogy in Descartes’s early philosophical thought, is exclusively concerned with the Aristotelian and scholastic tradition of faculty psychology that informs Descartes’s concept of the imagination. cf. Sepper 1996.

<sup>29</sup>“Sensibilia apta concipiendis Olympicis : ventus spiritum significat, motus cum tempore vitam, lumen cognitionem, calor amorem, activitas instantanea creationem. Omnis forma corporea agit per harmoniam.” (AT X, 218.)

<sup>30</sup>Dennis Sepper, in his analyses of Descartes’s early texts, particularly the *Compendium Musicae* and Descartes’s early mathematical observations, has convincingly shown that these two notes are by no means isolated instances. Descartes’s early preoccupation with relations and proportion is consistently predicated on a universal harmony of the corporeal and the spiritual.

<sup>31</sup>Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). cf. particularly chapter II “La prose du monde” and chapter III “Représenter.”

similitude, and analogy, and the taxonomical *épistémè* of the “âge classique,” based on the principles of order and measure, a rift for which Foucault cites Descartes’s *Regulae* as the prime textual witness, can thus be seen to be situated in Descartes’s own career as a philosopher. Descartes, in different stages of his life, is very much a man of both epistemological ages.

But it is the notion of enthusiasm and the “power of the imagination,” and the concomitant elevation of the poet over the philosopher, that is even more striking to find in a Cartesian text. What emerges here is a view of imagination that does not fall into the Aristotelian and scholastic tradition of faculty psychology underlying Descartes’s accounts of the faculty in the *Regulae* and the *Méditations*, but rather one that needs to be traced back to the concept of *phantasia* as a prophetic and inspirational power derived from Plato’s *Timaeus*, a concept that would have made its way to Descartes by means of the Neoplatonic poetics of the Renaissance.

Descartes, however, presents a different relationship between reason and imagination than Plato. Plato’s text ascribes to *phantasia* access to a type of knowledge unavailable to rational thought, while immediately containing this (incommunicable) inspirational moment within the (communicable) philosophical logos, that is nevertheless dependent on it. For Descartes, poet and philosopher reach the same kind of knowledge, but imagination provides the poet with a much more effective means to reach it than reason does for the philosopher. The former thus retains a rhetorical edge over the latter. The “seeds of science,” which lie dormant in us like the sparks of a flintstone, can be extracted through the step-by-step process of philosophical reasoning, but the poet, in a characteristic “leap of the imagination” accomplishes the task much more effectively and quickly, and it is thus more likely to encounter profound insights in the writings of the poets than in those of the philosophers. One would not expect such an assessment from the Descartes of the *Méditations*.

### 2.5.1 *The Spirit of Truth*

Descartes himself was indeed no stranger to the powers of enthusiasm, with which he had found himself blessed on the day and night of 10 November 1619. Descartes considered the three consecutive dreams which he experienced during that night to be admonitions for the future course of his life, admonitions that he was convinced, as his biographer Baillet notes, could only have “come from on high” (“qu’il s’imagine ne pouvoir être venus que d’en haut”). They were to him powerful inspirational confirmations from the “Spirit of Truth” (“l’Esprit de Vérité”), of his belief to have discovered the foundations of an “admirable science” during his intellectual exertions of the preceding day:

Le 10 novembre 1619, comme j’étais rempli d’enthousiasme et que je découvrais les fondements d’une science admirable... (Descartes 1963, 52)<sup>32</sup>

Already during the day, when he discovered the foundations of this “admirable science,” which probably was the starting point for the *mathesis universalis* he would ultimately set out to formulate in the *Regulae*, Descartes thus felt himself under the “reign of enthusiasm and the force of the imagination,” to which he attributes the superior insights of the poets in the note just discussed. A state of inspiration triggers the development of his scientific method.

Descartes sees the validity of this discovery verified by the dreams he experienced the following night and in which his state of enthusiasm continues. The sequence of the dreams and Descartes’s subsequent interpretation provide a fascinating interplay between dream and waking, inspiration and reason, as well as the self’s autonomy and its reliance on a metaphysical validation.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>X. Novembris 1619, cum plenus forem Enthousiasmo, & mirabilis scientiæ fundamenta reperirem &c. (AT X, 179)

<sup>33</sup>The opening sentence which I just quoted is the only surviving fragment of Descartes’s original account of his dreams. The sole version still available is that given by Baillet in his 1691 biography

In the first dream, Descartes finds himself considerably frightened in the streets of a city where he has great trouble walking because of an impetuous wind and considerable pain in his right side. Barely able to sustain himself on his feet, Descartes decides to seek shelter in the church of a college which he passes. In the courtyard of the college he encounters a person who tells Descartes that Monsieur M. has something to give to him. Descartes imagines that to be a melon and awakes upon the disconcerting recognition that all the other people in his dream seem to be unencumbered by the wind that still gives him trouble to even stand upright.

Throughout the narrative, the physiological reception of the dream images is related in the terms of faculty psychology, another indication that Baillet probably stays close to Descartes's own account: Descartes's imagination feels the representations of the dream phantoms "strike" it, and the dream scenes are consistently described as "imagination." Even while dreaming, Descartes acutely observes his own mental processes. Upon waking up, Descartes now effectively feels a pain in his left side and fears that it is due to the influence of an evil spirit, a "malin génie," attempting to seduce him, and he spends the next two hours praying for forgiveness for his sins and meditating about good and evil in the world.

After falling asleep again, Descartes has a second dream, in which he hears a loud and exploding noise that he takes for a thunder-clap, and which immediately awakens him. He now finds his room filled with glimmering sparks of fire. According to Baillet, this was a common experience for Descartes, who gathers sufficient calm in examining the properties of the fiery specimens presented to him to be able to fall asleep for a

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of Descartes. (cf. Descartes 1963, 52-61; AT X, 179-188.) How close Baillet's version comes to Descartes's original text is difficult to assess, but his account contains passages that can also be found in Leibniz's copies, notably the passage on poets and enthusiasm that I just discussed. One can thus at least assume that Baillet stayed fairly close to Descartes's original text, which he, like Leibniz, consulted in Stockholm. In any case, I will not be concerned here with a detailed textual analysis of Descartes's dreams, with which one would have to proceed with considerable caution given the second-hand nature of the surviving text. What interests me here first of all is the event of the dreams as such, and the ease with which Descartes can still connect his scientific endeavours and divine inspiration.

third time.

In the third dream, which, in contrast to the first two, presents nothing frightening, Descartes finds a “dictionnaire” on his desk, which he hopes to be extremely useful. Next to it he finds a collection of poems entitled *Corpus poetarum*. As Descartes begins to read a poem beginning with the verse “Quod vitae sectabor iter,” a stranger enters and presents Descartes with another poem, beginning with “Est et Non.” Descartes responds that he is familiar with the poem, contained in the idylls of Ausonius, and which can be found in the book right in front of him. The dictionnaire meanwhile has vanished, but reappears, although incomplete, at the other end of the table. Unable to find the poem, Descartes tells the stranger that he could present him with another one, beginning with “Quod vitae sectabor iter?” The stranger asks Descartes to do so, and while Descartes searches for the poem again, he discovers a series of small engravings. At this point, the books and the stranger disappear—efface themselves from Descartes’s imagination—without, however, waking him up. Still dreaming, Descartes now asks himself, according to Baillet, whether he had just experienced a dream or a vision. Descartes then not only decides in his dream that he was indeed dreaming, but also immediately begins to interpret his dream. He decides that the “dictionnaire” represented “all the sciences gathered together” (“toutes les Sciences ramassées ensemble”), while the *Corpus poetarum* signified the combination of philosophy and wisdom (“la Philosophie et la Sagesse jointes ensemble”). The explanation for this conclusion is given in a slightly different version of the passage on enthusiasm and the relation between imagination and the intellect discussed above. Upon this strand of reasoning, Descartes begins to doubt whether he is in fact dreaming or meditating, a doubt that awakens him “without emotion.” Descartes now completes his interpretation in a waking but still enthusiastic state. The various poets brought together in the *Corpus poetarum* signify to him the revelation and the enthusiasm with which he sees himself favoured. Of the two Ausonius poems that appear in the dream, Descartes concludes, the one beginning with “Quod vitae secta-

bor iter?" stood for the good counsel of a wise person, or even of moral theology, while the poem beginning with "Est et Non," this being the Yes and No of Pythagoras, stood for truth and falsity in human knowledge and the secular sciences.<sup>34</sup> All these interpretations working so perfectly to his advantage, Descartes feels encouraged enough to convince himself that the Spirit of Truth himself had wanted to offer him the treasures of all the sciences in this dream.

Descartes situates these dreams at a crossroads of his life. According to Baillet, he took the third dream to predict his future, while he saw the first two as a divine commentary about the shortcomings of his past. The thunder which he heard in the second dream, signaled to him the descent of the Spirit of Truth, come to possess him and to lead him in the right direction, away from the seductive influence of the "malin génie" that appeared in form of the impetuous wind in the first dream. The belief in divine possession is almost certainly Descartes's original conviction, since Baillet sees it as an indication that Descartes surely must have been drinking too much the previous evening (which was after all St. Martin's Eve, so that wine would have flown freely), a suspicion that Descartes repeatedly contests in his own narrative according to Baillet.

I do not plan to embark here on an extensive discussion of the content of Descartes's dreams,<sup>35</sup> but only want to highlight several points that are of particular interest for the present discussion. What is remarkable first of all is the interplay between enthusiastic possession and rational interpretation that Baillet's account exhibits. On the one hand, Descartes was led by means of enthusiasm to the discovery of his "admirable science" and decided that his dreams had indeed been a case of divine possession. On

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<sup>34</sup>The title of Ausonius's poem, beginning with "Est et Non" has in fact "The Yes and No of Pythagoras" as its title. Cf. Descartes 1963, 57, FN 2.

<sup>35</sup>Critical interpretations of the three dreams are numerous. For a good overview over the literature and the various contending positions, as well as a convincing conjecture about the meaning of the melon in dream one and the probable real-life counterpart of the "dictionnaire" of dream three, cf. Allan Gabbey and Robert E. Hall, "The Melon and the Dictionary: Reflections on Descartes's Dreams," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59.4 (1998): 651-668.

the other hand, he never quite loses control of his dreams, which he observes lucidly and is able to interpret even while dreaming. Particularly, the process of interpretation enables Descartes to assert his own autonomous position. The dreams reinforce the importance of his discovery, institute himself as somebody endowed with divine credentials, and set his path for the future. For now, even though it asserts itself in its interpretative autonomy, the Cartesian subject still finds itself dependant on divine inspiration.

Descartes's dreams throw a different light on the *Méditations* in this respect: The meditator's fears of being entirely controlled by a "malin génie" are not a mere thought experiment. Possession, be it by demons or the "Spirit of Truth," was a serious consideration at least for the early Descartes, as these dreams show. Equally interesting, particularly in the context of his argument in the *Méditations*, is the ease with which Descartes can be seen to switch between various states of consciousness such as dream and waking, which hence become almost indistinguishable from one another. While Baillet comments on it as quite remarkable, it does not seem unusual for Descartes to interpret his dreams and hence to reason consciously, while still dreaming. The predicament presented in the first meditation seems to have been a very real one for Descartes, for whom the boundaries between dreaming and waking could apparently be astonishingly blurry.

This lack of distinction between the two states of consciousness also complicates the relation between imagination and the intellect, a problem that is of course addressed neither by Descartes nor by Baillet: If all the dream-images are "imagination," imprinted in the organ of the *phantasia*, as the narrative asserts, and as they would have to be according to Descartes's faculty psychology still evident in the *Regulae*, then the operations of the intellect, interpreting these dream images as part of the dream, would also have to be imaginary representations, and the imagination would hence perform an operation that exceeds its abilities. The status of a dreaming but conscious self is one for which Descartes's model of the mind does not really provide

a place.

The greatest challenge to the concept of imagination that one encounters in the *Méditations* and the *Regulae*, however, is the model of divine enthusiasm with which imagination is connected both in the account of Descartes's dreams and in the notes from the *Olympica*. Imagination, akin to the Platonic model in the *Timaeus*, is here the power that allows for inspiration and hence new scientific discoveries, a role that is difficult to reconcile with the concept of the faculty that quite explicitly locates it beneath the intellect in the hierarchy of mental faculties. It is thus of specific interest at this point to see if any traces of this inspirational model of imagination survive in the *Regulae* and their *mathesis universalis*, which owes its inception quite possibly to the enthusiasm Descartes experienced on 10 November 1619.

### 2.5.2 *Seeds of Science*

The idea, expressed by Descartes in the *Olympica*, of the divine seeds of science, lying dormant in the human mind like the potential for fire in the flintstone, can indeed still be found in the *Regulae*. When Descartes places his method in a historical lineage in *Regula IV* he asserts that any kind of scientific study would more or less be futile if it was not done with something akin to his method in mind. The greatest thinkers before him must hence surely have employed something like it. This unacknowledged use of the Cartesian method *avant la lettre* was possible because Descartes's true achievement lies first and foremost in spelling out in a systematic and teachable way a method that was always accessible before, yet only to those untainted by too much scientific artifice and still close enough to their true nature to be able to bring the divine seeds planted in their minds to blossom:

Puisque, par conséquent, l'utilité de cette méthode est si grande que sans elle il semble devoir être plutôt nuisible que profitable de se livrer à l'étude, je me persuade facilement que depuis longtemps les meilleurs esprits, ou

plutôt ceux qui se laissaient guider par la seule nature, l'ont aperçue en quelque manière. L'esprit humain possède en effet je ne sais quoi de divin, où les premières semences des pensées utiles ont été déposées, en sorte que souvent, si négligées et si étouffées soient-elles par des études qui les dévient, elles produisent des fruits spontanés. (Descartes 1963, 93)<sup>36</sup>

The Cartesian method is thus a discovery in the truest sense of the word. It uncovers something that had been there all along, a truth that had only been stifled, suppressed, and forgotten, obscured by too many falsehoods and acquired habits of thought. If one manages to discard such misleading deviations, the principles of method can be exposed again, since they are principles of nature, seeds planted in the human mind by the divine creator. Descartes's organic metaphors leave no doubt: the discovery of the truth of the Cartesian method is at the same time a return to nature. Once again, Descartes institutes one of the central topoi of modernity: The discovery of the seemingly new is in fact a return to a forgotten origin, and by locating the future in the distant past, modernity legitimizes its radical break with the traditions of the present. Descartes reinforces this same conclusion a little later in the text, when discussing the mathematical achievements of the Greeks:

Mais je suis persuadé que certaines semences premières des vérités, déposées par la nature dans l'esprit humain, et que nous étouffons en nous en lisant et en écoutant tous les jours tant d'erreurs de toutes sortes, avaient tant de verdure dans cette rude et simple antiquité, que cette même lumière de l'esprit qui leur faisait voir qu'il faut préférer la vertu au plaisir et l'honnête à l'utile, tout en les laissant ignorer pourquoi il en est ainsi, leur a

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<sup>36</sup>Cum igitur hujus methodi utilitas sit tanta, ut sine illâ litteris operam dare nociturum esse videatur potius quam prosuturum, facile mihi persuadeo illam jam antè à majoribus ingenjis, vel solius naturæductu, suisse aliquo modo perspectam. habet enim humana mens nescio quid divini, in quo prima cogitationum utilium semina ita jacta sunt, ut saepe, quantumvis neglecta & transversis studijs suffocata, spontaneam frugem producant. (AT X, 373)

donné aussi des idées vraies en matière de philosophie et de mathématique, bien qu'ils n'aient jamais pu pousser ces sciences jusqu'à la perfection. (Descartes 1963, 96)<sup>37</sup>

But precisely *how* the human mind can access the divine seeds that trigger the discovery of the scientific method, precisely *how* the mind is able to perceive its true nature, even though it has been obscured by erroneous teachings, incorrect habits of thought, and the mistakes of tradition, is not discussed in the *Regulae*. The Cartesian method can in fact not account for its own inception and it can only be taught to those who already grasp its premises. The moment of insight that enables a different way of thinking, the blossoming of one of the seeds implanted in the mind, cannot be brought about by the method that depends on it. What the method of the *Regulae* teaches, is only the mechanical application of its principles; it does not teach the way that leads to the grasping of these principles in the first place. Again, Descartes is in a position similar to that of Plato in the *Timaeus*: The constitutive moment that allows the philosophical method to be cannot be expressed in the latter's own terms. As its foundation, this moment lies outside of the methodological grasp.

The rational framework of the *Regulae's* method does no longer allow for an articulation of this paradox. Neither enthusiasm nor imagination are mentioned as the stand-ins for the rationally impossible inception of a rational method. What comes closest to the notion of enthusiastic inspiration, still present in Descartes's preceding texts, is the mental operation of *intuitus*, the principle acknowledged *within* the framework of the *Regulae* to ensure the method's validity. But, in a familiar gesture, Descartes presents it as an operation of the pure intellect, so that it remains safely contained within the rational parameters of method, which cannot face the problem of

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<sup>37</sup>Sed mihi persuadeo, prima quaedam veritatum semina humanis ingenjis à naturâ insita, quâenos, quotidie tot errores diversos legendo & audiendo, in nobis extinguimus, tantas vires in rudi istâ & purâ antiquitate habuisse, ut eodem mentis lumine, quo virtutem voluptati, honestumque utili praefereendum esse videbant, etsi, quare hoc ita esset, ignorarent, Philosophiæetiam & Matheseos veras ideas agnoverint, quamvis ipsas scientias perfectè consequi nondum possent. (AT X, 376)

its autopoietic inception.<sup>38</sup> Descartes's own language, however, cannot quite contain the problems that this assertion creates: *Intuitus* is

une représentation inaccessible au doute, représentation qui est le fait de l'intelligence pure et attentive, qui naît de la seule lumière de la raison (Descartes 1963, 87)<sup>39</sup>

What does it mean for this “fact,” this “grasped idea” (conceptum), as Descartes's Latin puts it, of the pure intellect to be born solely of the light of reason? Could it be that this already highly metaphorical rendering of a supposedly imageless moment has simply omitted a metaphor that would evoke the wrong connotations? For a birth from the light of reason, a seed would seem necessary, which would bring *intuitus* dangerously close to that foundational grasping, which, as the note from the *Olympica* asserts, is much more easily achieved by means of enthusiasm and imagination, than by means of reason.

Openly, divine enthusiasm and imagination only appear in one singular instance in the *Regulae*, and there only to be immediately discarded as irrelevant for the further argument. In the second part of *Regula XII*, where Descartes outlines the criteria for the differentiation of simple and composite natures, he also discusses the means to avoid error in the process of knowledge formation. Error, Descartes contends here,

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<sup>38</sup>Descartes's rhetorical move—which he of course did not see as rhetorical—has worked exceptionally well. Dennis Sepper for example repeatedly stresses the importance of not misreading *intuitus* as “intuition.” *Intuitus*, Sepper insists, just as much as Descartes, needs to be understood as an operation of the pure intellect, a clear grasping of the mind, and not as an inspirational moment. It is no doubt correct that Descartes wanted to be understood that way, but Sepper fails to see that Descartes needed to deny a non-rational moment at the very foundation of his method in order to sustain it. (cf. Sepper 1996, 124) In the same vein, Ferdinand Alquie adduces V. Gouhier's commentary to Descartes's assertion that his dream-visions had been divinely inspired. Gouhier insists that Descartes is in fact not describing a religious or mystical experience, but rather presents a religious *explanantion* of his experience. The divine origin of his dreams is hence not felt but rather logically concluded. (cf. Descartes 1963, 57, FN 3.)—There may indeed be no irrational aspects in Descartes's oeuvre, a need that Descartes has effectively passed on to his commentators.

<sup>39</sup>mentis puræ& attentænon dubium conceptum, qui à solâ rationis luce nâcitur (AT X, 368)

is only possible if we ourselves have constructed or composed the things we take to be true. There are three means for such a construction: impulsion, conjecture, and deduction. Other than by free will, the first of them, impulsion can be brought about either by a higher power, i.e. divine influence, or imagination (*fantaisie* in the French translation, *phantasia* in the Latin original):

[...] cette composition peut se faire de trois manières : par impulsion, par conjecture, ou par déduction. C'est par impulsion que composent leurs jugements sur les choses ceux qui se laissent porter spontanément à quelque croyance, sans en être convaincus par aucune raison, et en n'y étant déterminés que par quelque puissance supérieure, ou par leur propre liberté, ou par la disposition de leur fantaisie : la première ne trompe jamais, la seconde rarement, la troisième presque toujours ; mais la première n'a pas ici sa place, car elle ne tombe point sous la jurisdiction de la méthode. (Descartes 1963, 151)<sup>40</sup>

Imagination has now already taken on its familiar role as the producer of insecure knowledge and there is no more hint of its connection to divine inspiration, which receives the same credentials as *intuitus*, as it is *always* true. This type of religious and non-rational knowledge, however certain it may be, has no more place in the *Regulae*, as the last sentence of the quoted passage makes clear. The *Regulae* provide a secure path of reasoning for the philosopher, from which the poet's or the believer's leaps of imagination need to be excluded. Those simply do not fall under the jurisdiction of method. Through this gesture of exclusion, the Cartesian method can preserve its own autonomy, an autonomy that is reasserted in the *Discours de la méthode* and the *Méditations* through the discovery of the *cogito*.

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<sup>40</sup>[...] hanc compositionem tribus modis fieri posse : nempe per impulsum, per conjecturam, vel per deductionem. Per impulsum sua de rebus judicia componunt illi, qui ad aliquid credendum suo ingenio feruntur, nullâ ratione persuasi, sed tantùm determinati, vel à potentiâ aliquâ superiori, vel à propriâ libertate, vel à phantasiædispositione : prima nunquam fallit, secunda rarò, tertia fere semper ; sed prima ad hunc locum non pertinet, quia sub artem non cadit. (AT X, 424)

This particular discovery now merits a closer look.

## 2.6 *Excogitations: Fabulating the Cogito*

In the institution of the Cartesian *cogito*, at one of the foundational moments of modern philosophy, the imagination is doubly excluded. On the one hand, as the self-recognition of the pure intellect, the *cogito* can *per definitionem* bear no relation to the input of the senses or to any mental process of representation, for which it is the precondition. From the perspective of faculty psychology, within which Descartes is mainly working, the *cogito* thus cannot be subject to the faculty of imagination. On the other hand, the *cogito* must be maintained as the autonomous moment in which thought presents itself to itself without any exterior mediation if it is to function as the Archimedean point on which Descartes's modern philosophical system is to be built. The intuition that is the *cogito* may thus also not be brought about by the inspirational force that has equally become known, via Plato and the Neoplatonists, as imagination. In the text of the *Méditations* and the *Discours de la Méthode* Descartes carefully secures this autonomous position of the *cogito*, which, as is quite clear to him, must remain unimaginable, if it is to succeed as a foundational philosophical concept.

The only definition of imagination that Descartes himself openly advances is the one that is derived from the Aristotelian tradition of faculty psychology. If one only uses Descartes's own definitions to measure his texts, which is philologically and philosophically prudent as long as it is Descartes's own position one is trying to understand, his demarcations of the *cogito* seem perfectly sound. But, as the preceding sections have shown, if one takes a closer look at earlier Cartesian texts, a quite different, inspirational understanding of imagination comes to light, which is suppressed in Descartes's later writings, but which is closely connected to the concept of "intuition" that informs the *cogito*, and which thus needs to be taken into account when the role

of imagination in Cartesian philosophy is at stake. Descartes's own perspective is thus not all that is to be found in his texts, and it is quite legitimate to investigate whether imagination does not also figure in the Cartesian text in yet another guise. For the concept of imagination which is most familiar to a contemporary understanding has so far not even been addressed: that of imagination as the faculty enabling the creation of fictions.

One may object, as John D. Lyons has done, that such an undertaking entails a retroactive projection on the Cartesian text that fails to differentiate between contemporary understandings of imagination and the historical definitions on which Descartes bases his arguments. To see the "malin génie" as a product of imagination, for example, would thus be misguided, since it is presented as a purely mental abstraction, to which Descartes attributes no sensory characteristics, those being the sole sphere of imagination. (cf. Lyons 1999, 303f.) The spirit of such an objection, however, would ultimately only legitimize readings of Descartes's texts that conform to the way we believe he would have liked them to be understood. We could neither read them against the grain, nor detect their blind spots, nor discover the meanings they produce against what we perceive as their author's intention. The parameters for reading Descartes's texts would thus be set in stone by Descartes himself. But one need not "only" point to the openness of texts to counter Lyons's argument. For Lyons can only uphold his position by means of an almost scholastic distinction that is ultimately not born out by the Cartesian text.

### *2.6.1 Feigning Things Unseen*

The concept of fictional creations that are not directly tied to sensory input is in fact by no means alien to Descartes. He just does not—at least not in most cases—employ the verb "imaginer" to describe such mental activities. The verb he employs in such cases is "feindre," and Lyons insists that this word needs to be strictly distinguished from "imaginer," the verb that is reserved for the epistemological processes described

with the help of faculty psychology. Yet even while this distinction might be helpful for an adequate discussion of Descartes's epistemology, there can be no doubt that within the physio-psychological framework of Descartes's thought, both activities can only take place within the physical part of the brain that the *Regulae* call *phantasia* or imagination. The verb "feindre" itself suggests as much.

The French "feindre," just like the English "to feign," is derived from the Latin "fingere," which Descartes uses in his Latin texts, a verb that can denote the actual physical acts of building and creating (the *ars fingendi* is the art of sculpture), mental acts of representation, fictional or otherwise, as well as acts of deception, lying, and false representation. Within the theoretical framework of faculty psychology, these activities, which all involve acts of representation, can only have their place and origin from and in imagination. The same holds true for the related verb "effingere," which can also be found in Descartes's Latin. While "fictio," fiction, is the noun that is coupled with the verb "fingere," "effingere" shares its root with the noun "effigies," image, representation, figure, dream-image.—The place for such fictions and effigies, as readers of the *Méditations* know well, is imagination.

Nor is this pure etymological speculation, for in the passage in the first meditation discussed earlier, in which Descartes considers purely fictional paintings that bear no representational relation to physical reality, he presents these paintings as the products of the painters' imagination:

[...] si peut-être leur *imagination* est assez extravagante pour inventer quelque chose de si nouveau, que jamais nous n'ayons rien vu de semblable, et qu'ainsi leur ouvrage nous représente une chose purement feinte et absolument fausse, certes à tout le moins les couleurs dont ils le composent doivent-elles être véritables. [my emphasis] (Descartes 1967, 407)(AT IX, 15)

As this passage makes clear, it is imagination, the mental faculty where images

are produced, temporarily stored, reshuffled, and recombined, where such fictional, “purely imagined and absolutely false” images are created.

To be precise, the French translation of the *Méditations* by the Duc de Luynes, which was checked and agreed to by Descartes, is more direct in assigning the creation of the new to the faculty of imagination than the Latin original; but also Descartes’s Latin clearly establishes the connection between the process of “fingere” and imagination. If one adds Descartes’s remarks about our dreaming states, for which the fictional paintings serve as an analogy, the connection is equally present:

Age ergo somniemus [...] tamen profecto fatendum est visa per quietem esse veluti quasdam pictas imagines, quae non nisi ad similitudinem rerum verarum fingi potuerunt; ideoque saltem generalia haec [...] res quasdam non imaginarias, sed veras existere. Nam sane pictores ipsi, ne tum quidem, cùm Syrenas & Satyriscos maxime inusitatis fingere student, naturas omni ex parte novas iis possunt assignare, sed tantummodo diversorum animalium membra permiscent; vel si forte aliquid excogitent adeo novum, ut nihil omnino ei simile fuerit visum, atquae ita plane fictitium sit & falsum, certe tamen ad minimum veri colores esse debent, ex quibus illud componant. (Descartes 1967, 178 f.) (AT XI, 19f.)

The aim of the analogy, as I commented earlier in this chapter, is to still be able to root our dream images, just as much as paintings of Sirens, Satyrs, and other unseen things, in a shared common reality. But even while the main argument of the passage is thus epistemological, it also gives us an insight into Descartes’s view of the creative process, at least as far as it concerns the visual arts. The painters, just as much as the dreamer, recombine the elements of the known in order to create the unseen and unknown, that which has never before been perceived (“maxime inusitatis fingere student [...] ut nihil omnino ei simile fuerit visum”). It is thus through a recombination of the elements present in their imagination that the painters can

create (literally “think up,” “excogitare”) the new. The central question about the process—how much of it is active creation, how much is passive reception?—, which is of equally central importance for the autonomy of the *cogito*, is brought into view when the different modalities of the French and the Latin text are compared. In the Latin text, the painters actively produce the new (excogitare/figere) out of the “raw material” available by means of imagination, while Descartes gives us little clue as to which mental faculty is responsible for the act of creative recombination. In the French text, however, it seems as if imagination itself is responsible for the creation of the new (“si peut-être leur imagination est assez extravagante pour inventer quelque chose de si nouveau”), while the painters only reproduce these newly found representations on canvas. One can assume that this ambiguity is no accident, but rather points to the fact that Descartes himself is unclear about the precise workings of the creative process. 360 years later, the question remains very much unanswered. It is clear, however, that it must be imagination where these “fictions” take shape. They are “res imaginarias,” products of imagination, even though Descartes intends to find an anchor for them in the real.

### 2.6.2 *Fictional Worlds*

This description of the creative process and the painterly creation of the new might be seen as an interesting albeit negligible aside that has no true import on Descartes’s philosophy as a whole. It is, however, not the only instance in Descartes’s work in which imagination assumes a central position in its capacity to produce fictional representations. If one examines *Le Monde*, the treatise in which Descartes presents the general principles of his physics and his theory of the nature of light in particular, one discovers that imagination is not only essential for the creations of the artist, but also plays a central role in the development of Descartes’s mechanistic science. After he has introduced the various elements that make up the singular matter out of which the world is composed, as well as the mechanistic principles that govern their

metamorphoses and interactions, Descartes innocently proposes to do the reader a favor by further explaining the principles of his physics in a more amusing fashion. To prevent his audience from becoming too bored with the formal presentation of his lengthy discourse, he will now continue by means of a fable, a fictional story:

Mais afin que la longueur de ce discours vous soit moins ennuyeuse, j'en veux envelopper une partie dans l'invention d'une fable, au travers de laquelle j'espère que la vérité ne laissera pas de paraître suffisamment, et qu'elle ne sera pas moins agréable à voir que si je l'exposais toute nue.  
(Descartes 1963, 342f.) (AT XI, 32.)

But Descartes's rhetorical justification for his fictional approach is in itself a rhetorical move—although it remains debatable whether it is a conscious one on the side of Descartes—for what follows is by no means simply the narrative embellishment of a truth that might as well have been presented straightforwardly; the “Description of a New World; and of the Qualities of the Matter of which it is Composed,” as the following section of the treatise is entitled, is more than the fictional coating on a bitter but otherwise fully effective scientific pill. For the “invention,” the “fable” that Descartes now presents, is not a superfluous poetical flourish, but rather a scientific model. The model itself, the “new world” that Descartes creates, and for which he asks for the reader's momentary suspension of disbelief, is indeed a fiction, something “made” in the sense of the original Latin, but it is with the aid of this fiction that the natural laws in the real world as Descartes envisions them, will become observable. If this fictional and alternative world can be *imagined*, i.e. if its representation can be clearly and distinctly produced without logical contradiction with the help of the faculty of imagination, it must be *possible*, Descartes's reasoning goes, for God is surely able to create anything the human imagination can clearly conceive.

[...] pouvant distinctement imaginer tout ce que j'y [dans le nouveau monde] mets, il est certain qu'encore qu'il n'y eut rien de tel dans l'ancien

monde, Dieu le peut toutefois créer dans un nouveau: car il est certain qu'il peut créer toutes les choses que nous pouvons imaginer. (Descartes 1963, 349) (AT XI, 36)

And if this new world, created with the help of imagination, is possible, if it could have been created by God, it might also be an accurate description of the real one, Descartes's reasoning implicitly continues. For the fictional world that Descartes describes confirms of course to the deist and mechanistic worldview to which he subscribed at the time. All that God needs to have created to be compliant with Descartes's theoretical/fictional model, are the natural laws. Their self-determined mechanisms, which demand no further divine intervention, then suffice to create an orderly world out of even the greatest chaos of the primal matter they act upon:

Car Dieu a si merveilleusement établi ces Lois qu'encore que nous supposions qu'il crée rien de plus que ce que j'ai dit et même qu'il ne mette en ceci aucun ordre ni proportion, mais qu'il en compose un chaos le plus confus et le plus embrouillé que les Poètes puissent décrire : elles sont suffisantes pour faire que les parties de ce chaos se démêlent d'elles-mêmes et se disposent en si bon ordre qu'elles auront la forme d'un Monde très parfait et dans lequel on pourra voir non seulement de la lumière, mais aussi toutes les autres choses, tant générales que particulières, qui paraissent dans ce vrai Monde. (Descartes 1963, 236f.) (AT XI, 34f.)

The mentioning of the poets in this crucial passage is in all probability not coincidental, for it almost appears like an underhanded retribution of the philosopher for the poets' seeming superiority in matters of creation, which Descartes had still acknowledged himself only two decades earlier in his *Olympica*. The poets might excel in imagining the chaos that reigned before the creation, but it is the imagination of the scientist-philosopher, which the reader can now see at work, that is able to

outline the laws that will produce order out of that chaos. For Descartes has taken the position of God in writing *Le Monde*. He might still attribute the origin of the laws of nature to a divine creator, but this attribution only thinly veils the fact that this (fictional) world is entirely the philosopher's creation. As Descartes's text slips seamlessly into the first person in the next sentence, one cannot but notice that this is the voice of a proud creator who shows off his creation with the conviction of its absolutely convincing ingeniousness:

Mais avant que j'explique ceci plus au long, arrêtez-vous encore un peu à considérer ce chaos et remarquez qu'il ne contient aucune chose que ne vous soit si parfaitement connue que vous ne sauriez pas même feindre de l'ignorer. Car pour les qualités que j'y ai mises, si vous y avez pris garde, je les ai seulement supposés telles que vous les pouviez imaginer. Et pour la matière dont je l'ai composé, il n'y a rien de plus simple, ni de plus facile à connaître dans les créatures inanimées; et son idée est tellement comprise en toutes celles que notre imagination peut former qu'il faut nécessairement que vous la conceviez ou que vous n'imaginiez jamais aucune chose. (Descartes 1963, 347) (AT XI, 35)

Who would dare to disagree? The authority of Descartes's writing is such that it can rule out as unimaginable the possibility of its not being understood and immediately comprehended. And thus imagination returns in the function that it had already been given in the *Regulae* as the main tool of the early modern theoretical physicist: The ability to clearly and distinctly *imagine*, i.e. mentally represent the scientific fiction just developed, is no less than the condition of possibility of its truthfulness and hence of its adequacy as a description of the real. But this is also a return with a significant twist, for imagination now not only enables the effective solving of mathematical problems, it makes possible the creation and the communicability of heuristic fictions as explanations of the real. Such "fables" are certainly

more than mere embellishments, they are part and parcel of Descartes's philosophical and scientific endeavour.

But maybe none of this is relevant for the constitution of the *cogito*. For the importance of the imagination in the *Regulae* and *Le Monde* is after all an importance for the solving of problems within the realm of physics, i.e. the realm accessible to the senses. Was it not precisely the function of the *cogito* to provide a point of certainty within the realm of the intellect, untainted by the ambiguities of knowledge derived from and about the world of the senses, and which could thus serve as the philosophical foundation for the modern scientific endeavour that Descartes had found lacking? Was this not precisely the reason why, as the *Regulae* already suggested and the *Méditations* had clearly spelled out, the products of imagination had to be discarded if the philosophical reasoning about the *cogito* and the metaphysical speculations about a foundational realm of pure thought were to make any sense? Descartes himself is of course unequivocal about the necessity of such a division of responsibilities, which is maybe most pointedly expressed in the following passage from the *Discours de la Méthode*:

Mais ce qui fait qu'il y en a plusieurs qui se persuadent qu'il y a de la difficulté à le [Dieu] connaître, et même aussi à connaître ce que c'est que leur âme, c'est qu'ils n'élèvent jamais leur esprit au delà des choses sensibles, et qu'ils sont tellement accoutumés à ne rien considérer qu'en l'imaginant, qui est une façon de penser particulière pour les choses matérielles, que tout ce qui n'est pas imaginable leur semble n'être pas intelligible. Ce qui est assez manifeste de ce que même les philosophes tiennent pour maxime, dans les écoles, qu'il n'y a rien dans l'entendement qui n'ait premièrement été dans le sens, où toutefois il est certain que les idées de Dieu et de l'âme n'ont jamais été. Et il me semble que ceux qui veulent user de leur imagination, pour les comprendre, font tout de même que si, pour ouïr les

sons, ou sentir les odeurs, il se voulaient servir de leurs yeux: sinon qu'il y a encore cette différence, que le sens de la vue ne nous assure pas moins de la vérité de ses objets, que font ceux de l'odorat ou de l'ouïe; au lieu que ni notre imagination ni nos sens ne nous sauraient jamais assurer d'aucune chose, si notre entendement n'y intervient. (Descartes 1963, 609) (AT VI, 37)

In the clear-cut world of Cartesian dualism, there can be no hesitation about such divisions. Just as much as the soul—even though it is closely intermingled with every part of the body, as Descartes explains in the sixth mediation<sup>41</sup>—is a substance completely separate from the body, there is an absolute division in kind between the realm of the senses and the realm of the intellect. Imagination, as “a particular way of thinking applied to material things” can thus be of no help whatsoever in the discussion of anything not accessible to the senses.

But from this perspective, the scientific fiction, the “fable” that Descartes tells his readers in *Le Monde* would have been impossible. For the world it describes with the help of and for its readers' imagination is not material at all; it is a mere possibility, located in the “imaginary spaces” of scholasticism, a potential creation that has its only reality in Descartes's text. And the primary substances that make up its original matter, just as much as the mechanistic movements and laws of cause and effect that govern their interaction are not observable either, even though Descartes asks his readers to imagine them “clearly and distinctly.” Such laws, as Hume would argue a century later, can never be proven empirically; they remain conjecture, part of an explanatory model, a necessary fiction. That is the reason why Descartes still needs

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<sup>41</sup>cf. Descartes 1967, p. 492. (AT IX, p. 64.) For further discussion of the mind/body distinction in Descartes's philosophy see for example the essays of Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, “Cartesian Passions and the Union of Mind and Body,” *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 513-534. and “Descartes on Thinking with the Body,” *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 371-393.

God to continually uphold them—otherwise, their existence could not be guaranteed. On the surface, Descartes might thus keep imagination within clear boundaries by narrowly defining it within the Aristotelian/scholastic epistemological tradition. But that does not alter the fact that imagination has a much broader function within the Cartesian text. In that regard, the *cogito* is no exception.

### 2.6.3 *Fingo Ergo Sum*

*Le Monde* and the complementary treatise *L'Homme*, which presents the mechanistic physiology that links the human microcosm to the macrocosm described in *Le Monde*, were never published during Descartes's lifetime. The fate of Galileo cautioned Descartes not to provoke the Catholic Church with such an openly deistic treatise, its partially "fictional" character notwithstanding. However, Descartes did offer at least a summary of *Le Monde* in the fifth part of the *Discours de la Méthode*, which he published in French in 1637, and which was to provide the philosophical foundation for the physics and the physiology outlined in the suppressed texts. And, in a parallel that might now no longer seem surprising, also the famous *Discours*, in which the *cogito* makes its first appearance, is, exactly like *Le Monde*, presented by Descartes in form of a heuristic fiction: "que comme une histoire, ou, si vous l'aimiez mieux, que comme une fable." (Descartes 1963, 571) (AT VI, 4.) The same principle that guides *Le Monde* thus also applies to the *Discours*: Descartes's autobiographical tale provides a model that will enable the reader to perceive the reality of the *cogito*.<sup>42</sup> Thus, imagination also enters into the complex process that produces the Cartesian *cogito*. To get a better idea as to how exactly this takes place, it is most instructive to take a close look at the passage in the fourth part of the *Discours*, where, in a short-

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<sup>42</sup>The paradoxical fact that Descartes uses an autobiographical fiction to establish the absolute truth of the *cogito* has of course not gone unobserved. Cf. for example Georges Leyenberger's essay "Métaphore, fiction et vérité chez Descartes." *Littérature* 109 (Mars 1998): 20-37. However, the discussions of the fictionality, the "written" nature of the *cogito* are mostly unconcerned with the role of imagination in the formation of the *cogito*.

ened version of the process of philosophical reasoning described in the *Méditations*, the idea of the *cogito* first emerges.

Here, the language of the *Discours* is particularly interesting. As Descartes describes the process of radical doubt, the central methodological device through which he hopes to reach a point of absolute certainty, imagination inadvertently presents itself as the precondition for the possibility of doubt itself:

[...] je pensais qu'il fallait [...] que je rejetasse, comme absolument faux, tout ce en quoi je pourrais *imaginer* le moindre doute, afin de voir s'il ne resterait point, après cela, quelque chose en ma créance, qui fût entièrement indubitable. [my emphasis] (Descartes 1963, 602) (AT VI, 31f.)

Doubt itself, the Cartesian narrator affirms, is thus a product of imagination. Doubt needs to be imagined. In order to be able to doubt a given conviction, thought, belief, or sense-impression, one has to be able to *imagine* alternatives, as Bernd Rathman has rightly pointed out in his essay "L'imagination et le doute,"<sup>43</sup> and the radical sceptic is thus dependent on a vivid imagination. Just as the natural laws of this world can be made visible by imagining an alternative universe—a model—, operating under such laws, the ability to doubt the validity of what one believed to be true, is dependent on the prior ability to imagine that things might not be precisely what they seem. Imagination, doubly excluded by Descartes from his philosophical search for certainty, thus returns in satisfying symmetry as doubly central for the intellectual process that claims to only be possible without it. Imagination not only enables the fiction that is the autobiographical narrative of the *Discours*, it is also indispensable for the main methodological device that this philosophical fiction employs. Despite all precautions, imagination thus remains intricately inscribed in the *cogito*.

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<sup>43</sup>Bernd Rathman, "L'imagination et le doute. Essai sur la genèse de la pensée cartésienne," *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature (PFSC)* 15.1 (1981): 57-73.

This intimate connection between imagination and the central aspects of Cartesian philosophy becomes even more pronounced, when the text continues by setting out to employ this radical doubt. For now the two verbs “imaginer” and “douter” openly fall into one, as Descartes “feigns” his way to the *cogito*:

[...] je me résolus de *feindre* que toutes les choses qui m'étaient jamais entrées en l'esprit n'étaient non plus vraies que les illusions de mes songes. [my emphasis] Mais, aussitôt après, je pris garde que, pendant que je voulais ainsi penser que tout était faux, il fallait nécessairement que moi, qui le pensais, fusse quelque chose. Et remarquant que cette vérité : *je pense, donc je suis*, était si ferme et si assurée, que toutes les plus extravagantes suppositions des sceptiques n'étaient pas capables de l'ébranler, je jugeai que je pouvais la recevoir, sans scrupule, pour le premier principe de la philosophie que je cherchais. (Descartes 1963, 603) (AT VI, 32)

The *Discours* is here much more straightforward than the *Méditations*. No deceitful evil demons or other rhetorical devices are necessary to make the capacity to feign that produces the effect of an all-encompassing doubt more impressive. No mysterious outside influence is needed as the self's imagination absolutely suffices to accomplish the necessary task. This proves in retrospect that the “malin génie,” whether a fire-breathing creature with scales and horns, or a disembodied mental abstraction, is in either case a product of imagination, which also means, as Georges Leyenberger (Leyenberger 1998) has pointed out, that the truth of the *cogito* (“cette vérité”) emerges at the limit of the process of feigning. It is discovered by pushing a method of imaginary, fictional construction to its seeming extreme and end point. Descartes's openly stated position that the *cogito* could not be imagined turns out not to be truly accurate. It is rather the non-truth of the assertion “*cogito ergo sum*,” “*je pense donc je suis*,” which cannot be imagined, or more precisely, which cannot be feigned. Only because Descartes's autobiographical narrator cannot imagine that he

who imagines might himself only be imaginary, does the *cogito* appear as the only secure and undoubtable truth that can form the first principle of Cartesian philosophy. The *cogito* owes its position to a *lack* of imagination.

Thus, the imagination's limit, presented as exclusionary in the surface narrative of Descartes's text, turns out to be foundational as the faculty that could be of no import to the grasping of the *cogito* now creates the preconditions for its discovery. As Leyenberger fittingly puts it:

La première formule de la vérité est bien *je feins, donc je suis*. (Leyenberger 1998)

But the true implications of this production of the *cogito* by means of imagination are even more unsettling for the foundation of Descartes's philosophy than Leyenberger's analysis admits. For if one accepts this complication of Descartes's narrative, the passage which immediately follows upon the discovery of the *cogito*, and which is meant to strengthen its validity, becomes itself subject to doubt.

Puis, examinant avec attention ce que j'étais, et voyant que je pouvais feindre que je n'avais aucun corps, et qu'il n'y avait aucun monde, ni aucun lieu où je fusse; mais que je ne pouvais pas feindre, pour cela, que je n'étais point [...] il suivait très évidemment et très certainement que j'étais; [...] je connus de là que j'étais une substance dont toute l'essence ou la nature n'est que de penser, et qui, pour être, n'a besoin d'aucun lieu, ni ne dépend d'aucune chose matérielle. (Descartes 1963, 603f.) (AT VI, 32f.)

The reason why the *cogito* is immune to the processes of doubt, why its non-evidence cannot even be imagined, is never given by Descartes, who must assume that his readers cannot but agree with his assertion. Yet, if the assumption is easily

accepted as a possibility that everything material, including space itself—the *cogito* has no need for a body, nor for a place—is a purely illusionary construct of imagination, there is no logical reason why the assumption should be deemed impossible that the substance, the “I,” which believes itself to do the thinking, might be equally imaginary, especially since this “I” that thinks is the product of a story, a fable. For a contemporary reader, any Beckett novel proves the contrary, and Descartes had all of Montaigne’s essays at his disposal to prove that the “I” of an autobiographical text can never claim itself as the stable origin of its writing, but rather has to admit that in the reciprocal and open-ended process of autobiographical writing, in which the subject is its own object, the subject matter of the writing produces the writing subject just as much as vice versa. Descartes had no doubt read Montaigne’s famous assertion that his book had written him as much as he had written it.—“Je n’ai plus fait mon livre que mon livre m’a fait.”

This is not to say that Descartes did not truly believe to have found the counterargument against the disturbing infinite regress with which the modern subject sees itself confronted in Montaigne’s texts. There is no reason to assume that the *Discours* and the *Méditations* are nothing but elaborate constructs that hide their author’s knowledge about their questionable foundation. Certainly, Descartes was absolutely convinced that the discovery of the *cogito* had led him to an unquestionable truth. To do so by means of fiction would not have seemed problematic to him, as such an end obviously justified the means.

But that does not alter the fact that Descartes’s conviction is also his blind spot, a failure to see, or a failure to imagine, if one prefers. There is, however, no need to state this failure anew, as it cannot be pointed out more explicitly than Friedrich Nietzsche has already done in his critique of Cartesian certainty in “Of the Prejudices of the Philosophers,” the first part of *Beyond Good and Evil*. It suffices here to simply quote Nietzsche’s merciless prose:

Es gibt immer noch harmlose Selbst-Beobachter, welche glauben, dass es “unmittelbare Gewissheiten” gebe, zum Beispiel “ich denke” [...] gleichsam als ob hier das Erkennen rein und nackt seinen Gegenstand zu fassen bekäme, als “Ding an sich”, und weder von Seiten des Subjekts, noch von Seiten des Objekts eine Fälschung stattfände. [...] Mag das Volk glauben, dass Erkennen ein zu Ende-Denken sei, der Philosoph muss sich sagen: “wenn ich den Vorgang zerlege, der in dem Satz “ich denke” ausgedrückt ist, so bekomme ich eine Reihe von verwegenen Behauptungen, deren Begründung schwer, vielleicht unmöglich ist, — zum Beispiel dass *ich* es bin, der denkt, dass überhaupt ein Etwas es sein muss, das denkt, dass Denken eine Thätigkeit und Wirkung seitens eines Wesens ist, welches als Ursache gedacht wird, dass es ein “Ich” giebt, endlich, dass es bereits fest steht, was mit Denken zu bezeichnen ist, — dass ich *weiss*, was Denken ist. [...] Wer sich mit der Berufung auf eine Art *Intuition* der Erkenntnis getraut, jene metaphysischen Fragen sofort zu beantworten, wie es Der [sic] thut, welcher sagt: “ich denke, und weiss, dass dies wenigstens wahr, wirklich, gewiss ist” — der wird bei einem Philosophen heute ein Lächeln und zwei Fragezeichen bereit finden. “Mein Herr, wird der Philosoph vielleicht ihm zu verstehen geben, es ist unwahrscheinlich, dass Sie sich nicht irren: aber warum auch durchaus Wahrheit?” — <sup>44</sup>

The *cogito*, as Nietzsche so eloquently shows, is by no means a self-evident truth of which no doubt would be possible, nor is it the logical conclusion of a sequence of well-founded argumentative steps. It is, and here we return to the terminology of the *Regulae*, an *intuition*. But intuitions, if one believes the (Neo)Platonic tradition

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<sup>44</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse, Sämtliche Werke* eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari Vol. 5 (München: dtv, 1988), 29f. For a thorough analysis of Nietzsche’s critique of Descartes cf. Tilman Borsche, “Intuition und Imagination. Der erkenntnistheoretische Perspektivenwechsel von Descartes zu Nietzsche,” *Kunst und Wissenschaft bei Nietzsche* ed. Josef Simon and Mihailo Djoric (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1986), 26-44.

that is still so present in the writings of the early Descartes, are equally products of imagination, as the organ through which higher powers communicate with the human mind. Through both fiction and intuition, an element of imagination thus remains indelibly inscribed into the foundational first principle of Descartes's rational philosophy: In the final analysis, the certainty of the cogito is the effect of a leap of imagination.

This opens up a possibility that had simply no place in Descartes's field of vision, the intricate connection of rationality and imaginary construction in the making of the modern subject. Precisely this connection would be embraced in the Romantic discourse about subjectivity and imagination. In order to understand how such a shift in perspective could become possible it is now necessary to closely examine the role of imagination in the pivotal philosophical texts of Immanuel Kant.

## Chapter 3

REASONABLE DESIRES AND SYSTEMATIC MADMEN:  
THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION IN IMMANUEL KANT'S  
CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Es ist nicht leicht, das transzendente Subjekt zu sein.

It is not easy to be the transcendental subject.

—Hartmut und Gernot Böhme, *Das Andere der Vernunft*—

The ambivalence with regard to imagination as a power both essential for and excluded from the constitution of the *cogito*, which a close reading of the Cartesian text could bring to light, is even more pronounced in Immanuel Kant's philosophical assessment of the faculty. While imagination emerges in the Kantian Critiques as an indispensable conceptual tool to secure the unity of the transcendental system, Kant presents imagination at the same time as inherently deficient and secondary with regard to the "higher" intellectual faculties of understanding and reason. As a consequence, the relation between reason, understanding, and imagination in the constitution of the transcendental apperception, Kant's non-empirical reconceptualization of the Cartesian *cogito*, remains highly unclear. The intellectual faculties of reason and understanding appear as simultaneously dependent on and superior to the transcendental imagination.

Kant's ambivalence with regard to imagination has famously been diagnosed by Martin Heidegger in his influential study *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, and Heidegger surmises that imagination posed a threat to the primacy of reason that proved unacceptable for Kant. The question why imagination could appear as so

menacing, however, is left unanswered in Heidegger's book, and I shall argue here that Heidegger's inability to provide such an answer is due to his dismissal of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* as of no value in the attempt to unravel the ambiguities of the critical system. When read together with the Kantian Critiques, this chapter will demonstrate to the contrary, the *Anthropology* can indeed unlock the reasons behind the Kantian fears about imagination. Imagination is inseparable for Kant from the threat of madness and the irrational, a threat which ultimately reminds him that to secure the rationality of his own systematic attempt to ground the subject and the philosophical endeavor on the noumenal principles of reason, is fraught with considerable difficulties. It is indeed not easy, as we will find out on the following pages, to be the transcendental subject.

