

Abstraction and Utopia in Early German Idealism

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Abstract: This paper is based on a close reading of the first five propositions of Schelling's *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie* (1801). The author argues that what is distinctive and significant about these propositions is that they both describe and create an ideal space determined by an athetic logic. The first five propositions of the 1801 *Darstellung* are intended to transport the reader outside of time and space, outside of affirmation and negation, to a neutralised utopia defined by three functions alone: abstraction, entailment and definition.

The author considers this intention in the context of German Idealist discussions of abstraction: Hegel's critique of the abstract particular and abstractive methodology, as well as Fichte's and early Schelling's attempt to theorise abstraction as the starting point for the philosophical enterprise. This leads the author to consider what a philosophical text that practices abstraction and construction (rather than deduction, inference, or explanation) looks like, and he draws upon the early work of Louis Marin to characterise such a text as utopic. In so doing, he attempts to demonstrate the significance and cogency of a nondialectical, a-Hegelian tradition in early German Idealism that culminates in the opening pages of Schelling's 1801 *Darstellung*.

Vous utopisez à perte de vue.
*Diderot to the Abbé Morellet*¹

- §1. *Definition.* I call *reason* absolute reason, or reason insofar as it is conceived as the total indifference of the subjective and objective... Reason's thought is foreign to everyone: to conceive it as absolute, and thus to come to the standpoint I require, one must abstract from what does the thinking. For the one who performs this abstraction reason immediately ceases to be something subjective, as most people imagine it. It can of course no longer be conceived as something objective either...
- §2. *Outside reason is nothing, and in it is everything.* If reason is conceived as we have asked in §1, one immediately becomes aware that nothing could be outside it...
- Remark.* There is no philosophy except from the standpoint of the absolute...
- §3. *Reason is simply one and simply self-identical...*
- §4. *The ultimate law for the being of reason, and, since there is nothing outside reason, for all being* (because it is comprehended within reason) *is the law of identity*, which with respect to all being is expressed as $A=A$. The proof follows immediately from §3 and the propositions that precede it...
- §5. *Definition.* I call the A of the first position the subject, to differentiate it from that of the second, the predicate.²

1. Denis Diderot, *Apologie de l'Abbé Galiani* in *Oeuvres politiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1963), 91.
2. F.W.J. Schelling, *Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-61), 4:114-7; *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*, trans. Michael Vater, in *Philosophical Forum* 32.4 (2001), 349-51.

SUCH are the first five propositions of Schelling's *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie*, published in May 1801. What follows attends to what is distinctive and significant about these lines; that is, I argue that not only do they describe a kind of ideal space for philosophising outside of existence, subjectivity, objectivity, action and reaction—a space determined by an a-thetic logic—these opening lines also perform this logic themselves. The first five propositions of the 1801 *Darstellung* are intended to transport the reader outside of time and space, outside of affirmation and negation, to a neutralised utopia defined by three functions alone: abstraction, entailment and definition. What is conspicuously missing from these propositions is any form of positing, whether thetic, antithetic or synthetic. For Fichte, Hegel and even Kant, some form of *Setzen* makes experience possible, gives rise to being and existence or motors the dialectical movement of reality. Schelling's text, however, is *indifferent to all positing*. From a Hegelian or even Fichtean perspective, such a philosophical space is impossible and can only be attained by means of an illegitimate act of transcendence, i.e. 'abstraction'. The task of this paper is to get to grips with this Schellingian performance of abstraction, thereby making sense of the impossible space which opens the 1801 *Darstellung*.

What is more, the chronological significance of these propositions should not be lost from view. Crudely put, in May 1801 Schelling stuck his neck out and began philosophising for himself. The *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie* has the emphasis placed firmly on 'meines'; here Schelling becomes a Schellingian. However, the 1801 *Darstellung*, is a tricky character, one which resists our standard categories for interpreting German Idealism: there is no dialectic, no movement, no time or history, nor even—despite Schelling's reputation—any mystical intuition. In fact, at this time Schelling falls foul of many of the accusations that Hegel will surreptitiously make of him in the *Phänomenologie*: just as Hegel complains of him, he *does* proceed to the absolute 'like a shot from a pistol', he *does* construct schema after schema 'monochromatically', he *does* mix philosophy up with natural science, mathematics and many other disciplines, he does indeed put forward a rigorously Eleatic monism that does away with finite individuals (at least as one normally understands them). The task facing any post-Hegelian reconstruction of Schelling's 1801 *Darstellung* is, therefore, to defend it against the widespread intuition that the above somehow leads directly to the invalidation of Schelling's thought, that merely to subscribe to these tenets is *prima facie* to practise bad philosophy. This task involves making explicit the cogency of Schelling's thinking precisely as monochromatic and Eleatic, etc. What follows is

a very small contribution to this task: an attempt to demonstrate the significance and cogency of a non-dialectical, a-Hegelian tradition in early German Idealism that culminates in the opening pages of Schelling's *Darstellung*, a tradition knotted around the concept of abstraction.

