

Laure Cahen-Maurel

## « The Art of Romanticizing the World. Caspar David Friedrich and Romantic Philosophy »

Deploying romanticism as an intellectual category, this doctoral thesis explores the nature of the painting of C. D. Friedrich (1774-1840) as a form of romantic art. Without turning the painter himself into a romantic philosopher, the concept of German romanticism is subject to a philosophical re-evaluation. And reciprocally: this work also furnishes a new contribution to the research on philosophical romanticism by means of a study of the plastic rather than the literary imagination.

P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J.-L. Nancy's *The Literary Absolute* (1978), took as their theoretical reference for romanticism "the strictly indefinite program" of the *Athenaeum* texts of the Schlegel brothers. In contrast to that reading, this investigation refocuses the interpretation of romanticism on the thought of Novalis (1772-1801). The main title of this PhD-thesis, "The Art of Romanizing the World," alludes to fragment 105 of Novalis's *Poeticisms* of 1798: "The world must be romanticized. This is how the original meaning will be found". Novalis explains in 12 condensed lines the precise meaning he accords to the word "romantic" and to the program of a "romantic philosophy." Accordingly, our topic is not German romanticism as a single exclusive category, but to philosophically determine Novalis's conception of romanticism.

The Novalisian program considers romanticism as an *operational* concept. Thus, in addition to the ordinary meaning of the word "art", understood as a produced or created object, our choice of the expression "the art of" furthermore refers to the *method* of the object's production. It was on the basis of this duality of meaning that we sought to establish whether and to what degree the art of romanticizing the world was a point of convergence capable of linking the divergences of Caspar David Friedrich and Novalis, that is, two major figures, and two sources of paintings and texts, which are *prima facie* of a heterogeneous nature, and whose points of approximation and convergence are not a priori self-evident.

The first three chapters consider the works of C. D. Friedrich. On the one hand, they study the hermeticism of their effects of meaning in terms of content, trying to situate the symbolism of this painting within the conceptual opposition of symbol and allegory. The specificity of symbolism in Friedrich is also taken into account by a detailed analysis of Hegel's judgment of the artist in his first Berlin course of aesthetics of 1820/21. Hegel's criticism was the fruit of a direct contact with the work of the Dresden painter, and this has been scarcely examined in the secondary literature. The philosopher's critique of Friedrich's painting style essentially reiterates his attack on the early romantics: the type of symbolism employed by the painter – enigmas obscuring their readability – descends for Hegel into a pernicious subjectivism, like the Novalisian beautiful soul or Schlegelian irony, insofar as this painting strips its canvases of any substantial content. On the other hand, this study highlights how Friedrich's works revolutionize the category of landscape: there is an absence of a framework, losses of reference to the place of origin of the gaze, the horizon, and geographic location, and an interaction with the *Rückenfigur*. This blurs the classical

conception of the window, a paradigm of imitation painting, by adding to the transitive element of the *veduta*, an intransitive element of the landscape-reflection as a mirror capturing what is out-of-frame, reflecting the partly invisible interiority of the artist.

The next three chapters offer an immanent interpretation of the understanding that Early German Romanticism had of itself. They aim to elucidate the concepts at stake in the definition of the romantization of the world, a form of philosophy for Novalis insofar as it serves as a quest for meaning. The theory of romantization remains incomprehensible unless placed within the general framework of Novalis's overall metaphysics: a conception of the absolute, a unity of matter and spirit. Novalis's specifically modern transcendental approach claims to overcome modernity's crisis of meaning arising from the fragmentation of unity: his concept of the *world* structures its conception of romanticism within a transcendental perspective as a space of factuality. Retracing the Kantian-Fichtean line of the poetic-practical extension of reason in Novalis's thought, this PhD also considers the question of the imagination and the well-known notion of "transcendental poetry". It does this in the light of a detailed examination of Fichte's only writing explicitly devoted in its entirety to the question of art and aesthetic intuition: *Über Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie* (written in 1795, published in 1800).

Romanticism in Novalis's sense is explicitly intelligible because it refers to a rigorously defined method: the operation of potentialisation and its opposite, logarithmization. In practice, this method is usually only applied in the quantitative field of mathematics. Yet for Novalis it must now be given an unprecedented qualitative and imaginative extension, in the modelled supplied by organic growth and the philosophy of nature. Here mystery plays a decisive role in the poetic-artistic extension of potentialisation. Novalis develops a concept of mystery as an aesthetics of stimulation or physiology of art.

Finally, this PhD thesis also addresses the neglected question of Novalis's conception of plastic imagination and landscape painting. It demonstrates that Novalis's reflections on landscape extend beyond the then new phenomenological theory of painting as an art that reveals what it is to see, proposed by Wilhelm Schlegel in *Die Gemälde* (1799). Novalis adds to this a reference to Herder's *Plastik* (1778), e.g. a reflection on the concrete and tangible force of the beautiful. The central importance Herder ascribes to the experience of one's own body allows Novalis to conceive, at the intersection of two epochs as it were, the antique and the modern, something akin to a landscape-body.

The final chapter of the work returns to the issues presented in the first three chapters. It reconsiders in detail the dominant interpretations of the romanticism of Friedrich's painting, the theories of fragmentation and indetermination against a background of a loss of unity and meaning, their esotericism and a passivity peculiar to religion, and the question of the romantic sublime. It concludes by precisely determining the extent to which Friedrich and his art should be designated as *romantic*, above all in line with Novalis's aesthetics as an "art of romanticizing the world".