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Edited by Giovanna Luciano
and Armando Manchisi

G. Andreozzi, M.G. de Moura, M. Gante,
P. García Cherep, F. Gregoratto, G. Hindrichs,
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Critique: Hegel and Contemporary Critical Theory

v *Hegel and Contemporary Critical Theory. An Introduction*
Giovanna Luciano and Armando Manchisi

Essays

1 *On the Contemporaneity of Critical Theory*
Gunnar Hindrichs

17 *Our Time Comprehended in Thoughts – Hegel, Humanity, and Social Critique*
Heikki Ikäheimo

39 *Romances of Nature. Hegelian and Romantic Impulses for Critical Theory*
Federica Gregoratto

63 *The Process Between Kant and Schlegel. Dialectic in the Adorno-Benjamin Debate*
Giovanni Zanotti

- 83 *Um desdobrar não tão silencioso: Algumas observações feministas sobre o § 166 da Filosofia do direito e a noção de modernidade de Hegel*
Marloren Lopes Miranda
- 103 *‘Was wir so wissen, weiß das Gewöhnliche Bewußtsein nicht...’: Zum Motiv der Bewusstlosigkeit in Hegels Philosophie des Rechts*
Markus Gante
- 131 *Simone de Beauvoir’s Critical Hegelianism*
Eliza Starbuck Little
- 149 *Max Horkheimer y el proyecto de una dialéctica no cerrada*
Paula García Cherep
- 173 *Anerkennung e teoria critica dell’intersoggettività*
Giovanni Andreozzi
- 205 *Reconstructive Social Criticism without a Genealogical Proviso: Honneth on Method and the Pathologies of Individual Freedom*
Antonio Ianni Segatto and Matheus Garcia de Moura
- 221 *The Becoming of Spirit. A Controversy on Social Change in Contemporary Critical Theory*
Agustín Lucas Prestifilippo

Report

- 247 *Begriff/begreifen, Schluss/schliessen, Idee/ideell. Usi lessicali e problemi di traduzione della Scienza della logica*
Federico Orsini, Armando Manchisi, and Paolo Giuspoli

Book Reviews

- 267 L. Filieri, *Sintesi e giudizio. Studio su Kant e Jakob Sigismund Beck*
(Emanuele Cafagna)
- 274 F. Pitillo, *La meraviglia del barbaro. L'intelletto negli scritti jenesi di Hegel (1801-1805)*
(Claudia Melica)
- 280 F. Nobili, *La prospettiva del tempo. L'idealismo fenomenologico di Husserl come autoesplicitazione della soggettività trascendentale*
(Iacopo Chiaravalli)
- 288 A. Bertinetto, *Estetica dell'improvvisazione*
(Enrico Milani)
- 295 R. Pozzo, *History of Philosophy and the Reflective Society*
(Giulia La Rocca)

ROMANCES OF NATURE. HEGELIAN AND ROMANTIC IMPULSES FOR CRITICAL THEORY

by Federica Gregoratto *

Abstract. *The intersection between social and natural processes has become a central issue for critical theorists nowadays. The paper investigates the intersection by drawing upon Hegelian and (German and English) Romantic insights. The first section proposes to address the issue from the perspective of human love, here taken as a Schauplatz, an exemplary scene. It proposes to interpret Hegelian and Romantic love as a social bond moved (in part) by natural forces, the study of which can shed light on the relation between human beings and their nature(s). The second section articulates a multiple, differentiated account of nature, which is, as Timothy Morton indicates, an «aroundness», an «ambience», a lively horizon in which human beings, their social relationships, their cultures, are immersed, as well as a series of different 'things' that are approached in various ways, by various human endeavours. The following two sections follow a particular, phenomenological approach, and look at two crucial types of experiences of nature. The third section illustrates the experience of nature in the mode of conciliation or aesthetic recognition, and the fourth one an experience of nature in the mode of drama, or breakdown of aesthetic recognition. The fifth section argues for the critical and transformative potential of dramatic experiences of nature. The sixth one concludes by discussing some Hegelian concerns around the Romantic perspective on critical theory.*

Keywords. *Hegel; Romanticism; Nature; Love; Transformation*

The relevance of nature and the need to talk about nature cannot be denied by critical theorists anymore¹. If one of critical

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¹ In order to justify this statement, we have written: F. Gregoratto, H. Ikäheimo, E. Renault, A. Särkelä, I. Testa, *Critical Naturalism. A Manifesto*, «Krisis», XLII (1), 2022. In the present article, I elaborate on a few motives of the *Manifesto* by pursuing my own path, which follows from many adventurous paths shared with

theory's main aims consists in detecting and challenging vicious forms of power (domination, oppression), power takes form not just at the level of intersubjective, *social* relationships, but at the intersection between social and natural processes. But what are these two terms, 'nature' and 'society', meant to pick up? How do they meet, intersect, get hybridized? From a Hegelian point of view, we might hazard to say right away, the relation between nature and society is an ambivalent one, namely one of both identity and non-identity. Nature and society are *one and not the same*: what we experience and regard as natural is dependent on our human (individual, cultural, economic, political) perspectives, yet nature is not simply what society has made of it; we cannot completely know and control it. Society is profoundly influenced and shaped by natural impulses and configurations, yet we also can, through social arrangements, intervene in and modify nature. This paper does not intend to address the subject-matter in such vague terms though. It proposes, rather, to look at the interconnection between nature and society from a specific angle-view, namely from the perspective of *human love*. Love, mostly erotic love, becomes here a sort of *Schauplatz*, an exemplary scene. Hegel, and the Romantics, knew that very well.

