

The Potencies of Beauty: Schelling on the Question of Nature and Art

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ABSTRACT

*This article unfolds Schelling's idea that artwork allows for infinite interpretations and condenses into an infinite meaning. This claim has been investigated by the double act of potentiation that occurs, in parallel ways, both in the artwork and in Nature writ large, as well as in the artist's body. The questions of form, formation, and individuation in Nature are addressed along with the role of the expansive productive intuition in the body of the artist. Nature in Schelling's thought consists in a self-generative artistic creativity and the primordial spring for the dynamics of the cosmic and the human poesis. In this context, the act of *Potenzierung* provides a powerful insight into the "leap of art-making."*

Keywords

Schelling, art, Nature, potency, inner creative life, productive intuition, *die Potenzierung*

The connection between Nature and art in Schelling's thinking is all pervasive and his works are all more or less implicitly imbued by this strong and indissoluble bond. In the *Philosophy of Art* (1803), Schelling makes the now rather astonishing claim that "the immediate cause of all art is God," the same God that Schelling also called "Eternal Nature" (Schelling 1989, 32, 36). Beauty is also here for the first and last time defined as activity completely permeated with knowledge, or knowledge that has completely become activity. However, the more persistent and recurrent definition of beauty is the one conceived as absoluteness in limitation, as the particular which has taken up in itself the entire essence of the absolute, accompanied with the extraordinary, if not

outrageous, proof of the kind: “This is self-evident, since the essence of the absolute is indivisible” (Schelling 1989, 33)! Certainly, if we recall Leibniz’s monads as mirrors of the entire universe, or even modern science’s claims about the holographic universe, Schelling’s claim no longer seems so outrageous but actually prophetic. However, if in a grain of sand we can see the universe, as William Blake insisted, does this mean that a grain of sand is also beautiful? Thinking with Schelling, I argue that a grain of sand seen as reflecting the universe is indeed rendered beautiful, and this is the whole endeavor, both the leap of artistic production and the purview of the artistic eye. This is, in other words, the act of *Potenzierung*, an act that both Schelling and Novalis regarded as precious.

The Discussion of Form in the 1807 Munich Lecture

A proper engagement with the aforementioned issues seems inevitably, at first, to revolve around the issue of form and limitation, which, according to most traditional philosophers, defines particularity in general and beauty in particular. The issue of form, regardless of the degree of disdain that it has received from the so-called Romantic stream, is an issue that Schelling does not disregard, but rather opens up in new dimensions.

In *The Philosophy of Art*, Schelling already claimed some provocative—for Kantian formalism—statements regarding both the status and role of limitation. He argues that the exemplary manifestation of absoluteness in limitation, which is, as we saw above, the instance and the actualization of beauty in the real world, is the various gods of Greek mythology. Here, the absolute shines forth in the splendor of the gods, even though they, too, are limited. Moreover, it is precisely by virtue of their limitations that the infinite radiates all the more intensely: “Precisely, the missing characteristics in the manifestation of gods lend them highest charm and yet still weave them back together into various relationships. The mystery of life is the synthesis of the absolute in limitation” (Schelling 1989, 36). However, this claim can be made only from the standpoint of reason and of the creative, divine imagination. From the standpoint of the understanding, limitation is unbearable and asphyxiating:

For reason as well as for the creative imagination we demand that nothing in the universe be constrained, purely limited and subordinated. We demand for every single being a particular and free life. Only the understanding subordinates; within reason and the creative imagination everything is free and moves about in the same realm without crowding or chafing, for each is within itself the equal of the whole. The sight of pure limitation is from a subordinated perspective sometimes annoying, sometimes painful, sometimes even insulting—but in any case repugnant. For reason and fantasy limitation, too, becomes either sim-

ply a form of the absolute or, considered as *limitation*, an inexhaustible source of jest and play, for one is allowed to joke with limitation, since it takes nothing away from the essence. (Schelling 1989, 37)

This passage suggests that for a particularity which fully develops its internal vital center, a center that is everywhere, as Giordano Bruno insightfully phrased it, and thereby moves freely “without crowding or chafing,” being able to relate to all other particularities, even transforming itself, limitation is a source of joy and play, of self-affirmation and positivity; limitation is not the negation of its existence and freedom.

