Naturalism and Symbolism

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The thesis defended below runs as follows: Schelling’s construction of symbolic language is to be understood as an application of *Naturphilosophie*; indeed, more generally, the concept of the symbol theorised anew in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Germany was predominantly a *naturphilosophische* concept, and its transfer into the discourses of aesthetics and ultimately linguistics was one instance of a broader project (represented, in what follows, by Schelling and A.W. Schlegel) to understand aesthetic phenomena through the explanatory framework of naturalism. Such a thesis calls for two investigations: (a) a historical inquiry into the question of *whether* theorists of the symbol did indeed understand the symbol—and in Schelling’s case, symbolic language—naturalistically; (b) a systematic inquiry into *how* language can be made sense of on *naturphilosophische* models. For reasons of space, what follows is for the most part restricted to the first inquiry, although I make some remarks on the second towards the end.

[A] ‘Meaning here is simultaneously being itself’

[B] *The structure of the symbol*

The most historically-effective feature of the redefinition of the symbol in German theory at the end of the eighteenth century has proven to be its differentiation from allegory. Goethe’s first attempt at this distinction in 1797 reads: ‘There are also works of art that shine by means of understanding, wit and gallantry, in which we also include all allegory. Very little good can be expected from these, because they destroy the interest of the presentation itself and, as it were, repel the spirit into itself and withdraw one’s eyes from what is really presented. The allegorical is differentiated from the symbolical by the fact that the former signifies indirectly, the latter directly.’ (*Gegenstände* 130) Nevertheless, to define the symbol as an aesthetic mode of presentation opposed to allegory—or even, more substantively, to specify that the symbol signifies ‘directly’—does not yet provide a full description of the concept of the symbol and its operations. Indeed, this led to numerous variations in how the symbol was further determined: for some, it revealed a transcendent, ineffable reality; for others, it evoked an excess of meaning within the self.[[1]](#footnote-1) This qualification notwithstanding, for almost all theorists of the symbol from 1797 to around 1810, one invariant feature was *the symbol’s indifferentiation of meaning and being*. It is this feature that lent itself to naturalistic interpretation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Four examples of its deployment during this period will exemplify this claim:

*[i] Schelling:* Schelling’s account of the symbol in his lectures on the philosophy of art first given at the University of Jena in 1802/3 and repeated at the University of Würzburg in 1804/5 centres on the claim: ‘Meaning here is simultaneously being itself, passed over into the object itself and one with it.’ (49) He continues, ‘That presentation… where neither the universal means the particular nor the particular the universal, but rather *where both are absolutely one*, is the symbolic.’ (46) For Schelling, the symbol indifferentiates meaning and being—that is, the symbol [*Sinnbild*] is an image [*Bild*] whose meaning [*Sinn*] is identical with it; it is, in Schelling’s words, ‘as concrete and self-identical as the image, and yet as universal and significant as the concept.’ (49)

*[ii] Goethe:* In a 1797 letter to Schiller, Goethe speaks for the first time of a kind of image, labelled ‘symbolic’, that is ‘eminent’, lays claim ‘to a certain oneness and universality’ and ‘annul[s] the contradiction’ between mind and world (*Correspondence* 1:372-3). He continues a few months later in the draft essay on sculpture quoted from above: subjective feeling ‘coincides with the best and highest objects and they are made symbolic. The objects presented in this way appear to stand only for themselves but are again meaningful in what is most deep.’ (*Gegenstände* 129-30) Again, there is the sense that symbolic meaning is inherent in the image itself.[[3]](#footnote-3) Goethe will later describe this as ‘seeing the universal in the particular’, such that one is already ‘in possession of the universal, without realising it’ (*Maxims* §261). Sørensen glosses Goethe’s definition of the symbol thus, ‘In the symbol, universal meaning merges with an individual object; the symbol is at the same time meaningful and autonomous; without any external end and without any reference to anything external, it is contained completely in itself, but despite this contains infinite meaning.’ (255)

*[iii] A.W. Schlegel:* The notion of the symbol as formulated anew by Goethe was taken up by A.W. Schlegel in his Berlin lectures on aesthetics, given in Winter 1801. Here Schlegel identifies symbolism as a mode of describing ‘how the infinite can appear in the finite’ in art and, following Goethe, he conceives the symbol as that which ‘binds together and merges’ mind and world, meaning and image. (2:81) That is, here too meaning is identical to being. It is, moreover, these Berlin lectures that Schelling borrowed from Schlegel, had copied and then ‘read feather in hand’ as he began to draft his own lectures on the philosophy of art in which, as we have already seen, the symbolic identity of meaning and being was to be made so explicit.

*[iv] Humboldt*: Wilhelm von Humboldt also theorised the symbol in this way. In a series of essays on Greek art and politics written between 1806 and 1808, he distinguishes the symbol from allegory: ‘The concept of the symbol is not always grasped correctly, and often confused with allegory.’ The distinguishing feature of symbolism, he continues, is the manner in which it exhibits ‘that which is presented’ as a component part of ‘the presentation itself’ (*Geschichte* 203-4). Once again, in symbolic forms, the idea—meaning—is to be conceived as identical with its presentation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

[B] *Interpretations of the meaning/being identity*

What results from this identity of meaning and being is the following claim: sense exists. When added to the thoroughgoing naturalism of Schelling and (to a lesser extent) other theorists of the symbol, this further leads to the conclusion that sense exists in nature and as a product of nature. A provisional example of this naturalistic interpretation of the symbol can be found in Goethe’s *Farbenlehre*. Here Goethe defines the symbolic as ‘an application [of colour], coinciding entirely with nature… The colour would be employed in conformity with its effect and would at once express its meaning.’ (§916) That is, meaning is ‘directly’ expressed in the symbolic, and such direct expression is made possible by the ‘entire’ coincidence of symbol and nature. When colour is understood as a part of nature, it is symbolic. As Hamm puts it more generally (807), through this deployment of the category of the symbolic, ‘Goethe attempted to secure for “nature”… a “sense” independent of human meanings.’

What I want to suggest in the following is that, when it comes to language, the theorisation of such mind-independent pieces of sense existing within the natural world is a significant contribution to linguistic thought and bears broad comparison to some positions in philosophy of language. For example, the basic claim articulated by all theorists of the symbol that meaning here gains a form of existence approximates to some of the more esoteric aspects of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophies of language. Symbolic meaning gains being in a way that is broadly comparable to the mode of being granted by Meinong to meanings as auxiliary objects or to the objective existence of sense in a third realm speculated upon by Frege. Similarly, it bears comparison to Deleuze’s ontologies of sense, both in his early engagement with Hyppolite (which, it should be remembered, was contemporaneous with his own redeployment of the notion of the symbol)[[5]](#footnote-5) and in his recovery of Frege’s ‘third realm’ in the *Logique du sens*. However, theorists of symbolic language go further still than this ontologisation of sense; they fully *naturalise* it. Meanings are conceived as natural objects immanent to the physical domain, rather than acorporeal surface effects or entities in a quasi-Platonic third realm. And here there are comparisons to be drawn with contemporary forms of semantic naturalism, even if fundamental differences separate the two viewpoints. I return to these comparisons at the end of the paper.

