

**The Essence of Art in German Romanticism
(Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis)
and the Concept of *Art-as-Religion* (Kunstreligion)**

(Abstract)

Concerning the interpretation of the genuine nature of religion and art in German Romanticism, we should single out three already mentioned German authors and their respective philosophical manifestos: *Addresses on Religion* (“Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern”, 1799) by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), *Athenäum Fragments* (1798) by Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1828) and *Flowerdust* („Blütenstaub“, 1798) by Novalis (Georg Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, 1772-1801). These works present free, creative, universal, adogmatic – hence, romantic and consequently, modern – interpretation and establishment of religion and poetics, detached from the discourses characteristic of the ecclesiastic and dogmatic tradition on the one hand and normative poetics on the other.

Keywords: *Art-as-Religion, German Romanticism, Romantic Poetry, Romantic Art*

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The turn of the 19th century – the 1800s, as referred to in cultural and literary studies – is believed to be the crucial period in the history of German, and not only German, reasoning. This is the age of Romanticism that marks the outset of – or at least lays the foundation for – the so-called “aesthetic modernism” („die ästhetische Moderne“) (Vietta 2007: 19). The reasons can be sought in the fact that on the one hand, the Romantic literary texts of the period are characterized by distinctly subjectivistic, self-reflecting discourses, which later, in modernist texts, acquire extreme forms (Vietta 2007: 20–21); on the other hand, Romantic texts dealing with literary theory and philosophy reconsider the fundamental phenomena of intellectual culture, and specifically, of religion and art, in totally modern terms, characterized by permanent relevance and inevitably oriented to the future, which has endlessly been inspiring modern and post-modern writing (Ziolkowski 2006: 205-227): in particular, at the given stage, these two phenomena (i.e. art and religion) are interpreted from the perspective of universality (for examples, cf. Schlegel’s famous *Athenäum Fragment* 116 Schlegel, „progressive Universalpoesie“), which means the interpretation of the genuine nature of *religion* and *art* through the complete disregard of two major normative constraints: on the one hand, these constraints are religious and aesthetic regulations embedded in history and tradition, i.e. the dogmatic interpretation of religion established by the church, and on the other hand, the poetic standards stemming from Aristotle and developed in the Enlightenment. Art and religion are interpreted beyond any historical contexts and interests – as autonomous, self-existing and self-sufficient facts, freed from any historical and spatio-temporal ties.

This implies a totally free, creative interpretation of the phenomena and the establishment of religious and artistic activities as a free, individualistic and creative process, when, as Friedrich Schlegel points out in *Fragment* 116, “the arbitrariness of the poet brooks no superior law” (“die Willkür des Dichters kein Gesetz über sich leide” (Schlegel 2005: 91).

It was exactly German Romanticism that at this juncture of centuries (the late 18th and the early 19th centuries) turned religion and art into the spaces of absolute freedom that overcame the

ecclesiastic and dogmatic understanding of religion on the one hand and a rationalistic approach to it cultivated by the Enlightenment and Kantianism on the other hand (see Kant's "Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason", where Kant interprets religion only as a lever regulating practical morality, based on the categorical imperative developed by reasoning). On the other hand, in aesthetics romanticism overcame the Gottschedian concept of Regelpoetik (that is, poetic norms, which is an aesthetic dogmatism of its kind). This was opposed by Schlegel's creative arbitrariness („Willkür“) of an artist and Schleiermacher's universal concepts of religious experience (“Anschauung”) and the subjective and mystical sensation of a religious impulse (“Gefühl”). Novalis confronted and overcame Kantian transcendental cognition and ontological dualism with the apriority of transcendence from mental perception and reasoning and the postulate of mystical introversion: “6. Never will we conceive [begreifen] ourselves entirely, but we can and will realize much more with ourselves than conceiving. [...] 17. [...] We dream of journeys through the universe – Is not the universe *within us*? We do not know the depths of our spirit – Inward goes the mysterious path. Within us or nowhere lies eternity with its worlds – the past and the future” (Novalis 1991: 383, 385).

Concerning the interpretation of the genuine nature of religion and art in German Romanticism, we should single out three already mentioned German authors and their respective philosophical manifestos: *Addresses on Religion* (“Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern”, 1799) by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), *Athenäum Fragments* (1798) by Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1828) and *Flowerdust* („Blütenstaub“, 1798) by Novalis (Georg Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, 1772-1801). These works present free, creative, universal, adogmatic – hence, romantic and consequently, modern – interpretation and establishment of religion and poetics, detached from the discourses characteristic of the ecclesiastic and dogmatic tradition on the one hand and normative poetics on the other.

