

The Question of a Science: Encyclopedistic Romanticism

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"A science only allows itself to be truly represented by another science" (Novalis 3:246, #49).¹ With this remark from the collection of fragmentary notes that were to form the basis of an encyclopedic project, Novalis indicates that the knowledge of a particular science cannot be represented by that same science. Instead, it can "only be truly" given expression by yet another science. Thus, any definition of what a science is, never mind science itself, is always displaced from its proper domain. According to what Novalis says, then, a science such as chemistry would have the ability to truly represent biology but would not be able to truly represent itself. This example could, however, be misleading. Since chemistry and biology are both "hard" sciences, what Novalis means can easily be reduced to saying that one science conveys the scientific character of the other. But such an understanding does not truly represent another science; rather, it represents any science that can be described as "hard." Novalis's understanding of science is not so restricted. In fact, Novalis develops his thinking on the nature of science in such a way that the place of Romanticism in relation to the Enlightenment may well have to be rethought—not as rejection of the Enlightenment but as its radicalization.²

To the extent that every science is understood as a form of knowledge, what a science is for Novalis cannot be restricted to what modernity has codified—according to Enlightenment principles—as the sciences. This inclusiveness becomes clear in another fragment to which Novalis gives the heading "Encyclopedistic." In this fragment, Novalis refers to the doctrine of knowledge that every science requires in order to establish itself as a science in the following terms: "there is a philosophical, critical, mathematical, poetical, chemical, historical, *doctrine of knowledge* [*Wissenschaftslehre*]" (Novalis, 3:321; #429). Here, under the rubric of encyclopedic thought, Novalis indicates the kind of understanding that permits one science (and poetry is as much a science here as chemistry) to truly represent another. When Novalis writes that the doctrine of knowledge is philosophical, critical, mathematical, etc., two things are stated. First, each science or discipline (these terms are interchangeable here since they both describe a particular means of knowing) possesses a doctrine of knowledge that is specific to each. Second, knowledge is thought in terms of a central principle in which philosophy, criticism, math, poetry, chemistry, and history are all equally present. The two understandings of discipline and knowledge represented in this fragment are of course contradictory. A knowledge specifically philosophical or specifically chemical emphasizes its difference from another science or discipline. The question Novalis's fragment poses concerns how this difference is related to an understanding

that emphasizes just the opposite: that there is a doctrine of knowledge that is equally mathematical, poetical, etc., in other words, a doctrine equally present in each of the individual sciences.

What then is such a doctrine? Clearly, it cannot be a doctrine in the traditional sense, a doctrine that governs each of the individual disciplines as if it were some kind of meta-knowledge. Yet, if it does not possess this sense, Novalis's use of this word still insists on some kind of identifiable content, on something that is recognizable as knowledge. Defining this content, as Walter Benjamin has pointed out, proved to be the greatest difficulty faced by the Jena Romantics. This difficulty, Benjamin notes, can be discerned in the different and conflicting answers it received: the absolute, the idea, religion (Benjamin 1:138-141 and 156). In the context of Novalis's remarks on encyclopedism, overcoming this difficulty would seem to require the production of an encyclopedia if such an answer were not already understood by Novalis as hopelessly inadequate—at least in the form bequeathed to Romanticism by the Enlightenment (the *Encyclopedia* of D'Alembert and Diderot). Such a form would offer too much, not because it contains an excess of knowledge but because its production, its physical existence, presumes the encircling of the known forms of knowledge.³ It is this presumption to encircle that would be excessive as well as always undermined by the generation of more knowledge. Rather than produce an encyclopedia, Novalis is content with an "encyclopedistic," with what is like an encyclopedia but never achieves itself in that form. At the same time, this "encyclopedistic"—as the doctrine of the encyclopedia—would also indicate the possibility of every encyclopedia, both future and past.

By preferring to remain within the realm of the "encyclopedistic," Novalis avoids the conflict that the encyclopedic project of the enlightenment could not avoid, its historical limitation—in the sense that the *Encyclopedia* of D'Alembert and Diderot could not avoid becoming, in the end, an example of enlightenment thought rather than a doctrine of knowledge.⁴ In their attempt to avoid this conflict, Novalis and the Jena Romantics are led to a focus on the formal condition of knowledge. This emphasis on form achieves its most privileged expression with respect to art if only because art, more so than knowledge, has its existence defined in formal terms. To the Jena Romantics, the disciplines of knowledge offer no exception to this defining characteristic of art. Like art, each science or discipline is understood as a form of knowledge; consequently, the doctrine it embodies must also be a formal one. What the Jena Romantics mean by form here is limitation: a science be-

comes a science by being limited, that is, by the recognition of its difference to other sciences. The recognition of this difference is the recognition of form. At the same time, this limitation affirms the failure of any one discipline to yield a doctrine of knowledge for all disciplines. A doctrine of knowledge, in effect the foundation of every discipline or science, can therefore never be found in a specific organization of knowledge, in any particular science, whether actively or passively (as a reflection).