However, when encountering this claim to the identity of meaning and being in theories of the symbol, commentators have rarely taken up the naturalistic interpretation. Instead, they have tended to look to a theological past for explanations. Such an identity, it is most often claimed, reflects a general romantic tendency to reinject meaning back into an inert world. As such, the symbol is read through the lens of the secularisation thesis as a redeployment of a premodern worldview in which being is always already full of significance independently of human intentions. As Blumenberg put it, ‘Probably nothing in the terminology of aesthetics is as instructive in regard to the problematic of secularisation as is the concept of a “symbol”.’ (111) From Benjamin onwards, the way that the symbol makes being meaningful is conceived as an ‘authentically theological’ moment in a post-theological age, supposedly demonstrating that German aesthetics in the *Goethezeit* was not as ‘modern’ as we tend to think of it.[[6]](#footnote-6) The symbol is, on this view, exemplary of counter-Enlightenment sites of resistance or, in Charles Taylor’s terminology, part of a romantic process of *reenchanting the world*: the hegemony of modern nominalism is resisted through embedding meanings back into being, alongside (and not purely within) minds.[[7]](#footnote-7) For a symbolic worldview, meaning exists already outside us, and so the external world no longer forms a deposit of dead matter governed by mechanical laws. As Hayes puts it, ‘Meaning therefore necessarily inheres in all of the world’s apparently accidental and meaningless phenomena.’ (282)

A similar reading of the meaning/being relation is provided in Halmi’s *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*. A great part of Halmi’s genealogy is aimed against those, particularly in Coleridge Studies, who attempt to understand the symbol solely as a modern expression of pre-modern worldviews.[[8]](#footnote-8) Halmi’s switch to the language of ‘compensation’ or Blumenbergian ‘reoccupation’ (115, 121) is meant to dilute some of these more reactionary interpretations. Nevertheless, Halmi’s ‘compensation story’ retains the counter-modern explanatory framework: the symbol formed part of ‘the task of compensating for the objectification of nature by modern science and technology’ (36). By shifting the domain of meaning away from the abstractions of the modern mind—its conceptual models and formulae—the symbol helped satisfy a need to make truth sensible and perceptible. This, as with the more general revival of aesthetics in the second half of the eighteenth century, was a ‘vindication of visibility’ (65), restoring ‘the primacy of manifest experience in the subject’s relation to the outside world’ (46).

I want to focus on the flipside of this identity of being and meaning. That is, while these secularisation narratives (however strong or weak) focus on the symbolic process of the making meaningful of being, I want to scrutinise the idea of giving being to meaning—the constitution of an ‘ontology of sense’ through symbolisation. In line with Schelling’s commitments to *Naturphilosophie*, what is is to be understood naturalistically, and sense is no exception. The symbol naturalises meaning, and so a theory of the symbol—in part—consists in a *Naturphilosophie* of sense. Implicit here is the further claim that, whatever else is going on, theories of the symbol in the *Goethezeit* continue and radicalise the early modern project of understanding the world naturalistically—that is, using the dynamics of the physical object to understand all of reality, sense included. In other words, commentaries on the symbol that deploy theological, mythological and reactionary discourses need to be supplemented, and occasionally supplanted, by the discourses of naturalism—or, perhaps even, such theological and mythological discourses themselves need to be understood naturalistically.

[A] Naturalism

[B] *The meaning of naturalism*

To begin to understand the naturalistic interpretation of the meaning/being identity, two preliminary clarifications are necessary. The first concerns the meaning of ‘naturalism’.

Much ink has been split recently on the relation of German Idealism to naturalism, and Ben Woodard’s contribution to this volume provides a fuller summary than I can here.[[9]](#footnote-9) Basically put, following Strawson (1), contemporary naturalism has been divided in two: the ‘hard’ naturalist is a reductionist, such that values and meaning are to be solely explained in terms of biological and physical processes; ‘soft’ naturalism is a response to this. There is much one could say about the place of Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* in this schema; however, I will limit myself to the following claim: the naturalism propounded by theorists of the symbol—and for the rest of this section, I take Schelling as representative—offers an alternative to the false dichotomy of hard and soft naturalisms. And this is because *Naturphilosophie* as Schelling conceives it has two pertinent characteristics: (a) it provides an exhaustive account of the basic stuff of reality in terms of natural forces; (b) it nevertheless refuses merely to reduce value and meaning to this ‘basic stuff’; instead, they retain strict autonomy.

This is, in other words, Schelling’s ‘higher realism’ (*Freedom* 26). In the *Freiheitsschrift*, for instance, Schelling includes moral and other value-laden phenomena within his naturalistic worldview: he attempts, that is, to provide some account of how God and freedom are assemblages of natural forces or ‘vital activating powers’ (30). This is, moreover, a necessary part of his overall project in philosophy of nature, as it had been developing since the late 1790s: the inclusion of all phenomena within its purview. Grant labels this fundamental motivation ‘the extensity test’ (19-21)—and it evidently corresponds to the first element of Schellingian naturalism set out above: the necessity for an exhaustive account of reality as nature. This leads to, in Grant’s words, ‘an uninterrupted physicalism leading from “the real to the ideal”’ (11) Moreover, in the *Erster Entwurf*, Schelling sets out two principles that supplement the absolute extensity of nature with the unquestionable priority of naturalistic explanation:

1. *Autonomy of Nature*: Since Nature gives itself its sphere of activity, no foreign power can interfere with it; all of its laws are immanent.
2. *Autarchy of Nature*: Whatever happens in Nature must also be explained from the active and motive principles which lie in it. (17)

Not only is nature absolute, the only way of interpreting this absolute is naturalistic—that is, reality calls for an interpretation that explains phenomena solely by means of principles immanent to nature.

And yet, even within this overarching naturalistic account, the value-laden phenomena under discussion in the *Freiheitsschrift* remain autonomous. This becomes clear in Schelling’s reinterpretation of ‘the meaning of the copula in judgment’ (12). Schelling here explicitly tackles how one might understand the principle, ‘The essence of the moral world is also the essence of the world of nature’ (13). He rejects such statements as expressions of absolute sameness, which would thereby reduce morality to nature, or nature to freedom. For him, such reductivism is grounded on a ‘general misunderstanding of the law of identity’ that erroneously insists on absolute sameness between the subject and predicate (13). Instead, he claims forcefully, ‘The unity of this law [of identity] is of an intrinsically creative kind… Dependence does not exclude autonomy or even freedom. Dependence does not determine the nature of the dependent’ (18). In other words, value may be dependent upon nature, but can nevertheless remain free from it. Such an account thus satisfies the two features of Schellingian naturalism set out above: to explain the emergence of meanings from nature, while simultaneously maintaining their fundamental autonomy.