### **3.1 *Imagination in the Limits of Pure Reason***

In the introduction to the transcendental logic of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant presents a seemingly unequivocal dualistic division of the cognitive faculties of the human mind. All cognition ("Erkenntnis"), explains Kant, is a product of the two fundamental sources of our mind, intuitions ("Anschauungen") and concepts ("Begriffe"), a distinction that is paralleled by an underlying division of the cognitive process into a passive and an active component. Intuitions, which are ultimately tied to the senses, make up the "receptive" and hence passive half of our cognitive apparatus, while concepts, the operating tools of the understanding ("Verstand"), constitute their "spontaneous" and thus active counterpart. The cognition of any object, maintains Kant, can only be achieved by a combination of both of these processes, never by one of them alone. Cognition thus depends on the one hand on the ability of our mind to passively receive mental representations ("Vorstellungen," "Eindrücke"), while it cannot be completed on the other hand without the active mental capacity to apply a concept to these representations and to *use* them as a means to cognize

an object. Neither of these two fundamental sources of cognition has priority over the other in Kant's rendering of the cognitive process, since we could not *think* about anything without the concepts of the understanding, while we would have nothing to think *about* without the intuitions that constitute their raw material. As Kant famously ascertains: "Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind."<sup>1</sup> (A51, B76)

This basic division of the process of cognition intersects with the central conceptual duality that pertains to all components of cognition in the framework of Kantian philosophy, the distinction between the empirical and the pure. In their empirical form, the processes of cognition pertain to a specific personal experience, a particular sensation ("Empfindung"), which makes them necessarily subjective, and hence for Kant ultimately arbitrary. He thus relegates the empirical forms of cognition and the *a posteriori* principles that can be derived from them on the basis of experience to the discipline of psychology, from which Kant sharply distinguishes his own critical project. Since Kant aspires to establish the universal conditions for the possibility of experience and cognition as such, the *Critique of Pure Reason* needs to establish the *a priori* conditions of any cognition, regardless of its specific empirical content. Only in this, their pure form, devoid of any empirical content can the processes of cognition be universally applicable to any experience. It is the ultimate goal of Kant's first critique to explain the possibility that certain representations ("Vorstellungen"), be they intuitions or concepts, could be applicable entirely *a priori*, and hence prior to and independent of any empirical experience. Kant is thus not really concerned with the concrete empirical relation of cognitions to their objects—a question that will be of great interest in the *Critique of Judgment*—but rather with undertaking

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<sup>1</sup> "Thoughts without contents are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 193f. All subsequent German quotations from the *Critique of Pure Reason* follow the standard notation of the Akademie Ausgabe. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* ed. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Reimer, 1911), Abt. I, vols. III, IV.

a critical analysis of the conditions of the possibility of cognition as such, a self-reflexive process, for which Kant uses the term “transcendental.” A transcendental cognition takes place on a meta-level where one cognizes how a specific representation can be applied *a priori*, and Kant’s transcendental philosophy is thus the self-critical assessment of the possibility of thought in its pure, non-empirical form.

Consequently, the differentiation between intuitions and concepts is a double one that characterizes both the empirical and the pure realm of cognition. In their empirical form, intuitions and concepts contain a sensation that constitutes their *content*, while as pure representations they provide the *form* for our processes of cognition. Pure intuition, free of any connection to empirical objects, only provides the “form” which prestructures the process of intuition itself, while a pure concept contains the form that enables us to apply concepts as such, prior to any empirical experience. The division of Kant’s *Transcendental Doctrine of Elements* in a transcendental aesthetics and a transcendental logic stems from these two sources of cognition in their pure form: Kant defines aesthetics as the science of the rules guiding sensibility (“Sinnlichkeit”) in general, while logic constitutes the complementary science of the rules guiding the understanding in general. In their pure form, these two sciences thus contain the *a priori* rules of human cognition, synthetic judgments *a priori*, which are the epistemological *desideratum*, the possibility as well as necessity of which Kant aims to deduce in the first critique.

Kant leaves no doubt in the introduction to the transcendental logic that he understands the separation of the two sources of cognition to be definitive and insurmountable. The understanding, Kant insists, cannot intuit anything, while the senses are unable to think. Cognition, Kant argues, can thus only take place if the two capacities of our mind are united: “Nur daraus, daß sie sich vereinigen, kann Erkenntnis entspringen.”<sup>2</sup> (A51, B76) Such a unification should, however, not be understood as

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<sup>2</sup>“Only from their unification can cognition arise.” (Kant 1997, 194)

a mingling of the two separate functions, Kant admonishes. Quite on the contrary, one has every reason to always keep them carefully separate. “Deswegen darf man aber doch nicht ihren Anteil vermischen, sondern man hat große Ursache, jedes von dem anderen sorgfältig abzusondern, und zu unterscheiden.”<sup>3</sup> (A51f., B76) The separation is so essential because the process of philosophical clarification constitutes for Kant, just as much as for Aristotle and Descartes, a process of meticulous division and differentiation. One can only understand cognition by determining and separating out its various elements, which can then be more easily explained in isolation. In an intricate division of labor, various scientific disciplines are then charged with the explanation of the different elements, while the philosophical system as a whole should guarantee and explain the possibility of their unity and collaboration.

Within such methodological parameters, however, which preclude any form of conceptual hybridity, the unification of the two sides of the divide between receptivity and spontaneity, which Kant nevertheless demands in the act of cognition, presents a serious problem. For how could intuitions and concepts possibly be united without a mixing of their roles at least to some degree?—Kant does not address this question in the introduction to the transcendental logics, for his primary intent, to create a clear dichotomy in the cognitive process that can then be treated by two separate disciplines, aesthetics and logics respectively, makes it more or less impossible, and at the very least inconvenient. Ultimately, however, Kant, just as much as his precursors Descartes and Aristotle, needs to take recourse to a mediating faculty in order to explain the—now transcendental—unity of the cognitive process.

### 3.1.1 *Transcendental Syntheses*

The distinction between receptivity and spontaneity also operates in the non-empirical realm of *a priori* cognition. Here, the categories of the pure understanding, the *a*

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<sup>3</sup>“But on this account one must not mix up their roles, rather one has great cause to separate them carefully from each other and distinguish them.” (Kant 1997, 194)

*priori* judgments of quantity, quality, relation, and modality, which provide the pure form for the empirical judgments of the understanding, rely on the manifold presented to them by pure intuition, the *a priori* structures of space and time, without which the categories would remain devoid of any cognitive content. When Kant introduces the table of the categories in paragraph 10 of the Transcendental Logic, he addresses the problematic relation between the two realms of cognition and delineates the process through which the elements of pure spontaneity can relate to the manifold of pure receptivity. Kant here suggests, in a rather vague fashion, that the spontaneous part of our conceptual apparatus necessitates the manifold of pure intuition to be already pre-structured “in a certain way”:

Allein die Spontaneität unseres Denkens erfordert es, daß dieses Man-  
nigfaltige zuerst auf gewisse Weise durchgegangen, aufgenommen, und  
verbunden werde, um daraus eine Erkenntnis zu machen.<sup>4</sup> (A77, B102)

The demand for this intermediary step problematizes the claim of the introduction to the Transcendental Logics, for it suggests that cognition is not solely produced by the application of concepts to intuitions: The process of “going through, taking up, and combining” could not be undertaken by the purely receptive intuition, and since it is presented as the precondition for the operations of our concepts, those could equally not be responsible for it. Kant hence ultimately needs to postulate a mental activity which is able to manipulate the passively received manifold of intuition, while it does not yet belong to the truly spontaneous concepts of the understanding, for which it only *prepares* the necessary content. Kant calls this activity, which bridges the gap between concepts and intuitions and constitutes the precondition for any cognition, “synthesis.” Synthesis, which can be, like intuitions and concepts, both empirical and pure, collects and combines the disparate elements of intuition in order to unify

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<sup>4</sup>“Only the spontaneity of our thought requires that this manifold first be gone through, taken up, and combined in a certain way in order for cognition to be made out of it.” (Kant 1997, 210)

them in a first pre-conceptual content to which the categories are then applicable. It is thus, as Kant points out, “the first thing to which we have to attend if we wish to judge about the first origin of our cognition.” (A78, B103)

At this critical point imagination makes its first appearance in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for Kant now presents synthesis in an oft-cited passage as “the mere effect of the imagination”:

Die Synthesis überhaupt ist, wie wir künftig sehen werden, die bloße Wirkung der Einbildungskraft, einer blinden, obgleich unentbehrlichen Funktion der Seele, ohne die wir überall gar keine Erkenntnis haben würden, der wir uns aber selten nur einmal bewußt sind.<sup>5</sup> (A78, B103)

Kant’s rhetoric here displays his fundamental ambivalence towards imagination, which, as we shall see, thoroughly informs his transcendental argument throughout the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the one hand, since Kant, unlike Descartes, does not reject the validity of sense impressions, but attempts to reconcile the spontaneous activity of the cognizing subject with its necessary receptive reliance on outside sensory input—the legacy of a century of empiricist critique of the Cartesian position—, imagination can regain the mediatory function it already fulfilled in Aristotle’s epistemological framework. In this capacity, imagination becomes an “indispensable function of the soul,” without which no cognition at all would be possible, and Kant thus presents it as an essential function for the cognitive process. On the other hand, however, this very connection to the realm of receptivity compromises imagination and renders it unable to produce an actual cognition worthy of the name. Like the intuitions which it synthesizes, imagination is struck with “blindness,” and it remains the privilege of understanding to complete the unconscious operations of imagination and to turn them into a “cognition in the proper sense”:

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<sup>5</sup> “Synthesis in general is, as we shall subsequently see, the mere effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we could have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious.” (Kant 1997, p. 211.)

Allein, diese Synthesis **auf Begriffe** zu bringen, das ist eine Funktion, die dem Verstande zukommt, und wodurch er uns allererst die Erkenntnis in eigentlicher Bedeutung verschaffet.<sup>6</sup> (A78, B104)

The relationship between imagination and understanding with regard to the unity of cognition is thus a complex and precarious one in the cognitive hierarchy of the first critique. For while the pure concepts of the understanding, the categories, are situated on a higher level of the process of cognition, where they *employ* imagination's synthesized products in order to enable cognition proper, they still depend on the previous work of imagination, without which they could not operate and whose mediatory function consequently appears as more fundamental. The Kantian text never quite resolves this ambiguity with regard to the hierarchy between the two faculties, for even though understanding often seems privileged on the surface level of the systematic edifice, more often than not, its foundations can be seen to rely on imagination. In his discussion of the categories, Kant negotiates this precarious relation between the two faculties by the rather scholastic differentiation between the *synthesis*, which imagination effects in the manifold of pure intuition and the ultimate *unity* of cognition, which to produce is the role of understanding. Kant thus now presents the *a priori* structure of cognition as comprised of three necessary steps:

Das erste, was uns zum Behuf der Erkenntnis aller Gegenstände a priori gegeben sein muß, ist das **Mannigfaltige** der reinen Anschauung; die **Synthesis** dieses Mannigfaltigen durch die Einbildungskraft ist das zweite, gibt aber noch keine Erkenntnis. Die Begriffe, welche dieser reinen Synthesis **Einheit** geben, und lediglich in der Vorstellung dieser notwendigen synthetischen Einheit bestehen, tun das dritte zum Erkenntnis eines

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<sup>6</sup>“Yet to bring this synthesis **to concepts** is a function that pertains to the understanding, and by means of which it first provides cognition in the proper sense.”(Kant 1997, 211)

vorkommenden Gegenstandes, und beruhen auf dem Verstande.<sup>7</sup> (A78, B104)

The two-fold distinction of the introduction has thus turned into a three-step process, in which imagination is both essential, mediatory, and secondary. While it provides the crucial connection between concepts and intuitions, only the categories of pure understanding can secure the unity of the cognitive process and thus of consciousness, under which all experience must be subsumed. This ambiguous relationship between the two faculties equally informs the center-piece of the Transcendental Logics, the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, where Kant investigates the *a priori* structures of cognition in more detail and once again cannot avoid a close encounter with imagination.

### 3.1.2 *The Transcendental Deduction and the Productive Imagination*

It is Kant's goal in the transcendental deduction to prove that the categories are not simply subjective conditions of our cognitive apparatus but have indeed objective validity, i.e they are not only necessary in order for objects to be represented in our consciousness, but required for there to even *be* objects of our intuition at all. "The *a priori* conditions of a possible experience in general," Kant maintains in the A deduction, "are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience."<sup>8</sup> This radical claim, that the possibility of objects is identical with and thus dependent on the *a priori* conditions of our experience, and that objects must hence conform to the conditions of our conceptual apparatus, constitutes the

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<sup>7</sup>The first thing that must be given to us *a priori* for the cognition of all objects is the **manifold** of pure intuition; the **synthesis** of this manifold by means of the imagination is the second thing, but it still does not yield cognition. The concepts that give this pure synthesis **unity**, and that consist solely in the representation of this necessary synthetic unity, are the third thing necessary for cognition of an object that comes before us, and they depend on the understanding. (Kant 1997, 211)

<sup>8</sup>(Kant 1997, 234) "Die Bedingungen a priori einer möglichen Erfahrung überhaupt sind zugleich Bedingungen der Möglichkeit der Gegenstände der Erfahrung." (A111)

“Copernican Revolution” of Kant’s transcendental philosophy. All we can know and cognize, maintains Kant, are objects as they *appear to us* in our consciousness, and as such, they must conform to the *a priori* concepts with which our consciousness operates. The processes of our cognition are hence “always already” at work in all our encounters with external reality, and Kant breaks with both the rationalist *and* the empiricist tradition when he argues that while our cognition is necessarily grounded in experience, there are at the same time no basic, pre-synthetic empirical elements, like Locke’s elementary sensory ideas for example, which would then be combined by our mind in a second cognitive step. While we need to presuppose that an object exterior to our consciousness to which the appearances of our cognition ultimately correspond does indeed exist, this object, as a Thing-in-Itself (“Ding an sich”) independent of our consciousness cannot become known to us and must remain an empty and unknowable X. If this is indeed the case, and herein lies the fundamental epistemological reversal entailed in the Kantian position, then the necessary unity which makes the manifold of our experience into objects for us can only be the unity which our mind itself produces: the unity of our consciousness. Our mind cognizes and produces its objects by creating a unity within the manifold of experience as it appears in consciousness. The object as a Thing-in-Itself is literally “nothing” for us, it is a mere although necessary presupposition, and the unity of sense-experience which it demands is for Kant ultimately the unity of our own consciousness. Within the limits of human cognition, the mind now truly *makes* its world.

Es ist aber klar, daß, da wir es nur mit dem Mannigfaltigen unserer Vorstellungen zu tun haben, und jenes X, was ihnen korrespondiert (der Gegenstand), weil es etwas von allen unsern Vorstellungen Unterschiedenes sein soll, vor uns nichts ist, die Einheit welche der Gegenstand notwendig macht, nichts anders sein könne, als die formale Einheit des Bewußtseins in der Synthesis des Mannigfaltigen der Vorstellungen. Alsdenn sagen

wir: wir erkennen den Gegenstand, wenn wir in dem Mannigfaltigen der Anschauung synthetische Einheit bewirkt haben.<sup>9</sup> (A105)

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<sup>9</sup>“It is clear, however, that since we have to do only with the manifold of our representations, and that X which corresponds to them (the object), because it should be something distinct from all of our representations, is nothing for us, the unity that the object makes necessary can be nothing other than the formal unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of the representations.” (Kant 1997, 231) It is crucial to stress that the Kantian perspective emphatically constitutes a *limitation* of our cognitive abilities, a limitation that is, however, simultaneously restrictive and empowering. On the one hand, Kant’s restriction of our cognition to the realm of appearances in consciousness puts all knowledge that would transcend these limits decidedly out of our reach. We cannot cognize objects *as such*, but only as they appear *for us*. The highest theoretical knowledge we can achieve in the Kant’s epistemological framework is the self-reflexive transcendental one of precisely these limits of our cognition. These critical limits constantly come into conflict with the fundamental goals of our faculty of reason, which pushes us to seek absolute first principles and hence constantly creates the illusionary belief that we could possibly overstep the theoretical boundaries of cognition. The negative task of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is hence to prevent reason from falling prey to this self-created and unavoidable illusion. Kant outlines this self-critical task in the Transcendental Dialectic, the second part of the Transcendental Logic, which is designed to uncover the illusions of seemingly transcendent judgments. In the realm of pure reason, the Kantian project is hence first and foremost a propaedeutical project of self-limitation, which has, as Kant puts it in the Canon of Pure Reason, mainly the negative function of guarding against errors: “Der größte und vielleicht einzige Nutzen aller Philosophie der reinen Vernunft ist also wohl nur negativ; da sie nämlich nicht, als Organon, zur Erweiterung, sondern, als Disziplin, zur Grenzbestimmung dient, und, anstatt Wahrheit zu entdecken, nur das stille Verdienst hat, Irrtümer zu vermeiden.” (A795, B823) (“The greatest and perhaps only utility of all philosophy of pure reason is thus only negative, namely that it does not serve for expansion, as an organon, but rather, as a discipline, serves for the determination of boundaries, and instead of discovering truth it has only the silent merit of guarding against errors.” (Kant 1997, 672)) Yet, apart from the merit of avoiding errors, this limitation also has a *positive* effect for the demarcated realm in which reason can safely operate. For within these limits it now becomes conceivable that we can have a certain and *a priori* knowledge of what we perceive as “nature” or the outside world, since the order which we “discover” in the sensory manifold is the one produced by our own cognitive apparatus: “Die Ordnung und Regelmäßigkeit also an den Erscheinungen, die wir Natur nennen, bringen wir selbst hinein, und würden sie auch gar nicht darin finden können, hätten wir sie nicht, oder die Natur unseres Gemüts ursprünglich hineingelegt. Denn diese Natureinheit soll eine notwendige, d.i. a priori gewisse Einheit der Verknüpfung der Erscheinungen sein. Wie sollten wir aber wohl a priori eine synthetische Einheit auf die Bahn bringen können, wären nicht in den ursprünglichen Erkenntnisquellen unseres Gemüts subjektive Gründe solcher Einheit a priori enthalten, und wären diese subjektive Bedingungen nicht zugleich objektiv gültig, indem sie die Gründe der Möglichkeit sein, überhaupt ein Objekt in der Erfahrung zu erkennen.” (A125f.) Hartmut and Gernot Böhme have convincingly described Kant’s two-fold solution to the problem of epistemology as the culmination of the modern scientific project that begins in the sixteenth century with the work of Francis Bacon. Nature as an Other that could not be completely controlled or dominated by an enlightened human observer is not only excluded from the Kantian project, it is effectively non-existent for it, since it cannot become the object of rational knowledge. The “nature” of Kant’s epistemology is a mere accumulation of empirical data, the product of modern scientific method, which can only yield the answers that are in accordance to the experiments that produce it. The Böhmes, whose controversial and provocative

In the A deduction Kant presents this formal unity of cognition as the product of a threefold synthesis, the stages of which correspond to what now emerges as the *three* subjective sources of cognition: sense, imagination, and apperception, the latter being Kant's term for the *cogito* as the "vehicle of all concepts" (A341, B399), which subtends the categories and their conceptual operations. Kant has thus effectively reformulated the previous cognitive duality of concepts and intuitions, which elevates the imagination to an equally central role in the epistemological process, for all three syntheses, and hence now also imagination operate in the empirical as well as the *a priori* realm, where they constitute the conditions of possibility of experience as such.

Es sind drei subjektive Erkenntnisquellen, worauf die Möglichkeit einer Erfahrung überhaupt, und Erkenntnis der Gegenstände derselben beruht: **Sinn, Einbildungskraft und Apperzeption**; jede derselben kann als empirisch, nämlich in der Anwendung auf gegebene Erscheinungen betrachtet werden, alle aber sind auch Elemente oder Grundlagen *a priori*, welche selbst diesen empirischen Gebrauch möglich machen. (A115)<sup>10</sup>

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1985 study of Kant, *The Other of Reason*, is an attempt to "think the Dialectics of Enlightenment to its end," have coined the term alienated knowledge ("entfremdete Erkenntnis") for this lifeless epistemological safety-zone. cf. Hartmut and Gernot Böhme, *Das Andere der Vernunft. Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996).

<sup>10</sup>The possibility of an experience in general and cognition of its objects rest on three subjective sources of cognition: **sense, imagination and apperception**; each of these can be considered empirically, namely in application to given appearances, but they are also elements or foundations *a priori* that make this empirical use itself possible. (Kant 1997, 236) The first to seize the philosophical opportunity of Kant's conspicuous shift from a binary to a tri-partite structure in his account of cognition was Martin Heidegger. Heidegger, in his influential reading of Kant's first critique in his 1929 study *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, sees the transcendental imagination as the productive root ("Wurzel") of Kant's systematic account of cognition. In writing the first critique, Heidegger claims, Kant "discovered" this foundational role of imagination, but immediately "recoiled" from this discovery, which would have challenged the primacy of reason, ultimately erasing the status of imagination as an independent source of cognition in the B version of the transcendental deduction. Heidegger's interpretation of Kant demands further attention, and I will return to it in more detail in section 4.1.6 of this chapter. cf. Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik Gesamtausgabe*, Abt.I, Vol.3., ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1991).

In its empirical function, the synthesis of imagination is subject to the laws of association, and the principles of resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect determine the way it can combine the representations of sense-impressions in consciousness. As “the faculty for representing an object even **without its presence** in intuition”—Kant’s definition of the faculty in the B deduction (B151)—imagination in its empirical form thus remains bound to the same laws which combine the sense-impressions in the manifold of experience when they are first received in intuition. In this guise, Kant thus refers to the faculty as *reproductive*.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, however, the faculty is of true interest for Kant’s argument only in its transcendental function, where its *a priori* synthesis *predetermines* the empirical laws of association. Without this transcendental form of the faculty, termed the *productive* imagination, Kant asserts, our concepts of the objects of experience could not be united at all, for through its transcendental mediation, imagination establishes the necessary connection between the two extremes of cognition, sensibility and understanding, which provides the unity of our judgments in the transcendental apperception:

Wir haben also eine reine Einbildungskraft, als ein Grundvermögen der menschlichen Seele, das aller Erkenntnis a priori zum Grunde liegt. Vermittelst deren bringen wir das Mannigfaltige der Anschauung einerseits, und mit der Bedingung der notwendigen Einheit der reinen Apperzeption andererseits in Verbindung. Beide äußerste Enden, nämlich Sinnlichkeit und Verstand, müssen vermittelst dieser transszendentalen Funktion

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<sup>11</sup>Kant’s division of the faculty into various incarnations that fulfill different functions in the epistemological process is of course not new in the history of the concept. Kant is indebted in particular to Johann Nicolaus Tetens’s discussion of imagination in the latter’s extensive *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung* from 1776-1777, which Kant had studied closely. Tetens, who synthesizes both the contemporary German and British discussion of imagination, was one of Kant’s main sources for the eighteenth-century aesthetic debate about the concept. Since it is not my goal at present to retrace once more the intricate eighteenth-century “Begriffsgeschichte” of the term “imagination,” I can only refer to two of the most thorough studies on the topic: James Engell’s *The Creative Imagination* (Engell 1981) and Gabriele Dürbeck’s *Einbildungskraft und Aufklärung* (Dürbeck 1998).

der Einbildungskraft notwendig zusammenhängen; weil jene sonst zwar Erscheinungen, aber keine Gegenstände eines empirischen Erkenntnisses, mithin keine Erfahrung geben würden.<sup>12</sup> (A125)

While the synthesis of imagination appeared as a necessary yet ultimately still insufficient intermediary step for cognition in the paragraph on the categories, the productive imagination here achieves an even more central position in the Kantian account of the cognitive process. No experience, asserts Kant, would be possible without it, and he thus presents imagination's ability to provide the connection between the two otherwise irrevocably distinct realms of receptivity and spontaneity as equally essential for the process of cognition. Yet, the tension between imagination and understanding that already characterized Kant's earlier account continues to inform also the transcendental deduction. For while the possibility of cognition depends on the synthesis of productive imagination, Kant also retains the hierarchical structure which clearly situates imagination on a lower level with regard to the pure understanding. Since imagination, even in its *a priori* transcendental function, remains associated with the sensual realm of the pure intuition, it depends on the understanding in form of the transcendental apperception in order to be elevated from the sensual to the intellectual realm. Kant hence once again presents imagination as simultaneously essential and deficient with regard to the understanding.

Diese Apperzeption ist es nun, welche zu der reinen Einbildungskraft hinzukommen muß, um ihre Funktion intellektuell zu machen. Denn an sich selbst ist die Synthesis der Einbildungskraft, obgleich a priori

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<sup>12</sup>“We therefore have a pure imagination, as a fundamental faculty of the human soul, that grounds all cognition *a priori*. By its means we bring into combination the manifold of intuition on the one side and the condition of the necessary unity of apperception on the other. Both extremes, namely sensibility and understanding, must necessarily be connected by means of this transcendental function of the imagination, since otherwise the former would to be sure yield appearances but no objects of an empirical cognition, hence there would be no experience.” (Kant 1997, 241)

ausgeübt, dennoch jederzeit sinnlich, weil sie das Mannigfaltige nur so verbindet, wie es in der Anschauung **erscheint** [...] (A124)<sup>13</sup>

Since it remains unclear at this point, how exactly the transcendental apperception can and will be “added” to the synthesis of the pure imagination, the ambiguous relationship of imagination and understanding ultimately affects Kant’s account of the “highest point of philosophy” itself. In order to elucidate how the unresolved codependence of the two terms continues to inform the transcendental “vehicle of all concepts,” it is now necessary to take a look at the Kantian version of the *cogito* in more detail.

### 3.1.3 *Saving the Cogito: The Transcendental Unity of Apperception*

The fundamental distinction of the empirical and the transcendental also applies to the Kantian concept of the self, where the differentiation supports Kant’s philosophical argument against David Hume’s radical empiricist scepticism about the existence of a Cartesian *cogito* as the unifying center of consciousness. Kant in fact completely agrees with Hume’s assessment of the self as a mere bundle of sense-impressions without any continuity or identity, as far as the self in its *empirical* form is concerned. In the temporal realm of our empirical self, which Kant calls the empirical apperception or the inner sense, there is, he concedes in the transcendental deduction, indeed no stability or continuity to be found, as we encounter nothing but the constant flux of changing cognitions passing through consciousness. Nothing *identical* could ever be thought in terms of these ephemeral sets of empirical data:

Das Bewußtsein seiner selbst, nach den Bestimmungen unserers Zustandes, bei der inneren Wahrnehmung ist bloß empirisch, jederzeit wandelbar,

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<sup>13</sup>It is this apperception that must be added to the pure imagination in order to make its function intellectual. For in itself the synthesis of the imagination, although exercised *a priori*, is nevertheless always sensible, for it combines the manifold only as it **appears** in intuition [...] (Kant 1997, 240)

es kann kein stehendes oder bleibendes Selbst in diesem Flusse innerer Erscheinungen geben, und wird gewöhnlich der **innre Sinn** genannt, oder die **empirische Apperzeption**. Das, was **notwendig** als numerisch identisch vorgestellt werden soll, kann nicht als ein solches durch empirische Data gedacht werden.<sup>14</sup> (A107)

The cognition of a stable self that would remain continually the same throughout the empirical stream of consciousness thus remains forever elusive from an empirical point of view, the reason for which Hume, who could only accept factual empirical evidence as the basis for sound philosophical argument, dismissed the idea of the *cogito* as a mere fiction and ultimately as the effect of intellectual laziness. Since it demands so much cognitive attention and analytical precision to distinguish close resemblance and contiguity in the association of our ideas from the superficial impression of their seeming identity, Hume claims, we ultimately succumb to the comforting seduction of the latter position and formulate the notion of the self as a mere cover-up:

Our last resource is to yield to it [this inaccurate method of thinking], and boldly assert that these different related objects are in effect the same, however interrupted and variable. In order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation. Thus we feign the continu'd existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption; and run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*, to disguise the variation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>“The consciousness of oneself in accordance with the determinations of our state in internal perception is merely empirical, forever variable; it can provide no standing or abiding self in this stream of inner appearances, and is customarily called **inner sense** or **empirical apperception**. That which should **necessarily** be presented as numerically identical cannot be thought of as such through empirical data.” (Kant 1997, 232)

<sup>15</sup>Hume develops his argument, which I cannot discuss here in full detail, in the famous section “Of

But for Kant, the empirical perspective on the concepts of self and identity, which almost inevitably leads to the Humean conclusion, is precisely that: a perspective. Particularly for ethical reasons, Kant cannot concede that our most basic sense of possessing a stable personal identity that could be held responsible for its actions, should be a mere illusion. But also from an epistemological point of view the Humean perspective has serious explanatory shortcomings, as much as his empirical critique of the Cartesian concept of the self as identical *substance* might be justified: For how could we even conceive of the self as a mere bundle of perceptions, if there was no position whatsoever in our cognitive apparatus from where to observe and judge it as such? To put it pointedly, if Hume's conclusions were indeed adequate, and if our consciousness was thus indeed completely reducible to the mechanical association of ideas in the organ of the imagination, it would be inconceivable for Hume's critique of Descartes to actually have been formulated. A self that was nothing but a bundle of perceptions could certainly not recognize itself as such, and a form of consciousness able to differentiate itself from the associative process is thus ultimately necessary even if only to perceive the empirical self as a mere stream of associated impressions. Once again, Kant provides an exit from the empirical impasse by differentiating the concept of "self" and by giving it an empirical incarnation and a transcendental precondition. The Humean bundle of perceptions, to which Descartes had ascribed ontological substance in the name of the *cogito* constitutes for Kant only the empirical side of the self, which cannot be understood without its transcendental counterpart. Just as much as all sensory intuitions must be relatable to an empirical consciousness in order to become intuitions *for us*, argues Kant, the instable sets of data, which succeed each

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Personal Identity" in book I of his *Treatise of Human Nature*. It should be remarked, however, that Hume, in his complete reversal of the Cartesian position with regard to the *cogito* actually brings the philosophical debate full circle by returning with an empiricist twist to Montaigne's sceptical view of the human mind as a kaleidoscope without any discernible center. What we perceive as the self is for Hume entirely the product of the imagination, which is for him—just as much as for Descartes—still the physiological organ in which the representation of sense perceptions, as well as the association of ideas literally takes place. cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 166.

other in the flux of time must be relatable to an *a priori* and hence transcendental form of our self in order to become the transitory events that we judge to occur in *our* consciousness. Kant calls the non-empirical, a-temporal, and non-substantive container that enables this relation, the transcendental unity of apperception, and the proposition that each different empirical form of the self must be united in this single transcendental form of consciousness, as the centerpoint of stability absent from the empirical realm, becomes for Kant the absolute first principle of the process of all thought and cognition:

Alles empirische Bewußtsein hat aber eine notwendige Beziehung auf ein transzendentales (vor aller besonderen Erfahrung vorhergehendes) Bewußtsein, nämlich das Bewußtsein meiner selbst, als die ursprüngliche Apperzeption. Es ist also schlechthin notwendig, daß in meinem Erkenntnisse alles Bewußtsein zu einem Bewußtsein (meiner selbst) gehöre. [...] Der synthetische Satz: daß alles verschiedene **empirische Bewußtsein** in einem einigen Selbstbewußtsein verbunden sein müsse, ist der schlechthin erste und synthetische Grundsatz unsres Denkens überhaupt.<sup>16</sup> (A117)

And Kant will be even more explicit in the B deduction, where he equates the transcendental unity of self-consciousness with the understanding itself, making it the “highest point” from which all transcendental philosophy needs to take its beginning:

Und so ist die synthetische Einheit der Apperzeption der höchste Punkt, an dem man allen Verstandesgebrauch, selbst die ganze Logik, und, nach

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<sup>16</sup>“All empirical consciousness, however, has a necessary relation to a transcendental consciousness (preceding all particular experience), namely the consciousness of myself, as original apperception. It is therefore absolutely necessary that in my cognition all consciousness belong to one consciousness (of myself). [...] The synthetic proposition that every different **empirical consciousness** must be combined into a single self-consciousness is the absolutely first and synthetic principle of our thinking in general.” (Kant 1997, 237)

ihr, die Transzendental-Philosophie heften muß, ja dieses Vermögen ist der Verstand selbst.<sup>17</sup> (B134)

As such, the *a priori* unity of apperception, Kant's transcendental version of the Cartesian *cogito* is the vehicle for the categories, the "I think," which, as Kant famously puts it in the B deduction "must be able to accompany all my representations," if there is to be any cognition at all *for me* as a cognizing subject. From the transcendental perspective of Kantian philosophy, Hume's sceptical account of the self can thus be accounted for, while the *cogito* returns to its fundamental position for the philosophical system.

#### 3.1.4 *Transcendental Illusions*

Yet, in the Kantian framework, this "I think" cannot be a self-present substance akin to the Cartesian *cogito*. As the transcendental condition of self-consciousness it cannot itself become part of empirical consciousness. It remains a mere form, which cannot be given content in an intuition. All we can become conscious of, insists Kant, in order to ward off any Humean criticism, is *that* we must also exist in this transcendental capacity, but not *how* we exist as transcendental subjects, since, we cannot have an intuition of the self as a transcendental entity that necessarily precedes the fundamental cognitive division of concepts and intuitions:

Dagegen bin ich mir meiner selbst in der transzendentalen Synthesis des Mannigfaltigen der Vorstellungen überhaupt, mithin in der synthetischen ursprünglichen Einheit der Apperzeption, bewußt, nicht wie ich mir erscheine, noch wie ich an mir selbst bin, sondern nur **daß ich bin**. Diese **Vorstellung ist ein Denken**, nicht ein **Anschauen**.<sup>18</sup> (B157)

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<sup>17</sup>"And thus the synthetic unity of apperception is the highest point to which one must affix all use of the understanding, even the whole of logic and, after it, transcendental philosophy; indeed this faculty is the understanding itself." (Kant 1997, 247)

<sup>18</sup>"In the transcendental synthesis of the manifold of representations in general, on the contrary,

The transcendental subject, just as much as the transcendental object is thus located on the boundary of our cognition, and equally remains an empty X that cannot become known to us even as an appearance, let alone *as such*. We can think, but never intuit it, as the first principle of our consciousness it is a necessary presupposition, which however, in the *circulus vitiosus* of consciousness, we can never grasp independent of the concepts that we use to cognize it, and which already presuppose its existence:

Zum Grunde derselben [die transzendente Seelenlehre] können wir aber nichts anderes legen, als die einfache und für sich selbst an Inhalt gänzlich leere Vorstellung: Ich, von der man nicht einmal sagen kann, daß sie ein Begriff sei, sondern ein bloßes Bewußtsein, das alle Begriffe begleitet. Durch dieses Ich, oder Er, oder Es (das Ding), welches denket, wird nun nichts weiter, als ein transzendentes Subjekt der Gedanken vorgestellt = x, welches nur durch die Gedanken, die seine Prädikate sind, erkannt wird, und wovon wir, abgesondert, niemals den mindesten Begriff haben können; um welches wir uns daher in einem beständigen Zirkel herumdrehen, indem wir uns seiner Vorstellung jederzeit schon bedienen müssen, um irgend etwas von ihm zu urteilen; eine Unbequemlichkeit, die davon nicht zu trennen ist, weil das Bewußtsein an sich nicht sowohl eine Vorstellung ist, die ein bestimmtes Objekt unterscheidet, sondern eine Form derselben überhaupt, so fern sie Erkenntnis genannt werden soll; denn von der allein kann ich sagen, daß ich dadurch irgend etwas denke.<sup>19</sup> (A346, B404)

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hence in the synthetic original unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am. This representation is a **thinking**, not an **intuiting**." (Kant 1997, 259)

<sup>19</sup>"At the ground of this doctrine we can place nothing but the simple and in content for itself wholly empty representation I, of which one cannot even say that it is a concept, but a mere consciousness that accompanies every concept. Through this I, He, or It (the thing), which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of thoughts = x, which is recognized only through the thoughts that are its predicates, and about which, in abstraction, we can never

The *cogito* in its transcendental form, is thus no longer self-evident as it was for Descartes, but has become an “opaque entity,” as Manfred Frank puts it.<sup>20</sup> In the transcendental act of self-reflection, the self becomes its own object as it presents itself to itself in consciousness, yet the transcendental self which provides the unity for this act of reflection cannot become present, and the empirical I can thus never represent the transcendental I which subtends it. An original perception of the transcendental subject as purely intellectual form *and* content would only be possible for a being capable of an “*intuitus originarius*” or of an “intellectual intuition,” a type of cognition where concepts would produce their own content without any reliance on prior sensory data. This, however, Kant insists, is impossible for human cognition, where spontaneity and receptivity always remain separate. Since our concepts cannot intuit anything, the understanding relies on the senses to provide its content, a content which cannot be given for the transcendental apperception. Only a divine understanding whose thought could produce its own objects would be able to perceive itself in this fashion. For such a consciousness, however, the whole explanatory framework of Kantian philosophy, designed to explain human cognition, would be meaningless:

Denn, wollte ich mir einen Verstand denken, der selbst anschauete (wie etwa einen göttlichen, der nicht gegebene Gegenstände sich vorstellte, sondern durch dessen Vorstellung die Gegenstände selbst zugleich gegeben, oder hervorgebracht würden), so würden die Kategorien in Ansehung

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have even the least concept; because of which we therefore turn in a constant circle, since we must always already avail ourselves of the representation of it at all times in order to judge anything about it; we cannot separate ourselves from this inconvenience, because the consciousness in itself is not even a representations distinguishing a particular object, but rather a form of representation in general, insofar as it is to be called a cognition; for of it alone can I say that through it I think anything.” (Kant 1997, 414)

<sup>20</sup>cf. Manfred Frank, “‘Intellektuale Anschauung.’ Drei Stellungnahmen zu einem Deutungsversuch von Selbstbewußtsein: Kant, Fichte, Hölderlin/Novalis,” *Die Aktualität der Frühromantik*, ed. Ernst Behler and Jochen Hörisch (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1987), 96-127, 109.

eines solchen Erkenntnisses gar keine Bedeutung haben. Sie sind nur Regeln für einen Verstand, dessen ganzes Vermögen im Denken besteht, d.i. in der Handlung, die Synthesis des Mannigfaltigen, welches ihm anderweitig in der Anschauung gegeben worden, zur Einheit der Apperzeption zu bringen, der also für sich gar nichts **erkennt**, sondern nur den Stoff zum Erkenntnis, die Anschauung, die ihm durchs Objekt gegeben werden muß, verbindet und ordnet.<sup>21</sup> (B145)

A divine understanding, capable of an intellectual intuition, would not be in need of a special act of synthesis to provide it with content and to unify the manifold of sensory experience. For a human understanding, however, which is after all the subject of the first critique, such a synthesis, and hence the work of the productive imagination, constitutes “unavoidably the first principle”:

Derjenige Verstand, durch dessen Selbstbewußtsein zugleich das Mannigfaltige der Anschauung gegeben würde, ein Verstand, durch dessen Vorstellung zugleich die Objekte dieser Vorstellung existierten, würde einen besondern Actus der Synthesis des Mannigfaltigen zu der Einheit des Bewußtseins nicht bedürfen, deren der menschliche Verstand, der bloß denkt, nicht anschaut, bedarf. Aber für den menschlichen Verstand ist er doch *unvermeidlich der erste Grundsatz* [...] [my emphasis]<sup>22</sup> (B138f.)

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<sup>21</sup> “For if I wanted to think of an understanding that itself intuited (as, say, a divine understanding, which would not represent given objects, but through whose representation the objects would themselves at the same time be given, or produced), then the categories would have no significance at all with regard to such a cognition. They are only rules for an understanding whose entire capacity consists in thinking, i.e., in the action of bringing the synthesis of the manifold that is given to it in intuition from elsewhere to the unity of apperception, which therefore **cognizes** nothing at all by itself, but only combines and orders the material for cognition, the intuition, which must be given to it through the object.” (Kant 1997, 253f.)

<sup>22</sup> “That understanding through whose self-consciousness the manifold of intuition would at the same time be given, an understanding through whose representation the objects of this representation would at the same time exist, would not require a special act of synthesis of the manifold for the unity of consciousness, which the human understanding, which merely thinks, but does not

In this passage, Kant thus presents the synthesis of the productive imagination as the first principle of the human understanding, even though both the latter and the former should ultimately be grounded in the transcendental unity of apperception, which, as Kant had argued earlier in the deduction of the categories, needs to be “added” to the transcendental synthesis of the manifold in order to elevate it to the status of a cognition. As Kant presents the case at this point, however, the transcendental apperception only serves as the necessary precondition of our consciousness, while it cannot provide the sole origin of our cognition. The relationship between the transcendental apperception and the transcendental imagination is thus also inherently and irresolvably ambiguous in the Kantian text, as the transcendental unity of apperception, while situated at the highest point of the critical system, remains dependent on the synthesis of imagination to enable human cognition:

Diese synthetische Einheit setzt aber eine Synthesis voraus, oder schließt sie ein [...] Also beziehet sich die transz. Einheit der Apperzeption auf die reine Synthesis der Einbildungskraft, als eine Bedingung a priori der Möglichkeit aller Zusammensetzung des Mannigfaltigen einer Erkenntnis.<sup>23</sup> (A118)

The productive imagination can thus provide what the transcendental unity of apperception pointedly cannot: the essential connection between receptivity and spontaneity without which humans, as finite and temporal beings, could not complete the act of cognition. The hierarchy between understanding and imagination in the A version of the transcendental deduction thus proves to be constructed on rather unstable ground, an ambiguous instability, which remains unresolved throughout the

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intuit, does require. But for the human understanding it is *unavoidably the first principle* [...]” [my emphasis] (Kant 1997, 250)

<sup>23</sup>“This synthetic unity, however, presupposes a synthesis, or includes it [...] Thus the transcendental unity of apperception is related to the pure synthesis of the imagination, as an *a priori* condition of the possibility of all composition of the manifold in a cognition.” (Kant 1997, 237f.)

first critique.<sup>24</sup> It is now time to take a closer look at Martin Heidegger's reading of the Kantian text, since Heidegger was after all the first to lay his hermeneutical finger on the metaphysical problem of the transcendental imagination for the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

### 3.1.5 *The Abyss of the Imagination: Heidegger's Reading of Kant*

For Martin Heidegger, the temporal constitution of the human cognitive apparatus in its specific finitude ("Endlichkeit") and its relation to Being as its metaphysical ground constitutes the true subject of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's first critique, Heidegger insists, "has nothing to do with epistemology"—"Die Kritik der reinen Vernunft hat mit 'Erkenntnistheorie' nichts zu schaffen." (Heidegger 1991, 17)—but must rather be treated as an ontology. Heidegger thus reformulates the Copernican turn enacted in Kant's text as the recognition that to lay out a critical foundation of metaphysics can only mean to question "the inner possibility of ontology,"<sup>25</sup> and he "repeats" Kant's distinction between the transcendent and the transcendental as the difference between the ontic and the ontological. For Heidegger, transcendental philosophy "truly" means to problematize the possibility of ontology.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>The same difficulty which haunts Kant's deduction of the categories also informs the chapter on the schematism, which opens the second book of the *Transcendental Analytic*, the *Analytic of Principles*. Here, Kant tackles the equally vexing question of how the *a priori* categories can actually structure our empirical sensibility. Once again, the necessary connection between the two distinct realms can only be provided by imagination, which produces the "mediating representation" of the transcendental schema, a hybrid cognitive principle, which is simultaneously pure, intellectual *and* sensible.

<sup>25</sup>"Mit dem Problem der Transzendenz wird an die Stelle der Metaphysik nicht 'Erkenntnistheorie' gesetzt, sondern die Ontologie auf ihre innere Möglichkeit befragt." (Heidegger 1991, 17)

<sup>26</sup>Heidegger explicitly conceives of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* as a "Wiederholung" (repetition) of the Kantian project, which is designed to reveal the latter's ontological essence. As Slavoj Žižek has rightfully remarked, Heidegger's interpretation of Kant can thus very well be read as the first book of the abandoned second part of *Being and Time*. (cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 22. ) In the mode of repetition, the fundamental goal of Heidegger's exegesis of Kant is not to restate what Kant explicitly presents in his text ("was Kant ausdrücklich gesagt hat"), but to bring to light what Kant truly *meant* to say ("was Kant hat sagen wollen"), a search for the guiding principle

Hence, just as much as Kant excludes the possibility of a direct access to transcendent principles as the basis of a metaphysics, Heidegger rules out the possibility of ontic knowledge—direct access to Being—for the finite human intellect, whose essence is always informed by its temporality. Being, while it cannot be directly experienced, can, however, “make itself known” as it were, as the resistance (“das Dawider”) that our cognitive faculties encounter in the ontological horizon opened up by the transcendental trinity of pure intuition, pure imagination, and pure apperception. Heidegger, however, unlike Kant, is unequivocal about making the transcendental imagination

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of the text—insufficiently articulated by the author himself—that constitutes for Heidegger the ultimate task of any act of philosophical hermeneutics (“Auslegung”). In a short paragraph, which could summarize several decades of heated debate between hermeneuts and deconstructionists—Jacques Derrida’s (in)famous silent encounter with Hans-Georg Gadamer in particular comes to mind—, Heidegger has no qualms to admit that such a reading necessarily involves a moment of interpretative violence: “Um freilich dem, was die Worte sagen, dasjenige abzuringen, was sie sagen wollen, muß jede Interpretation notwendig Gewalt brauchen. Solche Gewalt aber kann nicht schweifende Willkür sein. Die Kraft einer vorausleuchtenden Idee muß die Auslegung treiben und leiten. Nur in Kraft dieser kann eine Interpretation das jederzeit Vermessene wagen, sich der verborgenen inneren Leidenschaft eines Werkes anzuvertrauen, um durch diese in das Ungesagte hineingestellt und zum Sagen desselben gezwungen zu werden. Das aber ist ein Weg, auf dem die leitende Idee selbst in ihrer Kraft zur Durchleuchtung an den Tag kommt.” (Heidegger 1991, p. 202.) Kant’s text, in other words, does not turn all that easily into a vehicle for Heidegger’s philosophical convictions, yet ultimately cannot resist their interpretative force. The hermeneutical fusion of horizons, to use Gadamer’s term, which relies on Heidegger’s belief that author, text, and reader all work together to bring an unspoken underlying idea to ever clearer expression, is thus always a unidirectional assertion of power. The interpreter ultimately knows best what the author’s words were “really” designed to say, and it is he who can force the text to reveal a “hidden inner passion” that remains invisible on its rhetorical surface. My parenthetical aside here is more, however, than a digression on the potential violence of hermeneutic readings, for the interpretative force that comes to light in this passage is directly connected to a violence inherent in the philosophical discussion about imagination as it dates back to Plato’s *Timaeos*. The inspiration afforded by imagination, it will be recalled, can only become known in the words of the interpreters, the *prophetai*, who must “translate” and ultimately construct, what the ecstatic medium meant to communicate. Heidegger’s violent hermeneutical moment thus lies at the basis of the construction of meaning, where the rational and the irrational, the communicable and the incommunicable intersect, an intersection that will not coincidentally become of central importance for Kant’s third critique. Apart from these general implications, Heidegger’s distinction between the surface meaning and the “hidden passion” of a text also reveals the roots of his thought in the hermeneutical tradition of German Idealism and Early German Romanticism. No matter how strong Heidegger’s polemics against the “seinsvergessen” idealist readings of Kant might be, Fichte and his successors, as we shall see in the next chapter, were equally convinced that to read a text philosophically meant to distinguish between its letter (“Buchstabe”) and its spirit (“Geist”). This connection shows first and foremost, that to discover the “inner passion” of the Kantian text is not as straightforward a process as Heidegger would lead us to believe.

the “unifying and originally productive middle” (“einigende Mitte,” “ursprünglich bildende Mitte”) of this tripartite “horizon of Being” (“Seinshorizont”) and hence the “common root” (“gemeinsame Wurzel”) of pure receptivity and pure spontaneity. For Heidegger, the pure synthesis of imagination is precisely the middle ground that connects sensibility and understanding, and which alone can guarantee the unity of man’s transcendental nature.<sup>27</sup>

As such, the transcendental imagination becomes the source or “root,” from which the horizon of being ultimately originates. In Heidegger’s reading of Kant its synthesis produces the transcendental object—or the transcendental subject for that matter, since both complement each other in a non-hierarchical relationship in Kant’s account of cognition—, the unknowable and necessarily empty X, which ultimately grounds our concepts and intuitions, even while it cannot become an object of consciousness. This liminal subject-object, for Heidegger a product of imagination, constitutes the thematically “empty” horizon in which Being can make its “offer” (“Angebot”), and where the realm of the ontic becomes “audible” (“vernehmbar”). This passive onto-theological relation to Being, which can be revealed but never grasped, constitutes for Heidegger the defining core (“Wesen”) of human existence, which is hence fundamentally characterized by a receiving state (“Hinnehalten”) with regard to Being,

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<sup>27</sup>Heidegger describes the pure synthesis of imagination as a “going to and fro” (“Hin- und Hergang”) between the two poles of the cognitive process, while he depicts imagination as the middle ground that must be traversed in both cognitive directions Kant discusses in the transcendental deduction, the movement “downwards” from pure understanding towards pure intuition, and the “upward” movement in the opposite direction. Heidegger here almost directly echoes Friedrich von Hardenberg’s “to and fro direction” (“Hin und her Direction”) in the *ordo inversus* of human consciousness, which I will discuss in the following chapter. Passages that insinuate connections to von Hardenberg’s Early Romantic philosophy are frequent throughout Heidegger’s text, and the essence of Heidegger’s “Daseinsphilosophie” seems encapsulated in von Hardenberg’s speculation in the *Fichte Studies* that “consciousness is a Being outside of Being within Being.” (“Das Bewußtsein ist ein Seyn außer dem Seyn im Seyn.” cf. Friedrich von Hardenberg, *Das Philosophische Werk I. Novalis Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs* ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl, and Gerhard Schulz, Vol.2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960) 6 vols., 106. ) While Heidegger’s debt to and interpretation of Friedrich Hölderlin, manifested in Heidegger’s essay “The origin of the Work of Art” is well-known, the relation of Heidegger’s philosophy to the texts of Novalis still merits closer investigation.

which offers itself in a moment of grace (“Sichgebendes”). Even pure thought itself, technically pure spontaneity in its transcendental capacity of applying concepts to intuitions, is thus always marked by receptivity, and necessarily bears the characteristics of intuition with regard to Being.<sup>28</sup> Pure understanding, or pure apperception hence *is* pure intuition in relation to Being, and the “highest point of philosophy” thus needs to be described as a receptive spontaneity.<sup>29</sup> For Heidegger there can hence be no doubt that the pure apperception has the “ground of its possibility” in the transcendental imagination, the faculty of synthesis, which alone is always both receptive *and* spontaneous. As spontaneous receptivity, the transcendental apperception must originate in the transcendental imagination:

In diesem Sinne ist das reine Denken in sich, nicht nachträglich, hinnehmend, d.h. reine Anschauung. Diese struktural einheitliche rezeptive Spontaneität muß demnach der transzendentalen Einbildungskraft entspringen, um das sein zu können, was sie ist. (Heidegger 1991, 154)

The transcendental imagination, as the receptive spontaneity that *produces* the ontological horizon of possibilities within which alone our intuitions and concepts can become real, and in which the self must think and act, hence opens up the essential relation between human existence and Being. Ultimately, Heidegger can thus claim that the whole architectonics of human reason and hence the possibility of a philosophical system as such, both theoretical and practical, has its source in the pure imagination:

Die transzendente Einbildungskraft eintwirft bildend im vorhinein das

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<sup>28</sup>“Um den wesenhaften Anschauungscharacter des reinen Denkens zu sehen, muß nur das echte Wesen des endlichen Anschauens als eines Hinnehmens von Sichgebendem begriffen und festgehalten werden.” (Heidegger 1991, 154)

<sup>29</sup>The German term “Anschauung,” literally a “looking at,” as a substantivized verb that indicates a process of visualization that is both active and passive, lends itself much more easily to the metaphorical overdetermination of Heidegger’s philosophical language.

Ganze der Möglichkeiten, in das sie “hinaussieht”, um sich dadurch den Horizont vorzuhalten, innerhalb dessen das erkennende Selbst, und nicht nur dieses, handelt. Nur deshalb vermag Kant zu sagen: “Die menschliche Vernunft ist ihrer Natur nach architektonisch, d.i. sie betrachtet alle Erkenntnisse als gehörig zu einem möglichen System...” (Heidegger 1991, 154f.)

Kant, Heidegger asserts famously, must have discovered this originary ontological role of imagination as constitutive of the nature of man (“die Wesensverfassung des Menschen”) while working on the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Fundamentally unsettled by what he saw when coming face to face with this “unknown root” of cognition, Heidegger claims, Kant recoiled from his own discovery and consequently significantly reduced the role of imagination in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where imagination functions no longer as an autonomous source of cognition but is presented as a mere mode of the understanding:

Diese ursprüngliche, in der transzendentalen Einbildungskraft “gewurzelte” Wesensverfassung des Menschen ist das “Unbekannte”, in das Kant hineingeblickt haben muß, wenn er von der “uns unbekanntem Wurzel” sprach. Denn das Unbekannte ist ja nicht das, wovon wir schlechthin nichts wissen, sondern was uns im Erkannten als das Beunruhigende entgegendrängt. Doch Kant hat die ursprünglichere Auslegung der transzendentalen Einbildungskraft nicht durchgeführt, ja nicht einmal dazu angesetzt, trotz der deutlichen, von ihm selbst erstmals erkannten Vorzeichnungen zu einer solchen Analytik. Im Gegenteil: Kant ist vor dieser unbekanntem Wurzel zurückgewichen. (Heidegger 1991, 160)

Yet, what could have been so unsettling for Kant about this “discovery,” and what would have been at the origin of the fear Heidegger diagnoses in his repetition

of the Kantian argument? What, one might ask, is so menacing about imagination? Ultimately, Heidegger claims, nothing less is at stake in the Kantian shift from the A to the B deduction, than the primacy of reason itself. Once Kant realized where the implications of his analysis in the A deduction would lead him, Heidegger maintains, he decidedly opted for the pure understanding and against the pure imagination in the B deduction, since to admit to the foundational status of the latter would have severely threatened the position of pure reason as the highest faculty in the hierarchy of cognitive powers:

Nur hat sich in der transzendental subjektiven Grundlegung die zweite Auflage für den reinen Verstand und gegen die reine Einbildungskraft entschieden, um die Herrschaft der Vernunft zu retten. (Heidegger 1991, 170)

Heidegger presents two reasons for Kant's decision. On the one hand, he argues, Kant remained strongly influenced by the traditional accounts of imagination in the discourses of anthropology and psychology, which presented the faculty as one of the lower cognitive powers due to its intimate connection to the senses. The realization that this lowly faculty should be the true subject of the *Critique of Pure Reason* would have done nothing less than to turn the existing philosophical hierarchies upside-down. It would have insinuated a primacy of the sensory over the rational faculties of the human mind, and would thus have called into question the whole tradition of Western metaphysics with its clear focus on the superiority of reason and the *logos*. Kant, in other words, even though his Copernican revolution in metaphysics brought him to the brink of this ontological abyss, was not daring enough to call for the radical reversal in philosophical thought that Heidegger himself felt he was accomplishing by drawing attention to the secondary status of human rationality in relation to Being.

