A defense of the Romantic longing against Hegel’s critique

Uma defesa da aspiração romântica diante da crítica de Hegel

ABSTRACT
This paper questions Hegel’s critique to the central place that Romantic authors Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis gave to the dimension of affection in their philosophical thinking, as well as to the way they link philosophy and poetry. The summit of this affective and poetical tendency of the Romantics is the so-called Sehnsucht – the infinite longing or aspiration – which Hegel criticizes in a very truculent manner. The interest of this debate is not limited to the studies on the famous controversy Hegel versus Romanticism; in a broader sense, it presents a singular case of a certain dissent on the way how philosophy takes a stand on the matter of affection and poetry. In Hegel’s case, this stand is one that poses a strong hierarchy in which reason and the conceptual activity of thinking are superior to the dimension of feelings, and this hierarchy also unfolds as a superiority of the philosophical over the poetical – while the Romantics endeavoured, precisely, to unravel such hierarchy. This paper defends the importance and deepness of the affective dimension promoted by the Romantics, whilst also attempts to deconstruct some of the main assumptions of Hegel’s critique.

1 This paper was originally published in Portuguese, under the title “Um pensamento musical, que não chega ao conceito: crítica à crítica de Hegel à Sehnsucht romântica”, in the book “Arte e Filosofia”, 2019, organized by Fernando M. S. Silva and Ubirajara Rancan de Azevedo Marques, and it is available at https://repositorio.ul.pt/handle/10451/39999. I wish to thank Thomaz Tassis for the support with the present English version. I also wish to stress that the discussion presented here is still in progress, and I intend to develop its arguments in further papers.
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Sehnsucht; affection; passivity; activity

RESUMO
Este trabalho questiona a crítica de Hegel ao lugar central que os autores românticos Friedrich Schlegel e Novalis deram à dimensão do afeto em seu pensamento filosófico, bem como à aproximação entre filosofia e poesia. Suma desse pendor poético e afetivo dos românticos é a chamada Sehnsucht – o infinito anseio, ou a aspiração infinita – que recebe uma crítica bastante truculenta por parte de Hegel. O interesse dessa discussão não se limita aos estudos sobre Hegel e o romantismo; em um sentido mais amplo, ela apresenta um caso singular de uma determinada divergência no modo como a filosofia pode se posicionar frente à dimensão do sentimento e da poesia. No caso de Hegel, essa posição estabelece uma hierarquia da razão e do conceito sobre o sentimento que se desdobra também como hierarquia do filosófico sobre o poético – hierarquia que os românticos justamente procuraram desfazer. O presente trabalho defende a importância e profundidade da dimensão afetiva preconizada pelos românticos enquanto se empenha em desconstruir alguns pressupostos da crítica de Hegel.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Sehnsucht; afeto; passividade; atividade

1 SEHNSUCHT: THE ROMANTIC LONGING
A consideration of the word’s etymology may provide a first understanding of the affection that it expresses.

Sehnsucht is a compound word, formed by the prefix Sehnen, a strong longing, and the suffix -sucht, which means addiction or disease, as in Schwindsucht, German word for tuberculosis. Although this etymology is far from embracing the whole and vivid meaning of the word, it does bring a first clarification. The suffix -sucht intensifies the already intense nature of the desire expressed in the prefix. It is, indeed, according to Adelung, a “high degree of an imperative longing for something”. (ADELUNG, 1811, n. p.) But the meaning of disease also refers to the fact that the ‘object’ of this desire tends to evade; according to Dicionário de conceitos fundamentais da filosofia by Kirchner & Michaëlis (1907, n. p.), Sehnsucht is “the strong desire for something regarded as valuable, in connection to the feeling of sadness for the impossibility to achieve it.” The meaning of disease refers in great extent to this inclination of Sehnsucht to become an obsession for the impossible.

