

# Beyond Aesthetic Theory: Consolations of Art and Poetry in Romantic Criticism

*Estetik Teorinin Ötesinde:  
Romantik Eleřtiride Sanat ve řiirin Tesellisi*

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### Abstract

“Beyond Aesthetic Theory: Consolations of Art and Poetry in Romantic Criticism” aims to illustrate how German Romantic critics confronted the political, philosophical, and moral challenges at the dawn of modernity and the enduring relevance of their responses for our times. The concept of time and the problem of its representation beyond metaphysical systems was a major preoccupation of both Romanticism and modernity. During the turbulent political and moral crises in the wake of the French Revolution, the early German Romantics (*Frühromantiker*) Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, who collaborated on the short-lived journal, *Athenäum* (1798-1800), the major theoretical organ of German Romanticism, presented one of the earliest skeptical responses to the possibility of a first principle of philosophy. Human mortality generates the experience of being in time, of its passage, of loss and grief that cannot be cast in philosophical terms and do not belong to representation, thus precluding their reflection at the level of form. Ultimately, the burden of representing the unrepresentable, a burden that in Friedrich Schlegel’s view, emerges from the imperfections of philosophy, falls on art. At the very limit of representational certainties, art and poetry intimate the unsayable and negotiate the irreducible spaces between concept and representation. The *Athenäum* represents a novel mode of critical communication in employing the fragment as a philosophical form that extends into the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Walter Benjamin. It has also paved the way to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics and to poststructuralism by way of Nietzsche.

### Keywords

German romanticism, aesthetic theory, modernity, romantic poetry, time in literature

### Öz

“Estetik Teorinin Ötesinde: Romantik Eleştiride Sanat ve Şiirin Tesellisi” Alman romantik eleştirmenlerinin modernitenin şafağında politik, felsefi ve ahlâki zorluklarla nasıl yüzleştiklerini ve yanıtlarının zamanımızla kalıcı ilişkisini göstermeyi amaçlıyor. Zaman kavramını ve temsili metafizik sistemlerin ötesinde somutlaştırmak hem romantizmin hem de modernitenin başlıca uğraşlarındandı. Fransız Devrimi’nin ardından yaşanan çalkantılı siyasi ve ahlâki krizler sırasında Alman romantizminin en önemli teorik organı olan kısa ömürlü *Athenäum* (1798-1800) dergisi etrafında toplanan erken dönem Alman eleştirmenleri Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis ve Friedrich Schleiermacher felsefenin kapsayıcı ilkelerine ilk defa şüpheyile bakan bir ekolü oluşturdular. İnsanın faniliği felsefi terimlerle ifade edilemeyen ve temsile ait

olmayan zaman içinde olma, zamanın geçişi, kayıp ve keder gibi deneyimler üretir ve bu deneyimler biçim düzeyinde yansımazlar. Dolayısıyla felsefi sistemlerin temsil edilemeyeni temsil edememesinin yükü, Schlegel'e göre felsefenin yetersizliğinden kaynaklanır ve bu yükün sorumluluğu şiire ve sanata düşer. Temsil yeteneğinin sınırında devreye giren sanat ve şiir, dile gelmeyi ima eder ve kavram ve temsil arasındaki mesafeyi kapamaya yönelirler. *Athenäum* eleştirmenlerinin fragmanı felsefi bir biçim ve yeni bir iletişim organı olarak geliştirmelerinin etkileri Nietzsche, Heidegger ve Walter Benjamin'in yazılarında izlerini sürdürür ve Hans-Georg Gadamer'in hermenötiğine ve de Nietzsche aracılığıyla postyapısalcılığa yol açar.

### Anahtar kelimeler

Alman romantizmi, estetik teori, modernite, romantik şiir, edebiyatta zaman

Resorting to the useful superstition of dates, we could say that the heroic age of absolute literature begins in 1798 with a review *Athenaeum*, mostly put together anonymously by a few young men in their early twenties "proud seraphs," Wieland called them among whom the names of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis catch the eye, and ends in 1898 with the death of Mallarmé in Valvins.  
Roberto Calasso, "Absolute Literature"<sup>1</sup>

Also "resorting to the useful superstition of dates," Isaiah Berlin, the prominent Russian born British philosopher defines (German) Romanticism as the third, the last, and the greatest "turning point" in the history of "human thought and behaviour in Europe."<sup>2</sup> He identifies the period between the death of Aristotle and the rise of stoicism, when men were suddenly conceived of in terms of inner experience and

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1 Roberto Calasso, "Absolute Literature," 171.

