

BEFORE HEGEL:  
SCHILLER, NOVALIS, AND THE CONCEPT OF  
*AUFHEBUNG*

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ABSTRACT: Philosophical explorations of the concept of *Aufhebung* (sublation, supersession) immediately prior to its formulation in Hegel's work have remained relatively absent within the context of both Hegel scholarship and German Idealism studies. Hegel is often simply represented as the originator of the concept and the latter is understood almost exclusively within his oeuvre. This essay addresses this lack by offering an exposition of the notion as it unfolds in two works from 1795-1796: Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and Novalis' *Fichte Studies*. In these works, we find distinctive examinations of *Aufhebung* understood as the name of a process in which a subject comprehends itself in relation to its own processual development. My guiding premise is that without an adequate comprehension of the way in which *Aufhebung* is constructed and comprehended in the last years of the eighteenth century, we cannot establish the vantage point from which to reconstruct Hegel's early conception of the notion, a conception which begins to emerge in his earliest Frankfurt writings in 1797, as a contribution to the constellation of post-Kantian conceptions.

Keywords: *Aufhebung*, Schiller, Novalis, Aesthetic Education, Fichte Studies

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *Aufhebung* (sublation, supersession) is, without question, one of the most contested and discussed concepts of Hegel's philosophical enterprise and its critical reception in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>1</sup> One distinctive

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<sup>1</sup> So much so, in fact, that it has led philosopher's such as Jean-Luc Nancy to state that there is "no great study of Hegel that is not a study on the *Aufhebung*." Nancy 2001, 158n7. Nancy is perhaps expanding Jean

dimension of the reception, and of Hegel scholarship in particular, is an exploration of the historical emergence of the concept. *Aufhebung* is usually understood as arising in two opposing ways. First, Hegel is comprehended as the origin of the notion understood in its particular logical structure as “unity of opposites.”<sup>2</sup> Second, Hegel’s notion of *Aufhebung* is seen as the culmination of a long and complex genealogy of conceptual formation that runs in distinctive ways—from Aristotle’s concept of *hexis* to Kant’s notion of the transcendental imagination, or from Paul’s messianic *katargein* to Martin Luther’s translation of the Pauline term into *Aufheben*.<sup>3</sup>

As rich and interesting as these interventions are, what they uncritically presupposed is the sense in which Hegel constitutes either the beginning or the end the history of the notion of *Aufhebung* instead of, as I will try to show by reference to philosophers working prior to Hegel but within the milieu in which Hegel is forming his own understanding of the concept, as a moment that marks one contribution within the history of a philosophical problematic. Although Hegel’s concept of *Aufhebung* marks a decisive intervention in the history of post-Kantian philosophies of the subject and time, and their complex conjunction, I aim to suspend an analysis of this concept by exploring other moments in the history of the notion’s formation.

We often overlook the sense in which concepts emerge from out of theoretical and practical problematics developed by social groups within specific cultural fields and at particular historical conjunctures. What if we took the latter seriously? What if, against the assumption that the history of the concept of *Aufhebung* is reducible to Hegel’s thought as either its beginning or end, we understood the notion as a conceptual expression of a philosophical problematic within a particular moment and social space? This essay offers a preliminary answer to these questions by examining the way in which *Aufhebung* is explored in Jena in 1795-6 by two works: Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the*

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Wahl’s declaration that the history of French Hegelianism is marked by the necessity of translating and comprehending *Aufhebung*, that the latter concept constitutes “*toute la clef du hégélianisme*.” Wahl 1966, 22.

<sup>2</sup> This approach seems to be a theoretical determination operative in Marx scholarship. For one example, see Mészáros 1972, 17.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent philosophical presentation of Hegel’s critical appropriation of the classical (Aristotle) and modern (Kant) conceptions of *Aufhebung*, see Malabou 2005, 145-146. On the Paul-Luther genealogy, see Agamben 2005, 99-103.

*Aesthetic Education of Man* and Friedrich von Hardenberg's (Novalis) *Fichte Studies*.

These two texts are very much part of that *annus mirabilis* (1795) of literary and philosophical production. What I will focus on is the different conception of *Aufhebung* within the works, attending to their distinctive points of philosophical intervention: for Schiller, the attempt to augment and expand Kantian notions of the ethical and the aesthetic in a higher order ontological conception of the human being as the unity of competing and antagonistic drives (the play-drive as the unity of the form and the sense drives), a drive that urges toward the construction of a new, idealized social order (an "aesthetic state"); and for Novalis, the structure of the distinction between the subject and the non-subject in Fichte's idealist subjectivist construction of self-positing as the self-grounding of the "I" and its operation as the foundation of the systematic understanding of experience as such.

Within the *Aesthetic Education*, the play-drive offers us a higher order paradoxical conception of *Aufhebung* as both the negation and preservation of the form and sense drive that, nevertheless, cannot be reduced to the strictly formal order of analytical philosophical reconstruction.<sup>4</sup> For Novalis, the deployment of *Aufhebung* is slightly more complicated. *Aufhebung* emerges as the process of the I's self-differentiation, of the negation of itself, but not, as Fichte demonstrates, in relation to another (the non-I) constructed out of the I's self-construction. Rather, the I, the subject of experience, is, for the young Novalis, ontologically incomplete by the primacy of the constitutive division of reality itself (or the "absolute" as Novalis puts it).

