

“ THE LETTER IS PARTICULARLY LETHAL IN THE *WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE* ”

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ABSTRACT

It is striking to notice that Fichte intended the first written version of his Doctrine of Science (1794-95) “for his listeners,” namely for the students of the University of Jena where he had just taken up his post. Fichte has in fact always believed that the ‘letter’ of the scientific exposition of his philosophy should come along with an oral explanation, thereby establishing a direct contact with his audience in order to avoid misunderstandings. Throughout his career, he has been suspicious of the “written” word and this attitude explains at least in part the disagreement that took place between him and Schiller concerning the article “on the spirit and the letter in philosophy.” With Fichte, these two terms take a special meaning that illustrates, in an enlightening manner, the way he envisages transcendental philosophy and its mode of transmission.

Keywords : Fichte, transcendental philosophy, letter, spirit, oral exposition, book.

Schiller had good reasons for being dissatisfied with the article that Fichte had sent him in the summer of 1795 for publication in the journal *Die Horen*. As is well known, the dispute that erupted between the two men following Schiller’s critical remarks led Fichte to give up publishing his text in Schiller’s journal. It must be said that the latter was in a particularly bad position to judge the article, entitled “On the spirit and the letter in philosophy,” for the simple reason that Fichte had provided him, at first, with just the three first sections of a text that would eventually comprise ten. Thus, Schiller was forced to base his judgment on a mere fragment of a text whose true length he did not know, and as a result he could not fathom the novelty and originality of Fichte’s argument.

In what follows, I have no intention of systematically reconstructing the debate between Fichte and Schiller, as their philosophical dispute has already been abundantly documented and commentated. However, I would like to bring out two points in Fichte's argument that particularly perplexed Schiller, leading him to send the text back together with requests for clarification. For instance, Schiller told his correspondent that he was having trouble in grasping the meaning of the word "spirit." He admitted to wondering "how you intend to connect the spirit in Goethe's works – which, judging from the title of your essay, one would hardly have expected – to the spirit in the philosophies of Kant or Leibniz?"¹ Schiller regarded Fichte's choice of the term "spirit" as a kind of semantic shift – or *salto mortale*, as he called it – between the "spirit" animating the literary productions of a Goethe and the "spirit" in philosophy. To put it plainly, Schiller refused to countenance a spirit as the source of philosophical thinking. On the contrary, the spirit can only be one topic among others in philosophy, i.e., a mere object of presentation (*Darstellung*). He rejected the idea that speculative reflection springs from a philosophical spirit in the same way that an artwork flows from the aesthetic spirit.²

The other objection that Schiller raised against Fichte seems at first sight like a simple semantic correction or qualification, yet we shall see that it is particularly telling: "You entitle your article 'On the letter and the spirit in philosophy', yet the first three sections deal exclusively with the spirit in the fine arts, which, as far as I know, is something completely different from the opposite of the letter."³ Here Schiller was attempting to give Fichte a lesson in semantics, drawing a sharp distinction between the spirit vis-à-vis the letter on the one hand and the spirit that animates artistic works on the other. Indeed, in the first case, the spirit/letter pair pertains to the interpretation of texts, insofar as it is possible to understand a piece of writing in two ways, either according to its general intention or gist, i.e., its spirit, or else by adhering to a meticulous and servile reading of what the text explicitly stipulates, i.e., its letter. The terms

¹ Letter from Schiller to Fichte on June 24th, 1795, *GA III/2* : 333. On this topic, see Hartmut Traub, "Über die Pflichten des ästhetischen Künstlers. Der §31 des *Systems der Sittenlehre* im Kontext von Fichtes Philosophie der Ästhetik," *Fichte-Studien* 27 (2006), p. 81.

² Obviously, Schiller could not have known that in the manuscript of his lectures on the topic of the spirit and the letter in philosophy, Fichte had countenanced a genius for "truth" as well as a "genius" for virtue alongside artistic genius. See the manuscript of the summer 1794 course: "*Ich will untersuchen, wodurch Geist vom Buchstaben in der Philosophie überhaupt sich unterscheidet*," *GA II/3* : 303.

³ Third draft of Fichte's letter to Schiller on June 24th, 1795, *GA III/2*: 333.

“spirit” and “letter” are hereby employed in a figurative sense. We can thus easily see the point of Schiller’s correction, namely that the general spirit of a text and the spirit that produces a work of art are clearly two very different things – and that much is indisputable. However, we shall see that by focussing on this distinction, Schiller missed Fichte’s point, as Fichte took the spirit/letter pair in his title not in its figurative, but on the contrary in its proper sense. Accordingly, the “spirit” in his article designates aesthetic or philosophical genius rather than the spirit of a text, just as the “letter” is meant in its primary sense, namely a sensible trace, rather than an overly close exegesis. As surprising as it may seem, then, the title of Fichte’s article may have been signalling a tension between the spirit of the philosopher and the recording of the results of his intellectual work by the written sign, in print – such is the reading that I intend to put forward here. I will try to show the extent to which Fichte believed transcendental philosophy to be refractory to the fossilization of its approach in the written text. What is more, we will see that Fichte’s misgivings with regard to philosophical writing form a part of a more general critique of the book industry of his time: Fichte alleged that the customs of this industry undermined the spread of culture in general and particularly of philosophy. The title of the present article was taken from a letter that Fichte sent to J. E. C. Schmidt in September 1798; the sentence is worth quoting in full: “The letter is particularly lethal in the *Wissenschaftslehre*; this may be due partly to the nature of this system itself, yet also partly to the status of the letter until now.”⁴ This twofold observation will serve as our guiding thread. Firstly, I will have to show that the very particular nature of the *Wissenschaftslehre* justifies a comparison with the artist’s way of working, insofar as both the artist and the philosopher draw from the deepest wells of the spirit and consequently face the specific problems tied to the exteriorization of this spirit in the phenomenal world. Secondly, I will argue that the “letter” – taken in the proper sense of the term – turns out to be the very opposite of the spirit, whether philosophical or aesthetic, as the letter’s inertia constantly threatens to neutralise the spirit’s spontaneity.

