CHAPTER 1

Nature and Feeling

1.1 Inquiring into the Subject/The Inquiring Subject

The political interpretation of the Romantic Self proposed in this book is based on her deposition from the throne that pictured her as queen of nature. This is not a loss, though: on the contrary, throughout these pages we will see that this allows us to think of the human/nature relationship more as harmony than as a struggle. For the Romantics, the human being is part of nature, and not opposed to it, and her categories or will cannot be imposed on the natural realm. Their relationship is an interaction.

The Romantic gnoseology gains political relevance, then. The Romantics' critique of the subject–object dualism or of the divergence between ideal and real goes hand in hand with their concept of a fragile and dependent subjectivity. Indeed, in this chapter I will show that consistent with the importance given to the faculty of feeling and to love, the Romantics imagine their ontology as based on relationships (more than identity) and, as a consequence, the self is entangled in a mesh of reciprocal dependencies, excluding – as will be shown in the next chapter – the possibility of labelling her as 'sovereign'.

This political perspective on the Romantic philosophy of knowledge starts with the idea of 'experiment', which for the Romantics is a genetic method through which the subject–object dualism is undermined. It might be surprising for everyone looking at German Romanticism as a possible source for an environmental approach to nature to see how much the Romantics praised the idea of philosophy as an experiment. In environmental philosophy, indeed, the modern experimental method is frequently characterised as a form of domination of nature by scientists.[1] In

[1] In the words of Carolyn Merchant, Bacon's philosophy sought to dissect nature 'to force it to reveal its secrets' (2020: 18). Although, as William Leiss points out, human mastery over nature is more generally part of the Judeo-Christian heritage (2023: 25–44), it is in Bacon's philosophy and experimental method that this attitude finds its clearest articulation. For Bacon, scientific knowledge

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experiments, Francis Bacon writes, nature is 'restrained and vexed' as it is 'forced out of its own condition by human action, and squeezed and moulded' (1863: 34). In this way, experiments promise to help humanity regain 'the sovereignty and power (for whensoever he [man] shall be able to call the creatures by their true names he shall again command them) which he had in his first state of creation' (34).[2]

This interpretation of the experimental method as a form of domination was also widespread in late eighteenth-century philosophy.[3] Kant exalted the experimental method as the instrument of a veritable revolution whereby the understanding of nature would move confidently along the path of science. In the introduction to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bacon, Torricelli, and Galileo are praised precisely for the methodological innovation made possible by the experimental method, based on the idea that 'reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design' (Bxiii / *CpR* 109). This rational design (the planning of the experiment) is what makes it possible to discover the laws of nature. Through the experimental method, Kant writes, scientists come to understand nature, insofar as it accords with their own reason.

Kant's Copernican Revolution relied on the same worldview. In the words of the first *Critique*, 'objects must conform to our knowledge' (Bxvi / *CpR* 110). Applied to metaphysics, this also yielded Kant's definition of the *limits* of knowledge and objectivity. Reason can know only what it produces according to its own schema, and the subject–object relationship implied by Kant's understanding of the experimental method precludes reason being affected by the constant transformations of nature. Subjectivity is not touched by those mutations. Kant entrusts the philosopher with a viewpoint external to what is being investigated and, taking mechanism as its model, his idea of science reduces objects to transparent

begins with information about forms (or natures), firstly experienced through the senses, and secondly elaborated through inductive reasoning aimed at discovering general laws, with experiments acting as a guide. Indeed, these are designed to separate some specific qualities (that we want to understand) of a phenomenon from all its other characteristics – for this, Bacon's inductive method is a process of exclusion. For him, experiments allow us to gather information (derived by 'artifice') about the natural world and are meant 'to vet the information of the senses, and to counteract the distortions and wishful thinking which men unwittingly made in striving to discover the principles of nature' (Martin, 1992: 151). As Michel Malherbe points out, Bacon's idea of experimental science has little to do with today's form of science (1996: 75). See also Gaukroger (2001: 132–165).

[2] Joseph Glanvill, a disciple of Bacon, argued in his *Plus Ultra* (1668) that this scientific programme made the human being the emperor ruling over inferior creatures; it was this, according to Merchant, that contributed to our treatment of nature as an object to be controlled, dissected, and exploited (2020: 189).

[3] See Steigerwald (2019).

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geometric figures devoid of qualities, evolutions, and stochastic factors. The first *Critique* accentuates the idea that experiments must be designed based on necessary and rational laws; and this means, in the words of Nobel Laureate Ilya Prigogine and philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers, that it 'silences' nature (1979: 101). No dialogue between humans and nature seems possible within this view. Kant's Copernican Revolution places the subject at the centre of knowledge, and as she applies her categories to nature, it is muted.

In fact, this perspective silences not only nature but also the human being. If the subject is at the centre of knowledge – the sun around which the planets revolve – then the human being in her materiality and individuality remains opaque precisely because she is transformed into a transcendental subject, the guardian of immutable laws. She becomes a mathematical, immaterial point of observation.[4] The essence of the subject is external to the becoming of nature, just as the subject is not conditioned by history, social transformations, or her own physical condition. She is a sovereign outside Becoming, reduced to a static entity, deprived of any unpredictable and mutable character, and from this position she subjugates nature.

It is thus surprising that the German Romantic philosophers, who did not celebrate the human domination of nature, nonetheless paid particular attention to the potential of the experimental method. Friedrich Schlegel, in his Jena Lectures of 1800–1801, even claimed that 'philosophy is an experiment' (KFSA XII: 3). But this view, influenced by Schelling, does not correspond to the experimental method hailed by Kant. In his early works on natural philosophy (*First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* and *Introduction to His Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, both 1799), Schelling writes that the experiment is the only coherent means of knowing nature as active and changing. As he conceives of them, experiments provide the necessary conditions for a clear presentation of the observed objects' transformations. They are not impositions on or disruptions of nature by the subject. Rather, an experiment is an act – characterised by Jelscha Schmid (2018) and Daniel Whistler (2013: 119) as 'performative' – in which nature presents its own activity.[5] It does not serve to obtain a result that can later be analysed and possibly reduced to mathematics,

[4] Prigogine and Stengers (1979: 60). For Laplace, a description is the more objective the more it eliminates the observer (Prigogine and Stengers, 1979: 60).

[5] Schmid's (2018) article on this aspect is based on the crucial distinction between presentation and representation.

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or to explain *what* nature *is*, but rather to show *how* it has *become* what it is.

Both Schelling and Schlegel see in the experiment the instrument of a 'genetic' method suitable for understanding the inexhaustible creativity of nature and analogous to their own approach to philosophy (KFSA XII: 49).[6] Contrary to mechanistic philosophy, the Romantics saw experiments as shedding light on Becoming, and defined their own philosophy as dynamic (KFSA XVIII: 331, n. 173).[7] Thus, Schlegel writes in *Athenaeum* (1798) – the journal he founded with his brother August Wilhelm – that mechanism is characteristic of elementary thinking, and is incapable of illuminating the forces underlying nature (KFSA II: 232, n. 366 / *Fragments* 221; KFSA II: 243, n. 412 / *Fragments* 229).[8]

The genetic method had previously been applied to mathematical entities (by Kant but also by Euclid), whereby the experiment consists in the construction of a geometric figure.[9] When applied in philosophy – so Schlegel argues – this method unveils the genesis of the analysed object.[10] And if in geometry form and matter coincide, so that geometric constructions can be made a priori, independently of experience, then the objects of philosophy (nature, history, etc.) can be known only a posteriori. As

[6] Of the many recurrences of the idea of the genetic method in Schlegel's texts, I shall quote only the title of one of his lectures on transcendental philosophy, 'Genetic Presentation of the Whole' (KFSA XII: 49). That method, however, is not an invention of the Romantic era but rather one that draws on considerations of the 'genetic definition' already encountered in early modern philosophy. For classical German philosophy, Lambert's interpretation of Euclid was important in this regard: 'Lambert also holds up Euclid's geometric-constructive method as a model for all other sciences as an exact method of demonstration, since construction alone, as the genesis of the opposite state, is a guarantee that the object is also possible, and that means for it . . . [that] it really [*wirklich*] is' (Ende, 1973: 19).