In the opening pages of the *Erster Entwurf,* Schelling establishes a distinction between nature as pure productivity and natural products: on the one hand, nature consists in ‘unconditional’ and ‘infinite’ productivity; on the other hand, natural products are temporary and finite inhibitions of this activity (14-6). This dual perspective on the natural world defines Schellingian naturalism: there is the genetic perspective of the eternal act of producing and there is the phenomenal perspective of separate, static natural products. Schelling insists that the latter perspective (that of the phenomenal experience of nature as a series of objects) is thoroughly inadequate: ‘Nature exists nowhere as product; all individual productions in Nature are merely apparent products, not the absolute product that always becomes and never is, and in which the absolute activity exhausts itself.’ (16) He writes earlier in the text, ‘The unconditioned cannot be sought in any individual “thing” nor in anything of which one can say that it… It is being itself, and as such, it does not exhibit itself entirely in any finite product, and every individual is, as it were, a particular expression of it.’ (13) Nature is not to be found in its products, but solely in its constructing activity.

This dual perspective provides some kind of explanation for the above account of Schelling’s distinctive brand of naturalism. Genetically, everything forms part of the one primal productive force that is nature. Nature is absolute and omnipresent; there is nothing else. Yet, this does not hold for the objects that actually appear, which are not to be identified with nature properly understood. In other words, from the genetic perspective of the on-going becoming of nature, hard naturalism holds, while from the phenomenal perspective, natural objects appear autonomous, distinct and irreducible, and so the naturalism is liberal. Schelling’s naturalism is genetically maximal and phenomenally minimal.

[B] *Aesthetic naturalism*

In his assault on the concept of the symbol, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, Paul de Man explicitly marks out a boundary (189) between those who ‘stand out’ as theorists of the symbol (such as Schelling) and those who resist and disrupt such theory (Friedrich Schlegel, for example). In a similar vein, W.A. O’Brien’s *Novalis* (347) draws a distinction between the ‘Idealist ideology of the symbol’ as found in Schelling and Goethe on the one hand and the Jena Romantics with their commitment to the fragmentary, open-ended and playful nature of allegory on the other. This contrast is present more generally in much recent scholarship on German Romanticism from Behler to Frank: the writings of Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel (in particular) are considered ‘more relevant to modern critical consciousness’ (Seyhan 18).

Problems with such a neat classification are not too hard to discern. A.W. Schlegel, for example, is implicitly separated from the Jena Romantic movement he helped found, while theorists of the symbol are in general labelled ‘Idealist’ despite the fact that Schelling is the only Idealist philosopher consistently cited in this regard. It is even difficult to construct any kind of concerted resistance to the idea of the symbol from a reading of Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel’s works of the period.[[10]](#footnote-10) Part of what is at issue here is that commitment to the idea of the symbol, and its naturalisation of meaning, cuts across traditional groupings of *Goethezeit* theorists. To remain merely with the two figures under discussion in what follows: allegiance to the symbol groups together one of the founders of Jena Romanticism, but one whose theoretical credentials are often questioned because he remained partly in thrall to classicist discourse; and a philosopher, heir to Fichte and ally (at this juncture) of Hegel, who participated in the life of the Romantic circle. It is pretty evident that traditional labels such as ‘romantic’, ‘idealist’ and ‘classicist’ do not help.

In fact, one aim in this essay is to show that what in fact unites theorists of the symbol is participation in a more general project to naturalise aesthetic phenomena—that is, they each turn aesthetics into a branch of *Naturphilosophie*. The concept of the symbol becomes, then, a key tool in understanding the aesthetic sphere naturalistically. Such a project is difficult to classify as either idealist or romantic, for the symbol during the *Goethezeit* is many things, but a strictly ‘romantic symbol’ is not one of them.[[11]](#footnote-11)

[B] *Symbolism and Naturphilosophie*

The symbol is not primarily an aesthetic concept. Indeed, both Sørensen and Titzmann—who disagree on almost all points of interpretation concerning the history of the symbol—agree that the concept was primarily drawn from *Naturphilosophie* and only then imported occasionally into aesthetic theory. In Titzmann’s words, the symbol is ‘certainly *not merely an aesthetic [concept]*, and it is perhaps even *not primarily an aesthetic one*.’ (643) Even Goethe, the fount of literary theory’s distinction between allegory and symbol, elaborates on symbolism most fully in his *naturphilosophische* writings, such as the 1805 essay, *Symbolik*, and the discussion of the perception of colour in the *Farbenlehre*.

Schelling came to Jena as Extraordinary Professor of Philosophy in 1798 on the recommendation of Goethe, who significantly speaks of Jena providing ‘a company in which he might be guided in experience and experiments, and prosecute an enthusiastic study of nature.’[[12]](#footnote-12) Accordingly, Schelling’s output over the next few years was primarily in the field of *Naturphilosophie*—and it is in these *naturphilosophische* works (perhaps, partly, because of Goethe’s personal influence[[13]](#footnote-13)) that the concept of the symbol begins to be developed by Schelling.

Schelling’s earliest substantive employment of the concept of the symbol in the *Abhandlungen* is determinative for what follows:

If the human spirit is of an *organic* nature, nothing will enter into it *mechanically from the outside*; whatever is in it, [the spirit] has configured to itself *from the inside out* in accordance with an inner principle… Whatever is absolutely purposive *is in itself complete and perfected*. It contains within itself *the origin and the final purpose* of its existence… In purposiveness, form and matter, concept and intuition interpenetrate. Precisely this is the character of the spirit wherein the Ideal and the Real are absolutely united. Hence there is something *symbolic* in every organism, and every plant is, so to speak, *an arabesque delineation of the soul*. (92)

A close connection between the organism and the symbol is present from the first in Schelling’s writings.[[14]](#footnote-14) ‘Symbol’ describes a self-organising portion of nature, whose ideal purpose or concept (meaning, in a broad sense) is inherent in its being. The symbolic identity of meaning and being is formulated first by Schelling in a *naturphilosophische* context—and what is more, similar characterisations of the symbol run through all of Schelling’s writings in the late 1790s: the *Erster Entwurf* (96, 150, 176, 181), the *Allgemeine Deduktion* (*Werke* 4:33), and the *naturphilosophische* section of the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (122).

It is in the *Einleitung* to the *Erster Entwurf*, however, that Schelling gives axiomatic status to this concept of the symbol: ‘Here at the very beginning we lay down the principle that *since the organic product is the product in the second power, the organic construction of the product must be, at least, the symbol [*Sinnbild*]* *of the original construction of every product*.’ (217; translation modified[[15]](#footnote-15)) This passage was written in close collaboration with Goethe; indeed, Schelling wrote of the period of its composition: ‘I was with [Goethe] for a long time every day, and had to read aloud my work on *Naturphilosophie* and explain it to him. What a fluorescence of ideas these conversations have produced for me, you can well imagine.’ (*Briefe* 1:176-7; translated in Richards 464) And so it is therefore not surprising that the concept of the symbol is given such an important role—and tied so closely to potentiation, which is itself partially a recapitulation of Goethean *Steigerung*. Symbolic presentations are potentiated images, the intensification of being to a higher level, i.e. a level at which meaning is inherent to being. When one turns to Schelling’s lectures on the philosophy of art, in consequence, there is little reason to doubt its naturalistic undercurrent. As Schelling had already suggested in his earlier *naturphilosophische* writings, the symbol is a potentiated presentation in which being and meaning, real and ideal, are intimately united.