The aim of this study is to offer an exposition and commentary on two moments in post-Kantian philosophy that allows us to see that the history of the concept of *Aufhebung* should not be immediately understood as a road that always leads to Hegel, but that it is, rather, the concept that constellates a field of contestation, debate, and, crucially, of experimental theoretical constructions. To have a better understanding of the formation of the notion

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<sup>4</sup> Although the logical structure of *Aufhebung* in the *Aesthetic Education* anticipates Hegel's, it is crucial—looking toward their distinction—that, for Schiller, the concept signals the positing of a task to be actualized. It is, then, marked by the temporality of what "ought to be." For Hegel, *Aufhebung* is the name of the process of spirit's self-actualization, of its becoming what it is in its different manifestations (subjective, objective, and absolute). It is speculative philosophy, unfolded systematically, that expresses the highest level of this process of actualization.

within the *Aesthetic Education* and *Fichte Studies* is to grasp two points in the philosophical problematic opened up by Kant's critical philosophy: how to present the actuality of the philosophical subject that grasps itself in its own experience, hence its own time.<sup>5</sup>

#### 1 SCHILLER'S AESTHETIC EDUCATION

The philosophical network constellated by Schiller's *magnum opus* is as conjunctural as its historical context is overdetermined. Consciously composed in relation to the question of the uneven development of art and post-revolutionary society, and aggregating Kant's critical project—his theoretical, practical and aesthetics interventions—with a Rousseauist pessimism about the ontologically lost state of noble savagery, a Fichtean commitment to thinking the reciprocal relation of the subject with its posited other and, of course, in constant relation to the idealized classicism of Goethe and Winckelmann, Schiller's epistolary work is a complex philosophical text at the level of both form and content.<sup>6</sup> It is complex in so far as it has an ambitious and internally fraught goal: the work is an attempt to raise the concept of aesthetic beauty to the level of the theoretical articulation of the conditions of possibility of pure speculative genius—the subject of the production of beauty—via a construction of the latter's basic ontological character, namely, the play-drive. According to Schiller, "genius" has a rather focused meaning: it articulates the higher expression of what Schiller calls the "statesman-artist", a subject who, through its production, raises the self-identity of the living form of modern culture to its realization in the work of art (*AE*, 21). In other words, the genius creates an expression of social harmony by way of the production of an ideal cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Although I will not develop an analysis of the development of Hegel's notion of *Aufhebung*, it is worth noting here that it is in his earliest Frankfurt writings—the so-called fragments on love—that Hegel begins to deploy the category in relation to larger philosophical aspirations of constructing a system of the "true union" of the subject and the object (love allegorizes that union at the level of social life). See Hegel 1975, 302-308 and Hegel 2004, 116-120.

<sup>6</sup> On the uneven development of art and society, see *AE*, 7. In an almost completely forgotten work, the Soviet philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz raises the Schillerian reflection of the uneven development of art and society to its more sophisticated Marxist articulation. In some sense, it is precisely Lifshitz's work that allows us to perceive Schiller's positing of the unequal relation of art and social-historical reality. See Lifshitz 1973. For a recent dialectically experimental exploration of the Schiller-Marx conjunction, see Hartley 2017, 163-183.

form: the work of art.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this is why the greatest work of art is the “aesthetic state” (*AE*, 205-19), that is, the image of the unity of social life from out of its divisions.

Although an examination of the totality of Schiller’s work would far exceed the limits of this essay, it is important to note that the *Aesthetic Education* develops a notion of *Aufhebung* that operates, ambiguously, at the very center of the concept of the human as ontologically identical to freedom—as fully human—when determined by and through the play-drive. Importantly, however, the concept is not restricted to a single meaning that gets mapped onto the work at distinct moments of exposition. Rather, it develops—thus conceptually transforms—over the course of the letters. This developmental dimension of the concept’s formation makes it difficult to clarify the fundamental and definitive meaning and structure of *Aufhebung* developed therein. A useful way to approach its structure and sense is comprehend it in relation to problems that develop in conjunction to it throughout the letters. If we do this, we realize that *Aufhebung* is grounded on the structure of the play-drive as the unification of the basic division animating human life, and is constituted, by extension, by the speculative notion of “harmony.”

The principle elements of the division of the human are presented in the *Aesthetic Education* in terms of the essential conditions of the human’s being: feeling and thinking, or, more precisely put, the finite realm of the human’s physical existence—“condition”—and the infinite realm of the human’s capacity to think the idea of the unity of the manifold (that is, to connect and tie together his finite experiences)—“person.”<sup>8</sup> The opposition between condition and person is the central antinomy animating the letters. Thus, it expresses the basic theoretical obstacle to be overcome. As has already been noted, the aim of epistolary work is to prepare the ground for the expression of the higher unity of freedom. In the context of the antinomy of condition and person, the human must unify its two conditions. For Schiller, the antinomy

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<sup>7</sup> To my mind, Schiller’s concept of genius is indebted more to its elaboration in Goethe’s 1770s poetry and as a principle theme in the *Sturm and Drang* period, than it is to Kant’s *Third Critique*. For an interesting exposition of the notion of genius in the 1770s, see Wellberry 1996, 121-185.

