

# Why I write such excellent songs

David Bowie, 1947–2016

Keith Ansell-Pearson

As the limousine cruises its way through an arid Californian landscape, a pale and thin David Bowie sits in the back and humorously reflects that he never wanted to be a rock 'n' roll star, 'honest guv, I wasn't even there'. This is a 27-year-old Bowie talking to Alan Yentob in 1974 and screened as the BBC documentary *Cracked Actor* in 1975. For a 14-year-old fan, it was a pivotal moment: here was an articulate rock musician talking and singing about all manner of strange things, including psychosomatic death wishes, and giving a brilliant and emotionally charged rendition of Jacques Brel's *My Death*. A stranger in a strange land. The concert footage featured the *Diamond Dogs* revue, which never came to the UK, and included Bowie being projected over the audience for *Space Oddity*, seated aloft a cherry picker, wrapped around in rope for 'Diamond Dogs', and encased by a giant bejewelled blue hand for 'Time'. This may have been rock 'n' roll, but not as anyone knew it. *Cracked Actor* left one bewitched, bothered and bewildered, and wanting to be part of the Bowie universe.

Bowie's remark to Yentob in the limousine back in 1974 reflects a predicament he felt throughout his musical life: was he fated to be a mere rock star or could he be recognized as an artist who had chosen rock as his medium of expression?<sup>1</sup> How could one separate the rock 'n' roll myth – including rock 'n' roll suicide – from the artistic reality? By the end of his life Bowie had achieved what he had sought from the beginning: to be recognized as first and foremost an artist. As his manager of the late 1960s, Ken Pitt, put it: Bowie was 'never a devotee or exponent of rock 'n' roll. Whenever he rocked and rolled he did so in the context of theatre, as an actor. It has been his most successful role to date.'<sup>2</sup> Of course, such a statement belies the fact that for a good part of the 1970s, when he arguably produced much of his finest work, Bowie was the classic case of a rock 'n' roll casualty, up to his red-eyed eyeballs in drug addiction. As he observed in an interview of 1977, having left Los Angeles for Berlin, he was infuriated that he was still in rock 'n' roll, sucked right into the centre of it, 'in the middle of this crazy and filthy rock 'n' roll circus'.<sup>3</sup>

To his fans Bowie was not just a rock star but also a way of life. John Gray, writing recently in the *New Statesman*, is right to insist on his shaman-like qualities.<sup>4</sup> Bowie lured you into a world of art and alterity. In her own appreciation in *Mojo*, Siouxsie Sioux notes that the release of every album was like an event: one waited for them, examined them when they came out, and absorbed their entire content, listening to them over a period of many years.<sup>5</sup> In his late years, it seems that Bowie aimed to restore something of this event-like status, now rare in the world of rock where

everything is predigested and we live in a world of wall-to-wall music. He stopped doing interviews and left it to band members and his producer, Tony Visconti, to provide accounts of the albums, *The Next Day* (2013) and *Blackstar* (2016), reasserting the enigmatic character of his profile.

What was Bowie's art? In early interviews, such as the ones he gave during his first visit to the USA in 1971 to promote *The Man Who Sold the World*, he spoke of the rock music business as creating images to which audiences relate as they want. His aim, he said, was to supply another image, not so much of a new society but of a coming new world. This is the Nietzschean-inspired world of the *Homo superior* invoked in 'The Supermen' from *The Man Who Sold the World* and appealed to more directly in *Hunky Dory* (1971). In the 1970s it became standard to conceptualize Bowie as the Andy Warhol of the rock world, and clearly Bowie did study Warhol and the Factory entourage of 'speed freaks and transvestites', especially as he developed the character of Ziggy Stardust.<sup>6</sup> This is to construe him as a 'blank canvas on which consumers write their dreams', as Simon Frith and Howard Horne contend in their 1987 *Art as Pop*.<sup>7</sup> Frith noted in 1973 that Bowie constructs music not around a sound or a style but rather around an image, as a direct provocation to rock purism.<sup>8</sup> Bowie himself saw it in terms of a *synthesis* of the audio and the visual, and he pictured himself as part of a school that attempted to drag all the arts together so as to create a potpourri, a new kind of 'essence' of English music. He reflected: 'It started even before us, in the mid-1960s, when so many of our rhythm and blues bands came out of art school. In

