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Expanding the Canon

The Political Philosophy of Bettina von Arnim

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Bettina Brentano-von Arnim's political philosophy and argues against the traditional view that the feminine is extraneous to the political sphere. The introduction begins with some methodological reflections on the status of the feminist history of philosophy. Then the article provides a summary of the role that women had to play according to the male philosophers of *Frühromantik*. In the third part, the author focuses on a number of concepts underpinning von Arnim's political philosophy – 'law' and 'equality' in particular. It attempts to demonstrate the originality of her political philosophy and highlight its link with the modern philosophical-political tradition. The article concludes by examining the relationship between self-government and the government of others as outlined by the philosopher.

Keywords: natural law, feminist history of philosophy, modern contractualism, *Bildung*, equality

ABSTRACT

L'articolo "Espandere il canone: la filosofia politica di Bettina von Arnim" si concentra sulla filosofia politica di Bettina Brentano-von Arnim e il suo obiettivo è scuotere l'immagine tradizionale del femminile come estraneo alla sfera politica. Dopo un'iniziale introduzione metodologica (in cui verrà brevemente discussa la posizione della storia femminista della filosofia) e un breve riassunto sul ruolo che la donna doveva sostenere secondo i filosofi del Primo Romanticismo tedesco, l'articolo si concentra su alcuni concetti alla base della filosofia politica di Bettina von Arnim ('legge' e 'uguaglianza' in particolare), mostrandone sia l'originalità sia il legame con la tradizione filosofico-politica moderna. L'articolo si chiude sul rapporto indicato dalla filosofa tra governo di sé e degli altri.

Keywords: Diritto naturale, Storia femminista della filosofia, contrattualismo moderno, *Bildung*, uguaglianza

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Pfarrer. Sie haben einen männlichen Geist.
Dies Prädikat können Sie ohne Schmeichelei annehmen.
Fr. Rat. Ich mag Ihr Prädikat nicht.
Staun an den Mut eines Weibes und ihre Heldenkraft,
wie sie mit furchtlosem Blick den Kampf besteht!
Hoch über Gefahr hinweg trägt ihr Herz die Streiterin;
Unermeßlicher Stärke geneußt sie, von keiner Furcht die Seele bestürmt.¹

1. Introduction

In recent years, studies of the philosophy of women belonging to Romanticism have multiplied and can help better question the marginality of women within the development of German philosophy. Although the importance of these women thinkers can no longer be denied, it is also evident that within the tradition of German Romanticism the female nature was still linked with the idea of sentimentality and domestic privacy. It was often contrasted with the male nature, where the latter was considered as rational, public and political. This article critiques and calls into question this image of femininity. My aim is not to re-evaluate femininity conceived as affectivity, privacy and naivety and set it against masculine rationality and the public sphere. As Genevieve Lloyd has rightly pointed out,² any re-evaluation of femininity conceived as the affective and private sphere would only imply a corroboration of the norms that structure it. I argue that Bettina von Arnim's³ philosophy allows us to disrupt this normativity. It presents a woman philosopher whose concepts and ideas necessarily break those boundaries within which femininity has been constituted by the philosophical tradition: in fact, she claimed that women should be recognised as being capable of rational abstraction, but also that they should play a political role in society and could formulate a consistent political philosophy.

The first part of this article is devoted to the construction of femininity within the philosophy of the male thinkers of Early Romanticism – especially Friedrich Schlegel – in order to identify the role they attributed to women, and the extent to which they accepted the idea of women as individuals interested and active within the political sphere.

Bettina von Arnim's thought will be analysed starting from section §3, with the aim of understanding whether she herself ascribes to womanhood

¹ Bettina von Arnim, *Dies Buch gehört dem König*, in Bettina von Arnim, *Werke und Briefe in vier Bänden* (=AWB), vol. 3, ed. Walter Schmitz (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1986), 181–182.

² Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1993 2 ed.), 105. I would like to thank the peer reviewers for their suggestions, which greatly helped to improve this article.

³ In line with academic studies on Bettina Brentano-von Arnim, in this article she will be cited using her husband's surname (von Armin) and not by her first family name.

the same image that other people had sought to impose on her. Her interest in European (especially French) political events will be taken into consideration.

Explicating and searching for clues that testify to Bettina's interest in political and social transformations would not be enough, however, to reserve a place for her within the canon of the history of philosophy.⁴ According to Mary Ellen Waithe, an author may be recognised as a philosopher if the concepts and arguments ascribed to other philosophers can already be perceived and detected in their writings.⁵ Here we might run the risk of reducing the thought of a female philosopher to an incomplete or bad copy of the philosophy of her male counterparts. Thus, searching for ideas that have already been studied and are well-known through the works of male philosophers could imply that women philosophers are merely imperfect versions of those men who already occupy a place in the canon of the history of philosophy. The aim of this article is to seek a middle path between Bettina von Arnim's legitimisation as a philosopher and the recognition of her originality. She certainly belongs in the European philosophical tradition, but her thought has remained obscured in philosophical debates. With this awareness, I align myself with that feminist history of philosophy that Genevieve Lloyd calls 'positive', compared to the 'negative' one.⁶ By including Bettina von Arnim in the historical canon of philosophy, it will be possible to integrate her into it without rejecting this canon in its entirety. Moreover, in this sense, I agree with Karen Green's position that it should be recognised that:

we [women] have been conscious participants in the social construction of the past. [...] We implicitly denigrate past women if we assume that

⁴ Mary Ellen Waithe differentiates between the 'philosophical compendium' (i.e. the totality of all philosophical works) and the 'historical canon of philosophy' (from which women are excluded): Mary Ellen Waithe, "Sex, Lies and Bigotry: The Canon of Philosophy," in *Methodological Reflections on Women's Contribution and Influence in the History of Philosophy*, ed. Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir and Ruth Edith Hagengruber (Dordrecht: Springer, 2020), 3–17.

⁵ Mary Ellen Waithe, "Introduction," in *A History of Women Philosophers*, vol. 4: *Contemporary Women Philosophers: 1900-Today*, ed. Mary Ellen Waithe (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), xx.

⁶ That is to say, the 'negative' (and defensive) feminist history of philosophy rejects and accuses the non-feminist history of philosophy of an underlying misogyny. Genevieve Lloyd, "Introduction", in *Feminism & History of Philosophy*, ed. Genevieve Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–2.

they were incapable of forging any values for themselves, and hastily dismiss the consciousness of previous women as defective.⁷

I will therefore try to show that Bettina von Arnim should be included in the history of philosophy with an original position of her own. At the same time, I will show the proximity of von Arnim's reflections to a number of romantic political concepts in order to justify her presence among authors that can be rightfully considered as 'romantic': even if there is secondary literature that underlines Bettina's awareness of social and political changes,⁸ it does not yet fully justify the presence of her thought within the romantic philosophical-political tradition. It will therefore be possible to show that although the male authors of German Romanticism did not agree with female participation in politics and their interest in it, several women in this movement developed a philosophy (through concepts in common with the men) which still envisaged their involvement in politics and in philosophical-political discussions. Thus, as we shall see, an investigation of Bettina von Arnim's thought not only allows us to add a name to the list of philosophers belonging

⁷ Karen Green, *The Woman of Reason. Feminism, Humanism and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 150.

