

**Variations on Environmental Philosophy  
(Novalis, Bachelard, Sloterdijk)**

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**Abstract**

The study presents three alternative possibilities of the philosophical interpretation of man-environment relationship, each of which formulates its standpoint in opposition to the ruling trends. All three “counter-discourses” deny the concept that the sole reason of human life is to unrestrictedly rule over nature. Novalis, Gaston Bachelard, and Peter Sloterdijk draw our attention to the fact that the technological and capitalistic interpretation of man and the environment (both “original” and “artefactual”) is the source of countless dangers and misunderstandings, and all three thinkers stress the symbiotic interdependence of man and environment. The thoughtful confrontation with these – sometimes seemingly extreme – approaches is an especially timely endeavour due to recent, increasingly more serious ecological problems.

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It is widely known that the leading idea of the modern philosophy of the subject was built upon the opposition of the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*, and this opposition has prevailed in defining the thinking of the European man until these days. We also know that this strange (secularized) Manichaeism met with various criticisms at the very moment of its birth (Montaigne, Pascal, Spinoza), but these first, quite diffuse attacks were unable to break the walls of the strongly built systems of subject-centric philosophies. The priority of the active subject ultimately always seemed incontestable as opposed to the passive speechlessness of the surrounding world. Although there was a

well-conceived pragmatic interest – let us call it practical utilitarianism – which has also lent some kind of “relative value” to the natural world, this proved to be very vulnerable and negligible on the whole, due to its derived nature. The process which Max Weber called the “disenchantment of the world” perceived the environment exclusively as the necessary background of fluent functionality. Various philosophical theories connected to this functionality were conducted at first in a *rather* affirmative, later in a *rather* critical tone.<sup>1</sup>

The first truly ambitious philosophical program regarding the “rehabilitation” of the natural environment was drawn up by German Romantic thinkers, first of all in Novalis’s magic idealism, which perceived the relationship of man and nature as a kind of symbiotic interdependence.

The background of this perception is a well-known series of historical events. The French Revolution raised great interest among German intellectuals, and this increased intellectual state – at least in the beginning – was embodied by an interest in the philosophy of history. Kant’s works in the philosophy of history and politics were also inspired by the French Revolution, in view of writing a possible “critique of the historical reason”, the final drafting of which however surpassed the forces of the Königsberg thinker.

Nevertheless, the exaggerations of the Jacobin dictatorship urged the Romantics for – to put it in modern terms – a “paradigm shift”, which can be perceived in turning from history to nature. Since it proved extremely dangerous, the active subject striving to shape history was forced to the background, and the representatives of early Romanticism (the Schlegel-brothers, Novalis) rather hurried to connect the subject to the entirety of the cosmos. “Die Einbettung des Individuums in den Gesamtzusammenhang des Kosmos relativiert seine Einzigartigkeit und negiert seine ursprünglich angestrebte herrschende Rolle im geschichtlichen Prozeß”.<sup>2</sup> One should say: in this interpretation the man

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<sup>1</sup> Affirmative theories extend from the various versions of positivism to cybernetics and system theories, while the positions of the critical approach from Rousseau through the Frankfurt School all the way to ecological philosophies.

<sup>2</sup> Gerda Heinrich, *Geschichtsphilosophische Positionen der deutschen Frühromantik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1976), 170. “The embedding of the individual in the universal system of correspondences of the cosmos renders relative the uniqueness of man, and denies his role in the historical process originally striving for ruling.” (If not indicated otherwise, the translation of foreign language quotations is the translator’s own, E. G. Cz.)

and his environment have become equal actors of the cosmic processes. Naturally, the representatives of Romantic philosophy had their foundations to recline on, since Heine, for example, had already pointed out the importance of Goethe's serious interest in questions of natural philosophy, as opposed to Schiller.

As Gerda Heinrich writes: from an insecure social environment, the Romantics fled to the world-logos (Weltvernunft) and to natural evolution. Schelling's work *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (1797) also enforced this turn in natural philosophy, as already his first thesis claims that there are no sudden leaps in history, only gradual evolution. Nature is ruled by the world of absolute continuity, from crystals to the highest works of art. Attention is worth being drawn to the fact that the German tradition of natural philosophy radically differs from English and French traditions. In Germany – as opposed to England and France – it was not the practical / technological, but the mystical and theosophical current which proved more forceful (Jakob Böhme, Angelus Silesius, Franz von Baader, and others). This unity-thinking (*Einheitsdenken*), which culminates in Novalis's concept of *total science* (*Totalwissenschaft*), equally has its positive and negative consequences. It is positive inasmuch as it applies dialectics in epistemology to the utmost, and it does not deny the "original" connectedness of human nature and the nature external to it. (It is not accidental that all contemporary radical ecological currents – especially the so-called deep ecology – return to the representatives of German nature mysticism). It is of course also true that the too strong connection of the philosophy of history and nature also implies the danger of mystification of historical and social processes, and turns the man away from his direct involvement in social processes.

At the same time, the conscious *poetization* of nature, appearing as the imperative of the reinstatement of man/nature harmony, presupposes still some kind of active subject. But why is it necessary to redefine the man/nature relationship as active (acting-transforming), and what kind of subject can respond to it? Actually, this question was clearly answered by the research of Romanticism, therefore it will suffice to just mention the most important – seemingly even often stereotypical – statement.

One should start from alleging that the organic concept of nature, considering it as a whole, implies a strong modernity-criticism and – let us dare say it – an opposition to capitalism. According to Romantic natural philosophy, it is impossible to reach to the entirety of

the world and existence merely from the enumeration of empirical data or the numeric totalization and comparison of fragments detached from the whole – or, seen from the perspective of an economical approach: of pure exchange-value.<sup>1</sup> It is only the work of art, the aesthetic “semblance” which makes possible the appearance of the whole in the singular.<sup>2</sup>

The *poetological* program of Romanticism preserves the activity and creative function of the subject.<sup>3</sup> This kind of activity is of course sharply opposed to the austere reality of a teleologically operating, alienating (capitalizing) world, which was unfolding with a seemingly incontrollable power in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany as well. The Romantics hoped for the advent of a new kind of man, one who would not see nature only as a source of raw materials. What is more, the poetic visions of Dutch philosopher Hemsterhuis and Novalis also accounted for the appearance of a new, previously inexistent “human race” on the stage of history. This concept, as has been briefly discussed, was not completely unprecedented. Kant himself, who had laid the foundations of this kind of thinking in his *Critique of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*), primarily by the structural connection of nature and art, could be enlisted among its direct predecessors. So could Schelling’s natural philosophy, especially its concept of organism, despite Novalis’s repeated criticisms. The interpretation of nature as carrying an active and productive principle, as making its own rules (*Autonomie der Natur*) and being “self-sufficient” (*Autarkie der Natur*) were animating ideas for the Romantics as well.

Florian Roder wrote that Novalis was overwhelmed with enthusiasm when he received some important text, such as, for example, Hemsterhuis’s works, which he read in the early autumn of 1797. A selection of Hemsterhuis’s works in German translation had also been available previously,<sup>4</sup> but a comprehensive image of the ideas of the

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<sup>1</sup> “Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge” (“Everywhere we seek the Absolute, and always we find only things”). Novalis, “Blütenstaub”, in *Dichtungen und Fragmente* (Leipzig: Reclam Verlag, 1989), 296.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodore Wiesegrund Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Leipzig: Reclam Verlag, 1989), 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> Jochen Hörisch, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft der Poesie. Der Universalitätsanspruch von Dichtung in der frühromantischen Poetologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag), 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Joachim Mähl writes in his Introduction to the two philosophical studies

Dutch thinker was only offered by his works published in Paris in 1792. Emile Bréhier in his three-volume history of philosophy calls Hemsterhuis an “excellent French writer”,<sup>1</sup> which may lead to the conclusion (at least it has led me to it) that this 1792, two-volume French language work can be regarded as original. It is also known that Hemsterhuis’s works were lent to Novalis by August Schlegel, who started translating them in September 1797. It is somewhat exaggerated however to call Novalis’s work a translation, since the Hemsterhuis studies can much rather be called more or less literal transpositions. Looking at Novalis’s excerpts, it is readily apparent that Hemsterhuis’s texts become less frequent, in favour of Novalis’s own commentaries.

The most interesting part of Hemsterhuis’s philosophy was his teaching about the so called “moral organ”. The Dutch philosopher’s argument was based on the assumption that the man has some kind of secret internal organ, similar to the eye, which senses the outside world. This internal organ is, or *can be*, perceptive of morals. Furthermore, Hemsterhuis says that, as proved by history, the man is able to live in a state of detachment from the world (that is, as a solitary individual). However, even in cases like this he still preserves a kind of craving for re-uniting with the world. He calls this spiritual craving *desire* (*le desir*). The man/world detachment derives from the fact that the man does not perceive the world directly, but by his discretely working senses. Were it possible only once for the man to perceive the world not by his partial senses, that would be the greatest pleasure ever attainable for him. Then he could live in perfect joy (*jouissance*).<sup>2</sup> “Und wenn wir nun beides

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of year 1797 (*Hemsterhuis- und Kant Studien*) that Herder had already translated Hemsterhuis’s *Lettre sur les desirés* in 1781, and published it in the November issue of *Teutschen Merkur*. Mähl also mentions one of Friedrich Schlegel’s 1791 letters to his brother August, in which Friedrich writes: “... his [Novalis’s] favourite writers are Plato and Hemsterhuys – he passionately exposed it to me on one of our first evenings – and that there will be no evil in the world – and all this shows the advent of a Golden Age”. (...seine Lieblingsschriftsteller sind Plato und Hemsterhuys – mit wildem Feuer trug er mir einen der ersten Abende seine Meinung vor – es sey gar nichts böse in der Welt – und alles nahe sich wieder dem goldenen Zeitalter) In: Novalis, *Werke* II, (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960), 310; see also Heinrich, *Geschichtsphilosophische Positionen*, 249.