<sup>8</sup> The judgement of ‘one-sidedness,’ normally attributed to Hegel’s critical analyses of the limits of modern philosophies (of both the subject and the object), is a Schillerian motif. See for example, *AE*, 41-3 and 119-21.

itself provides a way out of its own impasse: since the human is ontologically identical to its conditions, the conditions themselves articulate its fundamentally creative capacity (*AE*, 11). Freedom however is only attainable, according to Schiller, on the condition that “the character of the age...first [lifts] itself out of its deep degradation” (*AE*, 47). The articulation of this elevation is that of the “aesthetic character”.<sup>9</sup>

There are two central dimensions to the aesthetic character: first, it reveals “the need of our age,” thus implying the attainment of the higher unity of freedom through the construction of the aesthetic character as the resolution to the essential contradiction of the dominant cultural form of the present (*AE*, 53 and 123). And second: the expression of the central speculative task of the letters is produced from out of the relation of the essential conditions of man’s being, that is, without recourse to an externally posited *tertium quid* whose condition of possibility is the lifeless synthesis of the subordination of feeling by reason. The aesthetic character, then, names both what the age needs—Schiller refers to this, at one point, as the complete unity of the “living form” (*AE*, 101)—and what is needed in order for that need to be satisfied—viz. aesthetic education.

According to Schiller, these two elements open up a chain of relations and problems that the *Aesthetic Education* at once tries to *elucidate*—principally in the form of the relation between the notions of “the middle”, synthesis and reciprocity; *philosophically deepen*—through the distinction of limitation, negation and creation; and *overcome*—in the notions of *Aufhebung*, harmony and completion. They can, I believe, be organized and consolidated around the single problem of what I would like to call the “mediated third.”

In order to grasp the structure and significance of this “mediated third” it is important to keep Schiller’s following theoretical transitions in mind: first, modern society is in need of an aesthetic education—this need is the higher need of social regeneration by way of the reconciliation of the idea of this need (freedom) and the finite needs of physical existence; second, what first needs to be established is the aesthetic character, without which the specificity of

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<sup>9</sup> The notion of ‘character’ is Schiller’s central ‘corrective’ to Kant’s practical philosophy. According to Schiller, Kant’s ethics do not elucidate the *way in which* man should carry out the categorical imperative. See especially, *AE*, 19-21.

aesthetic education has no import or definition; third, the aesthetic character is properly expressed in what Schiller calls the “play-drive,” that is, the psycho-physiological state that manifests the products of art and beauty in its power of socio-political unification; and fourth, the play-drive is a “third” which results from the reciprocal relation of the “sense drive” and the “form drive” in their equilibrium.

In a certain sense, the numerically denoted “third” brackets Schiller’s letters in that it is expressed both at the beginning of the work in terms of what needs to be philosophically elaborated and at the end, in terms of what is achieved by the letters. In the beginning of the work, the sense of the “third” is found in the expression of the higher unity that will resolve the basic antinomy between the character that expresses the “state of nature” and the character that expresses the “state of law” (*AE*, 11-15). The aesthetic character, which needs to be ontologically formed as the “third character”, will simultaneously pacify the state of nature through the state of law and breathe life into the state of law by the vivifying power of the state of nature. In the last letter, the “third” is evoked with respect to the achievements of the artistic productions of the play-drive, as the calibrated equilibrium of the sense-drive and the form-drive. As equilibrium, it does not fall victim to the extreme dispositions of both: “the aesthetic impulse to form is at work, unnoticed, on the building of a third joyous kingdom of play and semblance” (*AE*, 215).

This “kingdom” is constituted as a “third” in that it is not, on the one hand, the kingdom of the despotic rule of the immediate satisfactions given to bare circumstance, and on the other, the kingdom of the idea of law, which subjugates the individual to the rule of duty. Accordingly, it can be stated that the number three is the signifying higher unity; it is the numerical code of harmony. Significantly, it is the logical character of *Aufhebung* that brings us to a deeper sense of the structure of harmony. Harmony is, accordingly, the expression and appearance of the superior artistic expression of the true union of the subject with itself and society, a union not reducible to either a purely formal mode of theoretical presentation (one subsumed to the rational demands of a foundational principle), or a lyrical mode of expression of unity (which sets aside the rigours of rational explication).