In addition to this sense of unhealthy fixation, Sehnsucht has a deep existential dimension, already in its relationship with temporality. For one of the distinguishing features of this form of desire is that it "can be directed towards something past and lost or towards something future and expected", and in this double direction it "accompanies man throughout his life". It is the desire experienced by an essentially

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3 For all quotations used in this paper, I chose to maintain the original references used in the first (Portuguese) version of the paper, and to translate them myself into English.
temporal being, a being whose existence is marked by temporality. The “object” of this form of desire is everything that significantly fills the past and the future, everything that can be looked forward to in the course of life, the goods experienced and lost or those foreseen and wished for. *Sehnsucht* thus extends to a wide range of “objects”: a place; a love; childhood as a sphere of innocence, purity and fullness; something one wishes to create (a work); the ideals of Good and Beauty; God; transcendence. The word nostalgie, one of the possible translations for *Sehnsucht*, means the pain of what is distant, and this can be understood, in a broad sense, as an aspiration for something that is missing and wanted, something to be achieved. *Sehnsucht*’s various translations, moreover, reveal the sense of lack: longing is longing for what one does not have or is not, missing is to miss what one no longer has or what is not currently present, nostalgia is the painful desire for what is far in space or time. *Sehnsucht* is this aspiration of the soul, it is the soul itself as aspiration. Soul, therefore, understood in the opposite sense of a hypostasis: an opening, an indefinite and open existence. In this sense, it is the most human affection, and the meaning of disease inscribed in the word is not only literal, but can be understood, more profoundly, as the existential “disease” of a being radically experiencing a condition of fault and separation.

The word soul is also appropriate because *Sehnsucht* is never a mere bodily and sensual desire. It is born with the feeling of existence of the whole human being and is also oriented towards totality. *Sehnsucht* is a desire for wholeness. The word is, moreover, invested with this meaning which includes the spiritual, less prominent in other German terms for desire, such as *Verlangen*, *Begierde* and *Begehr*.

As an existential opening, *Sehnsucht* can be a desire that we do not know how to define – a deep, vague aspiration, which therefore remains open. It is a desire that finds satisfaction and rest when it finds its "object"; but, in a very specific sense, it is insatiable, immortal, since it is this very desire what mobilizes the soul. Even in its breadth of possible “objects”, what *Sehnsucht* longs for is always in some measure indefinite and undefinable. The painting "*Sehnsucht*" by Heinrich Vogeler (1900) illustrates this quite well:
A second name given to this painting by Vogeler is *Träumerei*: daydreaming, to be immersed in dreams. In fact, the entire composition shows a surrender to the dream. The blue sky in tune with the dress, the clouds stretching in the sky, the little flowers on the edge of the rock on which the dreaming girl sits. The surrender to the dream is especially visible in her bent posture: her surrender is so complete, lost in thought, that she seems to fall apart.

So, the affective opening which constitutes *Sehnsucht* also means the ability to dream.

In turn, the “object” of the dreamy aspiration is undefined – in the painting there is no way to know what the girl is dreaming about. But the dream can also be undefined for her, hence it is mixed and melted with the blue distance that she contemplates, a distance that can symbolize the infinite and the transcendence. This is a particularly important point to understand the dimension of *Sehnsucht* in Romanticism: the blue distance, while representing the indefinite, is a kind of sensitive image of transcendence and the infinite. This appreciation of the indefinite and the passage from the indefinite to the infinite is fundamental. As we will see later, this is precisely the point missed by Hegel.

