

From Kant to Romanticism: towards a justification of aesthetic knowledge in the young Benjamin

Abstract

The specialist literature has investigated extensively the link between Benjamin and German Romanticism and, less frequently, his relation to Kant. However, these contributions tend to take up these links separately, and therefore do not analyse in detail the process which begins with the theoretical sketches on Kant and concludes with the writing of the doctoral thesis on the *Frühromantik*. This paper argues that there is a marked continuity between the objectives which led Benjamin to plan, in first place, his doctoral investigation on Kant and those which were finally realized. I try to demonstrate that such continuity consists in a displacement of the problem of the justification of knowledge, from the field of the criticism of knowledge in general to a particular sphere: that of art criticism. In this shift the purpose of linking the justification of knowledge with a messianic philosophy of time and history is also preserved.

Keywords: Kant – Romanticism – Criticism of knowledge – Art Criticism – Messianism

Introduction

In a letter to Gershom G. Scholem in October 1917, Walter Benjamin expresses the desire to write his doctoral thesis on Kant's writings on history, which – he states – he has not read. Nevertheless, he expects to find in them a key to developing the coming philosophy.¹ Benjamin abandons that project after reading two texts by Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" and "Perpetual Peace". The thesis he finally presents at the University of Bern in 1918, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, deals with an issue apparently completely unrelated to the original plan: the concept of art criticism in early Romanticism, especially in the works of the young Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg). The examination of Benjamin's writings and correspondence for that year allows us, however, to discover his intellectual journey. What sparked off his interest in the writings of Kant? Why did he propose to address the Kantian philosophy of history? Why did he turn in the end towards the Romanticism of Jena? Is there a break between this interest in Kant and his research into Romanticism? The specialist literature has investigated extensively the link between Benjamin and Romanticism and, less frequently, his relation to Kant.² However, these contributions tend to take up these links separately, and therefore do not analyse in detail the process which begins with the theoretical sketches on Kant and concludes with the writing of the thesis on the *Frühromantik*. This paper argues that there is a marked continuity between the objectives and interests of the uncompleted project and those

¹ W. Benjamin, *Briefe I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), 150-152.

² The main work on the reception of Kant and Neo-Kantianism has been done by Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky (*Der frühe Walter Benjamin und Hermann Cohen. Jüdische Werte, Kritische Philosophie, vergängliche Erfahrung*. Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2000), Tamara Tagliacozzo (*Esperienza e compito infinito nella filosofia del primo Benjamin*. Roma: Quodlibet, 2003), Howard Caygill (*Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. New York: Routledge, 1998). Among the contributions on Benjamin and Romanticism, this compilation should be mentioned: Beatrice Hanssen y Andrew Benjamin. *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*. London: The Athlone Press, 2003. In the Latin American context, the following book should be mentioned: Mario Seligmann-Silva, *Ler o livro do mundo. Walter Benjamin: romantismo e crítica poética*. San Pablo: Iluminuras, 1999.

which were finally realized. As I will try to demonstrate, such continuity consists in a displacement of the problem of the justification of knowledge from the field of the criticism of knowledge in general, to a particular sphere: that of art criticism. In this shift the purpose – which will determine his output during the twenties – of linking the justification of knowledge with a messianic philosophy of time and history is also preserved.³ In order to show this I will take the following path: I) first, I shall indicate the broad outlines of Benjamin's approach to Kant (his exaltation of the Kantian conception of philosophy as a justification of knowledge; his purpose of merging the Kantian critique with a conception of a messianic character through the development of the notion of the "infinite task"); II) I will then examine the concepts which allow a transition from Kant's philosophy of history to the notion of criticism in the Romanticism of Jena, shaped by a historical and messianic conception: form, task, infinity; finally, III) I will state Benjamin's conception of the romantic theory of art criticism as justification and legitimation of criticism as a genre.

I. Kant: justification of knowledge and the infinite task

Benjamin's most extensive and detailed piece of writing on Kantian philosophy is "On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy", written mostly in November 1917.⁴ There he affirms that in recent philosophy the justification of knowledge, which grants the highest rank to philosophy, has been addressed only by Kant.⁵ Benjamin believes that Kant manages to make an admirable justification of the permanent validity of knowledge, whose criterion of certainty he defines as "systematic unity or truth".⁶ The central task of the coming philosophy is, he affirms, that of relating its own insights into the contemporary epoch to the Kantian system. Only in connection with the Kantian system can a "continuity of decisive systematic consequence"⁷ be achieved.