Britain there was always the joke that you went to art school to learn to play blues guitar.'<sup>9</sup>

Bowie often lost his way: there was the failure of success and the success of failure. There are many David Bowies to reflect upon, and I don't just mean the characters he assumed and as a way of masking his shyness and social ineptness. His life is a lesson in the spoils of fame and celebrity, in the corruption of art by money, and in how to survive an existence on the edge in accordance with the demands of Dionysian excess. Simon Critchley has written of Bowie's music as a search for love and connection,<sup>10</sup> and indeed there are many songs that testify to this yearning: from the grandeur of 'Station to Station' ('it's not the side effects of the cocaine, I'm thinking that it must be love...') through to 'Under Pressure'. This is about love on a social as much as a personal level.

As the years unfolded Bowie came to appreciate, through the influence of Brian Eno in particular, that there was an enormous gap between living life and being an artist. The aim, he once put it, was to remain 'artistically illegitimate'.<sup>11</sup> As Critchley states

in his book: 'The point is that during the 1970s ... Bowie was able to mobilize an artistic *discipline* that is terrifying in its intensity, daring, and risk.'<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on his death in the *Guardian*, John Harris said that in mourning Bowie's death we mark the end of an era when art could truly subvert on a popular scale: 'a world in which art could fracture normality, an idea that now seems strangely quaint'.<sup>13</sup> As Bowie himself once mused: 'When Nietzsche said, "There is no God", that really disturbed the 20th century. And it fucked everything up – philosophically and spiritually – when he said that.'<sup>14</sup> Bowie similarly wanted to fuck things up in the world of rock and pop. On one occasion he compared his art to a search *for* God, but in the sense of an effort to



reclaim the unmentionable, the unsayable and the unspeakable, 'all those things', he said in 2003, 'that come into being a composer, into writing music, into searching for notes and pieces of musical information that don't exist'.<sup>15</sup>

For Critchley, Bowie's vision is a consistently dystopian one, as seen in songs such as 'Five Years' from the album *Ziggy Stardust* (1972), with its pre-apocalyptic melancholy, the post-apocalyptic reveries of 'Drive-in-Saturday' on the 1973 album *Aladdin Sane*, and, above all, the 1974 *Diamond Dogs* album with its opening cry, 'This ain't rock 'n' roll, this is genocide'.<sup>16</sup> In fact, and although Bowie's song writing is never didactic, there is a lament in his writing for a *lost* or *failed* utopia, which is perhaps not surprising given that it was in the 1960s that he began to mature as both an artist and a person. The best example is the epic and extraordinary 'Cygnet Committee' from the album originally titled *Man of Words, Man of Music*. For the utopian Bowie, listen to the closing track of the same album, 'Memory of a Free Festival'. This lament continues right up to the song 'Fall Dog Bombs the Moon' on the 2003 album *Reality*, where Bowie sings ominously: 'These blackest of years that have no sound; no shape, no depth, no underground ... devil in the market-place, devil in your bleeding face.'

While, then, Critchley locates in Bowie's art a distinctly Warholian aesthetic of inauthenticity<sup>17</sup> – and he's right to the degree that Bowie *plays* at being a rock 'n' roll star (and did anyone play it better?) – one should not lose sight of the emotional impact of much of the music, too often neglected at the expense of a focus on the image. For Bowie there was 'an emotional engine' created by the juxtaposition of musical texture and lyrics: 'that's probably what art does best: it manifests that which is impossible to articulate', he once said in an interview.<sup>18</sup> Popular music is an art form, and Bowie was a master of the genre, even when this meant conveying emotion in a contrived, actor-like fashion. Forever the actor, forever the conveyor of truths: 'His art is a radically contrived and reflexively aware confederation of illusion whose fakery is not false, but at the service of felt, corporeal truth'.<sup>19</sup> This is sublime Bowie, creating inauthentic pop music; so much more than the liberal clichés of endless self-reinvention and limitless change. It has the power to transport.