The present article therefore concerns the strategy that Fichte developed for communicating his own philosophy. The focus, accordingly, will be not on his methodology for theoretical speculation, which takes place *in foro interno*, but rather on his methodology for communicating the transcendental philosophy, which must take place in and through the material world of the senses. This problem was so crucial to the dissemination and legacy of the

⁴ Letter from Fichte to Johann Ernst Christian Schmidt on September 16th, 1798, *GA* III/3: 142.

Wissenschaftslehre that Fichte granted it his utmost attention. As early as the summer of 1794, he devoted his series of popular lectures to the vocation of the scholar. As a matter of fact, the lectures on the “spirit and the letter in philosophy” were part of these popular lectures and constituted the basis for the text that he would send to Schiller the following year; they were devoted to working out the “rules for the study of philosophy” and to warning the apprentice-philosopher of the danger of becoming a mere *Buchstäbler*.⁵ I will be referring to the manuscript of these lectures, as this text offers us the advantage of gaining an overview of what the article for *Die Horen* was meant to have looked like in its completed form. Indeed, the spirit and the letter are treated from both philosophical and artistic perspectives.

I should start out by emphasizing that Fichte believed the spirit at the source of the fine arts to have such deep affinities with the philosophical spirit that he called upon art to perform a propaedeutic function for the transcendental philosophy. This function appears in §31 of the *System of Ethics*, where we are told that the aesthetic dimension enables one to raise oneself to the level of philosophy by effecting a transition between the common point of view and the transcendental point of view.⁶ The aesthetic spirit is thus clearly linked to philosophical activity. In a letter to von Berger, moreover, Fichte declares outright that both the aesthetic spirit and the philosophical spirit occupy the “transcendental point of view.”⁷ The doubts that Schiller raised in his letter about bringing art and philosophy closer together were therefore groundless. And that is precisely what he would discover, moreover, in Fichte’s answer to his refusal to publish the manuscript. Indeed, Fichte retorted by stressing the tight connection and affinity between the two domains: the aesthetic and philosophical forms of spirit are really two “subspecies” of the same “genus.”⁸ And that is how Fichte justified using the aesthetic paradigm for articulating his views on the role of spirit in philosophy: despite the specific difference between the two domains, they

⁵ Text of the first lecture on *Ueber den Unterschied des Geistes, u. des Buchstabens in der Philosophie*, *GA*, II/3: 315.

⁶ *SS*, *GA* I/5: 307-308. See Petra Lohmann, “Grundzüge der Ästhetik. Zur Bedeutung der Ästhetik für die Wissenschaftslehre anlässlich des Horenstreits,” *Jahrbuch des deutschen Idealismus* 4 (2006), p. 201.

⁷ Letter from Fichte to Johann Erich von Berger on October 11th, 1796, *GA* III/3: 37.

⁸ Letter from Fichte to Schiller on June 27th, 1795, *GA* III/2: 336.

both nonetheless partake of the same *Geist* to the extent that, in both cases, the spirit comes into play as a “creative imagination.”⁹

Just as in transcendental philosophy, art has the privilege of producing the representation thanks to creative imagination. Unlike the common point of view, therefore, art does not remain beholden to the representation of the world as it is given: art can so to speak sever the representation from the existing world and modify it as it sees fit. The world thereby created is fictional, of course, yet it remains an illusion to which the spectator readily consents.

Transcendental philosophy, for its part, is also concerned with the production of a world, but in its case, it has to produce the world such as it appears to the common point of view. That is, transcendental philosophy bears an analogy to the game played by the aesthetic spirit insofar as it studies the genesis of the representation of the world by the I: in both cases, a distancing from the representation occurs. The difference between the two stems from the fact that the artist, unlike the philosopher, does not “know” that he is operating at a transcendental level. Whereas the artist is blessed with a “divinatory faculty,” which allows him to create his works according to an unconscious law,¹⁰ the transcendental philosopher turns towards the interiority of his soul and endeavours to lucidly retrace the genesis of experience, i.e., the sum of representations that convey a feeling of necessity to the common point of view. Unlike the process of artistic creation, therefore, the philosophical procedure is conscious and deliberate, yet it requires just as much spirit.

It is also in this connection that Fichte declares that the transcendental philosopher must not lack “an aesthetic sense”. Obviously, the philosopher is not expected to be artistically creative, or to be an artist himself. Yet because he partakes of the spirit in general, he must demonstrate a measure of aesthetic sensibility. It is this very disposition, indeed, that allows him to regard the representation in itself and for itself, to distance himself from dogmatism of the common point of view. The philosopher must be open to the fact that the artist plays with the representation and that he produces it freely. This gesture of taking a step back from the facts of consciousness, following the example of the artist, is an indispensable prerequisite for philosophical activity:

⁹ Fichte, “*Ich will untersuchen...*,” *GA* II/3: 298.

¹⁰ Fichte, *Ueber Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie* (text of the article sent to Schiller), *GA* I/6: 339.