Despite this centrality of the question of knowledge to this work on Kant, Benjamin plans to write about the philosophy of history. The reasons for the relevance which he ascribes to the philosophy of history are explained in the same letter of October 1917:

I believe I recognize the ultimate reason that led me to this topic, as well as much that is apropos and interesting: the ultimate metaphysical dignity of a philosophical view (*die letzte metaphysische Dignität einer philosophischen Anschauung*) that truly intends to be a canonical will always manifest itself most clearly in its confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) with history; in other words, the specific relationship (*spezifische Verwandtschaft*) of a philosophy with the true

³ Benjamin continues on this course in the writings which immediately follow the thesis: *Goethe's Elective Affinities* (1922), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (published in 1928, started in 1923). On this subject, cf. B. Witte, *Walter Benjamin. Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker. Untersuchungen zu seinem Frühwerk*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976.

⁴ Benjamin, *GS II*, 1, 157-171. The text is taken up again and finalized in March 1918; then Benjamin adds an appendix to it. In late December 1917 he abandons the project of writing his doctoral thesis on Kant, for which reason the appendix postdates that decision.

⁵ Along with Kant, Plato is the other philosopher who – according to Benjamin – would have addressed in a comprehensive manner the justification of knowledge.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

doctrine (*Lehre*) will appear most clearly in philosophy of history; for there is where the subject of the historical evolution of knowledge (*historisches Werden der Erkenntnis*) for which doctrine is the catalyst will have to appear.⁸

Hence it can be inferred that the philosophy of history is, for Benjamin, inseparable from the theory of knowledge. Knowledge is historical (“historical coding”, says the *Trauerspiel-Buch*): it processes concrete and transitory historical contents. In this sense, knowledge is found in becoming. And Benjamin conceives of such becoming in connection with what he calls the “doctrine” (*Lehre*). Knowledge, then, is characterized as a sphere of continuous transformation, in harmony with the notion of doctrine in the Kabbalistic tradition.⁹ As Tamara Tagliacozzo points out, doctrine means here “a messianic historical process which has as its object the resolution of philosophy in the metaphysical-religious and linguistic dimension”.¹⁰ Benjamin understands that this idea is a vital element in the work of Kant, whose words should be interpreted and transformed.¹¹

In the *Programme*, Benjamin insists that knowledge is traversed by temporality, noting a deficiency in the Kantian criticism in this regard. According to Benjamin, the Kantian concept of experience obstructs the connection to a philosophy which is truly aware of time.¹² This concept receives different critical characterizations in this text: experience of the “lowest order” or with “no intrinsic value”, “naked” or “primitive” experience, experience with “small metaphysical importance” or with a “minimum of significance”, or “superficial” experience. The only significance which it could have been able to preserve would be that of certainty. In this sense, of the two aspects which, according to Benjamin, any theory of knowledge must present, only the first is developed successfully in the work of Kant. This is the certainty of knowledge, the permanent aspect, which makes its validity timeless. The second, which is not developed in Kant, is the dignity of experience, which is transient and temporary. Benjamin ascribes the failure of this second aspect to the enlightened historical context in which the thought of Kant is framed: “For the Enlightenment there were no authorities, in the sense not only of authorities to whom one would have to submit unconditionally, but also of intellectual forces who might have managed to give a higher content to experience”; in this consists

⁸ Benjamin, *Briefe I...*, 151-152. We follow here the translation of Manfred R. Jacobson y Evelyn M. Jacobson, en: *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*. Chicago: The University Chicago Press, 1994, 98.

⁹ This notion of doctrine alludes to the connection between the letter of the Bible and the various readings and commentaries that have been made of it throughout history, that is, the connection between the Scriptures and the *Kabbalah*. In other words, it is a question of the relation between the law and its interpretation.

¹⁰ Tagliacozzo, *op. cit.*, 299-300.

¹¹ Cf.: “wer nicht in Kant *das Denken der Lehre selbst* ringen fühlt und wer daher nicht mit äußerster Ehrfurcht ihn mit seinem Buchstaben als ein tradendum, zu Überlieferndes erfaßt (wie weit man ihn auch später umbilden müsse) weiß von Philosophie gar nichts [...] Die tiefste Typik des Denkens der Lehre ist mir bisher immer in seinen Worten und Gedanken aufgegangen...”, *ibid.*, 150. (The emphasis belongs to Benjamin).