We need to dwell further in this conception of limitation and thereby to acquire a deeper understanding of Schelling’s account of form. In his lecture *On the Relation between Plastic Arts and Nature* (Henceforth *The Munich Lecture*), Schelling states that “Determinate form is in Nature never negative, but always affirmative” (Schelling 1923, 12). Paradoxically, this statement, as well as his whole account of the positivity of form and limitation, is developed as his powerful riposte to Winkelmann’s aesthetic theory on the preponderance of form in a genuine work of art, exemplified by works of ancient antiquity like the Belvedere statue of Apollo in the Vatican. Here Schelling seems to ask of himself what he demands from the artist: “Only by the perfection of the form can form be annihilated” (Schelling 1923, 14). Indeed, the real root of the argument draws its strength from the radically different consideration of the actual or the natural, according to Winkelmann and Schelling respectively. In short, according to Winkelmann, art should surpass the actual by the creation of the ideal form, which comes about as the elevation and the idealization of the actual brought about by the purity of the serene artistic soul. In the *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, parts of which Schelling esteemed, Winkelmann argued:

But even supposing that the limitation of Nature could supply all the artist’s wants, she never could bestow the precision of Contour, the characteristic distinction of the Ancients. The noblest Contour unites or circumscribes every part of the most perfect Nature, and the ideal beauties in the figures of the Greeks;...many of the moderns have attempted to imitate the Contour, but very few with success... The line by which Nature divides completeness from superfluity is but a small one, and, insensible as it often is, has been crossed even by the best moderns; while these, in shunning a meager Contour, became corpulent, those, in shunning that, grew lean. (Winkelmann 1765, 22)

What is this much sought, sensitive and fragile limit, which for Winkelmann seems, as if by magic, to bestow from on high the fine lines of ideal beauty? What is this enigmatic limit, which consummately renders the statue so that it

can depict the skin in such a way that it follows the vibrations of the muscles and the flesh without being either emaciated or inflated? What is this limit, which allows the dancer to excessively curve her body while resisting gravity, or that compels the painter to add a final brushstroke in order to avoid utter failure?

Although *prima facie* Winkelman seems to have a real point about the all powerful role of the limit, Schelling offers his own account of the problem: the art of limitation and self-restriction is first and marvelously exercised by Nature herself, when, for example, rough matter restricts its own essence, its overflowing spirit, and unconsciously assumes stereomorphic forms. Determinate or positive form flows from inside each entity as the self-limitation of its indwelling energy. Nothing becomes what it is through external limitation. Form does not shape and limit from the outside but is rather the result of its internal living power. The consummation of something originates in its inner creative life, its power of asserting its own individuality, its capacity to transform its being. The positivity of form consequently expresses the dynamics, the incessant beginnings, of the process of formation rather than the conclusion of the finished form. Schelling inverts Winkelman's scheme: the artistic challenge is not to elevate or idealize the actual, but rather to become capable of sinking more deeply into it. The "ideal," even in its most unexpected and wild manifestations, is found within the natural: "If the actual were indeed opposed to truth and beauty the artist would be obliged not to elevate and idealize, but rather to dispense with and destroy it, that he might create something true and beautiful" (Schelling 1923, 10). However, in order for the artist to discover their creative bond with Nature and the living principle of Nature's inexhaustibly creative spirit, the artist must step back from Nature, withdrawing from the sheer impressions of the visible and the sheer outline of things. The latter is a mere delusion of the surface.

Moreover, the practice of mere naturalism, that is, the so-called copying or imitating of Nature, falls deplorably short:

All works which have taken their commencement from the form, betray, however elaborate in that direction, an inextinguishable vacuity at the very point where we express the perfect, the essential, the ultimate. The miracle, by which the finite should be elevated to the infinite is wanting...a creation possible by mere forms is empty...and the artist who is in this sense faithful to Nature would produce only masks according to a slavish truth. (Schelling 1923, 9)

So the artist, just like the Nature-philosopher, in order to connect with the creative spirit of Nature, must first withdraw from it. This means that they cannot regard Nature as an ensemble of *mere objects or products*, regardless if

they are beautiful or ugly, dead or alive. The formal outlines of things, as sheer products, are nothing but apparent products, *Scheinprodukten*, as he put it in the *First Outline of a Philosophy of Nature* (1799). In this early work, these seemingly static forms are in fact the result of the dynamic equilibrium of the interaction of two basic, conflicting forces operative in Nature writ large, and in various modifications and subdivisions in the various products (as the human species), i.e. the ever expanding productive and the ever contracting retarding force. The apparent outline of a *Scheinprodukt* is just the phenomenal manifestation of a momentary proportionality of these powers, and it could suddenly change either infinitesimally or radically, as in the case of combustion. Every product is only seemingly finite because two interactively oppositional productive infinities operate within it and because “Nature as a whole cooperates in every product” (Schelling 2004, 18).