1. Impossible Transcendence

The poverty of the abstract is supposedly a decisive moral to be drawn from German Idealism; hence, the Hegelian dictum, 'Think abstractly? *Sauve qui peut!*'³ Or, more fully, 'the abstract universal... is an isolated, imperfect moment of the Notion and has no truth.'⁴ What I want to suggest, however, is that prior to and in opposition to Hegel's dialectical suspicion of the abstract, there is a generative conception of abstraction to be found elsewhere in German Idealism—in, what one might call, the *utopic* strand of German Idealism.

One way-in to this other strand is through Hegel's own critique of transcendental methodology, particularly the limit argument he repeatedly deploys against it. The point here is to take seriously Hegel's implicit contention that there is in fact a distinctive and very different way of doing philosophy at play within German Idealism here being attacked and refuted, a utopic alternative. The *Enzyklopädie Logik* version of the limit argument runs,

It is the supreme inconsistency to admit, on the one hand, that the understanding is cognizant only of appearances and to assert, on the other,... cognition *cannot* go any further, this is the *natural*, absolute *restriction* of human knowing... Something is only known, or even felt, to be a restriction, or a defect, if one is at the same time *beyond* it... There can be no knowledge of limit unless the Unlimited is on *this side* within consciousness.⁵

Or, as Hegel summarises it in the *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, 'Kant says that we must remain at what is one-sided, at the very moment when he is passing out beyond it.'⁶ Hegel criticises Kant

3. G.W.F. Hegel, 'Who Thinks Abstractly?' in *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Anchor, 1966), 113.
4. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Prometheus, 1969), 604.
5. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets *et al* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), §60.
6. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (London: Routledge, 1896), 3:472. An early version of this argument is also to be found in G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Wal-

for transcending the limits of human cognition at the same time as deeming such transcendence impossible, i.e. in order to limit knowledge, he must himself have already gone beyond such limitations to recognise them *as* limits. By Kant's own lights, therefore, philosophy seems to be methodologically constituted by an impossible transcendence. The transcendental philosopher illegitimately takes up an impossible position outside of the limits of experience from which to conduct a critique of the given. This is a methodological standpoint that exists under erasure or, to put it slightly differently, the philosopher here generates an impossible space, a no-place—which is simultaneously a good-place from which to do critical philosophy. The transcendental philosopher creates a methodological utopia for herself, and it is the utopianism of this transcendental methodology that bears the brunt of Hegel's criticism here.

Hegel closely ties two further criticisms to the limit argument. First, the poverty of immediacy: as he writes of Kant, "This standpoint lacks mediation, and thus remains at the immediate,"⁷ echoing the 'like a shot from a pistol' line from the *Phänomenologie*⁸. Transcendental methodology immediately posits itself in a place in which its cognition is already secure. It knows prematurely. Hegel articulates this more fully as follows, "There soon creeps in the mistaken project of wanting to have cognition before we have any cognition, or of wanting to go into the water before we have learned to swim."⁹ The Kantian's impossible transcendence is also to be understood as an illegitimate way of claiming knowledge *too soon*. The philosopher immediately posits herself outside of the limits of cognition in order to determine such limits. This moment of transcendence always occurs too early: not only is it impossible, it is also premature.

Moreover, and appropriately enough, Hegel goes on to identify this methodology with the production of the abstract. He writes, transcendental philosophy gives rise to 'the empty abstractions of an under-

ter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), 89. For a recent reconstruction of the limit argument that places it at the centre of Hegel's philosophy, see A.W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), 164-6. Moore earlier writes of Hegel's critique of Kant in this regard, 'Can Kant, when he draws a limit to our thick sense-making, do so from anywhere inside that limit, or must he do so from somewhere outside it?... Must we not therefore already have taken a step back from the human standpoint?' (138-9) The *inhumanity* of abstraction will soon become apparent in regard to Schelling's programme for a philosophy of nature; see fn. 38.

7. Hegel, *History of Philosophy*, 3:475.

8. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §27.

9. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §41.

standing which keeps itself in the abstract universal'.¹⁰ This is 'a radically abstract thinking'.¹¹ And its abstract character is a direct consequence of the above: the philosopher who immediately transcends limits to determine them prematurely from outside can know them merely externally. She imposes properties onto phenomena from above, rather than making them explicit from within. Cognition is forever *ab-sehen von*, set apart from what is known. It is against such a paradigm of abstract and impossible transcendence that Hegel puts forward the model of dialectic, which 'is not brought to bear on the thought-determinations from outside; on the contrary, it must be considered as dwelling within them'.¹² Dialectic is immersive.¹³

2. Generative Abstraction

It is Fichte who had first fully articulated the utopic methodology that Hegel later criticised¹⁴; indeed, Fichte is very explicit about the utopic

10. Hegel, *History of Philosophy*, 3:472.

11. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §52.

