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The Early Writings of François Hemsterhuis, 1762-1773, Vol. 1 of The Edinburgh Edition of the Complete Philosophical Works of François Hemsterhuis, edited by Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 182 pp. ISBN 9781474486651

The Dialogues of François Hemsterhuis, 1778-1787, Vol. 2 of The Edinburgh Edition of the Complete Philosophical Works of François Hemsterhuis, edited by Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 198 pp. ISBN 9781474488082

In the poem *To Goethe, on his Producing Voltaire's "Mahomet" on Stage*, ten years after François Hemsterhuis' death, Friedrich Schiller wrote 'appearance should never attain reality, and if nature conquers, then art must retire'.

There are myriad sentiments like this that could "sum up" Hemsterhuis' thought. Even those that appear to say radically different things might somehow fit. Such is the shifting, elusory nature of the work presented in these two volumes of translation. Hemsterhuis' continuing struggle for articulation is an anticipatory echo of the romantic fragment, a necessarily incomplete piece that nonetheless implies the whole. The work presented in these volumes suggests a multi-faceted, sometimes mercurial assemblage of thought that complicates its surface chronology. Hemsterhuis moves through aesthetics, metaphysics, historical analysis, and even a form of proto-phenomenology. Rather than strictly ordered arguments and corollaries, his writing is made up of flows, hints, sketches, that never seem to want of addition. Before Wittgenstein made a point of including style in the wheelhouse of philosophical substance – something often sadly lacking from contemporary philosophy – Hemsterhuis seems to revel in the liminal spaces of intellectual and literary experimentation.

This new edition is comprised of three volumes. The two covered in this review, 'The Early Writings 1762-1773', and 'The Dialogues 1778-1787', compile Hemsterhuis' officially published writings, the third being a

collection of unpublished work and correspondence.¹ Each volume is accompanied by a series of essays about different facets of Hemsterhuis' philosophy. In the upcoming third volume, which the authors kindly shared with me for this review, there is some discussion of these biographical chapters into which Hemsterhuis' work has been arranged. Life chronology is an established foil for examining philosophical thought. Born in Franeker in 1721, the young François spent his early career somewhat in the shadow of his philologist father, Tiberius, the sr. to François' longstanding jr. or 'le fils'. It wasn't until Tiberius became chair at Leiden University in 1740 that he started experimenting with the Dutch Newtonianism popular at the time. Optics, insectology, studies in medicine and military engineering; it was these diverse and seemingly disparate pursuits that shaped a younger Hemsterhuis into an instrumental, yet wildly exploratory figure.

One other, perhaps even more significant shift mentioned repeatedly in the three volumes, is Hemsterhuis' encounter with German salonist Amalie Gallitzin, with whom he shared consistent correspondence after their first meeting in 1775. Gallitzin's inspirational force is clear, with Hemsterhuis exclaiming in a 1786 letter that their discussions made him realise that 'to familiarise men with beautiful philosophy', one first had to remove it 'from the weighty husks of the school which concealed it'.²

This yearning for transcendence, for a pure philosophy that could edify future generations, recurs in various ways through Hemsterhuis' writing. Without wanting to colour him too much in external commentary, it is clear that for Hemsterhuis, science, philosophy, and poetry all sit in close proximity. His reverence for nature, and for the works of art that strive to capture it, pre-empts Kant's analysis of beauty in the third *Critique*. But where Kant sought strict and defensible limits to such an analysis, Hemsterhuis is somewhat more unbounded. Philosophy, scientific knowledge, and the systematising tendencies of the human intellect all derive from what Schelling would call the 'universal ocean of poetry', striving for its perfection, which is itself a striving for the perfection of nature. This 'poetic turn' in Hemsterhuis' work, as Whistler calls it, might seem at odds with the former's more grounded, empiricist adjacent observations. Nonetheless, Whistler's project in his recent book on Hemsterhuis, is to 'extract a Hemsterhuis who is relatively speculative (even if sometimes uncomfortably so), a Hemsterhuis

¹ To be published in November 2023: *The Philosophical Correspondence and Unpublished Writings of François Hemsterhuis*, edited by Jacob van Sluis, Daniel Whistler (Edinburgh University Press). (Editors' note).