1. *Love as Schauplatz*

One leading contemporary critical theorist, Axel Honneth, argues that two distinctive Hegelian categories, recognition (*Anerkennung*) and freedom, both central for critical-theoretical undertakings, are best elucidated when looking at love bonds.

my fellow critical naturalists. Discussing Romantic poetry with Italo Testa has been particularly influential for this paper. I have presented previous versions of this text at the conference *Hegel's Heritage: First Nature in Social Philosophy* (Columbia University, New York, April 2022), organized by Gal Katz and Thimo Heisenberg, and at the conference *The Revolt of Nature* (Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin, January 2023), organized by Agnès Grivaux and Lèa Barbisan. I warmly thank the organizers of both conferences, as well as their participants, for inspiring insights and criticisms.

According to Honneth, love represents for Hegel «the first stage of reciprocal recognition, because in it subjects mutually confirm each other with regard to the *concrete nature of their needs* and thereby recognize each other as *needy creatures*»². As such, love, in parent-child bonds, friendships and sexual relationships, is fundamental for the formation of the human selves. If the «the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition», love, which constitutes the basic intersubjective situation in which one learns how to «develop a practical relation-to-self»³ by learning to view and sense oneself from the normative and affective perspective of the other(s), is fundamental for social life as well.

Furthermore, the Hegelian notion of ‘social freedom’, the freedom to realize oneself and one’s own projects together with others, as contributing to larger collective projects and identities, amounts to an experience of being-with-oneself-in-an-other, or as a *being-at-home-in-an-other*⁴. One of the more concrete examples of the experience is human love. The young Hegel had already maintained: «[i]n love man has found himself again in another»⁵. This does not mean that love is the only, or the most important affective and material bond of a society as a whole (as it might have been *philia* for Aristotle). Yet, an understanding of love can help us to better comprehend human sociality in general – and, in fact, human sociality in relation to nature.

Honneth speaks appropriately of social *life*: human *life* is part of ampler circles and fluxes of life, that comprehend nonhuman and nonsocial processes as well. Individual and social bodies are absorbed, sunken in organic matrixes, manifestations of vital processes driven by material appetitive dynamics. In the *Phenomenology*

² A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995, p. 95, my italics.

³ Ivi, p. 92.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, §§ 187, p. 185.

⁵ See e.g. Id., *On Christianity. Early Theological Writings*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1961, p. 278.

of *Spirit*, Hegel introduces the category of recognition (its «pure Notion»⁶) indeed as a development of his category of life⁷. When the protagonist of the phenomenological journey narrated by Hegel, a Consciousness who has just become self-conscious, realizes that she is a living creature, part of a lively natural whole, she makes the experience of herself as a desiring subject. Or we can say: when she senses herself as moved by desire, she realizes she is alive and part of a lively whole. This is a profoundly ambivalent experience, of both power (and empowerment) and powerlessness, vulnerability. Being a desiring subject is a tormented experience, electrified by lacerating tensions towards objects that, when absorbed and controlled, make the subject feel powerful. But this is a fleeting, illusory moment: objects tend to escape the subject's grasp, or, if possessed, consumed, leave the subject in an excruciatingly yearning state again. What *could* assuage this restless quest, Self-consciousness senses here, is the encounter with another similar being, another Self-consciousness. The possibility of overcoming the vicious circle in which the subject craves for an unreachable and/or unfulfilling object would consist in the overcoming of the (fraught, antagonistic) subject-object mode of relationality. A novel mode would then open up when the two Self-consciousnesses would «recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another»⁸. The subject would come to experience, that is, proper self-empowerment only when relinquishing the ambition to exert absolute power over the object, when realizing, that is, that the object might have power over herself as well, for it is, in fact, like herself, another subject.

A form of empowerment that results from relinquishing one own's unilateral power over the other and recognizing the other's power: isn't this the power of erotic desire⁹? And doesn't such

⁶ Id., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, § 185.

⁷ See in particular I. Testa, *Life and the two-fold structure of domination: subjugation and recognition in Hegel's master-servant dialectics*, «Intellectual History Review», XXXI (3), 2021, pp. 427-444.

⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 184.

⁹ See e.g. A. Novakovic, *Erotic Desire in Hegel's Phenomenology*, in *Hegel on Nature in Politics*, ed. by T. Heisenberg and G. Katz, unpublished manuscript.

erotic desire entail a promise of love? Love as mutual recognition, indeed: a bond in which and through which subjects perceive and treat themselves and each other as independent, separate beings, who have the power to satisfy the other's desires, and can choose to do so freely. At this point in the *Phenomenology*, though, Self-consciousness lets go of the erotic promise. More realistically, or cynically, Hegel's protagonist drops the possibility of love and prefers to try to continue to assert herself as a (illusory) powerful and controlling subject. We all know how the story continues (struggle for life and death, domination). The point that interests me here, however, is the fact that erotic desire emerges, and love might potentially emerge, as a *naturalist affaire*. We desire other human beings because we are part of life, and as such defective organisms, who dramatically depend on others for the fulfillment of our most profound needs and wishes – e.g. the impulses to receive and give joyful and pleasurable sensations and feelings, the need to be cared for, hold, protected, the fear to be abandoned, the shame to disclose too much vulnerability, the desire to be fulfilled in such needs and wishes and at the same time be regarded and treated like independent, free subjects. The dependence is dramatic because there is no guarantee that others will give us what we need. At the same time, this dependence is the condition for a special, precious way to feel empowered.