12. *Ibid.*, §41.

13. This is not to say that Hegel himself *merely* employs 'abstract' and its cognates in a negative sense; the word retains some ambivalence in his mature thought. As Osborne puts it, 'In its adjectival form "abstract" (*abstrakt*) thus remained a predominantly derogatory term in Hegel's lexicon. It denotes the one-sidedness and finitude of the concepts of the understanding... For Hegel, "bad" abstractions are the one-sided, oppositional abstractions of the understanding, considered as if they are true forms of knowledge. "Good" abstraction is the concrete abstraction of the absolute idea, containing within itself the systematic relations between the abstractions of the understanding.' Peter Osborne, 'The Reproach of Abstraction' in *Radical Philosophy* 127 (2004), 25. Such ambivalence is even more marked in Hegel's early thought (during his 'Schelling-discipleship' in 1801, in particular); for example, G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY, 1977), 97, 113. It is also the case that Hegel's philosophy can be said to only incompletely ward off the 'reproach of abstraction' itself: for accounts of Hegel's unacknowledged commitment to methodological 'bad' abstractions, see Lisabeth During, 'Hegel's Critique of Transcendence' in *Man and World* 21 (1988), 287-305 and Andrew Buchwalter, 'Hegel, Marx and the Concept of Immanent Critique' in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29.9 (1991), 260-7.

14. While it is explicitly Kant's name that is deployed by Hegel in the above, the method of abstraction is still obscured in his work. The clearest commitment to abstraction in the critical philosophy occurs in a methodological coda to the 'Transcendental Aesthetic': 'In the transcendental aesthetic we shall, therefore, first *isolate* sensibility, by taking away from it everything which the understanding thinks through its concepts, so that nothing may be left save empirical intuition. Secondly, we shall also separate off from it everything which belongs to sensation, so that nothing may remain save pure intuition and the

act of impossible transcendence that orients his philosophy. In the *Erste Einleitung* he writes,

A finite rational being possesses nothing whatsoever beyond experience. The entire contents of his thinking are comprised within experience. These same conditions necessarily apply to the philosopher, and thus it appears incomprehensible how he could ever succeed in elevating himself above experience. *The philosopher, however, is able to engage in abstraction.* That is to say, by means of a free act of thinking he is able to separate things that are connected with each other within experience... and when he does so he has abstracted from experience and has thereby succeeded in elevating himself above experience.¹⁵

For Fichte, abstraction designates precisely that act by which the philosopher *incomprehensibly* rises above experience. The human is defined as what is limited to experience and this limitation ‘necessarily applies to the philosopher’—and yet, nonetheless and almost miraculously, by means of abstraction the philosopher generates an impossible space beyond experience from which genuine philosophy can be conducted. The philosopher manages to achieve what no human can: utopia.

Hence, the impossible but successful experiment of abstraction founds philosophy, according to Fichte, and to this extent he adheres to the Hegelian caricature of transcendental methodology rehearsed above. However, Fichte counters that the type of knowledge that arises from this initial act of abstraction is not one-sided, empty or poor, but richer than it otherwise would have been. This is a form of abstraction that is generative: it makes appear to the philosopher aspects of reality not evident before. This is how Breazeale puts it,

We are no more conscious of our immediate ‘feelings’ than we are of the immediate unity of subject and object that is expressed in the *Tathandlung*... [They] become objects of thetic consciousness *only* within philosophical reflection, where they are *abstracted from* the full, rich context of lived experience.¹⁶

mere form of appearances.’ (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1929), A22/B36) See also Immanuel Kant, ‘The Jäsche Logic’ in *Lectures on Logic*, ed. and trans. J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), §6.

15. J.G. Fichte, ‘An Attempt at a New Presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ in *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 10-1.
16. Daniel Breazeale, ‘Fichte’s Abstract Realism’ in Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Michael Baur (eds), *The Emergence of German Idealism* (Washington: CUA Press, 1999), 112; my emphasis.

Only by neutralising ‘lived experience’ in abstraction does properly philosophical content come to consciousness.