2 Isaiah Berlin, "The Romantic Revolution: A Crisis in the History of Modern Thought," 168.

salvation, as the first turning point, and the age ushered in by Machiavelli, where a sharp division between moral and natural values was set, as the second one. By turning point, Berlin does not mean a solution or solutions to the burning questions of humanity but rather a radical change in the entire conceptual framework, in which these questions were posed.

In *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* by Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, originally published as *Révolte et mélancholie: Le romantisme à contre-courant de modernité*, the authors maintain that Romanticism did not disappear with the rise of modernity, nor did it go into decline. It was also not confined to pockets of resistance, since at its core it constituted a critique of modernity. Romantic strategies of form anticipate a vision for today's world, where an obsession with instantaneity and speed and the fear of obsolescence have created widening conflicts with the rhythms of our biosphere. Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenäums-Fragment* 116, often cited as the manifesto of the *Frühromantik* (early German Romanticism) or Jena Romanticism,<sup>3</sup> projects an uncannily prophetic vision whose implosion is realized in the modern efflorescence of images and narratives (in cell phone photos and videos, graphic novels, streaming platforms). When Schlegel refers to *romantische Poesie* as a *progressive Universalpoesie*, his prediction conjures up a triadic image of magic, metaphor, and montage that negotiate their way through a media ecology, where our consciousness is diffused by different textual, visual, and aural representations as forms of *techné* or art:

Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim is not merely to reunite all the separate genres of poetry and relate poetry to philosophy and rhetoric. It aspires to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, originality and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry alive and social, and life and society poetical; poeticize wit and fill and saturate art forms with every kind of solid formative material and animate them to the beat of humor. It embraces everything that is purely poetic from the greatest systems of art, which contain within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss the poeticizing child breathes out in artless song. ... It can also – more than any other form – hover between the represented and the representing, free of all real and ideal self-interest on the wings of poetic reflection and can raise that reflection to a higher and higher power and multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors.<sup>4</sup>

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3 In German scholarship, early German Romanticism is mostly referred to as *Frühromantik* (early Romanticism), which makes its members *Frühromantiker*. This group included Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), Friedrich Schlegel and his wife Dorothea, his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel and his wife Caroline, writer Ludwig Tieck, theologian-philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. With the exception of Schelling all contributed to the journal *Athenäum*.

4 F. Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, 2: 182. The critical Friedrich Schlegel edition, will be abbreviated in the text as *KA*, followed by volume and page number. While the author is listed as Friedrich Schlegel, the critical edition contains all the other works of the early

Friedrich Schlegel, who like the other early Romantics was also a cultural historian, referred to the history writer as a “backward-looking prophet” [*rückwärts gekehrter Prophet*].<sup>5</sup> However, as the first part of the fragment quoted here shows, Romanticism’s notion of life as poetic destiny was nothing short of forward-looking. At the same time, this visionary thrust in no way aligned with modernity’s relentless desire to catch up with the future. It is arguably the tension between these paradoxical desires that created the conditions for the emergence of what Isaiah Berlin called the last and the greatest turning point in European intellectual history. Löwy and Sayre, whose *Romanticism* study draws heavily on German philosophical and literary works, point to the “fabulously contradictory character” of the Romantic phenomenon, “its nature as *coincidentia oppositorum*: simultaneously (or alternately) revolutionary and communitarian, cosmopolitan and nationalistic, realist and fantastic, retrograde and utopian, rebellious and melancholic, democratic and aristocratic, activist and contemplative, republican and monarchist. . . .”<sup>6</sup>