By this means, Novalis distinguishes Romanticism sharply from the encyclopedic thought of the Enlightenment. Where the Enlightenment still thought the foundation of the encyclopedia in terms of an organization of knowledge that remained the effect or reflection of reason, Novalis attempts an encyclopedic thought that is without foundation and would thus appear, as Romanticism is so often portrayed, as radically anti-enlightenment. This attempt requires that the doctrine which relates all knowledge be thought from a position that always limits itself and puts itself into conflict with this same doctrine. Here, the temporal and historical limitation faced by the encyclopedic thought of the Enlightenment becomes a positive rather than a negative force since this limitation is understood as affirming that the significance of knowledge lies in its form rather than the claims of its content. A Romantic history of knowledge becomes, in this case, the accumulated and continuing recognition of such forms. This does not mean that the Romantic account of history is purely formal. To arrive at such a conclusion is to subscribe, unquestioningly, to an ideologically charged misreading of Hegel.

In *Athenaeum Fragment 77*, Friedrich Schlegel explicitly decries such a purely formal understanding when he entertains the possibility of a genre that answers in all essential aspects to the role played by Novalis's doctrine of knowledge. This fragment, itself concerned with the nature of fragments, reads as follows:

A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments. But as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences." (Schlegel 27).

To be faced with a genre that does not yet exist is to be faced with a form that has not yet achieved the ability to encompass or encircle all other forms. Yet the role of such a form is clear: it is to be the "necessary part in a system of all the sciences." To achieve this intention requires, however, no mere fragmentary form, but what Schlegel calls a genre.

Such a genre (*Gattung*), as the means of identifying a group, also addresses the question of a doctrine that permits knowledge to occur. In this sense, one can speak of genre as a kind of science: as a genus able to be considered separate

from other kinds just as physics is considered as separate from poetry or philosophy, or history. For Schlegel, the genres that exist are only fragmentary in their form. The question of a content that would be equally fragmentary remains unanswered. The difficulty of such an answer is what prompted Benjamin to state that Schlegel "despite all his efforts . . . cannot elucidate his presentiment of a worthy content" (Benjamin 1:156). Only the genre that is to come can promise such a content. This genre, as Schlegel indicates, would not be purely formal. Rather, it envisages a form whose content is not inconsistent with the limitation that made all form fragmentary for the Jena Romantics.

What Schlegel is thinking in this fragment can best be recast in terms of Novalis's remarks on science and the encyclopedic if it is presented in a negative manner. If a genre or science whose form is necessarily limited (necessary if it is to be recognized as a science or genre) and therefore fragmentary (since its limitation prohibits its completion) is to possess a content that is proper to it, then that content can only be understood as completely accounting for that same genre or science. The effect of such an account is to turn the individual, limited science or genre into a totality in its own right.⁵ Here, the form and the content are at odds with one another. The fragmentary existence of the former is belied by a significance that is far from fragmentary. What Schlegel faces in the fragment cited above is the question of a genre whose content must refuse such a significance. Similarly, Novalis faces the question of a doctrine of knowledge that refuses not only its doctrinal tendencies but also a tendency that seems inseparable from knowledge: to establish a foundation that guarantees knowledge.

The necessity of such a question for the Jena Romantics also represents a questioning of science at a point when what we recognize as the modern sciences are taking hold within education. To the extent that these sciences are the consequence of Enlightenment inquiry, Jena Romanticism can be read as an engagement with a rationale and a history that continue to exercise their claims on the organization of knowledge in the contemporary university. It is important to underline, however, that the position taken by the Jena Romantics is not a simple rejection of Enlightenment rationality—as if they were already caught within one of the clichés of our critical modernity, as if Romanticism were the simple antithesis of the Enlightenment. Instead, what Jena Romanticism undertakes in the thought of its two principal figures, Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, is a different yet nonetheless systematic response to the question that fueled the encyclopedic project of the enlightenment: the quest for an encyclopedic philosophy begun by Leibniz, carried on by Kant, and subsequently by Hegel in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* of 1830.