In spite of his aesthetic of inauthenticity, Bowie honed his craft as a writer of great three-minute pop songs. He saw his music as akin to painting, an attempt to portray ideas and reflect on life. One of the best examples is the song 'Life on Mars', from what is many people's favourite Bowie album, *Hunky Dory* (1971). Hearing the song for the first time on the radio was a supremely philosophical moment for me. It was like a philosophical short story in three glorious minutes, and to this day the song has for me the grandeur of the transfiguration of the everyday and the commonplace, never failing to provide me with the proverbial sense of wonder associated with philosophy. It wasn't just the lyrics, but the sense of the aporetic, the significance of that question



mark. Philosophy as the staging of the question mark was part of my initial attraction to Nietzsche, the philosopher of the question mark par excellence. I appreciated the deferral of meaning and the rich ambiguities. Bowie not only opened up my sexuality and complicated my identity; he also put me in touch with a philosophical world.

On occasion, Bowie would describe our condition as a *post-philosophical* world, by which he meant that we had no absolute truths or eternal facts to hold on to. 'There's nothing to rely on any more', he once said in an interview.<sup>20</sup> But much of his work testifies against this lazy postmodern nihilism in its search for commitment and faith in life. One thinks here of mantra-like songs like the wonderfully rhythmic 'Right' on the *Young Americans* album and the epic lament of 'ain't there one damn song that can make me break down and cry?' on the title track. Irony can only take you so far.

Critchley contends that Bowie's lyrics are at their strongest when they are at their most oblique: in this way we fill in the gaps, both with our imagination and our longing.<sup>21</sup> One doesn't want to deny this, but, at the same time, one cannot also deny the emotional pull of so many of his lyrics, yearning for a better life and a better world. In spite of his celebrated 'ch-ch-changes', there are constants running through Bowie's music, such as the way he questions our search for meaning and redemption, from the song 'Quicksand' on *Hunky Dory* to several tracks on *Heathen* of 2002, probably his finest album from the late period. The final song on that album poses a series of philosophical questions, as Bowie reflects on his own mortality, the passing of time, unfulfilled dreams, and what are perhaps vain hopes for humanity: 'Is there no reason?', he cries. 'Have I stared too long?'

Bowie wore many masks in his lifetime; he often hid behind them; and he frequently lost his way wearing them. But he could also be fearless and honest, and his last performance may be his most honest. In his final video shoot, screened just three days before his death, for the song *Lazarus*, we see Bowie on his deathbed, aware of his impending death, frantically wanting to release his creativity for one last time. Since his death it has been revealed that there is a long list of unscheduled musical releases that he planned before his death. Bowie exerted tight control over what was released from the archives; it is to be hoped that his wishes are respected and only the highest quality material is released. Welcome to the Bowie universe.

## Notes

1. On this relation between 'art' and rock, see also the obituaries of Captain Beefheart and Lou Reed by Ben Watson and David Cunningham: 'Vorticist Artist', *Radical Philosophy* 166, March/April 2011; and 'Rock as Minimal Modernism', *Radical Philosophy* 183, January/February 2014, respectively.
2. Cited in Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, Titan Books, London, 2011, p. 7.
3. Interview with Allan Jones, *Melody Maker*, 29 October 1977, in Sean Egan, ed., *Bowie on Bowie: Interviews and Encounters with David Bowie*, Chicago Review Press, Chicago, 2015, p. 64.
4. John Gray, 'The Shifting Shaman of the Modern Age', *New Statesman*, 15–21 January 2016, p. 35.
5. Siouxsie Sioux, 'The Eternal Genius of David Bowie', *Mojo*, March 2016, p. 70.
6. For further insight, see Judith A. Peraino, 'Plumbing the Surface of Sound and Vision: David Bowie, Andy Warhol, and the Art of Posing', *Qui Parle*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2012, pp. 151–84.
7. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 155.
8. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 163.
9. Interview with Michael Kimmelman, *New York Times*, 14 June 1998.
10. Simon Critchley, *Bowie*, OR Books, New York and London, 2014, p. 132.
11. Interview with Michael Watts, *Melody Maker*, 18 February 1978, in Egan, ed., *Bowie on Bowie*, p. 98.
12. Critchley, *Bowie*, p. 116.
13. John Harris, *Guardian*, 12 January 2016, p. 33.
14. Interview with Mike Jollett, *Filter*, July/August 2003, in Egan, ed., *Bowie on Bowie*, p. 392.
15. Unaired CBS interview, 2003: bowie wonderworld.com, accessed 26 January 2016.
16. Critchley, *Bowie*, pp. 76–7.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
18. Interview with Dominic Wells, *Time Out*, 30 August–6 September 1995, in Egan, ed., *Bowie on Bowie*, p. 256.
19. Critchley, *Bowie*, p. 54.
20. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 154.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