Moreover, Fichte is very clear, and this is central to what follows, abstraction is not negation. One does not actively cancel that from which one abstracts, one becomes indifferent to it. *Abstraction is the proper operation of indifference*. In Fichte’s words, ‘The concept... is here not thought of at all—either positively or negatively.’¹⁷ The abstracted element is not posited in any form; there is a suspension of judgment (an *epochē*), rather than an antithetic judgment. Fichte’s insistence on the fundamental difference between abstraction and negation needs to be contrasted with Hegel’s collapsing of abstraction into another modality of negation. Here, for example, is Hegel’s definition of abstraction in ‘Who Thinks Abstractly?’, ‘This is abstract thinking: to see nothing in the murderer except the abstract fact that he is a murderer, and to *annul* all other human essence in him with this simple quality.’¹⁸ For Hegel, abstraction ‘annuls’, and in so doing, the hegemony of the dialectic, motored by negation, is preserved. Nevertheless, there is a line of thought in early German Idealism that insists forcefully on the fundamental distinction between abstraction and negation, as evidenced in Fichte and, as we shall see, in the Schelling of 1801.

To emphasise: since abstraction is not negation for Fichte, a philosophy premised on it possesses (at least) one non-dialectical moment. Abstraction cannot be subsumed into a dialectical play of negation and negation of negation, for it obeys a different logic. The early philosophies of Fichte and Schelling, premised as they are on this initial act of abstraction, offer therefore something different to the hegemony of dialectic, concreteness and immanent critique bequeathed by Hegelian thought, a utopic alternative within early German Idealism resistant to the pull of the concrete universal.

3. Fichte’s Problem—via Manet

Nevertheless, Fichte’s account of abstraction is limited in one regard at least and I wish to name the limitation manifest here the problem of ‘the immune transcendental’. That is, Fichte proposes that one begin philosophising by abstracting from the *object* of intuition to isolate the self or the intuiting activity: ‘One should continue to abstract from everything possible, until something remains from which it is total-

17. Fichte, ‘New Presentation’, 39.

18. Hegel, ‘Who Thinks Abstractly?’, 117; my emphasis.

ly impossible to abstract. What remains is the pure I.¹⁹ For Fichte, the abstracting I *remains a limit*; it is what is left over after the most thoroughgoing procedure of abstraction has removed every object of consciousness. Moreover, this I is unabstractable precisely, it seems, because it is what makes the activity possible in the first place. The transcendental condition of abstraction cannot itself be abstracted; it is itself immune from the process. The self remains untouched by its own operation of abstraction.

This logic can be further illustrated by means of a very different example: Georges Bataille's *Manet*. For Bataille, Manet's painting can be characterised by the process of indifferentiation or abstraction:

Stripped to its essentials, Manet's sober elegance almost immediately struck a note of utter integrity by virtue not simply of its indifference to the subject, but of the active self-assurance with which it expressed that indifference. Manet's was *supreme indifference*, effortless and stinging... His sobriety was the more complete and efficacious in moving from a passive to an active state. This active, resolute sobriety was the source of Manet's supreme elegance.²⁰

Bataille picks Manet's *Execution of Maximillian* as an example of such abstraction: it refuses to empathise or to take sides, or even to engender affects in the spectator. The representation of murder is achieved as an affectless still-life:

Manet deliberately rendered the condemned man's death with the same indifference as if he had chosen a fish or a flower for his subject... On the face of it, death, coldly, methodically dealt out by a firing-squad, precludes an indifferent treatment; such a subject is nothing if not charged with meaning for each one of us. But Manet approached it with an almost callous indifference that the spectator, surprisingly enough, shares to the full.²¹

Whether the painting depicts murder or fruit is a matter of indifference to Manet: he 'put the image of man on the same footing as that of roses or buns.'²² Indifferentiation is actively pursued in the name of the

19. J.G. Fichte, 'Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy' in *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 204.

20. Georges Bataille, *Manet*, trans. Austyn Wainhouse and James Emmons (New York: Skira, 1983), 73.

21. *Ibid.*, 46.

22. *Ibid.*, 97.

neutral; as Bataille puts it of the *Masked Ball at the Opera*, 'every figure seems quite neutral.'²³

However, it is precisely here, when we begin to consider the process of abstraction in Manet's painting, that the very same problem that haunted Fichte recurs. According to Bataille, Manet's 'subversion' takes the form of an aestheticism that repudiates life, vitality and significance for the sake of reaffirming an insular sovereign subject who basks in his own creative powers. Manet subtracts from the world in the name of the self, finding in his paintings a mere reflection of his own mastery. In other words, the affect by which Manet indifferentiates the world is one of *condescension*: the construction of a master-subject over and above the material from which he is abstracting. Condescension names the affect that results when everything becomes indifferent *except the self*. This non-totalising operation of indifferentiation, moreover, reaffirms the problematic transcendental structure identified in Fichte's account. In both cases, the operation of neutralisation or abstraction is shown up as incomplete; in both cases, there is a limit beyond which it cannot pass, and this limit corresponds to the necessary condition that makes the operation itself possible.