The point I want to stress is that at least part of what moves (and troubles) love relationships consists in an impulsive, affective dimension that depends on the natural constitution of human beings as living beings. In *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel casts (familial) love as an immediate attachment, that has its origin not in thought, which is mediated or reflective, but in a natural feeling:

Love means in general terms the consciousness of my unity with another, so that I am not in isolation by myself but win my self-consciousness only through the renunciation of my independence [*Fürsichsein*] and through knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of

the other with me. Love, however, is *feeling*, i.e. ethical life in the form of *something natural*¹⁰.

There are natural sexual needs and impulses, according to Hegel, that bring two adults together in loving relationships, and help to keep them united. Nature brings human beings to form the ethical institutional unity of the family; at the same time, the ethical institution of the family must tame and cultivate natural impulses, give them the right form. Note that this argument remains valuable even if we want to *denaturalize* (as I think we should) the heterosexual and nuclear form of the family. Rather hastily, Hegel states that «human beings have by nature the impulse» towards «love between the sexes, the impulse to sociability, and so on»¹¹. The statement can be better articulated as follows: not only ‘sociability’ is a natural impulse, but also the need to form some kind of family, an intimate association of human beings bound by strong shared emotions and who desire to engage in a number of shared activities together. This association, as well as the relationship of love, can however take up different forms, that depend on the cultural coordinates of a given space and time (it is not nature, that is, that decides that two and only two persons can be united in love, and that these have to be of opposite sexes).

This naturalist approach to love (and sociality more generally) is a Romantic motive. The aim of the present essay, however, is not to historically reconstruct Hegel’s debts towards, and quarrels, with the Early German (Jena) Romantics, or his affinities with other Romantic traditions. The aim is rather to read together Hegelian and Romantic insights that deploy love as a lens through which we can better comprehend the interconnections between natural and social processes. By interrogating and representing love, the Romantic thought, we can better understand who we are, and who we want to become¹².

¹⁰ Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, § 158.

¹¹ Ivi, § 19.

¹² It is important to remark that ‘traditional’ or ‘historical’ Romantic love has not much to do with our contemporary understanding of romantic love. Romantic

Is it legitimate though to mobilize (some) Romantic reflections in the context of critical theory? This might sound odd, especially if we are influenced by the prejudice that reduces Romanticism to a form of anti-rationalist aestheticism, promoting anti-democratic idea and regressive tendencies. This prejudice has been dispelled by a number of publications in the last twenty years, that build solid dialogical bridges between Romantic authors and other philosophical traditions (Platonism, German Idealism, Critical Theory) and authors (Kant, Fichte, Hegel)¹³, and that moreover consider the systematic contributions of Romanticism for contemporary philosophical discussions, including those centered on critical and emancipatory interests¹⁴. If we rely on Michael Löwy's and Robert Sayre's map of the Romantic landscape, which stretches from the end of the 18th Century to the 20th Century, we can indeed find a much richer and astonishingly contradictory variety of projects. According to Löwy and Sayre's useful work, the common denominator of these project lies in the (self-)criticism of

love, in the sense I want to work out here, is for example not necessarily a dyadic, private story, but is always consciously embedded in a more complex social (and natural) network of relationships, and does have a politically rebellious potential. For the Romantics, a love union is not to be based only on a certain kind of (irrational, overwhelming) feelings, but requires intellectual and spiritual connection as well as friendship. Friendship and sexual love are not conceived as constitutively different sorts of bonds.

¹³ See e.g. F.C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative. The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003; D. Nassar (ed.) *The Relevance of Romanticism. Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014; Ead., *The Romantic Absolute. Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795-1804*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2014; W.G. Deakin, *Hegel and the English Romantic Tradition*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; N. Ross, *The Philosophy and Politics of Aesthetic Experience. German Romanticism and Critical Theory*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; A. Stone, *Nature, Ethics and Gender in German Romanticism and Idealism*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

¹⁴ See in particular this edited collection by N. Kompridis (ed.) *Philosophical Romanticism*, London, Routledge, 2006. In the Introduction, Kompridis writes: «[t]o 'romanticize the world' is to make room for the new, to make room for new possibilities» (4).

the Post-French revolution, modern, capitalist society. If we try to go beyond this general level, we notice that criticisms of the sort can assume different forms and go in different directions. Löwy and Sayre identify six different «types of Romanticism»: restitutionist, conservative, fascist, resigned, reformist, and revolutionary/utopian¹⁵. In this article, I can just refer to and rely upon a small sample of insights that fall under the latter type. Since I want to connect these insights to Hegel and the Hegelian-Marxist tradition of critical theory, the sample comprehends Early German Romantics (who were close, also on a personal level, with Hegel) like Friedrich Schlegel and his best friend Friedrich von Hardenberg, also known as Novalis. I moreover enrich the picture by references to English Romantics as well, like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats¹⁶.

2. *Nature (if not love) is all around*

In the previous section, I have suggested that love is a social bond moved (partially) by natural factors, and that a study of love should allow us to better comprehend the relation between natural and social dimensions. This relation, however, does not have to be understood as a link between two separated and different ‘spheres’ or ‘realms’ that have then to be synched together. The Romantics (and Hegel) propose a much richer and more differentiated picture of nature.

¹⁵ Moreover, they identify five different sub-types of revolutionary/utopian Romanticism: Jacobin-democratic, populist, utopian-humanist socialist, libertarian, Marxist: M. Löwy and R. Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2001.