⁸ In addition to those who are mentioned below in this article: Karl-Heinz Hahn, *Bettina von Arnim in ihrem Verhältnis zu Staat und Politik* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1959). Marie-Claire Hooock-Demarle, "Bettina als 'Zeugin' der Französischen Revolution," *Internationales Jahrbuch der Bettina von Arnim-Gesellschaft* 3 (1989), 81–92. Bernhard Gajek, "Bettine von Arnim und die bayerische Erweckungsbewegung," in *Die Erfahrung anderer Länder. Beiträge eines Wiepersdorfer Kolloquiums zu Achim und Bettina von Arnim*, ed. Heinz Hartl and Hartwig Schultz (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1994), 247–270; Fritz Böttger, *Bettina von Arnim. Zwischen Romantik und Revolution* (München: Wilhelm Heyne, 1995); Barbara Becker-Cantarino, "Zur politischen Romantik: Bettina von Arnim, die 'Frauenfrage' und der 'Feminismus'," in *Die echte Politik muß Erfinderin sein. Beiträge eine Wiepersdorfer Kolloquiums zu Bettina von Arnim*, ed. Hartwig Schultz (Berlin: Saint Albin Verlag, 1999), 217–248; Ulrike Landfester, "'Die echte Politik muß Erfinderin sein': Überlegungen zum Umgang mit Bettine von Arnims politischem Werk," in *Die echte Politik muß Erfinderin sein*, 1–37; Renata Dampc-Jarosz, "Frauen werden zum Subjekt. Die Selbstfindung der Frauen in der Romantik am Beispiel von Caroline Schlegel-Schelling und Bettina von Arnim," in *Erfolge und Niederlagen der Frauenfiguren in der deutschen und polnischen Literatur*, ed. Grazyna Szewczyk (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2000), 25–40; Ulrike Landfester, "Bettine Brentano-von Arnim (1785–1859) als politische Schriftstellerin: *Selbstdenken* ist der höchste Mut," in *Geist und Macht: Die Brentanos*, ed. Bernd Heidenreich (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2000), 71–91; Ursula Puschel, *Bettina von Arnim – politisch. Erkundungen, Entdeckungen, Erkenntnisse* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2005); Pia Schmid, "Bettina von Arnim und die soziale Frage," in *'Mit List und ... Kühnheit ... Widerstand leisten': Bettine von Arnims sozialpolitisches Handeln zwischen Privatheit und Öffentlichkeit*, ed. Wolfgang Bunzel, Kerstin Frei and Mechthild M. Jansen (Berlin: Saint-Albin Verlag, 2011), 91–108; Katrin Burgdorf, "Bettine Brentanos Briefe als Medium der Öffentlichkeit: Ein Schritt zur Umwertung der Geschlechterrollen?," in *Ich will keinem Mann nachtreten. Sophie von La Roche und Bettine von Arnim*, ed. Miriam Seidler and Mara Stuhlfauth (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2013), 47–64.

to our culture but also to reformulate what can be conceived as the ‘feminine’.

2. Romanticism on the Side of Women?

The commonly accepted image of the *Frühromantiker* is that of thinkers who were particularly influenced by social change,⁹ as poets interested in the sphere of affectivity or as philosophers clearly against the institution of marriage.¹⁰ This might suggest that Early German Romanticism could be a fruitful source of enquiry for a re-evaluation of the role played by women in the history of philosophy. Even if this is in some respects true, the role of women in *Frühromantik* is much more complicated than it may initially seem.

Certainly, since his earliest writings on ancient literature, Friedrich Schlegel emphasised the role of women, particularly in art. He published two texts on the role of women in Greek culture: *On Female Characters in Greek Poets* (1794) and *On Diotima* (1795). In this second text, in particular, Schlegel emancipates femininity from simply a domestic atmosphere. He underlines the accessibility of women to Greek art and culture,¹¹ in contrast to what was stated in the text of 1794.¹² Moreover, in *On Diotima*, Schlegel argues against Rousseau: for the French philosopher, women are incapable of experiencing aesthetic enthusiasm.¹³ According to Schlegel, certain types of enthusiasm are indeed strictly feminine. In this essay, Schlegel considers the traits of femininity to be tenderness and intimacy, as opposed to a form of masculinity endowed with breadth and determination (KFSa 1:93). However, both of these forms must enjoy autonomy (KFSa 1:93).

Schlegel’s attention to this theme increases with the onset of the so-called romantic phase of his thought. Under the enthusiasm for the French Revolution, he highlights the importance of freedom and equality within the relationships between men and women. Moreover, in his review of Kant’s *On Perpetual Peace*, he supports the right of women to vote.¹⁴

The importance that the Schlegel brothers gave to women in their philosophy complemented an (at least apparently) favourable picture in German Romanticism of the emancipation of women: for them, women

⁹ I refer here to the traditional interpretation (dating back to Hegel) of Romanticism as an expression of the new bourgeois individuality.

¹⁰ Adrian Daub, *Uncivil Unions. The Metaphysics of Marriage in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Über die Diotima*, in Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (=KFSa), Vol. 1 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1971), 100.

¹² Friedrich Schlegel, *Über die weiblichen Charaktere in den Griechischen Dichtern*, KFSa 1:47.

¹³ Schlegel, *Über die Diotima*, KFSa 1:97.

¹⁴ Friedrich Schlegel, *Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus*, KFSa 7:17.

would become the favoured subjects of philosophy.¹⁵ Furthermore, the genres and styles that the authors of Romanticism employed in their works seem particularly appropriate for the inclusion of women in philosophical discussion: novels, reviews and letters were all used to present and discuss philosophy; these works could be more easily read (but also written) by those who, like women, were basically excluded from university,¹⁶ the principal place for writing philosophical systems. Women, in fact, were the primary audience for novels,¹⁷ and letters were their privileged means of written expression.¹⁸ In other words, the romantic theory of philosophical exposition was therefore particularly suited to the involvement of women.

Romantic metaphysics and the philosophy of nature also seemed to be heading in the direction of a justification for the equality and emancipation of women. There are two ways in which this is possible. The first way (1) has been highlighted by Reill:¹⁹ romantic philosophy recognises the intrinsic duality of nature, and consequently, any female–male separation is to be viewed as an essential polarity in the development of nature. However, as Stone points out,²⁰ this view involves the risk of one of the two poles being considered as predominant over the other pole.

The second way in which German Romanticism can be interpreted as being favourably inclined toward the emancipation of women is (2) through its critique of identity. Although the first option mentioned above emphasises the intrinsic duality of being, the second option more radically recognises difference as the ontological principle of early German romantic

¹⁵ “I will be bringing all sorts of good things back for *Athenaeum*, among others a letter on philosophy to Madam Veit – but not just to Madam Veit alone, but also to *all* woman. Since the learned scribes in Berlin, as I hear, are intent on *not* understanding us, we are both quite inclined to put our hopes on women,” Friedrich Schlegel to Henriette Herz, 24 August 1798, tr. Doug Stott, last modified 2015, <https://www.carolineschelling.com/letters/volume-1-index/letter-202g/>.

¹⁶ Even if in the nineteenth century women were not officially banned from German universities, they were strongly discouraged from attending lessons; see: Bea Lundt, “Zur Entstehung der Universität als Männerwelt,” in *Geschichte der Mädchen- und Frauenbildung*, Vol 1: *Vom Mittelalter bis zur Aufklärung*, ed. Elke Kleinau and Claudia Opitz (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag, 1996), 103–118; Beatrix Niemeyer, “Ausschluß oder Ausgrenzung? Frauen im Umkreis der Universitäten im 18. Jahrhundert,” in *Geschichte*, ed. Kleinau and Opitz, 275–294.

¹⁷ Ursula A. J. Becher, “Lektürepräferenzen und Lesepraktiken von Frauen im 18. Jahrhundert,” *Aufklärung* 6, no. 1 (1992): 27–42.

¹⁸ Elke Frederiksen, “Deutsche Autorinnen im 19. Jahrhundert: Neue kritische Ansätze,” *Colloquia Germanica* 14, no. 2 (1981): 97–113.

¹⁹ Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 221–231.