[7] In the Early German Romantic philosophers' view, mechanism blinds us to the workings of both nature and consciousness; see Part II. The opposition between mechanical and dynamic philosophy is well summarised by Franz von Baader in a short introduction to a collection of his writings on natural philosophy: *Preliminary Remarks: Contributions to Dynamic Philosophy as Opposed to Mechanical Philosophy* (1809) (BSW I: 383–387).

[8] Schlegel writes again between 1805 and 1806 (in his *Appendix on Logic*, KFSA XIII: 371) that mechanistic science prevents us from thinking the Spirit and the infinite. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Schlegel anticipated Hegel's finite–infinite dialectic already in his *Transcendental Philosophy* lectures (KFSA XII: 26–27) by arguing that finite determinations and the infinite are not opposed: if the infinite is posited absolutely, then it will be a mere determined given.

[9] In his notes, Schlegel writes that the experimental method is more akin to mathematics than to physics (KFSA XVIII: 300, n. 1268). For the affinity with what Kant writes about construction in mathematics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, see Schmid (2018). For a history of the role of construction and genetic definitions in the sciences, see Ende (1973).

[10] In fact, Schlegel writes that the correct philosophical method is the same as that of physics (experimentation) or mathematics (construction) (KFSA XII: 3). In Schelling's early philosophy, construction (*Konstruktion*) consists in understanding a whole through its origin, showing that the whole is nothing other than the necessary self-development of that origin (Wild, 1968: 51).

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envisioned by the Romantics, the philosophical experiment consists in focusing on a specific phenomenon whose origin and activity are revealed to us. Recall Schlegel's declaration: '*Philosophy is an experiment*, and therefore everyone who wishes to philosophize must begin again and again from the beginning' (KFSA XII: 3). In the process, the infinite creativity of the Absolute and of nature are also revealed (KFSA XVIII: 155, n. 380). The Romantic experiment is then not a dissection of nature: it neither silences nature nor seeks to achieve human sovereignty and power over it. Rather, it is a collaboration between subject and object that makes it possible to perceive the emergence of a process.[11] Generalising what Daniel Whistler (2013) writes about Schelling, the construction that takes place in the course of the Romantic experiment is not a framework that the philosopher imposes on reality but rather a process that reality itself undertakes (123). And that is not all. As Schlegel wrote in 1798, 'the essence of the logical experiment consists in the comparison of objects with the world; it is still not enough to make them appear' (KFSA XVIII: 218, n. 288).[12] Indeed, the Romantic experiment goes beyond the observed process, relating it to everything from which it was initially isolated, gradually leading to a broader view, and ultimately revealing the connections between all natural processes.[13] The experiment is then the creation (*Hervorbringen*) of the whole, not just of a single object or concept (KFSA XII: 18).

But true understanding of the phenomenon requires looking at different aspects and repeating experiments under different conditions, with different subjects and objects. The experiment consists in their constantly renewed interaction.[14] To know a phenomenon, it is not sufficient to describe the laws it follows, its reasons and causes: it must be presented (*dargestellt*) because it is only 'through presentation [*Darstellung*] that what

[11] As Novalis writes: 'Experiments do not belong directly to idealism (to a priori invention [*Erfinden*]), but indirectly. Ideas do not help experiments directly, but are indispensable as indirect aids. This is a new view of the a priori–a posteriori relation' (HKA III: 385, n. 641). See also Schlegel (KFSA XII: 16). Gabriel Trop traces Novalis' conception of experiments to Hemsterhuis (2022: 49). While this interpretation is certainly warranted (also by Novalis' juxtaposition of the experiment and the organ, a crucial concept in Hemsterhuis' works; see HKA III: 391, n. 657), I consider Schelling's importance to be more decisive regarding this aspect. As Jürgen Daiber points out, the importance of the experiment in Novalis' philosophy also follows from his scientific studies (1999: esp. 10–15).

[12] See also KFSA XVIII: 148, n. 301.

[13] Novalis speaks of the experiment as an expansion (*Erweiterung*) of the object (HKA III: 353, n. 507). For Schlegel, even the reconstruction of the historical phases of literature is an experiment (KFSA XVIII: 141, n. 226).

[14] This leads to the idea that philosophy must be written in fragments (recomposed by the reader each time in a different order) or in systems that can never be considered final and completed: philosophy, according to Schlegel, is 'an infinite progression of systems' (KFSA XII: 10). See also KFSA II: 173, n. 53 / *Fragments* 167.

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happens in us will have to happen in others' (KFSA XII: 102). Only through the recreation of the subject–object dialogue is comprehension of the phenomenon possible.

Beside Schelling, there is another progenitor of the Romantic idea of experiments: Fichte. In 1798, Schlegel wrote that '[Fichte's] *Doctrine of Science* is an experiment' (KFSA XVIII: 135, n. 160).[15] Despite the growing distance between the Romantics and Fichte,[16] his idea that philosophy should present the development of consciousness, and that the listener or reader must reproduce in their own consciousness what Fichte describes in his lectures or publications, is a legacy appropriated by Romanticism but underestimated in the scholarly literature today.[17] Fichte's many rewritings of the *Doctrine of Science* – like the constant reproduction of an experiment[18] – resonate in Romanticism, as does the importance Fichte placed on a genetic 'construction' of philosophy (GA I/3: 254).[19] Nonetheless, the differences are undeniable. Fichte's idealism experiments with consciousness and subjectivity; Romanticism applies the experimental method also to nature (i.e. the object). So just as in the *Doctrine of Science*, the first step necessary towards revealing the emergence of our consciousness is the reproduction of an original identity of subject and object (i.e. the intellectual intuition),[20] and just as for Schelling the

[15] See also KFSA XVIII: 251, n. 682 and (for Novalis) HKA III: 391, n. 657.

[16] Many interpreters of Romantic philosophy have focused on the relationship between Fichte and Novalis. Some of them (Frank, 1997; Loheide, 2000) concentrate on Novalis' early collection of fragments, *Fichte Studies*, emphasising the importance of the *Doctrine of Science* for the Romantic philosopher; others (Behler, 1992; Nassar, 2014a; Stone, 2018) concentrate more on Novalis' late works, where Fichte's influence is weaker. Fichte's influence on Friedrich Schlegel does receive attention in some prominent studies (Frank, 1996b; Frischmann, 2005; Millán-Zaibert, 2007: esp. 72–94; Zovko, 2010: 65–74).

[17] In the *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Doctrine of Science* (1797), Fichte writes: 'Pay attention to yourself: turn your gaze away from everything that surrounds you and turn it inward; this is the first demand that philosophy makes of those who begin to devote themselves to it. You speak of nothing outside yourself, but only of yourself' (GA I/4: 186). As Fichte writes in a letter to Reinhold dated 2 July 1795: 'My words are only supposed to guide the reader in such a way that the desired intuition is formed within him' (GA III/2: 344 / Fichte, 1988b: 398). See also Fichte (1994: 11). Regarding philosophy as presentation of the development of consciousness, refer to what he writes in his *Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Science* (GA I/2: 404, 408).

[18] Fichte describes some passages of the *Wissenschaftslehre* not only as an experiment (if we consider only the *Grundlage*: GAI/2: 269, 270, 353, 420) but rather as an attempt, a *Versuch*, whose methodological description in *Concerning the Concept of the Doctrine of Science* (esp. GA I/2: 143) is particularly similar to the concept of the 'experiment' used by Schelling and the Romantics as a way of enabling the construction, genetically speaking, of what is being investigated. Breazeale (2002: 25) also speaks of the Fichtean attempts in terms of experiments.