... thus it shows that the philosopher has to possess an aesthetic sense, i.e. “spirit,” {for without this he will not succeed in raising himself to the transcendental viewpoint}. This does not mean that the philosopher must necessarily be a poet or a fine writer or an accomplished orator, but he must be animated by the same spirit that, when cultivated, serves to develop one aesthetically. Without this spirit one will never make any headway in philosophy, but will trouble oneself with the letters [*Buchstaben*] of the same without penetrating its inner {spirit}.¹¹

The transcendental philosopher is called upon to enter into himself and turn his attention towards a sphere that offers nothing stable or fixed. The dynamics that he seeks to describe operate in an intuitive sphere, the sphere of intellectual intuition; he concentrates on a pure self-activity. This descriptive task can only be discursive, however; the philosopher is forced to rely on the “concept,” even if it constitutes what Fichte calls a moment of “rest” (*Ruhe*),¹² a mere stage in the complex dynamics of consciousness. Thus, the concept serves as a necessary expedient for mapping out processes that remain essentially intuitive. In transcendental philosophy, the life of consciousness apprehends and examines itself. Only the philosophical spirit is capable of gaining access to this life, because it participates in it. But this in turn gives rise to a formidable problem for philosophical discourse: How to describe this process by means of concepts whose referent is an inner flux, a pure self-activity? And if the spirit does finally attain the object of transcendental philosophy, how will it then succeed in communicating it to other spirits by means of mere discourse? The *Wissenschaftslehre* was unprecedented in several respects, as Fichte was perfectly aware, and yet it was condemned to rely on the vocabulary available at the time (*vorhandene Wörtersprache*)¹³ and to articulate its concepts in words. It should therefore come

¹¹ Fichte, *WLnM[K]*, *GA* IV/2: 266; tr. D. Breazeale, *FTP*, p. 474. Here is what Herbart had to say about the importance of aesthetic culture for Fichte: “Mangel an Einbildungskraft legt er den meisten jetzigen Philosophen zur Last; von den Dichtern hingegen erwartet er sehr viel für seine Philosophie. Unter allen Menschen glaubt er bis jetzt von Schillern und Göthe’n sich am besten verstanden, die sich sehr mit seinem System beschäftigen. – Seit meinem Umgange mit Fichte’n habe ich es recht gefühlt, wie wesentlich die Cultur des ästhetischen Vermögens zur Ausbildung des ganzen Menschen gehört.” Letter from J. F. Herbart to G. A. von Halem on August 28th, 1795, in *Fichte im Gespräch I*, ed. E. Fuchs (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1978), p. 300. See Fichte, *Vorlesungen über das Wesen des Gelehrten* (1811), *GA* II/12: 342, 356. See also Petra Lohmann, “Die Funktionen der Kunst und des Künstlers in der Philosophie J. G. Fichtes,” *Fichte-Studien* 25 (2005), p. 116.

¹² Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797), *GA* I/4: 280.

¹³ Fichte, *Sonnenklarer Bericht* (1801), *GA* I/7: 236.

as no surprise that the transcendental philosophy enjoins a certain number of precautions in this regard, and that its methodology calls for a very particular communication strategy.

While Schiller was not in possession of all of the information necessary for properly judging Fichte's article at the time he raised his first objection, it is doubtful whether the same can be said with respect to his second objection. In consequence, one can at least partly understand Fichte's outrage at the suggestion that the spirit/letter dichotomy had nothing to do with his argument, the first three sections of which dealt with the artist's spirit and genius. As I suggested above, Fichte interprets both terms in their proper sense; accordingly, just as the title alludes to the "spirit" in philosophy, so must the "letter" in question here be taken for what it is, namely a material sign, or more precisely a printed character. And yet Fichte had given Schiller two hints in this regard.

The first of these hints appears in the form of a simple post-script appended to the letter that Fichte sent along with his manuscript, in which he makes the following, trivial-sounding remark about his title: "The word 'letter', as per its etymology, appears in the title on purpose [*mit Fleiss*]." ¹⁴ Fichte was hereby requesting Schiller, as the editor of the journal, to keep the spelling of the word *Buchstab* as it appears in the title, even if in German the word is spelled *Buchstabe* and besides should receive a final "-n" here, as it happens to be employed in the accusative case – which together would have normally yielded "*Ueber Geist und Buchstaben in der Philosophie*." Now, if Fichte insists on drawing his reader's attention to the "etymology" of the word, it is because that information contributes decisively to understanding his text. The etymology highlights the word *Stab*, which means stick and by extension the thin, tapering stroke on a printed page, while *Buch* of course designates a collection of printed pages. ¹⁵ The word *Buchstab* obviously translates as "letter," which must be understood in its primary sense – literally – as an inscription in a book. So Fichte wished to emphasize the materiality of the sign,

¹⁴ Letter from Fichte to Schiller on June 27th, 1795, *GA* III/2: 326.

¹⁵ One line of interpretation traces the origin of "*Buch*" to "*Buche*" – beech – thus to a heavy and hard kind of wood onto which the *Runen*, i.e., the *Stäbchen*, were inscribed. Whether one leans towards *Buch* (book) or *Buche* (beech), however, either reading remains compatible with Fichte's meaning insofar as he wants to emphasize the sign's materiality. See *Trübners deutsches Wörterbuch*, Volume I (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1939), p. 456; F. Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, 22nd ed. (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 1989), p. 111.

not the letter in a figurative sense; the nuance is subtle, but nonetheless essential to Fichte's project.