<sup>1</sup> Emile Bréhier, *Histoire de la philosophie* II. (Paris: PUF, 1993.), 440.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Florian Roder, *Novalis – Die Verwandlung des Menschen* (Leben und Werk Friedrich Hardenberg), (Stuttgart: Urachhaus, 2000), 290. I have to confess here that, in presenting Hemsterhuis’s views, I strongly recline on Roder’s book and

zusammen annehmen, daß die Gesamtheit oder die Summe dieser Ideen ohne Medium und ohne gerinste Zeit- oder Teilfolge die ganze Gesamtheit des Gegenstandes darstellte; oder anders ausgedrückt, daß der Gegensatz auf die innigste und vollkommenste Weise mit dem Wesen der Seele eins würde: dann könnten wir sagen, die Seele genießt ihn auf die vollkommenste Art.”<sup>1</sup>

The most interesting aspect of this issue is: how did Hemsterhuis himself, and particularly Novalis understand the concept of *moral organ*? Was this for him a kind of poetic figure (metaphor, or perhaps a symbol), or was it some sort of *biological organ*, which of course only exists as yet in an embryonic form? Did he perhaps conceive of it as being attached to, or *grown out of*, the heart, or did he hope the existence of some possible *associated organ*? Or could he confide in a kind of *medial* solution almost impossible to be conceptually formulated at the time? These are difficult questions indeed, and I see little chance that they could ever be straightforwardly answered.

It is clear, nevertheless, that both Hemsterhuis and Novalis connected the moral organ to the heart. Naturally, there have been other philosophers as well who searched for the source of moral force in the interior of man. It may suffice here to just mention the question of *akrasia* (the lack of command over oneself), already much debated by the Greeks. The problem here is the following: why is it so that the man knows in countless cases what is good, yet he has no strength to do it? How could the man be enforced from within? These are questions which had moved man’s imagination even before the Enlightenment.

Florian Roder draws attention to the fact that the most exciting aspect of Hemsterhuis’s philosophy for Novalis was that he considered these moral forces an *organ*. This special “environment”, the moral

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Mähl’s previously mentioned Introduction. The primary reason for this is that Hemsterhuis’s original French works are practically unavailable in Hungary.

<sup>1</sup> “And if we were able to know the world with these two kinds of organs (that is, the external senses and this strange something called a moral organ – L. A. K.) simultaneously, if we were able to perceive the entirety or sum of ideas without mediation (*Medium*), or we were able to present the object as a whole without the least temporal succession of events; or, to formulate it differently, if the object could unite with the essence of the soul in the most perfect and intimate way, then we could say: the soul enjoys cognition in the most perfect way.” Quoted by Roder, *Novalis*, 290. See also Novalis’s excerpt no. 19 from Hemsterhuis’s *Sur les désirs*: “Ohne Organe würde die Seele im Moment von dem unendlichen Object durchdrungen – beyde würden Eins – und der Wechselgnuss vollkommen seyn.” Novalis, *Werke*, 361.

organ would accept the connection of the sensory and super-sensory world, and it does not seem unfounded to assume that Hemsterhuis (and especially Novalis) hoped for a subversive anthropological turn which would have resulted in the emergence of a new, previously inexistent human race on the stage of history. Naturally, concepts should be used carefully. The retroactive application of the conceptual system of contemporary biology may lead us to false conclusions regarding the ideas of Enlightenment philosophers. However, it could probably be supposed that anthropogenesis for Novalis was not a completed act, but a process which had by far not ended. (This kind of thinking was not alien to Theilhard de Chardin as well a hundred years later).

In a first approach it is worth accepting Hemsterhuis's starting point, also based on the metaphoric concept of the moral organ. The Dutch philosopher reclines on Platonic philosophy's myth of origin in order to explain what this moral organ actually is. According to this myth, in ancient times the god Zeus created the man as a pure *being of will*. But this being, endowed with that special force, was far from being complete. Zeus sent Prometheus to help this "half-ready" "human-embryo", and he endowed the individual of this strange race with the ability of inner imagination. This imagination worked like a kind of open soul container, from which small pipes emerged (these pipes are the visual representation of senses – L. A. K.), and thus the internal world of the man and the outside world could be interconnected. Then Prometheus gave the man the fire that he had stolen from the gods. The affair had an unfortunate ending nevertheless, because humans made wrong use of their abilities of intellect and will. This was primarily caused by the lack of the connection of human race (and natural environment). But before Zeus's wrath afflicted the entire human race, Aphrodite pitied the "proto-humans" and figured out a way how to connect these left-alone beings into an organic whole. Thanks to Aphrodite's interference, "Sogleich ändert sich die ganze Welt, und die Erde ist mit Blumen bedeckt. Der Mensch eilt dem Menschen entgegen, ihn zu umarmen und ihm ewige Liebe zu schwören. Noch mehr, er geneißt mehr im Genuß des andern als in seinem eigenen; er fühlt die Not des andern, und indem er sie mildert, lindert er auch seine eigene. Zum ersten Male sieht und verehrt er in der Gestalt seines Bruders das herrliche Bild der Gerechtigkeit."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "(...) the whole world changes and the earth is covered with flowers. Men hurry to meet each other, embrace, and promise eternal love to each other. And even beyond all this: the man starts to be more pleased about the other's happiness than about his own. The man feels the need of the other, and while trying to ease

It is thus in *love* that Hemsterhuis sees the root of the moral organ. However, he still distinguishes between two kinds of activities within love: one belongs to the world of the natural “instincts”, such as love, hate, envy, courage, etc. Insofar as these are natural instincts, they also conceal the truth of the soul in themselves. The other activity is artificial and stilted, because it presumes the work of reason, and therefore it is much more vulnerable. If this ability follows Aphrodite’s instructions, then it will become refined and turn into consciousness – this would be in fact the moral organ. However, it also carries the possibility of becoming vestigial and degenerate, firstly because the external formal rules and the development of sciences and arts have deflected attention from it. Some kind of primal seed of this peculiar ability – as it is a divine gift – is still preserved nevertheless, albeit in a vestigial form. It was exactly this possibility which interested Hemsterhuis (and Novalis): how could this “primal seed” or “primal germ” be used to generate life? If that was possible, “Dann werden unsere Beziehungen zu den Göttern unmittelbarer, und das Universum offenbart sich uns von verschiedenen Seiten, die für dich und andere Menschen noch im Nichts liegen. Dann zeigt sich das glänzende Schauspiel der Reichtümer der menschlichen Seele offenbar, und dann, mit einem Wort, sehen wir die Beziehungen zwischen Wirkungen und Ursachen, dringen ein in die Zukunft und bekommen von denen, die uns hören und sehen ohne uns zu begreifen, den geheimnisvollen Namen von Sehen”<sup>1</sup>.

These ideas of Hemsterhuis had a great impact on Novalis. He sensed that these prophecies may become reality some day. Florian Roder calls attention to the fact that the prophecies about the moral organ also appear in the *Logological fragments*. Nevertheless, despite his enthusiasm, Novalis did not lose his philosophical clarity and added

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it, also relieves his own troubles. It is for the first time that he sees and respects the glorious image of truth in his brother.” Hemsterhuis, *Philosophische Schriften* II. (Leipzig, 1911), 199. Quoted by Roder, *Novalis*, 291.

<sup>1</sup> “Then our relationship to gods would become more direct, and all sides of the universe would open up for us, even those which are still hidden in the nothing for you and for any other man. This is when the drama of the human soul’s richness is revealed in its clarity, that is, this is only when we see the relations between causes and effects. It is these relations which will make us able to penetrate the future, and gain knowledge of that, what we see and hear without being caught by the secret power of the seers.” Hemsterhuis, *Philosophische Schriften*, 215. Quoted by Roder, *Novalis*, 291.



critical remarks to his excerpts. Here is one example of Novalis's subtle, yet clear criticism. According to Hemsterhuis, it is unconceivable to imagine the soul's perfect fulfilment with pleasure under the present conditions, because – as we have seen – the man possesses independent and separate senses. Therefore the goal "(...) remains an unattainable idea"<sup>1</sup> – Novalis summarizes Hemsterhuis's thoughts. Resuming his ideas, Novalis says that one must accept the existence of the moral organ as a possibility of eternal *provocation* (Reizt) which, once it had reached its purpose, would eliminate itself. "Es ist also eine *subjective Idee*, die wächst – so wie Seele wächst eine unbeschlimte Aufgabe – die nie gelöst werden kann, weil sie auf unendliche Arten, stest relativ nur, gelöst wird."<sup>2</sup>

What appears at Hemsterhuis as a silent and painful complaint – because it is never possible to ease the yearning which derives from the detachment of the Self and the World –, takes a different turn with Novalis. If "das Streben ist zuversichtlich angeschaut als unendlicher »Reiz«, als etwas, das unabdingbar mit zu der den Menschen auszeichnenden Aufgabe gehört",<sup>3</sup> then the situation is not that hopeless.

At the end of his work *Sur l'homme et ses rapports*,<sup>4</sup> Hemsterhuis analyzes at the widest the role of arts and sciences, naturally with respect to the future achievement of the moral organ. When concluding his excerpts, Novalis also formulates some notes connected to these questions. He agrees with Hemsterhuis on the point that there is an inherent danger in arts and sciences of covering the soul's latent moral abilities. He does not think nevertheless, as Hemsterhuis probably does, that the cure lies in turning away from civilization and development.<sup>5</sup> Novalis believes that the arts and sciences are able to renew themselves from within, and at the same time be morally effective as well. As for the sciences, he finds great possibilities in mathematical combinatorics, which he regards as the foundation of the aforementioned total science.

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<sup>1</sup> Roder, *Novalis*, 292.

<sup>2</sup> "So this is a *subjective idea*, which grows – just like the soul grows, an undetermined task –, which can never be solved, is divided into countless species, and may only have a relative solution". Novalis, *Werke*, 361.

<sup>3</sup> "this endeavour is looked at with confidence in its eternal "enchantment", that is, something which indispensably belongs to the man's outstanding task". Roder, *Novalis*, 292.

<sup>4</sup> The complete edition of Novalis's works that I myself have referred to contains these notes under the subtitle *Von Dumas*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Roder, *Novalis*, 293.

But the true problem – what exactly is in fact this moral organ? – is again treated by Novalis in the form of an unanswered question.<sup>1</sup>

As for me, I shall make another attempt to answer this repeatedly asked question.