**2 ROMANTICISM FUNDAMENTAL AFFECTION**

Ricarda Huch, Romantic and scholar of Romanticism, observed that if most men feel *Sehnsucht*, in the case of the Romantics it is “the fundamental tone of their character, it is their distinctive feature”. (HUCH, 1985, p. 116) In the words of Wilhelm Schmid, it is "the romantic feeling *par excellence*: there is no Romanticism without it". (SCHMID, 2011, p. 3) *Sehnsucht* moves the Romantic quest, and this precisely because this aspiration of the soul is restless, never becomes quiet: the infinite yearning (*unendliche Sehnsucht*) and the uneasy yearning (*unstillbare Sehnsucht*). Due to this condition of infinite openness, *Sehnsucht* mobilizes a wide range of expressions; it is the aspiration that drives the most diverse heroes of the *Bildungsromane*, from Werther...
to Faust, it mobilizes the writing of poetry, the musical creation of Beethoven, as observed by E. T. A. Hoffmann in his text about the composer.

This openness does not only lead to an exuberant expressive variety. Romanticism extols the aspiration itself as a willingness, a disposition or capacity to feel – a poetic state of mind. This open and indefinable state of mind that I tried to point out in Vogeler's painting is, precisely, a poetic disposition; "Poetry is indefinable", said Novalis. This indefinable, in turn, points to infinity: because Sehnsucht, as it were, transcends each and every object, it moves to infinity itself. Hence, it becomes the supreme ideal for Novalis and Schlegel and the central point of Romanticism as a formation project (Bildung): “Sehnsucht must be cultivated in all human beings”, says Schlegel; “The world must be romanticized”, says Novalis.

But it must be noted that, although Sehnsucht gains this meaning of infinity in Romanticism, the intention of the Romantic project is not to abandon and detract finitude in favour of an opposite or superior ideal. Indeed, Novalis defines the imperative of “romanticizing the world” in the following terms: “As I give the common a high sense, the customary a mysterious aspect, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite an infinite brilliance, I romanticize it”. (NOVALIS, 2001, p. 142) It is therefore a matter of uniting finitude and the infinite, the sensible and the spiritual. As I tried to emphasize earlier, Sehnsucht is a desire for fullness and wholeness, and as the Portuguese scholar Manuela de Sousa Marques said very well, “All the effort of these men is unitive and loving”. (SANTOS, n.d., n.p.)

This unitive and loving spirit also unfolds in the non-hierarchical relationship between poetry and philosophy, a relationship of continuity and interpenetration: Sehnsucht is both a poetic and philosophical affection; the Romantic project is a poetic-philosophical project. A brief excerpt where Schlegel defines the project of romantic formation under the motto ‘universal progressive poetry’ shows this clearly:

Romantic poetry is universal progressive poetry. Its determination is not only to reunify all the separate genres of poetry and establish a contact between poetry and philosophy […], it encompasses everything where the poetic lies, from the greatest systems of art […] to the sigh, the kiss that the poetant child exhales in a simple song. (SCHLEGEL, 1994, p. 99)

Finally, before entering Hegel’s criticism, I would like to stress two points that are crucial for understanding and deconstructing the mistaken assumptions of this criticism: the first is the fact that Sehnsucht is both a desire for the infinite and a deep awareness of finitude; the second is the fact that the non-hierarchical relationship between philosophy and poetry is at the basis of the project of Romantic formation.

3 HEGEL’S CRITIQUE

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Hegel criticizes in Romanticism the claim to an immediate access to the absolute, that is to say, a direct access by feeling. He understands this as a refusal and denial of finitude and negativity, a kind of shortcut to the absolute (we could say), and claims in his turn that negativity must be accepted as a moment of progress towards the absolute, and as such, therefore, also as something positive. True access can only be achieved, according to Hegel, by the purely conceptual reflection model, since only the concept is able to recognize negativity as negativity. The concept is thus the privileged, if not exclusive, element of philosophy. Now, we saw that Sehnsucht, more than a direct access to the absolute, is awareness of finitude. Hegel knows this and his point is precisely that Romanticism is lost in this finitude, in negativity, taking it for absolute when it is just a stage of consciousness towards the absolute. I do not intend to question here the problem of access to the absolute – which would also imply bringing Hegel closer to the Romantics with regard to the admission of an absolute that they intend to access in different ways – but specifically to point out that Hegel overpasses (avoids) the openness dimension of the feeling, of Sehnsucht, turning the concept into a solution to overcome what perhaps cannot and should not be overcome, especially not rationally. In this level of the discussion, we can perceive a divergence in the understanding of the being of man, of the essence of philosophy, of the dimension of the poetic and of the position of feeling and art in relation to philosophy. Let us see in detail.