²⁰ Alison Stone, *Nature, Ethics and Gender in German Romanticism and Idealism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 187–191.

philosophizing. Following Schlegel's philosophy of nature, even when we have the perception of an object that simply exists in a stable state and without variation, this representation is still the result of a continuous struggle, a continuous process of the occupation of a space and the production of a point of collision between forces to which we attribute the static principle of identity. For Schlegel, these are forces (of course, there are not just two forces, but many) that collide and intermingle, and they lead to a contradiction for anyone wishing to designate them or for anyone seeking to stabilise them in expressions that block the movement of the underlying forces, reducing them to a fixed identity.²¹

Of course, this does not mean that there is no sexual identity for romantic philosophers; rather, the identities of the masculine and feminine are constructions and are not at all immediate objects. This approach underpins Friedrich Schlegel's premise in which he argues that they are only superficial peculiarities.²² Schleiermacher's position is also compatible, insofar as he describes an "original gender" (he also calls it "the artist") that is constituted by the union of genders and that overcomes the male–female separation: Thandeka designates this the "proto-gender," an original state of the 'I'.²³

However, the idea that the "feminine" and the "masculine" are the result of a construction was not fully exploited by the Romantic philosophers. The innovative reflections of Romanticism on gender difference are in fact the story of an aborted potential. Nevertheless, the idea that gender difference is a social construction and a result of a continuous performance is advocated by contemporary philosophers like Judith Butler.²⁴ One of the origins of this idea could be rediscovered in Romanticism because of the analyses of Schleiermacher and Friedrich Schlegel on gender difference and on the construction of identity (2). The first perspective (1) above, on the contrary, finds in Romanticism the beginning of a philosophical position that leads to the so-called 'feminism of difference', as explained for example by Luce Irigaray,²⁵ whose feminist philosophy can be considered opposed to that

²¹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenäum-Fragmente*, KFSa 2:243, 412.

²² Friedrich Schlegel, *Über die Philosophie. An Dorothea*, KFSa 8:45.

²³ Thandeka, "Schleiermacher, Feminism, and Liberation Theologies: a Key", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 287–305.

²⁴ "Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed." Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 24–25.

²⁵ Again, see: Stone, *Nature, Ethics and Gender*, 188f. and Reill, *Vitalizing*, 221–231.

of Butler; in any case, both positions find affinities in the romantic vision of gender difference.

Finally, the romantic theory of philosophical exposition – the philosophical importance of the writing of fragments and poetry and the refusal to conceive of philosophy as a system – could (and still can) allow us to include in the philosophical canon works that were written by subjects (women) who, even for trivially sociological reasons, did not adopt philosophical system-building as their genre.²⁶

Unfortunately, however, the equality admired by the romantics, the freedom in the affective realm and the inclusion of women in symphilosophical discussions, obscures a much more complicated and restrictive condition experienced by women, not to mention the conservative perspective held by many of the male romantic philosophers. Firstly, the women in early German romanticism were not always equally recognised as authors or translators.²⁷ Secondly, it was commonly accepted that men and women should receive two different educations, as Schleiermacher – who nevertheless admired some women philosophers of his time (Henriette Herz, among others)²⁸ – claimed in his *Catechism of Reason for Noble Women*, published as fragment number 364 in the *Athenaeum*, or as Clemens Brentano did in letters to his sister Bettina von Arnim.²⁹ Thirdly, the general acceptance by the male philosophers of Romanticism that women should be excluded from the political reflection and activity. Despite Friedrich Schlegel's apparent liberality, in fact, and despite his initial idea that women should vote, he later states that “a woman is a domestic being” (KFSa 8: 42)

²⁶ “non-philosophical status is assigned to poetry, novels, and letters [...] But we must recognize that this designation is not because they are somehow unphilosophical in themselves, nor is it simply because these forms would be unsuitable for presentation of the sort of work done within the theories of the dominant model [...] These types of form seem to be at odds with the dominant model because in their own way they can be seen to uphold the importance of, or give validity to, certain moral concerns that are devalued on the dominant model. For example, they are open to the possibilities of being more intimate, more personal, indeed they may not only include the emotions of the author, but involve them on the part of the reader. What we must recognize is that what may appear to be ‘the’ philosophical genre is in fact just one possibility,” Catherine Villanueva Gardner, *Women Philosophers: Genre and the Boundaries of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2018 2 ed.), 9–10.

²⁷ On this, see: Alison Stone, Giulia Valpione, “Romanticism and Idealism,” in *Oxford Handbook of Women in 19th Century Philosophy in the German Tradition*, ed. Dalia Nassar and Kristin Gjesdal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

²⁸ Ulrike Wagner, “Schleiermacher's *Geselligkeit*, Henriette Herz, and the ‘Convivial Turn’,” in *Conviviality at the Crossroads. The Poetics and Politics of Everyday Encounters*, eds. Oscar Hemer, Maja Povržanović Frykman and Per-Markku Ristilampi (Cham: Palgrave, 2020), 65–87.

²⁹ See §3 of this article.

excluded from the political sphere.³⁰ Even Novalis, in his *Faith and Love*, excludes women from politics.³¹

Certainly, the male philosophers of Romanticism accepted women as interlocutors of symphilosophical discussions: Novalis, even if he excludes women from political activity, transfigures his beloved Sophie into the image and incarnation of the idea of philosophy.³² Nevertheless, they were still far from the idea that men and women should play equal roles in society and in particular from the idea that women could have a political relevance in the public sphere. A role that Bettina von Arnim, on the contrary, demanded.

3. Bettina von Arnim and the French Revolution

The household of the young Bettina von Arnim was a place where the events and debates taking place in nearby France were closely observed. Clearly, Bettina's readings were influenced by her grandmother Sophie La Roche, with whom she lived after the death of her parents (her mother died in 1793, her father in 1797). The idea that education does not involve the simple imposition of prescriptions, the interest in social change and in the condition of the poor and the idea that the knowledge of nature is a tool for the moral improvement of the human being³³ unite the two women.

Sophie La Roche held intense discussions and was engaged in correspondence with Mirabeau; she often hosted French intellectuals and politicians at her home. Von Arnim therefore had the opportunity to read Mirabeau's letters and Sieyès's, Mercier's and Pétion's works.³⁴ Her curiosity towards the progressive French thinkers was not welcomed by her brother

³⁰ Consistent with his initial idea that the division between genders is a superficial characteristic of human beings, a woman's vocation –that is, the divine voice in us– can indeed lead to the opposite direction from the domestic life (KFS 8: 43). Nevertheless, Schlegel sees a woman's nature and disposition as binding her to the materiality (and not to the spirituality) of things. Moreover, Schlegel did not consider the possibility that women could live outside the spheres of a married life and of motherhood and he did not at all contemplate the possibility that a woman might refuse the repetitiveness implicit in the role of wife and mother in order to fully dedicate herself to poetry and philosophy: he simply suggests a way for her to approach the absolute while still carrying out her domestic tasks.

³¹ "The queen does not have a political, but a domestic sphere of influence," Novalis, *Glaube und Liebe*, in Novalis, *Schriften* (=HKA), vol. 2, eds. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl and Gerhard Schulz (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), 491, 27.

³² See for example his letter to Friedrich Schlegel, 8 July 1796, HKA 4, 188.

³³ All these topics are explored in La Roche's novels: *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*, 2 voll. (Leipzig: Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1771), last modified 2020, <http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11260917-9> and in *Rosalie und Cleberg auf dem Lande*, (Offenbach: Weiß und Breda, 1791), last modified 2009, <http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10113503-6>.

³⁴ Bettina von Arnim, *Clemens Brentano's Frühlingskranz*, AWB 1:22.