[19] 'The *Wissenschaftslehre* does not say, "Understand what you are told," but rather, "Understand yourself. Construct yourself, so to speak, and see how it works"' (GA I/3: 254).

[20] In a letter to Schelling dated 15 November 1800, Fichte writes: 'The science that, through subtle abstraction, makes nature its sole object must, of course, posit nature as absolute and allow it to

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experiment has to overcome the representation–object duality,[21] so too must the experiment begin by overcoming the subject–object dualism, according to the Romantics.[22] This is possible only through feeling, the topic to which we now turn.

1.2 Knowing and Feeling: Beyond Dualisms

Thinking of philosophy as an experiment implied, for the Romantics, accepting that the human being does not dominate nature but is instead constantly and inevitably influenced by it. The Romantic refusal of the modern idea of experimentation is not an expression of irrationalism – or a critique of technology.[23] Rather, it promotes a comprehension in which the object is not crystallised before the subject's gaze. Subject and object are fruits of the same transformations, so that the subject is not isolated in an abstract dimension but connected to the object of study – influenced by it and affected by the conditions in which both she and the object find themselves.

This idea that subject and object interact subverts the rationalist epistemological framework. The deep relationship between the knower and the known is manifested first and foremost in feeling (*Gefühl*). Novalis writes in his *General Brouillon* that to carry out experiments, we must have a feeling for nature (HKA III: 256, n. 89 / *AB* 14). Only through this can we overcome the dualism of the critical philosophy.

The possibility that knowledge might be the result not (only) of the subsumption of matter by the forms of intuition and the intellect preoccupied all the Romantics. Although feeling is central to Romanticism's approach to epistemology, it has often been forgotten by scholars in recent years, who have given preference instead to other cognitive faculties: the productive imagination[24] and, above all, (intellectual or aesthetic) intuition.[25] Although their importance cannot be disputed, they have obscured the role of feeling,

construct itself through a fiction. This is precisely because it abstracts from the intellect. Similarly, transcendental philosophy lets consciousness construct itself *through a fiction*' (GA III/4: 360–361).

[21] Schmid (2018: 12).

[22] This is suggested by some of Novalis' notes on Friedrich Murhard's *System of the Elements from the General Theory of Magnitudes* (*System der Elemente der allgemeinen Größenlehre*, HKA III: 122–123).

[23] In contrast to Löwy and Sayre (2001: 20).

[24] On the imagination in Romanticism, see Gentry and Pollok (2019).

[25] On intellectual intuition, see especially Nassar, who regards it as the Romantics' way out of transcendental idealism (2014a: 7). On aesthetic intuition, see especially Stone, who also does suggest the possibility of a role for feeling (2018: 22, 96–97). On the possibility of only indirect knowledge and representation of infinity (through allegories, fragments, etc.), see Seyhan (1992).

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a cornerstone of Romantic philosophy.[26] Indeed, feeling manifests the primordial connection between subject and object and is the foundation of the relational idea of the subject. This connection overcomes the chasm between thought and its object, a chasm so deep in Kant's transcendental philosophy that it makes the coexistence of freedom and nature impossible and prevents the attribution of any content to the moral law – problems the Romantics confronted again and again in their works.

On this, Schleiermacher's perspective was central. From his earliest studies – even before he met Friedrich Schlegel and the other members of the Jena Romantics – Schleiermacher looked to Spinoza and Leibniz for answers to problems he found unresolved in Kant's philosophy. Studying Leibniz's theory of knowledge in 1797–1798, he found that 'Leibniz wants to overcome the opposition between the "I" and the "Not-I", for this, *agere* and *pati* are different only in degree' (KGA I/2: 85, n. 36). Thanks to Spinoza (whom he most probably read through the lens of Jacobi's interpretation; see Lamm, 1994a), Schleiermacher discovered the possibility of a knowledge that does not oppose a priori forms to matter.[27] This knowledge, which has similarities with Spinoza's *scientia intuitiva* and *amor dei intellectualis*, consists for Schleiermacher in feeling. In his notes from 1793 to 1794, published under the title *Spinozism* (*Spinozismus*), *Gefühl* is a feeling of Being that cannot be fully understood through concepts (KGA I/1: 334–335). It does not consist in the perception of an opposition between ideal and real (subject and object) but rather in the immersion of the self in a dimension that both penetrates and surpasses it, and in which the gap between idealism and realism is closed. The common ground of subject and object excludes all those conceptual opposites, and knowledge is not the imposition of categories proper to the knowing I on objects.

A few years later, in August 1797, Schleiermacher met Friedrich Schlegel, with whom he also shared a flat in Berlin for a few months, and thus became involved in the philosophical exchange of the Romantic

[26] An important exception to the silence on this specific topic is to be found in some of the writings of Manfred Frank, who emphasises the crucial role of feeling in Schleiermacher's *Dialectic* (KGA II/10.1 and 2) and *Doctrine of Faith* (*Glaubenslehre*, KGA I/13.1 and 2). But its relevance for Schleiermacher is evident in much earlier works.

[27] Jacobi had an incredible influence on German Romanticism, in particular in its aspiration to overcome the idealist–realist divide (exemplified by the contrast between Spinoza and Fichte); see Hampton (2023) who nevertheless does not contemplate Jacobi's impact on Schleiermacher, which influence is hinted at by Arndt (2004), Beiser (2012: 239–240), and Forster (2012: 80–83). Bollacher (1994), on the contrary, highlights the importance of Herder for the Romantic reception of Spinoza. The difference between these two interpretations is at the centre of Heinz (2004). On Jacobi's interpretation of Spinoza, see Sandkaulen (2019, 2023) and Bauer (1989).

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circle. The importance of feeling returns in *On Religion* (1799), where Schleiermacher's earlier studies of Spinoza and Leibniz (as well as Schelling's early work on natural philosophy) are also clearly echoed.[28] Here he explores an epistemology that reassesses the subject–object relationship Kant and Fichte saw as an opposition. Although these two names are never explicitly mentioned, it is hard to ignore the proximity of Fichte's and Kant's philosophy to the metaphysics and morals that Schleiermacher vehemently dismisses as limited understandings of human beings and nature.[29]

In *On Religion*, it becomes clear that, for Schleiermacher, Kant's Copernican Revolution and the *Doctrine of Science* place the human being at the centre of the entire universe (KGA I/2: 211 / *On Religion* 23), and that, for this reason, their metaphysics examine nature only in terms of what it can be *for us* (212 / 23). Kant's transcendental deduction of categories put metaphysics on the right path for becoming a science, but this reduced all speculation to a 'stiff and barren skeleton' (212 / 23). The human/universe opposition, according to Schleiermacher, prevents us from understanding the universe (212 / 23). A first step towards a better understanding of the natural world was taken by the science of the time, well articulated and integrated into Schelling's *Philosophy of Nature*: nature, he writes, is 'an eternally

[28] In the first edition of the text, Schleiermacher tends to equate intuition and feeling, whereas in the second edition, he leaves room for feeling alone.