## 2 THE LIMIT OF *AUFHEBUNG*

Within the context of our presentation of the theoretical orientation of the *Aesthetic Education*, supersession is grasped in a strictly negative manner. This is demonstrated in the following three instances: (1) in the context of analytic synthesis, it represents the mechanical amalgamation of the elements of nature and thought by analytic philosophy (*AE*, 5); (2) in the context of reason's subsumption of feeling in the idea (*AE*, 13); (3) in the suspension of the individual will in the state of law (*AE*, 19 and 45). Its negative sense, however, is neither simple in nature nor restricted to the first few letters. Rather, it is employed in a wide range of moments across the letters and begins to exhibit a deeper philosophical import – in context of the philosophical exposition of the concept of the play-drive as the preliminary articulation of the reconciliation of oppositions in the unity of man, especially.

Importantly for Schiller, the transition of the sense of *Aufhebung*, from simple negativity to a more complex articulation of unity, is established through an examination of a device not offered under the “tyrannical yoke” (*AE*, 7) of intra-revolutionary France: Schiller refers to this device as the “instrument [of] Fine Art” (*AE*, 55). This instrument provides a portal to the eternal, “indestructible vitality” of beauty via the production of artworks (*AE*, 55). Accordingly, its constitutive function is that it raises the individual out of its historical specificity, its “timeliness,” and into the eternity of the realm of beauty. At this point, Schiller famously declares that “the artist is indeed the child of his age; but woe to him if he is at the same time its ward or, worse still, its minion” (*AE*, 55).

The artist, in so far as he is raised to the level of the aesthetic character thus orientates his creativity to the service of the construction of a higher reality, is the subjective articulation of the idea of the “third fundamental drive,” namely the play-drive (*AE*, 85). The play-drive, however, does not provide a synthesis of the two conditional drives of man. Rather, it is the expression of the fundamental reciprocal relation between the two in the form of the maximum extension of the sense-drive and the maximum intensification of the form-drive (*AE*, 87). It is in this sense that Schiller grasps what is meant by the ‘third’ as mediation or means. In that the two drives relate, there is a psycho-physiological mid-point – a ‘midway state’ – between the two (*AE*, 123). It is only when the two drives relate in a strictly calculated manner (the equilibrium



of extension and intension) that the play-drive manifests the aesthetic character in its unity by way of the creation of art. This amounts to the following: the ontological energy expressing man's fundamental being must be appropriately *managed* – the aggressive sense-drive must be pacified and the calm form-drive must be stimulated (*AE*, 93). Finally, it is in this precise sense that the play-drive supersedes the essential conflict of the drives:

The play-drive, in consequence, as the one in which both the others act in concert, will exert upon the psyche at once a moral and a physical constraint; it will therefore, since it annuls (*aufhebt*) all contingency, annul (*aufheben*) all constraint too, and set man free both physically and morally (*AE*, 97).

The supersession of the play-drive is, initially, the process of the realization of freedom. The sense of the term appears here, then, in a kind of proto-Hegelian form: the play-drive supersedes in the sense that it negates the particularity of the extremities of the sense-drive (the intensification of its extension) and the form-drive (the extension of its intensity), through a controlled inversion of their difference, an inversion in which the distinction between the drives is at once preserved and overcome into a higher unity. It is precisely because it is essentially divided by the two drives that the expression of the play-drive of the aesthetic character establishes itself as the “happy medium” (*AE*, 105). The play-drive constitutes the symmetrical equivalence of the harmony of the two drives in their mutual, reciprocal self-subordination to one another. Schiller's notion of harmony is crucial in the context of the understanding of his concept of supersession since it raises the unity of the play-drive to the level of a higher, more complete unity.

Harmony is, however, distinguished sharply from the unification of supersession since the latter is presented as a mode of unity that results in an asymmetrical subordination of the sense drive by the form drive through the primary positing of the foundational antinomy between them. Schiller provides a rejoinder to his initial presentation of the unifying force of supersession:

Since, however, both conditions remain everlastingly opposed to each other, there is no other way of uniting them except by destroying (*aufgehoben*) them. Our second task, therefore, is to make this union complete; and to do it with such unmitigated thoroughness that both these conditions totally disappear in a third without leaving any trace of division behind in the new whole that has been made; otherwise we shall only succeed in distinguishing but never in uniting them

(*AE*, 123-5).

The play-drive can, in truth, only ever achieve a “high approximation” to this complete and actual unity since the presentation of actual harmonious unity would amount to the laying bare of the idea of beauty itself, which for Schiller remains ultimately inaccessible since man “can never escape his dependence upon conditioning forces” (*AE*, 153; see also, 103 and 111). The idea of the “third” is recoded within the presentation of supersession. It can now be grasped in two new senses: (1) it is, strictly speaking, a metaphor caught within the context of the construction of beauty in the work of art; and (2) it is a formal presentation of the logical relations established by reason itself. Crucially, the second signification is nothing but the limit of the first: the “third” is an essentially impoverished term that cannot express the higher unity of aesthetic freedom; it expresses only the limit of the philosophical deduction of beauty. Consequently, what the supersession of the play-drive establishes, in its unity-by-way-of-destruction, is the very disappearance of the potentiality of a “third” unity that sufficiently abolishes the trace of the conflict of the divided drives. In other words, what disappears is the passage to true harmony as an articulation of unity free of a *preserved* opposition. It is precisely because of this disappearance of the transition to harmony by way of supersession, that leaves us with the structural, theoretical hiatus of the distinctive incompleteness of conceptual unification in the *Aesthetic Education*, a hiatus that appears as the “second task...to make this union complete.”<sup>10</sup>