¹² Benjamin, *GS II*, 1, 158.

the “religious and historical blindness of the Enlightenment”.¹³ The notion of experience should be extended so it can embrace the religious and the historical.¹⁴

In spite of this shortcoming in Kant’s critique, Benjamin considered that, with the “correct understanding”, there could be found in his reflections on history, “more than enough” to think about that evolution of knowledge.¹⁵ In early December, Benjamin defines a precise object of research: the concept of the “infinite task” in Kant.¹⁶ The messianic overtones of this category, akin to the notion of *tikkun* from the Lurianic Kabbalah, must surely have captivated Benjamin. As is known, in Kant this concept does not have the status of a category; it is referred to simply as a “task” (*Aufgabe*).¹⁷ The idea of infinity is present in the remission of the task to humanity as a species, which has as its aim perpetual peace and international law in a time without end. The concept of the infinite task was taken up later and developed more fully by Hermann Cohen, one of the principal points of reference for the young Benjamin. Cohen seeks to unite the philosophy of Kant with the Jewish tradition by postulating a correspondence between monotheism and the exclusion of freedom from the sphere of sensibility. Within the tradition of the Jewish Enlightenment, which advocated the assimilation of the German Jews, Kant appears as the emblem of a Germanness (*Deutschtum*) which can be reconciled with Judaism (*Judentum*). From this perspective, Cohen offers a messianic interpretation of *Zum ewigen Frieden*, identifying perpetual peace with the Messiah, and stressing in both cases the reference to the future.¹⁸ It is highly likely that these neo-Kantian ideas – of enormous importance in the spiritual environment in which Benjamin’s youth developed – had an impact on him when he became interested in the Kantian philosophy of history and began to search there for the elements with which to develop a messianic conception.

Having addressed Kant’s two texts associated with history, Benjamin expresses his disappointment with what he has found: Kant’s conception is too constrained by

¹³ *Ibid*, 159. Here we follow the translation of Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings in: M. Bullock & M. W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 1: 1913-1926 (Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 101.

¹⁴ As Scholem has stressed, the broadening of the concept of experience is a point of contact with the reflections of Felix Noeggerath, who had as powerful influence on Benjamin in this period, cf. “Walter Benjamin y Felix Noeggerath”, en G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel. Vier Aufsätze und kleine Beiträge*, R. Tiedemann (ed.) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 78-127.

¹⁵ According to his own words, these writings of Kant were not being commented on at the time: the silence which reigned about them could have fed his hope of finding a conception of history akin to his own. Cf.: “Doch wäre es nicht ganz ausgeschlossen, daß in dieser Beziehung Kants Philosophie noch sehr unentwickelt wäre. Nach dem Schweigen, das über seine Geschichtsphilosophie herrscht, müßte man dies (oder das Gegenteil) glauben. Aber ich denke es wird sich für den, der mit richtigem Verstand herangeht, genügend und mehr als das finden.”, Benjamin, *Briefe I*, 151-152.

¹⁶ Cf. “In diesem Sinne bin ich neulich auf ein Thema zu einer Doktorarbeit gekommen das eventuell für mich in Betracht käme: Der Begriff der «unendliche Aufgabe» bei Kant”, *ibid.*, 159.

¹⁷ The concept is found in the work of Kant as a problem of reason and the noumena, that is, as falling within the scope of the antinomies of reason within the “Transcendental Dialectic”; as a moral problem in the *Tugendlehre*, and as a problem of history and law in the *Streit der Fakultäten*, *Zum ewigen Frieden*, *Theorie und Praxis* and in the conclusion to the *Rechtslehre*.

¹⁸ H. Cohen, “Innere Beziehungen der Kantischen Philosophie zum Judentum”, in: *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften* (Berlin: Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), 302.

morality and does not really address the question of history. For Benjamin, Kant does not deal with the subject of history itself, but rather “certain historical constellations of ethical interest”.¹⁹ In Benjamin’s understanding, to the extent that Kant considers this object inaccessible to a specific approach, he uses a method related to that of the natural sciences. In short, Kant’s philosophy of history is not fit for his purpose: that of linking the theory of knowledge to a messianic philosophy of history.²⁰

However, Benjamin does not abandon the concept of the infinite task nor the Kantian concept of critique as a justification of knowledge. In the same letter in which he manifests his disappointment with Kant, he restates the theme of his doctorate in the following terms: “What does it mean to say that science is an infinite task?” (*Was heisst es daß die Wissenschaft eine unendliche Aufgabe ist?*).²¹ It is highly likely that this question is the one which guides the content of two fragments dated by the editors of Benjamin’s work towards the end of 1917: “The infinite task” and “The ambiguity of the concept of the ‘infinite task’ in the Kantian school”.²² There Benjamin characterizes the concept of the infinite task as the *justification (Begründung)* of the autonomy of science and scientific method. The question of autonomy is related to the systematic unity of knowledge: Benjamin claims that the unity of science resides in the fact that it is an infinite task.²³ The legitimate use of the notion of the “infinite task” refers – as Benjamin understands it – to the *form* of knowledge, and not to its subject: “what does the infinite task mean in relation to the form? It does not mean that it is a task whose solution is infinite (in time or in some other mode). The infinite task is the one which cannot be given (*die nicht gegeben werden kann*)”.²⁴ This reading means that it is not a question of a “solution” (*Lösung*) to the task – a term which refers tacitly to Cohen – as a goal or ideal which we approach progressively, whether this ideal is thought of as constant in a stable way or as escaping into the distance.²⁵ This conception would assume an “empty” concept of infinity, supportive of the concept of a homogeneous, empty time. (This exact view is also criticized in Benjamin’s late theses about history, since it functions as the basis of the idea of progress.) In contrast to this idea, Benjamin defines the infinity of the task as “solvability” (*Lösbarkeit*), that is to say, as the fact that science as a unity can not be the object of a finite question. The unity of the system can not be investigated because the finite answer to each question raises a new question and from this one many more.