[29] In contrast to the other members, however, this new philosophical path did not imply a rapprochement with Fichte's philosophy – from which the other representatives of the *Early German Romanticism* would also soon break away anyway. Instead of the *Doctrine of Science* and the 'Fichtizing' (as Novalis and Schlegel labelled their philosophical discussions), Schleiermacher preferred to dwell on philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Schelling, who enabled him to integrate realism into idealism. Nevertheless, as early as 1793 Schleiermacher read Fichte's *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation* (1792), and when he became acquainted with Schlegel, he was still reading Fichte (in a 1797 letter to F. I. Niethammer, Schlegel calls Schleiermacher 'a preacher who studies Fichte', KFSA XXIV: 12). Nevertheless, Schleiermacher never had, in the words of Günter Meckenstock, a *Fichte-experience* (*Fichte-Erlebnis*; Meckenstock, 2022: 255). Although references to Fichte's philosophy are everywhere in Schleiermacher's works, they are always negative, as a constant point of contrast to his own thought. It should also be remembered that when Fichte moved to Berlin in 1799, he met Schleiermacher personally, but the two did not get along. When they taught at the University of Berlin, they often expressed their mutual opposition in public lectures. Therefore, I do not fully agree with Emanuel Hirsch when he claims that Fichte played a decisive role in Schleiermacher's background (1984: 252), nor do I agree with Eilert Herms' judgement that Fichte had a decidedly superficial influence (1974: 252). Dilthey, on the other hand, seems to me to have understood the relation between Fichte and Schleiermacher's philosophy (1870: 335–336, 346–347). According to him, Schleiermacher sought to unite Fichte's transcendental philosophy with Spinozist religious realism. From my point of view, however, it would be more correct to speak of an interaction (rather than a union), in which even some basic tenets of Fichte's philosophy (such as the absolute autonomy of the I or his concept of freedom) are not accepted.

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prolonged play of opposing forces [*ewig fortgeseztes Spiel entgegengesezter Kräfte*]' (191 / 5).[30]

This new comprehension of nature also concerns our idea of humankind (192 / 5). For Schleiermacher, every 'human soul' is indeed the result of two opposing impulses, parallel to the expansive and attractive forces found in nature: on the one hand, the tendency to absorb everything around us into ourselves, and on the other, the aspiration to expand, to penetrate everything (191 / 5). But we can never grasp the universe if we persist in our attempt to master (*bezwingen*) nature to the self (224 / 34). The metaphysics centred on the I is limited, and this weakness is by Schleiermacher's lights reflected in the moral philosophy deduced from it. From the practical perspective too, the subject and its categories are at the centre. The realm of freedom, understood as strictly human freedom, wants to extend infinitely, subjugating everything – 'morality proceeds from the consciousness of freedom; it wishes to extend freedom's realm to infinity and to make everything subservient to it' (212 / 23). Thus everything that cannot aspire to the autonomy of the forms of the intellect and reason is condemned as 'impure and self-seeking' (237 / 46). This goes not only for nature but also for any human element that does not derive exclusively from the pure forms of these faculties, leading to an 'awe [*Ehrfurcht*]' of the moral law that derives from such forms (237 / 46). And so compassion, gratitude, love, and affection are not considered moral because they depend on things external to the pure self.[31]

The specific knowledge that makes it possible to overcome the separation between human beings and nature, between the ideal and the real, is, according to Schleiermacher, religion, which he conceived in such a distinctly Spinozist way as to be accused of atheism.[32] And indeed, Schleiermacher's religion is not the worship of a transcendent entity but envisions nature as a dynamic infinity in which forces give life to the whole and to its members, including the human being. Religion understands the human being within this play of natural forces (212 / 23–24)[33] without,

[30] This aspect is not discussed in Dole (2010).

[31] In Schleiermacher, 'the self that emerges is . . . an inextricable part of the nexus of the natural world' (Thandeka, 1995: 13). Here, Thandeka is referring to Schleiermacher's *Dialectic*, but the same words could be used to describe the relationship between the I and nature in *On Religion*.

[32] See the letter written by Friedrich Samuel Gottfried Sack to Schleiermacher sometime between 1800 and 1801, in which Schleiermacher's *On Religion* is described as an 'apology of pantheism' (KGA V/5: 4); but also Eberhard's comment on the news of Schleiermacher's professorship at the University of Halle, reported in these words by G. L. Spalding to Schleiermacher himself in a letter of 27 July 1804: 'this is how far things have come: an open atheist is called to Halle as a theologian and preacher' (KGA V/7: 407). On the importance of Spinoza in *On Religion*, see Lamm (1994b: 57–94).

[33] In Berner's beautiful words, 'in the religious experience . . . Schleiermacher finds the original force that allows to structure the world, before the consciousness poses the world' (2017: 159).

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however, reducing her to a possible object of study for the natural sciences, which might describe her empirical anatomy, physiology, or psychology. Certainly she is part of nature, but nature is something infinite and living, in communion with which she can become 'one with the infinite in the midst of the finite and . . . be eternal in a moment' (247 / 54). The way to this eternity in finitude is indicated by religion, which sees the Infinite and the Universe within human beings (211–212 / 23). If the metaphysics criticised by Schleiermacher put the subject on a pedestal from which she gazes down at nature, the religion he envisages teaches human beings their limitations, insofar as they are but a small part of the immeasurable (*Unermeßlichen*, 212 / 23), and the infinite, uninterrupted activity of the universe (214 / 25). Schleiermacher's critique of metaphysics, laid out in *On Religion*, does not call for the elimination of metaphysics tout court but for its reformulation.[34]

It is not simply a matter of deciding whether Romanticism is a kind of idealism or realism.[35] What Romanticism proposes is a different relationship between the subject and the object. The Romantics reject the Kantian idea of knowledge as the result of the intersection between intellectual forms and contents coming from outside the 'I think'[36] – a logic that finally excludes human beings from nature.

Locating humankind within nature, as we read in Schleiermacher's *On Religion*, implies that knowledge is not simply the static (almost mechanical and extemporaneous) combination of a form and an object. Even when Kant contemplates the possibility of knowing living beings through teleological judgement, the vitality of the object remains confined within

[34] Frederick C. Beiser (2002) and Dalia Nassar (2014a) have already pointed out that in this Romantic reframing, the Absolute is not understood in opposition to the finitude of the subject but as an organic inclusion of it. However, what is left out by these authors (whose importance for Romanticism studies is nonetheless undeniable) is how radically this perspective modified not only the theory of knowledge of the Early German Romantics but also their idea of the self.

[35] This is the subject matter of a debate between Beiser and Frank, later mediated by Alison Stone and Nassar, and a question whose answer can be found by focusing on the limits of possible knowledge through reason and intuition. Romanticism is a recurrent topic in Frank's works, but *Unendliche Annäherung* (1997) is his most systematic attempt at an interpretation. As clearly demonstrated by Stone (2018), the disagreement between Beiser and Frank can be resolved through a careful analysis of their use of the terms 'idealism' and 'realism'. See also the introduction to Nassar (2014c: 1–11). Jane Kneller (2019), however, stresses the importance of maintaining the differences between Beiser's and Frank's interpretations: while both agree that Early Romanticism embraces the idea of an Absolute beyond human subjectivity, for Beiser this represents an affirmation of the Platonic metaphysics of forms, while for Frank the Romantic Absolute is more akin to the Kantian idea of reason. On the different positions held by F. Schlegel and Novalis regarding the Absolute, see Waibel (2009). For an original interpretation of the difference between idealism and Romanticism grounded on their different idea of 'borderline', see Millán-Zaibert (2008).

[36] See, e.g., F. Schlegel's refusal of the 'thing' intended as 'thing outside us' (KFSA XII: 37).

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a construction in which the parts of the organism are functional in relation to each other, but no particular relationship obtains between the observing subject and the object being contemplated: they remain external to each other. Kant's transcendental philosophy is not sufficient: not because Schleiermacher aims to know the thing in itself, or in his words, 'the nature of things' (*die Natur der Dinge*, 214 / 25), but because neither Kant nor Fichte consider the possibility of the object being active in the cognitive process – not just a collision (Fichte) or an impression on the senses (Kant) but a real, constant, radical influence. If we are part of an infinite, living universe, that universe acts (*handelt*) on us before any intuition takes place (245 / 53). And all intuition arises from an influence that the object has on the subject, a conditioning that cannot be summed up in the simple transfer of content to a form (213 / 24–25). The object plays an active part in the cognitive journey,[37] and the subject is involved in the transformations of the universe (to use Schleiermacher's terminology), so that knowledge cannot be thought of as a relationship between two separate and indeed opposed entities.