In so far as the formal conception of the play-drive reveals only the supersession of the distinction of its two conditions, the notion itself is simply the analytical residue of an insufficient articulation of the aesthetic realm. That is to say, supersession is the purely logical term for union. Therefore, in so far

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<sup>10</sup> In his study of the philosophical character of Schiller’s work, Frederick Beiser draws out attention to the issue of the unity of beauty in this section of the *Aesthetic Education*. That being said, in a strange turn against one of his claims apropos Schiller’s philosophy – viz. that it is not to be reduced to a mere stepping stone to German Idealism – Beiser suggests that the issue of unity rests on the “problem of how to preserve and cancel the differences [of the oppositions of conditions] as parts of a single whole.” See Beiser 2005, 150. In other words, the problem becomes how to supersede the oppositions in a distinctively Hegelian manner. There are two things problematic with Beiser’s expositions: first, nowhere in Letter XVIII does Schiller employ the categories of negation and preservation; and second, Schiller’s problem is the distinction between two modalities of unity, the unity of supersession (in which a trace of opposition remains) and the unity of beauty as the harmonic whole (a unity in which there is no trace of division).

as it is only the logical expression of the play-drive, it is ultimately subordinated to the form drive. As a consequence of this fall back into the purview of the form drive, supersession provides only the mere appearance of the unification of the two drives. This paves the way to Schiller's idea of the unity established through semblance. Indeed, true union appears more approximately in the semblance of the work of art (*AE*, 191-203).<sup>11</sup> It is semblance that signals this "third" that does not leave any "trace of division behind"; it is the work of art as the creation of the play-drive that produces the announced "new whole".

Accordingly, Schiller does not require a more developed concept of supersession. In so far as the idea of the beauty of the human being and its creation of the aesthetic state is fundamentally un-presentable, the letters do not need to raise the concept into a more rigorous, and immanent formed, ontological conception of being itself. It does, however, need to establish the distinctive limit of supersession as a false articulation of unity within an initial presentation of the unity of the drives. Simply put, the limit of supersession needs disclosing in order to show in what sense harmony is the true, un-presentable unity.

### 3 FROM SELF-POSITING TO *AUFHEBEN*

In the same year of the publication of the *Aesthetic Education*, the twenty-three-year-old poet and philosopher Friedrich von Hardenberg—who wrote under the *nom de plume* of Novalis—began what he referred to as a "strenuous investigation of Fichte's philosophy."<sup>12</sup> When one looks over what will be systematically collected under the title *Fichte Studies*, the strain suggested by the young man is an understatement. *Fichte Studies* is an extraordinarily difficult text. The difficulty lies not only in correctly discerning what the general philosophical status of the work is (and whether one can even speak of it as a systematically totalized work), but in also disentangling the complex tapestry of enigmatic and genial reflections on the character and limits of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. The complexity notwithstanding, it is clear that the notes are unified by an exceptionally intense confrontation with the grounding

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<sup>11</sup> Unlike the careful exposition of the 'play-drive' and the idea of beauty, there is not an 'analytic of semblance' in the letters. It appears as the (lyrical) result the letters try to establish. See *AE*, 191-203.

<sup>12</sup> Donehower 2007, 101.

principle of Fichte's *magnum opus* the *Science of Knowledge*: viz. the self-positing of the I as the key to comprehending the basis of the "system of representation," that is, of experience as such.<sup>13</sup>

In the entries that structure the *Fichte Studies*, sketches of a post-Fichtean elaboration of the subject via an investigation of its conditions of possibility can be discerned. That is to say, the feint shape of a distinctively post-critical presentation of the subject by way of its critique—a reconfiguration and extension of what Reinhold referred to as the "vicious circle" of Kant's *First Critique*—is observable.<sup>14</sup> This paradoxical manoeuvre is, I believe, suggested in the following condensed and polemical formulation: "I *am not* insofar as I posit myself, but rather insofar as I supersede (*aufhebe*) myself – I am not, insofar as I am in myself, I apply myself to myself" (*FS*, 93/196, translation slightly modified).<sup>15</sup>

The subject is identified as the "I" that supersedes itself by way of itself. It supersedes itself in that it supersedes the basic oppositions that determine its activity, which is to say, the oppositions of the subject "I" and the objective "non-I." According to Novalis, this means that "the subject is *at once* whole and part" (*FS*, 32/134). The simultaneity that gives sense to the ontological structure of the subject constitutes a conceptual description and development of the