A final way of articulating this problem is in terms of utopia: Bataille's Manet and Fichte both replicate the logic of a 'bad utopia', creating a transcendent, otherworldly space (the space of the painting or the thetic space, respectively) that puts into question all worldly values *apart from* those the utopia is itself affirming. In Louis Marin's words, 'The utopian critique is ideological because it is not itself the object of a critique.'²⁴ In other words, the critique is here incomplete, resulting in the construction of a secure domain in which all values are scrutinised apart from its own. Such, once more, is the problem of the immune transcendental.

My question for the second half of this paper is, therefore, whether Schelling's account of abstraction in 1801 necessarily suffers from this problem too, or whether other forms of abstraction and indifference are possible. At stake, then, are a notion of totalising abstraction and the identification of a good utopia. This would provide the basis for a procedure of abstraction that put its own transcendental conditions into question while still rejecting the dialectical valorisation of the concrete universal.

23. Ibid., 86.

24. Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath (New York: Humanity Books, 1984), 195.

4. Immersive Abstraction

In January 1801, Schelling found himself trying to articulate what distinguished his methodology for a philosophy of nature from Fichte's.²⁵ He writes, 'The reason that those who have grasped idealism well have not understood philosophy of nature is because it is difficult or impossible for them to detach themselves from [the methodology of Fichtean idealism].'²⁶ The shortcomings of the latter are clear to Schelling, and once more revolve around the centrality of the self. Fichte remains bound by the concerns and structures of the self, never transcending them to intuit anything more: 'During the entire [Fichtean] investigation I never get out of myself.'²⁷ The Fichtean idealist remains trapped in 'the circle of consciousness' which is 'inescapable'²⁸. Here the philosopher is both the subject and object of her philosophical interest: she is the one philosophising and she is also the one being philosophised about; philosophical narcissism at its most extreme.

What, then, is Schelling's alternative to the Fichtean model? It is, surprisingly enough, abstraction. Even though Fichte had so often spoken of abstraction, Schelling still uses the very same concept to name that methodological practice that distinguishes them, and so enables an escape from the circle of consciousness:

To see the objective in its first coming-into-being is only possible by *depotentiating*... This is only possible through *abstraction*.²⁹

So, Schelling's assertion is odd: both Schelling *and* Fichte make recourse to abstraction as a central methodological operation, as we have seen, but yet it is precisely here that Schelling considers his methodological differences from Fichte to be most evident. And this must be because he has somehow transformed this concept to mean something contrary to its Fichtean use, which turns out to be the case. For Schelling, unlike Fichte, abstraction takes one towards the world, not away from it. While the Fichtean idealist raises himself above the adulterated objects of ordinary experience through

25. For a detailed reconstruction of Schelling's doctrine of abstraction in 1801, particularly in contrast to Fichte's account, see Daniel Whistler, 'Schelling's Doctrine of Abstraction' in *Pli* 26 (2014), 58-81.

26. Schelling, *Werke*, 4:87; F.W.J. Schelling, 'On the True Concept of Philosophy of Nature and the Correct Way of Solving its Problems', trans. Judith Kahl and Daniel Whistler in *Pli* 26 (2014), 14.

27. *Ibid.*, 4:89; 11.

28. *Ibid.*, 4:90; 12.

29. *Ibid.*, 4:89; 12.

an act of abstraction (potentiation), in a subversion of the idealist the Schellingian philosopher transcends ‘beneath’ the limits of consciousness into the depths of nature (depotentiation).³⁰

Thus, in *Über den wahren Begriff der Naturphilosophie*, Schelling differentiates his own methodology from Fichte’s as follows. The Fichtean alters (or potentiates) the object (i.e. nature) until it becomes identical to the subject: to bring nature into the mind and make it into a sensation or perception. Yet, there is a major problem here, according to Schelling: that which is not raised to the potency of consciousness still remains hidden from the philosopher. That is, reality exists at non-conscious as well as conscious potencies, and the former are not accessible to the Fichtean. Here is how Schelling puts it, ‘[The Fichtean] can behold nothing objective other than in the moment of its entry into consciousness... and no longer in its original coming-into-being at the moment of its first emergence (in non-conscious activity).’³¹ To limit the philosophical task merely to the raising of reality into consciousness is therefore to foreclose on the study and description of the non-conscious potencies. Schelling contends that through Fichte’s method, ‘I assume *myself* already in the highest potency, and therefore the question is likewise *only* answered for this potency.’³²

The Schellingian proceeds in the opposite direction: to alter consciousness so that it becomes identical to (and can therefore know) non-conscious reality. That is, instead of altering nature and bringing it into identity with consciousness, what requires changing is consciousness in order to bring it into equality with nature. The philosopher must reduce her intuiting down to the lower potencies, so as to become one with the unperceived, hidden natural world: she must become like nature, immerse herself in it.³³ So, for Schelling the crucial methodological question in fact runs: what need the philosopher do to herself in order to become nature? And the answer is to be found in *abstraction*. In *Über den wahren Begriff der Naturphilosophie*, abstraction is the prac-

30. Hence, ‘abstraction’ names one of the ways by which the Schellingian philosopher refuses the German Idealist arms-race of ‘going-meta’. Abstraction in its Schellingian subversion ends up reinstating the priority of the immanent and the worldly. Schelling ‘abstracts’ in order to philosophise about stones.