I consider it worthwhile to depart from Novalis's notes on Hemsterhuis's work *Simon ou des facultés de l'âme*, connected primarily to the French philosopher's concept of art. Hemsterhuis mentions two kinds of effects of art. First, it assists the edification of the body; second, by perfecting and enriching the senses, it also assists the refinement of the soul. The body is mainly influenced by mechanical arts (such as craftsmanship), while the soul by the so called liberal arts. Novalis adds to this distinction: "... ob der Zweck der Kunst darüber hinaus nicht darin bestehe, »die gefällige Progression *des ganzen Menschen*« zu bewirken".<sup>2</sup>

Novalis's concept assigns a much wider territory to artistic activity than Hemsterhuis's interpretation. Furthermore, Novalis completes the bodily and mental viewpoint with a *spiritual* one as well. The reason for this is the fact that the meaning of the word progress must be founded by the intellectual formation of the man; that is, from the point of view of Novalis's *total science*, the completeness of the human Ego, and the consideration of this completeness appears as a necessary condition. The difference in Novalis's and Hemsterhuis's conception can best be grasped in their relation to poetry. Hemsterhuis himself acknowledges that poetry has an outstanding place among the arts, because it is the language of gods that is revealed through it.<sup>3</sup>

In fact Hemsterhuis depreciates the power of poetry to some extent – at least as compared to Novalis. The final conclusion of his train of thought is the following: "Betrachten wir aber diese Fähigkeit in uns selbst, in jenen glücklichen Augenblicken der Begeisterung, in denen wir dem Busen der Natur einige Funken des Wahren und Schönen entreißen, so werden wir finden, daß wir unsererseits sehr wenig dabei tun. Wir gehen nicht mehr den klugen, genauen, abgemessenen, bald langsameren,

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<sup>1</sup> "Keime künftiger Organe – Perfectibilitaet der Organe. Wie lässt sich etwas zu einer Organ machen?" Novalis, *Werke*, 368.

<sup>2</sup> "... does the purpose of art lie not in the way that and how it effects the fallen progress of the *whole* man?" Roder, *Novalis*, 293.

<sup>3</sup> "D'ailleurs, ce n'est pas sans raison que la poésie est appelée le langage des dieux; du moins c'est que les dieux dictent à tout genie sublime qui a des relations avec eux, et sans ce langage nous ferions très-peu progrès dans nos sciences." cf. Novalis, *Werke*, 315.

bald rascheren Gang des Verstandes (...).”<sup>1</sup> All nature does is to clothe reality into festive clothes.

Novalis continues Hemsterhuis’s thoughts and attributes absolute creative power to poetry (*Poësie*). Poetry stands higher than history or philosophy, because it is only able to create the “inner Completeness”, the “World-family”, the “beautiful Household of the universe”. While in Hemsterhuis’s concept man is a being seized by forces stronger than himself, the man enforced by poetry acquires extraordinary abilities. “Durch *die Poësie* wird die höchste Sympathie und Coactivitaet – die innewohnendste, herrlichste gemeinschaft wirklich.”<sup>2</sup> As Roder writes, Novalis started to deal with the questions of poetry’s definability influenced by Hemsterhuis. In Hemsterhuis’s concept the sense of poetry unfolds within the framework of a rational concept of man. Novalis’s anthropology stresses the openness and heroism of human nature. Thus Hemsterhuis’s any expectancy connected to some moral organ to be developed in the future is at the same time coupled with resignation about any kind of higher need of knowledge, and is satisfied with keeping alive some kind of mystical desire of unity. Conversely, Novalis does not even refrain from the ultimate consequences. Because Novalis, in opposition to Hemsterhuis, is not satisfied with merely knowing the symptomatic structures of the universe, but regards the man as God’s fellow-creator. At the end of the Hemsterhuis-studies he summarizes his perspective as follows: “Gott schafft auf keine andere Art, als wir – Er setzt nur zusammen. Ist die Schöpfung *sein Werck*, so sind wir auch *sein Werck* – Wir können die Schöpfung, als *sein Werck* kennen lernen, inwiefern wir *sind selbst Gott* sind – Wir *kennen* sie nicht, inwiefern wir *selbst Welt* sind – die Kenntniß ist zunehmend – wenn wir mehr Gott werden.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “But if we consider this ability within us, with the help of which in the happy moments of enthusiasm we rive some sparks of beauty and truth away from nature’s womb, then we find: we have not become much wealthier. Because it is not so much about the cleverer, more precise, or more adequate, but about the slower or faster operation of reason (...).” Quoted by Roder, *Novalis*, 293.

<sup>2</sup> “It is through poetry that the highest sympathy and co-activity brings to life the innermost and most magnificent community”. Novalis, *Werke*, 372-373. The term *Coactivitaet* used by Novalis is highly reminiscent of the German mysticism’s term *Mitschöpfung*.

<sup>3</sup> “God creates in no other way than we do. He also merely sets together. If creation is his work, than we are also his work. – We may only know creation as his *work* inasmuch as we are ourselves God. – We do not *know* creation, unless we are *ourselves world*. – But knowledge increases – if we become more like

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But what is this *moral organ* after all? Two kinds of answers can be given to this question. The first one may say that the moral organ, according not only to Hemsterhuis, but also to Novalis, is nothing else than a symbol of the eternal perfectibility of the human race. In this respect the moving force and inner stimulus of human development means some kind of unsatisfiable desire which strives for the reestablishment of the former harmony of man and the world – naturally, in vain. The urge to create Novalis's moral object seems to remind one of the function of Lacan's *the small object a* (l'objet petit a). According to Lacan *the small object a* is always some foreign body, an *anything* which hinders the fulfilment of the principle of joy. In connection to the principle of joy, Lacan speaks of a circle closing in on itself, but which is never able to completely close, because there is always some hindrance which makes it impossible. Following Freud to a certain extent, Lacan came to the conclusion that, in order for a man to remain a man (that is, a cultural being), it is paramount that he should not completely render himself to pleasure (*jouissance*); it is paramount that some pain be mixed with joy at all times – the most important is the pain deriving from the knowledge that things can never be accomplished.<sup>1</sup> The “joy in the pain” can be the peak of all pleasures (*jouissance*) because it can never reach to the swooning and disintegrated state which usually follows the satisfaction of usual pleasures. Another of Novalis's works, the fragmentary novel *The Novices of Sais* (Die Lehrlinge zu Sais) partly underlines this possibility of interpretation. In this work Novalis draws up the possibility of a retro-active utopia, in which the man wishes to return to the sonorous universe of the maternal womb that he had deserted, where foetal existence and wisdom were still one. This ancestral knowledge is mediated by female receptivity, similarly to the projection of the moral organ, only in a reverse direction. “Der denkende Mensch kehrt zur ursprünglichen Funktion deines Daseins, zur schaffenden Betrachtung, zu jenem Punkte zurück, wo Hervorbringen und Wissen in der wundervollsten Wechselverbindung standen, zu jenem schöpferischen Moment des eigentlichen Genusses, des innern

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God.” Novalis, *Werke*, 378.

<sup>1</sup> About the *objet petit a* see Slavoj Žižek's interesting commentaries in his article “Psychoanalyse und deutscher Idealismus”, *Mesotes* 1 (1992): 5-16.

Selbsempfängnisses.”<sup>1</sup> In such a perception, similarly to the lost maternal womb, the moral organ is part of the literary discourse, and as a fiction, it can only have an aesthetic significance.

However, there is another possibility of interpretation, which may be raised exactly in connection with the dizzying accomplishment of genetics, the *Totalwissenschaft* of our age. It could be possible that Novalis hoped indeed the birth of a new kind of man, a being who, possessing hitherto unknown abilities, understands the world in a completely different way than we do. To the astonishment of many, the “magic idealist” of our age, Peter Sloterdijk, seems to support the case of human cloning on the basis of this second, more radical interpretation. Now, what would Novalis himself say to all this? I suppose that no further extraordinary development of genetics will ever answer this question.

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Of all the philosophers of the twentieth century, it was probably Gaston Bachelard who most radically reinterpreted the relationship of man and the environment. The *material phenomenology* that he founded belongs to the noblest circle of ecological thinking.

Bachelard became interested in the questions of phenomenology and imagination beginning with the end of the 1930s. As Hélène Védérine pointed out, it was exactly during this time that the workings of imagination started to concern Sartre, who came however from a completely different social background. What is more, Bachelard included this previously quite neglected faculty, the *imagination*, into the focus of phenomenological research.<sup>2</sup> For the sake of poetry, forms, images, and myths, Bachelard left the world of pure scientific rationality, and in a sense turned against his views exposed in his earlier works of theory of science suiting the normal paradigm. They both formulated the

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<sup>1</sup> “The thinking man returns to the original task of his existence, to creative contemplation, to the point where creation and knowledge stand in a most wonderful interconnectedness: the moment of actual pleasure, of creative self-conception.” Novalis, “A szaiszi tanítványok” (The Novices of Sais), *Vulgo* 1 (2002): 228.

<sup>2</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace* (Paris: PUF, 1957). Cf. Hélène Védérine, *Les grandes conceptions de l'imaginaire – De Platon a Sartre et Lacan* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990); Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986 [1940]).

view that the body, the environment, and its fantastic nature ought to be made a subject of philosophical reflection, and at the same time recognize the “autonomous rights” of a materiality independent of the intellect. Let us realize – they both claimed – that the body is not merely the deposit of the spirit, but at the same time a *creative vehicle* of the imaginary and various transformations of imaginations. They both acknowledged the importance of Freudian psychoanalysis, but they did not accept its reductionist form, but claimed the need to reinterpret Freud’s ideas.

In Bachelard’s interpretation of existence the world appears as a disappearing civilization: old peasants’ houses with granaries and cellars, streams winding on the meadows; it is the world of obsolete wooden cases, chests, and hidden corners that comes to life, and becomes part of philosophical discourse.<sup>1</sup> (In opposition to this, in his work entitled *The Poetics of Space* he exclaims: “There are no houses in Paris!”). The study (*étudier*) of the world means for him that the text of existence must be reread almost line by line. But before the true power of imagination would unfold, one must surmount the most important barrier raised by modern epistemologies: the absolute command of impersonal objectivity, the imperative which not long before Bachelard himself considered his own. The modern ideal of science claims that the scientist must get rid of primitive images and primary experiences, and must learn to distinguish between vital interests and objective lack of interest. Bachelard had the strength to break up with the myth of objective knowledge; of course, Védrine says, this was possible since all books of charm and herbals were there on Bachelard’s bookshelves, and he was also one of the best physicians of his age. Naturally, this only partly explains Bachelard’s turn. Even so it is quite intriguing: how was it possible that an epistemologist utterly broke up with his previous attitude of research to draw up, step by step, the phenomenology of imagination?