The *Frühromantik* was neither a school, nor a movement in a strict sense. It revolved around the critical writings of the early Romantics, who collaborated on the short-lived journal, *Athenäum* (1798-1800), the major theoretical organ of German Romanticism. The *Athenäum*, famous for its collection of fragments, intended as entries into a projected universal encyclopedia, represents a novel mode of critical communication that extends well into Friedrich Nietzsche’s work and beyond to that of Walter Benjamin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Theodor Adorno. The compendium that was the *Athenäum* not only paved the way to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics through the work of Friedrich Schlegel and Schleiermacher but also to poststructuralism by way of Nietzsche’s elaboration on Romantic language philosophy. For the most part, it was not the German but French critics Philippe Lacoue Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, and Antoine Berman,<sup>7</sup> who coming from a poststructuralist tradition, recovered the critical legacy of early Romanticism that in traditional scholarship had been given short shrift as a minor literary movement preceding late Romanticism. This recovery was for the most part due to the publication of the critical Friedrich Schlegel edition, which includes the *Athenäum*, under the editorship of the late Ernst Behler. However, before this philosophical archive of German literary and cultural history was restored to scholarship, Walter Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation,

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Romantics, published in the *Athenäum*. All translations from German texts in this article are mine.

5 F. Schlegel, *KA 2*: 176.

6 Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, 1.

7 Berman’s *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* remains the most comprehensive study on the theory and practice of translation in early Romanticism.

*Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*<sup>8</sup> [The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism], had most eloquently brought the Romantics' critical reflection on poetics to light.

Let me pose at the outset that I consider early German Romanticism not an era or an epoch – thus avoiding what Roberto Calasso called the “useful superstition of dates” – but a critical phenomenon. Its traces and memories are marked by recursive destinies. In the following, I attempt, however briefly, to uncover the dynamic challenges the Romantic era continues to pose for our time. In this endeavor, the philosophical problem of representation, the concept of time and the problem of its representation as major preoccupations of both Romanticism and modernity, constitute the focus of my argument. To provide context, I offer a brief docent's tour of early Romanticism's conceptual frames of reference in German idealistic philosophy, then focus on tropes of memory, ephemerality, and melancholy and their evolving forms of aesthetic expression in the Romantic tradition.

*Romanticism Against the Tides of Modernity* recasts Romanticism as a phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to a common denominator, as it appears in multiple literary versions, informed by different individual and national specificities. However, Löwy and Sayre ultimately define Romanticism, which in their view defies analysis, as the critique of modernity, “Romanticism as a world view is constituted as a specific form of criticism of ‘modernity.’”<sup>9</sup> Equating modernity – not modernism, which is the late nineteenth century literary and aesthetic analogue of modernity as period – with the rise of market economy after the Industrial Revolution, is not an entirely novel approach. Max Weber had already portrayed the principal features of modernity as a propensity for calculation (*Rechnenhaftigkeit*), disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung der Welt*), and instrumental reason (*Zweckrationalität*). As these characteristics embody the spirit of capitalism, then Romanticism's perceived nostalgia for an idealized past and its enchantment of experience in literary and aesthetic expression reveal, if not a critique of modernity in the strict sense, certainly a resistance to it. While this view of Romanticism contra modernity aspires to highlight the political and economic directions of the period, it fails to account for the radical shift in critical sensibilities from poetic mimesis to critical poesis during the late eighteenth century, which the political, cultural, and moral crises in the wake of the French Revolution had given rise to.

The early Romantics' political aspiration centered on a philosophically and culturally united land, when at the time Germany, which consisted of twenty-five different states and Prussia, was nowhere close to nationhood. “The French Revolution, Fichte's philosophy, and Goethe's Meister are the greatest tendencies of the age,” writes Friedrich Schlegel in the *Athenäum* and adds, “Whoever is offended

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8 Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*.

9 Löwy and Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, 18.

by this juxtaposition, whoever cannot take any revolution seriously that isn't noisy and materialistic, has not yet achieved a lofty, broad perspective on the history of humanity."<sup>10</sup> However, the German Romantics, who initially saw the French Revolution as the ultimate signified of freedom, soon had their hopes dashed. Although Schlegel sees the French Revolution as "the prototype [*Urbild*] of revolutions," he states that it could also be regarded as the "most frightful grotesque of the age, where the most entrenched prejudices and their most brutal punishments are joined in a most gruesome chaos and interwoven as bizarrely as possible with a colossal human tragicomedy."<sup>11</sup>

The early Romantics' critical anxiety was triggered by the hitherto unseen violent births in political, intellectual, and moral life that precluded the possibility of knowing any truth, be it the noumenal world, a vanished time, or an occulted language. Michel Foucault had observed that the definite transition to modernity was marked "when words ceased to interact with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things."<sup>12</sup> Faced with the unfathomable chaos of lived experience, the early Romantics aim to set novel paradigms of understanding and redefine the objectives of criticism and representation. Mired in the chaos of post-revolutionary Europe, existing representations of history and temporality failed to provide "a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things." Immanuel Kant's critical paradigm was both daunting and liberating but failed to account for the experience of loss and grief. Not only words, as Foucault noted, but also the close encounter with human mortality in the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution "ceased to interact with representations." Thus, the crisis of representation necessitated a new vocabulary.