[A] Historical inquiry I: A.W. Schlegel

[B] *Schlegel and Schelling*

At the very same time as Schelling was producing so much *naturphilosophische* material on the symbol, he was also studying the *Divina Commedia* with A.W. Schlegel to improve his Italian, and the two ‘remained on astonishingly good terms’ (Richards 175) even through the personal tribulations that were to follow. They carried on an extensive correspondence in 1802-3 and it is in these letters that Schelling confessed his admiration for Schlegel’s 1801 Berlin lectures:

Your manuscript would be of excellent service to me, so as to keep myself orientated… and spare me much inquiry… Could you let me copy your manuscript in Berlin at my own cost and send it here towards the middle of next month, or even leave it with me until then to get a copy of it here, then I would be highly bound to you for it. In the hope that some of my ideas have perhaps even been useful to you, or in the future I could tell you more about such things, I will make use of your work thankfully, so long as my power of assimilation allows. (*Briefe* 2:436)

Schelling continues a month later, ‘Your manuscript on aesthetics gives me unnameable pleasure; it delights me to read it. A part of it I am in the process of having completely copied, another part I read with feather in hand.’ (2:449)[[16]](#footnote-16) Schelling draws attention to the scale of his own appropriation of Schlegel’s work on aesthetics for his own *Philosophie der Kunst*, but at the same time he also entertains the idea that the lines of influence proceed in both directions—and it is obvious from Schlegel’s original lecture course that this is indeed the case.

That is, Schlegel’s own initial employment of the symbol in the 1801 Berlin lectures occurs in the middle of a discussion of Schelling’s *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*. Schlegel writes,

According to Schelling, the beautiful is the infinite represented in finite form… I entirely agree with this definition, but I would prefer to define it in the following manner: the beautiful is a symbolic presentation of the infinite. Stated in this way, it becomes clear how the infinite can appear in the finite. (2:81; translation: 209)

Schelling had not employed ‘symbol’ in the concluding aesthetics portion of the *System*; however, Schlegel takes a term that had been employed most extensively in Schelling’s writings on *Naturphilosophie*—and redeploys it as the central concept in a definition of beauty; in so doing, he appropriates a *naturphilosophische* concept for aesthetic theory.

Traces of the concept’s *naturphilosophische* origins are still discernible. For instance, Schlegel’s conception of infinity in the above is explicitly styled as a natural force, rather than anything transcendent or theological: ‘One should not consider the infinite a philosophical fiction, one should not look for it in the beyond: it surrounds us everywhere, we can never escape it; we live, breathe, and dwell in the infinite.’ (2:81; translation: 209) The symbol manifests this infinite productivity in finite form. As we have seen, Schelling’s *Erster Entwurf* is similarly premised on a distinction between infinite productivity (nature itself) and its finite manifestations (natural objects). Schelling had claimed, as discussed above, that finite individuals in nature must fail to express this productive force, since the force itself—as unconditional and infinite—can never manifest itself entirely in a conditioned individual. Such a claim articulates a problem common to much of Schelling’s work as well as that of the Jena Romantics—the problem of the derivation of the finite from the infinite or ‘how the infinite can appear in the finite’, in Schlegel’s words above. One of the crucial, if implicit advantages of the concept of the symbol for Schlegel in the above passage (as well as later for Schelling in the *Philosophie der Kunst*) is its ability to resolve this problem of individuation and thereby provide a conceptual model for the complete manifestation of nature’s infinite productivity in its finite products. As Schlegel puts it almost in direct response to Schelling’s *Erster Entwurf*, ‘How can the infinite be brought to the surface, to appearance? Only symbolically.’ (2:81; translation: 207)

[B] *A natural history of art*

Schelling had in A.W. Schlegel an immediate precursor in his endeavour to naturalise aesthetic and linguistic phenomena. What is immediate evident in Schlegel’s 1801 Berlin lectures is a resolute, if often implicit insistence on importing the methods, and sometimes even the content, of *Naturphilosophie* into aesthetic theory. This had of course been an essential feature of Jena Romantic theorising since the mid-1790s: one need only consider the frequency of Friedrich Schlegel’s deployment of potentiation or Novalis’ use of mineralogical models. In all such cases, aesthetics had begun to be understood through a naturalistic framework.[[17]](#footnote-17) My argument in this essay is not meant to downplay these contributions to aesthetic naturalism; rather, there is at least one feature of A.W. Schlegel and Schelling’s accounts that, I am contending, goes beyond these earlier efforts: the wholesale use of the symbol as a *naturphilosophische* concept deployed within aesthetics.[[18]](#footnote-18) A few examples of the naturalistic treatment of art in Schlegel’s lectures help substantiate the above:

[i] Particularly revealing is Schlegel’s description of his task in these lectures as a ‘natural history of art [*Naturgeschichte der Kunst*]’ (2:230), a phrase he redeploys in the section on poetics as ‘a natural history of poetry [*Naturgeschichte der Poesie*]’ (2:231). Schlegel’s reference is evidently to classificatory systems of natural history, but more specifically he presumably also has in mind Schelling’s famous insistence that ‘philosophy is nothing other than a *natural history of our mind* [*Naturlehre unseres Geistes*]’ in his 1797 *Ideen* (30). Here Schelling had transformed the task of transcendental philosophy into a series of descriptions of the actual conditions productive of consciousness—and the phrase ‘natural history’ underlined that such conditions were to be natural ones.[[19]](#footnote-19) Such a contention is implicitly polemical, attacking Fichte’s interpretation of the critical project as a *pragmatic* history of the human mind. This contrast between naturalistic and ethical understandings of philosophy will become increasingly significant in the second half of this essay; for now, what is important to note is the fact that Schlegel takes Schelling’s part against Fichte: Schlegel follows Schelling in naturalising the transcendental, but goes beyond anything Schelling had attempted by 1801 in providing a *Naturphilosophie* of the aesthetic domain.[[20]](#footnote-20)

[ii] Schlegel frequently redeploys some of the central concepts of *Naturphilosophie* in his aesthetic theory. As I have already suggested, his use of ‘symbol’ can be understood in this light; however, a less controversial example is potentiation. The idea that nature continually recapitulates in ever higher forms is held by Schelling, Kielmeyer, Eschenmayer and Goethe, among others; and similarly Schlegel speaks of the history of art as a process of recapitulation (‘The perfectly intuitive history of art would therefore be, even if in prosaic form, a poetry in the second potency’ (2:23)). Below I consider his account of the origin of language through the prism of the concept of potentiation.