¹⁹ Cf.: “Was Kants Geschichtsphilosophie angeht, so bin ich durch die Lektüre der beiden speziellen Hauptschriften (Ideen zu einer Geschichte..., Zum ewigen Frieden) auf die Enttäuschung meiner hochgespannten Erwartung geraten. [...] Es handelt sich bei Kant weniger um die Geschichte als um gewisse geschichtliche Konstellationen von ethischem Interesse. Und noch dazu wird gerade die ethische Seite der Geschichte als einer besondern Betrachtung unzugänglich hingestellt und das Postulat einer naturwissenschaftlichen Betrachtungsweise und Methode aufgestellt. (Einleitung zur «Idee einer Geschichte...»)", *ibid.*, 161.

²⁰ It should be observed that on this occasion Benjamin does not read the second part of *Streit der Fakultäten*, in which, as Axel Honneth, Rudolf Langthaler and Reyes Mate have shown, he would have been able to find certain affinities with his own conception.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

²² Benjamin, *GS*, VI, 51-53.

²³ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ For Benjamin, this tension resides in the *ambiguity* of the concept of the infinite task in the Kantian school.

Thus, the concept of the “infinite task” is the basis of the autonomous nature of science: the sphere of science is autonomous because it can not be questioned from outside. As Heinz Eidam has pointed out,

the dilemma is that the virtual question of the unity of the truth could only be formulated from a position “interior” (*innerhalb*) to it, but only in such a way as if the question could be formulated from a position “exterior” (*außerhalb*) to it, that is to say, from the point of view of the answer. In other words, the question already presupposes its answer, the presence of the answer in the question.²⁶

The solution of the task always remains *in* the appropriate science. A similar argument is presented some years later in the preface to the *Trauerspiel-Buch*, where he describes the unity of truth as the annihilation of the purpose of the question.²⁷ This unity, separate from any conscious intention whatsoever, is the element which shapes science as an infinite task. It is not accidental that, along with criticism of the notion of experience, Benjamin presents in the *Programme* a critique of the notion of the subject, and argues that the transcendental sphere must be freed from its “vestments”.²⁸ For Benjamin, the justification of knowledge must not establish its bases on the subject, but on the structure of knowledge itself.

II. The transition to the study of early Romanticism

In a letter of June 1917 to Scholem – months before expressing his wish to write about Kant – Benjamin refers extensively to early Romanticism and to specific projects about Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. There he traces the following relationship between the Romanticism of Jena and Kant:

In a sense whose profundity one should first explain, Romanticism sought to achieve, in the sphere of religion, what Kant had carried out in the theoretical objects: to exhibit their form (*ihre Form aufzeigen*). But is there a *form* of religion? In any case, early Romanticism represented itself beneath the historical term something analogous to this.²⁹

The continuation and transformation that Benjamin wants to make of the Kantian philosophy follows, then, in the footsteps of the Romantics: on the one hand, he proposes in the *Programm* broadening the Kantian concept of experience so that it can encompass religion; on the other, he says in his notes on the notion of the “infinite task” that this must be related to the *form* of knowledge, and not to its object. His own conception,

²⁶ H. Eidam, *Strumpf und Handschuh. Der Begriff der nichtexistenten und die Gestalt der unkonstruierbaren Frage. Walter Benjamins Verhältnis zum Geist der Utopie Ernst Blochs* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1992), 55.

²⁷ Cf.: “Wäre nämlich die integrale Einheit im Wesen der Wahrheit erfragbar, so müßte die Frage lauten, inwiefern auf sie die Antwort selbst schon gegeben sei in jeder denkbaren Antwort, mit der Wahrheit Fragen entspräche. Und wieder müßte vor der Antwort auf diese Frage die gleiche sich wiederholen, dergestalt, daß die Einheit der Wahrheit jeder Fragestellung entginge”, *GS* I, 1, 210. Also in *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* (1922) Benjamin introduces such a conception, through the concept of the “ideal of the problem” (*Ideal des Problems*), described as an indication of a non-existent question (*nichtexistente Frage*) which has as its object the unity of the system of philosophy. Cf. *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁸ *GS* II, 1, 162.