Whatever lies behind this secret, it is a fact: since the end of the 1930s Bachelard’s attention and interest increasingly turned to the territories previously neglected by official theory of science. He concentrated much of his force to unveil the secret of literature, the mysteries of the world of images and imagination. He considered: the concept that the image-imagination is a barrier is only a later cultural phenomenon. Its weakness appears retrospectively, when in the light of modern science it seems ultimately exceeded. However, the will of a

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<sup>1</sup> Védrine, *Les grandes conceptions*, 114.

psychoanalyst striving for “truly objective knowledge” is able to induce new life into the secret forms of knowledge exiled to the world of an “obsolete” past. One must learn to give back to life once more the creative power of imagination and dreaming, even if it can only be found beyond the dozens of dead generations, merged into the past of humankind. It is the poetry and imagination comprising the strata of the unconscious that must be regarded as the basis of empirical and scientific knowledge. From this point on, for Bachelard it was the intimate experiential sphere of earth, water, fire, and air that represented the guideline which served the literary and mythological correction of modern physics and chemistry. One could also say: Bachelard created the chemistry and physics of dreaming.<sup>1</sup>

In his many books Bachelard found the dreaming soul (*anima*) in the works of Lautréamont, Novalis, and Poe, which yielded a new kind of cognitive energy and a particular epistemological dynamics to knowledge open to the world. Bachelard’s psychoanalysis does not aim at struggling with a neurotic psyche, but it presents the gigantic fight with the elements of the man who challenges the blind forces of nature. His share will sometimes be victory, other times destruction. Bachelard actually studies the micro- and macro-dramas of the encounter of matter and man; he analyzes the encounters in which the matter has not yet become alien, but elevates to the rank of property or friend (or even respectable enemy) – that is, the “interactive partner”. Bachelard’s matter is the self-revealing life itself; the essence of the matter is revealed by the phenomenology and ontology of the flexible, round (*rond*) forms. “Sa matière chante et, à la différence de Sartre, elle ne déchoit jamais en anti-physis”<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to his work *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard confesses: in writing the last chapter (“The Phenomenology of the Circle”), the greatest difficulty he had to face was to avoid the commonplace evidencies of geometrical thinking. “... Il nous a fallu partir d’une sorte d’intimité de la rondeur” – he says.<sup>3</sup> It is not accidental that Sloterdijk chose this same sentence as the motto of the first volume of his *Spheres*. Moreover, it is again not accidental that the centuries-long struggle of the *esprit de finesse* and the *esprit de géométrie* comes to life again in Sartre’s debate with Bachelard.

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<sup>1</sup> Védrine, *Les grandes conceptions*, 16.

<sup>2</sup> “His matter sings and, in opposition to Sartre’s, it never declines into an anti-physis”. Védrine, *Les grandes conceptions*, 117.

<sup>3</sup> “We had to start out from a kind of intimacy of the round”. Bachelard, *La poétique de l’espace*, 20.



*Block House in Piața Națiunilor, Bucharest  
(Photograph by Bianca Petcu)*



Bachelard complains in several of his works that modern philosophy is indifferent to the fantasticality of the imaginary. Living under the spell of systematization (and charmed by the desire to create general laws), it does not care for the studying of subtle perceptual things. His main objection to Husserlian phenomenology is that, as a consequence of its exaggerated intellectualism, it stiffens itself as a philosophy of seeing, and risks depriving therefore all things of their real weight. It is only their shadow that is left of the things, and therefore Bachelard's phenomenology is interested neither in radical (phenomenological) reduction, nor the revelation of essences. Bachelard intended to cultivate a kind of phenomenology of the image which answered the questions of where the specific reality and emotional power of poetic image came from, how an image could be unique and trans-subjective at the same time.<sup>1</sup> He thinks that it is basically poetic imagination which solves the difficulties of Husserl's phenomenology, since here the infinite synthesis of the *noema* and *noesis*, the complicated stratified structure of transcendental knowledge is dissolved. "Les exemples des phénoménologues ne mettent pas assez en évidence les degrés de tension de l'intentionnalité; ils restent trop formels, trop intellectuels (...) Ils faut à la fois une intention formelle, une intention dynamique et une intention matérielle pour comprendre l'objet dans sa force, dans sa résistance, dans sa matière, c'est-à-dire totalement."<sup>2</sup> Védrine thinks that Bachelard votes for the ontology of slowness, for a world where the murmur of existence can be heard, and where one can linger at the contemplation of the flexible dialectics of images and qualities.<sup>3</sup> Bachelard changed Husserl's pedant German language with the subtleties of an airy (and naturally French) style. In Védrine's witty

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<sup>1</sup> Védrine, *Les grandes conceptions*, 118.

<sup>2</sup> "The examples of phenomenologists do not place emphasis so much on the degrees of the tension of intentionality; they are much too formal, too intellectual (...) There is need at the same time of a material and formal intention in order to understand the object in its force, its resistance, its matter, that is: in its totality". Bachelard, *L' Eau et les rêves*, (Paris: Librairie, José Corti, 1942), 213 –214. Quoted by Védrine, *Les grandes conceptions*, 118. (In my own copy of the book I have not found the quoted excerpt).

<sup>3</sup> Bachelard's another notable remark also expresses his recognition of the environment's (in this case artefactual environment's) world-constituting power: "The elevators destroy the heroism of a staircase" (Les ascenseurs détruisent les héroïsmes de l'escalier). *La poétique de l'espace*, 42. In the following part I will offer a detailed analysis of Sloterdijk's version of the ontology of slowness, based mainly on his volume *Eurotaoism*.

formulation: Bachelard was actually attracted by the metaphysical freshness of miniatures. A happy Lilliputian imagination, where “adjectival philosophy plays its cheerful games”.

As I have briefly pointed to it before, Bachelard did not accept Freudian psychoanalysis either, which thinks much more than it dreams. “Entre le rêve et la rêverie, il y a une différence de nature: » le rêveur du rêve nocturne est une ombre qui peu a perdu son moi, le rêveur de la rêverie, s’il est un peu philosophe, peut, au centre de son moi rêveur, formuler un cogito. «”<sup>1</sup> In his *The Poetics of Dreaming*, Bachelard distinguishes the *animus* (concept) and the *anima* (image, imagination). In his view there is a radical heterogeneity between concepts and images. The opposition between concept and imagination cannot be reconciled, because these are different aspects of one’s “psychic life”.

The imagination of water is best elaborated in Bachelard’s material phenomenology. Water is a simple and feminine element, most suitable for revealing the innermost secret of human life. Water is at the same time a true transitional element, which dies every moment without losing its substance. The flow of water involves the image of permanent horizontal death. “Dans d’innombrables exemples nous verrons que pour l’imagination matérialisante la mort de l’eau est plus songeuse que la mort de la terre: la peine de l’eau est infinie”.<sup>2</sup>

One remarkable characteristic of the element of water is that it is part of the forming matter while it almost dissolves itself. The dough, the mortar, the silt, the hot metal slowly becoming fluid, etc. all witness water’s immeasurable combinational abilities.

The idle (modelling!) hand which only runs through pure geometrical lines, and which has mostly settled in for the deferred control of the finished work piece, naturally lets itself be deluded by the spell of pure and easy geometricality. But it has no idea what a hand penetrating into formable, kneadable matter may know. “Dans le règne de l’esthétique, cette visualisation du travail fini conduit naturellement à

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<sup>1</sup> “There is a natural difference between a dream and daydreaming: »the dreamer of a night dream is a shadow who can be lost in the Self, the dreamer of a daydream, if he is a bit of a philosopher, may create a cogito around the centre of the dreaming Self.«” Bachelard, *La poésie de la rêverie*. Quoted by Védrine, *Les grandes conceptions*, 120.

<sup>2</sup> “We shall see in countless examples that for a material imagination the death of water is much dreamier than that of the earth: the pain of the water is infinite”. Bachelard, *L’eau...*, 13.

la suprématie de l'imagination formelle".<sup>1</sup> The clay-moulding potter is one of the recurrent metaphors of the most ancient creation myths. Another basic metaphor of agricultural societies is the kneading of bread. (The experiences formulated by Bachelard have also left their marks on my own life. For instance, I have been deeply impressed by those childhood memories when my grandmother with her skinny, bony hands kneaded the dough for bread. I watched with great wonder how the forming dough transformed over a couple of hours into crispy bread thanks to the "cooperation" of another matter, fire, and became the source of incomparable delight). Water is not only a material, but also a *maternal* element, Bachelard says. Water expands the seeds so that the source of life may emerge from them. "L'eau est une matière qu'on voit partout naître et croître".<sup>2</sup> At the same time, there is water which is angry, violent, or even furious. In a sense it is a transvestite or hermaphrodite, it easily changes its sex. The sound of water conceals an original poetic metaphor, says Bachelard. The water of streams and rivers *sonorizes* the speechless landscape, teaches birds and humans to sing, speak, and tell stories, and all this is possible because there is a kind of continuity and transgression between the sound of water and human voice.

It is of course easy to recognize in Bachelard's material phenomenology the residues of those mystical natural philosophical teachings which both modern natural and social sciences hurried to make us forget. The well-known figures of twentieth century anthropology (Max Scheler, Helmut Plessner, Ernst Cassirer, and Arnold Gehlen) intentionally sociologized their anthropological theories, and radically broke with the ancient and medieval natural historical study of elements.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, the discussion of man's self-understanding in a historical dimension reveals incontestable truths. This historicizing tendency gained ground already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and has preserved its positions ever since. Still, the consensus that makes man appear as a being with a non-fixed, open horizon, may also make us accept seemingly obsolete self-interpretations at least on the level of memory. If for no other reason,

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<sup>1</sup> "In the realm of aesthetics such a visualisation of completed work naturally leads to the supremacy of formal imagination". Bachelard, *L'eau...*, 21.