# Introduction

Of all the genealogical sources of contemporary critical theory, in both its German- and French-inspired variants, early German Romanticism remains the most potent, yet it is also the least explicated in relation to current theoretical trends.\* The sources of modern criticism in Jena Romanticism are widely acknowledged, yet when theory parades as a post-philosophical genre, it largely does so in one of two main post-Hegelian modes: the dialectical and anti-dialectical critiques of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schlegel's insertion of a literary history of the moderns into the context of Kant's 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgment-Power', to produce 'a historical philosophy of art' (*eine historische Philosophie der Kunst*),<sup>2</sup> is recognized as formative for literary theory, but its more general-theoretical significance is still largely unexplored (or at least since the decline of deconstruction).

In particular, Schlegel's idea has yet to be systematically connected up to the idea of transdisciplinarity, which increasingly impinges on the methodological self-consciousness of a wide array of general-theoretical practices in the arts and humanities, having been imported from Education, and Science and Technology Studies, whence the self-conscious, but narrowly technocratic, formulation of its idea derives. From the standpoint of the prevalent (and bureaucratically convergent), technocratic and 'creative' (art school and cultural-industrial) discourses on transdisciplinarity, in fact, philosophical Romanticism is more or less invisible. Ironically, perhaps, because it is precisely the heritage of a 'bad' Romanticism of the artist as creator that the idea is being deployed to recode.

The constantly repeated self-historicization of the dominant, technocratic idea of transdisciplinary, as

the product of a state-led reorganization of knowledges, rarely ventures back beyond the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> This is primarily a result of an exclusive focus on knowledge production as a 'research process' orientated to 'real world' problems, to the neglect of concept construction, critique and conceptual meaning. Yet the relevant debates about the unity of the system of relations between academic disciplines date back to the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries (paradigmatically, in Germany), a period in which they were at once explicitly philosophical and institutional in character – as the article by Howard Caygill in this dossier indicates, with regard to the intellectual background to the founding of the University of Berlin. There is thus considerable scope (and one might hold out some hope) for a productive engagement of early Romanticism with the transdisciplinary problematic, in its broader sense. Indeed, might the conceptual form of transdisciplinarity most appropriate to the arts and humanities be something structurally akin to that of early Romanticism itself?

The relevance and resonance of early German Romanticism here are in part a product of its philosophical position 'between Kant and Hegel', and their transcendental and dialectical constructions of the relations between the disciplines, respectively; in part a product of Jena Romanticism's historical self-consciousness of the cultural consequences and aporias of its modernity; and in part a result of the privileged metaphysical status of the generic concept of art, lurking beneath the Romantic idea of literature/*Poesie* (for which, see David Cunningham's article, below).

The first two of these reasons are closely linked in so far as the modernity they represent is that

of a self-consciousness of both (i) the necessity of positivity (as well as transcendence) to the experience of truth and (ii) the restless subjectivity of interest (*Interesse*), which fractures any attempt to actualize the universality of classical ideals (beauty, in particular) under 'modern' conditions: then, bourgeois; now, more purely capitalistic.