The first point to note is that Hegel's philosophy establishes as the essence and purpose of human being the objectivation of a rational Absolute Spirit (Geist), who would become increasingly aware of himself through the progress of his stages.

The first stage of this progress is sensible certainty: when man, like a child, “is as if dreamily trapped in perceptions, [...] lost in the self-evidence of things”. (HOGREBE, 1993, p. 4) The growing reflexivity allows man to overcome this first form of alienation of consciousness. But, at first, the entrance of reflexivity occurs as a loss, because when recognizing its subjectivity as relative, the individual experiences the loss of unity with the world. This experience of loss characterizes a stage of consciousness that Hegel calls unhappy consciousness, because “the naive presence of the world loses the character of familiar self-evidence ... [and the world] is driven into a painful distance”; (HOGREBE, 1993, p. 5) now conscience “misses (sehnt sich) this lost world”. (HOGREBE, 1993, p. 5) Progress beyond such state requires overcoming that longing. If, instead, “we persevere in this Sehnsucht, we fall into an inactive and painful mulling-over of consciousness”, a “block of thought merely felt” (HOGREBE, 1993, p. 5): “[Thinking as such of this unhappy consciousness] remains as a shapeless bell toll, or a warm foggy satisfaction; a musical thought, which does not reach concept [...]” [ein musikalishes Denken, das nicht zum Begriffe [...] kommt.]. (HEGEL, 1988, p. 148) The unhappy consciousness

[...] certainly becomes the object of this infinite, pure and inner feeling; but in such a way that it does not become conceptual, and therefore appears as something strange. Thus, the inner movement of the pure soul, which feels itself, is present, but painfully, as a split; the movement
of an infinite nostalgia (unendlichen Sehnsucht), which is sure that its
essence is this pure soul, pure thinking that is thought by itself as
singularity. (HEGEL, 1988, p. 148-9)

In other words, in this movement the Spirit actually turns towards itself and
therefore takes a first step in becoming aware of itself, so the unhappy consciousness
has a positive function, as a resistance to be overcome; however, here the Spirit
remains alienated since that consciousness is separated from itself and sees itself as
strange. Nostalgia is infinite because it is an immersion, a sinking into alienation,
which can only be overcome by a leap from the Spirit, in which the Spirit ceases to
identify itself completely with this singular state and recognizes in it a phase of its
becoming-conscious. It is required that consciousness literally “sublate” (aufheben) that
state: suspend it while subordinates it. This is what concept does: it subordinates
contents so that they become recognizable in the whole. What Hegel calls “reaching
the concept/getting to the concept” (zum Begriffe kommen), therefore, means much
more than just reaching an exact definition about something: it is the pure form of clear
understanding, clarity of consciousness, rightful being aware, correct “being in
oneself”. Begriff (from greifen: catching, grabbing, reaching) is the element in which the
Spirit reaches itself.

It is in this active character of the concept that the essence of the Spirit resides for
Hegel. Sehnsucht is then a kind of “dreamy lapse” that stands between the Spirit and
Himself. Stuck in this interposition, the Romantic state of mind would be confused
with the singular, would immerse itself in it and would not recognize itself in the
Universal, thus becoming incapable of acting objectively, because it lacks

[…] the strength of extrusion/exteriorization [Entäußerung], the strength
to turn itself into thing and to support being. [The nostalgic existence]
lives in the anguish of staining the magnificence of its interior through
action and being-there (Dasein); to preserve the purity of his heart, he
avoids contact with effectiveness, and remains in the obstinate
impotence: - to renounce his Self, sharpened to the last abstraction; - and
to confer substantiality, or to change his thinking into Being. (HEGEL,
1993, p. 134)