The second hint points in the same direction. It can be found in the third section of the article. Speaking of the artist's aesthetic spirit, Fichte recalled that genius must unavoidably express itself in a work of art that is of necessity constituted of palpable materials. Here, the letter is tightly linked to the concept of a "body": "This inner mood of the artist is the spirit of his products, and the contingent forms through which he expresses it are their body, or their letter."¹⁶ Clearly, the spirit of the artist is diametrically opposed to the body (*Körper*) of the work. And it is precisely this opposition that the artist has to overcome through his work – an inescapable task if he is to communicate his inner state to a spectator. In other words, he is forced to convey his inner spiritual life in and through inert matter – inert insofar as it remains entirely heterogeneous and indifferent to this spiritual life. This form is hereby a "body" that at first presents itself to him as a "a lifeless lump" into which he must breathe movement and vitality capable of translating his inner "vibrations". That is, the "letter" – clearly identified here with the "body" – is conceived under the aspect of its materiality as a sign. At play here is the proper sense of the letter, thus, a sign that belongs to language, serving to transcribe and preserve the latter's phonetic dimension. The artist can employ it, just as he can also make use of other materials, such as colours or musical notes, for realizing his work. The philosopher, by contrast, has language, and language alone, at his disposal as a body for communicating his spirituality.

We saw above that speculative thought focuses on a pure flux, which it must nevertheless seize and capture, so to speak, and this by means of concepts, which are so many handholds for grasping the processual flux of intuition. Correspondingly, if the concept is only a stopgap for the philosopher, how much more do the words of ordinary language create an obstacle that he must overcome in order to communicate his discoveries! Thus Fichte himself admitted that he selected his expressions from the resources offered him by existing languages such as German, Latin and Greek – resources to be wielded with dexterity. The task of transmitting philosophy is not hopeless, however, especially when one can make use of the spoken word. In his summer 1794 course on the spirit and the letter, Fichte explained to his students that in order to communicate with them he would perforce make use of acoustic signs that, in and of themselves,

¹⁶ Fichte, *Ueber Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie*, GA I/6: 356. See the letter from Fichte to Schiller on June 27th, 1795, GA III/2: 337.

were nothing more than oscillations of the air emitted by the speaker, empty shells which the hearers would in turn have to fill with meaning. Only in this way can one communicate from one spirit to another;¹⁷ without this effort on the students' part, without their active participation in imbuing the signs with meaning, the latter would effect nothing.

And this danger becomes all the greater when the acoustic sign is recorded as a material trace – the letter. That is the crucial issue at stake here, and we shall see that its significance extends far beyond the immediate context of the lectures and of the article on the spirit and the letter in philosophy. Indeed, writing carries the inherent risk that the sign may remain in its material state – as a “lifeless body” – without being reanimated by the reader's consciousness, in turn giving the reader the illusion that by possessing the book he also grasps its meaning and its truth. The written page fossilizes the spoken language in an immobile and permanent state. The product may seem like a deposit, available at any time and even to someone who does not make the effort required to bring the letter to life. The *Buchstäbler*, as characterized by Fichte to his students, goes by the letter alone: “So and so said it; it's printed in such and such a book.”¹⁸ It is no accident that Fichte referred to the “book” in this connection: it echoes the *Buchstab* in the title and betrays Fichte's misgivings about print. One can detect, as we shall see next, a certain mistrust vis-à-vis the book that manifests itself all throughout his oeuvre.

We must now examine more closely how Fichte expressed his misgivings about print over the course of his first years in Jena. After all, Fichte published several works during that time, including scientific works, and what we find is that all of these published works, even in their titles, betray a strong preference for the antidote to the dead letter, namely the live, spoken word. For instance, the so-called *Programmschrift* (1794) bills itself, in the subtitle, as a “text of invitation to his lectures on this science.”¹⁹ It is surely significant that a writing aiming to introduce the *Wissenschaftslehre* should make very explicit reference to the lectures that Fichte

¹⁷ Fichte, *Ueber den Unterschied des Geistes, u. des Buchstabens in der Philosophie*, first lecture, *GA* II/3: 320.

¹⁸ Fichte, *Ueber den Unterschied des Geistes, u. des Buchstabens in der Philosophie*, third lecture, *GA* II/3: 339. Fichte allows himself a play on words here, in order to take those who are unfitted for philosophy to task for being unable to go beyond the sentences. He says that what they need are “*gesetzte Sätze*” – that is, sentences that have been processed by the typographer (“*Setzer*”) and the printing shop (*Druckerey*). Letter from Fichte to F. Johannsen on January 31st, 1801, *GA* III/5: 9.

¹⁹ Fichte, *BWL*, *GA* I/2: 107 (the subtitle was omitted in *SW* I, p. 27).

was preparing to give in Jena, such that the book itself becomes a mere introduction to the former. In other words, the genuine *Wissenschaftslehre* would be expounded in the lectures, whereas the short book would serve merely as a preparation.²⁰

One could then object that the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794 was also published – and surely it qualifies as a scientific work. But again, the complete title of the work (including both the *Grundlage* and the *Grundriss*) reveals the use Fichte envisaged for his printed works: “manuscript for my auditors.” The formulation has something intrinsically paradoxical about it: a writing for auditors, for *listeners*. But does this not imply – apparently contrary to the thesis being defended here – that the lectures by themselves did not suffice and that they had to be supplemented by a text? It is true that Fichte certainly had something like this in mind, for he regarded these publications as *Lesebücher*. However, one must also take account of the full justification that Fichte gave to K. A. Böttinger, just before arriving in Jena, regarding the printing of the *Grundlage* in the form of handouts to be distributed over the course of the coming weeks: the point of this, Fichte explained, was to counteract the attendees’ lamentable habit of taking dictation of everything the professor said, without bothering to think along with him