¹⁶ The English Romantics of the second generation, like Shelley, have been inspired by the Early German Romantics, especially thanks to the mediation provided by August Wilhelm Schlegel’s volume *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, published in German in 1809-1811 and quickly translated into English in 1815. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s stay in Germany, in 1799, has also helped with the transfer of ideas and motives across the Channel.

To begin with, Romantic nature is not just one sphere opposed to another one, but a much vaster horizon comprehending various spheres, and all interconnections between them. Timothy Morton has piercingly cast Percy Bysshe Shelley's idea of nature as «aroundness», or «ambience»¹⁷. This characterization can be extended to other Romantics as well. Nature must be conceptualized as a *whole* in which human bodies, minds, actions and relationships are immersed. Shelley has actually also another name for it, «life» (and intends it in ways that exhibit interesting assonances with Hegel's idea of life in the passage of *The Phenomenology* shortly discussed above). Life is the dimension surrounding us, that «includes all», and that the human (poetic and scientific) mind cannot ever completely grasp, apprehend¹⁸. When considering life, Shelley says, one becomes aware of «the shocking absurdities of the popular philosophy of mind and matter»¹⁹, that divides the two, or reduces one to the other. There is instead a «slippery continuity» between the natural horizon of life and what human (and nonhuman) beings do in it, namely their «culture»²⁰.

Nature, moreover, is not only 'exterior' to us, is also what 'internally' moves human beings. An illuminating example is love. According to Shelley, love has a natural component (which is however not to be found in the sexual dimension). We can understand as natural those compassionate, emphatic and ecstatic affects that bring lovers to go out of themselves, assume the perspective of the other, perceive the beauty in otherness – in other human beings, but also in their (cultural and social) world²¹. The paradigmatic example of love is thus useful also for calling into question the sharp

¹⁷ T. Morton, *Nature and culture*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. by T. Morton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 187.

¹⁸ P.B. Shelley, *On Life*, in Id., *The Major Works*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 633.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 634.

²⁰ Morton, *Nature and culture*, p. 185.

²¹ P.B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in Id., *The Major Works*. Interestingly, in another essay, Shelley depicts sexual desire as a sort of cultural construction, shaped and

distinction between what we can call ‘internal’ and ‘external’ natures: as Morton puts it, «the very ideas of inside and outside have fused»²².

A striking example of these movements is conveyed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous poem *The Eolian Harp*²³. The harp evokes the idea that mind and world are interpenetrated, «that human beings in some sense *are* their environment»²⁴. The human body-mind is formed by its ambient medium, interacts with it and forms it in return. The human body-mind, as well as every «animated» being (v. 44), according to Coleridge, is like a harp «caressed», or «swept» by a «desultory breeze» (v. 14), generating feelings of harmony and love, «idle flitting phantasies» (v. 40) and thoughts of various kinds. As a result, we can sense «the one life within us and abroad/Which meets all motion and becomes its soul/...Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where» (vv. 26-29). Interestingly, the lyrical I elaborates on this image while he is tenderly clinging to his beloved «pensive Sara», in front of their cottage. Boldly, he even compares the harp to a female figure, to a «coy maid half yielding to her lover» (v. 15)²⁵.

Natural (and social) things should not be viewed, Morton warns us, in essentialist, fixed terms, as «solid» entities: «without a sufficient strong view of nature as malleable and impermanent, the idea that social life has a biological basis becomes the kernel of

enabled by societal norms and historical contexts. He suggests, for example, that proper love between men and women was not possible in Ancient Greece because women were not considered as equal as men, and did not receive adequate education. At the same time, homosexual love and desire is not to be seen as unnatural: cf. Id., *A Discourse on the Manner of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love*, in *Shelley on Love. Selected Writings*, ed. by R. Holmes, London, Flamingo, 1980.

²² Morton, *Nature and culture*, p. 186.

²³ In S.T. Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, London, Penguin Books, 2004, pp. 87-88.

²⁴ Morton, *Nature and culture*, p. 187.

²⁵ The harp’s «strings», that are «boldlier swept», releasing «long sequacious notes» that «sink and rise» «over delicious surges» (vv. 17-19) might remind to more intimate, sexual interactions between the I and the harp (that he identifies with his female lover, and that he himself is).

fascism»²⁶. The natural horizon in which we are immersed is not a status quo, but an ensemble of various relations that keep shifting and becoming. Nature, writes Novalis in his fragmentary, strange, mystical and yet philosophical text *The Novices of Sais*, «asounds us with ingenious turns and fancies, with correspondences and deviations, with grandiose ideas and trifling whimsies»²⁷.

This general and encompassing meaning (nature as horizon or whole) is however not the only way in which we can think of and approach nature. As Novalis declares, «it is bombast to speak of *one nature*»²⁸, «the ways of contemplating nature are innumerable»²⁹. From within nature, we can, as embodied minds (or as minded bodies), sense and conceptualize various natural ‘things’, and relate them in various ways to social, cultural, psychological ‘things’. For example, we can refer to things like «the earth, the mountains, the seas and the rivers, and the grass and the flowers and the variety of the forms and masses of the leaves of the woods and the colours which attend the setting and the rising sun»³⁰ in poetical or other artistic terms, as the Romantics most notably have done. The same things can however also be studied by the natural sciences – as some Romantics, like Novalis himself, or authors intimately close to the Romantics, like Goethe and Alexander von Humboldt, have done. We can also study things like impulses, drives, needs, affects, unconscious or subconscious forces in different ways, try to explain them on the basis of neurobiological, neurochemical, psychological, or philosophical vocabulary, and investigate how they are both shaped by environmental and social factors.