[iii] There are other brief recourses to *naturphilosophische* concepts. For example, Schlegel compares types of art criticism to the division between atomistic and dynamic physics set out in Schelling’s *Erster Entwurf* (2:27); he derives the characteristics of each of the major art-forms from the physical features and operations of the five human senses (2:101-4); and in line with many other aesthetic naturalists, he deploys the organism as a paradigmatic interpretative framework for explaining the artwork (2:13). In fact, in his discussion of organic forms as ‘their own cause and effect’, Schlegel makes explicit reference to Schelling as ‘a sharp-witted physicist’, drawing attention to a passage from the *Erster Entwurf* in which organisms are compared ‘to vortexes or whirlpools in the general stream of causes and effects’ (2:98; translation: 225).[[21]](#footnote-21) If nothing else, this demonstrates that Schlegel had the *Erster Entwurf* very much in mind as he composed his lectures.

[iv] The most obvious debt Schlegel owes to *Naturphilosophie* is evident in his discussion of the idea that art should imitate nature (2:84-92; translation: 213-20). Here he explicitly invokes Schelling’s ‘higher physics’ to help elaborate a conception of nature as ‘creative’ pure productivity (2: 91; translation: 219), thereby rejecting a conception of nature ‘as specific isolated objects in the outside world.’ (2:89; translation: 217) The distinction between finite natural products that inadequately express nature and the unconditioned force of productivity itself—at play in Schelling’s *Erster Entwurf*—is thus fully reproduced. Schlegel’s dependence on this *naturphilosophische* conception of nature is most evident in the following concluding passage to the discussion,

The dead and empirical view of the world holds that things exist; the philosophical, that everything is caught up in an eternal becoming, in a never-ending creation… This universal power of creation cannot be exhausted in any single product, and we can never perceive it with our external senses. (2:90-1; translation: 218-9)

[B] *A semi-natural history of language*

In the twenty-third hour of the lecture course, Schlegel turns to a detailed reconstruction of his promised ‘natural history of poetics’, which now takes the form of a post-Kantian recasting of the eighteenth-century origin of language debate. That is, he asks, ‘How do we obtain language? Where does it come from?’ (2:234) To resume, the original debate was triggered by Condillac’s thought-experiment in his 1746 *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* that explained the origins of language by means of two abandoned children spontaneously and—to his critics—implausibly beginning to communicate to each other from scratch (113-6). In the build-up to the climactic Berlin Academy competition of 1771[[22]](#footnote-22), the disputing camps in the debate were arrayed along the lines of invention versus revelation—that is, between those (like Rousseau and Herder) who claimed that language was in some way the spontaneous invention of human beings and those like Süssmilch who believed it could only plausibly be accounted for as coming to humans heteronomously from a divine other. Schlegel is very aware that his topic here is

the problem of *the origin of language*, which preoccupied philosophers long ago and on which a quantity of books have been written in modern times. Very often this problem has given rise to a confusion between the philosophical—that is, the deduction of language from the nature of the human spirit and the exposition of the process it must necessarily follow—and the historical, what has really happened, or what one thinks could be known of it… Out of which emerge a host of insupportable hypotheses. (2:234-5)

Two features distinguish Schlegel’s account from the eighteenth-century version of the debate. First and in line with transcendental explanations more generally, Schlegel is interested in the *necessary* conditions of language-use, rather than its historically contingent emergence. As he puts it elsewhere in the lectures, ‘The natural history of art is the exposition of its necessary origin.’ (2:230) Secondly, such a shift to the register of the necessary requires him to jettison many of the anthropocentric powers and abilities that previous accounts relied on. In particular, Schlegel rejects those previous attempts in this field that ‘presupposed the faculty of knowing and recognising representations with the aid of signs.’ (2:235)

Schlegel’s precursor in making such claims is Fichte, whose 1795 intervention in the debate, *Von der Sprachfähigkeit und dem Ursprung der Sprache*, is similarly framed as a reply to its eighteenth-century sources. Just as Schlegel will, Fichte begins by criticising all previous contributions to the debate in terms of the contingent/necessary distinction:

One cannot be satisfied merely with showing that and how some language or other might have been invented; one must deduce the necessity of this invention from the nature of human reason; one must demonstrate that and how language *must* have been invented. (119)

Fichte continues, ‘We must deduce the use of arbitrary signs from the essential constitution of human nature.’ (120) That is, previous descriptions of the origin of language have provided merely probable suppositions, whereas Fichte claims he will elucidate the necessary conditions of the fact of language-use. This is, as Surber puts it, ‘the “genesis” of language transcendentally considered’ (28), and it is by means of this transcendental transformation of the problem of the origin of language that Fichte intends to succeed where pre-Kantian theorists did not. Nevertheless, Fichte’s solution to the question of the origin of language is resolutely anti-naturalist: in line with the primacy of practical reason defended in the *Wissenschaftslehre* more generally, ‘the character of the [linguistic] sign is this eliciting of freedom by freedom’ (156). In other words, language is a necessary condition of the expression of practical reason: it is the means of discerning, articulating and reacting to freedom in community. The production of linguistic meaning establishes practical intersubjectivity, and so Fichte’s philosophy of language forms part of his pragmatic history of the mind (against which naturalists, like Schelling, reacted so vehemently).

On the contrary, Schlegel’s account of the natural history of language is premised—at least, to begin with—on a conception of the linguistic sign as a repetition of bodily movement in a higher form; this repetition is then ‘squared’ at a higher potency as language potentiates into poetry. Language is motion at a higher potency, while poetry is language at a higher potency. In his ‘genetic explanation’ (2:232), Schlegel begins with the purported fact that ‘by certain movements, which are familiar to us, of the tongue, the lips, the teeth and the palate, we produce sounds which inevitably awaken in ourselves and in others certain representations.’ (2:233) Language—and consciousness—emerge from these initial sounds. Significantly for the present investigation, Schlegel employs the concept of the symbol to make sense of this process. He writes in line with the above, ‘The power that refines poesy into a true fine art is the same as that which is at the origin of language, except to a higher degree’, but then immediately continues that this will be shown when ‘[we] go deeper into the issue of the symbolic in language’ (2:84; translation: 212).[[23]](#footnote-23) Moreover, when Schlegel does later return to this topic, he speaks of ‘the poetic disposition lodged in the original language’ as ‘a second symbolics of the universe’ (2:232).

Therefore, Schlegel’s account seems at first blush to be both a naturalistic and a symbolic one. Corporeal movements are identified as ‘the natural mediums of art’ (2:230). Nevertheless, Schlegel is equally adamant that language is ‘no product of nature’ (2:12), for this naturalistic account provides merely the ‘negative condition’ of language. To understand language naturalistically is to understand it in a ‘completely mechanical way’, to consider words merely as ‘sounds emitted by a speaking machine’ or involuntary excitations. (2:236) In consequence, Schlegel in fact ultimately sides with Fichtean idealism, rather than Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*, in prioritising human agency in the construction of language: ‘Language is not a production of nature, but a reproduction of the human spirit’ (2:226), and as such, an ‘idealist explanation of the organism of our spiritual functions’ is needed (2:237).