In Schleiermacher's thought, the opposition between the subject and its object is overcome via the idea that knowledge begins at a moment in which form and content, subject and object, are not separate. It is a 'first and mysterious moment' in perception, in which the senses and the perceived object are not separate but interpenetrated as one (*Eins*, 221 / 31). And this first and mysterious relation is feeling (*Gefühl*), in which the subject–object distinction is forgotten (218 / 29).

Feeling also figures in Fichte's *Doctrine of Science*, but in a very different way. In the *Foundation* (1794), feeling is in fact the faculty by which the I discerns itself as limited, through representations accompanied by the feeling of necessity (GA I/4: 186–187; GA I/2: 28), and which the finite I attributes to a Not-I outside itself. For Schleiermacher, on the other hand, feeling is a conjunction in which there is no duplicity but also no reduction to the recognition of a single limited activity (as in Fichte): in Schleiermacher's feeling, ideal and real are inseparable but not reduced to the transcendental subject's activity. 'Why do you see everything individually, which surely does not function individually and for itself?' he asks rhetorically (KGA I/2: 231 / *On Religion* 40). There is no isolation, no separation, no juxtaposition: on the contrary, all things penetrate each

[37] 'All intuition proceeds from an influence of the intuited on the one who intuits, from an original and independent action of the former, which is then grasped, apprehended, and conceived by the latter according to one's own nature . . . what you thus intuit and perceive is not the nature of things, but their action upon you' (KGA I/2: 214 / *On Religion* 24–25).

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other and create bonds of dual dependence. Just as the I is present in nature and in the infinite, and is therefore determined by them, so too does the I determine them, in virtue of being part of them.

Feeling is the faculty that enables the subject to perceive the forces of the world and of infinite life, but in such a way that she perceives them, Schleiermacher writes, as 'her own' (221). Not in the sense that they are the powers of an absolute I, which the finite I attributes to Not-I. Feeling recognises us as part of such forces, which therefore penetrate us and are part of us (in this sense they are 'ours'), but at the same time they are beyond us. Subjects and objects are on the very same level: connected and mutually implied in a reciprocal and indissoluble influence.

In developing this notion of feeling, the Romantics aim to bring together idealism and realism, thought and reality. This involves a conception of subjectivity conditioned by the other: in Andreas Arndt's words, Schleiermacher's subjectivity is an 'indebted subjectivity [*verdankte Subjektivität*]' (2021: 67–68). No longer is the subject posited as the guardian of a priori forms of knowledge and morality, or as the foundation of philosophy. The self, even when conceived as a relation to itself (as self-consciousness), is a relation to that which lies outside the self: to the Absolute and to Being (identical and unknowable but perceptible through feeling),[38] but also to that which lies outside consciousness and which Schleiermacher, in a letter to Carl Gustav von Brinckmann dated 4 January 1800, calls the 'real world [*wirkliche Welt*]' (KGA V/3: 316). The self is never merely ideal, never pure.

In one of Schleiermacher's earliest writings (*On the Supreme Good*, 1789), there is still an invocation of pure reason by which to understand moral concepts (KGA I/1: 84), but the claim that the supreme moral good (beatitude) can be a pure concept of reason is already called out as an erroneous conception that would also make the achievement of that good impossible. He writes:

> If we conceive of a will that can be determined directly and solely by pure reason, then the complete conformity of this will and all its maxims and actions to the laws of pure reason would necessarily imply the best state and the most perfect fulfilment of such a will, but what has this to do with the beatitude of a sensually [*sinnlich*] afflicted and consistently sensually determined faculty of desire? (104)

This disjunction between a creature whose will can be completely determined by pure reason, on the one hand, and the sensible human being

[38] For Schleiermacher, Being is in fact a non-relational identity (KGA II/10: 1, 101), and because knowledge is always relational, it can never be known. See also Arndt (2021: 34).

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situated in a world of material relations and influences, on the other, is for Schleiermacher an impasse in Kant's practical philosophy that leads to an internal contradiction (95).

Schleiermacher's writings, particularly *On Religion*, had an enormous influence on the other Romantic philosophers, who followed similar lines of reflection.[39] Traces of his ideas are echoed even years later, in Bettina von Arnim's or in Günderrode's works.[40]

Between 1798 and 1800, Novalis wrote three texts (*The Disciples of Saïs*, *Christendom or Europe*, and *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*) that addressed the relationship between human beings and nature, and resound with certain themes from Schleiermacher's work – in particular, the importance of feeling. Feeling is a source of knowledge about nature, and at the same time – as in Schleiermacher – it deprives human beings of the crown that would put them at the apex of nature. Novalis had dealt with feeling before discovering Schleiermacher's philosophy, but in a very different way: namely, in the *Fichte Studies*, a collection of fragments written between 1795 and 1796, and inspired by Fichte's works. In this collection, intellectual intuition – the act at the heart of consciousness in which subject and object coincide – is divided into two moments: feeling and reflection (HKA II: 114, n. 16 / *FS* 13).[41] The former (*Gefühl*) is a content not posited by the I (125, n. 31 / *FS* 23–24) and is the *matter* of reflection (116, n. 19 / *FS* 15), which constitutes the *form* of consciousness (122, n. 27 / *FS* 21). Developing his interpretation of Novalis from these fragments, Manfred Frank (2002) proclaimed that Romanticism is essentially a realism insofar as it recognises an element (the matter offered to reflection by feeling) within the self that is not perfectly intelligible; that is, not posited by the self. Later interpreters have stressed how this 'realism' is reconsidered in Novalis' later works, especially in the fragments of the *General Brouillon*, where the I is immersed in the Absolute, which, although not fully transparent in all its details to the eyes of the subject, can nevertheless be comprehended from a more general perspective.[42] Regardless, the concept of feeling continued to play an important role in his philosophy, not so much as

[39] Soon after becoming acquainted with Schleiermacher in 1797 during his stay in Berlin, F. Schlegel praised him in a letter to Novalis (HKA IV: 491). Intrigued, his friend replied asking Schlegel to tell him more about the thinking of his new interlocutor (243).

[40] On the influence of Schleiermacher on Bettina von Arnim's works, see Schormann (1993). For his role in Günderrode's philosophy, see Martinson (2005) and Herrera (2024).

[41] 'Feeling and reflection are one in the original act . . . The original act is the *unity* of feeling and reflection, in reflection. Intellectual intuition is their unity outside of reflection' (HKA II: 119, n. 22 / *FS* 17–18).

[42] Beside the already mentioned works by Beiser, Stone, and Nassar, see also Jost-Fritz's (2022) beautiful article on Novalis' 'poetic realism'.

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the presence of a 'given' within the original act of consciousness but rather to indicate the relationship between subject and object.

Christendom or Europe was completed the same year that Schleiermacher wrote his *On Religion* (1799). It would be published posthumously upon the insistence of Friedrich Schlegel and against the opinion of Goethe and Ludwig Tieck – the latter worried that this obscure text would be misinterpreted as conservative. Here Novalis protests against what he saw as a widespread hatred of feeling in his time (HKA III: 515 / *N* 248). To us this claim may seem paradoxical because in our vocabulary hatred itself is in every sense a feeling. Not so in the language of Romanticism. In *The Disciples of Saïs*, feeling is characterised as a 'heavenly' sense that enables the perception of 'the inner music of nature' (HKA I: 95 / *N* 353); and in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Novalis writes that feeling is what lets us grasp the 'mysterious spirit of life' (HKA I: 259 / *N* 419).[43] The Romantic 'feeling' is then not a category of affects that can include hatred. It is a thoroughly positive faculty through which we can break with the vision of nature as a machine, a 'mill . . . without architect or miller', a 'self-grinding mill' (HKA III: 515 / *N* 248). This image is proper to mechanistic science, in whose idea of nature there is no life and no place for the forces that make it a dynamic whole, and which therefore cannot see the infinite connections and relationships that bind all beings together. It is only through feeling that we can perceive the harmony of nature (HKA I: 95 / *N* 353), discerning the dense mesh of interdependencies in nature and recognising that nothing can exist 'without others' (95 / *N* 353).