On the other hand, Heidegger stipulates that Kant was drawn to an even stronger preference for reason when he employed the transcendental framework he had de-

veloped in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in order to establish the *a priori* basis for moral philosophy in the second critique. For here, reason in its practical form now emerged as the central and truly spontaneous capacity of free moral agents. In order to preserve the possibility of a pure morality, untainted by the actual empirical decisions of human beings, it was now, Heidegger claims, even less possible for Kant to acknowledge the foundational role of imagination, which would have meant to bring a faculty intrinsically connected to the empirical embodiment of human existence into more than dangerous proximity to the law-giving position of pure reason and the categorical imperative.

Heidegger, however, has no doubts that even practical reason can only have its origin in the transcendental imagination. This conclusion is inevitable in Heidegger's reading of Kant's account of practical philosophy, since the subject of the second critique is both spontaneous *and* receptive with regard to the moral law. While the subject is spontaneous in so far as it freely gives itself the law to which it agrees to adhere, the law itself cannot be written by the subject—as a noumenal rule, it can only be passively received. The act that constitutes the self as a moral persona, its respect (“Achtung”) with regard to the law is thus an act in which the empirical self freely submits to a jurisdiction it receives in its intellectual form. The subject's relation to the law is hence equally marked by a simultaneity of pure receptivity and pure spontaneity, both of which, if they are to be unified, can only originate from the pure imagination, as the sole transcendental faculty capable of both receptivity and spontaneity. In Heidegger's view, Kant, unable to allow for such a fundamental threat to the rule of reason thus immediately recoiled from his glimpse at the true nature of the imagination as the origin of subjectivity and tried to cover up his discovery in the revisions he made for the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

It is quite clear, however, that Kant could not have recoiled from the insight that the transcendental subject is marked by both spontaneity and receptivity, for

Kant himself strongly insists, both in the first and the second critique, that the realm of the noumenal, while its existence needs to be presupposed in order to give a complete and non-contradictory account of human existence and the possibility of moral action, nevertheless and necessarily remains utterly inaccessible to a human subject confined to the transcendental limits of cognition. Freedom ultimately would not exist, if the subject did have immediate access to the realm of the moral law, for it would have no choice but to act in accordance with a directly present noumenal jurisdiction. Kant makes very clear that freedom can only be defined negatively, as the capacity *not* to be determined by the laws of nature, our physical desires, and the empirical laws of cause and effect. The possibility to act against nature's empirical laws is the only and merely indirect proof we can have of the existence of freedom and the moral law, ideas of reason, which can by definition never be demonstrated positively in the realm of the empirical. At the same time, freedom for Kant does explicitly *not* lie in our ability to opt for or against the moral law once we accept the possibility of its existence. The authority of practical reason and the categorical imperative is absolute, and they leave no room for a choice. To opt against them is for Kant not a capacity but rather an incapacity, and freedom thus only exists in the peculiar predicament of human existence, which enables us to choose to submit to a law that we can never verify and to reject another whose empirical effects are undeniably present. The human "Wesensverfassung" from which Heidegger sees Kant recoil is thus in the last consequence, the ontological framework aside, no different from the central predicament of Kant's critical edifice, where the possibility of freedom, or transcendental spontaneity, can only be located within the abyssal moment of irresolvable uncertainty where receptivity and spontaneity are paradoxically united. Heidegger's account draws close attention to a central question in the Kantian text, but it ultimately does not give a convincing explanation for the anxiety provoked by the transcendental encounter with imagination.

### 3.1.6 *Radical Freedom*

Heidegger is unable to do so, Slavoj Žižek suggests intriguingly in the first chapter of *The Ticklish Subject*, which presents his reading of Heidegger's interpretation of Kant, because Heidegger, just as much as Kant before him, recoiled from the true abyss opened up by imagination, the abyss of a radical freedom unconstrained by either the law of reason or the call of Being. The failure of Heidegger's reading of Kant, Žižek contends, lies in his repetition of Kant's account of the transcendental imagination as a faculty of synthesis, which can be used to produce unity in the cognitive process and the philosophical system, be it transcendental or ontological. By following Kant in this fundamental decision, Heidegger, Žižek maintains, essentially blinds himself to a different conception of imagination, which could explain the philosophical fears connected to the faculty. This alternative account of imagination, which Žižek derives from an interpretation of selected passages from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, locates the essential quality of the faculty not in its unifying, but in its disruptive power, which enables the uncontrolled and ultimately uncontrollable separation and recombination of preexisting unities. Kant, for whom the work of cognition is a process of organizing and of producing unity within the given manifold of intuition, Žižek explains, fails to account for this destructive element in the cognitive process:

If there is some truth in Heidegger's contention that Kant retreated from the abyss of imagination, his retreat thus concerns, above all, his refusal to bring to light Imagination in its negative/disruptive aspect, as the force of tearing the continuous fabric of intuition apart. Kant is too quick in automatically assuming that the multitude of intuition is directly given, so that the bulk of the subject's activity is then constrained to bringing this multitude together, to organizing it into an interconnected Whole [...]  
 What Kant neglects is the fact that the primordial form of imagination

is the exact opposite of this synthetic activity: imagination enables us to tear the texture of reality apart, to treat as effectively existing something that is merely a component of a living Whole. (Žižek 1999, 32)

In this explosive capacity of separation, diametrically opposed to the unifying power ascribed to it, imagination, Žižek contends, reveals the potential for a radical and violent freedom that informs the core of the self, but which neither Kant nor Heidegger are willing or able to accept as part of their account of subjectivity. The true threat, according to Žižek, for both Kant's *and* Heidegger's philosophical account of the self thus lies in the encounter with a moment of unrestrained freedom, "the *arbitrary freedom*," in the words of Hegel, quoted by Žižek from the *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, "to tear up the images and to reconnect them without any constraint," a moment of both disobedience to the moral law and of unheedfulness to the absolute primacy of Being. (Žižek 1999, p. 30) Here, Žižek argues, in the ultimately political notion of a radical und revolutionary freedom lies the true abyss of imagination, which unsettled both the transcendental sage of Königsberg, faced with the quandary of legitimizing Prussia's enlightened absolutism, and the ontological recluse of the Black Forest, who was soon to join the party of National Socialism.

Yet, while Žižek's suggestion is extremely convincing, one might question the validity of an argument that bases its interpretation of Kant's—and concomitantly Heidegger's—treatment of imagination on an account of the faculty derived from a reading of Hegel. After all, there are no direct traces of a disruptive conception of imagination to be found in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Žižek's contentions thus seem to project a non-Kantian conceptual framework on the Kantian text, which could diminish the interpretative power of his approach. Does Žižek's juxtaposition of two different concepts of imagination, one synthesizing and one disruptive, simply constitute a *different* kind of interpretative violence to the Kantian text than the one executed by Heidegger, but a moment of violence nevertheless? While the question

is difficult to answer if one remains within the limits of Kant's critical texts, Žižek's reading can indeed be strengthened and vindicated if one embarks on an alternative route, which follows the example of Hartmut and Gernot Böhme, who, in their controversial study *The Other of Reason (Das Andere der Vernunft)*, demonstrated so thoroughly the power of Kant's pre- and non-critical texts to open up the unspoken connections in the critical system. Ironically, this alternative route leads back to a suggestion of Heidegger's, a suggestion that the latter, much in the way he attributes to Kant's discovery of imagination, opens up yet instantly forecloses in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. For Heidegger is certainly correct when he contends that Kant's account of imagination is strongly influenced by the negative view of the faculty passed on to him by the discourses of anthropology and psychology, yet he decides not to explore the implications of this connection, and thus to trace Kant's fear of imagination to the latter's own *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Quite on the contrary, Heidegger clearly rejects the possibility that Kant's account of the imagination in the *Anthropology* might be of any importance for an interpretation of the Kantian critiques. Since the object of the *Anthropology* is not imagination in its transcendental form, Heidegger insists, the account Kant gives in the *Critique of Pure Reason* must necessarily be more fundamental, while a look at the *Anthropology* would be based on a misconception and could not bring any new insights about imagination as the foundation of ontology:

Der Versuch, von der Anthropologie Ursprünglicheres über die Einbildungskraft als den gelegten Grund der Ontologie zu erfahren, bleibt daher in jeder Weise erfolglos. Nicht nur das, er ist überhaupt ein Mißgriff, weil er den empirischen Charakter der Kantischen Anthropologie verkennt und andererseits der Eigentümlichkeit der Grundlegungsbetrachtung und Ursprungsenthüllung in der Kritik der reinen Vernunft nicht Rechnung trägt.  
(Heidegger 1991, 132)

Heidegger's dismissal of the *Anthropology*, however, is indicative of precisely the blind spot Žižek diagnoses, for it is the *Anthropology* in which Kant directly discusses the dangers of an uncontrolled and unruly imagination, which threatens the laws of rational control. If, unlike Heidegger, one approaches the question of imagination in the Kantian texts not from a transcendental or ontological point of view, but discusses it from a discourse-theoretical perspective, as Hartmut and Gernot Böhme have so meticulously done for Kant's work as a whole, then the *Anthropology* in fact offers an abundance of material that can help to get a better understanding of the anxiety about imagination that informs the Kantian critiques. Stepping outside the transcendental framework of the three critiques can then bring Kant's apprehensions with regard to imagination come into much sharper focus. With both Hartmut and Gernot Boehme's approach and Slavoj Žižek's account of imagination as radical freedom in mind, I thus now want to take a closer look at Kant's discussion of the faculty in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.

### **3.2 Dreamers and Madmen: Imagination in the Anthropology**

The lectures on anthropology, which Kant first offered in the Winter semester of 1772, were the most popular of Kant's lecture-series and the last one he still routinely gave at the University of Königsberg. Kant did not publish his lecture material in bookform until 1798, when old age forced him to discontinue the lecturing. The *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* thus reflects close to three decades of Kant's occupation with the subject, an empirical discussion of human nature, which he pursued side by side with the transcendental investigations of his critical philosophy. Due to this fact, the *Anthropology*, in its empirical context, takes up topics from all three of Kant's critiques and thus allows for a cross-reading with the critical texts that can illuminate the "worldly" underpinnings of Kant's transcendental idealism.

The epithet "pragmatic" in the *Anthropology's* title is akin to Kant's use of the

term “practical philosophy” for the discipline of ethics and refers to the basic distinction between the realm of nature and the realm of freedom in the philosophical evaluation of human activity. An anthropology, as a systematic account of our empirical knowledge of man, Kant explains in the introduction to his book, can either be physiological or pragmatic. A *physiological* anthropology aims to investigate “what *nature* makes of him [man],”<sup>30</sup> and it thus provides an account of the human being in so far as it is the passive product of its biological functions. Kant’s main philosophical interest, however, lies in the human capacities, not as they are influenced by nature, but as far as they pertain to the realm of freedom. His *pragmatic* anthropology hence focusses on our empirical knowledge of human beings as potentially free agents, uninfluenced by nature in their actions and decisions. It investigates, as Kant puts it, “what *man* as a free agent makes, or can and should make of himself.”<sup>31</sup> (Kant 1974, 3)

On the most fundamental level, already the relationship between the understanding and sensibility, the active and the passive elements of cognition reflects this basic dichotomy of nature and freedom in the Kantian discussion of our make-up as human beings. Kant takes up this discussion, which structures the architectonic of the first critique, once again in the first book of the *Anthropology*, where he presents a metaphorically much more explicit description of the relation between the two cognitive realms. A close look at Kant’s use of language in the *Anthropology* can provide a view of the hierarchical struggle between the two poles of cognition, which equally informs the more abstract discussion in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and which brings Kant’s text much closer to Žižek’s reading.

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<sup>30</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), 3. “[...] was die **Natur** aus dem Menschen macht[...].” Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, ed. Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Reimer, 1917), Abt. I, vol. VII, 119.

<sup>31</sup> “[...] was er als freihandelndes Wesen aus sich selber macht, oder machen kann und soll.” (Kant 1917, p. 119.)

### 3.2.1 *The Rule of the Understanding*

In the empirical approach of the *Anthropology*, just as much as in the transcendental analysis of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant, unlike Descartes in the *Méditations*, will not discard sensibility as detrimental for human knowledge. In order to secure the empiricist basis of his discussion, Kant first needs to defend the senses against the suspicions of seventeenth-century scepticism that had so strongly informed Descartes's position. §§ 8–11 of book I of the *Anthropology* thus present an "Apology for Sensibility," which Kant begins by succinctly summing up the accusations traditionally levelled against the senses:

Aber die Sinnlichkeit ist in üblem Ruf. Man sagt ihr viel Schlimmes nach: z.B. 1) daß sie die Vorstellungskraft verwirre; 2) daß sie das große Wort führe und als **Herrscherin**, da sie doch nur die **Dienerin** des Verstandes sein sollte, halsstarrig und schwer zu bändigen sei; 3) daß sie sogar **be-trüge** und man in Ansehung ihrer nicht genug auf seiner Hut sein könne.<sup>32</sup>  
(Kant 1917, 143)

Mary J. Gregor's English translation of the passage omits the explicitly gendered personification of sensibility that Kant utilizes. In the German text, sensibility is presented as a stubborn, unruly, and unreliable empress or mistress that is hard to subdue, while its proper place is that of a handmaiden to the understanding. Kant here reenacts the gendering of the epistemological process that had already marked Descartes's and Pascal's discourse on the relation of reason to the senses and imagination. And even though Kant will continue by defending sensibility against the charges brought against it, the Kantian text never discards the misogynous rhetorical framework of subordination and domination in order to describe the proper relation between

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<sup>32</sup>"But sensibility has a bad reputation. Many evil things are said of it: for example, 1) that it *disorders* the power of representation, 2) that it swaggers and, *lording it over* understanding when it should be only the *servant*, is headstrong and hard to subdue, 3) that it even *deceives* us, and that we cannot be sufficiently on guard against it." (Kant 1974, p. 23.)

male understanding and female imagination. In his defense of sensibility, Kant follows an Aristotelian perspective and argues that the senses, which only passively present the sensual data to the understanding, cannot be blamed for the mistakes our rational faculties might make in the active combination of the sensual manifold. Sensibility, Kant maintains, is ultimately much less influential than the sceptical position makes it out to be. Entirely passive, it could never possibly rule over the understanding and is always already reduced to the role of a docile servant, over which the understanding can dispose as it sees fit:

**Die Sinne gebieten nicht über den Verstand.** Sie bieten sich vielmehr nur dem Verstande an, um über ihren Dienst zu disponieren.<sup>33</sup> (Kant 1917, 145)

Cognitive problems thus for Kant do not stem from any active deception on the part of sensibility but rather from its very passivity. The cognitive process will only come into disarray if our rational faculties do not sufficiently exert their control and if we thus do not surmount and actively shape the passive input of the senses on which we remain necessarily dependent. Human perfection for Kant can only be reached through a complete control over one's mental faculties, and the senses, even though indispensable, only figure as the providers of raw material in this context. Necessary but intellectually inconsequential, the lower and unreflective part of human nature can be redeemed as long as the understanding adequately asserts its dominance in the hierarchy of cognitive powers:

Das **Passive** in der Sinnlichkeit, was wir doch nicht ablegen können, ist eigentlich die Ursache alles des Übels, was man ihr nachsagt. Die innere Vollkommenheit des Menschen besteht darin: daß er den Gebrauch aller

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<sup>33</sup> "The senses do not *lay down the law* to understanding. They merely offer themselves to understanding so that it may dispose of their services." (Kant 1974, 25)

seiner Vermögen in seiner Gewalt habe, um ihn seiner freien Willkür zu unterwerfen. Dazu aber wird erfordert, daß der Verstand herrsche, ohne doch die Sinnlichkeit (die an sich Pöbel ist, weil sie nicht denkt) zu schwächen: weil ohne sie es keinen Stoff geben würde, der zum Gebrauch des gesetzgebenden Verstandes verarbeitet werden könnte.<sup>34</sup> (Kant 1917, 144)

This passage clearly brings to light the *political* dimension implicit in Kant's account of the cognitive process, as Kant combines the two main metaphorical networks that inform his description of the relation between the senses and the understanding. The first of these metaphors is the relation between a ruler and his people, which presents the senses as a mere unthinking rabble that needs to be controlled for their own benefit by the rule of the understanding. In employing this metaphor, Kant can place the co-dependence of understanding and sensibility within a clear hierarchy: While the ruler remains dependent on the existence of a people, without which his power would be meaningless, this specific form of dependence never actually threatens his authority. "A ruler's power," to rephrase Kant's dictum from the first critique, "without a people is empty, while the people without a ruler remains blind." Kant complements this metaphor of a political and social hierarchy with a second analogy derived from the juridical realm. He presents the act of forming judgments as taking place in a cognitive "court," where the senses may present evidence and maybe even plead a case, but where the verdict is always spoken by understanding and ultimately by reason, the legislating judge, whose authority remains unchallenged. The voice given to the senses in this court remains merely nominal, for it does not achieve any

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<sup>34</sup> "The ineradicable *passive* element in sensibility is really the source of all the evil things said about it. Man's inner perfection consists in his having control over the exercise of all his powers, so that he can use them *as he freely chooses*. This requires that *understanding* rule, but without weakening sensibility (which in itself is rabble, since it does not think); for without sensibility there would be no matter that could be worked up for the use of legislative understanding." (Kant 1974, 24)

true power. To give the people the chance to be heard in court, Kant explains, is simply a means to reward them for their willingness to accept a state of subjugation:

Die Sinne [...] sind wie das gemeine Volk, welches, wenn es nicht Pöbel ist (*ignobile vulgus*), seinem Obern, dem Verstande, sich zwar gern unterwirft, aber doch gehört werden will.<sup>35</sup> (Kant 1917, 145)

The senses are thus only admitted to the court of reason and the understanding under the condition of their prior domestication, which ensures that they will submit willingly to the rules, decrees, and judgments declared by the rational faculties. In much the same way that Descartes made the unruly imagination suitable for philosophical discourse, also Kant preempts the possible—legal and political—conflict between sensibility and the understanding by limiting the discussion to a framework that is already brought under rational control. But the passage just quoted also alludes to an underlying threat that accompanies this framework. For how will it account for the “rabble” who, one must assume, does not as happily accept the subordinate position appointed to it? How can their relationship to the authorities be construed, since they obviously may not be admitted to a hearing at the court? Even in Kant’s “Apology of Sensibility,” an unruly element of sensual danger thus remains hidden in the margins, an element of mistrust and fear of the radical and arbitrary freedom discussed by Žižek, which ultimately surfaces in the *Anthropology*’s discussion of imagination, where Kant will now distinguish between two quite different incarnations of the faculty.

### 3.2.2 *Einbildungskraft and Phantasie*

Kant turns to a discussion of imagination in § 28 of the *Anthropology*. In addition to the already familiar distinction of the faculty into a *productive, a priori* imagination,

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<sup>35</sup> “The senses [...] are like the common people, who—unless they are rabble (*ignobile vulgus*—readily submit to their superior understanding, but still want to be heard.” (Kant 1974, 31)

and a *reproductive, a posteriori* form of the faculty, Kant now introduces a further differentiation, that between *Einbildungskraft* (imagination) and *Phantasie* (fantasy).<sup>36</sup> While imagination, both in its productive and its reproductive form stands in relation to our rational faculties and can thus be controlled by our volition (“*Willkür*”), the form of the faculty that Kant calls fantasy produces its mental images *involuntarily*, so that it lies outside the sphere of influence of reason and the understanding: “Die *Einbildungskraft*, so fern sie auch unwillkürlich *Einbildungen* hervorbringt, heißt **Phantasie**”<sup>37</sup> (Kant 1917, 167)

The dangerous potential of imagination, bracketed out in its productive and reproductive form, thus finds expression in the unruly images generated by fantasy. He who succumbs passively to their uncontrolled flux and takes them to be actual representations of empirical reality becomes a “*Phantast*,” literally a *fantacist*, and loses all ability to distinguish between truth and illusion. “Der, welcher diese [die unwillkürlichen *Einbildungen* der *Phantasie*] für (innere oder äußere) *Erfahrungen* zu halten gewohnt ist, ist ein **Phantast**.”<sup>38</sup> (Kant 1917, 167) The problematic pas-

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<sup>36</sup>This distinction performs a function quite different from the one between fancy and imagination that developed in the context of the British eighteenth-century discussion of aesthetics. To avoid conceptual confusion, it thus seems appropriate to use “fantasy” as a translation for the German term “*Phantasie*,” rather than the more commonly used “fancy.”

<sup>37</sup>“Insofar as imagination also produces images involuntarily, it is called *fantasy*.” (Kant 1974, 44) “*Willkür*” is Kant’s term for our power to make decisions, to choose, and to act, insofar as it is connected to specific empirical objects. It is an impure, empirical power, which is affected by our passions, desires, and physical needs. It can only be called free (“*freie Willkür*”) if it is determined by the *a priori* principles of our pure reason. The power with which we can freely control our empirical “*Willkür*” by means of reasonable principles is our will (“*Wille*”). The term “will” is for Kant a synonym for the practical reason, pure reason as it is applied not in the realm of epistemology but as a principle of our actions and ethical decisions. As such, in contrast to volition (*Willkür*), the will cannot be called free. The will simply executes the absolute authority of the moral law over our volition, and the distinction free/not free does not apply to it. A mental process that is completely involuntary (“*unwillkürlich*”) and thus lies outside of the control of our will ultimately threatens our essence as reasonable beings, our free and voluntary submission under the immutable laws of reason. For Kant’s discussion of the relationship of “*Wille*” to “*Willkür*” cf. Kant 1914. 213f.

<sup>38</sup>“One who habitually mistakes such images for (inner or outer) experience is *visionary*.” (Kant 1974, p. 56) “*Visionary*,” it should be remarked, is a problematic translation as it lacks the negative connotations of the German “*Phantast*,” which denotes a cognitive flaw and indicates

sivity of sensibility is thus heightened and intensified by the dangers presented by fantasy, for the “Phantast” takes a merely passive reception of images as his own active production of experiences and has thus become the deluded plaything of his own imagination. Rather than controlling the representations produced by the faculty and putting them to rational use, he is controlled *by* them as he loses his ability to evaluate their truth-status. Such mere passivity in relation to the images of fantasy, while normal and healthy during sleep, where its images make up our dreams, indicates mental illness when it occurs during a waking state:

Das Spiel der Phantasie mit dem Menschen im Schlafe ist der Traum und findet auch im gesunden Zustande statt; dagegen es einen krankhaften Zustand verräth, wenn es im Wachen geschieht.<sup>39</sup> (Kant 1917, 175)

This pathological condition, in which imagination plays with the waking mind, ultimately carries the threat of insanity, and constant vigilance is necessary to guard the mind against what Kant calls, in another juridical as well as moral metaphor, the offenses (“Vergehungen”) of imagination. In their worst form, those will lead to a perversion of the rational laws of the mind:

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mental derangement rather than a superior mental power. Kant is not prone to ascribe visionary qualities to non-rational thought.

<sup>39</sup> “When fantasy plays with man while he is asleep, this is called dreaming, which also occurs when we are in good health. But if it happens while we are awake, it indicates a pathological condition.” (Kant 1974, 51) As Manfred Engel has pointed out, the analysis of dreams is one of the central tasks of eighteenth-century anthropologies, and Kant’s discussion of dreams in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* reiterates the standard *topoi* of the Enlightenment discourse on dreams. Dreams, the philosophical “physicians of the soul” generally agree, are a deficient state of mind, in which the influence of the central rational faculties is considerably diminished or completely absent. Imagination can thus take complete control and will manipulate the human mind according to its every whim. As long as this phenomenon remains confined to the world of dreams, it has a safe rational explanation. Should it invade the waking world, however, such an irrational state of mind becomes a manifest danger. cf. Manfred Engel, “Träumen und Nichtträumen zugleich.’ Novalis’ Theorie und Poetik des Traumes zwischen Aufklärung und Hochromantik,” *Novalis und die Wissenschaften*, ed. Herbert Uerlings (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997), 143-176.

Die Vergehungen (*vitia*) der Einbildungskraft sind: daß ihre Dichtungen entweder bloß **zügello**s oder gar **regellos** sind (*effrenis aut perversa*). Der letztere Fehler ist der ärgste. Die erstern Dichtungen könnten doch wohl in einer möglichen Welt (der Fabel) ihre Stelle finden; die letztern in gar keiner, weil sie sich widersprechen.<sup>40</sup> (Kant 1917, 181)

The “unbridled” imagination, while a disturbance in the world of “regular” human interaction, can still be safely confined to the possible worlds of art and poetry, which, even in their imaginary exuberance, give proof of the artist’s active control. The perversions of the “lawless” imagination, however, which instantiate the logical crime of self-contradiction, present an offense for which even fiction is no excuse. They border on madness and might lead the individual to a complete loss of control over imagination’s representations.

Die zügellose Phantasie kann immer noch einbeugen [...]; sie ist Üppigkeit aus ihrem Reichtum; aber die regellose nähert sich dem Wahnsinn, wo die Phantasie gänzlich mit dem Menschen spielt und der Unglückliche den Lauf seiner Vorstellungen gar nicht in seiner Gewalt hat.<sup>41</sup> (Kant 1917, 181)

This capacity of imagination is particularly problematic because it is potentially contagious. Madness, as well as almost any other kind of behavior, Kant shows, can spread from one person to another by means of sympathy. Sympathy is itself an effect of imagination and triggers an uncontrollable mimetic imitation of the observed

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<sup>40</sup>“The offenses (*vitia*) of imagination consist in inventions that are either merely *unbridled* or downright *lawless* (*effrenis aut perversa*). Lawless inventions are the worst fault. Unbridled inventions could still find their place in a possible world (the world of fable); but lawless inventions have no place in any world at all, because they are self-contradictory.” (Kant 1974, 56)

<sup>41</sup>“Unbridled fantasy can always be bent [to the artist’s end] [...] It is luxuriant because of its richness. But lawless imagination comes close to madness. Here fantasy makes the man its mere plaything and the poor fellow has no control at all over the course of his ideas.” (Kant 1974, 56)

behavior. To observe convulsions or epileptic seizures in another, recounts Kant, will induce similar convulsions in the observer: a soldier in a violent frenzy (“Raserei”) will draw bystanders into the same state, and people with nervous problems and a particularly excitable imagination should avoid a visit to the lunatic asylum, for they might easily lose their mind as a price for their curiosity. (Kant 1917, 179) Once unleashed, the offenses of the lawless imagination will not remain confined to the mind of the offender, its crimes are contagious, and the *Anthropology* thus reveals the potential “dark side” of the faculty that is so central to the cognitive process in its synthetic form. If uncontrolled by the laws of the understanding, imagination poses the ultimate threat for the rational mind: its decent into madness. The contagiousness of this frenzy once again reveals the political and social dimension of Kant’s discussion of the faculty: If the excesses of the lawless imagination spread to form an unruly mob, unwilling to submit to the laws of reason, the very fabric of the body politic is at stake. The danger of madness always also connotes the political insanity of revolution.

### 3.2.3 *Waking Dreams*

Unlike Descartes, Kant will not let this form of madness, as a dangerous confusion of the waking and the dreaming state, invade rational discourse. The criterion to clearly distinguish dream from reality is for Kant not subject to doubt: While dreams constitute a private world that ultimately cannot be shared, reality must comply to rules that are verifiable intersubjectively by means of rational communication. As Kant quotes Heraklit’s dictum: “Wenn wir wachen, so haben wir eine gemeinschaftliche Welt; schlafen wir aber, so hat jeder seine eigene.”<sup>42</sup> (Kant 1917, 190) Fantasy, whose images are not bound to any objective correlative, will blur precisely this distinction, as the associations it creates remain completely subjective and are taken for

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<sup>42</sup>“When we are awake we have a world in common, but when we sleep each has his own world.” (Kant 1974, 63)

reality by the fantacist, even though his interlocutors cannot discern the principle of their connection. Ultimately, fantasy causes a social and intersubjective problem, and Kant indeed first introduces this lawless form of imagination in the *Anthropology* in the context of social conversation (“gesellschaftliche Unterhaltung”). Social conversation, Kant points out, is only possible if the associations that connect one topic of the discussion to the next are guided by the objective rules of understanding, which ensure comprehension for all participants. Were we to participate in a conversation in which imagination was given free reign, we would have to live the Cartesian experience of a waking dream:

Die regellos umherschweifende Einbildungskraft verwirrt durch den Wechsel der Vorstellungen, die an nichts objectiv angeknüpft sind, den Kopf so, daß dem, der aus einer Gesellschaft dieser Art gekommen ist, zu Muthe wird, als ob er geträumt hätte.<sup>43</sup> (Kant 1917, 177)

Imagination, in inducing such a dreamlike state, effectively undermines the rules of intersubjective communication, a disruption that needs to be prevented by the provision of a common theme, which ensures that the “play” of imagination remains bound to the objective laws guiding sensibility and the understanding that make up our shared reality.

Es muß immer ein Thema sein sowohl beim stillen Denken als in Mittheilung der Gedanken, an welches das Mannigfaltige angereiht wird, mithin auch der Verstand dabei wirksam sein; aber das Spiel der Einbildungskraft folgt hier doch den Gesetzen der Sinnlichkeit, welche den Stoff dazu hergiebt, dessen Association ohne Bewußtsein der Regel doch derselben

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<sup>43</sup>“A lawless, vagrant imagination so disconcerts the mind by a succession of ideas having no objective connection that we leave a gathering of this kind wondering whether we have been dreaming.”(Kant 1974, 52)

und hiemit dem Verstande abgeleitet, verrichtet wird.<sup>44</sup> (Kant 1917, 177)

A lawless “free play” of imagination, unrestricted by the control of understanding, which confuses dream and reality, ultimately poses a threat to the social fabric, so that the faculty always needs to be tied to the laws of sensibility provided by the understanding. Imagination may not take flight beyond the limits of intersubjectively shared experience, and for this reason it can also not be seen as truly creative. It remains necessarily constricted by the material presented to it through the senses:

Wenn also gleich die Einbildungskraft eine noch so große Künstlerin, ja Zauberin ist, so ist sie doch nicht schöpferisch, sondern muß den *Stoff* zu ihren Bildungen von den Sinnen hernehmen.<sup>45</sup> (Kant 1917, 168)

The image of imagination as a sorceress is once again reminiscent of the dangers of the faculty presented by Pascal and Descartes. Yet Kant does not share Pascal’s view that in her alluring garb imagination could be more powerful than reason. The faculty’s inability to truly create prevents this dominance, and the Kantian text keeps the faculty under control in much the same way as it controls the sensibility to which imagination remains connected. This is equally true for imagination’s role in art as Kant presents it in the *Anthropology*. Also in the realm of aesthetics, the faculty needs to be tied to the rules of nature and sensibility if it is not to be discarded as aberrant and dangerous. A radical freedom, unrelated to a set of authoritative laws, is unacceptable for Kant, and artistic expression, with its potential to break with the rules of “social conversation” thus also needs to be constricted within clear boundaries.

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<sup>44</sup>“Whether in silent thought or in conversation, there must always be a theme on which the manifold is strung, so that understanding too must be operative in it. In such a case the play of imagination still follows the laws of sensibility, which provides the material, and this is associated without consciousness of the rule but still in keeping with it.” (Kant 1974, 52)

<sup>45</sup>“So, no matter how great an artist, and even enchantress, imagination may be, it is still not creative, but must get the *material* for its images from the *senses*.” (Kant 1974, 45)

### 3.2.4 *The Artistic Imagination*

The artist needs imagination, Kant explains in § 31 of the *Anthropology* in its capacity to produce intuitions in space, which Kant calls the *imaginatio plastica*.<sup>46</sup> In order to depict a corporeal form, the artist needs to first have produced it in imagination, an aesthetic process in which the artist is confronted by the same danger that also threatens the “regular” aspects of cognition. Only if the artist’s inventions (“Dichtungen”) are actively governed by his volition (“Willkür”) can he truly lay claim to them. If, however, they are the involuntary and hence dreamlike products of fantasy, the artist has no right to call these passively received creations his own.

Ehe der Künstler eine körperliche Gestalt (gleichsam handgreiflich) darstellen kann, muß er sie in der Einbildungskraft verfertigt haben, und diese Gestalt ist alsdann eine Dichtung, welche, wenn sie unwillkürlich ist (wie etwa im Traume), Phantasie heißt und nicht dem Künstler angehört; wenn sie aber durch Willkür regiert wird, **Composition, Erfindung** genannt wird.<sup>47</sup>  
(Kant 1917, 175)

The artist is thus equally in danger of losing his active control and to become a merely passive recipient of images in the process of creation. To ensure that the active process of composition remains within the laws of understanding, this restriction is complemented by the demand to keep the products of the artistic process in keeping with natural models. The artist’s products will only be acceptable, Kant points out, as long as he proceeds mimetically and in adherence to the forms of nature. Otherwise, his artistic products will be the “perverted” and unnatural products of the lawless

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<sup>46</sup>Kant, like Descartes in the *Méditations*, when he discusses the creative process, has usually the visual arts in mind. This bias also informs the *Critique of Judgment* and is connected to the philosophical tradition of using visual metaphors to describe the processes of cognition.

<sup>47</sup>“Before an artist can present a physical form (tangibly, as it were), he must already have made it in his imagination; and this form is then an invention. If it is produced involuntarily (as in dreaming), it is called fantasy and lies outside the artist’s proper realm; but if it is governed by choice, it is called *composition, fabrication*.” (Kant 1974, 50)

imagination (*imaginatio perversa*), which here once again produces the dangerous “dream images of a waking mind”:

Arbeitet nun der Künstler nach Bildern, die den Werken der Natur ähnlich sind, so heißen seine Producte *natürlich*; verfertigt er aber nach Bildern, die nicht in der Erfahrung vorkommen können, [...] so heißen sie abenteuerlich, unnatürlich, Fratzen gestalten, und solche Einfälle sind gleichsam Traumbilder eines Wachenden (*velut aegri somnia vanae finguntur species*).<sup>48</sup> (Kant 1917, 175)

The artist’s play with imagination thus always flirts with the danger of becoming a mere plaything of fantasy:

Wir spielen oft und gern mit der Einbildungskraft; aber die Einbildungskraft (als Phantasie) spielt eben so oft und bisweilen sehr ungelegen auch mit uns.<sup>49</sup> (Kant 1917, 175)

Hence also in the process of artistic creation imagination needs to be kept in reasonable bounds if it is not to pose a threat, a control which Kant effects by constricting the artist to an *imitatio naturae*. Kant encounters a difficulty on this account, however, in the discussion of genius, which he presents in §§ 57–59 of the *Anthropology*. Since, as Kant explains, originality is a defining quality of genius, mere imitation cannot suffice to explain the phenomenon. To account for true artistic originality, imagination, which is “the proper domain of genius,” now needs to be presented as creative after all, while originality emerges as precisely the product of the faculty’s ability to break with the rules of the understanding:

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<sup>48</sup>“When the artist works from images resembling works of nature, his productions are called *natural*; but if he constructs forms according to images that cannot be found in experience, the objects so formed [...] are called fantastic, unnatural, grotesque forms—such fancies are like dream phantoms we see while awake (*velut aegri somnia vanae finguntur species*).” (Kant 1974, 50f.)

<sup>49</sup>“We like to play with our imagination, and often do it; but imagination (in its role of fantasy) plays with us just as often, and sometimes most inopportunately.” (Kant 1974, 51)

Das eigentliche Feld für das Genie ist das der Einbildungskraft: weil diese schöpferisch ist und weniger als andere Vermögen unter dem Zwange der Regeln steht, dadurch aber der **Originalität** umso fähiger ist.<sup>50</sup> (Kant 1917, 224)

To praise imagination for its capacity to evade the law would put Kant in an awkward position, and he solves the problem by declaring that the artistic products of genius, however original, need to be “exemplary,” i.e. that they themselves need to be worthy of imitation in turn. By means of this *caveat*, Kant ensures that the products of genius remain in the realm of imitation, which allows him to restore a social function even to artistic originality.

Nun heißt das Talent zum Erfinden das Genie. Man legt aber diesen Namen immer nur einem **Künstler** bei, also dem, der etwas zu **machen** versteht, nicht dem, der bloß vieles kennt und weiß; aber auch nicht einem bloß nachahmenden, sondern einem seine Werke **ursprünglich** hervorzubringen aufgelegten Künstler; endlich auch diesem nur, wenn sein Product **musterhaft** ist, d.i. wenn es verdient als Beispiel (exemplar) nachgeahmt zu werden.<sup>51</sup> (Kant 1917, 224)

The products of genius can be *exemplars* even though genius does not create according to predetermined rules, because the genius discovers the (natural) rules that inform the artistic process, rules that can then be imitated by others. Through

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<sup>50</sup> “The realm of imagination is the proper domain of genius because imagination is creative and, being less subject than other powers to the constraint of rules, more apt for originality.” (Kant 1974, 93)

<sup>51</sup> “Talent for inventing things is called *genius*. But we apply this term only to *artists*, and so to people who know how to make things, not to those who merely have experiential and *scientific* knowledge of many things. Moreover, we do not apply it to mere imitators: we reserve it for artists who are disposed to produce their works *originally*, and, finally, for them only when their work is *exemplary*—that is, when it serves as a model (*exemplar*) to be imitated.” (Kant 1974, 93)

the concept of genius, Kant can thus ensure that the rules of nature will also apply in art. Genius is hence defined, in the famous formulation that Kant also presents in the *Critique of Judgment*, as the talent “by which nature gives the rule to art.”<sup>52</sup> For the adequate representation of the rule in the work of art, the genius must then again proceed according to clear, even mechanical rules and constraints, which ensure that his work can be deemed exemplary. Should the genius neglect these rules, his creative activity will lead to nothing but “original folly”:

Aber jede Kunst bedarf doch gewisser mechanischer Grundregeln, nämlich der Angemessenheit des Products zur untergelegten Idee, d.i. der **Wahrheit** in der Darstellung des Gegenstandes der gedacht wird. Das muß nun mit Schulstrenge gelernt werden und ist allerdings eine Wirkung der Nachahmung. Die Einbildungskraft aber auch von diesem Zwange zu befreien und das eigenthümliche Talent, sogar der Natur zuwider, regellos verfahren und **schwärmen** zu lassen, würde vielleicht originale Tollheit abgeben, die aber freilich nicht musterhaft sein und also auch nicht zum Genie gezählt werden würde.<sup>53</sup> (Kant 1917, 225)

The inspiration of genius is thus dangerously close to the ravings of the madman, and the difference between the two states, one lawful and the other lawless, both of which are induced by imagination, is rather precarious. Indeed, the “Schwärmer” and his lawless imagination presents a far more disturbing aberrance for Kant than that of the fantacist. For while the fantacist only suffers from an inability to distinguish

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<sup>52</sup> “[...] weshalb man das Genie auch das Talent nennen kann, “durch welches die Natur der Kunst die Regel giebt.” (Kant 1917, p. 226)

<sup>53</sup> “Yet every art needs certain mechanical basic rules—rules, namely, for making the work suit the Idea underlying it, for portraying *truthfully* the object that the artist has in mind. This must be studied in strict academic fashion, and is certainly an imitative process. To free imagination from even this constraint and let individual talent carry on without rules and revel in itself, even against nature, might produce original folly. But this would not be exemplary and so could not be considered genius.” (Kant 1974, 93)

the fabrications of his imagination from true experiences, the “Schwärmer” confounds his imaginations with suprasensual essences and thus suffers from a defect of reason. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant defines “Schwärmerei” (visionary rapture) as the propensity to “dream according to principles” (“nach Grundsätzen träumen”) or to “rave with reason” (“mit Vernunft rasen”), where reason leaves the limits of sensibility behind and—unable to control the temptations of the lawless imagination—believes to have direct insight into matters of transcendence.<sup>54</sup> This is precisely the kind of dream that Kant needs to keep at bay at all costs, for the possibility to think of imaginary principles of reason threatens the very fabric of the critical system. The insidious “what if?” that Descartes’s doubt had openly invited into philosophical speculation returns in the Kantian text as the possibility of the dreamer of principles. In his discussion of mental illnesses in the *Anthropology*, Kant tellingly defines the peculiar type of madness that grips the “Schwärmer” as *systematic*. This inmate of the mental hospital, who suffers from *vesania*, “the sickness of a deranged *reason*”<sup>55</sup> is the twin brother of the systematic philosopher. (Kant 1974, 85) His reason follows “a different rule” (“eine *andere* Regel”), and his illness constitutes not only an aberrance of the use of reason, but “*positive unreason*” (“positive Unvernunft”). (Kant 1917, p. 216.)<sup>56</sup> The philosopher, one can only assume, is strongly urged not to pay his hospitalized *alter ego* a curious visit, for the “Schwärmer,” oblivious of the transcendental limits of philosophical inquiry, claims to possess the knowledge that the critical philosopher might desire but knows to be out of his critical reach:

Der Seelenkranke überfliegt die ganze Erfahrungsleiter und hascht nach

<sup>54</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, ed. Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Reimer, 1913), Abt.I, vol.V, 275. (A 125f.)

<sup>55</sup>“die Krankheit einer gestörten Vernunft” (Kant 1917, 215)

<sup>56</sup>Hartmut and Gernot Böhme have identified a very concrete *alter ego* for Kant’s critical philosopher: the “visionary” Emanuel Swedenborg. More so than the challenge of Hume, the Böhmes claim, it was the occult metaphysical system of Swedenborg that led Kant to develop his critical philosophy in an attempt to defend his “love of metaphysics” from the charge of Swedenborgian “Schwärmerei.” (Böhme and Böhme 1996, 250ff.)

Principien, die des Probiersteins der Erfahrung ganz überhoben sein können, und wähnt das Unbegreifliche zu begreifen.—Die Erfindung der Quadratur des Zirkels, des Perpetuum Mobile, die Enthüllung der übersinnlichen Kräfte der Natur und die Ergreifung des Geheimnisses der Dreieinigkeit sind in seiner Gewalt.<sup>57</sup> (Kant 1917, 215f.)

The “other rule” of the Schwärmer’s unreason is based on a transcendent knowledge that the self-censorship of the critical system had to exclude from the realm of reasonable speculation. Its principles are the pre-critical ones of a reason that is still caught up in the “battlefield of metaphysics.” The diagnosis that Kant gives of the systematic madman equals his account of the pre-critical principles of reason in the preface to the first critique, which are equally contradictory, and “since they surpass the bounds of all experience, no longer recognize any touchstone of experience.”<sup>58</sup> (Kant 1997, 99) The “Schwärmer’s” metaphysically principled dream is a monstrosity from the critical point of view, but it also constitutes a desire that is produced by the very limitations of the critical system. The transcendental boundaries of self-reflective reason create a safe space in which reason can operate without self-contradiction, but they also immediately open up a beyond that can now no longer be reasonably addressed. Dreams might be “a wise arrangement of nature,” yet one must always take guard not to take them for visions of an invisible world:

Das Träumen ist eine weise Veranstaltung der Natur zur Erregung der Lebenskraft durch Affecten, die sich auf unwillkürlich gedichtete Begebenheiten beziehen, indessen daß die auf der Willkür beruhenden Bewegungen

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<sup>57</sup> “The patient flies completely beyond the guidance of experience, snatches at principles that can be altogether exempt from its touchstone, and fancies that he conceives the inconceivable.—It is within his power to discover how to square the circle, to invent perpetual motion, to unveil the supersensible forces of nature and to understand the mystery of the Trinity.” (Kant 1974, 85)

<sup>58</sup> “da sie über die Grenze der Erfahrung hinausgehen, keinen Probierstein der Erfahrung mehr anerkennen.” (A VIII)

des Körpers, nämlich die der Muskeln, suspendiert sind.—Nur muß man die Traumgeschichten nicht für Offenbarungen aus einer unsichtbaren Welt annehmen.<sup>59</sup> (Kant 1917, 175f.)

Kant's own systematic thought, however, also demands the existence of an invisible world, the noumenal realm of freedom and the moral law, which can never find expression in the limits of possible experience, and to ascertain their legitimacy is the central goal of the critical project. Yet how to deduce the validity of such principles beyond all experience without falling prey to the contagious ravings of the systematic madman and his lawless imagination? The source of the anxiety with regard to imagination that informs Kant's critical project has thus come into even clearer focus: Everything depends on a clear separation between reason and imagination, while the non-empirical principles that underly the critical system constantly threaten to undercut the very possibility of this differentiation. The strained tight-rope walk Kant needs to perform as a result of this constant tension becomes most obvious in the *Critique of Judgment*, where the struggle between madness and philosophy, the imagination, understanding, and reason is now played out one more time in critical terms, as Kant attempts to guarantee the unity of transcendental philosophy.

### **3.3 *Natural Art and Sublime Madness: Imagination in the Critique of Judgment***

In the *Critique of Judgment*, as is well known, Kant aims to unify the critical system by bridging the chasm that had opened up between the domains of the first two critiques as a consequence of the seemingly irreconcilable dichotomy between nature and freedom, the legislative realms of theoretical and practical philosophy. While the

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<sup>59</sup> "Dreaming is a wise provision of Nature for exciting vitality through emotions which have been caused by involuntarily invented events, while muscular movements, depending on volition, are in the meantime suspended. But we must not take the content of dreams to be revelations from an invisible world." (Kant 1974, 66)

epistemological framework of the first critique had excluded all principles from the grasp of pure theoretical reason that would go beyond the transcendental conditions of possible experience, the moral philosophy of Kant's second critique depends on the principles of freedom and the moral law, which can by definition never become objects of experience. The two legislations ("Gesetzgebungen") at stake in the first two critiques, that of the understanding pertaining to nature in the first critique and that of reason pertaining to freedom in the second, may not infringe upon each other in order to avoid the metaphysical confusion the critical system had set out to combat in the first place. The transcendental argumentation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* could show that these two jurisdictions can at least coexist within the same subject without contradiction, provided that theoretical knowledge does not overstep its prescribed epistemological boundaries. Kant, however, also needs to show that a connection between the two critical worlds can at least be *thought* within the limits of transcendental philosophy. For if there could be no connection whatsoever between the noumenal and unconditional realm of freedom and the moral law and the phenomenal realm of human experience, the possibility of ethical behavior would remain mere speculation, a conclusion that constitutes an unacceptable consequence for Kant. That there be a connection between the two critical spheres and hence a unity of self-consciousness that guarantees the possible effect of the practical on the theoretical self, is in itself as it were a contrafactual moral command. Otherwise, the complex endeavour of saving the transcendental unity of the self undertaken in the first critique would be undone by the impossibility to connect this theoretical self with its practical counterpart. What cannot be possible nevertheless *should* be possible, and in the third critique Kant attempts to show that the lawfulness of nature can at least be *conceptualized* as being in accordance with the laws of freedom.

Ob nun zwar eine unübersehbare Kluft zwischen dem Gebiete des Naturbegriffs, als dem Sinnlichen, und dem Gebiete des Freiheitsbegriffs, als

dem Übersinnlichen, befestigt ist, so daß von dem ersteren zum anderen (also vermittelt des theoretischen Gebrauchs der Vernunft kein Übergang möglich ist, gleich als ob es so viel verschiedene Welten wären, deren erste auf die zweite keinen Einfluß haben kann: so soll doch diese auf jene Einfluß haben, nämlich der Freiheitsbegriff soll den durch seine Gesetze ausgegebenen Zweck in der Sinnenwelt wirklich machen; und die Natur muß folglich auch so gedacht werden können, daß die Gesetzmäßigkeit ihrer Form wenigstens zur Möglichkeit der in ihr zu bewirkenden Zwecke nach Freiheitsgesetzen zusammenstimme.<sup>60</sup> (Kant 1913, 176, A XIXf.)

The structure of the critical system as a whole thus reenacts the problem that Kant had already encountered in the first critique, since two distinct realms of philosophical enquiry now demand an impossible yet necessary principle of connection and transition. Just as much as the strictly separated realms of concepts and intuitions called for the mediatory common ground of imagination in order to account for the possibility of cognition, the clearly distinct realms of theoretical and practical philosophy necessitate a common principle that is neither theoretical nor practical. By virtue of its mediatory capacity, this principle will ensure the unity of philosophy and self-consciousness and allow for the possibility of the moral law to manifest itself in the realm of nature.

Also muß es doch einen Grund der *Einheit* des Übersinnlichen, welches der Natur zum Grunde liegt, mit dem was der Freiheitsbegriff praktisch

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<sup>60</sup>“Now although there is an incalculable gulf fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, as the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible, so that from the former to the latter (thus by means of the theoretical use of reason) no transition is possible, just as if there were so many different worlds, the first of which can have no influence on the second: yet the latter **should** have an influence on the former, namely the concept of freedom should make the end that is imposed by its laws real in the sensible world; and nature must consequently also be able to be conceived in such a way that the lawfulness of its form is at least in agreement with the possibility of the ends that are to be realized in it in accordance with the laws of freedom.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 63.

enthält, geben, wovon der Begriff, wenn er gleich weder theoretisch noch praktisch zu einem Erkenntnisse desselben gelangt, mithin kein eigenthümliches Gebiet hat, dennoch den Übergang von der Denkungsart nach den Principen der einen zu der nach Principien der anderen möglich macht.<sup>61</sup> (Kant 1913, 176, A XX.)

Just like the transcendental imagination, the concept that Kant employs to relate the realms of nature and freedom and to restore the unity of self-consciousness, is “homeless.”<sup>62</sup> Neither theoretical nor practical, it has no proper domain of its own and finds its place only in the hybrid zone of transition between the realms of reason and understanding. It needs to remain in this conceptual no-man’s land, where it only points to the ideal realm of the moral law, while keeping its eye securely on the touchstone of experience, if it is not to become the airy dream of a systematic madman. Since a direct cognition of the transcendent ideas of practical reason is rationally impossible, the conceptual u-topos of the *Critique of Judgment* is a fictional realm of analogy and felicitous coincidence.

### 3.3.1 *Divine Understanding and the Empirical “as if”*

In the third critique, the necessary “intermediary between the understanding and reason” in the “family of the higher faculties of cognition,” is the power of judgment, and it accomplishes the sought-after task by establishing the principle of the *purpo-*

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<sup>61</sup>“Thus there must still be a ground of the unity of the supersensible that grounds nature with that which the concept of freedom contains practically, the concept of which, even if it does not suffice for cognition of it either theoretically or practically, and thus has no proper domain of its own, nevertheless makes possible the transition from the manner of thinking in accordance with the principles of the one to that in accordance with the principles of the other.” (Kant 2000, p. 63)

<sup>62</sup>Martin Heidegger ascribes this epithet to the transcendental imagination of the first critique since it finds its proper place neither in the transcendental aesthetics nor in the transcendental logics, so that it cannot really be classified in the clear dichotomies of the critical system. The transcendental imagination can have no systematic home: “Die transzendente Einbildungskraft ist heimatlos.” (Heidegger 1991, 136)

*siveness* (“Zweckmäßigkeit”) of nature.<sup>63</sup> An end (“Zweck”) in the Kantian context is a concept that not only unifies and controls intuitions, but directly contains the ground of reality of its object. To judge nature in terms of its purposiveness thus asks us to represent it *as if* an understanding contained the ground of the unity of the manifold of nature’s empirical laws. The bridge that judgment provides between the realms of nature and freedom is hence built in the fictional mode of analogy. It postulates a correspondence that will subsequently be verified through the consistency it affords the critical system. Kant’s argumentation in the third critique proceeds in an hermeneutical circle that begins with the fictional desire of an “as if,” which demands, just like Descartes’s *cogito*, a philosophical leap of imagination.

The postulated understanding that guarantees the purposiveness of nature cannot be our own, since our cognitive apparatus provides only the *universal* laws of nature (the conditions of possibility of experience) in the form of the categories, but not the actual *empirical* laws governing the natural forms. It thus needs to be assumed—and here Descartes’s benevolent God underhandedly reenters the Kantian stage—that the empirical laws of nature, which are ultimately independent of our mind, are equally constituted in accordance to the transcendental laws of our cognitive faculties. Such would be the case if another—implicitly a divine—understanding had given them such a unity “for the sake of our faculty of cognition,” thus enabling the desired system of experience in accordance with nature’s particular empirical laws.<sup>64</sup> This assumption constitutes the *a priori* principle of reflective judgment, while the actual existence of such an understanding, as Kant remarks, does not necessarily have to be presupposed. The principles of judgment used here are only “reflective,” they try to find the general law that could account for the particularities of the natural world, and

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<sup>63</sup> “Allein in der Familie der oberen Erkenntnisvermögen giebt es doch noch ein Mittelglied zwischen dem Verstande und der Vernunft.” (Kant 1913, 177, A XX.) (Kant 2000, 64)

<sup>64</sup> “als ob gleichfalls ein Verstand (wenn gleich nicht der unsrige) sie zum Behuf unserer Erkenntnisvermögen, um ein System der Erfahrung nach besonderen Naturgesetzen möglich zu machen, gegeben hätte.” (Kant 2000, 67)

in this capacity, judgment cannot “determine” its objects by subsuming them under a known rule of law. (Kant 1913, 179) Judgment, which does not have a proper domain, thus also does not have a proper realm of legislation, it gives its laws only to itself, not to nature, and in this fictionally autonomous but legally neutral position it can mediate between the two other legislative powers, reason and understanding. Everywhere and nowhere, autonomous but without true legislative power, judgment achieves the fictional *a priori* mediation born of the philosophical desire for unity and the possibility of truthful cognition. Through its “heautonomous” laws—Kant’s term for an autonomy without legislative power—, the power of judgment ensures that nature and the understanding can be connected by means of the principles that the philosopher “wants” to exist.