<sup>2</sup> "Water is a matter which wants to be born and grow everywhere" Bachelard, *L'eau* ...22.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Harmut Böhme, "Die vier Elemente: Feuer Wasser Erde Luft", In Cristoph Wulf (ed.) *Vom Menschen: Handbuch der Historischen Anthropologie*, 1996: 17-46.

this imperative may seem grounded because the modern man living in an industrial society hardly ever meets the elements in his everyday life conduct. “Die Elemente sind an den Rand der Merwelt der industriellen Zivilisationen gerückt. Sie werden als solche kaum mehr erfahren, auch dann nicht, wenn dies möglich wäre: denn ihre kulturelle Semantik weitgehend untergegangen. Gewiß macht jeder Erfahrungen mit Feuer, Wasser, Erde Luft: man trinkt, ißt, wandert, spürt den Wind auf der Haut (...) Doch (...) das Wasser wird aus keine Quelle geschöpft (man wäre mißtrauisch ob uhre möglichen Verschmutzung), sondern Wasser im besten Fall in Flaschen gefülltes »naturreines« Mineralwasser aus Tiefen eines Gebirges, tausend Kilometer vom Ort des Verzehrs entfernt.”<sup>1</sup>

Bachelard’s material imagination – by reviving the ancient and medieval *aisthesiologia* – does not wish to deny the average everydayness of the modern world, but simply wants to remind us of our *elemental roots*.<sup>2</sup> Bachelard’s material phenomenology contains the imaginations of both ancient natural historians and medieval-early modern natural mysticism. For instance, there are perplexing similarities between Bachelard and the medieval mystical writer Hildegard von Bingen. Hildegard, according to the macrocosm/microcosm analogy, claims that the human body is not a closed, but an open entity in a metabolic relationship with nature. In her medical works she starts from the fact that the body is subordinated to nature as its inseparable part. For Hildegard, the person is not a being opposed to nature, but “the other of him/herself”.<sup>3</sup> One’s fallible corporeality – which nevertheless appears to one directly as the material vehicle of his life interest – has a special texture, which reveals at the same time the text of nature. “Der Körper ist ein stummes Entziffern der Anatomie des Kosmos, die in der Medizin zur Sprache kommt – das ist die Pointe Hildegards, womit sie die Linie

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<sup>1</sup> “The elements are exiled to the edges of industrial *civilizations*. They can hardly ever be experienced, not even in cases when it could be possible: because their cultural semantics has almost peremptorily been lost. Surely everybody experiences fire, water, earth, and air: we eat, drink, bathe, get warm, sunbathe, walk in forests, feel the breeze on our skin (...). Still (...) the water is not acquired from the spring (one must be mindful whether it is not polluted), but in the best case it is brought in bottles of »nature-pure« mineral water from the depths of a mountain, thousands of kilometres away from the place of its consumption.” Böhme, “Die vier Elemente...”. (see also: [www.culture.humboldt.de/HB/volltexte.html](http://www.culture.humboldt.de/HB/volltexte.html), 5.)

<sup>2</sup> Empedocles was the first natural philosopher whose system included all four primary elements (fire, earth, water, and air), termed by him as *risoma* (roots).

<sup>3</sup> Böhme, “Die vier Elemente...”, 23.

der antiken Medizin weiterführt, aber auch modernen medizinanthropologischen Ansätzen wie etwa Viktor von Weizsäckers nicht fern steht.”<sup>1</sup>

The human body is the medium of elements, but it also stands for the reverse way: elements are the media of man’s active life (*vita activa*). Elements have a specific power which works quasi-teleologically. For example, Hildegard says about water that it has fifteen kinds of powers, such as: “Wärme, Luftigkeit, Feuchtigkeit, Aufwallen, Geschwindigkeit, Beweglichkeit; ferner gibt es den Bäumen Saft, den Früchten Geschmack, den Kräutern die Grünkraft; mit seiner Feuchtigkeit trieft es weiterhin in allen Dingen, es hält die Vögel, nährt die Fische, belebt die Tiere durch seine Wärme, hält die Kriechtiere in seinem Schleim zurück und faßt so alles zusammen.”<sup>2</sup>

Bachelard’s entire train of thought is purposely anachronistic; besides ancient and medieval natural mysticism, his large-scale vision comprises the magic idealism of German romanticism as well. That aestheticized, orb-like universe, that is, in which, borrowing László Földényi F.’s words, “everything organically harmonizes with everything else, and there is correspondence between all phenomena of the world”, and which “*closes in as a trap on anyone who ventures in there, and leaves no way out*”<sup>3</sup>. No doubt: all holistic worldviews are deficient in a sense, at least from the perspective of modern epistemologies, because they are insensible to differences that have by now become common. The mystical unification of man/nature and subject/object has triggered the rejection of all rationalist thinkers following Hegel. What is more, the

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<sup>1</sup> “The body contains the mute or codified messages of the anatomy of the cosmos, voiced by medical science. This way Hildegard follows the line of ancient medicine, but her views are not far also from medical-anthropological theses of the kind, for instance, that Viktor von Weizsäcker claims”. Böhme, “Die vier Elemente...”, 23.

<sup>2</sup> “(...) warmth, lightness, moisture, upsurge, speed, mobility; furthermore, water feeds the trees with moisture, makes fruits taste good, and gives vegetables the power of spring; its moisture penetrates into all things, it keeps up the birds (swimming on water), it feeds the fish. Furthermore, the warmth of water gives life to animals, keeps the crawling animals on their way by slime, and thus keeps everything together...” Quoted in Böhme, “Die vier Elemente...”, 24. See also: Hildegard von Bingen, *Wisse die Wege*, (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1997), 62-64.

<sup>3</sup> László Földényi F., *A kettéhasadt természet* (Nature split in two), In Mihály Szegedy-Maszák and Péter Hajdu, *Romantika: világkép, művészet, irodalom* (Romanticism: worldview, art, literature), (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), 26.

removal of the subject also threatens the foundations of moral order to collapse. If we fail to surmise the existence of autonomous subjects, what shall we do with concepts like conscience and responsibility? However true it is that natural elements can be regarded as “interactive partners”, it is still clear to all of us that this partnership is regarded more like a metaphor; it is only rights but not responsibilities that we can confer even to higher apes (there are examples), and this easily unmasks the one-sidedness of this partnership.

It is a question, of course, whether that holistic unity-semantics that László Földényi F. rightfully mentioned is adequate enough in describing the standpoint of German romanticism, or it only reflects one face of an indeed very much Janus-faced kind of thinking. For myself, I see a much greater degree of self-awareness in Romanticist natural philosophy (and anthropology), not incommensurable with the presumption of a modern rational subject. For now, I only wish to ground this assumption with a single note, but I will naturally return to it in the followings. We have seen: the great figures of early German Romanticism, e.g. Novalis, or Franz von Baader, whose views approach Romanticist ideas, did not quite profess the principle of *unio mystica*, but spoke of the *reunion* of man and nature. The difference between these two points of view cannot be neglected. In the followings I will offer a detailed analysis of the dream description on the first pages of Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in which Heinrich finds himself in a basin (Bad im Wasser) of a cave reminding him of a maternal womb, where he swims “Berauscht von Entzücken und doch jedes Eindrucks bewußt...”.<sup>1</sup> The Romantic philosopher acts rather *as if* he would unite with nature, but he actually seeks the possibility of a new kind of man/nature relationship, however, without dissolving its reflected ego in the “chaos/cosmos” of complete indifference. This is the important difference which – as we shall see – Sloterdijk himself also keeps neglecting, though naturally for the sake of other conclusions.

The possibility that material imagination may be the corrective (or indeed the foundation) of a purely conceptual knowledge appears for example in Sartre's phenomenology as well. In the last chapter of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre formulates his ideas exactly in contrast with the arguments of Bachelard's book *Water and Dreams*. Sartre's final conclusion about the issue of material imagination (mainly deriving

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<sup>1</sup> “Drunken with delight and still aware of all his impressions...”. Novalis, *Dichtungen...*, 9. (Emphasis added).

though from fast reading, since he utterly misunderstands the core of Bachelard's ideas<sup>1</sup>) is exactly the opposite of where Bachelard had reached. Naturally, Sartre's system of categories in itself signals that for the two thinkers the everydayness of being and the elementary form of the experience of the world can be approached and revealed via completely different phenomena. While for Sartre the world can best be defined by the categories of *nothing*, *nausea*, and *the other's regard*, for Bachelard it is the cooper working with pitch, the hunter baiting the bird with his fife, the housewife cooking the jam in a cauldron which represent the elementary forms of *Mitsein* experience. Clearly, for Sartre the basic stage of man's active life (the Arendtian *vita activa*) is the inanimate, mechanical city work, which only yields alienation and viscid nausea as an experience. For Bachelard however the basis of imagination is the work of the craftsman and the farming peasant. Bachelard "Plus proche de Proudhon que de Marx, [il] décrit une France disparue..."<sup>2</sup>

Bachelard's views on being and labour are naturally alien to Sartre. It is at most a worker fighting the power of syndicates that enjoys some of his sympathy. In his eyes viscosity is the opposite of an existence in-itself, with a stable identity. It is a demure, feminine compensation, which symbolizes a different vision of the quality of sugar – says Védérine.

In the pertaining chapter of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre re-emphasizes the initial thesis of his philosophy: it is only the subject (cogito) fixing itself in the facticity of existence that may form the basis of man's transcendental activity. It is "... l'idée de facticité et celle de situation qui nous permettrons de comprendre le symbolisme existentiel des choses."<sup>3</sup>

This is exactly why Sartre insists on the presupposition of the subject's firm and well determined identity. In all sliminess, in all beings with an indefinite state of matter, Sartre's self-identity tends to see the self-destructing, threatening force of the outside world. "Le visqueux est l'agonie de l'eau; il se donne lui-même comme un phénomène en devenir, il n'a pas la permanence dans le changement de l'eau, mais au

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<sup>1</sup> Védérine, *Les grandes conceptions*, 122.

<sup>2</sup> "Closer to Proudhon than to Marx, he describes a France that has disappeared..." Védérine, *Les grandes conceptions*, 123.

<sup>3</sup> "Once again the ideas of facticity and situation will enable us to understand the existential symbolism of things." Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness. A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, translated and with an introduction by Hazel E. Barnes, (New York: Pocket Books, 1973), 769.

contraire il représente comme une coupe opérée dans un changement d'état. Cette instabilité figée du visqueux décourage la possession. L'eau est plus fuyante, mais on peut posséder dans sa fuite même, en tant que fuyante."<sup>1</sup> The water's identity appears thus in Sartre as the pure ability to flow apart. Slime escapes exactly from such kind of fleeting to a sticky thickness: it escapes its original substantiality, which – as we have seen – lies in the ability of free flowing. Water's ability to flow freely slows down in the slimy, by an unidentifiable obscure slop it turns into a sticky, "inscrutable" counter-matter. The obscure substantiality of this "being-between-two-conditions" is best proved by none other than what the slimy melts into: its own unidentifiability. In opposition to the slimy, water's encounter with itself happens as a transparent and natural event. "...une goutte d'eau touchant la surface d'une nappe d'eau est instantanément transmuée en nappe d'eau: nous ne saisissons pas l'opération comme une absorption quasi buccale de la goutte par la nappe, mais plutôt comme une spiritualisation et une désindividualisation d'une être singulier qui se dissout de soi-même dans le grand tout dont il est issu."<sup>2</sup>

In Sartre's material imagination slime is at the same time the embodiment of softness. Strangely enough, for him this softness triggers disgust rather than attraction. It is so because Sartrian softness should rather be conceived as laxity; this is the form of an annihilating/perishing/disappearing being which stops half-way.<sup>3</sup> "Jetez de l'eau sur le sol: elle *coule*. Jetez une substance visqueuse: elle s'étire, elle s'étale, elle s'aplatit, elle se molle, touchez le visqueux, il ne fuit pas: il cède."<sup>4</sup> Still, the most repellent feature of slime is that it deceptively

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<sup>1</sup> "Slime is the agony of water. It presents itself as a phenomenon in process of becoming; it does not have the permanence within change that water has but on the contrary represents an accomplished break in a change of state. This fixed instability in the slimy discourages possession. Water is more fleeting, but it can be possessed in its very flight as something fleeing." Ibid., 774.