The human being is necessarily a part of this web of mutual dependencies, and this informs Novalis' concept of subjectivity.[44] If nothing exists without the other, then neither does the subject – and not simply because, in order for there to be an I, it must be opposed to a Not-I, but because everything, in its own peculiarity, constantly affects the subject. We are no longer at the apex of a supposed natural hierarchy of beings (HKA III: 515 / *N* 248). But to assert this is not, for Novalis, to call into question the possibility of knowing nature. We can envision a science capable of grasping the interdependent relations between beings; and in the natural sciences of his time, with its studies of magnetism and electricity, and the advances of physiology, Novalis indeed saw indications of a possible new comprehensive understanding (519 / *N* 251). What needed changing, however, was the way in which knowledge was conceived: not as a struggle between the knowing subject and the known object but rather

[43] See Kluckhohn (1966a: 28). [44] An early version of this argument appeared in Valpione (2023).

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as a reciprocity in which the object modifies the subject as much as it is modified by it. Not an opposition between a priori form and a posteriori matter, but a mutual interpenetration.

If feeling is a relation to the object (HKA II: 130, n. 41 / *FS* 29), what kind of relation is it? In the collection of fragments entitled *Pollen*, published in 1798 in the *Athenaeum*, Novalis ventures: 'What I seem to learn is only nourishment' (419, n. 19 / *N* 70). While this metaphor may seem to suggest simply that new knowledge makes us grow spiritually, he would elaborate on the analogy in subsequent texts. Schlegel, too, picked it up, writing with reference to Novalis a few months later that 'In order to perceive an object, I must eat it' (KFSA XVIII: 146, n. 276). Novalis remarked in turn that 'In general, the sense eats, digests, secretes or *fertilises*' (HKA III: 88). And when the eye sees light, it is not simply stimulated by it; rather, 'an eye that sees . . . devours light' (96). Soon he would generalise this idea: 'Sensing is devouring' (288, n. 273 / *AB* 40). The object is not a product of the self or an element external to the subject: the object enters the subject and, like what we eat, becomes part of us, transforming us. This analogy between digestive activity and knowledge has the same aim as the passages from Schleiermacher's *On Religion*: to subvert our conception of the subject–object relationship.

But this image of knowledge risks reintroducing a dualism (between eater and eaten, interiority and exteriority) parallel to the thinking/being distinction that Novalis seeks to overcome. This problem is addressed in a famous fragment of *General Brouillon*, where Novalis traces the correspondence between inner and outer:

> We now behold the true bindings connecting subject and object – we see that there is also in us an external world which stands in a connection with our inner [world] in a way analogous to that of the outer world outside us with our outer [world], and that this and that are connected as our inner and our outer. (HKA III: 429, n. 820 / *AB* 151, translation modified)

In *Pollen*, he adds to this picture:

> To go back into oneself means, for us, to abstract from the external world. Analogously, among spirits earthly life means an inner contemplation – an entering into oneself – an immanent activity. Hence, earthly life springs from a primordial reflection – a primitive entering into and collecting oneself . . . Conversely, spiritual life in this world springs from a breakthrough of that primitive reflection – spirit unfolds itself yet again – spirit goes out of itself again – partly cancels that reflection again – and in this moment it says for the first time – I. One sees how relative the exiting and entering are here. What we call entering is really exiting. (HKA II: 431, n. 43 / *N* 74, translation modified)

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The ever-possible inversion of the inner and the outer dimensions does not warrant the view that for Romanticism knowledge is nothing more than the subjective projection of the self onto nature: on the contrary, it is precisely because the inversion works in both directions that we can claim that thoughts grasp reality. This is possible because – as we read in the continuation of fragment 820 – before the subject–object separation there is a universal principle that constitutes every being (including the I) through its own dynamic processes of development, and it continues to pervade every self and every object, connecting them. Thus, every object is 'instead of Not-I[, a] You' (HKA III: 430, n. 820 / *AB* 151, translation modified). That principle is not, as in Fichte's philosophy, an absolute I that determines itself and thereby produces its own limits, leading to the finite I (the knowing subject) that projects its own limits on the equally finite Not-I (the known object). For Novalis, knowledge is not the correspondence between two opposed entities (subject and object, internal and external) but the result of a relationship between an I and a You – or, rather, several You's. This relationship is perceived by feeling: our understanding of nature and of our place within it originates in the *Gefühl*, which, in turn, is a development of the relationship between two subjects (I and You) living within each other. Therefore, when Novalis describes knowledge as devouring, what is devoured is not an object that accesses the I as if it were entering a 'pure' space and time of consciousness where the movement of nature is excluded (expelled and limited to what is 'external'). The I is in part self-reflection, but at the same time it is part of the Absolute that develops and expands outside this introspection. As Beiser (2002) notes, this organic interaction is never concluded (433).[45]

The intense 'symphilosophical' dialogue between Novalis, Schleiermacher, and Friedrich Schlegel during those years is further evidenced by the fact that Schlegel too identifies *Gefühl* as a possible solution to the alterity between idealism and realism.[46] For him too, feeling is the key to understanding our place within nature and an infinite Absolute. In his 1800–1801 lectures in Jena,

[45] Here too the influence of Spinoza on German Romanticism is undeniable – see his criticism of the conception of truth as correspondence (*adaequatio*) between object and thought, a reflection that leads him to reject the term 'true idea' in favour of 'adequate idea' (Spinoza, 2018: 44 / E2 Def4). See also Spinoza's letter to Ehrenfried Walther de Tschirnhaus (Spinoza, 1977: 242–243, Letter n. 60, 5 January 1675).

[46] Friedrich Schlegel first met Novalis in 1792 and they subsequently corresponded frequently. In addition, the journal Schlegel founded with his brother August Wilhelm featured texts by both Novalis and Schleiermacher. For a compelling account of the friendship between these philosophers (and the other members of the Jena circle), see Andrea Wulf (2022) and Neumann (2023), but also

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Schlegel argues that, along with striving (*Bestreben*), feeling is what constitutes the human being, a faculty therefore more central than intellect and will (KFSA XII: 7). Feeling is an experience of the sublime, analogous to our consciousness of the infinite (7), insofar as it is the perception of the dynamism of that Absolute of which we are part. In some lectures given a few years later in Aubergenville, near Paris, and published under the title *Métaphysique*, Schlegel translates the German *Gefühl* with the French *sentiment*.[47] Aside from the translation, nothing changes: its connection with the infinite is reiterated (KFSA XIII: 396). In these lectures, feeling is always related to the infinite. It is contrasted with intuition (*Anschauung*), which cannot relate to the infinite and the Absolute (396). That is because intuition – divided between form and content, a priori and a posteriori – is incapable of grasping Becoming and the living infinite (397), which also eludes abstraction (403). In his lectures at Cologne in 1804–1805, Schlegel criticised intuition as the faculty that reduces nature to a thing (*Ding*), separating all the relations that actually constitute it, abstracting it from that Becoming which precedes (and enables the emergence of) identity. Contrary to intuition, and as Novalis and Schleiermacher had already concluded, feeling relates I and You – two subjects, not a subject and an object. Feeling is a relation, an immediate perception of another I (KFSA XII: 355, 390).