Wenn man also sagt: die Natur specificirt ihre allgemeinen Gesetze nach dem Princip der Zweckmäßigkeit für unsere Erkenntnißvermögen [...] so schreibt man dadurch weder der Natur ein Gesetz vor, noch lernt man eines von ihr durch Beobachtung [...] man *will* nur, daß man, die Natur mag ihren allgemeinen Gesetzen nach eingerichtet sein, wie sie wolle, durchaus nach jenem Princip und den sich darauf gründenden Maximen ihren empirischen Gesetzen nachspüren müsse, weil wir, nur so weit als jenes Statt findet, mit dem Gebrauche unseres Verstandes in der Erfahrung fortkommen und Erkenntniß erwerben können. [my emphasis]<sup>65</sup> (Kant 1913, 186)

The “subjective principle (maxim) of the power of judgment,” is hence a formal and ultimately aesthetic construct, as it represents the relation of mind and nature

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<sup>65</sup> “Thus if one says that nature specifies its universal laws in accordance with the principle of purposiveness for our faculty of cognition [...] then one is thereby neither prescribing a law to nature nor learning one from it by means of observation [...] one means only that, however nature may be arranged as far as its universal laws are concerned, we must always seek out its empirical laws in accordance with that principle and the maxims that are grounded on it, because only so far as that takes place can we make progress in experience and acquire cognition by the use of our understanding.” (Kant 2000, 72f.)

as if it sprung from a common source, an assumption for which there can be no proof aside from the formal consistency of the philosophical system based on this very principle. This fictional postulate then equally opens up the possibility of a connection between the concepts of nature and the concepts of freedom, for if the empirical laws of nature can be seen as operating in accordance with the transcendental laws of our understanding, it is equally possible that they could also be brought into accordance with the supersensual laws of reason, which are for Kant the “final end” (“Endzweck”) of the natural world’s teleological course. These final ends *should* exist, and the postulate of the purposiveness of nature makes their realization in the empirical world possible. By pointing to the *determinability* of nature by means of our intellectual faculties, the power of judgment creates the desired bridge between the two legislations of the understanding and of reason and helps to fulfill the dream of a complete philosophical system:

Der Verstand giebt durch die Möglichkeit seiner Gesetze *a priori* für die Natur einen Beweis davon, daß diese von uns nur als Erscheinung erkannt werde, mithin zugleich Anzeige auf ein übersinnliches Substrat derselben, aber läßt dieses gänzlich **unbestimmt**. Die Urtheilskraft verschafft durch ihr Princip **a priori** der Beurtheilung der Natur, nach möglichen besonderen Gesetzen derselben, ihrem übersinnlichen Substrat (in uns sowohl als außer uns) *Bestimmbarkeit durch das intellektuelle Vermögen*. Die Vernunft aber giebt eben demselben durch ihr praktisches Gesetz *a priori* die *Bestimmung*; und so macht die Urtheilskraft den Übergang vom Gebiete des Naturbegriffs zu dem des Freiheitsbegriffs möglich.<sup>66</sup> (Kant 1913, 196)

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<sup>66</sup> “Through the possibility of its *a priori* laws for nature the understanding gives a proof that nature is cognized by us only as appearance, and hence at the same time an indication of its supersensible substratum; but it leaves this entirely **undetermined**. The power of judgment, through its *a priori* principle for judging nature in accordance with possible particular laws for it, provides for its supersensible substratum (in us as well as outside us) **determinability through the intellectual faculty**. But reason provides determination for the same substratum through

Kant discusses the “real” and objective purposiveness of nature, the accordance of its forms with the possibility of objects themselves as determined by the concepts of reason and the understanding, in the teleology, the second part of the *Critique of Judgment*. Only the first part of the critique, the aesthetics, however, Kant explains, contains the unique *a priori* principles of the power of judgment, independent of reason and the understanding. In analysing the subjective and *formal* purposiveness of nature, the aesthetics attempts to verify nature’s accordance to our faculties of cognition *prior* to the formation of concepts. This formal and subjective purposiveness of nature can become known to us aesthetically, Kant suggests, in the perception of **natural beauty**, which we determine through a judgment of taste, guided by feelings of pleasure and displeasure. In the account of the aesthetic judgment Kant returns to imagination proper, and the faculty now enters into an ambivalent partnership with both the understanding *and* reason in order to ensure the stability of the critical system and the unity of consciousness.

### 3.3.2 Pleasurable Cognitions: Analogies of Mind and Nature

Kant provides yet another analogical ground on which to bring the power of judgment into a mediacy relation with regard to the other powers of representation, one that to him “seems to be of still greater importance” than judgment’s family relation with the other cognitive faculties. (Kant 1913, 177) In addition to the cognitive faculties of understanding, reason, and judgment, Kant now also introduces what he calls the three fundamental capacities or faculties of the soul, the faculty of cognition (“Erkenntnißvermögen”), the feeling of pleasure and displeasure (“Gefühl der Lust und Unlust”), and the faculty of desire (“Begehrungsvermögen”). The faculty of cognition, which has nature as its object, is the realm of legislation of the pure understanding, while the faculty of desire receives its *a priori* laws directly from rea-

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its practical law *a priori*; and thus the power of judgment makes possible the transition from the domain of the concept of nature to that of the concept of freedom.” (Kant 2000, 82)

son by means of the concept of freedom. Freedom, it needs to be remembered once again, is for Kant always a freedom *from*, not a freedom *to*. It is a freedom from personal interest, and thus a free acceptance and subordination under the impersonal and universally applicable moral law. We are free to accept the moral law, but not free to reject it. Like Lucifer in his rebellion against God, we deceive ourselves should we believe that a refusal to accept the law might lead to more freedom, as Kant points out in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. (cf. Kant 1914, 227.) The concept of freedom hence *controls* our faculty of desire in accordance with the laws of reason, and since the faculty of desire is necessarily connected to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, this feeling now allows for a transition from the concept of nature to the concept of freedom, which is analogical to the logical transition afforded by the power of judgment between the understanding and reason.

Nun ist zwischen dem Erkenntniß- und dem Begehrungsvermögen das Gefühl der Lust, so wie zwischen dem Verstande und der Vernunft die Urtheilskraft enthalten. Es ist also wenigstens vorläufig zu vermuthen, daß die Urtheilskraft eben so wohl für sich ein Princip *a priori* enthalte und, da mit dem Begehrungsvermögen nothwendig Lust oder Unlust verbunden ist [...] eben so wohl einen Übergang vom reinen Erkenntnißvermögen, d.i. vom Gebiete der Naturbegriffe, zum Gebiete des Freiheitsbegriffs bewirken werde, als sie im logischen Gebrauche den Übergang vom Verstande zur Vernunft möglich macht.<sup>67</sup> (Kant 1913, 178f. A XXIVf.)

This transition becomes possible, since, as Kant contends, the “attainment of every aim is combined with the feeling of pleasure.” To discover the accordance of

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<sup>67</sup> “Now between the faculty of cognition and that of desire there is the feeling of pleasure, just as the power of judgment is contained between the understanding and reason. It is therefore to be suspected at least provisionally that the power of judgment likewise contains an *a priori* principle for itself, and, since pleasure or displeasure is necessarily combined with the faculty of desire [...] it will likewise effect a transition from the pure faculty of cognition, i.e. from the domain of the concepts of nature, to the domain of the concept of freedom, just as in its logical use it makes possible the transition from understanding to reason.” (Kant 2000, 66)

the empirical natural laws with our faculties of cognition—the aim of the analytic of the beautiful—will thus also produce a feeling of pleasure, a pleasure connected to both the practical domain of reason and the theoretical domain of the understanding. While the accordance of our intuitions with the *a priori* categories of our understanding produces neither pleasure nor displeasure, since the understanding effects this accordance unintentionally, the active discovery that two heterogeneous empirical laws can be subsumed under one *a priori* principle creates “the ground of a very noticeable pleasure,” while the discovery of our inability to subsume the particular natural laws under universal and general ones would present, as Kant maintains, a source of considerable displeasure. (Kant 1913, 187f.) Since such an *a priori* unity has to be assumed, while we could neither gain an insight into it nor prove it, its pleasurable discovery hence amounts to a “happy accident”:

[...] daher wir auch, gleich als ob es ein glücklicher unsre Absicht begünstigender *Zufall* wäre, erfreuet (eigentlich eines Bedürfnisses entledigt) werden, wenn wir eine solche systematische Einheit unter bloß empirischen Gesetzen antreffen: ob wir gleich nothwendig annehmen mußten, es sei eine solche Einheit, ohne daß wir sie doch einzusehen und zu beweisen vermochten. [my emphasis]<sup>68</sup> (Kant 1913, 184, A. XXXIV)

The feeling of pleasure hence constitutes the only “proof” of the formal purposiveness of nature, and Kant will ultimately claim that we only call an object purposive *because* it is the immediate cause of pleasure. Both the feeling of pleasure and the formal characteristic of purposiveness, however, are not inherent in the object itself. They are an effect produced by the *subject*, as it experiences pleasure due to the

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<sup>68</sup> “[...] hence we are also delighted (strictly speaking, relieved of a need) when we encounter such a systematic unity among merely empirical laws, just as if it were a happy accident which happened to favor our aim, even though we necessarily had to assume that there is such a unity, yet without having been able to gain insight into it and to prove it.” (Kant 2000, 71)

suitability of nature's forms to its cognitive faculties. This subjective pleasure is necessarily pre-conceptual, for the subject experiences a possible unity of nature and our cognitive apparatus, which precedes the actual formation of concepts. As a feeling, this pleasure cannot be the product of understanding, and the experience must take place in apprehension, the pre-conceptual synthesis of intuitions by imagination, a synthesis which occurs before the cognitive unity produced by concepts has come into play.

Wenn mit der bloßen Auffassung (*apprehensio*) der Form eines Gegenstandes der Anschauung ohne Beziehung derselben auf einen Begriff zu einem bestimmten Erkenntniß Lust verbunden ist: so wird die Vorstellung dadurch nicht auf das Object, sondern lediglich auf das Subject bezogen; und die Lust kann nicht anders als die Angemessenheit desselben zu den Erkenntnißvermögen, die in der reflectierenden Urtheilskraft im Spiel sind, und sofern sie darin sind, also bloß eine subjective formale Zweckmäßigkeit des Objects ausdrücken.<sup>69</sup> (Kant 1913, 189f. A XLIVf.)

Famously, the two faculties at play in this aesthetic judgment are imagination, the *a priori* faculty of apprehension, and understanding, the power of providing rules through concepts. The apprehension of forms in imagination can never take place, explains Kant, without an—even inadvertent—attempt on the part of the power of judgment, to compare them with its capacity to subsume intuitions under the rule of concepts. Pleasure will arise if in this act of judgment imagination and understanding are brought into an unintentional accord, which points to the purposiveness of the

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<sup>69</sup>“If pleasure is connected with the mere apprehension (*apprehensio*) of the form of an object of intuition without a relation of this to a concept for a determinate cognition, then the representation is thereby related not to the object, but solely to the subject, and the pleasure can express nothing but its suitability to the cognitive faculties that are in play in the reflective power of judgment, insofar as they are in play, and thus merely a subjective formal purposiveness of the object.” (Kant 2000, 76)

object in question that already conforms to the rules of understanding before these have been actively enforced.

Wenn nun in dieser Vergleichung die Einbildungskraft (als Vermögen der Anschauungen *a priori*) zum Verstande, als Vermögen der Begriffe unabsichtlich in Einstimmung versetzt und dadurch ein Gefühl der Lust erweckt wird, so muß der Gegenstand alsdann als zweckmäßig für die reflectirende Urtheilskraft angesehen werden.<sup>70</sup> (Kant 1913, 190, A XLIV)

In the felicitous harmony of its cognitive apparatus with the natural world, a moment of inadvertent correspondence for which the representation of the object is only the occasion, the subject thus ultimately experiences pleurably the unity of its own self. The desire for this unity to exist is the “need” of which the subject is “relieved” in the experience of the beautiful, and the beautiful object, as Hans Feger has put it, serves as the “exemplary expression of a subject that feels itself.”<sup>71</sup> In the spontaneous and harmonious play of imagination and understanding, the subject will make the pleasurable discovery of its own internal unity.

It is crucial that the hierarchical relation between imagination and understanding be suspended during the experience of the beautiful and that the accord be produced without the subject’s intention of forming a concept about the object in question. For only then will the judgment about this relation, while not *a priori*, be both subjective and unversally valid, so that the feeling of pleasure can also provide a bridge to the concepts of practical reason. If the form of an object provokes such a pleasure without

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<sup>70</sup>“Now if in this comparison the imagination (as the faculty of *a priori* intuitions) is unintentionally brought into accord with the understanding, as the faculty of concepts, through a given representation and a feeling of pleasure is thereby aroused, then the object must be regarded as purposive for the reflecting power of judgment.” (Kant 2000, 76)

<sup>71</sup>“Der schöne Gegenstand ist nur *exemplarischer Ausdruck* eines sich selbst fühlenden Subjekts.” Hans Feger, *Die Macht der Einbildungskraft in der Ästhetik Kants und Schillers* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1995), 132.

any intention on the part of the subject, the experienced connection, while necessarily subjective, must also be universally applicable for any judging subject.

Wessen Gegenstandes Form (nicht das Materielle seiner Vorstellung, als Empfindung) in der bloßen Reflexion über dieselbe (ohne Absicht auf einen von ihm zu erwerbenden Begriff) als der Grund einer Lust an der Vorstellung eines solchen Objects beurtheilt wird: mit dessen Vorstellung wird diese Lust auch notwendig verbunden geurtheilt, folglich als nicht bloß für das Subject welches diese Form auffaßt, sondern für jeden Urtheilenden überhaupt.<sup>72</sup> (Kant 1913, 190, A XLIVf.)

This univervally valid judgment, which is based on the subjective feeling of pleasure in the encounter with the beautiful, Kant calls taste (“Geschmack”). In its subjective universality the doubly analogous judgment of taste allows us not only to regard nature *as if* the unity of its empirical manifold were provided by a superior understanding, it also introduces the possibility of an analogy with Kant’s ethical imperative, the free acceptance of the moral law. For the highest principle of practical reason, the categorical imperative, also demands a coincidence of the subjective with the universal when it asks us to chose the subjective maxims of our actions in such a fashion that they could be elevated to a general law. Kant’s categorical imperative is a practical rule, transforming actions that would be contingent in and of themselves into moral necessities by ensuring that the subjective desire of the agent—what he or she *wants* to do—is simultaneously also what he or she *should* do according to the objective laws of reason.<sup>73</sup> Like the critical system as a whole, the categorical

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<sup>72</sup>“That object the form of which (not the material aspect of its representation, as sensation) in mere reflection on it (without any intention of acquiring a concept from it) is judged as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object—with its representation this pleasure is also judged to be necessarily combined, consequently not merely for the subject who apprehends this form but for everyone who judges at all.” (Kant 2000, 76)

<sup>73</sup>Since the categorical imperative, as a purely formal principle, is necessarily devoid of any content, the burden of determining the concrete actions it demands in a specific empirical situation, lies

imperative acts as a form of self-censorship and only legitimizes those desires that are already in accordance with the law and which hence cannot introduce any threat to the system. The aesthetic judgment of taste prepares the ground for this relation, as it allows us to find pleasure in a subjective feeling that is at the same time universally valid. The aesthetics of the beautiful and the judgment of taste thus function as a sort of propaedeutics for ethical behavior.<sup>74</sup>

The central prerogative for this propaedeutical analogy is the simultaneity of freedom and lawfulness in the experience of beauty, a relation in which imagination will now come to play a central role.

### 3.3.3 *Lawfulness without the Law: the "Free Play" of Imagination*

Since the judgment of taste pertains to a preconceptual unity, no rule, i.e. no concept can exist to determine the beautiful, which remains in this sense a purely subjective sensation.<sup>75</sup> And yet, this judgment must be at the same time universally valid and *communicable* to everybody. To make such a communication possible, the free play of imagination and understanding in the judgment of taste needs to follow the general rules of cognition, as a mode of representation that is, according to Kant, necessarily valid for all rational beings.

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entirely with the judging subject. As far as its actual *content* is concerned, the law of reason is completely inaccessible to human beings, and Kant's moral philosophy thus has a dimension that is close to the moral universe of early Greek tragedy.

<sup>74</sup>Kant makes this propaedeutical relationship explicit when he discusses the analogies between beauty and morality in paragraph 59 of the *Critique of Judgment*, "On beauty as a symbol of morality." This connection of ethics and aesthetics opened up by Kant would immediately be elaborated and expanded upon by the Early German Romantics, and particularly of course by Friedrich Schiller. For a recent discussion of the ethical implications of the third critique and a vindication of Schiller's argument, cf. Gernot Böhme, *Kants Kritik der Urteilsskraft in neuer Sicht* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999).

<sup>75</sup>"Also kann es auch keine Regel geben, nach der jemand genöthigt werden sollte, etwas für schön anzuerkennen." (Kant 1913, p. 215. A25) "Thus there can also be no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful." (Kant 2000, p. 101.)

Die Erkenntnißkräfte, die durch diese Vorstellung ins Spiel gesetzt werden, sind hiebei in einem freien Spiele, weil kein bestimmter Begriff sie auf eine besondere Erkenntnißregel einschränkt. [...] Die subjective allgemeine Mittheilbarkeit der Vorstellungsart in einem Geschmacksurtheile, da sie, ohne einen bestimmten Begriff vorauszusetzen, Statt finden soll, kann nichts anders als der Gemüthszustand in dem freien Spiele der Einbildungskraft und des Verstandes (sofern sie unter einander, wie es zu einem **Erkenntnisse überhaupt** erforderlich ist, zusammen stimmen) sein, indem wir uns bewußt sind, daß dieses zum Erkenntniß überhaupt schickliche subjective Verhältniß eben so wohl für jedermann gelten und folglich allgemein mittheilbar sein müsse, als es eine jede bestimmte Erkenntniß ist, die doch immer auf jenem Verhältniß als subjectiver Bedingung beruht.<sup>76</sup> (Kant 1913, 217f. A28f.)

This free play, even if not subsumable under a concept, thus remains necessarily controlled, and imagination is free but by no means lawless. It plays with a relative freedom that remains within the realm of what is universally agreeable and hence communicable. In the “General remark on the first section of the Analytic,” which closes the Analytic of the Beautiful, Kant will accordingly come to define the concept of taste as “a faculty for judging an object in relation to the **free lawfulness** of the imagination.”<sup>77</sup> (Kant 2000, 124) To enable the experience of the beautiful,

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<sup>76</sup>“The powers of cognition that are set into play by this representation are hereby in a free play, since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition. [...] The subjective universal communicability of the kind of representation in a judgment of taste, since it is supposed to occur without presupposing a determinate concept, can be nothing other than the state of mind in the free play of the imagination and the understanding (so far as they agree with each other as is requisite for a **cognition in general**: for we are conscious that this subjective relation suited to cognition in general must be valid for everyone and consequently universally communicable, just as any determinate cognition is, which still always rests on that relation as its subjective cognition.” (Kant 2000, 103)

<sup>77</sup>“[...]ein Beurtheilungsvermögen eines Gegenstandes in Beziehung auf die *freie Gesetzmäßigkeit* der Einbildungskraft sei.” (Kant 1913, 240, A69)

imagination exercises the form of self-censorship that the individual also needs to practise with regard to the moral law. Its freedom always already complies to the law and the pathological and ultimately incommunicable liberties of fantasy could only be judged as “tasteless.” In this paradoxical dynamic of free lawfulness the hierarchy between the faculties is simultaneously eliminated and retained. Imagination needs to be considered as free in the judgment of taste; it is non-reproductive, as it operates independent of the laws of association and must be considered as “productive and self-active.” In order to contain a process in which imagination acts as the “authoress of voluntary forms of possible intuitions,” Kant assumes that the possible form of a beautiful object will demand a combination of the manifold in accordance with the laws of the understanding, which coincides with the combination imagination would produce of its own accord “if it were left free by itself”:

[...] so läßt sich doch wohl noch begreifen: daß der Gegenstand ihr gerade eine solche Form an die Hand geben könne, wie sie die Einbildungskraft, wenn sie sich selbst frei überlassen wäre, in Einstimmung mit der **Verstandesgesetzmäßigkeit** überhaupt entwerfen würde.<sup>78</sup> (Kant 1913, 240f. A69)

Kant’s use of the conditional in this passage is indicative: Imagination is never truly left completely free by itself, not even to produce a form that would freely fall under the laws of understanding. A completely autonomous imagination would be able to provide a law, and its forms would thus achieve legislative power, a function, which remains the privilege of reason and understanding. Imagination, like the faculty of judgment, achieves its freedom only in relation to the laws of the understanding:

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<sup>78</sup> “[...] nevertheless it is still quite conceivable that the object can provide it with a form that contains precisely such a composition of the manifold as the imagination would design in harmony with the **lawfulness of the understanding** in general if it were left free by itself.” (Kant 2000, 125)

Allein daß die **Einbildungskraft frei und doch von selbst gesetzmäßig** sei, d.i. daß sie eine Autonomie bei sich führe, ist ein Widerspruch. Der Verstand allein giebt das Gesetz.<sup>79</sup> (Kant 1913, 241, A69)

The experience of the beautiful thus does not challenge the law-giving power of the understanding, and imagination may only enter into this free play because it has already internalized the laws that necessarily apply in any process of cognition. The faculty can act freely as long as it does so in accordance with the rule of understanding, a freedom within bounds that ensures the consistency of the critical system without posing a threat to its foundations. The rule of the concept may not be directly present in order to secure the special status of the judgment of taste, but since imagination can be seen to anticipate the rule of law without any outside pressure, such a direct imposition will not be necessary to assure the lawfulness of the judgment of taste:

Es wird also eine Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz, und eine subjective Übereinstimmung der Einbildungskraft zum Verstande, ohne eine objective, da die Vorstellung auf einen bestimmten Begriff von einem Gegenstande bezogen wird, mit der freien Gesetzmäßigkeit des Verstandes (welche auch Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck genannt worden) und mit der Eigenthümlichkeit eines Geschmacksurtheils allein zusammen bestehen können.<sup>80</sup> (Kant 1913, 241, A69)

Once again, the freedom granted to imagination is the freedom of a domesticated faculty, which may speak before the law as long as it complies to its rules. As Hartmut

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<sup>79</sup>“Yet for the **imagination** to be **free** and yet **lawful by itself**, i.e., that it carry autonomy with it, is a contradiction. The understanding alone gives the law.” (Kant 2000, 125)

<sup>80</sup>“Thus only a lawfulness without law and a subjective correspondence of the imagination to the understanding without an objective one—where the representation is related to a determinate concept of an object—are consistent with the free lawfulness of the understanding (which is also called purposiveness without an end) and with the peculiarity of a judgment of taste.” (Kant 2000, 125)

and Gernot Böhme have pointed out, Kant himself reveals the framework for imagination's freedom in the *Analytic of the Beautiful* in a peculiar statement from the *Anthropology* about the political artist and his relation to freedom and the people<sup>81</sup>:

Übrigens kann ein politischer Künstler eben so gut wie ein ästhetischer durch Einbildung, die er statt der Wirklichkeit vorzuspiegeln versteht, z.B. von **Freiheit** des Volks, die (wie die im englischen Parlament), oder des Ranges und der **Gleichheit** (wie im französischen Convent), in bloßen Formalien besteht, die Welt leiten und regieren (*mundus vult decipi*), aber es ist doch besser auch nur den Schein von dem Besitz dieses die Menschheit veredelnden Guts für sich zu haben, als sich desselben handgreiflich beraubt zu fühlen.<sup>82</sup> (Kant 1917, 239f.)

Kant's text in the *Analytic of the Beautiful* does the work of the political artist and grants a freedom to imagination that is ultimately a mere formality since it remains in strict accordance with and operates for the benefit of reason and understanding. This rhetoric of illusionary possession of a good, which is designed to hide a privation, will return in the account of genius that Kant gives in the *Critique of Judgment*.

### 3.3.4 *The Freedom of Aesthetic Ideas*

In the paragraphs devoted to the discussion of genius in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defines the "underlying Idea," which, as the analysis of the *Anthropology* had pointed out, the genius must represent truthfully and in "academic fashion" in the work of art, as an *aesthetic idea*. The aesthetic idea is probably the most explosive

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<sup>81</sup>cf. Böhme and Böhme 1996, 239.

<sup>82</sup>"Moreover, an artist in the political sphere, like one in the aesthetic, knows how to guide and rule the world by dazzling it with images in place of reality (*mundus vult decipi*): for example, the *freedom* of the people (as in the British Parliament) or their estates and *equality* (as in the French Assembly), which are mere formalities. Still, it is better to have even the mere illusion of possessing this good that ennobles humanity than to feel clearly the privation of it." (Kant 1974, 56)

conception Kant introduces in his analysis of the aesthetic judgment, for it ascribes to imagination an ability that the first critique had strictly reserved to reason, a capacity to surpass the conceptualizing ability of understanding. In the presentation of aesthetic ideas, the ability of imagination to productively synthesize intuitions exceeds the capacity of the understanding to unify them under a concept, and it hence triggers an uncontainable process of thought that simultaneously stimulates and frustrates the abilities of the understanding:

[...] unter einer ästhetischen Idee aber verstehe ich diejenige Vorstellung der Einbildungskraft, die viel zu denken veranlaßt, ohne daß ihr doch irgend ein bestimmter Gedanke, d.i. *Begriff*, adäquat sein kann, die folglich keine Sprache völlig erreicht und verständlich machen kann.<sup>83</sup> (Kant 1913, 314, A192f.)

In other words, imagination here proceeds in a sense *like* reason and achieves something the understanding can never accomplish: it finds a way to allude to the ineffable, which properly belongs to the realm of reason, situated on the limits of the critical system. The aesthetic ideas of imagination can thus become a counterpart (“Gegenstück”) to the ideas of reason, which they anticipate in a complicated inverse analogy.

Man sieht leicht, daß sie [die ästhetische Idee] das Gegenstück (Pendant) von der **Vernunftidee** sei, welche umgekehrt der Begriff ist, dem keine **Anschaung** (Vorstellung der Einbildungskraft) adäquat sein kann.<sup>84</sup> (Kant 1913, 314, A193.)

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<sup>83</sup> “[...] by an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., **concept**, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible.” (Kant 2000, 192)

<sup>84</sup> “One readily sees that it [the aesthetic idea] is the counterpart (pendant) of an **idea of reason**, which is, conversely, a concept to which no **intuition** (representation of the imagination) can be adequate.” (Kant 2000, 192)

*Like* the ideas of reason, the aesthetic ideas exceed the capacities of the concepts of the understanding, but they only open up the possibility of a noumenal realm which they cannot properly represent. In this sense, their relation to the ideas of reason is not analogical but complementary: aesthetic ideas present intuitions to which no concept can adequately correspond, while ideas of reason are concepts to which no intuition can be adequate. Once again, imagination finds itself in a liminal position, which is, however, very different from the one described in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, since the faculty is now no longer situated between concepts and intuitions, but rather between concepts and ideas, where it now mediates between the understanding and reason. Powerful and powerless at the same time, imagination may change its position within the system, but its function remains the same: it affords the possibility of a transition and of unity but always answers to a higher faculty which controls its mediatory influence. In Kant's account, imagination develops its true power, which serves as an analogy for the power of reason, in the realm of artistic production. Here, it can create a "second nature" out of the material given to it by the intuitions of empirical reality.

Die Einbildungskraft (als productives Erkenntnißvermögen) ist nämlich sehr mächtig in Schaffung gleichsam einer andern Natur aus dem Stoffe, den ihr die wirkliche giebt.<sup>85</sup> (Kant 1913, 314, A193)

In this creation of a second nature—which must, however, appear in form of the first, since Kant's aesthetics is unreservedly an aesthetics of nature—imagination as employed by the genius enables us to feel our freedom from the empirical laws of association and points to our ability to conceive of a supersensual realm that lies beyond the realm of empirical sensation. The aesthetic ideas "strive toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience," and what is more, by means of them, the poet

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<sup>85</sup> "The imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely, very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it." (Kant 2000, 192)

actually dares to attempt the impossible, he sets out to make sensible the supersensible ideas of reason:

Der Dichter wagt es, Vernunftideen von unsichtbaren Wesen, das Reich der Seligen, das Höllenreich, die Ewigkeit, die Schöpfung u.d.gl., zu versinnlichen; oder auch das, was zwar Beispiele in der Erfahrung findet, z.B. den Tod, den Neid und alle Laster, ingleichen die Liebe, den Ruhm, u.d.gl., über die Schranken der Erfahrung hinaus vermittelt einer Einbildungskraft, die dem Vernunft-Vorspiele in Erreichung eines Größten nacheifert, in einer Vollständigkeit sinnlich zu machen, für die sich in der Natur kein Beispiel findet; und es ist eigentlich die Dichtkunst, in welcher sich das Vermögen ästhetischer Ideen in seinem ganzen Maße zeigen kann.<sup>86</sup> (Kant 1913, 314, A194)

In this capacity, imagination, as Kant puts it, “aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way” and its creative representations thus set the faculty of intellectual ideas, i.e. reason in motion. But at the same time, the genius is here again dangerously close to the “Schwärmer” of the *Anthropology*. Like the latter, he seems to have the impossible in his grasp and he dares to go beyond the limits of what the critical philosopher may allow himself reasonably to dream. And what is more, the genius, like the madman, knows not what he does. The aesthetic ideas are not his own creation, they are given to him by nature, since the genius is after all only a medium “by which nature gives the rule to art.” The genius neither knows how he receives the aesthetic ideas, nor can he describe how he creates—the creation of the work of art is not in his control.

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<sup>86</sup> “The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature, by means of an imagination that emulates the precedent of reason in attaining to a maximum; and it is really the art of poetry in which the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure.” (Kant 2000, 192f.)

Man sieht hieraus [...] 3) Daß es [das Genie], wie es sein Product zu Stande bringe, selbst nicht beschreiben, oder wissenschaftlich anzeigen könne, sondern daß es als Natur die Regel gebe; und daher der Urheber eines Products, welches er seinem Genie verdankt, selbst nicht weiß, wie sich in ihm die Ideen dazu herbei finden, auch es nicht in seiner Gewalt hat, dergleichen nach belieben oder planmäßig auszudenken und anderen in solchen Vorschriften mitzutheilen, die sie in den Stand setzen, gleichmäßige Producte hervorzubringen.<sup>87</sup> (Kant 1913, 308, A182.)

This passivity, speculates Kant in strikingly un-Kantian manner, seems to be the reason why the capacity derives its name from the Roman *genius*, the guiding spirit given to humans at birth, whose inspirations are the only source of original ideas. (Kant 1913, 308) As Kant's etymological explanation suggests, the position of the genius is close to that of the *manteis* in Plato's *Timaeos*, whose inspired visions are equally uncontrolled and incommunicable. Communicability, however, is an absolute necessity in the realm of Kantian aesthetics if it is truly to serve as the bridge to the noumenal realm of the moral law. Once again, the incommunicability of inspiration remains too close to madness, and the excessive and disruptive capacity of imagination in its lawless form needs to be immediately contained if it is not to threaten the very architectonic it supposedly supports. Like Plato, Kant needs the *prophetai* to control and communicate the inspired madness of the genius, and in an argument parallel to that in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, Kant achieves this goal by imposing a restraining form of self-censorship.

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<sup>87</sup> "From this one sees: [...] 3) That it [genius] cannot itself describe or indicate scientifically how it brings its product into being, but rather that it gives the rule as **nature**, and hence the author of a product that he owes to his genius does not know himself how the ideas for it come to him, and also does not have it in his power to think up such things at will or according to plan, and to communicate to others precepts that would put them in a position to produce similar products." (Kant 2000, 186f.)

### 3.3.5 *The Corrective of Taste*

The ability to receive aesthetic ideas is only one side of the capacities of the genius, and in itself merely a “talent of the imagination.” (Kant 1913, 314, A194) True genius will arise only, Kant explains, if this talent is combined with the ability to find a communicable expression for the idea, one that will be, as also the *Anthropology* contents, exemplary (“musterhaft”) and hence frames the freedom of imagination in a set of universally acceptable rules. Genius is thus defined as “the exemplary originality of the natural endowment of a subject for the **free** use of his cognitive faculties.”<sup>88</sup> (Kant 2000, 195) The exemplariness of the products of genius is ensured through the genius’s judgment of taste, which can guarantee that the aesthetic representations of the ideas of imagination will be universally agreeable and communicable. “Beautiful art” necessitates a combination of genius and taste, and while both need to be present, the suitability of the products of the free imagination to the law of the understanding guaranteed by the judgment of taste is ultimately more important than their originality if the products of genius are not to become the mere “nonsense” of the lawless imagination:

Reich und original an Ideen zu sein, bedarf es nicht so nothwendig zum Behuf der Schönheit, aber wohl der Angemessenheit jener Einbildungskraft in ihrer Freiheit zu der Gesetzmäßigkeit des Verstandes. Denn aller Reichtum der ersteren bringt in ihrer gesetzlosen Freiheit nichts als Unsinn hervor; die Urtheilskraft ist hingegen das Vermögen, sie dem Verstande anzupassen.<sup>89</sup> (Kant 1913, 319, A202f.)

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<sup>88</sup> “Nach diesen Voraussetzungen ist Genie: die musterhafte Originalität der Naturgabe eines Subjects im **freien** Gebrauche seiner Erkenntnisvermögen.” (Kant 1913, 318, A200)

<sup>89</sup> “To be rich and original in ideas is not as necessary for the sake of beauty as is the suitability of the imagination in its freedom to the lawfulness of the understanding. For all the richness of the former produces, in its lawless freedom, nothing but nonsense; the power of judgment, however, is the faculty for bringing it in line with the understanding.” (Kant 2000, 197)

The discipline of taste thus ensures that genius and its imagination remain civilized and well-behaved while giving guidance to keep them in the bounds of true purposiveness. Taste clips, as Kant puts it, the wings of genius. A corrective violence (“Zucht”) is necessary to keep imagination in its natural limits, and no matter how necessary the freedom of imagination might be, Kant leaves no doubt that it is always preferable to sacrifice this exuberance and freedom in order to secure the control of the understanding.

Der Geschmack ist, so wie die Urtheilskraft überhaupt, die Disciplin (oder Zucht) des Genies, beschneidet diesem sehr die Flügel und macht es gesittet oder geschliffen; zugleich aber gibt er diesem eine Leitung, worüber und bis wie weit es sich verbreiten soll, um zweckmäßig zu bleiben; [...] Wenn also im Widerstreite beiderlei Eigenschaften an einem Producte etwas aufgeopfert werden soll, so müßte es eher auf der Seite des Genies geschehen: und die Urtheilskraft, welche in Sachen der schönen Kunst aus eigenen Principien den Ausspruch thut, wird eher der Freiheit und dem Reichthum der Einbildungskraft, als dem Verstande Abbruch zu thun erlauben.<sup>90</sup> (Kant 1913, 319f. A203)

This corrective and violent control, which informs Kant’s language and rhetoric in the *Critique of Judgment* will surface much more openly in the Kantian text once imagination is no longer the partner for understanding but encounters the law of reason in its noumenal form, even if only *ex negativo*. In the *Analytic of the Sublime*, which presents the next step in the Kantian argument, imagination openly enacts a

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<sup>90</sup> “Taste, like the power of judgment in general, is the discipline (or corrective) of genius, clipping its wings and making it well behaved or polished; but at the same time it gives genius guidance as to where and how far it should extend itself if it is to remain purposive; [...] Thus if anything must be sacrificed in the conflict of the two properties in one product, it must rather be on the side of genius: and the power of judgment, which in matters of beautiful art makes its pronouncements on the basis of its own principles, will sooner permit damage to the freedom and richness of the imagination than to the understanding.” (Kant 2000, 197)

self-sacrifice in order to reveal the omnipotence of the moral law. As the philosopher himself tries to achieve a glimpse of the noumenal world, which he has to exclude from rational discourse, his philosophical desire can only be realized through a violation of imagination, and the violence that Slavoj Žižek has diagnosed becomes openly apparent. As Kant allows imagination to display its disruptive side in an excessive production of images, the previous internal constraint of self-censorship will be replaced by an open display of violence enforced by the power of reason.

### 3.3.6 *Liminal Violence: The Encounter of Reason and Imagination*

Ultimately, both in the positive analogy of the beautiful and the controlled freedom of the aesthetic idea, the power of imagination can only fall short in relation to the noumenal Absolute of the moral law, and the philosophical desire for an empirical trace of the intellectual realm of reason remains unsatisfied in the Analytic of the Beautiful. In the *Critique of Judgment* the Absolute only leaves its trace in the moment of pure negativity that is the sublime. In the sublime moment, both in its mathematical form of incalculable vastness and the dynamic one of awe-inspiring force, this trace appears precisely in the *inability* of imagination to create adequate representations for the ideas of reason. For the sublime, even more so than the beautiful, while triggered by the encounter with natural phenomena, is for Kant purely a product of the subject. Imagination, when faced with the mathematical sublime, fails in its endeavour to synthesize and comprehend the given object in the whole of an intuition. Yet, in this failed endeavour it nevertheless gives proof of the existence of a law, reason's idea of unity, which demands of it to embark on the attempt in the first place. This experience of our inadequacy with regard to an idea of reason that is nevertheless a law for us, is what Kant defines as respect ("Achtung"), and this paradoxical moment of spontaneous receptivity that Heidegger had diagnosed as the core of subjectivity is also at the heart of the sublime. What we come to respect in the experience of the sublime is thus not the power of nature but

rather the superiority of our rational vocation (to accept the moral law) over even the highest faculty connected to sensibility and the laws of nature, imagination. To locate the sublime in nature and not in the subject, would constitute a *subreption*, a confusion of an object with an idea, a seriously detrimental misunderstanding that the critical philosopher must set out to untangle.

Also ist das Gefühl des Erhabenen in der Natur Achtung für unsere eigene Bestimmung, die wir einem Objecte der Natur durch gewisse Subreption (Verwechslung einer Achtung für das Object statt der für die Idee der Menschheit in unserm Subjecte) beweisen, welches uns die Überlegenheit der Vernunftbestimmung unserer Erkenntnißvermögen über das größte Vermögen der Sinnlichkeit gleichsam anschaulich macht.<sup>91</sup> (Kant 1913, 257, A97)

The feeling of the sublime thus presents a negative analogy, if such a trope can be said to exist, as it allows us to think the Absolute of the moral law by means of the impossibility of its representation. If the beautiful object is conceptualized by Kant as the outward projection of the harmony of our faculties with a purposive nature, the sublime object causes a disruption of that very process and shows us the inadequacy of our cognitive apparatus. Where the feeling of the beautiful causes pleasure, the first encounter with the sublime only causes pain. As long as the subject still falls prey to the subreption and attributes the sublime moment to nature, this experience causes precisely the displeasure Kant had feared in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, it shows us that our cognitive apparatus is *not* in accordance with the empirical laws of nature. Imagination, however, by acknowledging the sublime's relation to reason and

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<sup>91</sup> "Thus the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we show to an object in nature through a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject), which as it were makes intuitable the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive faculty over the greatest faculty of sensibility." (Kant 2000, 141)

the subject, will not revel in its disruptive capacity. Compliant with the rule of reason it already knows how to “use” this moment and is thus able to turn it into a moment of negative pleasure (“negative Lust”), a masochistic pleasure that presupposes a prior moment of pain and deprivation. By affording this transformation from pain to pleasure, imagination, rather than disrupting the fabric of the critical system, makes itself an “instrument of reason” (“Werkzeug der Vernunft”). The ideas of the sublime are thus entirely separate (“ganz abgetrennt”) from the analysis of the purposiveness of nature, and Kant’s theory of the sublime only develops the “purposive use” that imagination can make of its failed representations.

Zum Schönen der Natur müssen wir einen Grund außer uns suchen, zum Erhabenen aber bloß in uns und der Denkungsart, die in die Vorstellung der ersteren Erhabenheit hineinbringt; eine sehr nöthige vorläufige Bemerkung, welche die Ideen des Erhabenen von der einer Zweckmäßigkeit der Natur ganz abtrennt und aus der Theorie desselben einen bloßen Anhang zur ästhetischen Beurtheilung der Zweckmäßigkeit der Natur macht, weil dadurch keine besondere Form in dieser vorgestellt, sondern nur ein zweckmäßiger Gebrauch, den die Einbildungskraft von ihrer Vorstellung macht, entwickelt wird.<sup>92</sup> (Kant 1913, 246, A78)

In this “purposive use,” necessitated by the encounter with the sublime, the freedom of imagination in the production of the aesthetic idea and the judgment of the beautiful reveals itself as the illusion of the political artist that Kant had referred to in the *Anthropology*. Behind the façade of aesthetic play, one encounters a core of

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<sup>92</sup>“For the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground outside ourselves, but for the sublime merely one in ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity into the representation of the former—a very necessary introductory remark, which entirely separates the ideas of the sublime from that of the purposiveness of **nature**, and makes of the theory of the sublime a mere appendix to the aesthetic judging of the purposiveness of nature, since by this means no particular form is represented in the latter, but only a purposive use that the imagination makes of its representation is developed.” (Kant 2000, 130)

restrictive violence as Kant erects a philosophical high-voltage fence around the abyss of imagination.

### 3.3.7 *Aesthetic Play and Moral Business*

The movement from the beautiful to the sublime, from pleasure to respect, is a movement from aesthetic play to the corrective business of dominance and coercion.<sup>93</sup> As the judging consciousness discovers the “genuine property of human morality” it now encounters the necessity of violence, which had only mildly asserted itself in the “Zucht” of taste applied to the genius’s imagination. When doing “lawful business” (“gesetzliches Geschäft”), reason is forced to do violence to sensibility, and in the aesthetic judgment that serves as a negative analogy for the noumenal law, this violence is exercised by imagination itself:

In der That läßt sich ein Gefühl für das Erhabene der Natur nicht wohl denken, ohne eine Stimmung des Gemüths, die der zum moralischen ähnlich ist, damit zu verbinden; und obgleich die unmittelbare Lust am Schönen der Natur gleichfalls eine gewisse **Liberalität** der Denkungsart, d.i. der Unabhängigkeit des Wohlgefallens vom bloßen Sinnengenusse voraussetzt und cultivirt, so wird dadurch noch mehr die Freiheit im **Spiele**, als unter

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<sup>93</sup>Interestingly and not surprisingly, the dichotomy of play and business is precisely the distinction Kant uses in the *Anthropology* to prevent an inappropriate blurring of the boundaries between the nocturnal realm of imagination and the diurnal realm of rational action. While the stimulation of imagination at night, by means of ghost stories for example, though a dangerous and unhealthy habit of women and hypochondriacs, might be tolerable as play with some entertainment value, it becomes mere silliness during daytime, when the talk should be all business: “Daher ist die Bezáhmung seiner Einbildungskraft durch frühes Schlafengehen, um früh wieder aufstehen zu können, eine zur psychologischen Diät gehörige sehr nützliche Regel; das Fraucnzimmer aber und die Hypochondristen (die gemeinlich eben daher ihr Übel haben) lieben mehr das entgegengesetzte Verhalten.—Warum lassen sich Geistergeschichten in später Nacht noch wohl anhören, die am Morgen bald nach dem Aufstehen jedem abgeschmackt und für die Unterhaltung ganz unschicklich vorkommen; wo man dagegen fragt: was Neues im Haus- oder gemeinen Wesen vorgefallen sei, oder seine Arbeit des vorigen Tages fortsetzt? Die Ursache ist: weil, was an sich blos **Spiel** ist, dem Nachlassen der den Tag über erschöpften Kräfte, was aber **Geschäfte** ist, dem durch die nachtruhe gestärkten und gleichsam neugebornen Menschen angemessen ist.” (Kant 1917, 181)

cinem gesetzlichen **Geschäfte** vorgestellt: welches die ächte Beschaffenheit der Sittlichkeit des Menschen ist, wo die Vernunft der Sinnlichkeit Gewalt anthun muß, nur daß im ästhetischen Urtheile über das Erhabene diese Gewalt durch die Einbildungskraft selbst, als durch ein Werkzeug der Vernunft, ausgeübt vorgestellt wird.<sup>94</sup> (Kant 1913, 268f. A116f.)

As an “instrument of reason,” imagination thus does violence to itself, it sacrifices its own freedom and uses this self-inflicted deprivation to point to a law that is not its own, yet which promises, if only *via negationis*, a power far greater than the one imagination has to relinquish. The rule of law does not have to interfere anymore, the violence it presupposes is self-inflicted and transformed into the negative pleasure of an imaginary reward.

Das Wohlgefallen am Erhabenen der Natur ist daher auch nur **negativ** (statt dessen das am Schönen **positiv** ist), nämlich ein Gefühl der Beraubung der Freiheit der Einbildungskraft durch sie selbst, indem sie nach einem anderen Gesetze, als dem des empirischen Gebrauchs zweckmäßig bestimmt wird. Dadurch bekommt sie eine Erweiterung und Macht, welche größer ist als die, welche sie aufopfert, deren Grund aber ihr selbst verborgen ist, statt dessen sie die Aufopferung oder die Beraubung und

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<sup>94</sup> “In fact a feeling for the sublime in nature cannot even be conceived without connecting it to a disposition of the mind that is similar to the moral disposition; and, although the beautiful in nature likewise presupposes and cultivates a certain **liberality** in the manner of thinking, i.e., independence of the satisfaction from the sensory enjoyment, nevertheless by means of it freedom is represented more as in **play** than as subject to a lawful **business**, which is the genuine property of human morality, where reason must exercise dominion over sensibility; it is just that in the aesthetic judgment on the sublime this dominion is represented as being exercised by the imagination itself, as an instrument of reason.” (Kant 2000, 151) The English translation of “Gewalt anthun” with “exercise dominion over” is somewhat misleading, as it makes the violence implicit that is quite explicit in the German text: “Gewalt anthun” literally means “to do violence to.” It is also a synonym for the German “vergewaltigen,” “to rape,” a particularly telling connotation in the clearly gendered encounter of male reason with the female imagination.

zugleich die Ursache **fühlt**, der sie unterworfen wird.<sup>95</sup> (Kant 1913, 269, A117)

The freedom that had been granted to imagination in the pleasurable feeling of the beautiful is stripped away again in the encounter with the sublime. Here, a higher purpose, a different kind of law makes itself felt at the price of precisely this potentially disruptive freedom. The complex power relations between the mental faculties in Kant's account of the sublime thus once again open up the political dimension of imagination's unrestricted freedom that is central to Žižek's reading of Kant. In the sublime moment, Kant quite ingeniously and insidiously prohibits an opening of radical freedom, by suggesting that imagination *already* understands that it will gain more power by its own subjugation than by an attempt to defy the law. A good revolutionary, in other words, will have understood that true power always lies with the government and will thus choose not to openly exert the freedom granted to him in theory but not in practice.<sup>96</sup> But the averted danger of the sublime moment, which lies in the potential discovery of the radical freedom, which the Kantian imagination denies itself before it can truly apprehend it, is heightened by the fact that this threatening abyss must be traversed if the moral philosopher himself wants to receive a glimpse of the moral law, which is revealed precisely in the voluntary self-sacrifice of imagination. This sacrificial logic has been analysed in detail by Jean-François Lyotard, who succinctly describes the masochistic simultaneity of pleasure and pain that is produced for the Kantian philosopher by the sublime moment:

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<sup>95</sup>“The satisfaction in the sublime in nature is thus also only **negative** (whereas that in the beautiful is **positive**), namely a feeling of the deprivation of the freedom of the imagination by itself, insofar as it is purposively determined in accordance with a law other than that of empirical use. It thereby acquires an enlargement and power which is greater than that which it sacrifices, but whose ground is hidden from it, whereas it **feels** the sacrifice or deprivation and at the same time the cause to which it is subjected.” (Kant 2000, 152)

<sup>96</sup>It goes without saying, that Kant's philosophical account of cognitive power relations, even more so than Descartes's, is a prime example for Michel Foucault's thesis of the internalization of corrective violence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European societies.

Violence must be done to the imagination because it is through its pain, through the mediation of its violation, that the joy of seeing or of almost seeing the law is obtained.<sup>97</sup>

The purposiveness of the morally good, the power of the law of reason can only be indicated in this negative moment of painful pleasure that is simultaneously jubilation and defeat. If the Analytic of the Beautiful could verify the postulate of the third critique, that a bridge between the realms of nature and freedom is indeed possible, the Analytic of the Sublime ultimately denies that possibility—at least by way of a “natural” harmony. Human nature, Kant points out, does not agree with the good, the highest idea of reason “of its own accord,” it can only be brought into this accord by means of violence, “weil die menschliche Natur nicht so von selbst, sondern nur durch Gewalt, welche die Vernunft der Sinnlichkeit antut, zu jenem Guten zusammenstimmt.” (Kant 1913, p. 271. A120.) Ultimately, this admission of the necessity of violence to unify the self as well as the critical system could only constitute a defeat, for what happens to the “free submission under the law,” if this submission can only be achieved by means of coercion? Yet, the self-sacrifice of imagination seemingly saves reason from this embarrassment, as it freely accepts a violence born out of desperation, which hence deflects the shortcomings of the sublime’s negative analogy. The relative freedom of imagination in the realm of the beautiful is only an illusionary façade, which hides the violent deprivation the faculty will have to undergo when confronted by the law of reason.

Lyotard has rightfully pointed out that the violence which emerges in the sublime moment is brought forth by the philosophical desire that animates the critical system, and which is the very desire that the critical philosophy is designed to constrain. Kant’s transcendental philosophy, as it seeks to establish the *a priori* conditions of possibility for judging the true, the just, and the beautiful in the realms of knowledge,

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<sup>97</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime. (Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment,’ 23-29* trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 180.

morality, and aesthetics must exclude but at the same time relies on an unconditional Absolute.<sup>98</sup> While the “Schwärmer” can happily believe to have this very principle in his possession, the systematic philosopher has to constrain himself to the painful impossibility of his desires, a constraint which the Analytic of the Sublime presents as a negative pleasure. Kant himself is very aware of his closeness to the philosopher’s systematic twin who resides in the lunatic asylum, and insists that the experience of the Absolute, offered by the sublime, precisely because of its negativity is in no danger of the undisciplined excess of “Schärmerei” (Kant 1913, 275, A125). Fearing for his sanity, the philosopher, like Ulysses, may listen to the sirens only while chained to the mast of his ship, while he convinces himself of the pleasure the pain of this precaution causes him. As Lyotard comments:

*A priori* conditions of possibility must, by hypothesis, be unconditioned, or else they would not be *a priori*. Yet if the critical examination can establish them as such, it must be able to see the nothingness of the condition that is “behind” them. In other words, reflection pushes the analysis of its own conditions as far as it can, in accordance with the demand of the critique itself. Reflection thus touches on the absolute of its conditions, which is none other than the impossibility for it to pursue them “further”: the absolute of presentation, the absolute of speculation, the absolute of morality. All thought is a being put into relation—a “synthesis,” in the language of Kant. Thus when thinking reaches the absolute, the relation reaches the without relation, for the absolute is without relation. How can the without-relation be “present” to relation? It can only be “present” as disavowed (as metaphysical entity), forbidden (as illusion). This dis-

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<sup>98</sup> “Die Vernunft wird durch einen Hang ihrer Natur getrieben, über den Erfahrungsgebrauch hinaus zu gehen, sich in einem reinen Gebrauche und vermittelst bloßer Ideen zu den äußersten Grenzen aller Erkenntnis hinaus zu wagen, und nur allererst in der Vollendung ihres Kreises, in einem für sich bestehenden systematischen Ganzen, Ruhe zu finden.” (A797/B825)

avowal, which is constitutive of critical thinking, is the avowal of its own fury. It forbids itself the absolute, much as it still wants it. (Lyotard 1994, 56)

The sublime thus encapsulates the dual nature of the Kantian fears with regard to the lawless imagination, which knows no bounds in its freedom bordering on madness. Not only does it threaten the social fabric and the very fabric of the self that the critical system is designed to hold together, it is also dangerously close to the denied desires of the critical philosopher himself, who is more than prone to a sympathetic infection with the virus of an over-imaginative and uncontrolled sensibility. Simultaneously necessary and dangerous for the unity of the system in its synthetic and its disruptive function, the imagination can thus only have a paradoxical and painfully conflicted position within the transcendental framework. At once the solution for the most vexing conceptual problems and a dreaded intrusion of lawless irrationality into the court of reason, the faculty opens up a conceptual abyss that the Kantian system, in spite of its rigorous unifying mechanisms, ultimately remains unable to close.

## Chapter 4

**“DAS GRÖSSESTE GUT BESTEHT IN DER  
 EINBILDUNGSKRAFT.” MODELS OF IMAGINATIVE  
 SUBJECTIVITY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF JOHANN  
 GOTTLIEB FICHTE AND FRIEDRICH VON  
 HARDENBERG**

Vollständiges Ich zu seyn, ist eine *Kunst*.

To be a complete I is an *art*.