31. *Ibid.*, 4:89; 12.

32. *Ibid.*, 4:90; 11; my emphasis.

33. Hence, the ‘of’ in philosophy of nature not only functions as an objective genitive (philosophy *about* nature), but also and primarily as a subjective genitive (philosophy *from the viewpoint of* nature); hence, the inhumanity of the abstractive standpoint.

tice that immerses the philosopher in the world. To repeat the crucial passage in full,

To see the objective in its first coming-into-being is only possible by *depotentiating* the *object* of all philosophising, which in the highest potency is = I, and then constructing, from the beginning, with this object reduced to the first potency. This is only possible through abstraction.³⁴

Nature at *all* of its levels of productivity, not merely the conscious, only becomes visible through a process of abstractive depotentiation by which philosophy shifts away from the high potencies in which Fichte philosophised and scours the low potencies for how nature comes to be. This form of abstraction differentiates Schelling from Fichte: ‘With this abstraction one moves from the realm of the *Wissenschaftslehre* into *pure-theoretical* philosophy.’³⁵ According to the true concept of philosophy of nature, philosophy must be taken to the potency o, to its very depths, through abstraction, before gradually reconstructing reality through all its potencies, mimicking the productive force of nature. The opposition between Schellingian and Fichtean abstraction can thus be schematised according to the following figure:

Highest potency (freedom/pure thetic positing of the I)
↑ Practical abstraction (the beginning of the *Wissenschaftslehre*)
Ordinary/pre-philosophical consciousness
↓ Theoretical abstraction (the beginning of *Naturphilosophie*)
Potency o (non-conscious emergence of nature/pure productivity)

5. Abstraction without Limit

Moreover, this change in orientation takes place because Schelling conceives of abstraction *without limit*, a totalising process of abstracting that not only indifferentiates all objects of experience, but the subject (and so the very act of abstracting) as well. For Fichte, abstraction reaches a limit with the subject; for Schelling it occurs without limits. The Schellingian process of abstraction neutralises *both the subjective* and the objective, so as to bring about pure indifference.

34. Ibid., 4:90; 12.

35. Ibid.

Hence, the *Identitätssystem* itself begins in Schelling's 1801 *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie* with an initial methodological moment of abstraction from *both* what is subjective *and* what is objective.³⁶ The first of the five propositions with which this essay started begins thus,

I call *reason* absolute reason or reason as it is conceived as the total indifference of the subjective and the objective... Reason's thought is foreign to everyone: to conceive it as absolute, and thus to come to the standpoint I require, one must abstract from what does the thinking. For the one who performs this abstraction reason immediately ceases to be something subjective.... [Reason] can of course no longer be conceived as something objective either, since an objective something... only becomes possible in contrast to a thinking something, from which there is complete abstraction here.³⁷

Both the subject and the object are neutralised so as to isolate what Schelling here calls 'the total indifference of the subjective and the objective.' Insofar as one abstracts from what is subjective for consciousness, one abstracts from what is objective for consciousness too. This is for the simple reason that one is inhumanly abstracting from consciousness as such, and so from the structural opposition of subjectivity and objectivity that it establishes. It is not the case that Fichtean abstraction merely removes what is objective, while Schellingian abstraction neutralises the subjective; rather, Schelling shows that the 'true' process of abstraction—and the only one that is coherent—is one which is shown to neutralise both the subjective and the objective insofar as they are qualitatively distinct in the name of a 'pure' subject-object.

Therefore, *complete abstraction generates absolute indifference*. This totalising gesture of abstraction presupposes the value—and even terror—of the abstract against the concrete (thereby refusing dialectics) and also the neutralisation of even its own transcendental conditions. What we begin to glimpse in the opening of Schelling's *Identitätssystem*, then, is the structure of a 'good utopia.' Indifferentiation is absolute for Schelling: nothing is posited whatsoever. The philosophical realm is

36. The 1801 *Darstellung* does, nevertheless, still limit abstraction in one way: to the philosophisable. Thus, nonbeing, which Schelling identifies with the non-rational and non-philosophisable in §2 of the work, remains external to its operation, and with it those aspects of reality which the Schelling of 1801 consigns to non-being, e.g. time, force, history and qualitative difference. In many ways, the subsequent attempts at the *Identitätssystem* over the next few years constitute Schelling's repeated attempts to recuperate such aspects for the abstracting philosopher.