<sup>2</sup> "A drop of water touching the surface of a large body of water is instantly transformed into the body of water; we do not see the operation as buccal absorption, so to speak, of the drop of water by the body of water but rather as a spiritualizing and breaking down of the individuality of a single being which is dissolved in the great All from which it had issued." Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> It betrays strange tastes that Sartre exemplifies this disappearing, yet not completely vanished materiality with the breasts of an aging woman lying on her back.

<sup>4</sup> "Throw water on the ground; it *runs*. Throw a slimy substance; it draws itself out, it displays itself, it flattens itself out, it is *soft*; touch the slimy; it does not



misleads man. The moment when we think we master it, it turns out that in fact it masters us. I consider Védérine's interpretation most convincing. In her view, slime at Sartre receives certain political connotations as well: for the proletariat, it would mean the renouncement of its commitment to class struggle if its thinking becomes "slimy".<sup>1</sup>

It is of course not the mystery of water that Sartre rejects, he only insists on its pure form. The background of this phenomenological purism is that Sartre sharply opposes perception and imagination. The perception of the material world offers as much information about objects as it objectively lies in them. Sartre's imagination appears on the other side of the spheres of experience, where the productive force of imagination may unfold unhindered.

In fact, it is not easy to decide whether it is the imagination in Bachelard's or Sartre's sense that displays more authentically the elementary form of the encounter between man and matter. The answer to this question can by no means avoid the problem of the nature of subjectivity. Therefore I cannot offer anything better myself than to return once more to my childhood experiences: to one of the yearly applications of mud cover on the house. At the beginning of the 1960s, at least eighty percent of the houses in the small town where I grew up were still made of adobe. The younger boys could do themselves the smaller corrections preceding whitewashing during the summer vacation. The best part of it was making the mud. Its "technology" is very simple. The clayey earth must be covered with fine straw and chaff, and water sprayed over it. This mass must be left to ripe for a certain time, then it must be treaded until it becomes a fine mud, suitable for daubing. It is an indescribable joy to feel the nice warm mud below one's soles and feet, slipping in between the toes, yielding and resisting at the same time... Only a swine can feel this pleasure, when tumbling in the warm, juicy puddle after great summer showers, and grunting self-obliviously.

Peter Sloterdijk's *psychonaut* also experiences this kind of ambivalence in the course of elementary encounters with the matter. Sloterdijk exhibits this peculiar encounter in the familiar/queasy sense of sweetness which hinders most philosophers or intellectuals in daring to draw up the "ontology of intimacy". "Der Intellekt, der seine Kraft auf würdige Objekte ansatz, mag es in Regel scharf, nicht süß. Man bietet Helden keine Bonbons an."<sup>2</sup> (The reason why forceful intellects do not

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flee, it yields." Ibid., 775.

<sup>1</sup> Védérine, *Les grandes conceptions*, 123.

<sup>2</sup> "The intellect, who keeps his ability for worthy things, usually brings into work

usually like sweets lies in the subversive effect that a small piece of sweet – in the form of a sticky little ball – has on proud subjects. Sloterdijk cites a most illustrative description of the utterly common event of consuming bonbons from German psychologist W. Heubach's book, *Das bedingte Leben*. So let us see – as this chapter's conclusion – the micro-drama of bonbon consumption, in three scenes (exposition, the unfolding of the plot, and resolution:

“Die gespitzten Lippen greifen das Bonbon auf, entlassen es umständlich in den Mundraum, wo es schließlich von der Zunge mit erwartungsvollen Wendungen empfangen wird. Süße entwickelt sich, öffnet sich zu einem kleinen schmeichelnden O und hat bald den Mund in eine süße, klebrig-gierig pulsierende Kugel verwandelt, die, sich ausweitend, mehr und mehr vereinnahmt. Man wird selbst eingerundet und existiert schließlich nur mehr als eine feine, immer gespanntere Peripherie dieser Süßkugel; man schließt die Augen und implodiert endlich: Selber Kugelcharakteristik annehmend, bildet man einen Gegenstand mit der im Süßen rundgewordenen Welt.

Diesem »inneren« Geschehen (parallel) verläuft ein »äußeres« Das leere Bonbonpapier wird glatt und glatter gestrichen, bis es ein planer Viereck bildet, das um den Finger zu einer zylinderischen Röhre gedreht und schließlich zu immer kleineren Flächen gefaltet wird. Und wenn die Süßkugel ihre Spannung zu verlieren beginnt, verflacht und zerfällt, nimt das Papier zwischen den Finger immer unordentlichere, zunehmend verklumpte Formen an; und wenn die Süße nur mehr die feine zehrende Linie eines Entzugs bildet, ist es endlich zu einem kleinen, harten Kügelchen zusammenpreßt, das man gerne sehr weit wegschnippt.”<sup>1</sup>)

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sharpness, and not sweetness. Heroes are usually not offered bonbons”. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären I*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 90.

<sup>1</sup> “The rounded lips grab the bonbon, and allow it to slip slowly into the mouth, where it is awaited by the squelching tongue, ready for pleasure. The sweetness slowly diffuses in the mouth, which takes on the shape of a coaxing little O, and soon transforms the mouth itself into a sweet, eagerly and viscidly pulsating ball, which becomes enormous and eats up everything. The man himself becomes round, ending up as merely the tasty, tense periphery of this sweet ball. The eyes are closed, and then the implosion comes: the man, taking on himself the shape of a ball, becomes *one object* with the world that became round in this sweet taste.

This “inner” event is accompanied (in parallel) with an “outer” one: we flatten out the empty wrapping of the bonbon until it becomes a square, then we roll it with our fingers into a cylinder-like pipe, and finally fold it into smaller

The novelty of Sloterdijk's psychonautic phenomenology lies in fact in a particular mixture of daring and riskiness. The Karlsruhe philosopher invites us to a journey to an unknown (under)world where our usual maps are quite useless. Still: if we have the courage to start with our voluntary guide into this awesome depth, then at a certain moment during this journey certain strange sounds will resound in our ears, and the dim fog will slowly lift from the landscape appearing in front of our eyes; and curiosity will increasingly take the place of fear.

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The first volume of the *Spheres* trilogy bears the title *Bubbles* (*Blasen*). Bubbles represent the ancient forms of spherical being (*sphaira* originally meaning a ball, an orb, etc.). "Je tente donc, avec l'image de la bulle, de décrire et d'évoquer le lieu dans lequel ou près duquel les hommes sont d'abord, et spécifiquement, et véritablement. Nous ne sommes en effet jamais absolument »dans le monde«, réserve la formule problématique de Être et temps, mais normalement, dans une bulle d'espace teintée, en un point défini et accordé, un lieu qui possède sa propre extension et tension sphérique singulière."<sup>1</sup> The description of bubbles or shells emerges as the phenomenology of the microscopic elements which organize their lives as the basic molecules, as rounded forms of being of the most intimate relationships. Sloterdijk undertakes the task to tell a story to the pathologically mature intelligence (meaning: enmeshed in the world of conceptual rationality, that is: us) the traces of which are still there in collective memory.<sup>2</sup> He submerges over and over

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and smaller shapes. And when the sweet ball starts to lose its tenseness, when it flattens and falls apart, then the paper between the fingers takes on shapes increasingly more inordinate and rolled up; and when the sweet taste only lingers as the slipping line of deprivation, we cease the wrapping into a small, hard ball, and finally flip it far away." Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, *Das bedingte Leben. Entwurf zu einer Theorie der psychologischen Gegenständlichkeit*, (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987), 163. Quoted in: Sloterdijk, *Sphären I*, 92-93.

<sup>1</sup> "So by the image of the bubble I intend to describe and recall the places in which or close to which people are, in a specific and veritable sense. We are in fact never »in the world« in an absolute sense, to refer to the problematic of the Being and Time, but in the bubble of a tinted space, in a defined point, a place which has its own extension and particular spherical tension." Peter Sloterdijk, *Ni le soleil ni la mort – Jeu de piste sous forme de dialogue avec Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs*, (Paris: Pauvert, 2003), 167.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären I – Blasen*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag,

again into a disappearing story which informs about the world of an emerging and again vanishing Atlantis. The usual conceptual world seems almost completely inadequate for describing this pre-objective existence. As I have previously referred to it, Sloterdijk attempts to penetrate the inner world of these intimate spheres with help of the creation of a strongly metaphorical linguistic universe. The *womb* and the *amniotic fluid* are used as basic metaphors. The womb is a secure sonorous universe, in which the embryo's life is interwoven with the mother's life. The analogies of the embryo-mother relationship appear in other interphase elementary communities as well. For instance, the meeting of faces or regards when lovers look at each other, or in Judas's kiss; in the various mythical religious imaginations of blood transfusion or heart transplant; in the ancient psychology of patient–therapist–hypnotizer relationships, etc. Seen from the inner life of intimate spheres, modern psychology (and philosophy) is unmasked as an individualist appearance: it is a conception which regards Self-units as members voluntarily joining a liberal club, who organize their relationships on the basis of posterior, voluntary, and at any time annulable contracts. In Sloterdijk's view this kind of mentality betrays the basic neurosis of Western thinking: the dream of a subject who is able to observe, name, and possess everything without letting anything limit or impede him. This mentality leads us to a new spherical level, the historical metaphor of which, as we have seen, is a Self-Ball-shaped dream that melts everything into itself. Its radius appears as a thought thinking itself, a thought which runs to the most extreme peripheries and never gets tired, is equipped with tireless discursiveness, and no external thing can oppose it.

Sloterdijk often states that the prehistoric worlds that he so eagerly refers to (the so called oral cultures) were naturally not familiar with the sharp opposition between subject and object. The contemplative spirit only appears with literacy. “Selon une conception plus ancienne, l'homme est une creature qui prend part à tout ce qu'elle rencontre. On ne peut pas voir un arbre sans prendre soi-même la forme d'un arbre, ni rencontrer un jaguar sans sentir en soi même la forme du jaguar... Personne ne peut regarder ou toucher une femme sans s'écouler un peu dans sa direction.”<sup>1</sup> One can say, of course, that this is only the past. But

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2000), 63.