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<sup>13</sup> Attention to the philosophical character of Novalis' work is increasingly understood as a central part of the developments of post-Kantian philosophy. For example, see Nassar 2014. See also Frank 2004, 151-76. Without question, it has been Géza von Molnár who has led the way in the appreciation of Novalis' contribution to post-Kantian philosophy. See Molnár 1970 and 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Reinhold 2000, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Like many studies of Novalis, my reflections are greatly indebted to Manfred Frank's work. In his study of early German Romanticism, Frank draws our attention to the proposition that anchors my exploration of Novalis's philosophy, namely, "I *am not* insofar as I posit myself, but rather insofar as I supersede (*aufhebe*) myself" (*aufhebe* is rendered as "negation" in the English translation of Frank's book). For Frank, the *Aufhebung* of subjective reflection as ground of being is the path through which Novalis can set out his "ontological realism," a realism that marks the end of the "dream of the sovereign self-origination of the subject," Frank 2004, 173. That being said, Frank does not explore what the determinate character of this *aufheben* is. This is all the more problematic when supersession is understood simply as negation. By focusing on the dynamics of the superseding character of the "I", I try to push against Frank's interpretation of Novalis. That said, I do not wish to subsume his work within the idealist orientation that Frank convincingly extracts Novalis from. I understand Novalis's philosophical contribution as an attempt to negotiate the impasse of the idealist-realist debate. As a negotiation of the idealist-realist debate, Novalis's work can neither be historicized in terms of a "proto-poststructuralist", a move that Frank makes along with a number of other Novalis scholars. For example, see Kuzinar 1987 and Krell 2004; nor can it be reduced to a proto-Hegelianism. For this interpretation, see Haerings 1954 and Schmitz 1992.

subject as “divided absolutely” (*FS*, 31/133). The subject is, accordingly, an expression of the absolute division of itself in itself. This means, above all, that the subject is ontologically identical to the separation of itself in and through itself. In other words, it is its own division. It is the ontological identification of the subject with its division that, in a paradoxical sense, secures the absolute univocity of the “I” (*FS*, 38/141).<sup>16</sup> Importantly, Novalis restores to the foreground of the philosophical conception of the “I” the epistemological opposition of subject and object, an opposition that Fichte strategically drops (reflected specifically in his terminological suspension of “subject” and “object”) in order to render more precise the structure of the self-positing “I” and the “non-I”. The absolute division of the subject is, for Novalis, the “*ordine inverso*” of the “I” (*FS*, 32/133 and 27/128). It is, accordingly, the inversion of the absolute univocity (the “absolutely one”) of the “I” in its purity as “one” (*FS*, 32/133). The subject is, as an inverted order of the absolute I, once again determined as the pure divided “I” as the *a priori* form of the synthesis between the absolute I (the unconditioned) and the absolute division (the conditioned).<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the subject articulates “the unification of absolute extremes”; it is the dissolution of the idea of the pure, absolute “I” devoid of the fundamental division between subject and object since it is the “unification of absolute extremes” that renders meaningful the absolute status of the pure “I” (*FS*, 31/132).

What we have here, then, is a dynamical unification, one in which the subject is simultaneously activity and rest, or the *drive* of itself and its self-realization (*FS*, 32/134). The subject’s drive toward unity is accordingly its drive toward itself; it is what *applies* itself back into itself. It is in this sense that the subject is simultaneously the whole and the divided part: it is the drive of its totality in the absolute division of itself as part. Novalis abbreviates these dense conceptual moves in a unifying expression: “absolute subject” (*FS*, 33/135). It is this dynamical core of the absolute subject that renders meaningful the

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<sup>16</sup> David Farrell Krell provides a useful gloss of this identity of subject with its division. Instead of ‘paradox,’ he understands the status of the subject in terms of the ‘oxymoron’ of the absolute relationality of the absolute. Krell 2004, 149.

<sup>17</sup> According to Frank, the *ordine inverso* is characteristic of the experiential order of finite epistemological consciousness. See Frank 2004, 172.

structure of *truth* and, hence, the philosophical (or speculative) character of Novalis's reflections. The speculative element, however, is not taken up in the first group of notes (1-210, autumn-winter 1795) since they are focused on the higher-level conception of the syntax of the "original act" of the absolute "I" in the context of a restitution of the question of its condition of possibility.<sup>18</sup> (It is for this reason that the forms of the "I"—empirical, intuitive, mediating, absolute, etc.—are the principle objects of the first group of reflections.) It is only in the second group of notes (from winter 1795 to February 1796) that Novalis begins to provide a more detailed exposition of the relation between the absolute subject and truth. More importantly for us, it is in this group of notes that the notion of supersession as the inner sense of the subject begins to emerge.

Formally anticipating Hegel's condensed formulation of truth in the famous "Preface" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Novalis remarks that "Truth is the Whole" (*FS*, 77/179). This is immediately supplemented by "illusion only the fracture—the half that seems to be the whole and is not—the former the positive, the latter the negative quantity" (*FS*, 78/179-80). The comprehension of truth, which is posited as the whole, consists of the self's desertion or abandonment from the identity of being as such. The proposition "truth is the whole" can be understood in light of the first note of the *Fichte Studies*, namely as an "illusory proposition" (*FS*, 3/104). The theoretical judgement of the subject, as presented in the form of a proposition, expresses the fracture of truth in its illusion. There is, accordingly, a dialectical relation, at the ontological level, between truth and illusion: "Truth is the form of illusion—illusion the form of truth" (*FS*, 77/179). This dialectical relation, however, reveals the strictly negative quality of truth and illusion (*FS*, 81/183).<sup>19</sup> The nature of the relation is expressed more precisely within the context of the synthesizing imagination (more of which shortly) in terms of the universal concepts of determinability and determinedness.