This decisive historical self-consciousness may be traced back to Friedrich Schlegel's rethinking – and resolution – of the terms of the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, in the wake of the French Revolution, in his early *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (1795–7). In the theory debates of the last fifty years, though, conflicting cultural periodizations and historical positions – within the Romantic modern – have taken on a more fine-grained cast, appearing as what we might call a Quarrel of the Prefixes: Inter, Post and Trans. It is within the theoretical imaginary of this cultural-historical field that the idea of transdisciplinarity acquires its broader coordinates, linking it to the 'forever becoming never perfected' 'kind that is more than a kind', which is the Romantic conception of art.<sup>4</sup>

## The Quarrel of the Prefixes

In 1977, reflecting upon the effect on the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns of the intensifying antiquation of the modern itself, immanent to the temporal culture of modernism, Matei Călinescu anticipated its imminent replacement by a Quarrel of the Moderns and the Contemporaries. Ten years later, however, this idea had been displaced by the emergence of the concept of postmodernism.<sup>5</sup> Twenty years further on and postmodernism itself had already succumbed to the same temporal logic (registered in the abstract negation of its 'post'), leaving a periodizing space vacant, once again, for a now finally critical, but nonetheless ambivalent, concept of contemporaneity.<sup>6</sup>

What this relatively brief historical episode suggests – apart from the inevitable transitoriness of a critical category constructed on a wholly backward-looking temporal negation – is that we might attend a little more closely to the prefixes of critical categories, as constructors of affinity between different theoretical fields within broader frameworks of thought. When we do this, we can detect a series of overlapping relations of dominance as figures of historical overcoming between the operators 'inter', 'post' and 'trans'.

'Inter' was the dominant prefix of the first half of the twentieth century; 'post', the prefix *du jour* from the 1960s through to the 1990s; and now, in the last

two decades, in the wake of the rapid antiquation of the 'post', cultural theory is awash with 'trans' terms. In fact, the theoretical weakness of the prefix 'post' is marked by its status as a vanishing mediation between 'inter' and 'trans'. To take some examples from the fields of art criticism and economic and political theory in the 1960s and 1970s, the following substantive categories were subjected to the following backward-looking temporal overcomings:

Formalism	Postformalism
Modernism	Postmodernism
Medium	Postmedium
Conceptual	Postconceptual

More broadly:

Colonial	Postcolonial
Industrial	Postindustrial
Fordist	Postfordist

If we now add a list of concepts coming to prominence since the 1990s through the prefix 'trans', we see that they are mainly transformations of ideas initially grasped, earlier in the postwar period, through the transformation of substantive terms by the 'betweenness' of the 'inter':

National	International	Transnational
Disciplinary	Interdisciplinary	Transdisciplinary
Medium/media	Intermedia	Transmedial
Sex	Intersex	Transsex
Gender		Transgender
Textual	Intertextual	Translational

To which might be added a further mediating column governed by the prefix 'multi': multinational, multidisciplinary, multimedia, multi/polysexual, multilingual, and so on. In this respect, the 'trans' terms appear as mediating unifications of 'inter' and 'multi' as formal designations of the result of placing the referents of the substantive terms into systems of relations.

In fact, the largely adjectival form of the 'trans' terms above tends to reify as attributes of objects the movements of the operations across fields – the processes – that they designate and model. These movements are thus better represented as:

National	International	Transnationalization
Disciplinary	Interdisciplinary	Transdisciplinaryization
Medium	Intermedia	Transmedialization
Sex	Intersex	Transsexualization

It is ironic that the 'postmodern' (a temporal term if ever there was one) associated itself so doggedly with

\* The articles in this dossier are from the AHRC-funded project 'Transdisciplinarity and the Humanities: Problems, Methods, Histories, Concepts' (AH/1004378/1), located within the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP), Kingston University London, 2011–13. Earlier versions were presented at the 5th conference from the project, 'Romantic Transdisciplinarity', held at Senate House, University of London, in collaboration with the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, School of Advanced Study, 8–9 May 2013. This represented the 'German' side of the project. Essays from the 'French' side are assembled in the section 'Legacies of Anti-Humanism', in Peter Osborne, Stella Sandford and Éric Alliez, eds, *Transdisciplinary Problematics*, special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 32, nos 5 and 6, September–November 2015, pp. 37–158. For an overview of the project as a whole, see Peter Osborne, 'Problematizing Disciplinary, Transdisciplinary Problematics', in *ibid.*, pp. 3–35. A preliminary take on the significance of the concept of transdisciplinarity for understanding the distinctive theoretical dynamics of the great books of postwar French thought – focused on concepts rather than authorships – can be found in the two dossiers, 'From Structure to Rhizome: Transdisciplinarity in French Thought' (1) and (2), *RP* 165 (Jan/Feb 2011), pp. 15–40 and *RP* 167 (May/June 2011), pp. 15–42, respectively. A further short selection of articles from the 'Romantic' side of the project will appear in a second dossier in *RP* later this year.