²⁰ Was it merely a coincidence that it was in mid-February of 1794 – i.e., just as Fichte had accepted a position as a professor in Jena – that we find, in the lectures given at Lavater’s house in Zurich, the first occurrence in his entire oeuvre of the term *Wissenschaftslehre* to designate transcendental philosophy? Do we not hear in *Lehre* the echo of the verb *lehren* – to teach, just as, in Latin, the verb *docere* can be heard in *doctrina*? That correspondence is, after all, the basis for the English and French translations, namely “Doctrine of Science” and “doctrine de la science” (see W. E. Wright’s introduction to his translation of Fichte, *The Science of Knowing. J. G. Fichte’s 1804 Lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), p. 10). Of course, rendering *Wissenschaftslehre* as “theory of science” would also be faithful to Fichte’s intention to the extent that he characterized his enterprise as a “*Wissenschaft der Wissenschaften überhaupt*,” whereby Fichte meant to emphasize the properly scientific status of his philosophy. However, nothing prevents us from reading the term *Lehre* as an indication of the specific purpose of this philosophical corpus: Fichte’s new philosophical system was indeed a doctrine, a teaching, insofar as it was essentially meant to be taught. During the same period, moreover, Fichte described himself as a *Lehrer der Philosophie*, preparing to take up a *Lehramt*. Cf. the preface of his editors as well as the text *BWL*, *GA* I/2: 98, 99, 117, 118. For the first appearance of the term “*Wissenschaftslehre*” in Fichte’s oeuvre, see I. Radrizzani, “La ‘première’ doctrine de la science de Fichte. Introduction et traduction,” *Archives de philosophie* 60 (1997), p. 627 note 52. For the first occurrence of this expression in the correspondence, see Fichte’s letter to K. O. Böttiger on March 1st, 1794, *GA* III/2: 72. On the interrelationship between the doctrine and its instruction, see *Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (1811), *GA* II/12: 339.

(*gadankenloses Nachschreiben*).²¹ Needless to say, the utterances thus recorded in the students' notebooks would become dead letters serving, at best, to recall the words that the professor had spoken, but without their meaning or their real import, since the student, scribbling furiously, would have from the outset withdrawn from the thought process. Rather, the professor's thought process unfolds as an event: it is alive and calls for active listening on the audience's part. Correspondingly, printing handouts on the *Wissenschaftslehre* was meant to obviate incessant note-taking and to thereby free up the students for such active listening. Fichte's choice of the term "*Handschrift*" to refer to these handouts further emphasizes that he conceived of the *Vorlesung* as a live event. While the *Grundlage* published over the course of the successive lectures actually appeared in print, it was nonetheless essentially a *manuscript* in the sense that it reminded the reader of the provisional, unfinished character of the text and of the closeness of the "hand" of the person who had written it. Accordingly, the author had to flesh out such a manuscript with oral explanations, otherwise it would remain of minimal use – and that is precisely how Fichte viewed the handouts on the *Wissenschaftslehre* to be distributed at each lecture.

Indeed, Fichte was so conscious of this contextual and specific dimension of the *Handschrift* that he took special measures to ensure a certain control over the distribution of his printed texts from the outset. Since they were specifically meant for his lecture audience, he wanted to tightly restrict their distribution outside of the lecture hall to only those people able to make proper use of them. Such was his initial intention, at least: Niethammer, who met Fichte upon his arrival in Jena relates that the new professor intended "to have a primer [*Lehrbuch*] for his lectures on theoretical and practical philosophy printed; for the time being, however, this primer must neither appear in the bookstore, nor be sold to anyone besides those who attend his lectures [*seine Zuhörer*]." ²² None of this was lost on Goethe, moreover, who saw that the texts

²¹ Letter from Fichte to K. A. Böttiger on January 1st, 1794, *GA III/2*: 71. See the preface to the second edition of *BWL*, *GA I/2*: 162: "... der bis jetzt gewählte einen festen Buchstaben vermeidende Vortrag [scheint], als der innere Geist dieser Lehre sie gegen gedankenlose Nachsprecher zu schützen." See also *Wissenschaftslehre* 1804 (*Zweiter Vortrag*), *GA II/8*: 25.

²² Letter from F. I. Niethammer to F. P. von Herbert on June 2nd, 1794, in *Fichte im Gespräch I*, p. 111: Fichte intends "ein Lehrbuch zu seinen Vorlesungen über theoretische u. praktische [Philosophie] drucken zu lassen; vor der Hand aber solle dies Lehrbuch nicht in den Buchhandel kommen, u. an niemand als an seine Zuhörer verkauft werden." See the letter from Fichte to K. A. Böttiger on March 1st, 1794, *GA III/2*: 72.

that Fichte was handing out over the course of the semester were still rather rough drafts which absolutely had to be supplemented by a commentary, better still an oral commentary. Here is what he writes to Charlotte von Kalb on June 28th, 1794: “I am not sending you any of Fichte’s philosophical handouts; if you want to get any idea of their content, then an oral presentation [*ein mündlicher Vortrag*] will be absolutely necessary.”²³ Goethe therefore understood the nature and purpose of Fichte’s “manuscript” very well: the text cannot acquire its full meaning unless it is accompanied by a running commentary that breathes life into each of the steps of the reasoning that it records.

This tug of war between scripturality and orality allows us to discern an important aspect of Fichte’s attitude towards philosophical language. Clearly, writing offers the considerable advantage of recording the ideas of the *Wissenschaftslehre* by means of material signs. However, only by speaking live in front of an audience can the professor breathe life into his reasoning and adjust it according to the audience’s reactions. Thus Fichte had to satisfy two demands. On the one hand, since he regarded his *Wissenschaftslehre* as the definitive system of philosophy, it seemed advisable to preserve it for the ages by recording it once and for all, with the greatest terminological precision that writing affords. On the other hand, he recognized that this science had not yet attained a definitive form and furthermore that its audience still required the continuous assistance of a guide. One should not be surprised, therefore, to discover a tension in Fichte’s thought between the search for a fixed terminology for the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the simultaneous desire to avoid prematurely setting the transcendental philosophy’s vocabulary in stone.