Clemens Brentano (AWB 1:80). He feared that these writings might divert her from texts and activities that were more suitable for a young girl, such as the study of foreign languages or playing the piano. Bettina von Armin stubbornly continued to devote her attention to the revolutionary movements (AWB 1:96), and her readings were not only the source of her intellectual vivacity but also of her personality, as well as her aversion to any image of women that relegated them to merely the role of mother and housewife with no culture and no political voice. From Sieyès she learned the vocabulary of modern contractualism and from Mercier she took the idea that women should play a key role in the political community. For Mercier, in fact, women (or, better, mothers) must educate their children (or, again, their sons) to civil values, and they thus constitute a bridge between the private and the public and political domain.³⁵ For the French thinker, although women do not therefore play a political role in the public sphere, they are not simply relegated to a totally apolitical sphere either. The transformation of the role of women in society also materialised during the French Revolution, in which the movements of French women demanded the right to education, work, a fair wage, divorce and the abolition of the dowry.³⁶

These philosophers and the historical events influenced both von Arnim's philosophy and her imagination, as is the case with many other German writers of her time.³⁷ They interpreted the French Revolution as a historical manifestation of a process towards the freedom and autonomy of the individual.³⁸ Bettina was no exception: the French Revolution impressed and ignited a rebellious attitude in her.

She wanted to rebel against the conventions of good manners, which hindered her will and the free expression of the human being (AWB 1:212).

³⁵ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *L'An 2440. Rêve s'il en fût jamais* (Londre, 1771), in particular 339, last modified 20 January 2014, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6571684d>. On this: Annie K. Smart, *Citoyennes: Women and the Ideal of Citizenship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press), 61–83.

³⁶ After initial transformations in favour of women's emancipation, France returned to much more conservative positions: for example, the repressive decrees of year III, which effectively prohibited the political action of women. On this: Suzanne Deasan, "Recent Historiography on the French Revolution and Gender," *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 566–574.

³⁷ On this, see: Dagmar von Hoff, "Dramatische Weiblichkeitsmuster zur Zeit der Französischen Revolution. Dramen von deutschsprachigen Autorinnen um 1800," in *Die Marseillaise der Weiber: Frauen, die Französische Revolution und ihre Rezeption*, ed. Inge Stephan, Sigrid Weigel and Ruth Henry (Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, 1989), 74–88.

³⁸ On this: George Peabody Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution* (London: Longmans, 1920); Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Rudiger Safranski, *Romanticism: A German Affaire*, trans. Robert E. Goodwin (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

An awareness of the emancipatory process of women (“Vivat – a new era is coming”)³⁹ was the source of both the attitudes concerning more superficial aspects of women’s lives—such as the joy of having bought trousers instead of a much more feminine skirt (AWB 2:19)—and the claim of women’s rationality was sufficiently elevated to be the subject (and not only the object) of philosophical reflection.

For von Arnim, a woman is not only, at best, a writer of literary works in which a philosophical position may be found among the narrated events, or merely the author of letters in which speculation is mixed with the narration of everyday life. In fact, in her *This Book Belongs to the King*, a woman is associated with the figure of Socrates: for her, the rational human being, the logically impeccable mind, or the inquisitor seeking truth can be represented as a woman.⁴⁰ Bettina von Arnim associated the Socratic approach with Katharina Elisabeth Goethe, mother of Johann Wolfgang Goethe and also called “Frau Rat”,⁴¹ the protagonist of the second part of *This Book Belongs to the King*, which is entitled “Socratic of Frau Rat”. Not surprisingly, during a dialogue in this volume Goethe’s mother has to defend herself against her interlocutors who disregard the female intellect.⁴²

Bettina von Arnim expressed a sincere admiration for the French revolutionary uprisings. In the imaginary correspondence with Frau Rat (published in *Goethe’s Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde*), her admiration (if not a real fascination) for Napoleon is also evident.⁴³ This admiration is dictated

³⁹ von Arnim, *Goethe’s Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde*, AWB 2:19.

⁴⁰ As Genevieve Lloyd (following Sarah Kofman’s reflections in: *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*) clearly points out, this image of Socrates as an apogee of rational reflection opposed to the more sentimental feminine is much more indebted to the philosophers who contributed to the construction of this image than to Socrates himself (Genevieve Lloyd, “Introduction,” 7). It is in fact Lloyd’s central thesis that “the maleness of reason ... [is] a metaphorical construct.” Genevieve Lloyd, *The Male of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1993, 2 ed.), viii. On the idea that the “speaking-positions” in philosophical works are not gender-neutral, but “incorporate assumptions of maleness” (Genevieve Lloyd, “Feminism in History of Philosophy. Appropriating the Past,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, ed. Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby [Cambridge: Cambridge UP], 245–263, here: 246) also see: Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian T. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁴¹ On the relationship between Goethe’s mother and Bettina von Arnim: Ulrike Prokop, “Die Freundschaft zwischen Katharina Elisabeth Goethe und Bettina Brentano – Aspekte weiblicher Tradition,” in *Frauenfreundschaft – Männerfreundschaft. Literarische Diskurse im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Barbara Becker-Cantarino and Wolfram Mauser (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991), 237–277.

⁴² Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, ABW 3:246.

⁴³ On this and for an overview on the critical reception of Napoleon imagery by German writers during the *Vormärz* period: Kathleen M. Hallihan, “Following Bonaparte: Images of Napoleon in the Works of Bettina von Arnim,” *Colloquia Germanica* 36, no. 2 (2003), 97–117.

by the relevance in Bettina's philosophy (at least in her early years) for the resolve of individuals (*Entschluß*) and their ability to incite changes in history and "a joyful rush through all lifelines."⁴⁴ A strength also manifested in the French Revolution. The philosopher hoped that Napoleon could be the personification of the French revolutionary uprisings with respect to the burgeoning affirmation of freedom and self-determination. Napoleon had fascinated the world,⁴⁵ but von Arnim was ultimately greatly disappointed by his international politics.

Napoleon presented himself as the liberator of the oppressed people, but in reality he simply undermined the self-determination of the people: for the chains constraining them remained intact.⁴⁶ His bloody campaigns for the liberation of the people were useless, staining with blood the throne that the Revolution had broken (AWB 3:194). Like other sovereigns, Napoleon applied the *Staatskunst* or state machinery to oppress the people of Europe: for instance, he did so in the strategy he pursued against the people of Tyrol, who had demanded independence, but were eventually cruelly repressed.

The disillusion towards this charismatic figure who had subjugated Europe drove Bettina away from her early desire for Germany to have a similar hero. Someone whom she hoped would lead to the rebirth of its freedom and republican ideals (AWB 3:190). On the contrary, the politics of Napoleon in his treatment of the uprisings in Tyrol convinced her that to bow down to him would have meant renouncing the ideal of freedom (AWB 3:189).

4. "The Tree of Freedom has no Roots and no Shade": Equality in von Arnim's Philosophy

Von Arnim's enthusiasm for the French Revolution did not wane over the years, even though her detachment from the development of events in France (particularly since Napoleon's seizure of power) became gradually more perceptible. She saw Napoleon as evidence of a betrayal of the ideals of the Revolution and a perversion of its goals of freedom and equality.

The desire for freedom and equality that first motivated the revolutionaries aroused Bettina's continual enthusiasm, but what they became did not inspire any admiration in her, because they gradually transformed those ideals into formal concepts. Indeed, for her the equality that was theoretically assumed and affirmed in practice by the French

⁴⁴ Von Arnim, *Frühlingskranz*, ABW 1:97.

⁴⁵ Bettine von Arnim, *Goethe's*, ABW 2:18.

⁴⁶ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:88–89.