This common dialogue on the role and concept of feeling spread in the Romantic philosophy also beyond the temporal (and geographical) limits of the Jena circle. Some years later, indeed, Bettina von Arnim engages with the idea of feeling as the faculty at the basis of knowledge (ABW II: 474) because it sanctions the reciprocity in the cognitive relationship between subject and object: with a beautiful image, she writes that when I perceive and know some flowers, these know me (AWB I: 251). This reciprocity is a sign of an interdependence that characterises the individuality. The self corresponds for Bettina to the act of feeling herself in the other (*sich fühlen im Anderen*, AWB I: 381). For the Romantic philosopher, knowledge of nature does not simply imply the discovery of its laws or to write definitions, but first and foremost the capacity to feel the process of Becoming in the natural realm (AWB I: 527) that permeates every singular thing (AWB II: 173).

the invaluable introductions to the critical editions of Novalis', Schlegel's, and Schleiermacher's works, as well as Eichner (1967: xlii f.), Kluckhohn (1960), and Meckenstock (1984: esp. ix–lxxxvi).

[47] Regarding the suitability of this translation, which conceals the fact that the German *Gefühl* also includes the capacity for perception (*Empfindung*), cf. KFSA XVIII: 218, n. 294.

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1.3 Love: Epistemology and Ontology

The relational ontology underlying the Romantic conception of feeling is even more evident in their analysis of love. The very essence of feeling, for Schlegel, is love (*Liebe*), understood as the bond that connects all beings and makes them exist, linking gnoseology and ontology (KFSA XII: 66). Indeed, life itself, as a force that relates and creates, is love (KFSA II: 264, n. 91 / *Fragments* 249).[48] Thus it is the source of all feelings, where this bond is present too (KFSA XII: 66).

The philosophy that, according to Schlegel, has placed love at its centre is that of Spinoza (30). His monism allows us to think of human beings and nature within the same whole, in an interweaving of dependencies and connections that prevents us from thinking of one without the other:[49] love is the organic bond between beings (KFSA XII: 70) whereby the existence of each is involved in the life of all the others (KFSA XVIII: 217, n. 278). For this reason, love is not only a force that allows the self to be located within the Absolute; it is also what enables the philosopher to understand the relationship between the knower and the known. Similarly to Novalis, Schlegel writes that love is a point of indifference in which subject and object (or rather, two subjects) are united: 'A loving becoming one with the object of the I, the You. The marriage of the perceiving I with the perceived spirit is called love' (KFSA XII: 53, 350).

If feeling plays a crucial role in overcoming Kantian dualism and rethinking the position of the subject in relation to the object, love refers to the relational dimension of reality; it is what connects every being to all others. In this perspective, the subject is placed in a web of relationships that condition it and whose order does not derive from subjectivity. The importance of the concept of love in the writings of Schlegel (and Novalis, as we shall see) is due not only to Spinoza's influence (as a counterpart of Fichte) but also to that of Hemsterhuis and Herder.[50] Indeed, it is from

[48] See also KFSA XII: 142.

[49] This is obviously an interpretation of Spinoza that deprives him of the static aspect that characterises his philosophy – for Spinoza, in fact, there is no becoming. This is why John Zammito (2018), in comments on Herder, Goethe, and Schelling, rightly points out that Romanticism combines Spinoza's materialism with Leibniz's dynamism (180–181, 297, 304–305).

[50] Hemsterhuis (1721–1790) was a Dutch philosopher whose relevance for German Romanticism and idealism has been emphasised in recent philosophical-historical research – the new English translation of Hemsterhuis' complete works, edited by Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler, is essential (Hemsterhuis, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). Hemsterhuis' importance particularly for Novalis is evidenced in a letter from Friedrich Schlegel to his brother in January 1792, where he describes his first encounter with Novalis, whose key philosophers, Schlegel writes, were Plato and, indeed, Hemsterhuis (KFSA XXIII: 41). The influence of Hemsterhuis on Romanticism is also evidenced by the frequent references to his work by both Novalis and Schlegel – besides scattered references, Novalis collected a series of fragments on the

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Herder's interpretation of Hemsterhuis that the Romantic epistemological and ontological dimension of love is derived. The Romantic concept of love is strongly conditioned by one of his short texts, *Letter on Desires* (*Lettre sur les désirs*), written in 1768, published in 1770, and translated into German by Herder in 1781.[51]

In Hemsterhuis' original French text, desire is described as the soul's attempt to unite its essence with that of the object it desires (2022a: 85), and is therefore analogous to a physical attraction of matter (79, 85), leading to the conclusion that 'everything naturally tends towards unity' (85). This tendency is counterbalanced by inertia and by the divine power that prevents the dissolution of individuals into a homogeneous unity (81, 85). The relationship between natural forces and desire outlined by Hemsterhuis is modified by Herder in his German translation, to which he adds a commentary entitled *Love and Selfhood*, published the same year (FHA IV: 405–424).[52] The translation renders *désirs* in the singular (*das Verlangen*),[53] suggesting the suppression of a potential multiplicity; and the commentary translates *désir* as *Liebe*.[54] Moreover, the analogy between the force of attraction and desire that Hemsterhuis alludes to becomes an identity in the German: 'attraction' and 'love' are two different names for the same force, which is opposed not to inertia but to repulsion.[55] Nature and humans are thus both subject to the same force that pervades the universe. Love, however, has a dark side: it 'destroys itself or its object with penetrating, devouring

Dutch philosopher in the *Hemsterhuis Studies* (1797) (HKA II: 360–378 / *N* 25–51). Schlegel, for his part, frequently referred to Hemsterhuis in his letters to August Wilhelm between 1792 and 1793, even reporting on one occasion that 'I am now familiar with all the known writings of Hemsterhuis' (KFSA XXIII: 140). For more on the various references to Hemsterhuis in Schlegel's works, see Whistler (2022: 65–66). Other studies have highlighted the importance of Hemsterhuis' concept of *désirs* for the understanding of love in the *Goethezeit*, in particular for Herder (Hammacher, 1995: esp. 419–423; Heinz, 1995). On the influence of Hemsterhuis on Early German Romanticism more generally, see, e.g., Flickenshild (2010). Unlike Cahen-Maurel (2022), I believe that Hemsterhuis' concept of love is central to Romantic ontology, not only to Romantic religion and morality.

Schleiermacher, too, was a reader (albeit less passionate) of Hemsterhuis' works. He began reading Hemsterhuis' works in 1790, following his father's advice (Whistler, 2022: 70). Even if Kraetke (1995) confirms that Hemsterhuis had less of an influence on Schleiermacher than on other Romantics, she nevertheless finds in the works of the Dutch philosopher one of the sources for the development of Schleiermacher's *Gefühl*.

[51] Published under the title 'Über das Verlangen: Von Herrn Hemsterhuis' in the journal *Der Teutsche Merkur*, IV, November 1781: 97–122.

[52] The full title is *Love and Selfhood: An Afterword to Hemsterhuis' Letter* (*Liebe und Selbstheit: Ein Nachtrag zum Briefe des Herrn Hemsterhuis*), originally published in *Der Teutsche Merkur*, December 1781: 211–235.

[53] See Trunz (1980). [54] This translation is criticised in Moenkemeyer (1975: 55).

[55] In Herder and Hemsterhuis, as Trop (2022: 45–46) points out, this also implies two different conceptions of unity.

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flames' (FHA IV: 413). Indeed, love is fulfilled in pleasure, which leads the lover to absorb the beloved object into herself, thus destroying it (408–409). Although love is seen as a force that pervades all beings, its destructive power is particularly manifest in humans, who, according to Herder, also have an evil tendency – 'the human being is [the] tyrant [*Tyrann*] of the universe' (420) – believing themselves limitless and capable of extending themselves infinitely through the attraction they exert on other things (421). But in reality, they 'live only thanks to alms' (421) and must therefore adapt themselves to the 'economy of desire [and] love' established by nature, 'which has divided and at the same time balanced everything in this pulsation of beings who suffer and act, give and receive' (420–421).