All the three Romantic authors interpret the essence of art in the context of the essence of religion, as for them the new, i.e. *modern* romantic art¹ is inherently *religious* or *communional*, which means the interpretation of a work of art as a transcendentable phenomenon, i.e. as a phenomenon that overcomes empirical time and space and thus establishes *religion* i.e. *communion* with the transcendent. Hence, art and consequently, a work of art is reckoned as an inherently *transcendental* phenomenon, establishing/restoring *religion* or *communion* with the transcendent, i.e. the infinity through the process of aesthetic transcendence. Here, art reveals its genuine universal and *religious*, i.e. *communional* nature as its main form of being is the coverage of the universal existence and the establishment and comprehension of the transcendent – that is, of the *infinity* and *universe* as interpreted by the Romanticists – in the finite format of a work of art. The whole Romantic art in general, whether poetry, painting or music, is transcendental by nature – Romantic art is *a transcendental art*, which means that this kind of art is in essence *the religion of art*, i.e. it is the kind of art whose essence is to establish and restore *religion*, i.e. *communion* with the transcendent, which is accomplished in the aesthetic space of Romanticism – the romantic poetry (Novalis), art (Caspar David Friedrich) and music (van Beethoven).

Hence, according to the Romantic theory of art, a work of art is to be *religious*, i.e. *communional* in essence; it should a priori have a communion with the transcendent, that is, it should transcend. Naturally, Romanticists also employ religious, and in particular, Christian motifs and symbols, which, however, are embedded within the process of aesthetization characteristic of the Romantic theory of art. As a result, in literature and painting, for instance,

1 It should be noted that in the works of Romanticists *modern* and *romantic* are synonymous notions (see F. Schlegel's article “On the Study of Greek Poetry”). They interpreted Romantic poetry as an inherently modern, up-to-date aesthetic phenomenon opposed to the 18th century literature that stems from the philosophical Enlightenment and ancient literary tradition – the literature of Enlightenment (Lessing) or Weimar classics (Goethe, Schiller).

Christian motifs and symbols appear “secularized”, that is, adogmatic and non-ecclesiastic (e.g. C. D. Friedrich’s painting „Tetschener Altar“, or Novalis’ lyrical cycle “Hymns to the Night” (“Hymnen an die Nacht”). Through liberal creative interpretation, Romanticists create a mythology, which they call the *New Mythology* (>Neue Mythologie<) (Novalis, Schlegel). In conceptual terms, the fact suggests the establishment of adogmatic and unecclesiastic, subjective and individualistic Christianity, while in aesthetic terms, it indicates the anchoring of the traditional Christian symbolism in the aesthetic domain of Romanticism and establishing liberal religious art, and more specifically, *Art-as-Religion* (Kunstreligion), based on “free poetic invention” (“freie poetische Erfindung”, Novalis), i.e. the free creative act (e.g. Novalis’ *Hymns to the Night*). This very concept of *Art-as-Religion* is supposed to free art from ecclesiastic and dogmatic regulations and oppose and diverge from any kind of dogmatic (e.g. Catholic) manifestations in art.

In general, when interpreting the ontology of art, and consequently of a work of art, two basic points can be singled out: a) what is its genuine nature; b) where is its aesthetic function revealed. The concept of *Art-as-Religion* (Kunstreligion) and consequently, *Art-as-Religion* itself, as a form of art, should be analysed through this prism, i.e. from the standpoint of defining its essence and function. The following three points emerge in this respect: a) the essence of such art is religious, thus it is primarily oriented to the transcendent and its function is to transcend, that is, to establish religion, i.e. communion with the transcendent through an act of free art; b) or, *Art-as-Religion* in essence is the replacement of a historically existing traditional religion aiming at establishing itself as an object of religious veneration, religious cult; c) or, it is religious art determined by the confessional dogmatism of a particular traditional religion and consequently, its function is the apology and propagation of religious cult through artistic rendering of religious dogmatics and teachings.

As mentioned above, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis regard Romantic art as *Art-as-Religion* that does not replace any historically existing religion (i.e. Christianity) or acquire the functions of a religious cult to become an object of religious veneration, as pointed out by B. Auerochs in his article “Religion and Literature” (Auerochs 2007: 644), but is perceived as *Art-as-Religion* saturated by and possessing religious essence and functions, thus implying an a priori initiation into process of transcendence by a Romantic work of art, aspiration for the absolute and establishment of religion, that is communion with it. Therefore, I cannot share the viewpoint of the German researcher N. Heinkel, who interprets Romantic art and consequently the concept of *Art-as-Religion* as an ersatz of historical religion (here Christianity) possessing cult functions (Heinkel 2004: 42).