Revolution was a simple equality of power (*Macht*).⁴⁷ The French proclaimed themselves as brothers, but the equality of strength and power that their concept of equality entailed had led them to war (ABW 3:256). Faced with this condition, Napoleon attempted to bring peace by imposing himself as the sovereign of France, not by virtue of a representative mandate according to the rules established by the constituent power, but by virtue of his own genius (ABW 3:256).

The equality that the Revolution had achieved in France was an equality of strength; it implied that one individual has the same power as another individual: in practice, the state of nature (a state of constant potential war, following the modern theory of natural law) was the result and not only the theoretical presupposition of the French Revolution.⁴⁸ This chaotic condition made it possible for Napoleon to assume power: the equality of individuals with regard to their strength that is proclaimed by modern natural law cannot be pacified, except by the genius that prevails on all of them. The Tree of Liberty was planted on this false idea of freedom: “a tree without roots and without shade, with a hat crowned with anger and a shield covered with tyranny” (ABW 3:255). Von Arnim constantly and firmly criticised this concept of equality.

The theme of equality was cherished by Bettina, especially regarding the Jewish question. She was, in fact, particularly connected with the Jewish community. In her letters, she often recounts her relations with its members, and sometimes her correspondents ask her about that culture.⁴⁹ She never rejects their requests, and although her religious judgement towards them is harsh,⁵⁰ the equality of Jews and Christians remains unquestionable: both must be the beneficiary of human rights (*menschliche Rechte*).⁵¹ The language used here is clearly indebted to the theory of modern natural law but the meaning von Arnim gives to this expression is unusual.

⁴⁷ von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, ABW 3:256.

⁴⁸ Summarising the role of equality in modern natural law: both Hobbes' and Rousseau's idea of a state of (potential or actual) war or at least of a permanent instability is based on the logic of individual equality because no one wants to recognise another person as superior and therefore as the holder of a power that allows them to establish a stable social order. Although Bettina was not aware of Hobbes' texts nor do we have evidence of her reading of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, she did have a direct knowledge of Sieyès's and Mercier's works, who made extensive use of the concepts of modern natural law.

⁴⁹ On this, see: Claire Baldwin, “Questioning the ‘Jewish Question’: Poetic Philosophy and Politics in ‘Conversations with Demons’,” in *Bettina Brentano-von Arnim. Gender and Politics*, ed. Elke P. Frederiksen and Katherine R. Goodman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 213–246.

⁵⁰ Von Arnim, *Goethe's*, AWB 2:147.

⁵¹ Bettina von Arnim, *Die Gündertode*, ABW 1:616.

The equality between Christians and Jews is sustained by von Arnim clearly in a letter to her friend Karoline von Günderrode, in which von Arnim had praised a school where Jewish children and Christians were educated together. Consequently, these children will grow up with an awareness that they enjoy the same human rights. Given the context and in line with what has been analysed so far of von Arnim's political thinking, it can be deduced that this is not a legal status that humans enjoy. In fact, the equality that the philosopher finds among human beings is based on a different paradigm: it is a question of moral equality, i.e. the fact that moral greatness only depends on one's own self (ABW 3:256). It is a question of equality with regard to ethical autonomy and not to strength and powers (as for the French revolutionaries, in von Arnim's interpretation). The theme of autonomy was dear to Bettina and is at the centre of many of her writings. This is particularly the case in a short text *Erfahrungen eines jungen Schweizers im Vogtlande* published in *This Book Belongs to the King*. Here autonomy is related to freedom and self-knowledge: i.e. without self-knowledge, there is no moral autonomy, and therefore no freedom.⁵²

However, this idea of equality signifying the capacity of everyone to achieve moral ends requires certain social, political and economic conditions. To be sure, human beings can enjoy the "starry sky" (recalling the Kantian expression) within themselves, but the material conditions in which the moral subject lives determine the possibility or the impossibility of following the direction indicated by those stars: the condition of the possibility of morality does not concern *a priori* practical reason (as it does for Kant), but rather the material conditions under which morality can be developed. Material and sensible needs are a part of the existence of the moral subject. Their corporeity is not a "sinful excrement of nature" (ABW 3:291) that is opposed to spirituality and morality (ABW 3:291): the physical dimension and condition of the subject must be taken into consideration in any reflection on moral philosophy. According to von Arnim: "nature has created a sensible body so that it is pervaded with spirit at every sensation (*Empfindung*)" (ABW 3:278). This is why morality and politics are so closely intertwined: the political community – or, better said, the state – must take responsibility for the realisation of these conditions and guarantee that the basic bodily needs are satisfied. Although moral greatness depends on one's own self, the conditions permitting the individual to be in a position to listen to the voice of morality are the responsibility of the state.

⁵² On this, see, again: Alison Stone, Giulia Valpione, "Romanticism and Idealism."

It is up to the state to grant women an alternative for their survival, and not force them into cohabitation with men, with whom they are not bound by the constraints of marriage nor by any sentimental relationships (ABW 3:336): they must be allowed to and helped in finding an economic autonomy. Furthermore, it is up to the state to provide people with sustenance and access to primary goods so that nobody is forced to steal or beg for alms in order to survive (ABW 3:286, 337, 357) and so that people will have the necessary time and energy to discover their moral vocation. For example, the poor cannot even afford the time for self-analysis (*Selbstprüfung*) that is required by some religious communities (ABW 3:348). In addition, it is the duty of the state not simply to contribute to their subsistence through (the more or less regular) payment of small amounts of money, or through free food and clothing, but its responsibility is to also ensure that individuals have the means to escape from poverty (ABW 3:356). Finally, the state authorities must always guarantee that the production costs and wages of the workers who manufacture a product are in proportion to the market price of the product itself in order to enable the workers to purchase things: it must ensure that the profits of traders and industry owners are not disproportionate to the salaries of the workers (ABW 3:355). If this is not done, human beings will become deaf to the voice of morality resounding within them, and the resulting imbalance between the forces and attitudes in their soul might drive them to commit crimes. In this case, however, it is the state that is guilty of the crime because it did not guarantee the conditions granting people the freedom to act morally, but bound them instead with the chains of ignorance and necessity (ABW 3:200–211).

The equality between human beings, therefore, is not based on the idea that they are naturally equal in strength and power. Jews and Christians are equal not because each community is made up of abstract individuals stripped of peculiarities but because everyone has the capacity for moral self-determination. The understanding of this equality does not pass through a rational form of abstraction that reduces each human being to an atom devoid of any quality and only provided with a will,⁵³ but through a feeling that surpasses all their differences. Equality concerns freedom, a harmony with itself and with other human beings and nature (ABW 3:239–240, 274). This is not just a question of the individual autonomy of a single human being separate from others, nor is it an ascetic idea of the pursuit of morality: “you are not an isolated life, even if all the life that is touched in you depends on

⁵³ As it is for modern contractualism. See, for example: Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers État?*, 168–170.

you.”⁵⁴ On the contrary, autonomy, equality and freedom are given in a social and economic context that is favourable to it; it promotes a state that remains vigilant in order to ensure that these favourable conditions are met. The moral action of each individual is the result of a set of relationships in which this individual is placed: it is the community of affiliates that allows or does not allow individuals to act morally.

5. The Romantic Conception of Natural Law

The importance of this equality – that is to be understood as moral autonomy – also lies at the basis of Bettina’s strong support for the self-determination of the people. The nascent German public opinion at that time was shaken by the struggle for independence in Tyrol, the *Volksaufstand* of 1809. After much bloodshed, Tyrol remained annexed to the Kingdom of Bavaria (from which it had wanted to secede) under French aegis, and under the indifference of the other European powers, particularly Austria.⁵⁵ Supporting equality has nothing to do with abstract individualism that separates human beings and keeps them under the permanent threat of civil war because they have all the same power. Rather, it involves sharing in the desire for autonomy, leading to groups and communities that strive for self-determination: be it the Tyroleans who want to secede from the Kingdom of Bavaria or a small community of poor people described by Bettina, a community which the central police were not allowed to enter.⁵⁶

However, the political vocabulary used by Bettina might be misunderstood. Even in discussions of the conditions in Tyrol, she employed an expression that is typical of modern political science but she changed its meaning: ‘natural law’ (*Naturrecht*). This is not surprising, because the transformation of the meaning of the term *Naturrecht* was not new to the Romantic circle. In particular, Friedrich Schlegel consciously carried out this transformation: to him, natural law is the same as historical law because there

⁵⁴ Von Arnim, *Die Gunderode*, AWB 1:699.