<sup>1</sup> “According to the most ancient conceptions, man is a creature who takes part in everything he meets. He cannot see a tree without taking on the shape of that tree himself. He cannot meet a jaguar without seeing himself as a jaguar, too. Nobody

Sloterdijk also claims that these intimate spheres have not disappeared without a trace, even if modern European philosophy did marginalize all elementary forms of knowledge. It is possible for all of us to understand the intimate warmth of the “archaeology of bubbles”, even if we have never been members of an intimate religious or non-religious community, have never taken part in the work of political, artistic, or educational groups, and have never been members of a good work- or sports community, etc. “...quiconque a donc jamais eu une expérience claire de l’animation et de la solidarité, n’a pas besoin de longs discours pour être converti au monde de pensée sphérologique.”<sup>1</sup>

Sloterdijk clearly follows Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s footsteps in his sharp criticism of academic philosophy and creation of a kind of nonconformist discourse. Still, Sloterdijk is, as they say, an able person. Although the criticism of media society is one of his permanent targets, he does not really mind being one of the permanent characters of German media society. (Together with Rüdiger Safranski, he was for a long time moderator of the philosophical talk-show *Glashaus*, broadcast more or less regularly on *3sat* channel.)

This contradiction is mostly dissolved by another peculiarity of his philosophizing, which can equally be regarded as his original invention. The following piece of information may be of much help in understanding it: Sloterdijk is also a member of the German society of homeopathic medicine. Perhaps this also explains the strangeness of the fact that the French translation of one of his grand essays bears not the original title (*Selbstversuch. Ein Gespräch mit Carlos Oliveira* [Self-attempt. A conversation with Carlos Oliveira]), but *Essai d’intoxication volontaire. Conversation avec Carlos Oliveira* [Essay on voluntary self-intoxication]). Although the problem of intentional self-intoxication appears already in Nietzsche’s cultural criticism, in Sloterdijk’s sense it receives a more emphatic role, as a general metaphor of the defiance of the diseases of modernity. The essence of homeopathic medicine is precisely that it cures the diseased by willingly intoxicating him with the weakened form of his original disease. So Sloterdijk is so keen on using media (naturally, while ironically and liberally overwriting its stale forms of expression) in order to criticize it *in a way not characteristic for*

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can watch or touch a woman without moving a little to the direction of femininity.” Sloterdijk, *Ni le soleil...*, 186.

<sup>1</sup> “Whoever has never gained a clear experience of life community and solidarity, needs no long explanation to be converted to the world of spherological thinking.” Sloterdijk, *Ni le soleil...*, 188.

*critical theory*. Bourdieu's observation is just as valid for him as it is for Heidegger: "A distinguished philosophical intellect cannot allow an ordinary contrasting of the distinguished and the ordinary".<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Sloterdijk's philosophy, at least to my mind, is less threatened by the danger of the so called "inner reading", which has caused so many troubles in Heidegger's case. In the latter's case inner reading means that the authentic knower of his texts comes from a small and considerably determined group of his followers and the initiated. These disciples and followers elevate their master's oeuvre into some kind of sacred space, making it immune to all criticism coming from the outside. Sloterdijk's works – as a result of their diffuse and purposely disintegrative nature – resist this kind of sacralization, and deal with criticism quite well, too.

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If we trace back the migration-phenomenology of the chimaeric being called a human, we will reach to the drama of birth. The way man comes to life is at the same time the key to the problem of nothingness.<sup>2</sup> An autobiographical secret unfolds with birth, namely that remembering our own birth always appears as some kind of "impossible thing".<sup>3</sup> The notion of remembrance has a double meaning here: it can always be perceived in the ambiguity of I remember/I do not remember. On the one hand, it is impossible for my own birth not to pertain to me. But exactly where the remembering of one's birth should appear, nothing else appears in fact than an all-encompassing I-do-not-know. However, this not-knowing is always intimate: this is the darkness that makes me possible. "Nur ich selbst komme als Inhaber dieses Nichtwissen (...) nur ich lebe im Kernschatten spurlosen Vergessens..."<sup>4</sup>

My not-knowing-my-birth is always much more, than my "running towards death" in a Heideggerian sense. Sloterdijk often quotes Cioran, who says: "Nous ne courons pas vers la mort, nous fuyons la catastrophe de la naissance, nous nous démenons, rescapés qui essaient

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Martin Heidegger politikai ontológiája* (Martin Heidegger's political ontology), (Budapest: József Műhely Kiadó, 1999), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoisumus – Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), 174.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Weltfremdheit*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993), 238.

<sup>4</sup> "It is only I who is the owner of this not-knowing (...) it is only I who lives in the shadowy core of this traceless not-knowing" Sloterdijk, *Weltfremdheit...* 238.

de l'oublier. La peur de la mort n'est que la projection dans l'avenir d'une peur Qui remonte à notre premier instant."<sup>1</sup> The ancient philosophical question – namely, “Why is there Being at all rather than Nothing?” – refers to an even more original question: “How did I come to be in this world, and where am I actually when I am in the world?”<sup>2</sup> In the lack of a better term, Sloterdijk names the method by which he hopes to return to the beginnings the idea of *radical autobiography*. According to this, my real existence pertains to me already in the original, “darkest points”, even if “I cannot reach it by my ability to recount”. Although we cannot turn the pages back to these initial points, we can be sure that “these pages are completely covered”.<sup>3</sup> Even if the linguistic competence of imperial metaphysics, prepared for daylight clarity and conceptual rationality, cannot account directly for the original moments, “The language-sun follows the mysterious levitation in the breeze of feelings which embraces everything it borders on, just as the water always follows the shape of the vase as well. Before words and sentences appear, the soul floats in a kind of colourful, fluid feeling, which, dissolvable in joy, touching, and friendliness, finds the trace of the nearness of things.”<sup>4</sup> In parallel with the creation and strengthening of referential language, the original “world plasma slowly stiffens”, and everything that becomes viscous and resists definability, is either forgotten, or simply induces disgust.<sup>5</sup> The reading of the first pages of the finite book (as one possible metaphor of individual life) needs a special technique. The eye cannot decipher the coded messages of a sunken Foetal-Atlantis; this needs the subtle gnosis of a *philosophical ear*. It was Gustav Hans Graber, creator

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<sup>1</sup> “We do not run towards death, but flee from and struggle against the catastrophe of being born; like those saved, who want to forget. The fear of death is nothing else than the projection into the future of the fear which starts with our first moment”. Peter Sloterdijk, *Világra jönni – szót kapni*. Pécs, 1999. 83. Originally: Emile Cioran, *De l' inconvenient d'être né*, In *Œuvres*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 1271.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Father Exner's (alias Heidegger's) reflection in the *Der Zauberbaum*. Peter Sloterdijk, *Der Zauberbaum*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Sloterdijk, *Világra jönni...*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Sloterdijk, *Világra jönni...*, 39-40. By the expression “(...) the soul floats in a (...) fluid feeling”, Sloterdijk clearly refers to the particular universe of the maternal womb, in which the proto-subject (the foetus) and its primordial environment (the amniotic fluid) cannot yet be grasped in a commonly known oppositional form of subject and object.

<sup>5</sup> Sloterdijk, *Világra jönni...*, 40. See my previous discussions on water and viscosity.

of modern prenatal psychology, who first called attention to the fact that man's psychological life begins in the Mediterranean wideness of the maternal womb – in a sort of continuous euphoria, from which the being to be born comes to life in a more or less radical way. “Zu den Merkmalen der fötalgnostischen Selbstentwicklung gehört – wie man heute zu wissen meint – ein tiefenmusikologischer Aspekt, der das tonisierte Stimmungswesen Mensch mitbildet, und ein plazentologische Dimension, die die ursprüngliche Hinordnung des Selbst auf eine Hülle, einen Genius, einen Begleitengel oder ein Proto-»Objekt« umfaßt.”<sup>1</sup> However, in the last two and a half thousand years of Western culture the philosophical ear seemed inadequate for epistemological “use”. From Plato to Hegel, Western epistemology lived under the rule of the metaphor of seeing. The foremost ambition of the all-seeing eye is to see everything, and it would even like to see itself as it sees everything.<sup>2</sup> The seeing subject sees the world from one of its corners, and this necessary spatial detachment or opposition also creates the opposition of subject and object. “... olympische Kontemplation und optische Theologie sind nur zwei Seiten derselben Münze.”<sup>3</sup> In opposition, the metaphor of hearing does not yield its intimate relationship to the world. No hearing man may believe to stand at the edge of hearing, says Sloterdijk. Hearing does not know any counter-object. When we hear, we float or submerge in an auditive space. The philosophy of hearing can be imagined *ab ovo* as the theory of being-within (*In-Sein*). At the same time, says Sloterdijk, one may just as rightfully speak of forgetting hearing, as of forgetting being. The modern man is, so to say, ontologically hearing impaired, because it relates to that what can be heard in the same way than to the objects in the environment he sees around: in an objectivating and diffuse way, and not in the way of being-within.

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<sup>1</sup> “Foetal-gnostic evolution, as we know it today, is equally characterized by a deep musicological aspect which creates the tonic tune-being, and a placentological dimension which means the Self's original assignment to a shell, and which embraces the foetus as a genius, a guardian angel, or a proto-»object«.” Sloterdijk, *Weltfremdheit*..., 288.

<sup>2</sup> Niklas Luhmann offers excellent additions to the system theoretical interpretation of these paradoxes in his “Tautologie und Paradoxie in der Selbstbeschreibung der modernen Gesellschaft”, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 3 (1987): 161-175.

<sup>3</sup> “Olympian contemplation and optical theology are but the two sides of the same coin”. Sloterdijk, *Weltfremdheit*..., 296.