At the very beginning of 1794, Fichte realised that he would eventually have to construct a “philosophical language” by restricting the semantic field of ordinary language and coining new terms when the need arose. While he certainly envisaged such a *Zeichensystem* seriously, it would be truer to say that he viewed it more as the crowning of his philosophical enterprise than as a complete system of signs at his disposal from the start.²⁴ Fichte found himself forced to provisionally rely on the resources afforded him by the existing language in order to execute his task. In a letter to his wife in 1795, for instance, he disclosed that not a single “letter” of the

²³ This letter of Goethe’s can be found in *Fichte im Gespräch I*, p. 127.

²⁴ Letter from Fichte to A. H. Schütz on January 15th, 1794, *GA III/2*: 50. See also *Sonnenklarer Bericht*, *GA I/7* : 237.

philosophical system that he had developed up to that point ought to be considered definitive.²⁵ An important concern of his at this time was to avoid any fixation of his thought in a definitive idiom. Accordingly, he cautioned Herbart about the “letter” of the primers that he had already published, enjoining him to step back from the letter of the text and to consider the questions in their relation to the whole. Herbart, for his part, was surprised to note just how greatly Fichte distanced himself from his own writings in 1795, barely a year after their publication.²⁶ Moreover, this provisional and changeable character of philosophical terminology offered the further advantage of providing the surest means for confounding those who endeavoured no more than to parrot back what they heard (*Nachbeter*).²⁷ The professor’s free and changing lecturing discouraged the audience from attending solely to the words; conversely, he could monitor the genuinely interested students, detect when they became puzzled, and address their confusion by reformulating the question in various ways. In his *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte affirmed that : “In keeping with my academic post, I first wrote for my auditors, a situation which enabled me to explain myself orally until I was understood.”²⁸ There is indeed a considerable advantage to presenting this system ‘live’, since it is, and can only be, the fruit of the philosophical spirit, an essentially vivifying force. Without a doubt, the voice represented the best means for communicating the *Wissenschaftslehre*, as it is no prisoner of the printed word. Marie Johanne Fichte attested that her husband never gave the same course twice from one semester to the next, quoting his conviction that he could make his presentations “livelier” by renewing his approach and keeping it “fresh.”²⁹ This attitude resulted from an entirely conscious decision on Fichte’s part, as he believed it to be the instructor’s duty to constantly renew the form of his oral presentations. Orality thus gave the inventor of the *Wissenschaftslehre* the opportunity to ‘sound out’ his audience and to adjust his teaching

²⁵ Post-script of a letter from Fichte to Marie Johanne Fichte in September, 1795, *GA* III/2 : 409.

²⁶ “Zudem scheint er wenig an dem, was er einmal geschrieben, zu hängen; selbst in Ansehung der Wissenschaftslehre, deren erste Bogen kaum ein Jahr alt sind, warnt er mich, nicht an den Buchstaben des Einzelnen zu kleben, sondern alles aus dem Gesichtspuncte des Ganzen anzusehn.” Letter from Herbart to Halem on 28 August 28th, 1795, in *Fichte im Gespräch I*, p. 300.

²⁷ Fichte, *BWL*, *GA* I/2: 162.

²⁸ Fichte, *Neue Darstellung*, *GA* I/4: 183.

²⁹ See Marie Johanne Fichte in *Fichte im Gespräch I*, p. 97.

accordingly – an essential component of effective communication.³⁰ Fichte therefore constantly monitored how his audience was progressing, to the point that he sometimes concluded that the latter was unfitted for receiving the new philosophy³¹ – a circumstance due partly to the particular nature of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but also more generally to the “characteristics of the present age.”

Lastly, if we examine the popular lectures bearing this title, we find that Fichte adopted a broader perspective on the contemporary situation of humanity, which in turn has bearing on the question we have been pursuing, namely the identification of factors that could explain the reading public’s indifference vis-à-vis the new philosophy. According to these lectures, humanity in Fichte’s day found itself in a stage characterized by the unbridled affirmation of individuality and the reign of the arbitrary; furthermore, the culture centred on the book played no small role in reinforcing this tendency. The sixth lecture attempts to demonstrate that the public’s lack of receptivity stems from the ubiquity of books and the habits that this pervasiveness creates in the individual. More precisely, the habit of reading leads to a purely passive, insouciant attitude, which replaces the alertness and concentration required by oral discourse. As a result, the preconditions for effective oral communication and *a fortiori* for the transmission of the *Wissenschaftslehre* were lacking. Fichte blamed the reading culture of his own time for destroying the predispositions required for an effective oral presentation.

³⁰ Oral presentation offers the advantage of always taking account of the context (*Zusammenhang*) in which the communication takes place; on this point see *Ueber das Wesen des Gelehrten*, (1805), *GA I/8*: 130 : “Der Schriftsteller mag nur Eine Form für seine Idee besitzen ; ist diese Form nur vollkommen, so hat er seiner Pflicht Genüge gethan: der akademische Lehrer soll eine Unendlichkeit von Formen besitzen, und ihm kommt es nicht darauf an, dass er die vollkommene Form finde, sondern dass er die in jedem Zusammenhange passendste finde.” See *ibid. GA I/8*: 130.

³¹ For instance, notice how he presents the situation in a letter on January 3rd, 1804 addressed to the Royal Cabinet of Berlin: “Der Erfinder, durch seine vieljährige Beobachtung des sogenannten literarischen Publikums sattsam überzeugt, dass durch die bisherige Weise des Studirens die Bedingungen des Verständnisses eines solchen Systems grössentheils verlohren gegangen, auch dass gerade jetzo eine grössere Menge Irrungsstoff sich im allgemeinen Umlaufe befindet, als vielleicht je, - ist nicht gesonnen, seine Entdeckung in ihrer dermaligen Form durch den Druck dem allgemeinen Missverständnis, und Verdrehung Preis zu geben. Er will sich auf mündliche Mittheilung beschränken, indem hiebei das Missverständnis auf der Stelle erscheinen, und gehoben werden kann.” *GA III/5*: 223.