### Translating Idealist Philosophy into Living Poetry

Immanuel Kant's revolutionary transformation of the metaphysical tradition, his "second Copernican revolution," posits that instead of measuring the content, meaning, and truth of intellectual forms by some extraneous condition which is supposed to be reproduced in them, we must find in these forms themselves the criterion of their own truth generated by the faculty of reason, thus, "we can recognize of things *a priori* only that what we ourselves put in them."<sup>13</sup> In Gilles Deleuze's words, "The

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10 F. Schlegel, *KA 2*: 198-199.

11 *Ibid.*, 248.

12 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 304.

13 Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, 3: 26.

rational being discovers that he has new powers. The first thing that the Copernican Revolution teaches us is that it is we who are giving the orders.”<sup>14</sup>

While Kant rescued science from epistemological skepticism and secured the status of idealism, he did not account for an understanding of the “real” world, of an independent and totally unknowable “thing in itself” [*Ding an sich*], thus thwarting the desire for the unity of knowledge. (Johann Gottlieb) Fichte set out to overcome the duality of Kantian philosophy by positing an absolute consciousness that would guarantee a systematic unity of conception from which a multiplicity of experience could be deduced. The first principle in Fichte’s transcendental system is the absolute “*Ich*” [I/self] that posits itself as an object of cognition. Because of this inherent self-representation (and thus self-critique) of the *Ich*, forms of both cognition and moral consciousness are informed by an infinite progression. Picking up this thread of Kantian-Fichtean idealisms, Friedrich W. Schelling further erases all forms of discontinuity between the conscious mind and the objective nature by a dialectic, where nature becomes objectified self and self represents reflected nature. His philosophy of identity [*Identitätsphilosophie*] renders subject and object identical in the Absolute. As the Absolute manifests itself in human consciousness, the harmony of mind and nature gives rise to aesthetic contemplation.

If Kant’s transcendental idealism maintains that all theoretical knowledge is restricted to the world of experience via appearances and rejects all forms of metaphysical and epistemological realism, what forms of expression are then available to subjects, who recognize the failure of philosophical reflection to epistemologically secure the absolute? How can creative minds express their aspirations, when their reflections have no recourse to an *a priori* foundation? Although the critical project of early German Romanticism rested on an abiding interest in idealistic philosophy, it also challenged the latter’s rejection of metaphorical accounts of experience. The Romantics considered representability [*Darstellbarkeit*], which is only indirectly or elliptically realized in *Poesie* as the condition of all understanding. In Novalis’ words, “even God is only conceivable in representation” [*Gott selbst ist nur durch [Re]präsentation verständlich*].<sup>15</sup>

The early Romantics’ extended meditation on the work of the idealist philosophers led to one of the earliest skeptical responses to the possibility of a first or overarching principle of philosophy. The ascendancy of the early German Romantic critical movement constituted a rigorous response both to a perceived moral failure of post-Enlightenment Europe and to the crisis of absolute idealism that had established self-consciousness as the grounding principle of all philosophy. Recent scholarship on the philosophical foundations of early Romanticism has made major strides in reinscribing the philosophical muscle of German idealism into the poetics of early

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14 Gilles Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, 14.

15 Novalis, *Werke*, 446.

Romanticism, which had long been underrated in earlier traditional scholarship as a kind of light opera. At the same time, modern scholars have insisted that the critical activity of the early Romantics not be cast in the idiom of absolute idealism. Whereas absolute idealism à la Fichte posits self-consciousness as the grounding principle of philosophy (by creating this phantom other consciousness), the early Romantics establish the primacy of Being (anything that is ontologically classifiable) over self-consciousness or reflection. The transcendence of Being urges philosophy to take the path of infinite progression, which leads to aesthetic experience.