Herder's translation and annotations, which at once reproduce and betray Hemsterhuis' thought by transforming his text into an essay on the nature of love, are crucial for explaining the origin of the concept of love in German Romanticism.[56] The movement conceived of love as a force that permeates both humans and nature, putting them on the same level.

Another figure who contributed to the richness of that concept in those years is Franz von Baader. A Bavarian philosopher, scientist, and politician, he was at the centre of one of the sources of all German Romanticism, namely a group of philosophers associated with the Munich Real Academy of Sciences, to which Johann W. Ritter also belonged. Their influence on what is known as 'Early Romanticism' was so profound that Philipp Funk (1925) proposes to call them 'Munich Romanticism',[57] as an earlier and hitherto underestimated phase of the movement.[58]

Franz von Baader was fundamental for both Novalis and Schlegel, as they themselves state in several passages in their works.[59] Referred to by some interpreters as an 'erotic philosophy', Baader's thought was particularly significant to the Romantic view of love.[60] In *On Heat Substance, Its Dispersal, Bonding and Discharge* (1786), Baader describes a material, the

[56] According to Kluckhohn, Hemsterhuis' *désir*/*Liebe* was the vehicle for a Plotinian influence on the German Romantics (1966b: 496–497).

[57] See also Graßl (1968).

[58] As is well known, the other phases have been labelled *Hochromantik* (lasting until about 1815) and *Spätromantik* (until about 1830) (Kluckhohn, 1966a: 8–9).

[59] In 1798, Friedrich Schlegel wrote to Novalis: 'Bring me everything you have by Baader. As he is, as I have heard, one of the five directors of philosophy, I shall certainly try to make his acquaintance' (HKA IV: 496, 8 July 1798). Later that year, Novalis also praised Baader immensely in a letter to Schlegel, and declared his debt to his philosophy (HKA IV: 263). See also HKA II: 529, n. 25. Baader's significance is evident also in Schlegel's fragments KFSA II: 266, n. 97 / *Fragments* 250; KFSA XVIII: 149, n. 319; 166, n. 504; 166, n. 505.

[60] *Erotische Philosophie* is indeed the title of a collection of Baader's works edited by Gerd-Klaus Kaltebrunner (Baader, 1991).

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Wärmestoff of the title, from which all matter solidifies (BSW III: 30, 35, 42). In this short but rich text, Baader also identifies an immaterial principle in nature, namely love. This is defined as the 'universal bond that unites and intertwines the beings of the universe', comparable to the attractive force that drives the parts of matter together (BSW III: 42). The concept of love plays a role not only in Baader's philosophy of nature but also in his gnoseology – as it does, together with feeling, for Schlegel, Novalis, and Schleiermacher. In his later *Fragments on a Theory of Knowledge* (written in 1809), he expounds further on what he had stated in *Heat Substance*. Here, Baader criticises mechanical knowledge, in which the knowing subject forms her object by 'constraint'; that is, by applying her own categories to it (BSW I: 53, n. 17). Baader contrasts this to a kind of knowledge he characterises as 'dynamic', in which the knower and the known are interwoven and both active in the process of understanding, as a result of their mutual desire for each other (53, nn. 11, 13, 14). For Baader, therefore, true knowledge – aiming to perceive the attractive force of love that permeates all beings – cannot be an imposition of forms on content, but a loving and reciprocal relationship, a perpetual exchange and mutual conditioning in which subject and object are not distinguished as one imposing itself on the other.

The same thinking can be found in Schlegel. Knowledge comes only from love, Schlegel writes in 1804: 'The condition for the understanding of the intuited object [*das Angeschaute*] by the subject [*der Anschauender*] is not any particular power, it is simply love' (KFSA XII: 369). Although Schlegel seems here to rehabilitate intuition, it does not change much from what we have just seen: the main condition for knowledge is the original contact between knower and known, denying a subject–object opposition (KFSA XII: 369, 100). This contact is present also in Schlegel's conception of consciousness: feeling, as we have seen, is a peculiar characteristic of consciousness that also precedes its intellectual faculty and will. This feeling, however, is not equivalent to Fichte's intellectual intuition or to his fact-act (*Tathandlung*), whereby the I posits itself as subject and object. True (*wharhaft*) feeling is not only related to the I-ness (*Ichheit*) but is also always directed towards the world, embracing the infinite unity and fullness of a Spinozist substance (390). In other words, by placing feeling at the centre of the I, the subject is conceived as always containing within itself a relation to otherness, which relation reproduces the organic connections between all beings in all of nature.[61] Love binds every member of

[61] He writes: 'Nature is love made free and moving' (KFSA XVIII: 254, n. 725). See also KFSA XVIII: 153, n. 359 and KFSA XII: 373.

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nature, including human beings, in communicative relationships, and for this reason the I is structurally open to the You.[62] This You, in turn, does not stand before it as an Other, but is part of the same I. Schlegel's subject then has at her centre a relation to the Other, and this relation entails the permeability of the subject by the Absolute, which embraces it in an organic unity.

Thus, in Romanticism, love is not merely an affective capacity in the individual but rather defines her as an element in a wider network of relationships, of which the subject is not the apex. We see this also in Novalis, according to whom love is a synthetic force (HKA II: 292, n. 651 / *FS* 190) that unites all beings and with which both science (HKA III: 253–255, n. 79 / *AB* 12) and religion are concerned (HKA II: 395, n. 56). This is a 'rational love', where something is 'loved' insofar as it is put within a wider web of relationships (HKA II: 615, n. 424). Novalis is not concerned with the affective sphere of the individual and the 'personal love' related to it (615, n. 424 / *N* 203).

In a similar tone, Bettina von Arnim (maybe under the influence of Hemsterhuis' philosophy) later writes that love is the entanglement between all things, the condition where one being is in another one (ABW II: 427).[63] Therefore, the concept of love permits to fade the boundaries that superficially separate the individuals (430), revealing a higher and divine community (509).

The Early Romantic philosophers thus accept the equation of the concept of love with the forces of nature proposed by Baader, and use the term to refer to the bond that unites all beings. Love is not a force liable to destroy the beloved by assimilating her into the lover (as was the case in Herder's and Hemsterhuis' views) but rather the network of relationships in which each singularity is situated and open to the others. The love relationship, moreover, involves exchange and communication between beings in which there is no prevarication: rather than the possible destruction of the object (or all of nature) by the human being because of her tyrannical tendencies (as in Herder), Novalis emphasises the constant reciprocity of such assimilation, which does not destroy the beings involved in the love relationship but transforms them.

In a cognitive relationship sprung out of love, there is no opposition between an I and a Not-I but rather a reciprocity between an I and a You.

[62] Love, for Schlegel, is the basis of any communication (KFSA XII: 369).

[63] In her epistolary novel *The Günderode*, she writes to her friend that she is indeed reading Hemsterhuis' works (ABW I: 321). We also know that Günderrode read Hemsterhuis' *Simon, or on the Faculties of the Soul* (KGSW II: 299–301).

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What the concept of love adds to the picture in which feeling is already so central is that the cognitive relationship (originating in feeling) is also part of a wider network of relationships where a universal force – love – unites beings to and in the Absolute. It is a mesh of relations that is not static but in constant transformation, thanks to the relations themselves, which condition all others: the knowledge between two singularities is itself part of that whole, that love that binds everything together, and of the Absolute. Only with an awareness of this connection to an infinite creation and Becoming is it possible to carry out the Romantic experiment, in which not only the genesis of the element in question is revealed but also its connection to the Absolute, to the rest of nature, and to the self.

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