Furthermore, this tendency went against the nature of things, as he saw it, whereby the spoken word ought to have precedence over the letter:

Hence verbal communication, by continuous discourse or scientific conversation, possesses infinite advantage over the communication through the mere dead letter; writing was invented by the Ancients only in order to replace such spoken instruction to those who had no access to it; everything that was written had in the first place been verbally communicated, and was but a copy of the spoken discourse. Only with the Moderns, especially since the invention of the printing press, has the printed word aimed at becoming autonomous, and this entailed among other things that style, deprived of the correction of the living speech, has fallen into such decline. But the reader just described has already been spoiled even for such verbal communication.³²

Since Gutenberg's press, the ersatz had supplanted the original and become the norm. But Fichte would not give in. Instead, he outlined plans for reversing this tendency, including teaching the younger generation a new, far more active and critical way of reading, cultivating the "method of oral communication" among educators, and fostering dispositions conducive to this mode of communication among his audience. Nor was this all just wishful thinking on Fichte's part: on several occasions he considered founding institutes devoted to cultivating the art of speaking, and during the last years of his life he was planning to found an institute for professors.³³ Furthermore, he is known to have taken an interest in pedagogy from very early on, pursuing it throughout his entire career.³⁴ In philosophy, he was drawn to the primacy of orality over

³² Fichte, *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, GA I/8: 263. And just below Fichte adds: "Wenn er [today's reader] es nur, schwarz auf weiss gesetzt, an seinen Augen halten könnte, dann, meint er, wäre ihm geholfen. Aber er täuscht sich. Auch sodann würde er die Perioden nicht als Einheit geistig fassen; sondern nur das Auge würde auf dem Umfange, den er einnimmt, ruhen, und ihn fortdauernd auf dem Papiere, und vermittelst des Papiers, festhalten, so dass er nun glaubte, Er fasse ihn."

³³ Fichte, *Einleitung in seine philosophische Vorlesungen*, October 1810, in *Die späten wissenschaftlichen Vorlesungen I, 1809-1811*, ed. H. G. von Manz et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000), p. 225.

³⁴ I am referring to his association with Pestalozzi during his stay in Switzerland, for instance, as well as to his numerous writings on the university as an institution and on the method for academic studies. See my previous articles on these topics, including "La *Staatslehre* de 1813 et la question de l'éducation chez Fichte," in *Fichte. La philosophie de la maturité (1804-1814), Réflexivité, phénoménologie et philosophie*, ed. J.-C. Goddard and M. Maeschalck (Paris : Vrin, 2003), pp. 159-174 ; "Fichte, Schleiermacher and W. von Humboldt on the Foundation of the University of Berlin," in *Fichte, German Idealism and Early Romanticism*, ed. D. Breazeale and

scripturality among the Ancients and would occasionally evoke Pythagoras' intellectual community, although he remained strongly partial to the Socratic approach, with its active method centred on dialogue. And while classes as they were given at the modern university tended to make such exchanges between the professor and students difficult, Fichte proposed concrete measures to address this problem, notably the *Conversatorium*, where the student could conduct an exchange of questions and responses with the teacher and thereby enter into a genuine dialogue.³⁵

We have seen that the philosophical spirit must rely on a form, on a sensible concretisation in the world of the senses that translates the inner thought process at the basis of transcendental philosophy. Just as the artist strives to produce a finished (*vollendet*)³⁶ work and, in order to do so, is forced to go through the mediation of a material suitable for adequately expressing the aesthetic spirit, so does the philosopher seek to attain the faithful presentation of his spiritual approach and to give it a lasting form that can be passed on to future generations. The privilege of the philosopher, however, is that his approach can be articulated discursively, which in turn allows him to make his reasoning explicit and to guide the novice by means of oral explanations. Thus on the one hand, Fichte sought a definitive literary form, the ultimate "letter," for recording the *Wissenschaftslehre* and ensuring its future transmission. On the other hand, considering the character of his own age, he felt the need to direct the apprentice's initiation into this work of the spirit by means of oral communication. The spoken word's greater affinity with the spirit, together with dialogue's ability to foster this initiation, seemed to Fichte to offer the philosopher an undeniable advantage over the artist, as the latter is not licensed to provide

T. Rockmore (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2010), p. 371-386. See also G. Cecchinato, "Fichtes Ästhetik. Eigene Reflexionen über Kunst und Wissenschaftslehre," *Fichte-Studien* 32 (2009), p. 160-168; P. L. Oesterreich, "Fichte und die Kunst des Philosophierens," *Fichte-Studien* 32 (2009), p. 150-160.

³⁵ On the Socratic method of teaching, see Fichte, *Deduzierter Plan einer zu Berlin zu errichtenden höheren Lehranstalt* (1807), *GA* II/11: 88-89. For Fichte's references to Pythagoras' community, see Fichte, *Philosophie der Maurerei. Briefe an Konstant*, 13th Letter, *GA* I/8: 454; Xavier Léon, *Fichte et son temps II/1* (Paris : Armand Colin, 1958), p. 40, 55.