From a Romantic metaphysical point of view, all these things, and our relations to them, are emerging from nature: their social character is a specific natural concretization and realization. From a Romantic epistemological point of view, all the different approaches to nature (scientific, artistic, philosophical, practical ones)

²⁶ Morton, *Nature and culture*, p. 198.

²⁷ Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, New York, Archipelago Books, 2005, p. 87.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 29, my italics.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 31.

³⁰ Shelley, *On Life*, p. 633.

have to be thought as bundled together, they are part of the same human enterprise. In a way, the Romantic epistemological position could be cast as a call for a vast multidisciplinary research project³¹.

In this paper, I want to look at the relation between human beings and nature(s) from a quite specific, much narrower point of view, a phenomenological one: how do human beings experience nature(s)? Human beings are always already in a deep connection with nature, and this connection can be experienced according, roughly, to two different modalities: as a conciliation, or aesthetic recognition, and as drama, or breakdown of aesthetic recognition.

3. *Experiences of conciliation or aesthetic recognition*

When we experience nature in the mode of conciliation, we feel *at home* – in the world, with others, with ourselves. As mentioned before, (happy) love, according to Hegel, gives us a clear sense of what this experience amounts to. To begin with, we sense that our impulses, drives, needs, desires are not perceived, by ourselves and by others, as strange, abnormal, impossible. We feel comfortable in our bodies and together with others' bodies. This is not a state of symbiosis, or omnipotence: misunderstandings and disappointments might and do happen, but there is trust and reassurance that they will be overcome, that affective expectations will be met. In his novel *Lucinde*, one of the most controversial and significant text in determining the poetics and philosophy of Early German Romanticism, Friedrich Schlegel explains that the feeling of attunement between lovers does not mean boring mellowness: erotic love, he writes, «is an electricity of feeling and yet at the same time a still, secret listening inside, and a certain clear transparency outside [...]. It is a wonderful mixture and harmony of all the senses»³². Love bliss is, crucially, enabled by «nature», «the true

³¹ In this sense, the multidisciplinary organization of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main, historical crib of the first generation of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, seems to have a Romantic inspiration.

³² F. Schlegel, *Lucinde. A Novel*, in Id., *Lucinde and the Fragments*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1971, p. 59.

priestess of joy; only she knows how to tie the knot of marriage: not by means of empty words that have no blessing, but by fresh blossoms and living fruits from the fullness of her power»³³.

Conciliation, importantly, is not just felt intrasubjectively and intersubjectively, it has an external, objective dimension too. For example in his *Jena Lectures*, Hegel suggests that the institution of love-based marriage relies on a material dimension too, consisting of possessions (shared properties) and relationships with other people³⁴. For the Romantics, for example, for Novalis, lovers feel properly at home when they entertain a special relation – of curiosity, care and awe – with their natural surroundings. The «home of the spirit», he says, is among human beings in association, human beings who undertake activities together and share the same or similar emotions, and feel themselves immersed in nature³⁵.

This idea of conciliation between human beings, and between human beings and nature is expressed in the most vivid terms by William Wordsworth, for example in his *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, one of the ‘Manifesto-poems’ of English Romanticism. The poem is traversed by several images of extensive, profound conciliation between the I and his natural «aroundness», and includes a reference to the home-metaphor («dwelling»). Read for example:

...For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour

³³ Ivi, 107. More generally on the idea of nature in Schlegel, and how it relates to Alexander von Humboldt’s studies, see E. Millán Brusslan, *Nature and Freedom in Schlegel and Alexander von Humboldt*, in *Nature and Naturalism in Classic German Philosophy*, ed. by L. Corti and J.-G. Schülein, London, Routledge, 2023, pp. 59-78. The article argues that both authors call into question the Eurocentric and colonialist vision of nature of their contemporaries, which entails a philosophical justification for the human domination of nature. As Morton has also famously argued in several works, the romantic idea of nature could be made fruitful for contemporary ecological thinking.

³⁴ See e.g. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Spirit*, in *Hegel and The Human Spirit*, ed. by L. Rauch, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, pp. 134-138.

³⁵ Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, p. 53.

Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
 The still, sad music of humanity,
 Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
 To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose *dwelling* is the light of settling suns,
 and the round ocean, and the living air,
 And the blue sky, [...]
 [...] Therefore I am still
 A lover of the meadow, and the woods,
 And mountains [...] (vv. 89-104, my italics)³⁶.

Crucially, in *Tintern Abbey* the lyrical I does not represent himself alone in front of nature: his relationship to nature is mediated by love, in this case nonerotic love, namely by the thoughts he addresses to his dearest friend, or sister (see e.g. vv. 116-119). Nature is a place to be inhabited together. What is more, nature allows the I to reach also internal, psychological conciliation, establishing a connection between his present-self and his past-self, tracing a unitary personal narration, helping to overcome an internal troublesome split.

In his *Hegel and the English Romantic Tradition*, Wayne George Deakin provides a useful concept to convey such an experience of conciliation as home, namely that of «aesthetic recognition». Aesthetic recognition is defined as a «struggle towards an intuitive recognition of themselves within and as part of the external world in and through the medium of art»³⁷. Through this process, human minds-bodies get out of themselves, lose themselves and find themselves in nature again. At the same time, they receive and feel nature within themselves not as a strange or estranged presence. Minds-bodies realize, both on cognitive and affective levels, that

³⁶ In W. Wordsworth and S. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798-1800, London-New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 113.