Hegel understands Sehnsucht, therefore, as an obstacle to objectivation, to the
effectiveness of the Spirit. This happens, in his understanding, because Sehnsucht
deceives man in relation to his self; it seduces him – musically, sensorially – to identify
himself with a moment of his evolution, preventing him from reaching the universal.
It is no accident that Hegel makes use of the image of the “shapeless ringing of bells”
to characterize Sehnsucht; his critique of the Romantic attitude, of the surrender to
interiority, refers precisely to the fact that the Spirit falls into a self-immersion of an
aesthetic nature:
The empty object which it produces for itself thus fills it with the awareness of its emptiness; his action is the longing [Sehnen] that is only lost in converting himself into an object lacking in essence /devoid of being [wesenlosen]. Overcoming this loss and becoming real, he finds himself only as lost. In this transparent purity of its moments, a so-called beautiful soul [Schöne Seele] burns, unhappy, consuming itself, and evaporates like a shapeless cloud that dissolves in the air. (HEGEL, 2001, p. 134)

What seduces one to fall and remain in this state of ontological inconsistency is precisely its aesthetic character, in a broad sense. In the images used by Hegel, it can be clearly perceived that it is a matter of aesthetics in both senses: as what refers to the sensorial aspect of feeling (“warm nebulous satisfaction”, “burns”, “evaporates”, “cloud”, “dissolves”), and in the sense of what is proper to the art of musical paradigm, the melody that involves and elevates. Perhaps we can say that the problem for Hegel is the lyrical as such, or at least this musical essence of the lyrical – essence of which the word is etymologically embedded. We could say that his critique to the beautiful soul is the critique to a lyrical state of mind or a lyrical attitude, allegedly unable to get out of itself and overcome itself:

[…] then there is nothing left but the withdrawal in the inner world of feelings, from which the individual does not leave, considering himself, in this ineffectiveness, as one who knows a lot, who only looks at the sky in a nostalgic way, believing he can belittle everything that is earthly. (HEGEL, 2001, p. 250)

Hegel’s criticism of Romanticism turns mainly against Schlegel and Novalis because they not only valued Sehnsucht in its poetic dimension, but also gave it the weight and dignity of an entire philosophy, that is, they brought the poetic and the affective to the core of philosophy, giving Sehnsucht a privileged place, rather than a subordinate one, in terms of knowledge. There is a deep divergence in what these authors understand to be the relationship between feeling and self-awareness and between the poetic and the philosophical. Hegel, in the wake of an extreme (and quite frequent in the history of philosophy) split between pathos and logos, sees feeling as ontologically inferior to the concept, and the poetic as something that must be essentially subordinated to the philosophical. Hence aesthetics in Hegel’s philosophy also has a subordinate place, in a very precise sense: it can only describe art as an exhibition of the rational Absolute Spirit; the dimension of art remains in function of the concept and it is in the philosophical-scientific knowledge that the truth of art ultimately resides. In other words, the poetic itself will never be entitled to a "final word". This is because the subjective and inner poetic dimension must, precisely, be overcome. It is a sort of absolutism of reason and of the concept.