²⁹ Benjamin, *Briefe* 1, 138.

likewise, led to a solution in the field of the philosophy of history. In this same sense, he notes as something typical of early Romanticism the centrality of religious and historical areas: “the center (*Zentrum*) of early Romanticism is religion and history”.³⁰ Compared to late Romanticism, the beauty and depth of the former lies for Benjamin in the *linkage* between these two areas: early Romanticism was not inspired by religious or historical “facts” (*Tatsachen*), but sought rather to produce “in the very *thought* and in life itself the highest sphere (*die höhre Sphäre*) in which both should coincide”.³¹

Benjamin’s turn to the Jena Romanticism is not the result of a sudden enthusiasm: its influence on his work can be seen in his earliest writings, such as “Romanticism” and “Romanticism – the Answer of the Uninitiated” (both from 1913).³² But in that letter Benjamin refers to a turning point in his relationship with Romanticism, saying that *for the first time* he is ready to undertake a thorough study of this movement.³³ His first step is, as indicated, to work on the “Fragments” of Schlegel, whose *systematic foundations* he aspires to understand; he will then tackle the posthumous fragments of Novalis. The persistent search for a system in Schlegel shows a continuity with his interest in Kant. Art criticism, the subject of his future thesis, is completely absent from this letter. The decision to address the fragmentary work of these authors is explained here by their relation to the concept of tradition: Benjamin declares, as has been cited frequently, that Romanticism is “the latest movement to recover tradition for its time” (*die letzte Bewegung, die noch einmal die Tradition hinüberrettete*),³⁴ carrying out an “orgiastic opening” of its secret sources. Here attention should be paid not only to the concern of the Romantics to recover the legends and art of the past, but also to the fact that the rescue operation was carried out *for the present*. Schlegel and Novalis conceived their own epoch as a turning point in modern culture, one which must accept its own character and reconstruct its relationship with the past: hence the importance of the philosophy of history. In this sense, they establish a new link both with Antiquity,— abandoning the concept of imitation as a theoretical matrix — and with the Middle Ages. As Piero Cresto-Dina points out, “Romanticism is identified with modernity to the extent to which the latter represents the crisis”.³⁵ In the Modern Age the artist no longer starts from myth as the substance of his dramas; he must create, as they insistently proclaimed, a “new mythology”.³⁶

Such a mythology, which must be the expression and substrate of the modern work of art, is characterized as an *infinite process*, always in becoming (in contrast to the finishing and the perfection that is attributed to the works of ancient art). Hence the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 138. With respect to late Romanticism, Benjamin had contact with the theories of Franz von Baader, Franz Joseph Molitor, Joseph Gorres and Adam Müller, among others.

³² Both texts were published under the pseudonym “Ardor” in the youth magazine *Der Anfang*. Cf *GS* II, 1, 44 et seq.

³³ Cf. “Ich zum ersten Male erfreulicherweise Male tief in das Studium der Romantik hinein”, *Briefe*, 137.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

³⁵ P. Cresto-Dina, *Messianismo romantico. Walter Benjamin interprete di Friedrich Schlegel* (Turin: Trauben, 2002), 9.

³⁶ A case in point is the famous writing entitled “The oldest program of German idealism”, which expresses the project of building a new mythology.

phrase, in the celebrated fragment 116 from the *Athenäum*: “progressive universal poetry”. Such a name maintains its affinity with the notion of the infinite task, in both its universal and progressive aspects. Not surprisingly Benjamin distinguishes between this progression characteristic of Romanticism and the idea of progress (*Fortschritt*) – which he has rejected since his youth.³⁷ In Romanticism Benjamin finds (and, in part, projects) a concept similar to his own. This romantic vision has its paradigm in the novel (*Roman*), conceived as an infinite process and one which exceeds the limits of the literary genres. It is a kind of trans-genre, containing an infinity of possible genres (it brings together and incorporates all of them). The infinitude thus sets itself up as the characteristic principle of modernity, in contrast to the idea of finitude, which corresponds to antiquity. The new mythology does not arise spontaneously, in the manner of ancient poetry (*Naturpoesie*), but rather, as the *task*, it assumes a self-conscious and artificial character. Romantic poetry is determined, then, by reflection and criticism: “Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry. Its aim isn’t merely to (...) put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism”.³⁸ The character of Hamlet, as the embodiment of (infinite) reflection, is the epitome of modern literature.³⁹