³⁷ Deakin, *Hegel and the English Romantic Tradition*, p. 7.

human powers (to grow, to create, to know, to transform) are embodied and enabled by various natural faculties, but also by contextual, objective, both social and natural conditions. In intersubjective encounters, maybe most clearly in erotic ones, we realize that other human beings are part of this natural otherness, they are natural beings – just like us.

Deakin speaks, fittingly, of a *struggle towards* recognition: conciliation, finding a home in the (socio-natural) world, is not something that happens easily and automatically³⁸. As Richard Bernstein writes, Spirit, for Hegel, namely the process through which human beings come to know and inhabit themselves and their world, «does not develop in a smooth and continuous manner; it develops by a process of self-diremption and self-division wherein there is opposition, rupture, and contradiction»³⁹. For Hegel, however, even if it cannot be viewed as a final and definitive state, full conciliation can, and does happen. The Romantics are more hesitant and cautious. Aesthetic recognition is never perfectly and fully achieved, it remains a fragile and precarious endeavor⁴⁰. If we read *Tintern Abbey* again, we might notice a melancholic note that traverses some of its central lines, somehow spoiling their emphatic conciliatory images. Consider moreover, for example, Wordsworth's *Strange Fits of Passion*, part of the so-called «Lucy Poems».

³⁸ It is interesting, in this context, that John Dewey defines naturalism, precisely on the wake of Wordsworth, as «escape from convention to perception» and «sensitivity to natural rhythm» (J. Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, ed. by J.A. Boydston, Vol. 10: 1934, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2008, p. 158). If there is «escape from convention», there is a moment of break in the normative fabric of reality; «perception», moreover, means for Dewey apprehension of things as they are becoming. Perceiving something is not fixing it into given forms but anticipating and participating to its change.

³⁹ Bernstein, *The Vicissitudes of Nature*.

⁴⁰ The idea of Romanticism I am conveying here, anyway, stands in contradiction with Hegel's own interpretation according to which the Romantics promote an unfortunate dichotomy between the real world on the one hand and the subjectivity of the artist on the other, see e.g. G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Arts. Volume I*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 527; see also *ivi*, p. 595; p. 609.

The I's erotic desire for the beloved Lucy is here depicted as corresponding to and expressed by a certain bodily movement, the act of walking towards the cottage of the beloved in a natural landscape, lit by the moon. Here, however, conciliation between lovers, and between them and the natural landscape, is just a promise, a dreamy image. In the final lines, in fact, a sudden, anxiety-inducing thought pops up: «O mercy! to myself I cried,/ 'If Lucy should be dead!» (vv. 27-28)⁴¹. The experience of conciliation is shaken, maybe animated, by drama.

4. *Experiences of drama or breakdown of aesthetic recognition*

When we sense and realize, painfully, that we cannot inhabit our bonds with others and with the world shared with them, we experience nature in the mode of drama. We yearn for a home, but our attempts are regularly frustrated and shattered, we cannot recognize ourselves in our surroundings, our impulses and drives feel at odd with what we think we (should) desire and with what others desire from us.

Shelley offers numerous examples of lacerating dramatic experiences. Many of his poems convey experiences of nature that fracture the Coleridgian harp-model sketched in section 2, according to which minds-bodies and their surroundings are vivaciously interconnected and vibrate together generating expansive feelings and thoughts. Rather, a vast 'cosmological', organic and inorganic nature appears as threateningly towering over and dominating human beings. This nature is source of awe and wonder, but predominantly of fear and angst. It is a «wilderness» that we cannot understand, it speaks with a «mysterious tongue», as reads for example *Mont Blanc* (v. 76)⁴². The possibility of recognition of and within it breaks down. In the poem *Alastor*, Shelley lists obsessively a series of distressing pictures of this menacing nature, as for example:

⁴¹ In Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 150.

⁴² In P.B. Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Volume 3*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, p. 84.

[...] On every side now rose
 Rocks, which, in unimaginable forms,
 Lifted their black and barren pinnacles
 In the light of evening, and its precipice
 Obscuring the ravine, disclosed above
 Mid toppling stones, black gulfs and yawning caves,
 Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues
 To the loud stream. Lo! where the pass expands
 Its stony jaws, the abrupt mountain breaks,
 And seems, with its accumulated crags,
 To overhang the world [...] (vv. 544-553)⁴³.

We can make sense of such dramatic natural experience by borrowing Albert Camus' words: in the heart of natural «beauty lies something inhuman», hostile: «[t]he world evades us because it becomes itself again. [...] It withdraws at a distance from us»⁴⁴.

Sometimes, the same terrifying, disrupted landscape appears 'internally', or better said, similar metaphors can be employed to describe moments of psychic distress and pain. Those who go through unhappy, unreciprocated, impossible erotic affairs know that. Tore apart by grief after the death of his fiancé, Novalis starts his most famous collection of poems, *Hymns to the Night*, with words that read (in the Atheneum version of the text):

Down over there, far, lies the world – sunken in a deep
 vault – its place wasted and lonely. In the heart's strings,
 deep sadness blows. In dewdrops I'll sink and mix with the
 ashes. – Memory's distances, youth's wishes, childhood's
 dreams, the short joys of a whole long life and hopeless
 hopes come greyclad, like evening mist after the sun has set⁴⁵.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 25.

⁴⁴ A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, London, Penguin Books, 2005, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁵ Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*, New York, McPherson & Company, 1988, p. 11. This was a quote from the first hymn. In the following verses, Novalis finds a way to be reunited with his lost lover by depicting a kind of regressive and ecstatic conciliation with the nocturnal world.