—Friedrich von Hardenberg, Fichte Studien—

Immanuel Kant’s critical project immediately triggered an intense philosophical debate that would give rise to the intimately connected discourses of both German Idealism and Early German Romanticism. Much to Kant’s surprise, the critique levelled against his systematic approach would mainly focus on his account of the structure of self-consciousness and in particular on the possibility of an intellectual intuition, which he had so vigorously ruled out in his discussion of the transcendental unity of apperception in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Fichte, Schelling, Hölderlin, Friedrich Schlegel, and Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known as Novalis, to name only some of the most prominent participants in the German philosophical debate at the turn of the eighteenth century, would all take Kant’s assessment of the unity of self-consciousness as the “highest point of philosophy” very seriously, and their scrutiny of its potential as the absolute foundation for a complete philosophical system would lead to a radical reconfiguration of the concepts of subjectivity, freedom, and

consequently of the role of imagination in the German philosophical discussion.<sup>1</sup>

In the accounts of subjectivity of both René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, imagination, as the two previous chapters could show, emerges simultaneously as a central concept for the constitution of self-consciousness and the foundation of the philosophical system, *and* as a grave danger to the philosophical project, potentially detrimental to the goals of reason because of its treacherous, deceptive, and possibly uncontrollable connection to the senses. The fundamental ambiguity with regard to imagination, which a close reading of the Cartesian and the Kantian text can bring to light, is a direct effect of this dual assessment of the faculty as both indispensable and dangerous for the constitution of the subject and the philosophical system. This assessment in turn ultimately springs from the dualistic tension between mind and body, subject and nature, and the realms of freedom and determined causality at the heart of both

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<sup>1</sup>One of the first to describe the relation between the variegated Idealist and Romantic responses to Kant's position on the possibilities and impossibilities of an intellectual intuition was Walter Benjamin. In his dissertation on the concept of art criticism in Early German Romanticism, "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik," Benjamin pointedly characterizes the relation between Kant and his immediate successors with regard the questions of self-consciousness and the reach of philosophical systems in the following way: "Sobald die Geschichte der Philosophie in Kant, wenn auch nicht zum ersten Male, so doch explizit und nachdrücklich, zugleich mit der Denkmöglichkeit einer intellektuellen Anschauung ihre Unmöglichkeit im Bereich der Erfahrung behauptet hatte, tritt ein vielfältiges und beinahe fieberhaftes Bestreben hervor, diesen Begriff für die Philosophie als Garantie ihrer höchsten Ansprüche wieder zurückzugewinnen." Walter Benjamin, "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik," *Walter Benjamin. Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols, vol. 1.1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 19. . Benjamin's reading of the Early German Romantic theory of subjectivity as a medium of reflection ("Reflexionsmedium"), its relation to Fichtean philosophy, and the aesthetic theory that follows from it has been criticized—mainly on philological grounds—by Winfried Menninghaus. While Menninghaus may be correct in pointing out that some of Benjamin's points rely on a misreading of Fichte and consequently of the Romantic response to his philosophy, Benjamin's study remains one of great insight. cf. Winfried Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdopplung. Die frühromantische Grundlegung der Kunsttheorie im Begriff absoluter Selbstreflexion* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1987). A good thirty years prior to Benjamin's dissertation, Friedrich Nietzsche, in "Beyond Good and Evil," had found more scathing tones for German post-Kantian philosophy, when he satirically assessed the attempts to complete the Kantian system as a theological wild goose chase conducted in Schwabia by youthful German minds, deluded by the malignant fairy of Romanticism: "Es kam der Honigmond der deutschen Philosophie; alle jungen Theologen des Tübinger Stifts giengen alsbald in die Büsche,—alle suchten nach "Vermögen". Und was fand man nicht Alles—in jener unschuldigen, reichen, noch jugendlichen Zeit des deutschen Geistes, in welche die Romantik, die boshafte Fee, hineinblies, hineinsang, damals, als man "finden" und "erfinden" noch nicht auseinanderzuhalten wußte!" (Nietzsche 1988, p. 25.)

Descartes's and Kant's philosophy. The discussion of imagination as the mediating faculty between the respective oppositions within the system only brings this tension into more immediate focus. From their respective philosophical perspectives, both Descartes and Kant proclaim the victory and the control of rational subjectivity over the irrational forces of nature, and can thus either exclude the mediating faculty of imagination from the constitution of the subject altogether, or cast it as a willingly subservient handmaiden, which will ultimately support rather than challenge the role of rational subjectivity as the foundation of the philosophical system. Upon closer examination, however, the subject in both the Cartesian and the Kantian text remains uneasy in its seemingly supreme position, and both systematic accounts of subjectivity betray a consciousness—explicitly formulated to varying degrees—that the *cogito*, to put it in Nietzsche's words, "rests on the back of a tiger, while hanging in dreams." The tiger of an untamed and unreasonable nature, whose most powerful weapon is imagination, and who might wake up at any moment, poses a constant threat to the subject's systematic control, which might be revealed as an illusion.

In examining Johann Gottlieb Fichte's Idealist response to Kant and Friedrich von Hardenberg's complex and brilliant Romantic reading of Fichte's text, the following chapter will now delineate in close detail the transformation and dissolution of this particular tension in the post-Kantian philosophical debate. It can thus present the way in which imagination now openly moved to the center of the philosophical stage.

#### **4.1 *The Highest Point of Philosophy: Fichte's Reimagining of the Kantian System***

The awareness of the threat posed by imagination will largely dissipate as Johann Gottlieb Fichte sets out to complete and secure the role of the *cogito* as the absolute foundation of philosophical discourse. Fichte perceived Kant's refusal to allow for the possibility of an intellectual intuition, as a simultaneity of the noumenal and the

empirical in which the subject would be completely present to itself in the realm of experience, as a philosophical *skandalon*. Kant's dictum ultimately denies the possibility of a self-present first principle for the architectonic of a systematic philosophy, and Fichte's idealist project to remedy this foundational problem within a transcendental framework constitutes without a doubt the most grandiose philosophical attempt to vindicate the Cartesian conviction that philosophical certainty can only be located in the self-evidence of the *cogito*. Nature, which is even for Kant to a certain degree still the Other of the subject, will for Fichte simply become a different expression of the free and autonomous absolute subject, from which all of reality must of necessity be deduced. When Fichte, as we shall see, then (re)discovers the foundational qualities of imagination for the philosophical system, this discovery no longer poses a threat to the philosophical endeavour, since a potentially unruly nature has been completely assimilated within the overarching structure of the absolute subject. Imagination in its synthetic capacity can thus be fully exalted, since it no longer carries the traces of a disruptive power that would challenge the primacy of reason.<sup>2</sup>

In an only seemingly paradoxical development, imagination can thus unrestrictedly be presented as an essential cognitive faculty precisely at the moment where Fichte unfolds and completes Descartes's and Kant's philosophical premises, transgressing the Kantian limitations for the transcendental apperception in order to ascertain the absolute primacy of a freely acting subjectivity, which comprises both sides

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<sup>2</sup>As I pointed out in the introduction to this study, to call attention to this notable shift entails a direct engagement of James Engell's influential book *The Creative Imagination. Enlightenment to Romanticism*. (Engell 1981) Engell, in his focus on the continuities that connect Enlightenment and Romanticism, completely neglects the negative discourse about imagination that, as the analyses of René Descartes's and Immanuel Kant's philosophical texts in chapters three and four have shown, equally informs pre-Romantic philosophical positions. Even Fichte's enthusiastically positive account of imagination still goes hand in hand, as we shall see in the following discussion, with the domestication of the faculty by means of reason. The emergence of the notion of a "creative imagination," which is the subject of Engell's book, thus cannot be separated from the philosophical efforts to control this potentially unruly human capacity. Intellectual history is ultimately a more complex phenomenon than Engell's teleological account of the rise of "creative imagination" can acknowledge.

of the epistemological equation. Ironically, however, this very transgression of the boundaries set by Kant for philosophical thought will ultimately push philosophical discourse to the recognition that the subject cannot ground itself autonomously but needs to rely on an Other for its constitution.<sup>3</sup> As Friedrich von Hardenberg, one of the most attentive readers of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* reexamines the Fichtean terms, already derived from a reassessment of Kant's critical system, the seemingly secure position of the absolute subject will undergo a radical transformation. In order to trace this process in more detail it will now first be necessary to examine the Fichtean argument in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794/95.

#### 4.1.1 *The Logics of Positing. Intellectual Intuition and the Absolute Subject*

"Wissenschaftslehre," which has been translated as *Theory of Scientific Knowledge*, is Fichte's term for philosophy. The change in terminology reflects Fichte's claim to have completed the Kantian endeavor and to finally have transformed philosophy into an exact science. As a *Theory of Scientific Knowledge*, philosophy would provide a meta-system for all other sciences—it would establish their foundation, their order, their relations within the whole of human knowledge, and, following the Kantian example, the conditions of possibility of scientific knowledge as such. The fundamental question that the *Theory of Scientific Knowledge* seeks to answer, is the question of how the content (the "what" of knowledge) and the form (the "how" of knowledge) of a "science in itself," a "Wissenschaft überhaupt" is possible. "Wissenschaftslehre," or philosophy is thus a science of science, and Fichte aims to present a solution on a meta-theoretical level to the Kantian problem of the systematic unity of the empirical and transcendental forms of knowledge.

A science, Fichte explains, needs to have a systematic form. That is, all its

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<sup>3</sup>This recognition takes one of its most pronounced forms in Schelling's critique of Fichte's philosophical approach, but it is, as we shall see, already entailed in the Fichtean text itself. For a detailed presentation of Schelling's critique of Fichte cf. Hühne 1994 and Manfred Frank, *Eine Einführung in Schellings Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995).

statements (Sätze) need to be a) deducible from one fundamental statement or first principle (Grundsatz), and b) they all need to form a coherent whole. Scientific certainty, Fichte maintains, is only possible if the first principle of a given science, from which all its other statements can be deduced, is itself absolutely certain.

Hence, if the *Wissenschaftslehre* is to provide the foundation for all other sciences, it needs to define their respective first principles so as to provide an abstract knowledge of their content as well as their form. And since the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself is also to be a scientific system, it, too, must have a first principle. This first principle, however, from which the form and the content of all scientific statements must be deducible, cannot be deducible in turn. If it is to provide a true foundation for the sciences, it must be absolute—without presuppositions—and absolutely certain. All of human knowledge needs to flow from it of necessity.

Ever since Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* it has been a common philosophical approach to locate this first principle within the knowing subject. Fichte's system, as is well-known, is the most radical expression of that tradition. The absolute foundation of all human knowledge, Fichte maintains famously, is a pure transcendental activity, a "Thathandlung" in which the absolute subject posits itself as such. In this action, the subject or the "I" is at the same time the agent and the product of the agency, the act and that which is produced by it: in the "Thathandlung," agent, act, and agency become one and the same.<sup>4</sup> This act of absolute identity is expressed in the statement  $A = A$ , where the first A represents the absolute subject and the second A the empirical "I." Both are ultimately one and the same, claims Fichte, since the "I" is nothing but an emanation of itself as the absolute subject, which in turn becomes the object of reflection and thus posits itself in its empirical form. Fichte

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<sup>4</sup>"Es [the I] ist zugleich das Handelnde, und das Produkt der Handlung; das Thätige, und das, was durch die Thätigkeit hervorgebracht wird; Handlung, und That sind Eins und eben dasselbe [...]" Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre," *Werke 1793-1795* ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacob, and Manfred Zahn, *Gesamtausgabe der bayrischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1965), Abt.I, vol.II, 259.

openly acknowledges that there can be no proof for this absolute identity, which can only be demonstrated in a circular argument, and he admits in the first paragraph of the *Foundations of the Whole Theory of Scientific Knowledge* that even philosophical reflection cannot make the foundation and first principle of consciousness part of consciousness itself. Yet, even if it cannot make the Absolute an empirical reality, philosophical reflection is nevertheless the means to understand what necessarily *has to be thought* as the absolute foundation of consciousness:

Selbst vermitteltst dieser abstrahirenden Reflexion nicht—kann Thatsache des Bewußtseyns werden, was an sich keine ist; aber es wird durch sie erkannt, daß man jene Thathandlung, als Grundlage alles Bewustseyns nothwendig *denken* müsse. (Fichte 1965, 255).

Indeed, the absolute subject, while never present in empirical consciousness, is for Fichte rather a moral necessity, since it alone can guarantee the autonomous origin of subjectivity in an act of absolute spontaneity. Fichte's idealism is first and foremost a practical one, and it is driven by the belief in an absolutely autonomous subject, which self-originate as a freely acting moral agent. The absolute subject thus represents not what "is" but rather what "should be produced by us," a moral command, which serves as the highest point of the philosophical system, even though we cannot succeed in making it "real." Trying to present an alternative to the only system that had so far postulated a truly all-encompassing unity, Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy, Fichte is intent on postulating a highest point not grounded within the empirical reality of being but rather, no matter how contrafactually, in the noumenal realm of morality:

Seine [Spinoza's] höchste Einheit, werden wir in der Wissenschaftslehre wieder finden; aber nicht als etwas, das *ist*, sondern als etwas, das durch uns hervorgebracht werden *soll*, aber nicht *kann*. (Fichte 1965, 264)

To posit the absolute subject's necessary existence is, in Fichte's own terms, an "executive decision of reason" ("Machtspruch der Vernunft"), a decision that is not only a practical, but also a theoretical demand. (Fichte 1965, 268) For without this unconditional decree, the theoretical phenomenon of self-consciousness, the *cogito*, with which we seem so intimately familiar, would ultimately remain inexplicable. In Kant's account of the transcendental apperception, the subject that reflects back on itself remains caught in an infinite regress, and it could never recognize itself as the "I" which must be able to accompany act of reflection if it did not already "know" itself as the origin of both the transcendental and the empirical form of subjectivity. Constantly reproducing a split between observer and observed, the subject's transcendental self-reflection could never bring about any form of self-knowledge, a circular dilemma that is inescapable within a reflective and consequently representational model of self-consciousness. Recognizing this logical impasse, Fichte decides to sever the Gordian knot of self-consciousness by imagining it, unlike both Kant and Descartes, not as an act of reflection, but as a "Thathandlung."<sup>5</sup> This act, in which action and reflection, form and content fall into one as the subject creates its own origin constitutes for Fichte precisely the object of the intellectual intuition that Kant had excluded from his transcendental account of subjectivity.

The term "intellectual intuition," as both Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank have pointed out, and as Fichte himself insisted repeatedly in response to the criticism of

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<sup>5</sup>This, as Dieter Henrich was the first to point out in an influential essay from 1966, is Fichte's "original insight." Fichte's observation that self-consciousness cannot be accounted for as a process of reflection, a process that always presupposes a subject and an object of reflection, which ultimately cannot be united, indeed constitutes a radical shift in the philosophical discussion of subjectivity. Henrich's essay also traces in detail the various forms which Fichte's account of the origin of self-consciousness as a "Thathandlung" or intellectual intuition would take in the constantly evolving versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, a development which I cannot discuss here at present. Cf. Dieter Henrich, "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht," *Subjektivität und Metaphysik. Festschrift für Wolfgang Cramer* ed. Dieter Henrich and Hans Wagner (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1966), 188-232. For an extensive study of Fichte's concept of the intellectual intuition cf. also Jürgen Stolzenberg, *Fichtes Begriff der intellektuellen Anschauung. Die Entwicklung in den Wissenschaftslehren von 1793/94 bis 1801/02* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986).

his contemporaries, thus has a different meaning here than it had for Kant. Kant excluded the possibility of an intellectual intuition from the realm of experience since it designated for him the mental production of sensual intuitions. To claim such a divine capacity for a human intellect would entail absurd philosophical consequences, and Fichte excludes this “*intuitus originarius*” from human experience just as much as Kant. While Fichte does see the necessity to take exception from Kant’s strict separation of concepts and intuitions for the originary act of self-consciousness in which the absolute subject constitutes itself as such, he assigns a different quality to this moment than Kant had done. As Fichte points out in the second introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, an intellectual intuition within his philosophical system is not directed towards being, but rather toward an act, a conception for which Fichte sees no precedent in the Kantian text:

Die intellectuelle Anschauung von der die WissenschaftsLehre redet, geht gar nicht auf ein Seyn, sondern auf ein Handeln, und sie ist bei Kant gar nicht bezeichnet, (außer, wenn man will, durch den Ausdruck *reine Apperception*).<sup>6</sup>

In the framework of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, as I pointed out, this intellectual intuition directed towards a “*Thathandlung*” solves not only the question of self-

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<sup>6</sup>Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “Zweite Einleitung in die WissenschaftsLehre für Leser, die schon ein philosophisches System haben,” *Werke 1797-1798* ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Gliwitzky, and Richard Schotky *Gesamtausgabe der bayrischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1970), Abt.I, vol.IV, 225. Despite this necessary differentiation, there can be no doubt that Fichte’s originary act of positing has the thinly veiled qualities of a divine *fiat*. The very term “absolute subject” indicates after all that the powers of self-creation traditionally reserved for a divine entity have been philosophically transferred to the subject itself to guarantee its complete autonomy. Schelling, for one, would criticize the hubris entailed in Fichte’s position and would, in the post-Fichtean phase of his philosophical career, return the Absolute to a position outside and beyond both subject and being. Similarly, also Novalis would ask himself in the *Fichte-studies*, whether Fichte could truly claim the right to locate *everything* within the subject. “Hat Fichte nicht zu willkürlich alles ins Ich hineingelegt? mit welchem Befugniß?” (Hardenberg 1960a, 107) Hartmut and Gernot Böhme are less reserved in their judgment, Fichte’s “executive decision of reason” constitutes for them the prime instance of philosophical megalomania. “[...]wäre es nicht Fichte,” they assert, “wäre es Wahnsinn.” (Böhme and Böhme 1996, 126)

consciousness, the highest point of theoretical philosophy. As an autonomous act of the subject it also constitutes the first principle of practical philosophy, and it thus enables Fichte to close the gap that had arisen in the Kantian system between the first two critiques. Indeed, Fichte argues, Kant himself had laid the groundwork for such a connection and was merely unable to complete it because he pursued two different lines of inquiry in the first and the second critiques. Kant's concept of the categorical imperative, Fichte maintains, ultimately necessitates an intellectual intuition in form of an act of the will, for here the subject simultaneously perceives and enacts the law. Had Kant only asked himself what kind of self-consciousness the highest principle of his practical philosophy entailed, Fichte suggests, he would have had to acknowledge the existence of an intellectual intuition in the Fichtean sense, and thus he would have been led to discover the true first principle of *all* philosophy:

Doch lässt auch im Kantischen Systeme sich ganz genau die Stelle nachweisen, an der von ihr [der intellectuellen Anschauung] gesprochen werden sollte. Des kategorischen Imperativs ist man nach Kant sich doch wohl bewusst? Was ist denn dies nun für ein Bewusstseyn? Diese Frage vergaß Kant sich vorzulegen, weil er nirgends die Grundlage *aller* Philosophie behandelte, sondern in der Kritik der r. Vft nur die theoretische, in der der kategorische Imperativ nicht vorkommen konnte; in der Krit. d. prakt. Vft nur die praktische, in der es bloß um den Inhalt zu thun war, und die Frage nach der Art des Bewusstseyns nicht entstehen konnte.—Dieses Bewusstseyn ist ohne Zweifel ein unmittelbares, aber kein sinnliches; also gerade das, was ich intellectuelle Anschauung nenne [...] (Fichte 1970, 225)

The categorical imperative, as Manfred Frank has pointed out, presents a similar problem to that of the transcendental unity of apperception. In both cases, Kant presupposes the actualization of a principle to which no empirical experience can ever

be adequate but on whose existence the unity of his philosophical system nevertheless depends. (Frank 1987, 103) In the theoretical realm of the *Critique of Pure Reason* this principle is the "I" which needs to accompany all perception to guarantee the unity of consciousness, and in the *Critique of Practical Reason* the principle in question is the categorical imperative as it entails the free acceptance of the noumenal moral law. Fichte concludes that both of these principles need to be seen as united in a single act, situated right on the threshold of the sensible and the supersensible, which constitutes the truly highest point and first principle of a complete philosophical system. The "Thathandlung" through which the absolute subject posits its own existence is thus also an absolute act of freedom in which the subject overcomes what "is" and realizes what "should be" in accordance to the moral law<sup>7</sup>:

Der Begriff des Handelns, der nur durch diese intellectuelle Anschauung des selbstthätigen Ich möglich wird, ist der einzige, der beide Welten, die für uns da sind, vereinigt, die sinnliche und die intelligible. Was meinem Handeln entgegensteht,—etwas entgegensetzen muß ich ihm, denn ich bin endlich—ist die sinnliche, was durch mein Handeln entstehen soll, ist die intelligible Welt. (Fichte 1970, 220)

In defining the intellectual intuition of the absolute subject as an act ("Thathandlung"), not as an ontological fact ("Thatsache"), Fichte thus claims to have solved not only the problem of self-consciousness, but simultaneously the question of freedom and ultimately of the unity of a complete philosophical system. The moment

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<sup>7</sup>Freedom, for Fichte just as much as for Kant, cannot be thought independently from the moral law. In order to think oneself as free, Fichte points out in the "System der Sittenlehre nach den Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre," one has to think oneself as subject to a law and vice versa: "Wenn du dich frei denkst, bist du genöthigt, deine Freiheit unter ein Gesetz zu denken; und wenn du dieses Gesetz denkst, bist du genöthigt, dich frei zu denken; denn es wird in ihm deine Freiheit vorausgesetzt, und dasselbe kündigt sich an, als ein Gesetz für die Freiheit. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Das System der Sittenlehre nach den Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre," *Werke 1798-1799* ed. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky. *Gesamtausgabe der bayrischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1977), Abt.I, vol.V, 64.

of the intellectual intuition finally provides the single archimedean point from which the philosopher can survey both the phenomenal and the noumenal world with one leisurely glance:

Geht sie [die Philosophie] von der ThatSache aus, so stellt sie sich in die Welt des Seyns und der Endlichkeit, und es wird ihr schwer werden, aus dieser einen Weg zum Unendlichen und Uebersinnlichen [sic] zu finden; geht sie von der ThatHandlung aus, so steht sie gerade auf dem Punkte, der beide Welten verknüpft, und von welchem aus sie mit Einem Blicke übersehen werden können. (Fichte 1970, 221)

The retroactive proof for the existence of the highest point of philosophy in which the subject emerges as both unified and free, is then to be given by the narrative of the theoretical and the practical part of the *Theory of Scientific Knowledge*, which are to unfold the philosophical implications of this first principle. To accomplish the desired proof, the philosophical narrative will proceed on two parallel and simultaneously developing series or levels, which could be called, borrowing from the terminology of contemporary systems theory, first and second order observations. One series or level presents the facts or observations of empirical consciousness, while the second series presents the reflections or second order observations that make the presentation of the first level possible to begin with, and which simultaneously provide a means to go beyond their limitations. On the first level, the empirical "I" sees itself as differentiated from and limited by the "Non-I," reality exterior to it, an observation on which it can reflect on the second level of the narration, where this differentiation appears as a mere illusion of consciousness. By means of reflection, the empirical I can understand that—as the absolute I—it has actually posited these limits itself and is thus their free and productive unity. The narrative of the *Wissenschaftslehre* will lead the "I" from the first level to the second, which will prove to be one and the same once the narration has come full circle. This internal narrative technique corresponds

to the relationship of the reader of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to its author. Just like the empirical I will be led to understand its absolute nature, the reader, who starts out on the first unreflective level of consciousness will be guided to reach the second level of reflection where the philosopher had been waiting for him all along. The English translation of *Wissenschaftslehre*, where “Lehre” is rendered as “theory,” obscures one of the fundamental points of the project. A “Lehre” is literally a teaching, a quasi-religious affair, of which the philosopher is the prophet. The core belief of Fichte’s “teaching of science” is the belief in the existence of the absolute autonomy of the subject, and the narrative structure of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is the only way this belief can actually be “taught”: through inducing an act of sympathetic identification on the part of a reader or listener, who will thus allow the author/philosopher to perform an act of reflective transformation of his consciousness. The *Wissenschaftslehre* is a philosophical novel, a Bildungsroman, and it demands the sympathetic act of a “self-activity” (Selbstthätigkeit) from the student, which the text needs to induce in order to make its “message” understood. The transmission of philosophical knowledge thus openly depends on a moment of hermeneutical inspiration, and the medium of this transmission is now no longer reason, but rather imagination.

#### 4.1.2 *Ecstasy, Inspired Communication, and Philosophical Genius*

Critics of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte points out as he brings his philosophical argument to its conclusion, usually do not understand the fundamental principles of the Fichtean system, as they interpret it either from an idealist, or from a realist perspective, forcing it to focus either on the subjective pole of the relation, the empirical “I,” or on its objective counterpart, the “Not-I.” To grasp the true premise of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, however, it is necessary to do neither, and to reflect on both poles of the epistemological equation *at the same time*, actively imagining them in a unity that refuses a resolution to either side. This moment, however, which is precisely the intellectual intuition that reveals the “Thathandlung” of the absolute subject from

which both “I” and “Not-I” originate, cannot be produced at will, it needs to present itself to the soul in a “felicitous minute” of inspiration. While every human being is endowed with the faculty of imagination, not everybody, Fichte claims, is able to put it to the necessary use in this extraordinary moment. Only the philosopher, capable to freely control and use his imagination, will be able to prolong this moment, to hold on to the image it presents to the mind, analyse it, and inexorably imprint it in his memory so that it will not be lost for further use.

Dies ist nun das Geschäft der *schaffenden Einbildungskraft*, und diese— ist ganz gewiß allen Menschen zu Theil geworden, denn ohne sie hätten dieselben auch nicht eine einzige Vorstellung, aber bei weitem nicht alle Menschen haben dieselbe in ihrer freien Gewalt, um durch sie zweckmäßig zu erschaffen, oder, wenn auch in einer glücklichen Minute das verlangte Bild wie ein Blitzstrahl vor ihre Seele sich stellte, dasselbe fest zu halten, es zu untersuchen, und es sich zu jedem beliebigen Gebrauche unauslöschlich einzuprägen. (Fichte 1965, 415)

The central metaphor Fichte employs for the intellectual intuition in this passage, the flash of lightning that fleetingly reveals the desired image, clearly signals a return to one of the oldest roots of the philosophical assessment of imagination: the (Neo)Platonic interpretation of the faculty as a divine gift that accounts for inspiration and prophecy and allows for the communication with the noumenal, the absolute, and the divine. The flash of lightning as an ancient metaphor for divine revelation, and a recurrent image of Neoplatonic as well as mystic thought and religious practice, indicates that the empirical “I” has stepped outside itself by means of imagination in an extratemporal and ecstatic moment, enabling a felicitous vision of the Absolute.<sup>8</sup> The young Descartes had referred to such an encounter when he suggested

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<sup>8</sup>Schelling was certainly still true to the spirit of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, when he suggested in his Erlangen lectures in the 1820s that the concept of the intellectual intuition would be more

that philosophical invention might procede through inspirational moments that lie hidden in the soul like sparks in a flintstone, and Kant had agonizingly introduced it while simultaneously holding it at bay in the paradoxical moment of negative revelation that is the sublime. As Fichte attempts to bring both the Cartesian and the Kantian project to their completion, he thus reintroduces and rediscovers the ecstatic and ultimately irrational moment of inspiration at the basis of subjectivity and the philosophical system. If the Fichtean philosopher is uninspired, if he or she is unable to employ and activate their imagination, the fundamental principles of Fichtean philosophy can neither be understood nor communicated. Read unimaginatively, the text of the *Wissenschaftslehre* will remain an assemblage of dead letters and will lack the spirit (“Geist”) that alone makes it communicable. The hermeneutical act of sympathetic identification that is necessary for the reader to grasp the true spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and to follow the philosopher on his reflective path from the illusions of the empirical I to the origin of the absolute subject, cannot be performed if the reader does not use his or her own imagination for an act of *Selbstthätigkeit* that repeats and represents—makes present once again—the central idea that informs the Fichtean teaching. It is no longer the universal law of reason that guarantees the communicability of ideas within a reasonable philosophical community, but rather—anathema to Kant—the quasi-religious inspirational power of imagination.

Von diesem Vermögen hängt es ab, ob man mit, oder ohne Geist philosophire. Die Wissenschaftslehre ist von der Art, daß sie durch den blossen Buchstaben gar nicht, sondern daß sie lediglich durch den Geist

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appropriately and less confusingly rendered by the term *ecstasis* (“Ekstase”). This change in terminology, Schelling suggests, would make clear that the subject does not relate to an empirical object, as in a sensual intuition, but rather loses itself in an inspirational moment of contact with the Absolute. “Eher könnte man für jenes Verhältniß [die intellektuelle Anschauung] die Bezeichnung *Ekstase* gebrauchen. Nämlich unser Ich wird *außer* sich, d.h. außer seiner Stelle gesetzt.” cited in: Hühn 1994. Over twenty years earlier, Friedrich von Hardenberg had already made this conclusion very directly in the *General Brouillon*: “Ohne *Ekstase*—fesselndes, alles ersetzendes B[ewußt]S[eyn]—ist es mit der ganzen Philosophie nicht weit her.” (Hardenberg 1960b, 465)

sich mittheilen läßt; weil ihre Grundideen in jedem, der sie studirt, durch die schaffende Einbildungskraft selbst hervorgebracht werden müssen; wie es denn bei einer auf die letzten Gründe der menschlichen Erkenntniß zurückgehenden Wissenschaft nicht anders seyn konnte, indem das ganze Geschäft des menschlichen Geistes von der Einbildungskraft ausgeht, Einbildungskraft aber nicht anders als durch Einbildungskraft aufgefaßt werden kann. (Fichte 1965, 415)

Only by activating imagination can the reader ultimately understand that he or she literally *is* the (absolute) subject of the Fichtean text. It is hence only a logical consequence if Fichte claims in his programmatic introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre, Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder der sogenannten Philosophie*, that the philosopher, no less than the poet or the artist is in need of genius. He needs a “dark feeling,” a “sense for truth” if he is to succeed in his task.

Es erhellet daraus, daß der Philosoph der dunklen Gefühle des Richtigen oder des Genie in keinem geringern Grade bedürfe, als etwa der Dichter oder der Künstler; nur in einer andern Art. Der letztere bedarf des Schönheits- jener des Wahrheitssinnes, dergleichen es allerdings giebt. (Fichte 1965, 143fn)

The highest point of the philosophical system is thus both a moment of inspiration and an act of invention, which can, as Fichte insists, in a response to an unknown critic of the first edition of his text, not be theoretically accounted for, since such a theory of invention would have to rely in turn on an act of artistic creation:

Es hat sich,—ich sehe nicht recht ein, wie, und warum, ein sonst achtungswürdiger philosophischer Schriftsteller über die unschuldige Aeußerung der obenstehenden Anmerkung ein wenig creifert. “Man möge

das leere Wort Genie Seiltänzern, französischen Köchen—schönen Geistern, Künstlern, u.s.w. überlassen; und für solide Wissenschaften lieber eine Theorie des Erfindens aufstellen.“—Ja wohl sollte man das; und es wird ganz sicher geschehen, sobald die Wissenschaft überhaupt bis zur Möglichkeit einer solchen Erfindung vorgerückt seyn wird. Aber in wiefern steht denn die obige Aeüßerung mit einem solchen Vorhaben in Widerspruche?—Und wie wird denn eine solche Theorie des Erfindens selbst erfunden werden? Etwa durch eine Theorie der Erfindung einer Theorie des Erfindens? Und diese? (Fichte 1965, 143fn)

It thus becomes clear why the *Wissenschaftslehre* in its fusion of the theoretical and the practical is in no need of an aesthetic tertium akin to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, and why Fichte, unlike Schelling, saw no need to write a philosophy of art. The Fichtean philosopher has already assumed the domain of the artist, and the ultimate success of the Fichtean system depends on the inspirational effect of its narrative execution. And imagination is not only essential for the transmission of this philosophical narrative, but also, as we shall see, for the unity of its internal structure.

#### 4.1.3 *Light, Dusk, and Darkness: The Reconciliation of Opposites*

In the narrative procedure of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, as Winfried Menninghaus has remarked, Fichte almost seems to be intent on the deconstruction of his own philosophical premise, for the argument that should unfold and secure the postulate of a single absolute principle consists of a seemingly unending spiral of differences, whose reconciliations only produce new distinctions, which never quite return to a single origin.<sup>9</sup> The crux of Fichte's argument, which creates the narrative complications of the

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<sup>9</sup>“Man könnte überspitzt sagen. daß sich die Wissenschaftslehre eben den letzten Grund, den sie sucht und zunächst auch behauptet und dem allein sie die Garantie von Realität und Gewißheit zutraut, im Gang ihrer Darstellung selbst wieder entzieht.” Winfried Menninghaus, “Die frühromantische Theorie von Zeichen und Metapher,” *The German Quarterly* 62.1 (1989): 48-58, 55.

*Wissenschaftslehre*, is to explain why the subject, in its incarnation as the empirical I, will perceive itself as limited by the outside influence of a seemingly objective world, if it is truly constitutive of both empirical realms through the act of freedom it performs as the absolute subject. Why, in other words, will the I perceive itself as finite and limited if it is truly infinite and unlimited, and, as this “should be” the case, how can the empirical perception of an insurmountable subject-object opposition, and hence a lack of freedom with regard to the objective world be revealed as a mere illusion of consciousness? In the attempt to resolve this narrative predicament, Fichte will take recourse in an unprecedented way to the mediatory power of imagination.

The answer to the question lies once again in the central paradox of consciousness itself, for finitude and limitation are its necessary precondition. The subject can only become conscious of itself *as* the subject if it distinguishes itself from an outside, the object. In the production of self-consciousness, the absolute subject thus simultaneously posits and delimits itself, for the possibility of unity can only be perceived consciously once a distinction has been made from which unity becomes observable. The I, Fichte explains, not only posits itself as the absolute subject, it also and simultaneously opposes a Not-I to itself. The statement  $A = A$  is thus not the only principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* with claims to absolute certainty. Equally certain is its implied contrary, the statement  $-A \text{ not} = A$ , which signifies the simultaneous act of an absolute “opposing” (“Gegensetzen”), from which the other pole of the epistemological equation, the object, or Not-I will flow. The absolute subject thus performs two actions or “Thathandlungen,” one in which it posits itself in the unconditional reality of the I, and another in which it posits its unconditional negation as the Not-I, for only in this opposition will the absolute subject be able to recognize itself in the mirror of consciousness. The unity of both the act of positing and that of negation will be provided by the third fundamental principle introduced in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the principle of *limitation*, which presents the opposites I and Not-I as the mutually dependent poles of a “Wechselbestimmung” (reciprocal determination).

Every quantum of negation, claims Fichte, that the I posits within itself creates an equal amount of reality within the Not-I and vice versa, a reciprocity which allows for the inference of their common origin. The narrative of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in its various incarnations flows from the unfolding of these three principles and Fichte's attempt to explain their ultimate unity and identity.

For this reason, Fichte's most important task becomes to explain how the two polar opposites of the I and the Not-I can indeed be seen as mutually affecting each other and to demonstrate that the two completely different poles of subject and object indeed have a point of connection through which they can be seen as united.<sup>10</sup> In other words, it needs to be shown that the finitude of the I, which arises through its limitation by the Not-I, and its infinity, which is the product of its own free act of positing as the absolute subject are ultimately one and the same, a simultaneity of infinity and finitude which, as Fichte concedes, contains a logical impossibility. This simultaneity, however, is precisely what the system demands, as all limitations must be sublated within the all-encompassing singularity of the absolute subject. Fichte, anticipating the historical dialectics that would later be developed in different versions by Schelling and Hegel, attempts to solve the problem by means of a deferral. The philosophical method of the *Wissenschaftslehre* consists in the continuous introduction of intermediary links ("Mittelglieder") between the two seemingly irreconcilable extremes of I and Not-I, infinity and finitude. These intermediary links, which are affected by both I and Not-I will then serve as syntheses, through which the two poles can be seen as mutually affecting each other. Within these synthesizing links, however, a point can always be discerned in which I and Not-I would have to come into an impossible direct contact. Another mediary link will be required to prevent such a direct confrontation, and the synthesizing process would thus potentially have

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<sup>10</sup> "Die eigentliche, höchste, alle andere Aufgaben unter sich enthaltende Aufgabe ist die: wie das Ich auf das Nicht-Ich; oder das Nicht-Ich auf das Ich unmittelbar einwirken könne, da sie beide einander völlig entgegengesetzt seyn sollen." (Fichte 1965, 300)

to be repeated *ad infinitum*, without any discernible endpoint.

Man schiebt zwischen beide [Ich und Nicht-Ich] hinein irgend ein X, auf welches beide wirken, wodurch sie denn auch unmittelbar auf sich selbst wirken. Bald aber entdeckt man, daß in diesem X doch auch wieder irgend ein Punkt seyn müsse, in welchem Ich und Nicht-Ich unmittelbar zusammentreffen. Um dies zu verhindern schiebt man zwischen und statt der scharfen Grenze ein neues Mittelglied = Y ein. Aber es zeigt sich bald, daß in diesem eben so wie in X ein Punkt seyn müsse, in welchem die beiden entgegengesetzten sich unmittelbar berühren. (Fichte 1965, 301f.)

Once again, this intolerable infinite regress is prevented by an “executive decision,” through which reason now declares, rather than the necessary existence of the absolute subject, the necessary non-existence of the Not-I. If I and Not-I ultimately cannot be unified, the problem will have to be solved in a more radical way:

Und so würde es in's unendliche fortgehen, wenn nicht durch einen absoluten Machtspruch der Vernunft, den nicht etwa der Philosoph thut, sondern den er nur aufzeigt—durch Den: es *soll*, da das Nicht-Ich mit dem Ich auf keine Art sich vereinigen läßt, überhaupt kein Nicht-Ich seyn, der Knoten zwar nicht gelös't, aber zerschnitten würde. (Fichte 1965, 301)

The Not-I “should not” exist, and Fichte thus needs to show that it is ultimately nothing but the I under a different guise. To guarantee a philosophical system without contradictions, the objective empirical world will lose all autonomous reality, as it is redefined in terms of the I. Fichte illustrates his argumentative procedure by means of another ancient gnoseological metaphor, when he portrays the opposition of I and Not-I in terms of the opposition between light and darkness. While light and

darkness form a continuum, Fichte explains, it is impossible—in the terms of binary logic—to conceive of a point that could be simultaneously light *and* darkness. One might attempt to solve the problem by introducing the phenomenon of dusk as an intermediary between the two states, a transitional phase which would be bordered by light on one side of its spectrum and by darkness on the other. Yet, the original difficulty will recur at both points of contact, for one would necessarily need to envision the contact point A to be a mixture of dusk and light and contact point B to consist of a mixture of dusk and darkness. And since dusk can only be differentiated from light by virtue of not being darkness and vice versa, the problem of transition is only deferred, not solved: both liminal points on the continuum would still need to be simultaneously light and darkness. The ensuing contradiction, Fichte claims, can only be resolved by assuming that light and darkness are ultimately not in opposition at all, but rather only differentiated by degrees. From this perspective, darkness has no status of its own, it is nothing but a very low quantity of light. Such, Fichte states is precisely the relation between I and Not-I:

Mithin ist der Widerspruch gar nicht anders aufzulösen, als dadurch: Licht, und Finsterniß sind überhaupt nicht entgegengesetzt; sondern nur den Graden nach zu unterscheiden. Finsterniß ist bloß eine sehr geringe Quantität Licht.—Gerade so verhält es sich zwischen dem Ich, und dem Nicht-Ich. (Fichte 1965, 301)

The analogy, however, will remain incomplete until an equivalent for the transitional state of dusk can be introduced into the argument of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, for an intermediary that could guarantee the continuity of a gradual spectrum from the total light of the I to the complete darkness of the Not-I still remains to be found. Fichte's narrative reconciliation of these two empirical states would ultimately fail if he could not take recourse to a principle of a different kind, flexible and fluid enough

to mediate the harsh opposition between subject and object, while sufficiently autonomous to still keep both of them separate.

#### 4.1.4 *The Metaphysics of Hovering and the Truth of Imagination.*

As Fichte develops his argument in the course of the *Wissenschaftslehre*'s theoretical part, he will define I and Not-I as *accidences* of the absolute subject. The absolute subject, as their *substance* in turn, is nothing but the synthesis and reciprocity ("Wechsel") of these two accidents. It has no *reality* but only contains the totality and completeness of their relation, it is a container, a "sphere" ("Sphäre") as Fichte puts it. This substance is hence not a stable substratum of two accidents, but rather a simultaneous activity of positing ("Setzen") and reciprocity ("Wechsel") that allows for the connection of I and Not-I. The positing I, the absolute subject, is endowed with a "marvellous faculty," which enables it to retain the diminishing accident just long enough to compare it with its rising opposite, thereby establishing their unity. By means of this faculty, the subject can connect and sustain two moments which otherwise would destroy and cancel each other out like matter and anti-matter.<sup>11</sup> Fichte, increasing the narrative suspense, is not quite ready yet to reveal the identity of this peculiar power, which, as he asserts confidently, accounts for nothing less than the existence of life and consciousness as such. For the time being, the reader is left with the promise of a more detailed analysis, which will be presented at the appropriate moment:

Das setzende Ich, durch das wunderbarste seiner Vermögen, das wir zu seiner Zeit näher bestimmen werden, hält das schwindende Accidenz so lange fest, bis es dasjenige, wodurch dasselbe verdrängt wird, damit vergleichen hat—Dieses fast immer verkannte Vermögen ist es, was aus steten

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<sup>11</sup>Fichte, of course, illustrates his argument with the metaphors of magnetism and electricity, which were already pervasive at the turn of the eighteenth century and would only grow in importance throughout the nineteenth.

Gegensätzen eine Einheit zusammenknüpft,—was zwischen Momente, die sich gegenseitig aufheben müsten, eintritt und dadurch beide erhält—es ist dasjenige, was allein Leben und Bewustseyn, und insbesondere Bewustseyn als eine fortlaufende Zeitreihe möglich macht; und das alles thut es lediglich dadurch, daß es an sich, und in sich Accidenzen fortleitet, die keinen *gemeinschaftlichen* Träger haben, noch haben *könnten*, weil sie sich gegenseitig vernichten würden. (Fichte 1965, 350)

We are of course by now closely familiar with this “almost always unrecognized and misrepresented faculty,” and will not be surprised, when Fichte reveals its identity a few pages later. As he returns once again to the metaphorical relation of light and darkness in order to illustrate the unity and reciprocity of the accidences I and Not-I, Fichte now completes his earlier analogy and replaces the intermediary state of dusk with the traditional faculty of thresholds, transitions, and cognitive hybridity: imagination. (cf. Fichte 1965, 352f.) By now, however, Fichte has pushed his argument a step further, and imagination now does much more than merely ensure the (temporal) continuity between light and darkness by providing the unifying border that allows for a connection and relation between the two extremes. As the “marvellous faculty” that—however fleetingly—gives I and Not-I unity and substance, the liminal power of imagination, in a very Romantic and utterly un-Kantian move, which Fichte almost off-handedly adds in parentheses, now emerges as the productive force that actually brings them into existence. The “homeless” faculty of the imagination, Fichte can now speculate, might very well be the fundamental ground and basis of the whole mechanism of the human mind:

([...] es ist hier zugleich ein Experiment mit dem wunderbaren Vermögen der productiven Einbildungskraft in uns angestellt worden, welches in kurzem erklärt werden wird, ohne welches gar nichts im menschlichen Geiste

sich erklären läßt—und auf welches gar leicht der ganze Mechanismus des menschlichen Geistes sich gründen dürfte.)<sup>12</sup> (Fichte 1965, 352f.)

The seemingly irreconcilable opposites that nevertheless constitute the substance of the absolute subject, and which find their productive unity in the imagination, appear in ever-shifting forms in the various steps of Fichte's argument: as two conflicting drives ("Triebe") or directions of desire ("Sehnen"), two interacting spheres or globes ("Sphären," "Kugeln"), or as two opposing forces ("Kräfte"), one centrifugal, one centripetal, all of which only find connection in their productive limit. Underlying all of these incarnations, however, remain the two fundamental activities of the absolute subject, the infinite activity of self-positing and the finite activity of (self)definition and delimitation, in which the absolute subject becomes conscious of itself as the opposition and substance of I and Not-I. As the limit or border between these opposites,

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<sup>12</sup>It would seem that by acknowledging the imagination as the foundational power of the human mind, productive of time and consciousness, Fichte here comes to embrace precisely the discovery from which Heidegger saw Kant recoil in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Heidegger, however, while he acknowledges that already Fichte and Schelling had given a central role to the imagination in their development of transcendental philosophy, very much doubts that they discovered the "true essence" of the faculty, and he in fact presents his own account in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* as headed in the opposite direction from German Idealism. (cf. Heidegger 1991, 137fn.) Particularly with regard to Fichte, this position should not come as a surprise, since Fichte's attempt to deduce all being from the absolute subject runs counter to Heidegger's endeavour to demonstrate the primacy of Being to which subjectivity needs to be deferred. Ultimately, however, these philosophical differences matter little when it comes to the assessment of imagination, which can be fully embraced from both perspectives, because its disruptive power, which made it a threat for both Descartes and Kant, has been safely defused by Heidegger just as much as by Fichte. Heidegger's ontological project, which brings all of Being under the purview of the philosopher is no less of a self-aggrandizement than Fichte's deduction of empirical existence from the all-encompassing position of the absolute subject, and neither of the two systems acknowledges an Outside or an Other, which could present a serious challenge. As Hartmut and Gernot Böhme have pointed out, Heidegger's philosophy ultimately even exceeds the dominion ascribed to reason in Kant's enlightened philosophy, as its inclusionary move strips imagination of all its subversive power. "Im radikalen Herrschaftsanspruch noch war sich Vernunft bewußt, *nicht* Herr im eigenen Hause zu sein. Heideggers Philosophie—unter dem bescheidenen Fähnlein der 'Endlichkeit des Menschen' vorgetragen—ist der Ausdruck einer radikalen Selbstermächtigung des Menschen, die die Herrschaft der Vernunft in der Aufklärung noch zu überbieten trachtet. [...] Eine Arbeit für die Anerkennung des Anderen der Vernunft hat mit solcher Rehabilitierung der Einbildungskraft nichts zu schaffen." (Böhme and Böhme 1996, 244f.) The same assessment can be made for Fichte's "rehabilitation" of imagination.

the imagination now becomes the central concept for Fichte's argument, since its limit not only constitutes the conceptual border where the extremes will meet ("Zusammentreffen"), but also the interface where they can be united ("Zusammenfassen"). Ultimately, Fichte will make the seemingly paradoxical assertion that unification and the positing of a limit are not only one and the same, but ultimately presuppose each other: The unification of two sides only becomes possible by drawing a distinction between them, and both activities are the work of imagination<sup>13</sup>:

Aber die Grenze ist denn auch weiter nichts, als das beiden gemeinschaftliche; mithin ihre Grenzen setzen—heißt, sie zusammenfassen, aber dieses Zusammenfassen beider ist auch nicht anders möglich, als durch das Setzen ihrer Grenze. (Fichte 1965, 357)

The border or limit thus enables the reciprocity ("Wechsel") between the two contrary accidents in an imaginary unity which produces the substance of the subject. It allows the subject to perceive itself—in a constant shifting of perspectives—as both I and Not-I, unlimited and limited, finite and infinite. The absolute subject has its existence in this impossible tension and opposition, in the constant productive movement between two irreconcilable but necessarily unified extremes. This dizzying interchange ("Wechsel") of the I with itself and within itself is precisely what Fichte calls "the faculty of imagination":

Der Wechsel des Ich in und mit sich selbst, da es sich endlich, und unendlich zugleich setzt—ein Wechsel, der gleichsam in einem Widerstreite mit sich selbst besteht, und dadurch sich selbst reproducirt, indem das Ich unvereinbares vereinigen will, jetzt das unendliche in die Form des endlichen

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<sup>13</sup>This logical paradox is one of the central problems of Early German Romantic thought, which still informs even a late Romantic text like Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and its paradoxical distinction between the Apollinian and the Dionysiac. As analyzed in formal logical terms by George Spencer Brown, the problematic relation between unity and distinction is also a central principle of contemporary systems theory. cf. Spencer Brown, George. *Laws of Form*. London 1969.

aufzunehmen versucht, jetzt, zurückgetrieben, es wieder ausser derselben setzt, und in dem nemlichen Momente abermals es in die Form des Endlichkeit aufnehmen versucht—ist das Vermögen der *Einbildungskraft*. (Fichte 1965, 359)

In a formulation that would become one of the central terms and concepts of Early German Romanticism, Fichte designates this “marvellous” productive activity of the imagination with the term “hovering” (“Schweben”).<sup>14</sup> As it produces the connecting border between I and Not-I, imagination has itself no stable position but rather “hovers” in the middle between the finite and the infinite. The limit it produces is hence change- and moveable, and imagination produces the sought-after unity precisely because it is not fixed and allows for no fixed borders. Its hovering between the extremes, which puts it simultaneously in the position of both, can thus produce the sought-after unity of the absolute subject.

Die Einbildungskraft setzt überhaupt keine feste Grenze, denn sie hat selbst keinen festen Standpunkt; [...] Die Einbildungskraft ist ein Vermögen, das zwischen Bestimmung, und Nicht-Bestimmung, zwischen Endlichem, und Unendlichem in der Mitte schwebt; und demnach wird durch sie allerdings  $A + B$ . *zugleich* durch das bestimmte A. und *zugleich* durch das unbestimmte B. bestimmt, welches jene Synthesis der Einbildungskraft ist, von der wir so eben redeten.—Ienes Schweben eben bezeichnet die Einbildungskraft durch ihr Produkt; sie bringt dasselbe gleichsam während ihres Schwebens, und durch ihr Schweben hervor. (Fichte 1965, 360)

In this moment of synthesis the two opposites undergo a substantial transformation. While passing through the unifying limit of the imagination, they will receive

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<sup>14</sup>Walter Schulz has used this characterization for the title of his study of the history of modern aesthetics and subjectivity, *The Metaphysics of Hovering*, from which I have borrowed in turn for the title of this section. cf. Walter Schulz, *Metaphysik des Schwebens. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Ästhetik* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1985).

something that they did not have before: reality and content. As the mind (“Geist”) hovers between the need to unify its opposing forces and the impossibility to fulfill this reconciliatory need, it touches on and holds together the extremes, even as it is constantly attracted and repelled by both of them. In this movement, Fichte explains, the mind puts them in relation to itself and thus gives them a certain content and a certain expanse, a transmission that creates the fundamental categories of time and space.

In diesem Streite verweilt der Geist, schwebt zwischen beiden; schwebt zwischen der Forderung, und der Unmöglichkeit, sie zu erfüllen, und in diesem Zustande, aber nur in diesem, hält er beide zugleich fest, oder, was das gleiche heißt, macht sie zu solchen, die zugleich aufgefaßt, und festgehalten werden können—giebt dadurch, daß er sie berührt, und wieder von ihnen zurückgetrieben wird, und wieder berührt, ihnen im *Verhältniß auf sich* einen gewissen Gehalt, und eine gewisse Ausdehnung (die zu seiner Zeit als Mannigfaltiges in der Zeit und im Raume sich zeigen wird.)  
(Fichte 1965, 367)

Fichte calls this state of paradoxical unity in opposition, in which the productive imagination is the active faculty, a state of “Anschauung” (intuition): “Dieser Zustand heißt der Zustand des *Anschauens*. Das in ihm thätige Vermögen ist schon oben produktive Einbildungskraft genannt worden.” (Fichte 1965, 367) And since it is in this, and only in this state, that the mind can receive a fleeting glimpse of its unity as the absolute subject, the moment that the productive imagination here enables and enacts can only be the moment of the intellectual intuition. The highest point of philosophy, the liminal unity of consciousness and the philosophical system is thus not only communicated by imagination, it is also *produced* by the faculty, whose action, as Fichte expands, provides no less for the subject than all of reality, consciousness, life, and being itself. One of the traditional critiques of imagination, however, still

lingers even in the Fichtean apotheosis of the faculty, and Fichte feels the need to address it, as he anticipates a reminder of the imagination's deceptiveness and the illusionary quality of its products. In the context of Fichte's idealism, however, such Cartesian scepticism with regard to the products of the faculty can no longer be sensibly entertained, and Fichte will immediately dismiss it as ultimately irrelevant. If, as Fichte had attempted to show, the subject's self-consciousness and hence the *cogito's* very existence depends on the activity of imagination, then the faculty's products can no longer be reasonably doubted, for such a doubt would have to deny the self-evidence of the subject's existence, which can no longer be separated from imagination. Fichte will thus affirm that the representations of imagination, even if possibly deceptive or illusionary, provide the only possible and accessible truth for the thinking subject.

Es wird demnach hier gelehrt, daß alle Realität—es versteht sich *für uns*, wie es denn in einem System der transcendental-Philosophie nicht anders verstanden werden soll—bloß durch die Einbildungskraft hervorgebracht werde. Einer der größten Denker unsers Zeitalters, der, so viel ich einsehe, das gleiche lehrt, nennt dies eine *Täuschung* durch die Einbildungskraft.<sup>15</sup> Aber jeder Täuschung muß sich die Wahrheit entgegensetzen, jede Täuschung muß sich vermeiden lassen. Wenn denn nun aber erwiesen wird, wie es im gegenwärtigen Systeme erwiesen werden soll, daß auf jene Handlung der Einbildungskraft die Möglichkeit unsers Bewußtseyns, unsers Lebens, unsers Seyns für uns, d.h. unsers Seyns, als Ich, sich gründet, so kann dieselbe nicht wegfallen, wenn wir nicht vom Ich abstrahiren sollen, welches sich widerspricht, da das abstrahierende unmöglich von sich selbst abstrahiren kann; mithin täuscht sie nicht, sondern sie giebt Wahrheit, und die einzige mögliche Wahrheit. Annehmen, daß sie

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<sup>15</sup>Fichte here refers to Salomon Maimon. cf. Fichte 1965, 368 fn5.

täusche, heißt einen Skeptizismus begründen, der das eigene Seyn bezweifeln lehrt. (Fichte 1965, 368f.)