Therefore, if we use the concept of *Art-as-Religion* (Kunstreligion) in reference to Friedrich Schleiermacher’s, Friedrich Schlegel’s and Novalis’ interpretation of the essence of art and religion, and of the religion-and-art dialectic, the concept will acquire a dialectic nature and will offer an entirely new or Romantic perception of art and religion: as expounded by the philosophers, the concept refers to religious, transcendental nature of art and its communal functions, charging religion and religiousness in general with the essence and function of art. The main point here is that the concepts of religion and religiousness as employed by the Romanticists are devoid of references to cult, ecclesiastic dogmas or a historically existing traditional religion. They are used by the Romanticists in its primary etymological sense on the one hand, i.e. religion as a communion with the transcendent and the establishment and restoration of ties with the latter, while on the other hand, the concepts refer to the ontological implicitness of religion and religiousness: religion is interpreted as a phenomenon inherent with human essence and existence, an essential characteristic feature of human existence – human as a religious being, human as a being of religious nature, whose consciousness and spiritual skills are a priori directed to the transcendent. Therefore, Romanticists consider *religion* and *religiousness* as purely philosophical and aesthetic values, and not theological and confessional concepts.

Hence, Romantic art is established as a religion, or *Art-as-Religion*, having a religious, or

communion function: the essence of art is the process of transcendence – overcoming the empirical boundaries and restoring communion (religion) with transcendence (eternity/universe). Determined by its ontological nature and possessing such creative and aesthetic functions, Romantic art establishes an uninterrupted, eternal process of transcendence and evokes in readers, listeners and viewers, or rather in their deeper nature and senses (*Gemüt, Gefühl*), an inextinguishable longing for transcendence. Thus, in terms of the romantic interpretation of art, the concept of *Art-as-Religion* refers exactly to the religious, i.e. communion nature of art.

The Romantic hermeneutics of the essence of art a priori rules out the replacement of art by cult religion and determination of a work of art as an object of religious veneration. At the same time, the religious perception of art maintained by Romanticists does not mean interpreting art (and consequently, a work of art) as religious art, as they reject the determination of art according to a particular religion, confession and ecclesiastical dogmas (e.g. the medieval ecclesiastical art). In the latter case, the aesthetic function of a work of art is to worship cult and praise church, propagate confessional religiousness or provide artistic embellishment for religious dogmatics and teachings, which, as mentioned above, is principally alien to the Romantic perception of art. Hence, Romanticists interpret art as *Art-as-Religion*, that is, art with an inherent religious, communion nature, and not as religious art, that is ecclesiastical art.

Therefore, two fundamental directions can be distinguished in the Romantic hermeneutics of the essence of art: it offers a precise definition for the ontological essence of a work of art, its genuine nature and function. As mentioned above, the essence of art in Romanticism is revealed in transcendence, that is, the longing for divineness, and its supreme aesthetic function is the establishment of a communion with the transcendent. To this extent, the essence of Romantic art is religious and it is *Art-as-Religion*.

Romanticists subordinate art to the goals of transcendence and consider it a phenomenon directed towards the transcendent, when the communion (religion) with the eternity/universe is established through a work of art. The examples of the romantic *Art-as-religion* are Novalis' "Hymns to the Night" and C. D. Friedrich's landscape paintings, Beethoven's symphonic music, R. Wagner's operas ("Tannhäuser", "Tristan and Isolde", "Parsifal"), S. George's, R. M. Rilke's and Galaktion Tabidze's symbolic poetry and in our contemporary times - Pink Floyd's and Led Zeppelin's progressive and hard rock - the list can be continued endlessly. They all have in common their transcendental nature and consequently, the function of establishing and restoring religion or communion with the transcendent.

Thus, *Art-as-Religion* in general and the respective works of art in literature, painting and music are *life-giving, living* ("lebendig") works of art, which on the one hand reflect and express the process of religious transcendence and on the other hand, establish and implement the process in the recipient himself during the reception. Hence, the ontological essence of the works of *Art-as-Religion* is religious, that is directed towards the transcendent, while their function is transcendental, that is, establishing religion, communion with the absolute. Hence, *Art-as-Religion* is art with religious nature.

In the theory of art propounded by the Romanticists (Fr. Schleiermacher, Fr. Schlegel, Novalis) and in their works, the essence of art in general and of Romantic art in particular is established as *Art-as-Religion*, which does not replace a particular historical-empirical religion (i.e. Christianity); neither is it a religious-ecclesiastic art (like, for example, the art of the Middle Ages). However its inner essence is filled with religious ethos or the attempt to restore communion with the transcendent. Therefore, determined by its inner essence, Romantic art is established as *transcendental art*. Consequently, the concept of *Art-as-Religion* in relation to Romantic art refers to its transcendental and religious inner essence, which in its turn implies that Romantic art is primarily *Art-as-Religion*.

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