Peter Szondi has highlighted the influence of Kant on Schlegel’s theory of literary genres and the links between the latter and the philosophy of history, with the aim of showing that it was Schlegel, and not Schiller, who applied the method of criticism to the aesthetics.⁴⁰ Szondi presents the Schlegelian theory of genres as a “critique of poetic reason”,⁴¹ one which raises the issue of the *conditions of possibility* of the concept of genre itself. This application of the Kantian critique of knowledge results in Schlegel in exceeding the limits of the system of genres, that is to say, in the overcoming of the limits set by Kant to knowledge, as part of a project which aims to access the absolute through art.⁴²

The Romantic conceptions of religion, history, knowledge, and art, justify Benjamin’s interest in the *Frühromantik* in harmony with the concerns that had led him to Kant. The notion of the infinite task, which was central to his project on Kant, reappears in a veiled form in his thesis on Romanticism. This notion brings together both the idea of *unity* and that of *incompleteness*. These features were fundamental to the Benjaminian understanding of philosophy. As Adorno puts it, still maintaining the overrunning of the boundary between the conditioned and the unconditioned, “nor does

³⁷ Cf: “Die zeitliche Unendlichkeit, in der dieser Proze stattfindet, ist ebenfalls eine mediale und qualitative. Daher ist die Progredibilität durchaus nicht das, was unter dem modernen Ausdruck «Fortschritt» verstanden wird, nicht ein gewisses nur relatives Verhältnis der Kulturstufen zu einander”, *GS I*, 1, 92.

³⁸ F. Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften*, Wolfdieterich Rasch (ed.), (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1958), 37-38. We follow the translation of P. Firchow in: Schlegel, F. *Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde, and, The Fragments* (Minneapolis/ London: University of Minnesota Press, Oxford University Press, 1971), 175-176.

³⁹ Cf. F. Schlegel, *Sobre el estudio de la poesía griega*, trans. Berta Raposo (Madrid: Akal, 1996), 78 et seq.

⁴⁰ P. Szondi, “La teoría de los géneros poéticos en Friedrich Schlegel”, in: *Revista ECO*, N. 162, Bogota, 561-591, here 562.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 562.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 566.

he [Benjamin] proclaim a vindication of definitively total”.⁴³

III. The justification of art criticism as a sphere of knowledge in the thesis on Early Romanticism

The choice of Romanticism as an object of study is related to the project on Kant through the relationship between the Romantics and criticism, a philosophical tradition which they sought to continue and transform. Indeed, at the beginning of his investigation, Benjamin expresses his intention to demonstrate that the romantic concept of criticism has as its “essential prerequisite” the aesthetics of Kant.⁴⁴ In this section the concern is to specify the sense in which Benjamin undertook such a project.

In his thesis, Benjamin argues that the romantic concept of art criticism is analogous in the field of aesthetic criticism to the Kantian concept in the sphere of knowledge. Just as Kant overcomes the antithesis between dogmatism and scepticism, the romantic concept of art criticism overcomes both the rationalist “aesthetic dogmatism of the rule” (which judges works in accordance with fixed and external parameters) and the antithetical position of *Sturm und Drang*, which is sceptical in terms of its effects (since it challenges the whole basis of judgment of the works). In this sense, Kant has “prepared the way”⁴⁵ for the Romantics of Jena, who, according to Benjamin, were the first to have placed the concept of critique at the centre of the philosophy of art. With them the expression *art critic* (*Kunstkritiker*) is definitely affirmed, in contrast to the previous expression, *judge of art* (*Kunstrichter*).⁴⁶ Early Romanticism carries out a *justification* of the critical genre – a meta-critique or philosophy of criticism which rejects both the sceptical thesis and the one which judges works from an *external* regulatory system, while ignoring their concrete singularity. In contrast to these two positions, the romantics propose an *immanent* critique, which establishes its parameters on the basis of the work itself.

This operation is possible thanks to the postulation of a criticizability (*Kritisierbarkeit*) of the work: the latter contains *within itself* the seeds of its own critique and, therefore, claims the concept from its own internal structure. The work is criticizable, independently of criticism. This criticizability is the result of a reflection (*Reflexion*), contained in the work itself and is developed – it is unravelled like a ball of wool – in the critique. Art criticism reveals, then, this reflection present in the work. As

⁴³ T. W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur* (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 11), Rolf Tiedemann with Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss and Klaus Schultz (eds.), (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 550-551.

⁴⁴ Cf. “Die relative Autonomie des Kunstwerkes gegenüber der Kunst oder vielmehr seine lediglich transzendente Abhängigkeit von der Kunst ist die Bedingung der romantischen Kunstkritik geworden. Die Aufgabe wäre, Kants Ästhetik als wesentliche Voraussetzung der romantischen Kunstkritik in diesem Sinn zu erweisen”, *Briefe* 1, 180.