⁵⁵ Von Arnim, *Goethe’s*, AWB 2:319. The rebellion in Tyrol was one of those wars of liberation that were supported by various philosophers and intellectuals in Germany. Just think of Fichte (in his *Addresses to the German Nation*), Arndt (*Die deutsche Wehrmannschaft*) and Kleist (*Die Hermannsschlacht*). On this and on the intricate relationship between wars of liberation and counter-revolution, I refer to the still excellent: Domenico Losurdo, “Fichte, la resistenza antinapoleonica e la filosofia classica tedesca,” *Studi storici* 24, no. 1/2 (January – June, 1983), 189–216.

⁵⁶ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, ABW 3:366.

is no phase (whether logical or historical) in the evolution of a law that is not subject to transformation.⁵⁷

Even von Arnim, in her deployment of the lexicon of natural law, did not consider it as a more or less peaceful state that served as the founding stage towards the affirmation of a civil state. Instead of characterizing it in historical terms, as Schlegel does, *Naturrecht* for her constitutes a constant in the relations between human beings. Natural law, in an original way, concerns our effective ability to relate to other people: it is the feeling that overcomes the separation, it makes us experience other people and understand their actions and accept their wishes and desires. It does not concern the feeling of belonging to a particular national identity, or in the sense of belonging to a specific community. Natural law exists in the soul of anyone who understands the desire of the Tyroleans for autonomy and who supports them despite not belonging to their identity – “natural law predominates in him”, writes von Arnim of a piano teacher: this means he will be able to empathize with the Tyrolean cause.⁵⁸ Moreover, natural law guarantees an identification (*sich fühlen*) with the criminal, with someone who commits a crime not out of an intrinsic evil, but for a simple lack of alternatives, given his lack of self-awareness and freedom.⁵⁹ Bettina’s conception of natural right is in no way equal to the set of Hobbes’ or Rousseau’s rational rules explained respectively in the *Leviathan* and in *The Social Contract*. In particular, she distances herself from the idea that it should decree the separation between individuals or the annihilation of their relationships. On the contrary, *Naturrecht* here is a feeling that is similar to love, since it unites and ties human beings together. It is a feeling so innate that it is comparable to an instinct⁶⁰ towards the communion with the beloved (AWB 2:509), to a spiritual form of love (*Geistesliebe*) that weaves kinship between spirits –as well as the forces of nature.⁶¹ If *Naturrecht* has to be used as the basis for undertaking a study of human relationships in civil society, then abstract individuality has to be excluded. The starting point is the feeling of belonging to a whole,⁶² and not selfishness or the needs of the individual: the whole comes before its parts. This way, the meaning given by

⁵⁷ On this, see: Giulia Valpione, “*Bildung* et vie dans la philosophie politique de Friedrich Schlegel,” in *L’Homme et la nature dans le Romantisme allemand. Connaissance, politique et esthétique*, ed. Giulia Valpione (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2021, forthcoming), 147–162.

⁵⁸ Von Arnim, *Goethe’s*, AWB 2:257–258.

⁵⁹ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:245.

⁶⁰ Von Arnim, *Goethe’s*, AWB 2:509.

⁶¹ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:268.

⁶² Von Arnim, *Goethe’s*, AWB 2:453; Von Arnim, *Die Gündertode*, AWB 1:527.

Bettina to the expression “natural law” is quite different from that given by modern contractualism.

The criticism directed at abstract individualism, which underpins the modern science of law both in the *Code Napoléon* and the *Allgemeines Landrecht* (which was gradually introduced into Prussia from 1794 onwards and which was destined to change and influence the whole German jurisdiction),⁶³ is one of the main elements of the romantic criticism of modern contractualism. Compared with the atomistic view in which an individual is treated in isolation, Friedrich Schlegel suggested focusing on what constitutes the heart of politics itself, that is, on the relationship.⁶⁴ The relationship between the members of a community precedes the state, and the objective of political philosophy should not be a search for fundamental laws of an original and founding balance. Politics should govern the movement and life of the political body, and therefore always maintains its own vital constituent force.⁶⁵ This was the prerequisite for Schlegel’s choice not to focus on an isolated individual, but on his or her simpler relationships that exist before and after the constitution of the state. However, beginning in 1804, during his lectures in Cologne, he began with the philosophical–political analysis of another central relationship: that of the married couple (*Ehe*). Therefore, although the romantic philosopher aims at overcoming all individualist logic, he now runs the risk of falling into the conservative image of a political community that is based on marriage and the family. The importance of the married couple is also present in Novalis’s political philosophy. As mentioned above, Novalis places the king and queen – the royal couple – as joint sovereigns of the state and not merely the king.

Undeniably, in some passages of von Arnim’s works she also recognises the value of marriage. On the one hand, she admits that the *Ehe* is one of the basic principles of the universe: a vision derived from her *Philosophy of Nature*, in which nature is intrinsically twofold.⁶⁶ On the other hand, she argues that the institution of marriage isolates a woman inside the home and hinders her from developing her freedom.

⁶³ Ernst Rudolf Hueber, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte seit 1789*, Vol. 1: *Reform und Restauration 1789 bis 1830* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1957 2 ed.), in particular page 106. Reinhart Koselleck, *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution. Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung und soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1975), 23–77.

⁶⁴ Friedrich Schlegel, *Transzendentalphilosophie*, KFSa 12:45.

⁶⁵ See Giulia Valpione, “Schlegel’s Incomprehensibility and Life: From Literature to Politics”, in *Romanticism, Philosophy, and Literature*, ed. Michael N. Forster and Lina Steiner (New-York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 193–215.

⁶⁶ She uses this principle to harshly criticise the idea that only the male intellect exists: for von Arnim, the spirit of the world needs both the male and female intellect.

A comparison with Schlegel and Novalis reveals the difference between von Arnim and the other members of Early German Romanticism. For Bettina von Arnim, a civil union is neither the result of a contract stipulated between equals nor the result of a genealogical development beginning with the institution of the couple (as it was for Schlegel).⁶⁷ Rather, von Arnim views the community emerging through natural right, a community that allows us to experience another person and not just to see them as an object. It is a widespread feeling that is present in both men and women. It precedes and overcomes these separations by putting them at the centre of the political reflections. It is not focused on what divides us from others, but on what spontaneously brings us closer without leading to an impulse towards a political or cultural identity. It is not simply the love for another person – as it is with a married couple – but the feeling that allows us to connect with other people.

6. The Government of the Self and Others

The originality of Bettina von Arnim's philosophical–political approach and her distance from modern *Naturrecht* are also present in her conception of the law. The formality and abstractness of laws were key concepts of modern contractualism and made them attractive to the European Enlightenment.⁶⁸ The aim of modern *ius naturale* was to achieve a peaceful state in which civil wars and power struggles were made impossible through a science of politics that was valid everywhere and under all conditions.⁶⁹ To do this, however, it was necessary to abstract from the customs and different power relations that already existed and to treat the human community as a mathematician would treat geometric figures.⁷⁰ Just as Cartesian geometry does not take into consideration the conditions in which a square is placed in order to calculate its area (for example, if it moves or not or if it is adjacent to other figures), similarly, modern contractualism does not take into consideration the features of either a particular community or individual subjects in order to establish the basic rules of their coexistence. It does not matter whether you are a landowner or a craftsman or whether you are intelligent, strong or impetuous, nor does political weight you inherited from your ancestors matter: human beings are considered first of all in order to build a universal

⁶⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über Universalgeschichte*, KFS 14:6.