37. Schelling, *Werke*, 4:114-5; *Presentation*, 349.

constituted for him by a complete suspension of all judgment (absolute *epochē*). To abstract is to create a space for philosophising indifferent to positing, indifferent to self-consciousness, indeed indifferent to anything subjective or objective whatsoever. Such a philosophical space performs absolute indifference.³⁸

* * *

This textual operation of abstraction also provides a crucial clue to a recurrent question for readers of Schelling's output: what precisely does a philosophical text do? That is, during this period, Schelling is keen to expel many typical modes of argumentation, explanation and description from the genuine philosophical enterprise. For example, he rejects all forms of description based on the category of representation, for they presuppose a dualism in which 'on the one side [stands] thinking and on the other side matter or the empirical in general'³⁹, and thus contravene the demands of identity. Schelling's task is thus to philosophise without recourse to the category of representation (or any of its correlates, such as reflection, correspondence or even adequacy): since representation is an inadequate category for understanding the activity of philosophising, there is a metaphilosophical need to *think philosophical activity without representation*.

In the first of his *Fernere Darstellungen*, Schelling insists, moreover, that deduction, derivation, inference, explanation, even analysis and synthesis, are inadequate modes of cognition.⁴⁰ Insofar as they presuppose the principle of causality or separate and conditioned finite entities, such methods are productive of 'non-knowledge' that 'dissolves into complete nothingness.'⁴¹ In general, 'All these modes of cog-

38. One should also stress the radicality of Schelling's position here: it is through becoming indifferent to consciousness that one gains knowledge. To philosophise, Schelling states, I had 'to posit [the I] as *non-conscious*... not = I.' (Schelling, *Werke*, 4:92; 'On the True Concept', 14) As one depotentiates one's conscious attention, one intensifies one's knowledge. More is known through less—less freedom, less personality, less thinking. This is partly why one ought to designate the perspective made possible by abstraction as an impossible or utopic one; for how is it possible to know without consciousness? How philosophise thoughtlessly? The contemporary significance of these questions can be brought out in reference to questions which haunt Brassier's *Nihil Unbound*: 'How does thought think the death of thought?' i.e. how does 'the subject of philosophy... recognise that he or she is already dead'? Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 223, 239.

39. Schelling, *Werke*, 4:341. On the critique of representation, see further *ibid.*, 6:137-40.

40. Schelling, *Werke*, 4:343-6.

41. *Ibid.*, 4:343-4.

dition are false *per se*, according to their principle. They are an eternal and flowing source of error.—It is not only these specific forms which must change, but the whole outlook must be fully reversed and reconfigured.⁴²

Hence, there remains the question of precisely what Schellingian philosophy does, if description, explanation and all modes of argumentation are unavailable to it. If it does not argue, explain or describe, what then? The answer is, in short, that Schelling's writings are made up of *Darstellungen*: his philosophical texts *exhibit*. The very fact that Schelling entitles so many of his works '*Darstellung*' is itself evidence of this: the task of his texts is to exhibit reality linguistically, or, as he puts it more grandiosely himself, 'Philosophy is the immediate or direct *Darstellung* of the divine.'⁴³ In this way, the first five propositions of the 1801 *Darstellung* consist in, what Schelling elsewhere calls, '*Darstellung* with complete indifference'⁴⁴—a perfect textual symbol of a-thetic space, or (quite literally) 'a figure of the absolute.'⁴⁵ Here, reality instantiates itself a-thetically.

There are two components to this procedure of exhibition: abstraction and construction. This is not the place to discuss Schellingian construction at length⁴⁶, but it is worth noting that these two complementary operations are both non-dialectical, insofar as they produce abstract particulars, rather than concrete universals. Following Kant, Schelling conceives construction as a procedure of exhibiting ideas in intuition, and since intuitions are particulars, constructions are to be understood as particular instantiations of abstract entities.⁴⁷ The abstracted impossible space, which I have been outlining in this essay, is similarly both particular and abstract. The Schellingian text as a whole is an abstract particular: in place of argumentation, explanation or description, the first five propositions of the 1801 *Darstellung* generate abstract particulars in language that are intended to exhibit reality indifferently.

42. *Ibid.*, 4:342. Schelling also attacks modes of critical and sceptical argument in a later section of the work (*ibid.*, 4:350-52).

43. *Ibid.*, 5:381; F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989), 29.

44. *Ibid.*, 5:411; 49.

45. Alberto Toscano, 'Philosophy and the Experience of Construction' in Jane Norman and Alistair Welchman (eds), *The New Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2004), 117.