The early German Romantics' keen awareness of idealistic philosophy's inability to arrest the ultimate within a method resulted in the collective work of the Schlegel brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich and Novalis to invest art with the power to represent the unrepresentable, in other words, to intimate the absolute that eluded all reason. As Friedrich Schlegel famously remarked, "The Absolute because it is unsayable, can only be represented allegorically" [*Das Höchste kann man eben weil es unaussprechlich ist, nur allegorisch sagen*].<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin's dissertation on the concept of art criticism in German Romanticism highlights the critical rigor attributed to form and shows how all articulations of Romantic idealism are registered at the level of aesthetic form, such as romantic irony, allegory, *Witz*, fragment, which, in turn, self reflect at the level of idea. These forms, particularly as they were theorized and developed by Friedrich Schlegel, present a persuasive answer to the dilemma of the subject skeptical of philosophical faith in grounding principles, while holding on to the belief in the power of expressive articulation. The value of aesthetic form lies in its generative energies of transformation in both the subject and the world, forms of metamorphosis that enable them to resist any form of *stasis*. Thus, the burden of representing the unrepresentable, a burden that in Friedrich Schlegel's view, emerges from the imperfections of philosophy, falls on art. Starting from Schlegel's premise, I hope to illustrate how at the very limit of representational certainties, art and poetry intimate the unsayable and negotiate the irreducible spaces between concept and representation.

### Challenges of Representing the Unrepresentable

I limit my analysis to notions of time and grief and their allegorical variations in expressions of memory, loss, melancholy, or even trauma, as these have resisted representation in philosophical systems and summon art and poetry to lend them the materiality of expression (*Darstellung*).<sup>17</sup> Human mortality generates the experience

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16 F. Schlegel, *KA 2*, 324.

17 Although in German *Vorstellung*, *Darstellung*, and *Repräsentation* all refer to representation, only *Darstellung*, the most frequently used aesthetic expression in the

of loss and grief that cannot be cast in philosophical terms. The question, whether there are representations that determine an *a priori* a state of the subject like grief, eludes a clear solution. And if we reject Kantian time as an *a priori Anschauung* (view or concept), the burden of representing time, that is neither *anschaulich* (sensible or vivid), nor tangible, turns into the very problem of representation itself. Because representation is a problem of mediating presence or being, it confronts the problem of presenting time, that is, making it present – or rather making it visually or physically present.

The elusiveness of any defining marker of time is aptly expressed in Saint Augustine's famous remark that if no one had asked him what time was, he would know, but if someone did, he could not explain what it was. In this sense, time resembles the experience of a language without a grammar, the experience of a child's mastery of language where he can speak but cannot explain how the language is structured. Augustine maintained we can measure neither the past, nor the present or the future, as these do not exist, yet we have a sense of the non-metric experience of time, when we say a lecture was long (read, boring) or how pleasant time passes so quickly. Ultimately, for Augustine, the true measure of un-measurable time is an inner measure. In most philosophical debates, the time of consciousness is related to the present. However, the consciousness of the past and the anticipation of the future are always present in the present. Since events cannot be identified as past, present, and future in any essential sense, they can only be encoded as differentiated temporalities by being assigned mutually exclusive relational attributes.

Since in Kant, time and space are both *a priori* forms of sensible intuition, they do not belong to representation, thus precluding their reflection at the level of form and excluding them from the faculty of imagination. In Fichte, successiveness of time is the condition of self-positing. Novalis, sees time as the condition of all representation, since it is the prerequisite of all synthesis, which is only realized in successive time. He endeavored to complement Fichte's focus on philosophical speculation by taking into account other forms of intellectual experience like poetry. As a mathematician and a poet, Novalis challenges Kant's notion of time and space as *a priori* forms with an almost uncannily Einsteinian theory of space and time as interlinked, "Time and space emerge simultaneously and are, therefore, likely one." However, he articulates this concept of time as a dimension of space in metaphors, "Space is enduring [*beharrlich*] time – Time is flowing, variable space – Space – Basis of all that is enduring – Time – Basis of all that is changeable."<sup>18</sup> Novalis also formulates with elegant simplicity (in the original German) how (re) presentation entails a distance both in space and in time between the concept and its portrayal: "*Die ganze*

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writings of the early Romantics, designates the materiality of figural representation and distinguishes itself from the other two terms in its emphatic focus on poetic presence.