⁶⁸ Franz Wieacker, *A History of Private Law in Europe, with Particular Reference to Germany*, trans. Tony Weir, foreword by Reinhard Zimmermann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁶⁹ See Wieacker, *A History of Private Law*.

⁷⁰ See Hobbes' *On Man*, and in particular: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Vol. 2: *The English and Latin Texts (i)*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 56, 124.

anthropology and to establish a political science in possession of the rules of civil society.⁷¹ These rules serve to mark a clear boundary between what is granted to an individual and what is not granted, placing him or her in a realm beyond whose borders it is forbidden to act.⁷²

Von Arnim labelled the huge importance attributed to the law ‘despotism’: a “Gesetzes-Despotie der Rechtsform”.⁷³ An oppression of the subject through the law, which binds and suffocates the human sense (*Menschensinn*) making the human being a slave (AWB 3:221). According to von Arnim, obedience to the formal law (even if it is a rational law, which *from the transcendental point of view*, corresponds to the principle of autonomy) is a sign of the absence of freedom. The formal law is imposed heteronomously, constraining the human impulse to act within a binary logic of what is allowed/banned and that is imposed on the subject from above: the subject (which not only consists of his or her rationality) must adapt to the law, which is in no way influenced by him or her.⁷⁴ The link between law and action is instead indissoluble in nature, where life governs itself:

What are your laws and systems compared with a bird that knows how to build its nest and fills the warm summer nights with songs? Or compared with a flower, or in comparison with the world that forms in and around a flowering tree? (AWB 3:51)

There is a link between civil laws and the laws of natural phenomena: the former must not eradicate the latter since the latter tend towards harmony (AWB 3:51). Harmony among human beings and wisdom are not opposed to nature, but must follow its harmonious path (AWB 3:51). The natural desires and the impulses to act must be indulged and, if necessary, moderated, but in any case, they must be recognised as elements intrinsic to human beings: they must not be eradicated by formal rationality. Although society has built for them only prisons and has established the police to control and censure them (AWB 3:51), they can bring harmony and freedom. Taking up a recurrent image from the very beginning of the European tradition of political philosophy, von Arnim compares the community of

⁷¹ “A law of nature, (*Lex naturalis*,) is a Precept, or generall Rule, found out by Reason”, Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 198 (chap. 14).

⁷² “For the use of Laws ... is not to bind the People from all voluntary actions; but to direct and keep them in such a motion, as not to hurt themselves by their own impetuous desires, rashness, or indiscretion; as Hedges are set, not to stop Travellers, but to keep them in the way”, Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 540.

⁷³ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:229.

⁷⁴ Following Pierre Macherey, this is the difference between laws and norms: Pierre Macherey, *Le Sujet des normes* (Paris: Amsterdam, 2014).

human beings with the crew of a ship that has to sail through stormy waves. Her interpretation of this metaphor testifies to her inclusion in German romanticism (which does not place nature and freedom in two separate domains), because for her the rudder of the ship is not a human being but nature itself:

If you were allowed the voice of nature to be your helmsman, you would not be shipwrecked! She does not sit on a sandbank of the law-despotism of the legal form, of the superstition in the old system; she steers carefree between the waves of anger of arrogance, envy, lust for power and the insulted ambition of secret revenge, of tyrannical egotism. (AWB 3:229)

Nature here is understood as human nature but not as an immediate fact; rather, it is the result of a discovery of the self and of a path towards the core of human beings: in order to reach the truth of man and woman, one must undertake a path of knowledge of the 'I' and of the nature that surrounds us. For Bettina von Arnim, unconsciousness and ignorance are, in fact, a prison from which it is possible to free oneself only through knowledge.⁷⁵ the nature of human beings is a goal to which one must be educated.

The concept of nature that should stand at the helm of the ship of the community of human beings is therefore rediscovered nature.⁷⁶ It is mediated through the knowledge that human beings have of themselves and through their self-governance or self-government –not through ascetic practices or transformations of the self, but through science.⁷⁷ Through knowledge, following von Arnim, human beings move away from criminal behaviour: the discovery of the truth regarding the self modifies one's actions. Self-knowledge allows us to discover our freedom from the epistemological point of view, but at the same time, it changes our behaviour towards harmony with ourselves, with our own nature, that is, with freedom.⁷⁸ For this reason, self-knowledge not only serves to know one's own autonomy, but it is what

⁷⁵ Von Arnim, *Goethe's*, AWB 2:161.

⁷⁶ Here there is a connection with Rousseau's philosophy. This similarity must not, however, overshadow Bettina's criticism of the modern contractualism to which Rousseau adheres.

⁷⁷ This tradition of ancient philosophy has been well analysed in Michel Foucault's latest works, in particular: *Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana and Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2017); *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana and Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave 2005); *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2010).

⁷⁸ Von Arnim, *Günderode*, AWB 1:705–706.

everyone is born for⁷⁹ because through it we exercise freedom, which involves the possibility of forming the self (*sich bilden*) in the direction dictated by our nature. Through self-knowledge, a subject strengthens her own will (AWB 3:198), she discovers her own *Lebenskeim* (AWB 3:275) and her own principle of harmony that is innately placed in us. Through self-knowledge, therefore, one allows the voice of nature to speak, which thus becomes the *Herr* of our soul and drives away evil and the disharmony between our forces (AWB 3:230): she who acts against the good has not only given in to evil, but has renounced herself (AWB 3:202).

Reflection on the self requires the highest courage, necessary also to have the strength to be that self that is reached by such knowledge,⁸⁰ and it is precisely this courage that is necessary for the helmsman of the ship, who cannot impose his own laws on the waters and waves with the pretension of their rationality and universality, but must adapt to the conditions he faces – “the Lord is like the subject ... both are the wretched slaves of chance”⁸¹ – towards the direction that he sets. In order to understand in which direction to navigate to, it is useful to take into consideration the criticism that von Arnim addressed to the state that does not care about the criminals living in its territory. In her research in the Vogtland,⁸² the philosopher underlined that the only measures taken by the state so far consist of (insufficient) subsidies in order to avoid crimes in the poorest part of the community, which, in no way, help those who receive them.⁸³ It consolidates a legitimate economic disparity, which however hides a real abuse and theft against the poor (AWB 3:52–53). What needs to be done in order to help the poor in the community – whose presence indicates the distance of *the whole* community from freedom (AWB 3:335) – and to avoid the repetition of crimes is to approach individual criminals not by locking them in prison but by trying to offer them a chance of rehabilitation. This should not only imply the study of science (AWB 3:339–240), which allows us to know nature and our role in it, but also to relate to each criminal as if we were their second I or ego (AWB 3:227). Not by judging them from the towers of virtue erected by a moral law that is impossible to satisfy (AWB 3:249), but by trying to help them to develop their own strength and to discover their nature (AWB 3:227).

⁷⁹ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:212.

⁸⁰ Von Arnim, *Günderode*, AWB 1:662.

⁸¹ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:34.

⁸² Becker-Cantarino defines this research by Bettina von Arnim as one of the first examples of empirical and qualitative social research: Becker-Cantarino, *Bettina von Arnim Handbuch*, 413.

⁸³ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:367.