² Daniel Whistler, *François Hemsterhuis and the Writing of Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), xi.

for whom philosophy is a voyage into remote epochs to discover ‘unknown lands’.³

This kind of romantic voyage gives us a way in to the relevance of reading Hemsterhuis today. His influence on both coincident and subsequent movements in European philosophy cannot be understated, especially given the relative lack of Hemsterhuis scholarship – at least in English speaking contexts – up to this point. Romanticism is not just a useful frame for approaching Hemsterhuis; it is indebted to his so-called poetic turn, a late evolution of his thought that sought to merge aesthetics, metaphysics, and a deliberate use of literary devices. In Germany, the Jena school busied itself studying the ancients, attempting to craft their own lens through which to re-evaluate, reconfigure, and hopefully synthesise ancient Greek thought with a rapidly changing modern context. Kant’s role in this flurry of activity around the turn of the 19th century is well known. The strict limits Kant placed on metaphysical knowledge and the attempts by figures like Schelling, Goethe, and the Schlegel brothers, is part of the German idealist canon. But in Hemsterhuis, the Jena Romantics found a shared concern for the specificities of presentation, an eternal gesturing toward an inaccessible absolute, and the *sui generis* poetic ground of all philosophical investigation.

All of this can seem dizzying. Chaotic threads without a centre. Hemsterhuis’ 1772 essay ‘On Man and His Relations’, the penultimate essay included in volume one of this collection, offers a robust and fairly direct presentation of Hemsterhuis’ metaphysics. While grounded firmly in sense experience, this is neither a blunt empiricism, nor a kind of reverse engineered idealism, (*à la* Kant). Instead, as the original editor’s announcement that introduces the essay makes clear, Hemsterhuis seeks to demonstrate that ‘reason alone, by making use of simple experiments and abstracted from the alterations which imagination and prejudices often give rise to, can never lead us to systems of materialisms and libertinage’ (vol. 1, p. 88). Given Hemsterhuis’ own introductory line, where he purports to be writing about ‘the nature of man’, and ‘those things which are outside of him’, it is clear from the outset that Hemsterhuis is not friendly toward systems of thinking. While the observations in ‘Relations’ could be arranged into something like a systematic presentation, they are instead left bare, unaligned with any scholastic ideology.

Hemsterhuis’ language reflects this dissatisfaction with following the tradition of a philosophical school. His seemingly unproblematic use of

³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

‘matter’ and ‘ideas’ to describe the relation between experience and objects, could equally be read as a devout idealism or a stubborn empiricism, depending on the inclinations of the reader. The repeated use of ‘organ’ as a frame of reference for sensorial mediation did not go uncriticized, notably by Diderot, who noted that such terms ‘work badly in a text where one works strictly’ (vol. 2, p. 4). The Parisian intelligentsia would apparently not tolerate this unfashionable way of writing. These kinds of objections reveal precisely why Hemsterhuis is so intriguing, especially in a contemporary Anglo-philosophical moment that occupies itself largely with policing “proper” terminology. The freedom with which Hemsterhuis describes the physical scaffolds of experience – and so, by extension, knowledge, science, experiment – can be disarming for its casual nature. And yet this casualness generates a larger commentary on the excessive ornamentation of philosophical presentation. The ground of Hemsterhuis’ philosophical position is simple, it is the soul’s ‘absolute goal’, for ‘the most perfect and intimate union of its essence with that of the desired object’ (vol. 1, p. 80).

This is the recurring of Hemsterhuis’ philosophy, a yearning for something already established as impossible. Any union between souls and objects can only be undertaken by way of organs, the quasi-tragic necessity of finitude and partiality that Kant prized, and Schelling tried to peer around. It is this endless yearning that is central to all human experience, and its grounding as such in ‘Relations’, hints at the poetic turn still to come.

Hemsterhuis’ poetics is not naïve sentimentalism, despite its apparent founding in ‘the Princess’ that was Amalie Gallitzin. Hemsterhuis mentions beauty in the same breath as rigour. He works by analogy, without denying the reality inherent in that relation. His early experiments in optics demonstrate this. Hemsterhuis’ insistence on the telescope and the microscope as the basis of organological thinking pre-empts Schelling’s bold and strange identity-philosophy, including the latter’s philosophy of art. But where Schelling’s experiments were largely hypothetical, conducted in the abstract space of transcendental ideal-realism, Hemsterhuis’ were practical, concrete investigations into what connects the largest with the smallest, the interior with the exterior. The connection between art and nature is one of always incomplete striving for Hemsterhuis, but that does not make it doomed or melancholic. Rather, incompleteness is what lends value to the experiment. Hemsterhuis anticipates Schelling’s claim in 1799 that experiments are productions of phenomena, and he does so with a basic observation so often lost on philosophers; the ceaseless movement of history.