⁴⁵ Cf. “Kant, in dessen Terminologie gar nicht wenig mystischer Geist enthalten ist, hatte sie vorbereitet, indem er den beiden verworfenen Standpunkten des Dogmatismus und Skeptizismus nicht sowohl die wahre Metaphysik, in der sein System gipfeln sollte, als «Kritik», in deren Namen es inauguriert wurde, entgegenhielt”, *GS I*, 1, 52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

F. Schlegel affirmed, poetry and philosophy join forces. Benjamin dedicates the first part of his thesis to the concept of “reflection”; he starts off from the Fichtean characterization in the *Doctrine of science*, and places it on the basis of the romantic concept of reflection. With this, Benjamin seeks to demonstrate the epistemological foundations of art criticism:

We can no more determine the concept of art criticism without epistemological presuppositions than we could without aesthetic ones – not only because the latter imply the former, but above all because criticism contains a cognitive factor, regardless of whether one takes this to be pure cognition or value-laden cognition. Thus, the Romantic determination of the concept of criticism also stands completely upon epistemological presuppositions.⁴⁷

The reflection is, above all, the place where the possibility of direct contact with the absolute is located. In terms of the immediate relation of thought to itself, reflective self-consciousness is the exit which idealism finds from the crossroads of the thing in itself.⁴⁸ In the process of reflection, the content is the form of thought, the act of thinking itself. To the extent that no other content detains the process, nor is necessary so as to carry it out, self-consciousness can be immediate. For the romantics, the phenomenon of reflective self-consciousness does not refer to an ego (*Ich*), as in the case of Fichte, but rather starts off from a “self” (*Selbst*) and refers to thought itself. As selves, the objects and works of art are also centres of reflection. The critique, then, is equivalent to an “experiment” which activates or enhances the *self-knowledge* of the work, increasing its self-awareness. The experiment is not a reflection *on* the work, but is rather the unfolding of the reflection *in* the work.⁴⁹ Two centres of reflection, a subject and a work, can transfer themselves reciprocally in the *medium* of the reflection, in which all art forms are connected to each other in a *continuum* (hence the idea of uniting all genres, all forms in a single genre represented by the novel). Knowledge consists precisely in this *systematic connection* with the absolute. The postulate of a reflection in the work is the key to understanding the objective character the Jena Romantics attributed to art and criticism. In this respect Benjamin’s interpretation contrasts with a long tradition which, since Hegel at least, had branded the romantic theories as subjectivist. According to Benjamin, the romantics introduce to the philosophy of art a rigorous notion of “work”. The work is not conceived as the result of the application of given rules (neoclassicism) or as the product of genius (*Sturm und Drang*), but, as Benjamin says, citing Novalis, carries within it an *a priori* ideal, a need to exist (*eine Notwendigkeit bei sich, da zu sein*).⁵⁰

Benjamin pauses at the *infinite quality* of reflection. This quality seems incompatible with the idea of reflection as immediate access to knowledge. Self-consciousness or the reflective scheme which founds it, could always add another level, in an infinite regress. Fichte resolves the problem by postulating that self-consciousness

⁴⁷ W. Benjamin, *GS* I, 1, 11. We follow here: *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, R. Livingstone et. al. (trans), Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P-Harvard UP, 1996), 116.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 76. (cf. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings...*, 123).

does not occur through a reflection, but is immediately present in thinking. According to Benjamin, Fichte

tries everywhere to exclude the infinitude of the action of the “I” from the realm of theoretical philosophy and to assign it instead to the domain of practical philosophy, whereas the Romantics seek to make it constitutive precisely for their theoretical philosophy and thus for their philosophy as a whole.⁵¹

Considering that in Kant the concept of “task” is located within practical philosophy, and that in his fragments Benjamin tries to locate it as the foundation of theoretical knowledge (of its autonomy and its method), it can be understood that on this point Benjamin’s project also follows the Romantics. The romantic solution does not remove infinity from the theoretical level, but proposes rather a distinction between two types of infinity: that of the process (*Unendlichkeit des Fortgangs*) and that of the connections (*Unendlichkeit des Zusammenhanges*).⁵² The infinity of the process is linked to an infinite *progress* of the formal process of consciousness, which, as we saw, Benjamin rejects and denies that it belonged to Romanticism itself. The infinity of the connections, however, is linked to a creative reflection, whose unfolding takes place in a real and living sphere. Hence, F. Schlegel and Novalis characterized thought as a form of “poeticizing” or “romanticizing”, terms which account for a thought capable of producing or creating, in a sense, its own material. The scope (*Medium*) of reflection is “full”, and infinity refers to the multiple *systematic connections* in this real field.⁵³