The exposition of the absolute subject then, in direct contra-distinction to

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<sup>18</sup> The first group of notes offer a critique of the original act of the self-positing "I" in the strict Kantian sense of critique.

<sup>19</sup> The inter-relation between truth and illusion is developed by Schiller in the last two letters of the *Aesthetic Education*.

Fichte's foundational principle on which the totality of the *Science of Knowledge* experientially unfolds, does not grasp, by way of the sovereign act of self-identification, the truth of being as its own construction. Rather, the subject is what recognizes itself through its judgement (in the division), as the identity that moves away from being in the form of its presentation (the illusory proposition). The subject does not grasp itself in its self-positing but rather returns to itself ("myself to myself") in and through supersession. It moves from itself to the more delicate register of self.

The conception of the self, here, is organized around the distinction between the Fichtean principle of self-positing and the status of supersession not yet adequately defined by Novalis. What, after all, is the structure of supersession according to the self in Novalis?<sup>20</sup>

#### 4 AUFHEBEN AS THE RESULT OF ABSOLUTE DIVISION

The reflection on judgement as the desertion from the knowledge of the identity of being as it is purely, in-itself, consists of one of the distinctive features of Novalis's critique of Fichte's *magnum opus*, namely its emphatic attempt, as Fichte puts it in the first part of his work, to "discover the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge" (*SK*, 93). The "discovery" of this principle is disclosed by the reflective description of the activity of the self's positing of itself in relation to the non-self (non-I). What is to be discovered is, strictly speaking, the structure of this positing as the structure of activity of the "I." Thus, the logic of positing emerges in an immanent connection to the principle of self-identity, namely the proposition that "A = A". This proposition simply and purely states, at the level of form alone, that if A then A. The A is purely itself if it always already connects to itself and in so far as this connection is its own (*SK*, 95). Insofar as this basic proposition is essentially the judgement of an "I", the structure of positing is in fact the structure of the "I" itself since it is the "I" that grasps the connection posed in the proposition. The connection of "A = A" expresses the connecting power of the "I"; it contains within itself the positing and is itself the positing. Accordingly, in that the connection of the self is to itself, it is grasped more precisely as a self-connection. Through the logical unfolding of the form of the

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed exposition of the relation between Fichte and Novalis, see Loheide 2000.

algebraic proposition,  $A = A$  leads to the basic proposition of subjective self-identity, namely “ $I = I$ ”. In other words, the fundamental proposition of Fichte’s idealism in which the self *is* in that it posits itself (*SK*, 96ff).

Novalis does not distinguish his own reflections on the identity of the “ $I$ ” by way of what stands in direct opposition to the Fichtean project, namely “dogmatic realism” (which assumes in advance the existence of being as the pure precondition of all reflection). Rather, he sharpens his own conception of the self by way of an immanent critique of the structure of positing as the absolute self-positing of the “non- $I$ ”. The postulation of pure being is, according to Novalis, a decidedly non-philosophical fabrication. It is, however, a “necessary fiction” (*FS*, 77/179). What necessitates the fiction is, on the one hand, the appearance of the connection of the dimensions of philosophical judgements: Novalis pushes the experimental status of Fichte’s work to its extreme logical conclusion, namely that experimentation itself reflects from within itself its own fictive, or illusory, conditions as pure and self-identical.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the necessary fiction of the judgement of self-identity discloses the deceptive productivity of the imagination, which, in contradistinction to the sheer passivity of reflection, is mobilized by Novalis (*pace* Kant) as the power (*Kraft*) of philosophical conception: “Feeling, understanding and reason are in a way passive—which is already shown by their names—imagination on the other hand is the only power—the only active one—the moving one” (*FS*, 65/167). The imagination is active and philosophical in so far as it is mobilized by the transition from the positing of opposition and contradiction to their unification: “Philosophy will be the working out of all contradictions. It is the endpoint of the line—as the simplest whole—the sphere of the line will be determined by the endpoints” (*FS*, 84/186). Novalis notes, immediately prior to this invocation of philosophy that: “The imagination is the binding mediator—the synthesis—the power of change” (*FS*, 84/186).