In less dramatic experiences, love has anyway the power to trouble us through overwhelming, disconcerting affects, that we cannot, at least in some phases, recognize and articulate. *Lucinde*, the same novel that had offered a powerful image of conciliation and feeling-at-home, portrays its male protagonist going through such moment: «[w]ild blood rages in my swollen arteries, my mouth thirsts for union, and my imagination, alternately *choosing and rejecting* among the many forms of joy, *finds none in which desire can finally fulfil itself and be at peace at last*»⁴⁶.

Also in the dramatic experiential mode, inside and outside are intertwined. For example, in Coleridge's poem *Dejection: An Ode*⁴⁷, as well as in the former version of the same poem, *A Letter to*⁴⁸, the relation between the I and nature is dim, or even broken, as revealed by another similar relationship, that between the I and his beloved Sara. The relation poet-nature is mirrored by, and is a mirror of the relation poet-beloved. There is a feeble hope that human love might be a replacement for the loss of nature. Loving recognition, however, cannot work if a more general aesthetic recognition is not possible.

5. *Drama as learning process*

Crucially, the dramatic mode of experience does not suggest resignation in front of loss, despair and the breakdown of recognition. I would now like to suggest that what Shelley calls, in *Mont Blanc*, the «awful doubt» (v. 77) in the possibility of conciliation or aesthetic recognition represents indeed a valuable learning possibility⁴⁹. When we undergo dramatic experiences, we do not just

⁴⁶ Schlegel, *Lucinde*, p. 47, my italics.

⁴⁷ In S.T. Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, London, Penguin Books, 2004, pp. 307-311.

⁴⁸ Ivi, pp. 298-307.

⁴⁹ Shelley, *Mont Blanc*. In a dialectical twist, Shelley associates the awful doubt to a «faith so mild», which does in fact *may* allow reconciliation with nature (v. 79). Reconciliation with nature is possible, Shelley seems to suggest here, if we have the strength to go through experiences of solitude, alienation, intellectual and affective derailment.

find ourselves in a static condition of alienation (from ourselves and our activities, our world and other human beings), but we undergo a process through which we can come to imagine, affectively and even cognitively grasp something new, to change some of our perspectives and practices. Dramatic experiences entail moments of uncertainty, self-loss, affective and cognitive failure. Schlegel speaks in this regard of a «romantic confusion»⁵⁰, that arises in the sexual bliss of unconventional love as well as in poetic production, and bears the potential for changing given values and creating new ones. John Keats, for his part, praises the capacity, that he calls «Negative Capability», to linger on such moments – of «uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason»⁵¹. In these phases, we might come to realize that the ways in which we have structured, organized, institutionalized our relations with otherness (our environments, other human beings) are problematic, oppressive, and in need of change. The breakdown of recognition, we might come to realize, is not necessary and inevitable, but depends on certain given social structures, norms, habits and institutions. Importantly, the force of critical and transformative awareness is not merely a cognitive and rationalist one: the work of critique and transformation is rooted in feelings and affects – those e.g. related to psychic and bodily suffering, to hope, to the memory or imagination of the joys of conciliation.

As result of dramas, we might feel the *impulse* and the *desire* to critique and change structures, norms, habits and institutions that hinder and damage the possibility of recognition and conciliation. Dramatic experiences, finally, can powerfully reveal how exposed, helpless, needy we are. The bodily and affective sense of our vulnerability helps us to discover and cultivate capacities for receptivity and even passivity. According to a core Romantic idea, being open to, letting oneself be overwhelmed by the other, are crucial precondition for learning something new, for becoming creative, and able to overcome and transform the status quo.

⁵⁰ Schlegel, *Lucinde*, p. 51.

⁵¹ J. Keats, *Selected Letters of John Keats*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 60.

This is one of the most important lessons of *Lucinde*⁵². The passivity that comes with the exposure to eros' power is exemplary in this sense. By giving in to their natural, scandalous passion, Lucinde and his lover Julius manage to criticize the social and moral order of their time. *Lucinde* can be read as an attempt at imaginal experimentation with relationships forms (that goes together with the experimentation with literary genres). Lucinde and Julius are trying something new, at least in their social context: their sexual desire is fed by their intellectual and spiritual connection, as well as by mutual admiration and respect, and viceversa, they understand themselves as equal (and yet different, while their differences shifting and mutating in the course of the novel). In the end, they even seem to want to include other persons in the dyad. The experimentation with erotic equality, inclusion and mutual recognition should prefigure and call for experimentations with social and political equality, inclusion and mutual recognition. The opening up of the lovers' community should anticipate a type of community that rejects bourgeois, capitalist values.

A similar reference to what we would now call the polyamorous project⁵³ appears in Shelley's poem *Epipsychidon*, in which the poet articulates an argument against the bourgeois and monogamous love regime of his (and our?) time⁵⁴. Shelley has also

⁵² See explicitly Schlegel, *Lucinde*, pp. 65-66. See also Keats' letter to Reynolds of February 19th, 1818: Keats, *Selected Letters*, p. 93.

⁵³ The contemporary discourse on polyamory, which today is depicted as an anti- or post-romantic move, has been introduced and even practiced by some Romantic personalities or their friends, like the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich and August Wilhelm, their partners Dorothea Veit and Caroline Schlegel-Schelling (who for a while had a love relationship at the same time with August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schelling), Wilhelm and Caroline von Humboldt (see A. Wulf, *Magnificent Rebels. The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self*, New York, Knopf, 2022), and, in the English context, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley.