18 Novalis, *Werke*, 484.

*Repräsentation beruht auf einem Gegenwärtigmachen des Nichtgegenwärtigen*”<sup>19</sup>  
[All representation rests on the present-making of the non-present].

These philosophical and aesthetic articulations of temporality occupy an important space between Kant and Fichte and Martin Heidegger. In *Sein und Zeit* [Being and Time], Heidegger, who has proven to be very inventive with the German language, attempts to grasp and analyze the relationship of existence to being. This sense of being should not be understood in terms of a metaphysics of presence, which thinks of being as a substance, but as a question of ontology, what is it to be an entity of things, rocks, tools, humans? The transformation from the obliteration of metaphysics to a history of Being had important consequences for Heidegger’s concept of the “forgottenness of Being” [*Seinsvergessenheit*]. While the concealment and eventual forgottenness of Being were result of its reduction to idea, cogito, or will, the concept of the history of Being is represented in the concept of the thinker, more specifically, as entrusted to certain thinkers, who “utter Being, that is, utter *the Being of beings* within metaphysics.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the personification (or representation) of beings in the history of Being suggests the conflation of time with the inevitability of human transience.

Heidegger’s sense of physical time dictates that all beings tend toward the void. He places this unrelenting physical time along a time of projection, a reflection on how we can live resigned to being inescapably mortal. *Dasein* (the experience of being human, conscious of one’s own mortality) is at the core temporality; it makes the present *present* by choosing from among possibilities [*Seinkönnen*] yet to come; it makes available to the present the possibilities for being by representing and imagining them. From these intuitions of time, it generates its own experience of unreal/intangible/unquantifiable time [*Innerzeitigkeit*] and real/measurable time [*Sein zum Tod*], that is, acceptance of its finitude, which intimates the sense of loss and grief of human beings. For Heidegger, time is neither in the subject, nor in the object, but as Novalis had maintained, is the condition of their possibility, because it is “‘earlier’ than any subjectivity and objectivity, as it represents the condition of the very possibility of this ‘earlier.’”<sup>21</sup> Thus, time is only given to representation and only represents itself. The metaphorical thrust of Heidegger’s vocabulary cannot conceal the failure of philosophy to connect temporality to any eternal structural principle. However, measurable time [*Sein zum Tod*] gives rise to our consciousness of evanescence, human mortality, loss, and finality of all things. Furthermore, the experience of being “thrown” into *Dasein* [*Geworfenheit*] and the consciousness of this “earlier” give rise to the sensation of uncanniness, a sense of experiencing something strangely familiar and frightening. Freud, as is known, drew on Romantic literature to develop

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19 Novalis, *ibid.*, 489.

20 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 3:188.

21 Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 178.

the theory of the uncanny as the sensation of having been somewhere that was once familiar but is now strange.<sup>22</sup>

These intuitions of passage and demise emerge in their complexity and ambiguity in aesthetic contemplation. In Romantic art, specifically in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), in Surrealism, and in Benjamin's critical oeuvre, temporality is imagined along the axis of the allegorical. Romanticism's twin tropes of irony and allegory represent the idea(l) indirectly, whereby, in the most compact sense, allegory signifies an approximation and irony an implicit impossibility of the ideal. Both refer to the absence of an ultimate referent in terms of concept and time and recover these anew in poetic expression. They are temporally detached from their origin and telos and signify only through a synthesizing reconfiguration. The allegorical form forever mourns the death of the whole, the being, the truth and re-collects its temporal relics. Thus, in its allegorical representation, famously in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, time is depicted in images of ruin, shard, and fragment that inhabit sacred spaces. One of his favorite motifs were the ruins of Eldena monastery near Greifswald, from where he hailed.<sup>23</sup> Friedrich's landscapes emerge as the edge of an infinity, where in Schlegel's view, infinity (as the chaos of unbounded time and space) becomes bound in form: "*Why has the infinite come out of itself and made itself finite? – In other words, why are there particulars?*" [*Warum ist das Unendliche aus sich herausgegangen und sich endlich gemacht? – das heißt mit andren Worten: Warum sind Individua?*] (italics in the original). The question can be answered, Schlegel adds, by inserting between the infinite and the finite, "the concept of *picture* or *Darstellung*, *allegory* (*eikón*)."<sup>24</sup> Allegory, then, marks the transition between chaos and form, but not an origin or a finality, since it is the infinitely repeatable moment of creating form. Without allegory as aide-mémoire, human achievement cannot emerge from the chaos of unmarked time and space.