The importance of historical movement can be seen more acutely in Hemsterhuis’ aesthetics. In his ‘Letter on Sculpture’ from 1769,

Hemsterhuis uses the specificities of sculpture as a form of fine art as a vehicle for wider observations on art's place in human life. Central to his prizing of sculpture as the highest art (a common interest of European aesthetics at the time), is the notion that art is valuable because it presents to the soul the 'larg[est] number of ideas in the smallest possible space of time' (vol. 1, p. 63). This formula does not appear from nowhere; Hemsterhuis again bases his claims in his studies of optics, in the biological mechanisms that govern how, and what, we see. This issues some intriguing results, particularly the notion that beauty is objective and subjective at the same time. There is no meaning to the beauty of an object without someone to experience it, but there are measurable standards by which beauties can be compared, as demonstrated in, for example, Hemsterhuis' drawings of two vases. While these geometrical rules for beauty might come across as overly strict or reductive, they all sit on top of a more basic human desire represented in artistic work. The impetus of artistic endeavour lives in the same yearning mentioned above, a yearning for the connection of isolated bodies with something eternal, a yearning to move from the temporal to the eternal.

The scientific method is a continual source of inspiration for Hemsterhuis, and his thoughts on art and beauty are no exception. At the core, scientific and aesthetic experiments are the same, they both gesture toward the same inscrutable absolute that will occupy the Romantics for decades. As Sonderen points out in his introductory essay, for Hemsterhuis 'the work of art becomes, as it were, an experiment for and of itself' (vol. 1, p. 18). This might seem at odds with the nihilistic tendencies of contemporary art's most obscene iterations, but in an artistic context where automated and "intelligent" technologies play an increasingly determinative role, perhaps this is scope for reconciling the illuminated artistic genius with the brief-following executor of artistic intent.

Relatively little has been said of the second volume included here. That is not to deny its importance, nor its similarly high editorial quality. It will no doubt be felt by some, this author included, that the dialogue is a slightly awkward philosophical form. It should be noted, however, that in spite of its sometimes cartoonish appearance, Hemsterhuis makes uncommonly good use of dialogue form, particularly when it comes to the interlocutor figure, who is usually little more than a device to elicit long monologues from the speaker. Hemsterhuis complicates things, and in the dialogue *Simon*, for example, introduces a plethora of characters and inter-referential recollections. The characters in each dialogue are much more than vehicles for a direct, one-sided argument, and their complexity reveals something of the later, poetic Hemsterhuis: a concern for fictional worlds. The elaborate

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nature of dialogues like *Simon* are perhaps the most romantic of Hemsterhuis' works, in the sense of investing heavily in an attempted union between form and content, a place where, as Friedrich Schlegel put it, 'poetry would become philosophy, and philosophy would become poetry'.

The presentation of these volumes is expectedly excellent. The editors' experience with pulling understudied thinkers into the Anglophone context is well established at this point, and their treatment of Hemsterhuis is no exception. The essays that accompany these translations are all astute and appreciative commentaries, which help lend important context to the material itself. While each essay focusses on a different aspect or specific text, they are all threaded through with the same overarching sense that I hope to convey in this review; that Hemsterhuis presents us with a persistently attractive conundrum. How are we to reconcile these seemingly disparate elements of human experience, the beautiful with the analytical, the systematic with the chaotic, that which is remembered with that which is anticipated?

Anyone interested in learning more about Hemsterhuis, or indeed about the history and continued importance of 18th and 19th century European philosophy, should read these volumes, introductions and all. This is another large step in the editors' already impressive repertoire of under-explored or marginalised figures in the mainstream modern European canon of philosophy, one that can perhaps encourage a re-examination of what philosophy is concerned with doing, perhaps even with something as romantic as a philosophical spirit.

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