Without the “benevolent deception of the imagination” (“wohlthätige Täuschung der Einbildungskraft”) as Fichte calls it, which creates the substratum that subtends the opposing forces of I and Not-I, no thought and no reflection would be possible, I and Not-I would annihilate each other and would ultimately amount to sheer nothingness. Only the necessary and truth-providing illusion of imagination prevents this *reductio ad nihilo* of the Fichtean system, and in one of the most ironic twists of the history of philosophy, Fichte, who arguably sets out to bring Descartes’s philosophical project to its completion, makes the very power that Descartes had decidedly excluded from the *cogito* the ultimate condition of its possibility: Without imagination, to put it in Kantian terms, Fichte’s absolute subject would be both blind and empty. In the philosophical development from Descartes to Fichte, the reading of the Cartesian text carried out in Chapter Three of this study is thus performed, one might say, by the process of intellectual history itself.

#### 4.1.5 Reason’s Fixations: Arresting Imagination

Fichte’s philosophical presentation of imagination as an essential faculty for the unity and even the existence of self-consciousness, does not, however—as I already remarked earlier—amount to an acceptance of the potentially disruptive, unruly, and dangerous form of the faculty that still appeared so threatening to Immanuel Kant. For Fichte completely agrees with Kant that the freedom the subject realizes when it discovers itself as the absolute subject is the freedom to act according to the categorical imperative and the moral law. The “Thathandlung” which instantiates the absolute subject, and which is revealed in the intellectual intuition, is of necessity an enactment of the absolute moral law. In order to secure this connection and to ground the philosophical system in its highest practical and theoretical principle, the “hovering”

of imagination ultimately needs to be brought to a hold. The movement of imagination, which knows no boundaries, needs to remain controlled within the sphere of the absolute subject, the single origin, which alone can give to the system its necessary order and foundation. Imagination, as Fichte puts it, needs to be "fixated" in an act of limiting control that can only be accomplished by reason.

Die Einbildungskraft setzt überhaupt keine feste Grenze, denn sie hat selbst keinen festen Standpunkt; nur die Vernunft setzt etwas festes, dadurch, daß sie erst selbst die Einbildungskraft fixiert. (Fichte 1965, 360)

If the subject is to truly recognize itself as one and the same, as the autonomous unity of observer and observed, from which the system takes its origin, then the intellectual intuition, the fleeting product of imagination, needs to be retained and fixated. Only this fixation can preserve the necessary trace of the moment of intuition, which would otherwise simply vanish and dissolve. Also for Fichte, there can be no doubt that imagination is a necessary but by no means a sufficient condition for the constitution of subjectivity:

Die Anschauung als solche soll fixiert werden, um als Eins, und eben dasselbe aufgefaßt werden zu können. Aber das Anschauen als solches ist gar nichts fixiertes, sondern es ist ein Schweben der Einbildungskraft zwischen widerstreitenden Richtungen. Dasselbe soll fixiert werden, heißt: die Einbildungskraft soll nicht länger schweben, wodurch die Anschauung völlig vernichtet, und aufgehoben würde. Das aber soll nicht geschehen; mithin muß wenigstens das Produkt des Zustandes in der Anschauung die Spur der entgegengesetzten Richtungen, welche keine von beiden, sondern etwas aus beiden zusammengesetztes ist, bleiben. (Fichte 1965, 373)

Reason accomplishes this task of fixating imagination through its "executive decision" in the absolute act of positing. Yet it still depends on another cognitive faculty

to carry out its demand, which Fichte now presents as the understanding. In a reversal of the usual relation between the faculties, understanding is now seen as the mental power that mediates between reason and imagination. By means of the understanding, reason can fixate imagination, while understanding is necessary on the other hand to make the ephemeral products of imagination available to reason as stable fixated entities. In an almost Heideggerian instance of philosophical etymology, Fichte sees understanding as an arrested form of the imagination, as indicated by the root “to stand,” which can be detected in the German “Verstand” just as much the English “understanding,” and which points for Fichte to a movement come to a standstill.

Der Verstand läßt sich als die durch Vernunft fixierte Einbildungskraft, oder als die durch Einbildungskraft mit Objekten versehene Vernunft beschreiben. (Fichte 1965, 374)

Fichte’s system thus ultimately remains constrained by the authority of a single origin, which determines and fixates the objects that fall under its jurisdiction, and also the last vestige of imagination’s disruptive capacity addressed by Slavoj Žižek that is still present in Fichte’s account, the faculty’s limit-defying movement, is safely brought under the control of reason. That also Fichte’s system, no less than Kant’s, has direct political implications, becomes immediately apparent when one examines Fichte’s *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre*, his philosophical attempt to systematize natural law according to the principles of the *Theory of Scientific Knowledge*, published in 1796/97. Here, Fichte’s desire to deduce the system of natural law from the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and to conceive of a state whose central authority could secure the safety of all its citizens, ultimately leads to a system of absolute bureaucratic control, which, even though it derives its goals from the reasonable principle of freedom, leaves no space for the free decisions

of individuals.<sup>16</sup> Friedrich von Hardenberg, to whose reading of Fichte I now want to turn in the second part of this chapter, anticipated this consequence of Fichte's approach, and saw precisely the desire for an absolute origin and the philosophical tendency to reduce everything to a single foundation as the fatal flaw of the Fichtean system. As a remark in the *Fichte Studies* illustrates, such a system seemed to von Hardenberg as correct, but also as "injust" as religious dogmatism. By "fixating" its objects it not only constricts the free activity a philosophical system should propagate, von Hardenberg concludes, it also proceeds in a way improper for the limited possibilities of human knowledge:

Jede *Fixierung* eines Objects etc. is so *richtig*, aber auch so *ungerecht*, wie eine alleinseligmachende Religion—der Mensch nimmt sich mehr damit heraus, als ihm seine Menschheit erlaubt [...]<sup>17</sup>

Just like his close friend Friedrich Schlegel, von Hardenberg in turn would aspire to develop a philosophical system that—in order to be neither unjust nor anarchic—could systematize its own lack of systematicity:

Das eigentliche Philosophische System muß Freyheit und Unendlichkeit, oder, um es auffallend auszudrücken, Systemlosigkeit, in ein System gebracht, seyn. Nur ein solches System kann die Fehler des Systems vermeiden und weder der *Ungerechtigkeit* noch der Anarchie bezogen [bezichtigt] werden.<sup>18</sup> (Hardenberg 1960a, 289)

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<sup>16</sup>cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre," *Werke 1794-1796* ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacob, and Richard Schottky *Gesamtausgabe der bayrischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1966), Abt.I, vol.III, 291-460.

<sup>17</sup>Friedrich von Hardenberg, "Fichte-Studien," *Das philosophische Werk I* ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl, and Gerhard Schulz *Novalis Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), 287. "Every fixation of an object etc. is as *correct* but also as *injust* as a religion that promises to be the only path to salvation—man presumes more with such an assertion, then is warranted by his humanity [...]" [translation mine]

<sup>18</sup>The real philosophical system has to be freedom and infinity, or, to put it strikingly, a lack of

Von Hardenberg thus searches for a compromise between the anarchic effects of unconstrained freedom feared by both Kant and Fichte and the complete control of the law of reason, which seemed the only philosophical and political alternatives. Von Hardenberg's developed his attempt to delineate an alternative system in an attentive reading of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, documented in the series of philosophical questions, speculations, and reflections that are now collected under the title *Fichte Studies*. The *Fichte Studies*, which fill roughly two hundred pages in the critical edition of von Hardenberg's work, are extensive marginalia to the *Wissenschaftslehre* and need to be read side by side with Fichte's text. As a critical questioning of Fichte's philosophical system, they constitute a reading through which von Hardenberg, in inhabiting the Fichtean terms and presuppositions, ultimately decenters them and wrests them from their place in order to create something new. What emerges from the *Fichte Studies*, is a sketch of von Hardenberg's very own idea of a system, and one of the most brilliant Romantic critiques of Fichte's idealism. As a narrative that demands an act of imagination for its transmission, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, von Hardenberg can show, also allows for a "Selbstthätigkeit" that can defy the presumed intentions of its author. Like any narrative, it is open to a creative appropriation, an appropriation that will give the concepts of subjectivity, freedom, and imagination yet another radical turn in the span of a mere two years.

#### 4.2 *A System without Foundations: The Ordo Inversus of Friedrich von Hardenberg's Fichte Studies*

"Was heißt *rein* und *empirisch*," "what is meant by *pure* and *empirical*," Friedrich von Hardenberg asks in a long reflection, number 234 of the *Fichte Studies*, which revisits the central distinction of Kant's critical philosophy in the light of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. Everything that is related or relatable ("bezogen oder beziehbar"),

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systematicity, brought into a system. Only such a system could avoid the errors of the system and be accused neither of *injustice*, nor of *anarchy*." [translation mine]

von Hardenberg continues his recapitulation of the transcendental philosophical argument, i.e. everything that can be described by the logical relation of a subject to its predicate, must be called empirical. The pure, however, is by definition non-related and non-relatable, as already Kant had argued, since a pure concept can have no empirical content, and no predicate or empirical intuition will ever be adequate to it. The concept *pure* itself, von Hardenberg concludes, is thus necessarily empty, it is neither real, nor possible, or even necessary. The pure, which is nevertheless the precondition for any form of self-consciousness, is thus ultimately a deception (“Täuschung”) of imagination. It constitutes a *necessary fiction* without which no thought and no reflection would be possible:

Der Begriff *rein* ist also ein leerer Begriff—i.e. ein Begriff, dem keine Anschauung entspricht—ein weder möglicher, noch wirklicher Begriff, noch ein Nothwendiger—alles Reine ist also eine Täuschung der Einbild[ungs]Kr[aft]—eine *nothwendige* Fiction. (Hardenberg 1960a, 179)

Von Hardenberg thus presents a modified version of Fichte’s argument in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, when he comes to the conclusion that the foundation of a transcendental philosophy in the Kantian sense can only be provided as a product of imagination. Unlike Fichte, however, von Hardenberg does not collapse the distinction between the real and the imaginary, between truth and illusion, in order to account for a stable, even if imaginary, foundation of the absolute subject in the impossible moment of an intellectual intuition. Both truth *and* illusion, Hardenberg contents as he transfers the Fichtean “Wechselbestimmung” onto the relation of these terms themselves, are interdependent products of imagination. As truth and illusion simultaneously exclude and precondition each other, the “highest point of philosophy” is seen as informed by a peculiar dynamic:

Die Einbildungskraft hat zweyerley Producte—das Wahre und den Schein.  
Eins schließt das Andre aus—negirt es. Identisch ist beydes—Schein ist

Schein—Wahrheit—Wahrheit. Wahrheit ist die Form des Scheins—Schein die Form der Wahrheit. [...] Wahrheit ist das Ganze—Schein nur der Bruch—das Halbe—der das Ganze scheint und es nicht ist—Jene die positive, dieser die negative Größe. [...] Schein und Wahrheit zusammen machen nur eine eigentliche Realität aus. (Hardenberg 1960a, 179f.)

This paradoxical account of the relation between truth and illusion contains the central topos of von Hardenberg's thought and of Early German Romanticism as a whole. Illusion is not truly the negation of truth, but rather the *condition* for the appearance of truth in empirical consciousness. We can only have access to truth—the pure *a priori* form of absolute self-consciousness—in the form of an illusion, the incomplete half (“das Halbe”) or rupture (“der Bruch”) that constitutes our empirical consciousness. The distorting lack of this illusion, however, simultaneously constitutes the only means by which the truth can have any reality *for us*. Without it, the empirical I would be completely cut off from the truth of the pure, a notion that would remain inaccessibly empty without the deceptions of imagination. Both truth and illusion are hence the coinstantaneous products of imagination, the faculty which guarantees that the truth can be represented at all, even if only in illusionary form. Whenever we believe to have grasped the whole (“das Ganze”), we still remain deceived by the ruptured half of our consciousness, which only creates the illusion of a complete reality. Kant had described this problem as a necessary illusion of reason in the transcendental dialectics, and von Hardenberg reads it back into the imaginative account of self-consciousness that he found in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. There can be no escape from this paradoxical state, and all thought, Hardenberg contents, is thus an “art of illusion,” while the productive imagination creates the foundation for all form and content of our consciousness:

Alles Denken ist also eine Kunst des Scheins. Schein ist Grund aller Form und alles Stoffs allein. (Hardenberg 1960a, 181).

To *think* this paradoxical simultaneity of truth and illusion, of illusionary foundations and foundational illusions, is indeed an art, and I will now retrace the steps of von Hardenberg's argument in the *Fichte Studies* in more detail in order to illuminate how his aesthetic philosophy arises from a transformative reading of Fichte's scientific system.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.2.1 Reflection, Feeling, and the Problem of Representation

In the group of fragments with which the *Fichte Studies* begin von Hardenberg questions the authority of reason's "executive decision" in the positing of the absolute I, and embarks on a thorough semiotic critique of Fichte's first principle. As a statement, von Hardenberg contends,  $A = A$ , the *idée simple* on which Fichte bases his argument, does not constitute an absolute identity at all, but rather a representation of the Absolute, in which the equals sign inevitably introduces an insurmountable moment of difference. The process of reflection<sup>20</sup> through which the unity of the statement is produced, is always a process of representation, von Hardenberg argues, since consciousness deals in signs, not in things. At the moment of reflection, the moment where absolute identity reaches the level of consciousness, it is hence no

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<sup>19</sup>The philosophical shift of Early German Romanticism to the centrality of art and aesthetics for the production of a unified system, constitutive for the work of not only of Friedrich von Hardenberg, but also of Schelling, Friedrich Schlegel, and Hölderlin, is of course well known, and the most concise account of the development and its roots in Kantian and Fichtean philosophy can be found in Manfred Frank's *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik*. (cf. Manfred Frank, *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik. Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989). For a detailed study of the the concepts of imagination of German Idealism and Early German Romanticism see Bernd Küster, *Transzendente Einbildungskraft und ästhetische Phantasie. Zum Verhältnis von philosophischem Idealismus und Romantik* (Königstein/Taunus: Hain Meisenheim, 1979). ) My revisiting of von Hardenberg's specific rereading of Fichte is necessary here, however, since the aesthetic reconfiguration of the relation between subjectivity, imagination, and freedom it entails, still demands closer attention.

<sup>20</sup>The term reflection ("Reflexion") designates the kind of second-order observation that Fichte demands from the disciples of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Reflection thus does not cover all thought as such, but only the type of mental observation that reflects on the first-order level of thought. As von Hardenberg puts it, reflection is "bedachtes Denken," thought about thought: "Reflexion ist nicht alles Denken, sondern behandeltes, bedachtes Denken." (Hardenberg 1960a, 270)

longer absolute. It surfaces as a sign and has been lost in the form of a representation that presupposes a difference between signifier and signified. Just as much as his friends Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Hölderlin, also von Hardenberg perceived Fichte's argument to reside on a fundamental contradiction: For the I to know itself as itself in the act of intellectual intuition, the notion of the sameness of perceiver and perceived, the subject and object of thought, needs to exist prior to the act of self-consciousness. The absolute unity of the I constitutes the very possibility of consciousness and cannot be produced by it in the act of self-perception. Von Hardenberg thus reintroduces the doubling movement of reflection that Fichte had sought to exclude from the intellectual intuition in order to overcome the impasse of Kant's account of self-consciousness back into the philosophical argument, splitting the foundational act of intellectual intuition into the moments of perception and conceptualization ("Anschauen und Begreifen"), the actual unity of which cannot become part of consciousness. Reflection thus reveals a unity which must *seem* to exist prior to the act of reflection itself as von Hardenberg points out:

Was die Reflexion *findet*, *scheint schon da zu seyn* (Hardenberg 1960a, 112)

Through the ambiguity of the verb "scheinen," von Hardenberg introduces a crucial moment of indetermination into the system, the very same moment of ambiguity that also informs the foundational productivity of imagination which I discussed above. While one necessarily has to assume that the absolute unity of the I precedes the moment of reflection, its possibility can at the same time only be known in the illusionary moment of reflection that takes place in empirical consciousness. The Absolute is thus reflection's presupposition as well as its product, and it seems to already have been there when reflection either finds or produces it. Reflection, like the imagination that provides both the form and the content on which it reflects, thus always finds its truth in the form of an illusion, and the moment of representation, which is

the precondition for any self-conscious act of thought, thus simultaneously depends on and precludes a moment of identity. Once again, von Hardenberg formulates the problem with great precision:

Das Wesen der Identität läßt sich nur in einem *Scheinsatz* aufstellen. Wir verlassen das *Identische* um es darzustellen [...] <sup>21</sup> (Hardenberg 1960a, 104)

Fichte had sought to overcome this representational impasse by differentiating between reflection and feeling (“Reflexion und Gefühl”), a distinction that is central to the practical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. “Feeling,” Fichte explains here, is—paradoxically—a reflection without consciousness, in which the subject feels itself as the pre-conscious product of the two conflicting drives (“Triebe”) of the ideal and the real.<sup>22</sup> In this pre-conscious state, the subject “feels” the activity of the Not-I, a force (“Kraft”) outside of the empirical I that could logically never have any effect on it. Feeling, which fulfills a function very similar to that of imagination in the theoretical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, thus provides a pre-conscious synthesis of the two opposites I and Not-I. It indicates the absolute identity of consciousness by overcoming the illusion of its empirical divisions, as it allows the empirical I to “feel” something that is not part of its own conscious activity of reflection. It is through feeling, not through reflection, that the empirical I becomes aware of its own positing activity as the absolute subject, and the relation of the two terms thus unfolds in analogical fashion to that of imagination and reason. If imagination is the source of all reality, of all consciousness and being *for us*, then feeling is analogically, and here Fichte and von Hardenberg agree, the origin of all philosophical thought. “Die Philosophie,”

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<sup>21</sup> “The essence of identity can only be put forward in a *pseudoproposition*. We leave the identical in order to represent it [...]” Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al, ed. and trans, *Theory as Practice. A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 90.

<sup>22</sup> “Da aber das Ich in dieser Reflexion seiner selbst sich nicht bewußt wird, so ist dieselbe ein bloßes *Gefühl*.” (Fichte 1965, 426)

as von Hardenberg sums up and appropriates Fichte's position, "ist ursprünglich ein Gefühl."<sup>23</sup> (Hardenberg 1960a, 113) As both Fichte and von Hardenberg point out repeatedly, a "Selbstgefühl," ultimately an act of imagination, is necessary to instigate, complete, and communicate the philosophical process.

Yet, von Hardenberg insists, even feeling, just like imagination, cannot provide for a direct experience of the Absolute. It rather constitutes a form, to which the Absolute, which von Hardenberg at this point designates with the term "Urhandlung"—his version of Fichte's "Thathandlung"—needs to be given as its content.<sup>24</sup> And since feeling is not a conscious form of knowledge, it remains dependent on reflection to determine its content, which would otherwise never be known. Feeling thus needs reflection just as much as reflection depends on feeling, and the hierarchy between the two modes of thought constantly subverts itself. The Absolute, however, or the "spirit of feeling," as von Hardenberg puts it, is always already lost once feeling is constituted by reflection as the form of the Absolute in consciousness. The spirit, von Hardenberg asserts in a sceptical twist on Fichte's distinction in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, can only appear in consciousness in form of a dead letter, and the existence of an Absolute can only be inferred retroactively as the possible cause of a feeling that is the product of reflection:

Was ist denn ein Gefühl? Es läßt sich nur in der Reflexion betrachten  
- der Geist des Gefühls ist da heraus. Aus dem Produkt läßt sich nach  
dem Schema der Reflexion auf den Producenten schließen.<sup>25</sup> (Hardenberg  
1960a, 114)

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<sup>23</sup> "Philosophy is originally a feeling." (Schulte-Sasse 1997, 96)

<sup>24</sup> "Das dem Gefühl Gegebne scheint mir die Urhandlung als Ursache und Wirkung zu seyn." (Hardenberg 1960a, 114)

<sup>25</sup> "What, then, is a feeling? It can only be contemplated in reflection—the spirit of feeling is, then, gone. Following the schema of reflection, the producer can be inferred from the product." (Schulte-Sasse 1997, 96)

Feeling, von Hardenberg elaborates, “cannot feel itself” and will always remain dependent on the semiotic preconditions of reflection. And since philosophy originates in feeling, this restriction also constitutes the insurmountable boundary of philosophical thought as such.

Die Grenzen des Gefühls sind die Grenzen der Philosophie. Das Gefühl kann sich nicht selber fühlen.<sup>26</sup> (Hardenberg 1960a, 114)

The Absolute (which also figures in the *Fichte Studies* as “reines oder Nur-Seyn,” “das Identische,” “Zustand,” or “Gegensatz”) can thus never become the unmediated object of knowledge, it can only appear in consciousness in form of the paradoxical relation of feeling and reflection, mirroring the simultaneity of truth and illusion as products of imagination. In the illusiory movement from feeling to reflection and vice versa, the Absolute, or the “idealreal,” as von Hardenberg now calls it, can only appear “halb” (half) and “verkehrt” (upside-down, perverted, and distorted):

Im Bewußtsein muß es scheinen, als gienge es vom Beschränkten zum Unbeschränkten, weil das Bewußtsein von sich, als dem Beschränkten ausgehen muß—und dies geschieht durch das Gefühl—ohnerachtet das Gefühl abstract genommen, ein Schreiten des Unbeschränkten zum Beschränkten ist—diese umgekehrte Erscheinung ist natürlich. Sobald das Absolute, wie ich das Ursprünglich Idealreale oder realideale nennen will, als Accidens, oder halb erscheint, so muß es verkehrt erscheinen—das Unbeschränkte wird beschränkt et vice versa.(Hardenberg 1960a, 114)

Consciousness, which is inevitably characterized by this paradoxical simultaneity of conflicting movements must hence be described for von Hardenberg as an “ordo inversus,” a hall of mirrors, where half appears whole and up appears down, where

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<sup>26</sup> “The limits of feeling are the limits of philosophy. Feeling cannot feel itself.” (Schulte-Sasse 1997, 96)

nothing is what it seems, while the ultimate source of reflection remains ever elusive.<sup>27</sup> Since this illusion of consciousness cannot be overcome—an insight from which Friedrich Schlegel would develop his closely related conception of Romantic irony—philosophical thought, if it still seeks to attain a glimpse of the Absolute, can only attempt to do so by performing a rigorous reflection on reflection, a third-order observation, in which the fundamental categories of thought are brought to bear upon themselves. Only such a process might allow reflection to abstract from the processes through which it prestructures its own content and hence to infer *ex negativo* something about the original form of the Absolute before it is given to consciousness.

/Wir müssen das gleichsam Objective, zum gleichsam subjectiven mache[n], das Seyn in eine Form des Denkens bringen, um es untersuchen zu können. Wie sorgfältig man aber dann von dem nothwendigen Zusatz, von der gegebenen Form, abstrahiren muß, um die urspruengliche Form des Seyns zu finden und mit dieser das mögliche Substrat alles Stoffs, dies ist leicht einzusehn./ (Hardenberg 1960a, 111f.)

Ultimately, however, also this level of philosophical reflection can only repeat the impasse of the first in the recurring figure of the “*ordo inversus*,” where thesis and antithesis, reflection and feeling are contradictory and yet interdependent in a constant movement from one pole of consciousness to the other. The need to cancel out and reverse the result of a distorting reflection by a further reflection on reflection and vice versa resurfaces on every level of the reflexive spiral, and the movement will thus continue *ad infinitum*. The stable ground that Fichte sought in the act

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<sup>27</sup>Famously, the *ordo inversus* was first described in an influential essay from 1977 by Manfred Frank and Gerhard Kurz as an Early Romantic mode of thought that equally informs the work of Heinrich von Kleist and Franz Kafka. cf. Manfred Frank and Gerhard Kurz, “Ordo inversus. Zu einer Reflexionsfigur bei Novalis, Hölderlin, Kleist, und Kafka,” *Geist und Zeichen. Festschrift für Arthur Henkel* ed. Herbert Anton, Bernhard Gajek, and Peter Pfaff (Heidelberg: Winter, 1977), 75-97. Manfred Frank has also presented a detailed discussion of the concept of the *ordo inversus* in the work of Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich von Hardenberg in his introductory lectures to the aesthetics of Early German Romanticism. (cf. Frank 1989)

of absolute positing has now turned into reflective quicksand, and von Hardenberg, far from taking recourse to Fichte's "Machtspruch der Vernunft" in order to prevent a feeling of conceptual dizziness, comes to a radical reformulation of Fichte's first principle: In the *Fichte Studies*, the subject finds itself no longer in an act of absolute identity, but rather in the act of its own reflective negation.

/Ich bin nicht inwiefern ich mich setze, sondern inwiefern ich mich aufhebe  
- Ich bin nicht, inwiefern ich in mir bin, mich auf mich selbst anwende./  
(Hardenberg 1960a, 196)

The only "truth" that can still be found in the process of reflection is thus not a prereflective act of absolute positing but rather a constant cognitive movement enacting and displaying the illusionary negation of inescapable illusions. Only by acknowledging the *ordo inversus* of consciousness as a continual movement to and fro, up and down, and from one pole to the other, which is driven by the unrealizable desire to represent an Absolute, can philosophical thought still point to an Absolute that ultimately lies beyond its grasp. An absolute foundation is necessarily absent from the *ordo inversus*, and with and against Fichte's text, von Hardenberg will thus ultimately come to abandon the idea of a self-present absolute as philosophy's first principle.

#### 4.2.2 "The Key to Philosophy." *Relinquishing the Absolute.*

Philosophy, von Hardenberg had read in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, necessarily has to seek for an absolute foundation if it wants to realize its systematic desires. Von Hardenberg's own reflections on Fichte's text, however, had led him to the conclusion that this desire could never be fulfilled. If the very concept of an "absolute ground" contains a logical impossibility, von Hardenberg contends, the philosophical striving for an Absolute would constitute an infinite drive ("unendlicher Trieb") that could never come to an end:

Alles Philosophiren muß also bey einem absoluten Grunde endigen. Wenn dieser nun nicht gegeben wäre, wenn dieser Begriff eine Unmöglichkeit enthielte - so wäre der Trieb zu Philosophiren eine unendliche Tätigkeit - und darum ohne Ende, weil ein ewiges Bedürfniß nach einem absoluten Grunde vorhanden wäre, das doch nur relativ gestillt werden könnte - und darum nie aufhören würde.<sup>28</sup> (Hardenberg 1960a, 269)

This activity of an infinite striving towards the Absolute, von Hardenberg suggests, is the only Absolute that is actually accessible to us, and which we can paradoxically only find by relinquishing the hope of ever attaining the Absolute altogether. While the notion of a self-present and identical Absolute is still retained by von Hardenberg, it is now presented as an unfulfillable ideal, changing the nature of philosophy from a Fichtean project, where freedom is tied to the notion of the absolute autonomy of the subject, to a Romantic process of eternal desire. For von Hardenberg, in an Early Romantic twist on both the Kantian and the Fichtean position, freedom now resides in the *voluntary relinquishing* of the Absolute, not in the free subjugation under its self-present law. Instead of providing a positive foundation for philosophical thought and the source of the moral law, the Absolute now serves as a negative principle of absence, triggering human action and desire and thus enabling freedom through its very inaccessibility:

Durch das freywillige Entsagen des Absoluten entsteht die unendliche freye Thätigkeit in uns - das Einzig mögliche Absolute, was uns gegeben werden kann und was wir nur durch unsre Unvermögenheit ein Absolutes zu erreichen und zu erkennen, finden. Dies uns gegebne Absolute läßt sich nur

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<sup>28</sup> "Thus all philosophizing must end at an absolute ground. If such a ground were not given, if this concept contained an impossibility, then the drive to philosophize would be an infinite activity. Thus it would be without end, because there would be an eternal need for an absolute ground, which could only be satisfied to a relative degree, and therefore would never cease." (Schulte-Sasse 1997, 107)

negativ erkennen, indem wir handeln und finden, daß durch kein Handeln das erreicht wird, was wir suchen.<sup>29</sup> (Hardenberg 1960a, 269f.)

An absolute principle that guarantees the unity of experience and the identity of subject and object, von Hardenberg agrees, needs to be postulated in order to establish a functioning philosophical system. Yet this Absolute can never be an actual object of knowledge; it is neither real, nor possible, for it can only be represented in the dialectical movement of feeling and reflection, which can do no more than allude to the heuristic principle of an absolute unifying ground. Freedom, von Hardenberg now argues, results precisely from the *fictionality* of this Absolute, which needs to be *constructed* in retrospect as a necessary yet fictional presupposition for the mutual dependency of feeling and reflection, of truth and illusion. Philosophy's highest principle, von Hardenberg concludes, which cannot be anything given or present for reception, not even in the ecstatic moment of an intellectual intuition, has to be conceptualized as an act of *poiesis* and hence as a *product* of imagination. It needs to be understood as something freely *made*, as an aesthetic product of reflection, which can ground the system without recourse to a self-present origin. The resulting system can then truly begin in and lead to freedom, because it relies on a first principle that entails itself a free act of poetic and reflective construction, that is "ein *Erdichtetes, Erdachtes*":

/Das oberste Princip muß schlechterdings Nichts Gegebenes, sondern ein Frey Gemachtes, ein *Erdichtetes, Erdachtes*, seyn, um ein allgemeines metaphysisches System zu begründen, das von Freyheit anfängt und zu Freyheit geht. (Hardenberg 1960a, 273)

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<sup>29</sup>Through the voluntary renunciation of the absolute, infinite and free activity arises within us. This activity is the only possible absolute that can be given to us and that we find through our inability to reach and to recognize an absolute. We can only recognize this given absolute negatively, by acting and finding that we cannot reach what we are searching for through any action. (Schulte-Sasse 1997, 107f.)

When von Hardenberg thus contends that the term “freedom” designates the state of the “hovering imagination”—“/Freyheit bezeichnet den Zustand der *schwebenden* Einbild[ungs]-Kr[aft]./” (Hardenberg 1960a, p. 188)—, and not the moment of its subsequent fixation, he refers to an aesthetic process that creates a unity quite different from the one Fichte had described in the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In both systems, imagination produces unity through its constant liminal movement between the two poles of consciousness—“Aller Transitus—alle Bewegung ist Wirksamkeit der Einbild[ungs]Kr[aft],” writes von Hardenberg (Hardenberg 1960a, 188)—and for both Fichte and von Hardenberg philosophy’s first principle becomes possible by means of a creative fiction of imagination. But the freely created first principle at which von Hardenberg arrives in the *Fichte Studies* is no longer a moment of absolute identity, which contains and fixates this movement, as it was for Fichte, but rather a non-foundational unity, in which freedom is the result of an ever closer connection of the various parts within a whole, a whole that takes shape by virtue of the ceaseless and unarrested weaving motion of imagination within the *ordo inversus*. In another reformulation of the Fichtean pre-text, which is a direct result of the renunciation of a self-present first principle, freedom is now no longer the product of an absolute identity but rather a process of constant interconnection, of “making whole” (“Verganzung”) within a system without a center or an absolute foundation.<sup>30</sup> As von Hardenberg calls for an interruption of the philosophical drive towards an absolute ground, imagination can continue its hovering movement in the construction of the *whole*, which now replaces the concept of the Absolute as the ultimate goal of philosophical desire, and the poetic process of imagination becomes the “actual absolute ground” of freedom:

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<sup>30</sup>For another discussion of this movement from the Absolute to the whole as the result of von Hardenberg’s critique of Fichte and the consequent shift from philosophy to poetry as the preferred medium of reflection cf. Georg Graf von Wallwitz, “Über den Begriff des Absoluten bei Novalis,” *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 71.3 (1997): 421-436.

Filosofie, Resultat des Philosophierens, entsteht demnach durch Unterbrechung des Triebes nach Erkenntniß des Grundes - durch Stillstehen bey dem Gliede, wo man ist - Abstraction von dem absoluten Grunde, und Geltendmachung des eigentlichen absoluten Grundes der Freyheit durch Verknüpfung (Verganzung) des Zu Erklärenden / zu einem Ganzen. Je mannichfaltiger die Glieder dieses Ganzen sind desto lebhafter wird die absolute Freyheit empfunden - je verknüpfter, je Ganzer es ist, je wirksamer, anschaulicher, erklärter, ist der absolute Grund alles Begründens, die Freyheit darinn. Die Mannichfaltigkeit bezeugt die Energie, die Lebhaftigkeit der practischen Freyheit - die Verknüpfung - die Thätigkeit der theoretischen Freyheit. (Hardenberg 1960a, 270)

The idea of the whole, however, is for von Hardenberg the constitutive force of the work of art, and the preferred medium for the "making whole" of the system is thus not philosophical but rather poetic discourse. Because of the aesthetic shift from the Absolute to the whole, poetry now becomes, to quote von Hardenberg's definition from the "Logological Fragments," the "key to philosophy," its final end and meaning:

Die Poësie hebt jedes Einzelne durch eine eigenthümliche Verknüpfung mit dem übrigen Ganzen - und wenn die Philosophie durch ihre Gesetzgebung die Welt erst zu dem wirklichen Einfluß der Ideen bereitet, so ist gleichsam Poësie der Schlüssel der Philosophie, ihr Zweck und ihre Bedeutung; (Hardenberg 1960a, 533)

Reciprocally, however, philosophy, as Novalis puts it in a fragment written in 1798, at the same time he was working on the *Logological Fragments*, becomes the necessary "theory of poetry," which is needed to understand the true worth and foundational qualities of poetry. Both discourses, much like feeling and reflection, thus remain united, complementary, and interdependent in von Hardenberg's transcendental poetics:

Die Poësie ist der Held der Philosophie. Die Phil[osophie] erhebt die Poësie zum Grundsatz. Sie lehrt uns den Werth der Poësie kennen. Phil[osophie] ist *die Theorie* der *Poësie*. Sie zeigt uns was die Poësie sey, daß sie Eins und alles sey. (Hardenberg 1960a, 590f.)

And the faculty, the “higher organ” that enables this creative unity of transcendental poetry is imagination, which is for von Hardenberg the “poetic sense as such”:

Ist nicht die Einbildungskraft, oder das höhere Organ, der poetische Sinn überhaupt?<sup>31</sup> (Hardenberg 1960a, 568)

Imagination, as the poetic sense and the poetic principle of movement (“Transitus”) and making whole (“Verganzung”) within the *ordo inversus* thus makes possible the unity and interdependence of philosophy and poetry that is at the heart of von Hardenberg’s poetic and philosophical project. “Transcendental poetry,” the “mixture” of philosophy and poetry<sup>32</sup> would not be possible without imagination, which consequently becomes “the highest good” for von Hardenberg:

Das grösseste Gut besteht in der Einbildungskraft.<sup>33</sup> (Hardenberg 1960a, 275)

Andreas Michel and Assenka Oksiloff have pointed out in their insightful essay “Romantic Crossovers: Philosophy as Art and Art as Philosophy,” that an aesthetic approach like von Hardenberg’s—and similarly those of Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Hölderlin—which relies on the performative capacity of poetry to actively produce a unity within consciousness and the philosophical system (a *poiesis*) needs

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<sup>31</sup> “Is not imagination, or the higher organ, the poetic sense as such?” [translation mine]

<sup>32</sup> “Die transcendente Poësie ist aus Philosophie und Poësie gemischt.” (von Hardenberg 1960a, 536)

<sup>33</sup> “Imagination is the highest good.” [translation mine]

to be distinguished from a second trend within Romantic aesthetics, which relies on the particular metaphysical properties of poetry, which are then used to complete the philosophical system on a theoretical level (a *poetics*). This second trend would be represented by August Wilhelm Schlegel, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and, as we will see in the following chapter, also by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England. “With respect to the Romantics, we might distinguish between two different philosophical conceptions of aesthetics, one representing a more ontologically and poetologically oriented concentration on the metaphysical properties of *art* (A.W. Schlegel, Schelling), the other constituting an epistemological and sociohistorical practice that Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel refer to as *poiesis* or *aesthetic production*. A *poetics* will thus be opposed to *poiesis*.” (Andreas Michel and Assenka Oksiloff, “Romantic Crossovers: Philosophy as Art and Art as Philosophy” in Schulte-Sasse 1997, 157-179.) For this reason, von Hardenberg, unlike Schelling or Coleridge, does not formulate an explicit *theory* of imagination in his philosophical and poetic fragments. Imagination, as the poetic sense, is rather to be understood as the active principle that animates the performance of von Hardenberg’s texts themselves.

Herbert Uerlings has very aptly termed the resulting aesthetic and imaginative philosophical principle “narrative construction of immanent transcendence.”<sup>34</sup> The term “construction” points to the fact that the absolute unity of subject and object enabling and underlying their harmonious whole always has to be posited, to be constructed *as if* it existed, while Uerlings uses the epithet “narrative” to illuminate that this positing and construction is always necessarily a poetic representation. Such a “narrative construction” constitutes the first principle at the base of all of von Hardenberg’s endeavours, be they philosophical, scientific, encyclopaedic, political, theological, or poetic. Poetry is hence only a privileged medium of expression insofar as it allows for the *aesthetic* representation of an ideal unity, and as such for a

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<sup>34</sup>Herbert Uerlings, *Friedrich von Hardenberg, genannt Novalis. Werk und Forschung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991), 229f.

self-reflexive representation that already indicates its own failure. Poetic discourse—and poetry is for von Hardenberg, as for most of the Romantics not a specific genre, but a principle or rather a quality that infuses all forms of art—is thus best suited to instigate the reader’s desire to reenact such a unity (von Hardenberg defines poetry as “Gemuetererregungskunst,” literally: the art to stimulate mind and soul), while pointing *at the same time* to the illusory constructedness of this very goal. It is hence inevitable that this “narrative construction” only realizes an “immanent transcendence,” a term which designates not a positive, actually present transcendence, but a negative one, which manifests itself as an infinite “moving towards,” represented within a whole that can communicate if not cancel out the deceptions and distortions of the *ordo inversus*.<sup>35</sup> As the principle of connection of a manifold of elements within a whole replaces the idea of their deducability from one absolute principle, von Hardenberg thus develops a truly *aesthetic* model of subjectivity. When he asserts in the *Fichte Studies* that “to be a complete I is an *art*,” he points to the fact that the subject can always only discover itself *in modo representationis*. Subjectivity in fact, *is* a particular process of representation, one which operates without the need for an absolute referent or signified. Von Hardenberg’s complete I thus needs to posit itself *as representing* (“darstellend”), in an act of *free* representation, which only represents to represent, and which is best realized in the creation of a work of art:

/Das Ich muß sich als darstellend setzen./ [...] Gibt es eine besondere darstellende kraft—die blos um darzustellen, darstellt—darstellen, um darzustellen ist ein *Freyes* darstellen. [...] Dadurch erhält das Kunstwerck einen

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<sup>35</sup>One cannot insist strongly enough that poetry is thus for von Hardenberg *not* a mystical practice through which the subject’s union with the Absolute could actually be achieved, an interpretation that often characterizes traditional criticism. Thanks to the work of Manfred Frank and Herbert Uerlings in particular, the complex epistemological and philosophical underpinnings of von Hardenberg’s poetic practice can no longer be ignored. Von Hardenberg clearly does not embark on the naïve endeavor to short-circuit the limits of Kantian and Fichtean philosophy in a non-reflective form of “aesthetic absolutism.” For an overview of this central conflict in the critical debate about Early German Romanticism cf. Loheide 2000.

freyen, selbstständigen, idealischen Karakter—einen imposanten Geist— denn es ist *sichtbares* Produkt eines Ich—Das ich aber setzt sich auf diese Art bestimmt, weil es sich, als ein unendliches Ich setzt—weil es sich, als ein unendlich darstellendes Ich setzen muß—so setzt es sich frey, als ein bestimmt darstellendes Ich. (Hardenberg 1960a, 282)

Subjectivity is thus a process that realizes itself—becomes real—in the unity of the work of art, which is its free and *visible* empirical expression by means of imagination. Von Hardenberg thus finds the impossible moment of a defined infinity, which also Fichte had perceived as the desired origin of self-consciousness, in the productive whole of the work of art. Only the work of art presents the I as “unendlich bestimmt,” infinite and thus free in the process of representation, yet empirically defined as a concrete aesthetic product. As a mode of representation (“Darstellung”), in which the subject always appears as *both* philosophical reflection and poetical construction—both truth and illusion are the products of imagination—the work of art will then also always relate that the unity of transcendental poetics can only be realized in the realm of the *ordo inversus* and hence *as a fiction*. In a transformation that Descartes could not have dreamed of, the subject thus constitutes itself not only *by means* of imagination, but as an aesthetic *product* of imagination, it can only grasp itself poetically in the reflection of a work of art. Only a system based on such a first principle could truly be said to have freedom as its goal:

“Das oberste Princip muß schlechterdings Nichts Gegebenes, sondern ein Frey Gemachtes, ein *Erdichtetes*, *Erdachtes*, seyn, um ein allgemeines metaphysisches System zu begründen, das von Freyheit anfängt und zu Freyheit geht.”

## Chapter 5

THE ABYSS OF THE SELF. SAMUEL TAYLOR  
COLERIDGE, EDGAR ALLAN POE AND THE  
AMBIGUITIES OF IMAGINATION

Der Mensch ist ein Abgrund—wenn man hineinblickt schwindelt's einem.

Man is an abyss—one gets dizzy looking into it.

—Georg Büchner, *Woyzek*—

Von Hardenberg's poetic rereading of the Fichtean system will be complemented in a double fashion in the present chapter, which analyses the conceptions of imagination at work in the prose of Edgar Allan Poe and the philosophical texts of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The transformation of the relation between subjectivity and imagination that takes place in the intertextual movement from Coleridge to Poe also presents an indirect commentary on the aesthetic hopes expressed in von Hardenberg's philosophical and poetic fragments. On the one hand, the intertextual relation between the work of Coleridge and Poe will lead us back to the conflicting views of imagination that could be seen to inform the texts of Immanuel Kant and René Descartes. Poe reminds us of the dangerous empirical implications of imagination for the philosophical system, with which Kant had wrestled in the *Anthropology* and which had equally haunted Descartes before him. Coleridge by contrast continues the transcendental discussion of imagination as a mediatory faculty, which Kant had also opened up and which had become central for Kant's Idealist and Romantic heirs. The confrontation and connection of Coleridge and Poe can thus serve to show that the conflictual potential of imagination for literary and philosophical conceptions of

subjectivity still remains an active presence, even after the “idealist turn” of German philosophy and Early German Romanticism.

On the other hand, Poe’s narrative subversion of Coleridge’s philosophical principles, which will interest us in the following pages, also leads to a model of the fictionality of subjectivity that undermines not only Coleridge’s but also von Hardenberg’s Romantic conception of the subject’s unity and freedom as a work of art. As a purely aesthetic principle, Poe’s narrative imagination breaks with the Idealist and Romantic models of art and aesthetics as the link or poetic principle that could salvage the unity of the self and the philosophical system. The poetic construction of the unity of mind and world, as *Eureka*, Poe’s “Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe” will show, has for Poe irrevocably become “mind’s world,” the fictional product of the writing subject’s desire to ward off its own impending death. In Poe’s narrative voice, even as it employs fundamental principles of Romantic aesthetic discourse, the Romantic dreams of a unified subjectivity will be seen to slip away. It is hence of particular importance that Poe’s aesthetic utterance stands in direct relation to that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the central philosophical figure of British Romanticism, and this intertextual connection now first needs to be established in all its complexity.

## 5.1 *The Perversion of Reason*

### 5.1.1 *Letter to B—*

The pervasive influence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s work on the writings of Edgar Allan Poe is well documented. As early as 1930, in his article “Poe’s Debt to Coleridge,” Floyd Stovall maintained that Coleridge was “the guiding genius of Poe’s entire intellectual life.”<sup>1</sup> Daniel Hoffman’s contention from 1972 that “the philosoph-

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<sup>1</sup>Floyd Stovall, “Poe’s Debt to Coleridge,” *University of Texas Studies in English* 10 (1930): 70-127. 71.

ical breadth of Coleridge underlies Poe's acute narrowness as the pyramid on the Great Seal of the United States at its summit supports one assured and unblinking eye" is equally far-reaching.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as undeniable as the influential presence of Coleridge's thought in Poe's texts might be, the insinuation of seamless continuity and intertextual unity that underpins these and similar assessments needs to be called into question. Poe is in fact far from completing the philosophical structure that Coleridge had attempted to build, and if he inhabits it, he does so not as a headstone in its supporting arch, but rather as a threat to its desired foundations.

A close analysis of a passage from Poe's earliest poetological text, the preface to an 1831 collection of his poems that would later be published separately as the "Letter to B—" will serve me as a starting point to unravel the intricate process of transformation and appropriation that constitutes Edgar Allan Poe's reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

Of Coleridge I cannot speak but with reverence. His towering intellect! his gigantic power! He is one more evidence of the fact "que la plupart des sectes ont raison dans une bonne partie de ce qu'elles avancent, mais non pas en ce qu'elles nient." He has imprisoned his own conceptions by the barrier he has erected against those of others. It is lamentable to think that such a mind should be buried in metaphysics, and, like the Nyctanthes, waste its perfume upon the night alone.<sup>3</sup>

This is neither the unquestioning acceptance of a "guiding genius" or of a philosophical foundation for Poe's own work, nor is it simply the common combination of admiration and regret with regard to Coleridge's philosophical endeavors, which is usually founded on a mere refusal to actually come to terms with Coleridge the

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<sup>2</sup>Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972) 87.

<sup>3</sup>Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews* ed. G.R. Thompson, (New York: Library of America, 1984) 10f.

philosopher and metaphysician. There is more at stake in the “Letter to B—” than is apparent at a merely superficial glance: In its original form, the text is designed as a defense of Poe’s own poetry, which he fears will be judged by his American reviewers according to the positions of the “Lake school.” In Poe’s rendition, a conception of poetry as a philosophical and metaphysical practice is foremost among these positions, a tenet against which he upholds the view of poetry as solely a means for the production of beauty and pleasure: “Against the subtleties which would make poetry a study—not a passion—it becomes the metaphysician to reason—but the poet to protest.” (Poe 1984a, 8.) In his protest, Poe devotes lengthy passages to ridicule Wordsworth, but it is quite obvious, that the true object and the only real threat against which he prepares his defense, is Coleridge. Poe had in fact sufficient reason for such a strategy of distraction, for when he claims at the end of his text, that “A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth, ...” he is lifting his opinion directly from Chapter Fourteen of the *Biographia Literaria*.<sup>4</sup> (Poe 1984a, 11.) Yet Poe, who had closely read the *Biographia*, does not merely purloin Coleridge, he does so, quite consciously, in truly Coleridgean fashion. For in a calculated rhetorical move, also his preceding critique is presented in words—French and English—that are taken verbatim from Chapter Twelve of the *Biographia*, where Coleridge himself had written the following:

The spirit of sectarianism has been hitherto our fault and the cause of our failures. We have imprisoned our conceptions by the lines which we have drawn, in order to exclude the conceptions of others. J’ai trouvé que la plupart des sectes ont raison dans une bonne partie de ce qu’elles avancement, mais non pas tant en ce qu’elles nient.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Coleridge’s text reads as follows: “A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; ...” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* II, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 16 vols. vol. 7:2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 13.

<sup>5</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* I, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *The*

While Poe was unaware that the French just as much the English in Coleridge's passage is derived from the writings of Leibniz, the French clearly indicated to him that he was quoting a quote.<sup>6</sup> In what Jonathan Bate has described in his essay "Edgar Allan Poe: A Debt Repaid" as a true act of homage to Coleridge, Poe hence repeats almost uncannily Coleridge's own pastiche-like practice of creating his text out of a network of quotes.<sup>7</sup> He thus ironically undermines Coleridge's authority by a repetition of the latter's very own textual practice: he usurps his voice and makes it his own. The first version of Poe's text, as Bate has pointed out, in fact still acknowledges the quote and reads as follows: "To use an author quoted by himself [i.e. Coleridge], 'J'ai trouvé que la plupart des sectes ont raison dans une bonne partie de ce qu'elles avancent, mais non pas tant en ce qu'elles nient'..." Assuming the translation from Leibniz to be Coleridge's original text, Poe then continues: "and, to employ his own language, he has imprisoned his own conceptions by the barrier he has erected against those of others." The fact that Poe removes these markers of quotation in the later version of the text only heightens the effect of a conscious usurpation of Coleridge's voice, which, however, is even less Coleridge's "own" than Poe expected. But what is more, Poe also seizes this quote from one of the most central passages in the *Biographia Literaria*, where it appears at the end of an extended direct translation from Leibniz, in which the latter outlines the concern that is also situated at the heart of Coleridge's own philosophical project. Coleridge claims in Leibniz's words that if all philosophical systems known so far were considered in their fundamental

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*Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 16 vols. vol. 7:1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 247.

<sup>6</sup>The French quote originally derives from one of Leibniz's letters to Remond de Mont-Mort. The remainder of the paragraph is Coleridge's translation from Leibniz's "Eclaircissement des difficultés que M. Bayle a trouvées dans le système nouveau de l'union de l'âme et du corps." Coleridge has slightly altered the original, but the text remains essentially Leibniz's. cf. Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) 135f.

<sup>7</sup>Jonathan Bate, "Edgar Allan Poe: A Debt Repaid," *The Coleridge Connection—Essays for Thomas McFarland*, ed. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (London: McMillan, 1990) 254-273. 258.

and only seemingly contradictory truths, they would be found “united in one perspective central point, which shows regularity and coincidence of all the parts in the very object, which from every other point of view must appear confused and distorted.” (Coleridge 1983a, 247) This promise, which immediately follows the passage quoted by Poe, is the basis for Coleridge’s own attempt at idealist system-building and the ultimate philosophical goal he had set himself for his still to be written and continually deferred “magnum opus,” where in the system of all systems every possible philosophical perspective would prove to be relatable to the same underlying principles. And for Coleridge just as much as for Descartes, Kant, Fichte, and Friedrich von Hardenberg, the unity and successful completion of such a philosophical meta-system is directly predicated upon the unity of subjectivity. It is after all not without reason that Coleridge presents a sketch of his systematic philosophical convictions in the form of a literary autobiography. Quite purposefully, the *Biographia Literaria* is written to guarantee both the progressive unity of Coleridge’s literary life and by virtue of this unity the possibility of a complete and dynamic philosophical system. Very much in tune with von Hardenberg’s insights in the *Fichte Studies*—even though Coleridge does not employ this strategy as self-consciously as von Hardenberg—the *Biographia* thus presents the unity of subjectivity, the “one perspective central point” in which all philosophical perspectives can be seen as united, as a process of literary and poetic self-creation. The voice of the philosophical utterance that can include and synthesize the network of quotes and appropriated perspectives that make up the textual body of the *Biographia*, and which presents itself as distinctly Coleridge’s own, is also the voice which will be able to outline the complete philosophical system. For both the philosophical and the autobiographical self, the desired unity is thus of necessity a synthetic act of creation and of writing.

Precisely for this reason, Poe’s appropriation of Coleridge’s voice at this central moment in the *Biographia* is doubly subversive. Not only does it question and undermine the alleged authenticity of Coleridge’s textual utterance, which is usurped

by means of repetition in Poe's text, it also turns Coleridge's own, albeit borrowed words inside out and presents precisely their all-inclusive philosophical position as Coleridge's own "imprisonment." Poe of course could not pretend to present a more inclusive philosophical perspective than the one already projected by Coleridge himself; Poe's protest here is not of a systematic nature. The conflict that needs to be located in the intertextual relation of these two writers, marked by an intricate simultaneity of sameness and difference, where the same words take on different meanings as they make their way from Coleridge's page to Poe's pen, lies rather in their different accounts of the rational subject that should form the basis of an all-inclusive philosophical system. Poe's texts continuously call into question the very possibility to discover a self-present rational subjectivity in the reflective act of writing, and his protest against Coleridge's metaphysical conceptions is thus ultimately the refusal to entertain and support the philosophical desires which sustain them.

### 5.1.2 *The Imp of the Perverse*

Nowhere is this refusal formulated more clearly than in Poe's short text "The Imp of the Perverse," written in 1845, fourteen years after the "Letter to B—." Part philosophical essay, part short story, Poe's text negotiates the relation of literature and philosophy, of writing and systematic unity, to quite different ends than those of Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria*. Poe's short text also seeks to present a basic principle of the human mind and can hence be seen to equally describe the "one perspective central point" from which human thought and action could be seen as united. The explanatory principle to be divulged by Poe's narrator, however,—“a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment”—leaves little room for the syntheses usually performed under the auspices of reason. Indeed, the philosophical imprisonment that the narrator deems responsible for the inability of all previous "moralists" and "metaphysicianism" to acknowledge the principle in question is precisely their biased

belief in human rationality, “the pure arrogance of the reason.”<sup>8</sup> The explicit target of Poe’s philosophical essay is the discipline of phrenology and the phrenologists’ attempts to deduce the causes and motivations of human behavior from the function of postulated mental “organs.” The text’s general challenge to the unquestioned assumption of the human capacity for reason, however, at the same time deals a blow to the enlightened philosophical tradition from Descartes to Kant and thus by extension to Coleridge’s philosophical desire to bring it to completion.