the claim for a 'spatial turn' *against* temporal concepts. The spatial imaginary of the 'trans', on the other hand, in conveying movement, refers to the temporality of the process of thinking itself. This shift to conceptualizations of processes, rather than objects, explains the associated rise of the prefixes 'de' and 're': most notably Deleuze and Guattari's cycle Territorialization–Deterritorialization–Reterritorialization. This was itself a spatialization of the totalizing temporal dynamics of late Sartre's concept of praxis, in which the neo-Hegelian series Totalization–Detotalization–Retotalization took the form of a Temporalization–Detemporalization–Retemporalization.<sup>7</sup> Yet in its seriality, it too remains equally temporal.

## Art

From the standpoint of Schlegel's philosophical Romanticism, 'art' – for which Romantic poetry in its broadest sense, encompassing the novel, is at once the model and the enactment – is not simply a kind 'that is more than a kind', but *the* kind that is more than a kind. Art both includes philosophy – through the philosophical character of the criticism which 'completes' an artwork – and constitutes it, as one of the 'two conflicting forces' of which philosophy is the 'result': 'poetry and practice'.

Where these interpenetrate completely and fuse into one, there philosophy comes into being; and when philosophy disintegrates, it becomes mythology or else returns to life.<sup>8</sup>

Philosophy is like a 'chemical process', for Schlegel, made up of 'living, fundamental forces' expressed in 'dynamic laws'. It must 'always organize and disorganize itself anew'.<sup>9</sup>

Transposed into the academic context that was about to re-disciplinarize philosophy on a newly narrow basis, this Romantic image of philosophy appears as a radically transdisciplinary ideal. Meanwhile, the Romantic universality of art was broken up into separate compartments by the new division of academic labour. Separated from philosophy (which would residually insist on subjugating it to the sub-discipline of 'aesthetics'), and with its criticism increasingly divorced from the study of its history, not only was the thinking of art divided up into self-contained disciplines (to be augmented later by the sociology of art, among others), but its idea also underwent a fundamental transformation. In the course of the nineteenth century, the most decisive factor was the transfer of the signifier 'art' from literature to the 'fine' (beautiful/*beaux/schöne/belle*) arts;

painting and sculpture, in particular. Literature, the Romantic model of art itself, ceased to be included in this institutional designation.

This was followed, in the course of the twentieth century, first, by the purification of the visual aspect of the fine arts, as their essence, and then, conversely, the internal destruction of that specifically visual character, by a range of art practices pre-dating but institutionally consolidated in the 1960s. At the very same time, these arts achieved an ironic retrospective unification as 'visual', in the wake of that destruction. Yet the only plausible conceptual unification of the new practices remains internal to the historical development of works grasped in their unity by the generic idea of art as such. Thus does contemporary art as a postconceptual practice return us to its Romantic origins. It thereby requires for its comprehension the renewal of the proto-transdisciplinarity of philosophical Romanticism itself.

Whether the educational institutions of art are capable of actualizing such a practice – for all their current enthusiasm for the term 'transdisciplinarity' – remains moot. Perhaps only a Romantic bureaucrat can save them at this point.