⁵⁴ The poetic I declares that he does not belong to that «sect» believing that «each one should select/Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend», while the rest «commend/To cold oblivion». These persons who restrict their passions and loves to one companion only, whom they chose («select») according to some kind of cold

explicitly and enthusiastically endorsed, at least in words, the equality between men and women, as well as the necessity of women's freedom. For Shelley, women's freedom, the liberation from «a great part of the degrading restraints of antiquity», is even considered a sort of material condition for the production of the «poetry of sexual love»⁵⁵. Women, according to Shelley, cannot become the object of lyrical expression if they are not themselves subjects, agents. Certainly, one can object that such critical and transformative declarations and imagined experimentations present, on an ideal textual level, some problems, and that they are matched, in reality, by failures. In a social reality still skewed by problematic structures and habits, like patriarchal and capitalist ones, such experimentations cannot perhaps but unfold as dramas.

6. *Hegel's troubles*

Hegel agrees that the erotic experience amounts to self-transformation. In the process of relating to her beloved, the self develops a (partially) different self, she transforms herself⁵⁶. The process of transformation is enhanced if we consider, as suggested above thanks to the notion of aesthetic recognition, that love bonds are not just intersubjective ones, but participate in exchanges with their natural and social surroundings. By transforming themselves, lovers transform others, and their world as well.

In a passage of his *Lectures on Fine Art* dedicated to Romantic love, Hegel associates the experience of love with the experience of Beauty. Emotions connected with experiences of Beauty, he

rationality and end up chaining him or her, do comply with «modern morals, and the beaten road», but are in fact just «poor slaves», having their home «among the dead» (in P.B. Shelley, *The Major Works*, pp. 512-528; vv. 149-159). «True love» is one that, if «divided», «is not taken away»: fed by imagination and fantasy, this love is «like understanding, that grows bright/Gazing on many truths» (vv. 161-163).

⁵⁵ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 690.

⁵⁶ See e.g. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, I, p. 563.

says, are not indulged and consumed in themselves, but they become productive and creative, connecting the personal experience of the lovers with a (imaginative, aesthetic) experience of the world at large. The emotions of love is an «impulse» that pushes beyond itself:

beauty is chiefly to be sought in the fact that this emotion does not remain mere impulse and emotion but that *imagination builds its whole world up into this relation*; everything else which by way of interests, circumstances, and aims belongs otherwise to actual being and life, it elevates into an adornment of this emotion; it tugs everything into this sphere and assigns a value to it only in its relation thereto⁵⁷.

I read this passage in dramatic-naturalist terms: the excitement and turmoil of erotic love (the «insidious and devouring flame of the blood», writes Hegel quoting Sappho) do not limit themselves to self-referential suffering, but push to transfigure the world in and thanks to imagination. From a Romantic perspective, new images and representations of the world should serve as (utopian) forces of changes.

Hegel did not believe in those though. The world is effectively changed, in his view, through processes of institutionalization of freedom. Also with regard to intimate and interpersonal relationships (e.g. with regard to the organisation of family forms), it is better not to entrust the institutionalization process to emotional, aesthetic, utopian work. In the conflict, «collision», between the force of love and the force of given social structures and norms, the latter prevail, according to Hegel. Note, however, that in this collision love loses not because it is just an emotion, but because it is a *certain type of emotion*, a gentle one, not a violent one. The drama happens here not between the institutional, juridical, political order of constraints on the one hand and an emotional order on the other, but between two different orders of affective habits:

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, my italics.

there may in general be external circumstances and hindrances which stem the flood of love: e.g. the usual course of events, the prose of life, misfortunes, passion, prejudices, restrictions, stubbornness of others, and incidents of the most varied kind. With these there is then often mixed much that is hateful, frightful, and base, because it is the wickedness, barbarity, and savagery of some other passion which opposes love's tender beauty of soul⁵⁸.

Yet, as it is well known, Hegel raises compelling arguments against an interpretation of Romanticism as favourable to critical theory interests (including a critical theory of practices of love and sex). Love, in his sober view, amounts to an experience that reveals itself as too accidental, contingent, private, and capricious to represent a valuable force on a social and political level. Although we should not dismiss the Hegelian scepticism, it is important to remember that the Romantics were not naïve with regard to the power of love. For example, Shelley's *Epipsychidon* depicts love in highly contradictory terms, as unravelling through a series of restless dialectical figures (Life, or Birth vs. Death, Light vs. Darkness, or Shadows, Freedom vs. Enslavement, Hope vs. Fear, etc.), it follows a tormented process that never finds peace or conciliation. The description of the utopian idyll of the «ionic isle», where the poet wants to bring his beloved woman after having rescued her, is enthusiastic and excited for many lines (vv. 422-559), but towards the end shows awareness of its weakness and self-delusional character (vv. 591-592).

The dramatic mode of experience does not offer warranties for effective criticism and liberation from oppression⁵⁹. In dramatic phases, however, *possibilities* and *resources* for critical awareness and disruption of given problematic structures and habits emerge –

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 566.

⁵⁹ To be sure, it does not provide normative criteria for critique. In this article, I have not discussed normative troubles. On a phenomenological approach, I have rather reflected on how critique and change might happen, on the experiences that might provide resources for that.

from within nature and thanks to the openness to our natural vulnerabilities. Dramas can be helpful to detect and dispel false, illusory and ideological images of conciliation and aesthetic recognition. Yet, conciliation and aesthetic recognition are yearned for and sought after. In the rhythms between conciliation and drama, in the complex interrelations between human beings and their nature(s), impulses, needs and desires for critique and change arise and take shape. They open up spaces for building up alternatives, for becoming different.