The quest for an encyclopedic philosophy that proceeds from Leibniz to Hegel sought to realize itself in a self-authorizing systematicity. Hegel refers to this quest as "the

one single aim, action, and goal of philosophy—to arrive at the concept of its concept, and thus attain its return and its satisfaction” (*Encyclopedia* 23). To accomplish this quest, Hegel states, is to attain the unity of science—what Hegel calls the “whole of science.” According to Hegel, “only the whole of science is the presentation of the Idea.” With this remark he locates the realization of systematicity within the presentation or exhibition of this science, thus making the thought of such a science identical with its own existence. The Idea of science, of the whole science, becomes in this case the laying out of the idea or thought which is “identical with itself.” Hegel’s account of science in terms of this identity allows him to avoid any falling back into a systematicity that would be dogmatic (imposed externally, thereby making the system a mere representation of a thought and not its presentation) or into any reliance on a reason that must always withhold itself as in Kant (thereby making a whole system a postulate of reason rather than the exhibition of reason). Yet, in each case, the dogmatism of a Wolff or the withholding of Kant, there still occurs a drive to fulfill an encyclopedic project, to produce the encyclopedia as the form in which science or knowledge attains its complete account: the “whole of science.”

In contrast, Novalis not only prefers to describe, as already mentioned, what is like an encyclopedia, but the form in which he presents this “encyclopedistic” remains deliberately fragmentary. The whole, or what is referred to by Schlegel as the genre, thus remains and persists in the failure of its realization. Its content—the content Schlegel refers to as “fragmentary”—is then only graspable as an anticipation.⁶ By formulating this content in such a way Jena Romanticism would appear to deviate most strongly from the foundational tendencies of the Enlightenment, tendencies which not only associate foundations with content (for instance, reason as the foundation and content of all knowledge) but also require that a foundation is what must necessarily precede. Jena Romanticism must also reject the identity of a science with its idea—precisely the identity from which the possibility of an encyclopedia proceeds in Hegel. If a science, as Novalis asserts, can only be represented by another science, then no science can be identical with itself, no science can account for its own status as a science.

Despite the radical difference between Hegel and Novalis on this point, the intention of Novalis does not, in the end, disagree with that of Hegel (and despite Hegel’s forceful criticism of the Jena Romantics in his *Lectures on the Aesthetic*). Instead, they exemplify two attempts to overcome what became a central difficulty in the legacy of Enlightenment thought and its encyclopedic project: how to avoid a merely representational and therefore incomplete system of knowledge or science. To put this another way, it is a question of how to avoid a merely historical (that is, non-scientific) account of science. Yet, since such an account cannot give up on history if it is to claim significance for both its past and its future, this question places science and the concept of

disciplines on which sciences are based in a difficult position. If a genuinely scientific account of the sciences is to be forthcoming, that is, an account in which knowledge justifies itself as a system, this same system must then already incorporate its incompleteness, to echo Schlegel, as a necessary part of the system. The position of this incompleteness and how it is understood remains crucial to the difference between Hegel and the Jena Romantics.

For Hegel, incompleteness recurs as the constant reminder that philosophy has failed to attain a systematic account of knowledge, has failed to justify itself as science. This failure is not only expressed in dogmatism and skepticism for Hegel, but also in the recourse to what he describes as the purely formal solution offered by Kant, a solution that remains contentless to the extent that its foundation, reason, can only be known according to the forms of the understanding (and therefore remains unknown). To Hegel such a failing is already constructive; it already impels understanding to go beyond itself. Hegel’s discussion of this movement of thought is most economically presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in terms of a thing understood to exist only in itself as a thing—a discussion that clearly takes aim at the unknowability of both Reason and the thing in itself in Kant. Hegel writes: “The thing is posited as existing *for itself* or as the absolute negation of all otherness, it is therefore absolute in its absolute self-relating negation; however, the absolute which is a self-relating negation is the canceling and superseding (*Aufhebung*) of itself, set up as having a being of its own, as existing for itself, or as an absolute negation of all otherness; hence it is absolute negation merely relating itself to itself. But this kind of negation is the canceling and superseding of *itself*, or, the thing has its essential being in another” (*Phenomenology* 76; translation modified).

To Hegel, such a mode of thought is already contradictory, and hence contains within itself the seed of its own dissolution. For Hegel, this self-dissolution informs a system built upon the incompleteness of all preceding attempts at realizing a truly philosophical system. Since this dissolution is performed by the operation of the understanding and its knowledge, it inaugurates a movement whereby thought, as Hegel describes it, is compelled to go beyond itself. But, at the same time, this compulsion has a fixed goal, a goal that is to assure the realization of a content and thereby its knowledge as systematic and therefore scientific. Hegel states: “the goal is necessarily fixed for knowledge The goal is the point where knowledge no longer has any necessity to go beyond itself, where knowledge finds its own self, where concept corresponds to object and object to concept. The progress towards this goal is consequently unhalting, and at no earlier stage is satisfaction (*Befriedigung*) to be found” (*Phenomenology* 51). Again, it is in identity that science is to become scientific, but this movement is not merely one of knowledge. Rather, it is a movement towards satisfaction, towards the accomplishment of a desire (this satisfaction or *Befriedigung* is also what Hegel had named, to recall the pas-

sage from the *Encyclopedia* cited above, as the “the one single aim, action, and goal of philosophy—to arrive at the concept of its concept, and thus attain its return and its satisfaction” (*Encyclopedia* 1:23).