Schlegel’s solution to the origin of language debate ultimately rests on transcendental psychology, particularly how ‘the mechanism of human forms of spirit expresses itself universally in the form of language’ (2:12): words are, he insists, spiritual, not natural productions. Thus the promise of ‘a natural history of language’ is not quite fulfilled in Schlegel’s 1801 Berlin lectures: aesthetics may well be interpreted naturalistically, but the linguistic domain remains irreducible to the natural. Language resists *naturphilosophische* explanation most. For a fully naturalistic construction, one must wait for Schelling’s various attempts that begin a year later.

[A] Historical inquiry II: Schelling

Schelling’s participation in the general project to naturalise aesthetic phenomena is made clear in his 1807 speech to the Munich Royal Academy of Sciences, *Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur*. Indeed, he sums up the whole objective of the speech as follows, ‘The whole of this treatise demonstrates that the foundations of art, and hence of beauty as well, lie in the vitality of nature.’ (361) As with the *Erster Entwurf* and Schlegel’s Berlin lectures, this claim is based on a dual perspective on the natural world in which ‘the view of nature as a mere product, of things as lifelessly existent’ (327) is to be rejected in favour of a conception of ‘the world’s holy, eternally creating primal energy, which engenders and actively brings forth all things out of itself’ (325). Art is to be considered as a component of this productivity. We are already familiar with such moves; where Schelling goes beyond his contemporaries is in the extension of this naturalistic approach to the linguistic domain.

Schelling’s symbol is comparatively radical: not only is it applied in full to the domain of language and poetic production, language is, according to Schelling, the *most symbolic* of phenomena. Language, he writes, ‘is the most appropriate symbol of the absolute.’ (*Philosophy of Art* 100)[[24]](#footnote-24) Language is symbolic in essence, and so, more than any other phenomenon, words manifest an identity of meaning and being.

Schelling goes on to characterise symbolic language in his lectures on the philosophy of art as follows,

Viewed from the one side, language is the direct expression of something ideal… in something real, and is to that extent itself a work of art. Yet viewed from the other side it is just as definitely a work of nature... Hence, it is a natural work of art. (99)

Conceiving language as ‘a natural work of art’ is central both to Schelling’s theory of the symbol and his philosophy of language. Schelling insists on language as natural—to be described by means of concepts from *Naturphilosophie* (such as organism), and this is the very culmination of the project of naturalistic aesthetics he shared with A.W. Schlegel and others: a naturalistic perspective on language.

[B] *The 1811* Bericht

Schelling will go on to undertake this *Naturphilosophie* of language most extensively in an 1811 speech to the Munich Academy, *Bericht über den pasigraphischen Versuch des Professor Schmid in Dilligen*. For although, as Henningfeld has pointed out, ‘there is no elaborate philosophy of language in Schelling’s corpus, except for a few significant but isolated beginnings’ (16), this report is perhaps the most significant. The occasion for the report is, as the title suggests, a 1807 work by J.M. Schmid which proposes a universal script that logically represents thoughts in a manner evident to speakers of any language, in the tradition of Leibniz’ *ars characteristica*. Schelling gives short shrift to Schmid’s work, but does use the opportunity to ‘communicate a series of observations to the Academy… that I have made in this connection on words.’ (*Werke* 8:443)

Just as in his 1802-5 lectures on the philosophy of art, Schelling here insists on the need to bring together meaning and being in accounts of language. Linguistic sense and verbal sign possess ‘an original—if still undiscovered—connection’ which ‘the philosopher cannot help but assume’ (8:442). And, as with many definitions of the symbol, this leads to an emphasis on the self-sufficiency and even autarchy of the word, which requires no external aids to signify. Thus Schelling attacks those who regard language ‘as something dead, with no value in itself, a mere means.’ (8:446) Language is not merely a vehicle, and certainly not a vehicle for communicating the subject’s freedom and practical reason: this is a completely unphilosophical attitude.

Despite such an implicit attack on the Fichtean conception of language, Schelling shares with Fichte (as well as Schlegel) an insistence on the need to understand language-formation by means of language’s ‘necessary, inner ground’ (8:449). This is ‘a higher insight into things’ (8:443) which uncovers ‘the greatest lawfulness’ in the emergence of language, (8:453) thereby opposing ‘the usual view of language… that it is something subjective, in essence arbitrary, and because of this merely externally acquired’ (8:449-50). Schelling, like Fichte and Schlegel before him, is only interested in identifying and describing the necessary conditions of language-use; however, unlike Fichte and Schlegel, Schelling insists that such conditions are not practical or otherwise grounded in human agency, but strictly natural.

The first suggestion that Schelling intends to conceptualise language naturalistically in the 1811 *Bericht* can be discerned from the following:

One may ask whether there are not… homologous language formations like there are mountain formations that can recur in quite different places in the world independently of each other. (8:453)

Can words, Schelling asks, be thought of on the model of natural objects, produced by dynamic forces analogous to those which generate other natural phenomena (like mountains)? And in so asking, he raises the possibility of treating the formation of words on a geological model. Later in the *Bericht*, he goes even further and insists,

When one cognises the physical in language, and pursues and arranges the facts of the history of peoples and language in connection or at least in analogy with the geological, what wondrous and (at present) unbelievable regularity and lawfulness will then appear before our eyes! (8:453)

‘Lawfulness’ is precisely what Schelling had claimed to seek in order to scientifically describe language, and it is here discerned precisely by means of recognising ‘the physical in language’ and considering it ‘in connection’ to ‘the geological’. Words, Schelling implies, are natural objects like any other, constituted from natural forces and part of a *naturphilosophische* account of reality. Such a *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling makes clear, would uncover the ‘wondrous and unbelievable regularity and lawfulness’ that the ‘inner ground’ of language really possesses.

Moreover, in this passage Schelling makes the strong claim that the history of language is to be understood ‘in connection’ with geological phenomena, thereby going beyond his own initial, cautious suggestion that language should be thought of ‘in analogy with’ mountain formations. This stronger connection goes beyond a merely regulative metaphorical relation to a determinative one; as Grant has put it in another context, ‘The likeness involved in such correspondences is not ideal or analogical, but physical.’ (201)[[25]](#footnote-25) In other words, linguistics and geology become one and the same endeavour, two regional enquiries within the overarching project of *Naturphilosophie*. Meanings, then, are treated as rocks, to be described in exactly the same way. And this is a direct consequence of Schelling’s initial characterisation of the symbol in 1802 and, indeed, of the more general project of naturalising the aesthetic domain.