Poe’s narrator, who is much closer in temperament to the pessimism of a Pascal with regard to the influence of reason on human actions, sees ultimately little grounds for an optimistic view of the human potential for rationality. The particular arrogance of reason that Poe’s narrator sees at work in “imprisoned” philosophical perspectives is the teleological belief, “concocted *à priori*,” that human capacities should fulfill a certain need and that the driving force behind human actions should “be made to further the objects of humanity, either temporal or eternal.” (Poe 1984b, 826) Moralistic metaphysicians, who refuse to be guided by the empirical observation of man’s actual behavior, scoffs Poe’s narrator, claim to have access to a divine design and purpose which human beings are created to fulfil. They hence fashion an imaginary moral imperative that will serve as the basis for their philosophical systems:

The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs—to dictate purposes to God. Having thus fathomed to his satisfaction, the intentions of Jehova, out of these intentions he built his innumerable systems of mind. (Poe 1984b, 826)

Poe’s empirically-minded narrator ultimately rejects both eighteenth-century utilitarianism and Kantian transcendentalism as legitimate philosophical frameworks for the assessment of human behavior. He sees no empirical evidence for the utilitarian

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<sup>8</sup>Edgar Allan Poe, “The Imp of the Perverse,” *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn, (New York: Library of America, 1984) 826.

assertion that human beings act consistently and hence rationally to further their own (temporal) good, their earthly needs and happiness. He rejects even more forcefully the Kantian attempt to establish reason's transcendental moral law contrafactually and to postulate *a priori* principles of reason which can precisely serve as guidelines for moral behavior *because* they remain untainted by the factual moral depravity of humankind. Poe's narrator asserts adamantly that the only true measuring rod for human morality and man's potential rationality is the *a posteriori* one of empirical observation:

It would have been wiser, it would have been safer to classify, (if classify we must,) upon the basis of what man usually or occasionally did, and was occasionally doing, rather than upon the basis of what we took it for granted the Deity intended him to do. (Poe 1984b, 827)

The principle that Poe's narrator actually does see at work upon empirical observation, a principle which falls inevitably outside of the purview of the "arrogant" *a priori* perspective of reason, is the impulse that gives Poe's text its title: perverseness. Perverseness, which Poe's narrator describes as the propensity to act precisely "for the reason that we should *not*," undermines the Kantian account of human reason in a particularly devious fashion. It not only defies the categorical imperative as the unifying principle of human subjectivity and rationality, it also mocks its very function by describing the moral law as the immediate source for the subject's non-compliance to it. An irrational impulse triggered by the law of reason itself is thus presented as the strongest driving force of human behavior. "No reason," claims Poe's narrator, "can be more unreasonable; but, in fact, there is none more strong." (Poe 1984b, 827)

As such, the principle of perverseness is a direct perversion of the Kantian will, the practical form of pure reason as it is applied to our actions and ethical decisions. Kant's "Wille," which controls our "Willkür" (volition), the impure and empirical

power affected by our passions, desires, and physical needs, unquestioningly executes the absolute transcendental authority of the moral law. Perverseness, as described in Poe's text, is an impulse which constrains us to act with equally irresistible force, yet which does so, not as the embodiment of the moral law, but rather as the diametrically opposed command to do "wrong for the wrong's sake." (Poe 1984b, 827) Poe's narrator presents perverseness as an absolute first principle, an elementary impulse which defies further analysis, a Cartesian *idée simple*. As he forcefully expounds his perverse moral credo, he thus fuses his insidious riposte to Kant with an appropriation of Descartes, hence subverting the tradition of rational and systematic philosophical enterprise in the philosophers' own voice. In Poe's prose, the perversion of rationality and the Kantian moral law is formulated with corrosive precision as a self-evident truth of reason, a Cartesian touchstone of absolute certainty:

I am not more certain that I breathe, than that the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable *force* which impels us, and alone impels us to its prosecution. Nor will this overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong's sake, admit of analysis, or resolution into ulterior elements. It is a radical, a primitive impulse—elementary. (Poe 1984b, 827)

As Poe's writing transforms the rational self-evidence of the cogito—the breath of the thinking subject—into a perversion of reason itself, the voice of his text, which uncannily doubles the prose of Kant and Descartes, ultimately undermines the very endeavour of a search for rational first principles as the basis for a systematic philosophy. By parodying reason's "arrogant" efforts to ground itself in a system of principles that would be safe from all perversion, madness, and demonic dreaming, Poe's parasitical voice thus by extension also parodies the Coleridgean desire to bring this systematic endeavor to its ultimate completion. The "one perspective central point" that emerges from Poe's combined perversion of Descartes's and Kant's philo-

sophical discourse is precisely the impossibility to safely distinguish reason from its irrational other.<sup>9</sup>

### 5.1.3 *Strange Fears*

At its deepest level, the philosophical desire for rationality and the ability to give a systematic account of the subject's relation to the world is a desire for self-preservation. To think philosophically in the manner of Descartes, to orient oneself in one's thought, to speak with Kant, means to establish an order and hence to give meaning and to establish a certain amount of control over the mind's affairs with the world. As such, philosophical thought necessarily depends on the exclusion of an irrational other which cannot be made to conform to the order thus created. As we know for example from Samuel Beckett's decaying narrators, who explore this desire of the subject to its most minute linguistic detail, there lies great comfort and reassurance in the ability to establish an order, in the successful classification of events and occurrences, and in the discovery of reliable chains of cause and effect, which assure the observing subject's control over whatever it happens to observe. The failure of this systematic endeavor on the other hand, can cause great anguish, as it suggests a universe

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<sup>9</sup>The reading of Poe's text as a parody of Descartes's *Meditations* and the philosophical impulse to ground rationality by separating it from its opposite has already been developed by Stanley Cavell in his essay "Betting Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)." In reading Poe as a perverse ventriloquist of Descartes, Cavell arrives at a deconstructionist assessment of the aim of Poe's text in relation to philosophical prose: "The sound of Poe's prose, of its incessant and perverse brilliance, is uncannily like the sound of philosophy as established in Descartes, as if Poe's prose were a parody of philosophy's. It strikes me that in Poe's tales the thought is being worked out that, now anyway, philosophy exists only as a parody of philosophy, or rather as something indistinguishable from the perversion of philosophy, as if to overthrow the reign of reason, the reason that philosophy was born to establish, is not alone the task of, let us say, poetry but is now openly the genius or mission of philosophy itself." Stanley Cavell, "Betting Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)," *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 3-37. 19. Poe's text, however, becomes even more troubling, as we shall see, if one takes its close connection to Kantian discourse into account, a relation that Cavell only mentions in passing. It is precisely the combined rewriting of Cartesian and Kantian accounts of rational subjectivity that give Poe's text its radical force, while the consequent subversion of the subject's positive relation to the moral law presents Poe's most threatening challenge to Coleridge's convictions.

devoid of meaning, a life ruled by randomness and chance, and ultimately the irrevocable finality of the subject's death. The system and its abstract rational order is in the last instance a defense against the inevitable dissolution of the physical and the mortality of an embodied subjectivity. Noumenal reason and the moral law are the subject's substitutes for immortality; they ensure, to slightly modify Kant, that humanity survives, even if the individual human necessarily dies. Death is the true other of reason and the ultimate cause of the philosopher's fear of the irrational. And death is unmistakably at the heart of Poe's literary universe, the subject's mortality is as it were the gravitational pull that holds it together. Not surprisingly then, the principle of perverseness is directly linked to the moment of death: As it undermines the rational impulse for self-preservation and control, it reveals an even stronger desire for self-annihilation at the heart of subjectivity. As "The Imp of the Perverse" now pushes the reader towards the brink of a precipice, it not only reinforces its intimate connections to Kantian discourse, but also returns us at a central moment to the problem of imagination:

We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degrees our sickness, and dizziness, and horror, become merged in a cloud of unnameable feeling. By gradations, still more imperceptible, this cloud assumes shape, as did the vapor from the bottle out of which arose the genius in the Arabian Nights. But out of this *our* cloud upon the precipice's edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius, or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. And this fall—this rushing annihilation—for the

very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination—for this cause do we now the most vividly desire it. There is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient, as that of him, who shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge. (Poe 1984b, 829)

Pointedly, the unaccountable and irrational decision to remain in a position of danger, and the subsequent desire to succumb to a delightfully horrific impulse that assures certain death and destruction, is triggered by images that take shape, vaguely at first, but with ever-increasing clarity, in imagination. It is imagination that promises both the delight and the anguish, the suffering and the exhilaration of a rush to destruction, and which thus completely destabilizes a position of seemingly rational safety and control. Desire, to recall Proust's dictum already quoted in my discussion of Descartes, would be completely empty without imagination, and the "Imp of the Perverse" could not do its work without the help of the faculty's siren song. Even death becomes attractive with the help of imagination. But Poe is not the first to connect the bewildering desire for self-annihilation, experienced on the irrationally alluring brink of a precipice, with the force of imagination. The very same example, although less sympathetically embellished in rhetorical detail, can be found as an instance of the illusions of imagination in Immanuel Kant's *Anthropology*.<sup>10</sup> Here, Kant writes the following in paragraph thirty-two:

Die Täuschung durch die Stärke der Einbildungskraft des Menschen geht oft so weit, daß er dasjenige, was er nur im Kopf hat, außer sich zu sehen

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<sup>10</sup>The moment of terror entailed in the experience of the sublime has of course been discussed before Kant by both Longinus and Edmund Burke. I would like to focus here, however, on the indirect connection of Poe's text to Kantian discourse, which will help to illuminate in how far Poe's narrative brings to light the Kantian fears about imagination that have to be suppressed in the Kantian version of the sublime.

und zu fühlen glaubt. Daher der Schwindel, der den, welcher in einen Abgrund sieht, befällt, ob er gleich eine genugsam breite Fläche um sich hat, um nicht zu fallen, oder gar an einem festen Geländer steht.<sup>11</sup> (Kant 1917, 178)

And Kant, too, knows about the fear of the ensuing impulse to plunge into the abyss, a fear, however, which predictably seems “strange” to Kant, who has heard about it only as a *désire* of the mentally ill, the only people whom he deems capable of such feelings:

Wunderlich ist die Furcht einiger Gemüthskranken vor der Anwandlung eines inneren Antriebes, sich wohl gar freiwillig herunterzustürzen.<sup>12</sup> (Kant 1917, 178)

As it utterly defies his most basic assumptions about human rationality, the fatal attraction of an irresistible imagination must seem inexplicable for Kant even in the mentally deranged, and consequently the fear of such a loss of control can only be registered as “strange”—to allow for it as an understandable emotional reaction of any subject to the confrontation with the abyss would demand a radical reformulation of Kant’s transcendental system. Poe’s text challenges the very core of reason’s self-definition, and the irrational aesthetics of horror developed in the central paragraph of the “Imp of the Perverse,” which links the philosophical essay to the short story that is to follow, thus also undermines the Kantian attempt to secure the connection between the phenomenal and the noumenal in the aesthetic rationality of the act of

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<sup>11</sup> “The illusion caused by the *strength* of our imagination often goes so far that we think we see and feel outside us what is only in our mind. This accounts for the giddiness that comes over us when we look into a chasm, even though we have a broad enough expanse around us so that we will not fall, or even a parapet.” (Kant 1974, 53)

<sup>12</sup> “Some mental patients have a strange fear that, seized by an inner impulse, they will spontaneously hurl themselves down.” (Kant 1974, 53) The translation of “freiwillig” with spontaneously here is misleading: Kant’s mental patients decide to destroy themselves “of their own free will.”

judgement. The emotion of fear is after all not alien to Kant, it plays a central role in his account of the dynamically sublime, which, in a peculiar dynamic of repulsion and attraction, furnishes the subject with an indirect proof of the noumenal law. Poe's horrifying precipice indeed stands in inverse relation to the "bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs" of the Kantian sublime (significantly, Kant prefers to look up where Poe decides to look down) and a closer analysis of Poe's desire for "rushing annihilation" will show that it develops a subversive aesthetics of a negative sublime in which reason ultimately has to succumb to imagination.

#### 5.1.4 *Towards a Negative Sublime*

Kant's sublime, as has been discussed in Chapter Three, serves as a negative proof for the influence of the noumenal moral law on the phenomenal world, the only proof that can in fact be given of the unity of the world of cause and effect with the supersensible realm of freedom and pure reason. In Kant's dynamically sublime, this proof relies on the transformation of an initial moment of fear and displeasure in the encounter with nature into a moment of negative pleasure ("negative Lust") brought about by the recognition of a "subreption" in the power-relation of mind and nature, subject and object. Sublimity, claims Kant, should not be located in the natural object and its seeming power over the subject, but must rather be located in the subject itself, which discovers in a crucial cognitive reversal that its fears with regard to nature are ultimately unfounded. Imagination, which presents these fearful images to the mind will become in the final analysis an "instrument of reason," because its struggle at the limits of sensibility can make us understand that "the rational vocation of our cognitive faculty" is far superior to even "the greatest faculty of sensibility [i.e. the imagination]." (Kant 1913, 257. A97) Two related insights are necessary to discover the subreption entailed in the dynamical sublime and to comprehend the true origins of the sublime moment. First of all, Kant points out, it is necessary to understand that while an object can be *fearful*, we do not necessarily have to be afraid *of* it, an

intellectual feat we can accomplish if we remind ourselves that we only *think* about a possible confrontation with nature in which indeed all our resistance would be pointless.

Man kann aber einen Gegenstand als *furchtbar* betrachten, ohne sich *vor* ihm zu fürchten, wenn wir ihn nämlich so beurtheilen, daß wir uns bloß den Fall *denken*, da wir ihm etwa Widerstand thun wollten, und daß alsdann aller Widerstand bei weitem vergeblich sein würde.<sup>13</sup> (Kant 1913, 260. A103)

As this reflection enables us to realize that we are actually safe—and safety is the *conditio sine qua non* for the experience of the Kantian sublime, which cannot be experienced if our life is truly in jeopardy<sup>14</sup>—the fearfulness of external objects actually becomes attractive, because it allows us to discover in a second step a power of a different kind *within ourselves* that proves our actual superiority over a seemingly all-powerful external nature:

Aber ihr Anblick wird nur um desto anziehender, je furchtbarer er ist, wenn wir uns nur in Sicherheit befinden; und wir nennen die Gegenstände gern erhaben, weil sie die Seelenstärke über ihr gewöhnliches Mittelmaß erhöhen und ein Vermögen zu widerstehen von ganz anderer Art in uns

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<sup>13</sup> “We can, however, consider an object as **fearful** without being afraid of it, if, namely, we judge it in such a way that we merely **think** of the case in which we might wish to resist it and think that in that case all resistance would be completely futile.” (Kant 2000, 144)

<sup>14</sup> “Wer sich fürchtet, kann über das Erhabene der Natur gar nicht urtheilen, so wenig als der, welcher durch Neigung und Appetit eingenommen ist, über das Schöne. Jener flieht den Anblick eines Gegenstandes, der ihm Scheu einjagt; und es ist unmöglich, an einem Schrecken, der ernstlich gemeint wäre, Wohlgefallen zu finden.” (Kant 1913, 261. A103) “Someone who is afraid can no more judge about the sublime in nature than someone who is in the grip of inclination and appetite can judge about the beautiful. The former flees from the sight of an object that instills alarm in him, and it is impossible to find satisfaction in a terror that is seriously intended.” (Kant 2000, 144)

entdecken lassen, welches uns Muth macht, uns mit der scheinbaren Allgewalt der Natur messen zu können.<sup>15</sup> (Kant 1913, 261. A104)

Thus, the discovery of our physical powerlessness in a first moment of fear leads to a reflexive movement of interiorization in which we discover our moral destination and the noumenal power of the law of reason, which is independent of the sensible world and has thus nothing to fear from the merely phenomenal might of external nature. The moment of the sublime opens up for Kant an intellectual form of self-preservation in which we understand that—qua our capacity for reason and the moral law—the humanity in our person would remain undemeaned even though we as a human being had to succumb to nature's brute force, "wobei die Menschheit in unserer Person unerniedrigt bleibt, obgleich der Mensch jener Gewalt unterliegen müßte." (Kant 1913, 262. A105)

Imagination, in spite of its disruptive and destructive potential thus ultimately serves to advance the purposes of reason by elevating nature to the presentation of such cases in which our mind can discover and feel the sublimity of its own vocation.

Also heißt die Natur hier erhaben, bloß weil sie die Einbildungskraft zu Darstellung derjenigen Fälle erhebt, in welchen das Gemüth die eigene Erhabenheit seiner Bestimmung selbst über die Natur sich fühlbar machen kann. (Kant 1913, 262. A105)

While Kant's sublime thus achieves the aesthetic transformation of fear into pleasure by means of a reflective internalization which uncovers the initial danger as illusionary, Poe's perverse produces the opposite cognitive movement. For in the case of the perverse it is precisely the internalization of the encounter with nature which

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<sup>15</sup>"But the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature." (Kant 2000, 144f.)

presents the greatest danger as it transforms a position of relative safety into one of almost assured destruction. What causes horror and fear in Poe's description is not the actual precipice, the natural object with which the subject is confronted, but rather the *thought* which develops in the observing mind. Kant can find reassurance in the fact that the fearful confrontation with nature is a mere thought, but Poe's perverse is no less dangerous for being "but a thought." And while Kant speaks of an "inspiring satisfaction" ["begeistendes Wohlgefallen"] to be derived from the initial fear, a satisfaction which presupposes, however, "that we must see ourselves as safe" (Kant 1913, 262. A105), the delight caused by the perverse is directly connected to the observer's premonition of his or her assured annihilation. Fusing the dual moment of the Kantian sublime into a single one of delightful horror, Poe's perverse stipulates an aesthetic experience which no longer presupposes the safe distance of the cultured observer, but which is rather predicated on the very real anticipation of the self's imminent destruction. Consequently, the "unnameable feeling" that imagination is at pains to bring into shape, even while it triggers a process that is reminiscent of imagination's inability in Kant's mathematical sublime to find adequate representations for the ideas of reason, is not the sublime intimation of the self's moral vocation and the noumenal power of the law of reason, but rather the horrifying though perversely pleasurable understanding of the self's inescapable mortality. Death has replaced the moral law as the principle of transcendence, and Poe's aesthetic experience of negative sublimity, precipitated by imagination, is a headlong rush towards death and the unknown that lies beyond it. While Kant's aesthetic of the sublime employs a sacrifice of imagination for the sake of reason in order to provide the self with a safe glimpse of the noumenal world, Poe's text does not allow for the "comfort" of such sacrificial substitutions. Only the subject's actual death could allow for a knowledge that transcends its empirical limitations, and Poe's perverse thus openly embraces the moment of violent madness that is inherent in the Kantian sublime.

### 5.1.5 *The Abyss of Thought*

Kant's sublime also leads the subject to the brink of an abyss, an abyss which is opened up by sensibility and imagination, only to be closed immediately by the safety-net of thought and the ideas of reason. "The disposition of the mind to the feeling of the sublime requires its receptivity to ideas," Kant reminds us in the *Critique of Judgment*, for only the presupposition of such ideas of reason, and the knowledge of reason's dominion over the phenomenal world will allow sensibility "to look out upon the infinite, which for sensibility is an abyss." (Kant 2000, 148) The sublime experience, in other words, is only accessible to the believer, for only the trust in the existence of the practical ideas of reason will allow the mind to transform a repulsive experience of fear into an attractive discovery of moral superiority. Should such a thought not intervene, the self would be lost in an abyss created by its own imagination. The sublime, explains Kant, can be likened to a mental tremor or shock ("Erschütterung"), it literally jolts the mind from its accustomed position of cognitive safety and control because it triggers "a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object." (Kant 2000, 141) The object with which the mind is confronted will appear repulsive for sensibility because it induces the fear of the self's destruction, a sensation which can only be recuperated and made attractive because it leads to the subsequent discovery of reason's unchallenged superiority over nature. Without this recuperation, the blow to the mind would indeed be fatal, because imagination, in an excessive use of its powers opens up an "abyss, in which it fears to lose itself." This very abyss can subsequently become "lawful" only because the self intimates that it is reason's idea of the supersensible which has endued this fearful effort of imagination.

Das Überschwengliche für die Einbildungskraft (bis zu welchem sie in der Auffassung der Anschauung getrieben wird) ist gleichsam ein Abgrund, worin sie sich selbst zu verlieren fürchtet; aber doch auch für die Idee der Vernunft vom Übersinnlichen nicht überschwenglich, sondern gesetzmäßig,

eine solche Bestrebung der Einbildungskraft hervorzubringen: mithin in eben dem Maße wiederum anziehend, als es für die bloße Sinnlichkeit abstoßend war.<sup>16</sup> (Kant 1913, 258. A98f.)

In the double movement of the Kantian sublime the abyss of imagination is thus closed in a second moment of reflection, as the mind substitutes the attractive discovery of the moral law for its initial repulsion from the point of view of sensibility.

Predictably, this cognitive recovery is not granted in Poe's account of the perverse. Quite on the contrary, Poe's narrator makes it absolutely clear that reflection and the discovery of a lawful imperative for self-preservation will only exacerbate the desire for self-destruction. Reason has no power whatsoever to keep imagination in check:

To indulge for a moment, in any attempt at *thought*, is to be inevitably lost; for reflection but urges us to forbear, and *therefore* it is, I say, that we *cannot*. If there be no friendly arm to check us, or if we fail in a sudden effort to prostrate ourselves backward from the abyss, we plunge, and are destroyed. (Poe 1984b, 829)

The mind which Poe's texts attempt to analyse and describe does not have the necessary "disposition" to experience the feeling of the sublime. It lacks "receptivity to ideas," or maybe more precisely it is unable to accept them as its own reasonable essence and moral vocation. Poe's subject feels compelled to act *against* a law which would prevent it from embracing the abyss that opens up before its mental eye. In this irrational and—in both senses of the word—revolting decision, the self thus enacts precisely the radical freedom *from* the law which remains inconceivable and suppressed in the Kantian philosophical framework. Reason's very "arrogance" in claiming to

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<sup>16</sup> "What is excessive for the imagination (to which it is driven in the apprehension of the intuition) is as it were an abyss, in which it fears to lose itself, yet for reason's idea of the supersensible to produce such an effort of the imagination is not excessive but lawful, hence it is precisely as attractive as it was repulsive for mere sensibility." (Kant 2000, 141f.)

define the essence of the self creates the abyss of imagination in which the subject can now only find itself in a rush towards destruction. There is no freedom from the law, Poe's texts make clear, except maybe in self-annihilation, and death thus becomes the subject's perverse albeit necessarily uncertain possibility for self-definition. Poe's narrator suggests as much in the closing exclamations of "The Imp of the Perverse": "To-day I wear these chains, and am *here!* To-morrow I shall be fetterless!—*but where?*" (Poe 1984b, 832) As the sacrifice of imagination for the sake of reason which informs Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" is transformed into the sacrifice of the rational subject itself, the inherent violence of the sublime thus engulfs a self that is inevitably lost in the abyss of its own mind.

#### 5.1.6 *Necessary Beliefs*

This, it goes without saying, is not the view of the self, nor of the imagination that Coleridge, who saw himself after all as charged with the translation and transmission of Kant's critical system and of German Idealism to the British philosophical and cultural context<sup>17</sup>, had sought to develop in his philosophical texts. The "gigantic power" which Poe attributes to Coleridge in the "Letter to B—" might very well be an ironic echo of Coleridge's famous proclamation in Chapter Nine of the *Biographia Literaria* concerning the influence of Immanuel Kant on his philosophical thought: "The writings of the illustrious sage of Königsberg...took possession of me as with a giant's hand." (Coleridge 1983a, 153) In strong contrast to the views of Poe's empiricist narrator in "The Imp of the Perverse," Kant's transcendental perspective on epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics presented for Coleridge not an incarcerating "arrogance of reason," but rather a philosophical means of liberation. For Kant's crit-

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<sup>17</sup>With respect to Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's "completion" of Kant's "revolution in philosophy," for example, Coleridge declared in the *Biographia Literaria* that "To me it will be happiness and honor enough, should I succeed in rendering the system intelligible to my countrymen, and in the application of it to the most awful of subjects for the most important of purposes." (Coleridge 1983a, 163)

ical system afforded Coleridge with a philosophical position from which to counter the associationism of David Hume and David Hartley, which suggested the mechanical determination of the human mind by the empirical forces of cause and effect, a philosophical assumption which had at this point become as ethically troubling for Coleridge as it had been for Kant.<sup>18</sup> Precisely because Kant's noumenal law of reason remained intact as a moral principle regardless of the empirically observable actions and behavioral patterns of human beings, and could thus guarantee the sanctity of human moral freedom against all empiricist allegations, it seemed to Coleridge the indispensable first principle for any philosophical system worthy of the name. Unlike Poe's narrator in "The Imp of the Perverse," Coleridge's philosophical texts always

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<sup>18</sup>While Coleridge had been strongly influenced by David Hartley's *Observations on Man* earlier in his philosophical career, associationism had become an untenable philosophical position for him by the time he was writing the *Biographia*, Chapters Six and Seven of which are devoted to a refutation of the Hartlean system. While Coleridge here mainly exposes the philosophical inconsistencies of a mechanical account of the human mind, he had already developed the ethical consequences of associationism in the 1809-1810 version of *The Friend*. The utilitarianism of William Godwin and William Paley, based on associationist philosophy, seemed to Coleridge the dangerous outcome of an account of human beings as "living machines": "And truly, if I had exerted my subtlety and invention in persuading myself and others that we are but living machines, and that (as one of the late followers [i.e. Godwin] of Hobbes and Hartley has expressed the system) the assassin and his dagger are equally fit objects of moral esteem and abhorrence; or if with a writer of wider influence and higher authority [i.e. the theologian Paley], I had reduced all virtue to a selfish prudence eked out by superstition...I know not, by what arguments I could repel the sarcasm." The argument Coleridge was looking for is provided by the Kantian distinction between noumenal reason and the phenomenal and hence mechanical understanding, which allowed for the "vital" and "warm" metaphysics of *The Friend* and Coleridge's attempt to unify reason and (religious) feeling to provide a counter-model against the "dead" and "cold" mechanical position of utilitarianism: "...to expose the folly and the legerdemain of those who have thus abused the blessed machine of language; to support all old and venerable truths; and by them to support, to kindle, to project the spirit; to make the reason spread light over our feelings, to make our feelings, with their vital warmth, actualize our reason:—these are my objects, these are my subjects, and are these the metaphysics which the bad spirits in hell delight in?" Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend* I, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 16 vols. vol. 4:1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 108. For a detailed discussion of Coleridge's philosophical struggle against utilitarianism and particularly the role of his concept of imagination in that context, cf. John Whale, *Imagination under Pressure, 1789-1832. Aesthetics, Politics and Utility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 166-193. The impact of the essential distinction between a dead, mechanical system and a vital metaphysics on Coleridge's theory of language and writing, particularly in relation to Hartley's associationism has been discussed by Jerome Christensen. Cf. Jerome Christensen, *Coleridge's Blessed Machine of Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

exemplify, to put it in Kant's words, an eminent "receptivity to ideas." Coleridge, just as much as Kant, saw the self's very essence to reside in its connection to the noumenal law of reason, which for Coleridge, however, was not merely a transcendental but decidedly a divine principle, an equation of metaphysics and religion, which, Coleridge felt, had to also have been Kant's own albeit unexpressed conviction: "In spite therefore of his [Kant's] own declarations, I could never believe, it was possible for him to have meant no more by his *Noumenon*, or THING IN ITSELF, than his mere words express..." as Coleridge famously declares in the *Biographia*.<sup>19</sup> (Coleridge 1983a, 155)

While Coleridge thus placed utmost importance on the revelation of a noumenal realm and on the subject's non-empirical connection and access to a divine moral law, he was troubled by the violent form this revelation had taken in the Kantian account of the sublime experience, a violence that Poe's narrator openly exposes. The idea that the law of reason should only manifest itself in a violent power-struggle with the phenomenal world of the senses and imagination, in which the mind demonstrated to itself its own superiority at the expense of nature did not appeal to Coleridge's philosophical and religious sensibility.<sup>20</sup> In his attempt to reconcile mind and na-

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<sup>19</sup>Significantly, Coleridge assumes that Kant had political reasons not to formulate the religious implications of his critical philosophy more clearly. Aware of the fate of both one of his immediate philosophical predecessors, Christian Wolff, who was expelled from Prussia because of his liberal religious views, and his immediate philosophical heir, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who lost his professorship at the University of Jena on charges of atheism, Kant, Coleridge speculates, attempted to avoid a similar fate. There can be no doubt that the political implications of both philosophical and religious positions were vividly present for Coleridge.

<sup>20</sup>Raimonda Modiano has shown in detail that both the desire to defuse the violent conflict with nature inherent in the Kantian and related eighteenth-century concepts of the sublime, and the hope to integrate the experience of the noumenal into the Christian framework of his philosophical thought lead to Coleridge's own distinctive version of a Romantic sublime. On the one hand, Coleridge attempted to describe a sublime experience which would establish a connection between the empirical self and its noumenal, divine essence, while granting a positive role to nature in the aesthetic process, so as to establish an effective unity between mind and nature, rather than their violent opposition. On the other hand, Modiano argues, a reformulation of the sublime was necessary for Coleridge in order to reconcile the sublime experience with his religious convictions, which made the mind's self-aggrandizement suggested by the Kantian sublime unpalatable: "Clearly, from a Christian standpoint, the deification of man above all powers, as celebrated by

ture, subject and object in an all-encompassing and dynamic philosophical system, Coleridge, unlike Poe's narrator in "The Imp of the Perverse," thus would not emphasize the conception of imagination as a disruptive and unruly power, pitted against and in conflict with the rational law of reason, which we have seen at work both in Kant's and Descartes's philosophical accounts of subjectivity. Rather, Coleridge naturally seized upon the concept of imagination as a unifying and mediatory power, which had found its strongest expression in the philosophical texts of the German idealists, where the faculty was now no longer discussed in its previously threatening connection to the realm of the passions and the senses. Coleridge, in his struggle "to idealize and to unify" sought to overcome conflictual models of the relation between reason and imagination, two faculties which to him could ultimately be seen as united in their respective reference to the divine will. "It is wonderful," Coleridge wrote in what is his most concise formulation of this conviction in a note to the flyleaf to copy D of *The Friend*, "how closely Reason and Imagination are connected, and Religion the union of the two." (Coleridge 1969a, 203) Most influential for Coleridge in this regard had been the transcendental idealism of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, for whom imagination played an even more overtly central role than it already had for his teacher and friend Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Schelling had departed from the Fichtean system in locating the Absolute not in the subject itself but in an overarching sphere which united both the self's conscious subjectivity and the unconscious force of nature, which thus constitutes part of the Absolute, rather than the merely illusionary reflection of the Fichtean "I." The union of subject and nature, which Schelling had discussed in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* and his *Philosophy of Nature* respectively, could be revealed and realized in the work of art and thus ultimately by means of imagination, the artist's mental faculty which provides for Schelling a

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eighteenth-century proponents of the sublime, was an heretical attitude which could only lead to excessive pride and disobedience to the Supreme Deity." Poe's version of the sublime, one might say, proves in its own perverted way that Coleridge's reservations were quite justified. cf. Rainonda Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (London: Macmillan, 1985). 135.

connection to both the conscious and the unconscious pole of the Absolute and can hence act as the mediatory power able to reconcile both subject and object, mind and nature, in an aesthetic representation of the Absolute.<sup>21</sup> Schelling, to whom, as Coleridge points out in the *Biographia*, “we owe the completion, and the most important victories, of this [i.e. the Kantian] revolution in philosophy,” hence provided Coleridge with a model of imagination that relied on the Kantian distinction of the phenomenal and the noumenal, while it abolished the direct conflict of reason and imagination inherent in Kant’s philosophical system. Fichte, as could be shown in the previous chapter, had effectively rehabilitated imagination as a central philosophical concept, but he had done so by effectively collapsing the distinction between mind and nature on which the Kantian system relied. In reducing nature to nothing more than the Not-I, a necessary opposition to the empirical I, through which the latter could realize its true nature as the absolute subject, Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* thus could not present an acceptable philosophical model for Coleridge, to whom Fichte’s theory ultimately “degenerated into a crude egoismus, a boastful and hyperstoic hostility to NATURE, as lifeless, godless, and altogether unholy.” (Coleridge 1983a, 158f.) But Schelling provided Coleridge with a model of imagination, the self, and the philosophical system, which lend themselves much more readily to the development of the “one perspective central point” from which all philosophical systems could be seen as united. “In Schelling’s ‘NATUR-PHILOSOPHIE,’ and the ‘SYSTEM DES TRANSCENDENTALEN IDEALISMUS,’” Coleridge writes in the *Biographia*, “I first found a genial coincidence with much that I had toiled out for myself, and a powerful assistance in what I had yet to do.”<sup>22</sup> (Coleridge 1983a, 160)

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<sup>21</sup>cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus (1800) Schriften von 1799-1801* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975).

<sup>22</sup>The influence of Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism* and his *Philosophy of Nature* on Coleridge’s attempts at philosophical system-building, both in the *Biographia* and elsewhere is so well-documented that I need not restate it in greater detail. For a concise presentation of Schelling’s influence on Coleridge’s famous distinction between a primary and a secondary imagination, as well as Coleridge’s subsequent disenchantment with Schelling’s system as possibly

The different conceptions of imagination at work in Poe's "Imp of the Perverse" and Coleridge's philosophical texts thus lead us back to the conflicting views of the faculty which could be seen to inform the texts of Immanuel Kant. While Poe reminds us of the dangerous empirical implications of imagination for the philosophical system, with which Kant had wrestled in the *Anthropology* and which had equally haunted Descartes before him, Coleridge continues the transcendental discussion of imagination as a mediatory faculty, which Kant had opened up and which had become central for Kant's Idealist philosophical heirs. The confrontation and connection of Coleridge and Poe can thus serve to show that the conflictual potential of imagination in literary and philosophical conceptions of subjectivity still remains an active presence, even after the "idealist turn" of German philosophy and its exultant presentation of the faculty as a central principle for any philosophical system.

## 5.2 *Purloined Voices. Coleridge's and Poe's Methods of Imagination*

The intricate relationship of sameness and difference that connects Poe and Coleridge, however, does not end with this confrontation, for Poe's tales not only present a disruptive view of the self and imagination that undercuts Coleridge's attempt to provide a systematic philosophical account of the subject's unity. Poe also appropriates and

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pantheistic and too "protestant" cf. Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1988) 124-146. Raimonda Modiano has discussed the influence of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* on Coleridge's thought in *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (Modiano 1985), and the relation of Coleridge and Schelling with regard to the question of pantheism forms part of Thomas McFarland's seminal study *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969). For a lucid analysis of the influence Schelling had on Coleridge's conception of a complete philosophical system and the deduction of its first principles, cf. Nicholas Reid, "Coleridge and Schelling: The Missing Transcendental Deduction," *Studies in Romanticism* 33.3 (1994 Fall): 451-479. Schelling's writings are of course not the only intertexts for Coleridge's definition of the imagination in the *Biographia*, for which Coleridge drew extensively on the work of eighteenth-century authors in both Germany and England. For an extensive overview over Coleridge's various sources cf. Engell 1981, Engell's and W. Jackson Bate's introduction to the *Biographia Literaria*, as well as the essays in Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe, ed., *Coleridge's Imagination. Essays in Memory of Pete Laver* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and in Christine Gallant, ed., *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today* (New York: AMS Press, 1989).

reformulates Coleridge's own unifying and mediatory view of reason and imagination and with it Coleridge's distinction between dead, mechanical, and vital, organic modes or reasoning. Also in this case of appropriation, however, Poe's texts do not endorse a philosophical rescue of the unified self, but rather present the aesthetic constructs of narrative fiction—products of imaginative reasoning for Poe—as the only recourse against and hence as the direct outcome of the writing self's encounter with the abyss of the perverse. Neither philosophical nor literary discourse can bridge this chasm in Poe's texts; as forms of writing, subject to the rational demands of argument and plot-structure, they are rather means to convince the reader that the predicament of Poe's narrators cannot be discarded as sheer insanity. "Had I not been thus prolix," the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" informs the reader about the purpose of the philosophical essay that opens his tale, "you might either have misunderstood me altogether, or with the rabble, you might have fancied me mad." (Poe 1984b, 830) Poe's "systematic madmen" refuse to be relegated to a mental institution, to which the Kantian philosopher would have preferred to relegate them, and by inhabiting the rational structures of narrative they constantly remind their philosophical twins of their vexing likeness. Even in his "Tales of Ratiocination," which feature the famous detective Auguste Dupin as the fictional embodiment of rational inquiry, Poe thus does not suggest the narrative recuperation of the unified self, but rather substitutes the rationality of plot for the philosophical desire for a unified subjectivity. In Poe's case, the work of art can no longer be called upon to heal and restore the rift between subject and object, mind and world, as the Romantics in the wake of Kant had still hoped. Rather, the work of art now irrevocably becomes "mind's world" and thus the only terrain where the self can still *create* an order that it otherwise would have to declare as missing. It is hence of particular import that Poe, as we shall see in the following section, derives his aesthetic principles of ratiocination directly from Coleridge's philosophical texts, for this intertextual movement ultimately bears witness to the slipping away of the Idealist and Romantic dream of a complete and unified

philosophical system.

### 5.2.1 *The Purloined Letter*

In order to delineate this subversive transformation more closely, I will now approach the problem of imprisoned perspectives and the possibility of a privileged point of observation from which they could all be united from a different angle. I would like to discuss another of Poe's tales, also published in 1845, which is most overtly concerned with this Coleridgean difficulty, "The Purloined Letter," a text that is not only one of Poe's best-known and probably the most-discussed of his stories, but also one that attests to the lasting influence of Coleridge's ideas on Poe's thought and prose.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the very Coleridgean predicament that Poe takes up in the "Letter to B-," and which is so forcefully refuted in "The Imp of the Perverse," also constitutes the central problem and determines the narrative structure of "The Purloined Letter," which juxtaposes two modes of reasoning, an "imprisoned," mechanical and a "liberated," imaginative one in the characters' struggle for an enigmatic piece of writing.

In his effort to retrieve the mysterious letter that the cunning Minister D. is using to blackmail a "certain royal personage," the Parisian Prefect G. is quite unsuccessful, even though his search of the Minister's hôtel is certainly rigorous beyond reproach. "The remote source of his defeat," as the protagonist of Poe's story, Auguste Dupin, puts it, lies in the fact that the Prefect is quite thoroughly imprisoned in his own perspective, excluding that of others. Unable to imagine an approach other than his

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<sup>23</sup>Ever since Jacques Lacan's discussion of "The Purloined Letter" and Jacques Derrida's subsequent critique of Lacan's reading, Poe's text has almost become a token reference for deconstructionist criticism. It seems hence particularly important to emphasize the text's close relation to the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and to present a perspective different from that of a host of existing readings. For the currently best source of information about the Lacan-Derrida debate and its subsequent continuation cf. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, eds., *The Purloined Poe—Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). For an extensive analysis of "The Purloined Letter" as a response to the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge cf. Daniel Burgoyne, *The Colloquy of Edgar Allan Poe and Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Dissertation University of Washington, 1998).

own, it is impossible for him to reflect back on the principles of his search and hence to assume a position that would allow him to see beyond their limits. What lies outside the Prefect's comprehension, is precisely the fact that our principles of observation constrain what we are able to observe, since no matter how much one might refine a certain model, it will only yield results which confirm to its presuppositions. The Prefect, to borrow from a distinction that Poe's narrator develops in another tale of ratiocination, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," is merely "ingenious" and far from being "analytic." While ingenuity is defined by Poe's narrator as a merely mechanical skill of correctly combining the facts, obeying the law of cause and effect, analysis is a truly creative power, not determined in its outcome by a strict adherence to such external rules. The close relation of this distinction to Coleridge's differentiation in the *Biographia Literaria* between "fancy" and "imagination" need not even be deduced, it is openly admitted in Poe's text. In a telling aside, the narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" remarks that "Between ingenuity and the analytic ability there exists a difference far greater, indeed, than that between the fancy and the imagination, but of a character very strictly analogous. It will be found, in fact, that the ingenious are always fancyful, and the truly imaginative never otherwise than analytic."<sup>24</sup> (Poe 1984b, 399f.)

Dupin himself is a true example of the analyst: Not confined to a single perspective, his observations are not limited to a specific set of presuppositions. Rather, through an act of imaginary identification, he is able to put himself in the mind of the Minister, which allows him to recreate the latter's thoughts and hence to "intuit" his strategy. The crux of the problem is the question of how one is to arrive at the principles that will make this analytical "leap of the imagination" possible in the first

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<sup>24</sup>Already in 1988, Nigel Leask surmised that Coleridge's distinction between fancy and imagination and its sources in eighteenth-century literature and philosophy "must be one of the best-documented areas of literary history." (Leask 1988, 135) While I hope that the coda to this study can add an additional facet to the debate, there is no need to repeat here the considerable research that has already been done on the topic. For a good overview over the discussion cf. James Engell's and W. Jackson Bate's introduction to the *Biographia Literaria*.

place. What is the position from which all other perspectives become accessible and how does one reach it?—The narrator of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” has no trouble admitting that there is in fact no way to arrive at such a position by means of analysis itself, as the method that allows us to perceive the rules and laws according to which we decide to frame our observations, cannot itself rely on a set of analysable principles. Hence the results of the analyst’s performance, “brought about by the very soul and essence of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intuition.” (Poe 1984b, 397) This reference to the “essence of method” again openly alludes to Coleridge, whose “Essays on the Principles of Method,” a central part of the 1818 version of *The Friend*, Poe had read in James Marsh’s American edition from 1831.<sup>25</sup> It is here that Poe found the philosophical model for the two modes of reasoning described in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and narrativized in “The Purloined Letter.” We thus need to turn to *The Friend* in order to develop a clearer understanding of what is at stake when the “essence of method” is transferred from Coleridge’s text to Poe’s tales.

### 5.2.2 *Essays on Method*

The “science of Method,” as Coleridge describes it in *The Friend*, will enable its practitioners to satisfactorily construct a system, be it scientific, aesthetic, philosophical, or otherwise. Method thus constitutes a science that does not treat specific classes of objects, but rather the relations between the objects of knowledge as its primary material.

METHOD, therefore, becomes natural to the mind which has been accustomed to contemplate not things only, or for their sake alone, but likewise

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<sup>25</sup>Marsh also published an edition of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* in 1829. These two editions and in particular Marsh’s foreword to the *Aids to Reflection* were instrumental for Coleridge’s impact on American intellectual life. c.f. Anthony John Harding, “Coleridge and Transcendentalism,” Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure, eds., *The Coleridge Connection—Essays for Thomas McFarland* (London: Macmillan, 1999) 233-254.

and chiefly the relations of things, either their relations to each other, or to the observer, or to the state and apprehension of the hearers. (Coleridge 1969a, 451)

The relations that can form the material for Method are of two kinds, Coleridge explains. The second and lesser type of relation stems from the observation of empirical facts and will thus always suggest a systematic arrangement governed by the mechanical laws of cause and effect. Coleridge labels this associationist mode of classification "theory" and defines it as a relation "in which the existing forms and qualities of objects, discovered by observation or experiment, suggest a given arrangement of many under one point of view: and this not merely or principally in order to facilitate the remembrance, recollection, or communication of the same; but for the purposes of understanding, and in most instances of controlling, them." (Coleridge 1969a, 464) Such is the systematic approach of the Prefect in Poe's story, whose attempts at theoretical control of the given facts are described by Dupin as "a sort of Procrustean bed, to which he forcibly adapts his designs." (Poe 1984b, 689) This approach is doomed to failure because the Prefect, unlike Dupin, has not the motivations of the Minister D. in view, but rather a set of external circumstances, which he believes to be thoroughly in his control. It does not occur to him to examine the hypothesis underlying his theoretical approach, which, as the product of an abstraction from empirical data, necessarily remains arbitrary, as Coleridge explains:

For what shall determine the mind to abstract and generalize one common point rather than another? and within what limits, from what number of individual objects, shall the generalization be made? The theory must still require a prior theory for its own legitimate construction. (Coleridge 1969a, 476)

If this were all, however, the science of Method would be caught in an infinite regress. Every meta-theory would be as groundless as the theory it was designed to

explain, and its generalizations would hence be in need of yet another theory for their justification. Dupin, to put it in the terms of Poe's story, would be yet another Prefect, simply on a superior level, different in degree, but not in kind. For Coleridge, the central problem of "theory," no matter how abstract its principles, is its reliance on observation and empirical data. Built on such an insecure basis ("observation, though aided by experiment, is necessarily limited and imperfect" [Coleridge 1969, 477]), a merely theoretical system could never provide any insight that goes beyond these empirical limitations. For this reason, only mathematics could qualify as a perfect science, since it operates unconcerned with empirical reality and deals exclusively with intellectual entities that are the synthetic products of prior definitions.<sup>26</sup> Following the model of mathematics, true philosophical insight can thus only be achieved if the relations that are the material of Method originate not in empirical observation, but in the mind of the observer. This superior kind of relation, which Coleridge terms "Law," occupies the foremost place in the science of Method.

...in whatever science the relations of the parts to each other and to the whole is predetermined by a truth originating in the mind, and not abstracted or generalized from observation of the parts, there we affirm the presence of a law. (Coleridge 1969a, 459)

Unlike the definitions of mathematics, however, the principles of Law are not only intellectual principles but also account for the relations between and for the very existence of the objects of empirical reality. They can do so, because they are the divine causes of empirical phenomena that can never be derived from the

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<sup>26</sup> "With the mathematician the definition makes the object, and pre-establishes the terms which, and which alone, can occur in the after reasoning," writes Coleridge, echoing Kant's assessment of the mathematician's synthetic *a priori* judgments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While Kant is never directly referred to in the "Essays on Method," nor in *The Friend* as a whole, the influence of Kantian philosophy on Coleridge's systematic approach developed here is undeniable. The distinction, so essential for Coleridge, between theory and law and understanding and reason is clearly derived from his study of Kant. (Coleridge 1969a, 476)

latter through the deductive processes of theory. The science of Method, which has ultimately little to do with Poe's purloined principles of analysis, is firmly grounded in religious faith.

...we contemplate it [Law] as exclusively an attribute of the Supreme Being, inseparable from the idea of God: adding, however, that from the contemplation of law in this, its only perfect form, must be derived all true insight into all other grounds and principles necessary to Method, as the science common to all sciences... (Coleridge 1969a, 459f.)

The "essence of method," which has "the whole air of intuition," is thus for Coleridge an act of faith, while the mere ingenuity of theory is due to the lack of a religious principle:

Alienated from this (intuition shall we call it? or steadfast faith?) ingenious men may produce schemes, conducive to the peculiar purposes of particular sciences, but no scientific system. (Coleridge 1969a, 460)

Coleridge's science of Method, much like Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, is thus a science of science, a propaedeutical discipline which is to supply in Coleridge's words "A Principle of Unity with Progression" (Coleridge 1969a, 476.) that would provide the foundation, unity, and first principle of a truly comprehensive philosophical system, capable of continuous development.<sup>27</sup> Based on the principle of Law, this scientific philosophical method thus extolls religion as the ultimate goal and unifying element of any systematic endeavour:

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<sup>27</sup>Ultimately, Coleridge's science of Method, in its effort to provide the "supersensual essence, which being at once the ideal of reason and the cause of the material world, is the pre-establisher of the harmony in and between both" (Coleridge 1969a, 463) is closer to the transcendental idealism of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, a connection I have already indicated in the previous section of this chapter. This relation notwithstanding, the systematic impulse to truly transform philosophy into an exact science has its roots in Fichte's *Theory of Scientific Knowledge*.

Religion therefore is the ultimate aim of philosophy, in consequence of which philosophy itself becomes the supplement of the sciences, both as the convergence of all to the common end, namely, wisdom; and as supplying the copula, which modified in each in the comprehension of its parts to one whole, is in its principles common to all, as integral parts of one system. And this is METHOD, itself a distinct science, the immediate offspring of philosophy, and the link or mordant by which philosophy becomes scientific and the sciences philosophical. (Coleridge 1969a, 463)

This religious principle, which unites philosophy and the sciences needs to be recognized, if one aims to construct a satisfactory philosophical system. Coleridge's philosopher is ultimately a philosopher only because he has access to the source of divine reason which provides him with the vantage point from which to truly perceive the necessary relations of things, which form the primary material of the science of Method. It is this capacity which distinguishes theory from Method and a mere mechanical arrangement of facts from an organic system. It demands of the philosopher an act of faith.

### *5.2.3 Faith, Imagination, and the Subject*

As to be expected, there is not much faith in either Dupin or the Minister D. As the analysis of "The Imp of the Perverse" has indicated, Poe's deathbound tales provide ample proof for his conviction that it is impossible for the human mind to come to know itself, let alone its divine origin, unless perhaps in its irrational desire for self-destruction. A well-crafted communication of this conviction is ultimately the only fine line that separates Poe's writing selves from sheer madness, and if there is a higher power involved in the telling of "The Purloined Letter," it is the purely aesthetic one of a good plot. Poe's story is entirely the product of literary machinations: It begins in the dark of a library and it ends with a quote. One can

wonder after all, if the mysteriously incriminating letter has ever existed to begin with. And the reason why Dupin is so perfectly able to intuit the actions of the Minister D., is, like the letter purloined by both of them, almost too obvious to see: Twin brothers in physical appearance and mental capacity, they mirror each other as the figments of the imagination of one and the same creator, who claims no divine inspiration for his aesthetic constructs.

In this narrative transformation of Coleridge's Method, it is once again not the metaphysician who reasons but rather the poet who protests. For poetry, not philosophy is what makes Dupin and the Minister D. superior thinkers in Poe's story. While both of them are, quite in Coleridge's sense, mathematicians and not empirical scientists, they neither combine philosophy nor faith with their mathematical reasoning, but rather their experience as poets. Only because of their imaginative poetic faculties are both able to outwit the merely ingenious and fancyful Prefect, who is trapped in his conviction that an insurmountable difference separates the realm of poetic imagination from effective methods of rational calculation. As Dupin argues, the Prefect's blindness to the shortcomings of his approach ultimately "lies in the supposition that the Minister is a fool, because he has acquired renown as a poet." When the narrator of "The Purloined Letter" contends that to his knowledge the Minister was no poet, but a mathematician who had received acclaim for his writings on differential calculus, Dupin reinforces the necessity to see these two professions as united:

You are mistaken; I know him well; he is both. As poet and mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect.  
(Poe 1984b, 691)

Poetic imagination thus replaces religious faith as the key element of systematic thought in Poe's narrative. In performing this shift, Poe severs the union of poetry and

philosophy that was essential for Coleridge, who had written after all—in a passage of the *Biographia Literaria* with which Poe was certainly familiar—that “No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher.” (Coleridge 1983b, 25f.) Poe, it is clear, here utilizes, not the disruptive concept of the imagination that is at work in “The Imp of the Perverse,” but rather the aesthetic model of the faculty he had encountered in Coleridge’s *Biographia*. Cut off from its religious and philosophical context in Coleridge’s literary autobiography, imagination, however, now no longer performs the mediatory and systematic function Coleridge had inherited from the German idealists. As a purely aesthetic faculty, Poe’s poetic or better his narrative imagination breaks with the Idealist and Romantic model of art and aesthetics as the link that could salvage the unity of the self and of the philosophical system. To examine this transformation more closely, it will prove illuminating to return once more to the *Biographia Literaria* and to examine the unity of poetry, philosophy, and faith in Coleridge’s text, from which Poe purloins his view of the work of the imagination. For this purpose we can in fact return to the very page where the quote from the “Letter to B—” that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter had left off.

Coleridge, right after he introduced the goal of completing an all-inclusive philosophical system, now addresses the question of where the first principle of such a system might be found. For the same reason that theory was discarded as a means to provide it in the “Essays on the Principles of Method,” Coleridge here excludes the possibility that this principle could be located in memory, the mechanical part of the human intelligence. Such an approach would immediately lead to the familiar problem of infinite regress, as this part of the human mind after all constitutes part of what the system as a whole should be able to explain:

A system, which aims to deduce the memory with all the other functions of intelligence, must of course place its first position from beyond the

memory, and anterior to it, otherwise the principle of solution would be itself a part of the problem to be solved. Such a position therefore must, in the first instance be demanded, and the first question will be, by what right is it demanded? (Coleridge 1983a, 247)

This question complicates the central assumption of the "Essays on the Principles of Method," where Coleridge asserted the existence of the divine relations of Law as a necessity that only had to be reinforced by the shortcomings of theory. In his attempt to demonstrate the right to demand such a first principle located outside the confines of merely mechanical ingenuity, Coleridge now moves to the writings of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling and continues his text with an embellished translation from the latter's "Über Postulate in der Philosophie (On Postulates in Philosophy)." In this text, which is an appendix to Schelling's "Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre," written in 1796 and 1797, Schelling uses the postulation of first principles in geometry as an analogy which "supplies philosophy with the example of a primary intuition, from which every science that lays claim to evidence must take its commencement," and Coleridge thus returns to the example of mathematics he had also given in *The Friend*.<sup>28</sup> (Coleridge 1983a, 250) Geometry's first principle, expands Coleridge translating Schelling, an undetermined line, or rather an undetermined point in motion, is in fact a mere postulate. It needs to be inferred from the two observable types of movement: straight lines and circles. Ultimately, the possibility of an externally undetermined line, "undetermined through any point without, and determined through itself," which cannot be demonstrated, must be intuited as the middle ground of the two movements. "The mathematician," like

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<sup>28</sup>"Die Mathematik gibt also der Philosophie das Beispiel einer ursprünglichen Anschauung, von der jede Wissenschaft ausgehen muß, welche auf Evidenz Anspruch machen will." F.W.J. von Schelling, "Über Postulate in der Philosophie," K.F.A. Schelling, ed., *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's Sämmtliche Werke* (Stuttgart:Cotta, 1856-1964), 444. The English translation is Coleridge's. Schelling himself here of course takes his cue from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. cf. note 31

Poe's analyst, hence "does not begin with a demonstrable proposition, but with an intuition, a practical idea." (Coleridge 1983a, 250) Coleridge, via Schelling, uses the mathematical discipline of geometry as an analogy for philosophical activity. Just as much as the mathematician needs to intuit the first principle of geometry, the philosopher needs to discover the first principle and postulate of philosophy by means of a "most original construction."<sup>29</sup> (Coleridge 1983a, 250) In Schelling's early text, which still operates within the terminological framework of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, this "most original construction," which provides the first principle of philosophy, is the Fichtean "Thathandlung," the self-reflexive construction of the "I" in consciousness. This original activity, ultimately an act of imagination, as we have seen in the previous chapter, in which the "I" creates itself simultaneously as subject and object, is the philosophical equivalent of the mathematical postulate. Since this postulate, as a purely internal act, can never be empirically demonstrated, Schelling just as Fichte insists that it will only be evident to those who possess the "philosophical organ" that will allow them to recreate the same moment of construction within themselves.<sup>30</sup> Also in Schelling's explication of the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, such an activity has to be demanded in order to make the philosophical position communicable and comprehensible.