Indeed, a further clue for understanding the direction that the human community must take in this navigation is the importance ascribed to *Bildung* or education in von Arnim's philosophy. In the correspondence with her friend Karoline von Günderode, von Arnim criticises education and culture as a collection of prescriptions and catechisms,⁸⁴ as well as criticising those philosophers who want to reduce nature to a succession of mathematical formulas and machine models (AWB 1:308). Instead, von Arnim and Günderode envisage a form of *Bildung* that encourages curiosity and the full exercise of the subject's forces.

Another indication is Bettina von Arnim's criticism of that political science in which the state is represented as a machine.⁸⁵ In mechanistic science, the natural forces become sterile and inactive, and the world is reduced to an automaton that must receive the first impulse to act from the outside because it is devoid of any vital spark that would allow it to provoke its own movement.⁸⁶ This is a central theme of German Romanticism: in Novalis we find the example of how mechanistic political science has transformed the state into a mill that grinds itself.⁸⁷

According to Bettina, the vital impulse that allows the community to grow in freedom maintains a constant dialogue between the people and the prince: they are agents of action standing on the same plan constituted by relations, even at a distance.⁸⁸ On the contrary, mechanistic political science considers them as two elements opposed to each other where the person representing simply commands the represented. This vision reduces the living *Volksgeist*⁸⁹ to a machine, and the tyranny of slavery is affirmed.⁹⁰

Instead, the direction that the ship has to take is towards the free expression of nature – of both the community and individuals. But then the

⁸⁴ Von Arnim, *Günderode*, AWB 1:468.

⁸⁵ Cf. Carl Schmitt, "Der Staat als Mechanismus bei Hobbes und Descartes," *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 30/37 (1936): 622–632; Carlo Altini, "Ipotesi sul meccanicismo politico. Tra Hobbes e Spinoza," *Filosofia Politica*, 3, (2018): 409–426.

⁸⁶ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:324.

⁸⁷ Novalis, *Christenheit oder Europa*, HKA 3:515.

⁸⁸ The prince "can do nothing without the accordance between his spirit and the senses of the people," Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:268. See: Barbara Becker-Cantarino, "Die Idee vom Volkskönig. Zu Bettina von Arnims Transformation romantischer Konzepte in *Dies Buch gehört dem König*," in *Einheit der Romantik? Zur Transformation frühromantischer Konzepte im 19. Jahrhundert*, eds. Dirk von Petersdorff and Bernd Auerochs (Paderborn: Schöningh 2009), 67–80.

⁸⁹ For an introduction to the concept 'Volksgeist' in those years: Karin Raude, "Jacob Grimm und der 'Volksgeist'," in *Romantik und Recht. Recht und Sprache, Rechtsfälle und Gerechtigkeit*, ed. Antje Arnold and Walter Pape (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 15–35.

⁹⁰ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:170.

problem arises – a problem present in the German *Aufklärung*⁹¹: how can we educate people to be free? How can the prince guide his subjects towards freedom if the imposition of an action or a concept (even that of freedom) clashes with the idea of autonomy? Von Arnim’s answer is the following: “governing a whole country is no different from self-government!”⁹² Only those who have already discovered their own seed of life (*Lebenskeim*) can lead others towards their nature and freedom – after all: “Life means to awaken life.”⁹³ For this reason, every citizen has the potential to know how to govern,⁹⁴ although every citizen prefers the prince (*Fürst*) to be in charge (AWB 3:84–85). However, every citizen must govern himself or herself, and toward this end, they must be educated: Bettina explicitly set this as her objective. It was a plan involving King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia, Prince Karl von Württemberg and Grand Duke Karl Alexander von Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach in a pedagogical path.⁹⁵

Governing is easy, just as it is easy to bring it into harmony with the meaning (*Sinn*) of one’s own nature⁹⁶ in order to elevate the spirit (one’s own and that of others) towards its greatest potential development (AWB 3:86). To this end, however, the ruler must provide all citizens with education⁹⁷ and needs the support of demagogues (of which the prince is a part and of which he is the leader)⁹⁸ who help individuals understand themselves and their connection with nature (AWB 3:274–275). ‘Demagogy’ is the term used by von Arnim, and does not indicate here a class of indoctrinators that prevent the people, in line with Kant’s text on the *Aufklärung*, exiting from the age of self-imposed immaturity.

An almost paradoxical figure is therefore needed to enable the people to attain the age of maturity: someone who teaches (risking imposing him- or herself on the pupil), but at the same time encourages the autonomy of the pupil towards self-government. According to von Arnim, this role must be taken up by the scholar or *Gelehrter*. He or she – “as a free teacher with shared interest” (AWB 3:240) – must educate the people in science and free

⁹¹ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, Introduction by Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–22.

⁹² Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:85.

⁹³ Von Arnim, *Günderode*, AWB 1:467.

⁹⁴ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:85.

⁹⁵ On this: Ulrike Landfester, *Selbstsorge als Staatskunst. Bettine von Arnims politisches Werk* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), in particular: 146–169.

⁹⁶ Von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:86.

⁹⁷ Von Arnim, *Frühlingskranz*, AWB 1:125.

⁹⁸ “Prince and demagogues one heart and soul in defiance of their persecutors,” von Arnim, *Dies Buch*, AWB 3:273.

individuals from the slavery of ignorance. The demagogues (the prince as well as the intellectuals) will therefore impose neither formal laws that eliminate desire nor doctrines to be repeated, nor litanies to be memorised: doing this would not require the freedom of the demagogues, achieved through knowledge and consequent self-government. Only the one who is free and only the one who governs himself or herself is capable of governing others.

7. Conclusion: A Politics of Philosophy

It is now clear that Bettina von Arnim formulated a consistent political philosophy full of links with the tradition of political thought. Her philosophy, however, is not strictly systematic, a fact well illustrated by the genres of her texts: letters, reports of investigations, accounts of the social conditions on one part of the population and dialogues. These presentations or *Darstellungen* are not separate or independent from the content: certainly, Bettina did not choose the systematic exposition reserved for her fellow male university professors, but a genre of exposition that was fully in line with what she expressed and, above all, with what she considered the role of philosophy to be. Von Arnim's objective was not the reconstruction and demonstration of rational principles from which one can deduce what is good and right. Her thought did not claim to construct a theory applicable to different situations regardless of practical and contingent conditions. This exercise of philosophy was the result of von Arnim's own experiences, which she recounted and reflected on in her letters. Furthermore, it was a knowledge rooted in social issues. – Indeed, she was much more interested in investigating the conditions of the poor living on the outskirts of Berlin than in studying, for example, the constitutional principles of the monarchy or republicanism. Hence, von Arnim's philosophy was far from systematic thought, but at the same time, she did not simply write mere descriptions of what she was faced with or what she observed. Her works are rational elaborations in order to determine problems, assessments, and possible avenues in politics: she did not limit herself to verifying the large presence of the poor in the suburbs of Berlin (AWB 3:335), but asserted that this is a sign of the lack of freedom of the whole Berlin area and suggested a direction to be taken to improve their conditions. In this balance between descriptive and normative-prescriptive thinking, von Arnim verified from her idea of freedom that it is not realised in many cases and indicates the possible solutions.

Von Arnim therefore abandoned the systematic form (preferred by male philosophers and professors), and accepted instead the plurality of the

philosophical *Darstellungen* favoured by the German Romantics. At the same time, she did not allow herself to be isolated in a private life in which even the male thinkers of Early German Romanticism would have liked to restrict the women. Her works, reflections and investigations into the conditions of the poor and destitute are inherently political thoughts. It was certainly not, like in the case of the Queen described in Novalis's *Faith and Love*, an occupation that only concerned the private sphere. It is political because it calls into question the relationship between men and women, and the plans for an education of the masses, the role of the state in the economy, and much more. And the very fact that it is a woman who published this text on these topics is a sign of political awareness: it is an intrinsically political fact that here a woman is speaking.