Benjamin says that messianism – which he considers “the heart of Romanticism” – was addressed only in an indirect, “mediated” (*nur mittelbar*), way in his thesis, because he could not do otherwise in the context of the rigid structures of academia.⁵⁴ The infinity of connections is undoubtedly one of the mediations Benjamin uses in order to present his (anti-Cohenian) vision of messianism: according to Benjamin, Romanticism demands the Kingdom of God in full now, rejecting the thought of an *ideal* of humanity towards which we move in an empty, future-oriented infinity.⁵⁵ In addition, the mediated approximation to romantic messianism depends on the concept of the

⁵¹ Cf.: “Fichte ist überall bestrebt, die Unendlichkeit der Aktion des Ich aus dem Bereich der theoretischen Philosophie auszuschließen und in das der praktischen zu verweisen, während die Romantiker sie gerade für die theoretische und damit für ihre ganze Philosophie überhaupt”, *ibid.*, 22.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵³ Cf.: “Das Gleiche hatten Schlegel und Novalis im Sinn, indem sie die Unendlichkeit der Reflexion als eine *erfüllte* Unendlichkeit des Zusammenhanges verstanden: es sollte in ihr alles auf unendlich vielfache Weise, wie wir heute sagen würden *systematisch*”, *ibid.*, 26. (The italics are ours.)

⁵⁴ Cf.: “Vor einigen Tagen habe ich die Rohschrift meiner Dissertation abgeschlossen. Was sie sein sollte ist sie geworden: ein Hinweis auf die durchaus in der Literatur unbekannte wahre Natur der Romantik – auch nur mittelbar das weil ich an das Zentrum der Romantik, den Messianismus– ich habe nur die Kunstanschauung behandelt – ebenso wenig wie an irgend etwas anderes, das mir höchst gegenwärtig ist herangehen durfte, ohne mir die Möglichkeit der verlangten komplizierten und konventionellen wissenschaftlichen Haltung, die ich von der echten unterscheidet, abzuschneiden”, *GB I*, 208. The question of messianism in the Romantic conception of art criticism has been studied by, amongst others, Beda Alleman in “El concepto de una moderna ciencia literaria en el Romanticismo temprano”, which deals above all with the conception of temporality which underlies the concept of criticism (in: *Literatura y reflexión I*, Ángel Rodríguez Francisco (trans.), Buenos Aires: Alfa, 1975, 135-151).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

“criticizability” of the work. This indicates a need for redemption *in* the works, which is in harmony with the perspective outlined in those preparatory notes on the concept of the infinite task (in which the concept of “solutionability” was introduced). Benjamin says that the critique serves to redeem the works, on the basis of the demand proceeding from them. As long as the increase in reflection is infinite – according to Benjamin, on principle – the criticism focuses the – unique and limited – work towards the infinity of art. The form of the work is limited, but the distinct forms are united in the absolute form of art: the *idea of art*.⁵⁶ Progressive universal poetry and the concept of transcendental poetry are determinations of this idea, which expresses the *unity* of art. Criticism exhibits the relationship of the work to the other works and, therefore, to the idea of art. It does not evaluate or judge a unique work, nor has the function of being informative or educational: “it is not the critic who pronounces judgment on this, but the art itself, in so far as it assumes in itself the work in the *Medium* of criticism, or rejects it”.⁵⁷ Once the works have been taken up – redeemed – by means of criticism, they dissolve in the idea.

Both in the project concerning the notion of the infinite task in Kant and in the thesis on the concept of art criticism in early Romanticism, Benjamin establishes a link between the critical work of knowledge and the Messianic time. When, with respect to the question about the notion of the infinite task, he affirms that it “is much deeper and more philosophical than what is believed at first glance” (*viel tiefer und philosophischer als man auf den ersten Blick glaubt*)⁵⁸ he is referring implicitly, as is evidenced by the notes of 1917, to the problem of the justification of knowledge and its history. In the thesis, this justification is carried out in the field of aesthetic knowledge, without ignoring the concept of redemption. Since this deals with the connection between knowledge and history, it is not surprising that the concept of *task* recurs in his work in different ways, as the task of the translator, of the critic, or of the historian. This project with respect to Kant is, in this sense, an antecedent of that rigorous use which the term presents in the later writings.

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⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁷ Cf.: “Nicht der Kritiker fällt über dieses das Urteil, sondern die Kunst selbst, indem sie entweder im Medium der Kritik das Werk in sich aufnimmt oder es von sich abweist”, *ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁸ Benjamin, *Briefe I*, 161

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