46. See Whistler, *Schelling's Theory of Symbolic Language*, Chapter Six.

47. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A713/B741, and Schelling's endorsement of this definition in *Werke*, 5:128; F.W.J. Schelling, 'On Construction in Philosophy', trans. Andrew A. Davis and Alexi Kukuljevic in *Epoché* 12.2 (2008), 273.

6. The Utopic Space of the 1801 *Darstellung*

The above Schellingian procedure can, I wish to conclude, be precisely denoted as the *production of a utopic space*. For Schelling's conception of abstraction reinforces the contemporary link between utopia and the neutral, first invoked by Louis Marin in the early '70s and subsequently informing Barthes' 1978 Collège de France lectures (indeed, the figure of the neutral was itself to provide a kind of utopic asylum from the structuralist hegemony of the signifier for Blanchot and those following him).⁴⁸ Even Derrida, whose anti-utopianism often prevents him from properly appropriating the Blanchotian neutral, echoes Fichte in asserting the resistance to dialectics within the operation of neutralisation: 'The movement of the neuter is evidently neither negative nor dialectical.'⁴⁹

It is Marin, however, in his identification of utopia with the neuter, who approaches the a-thetic logic of Schellingian abstraction most closely. For him, the utopic space is 'the place of the neutral'⁵⁰, or more fully, 'the place where mutual neutralisation occurs between contrary properties.'⁵¹ Schelling's performance of immersive abstraction converges with such a definition of utopia, i.e. as 'the discursive expression of the *neutral* (defined as "neither one nor the other" of contraries).'⁵² Here, the contraries of subject and object are reciprocally neutralised, such that this no-place ultimately forms an impossible space. Marin writes,

[Utopia] has no negative function because it comes before judgment or even a position one might take... neither before nor after affirmation or negation but *between* them... Neither yes nor no, true nor false, one nor the other: this is the neutral... This neutral is the span between true and false, opening within discourse a space discourse cannot receive. It is a third term, but a *supplementary* third term, not synthetic.⁵³

The utopic space is an a-thetic space resistant to the dialectical ruses of contradiction and negation; indeed, it is a-Hegelian, or, in Marin's words, 'the zero degree of the Hegelian synthesis.'⁵⁴ Marin expresses this

48. On the above, see R. Teeuwen, 'An Epoch of Rest: Barthes' "Neutral" and the Utopia of Weariness' in *Cultural Critique* 80 (2012), 1-26.

49. Jacques Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 70.

50. Marin, *Utopics*, 11.

51. *Ibid.*, 13.

52. *Ibid.*, xiii.

53. *Ibid.*, 7.

54. *Ibid.*, 7.

resistance to the dialectic through the figure of the zero⁵⁵, indifferent to the instable play of number, prior to judgment, 'what remains after the crossing out of... negation.'⁵⁶

Such a space is nowhere better exemplified in Schelling's output than in the first five propositions of the 1801 *Darstellung*, which perform, as well as describe, the generation of indifference through abstraction. It is only in proposition six⁵⁷ that identity is *posited*, and so the initial (and sole) thesis of the *Identitätssystem* occurs. Propositions one to five, on the contrary, must describe and perform an a-thetic state of affairs, consisting of abstract particulars. These propositions operate according to processes of abstraction, definition and analytic entailment alone. Here, as Schelling repeatedly points out and as we have seen, both the subject and the object are thoroughly neutralised in an act of total abstraction; here emerges a non-dialectical language of indifference. In other words, in the first five propositions of the 1801 *Darstellung*, Schelling abstracts absolutely so as to make manifest an a-thetic, utopic space:

- §1. *Definition.* I call *reason* absolute reason, or reason insofar as it is conceived as the total indifference of the subjective and objective... Reason's thought is foreign to everyone: to conceive it as absolute, and thus to come to the standpoint I require, one must abstract from what does the thinking. For the one who performs this abstraction reason immediately ceases to be something subjective, as most people imagine it. It can of course no longer be conceived as something objective either...
- §2. *Outside reason is nothing, and in it is everything.* If reason is conceived as we have asked in §1, one immediately becomes aware that nothing could be outside it...
- Remark.* There is no philosophy except from the standpoint of the absolute...
- §3. *Reason is simply one and simply self-identical...*
- §4. *The ultimate law for the being of reason, and, since there is nothing outside reason, for all being* (because it is comprehended within reason) *is the law of identity*, which with respect to all being is expressed as $A=A$. The proof follows immediately from §3 and the propositions that precede it...

55. *Ibid.*, xvii-xix, 7.

56. *Ibid.*, 13.

57. Schelling, *Werke*, 4:117; *Presentation*, 351.

- §5. *Definition.* I call the A of the first position the subject, to differentiate it from that of the second, the predicate.
- §6. ... *The unique being posited through this proposition is that of identity itself...*⁵⁸

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58. Schelling, *Werke*, 4:114-7; *Presentation*, 349-51.

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