In the context of Romantic art and criticism, a melancholy linked to the passage of time and the desire to redeem the vanished past for the present, constitute the two fundamental impulses of allegory as perception and as technique. Yet, the anxiety of not recovering the perceived wholeness of the past is reflected in representation that marks the aporia of a vanished time and can only signify it elliptically, in fragments.

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22 In Freud, the uncanny is in reality not something eerie or unfamiliar but a lived experience, which has become alienated from the mind by repression. Freud bases the theory of the Uncanny ("*das Unheimliche*") on the famous Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann's story, "Der Sandmann" [The Sandman], where the protagonist Nathanael repeatedly encounters a figure from his past that is both familiar and frightening.

23 Due to copyright issues, I chose not to paste an image of this painting. However, copying and pasting the following link in your browser accesses the image: <https://www.caspardavidfriedrich.org/Eldena-Ruin.html>

24 F. Schlegel, *KA* 12, 39.

Thus, in Friedrich's paintings, ruins become the most comprehensive expression of the evanescence [*Vergänglichkeit*] of all beings and of human works dissolved in time and reabsorbed into nature. The allegorical image is not transparent to its signification, as the relation between what is in the picture and what is outside it, what is between this world and the other, goes beyond the boundaries of the represented scene. The partial image, ruin, and decay, as in Benjamin's depiction of Baroque allegory, capture the arrested countenance of time and history that can only be conveyed by objects dissonant with the natural order. Benjamin elaborates on this by saying that both symbol and allegory involve a violation and transfiguration of linear time. Whereas symbol glosses over the disruption of the moment in the transcendental image, allegory captures the shocked face of history in memorable form.<sup>25</sup>

Benjamin's narrative about the angel of history in Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* reminds us that the angel cannot return to paradise to restore order to the disarray and ruins of the past; it is caught in the grip of a ruthless forward movement of time.<sup>26</sup> Reconstruction of the past in history and memory is a posthumous event. Memory in the form of fragments of remembered time, however, only reminds us of the fossilized face of history at moments of shock and trauma. The association of memory with trauma complicates the issue of re-membering and re-presentation and has in more recent critical debates centered increasingly on the ethics of representing extremity. Like the experience of time, that of extremity of suffering eludes grasp and can only be told elliptically – but the elliptical is subject to mis(sed) understanding. Yet the problem of representing trauma demands critical attention in these times besieged by ethnic and religious fighting, unspeakable war crimes, and the senseless killing of civilians within and without the range of actual warfare. When people are persecuted, catapulted out of home and history, and suffer unimaginable trauma, what survives as witness to their lives and stories?

Like unmeasurable, unquantifiable time, trauma and grief refer to an elusive experience of an inner sense, *Innerlichkeit*. The impossibility of grasping extreme trauma may have a conceptual analogue in the Kantian sublime, where imagination, faced with an immensity, is confronted with its own limit, forced to strain to the utmost, experiencing a violence that stretches it to the extremity of its power.<sup>27</sup> The immensity

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25 In *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama], Benjamin notes, "Whereas in the symbol the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption through the idealization of destruction, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a paralyzed primordial landscape," *Gesammelte Schriften* I.1: 343.

26 Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," 255.

27 While I cannot go into the discussion of the Kantian sublime in detail, for purposes of this discussion, suffice it to say that whereas the beautiful in nature is focused on the form of the object, the sublime can be found in a formless object, as long as in it a boundlessness is represented. At the face of the boundlessness and immensity of the sublime,

of feeling, however, is not a representation of pure form; it does not lend itself to formal reflection. Only poetry can express the jagged edges of pain in the compactness and fracturedness of its form. Many modern poets the world over, like Nâzım Hikmet, Mahmoud Darwish, César Vallejo, Bertolt Brecht, or Czeslaw Milosz, who suffered loss and displacement, whether through censorship, imprisonment, or forced exile, have become both witness to and interpreter of the tragedies that governments have inflicted on their own people. What has come to be known as poetry of witness not only captures what history forgets but also offers a sense of solace and solidarity to those affected by loss and tragedy.