[B] *Naturalism and the origins of language*

One characteristic of all the accounts of language under discussion has been the tendency to intervene in pre-Kantian debates on the origin of language. A.W. Schlegel does so at length and much of Schelling’s 1811 *Bericht* redeploys a similar terminology of language-formation and necessary, internal grounds. It is not particularly surprising, therefore, that immediately after setting out his theory of symbolic language in the *Philosophie der Kunst*, Schelling turns explicitly to the problem of the origin of language. He writes,

At this point I would like to make some brief remarks concerning the variously posed question concerning why reasonable beings opted specifically for language or voice as the immediate body of the inner soul. (102)

Schelling goes on to disagree with the premise of the whole eighteenth-century debate in a way with which we are now very familiar from his 1811 *Report*, Fichte’s 1795 essay and Schlegel’s 1801 lectures: ‘Yet even the question itself views language as an arbitrary choice or invention… Yet language is not that accidental. There is a higher necessity.’ (102) In consequence, ‘Both assertions—that it arises as an invention of human beings, through freedom, and by divine instruction—are false’ (102)—that is, Schelling rejects both the theological response of Süssmilch that language is a result of divine instruction and the Condillacian solution that it is a product of human freedom. They form an antinomy resting on an incorrect presupposition—that language-formation is a contingent process. In contrast, Schelling advocates the need to exhibit ‘the absolute idea of language’ (102). He writes, ‘The whole question concerning the origin of language, at least as it has been treated until now, is merely an empirical one with which the philosopher accordingly has nothing to do.’ As we have seen, once the higher standpoint is attained, language must be considered symbolic, and thus meaning naturalised. Only from this naturalistic perspective can the question of the origin of language be properly understood.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Therefore, Schelling’s response to these debates in both his lectures on the philosophy of art and the 1811 *Bericht* is twofold: first, language has necessary grounds and, second, such grounds are natural. The first thesis is directed against eighteenth-century theorists, for it places the question of the origin of language within a transcendental framework (identifying necessary conditions for irrefutable facts of consciousness, such as language-use); the second thesis opposes anti-naturalists like Fichte or even semi-naturalists like Schlegel who ultimately understand the transcendental conditions of language-use practically, in terms of human agency. We can note of this, in closing, how far the eighteenth-century debate has been transformed and how difficult it is to map Schelling’s position (or even Schlegel’s, for that matter) back onto the earlier debate. A debate between human spontaneity and divine revelation has now become one between naturalistic and ethical modes of transcendental explanation. And such a radical transformation is partly due to the new theories of the symbol then being developed. We are here very far from the idea that the symbol merely recapitulates old ideas in a new form; whatever else we can say about the symbol, it did something radical to accounts of language at that period: for almost the first time, a fully naturalistic description of language-formation was a serious theoretical alternative.

[A] Systematic inquiry

The preceding provides the historical evidence for the naturalisation of linguistic meaning in *Goethezeit* theories of the symbol. The concluding question, then, becomes how exactly this naturalistic conception of sense is to be modelled.

[B] *Dualist accounts*

To naturalise sense is anathema to some. In 1979, for example, Michael Titzmann wrote a scathing critique of, what he calls, ‘the semioticisation of the natural and the naturalisation of the semiotic’ in theories of the symbol (660). He writes, ‘The artwork approaches nature and nature the artwork… By means of the concept of the symbol, the difference between a semiotic field whose objects signify something and a natural field whose objects signify nothing is annulled.’ (660) In other words, according to Titzmann, the naturalisation of meaning leads to the dissolution of meaning, because non-naturalised meaning is precisely that which differentiates signifying objects from natural ones. Language is no longer language when meaning is naturalised.

Contemporaneous with Titzmann’s critique and more notorious is Paul de Man’s ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, which attempts to ‘put into question… the assured predominance of the symbol as the outstanding characteristic of romantic diction.’ (*Blindness* 198) He contends that theories of symbolic language were achieved by means of a violent ‘suppression’ (207) of the difference between meaning and being in language. For this reason, symbolic language ‘will never be able to gain an entirely good poetic conscience’, but is rather a form of ‘tenacious self-mystification’ (208). Moreover, ‘the priority of natural substances’ in theories of the symbol plays a large part in de Man’s denunciation of it. He cites Hölderlin’s image in *Brot und Wein*:

But now he names his most loved,

Now, for this reason, words, like flowers, must arise. (2:90-5, ll. 89-90)

For de Man, this comparison of words to flowers is exemplary of a naturalisation of the semiotic at play in the *Goethezeit* generally. Such naturalisation overrides the ‘essence of language’: ‘Words do not originate like flowers… It is in the essence of language to… never achiev[e] the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object.’ (*Romanticism* 6) Natural objects are constituted by self-presence; language by a permanent non-identity of meaning and being, such that symbolic language’s ‘nostalgia for the natural object’ is doomed to ‘ontological bad faith’ (*Blindness* 211). De Man asserts, ‘That sign and meaning can never coincide is what [should be] precisely taken for granted.’ (17)

It is difficult, however, to discern much in these arguments that does not beg the question. De Man’s very premise that ‘the essence of language’ is constituted by the non-identity of meaning and being or Titzmann’s premise that semiotic objects are distinct from natural ones is precisely what theorists of the symbol dispute. There is just a different model for language at play here: a dualism of meaning and being, rather than an identity.[[27]](#footnote-27)

[B] *Naturalist accounts*

And yet even if dualist accounts of language (in which meaning and being are necessarily distinct) beg the question, this does not by itself substantiate the possibility of a naturalist account. Much more work is needed to provide a fully-fledged model of linguistic sense out of the Schellingian construction of symbolic language.

Late twentieth-century philosophy of language has flirted with the idea of ‘a meaning-constituting fact’ (Gaskin 233)—that is, a state of affairs describable in purely naturalistic terms that constitutes a meaning (or semantic property). While in the wake of Kripke’s anti-realist arguments in *Wittgenstein*, *Rules and Private Language* such semantic naturalism has proven less and less popular, it nevertheless remains a live option. For the most part, such meaning-constituting facts are understood as mental dispositions or brain states which cause semantic properties or on which semantic properties supervene. But Schelling’s construction of language is more radical than this for two reasons: (a) meaning-constituting facts do not have a causal relation with semantic properties but rather a relation of absolute identity with them: meaning has here passed over into being; (b) such naturally-embedded meanings are entirely mind-independent (or, at least, not constituted or formed by finite human minds). This is not a form of naturalism in which meanings obtain in virtue of non-semantic states of affairs, but one in which such meanings are themselves describable in purely naturalistic terms. Symbols, on this reading, are brute semantic facts—and contemporary attitudes to such an idea can be summarised in Putnam’s dismissal of it as ‘magical’.[[28]](#footnote-28)

A critique of the possibility of such brute semantic facts—or symbols—would focus on two points, among others: first, how the normative nature of such facts could be accounted for in purely naturalistic terms; second, how such facts would give rise to the phenomenological experience of language use (and two experiences in particular: mistakes or misuses of language, on the one hand, and meaning-change and linguistic plurality, on the other). It is worth providing an initial response to the first of these criticisms to give some sense of how Schelling’s model might work. One of the ways of articulating the normativity problem is as follows: linguistic meaning is normative because there exist better and worse ways of using and understanding language; indeed, there even exists ‘some kind of categorical obligation on me to use words in a particular way’ (Gaskin 247). Hence, meaning seemingly cannot be immediately encapsulated in an account of the world provided by hard naturalism. Gaskin argues that the problem here concerns the fact that any semantic property requires an open-ended list of conditions that would describe its correct use and, since such an infinite set of conditions always eludes complete naturalistic description, the normativity of language-use is irreducible to a naturalistic account. As Gaskin puts it, there is ‘no *reduction* of understanding to a set of physical conditions’ (253).