...it [philosophy] is evident for anyone who possesses the organ for it (who does not lack the inner capacity for construction), just like mathematics, which is also not made comprehensible by means of figures, stencilled in copper, or through mere contemplation, but by means of an inner organ (the imagination).<sup>31</sup> (Schelling 1856, 447)

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<sup>29</sup> "Nevertheless philosophy, if it is to arrive at evidence, must proceed from the most original construction..." "Num muß aber die Philosophie, wenn sie evident werden soll, von der ursprünglichsten Construction ausgehen..." (Schelling 1856, 445)

<sup>30</sup> For Fichte's demand for such an imaginative "Selbstthätigkeit" cf. pp. 196ff. in chapter four.

<sup>31</sup> "...sie [die Philosophie] ist evident für jeden, der das Organ dazu hat (dem das innere Construc-

The central postulate of transcendental philosophy, which Schelling here renders as the Fichtean command “become conscious of yourself in your original activity!”<sup>32</sup> is thus for Schelling just as much as for Fichte a product of imagination. As the “philosophical organ,” this faculty constitutes the irreplaceable element that alone can differentiate a merely mechanical set of presuppositions from the living whole of an organic system. Without access to this self-reflexive inner organ, every thinker remains a mere Prefect in Coleridge’s translation of Schelling’s text:

So is there many a one among us, yes, and some who think themselves philosophers, too, to whom the philosophical organ is entirely wanting. To such a man, philosophy is a mere play of words and notions, like a theory of music to the deaf, or like the geometry of light to the blind. The connection of the parts and their logical dependencies may be seen and remembered; but the whole is groundless and hollow, unsustained by living contact, unaccompanied with any realizing intuition which exists by and in the fact that affirms its existence, which is known, because it is, and is, because it is known. (Coleridge 1983a, 251)

The last three lines of this quote are no longer a translation from “Über Postulate in der Philosophie,” but are derived from another of Schelling’s early texts, which Coleridge uses throughout the remainder of Chapter Twelve of the *Biographia*: “Vom Ich als Princip der Philosophie oder über das Unbedingte im menschlichen Wissen (About the I as the Principle of Philosophy or about the Absolute in Human Knowledge).” Here, Schelling had written:

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tionsvermögen nicht abgeht), gerade so wie die Mathematik, die auch nicht durch die Figuren, in Kupfer gestochen, oder durch das Ansehen allein, sondern durch ein inneres Organ (die Einbildungskraft) verständlich wird.” The English translation is mine, this part of Schelling’s text is not incorporated by Coleridge in Chapter Twelve of the *Biographia Literaria*.

<sup>32</sup> “...werde deiner selbst in deiner ursprünglichen Thätigkeit bewußt!” (Schelling 1856, 448)

For the ultimate ground of all reality is a something that is only thinkable through itself, i.e. through its being, which is only thought insofar as it is, in short, in which the principle of being and thinking fall in one.<sup>33</sup>

This absolute ground of reality in which the activity of thinking or knowing and being are one and the same, however, has different connotations for Schelling and Coleridge respectively. Ultimately, Coleridge proves to be purloining Schelling's concepts just as much as Poe would later purloin his own. For Coleridge, the absolute identity of knowing and being, epistemology and ontology, which the passage in the *Biographia Literaria* professes as the outcome of "living contact" and "realizing intuition," is a property of the living God and can as such, like the principles of Law, only be attributed to a supreme being. For Schelling, however, this identity of being and knowing, which he here, following Fichte, still calls the absolute subject, does not depend on the idea of God, but creates itself in absolute causality in the act of thinking itself:

It [the absolute subject] is by virtue of being thought, and it is thought because it is; the reason being that it is only insofar and is thought only insofar, as it thinks itself. It hence is because it thinks itself, and it only thinks itself because it is. It produces itself—from absolute causality—through its own thinking.<sup>34</sup>

Schelling does discuss the idea of God in both of the texts that Coleridge has amalgamated in his paragraph, yet he does so only to show that it cannot form the

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<sup>33</sup> "Der letzte Grund aller Realität nämlich ist ein Etwas, das nur durch sich selbst, d.h. durch sein Seyn denkbar ist, das nur insofern gedacht wird, als es ist, kurz, bei dem das Princip des Seyns und des Denkens zusammenfällt." (Schelling 1856, 163) This and all following English translations from "Vom Ich" are mine.

<sup>34</sup> "Es ist, indem es gedacht wird, und es wird gedacht, weil es ist; deßwegen, weil es nur insofern ist und nur insofern gedacht wird, als es sich selbst denkt. Es ist also, weil es nur selbst sich denkt, und es denkt sich nur selbst, weil es ist. Es bringt sich durch sein Denken selbst—aus absoluter Causalität—hervor." (Schelling 1856, 167)

first principle of a philosophical system. If the idea of God should constitute the ground of all knowledge, Schelling explains in "Vom Ich," God could not be seen as an object of knowledge, but would have to be assumed as identical with the "I." Such an identity of God and the absolute subject, however, Schelling argues, "is impossible in theoretical philosophy."<sup>35</sup> In "Über Postulate in der Philosophie," Schelling introduces God and immortality to clarify a possible misunderstanding about his use of the term postulate. God and immortality are not postulates, Schelling explains, making essentially the same argument as in "Vom Ich," since they cannot be the objects of an original construction, i.e. they are decidedly *not* products of the imagination.<sup>36</sup> They are rather the infinite tasks ("Aufgaben") of philosophy and specifically practical philosophy, and as such they are the objects of commandments ("Gebote") which philosophy strives to realize but cannot reach within the finite limits of time and space. As real but unrealizable, they are thus differentiated from the absolute subject, which is the postulate underlying the philosophical system.

Coleridge on the other hand aims precisely to unite the postulate and the commandment of philosophy in an original construction that links the "I" directly to the idea of God. This transformation becomes obvious in a sentence that immediately follows the translated passage from Schelling's "Über Postulate in der Philosophie." Here, Coleridge significantly alters the first principle and postulate of philosophy presented in Schelling's text. Self-knowledge, which had been for Schelling the recognition of the original activity that constitutes the "I," is famously rendered by Coleridge as divine a gift:

The postulate of philosophy and at the same time the test of philosophic capacity, is no other than the heaven-descended KNOW THYSELF. (Co-

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<sup>35</sup> "Aber eine solche Bestimmung Gottes ist in der theoretischen Philosophie unmöglich." (Schelling 1856, 168n.)

<sup>36</sup> "Gott aber und Unsterblichkeit sind keine Gegenstände einer ursprünglichen Construction." (Schelling 1856, 451) "God and Immortality, however, are not the objects of an original construction." (Translation mine.)

leridge 1983a, 252)

In the *Biographia Literaria*, just as much as in *The Friend*, the act of self-knowledge which underlies transcendental philosophy has thus for Coleridge its true foundation in the divine reason. This conviction is reinforced throughout the remainder of Chapter Twelve, where Coleridge continues to unfold the necessary prerogatives of a complete philosophical system by creating his own text out of a series of translated quotes from Schelling. As is well known, Coleridge now mainly draws and translates from Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*, which presents a decisively less Fichtean position than the earlier texts Coleridge had used. In Schelling's own system, transcendental philosophy, which has the "I" or self-consciousness as its object, now forms only one part of a comprehensive philosophy and needs to be complemented by natural philosophy, the science which treats of the objective activity of nature. It is the task of Schelling's system to show that these two poles of human knowledge, are ultimately identical and simply two different expressions of one and the same absolute activity, an absolute which is now no longer located within the "I" but constitutes a higher sphere that comprises both the subject and nature. While Coleridge reproduces Schelling's argument in broad stretches of his own text, he continues to significantly alter these Schellingian passages. Schelling had described the highest goal of natural philosophy as showing the identity of nature and self-consciousness. Coleridge, however, presents this identity as an affirmation of the creative presence of the Judeo-Christian God.

The theory of natural philosophy would then be completed, when all nature was demonstrated to be identical in essence with that, which in its highest known power exists in man as intelligence and self-consciousness; when the heavens and the earth shall declare not only the power of their maker, but the glory and the presence of their God, even as he appeared

to the great prophet during the vision of the mount in the skirts of his divinity. (Coleridge 1983a, 256)

But Coleridge's religious transformation of Schelling's Absolute is most clearly visible when Coleridge describes his own expectations of the "equatorial point" of both natural and transcendental philosophy that "would be the principle of a total and undivided philosophy." (Coleridge 1983a, 282) In a description that recalls Coleridge's assertion from *The Friend*, religion and philosophy would be seen as interchangeable in this point of absolute identity:

In other words, philosophy would pass into religion, and religion become philosophy. We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM. We proceed from the SELF, in order to lose and find all self in GOD. (Coleridge 1983a, 283)

Coleridge's text here foreshadows his definition of imagination, which will be presented in Chapter Thirteen of the *Biographia* as a substitute for an extensive deduction of the "equatorial point" of philosophy, which Coleridge, using the ploy of a cautionary letter from a fictional friend, had postponed for a later work on "constructive philosophy." (Coleridge 1983a, 302.) Imagination, for Coleridge as central as for Fichte, von Hardenberg, and Schelling, provides the possibility of an actual connection of the self and God and thus the unity of philosophy and religion in the medium of artistic activity. What the self grasps in the act of artistic imagination is its analogical connection to the divine. This divine relation differentiates the "living contact" of the imagination from the "mere play of words and notions" that is the product of the recollective faculty of fancy, which remains bound to the mechanical law of association. With this vital connection of imagination and the divine first principle of Coleridge's desired philosophical system in mind, we can now return to Edgar Allan Poe, who purloins Coleridge's concept of imagination for his own narrative purposes.

#### 5.2.4 *Eureka*

The crucial change which Coleridge's concepts undergo when they are recontextualized in Poe's work is maybe best exemplified in the last text Poe wrote, the tour-de-force prose-poem *Eureka*, Poe's *Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe*. For *Eureka*, which treats of no less than the essence, origin, creation, present condition and destiny of the universe, not only continues the purloining of principles and concerns central to Coleridge's texts, it is also the only one of Poe's texts that openly propounds the creation of a system. And even though Poe asks the reader in the preface to *Eureka* to judge the text purely as a poem, it thus goes a step further in the usurpation of Coleridge's philosophical voice.

The plot of *Eureka* can roughly be summarized as follows: The divine volition creates a first particle, characterized by oneness and simplicity. By a primal divine act, this particle is then forced to diffuse itself completely by means of radiation. The ensuing atoms, once completely diffused, interact while governed by the two forces of attraction and repulsion which account for all the successive states of the universe. By attraction, the atoms strive to regain their primal unity in a common center, while repulsion secures that the divine goal of utmost relation between the atoms is reached, precluding them to unite up to the point in time when the force of attraction will eventually be stronger than the force of repulsion, allowing the universe to coalesce again into one common center.

Poe's systematic account of the universe, while based on the materialist principles of attraction and repulsion--to a certain extent, Poe's atoms do operate like Hume's famous billiard balls--thus rehearses in its spiritual dimension the basic structure of an idealist system. Already Fichte, after all, used attraction and repulsion and the analogies of magnetism and electricity to describe the interaction of I and Not-I in the sphere of the absolute subject, which wills itself into being just as much as Poe's divine volition sets the universe in motion. One of the most likely sources for Poe's

rendition of a poetic system based on these two contrary and complementary forces of contraction and expansion, however, is once again Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. For at the beginning of Chapter Thirteen Coleridge presents his rendition of Descartes's systematic promise, "give me matter and motion and I will construct you the universe," before moving on to Schelling's claim from the *System of Transcendental Idealism* that such a construction of the universe can be made intelligible by the reconciliation of two opposing forces:

In the same sense the transcendental philosopher says; grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or find itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you. (Coleridge 1983a, 297)

Coleridge, first returning to Kant's influential essay from 1763 "Versuch den Begriff der negativen Größen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen," which lays the indispensable conceptual ground for the idealist attempts to present the self as the unity and interaction of positive and negative forces, then embarks—drawing again from both Fichte and Schelling—on his own account of the productive counteraction of these two forces, which should lead to the completion of the philosophical system that Chapter Twelve had begun to sketch out. This completion, however, as is well known, never takes place. Coleridge interrupts his transcendental deductions with the famous "letter from a friend," who reminds him of the impracticality of presenting a comprehensible philosophical account in a single chapter of his literary life, and who urges him—for his own sake as well as the sake of his readers—to postpone its presentation for his promised "great book on the CONSTRUCTIVE PHILOSOPHY." (Coleridge 1983a, 302) "In consequence of this very judicious letter," Coleridge thus desists from a complete philosophical deduction and merely presents "the main result of the Chapter," his definition of the imagination. (Coleridge 1983a, 304) Neither the promised "future

publication,” nor the “detailed prospectus” for it, which Coleridge announces for the end of the *Biographia* would ever be written, and Coleridge’s attempt to build a complete philosophical system would thus remain fragmentary, while his definition of the imagination, severed by the “friend’s” letter from the philosophical presentation of Chapters Twelve and Thirteen presents the fragment of a fragment.

Poe, who was closely familiar with Coleridge’s presentation in the *Biographia*, develops his very own account of the interaction of two simultaneously material and spiritual forces. While firmly connected to the idealist tradition through an echo of Coleridge’s text, Poe constructs a poetic universe that is at the same time fundamentally different from an idealist system. This difference becomes apparent already in the beginning of *Eureka*, where Poe locates the “equatorial point” from which the universe could be perceived in its oneness and unity on the top of mount Ætna:

He who from the top of Ætna casts his eyes leisurely around, is affected chiefly by the extent and diversity of the scene. Only by a rapid whirling of the heel could he hope to comprehend the panorama in the sublimity of its oneness. (Poe 1984b, 1261)

However, mount Ætna has no top, and there is thus no position from which to make this observation, except that of a free fall into the mouth of a volcano. Like the legendary Empedokles, to whom this passage alludes, and like the narrator of the “Imp of the Perverse,” Poe’s fictional observer has to embrace death in order to experience the universe in its oneness. The ideal unity and the perfect relations of Law, which for Coleridge could be intuited through the divine faculties of Reason and Imagination, constitute for Poe the object of an aesthetic desire, which can be sought in the process of writing, but which—like the bottom of the Maelström in Poe’s short story “A Descent into the Maelström”—could only be truly attained in a moment of self-annihilation. Also in *Eureka*, the sublime moment of “oneness” entails the self’s destruction, and the lure of the imagination, this time a comprehensive account of

the universe, is once again bought at the cost of death and by means of a plunge into the abyss.

The method which Poe uses to structure this free fall into the volcano is the same he had propounded in the stories of ratiocination. It is developed in *Eureka* in a curious letter, written in the year 2848, the contents of which Poe relates to the reader as a methodological prelude before embarking on his actual project.<sup>37</sup> Looking back on intellectual history, the fictitious letter writer shows himself surprised that in earlier years only two roads to truth had been accepted by mankind: those of deduction and induction, of a priori and a posteriori philosophy. After thoroughly ridiculing both paths of reasoning, he finally relates what in his day is conceived as the most direct road to absolute truth:

...none of them [earlier philosophers] fell, even by accident, into what we now so distinctly perceive to be the broadest, the straightest and most available of all mere roads—the great thoroughfare—the majestic highway of the Consistent[.] Is it not wonderful that they should have failed to deduce from the works of God the vitally momentous consideration that a perfect consistency can be nothing but an absolute truth?...By its means, investigation has been taken out of the hands of the ground-moles, and given as a duty, rather than a task, to the true—to the only true thinkers—to the generally-educated men of ardent imagination. (Poe 1984b, 1269)

The difference to Coleridge's idealist approach is striking. While Coleridge, both in *The Friend* and the *Biographia Literaria*, had argued for a common principle in

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<sup>37</sup>Poe's fictitious letter bears somewhat of an inverse resemblance to Coleridge's in Chapter Thirteen of the *Biographia*. While Coleridge uses the letter to avail himself of the necessity to properly deduce his definition of imagination, Poe employs his letter precisely to present an *imaginary* mode of reasoning which is to replace both induction and deduction as philosophical routes to truth. Poe, one might say, thus embraces what Coleridge would be reluctant to admit: that the completion of the system cannot be brought about theoretically *without* a leap of the imagination.

which both induction and deduction, as well as materialist and idealist philosophies could be seen as united, Poe no longer bases his road to truth on correspondence to an essence, but on formal consistency. In other words, the theory developed in *Eureka*, as the product of an “ardent imagination,” is judged for its aesthetic value. As an aesthetic construct it no longer reflects a fundamental principle of unity, but creates its own coherent system. The discovery of the rationally consistent structure of the universe thus requires a leap of imagination that is, however closely related to Coleridge’s principles of Method, no longer grounded in divine Law. Discussing Johann Kepler’s discovery of his law for the movement of the planets, which provided the basis for Newton’s theory of gravitation, Poe explains:

Yes!—these vital laws Kepler *guessed*—that is to say, he *imagined* them. Had he been asked to point out either the *deductive* or *inductive* route by which he attained them, his reply might have been—“I know nothing about *routes*—but I *do* know the machinery of the Universe. Here it is. I grasped it with *my soul*—I reached it through mere dint of *intuition*.”  
(Poe 1984b, 1270)

This moment of intuition, however, despite the insight it produces, is not the revelation of an essence. Like the top of mount Ætna and the absent letter that allows the story of Dupin and the Minister D. to circulate in perpetuity, this imaginative grasping reveals no origin. In Poe’s texts, rather than discovering the principle of unity behind its distinctions, the mind has to be satisfied with the consistency of its constructs. This aesthetic conception, it should be remarked, also differs greatly from Friedrich von Hardenberg’s aesthetic conception of the subject as a work of art discussed in the previous chapter. Von Hardenberg, after all, had also criticized Fichte’s attempt to base subjectivity and the philosophical system on an absolute first principle, and had replaced this notion with the aesthetic and performative coherence of subjectivity as a unified whole. But while von Hardenberg still conceived of this

aesthetic principle in a philosophical context, i.e. as a means to reconcile subject and object, mind and nature, through the unity of their representation in the work of art, Poe's *Eureka* no longer offers the unity which both the German Idealists and the Early German Romantics attempted to achieve. Poe's "system" is an aesthetic construct born out of the subject's inevitable plunge into the abyss in its desire for discovery, no more and no less. Thus, Coleridge's philosophical principles of Method are replaced by the narrative and purely aesthetic principle of plot in a striking reversal that turns the Coleridgean relation of artistic creation and the divine on its head:

In the construction of plot, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the incidents that we shall not be able to determine, of any one of them, whether it depends from any one other or upholds it. In this sense, of course, perfection of plot is really, or practically, unattainable - but only because it is a finite intelligence that constructs. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God. (Poe 1984b, 1270)

Method has thus turned into plot, and the principle of Law, which according to Coleridge "in its absolute perfection is conceivable only of the Supreme Being," is now the creative principle of a divine narrator. Where Coleridge's divine Law "not only appoints to each thing its position, but in that position and in consequence of that position, gives it its qualities, yea, it gives its very existence as that particular thing" (Coleridge 1983a, 459), Poe's God does so, in Joycean fashion, in a universe that has turned into fiction.

But Poe not only defines the universe as a piece of modernist fiction, he also fulfills this definition in the written performance of his own text. *Eureka* is based on a set of fundamental paradoxes and ambiguities, constantly undercutting the principle of cause and effect, which leave the task of unravelling the text's self-referential plot to the reader. Consider for example Poe's rendition of the prospective apocalyptic ending of the universe, which finds close parallels in the rushes to destruction of "A

Descent into the Maelström” and “MS. Found in a Bottle,” as well as in Arthur Gordon Pym’s enigmatic journey to the south pole:

...and now, with a million-fold electric velocity, commensurate only with their material grandeur and with their spiritual passion for oneness, the majestic remnants of the tribe of Stars flash, at length, into a common embrace. The inevitable catastrophe is at hand. (Poe 1984b, 1353)

This final catastrophe will reinstate the universe’s lost unity by a complete annihilation of all matter, leaving God once again to remain all in all. Such an ending, however, that did not appeal to Poe’s notion of a denouement:

But are we here to pause? Not so. On the Universal agglomeration and dissolution, we can readily conceive that a new and perhaps totally different series of conditions may ensue—another creation and radiation, returning into itself—another action and reaction of the Divine Will. Guiding our imaginations by that omnipotent law of laws, the law of periodicity, are we not, indeed, more than justified in entertaining a belief—let us say, rather, in indulging a hope—that the processes we have here ventured to contemplate will be renewed forever, and forever; a novel Universe swelling into existence, and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the Heart Divine? (Poe 1984b, 1356)

Nor does Poe stop at this point. Not only has the idea of a divine unity and the teleological development typical for the systems of the German Idealists been replaced by a cyclical pattern of creation and destruction, but the notion of the divine itself will be subject to a fundamental ambiguity:

And now--this Heart Divine--what is it? *It is our own.* Let not the merely seeming irreverence of this idea frighten our souls from that cool

exercise of consciousness—from that deep tranquility of self-inspection—through which alone we can hope to attain the presence of this, the most sublime of truths, and look it leisurely in the face. (Poe 1984b, 1356)

This moment of introspection turns the Coleridgean notion of self-knowledge completely upside down. It is not the intuition of a universal Reason, governing our conscious mind by the same principles which account for the existence of the universe and which provide the key for self-knowledge as well as for a comprehension of the Absolute. In Poe's narration, *Eureka's* plot does not "proceed from the SELF in order to lose and find all self in GOD." Quite on the contrary, in Poe's account, the "eternal I AM" is ultimately a product of the mind's own workings. It only subsides as a remnant in each individual's desire for unity.

each soul is, in part, its own God—its own Creator:—in a word, that God—the material and spiritual God—now exists solely in the diffused Matter and Spirit of the Universe; and that the regathering of this diffused Matter and Spirit will be but the re-constitution of the purely Spiritual and Individual God. (Poe 1984b, 1357)

What should serve as the unifying concept of Poe's treatise presents itself as an unresolved ambiguity, in which cause and effect cannot be told apart. It remains undecidable whether the former existence of a unity causes the desire for its re-constitution in the individuals' minds, or if it is simply an effect of this same desire which has predicated Poe's poetical account of the mind's divine origins. Poe himself has introduced this suspicion into his text in form of a quote from Alexander von Humboldt, to whom *Eureka* is dedicated:

"It is but Man's longing for a fundamental First Cause, that impels both his intellect and his fancy to the adoption of such an hypothesis." (Poe 1984b, 1347.)

Poe's *Eureka* thus does not offer itself as a revelation about the true nature of the universe, but rather attempts to reproduce the universe's structure as a plot, that is as an autonomous creation of the mind which owes its consistency to its creator's concerted effort of reason and imagination. Its unity is solely produced by the impossible gyration around a lost center which is performed in the work of art. The process of ratiocination thus produces a consistent whole, yet one which no longer reflects the first principle of a comprehensive philosophy, or the unity of mind and nature as a dynamic whole, but rather the purely self-reflexive unity of an autonomous system. Poe's text demonstrates in other words, that the unity of the self necessarily relies on a fiction, an act of the literary imagination that alone can project a whole where the self would otherwise merely encounter an abyss.

## CODA

Wir verlangen für die Vernunft sowohl als für die Einbildungskraft, daß nichts im Universum gedrückt, rein beschränkt und untergeordnet sey. Wir fordern für jedes Ding ein besonderes und freies Leben. Nur der Verstand ordnet unter, in der Vernunft und in der Einbildungskraft ist alles frei und bewegt sich in dem gleichen Aether, ohne sich zu drängen und zu reiben.<sup>38</sup>

—F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*—

### 5.3 *The Politics of Imagination*

When Poe reveals in *Eureka* the *desire* for unity as the driving principle of an aesthetic artifice that comes to replace the philosophical system, he lays bare what Forest Pyle has described as the *ideological* power of the discursive figure of imagination in the Romantic period: its function in Romantic texts to (re)present and thus to *create* by means of aesthetics a unity—or a freedom for that matter—that can empirically only be diagnosed as absent.<sup>39</sup> For Pyle, imagination is inextricably linked to ideology, and he sees the poetic performance and/or philosophical assertions linked to the concept as inseparable from political as well as social matters. As ideological discourse—for Pyle not a form of “false consciousness” but rather “the fundamental necessity of a representation of the social”—seeks to construct and implement a particular vision of social coherence and unity, it necessarily relies on the ability to *imagine* such a

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<sup>38</sup>We demand for reason just as much as for imagination, that nothing in the universe be dejected, purely limited, and subordinated. We demand for every thing a particular and free life. Only understanding subjugates, in reason and imagination everything is free and moves in the same ether without being crowded or causing friction. [translation mine]

<sup>39</sup>cf. Forest Pyle, *The Ideology of Imagination. Subject and Society in the Discourse of Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 1–25.

unity in the face of existing social divisions. "One cannot, in other words," Pyle asserts, "hope to understand ideology without something called the imagination." Imagination, then, is for Pyle the necessary precondition and the active principle of any ideological position.<sup>40</sup> (Pyle 1995, 3.) We have mainly seen such a contrafactual projection of imagination at work in Coleridge's texts with regard to his desire for the unity of the self and the philosophical system, but both the *Biographia Literaria* and *The Friend* develop explicit links between the discourses of philosophy and politics, and it is quite clear that imagination has for Coleridge, just as much as it had for Kant, not only an aesthetic and philosophical but also an immediate political dimension.

The same is equally true for the systematic conceptions of both Fichte and von Hardenberg, which do not develop in a political vacuum but which need to be read within the context of the sociopolitical situation in "Germany" in the wake of the French revolution. Both Fichte and von Hardenberg after all see their respective systems as guarantors of "freedom," an aspiration that is by no means politically neutral in Prussia at the turn of the eighteenth century. Particularly von Hardenberg's attempt to reconcile chaos and order—anarchy and social stability one might say—and to integrate a lack of systematicity into the system itself, needs to be seen as part of the Early German Romantic critique of Prussia's enlightened absolutism. The rational structures of a bureaucratic state, governed centrally by an enlightened monarch—the state championed by Kant and later by Hegel—were seen as politically stifling by the Romantics, whose reevaluation of imagination thus stands in direct relation to a shift in political perspective. What seemed a political threat to Kant,

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<sup>40</sup>Pyle's approach is thus an explicit critique of Jerome McGann's new historicist project to unmask the "Romantic ideology" of organic unity and to undo the aesthetic smoke and mirrors of the Romantic theory of imagination that constitutes its centerpiece. By discussing "imagination" not as a particular ideological construct of Romantic poets but rather as part and parcel of any ideological position, be it Romantic or contemporary, Pyle insists in deconstructive fashion that it is indeed impossible for the contemporary critic, no matter how committed to material history he may be, to extricate him or herself from the curse of ideological positioning and the lure of imagination. cf. Pyle 1995, 14–18, and Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

the introduction of the uncontrolled exuberance of imagination into the system, could become a political *desideratum* for von Hardenberg. It would thus constitute the goal of a future project to examine the discourse about imagination in order to explore the shifting political positions that are connected to philosophical and poetic attempts at system-building in the Romantic period. A comparison of British and German Romantic reactions to the political challenge of the French revolution as reflected in the respective conceptions of imagination would be particularly fruitful in that regard. While it is not possible at present to sketch out the implications of such a study, a concluding discussion of the political underpinnings of Coleridge's theory of imagination in the *Biographia Literaria* can serve as an example its potential.

### 5.3.1 *Antidotes to Fanaticism*

If Coleridge's *Essays on Method* develop the necessity of grounding the merely arbitrary positions and classifications of the mechanical understanding on the absolute first principles of the divine Law, Coleridge's discussion of his "Opinions in Religion and Politics" in Chapter Ten of the *Biographia Literaria* make the political dimension of this philosophical conviction explicit. When Coleridge discusses the factional political strife in Europe and England in the wake of the French Revolution, which threatens in his view the very fabric of English society through the violent clash of divergent and fanatical beliefs that are embraced as absolute political truths, Coleridge offers a *philosophical* solution to this political problem. He praises the knowledge of *principles* as the only effective and truly patriotic source of a lasting unanimity and social coherence that would be based on transcendental and hence immutable moral feelings rather than on the whim of political opportunism.

If then unanimity grounded on moral feelings has been among the least equivocal sources of our national glory, that man deserves the esteem of his countrymen, even as patriots, who devotes his life and the utmost efforts

of his intellect to the preservation and continuance of that unanimity by the disclosure and establishment of *principles*. For by these all *opinions* must be ultimately tried; and (as the feelings of men are worthy of regard only as far as they are the representatives of their fixed opinions) on the knowledge of these all unanimity, not accidental and fleeting, must be grounded. (Coleridge 1983a, 190)

An example of such a man is of course Coleridge himself, who here casts his philosophical endeavor to establish the first principles of a complete philosophical system in unequivocally political terms. Only the successful completion of his philosophical project can guarantee a “true unanimity”—no reasonable human being, as we know from Kant, could choose not to accept the principles of the moral law—and thus a functioning political system that would deliver both England and Europe from the cycle of sectarian and partisan violence in which it had been engulfed for centuries. Such a foundation of the political order on Kantian first principles seems all the more pressing to Coleridge since he directly attributes the disturbing and disruptive violence of the French Revolution—France’s enlightened experiment in freedom gone wrong—to the shallow half-truths of a misguided “French” philosophy. The “democratic fanaticism” of Jacobean terror is for Coleridge the direct outcome of the “cold,” purely rational, a-religious, and mechanical system of the French *philosophes*, for which the “vital warmth” of Coleridge’s own organic system, an English version of the German transcendental model, was to provide the philosophical and hence political antidote.<sup>41</sup> “Democratic phrensy,” the uncontained and destructive revolu-

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<sup>41</sup>Coleridge’s conservative assessment of the French revolution by the time he writes the *Biographia* is, needless to say, thoroughly Burkean, and Edmund Burke is appropriately the preeminent example of a man of political and philosophical principle that Coleridge presents immediately after the passage just cited. “...Edmund Burke possessed and had sedulously sharpened that eye, which sees all things, actions, and events, in relation to the *laws* that determine their existence and circumscribe their possibility. He referred habitually to *principles*. He was a *scientific* statesman; and therefore a *seer*.” (Coleridge 1983a, 191.) Burke in other words, is a man of *method*, and the text of the *Biographia* here anticipates and harkens back to the political framework that

tionary energy so feared by Kant in the *Anthropology*, is for Coleridge the inevitable result if the political and philosophical thought of Rousseau and Voltaire is applied to political realities, and Coleridge saw it as his personal mission to prevent England from such devastating philosophical and political confusion. In 1817, Coleridge feared that the barely overcome despotism of the Napoleonic regime had once again wetted the public's appetite for revolution, while the recent past of revolutionary bloodshed seemed almost forgotten. To prevent another outbreak of the cycle of violence and counter-violence, the establishment of a more than "fashionable" and truly lasting philosophy thus appeared all the more important:

The same principles [of sectarian and democratic fanaticism] dressed in the ostentatious garb of a fashionable philosophy once more rose triumphant and effected the French revolution. And have we not within the last three or four years had reason to apprehend, that the detestable maxims and correspondent measures of the late French despotism had already bedimmed the public recollections of democratic phrensy;...and that a favorable concurrence of occasions was alone wanting to awaken the thunder and precipitate the lightning from the opposite quarter of the political heaven? (Coleridge 1983a, 199)

With "thorough disgust...both with regard to the disputes and the parties disputant" and in profound "despondency,"<sup>42</sup> after the political events of the French revolution seemed to have perverted the principle of freedom itself, Coleridge thus decided, as he recalls in 1817, to turn his back on the "mad game" of contemporary politics in the late 1790ies in order to devote himself to the study of philosophy:

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structures the argument of both the 1809-1810 and the 1818 version of *The Friend*, where the politicized dichotomy of a mechanical *French* and an organic *English* philosophy equally informs the distinction of understanding and reason. For a thorough discussion of Burke's importance for Coleridge's thought and Coleridge's attempt to reconcile his political radicalism of the 1790ies with a Burkean position in the 1809-1810 version of *The Friend*, cf. Coleman 1988, 107-131.

<sup>42</sup>Coleridge 1983a, 199.

I retired to a cottage in Somersetshire at the foot of Quantock, and devoted my thoughts and studies to the foundations of religion and morals.  
(Coleridge 1983a, 200)

Coleridge's recapitulation of the outcome of his studies, which I have discussed in the previous chapter, ultimately culminate in his famous definition of imagination and fancy in Chapter Thirteen of the *Biographia*, definitions which thus are not only of philosophical and aesthetic import but which also form the centerpiece of Coleridge's political aspirations for his principled philosophical approach. Forest Pyle has put this connection very succinctly:

*Politics must henceforth be instituted through the imagination. Only the cultivation and institution of philosophical principles—precisely those that Coleridge finds in Kant and Schelling and that cohere in the concept of the imagination—can effectively govern both nation and individual. The imagination, ostensibly a principle of self or faculty of mind, thus assumes in Coleridge's work a public, institutional role in the securing of the nation.*  
(Pyle 1995, 31)

There is thus indeed "considerable pressure" on the concept of imagination, as Pyle puts it, for it needs to guarantee the unity of the text of the *Biographia*. The definition in Chapter Thirteen serves as a link between the two parts of Coleridge's text: the unity of the writing self as both subject and object of Coleridge's narration of his literary life, the unity of the proposed philosophical system, *and* by extension the principles of a true political unanimity.<sup>43</sup> Poe's narrative transformation of Coleridge's

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<sup>43</sup>Stuart Peterfreund had already described this complex and problematic linkage of critical/philosophical and political positions in his 1981 article "Coleridge and the Politics of Critical Vision." After the historical development of the French Revolution failed to vindicate their political expectations, Peterfreund argues, the "first generation" of the British Romantic poets, Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular, attempted to salvage their political hopes by articulating them aesthetically and by placing them under the aegis of their "critical vision." To accommodate

philosophical endeavor, just as much as the Kantian ambivalence about imagination discussed in Chapter Three, has by now prepared us to suspect that this desired articulation of synthesis and unity will evince visible fissures in the Coleridgean text.

### 5.3.2 *Political Fissures*

As Forest Pyle has pointed out, one of the inescapable ambiguities of such an articulation of unity lies in the fact that it necessarily *also* points to a prior disjunction. The very definition of imagination in Chapter Thirteen of the *Biographia*, even as it

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the disappointments of the contemporary historical development, Peterfreund suggests with M.H. Abrams, the Romantic poets opted to “internalize” history and its political questions, and hence “to fuse the political vision with a critical vision aimed at portraying the individual’s personal dealings with, and personal revelations and conversions arising from, his confrontation of the world in all its diversity.” In this context, Coleridge’s *Biographia*, Peterfreund argues with Hayden White, has the task to provide a synthesis of the three sets of data that make up this confrontation: the data of the physical-natural process, i.e. the mind’s epistemological connection to nature, the data of individual consciousness, and the data of social and political development. The figure of imagination, as Pyle will put it fourteen years later, thus becomes the site where the unity of all three processes needs to be “articulated.” (Stuart Peterfreund, “Coleridge and the Politics of Critical Vision,” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 21.4 (Autumn 1981): 585–604.) Whether this “internalization” should ultimately be interpreted as a political act or rather as an ideologically suspect withdrawal from political realities has been the subject of critical discussion ever since the “second generation” Romantics lamented the loss of revolutionary spirit of their poetic predecessors. The vexing question of the relation between aesthetics and politics still haunts the contemporary debate and the contributions of both new historicist and deconstructionist critics, with Pyle’s critique of McGann being in effect an attempt to reconcile both positions through his linkage of imagination and ideology. One of the defenses against the aestheticist accusation is provided by John Whale, who has argued that by separating imagination and the work of the critic from the realm of immediate (political) utility—Chapter Eleven of the *Biographia* is not coincidentally an admonition to young authors *not* to become professional writers—Coleridge in fact enhances the political potential of imagination by keeping it as it were “in reserve”: “Perhaps with hindsight it might look more like a strategic withdrawal: imagination remains to fight another day. The aesthetic reservoir can be drawn upon when required. The retreat might even act in favour of the power of the aesthetic: to make the aesthetic a discrete zone might provide it with all the power of the repressed, or even the unconscious, which is well capable of making its return at moments of cultural crisis.” (Whale 2000, 176.) From a slightly different perspective, also Raimonda Modiano has described Coleridge’s embrace of philosophy and metaphysics not as an “escape route from politics” but rather as a “protective support which enabled him to engage more freely in the political struggle.” Necessarily unrealized in (political) reality, the philosophical principles developed in the *Biographia* and *The Friend*, like Kantian moral principles thus act as guidelines for a potential politics, while eschewing the dangers of censorship. (Raimonda Modiano, “Metaphysical Debate in Coleridge’s Political Theory,” *Studies in Romanticism* 21:3 (Fall 1982): 465–474.)

celebrates the faculty's unifying power, cannot help but reveal an existing disruption, for if imagination is called upon to unify and to heal the effects of the confrontational struggle of opposing forces, it simultaneously calls attention to the existence of a wound:

This means that the imagination, as it undertakes an articulation or tries to speak the language of community, necessarily points to the prior existence of a rift, a fissure, a disjunction that must be crossed or healed. (Pyle 1995, 2f.)

For Pyle, this contradictory effect of simultaneously healing and revealing a rupture is a necessary attribute of imagination as a discursive figure in the Romantic period. Akin to Slavoj Žižek in his discussion of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Pyle thus presents imagination as a *doubly* articulated faculty, which, even as it is employed to (re)create a state of unity, cannot but reveal the existence of a previous disjunction. And again similar to Žižek, also Pyle refers to Hegel as a witness for this "double logic" of imagination,

...an imagination that is invoked to translate or articulate but that discloses or even effects a more fundamental mistranslation or disarticulation. To say this is to restore Hegel's awareness in *Faith and Knowledge*, for instance, that the imagination is itself the site *and* source of the diremption between subjective and objective worlds. Deployed as a principle of coherence, an agent of linkage, or a medium of translation for the discourse of Romanticism, the imagination is simultaneously a principal site of its division and disjunction. (Pyle 1995, 10)

Such an assessment of imagination has already been borne out in Chapter Three and the discussion of Kant's view of the faculty, which drew attention to the conflict

between the synthesizing role of imagination in Kant's critical system and the Kantian fears of the faculty's disruptive (political) potential as expressed in the *Anthropology*. While Friedrich von Hardenberg could be seen to attempt an integration of imagination's anarchic potential with its capacity to create unity, Poe's texts have reminded us that imagination's threat for the stability of the self remains very much alive well beyond the unifying discourse of Idealism and its influence on Romantic aesthetic positions. Pyle's analysis now reveals that in the case of Coleridge the Romantic desire for unity is undercut in the very definition of imagination, which presents itself, when it at long last appears in Chapter Thirteen of the *Biographia*, not in form of the expected unity, but rather as marked by an intrinsic division.

But when it finally arrives in the last pages of Chapter Thirteen, the much anticipated and celebrated definition of the imagination does little to fulfill the promises of reconciliation and guarantees of coherence it had prompted. What one finds in the definition is the disclosure of a new and singular division within the faculty itself.<sup>44</sup> (Pyle 1995, 35)

The division Pyle refers to here is of course Coleridge's famous distinction between a primary and a secondary imagination, and in order to discuss Pyle's assertions in more detail, it is now necessary to quote Coleridge's much-debated definition one more time:

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<sup>44</sup>When Pyle calls Coleridge's division of the faculty "new and singular," he refers to its position within the argument of the *Biographia*, which has done nothing to prepare the reader for this doubling of imagination, which Coleridge will not take up again in the second volume of the text. The two-fold view of the faculty is thus "new and singular" in the text of Coleridge's literary life, and Pyle is well aware that several sources for Coleridge's distinction, both German and English, have been established. The list of theoreticians of imagination that Coleridge draws upon stretches, among others, from Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Genius*, Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination*, and Addison's essays in the *Spectator* to Johann Nicolaus Tetens's *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung* and of course the philosophical accounts of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling. For a presentation of the intertextual maze that spirals outward from Coleridge's two short paragraphs cf. Engell's and Bate's introduction to the *Biographia*, lxxxv-xciii.

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (Coleridge 1983a, 304.)

Pyle remarks that there are two ways of reading and interpreting this celebrated passage. One line of interpretation, “whether in veneration or denunciation,” so Pyle, sees this passage as the direct presentation of Coleridge’s ideas about the faculty, his account of how imagination does in fact “work.” Another tradition of Coleridge criticism, more closely associated with post-structuralist frameworks of interpretation, however, discusses the passage as a self-conscious narrative act and thus as a verbal *performance*, driven by a desire for unity that is undercut by the rhetoric of the passage itself. Both readings, Pyle argues, are in fact provoked and supported by Coleridge’s text, informed as it is by the double gesture of ideology, which institutes a unity in view of a perceived division:

To read the passage is to encounter a division in the very faculty that is being called to unify, a division moreover for which there is no preparation or explanation in Coleridge’s work. At the same time, the passage that calls for this reading has itself acquired the status of an institution of the imagination, and such institutionality is neither secondary nor mistaken; it is, in fact, a primary project of this Romantic critic. (Pyle 1995, 36)

What then is the doubling of imagination as a figure of ideology called upon to do in Coleridge's definition? Nigel Leask has clarified the relation of primary and secondary imagination by relating the Coleridgean passage back to one of its sources, Schelling's definition of *Poesie* in Chapter Six of the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, which is designed to explain how art can "reconcile the primary, unconscious being of the Absolute with the secondary, conscious activity of the intellect." (Leask 1988, 135) *Poesie* is for Schelling both the "primordial intuition," the active power of the *natura naturans*, or the unconscious, objective pole of the Absolute, and the highest degree of productive power of the perceiving intellect, the Absolute's conscious and subjective pole. One and the same capacity, imagination, is active in both poles of the Absolute, which only appear separate from the point of view of a consciousness that has not yet come to understand the illusionary nature of the subject-object distinction with which it operates. Coleridge's secondary imagination, as a poetic and creative power, serves to dissolve the illusionary divisions of empirical consciousness in order to re-create an ideal unity in the work of art, and is thus an aesthetic and poetic principle. It operates in the realm of consciousness and will, but serves to make the self aware of its intimate connection to the Absolute—the divine principle of the infinite I AM in Coleridge's rendition of the philosophical problem—an Absolute which permeates both mind and nature in form of the subconscious principle of the primary imagination. The secondary imagination is thus a "copula" as Leask puts it, a principle of creative freedom, which allows the self to regain its connection to the divine by means of the aesthetic.<sup>45</sup> (Leask 1988, 137) As Pyle remarks correctly, the

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<sup>45</sup>Coleridge, in the terms of Andreas Michel and Assenka Oksiloff, introduced in Chapter Four, thus relies, like Schelling before him, on an account of the particular metaphysical properties of art and poetry, which are called upon to reestablish a desired unity. Coleridge's definition of imagination thus encapsulates a *poetics*, a philosophical approach that is usefully distinguished from projects like von Hardenberg's, which seeks to realize a *poiesis*, and calls upon the performative capacity of poetry to actively produce a unity in the aesthetic text. Elements of such a *poietic* rather than *poetological* approach, however, are also part of Coleridge's work. Gene M. Bernstein for example sees the activity of *creating* the self through the linguistic performance of the poetic text as central for Coleridge's conversation poems, which thus present a poetic enactment of Coleridge's

role of the secondary imagination can thus only be properly understood in its relation to fancy, since the dual properties of imagination depend on their distinction from this purely mechanical faculty, which “has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites” and which “must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.” (Coleridge 1983a, 305) Only by dissolving these “fixities and definites,” which are mistakenly taken for the real, can the secondary imagination open up the vital connection of the self to the divine, thus revealing the hermeneutical “ground” of Being that is the primary imagination. The secondary imagination thus frees the self from its limitations within the empirical realm of cause and effect, and it has, as Coleridge will describe it with regard to Wordsworth’s contribution to the *Lyrical Ballads* in Chapter Fourteen of the *Biographia*, the capacity to awaken “the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom” and to remove from habitual perception “the film of familiarity.” (Coleridge 1983b, 7) Yet, it only does so in order to immediately resubmit the mind in Kantian fashion to a different kind of law and to return the self to its true origins in the divine Law of reason. The distinction between fancy and imagination thus doubles and runs parallel to the distinction between the mechanical and empirical philosophy of association and the transcendental principles of Kantian and Idealist systems that informs the overall argument of both the *Biographia* and *The Friend*. The definition of imagination, the internal division of the faculty, and its marked distinction from fancy thus encapsulates *in nuce* the philosophical desires that we have seen at work in the Coleridgean project as a whole.

However, as Pyle points out in his deconstructive reading of the passage, the moments of sameness and unity which Coleridge’s definition suggests are simultaneously sites of difference, and the “copula” of the secondary imagination, the Derridean “supplement” of Coleridge’s text, equally enacts a process of displacement within the self. For the secondary imagination is after all the “echo” of a “repetition” and

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philosophical principles. cf. Gene M. Bernstein, “Self-Creating Artifices: Coleridgean Imagination and Language,” *Modern Philology* 76.3 (February 1979): 240-259.

thus far from achieving an actual moment of (co)presence with the absolute act of divine creation. As the primary imagination “repeats” the infinite I AM in the finite mind, an unconscious process that is “echoed” by the conscious poetic choices of the secondary imagination, the self is thus caught up in a chain of linguistic substitutions and representations that must ultimately fail to return it to the desired point of origin and unity. As much as it endeavors to enact a unifying process of reconnection, Coleridge’s definition necessarily draws attention to a state of difference and displacement within the self that cannot be truly recuperated. The unifying task of imagination thus points to a disruption and a fissure between various aspects of the self, which Coleridge’s text both attempts to close and opens up. The originality of Pyle’s reading lies in the fact that he goes beyond such a “traditional” deconstructive reading, which would ultimately accuse Coleridge of an ideological position in the narrow sense, of an “idealist and mystified investment in a divine power of mind.” (Pyle 1995, 37) Far from simply falling prey to a mystification, Pyle suggests, Coleridge indeed *recognizes* the divisiveness of subjectivity, which the ideological project of imagination is conceived to heal. The power of Coleridge’s theory of imagination lies for Pyle precisely in the fact that it does not *presuppose* the unity of the subject and by extension the cohesiveness of the nation but rather in that it *projects* them as a future potential, an “imaginary outcome”:

The power and difficulty of Coleridge’s theory of the imagination is that it does not *presume* the unity of either subject or nation; it takes the division of both as the starting point of its ideological work. Coherence is not, in other words, a condition of the process but an imaginary outcome...Taking into account the “pure fiction” of the nation, Coleridge finds in the imagination both the condition of perception and social being *and* the principle of an *eventual* cohesion that can make the nation. Thus, the “idealism” of Coleridge’s theory enables the ideological purchase of the imagination.

(Pyle 1995, 57)

Coleridge thus knows, like von Hardenberg, what Descartes's texts equally reveal, but what their author could not have admitted: that the unity of the *cogito* can only be *imagined*, that it is by no means a fact, but rather the product of a philosophical and/or poetic leap of imagination. But if Coleridge was aware of the imaginary unity of both the self and the nation that his philosophical definition is called upon to produce, the famous passage in the *Biographia's* Chapter Thirteen also retains a knowledge of the dangerous potential of the faculty that made both Descartes and Kant reluctant or unwilling to admit it as a constitutive principle of the self. For if we take up the passage yet again, from another slightly different perspective, which has been sharpened by our readings of Kant, Descartes, and Poe, we will *also* rediscover the openly disruptive potential of imagination that is by now well-known to us and that Pyle fails to address in his otherwise astute interpretation.

### 5.3.3 *Tearing Apart the Fabric of the Real*

The secondary imagination, as we have seen, is openly called upon to effect a disruption, a poetic lifting of the "veil of familiarity" created in the mind by the dead and mechanical relations of both understanding and fancy. This act of dissolution *should* be followed by a moment of poetic closure and an aesthetic recreation of the vital powers of reason and the primary imagination, which will allow the self to recognize and to embrace the divine Law. There can, however, be no guarantee that this moment of closure will actually take place, for is it not possible that the secondary imagination, as an act of poetic freedom might "dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate," yet *not* in order to recreate, or at least not to recreate in a way that is compatible with the principles of divine Law? What if the spirit of perverseness made itself heard from the abyss that opens up between the disruption of "the lethargy of custom" and the closure enacted by the law of reason? What if the self were to be overcome by giddiness and vertigo

upon discovering its ability to reconceive the customary relations between thoughts and things and to recombine them entirely anew? Coleridge's description of the process of secondary imagination does of course not openly anticipate such a possibility, but it is nevertheless striking how close it comes to Žižek's description of the radical and disruptive freedom of imagination from which Kant recoiled in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. As Žižek writes about Kant and his "endeavour to synthesize":

...Kant's notion of imagination silently passes over a crucial "negative" feature of imagination: obsessed as he is with the endeavour to synthesize, to bring together the dispersed manifold given in intuition, Kant passes over in silence the opposite power of imagination emphasized later by Hegel—namely, imagination *qua* the "activity of dissolution", which treats as a separate entity what has effective existence only as a part of some organic Whole. (Žižek 1999, 29)

While Coleridge, as Pyle has shown, does not "pass over in silence" the fissures inherent in the self that prompt his desire to unify and to synthesize, he nevertheless *does* pass over the rather disturbing possibility that the same faculty which is under so much pressure to realize the project of unification despite all empirical obstacles, might ultimately bring about its failure. Coleridge cannot lay stress, as Žižek does, on the secondary imagination as an "activity of dissolution," since a faculty that separates rather than unifies, would ultimately undercut the creation of an organic whole in which the primary imagination would stand revealed as the "communicative intellect in Man and Deity." (Coleridge 1983a, 302) And by analogy, the negative and disruptive aspect of imagination, its ability, in Žižek's words, to "tear the texture of reality apart" (Žižek 1999, 32) cannot be openly invoked in Coleridge's text since it would place imagination in an entirely different ideological context, irreconcilable with both Coleridge's philosophical and political hopes in 1817. The negative aspect of imagination, as we have seen in chapter three, is for Žižek the potential for a radical

and violent freedom at the core of the self, “the *arbitrary freedom*” in the words of Hegel from the *Jenaer Realphilosophie* “to tear up the images and to reconnect them without any constraint.” (Žižek 1999, 30) Such an “arbitrary freedom,” for Coleridge just as much as for Kant not a welcome potential for political change, but ultimately no freedom at all, is precisely the “democratic phrensy,” the “democratic fanaticism” Coleridge had seen unleashed during the French revolution.<sup>16</sup> In this context, imagination reappears, not as the desired “synthetic and magical power,” by virtue of which the poet “diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each” (Coleridge 1983b, 16), but rather as the dangerous “mistress of the passions” with which we are familiar from the texts of Descartes, Pascal, and Kant. A mere look at the dictionary can show us that the verb “to dissipate” and the act of dissipation which Coleridge attributes to the secondary imagination encapsulates almost comprehensively the main suspicions that Kant in particular had held about the image-creating faculty: a wasteful squandering of energy without thought about the usefulness of the work, an intemperate indulgence in extravagant pleasure, excessive amusement, and a general state of physical and moral dissolution. Contrary to what Coleridge asserts at the beginning of Chapter Fourteen, “the name of imagination” has not been “exclusively appropriated” in his definition for the “spirit of unity.” Its distinction from fancy notwithstanding, imagination in its secondary and poetic form retains on the contrary a spirit of dissemination, a power to exuberantly scatter, disperse, and disintegrate. Like the maenads who tear apart a Theseus to secure in his belief in the dominance of reason and the intellect, the secondary imagination thus retains the seed of danger for the system and the self, both of which it should simultaneously help to secure.

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<sup>16</sup>It would take the political and poetic sensibilities of a Shelley to disconnect the “defamiliarization” effected by imagination from its task to establish a unity with the transcendental principles of divine Law and to embrace the faculty’s revolutionary potential for constant change as a *positive* poetic as well as political principle. In the intertextual trajectory that leads from Coleridge’s *Biographia* to Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* thus lies another discursive reconceptualization of the role of imagination.

The ambiguity of imagination, which has been the central concern of this study with regard to models of subjectivity and philosophical systems, thus equally emerges in the faculty's related role in the political discourse of the Romantic period. Imagination as a discursive figure always carries a double promise and implies both a unifying and a disruptive and disseminating potential. To embrace either one or both of these two sides, to champion one over the other, to perceive them as mutually exclusive, reconcilable, or complementary is as much an aesthetic and philosophical decision, as it is a political one.

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