In Novalis’s account of an encyclopedic knowledge, there is no such return, no such satisfaction. For Hegel what is systemless is shown to be already systematic. For Novalis, as the different emphasis of the following fragment asserts, this systemlessness is the basis of a system, a systemlessness that is to be systematically preserved: “The authentic philosophical system must be freedom and infinity, or, to put it strikingly, must be systemlessness brought into a system” (Novalis 3:288-89; #648). By systematically preserving this systemlessness—this is, in effect, the task of and the understanding of system in Novalis—the project of an Enlightenment that issued into dogmatism, skepticism, and the impenetrability of Kant’s reason, is maintained at the very limit of its reach. The failure, the innate incompleteness of a project built upon reason, is now founded on this failure as science becomes scientific, that is, it becomes complete by the continual adoption of incompleteness as its central doctrine. This is already explicit in Novalis’s presentation of science as what can only be represented by another science. Unable to become identical to itself, and aware of the danger of falling back into the Kantian formalism rejected by Hegel, Novalis’s understanding of science performs its difference to itself, thereby always deferring the question of its content, questioning its own systematic tendency, questioning itself as science even as it represents itself as science.

Within such a deferral, the question of what content Novalis’s idea of a systemless system possesses cannot be answered except in the form of a promise—hence the messianic aspect Benjamin rightly drew attention to as essential to Jena Romanticism (Benjamin 1:168).⁷ Novalis sums up the crucial role of this promise in a three word fragment from his “Fichte Studies” of 1795-1796: “Systematik. Encyclopaedik. Profetik” (Novalis 2:143; #68). The deferral of its content into a form that will have no concrete existence beyond its prophecy, its condition of afterwardness or post-ness, marks the extent to which Romanticism, at least in Jena, defined the legacy of our Enlightenment modernity: the promise of a simultaneous completion and overcoming of that modernity in the actuality of a post-modernism whose own promise remains strategically unfulfilled. Such is the consequence of the doctrine of science Novalis presents as the “encyclopedistic” of Romanticism and such is the consequence that forced Hegel to bring this doctrine to the satisfaction of an end that was already present at the beginning. Yet, inasmuch as Hegel’s scientific account of science desires a content (as well as satisfaction) and thereby refuses what is regarded as a central question of post-modernity, this refusal does not in any way point to Jena Romanticism as a post-modernity *avant la lettre*. Rather, it is post-modernity that has come to look like the “science” of this Romanticism and, in so doing, risks

affirming the very Enlightenment project it has so consistently defined itself against. Despite this rapprochement, the science presented by Jena Romanticism remains the promise of a science that has as yet no generic form to call its own. This promise poses the question of whether the post-modern, the historical era that eschews its own generic definition, has not after all become the genre of its own science, the discipline of a fragmentary content, the historic fulfillment of what Novalis called the “encyclopediazation of a science” (Novalis 3:270; #161).

NOTES

¹From *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, notes and fragments Novalis collected for his encyclopedic project in 1798 and 1799. The remark occurs in a note written under the title: “Psychology and Encyclopedistic.” Although these notes will be referred to as fragments (they are all in fragmentary form), they are not to be understood, as the editors of this edition point out, as a collection of fragments in the way that the jointly authored *Athenaeum Fragments* were conceived.

²This sense of this radicalization is quite different from what Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment*.

³This is also the etymology of the word, a sense that Diderot emphasizes by calling attention to it at the beginning of his entry on “Encyclopedia” in the *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*.

⁴Novalis’s emphasis on “encyclopedistic” also signals that the intended result is not to produce yet another encyclopedia but to articulate its possibility. For this reason, Novalis speaks of the encyclopedistic in introductory terms. See fragment 599: “the introduction is the encyclopedistic of the book” (3:372).

⁵Science and genre can from the perspective of the Jena Romantics be considered as equivalent despite the literary connotations of genre. Both come into existence through their limitation, through the recognition of their difference from other sciences or genres. In this respect they are equivalent. The relevance of “genre” to non-literary issues is reflected in the following fragment from Novalis’s *Allgemeine Brouillon*: “Encyclopedistic: . . . The universal concept, the notion of genre, etc., belong to the elements [*Elemente*: elements of science]” (Novalis, 3:251; #65).

⁶In *The Literary Absolute*, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy interpret this aspect as productive of what they term the literary absolute of Jena Romanticism.

⁷Although Benjamin underlines that “Romantic messianism is not at work in its full force” in the notions he has just discussed, he draws attention in note 238 on the same page (1:168) to how the Jena Romantics’ understanding of an “infinite process of fulfillment” follows from their messianism.

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