A Schellingian response to such concerns would focus on the dual perspective required by *Naturphilosophie*. *Genetically*, naturalistic conditions (which, for Schelling, are those which are reducible to nature’s pure productivity) do fully determine and describe symbols, and so semantic properties. *Phenomenally*, however, the experience of language-use—with its attendant normativity, mistakes, etc.—is an entirely autonomous product. Leaving aside the question of how meaning can both be derivative of and autonomous from nature—which would require a much more detailed reading of the logic of the *Freiheitsschrift*—we can see here a first sketch of a Schellingian naturalism of sense. Sense is naturalised genetically, but irreducible to nature phenomenally. This insight forms the preliminary basis for any detailed account of how language can be made sense of on a *naturphilosophische* model.

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1. Adams (17-9) makes this point particularly acutely, distinguishing between the symbol as ‘secularised Eucharist’ and a productive or ‘prolific’ symbol in post-Kantian theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of course, the precise way in which this indifferentiation was conceptually developed—and indeed how strongly it was affirmed—differed greatly. See the distinction between ‘partial’ and ‘absolute’ conceptions of the identity of meaning and being in Whistler 17-9, 25-8, 161-3. As the foregoing implies, this essay is in no way intended as a full reconstruction of the concept of the symbol during the *Goethezeit*; I am focusing solely on one element of it susceptible to naturalistic interpretation. Or, to make a slightly different, if connected point: this essay is in no way intended to imply that A.W. Schlegel and Schelling (for instance) share identical conceptions of the symbol; as I have argued elsewhere, Schelling’s notion of the symbol, in particular, is very different from any other proposed during the *Goethezeit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is also implied in Goethe’s characterisation of the symbol as signifying ‘directly’ (quoted above). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While there is no explicit link between Humboldt’s writings on the symbol and his later contributions to linguistics, it is worthwhile (considering the topic of this essay) pointing out that when Humboldt later writes his Kawi Introduction in the 1830s, one of its more remarkable aspects is its bald naturalism in, for example, refusing to understand language as a human artefact. Moreover, Humboldt’s approach to linguistics is premised on the very distinction between nature as productivity and nature as product that will play a crucial role in what follows—that is, on the need to view language as ‘no product (*ergon*), but an activity (*energeia*)’ (*On Language* 49). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a critical discussion of the early Deleuze’s conception of an ontology of sense, see Widder. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On Romanticism and Idealism as the return of pre-modernity more generally, see Abrams. Benjamin, more specifically, speaks of theories of the symbol in the *Goethezeit* as ‘illegitimate’, ‘distorted’ and ‘destructive’, since they are extrapolated from the concept’s ‘genuine’ place ‘in the field of theology’ (159-61). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Taylor explicitly discusses the concept of the symbol in this regard (98-9, 352-61, 756-9). Jaszi similarly speaks of theories of the symbol as a ‘memorable interval’ from modern nominalist presuppositions, continuing, ‘Symbolism frees being from its nominalistic isolation and fragmentation.’ (73, 76) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Most obviously, Barth, who argues that Coleridge’s appropriation of the symbol arises out of ‘an imaginative return to an earlier orthodoxy’ (141). See further Halmi’s explicit response to Barth (111-21). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. What follows also draws on Nisenbaum and Whistler. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Indeed, Novalis in particular often has recourse to the idea of the symbol. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Whistler 10-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Pace* Tindall (3), who considers the symbol essentially romantic (and, consequently, that it is correctly named ‘the romantic symbol’), as well *pace* Sørensen (265) and Hayes (273) who claim, in Hayes’ words, that it was ‘handed down to us from German classicism’. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Richards 462. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Schelling and Goethe certainly discussed the concept of the symbol at the time, see Whistler 8-9. For more general accounts of Goethe’s influence on Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, see Adler, Nassar, Richards. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In Sørensen’s words, ‘As Schelling progresses from *Naturphilosophie* to aesthetics, so his notion of the symbol develops out of the characteristics of the natural organism.’ (251) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Peterson translates *Sinnbild* as ‘sensuous image’; hopefully my argument suggests that Schelling’s use of the term is more technical. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Three weeks later, Schelling is still impressing on Schlegel his high opinion of the Berlin lectures: ‘In your lectures on the theory of art, I admired the brilliantly pure and objective traits with which you have expressed so many ideas in, as it were, a universally valid form even for reflection.’ (2:464) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For an account of Jena Romantic aesthetics read in light of post-Schellingian naturalisms, see Ellermann. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. That is, Novalis (to take the most obvious instance) is evidently a significant contributor to the project of naturalising aesthetics, but it is more difficult to see his contribution as one that fundamentally involves the concept of the symbol. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Moreover, Schlegel’s insistence that the philosopher should ‘recognise the spiritual in the material’ (2:82; translation: 210) mirrors Schelling’s demand in the *Ideen* to discern in nature ‘mind made visible’ (42). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Indeed, in his survey of the history of aesthetics, Schlegel disparages Fichte’s ethicisation of art in passing (2:80), before proceeding to a very positive and detailed account of Schelling’s nascent aesthetics (2:80-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The passage from the *Erster Entwurf* itself reads, ‘A stream flows in a straight line forward as long as it encounters no resistance. Where there is resistance—a whirlpool forms. Every original produce of nature is such a whirlpool, every organism.’ (18) Schelling repeats the image in the later *Einleitung* (206), which Schlegel may also have read. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Dedicated to the question, ‘Suppose men abandoned to their natural faculties. Are they in a position to invent language? And by what means will they arrive at this invention?’ [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Similarly, Schlegel insists in the same passage, ‘Research into the symbolic in our cognition would lead to the most surprising discoveries about the secret of poetry; discoveries that are equally interesting for science, in that they demonstrate how poetic fantasy had heralded long ago what is now being revealed by the most extensive studies concerning the laws of nature.’ (2:83-4; translation: 211-2) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I discuss this material at greater length in Whistler, *Schelling’s Theory of Symbolic Language*. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Schelling rejects such analogical relations partly because of the close connection in Kant between the regulative/analogical and the ethical/non-natural. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For a detailed reconstruction of Schelling’s comments on the origin of language, see Hennigfeld 16-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. There is a further Hegelian critique of Schelling’s anti-dualist position that cannot be addressed for reasons of space. If my essay can be resumed as an attempt to rehabilitate a Schellingian conception of discursivity, then the question is how such discursivity functions without recourse to the category of negativity. This brings in all sorts of metaphysical issues surrounding affirmation, potentiation and the avoidance of negation in Schelling’s thought. Nevertheless, even from A.W. Schlegel’s construction of language on the basis of potentiation, one can see the beginnings of a Schellingian answer: language is always already present in the first bodily movements, just as poetry is always already present in the first words. Discourse is characterised by the dynamics of immediate mediacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Putnam chapters one and two, *passim*. As Van Cleve describes Putnam’s position (355), ‘Brute semantic facts, or semantic facts that do not hold in virtue of any deeper stratum of fact, are precisely his target when he inveighs against “magical” theories of reference.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-28)