The idea of onto-rhythmic ontology brings forth a double program: on the positive side, a trivial metaphysics, while on the negative side, the ontology of the discrete or grey nothing. Stoterdijk speaks about trivial metaphysics, because the rhythmic aspect that unfolds in it refers to man's ancient and mysterious existential relations: sleeping, ineptitude, drug culture, meditation, and especially music. Sloterdijk refers to Cioran again here, who claims: "Nous portons en nous toute la musique: elle gît dans les couches profondes de souvenir. Tout ce qui est musical est affaire de réminiscence. Du temps où nous n'avons pas de *nom*, nous avons dû tout entendre."<sup>1</sup>

The understanding of music as a proto-language is a quite old tradition in European musical philosophy, ranging at least from German Romanticism to Adorno. Wackenroder and Tieck employ the image of a flowing river for revealing the essence of musical language. "Keine menschliche Kunst vermag das Fließen eines mannifaltigen Stroms nach allen den tausend einzelnen glatten und bergigten, stürzenden und schäumenden Wellen mit Worten fürs Auge hinzuzeichnen, – die Sprache kann die Veränderungen nur dürftig zählen und nennen, nicht die aneinanderhängenden Verwandlungen der Tropfen uns sichtbar Vorbilden. Und ebenso es mit dem geheimnisvollen Strome in den Tiefen des menschlichen Gemütes beschaffen."<sup>2</sup>

Foetal hearing anticipates the world for a foetus as a totality of noises and sounds. From an embryo's "perspective", the outside world is always in-coming, because it ecstatically "pricks its ears" – so to say – from the depths of the womb. Secondly: we always hear backwards, even following the formation of the self – because the ear wants to undo the world as a totality of noises, and the man yearns back to that archaic euphony of a pre-worldly intimacy which turns memory into a euphoric

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<sup>1</sup> "We carry all the music in ourselves: it lies in the deep strata of remembering. All that is musical pertains to reminiscence. In the time when we still had no *name*, we had to have it all heard already." Emile Cioran, *Des larmes et des saints*. In *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard (Quarto), 1995), 297.

<sup>2</sup> "No human art can place the picture of an enormous river flowing with thousands of towering and smoothing, pouring and frothing waves in front of one's eyes in words – the language can only sparsely take all variations into account and name them, it cannot visibly draw the metamorphosis of inter-flowing water drops. And this is exactly the case with the mysterious flood flowing in the depths of the soul." Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, *Phantasien über die Kunst*, (Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 1973), 82. I owe thanks to Péter György Csobó for his help in clarifying musical philosophical issues.

enstasy.<sup>1</sup> According to Sloterdijk, a strange “dialectic contradiction” can be observed in being born. It is so because music always connects two kinds of aspirations: one direction leads out from a positive nothing, from worldlessness to the world arena, while the other direction leads back from overchargedness, from dissonance to worldlessness and intimacy. The music of coming to life is the *will for power* achieved as sound; but the music of yearning-back strives for the man to return to an acosmic, floating status, to a *non-will of power* derived from a wounded life.<sup>2</sup>

For myself, I consider that these two opposing directions refer to an antinomy rather than dialectics. Sloterdijk may be right, however, inasmuch as we are never completely in the world indeed while listening to music. It is either coming to life or escaping life that it accomplishes.

But why is it so that the existence which follows one’s birth, which is normally regarded as the exclusive terrain for human self-accomplishment, will finally always prove to be a deficient form? In his book *Eurotaismus*, Sloterdijk attempts to answer this question. First, he differentiates between being born and coming to life. Man’s physical birth is contrary to his coming to life. Coming to life is nothing else than falling out from the known to the unknown and the monstrous, in a threefold way. Firstly, by coming to life, the child leaves behind its first and only really familiar world, and begins its exodus to an unknown world with many dangers.<sup>3</sup> Secondly: the world he gets into is not originally fixed, but awaits mediation. The point of arrival is at the same time the point of departure, which, as a constructed place, is itself in movement. He, whose fate is to fall from the womb directly to the pulsating world of New York, Mexico City, or Cairo, is irrevocably determined to change the sonorous milieu of the womb for the monstrous music of the city. Thirdly: the world always comes too soon for a child. Man is a premature being, and it is only somewhat comforting that the world is always a little identical with the mother. It is exactly this littleness which makes the ontological difference.<sup>4</sup> Once we are old enough to know our mother on the outside, we also start to know the parallel “world”, which is not identical with her. Our whole life is about trying to know the difference between Mother and Non-Mother, says Sloterdijk. The story is simple in fact: a nameless Something, by its

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<sup>1</sup> Sloterdijk, *Weltfremdheit*..., 301.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Sloterdijk, *Eurotaismus*..., 174-175.

<sup>4</sup> Sloterdijk, *Eurotaismus*..., 176.

coming to life, is thrown into a situation which promises nothing certain or good. Except for the fact that its mother and other people promise this (still nameless) Something a good and definite world. Therefore for the newborn the world is identical with what the other people who inhabit it promise it to be. However, by this promise the question of *Nothing* gains new meanings.<sup>1</sup> So this Nothing either means that nothing is promised to this newcomer, and it yields nothing good for its own existence, too. Therefore it has a strong tendency to return to the womb, that is, death, the monistic Everything-Nothing, a tendency which forms the basis of all redemptive religions and teachings of Universal Unity. Or, it means that nothing comes true of Mothers' great promises, and all expectations prove futile. That is, the world as Non-Mother *accomplishes nothing*. This is exactly the meaning of sceptical, nihilist, or cynical ideas. The Nothing, in a precise formulation, is an incongruence lying between the newborns' expectations and the world's achievements.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, concludes Sloterdijk, man as a being is himself the Problem, because his existence and fate is the chronic premature existence itself.

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It is clear that the fascinating force of Sloterdijk's works lies primarily in the originality of his ideas and that peculiar linguistic creativity which neglects all comfortable (and quite boring) argumentative techniques characteristic for *Beamterphilosophie*. Nevertheless, it should be asked to what extent Sloterdijk's work can still be regarded as philosophy. My short answer: the attempt to connect philosophy and poetry is not unequalled in German culture. True, Sloterdijk only sporadically refers to Novalis, but the similarity of their thinking is conspicuous. This kinship can best be grasped in the interpretation of the trauma of birth. The complementary events of birth and death appear as primary subjects in several of Novalis's works. As we have seen earlier: in his *The Novices of Sais*, Novalis raises the possibility of an education in which sensibility and intellect perceived as inner perception are not merely built upon each other, but appear as a live, organic "total knowledge". "Dadurch gewinnen beide Wahrnehmungen: die Außenwelt wird durchsichtig, und die Innenwelt mannigfaltig und bedeutungsvoll, und so befinden sich der Mensch in

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<sup>1</sup> Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoisimus...*, 177.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

einem innig lebendigen Zustande zwischen zwei Welten in der vollkommensten Freiheit und dem freudigsten Machtgefühl.”<sup>1</sup> Nature is directly connected with our senses “grown out” of our body, as these are also in a way part of nature. However, empirical natural sciences start in the wrong direction from sensory experiences, says Novalis, because they seem to find the reason of nature in mechanical repetition and the exploration of rules, and therefore stop half-way. It were only the poets who understood or felt the essence of nature, because “Ihnen allein bleibt die Seele derselben nicht fremd (...) Für sie hat die Natur alle Abwechslungen eines unendlichen Gemüts, und mehr als der geistvollste, lebendigste Mensch überrascht, sie durch sinnreiche Wendungen und Einfälle, Begegnungen...”<sup>2</sup> Although originally disposing of the same language as the natural scientist, the poet has a different way of looking at nature. The natural scientist explains the wind by external reasons, “...aber ist er dem einsamen, sehnsuchtsvollen Herzen nicht mehr, wenn er vorübersaust, von geliebten Gegenden herweht und mit tausend dunkeln, wehmütigen Lauten den stillen Schmerz in einem tirfen melodischen Seufzer der ganzen Natur aufzulösen scheint?”<sup>3</sup> It is not primarily the cold mind and reason, but disposition (*Gemüt*) and perception (*Empfindung*), with help of which man knows the world. Therefore the thinking man acts correctly when trying to place himself back into the origins of his existence. And this origin cannot be found elsewhere than in the sonorous milieu of the maternal womb. At the beginning of beginnings birth and wisdom are one, and this ancient knowledge is mediated by feminine receptivity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Both kinds of perception are enriched by this: the outer world becomes transparent, and the inner world manifold, filled with meaning, and thus the man finds himself in a devotedly living state between two worlds, in the most perfect freedom and the joyful experience of his power.” Novalis, *Dichtungen...*, 180-181.

<sup>2</sup> “It is only to them that nature’s soul did not remain alien (...) For them, nature offers all the variety of an eternal soul, and presents them with its witty twists and ideas, more than the wittiest or liveliest of men (...)”. Novalis, *Dichtungen...*, 183.

<sup>3</sup> “...but does it [the wind] not mean much more for a heart filled with lonesome desire, when it comes from beloved lands and wuthers into his ears, and its thousand dark, painful sounds dissolve the quiet heart into nature’s deep, melodic sobbing?” Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Astrid Meyer-Schubert, *Mutterschoßsehnsucht und Geburtsverweigerung – Zu Schellings früher Philosophie und dem frühromantischen Salondenkens*. (Wien:

The foetus adapts the function of the female body for its entire life, and the “knowledge” of its birth unfolds as a particular consciousness from the depths of the unconscious. It is exactly this primary form of movement of the unconscious that Novalis regards as primary knowledge. “Wenn er nun ganz in die Beschauung dieser Uerscheinung versinkt, so entfaltet sich vor ihm in neu entstehenden Zeiten und Räumen, wie ein unermessliches Schauspiel, die Erzeugungsgeschichte der Natur, und jeder feste Punkt, der sich in der unendlichen Flüssigkeit ansetzt, wird ihm eine neue Offenbarung des Genius der Liebe, ein neues Band des Du und des Ich. Die sorgfältige Beschreibung dieser innern Weltgeschichte ist die wahre Theorie der Natur...”<sup>1</sup> But where is the language which is still able to sound this fossil knowledge? The people of the modern age are no longer able to hear “(...) the lullaby of the mother-water, and do not enjoy the amazing play of its endless waves”.<sup>2</sup> Novalis’s vision unveils the ancient language of an ancient people, whose miraculous tune was still capable of penetrating the secrets of nature.

Sloterdijk in fact – similarly to the “novices of Sais” – also makes an attempt to revive this ruined language. This is the reason of the following formulation in his book *Zur Welt kommen – Zur Sprache kommen* (Coming to world – Coming to speech): “The essence of language, ladies and gentlemen, is not limited to transmitting national commitments and prejudices. The language which articulates the cries interchanged by those who came to life also integrates the breath of liberation.”<sup>3</sup>

Translated by Emese G. Czintos

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Passage Verlag, 1992), 188-189. See also Novalis’s thoughts on foetal-gnostic harmony in note 22.

<sup>1</sup> “If the man contemplates exclusively this ancient phenomenon, then an immeasurable drama will unfold for him in newly created ages and places, the history of Nature’s conception; that fixed point, which is created in the endless fluid, the new revelation of the genius of love, the new bond of You and I. The careful description of this inner world history is the real theory of nature.” Novalis, *Dichtungen...*, 185.

<sup>2</sup> Novalis, *Dichtungen...*, 187.

<sup>3</sup> Sloterdijk, *Világgra jönni...*, 128.