This is why Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* is both entirely immune to atomistic or quasi-empiricist interpretations and utterly resistant to any account of Nature as an aggregate of animate and/or inanimate *objects*. Nature is the plenum of the world soul—the primordial opposition of forces—that produces particularity by means of infinite subdivisions and recapitulations, not the other way around.¹ The production of the individual products of Nature then is *the infinite multiplication of the original center*, for the infinity of Nature’s productivity is not conceived as a series through aggregation, but rather as the unfolding of a magnitude already infinite in its point of origination—“the whole infinity is originally concentrated in this one magnitude” (Schelling 2004, 16). The eternal subdivisions of the absolute are dynamic acts of continual creation and express a universe that always *becomes* but never *is*. This is a universe that in its individual becomings always and everywhere creates, destroys, and recreates itself.

A few years later, in the third draft of *Ages of the World* (1815), Schelling developed his Munich characterization of the working of the creative spirit as the outreaching potency of freedom (A^2), which bursts forth as the potentiation of the first potency in its initial contraction (A^1). This operates in continuous scissions as the unconscious decisions of the self-differentiating matter, which shapes every singular entity. Put in less abstract terms, this continual creation of the universe implies the eternal proliferation of unities, such as, for example, the unity of a galactic complex which, by subdividing itself, produces various unitary planetary systems. These in turn, given the distance of a specific planet from the sun according to the achieved proportion of the interacting forces, produce new units of organic life through further subdivisions in the

1. For an excellent account of the process of individuation, see Grant 2006.

planetary unit and in so doing incorporate in a higher differentiated degree the previous unities, and so on *ad infinitum*. Hence, every “finite” product incorporates, in various degrees of intensity and depth, Nature as a whole, not only in its productive activity, but also in its immemorial history of its cataclysmic catastrophes and recreations. The circumscribed dimensions of every product are the visible shape of a vortex in the midst of invisible convulsions of contracting and expanding forces and fields, of which the deeper center vibrates along the pulses of the cosmic heart.

In the Munich lecture, Schelling charges the artist with connecting to this cosmic heart. After the artist’s initial withdrawal from the surfaces of Nature, they somehow recapture this always-emerging center with their “spiritual eye.” This is the “creative spirit,” the “science of formations, of number and measure,” the “vital immanent principle,” the “living principle” of Nature, and the “indwelling soul” of each of its products. In order for the artist to be an artist, they must discover this living center within themselves. The artist can only do this by moving in and through their finitude until they feel themselves found by this center. This experience is not at all the result of a conscious technique, but rather the unexpected (and not as such subject to expectation) stirring of one’s whole being. It is like a shock, as if an objective force suddenly emerged and attacked. This attack can be violent, or it can happen mildly, as if it were a soft electric current.

This experience marks the fork in the road that makes possible artistic production. Either the artist produces under the guidance of this spirit, gently allowing it to mold itself into its product, or he will produce “masks of a slavish truth.” This allowed the Greeks, for instance, to extract their gods from Nature: “For the penetrating Hellenists, who everywhere recognized the traces of this living creative energy, Nature produced gods indeed” (Schelling 1923, 3). Hence, the radiance of the light and its sovereign serenity became the undeniably beautiful perfection of Apollo. The contracted fire inside the harsh form of a stone or burning metal becomes Hephaestus, the ‘ugly’ and deformed god of volcanic explosions, which for Schelling, even as a reverse ideal, belongs to the realm of the beautiful (Schelling 1989, 40). This inner point of unity, like a mild magnetic field, provides an imperceptibly immanent cohesion among the most discordant elements. Nonetheless, this discordance, this vibrating polarity in the background of this unity of depth, radiates like a wild grace, not with the splendid transparency of the blinding midday light, but rather as the enigmatic translucence of the chiaroscuro of the rainbow of the moon.

The Unconscious, Nature, and Art in the STI and Nature-Philosophy

Our discussion leads us to the following, quite critical question: Does this spiritual eye reintroduce Winkelmann's exalted soul through the back door? Is there an implicit dualism in Schelling's account of the creative spirit of Nature? These kinds of charges fail to grasp Schelling's subtle distinctions between difference and dichotomy. Putting it succinctly and abiding by the parameters of this essay, we could say that for Schelling any possibility of ontological dualism between matter and spirit has been utterly abolished. Schelling's ontological monism of forces and potencies replaces the traditional dichotomies between being and thought, matter and spirit, and matter and form. Instead we have intelligent matter and incarnate spirit. The differences and distinctions result exclusively from the infinite process of self-division of the relative units of the interactive forces, and only the relative preponderance of one force over the other would effect the appearance of a contracted product, as in the case of the preponderance of gravitational forces in the case of visible matter.