HEGEL’S MISUNDERSTANDING

There is a fundamental dissent regarding what Hegel and the Romantics understand to be the spiritual essence of human beings: for Hegel, pure active Spirit; for the
Romantics, also the soul in its deep ability to feel. Hegel establishes an extreme and hierarchical opposition between pure thinking (active) and “mere feeling” (passive). But this is not just a disagreement, it is also a misunderstanding of the Romantics on the part of Hegel: he treats the Romantic feeling almost as merely sensorial and incapable of awareness – hence an unhappy consciousness. Now, to some extent the Romantics would agree that their consciousness is an unhappy one, but this would be a self-aware statement: it is a look of the soul inside itself, by means of which it becomes aware of a fundamental lack and separation; it is an affection that knows itself to be an affection, recognizing its finite condition. Insofar as this condition of separation is recognized as a disposition of the soul and is assumed, it passes from a merely passive condition – something that the soul only suffers – to the dignity of a disposition in which the soul places itself and affirms itself. As a self-aware recognition of a condition, the affection is not mere inactivity, a mistake or a lower stage in the development of the spirit, but it proves to be a fundamental spiritual instance. If Sehnsucht is a musical thinking, it is not, then, because it “doesn’t reach the concept”, but because it should not be “sublated” (aufgehoben). While Hegel rushes to deny it and sublate/suppress it by the “active force of the concept”, the Romantic is open to it. From this angle, Hegel’s stand is the one that leads to alienation from a fundamental aspect of human condition; in Schlegel and Novalis terms, this would be an insufficiency in the very notion of the absolute, because absolute cannot be absolute if it excludes fundamental aspects of human condition.

A good example that summarizes quite well the complicated point of Hegel’s critique of Romanticism is found when he directs his criticism specifically to Novalis. He recognizes in Novalis “a noble spirit”, but then states that Novalis

[...] was driven into the lack of determined interests, into this shyness towards effectiveness and, if one can say so, lifted to this consumption of the spirit. This is a nostalgia that does not want to condescend to effective action and production, because it fears that it will become impure through contact with finitude [...]. (HEGEL, 2001, p. 172)

Hegel’s criticism against Novalis is the same we have seen against Romanticism in other passages. The injustice of this criticism can be perceived, however, simply by reading Novalis’ poem "Armenmitleid", "Compassion for the poor" (NOVALIS, 2001, n. p., my translation):

Sag an, mein Mund, warum gab dir zum Sange  
Gott Dichtergeist und süßen Wohlklang zu,  
Ja wahrlich auch, daß du im hohen Drange  
Den Reichen riefst aus träger, stumpfer Ruh.

Denn kann nicht Sang vom Herzen himmlisch rühren,  
Hat er nicht oft vom Lasterschlaf erweckt;

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Kann er die Herzen nicht am Leitband führen,  
Wenn er sie aus der Dumpfheit aufgeschreckt.

Wohlauf; hört ihr ihr schwelgerischen Reichen,  
Hört mich doch mehr noch euren innren Ruf,  
Schaut um euch her, seht Arme hülflos schleichen,  
Und fühlt, daß euch ein Vater nur erschuf.

Say, o mouth, why gave you God  
To sing poetic spirit and gentle melody,  
If not so that you in higher impetus  
Awakens the wealthy from their dull lethargy?

Can singing not touch the heart,  
And awakens from drowsy vice?  
Can it not conduct it to the good path  
Shaking it out of its sluggishness?

Awaken; hear me, o rich sybarites,  
Hear even more your inner shout,  
See the poors helplessly lingering,  
And feel that One Father has given you life.

With his chanting, the poet makes it clear that his poetic sentiment and vocation are directed towards the world, towards life, precisely in what they have of most flawed and finite – in this case, a form of social injustice. It is worth noticing that this poem criticizes precisely the self-immersion that is unable to get out of itself – but this self-immersion has nothing to do with the sentimental and the poetic. There is plenty of "extrusion force" in this poem, in a very precise sense: as an appeal, as a shout of feeling, *a poetic shout*. It does not seem fair to say that the poet "remains in stubborn impotence", that he "fears contact with finitude".

Hegel's criticism shows its flaw precisely in not realizing the ultimate importance of the dimension of feeling for consciousness. Even his abrupt distinction between activity and passivity is debatable, since the force in Novalis's poem is not only a force of the Spirit as pure determining activity (in Hegel's sense), but also a force of the beautiful soul, who – precisely for being open and allowing itself to be affected (for being passive) – is able to react with the beauty and potency of a poetic appeal.

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