³⁶ *Ueber Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie*, *GA* I/6: 359. Here is how Fichte characterizes the well-executed artwork: "In den Werken der letzteren [Künstler] sind Geist und Körper, wie in der Werkstätte der Natur, innigst zusammengefloßen, und das volle Leben geht bis in die äussersten Theile."

commentary on his own work or to specify how it ought to be received. Besides, the prerequisites for the reception of artworks were no different than those holding for philosophy. In a letter sent to Schiller in the summer of 1795, Fichte bemoaned the habits of his contemporaries, who expected the work of art to be undemanding and would therefore be unable to appreciate works of a genius such as Goethe.

Thus, Fichte was loath to give up the dialogue with his students, thereby losing this advantage. In the preface to the second edition (1798) to the *Programmschrift*, he announced his intention to take account of the concrete situation of his time in presenting the *Wissenschaftslehre* and assigned himself the corresponding tasks of remoulding the habits of his contemporaries and of guiding them along the path of the one and true philosophy.³⁷ His departure from the University of Jena must have constituted an abrupt and untimely interruption, therefore, and so one must not underestimate just how great a rupture the Atheism Dispute brought about. In reality, this resignation/dismissal did not just entail the loss of Fichte's livelihood, but also represented a break in his way of philosophizing, as before then he had always complemented his thinking, especially the transcendental philosophy, with lectures and communicated it through that medium. Needless to say, Fichte could surely have relied on his great fame and led a peaceful existence in Berlin as a writer; the circumstance that in 1800 the city still lacked a university would have been of no great consequence, as he could easily have continued his work independently, living by his pen. But Fichte refused to resign himself to such a fate and fought it with all his strength.³⁸ In fact, we can see that he obviously needed to

³⁷ "Für die Vollendung des Systems ist noch unbeschreiblich viel zu thun. Es ist jetzt kaum der Grund gelegt, kaum ein Anfang des Baues gemacht; und der Verf. will alle seine bisherige Arbeiten nur für vorläufige gehalten wissen. Die feste Hoffnung, die er nunmehr fassen kann, nicht, wie er vorher befürchtete, auf gutes Glück, in der individuellen Form, in der es sich ihm zuerst darbot, für irgend ein künftiges Zeitalter, das ihn verstehen dürfte, in todtten Buchstaben, sein System niederlegen zu müssen, sondern schon mit seinen Zeitgenossen, sich darüber zu verständigen, und zu berathen, dasselbe durch gemeinschaftliche Bearbeitung mehrerer eine allgemeinere Form gewinnen zu sehen, und es lebendig im Geiste und der Denkart des Zeitalters zu hinterlassen, ändert den Plan, den er sich bei der ersten Ankündigung vorschrieb. Er wird nämlich in der systematischen Ausführung des Systems vor jetzt nicht weiter fortschreiten, sondern erst das bis jetzt erfundene vielseitiger darstellen, und vollkommen klar, und jedem unbefangenen evident zu machen suchen." Fichte, *BWL*, *GA I/2*: 162-163.

³⁸ If Fichte opposed his students' obsession with writing down every single word, it is because they thereby confined the professor to the role of a mere writer: "... wo der Lehrer sich bestrebt, recht lebendig und dem Zuhörer gleichsam in die Seele hinein zu reden, da ist er [the student

communicate the fruits of his ongoing labours on the *Wissenschaftslehre* to an audience and that he cared about his listeners' reactions to his lectures. Did he not confess that the only worthwhile comments that he ever received on the *Wissenschaftslehre* were invariably made by the “auditors” who attended his courses?³⁹

Immediately following his departure from Jena, he urgently needed to reconnect with an audience if not to get back to teaching as soon as possible. From Berlin, he wrote the following to his wife, who had stayed behind: “If I could have a guarantee that I would be allowed to spend my days here quietly, with a certain dignity, and especially to give lectures, then I would have a good mind to stay here for a few years.”⁴⁰ His desire to return to teaching as quickly as possible even surprised Jacobi, whom Fichte had requested to intercede on his behalf in order to get him a position. Indeed, Jacobi was taken aback at what he regarded as Fichte's pure presumption in asking him not only to find some work for him, but on top of that to land him a position as a “professor,” at the University of Heidelberg, for example. But for Fichte, the latter request was motivated not by social status, but rather by a vital necessity, as it were – at least for the future of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Indeed, how else to explain his eagerness to join the Royal-York Lodge soon after his arrival in Berlin, if not in order to pursue his philosophical work under more-or-less acceptable conditions? Were the Free Masons not a prime audience? We can easily see why he quickly attained the rank of “Grand Orator” of the Lodge, a position on which he wished to maintain a firm hold. To be sure, his initiative in the Lodge would soon lead to a clash that drove him to resign. But let us not forget that from outset he secretly nourished a plan to use his status as orator to disseminate the *Wissenschaftslehre* to this elite audience! Varnhagen von Ense attests to as much about a conversation he had with Fichte.⁴¹ But these efforts remained in vain, and as a result, for the many years before finally regaining his status as a university professor,

who writes everything down] nur geschäftig, das Lebendige gleich wieder in ein todes Bild des Lebendigen zu verwandeln. Was er dadurch erhält, ist doch im günstigsten Falle nur ein Buch; wäre Ihnen aber das genug, so wollte ich zu Hause bleiben und Ihnen Bücher schreiben, und Sie könnten auch zu Hause bleiben, um sie da zu lesen.” *Einleitung in seine philosophische Vorlesungen, Oktober 1810*, p. 224.

³⁹ Fichte, *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* (1797), *GA* I/4: 184.

⁴⁰ Letter from J. G. Fichte to Marie Johanne Fichte on July 20th, 1799, *GA* III/4: 16.

⁴¹ X. Léon, *Fichte et son temps II/1*, p. 32, 53, 55.

Fichte found that the only way that he could continue to lecture on the *Wissenschaftslehre* was to convene an audience in his own living room.

Translated from the French by Adam Westra