More importantly, the spiritual eye is the domain of the artistic unconscious. As such, it should not be reduced to the psychoanalytic level. It is not, as Freud would have it, the sphere of repressed desires or fears and unexpressed libidinal energy. In the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism* (STI), the unconscious is an ontological sphere; it is Nature itself, and, in another respect, it can also be thought of as the body of the artist. It is the universe, compressed in its finite individuation in the singleness of one's body. It is the history of the cosmos uniquely inscribed in the cells, tissues, organs, and bones of one's unrepeatable singularity.

Although it may be stating the obvious, but when we say that the artwork should somehow transpire the whole, this does not ridiculously mean that the artist just repeats Nature's infinite activity or that the artist should aspire to the infinite quantity Nature or cram the artwork with a plethora of detail. The creative spirit instead gives the artist the capability of selecting the means, symbols, tonalities, and gradations of the material such that the artwork can suggest the dynamic depths of being. This eclectic capacity, this special principle of economy and silence, indicates the artist's talent. It is this talent, as Paul Klee later saw, which transforms a mere triangle from the static geometry of the connection of three points not on a straight line to the pictorial figure of a triangle which transpires the dynamics of forces, through some inexplicable capacity to make visible the tension between the line and the point, between the base and its directional thrust (Klee 1961, 113). In the STI, this is in some way the process of the generation of matter via the productive intuition of the self. Matter is generated as the interaction of directionally antithetical forces that open up the

dimensionality of space. Moreover, this matter is at once matter writ large and the matter of the finite self's body, i.e. its unconscious productivity.

Let us return to the problem of the productive intuition. In the previous section we tried to grasp Schelling's account of formation and limitation through the creative spirit in Nature and the way that things are thereby conceived from the perspective of their dynamics of forces and potencies. Let us now try to understand this process from the inside body of the self, through a reading of the STI itself, understood as both *Naturphilosophie* and a philosophy of art, since the self in the STI is both Nature writ large as well as radical human finitude depicted as an artistic self. The activity of the productive intuition provides us with further insights into this process. Schelling proposed an account of the productive intuition in order to find a solution to the empiricists' dead end attempts to solve the problem of sensation. If the self and external affection are understood to be ontologically distinct, we cannot explain how external feelings affect the self. One could immediately see how Schelling could easily solve this problem by resorting to his basic approach of the commonality of the forces, which co-constitutes the self and the world. However, Schelling takes an unexpected and intriguing approach to this problem. He introduces in productive terms the idea of the unconscious (*das Unbewusste*). The initial predicament arises from the feeling of restriction, which the self feels or senses as an external limit. The demand on behalf of the self's active character is to appropriate immediately this limit by its own activity as it does in Fichte's unaccomplished synthesis of the self and the not-self through the interminable wavering of the imagination. For Fichte this seems to be the end of the story. For Schelling, however, this battle with the limit marks the beginning of what he called at the end of the STI the "odyssey of the spirit" (Schelling 1978, 232). The conflict of the self with the limit is transformed into a real, productive activity, which generates its body, its intelligence, and its will. Moreover, this production discharges itself in the work of art. The self, responding to its initial bewilderment at its feeling of restriction, responds by creating a sphere of production precisely at the boundaries between the thing and itself. In this sphere, the self already feels itself as actively sensing, not just as passively being sensed. It feels itself as an active force against an oppositional active force. In this sphere the self discovers itself as a producer although the limit has not been incorporated into its production. However, the limit has already been transposed to a deeper level because through the activation of its internal forces, the self discovers the forces of the thing as well.