## Notes

1. See Peter Osborne, 'Philosophy After Theory: Transdisciplinarity and the New', in Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge, eds, *Theory After 'Theory'*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, pp. 19–33.
2. Friedrich Schlegel, 'On Goethe's *Meister*' (1798), in J.M. Bernstein, ed., *Classic and Romantic Aesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 274; Friedrich Schlegel, *Ästhetische und Politische Schriften*, ed., Michael Holzinger, CreateSpace, Berlin, 2014, p. 141.
3. For a recent example, see Jay Hillel Bernstein, 'Transdisciplinarity: A Review of its Origins, Developments and Current Issues', *Journal of Research Practice*, vol. 11, no. 1, Article R1, 2015: <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/510/412>.
4. Friedrich Schlegel, Athenaeum Fragment 116, in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and Oxford, 1991, p. 32.
5. Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1987, p. 92; originally published in 1977 (without the chapter on postmodernism) as *Faces of Modernity*.
6. See Peter Osborne, 'The Fiction of the Contemporary', in *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, ch. 1; and 'The Postconceptual Condition, Or, the Cultural Logic of High Capitalism', *Radical Philosophy* 184, March/April 2014, pp. 19–27.
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Volume 1: *Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, Verso, London and New York, 1976, pp. 45–8, 79–94, 666–7.
8. Schlegel, Athenaeum Fragment 304, in *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 60.
9. *Ibid.*

# Bildung and strategy

## The fate of the 'beautiful sciences'

### Howard Caygill

Kant's 1798 *Conflict of the Faculties* makes an explicit case for viewing philosophy as *the* romantic trans-discipline. The 'lower faculty' he explained there is less tied to the professional restrictions on research and teaching characteristic of the 'higher faculties' of law, medicine and theology dedicated to training lawyer-officials, doctors and priests. Philosophy served not only as the propaedeutic to the study of these disciplines – students had formally to pass through the lower faculty before being admitted to one of the higher faculties in the eighteenth-century German university – but also served to organize the content of those disciplines themselves. Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century, philosophy seemed to have exceeded its propaedeutic vocation and was developing towards a romantic transdisciplinarity in which the philosophy of law, the philosophy of medicine and philosophical theology, united with the philosophy of art, sought to absorb and take the place of the vocational orientations of the higher faculties and produced an extraordinary fusion of civil (*Bildung*) and military energy.

This not entirely implausible hypothesis seems to make sense of the trajectory of German idealism, moving steadily forward with the claim to promote culture or *Bildung* through pure research and confident that its possession of the concept of 'system' will allow it to reorganize not only disciplinary knowledge but also its institutional articulation in the reformed Humboldtian university. Yet this is only a hypothesis, albeit one elevated to dogma by late-nineteenth-century historical scholarship, which had its own reasons for doing so. Indeed, it might be the case that philosophy could assume what can retrospectively be described as its transdisciplinary vocation only in so far as it was no longer philosophy but rhetoric in the process of assuming the form of philosophy. For far from undergoing an eclipse in the eighteenth century, the technical discipline of

rhetoric migrated, first, into the 'beautiful sciences' and then into philosophy.

Listening to the Devil can offer some insight into this metamorphosis. In a hilarious parody of a romantic transdisciplinarity in Goethe's *Faust*, Mephistopheles dons the robes of Dr Faust and interviews a prospective student. He advises him to attend the lower faculty: 'So first, dear friend / You should make room / For the Collegium Logicum / This leaves the mind all trained and dressed / In Spanish trusses tightly pressed / So that it, slow and undistraught / Will potter down the road of thought.' The demands on logic to organize the discourses of the higher faculties and prepare students for the study of this material perplexes the young man, whom Mephistopheles promptly reassures: 'It will all soon grow more nearly clear / When you learn how to analyse / and properly categorize.' Mephistopheles then moves on to the next philosophical discipline the student must learn: 'Next, Metaphysics I should mention / As the foremost study for your attention! / There make your deepest insight strain / For things out of scale with the human brain; / For whatever fits into it and what doesn't / Some wondrous word is always present.'

Now, Mephistopheles is being really devilish in suggesting that not only logic and metaphysics but also the higher faculties are only a matter of manipulating words. This indeed is the skill that traverses all the disciplines. Law creates injustice through the manipulation of words, while for theology 'Words are good things to be debated / With words are systems generated / In words belief is safely vested / From words no jot or tittle can be wrested.' Medicine or the art of healing, or making money out of healing, too relies on the manipulation of words: 'If you adopt a halfway decent air / You'll lure them all into your lair.' For the Devil, philosophy as the lower faculty has in common with the higher faculties of law, medicine