### Persistence of Romanticism: Consolations of Poetry in Fateful Times

Each science [*Wissenschaft*] becomes  
poetry after it has been philosophy.  
Novalis<sup>28</sup>

The following verses of two poets, who are separated in time and geography, Heinrich Heine, who was considered an heir to German Romanticism, “a Romantic *manque*,” and Nâzım Hikmet, often referred to as a “Romantic Communist,” powerfully represent a sense of inborn *Weltschmerz*, a transience of all earthly things, and unsayable sorrow. Although both poets were also persecuted and exiled, the following lyrics were composed, when they were in their early youth, long before their respective exiles. The last stanza of Heine’s poem, quoted below, which he based on a folk song he heard on the shores of the Rhine river, describes the grave of two young lovers, who eloped only to perish:

*Die Winde die wehen so lind und schaurig,  
Die Vögel die singen so süß und traurig,  
Die schwatzenden Buhlen, die werden stumm,  
Sie weinen und wissen selbst nicht warum.*<sup>29</sup>

[The winds, they blow so mildly and ghastfully,  
The birds, they sing so sweetly and sorrowfully,  
The chatting paramours, they fall silent and cry,  
And they don’t even know why].

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imagination experiences its own inadequacy, and “in striving to surpass it, recoils upon itself” (Kant, *Werke* 8, 338).

28 Novalis, *Werke*, 482.

29 Heinrich Heine, *Säkularausgabe* (HSA) II, 66-67. Translation mine.

## Consolations of Art and Poetry in Romantic Criticism

The same aura of evanescence covers Hikmet's verses in "*Hâlâ Servilerde Ağlıyorlar mı?*" [Are they still crying among the cypress trees?] like a heavy mist. The poem was published, when Hikmet was only seventeen. He imagines hearing the sobs of the departed in a cemetery. Like Heine, Hikmet uses an old verse form, *rubâi*, a quatrain, which in classical Persian poetry is composed of four lines or two couplets:

*Gözlere inerken siyah örtüler,  
Umardım ki artık ölenler güler.  
Yoksa hayatında sevmiş ölüler  
Hâlâ servilerde ağlıyorlar mı?*<sup>30</sup>

[As eyes were covered with black shrouds,  
I hoped the dead could finally find peace.  
But are those dead, whose love could not cease  
Still crying among the cypress trees?]

As in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings of a vanished time, represented in images of ruins and cemeteries, these verses, evoked by the sight or memory of graveyards, represent the act of mourning and loss in the verbal image. Here, the corporeal body vanishes in time and is reabsorbed into the earth (nature) as remains or fragments. Although the verbal imagery expresses extreme sorrow, it also offers the consolations of the sublime. Once the experiencing subject identifies that the relation between what is in the verbal image and what is outside it, what is between this world and the great beyond, cannot be represented, the mind overcomes the boundary of imagination.

The aesthetic mode of Romantic idealism has shown that philosophical achievement is a question of manifesting an argumentatively persuasive style, that is aesthetic, rather than a clearly demonstrative superiority over other modes of articulation. Lamentably, the art of rhetoric, cherished and cultivated by the early Romantics has been replaced by modern demagoguery. The trials of our modernity still carry the not very distant echoes of German Romanticism's anxiety of a world in intellectual and moral crisis. Those crises have multiplied in our age, in which individuals, communities, and nations struggle for agency, as they face the seemingly insurmountable challenges of consumerism, intolerance, lack of ethical vision, religious fanaticism, and the twilight of creative reason and empowering art. The challenges of modernity, the atomization of our lives, the imperative to constantly speed up or catch up with technology, constant escape from all forms of terror, and the almost universal violation of human rights may remind us of the Romantic strategies of coping and consolation that defy the limitations of the real. The point of most early Romantic discussions of the self was not to suggest that the empirical and the transcendental subject can

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30 Nâzım Hikmet, *Bütün Şiirleri*, 1929. Translation mine.

posit or control the world as such but, by taking the historical and aesthetic turn, to suggest the ways, whereby the self can both confront and be consoled by the forces of nature, language, and art. The extent of the influence of Romanticism's critical cultural legacy and its transfigurations, continuities, and ruptures in modernism and postmodernism remain a field of disputed claims. However, without their faith in the power of art and poiesis, the social imagery would be limited to the narrow horizon of what really exists or what is merely instrumental.

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