An unconscious process of *intussusception* is taking place, producing and transforming the existing structures of the self. The limit dilates and becomes

a sphere of interfusion, a field of mutual movements of recognition of an unknown land. This is an intuition of its sensation, an intuition of intuition, which constitutes the genesis of the productive intuition. The first act of the drama ends: the awareness of the self as at once both sensing and sensed, that is, as the production of two interacting oppositional forces. The production is finite, and exhausts itself, and the self is again dangerously before a new limit. This generates a further sphere of production, where the self produces deeper layers of its being, until it finds anew the newly modified limit, and this alternation prolongs itself *ad infinitum*. This process may also be seen as the ever-extending and penetrating character of our intuiting capacity so that where we first see things on the surface, we can then feel the whole object:²

There is a cube in this portion of space, means nothing else but that in this part of the space my intuition can be active only in the form of a cube... But now in intuition it is not the mere effect of an object, but the object itself that is immediate present...so the thing, so far derived, is still always a live and active affair, and not the passive, inert item encountered in appearance.

(Schelling 1978, 58, 73, 78)

Schelling clearly indicates that the intermediate activity of the productive intuition neither falls into the sphere of self-consciousness nor amounts to a simple sensory intuition. Productive intuition “borrows its reality from an immediate cognition,” whereas “concepts are merely shadows of reality,” generated by the understanding, which produces from itself by a primordial force, having *no original outside itself* (Schelling 1978, 70, my emphasis). Productive intuition is therefore an immediate but unconscious cognition *rooted in and emerging out of one’s objective productions*, which, only at a later stage/epoch will generate conscious reflection.

At this point, Schelling introduces the bizarre combination of an immediate yet unconscious cognition. Who could possibly be the agent of such a cognition? The only convincing candidate is the intelligent body of the self. Schelling’s remarks on sensibility in his *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* could shed further light on this incipient material creative intelligence. Sensibility is here conceived as the original source of the life of the universe, the *potentiation* of the magnetic force up to the organic potency. Sensibility is by no means conceived as the direct reaction to an external stimulant. This would reduce the matter of an organic body to a merely mechanical and inert entity. A trace, a spark of freedom in this matter, exists precisely when there is

2. For an extraordinary example of this enlarged intuitive capacity, see Goethe’s essay on granite (Goethe 1955, *Über den Granit*, 253).

an infinitesimal time lapse between the stimulant and the reaction to it. This is precisely the freedom of sensibility, which is seen as an internal operation that denotes the freedom of the sensible to recoil, to reflect upon itself, to take up, to select, to transform, to assimilate or discharge at will, the external stimuli. Sensibility is a self-reverting, inner, inscrutable activity, which can only indirectly be manifested in its responses as irritability. It is this internal living activity that generates the sense organs and not the reverse (Schelling 2004, 123, 136–140, 157, 158). In this context, the unconscious cognition that emerges suddenly in the artist's body occurs as a *Weltereignis*.³

Conclusion

What renders an artwork into a finitude that somehow incorporates and transpires infinity is precisely this prolonged activity of the productive intuition crystallized in the work of art. This is what inculcates the artwork by an inexhaustible potential of infinite meaning.

Schelling goes on to describe this process as the infinite conflict between the unconscious and the conscious of the artist, which finally finds its outlet and finite expression in the artwork. Nonetheless, Schelling, despite the immense importance which he ascribes to the role of the unconscious as well as to the productive character of its internal contradictions, would not unquestioningly align himself with something like the Surrealists' wholesale self-abandonment to the forces of the unconscious in artistic production. This is not a plea for a kind of psychic automatism. In the STI, Schelling recognizes, in addition to the fertility of the unconscious, an even more fecund source of creativity in the conflict between conscious and unconscious activity. This is perhaps a more challenging conflict than the dream of automatism because it pits the pretence of free conscious activity against the ineluctable fate of unconscious activity. This conflict resolves itself only in the artwork as the final release of this internal tension and as the point of coincidence between freedom and necessity, conscious and unconscious activity. This identity, however, "can never attain to consciousness, and merely radiates back from the product" (Schelling 1978, 222). The artist seems to recover, to some extent, even consciousness itself back from artistic production because "however deliberate he may be," he "seems nonetheless to be governed, in regard to what is truly objective in his creation, by a power which separates him from all men, and compels him to say or depict things which he does not fully understand himself, and whose meaning is infinite" (Schelling 1978, 223). If we take seriously both Schelling's remarks

3. For an interesting account of the conception of *Welterkenntnis* as *Weltereignis*, see Hogrebe, 23.

on sensibility and his *Naturphilosophie* as such, then the marvel of this very Spinozist thesis concerning the coincidence of freedom and necessity becomes possible because it is in the end about the coincidence of two orders of freedom. Regardless, in the end, only the artwork itself could confirm this through its infinite meaning. Or, are we to confess, along with Novalis, in our disenchanted age: “*Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge*” (Novalis 1960, 413)?

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