Novalis’s restoration of the epistemological categories of subject and object in direct contradistinction to Fichte’s philosophical deepening of the subject at the level of the positing and self-positing of itself is, once again, revealed as an

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<sup>21</sup> Manfred Frank draws out this same conclusion; see Frank 2004, 174. On the experimental status of the transitions of the ‘ $I$ ’ elaborated in the *Science of Knowledge*; see *SK*, 30-1.



essential constitutive feature of Novalis's critique. Accordingly, for Novalis, the movement of the imagination is reflected at a higher level in the movement of the absolute subject as the absolute division of the absolute qua whole (the "one"). Put another way: determination is not wholly a determination of the self-positing I, but rather is a concept "already contained" within the absolute "I" that expresses the original division of the absolute subject, which is to say, as its retroactive reflection (*FS*, 93-6/194-8). It is at this point that Novalis's reflections come remarkably close to those of Friedrich Hölderlin, who in 1795 provided a sketch of the distinctively immanent nature of being's division and the issue of its presentation in philosophical form.<sup>22</sup>

A conceptual distinction between the two, however, centers on the expression of the supersession of the subject's self-activity as essentially formed as the division of subject and object and the opposition of both to the absolute "I." As a retroactively disclosed anterior absolute, Novalis's subject is said to contain within itself its own supersession. Or, put another way, the determinations of the subject constitute their own supersession: "they supersede themselves as soon as they are applied to themselves" (*FS*, 93/194, translation slightly modified). Supersession is, accordingly, at once the description of the limits of Fichte's notion of the original act of self-positing (both immediate and self-referential), and the dynamic transition of activity and representation at the level of the subject. The sense of supersession in Novalis, then, is grasped at its twofold level of "apparent negation" and transformation (*FS*, 93/194). It is here that we can return more definitively to the proposition that inaugurated our reflections on the *Fichte Studies*, namely "I *am not* insofar as I posit myself, but rather insofar as I supersede myself". The original act of the "I" and its positing of the "non-I" is, accordingly, impossible at the level of positing since it is presupposed on the represented determinacy of the "undetermined".

An important distinction to be drawn out within the context of Novalis's employment of supersession is its distinction from the pure negativity Fichte assigns to the term in his *Science of Knowledge*. Supersession, as "apparent negation", functions merely as a mere opposite, that is to say, it is too readily

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<sup>22</sup> Novalis provides a far more expanded and quasi-systematic philosophical account of a critical post-Fichtean self-consciousness, thus giving the studies a distinctively more sophisticated depth to Hölderlin's gnomic articulations. See Hölderlin 2009, 231-2.

grasped as the opposition of the self-positing “I” (an opposition posited immediately via the original act). Such negation, which figures prominently in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, fails to grasp the immanent inter-relation between the presented and the represented, which is to say, the conception of determination internal to the “undetermined”, the “absolute spontaneity” that mediates self-positing (*SK*, 135). What I call here “immanent inter-relation” restores to the primacy of thought the experience of the absolute status of the divided absolute, that is, the whole that is the expression of itself as immanently and originally sundered. In light of the above, this means something specific: the original act of the subject cannot emerge from a defining and grounding, single principle that functions as the basis on which all senses of the “I” are derived.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it has to be grasped within the *a priori* division of itself with its own being, a division that, paradoxically, articulates a certain original connection between the subject and its object. The process of this connection is condensed in the category of *aufheben*.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has tried to reconstruct the formation of the concept of *Aufhebung* within Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and Novalis’s posthumously published set of fragmentary notes, *Fichte Studies* so as to expose two post-Kantian theories of the particular structure of the subject and the relation it maintains to itself in relation to its own formation—as the posited yet non-actualized harmony of the aesthetic state as totalized social life by way of the work of the subject of the play-drive (Schiller), and as the dissolution of the absolute self-grounding of the I as self-construction and self-positing (Novalis). The reconstructions were motivated by the attempt to paint a more complicated historical exposition of the way in which *Aufhebung* is not an *a priori* Hegelian category but was, more precisely, part of the philosophical problematic of the conception of the subject in the wake of Kantian critical philosophy. To be sure, the concept has been raised to its highest level of philosophical articulation in the critical reception of Hegel’s speculative philosophy, but this does not mean that the concept either originated in Hegel

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<sup>23</sup> See *FS*, 168/270.

or that the speculative philosopher has the last say.<sup>24</sup>

When positioned in relation to the development of philosophy in the wake of critical philosophy, *Aufhebung* appears as a point of lively philosophical construction that is at work in many philosophical projects (especially those that emerged in Jena). Perhaps, then, Hegel is not to be immediately assumed as *the* thinker of *Aufhebung* but, rather, as a philosopher who offered a distinctive contribution to an existing philosophical problematic of the possibility of actualizing the subject of experience with itself as subject of *its* experience—a contribution, to be sure, that radicalized and reconfigured the problematic in a new and unforeseen way.

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<sup>24</sup> Beyond Hegel, it is Karl Marx and Richard Wagner who develop the notion of *Aufhebung* in its most radical, distinctively post-philosophical sense. In Marx, by way of the conception of the politico-philosophical principle of communism (“*Aufhebung* of private property”) and the exposition of the uneven historical development of the capitalist mode of production as the *Aufhebung* of different modes of production and internal systemic transformations (from the system of industrialized commodity production to the banking-system, for example). In Wagner, *Aufhebung* appears as the thinly veiled logic of the “redemption” of social regeneration in the construction of the work of art. This alternative genealogy of a post-philosophical construction of *Aufhebung* has yet to receive the attention it deserves.

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